

Community heritage at stake

Michael and Ann Dudek
Contributing Writers

"Memorials become relics if they do not stir our modern conscience."
— Henry Waxman

There has been a flurry of activity lately on the local historic preservation front. While some might brush these issues off as the passion of a few history buffs, there is much more at stake.

Our community heritage is at stake. Now if you do not realize the value of honoring our physical past as a community value, then this letter will not change your mind. But if you are one of the many Manhattanites who appreciate and respect the physical evidence of our collective past, and you, like us, were unaware of these issues, maybe this letter will inspire you to become informed or, better yet, actively engaged in these issues.

The first issue is that of the Goodnow Park Youth Cabin (the Boy Scout House) and the city's obligations in regard to its preservation and upkeep. Unfortunately, the city has been deftly avoiding the issue for at least a generation. While the cabin is in a state of bureaucratic/political stasis, many in the community have stepped forward and invested a great deal of time and sweat equity in keeping the cabin in working order. However, the beneficence of these volunteers can only go so far. The time has come for the current owner, the City of Manhattan, to do what is necessary to ensure the viability of the structure for future generations. At a minimum, its nomination to the National Historic Register should be approved and processed.

Much as we and our neighbors are obligated to maintain our homes, the city, of all landlords, should also be obligated to the upkeep of its properties. Will it cost money? We all know the answer to that. Is it worth saving? Well, again, if you do not appreciate where we've been as a community, then you obviously do not care where we are going — at any cost.

The second and more complicated preservation issue is that of the Peace Memorial

Auditorium at City Hall.

In an effort to consolidate the Parks and Recreation offices with those in City Hall, city planners determined that the auditorium presents a cost-effective opportunity. We will not get into the history, or wisdom, of this decision process. Suffice it to say that the intentions are good but the implications of repurposing the Peace Memorial Auditorium were not fully considered.

Even City Hall employees seem to have overlooked the value of Peace Memorial Auditorium as a physical marker of our community's history and its dedication to honor not only the service and lives lost of our World War II veterans (101 Manhattanites perished in World War II), but this living memorial also honors the hardships of the early settlers.

Now that the city's efforts to consolidate city offices in the

**"Let's all look at this
as an opportunity to honor
our past, consolidate current city
services and leave a lasting legacy
for future Manhattanites."**

most economical manner possible is out of the proverbial bag, there are several historic, current and future implications the community must consider. Note we did not say that "the city must consider" as these issues affect all of us — the residents, and in particular, the future residents of Manhattan. There is a lot more at stake here than finding cost-effective office space.

In essence, what this project demands is a thoughtful investigation of the past with a reasonable attempt to envision how future generations will look upon our actions. Maybe the current bleacher and stage portions of the Peace Memorial Auditorium are underutilized due to neglect (note to the landlord), but that does not give the current city administration the right to take a rather broad brush justification that this "living memorial" space would be better utilized as office space, thereby ensuring its longevity.

City leaders should take considerable heed with this line

of reasoning. Should the project proceed as planned, in the absence of a master plan for City Hall expansion, we fear that a precedent will be set prompting future city leaders, when in need of more office space, to look at the remaining two-story volume housing the basketball courts as prime office real-estate.

Consequently, the opportunity to use the Peace Memorial Auditorium as it was envisioned by our predecessors may be lost forever. Is that the legacy we want to leave?

There is no doubt that Parks and Recreation needs to be housed in City Hall, and it will require a financial investment on our part. But instead of heading full steam down the path of least cost, maybe the city should fully consider the desires of all of the constituencies in this issue throughout the continuum of time.

Let's all look at this as an opportunity to honor our past, consolidate current city services and leave a lasting legacy for future Manhattanites. A well-designed, well-managed, multi-purpose community center rededicated to those who served and sacrificed on our behalf perhaps? A well-designed addition to City Hall accommodating 15 or so Parks and Recreation staff that would allow for the Peace Memorial Auditorium to be upgraded and used as intended may be a better long term investment at this point.

Also as part of this equation, city leaders should consider the hopefully vacated Parks and Rec offices in City Park as having served their purpose. Consequently, it would be appropriate to demolish that facility with its attendant parking area and return it to its original state as green space. Another potential win for the city.

After World War II, the citizens of Manhattan stepped up to do the right thing in respect of the city's heritage. This seems like an opportune time to honor their legacy and create our own.

Michael and Ann Dudek live at 2315 Grandview Terrace. Michael, a former member of the Manhattan Historic Resources Board, is an associate professor in the Department of Apparel, Textiles & Interior Design at KSU.