
MANHATTAN/RILEY COUNTY PRESERVATION ALLIANCE NEWSLETTER

APRIL, 2008

A LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT LINDA GLASGOW

This past month I have been looking through a book by James Howard Kunstler entitled **Home from Nowhere, Remaking Our Everyday World for the 21st Century** (copyright 1996 by Touchstone).

I've taken special note of chapter 2, "The Public Realm and the Common Good." The author defines the public realm as those public spaces, such as streets, highways, town squares, parks, parking lots, and natural areas that belong to everybody and which everybody may visit most of the time.

Prior to 1945 the **American Main Street model**, "mixed use, mixed income, apartments and offices over the stores, moderate density, scaled to pedestrians, vehicles permitted but not allowed to dominate, buildings detailed with care, and built to last," was the standard pattern and it produced places that people continue to care about deeply. The model remains part of our cultural memory despite the fact that it is being replaced by the far less satisfying **Suburban Sprawl model**.

Communities pay a price when buildings are not scaled to the human form, where people do not feel safe and comfortable in public places, and when individuals are isolated by a sole reliance on the automobile as a means of getting around. Blank brick walls send

a message: "The street has no meaning, and you, Mr. Pedestrian, are a meaningless cipher. The public realm has no significance and what goes on there doesn't matter. We don't care what goes on outside our building."

Beyond physical characteristics, the public realm also consists of the laws, beliefs, social agreements, and language that we share and are governed by. The degradation of the public realm, in particular its language, harms the ability of people to think about the common good. An example of this is when a city hall refers to citizens of the republic as "customers."

All of us, young and old, deserve a public realm worthy of respect. We need "dignified places to hang out. Shops. Eating establishments. Libraries, museums, and theaters." We need access to these places on our own, without the necessity of transportation assistance.

The author proposes a civic transformation in which the benefits of well-designed public spaces are recognized. "The common good demands a public realm in which to dwell. It can't sustain itself merely in our hearts or memories."

The book is thoughtful, provocative, and worthy of a wide audience willing to engage in this discussion.

Depot Committee Report

The Depot Committee, chaired by Mike Mecseri, has been meeting to consider possibilities for interior and exterior improvements to Manhattan's Union Pacific Depot, now used as community meeting space.

The Alliance previously secured a Caroline Peine Foundation grant to reimburse the City for the large round tables, the chairs, and the furniture storage carts. The grant also funded the flat screen television, data projector, audio visual rolling cart, and room-darkening shades. These amenities enhance the usefulness of the building as a meeting space. The Alliance has also provided a Sesquicentennial tree to provide visual interest and shade.

A number of interior and exterior improvements are now being contemplated. The building's hard-surface acoustics need to be mitigated; decorative features need a safe and attractive way to be displayed without harming the plaster walls; interior or exterior storm windows would increase energy efficiency and noise abatement; the soft pine flooring could be better protected from wear; a gate to limit access to the parking lot when the building is not in use would reduce vehicle damage to curbs and landscaping; and a sign in keeping with the building's architecture could be placed at the driveway entrance.

The Depot Committee looks forward to working with the Manhattan Parks and Recreation Department on Depot improvements.

Reminder: the Riley County Historical Society, 2309 Claflin Road, Manhattan, Kansas 66502 is accepting tax-deductible donations towards the courthouse clock project.

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Contact us at
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Saving the Strasser House

In keeping with its mission, the Manhattan/Riley County Preservation Alliance, Inc. is making a serious effort to save the Phillipena Strasser House, 326 Laramie, in Manhattan.

We know this historic house is an important part of Manhattan's heritage from the research provided by Dr. Pat O'Brien (see the April, 2007, newsletter at www.preservemanhattan.org).

The importance of the house was acknowledged in a formal and public way when, in April of 2006, the City of Manhattan and the State Historic Preservation Office entered into a Memorandum of Agreement that, in part, concerned this house.

In the agreement the Strasser House served as partial mitigation for the loss of SIX historic houses. After a weak and unsuccessful effort to find new lots for the houses, all six were demolished. The City of Manhattan agreed to refrain from issuing a permit to move or demolish the house and the City agreed to encourage the house's owner to list the house on the National Register of Historic Places.

It came as a surprise to learn in the fall of 2007 that the City of Manhattan proposed to break faith with the preservation community by suggesting, along with the developer, that this large and significant limestone house be MOVED.

What is the likelihood that the house would survive the move? The developer happily reported that the movers did not intend to charge if the move was not successful.

What did the proposal to move the Strasser House cost the Manhattan/Riley County Preservation Alliance? In addition to the enormous amount of time and energy taken from the lives of busy people, the Alliance

spent what is, for us, serious money in the house's defense.

The Alliance placed newspaper advertisements and cable t.v. weather crawl announcements to remind the public to attend meetings at which the issue would be discussed. Letters to the editor were written. A good many members sat through lengthy meetings at which public sentiment could not have been more clear: save the Strasser House!

After the first amendment to the PUD was denied, the developer proposed a different amendment. The house would not be moved, but rather would be seriously crowded by an eight foot wall just four feet from its east side behind which at least fifty semi tractor trailer trucks would travel each week to service the back side of the proposed Hy-Vee store.

The Alliance responded by taking the drastic financial step of printing and placing an informational insert in the January 7th edition of **The Manhattan Mercury**.

Saving the house means more than just not moving it. Saving the house means that it must be given the resources it needs to support a reasonable use, that sufficient dedicated and convenient parking will be made available, that the house will not be subjected to excessive vibrations due to its close proximity to a massive construction project, that vibrations and fumes from heavy truck traffic will not harm the house or its occupants, and that the house retains sufficient space to remain visually attractive and historically relevant.

The Alliance continues to call upon City Hall to abide by the Memorandum of Agreement and truly save the Strasser House.

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617 Colorado: Midway on the journey from the brink of destruction to landmark bed & breakfast

About twenty Historical, Preservation, and Landmark level Alliance members attended a special “work in progress” tour of the historic Hulse-Daughters House at 617 Colorado on the afternoon of March 16th.

In the absence of the homeowners, long-time member and former Alliance president Dixie West welcomed the group and presented the house’s history before turning the tour over to another former president and 617 Colorado project architect, Mike Mecseri. Mike led the group through each room, explaining what work has been done and what is planned for this

future bed & breakfast establishment.

Membership chair Debbie Saroff arranged for the printing and mailing of invitations and provided the delicious homemade cookies as well as coffee and hot chocolate, so welcome on a cold and gloomy day in a house with no heat.

Thank you, Jim Sherow and Bonnie Lynn-Sherow for opening your house for viewing by the group. Yes, you guessed it—both Jim and Bonnie are former Alliance presidents! Thank you Dixie and Michael for giving the tour. Thank you Debbie for putting it all together.



Looking up above the historic staircase to the newly constructed and relocated steps to the third floor master suite.