

From old government center — new inspiration

By Steve Karp
Old Town Hall

How proud an achievement it would be for our Stamford citizenry to restore this important and magnificent building to living greatness.

Now that the Old Town Hall has been renovated, cleaned up and restored to its original, back-to-the future, architectural grandeur, the Solomon-esque question remains: What to do with it (Advocate news story, Jan. 27)?

The nagging problem with the prevailing rationality, which insists that some "commercial economic engine" is necessary to assume the building's operating costs, is the suspicion that any commercial enterprise occupying the Old Town Hall would diminish the building's iconic stature.

Affordability, as a practical matter, obviously needs to be considered as the Old Town Hall looks for tenants. But as the late Peter Ustinov once remarked, "No one remembers what the Acropolis cost."

The point is, the Old Town Hall is not just any building. It may not be the Acropolis, but it is a building of such obvious historical importance to Stamford that only a tenant engaged in an activity worthy of and commensurate with the building's own venerable presence ought to be considered for occupancy.

Not a commercial tenant. The Old Town Hall cries out for something far more universally encompassing and uplifting.

son made to the integration and democratization of our country, as the first black American to play Major League Baseball and as a human rights activist and business leader, are all clearly a matter of historical record. Robinson is one of the most important figures in American history and a longtime Stamford resident. Nowhere in America would such a center bearing his name be more appropriate than in Stamford — and no Stamford building is more appropriately worthy than the Old Town Hall.

As a private, non-profit institution, a Jackie Robinson International Center for Human Rights could be initiated by a commission of prominent citizens, perhaps convened by the mayor or by some independently organized community group dedicated to the cause of human rights. Its mission would be to not only chronicle the international history of human rights, with its repository of archival information ranging from historical artifacts to written and visual documentation, but also to function as a living human rights "think tank," with regularly scheduled, year-round public programs and seminars, and with distinguished leaders and speakers invited from around the world. The history of America's own civil rights movement would, of course, be prominently featured, with a special section dedicated to the history of Robinson's breaking

the "color line" in Major League Baseball — arguably the historical beginning of the civil rights movement itself.

Think of the synergies that such an international center in the Old Town Hall would promote, with the University of Connecticut, Rich Forum, The Palace and Stamford's many downtown hotels and restaurants all within walking distance of each other. Think of the tourism.

Think of the educational research opportunities it would provide for students and teachers of all ages and levels of education. Think of the inspirational resource that such a center named for Jackie Robinson — one of America's truly authentic and courageous heroes — would be for young people everywhere, but most especially for our own young people in the

greater Stamford community.

Think of the summer baseball tournaments that the Jackie Robinson Center might help lure to Stamford. Think of how Stamford's dynamic business community, already steeped in globalization and international commerce, might interface with the work of the Jackie Robinson Center — and how, in return, it might be willing to be financially supportive.

At a time when sectarian conflict in the world should remind all Americans of how fortunate we are to live in a country with a Constitution and Bill of Rights to protect our liberties, the Jackie Robinson International Center for Human Rights, operating as a dynamic force for civic responsibility, would be a living symbol that freedom is never guaranteed and a reminder that our extraordinary

system of democratic government and justice for all requires constant vigilance by an informed and participating electorate, which seems to grow dangerously smaller with each succeeding election.

Having outlived its usefulness as the seat of our city's government, how sweetly appropriate it would be for the Old Town Hall to emerge as an even greater instrument of the public good. And how proud an achievement it would be for our Stamford citizenry to restore this important and magnificent building to living greatness. With vision, leadership and imagination, it can and should be done.

Steve Karp is a Stamford native and founder/producing director of the Stamford Theatre Works, a resident professional theater.

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