

Residents should have say in future of Stamford landmark

By Renee Kahn
Old Town Hall

I have thoughts to pass along on three different aspects of the Old Town Hall project: 1) the proposed rear addition; 2) the allocation of interior space and; 3) the already completed exterior work.

As readers may know, I have been concerned with the fate of this iconic building for almost 30 years and have worked on several attempts to rehabilitate and reuse the building. Many readers are familiar with the stack of reports produced by past committees.

The proposed rear addition

The problem with the Old Town Hall is that it is a public building, owned by the citizens of Stamford and paid for with taxpayer money. The addition, while at the rear of the building, is in a prominent site and will be an important element in the downtown streetscape for many decades to come.

Before going ahead, there should be considerable input from the clients — namely us, you and me, the citizens of Stamford.

Architectural renderings can make buildings look great on paper, but they don't always translate well into real structures on

real streets — and by the time problems are discovered, it's too late. There's an old saying that "Physicians bury their mistakes; architects can only plant vines."

There have been many references to the "Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation" as justification for the non-contextual appearance of the addition. Standard No. 9 specifically deals with additions to historic buildings. It states that "the new work shall be differentiated from the old." In the case of the Old Town Hall, that means the addition shouldn't pretend to have been part of the original Beaux Arts structure.

That said, it seems no one (conveniently) bothered to read the rest of the sentence. It says that the new work "shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale and architectural features of the old to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment."

I was informed by the project manager that the State Historical Commission has already seen and "approved" the addition although, given the clear language of Standard No. 9, it is doubtful that this decision would ever pass higher review. While the proposed glass addition does have a high "wow!" quotient, it is hardly "compatible" in the way recommended in Standard No. 9. And do we really want

"wow" for our Old Town Hall?

Here's my concrete suggestion: I think it is vital to have Old Town Hall's owners (you and me) participate more fully in the decision-making process. I haven't seen the model and I don't know how far it is from completion. However, I suggest that the finished model be placed in the lobby of the Stamford Government Center with a comment box next to it.

Don't groan. I know public input is a time-consuming nuisance. Democracy is not the most efficient way to get things done. But given the importance of this building in public life, we must have broad input — and not just the opinions of a chosen few, including myself. If we get some degree of consensus up front, (you'll never get 100 percent) the public can't complain if they don't like the result.

Allocation of Interior Space

Previous studies of the Old Town Hall accepted that the space would be used primarily for arts-related purposes, with some space allocated for commercial use to help pay overhead. The present proposal reverses this formula. Most of the building is commercial, with art space segregated to a portion of the main floor and some of the halls.

In light of the lack of inter-

est from private businesses (no parking, too much hallway, etc.) I suggest we go back to the thinking of previous committees — artists studios, practice rooms, quiet cubbies for writers, offices of arts organizations, etc. I would be happy to meet with interested parties and review successful models elsewhere — art centers that are both self-supporting and

community friendly.

Completed exterior work

This is a perfect example of the "law of unintended consequences." The exterior is greatly improved, although I have some reservations about the materials and design of the front stairs. But then some well-meaning bureaucrat went ahead and put large, tacky bus shelters on At-

lantic and Main streets that hide the refurbished facade.

If these eyesores can't be moved elsewhere, at least make them entirely out of glass so they don't block a view of the building for passersby.

Renee Kahn is a Stamford preservationist and coordinator of the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program.

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