

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
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MEMO

TO: City Clerk, Nikki Elsen

FROM: Mayor Mitch Reynolds



DATE: July 10, 2024

RE: South Branch Library Appeal

The information contained in this memo is meant as supporting documentation for the request to appeal the historic designation of the former South Branch Library at 1307 16th Street S. bestowed by the Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) on 23 May 2024. The request for appeal was filed with the City Clerk's office on 17 June 2024. The Applicant for the historic designation claims that the former South Branch Library should be designated historic based on all four categories stipulated in Sec. 20-90 of the municipal code. The HPC agreed to this request on a divided vote of 3 ayes and 2 nos. The Common Council member assigned to the HPC—the only elected member of the body—was absent and excused from the proceedings.

In general, if the HPC determines any one of the four categories by which an historic designation should be bestowed is valid then the designation can be granted. However, this application fails to effectively support any of the claims of historic value and therefore should be overturned on appeal. Any determination of this appeal's legitimacy should be based solely on whether the applicant has met the criteria of historic designation. Any decision on appeal does not directly relate to final disposition of 1307 16th Street South. A current city-approved plan will result in a repurposing of the current building as a space for new housing units. This appeal is not intended to challenge that decision in any way. However, this appeal is intended to safeguard the criteria used and the process by which historic designations are approved from overuse and/or to accomplish covert objectives.

Section 20-90 of the municipal code creates parameters for historic designation by stipulating that such designation may be bestowed if the following criteria are met for certain structures or sites:

- (1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, State or community;
- (2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, State or local history;
- (3) Embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or of indigenous materials or craftsmanship; or
- (4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer or architect whose individual genius influenced such master's age.

The Applicant claims the former South Branch Library meets all of the criteria listed above. Both the determination of granting a historic designation and determining the appeal of said designation can be a somewhat subjective process. However, there is little provided in the application for historic designation to support any of these.

- 1) Nearly any application for historic designation can make a strong case for the requirement to “Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, State or community.” This is arguably the most subjective of determinants in Sec. 20-90 of the municipal code. The language of the ordinance can be liberally and endlessly interpreted to fit any desired narrative. While this broad expanse of an evaluation tool may lead one to conclude that a need for an update to city ordinance should be considered, for this particular application, the Applicant argues, “There are residents who visited the South Branch Library as children in the 1950s, only to return 30 years later with *their children* (original emphasis), then in subsequent years with *their grandchildren* (original emphasis).” The Common Council members will have to determine for themselves whether this type of reasoning fulfills the requirements of the ordinance.
- 2) The Applicant fails to make any reasoned argument why the former South Branch Library can be “identified with historic personages or with important events in national, State or local history.” While the application indicates this requirement is satisfied, it fails to be addressed effectively. Perhaps the closest the application gets to fulfilling this requirement is broadly setting the historical stage at around the time of the second world war and quoting a longtime librarian celebrating the construction of the new library in 1952. “...now it’s really a dream come true,” was a quote attributed to librarian Nellie MacDonald.
- 3) The Applicant’s claim that the building, “embodies the distinguishing characteristics of a Prairie School influenced mid-century library,” is also not effectively supported in the applicant’s request for historic designation. The building is an amalgamation

of various styles and embodies none of them. The Applicant cites a relatively ubiquitous and common brickwork pattern which is, in fact, often termed a "Common Bond." Other than that, Prairie School elements largely exist in a roof and chimney added 41 years after the original building was constructed. Dr. Les Crocker is a UW-La Crosse professor emeritus and has published books on La Crosse history that have been described as "standard reference" for researchers. Dr. Crocker is also past president of the La Crosse County Historical Society. In his comprehensive work, *Places and Spaces: A Century of Public Buildings, Bridges and Parks in La Crosse, Wisconsin*, Crocker provides this commentary on the additions: "They didn't turn the library into a fake Prairie style building. They modified its harsh shape and visually related it to the neighborhood." The South Branch Library was opened with a flat roof design in 1952. It is apparent that architect, Frank J. Fuchs had no interest in designing a Prairie School-inspired building based on the spartan shape and form of the structure. Moreover, the Applicant's claim that the library building's design is also significantly influenced by the International Style of architecture is not supported other than through a design that originally incorporated the flat roof. Which, again, was essentially fixed by an addition four decades later. From Crocker: "there is little craftsmanship to admire and no details to delight our senses." It is also imprecise to suggest that the "The South Branch Library building is a unique, publicly-owned asset," as the Applicant does in the opening statement of the application for historic designation. Even the floor plan appears to have been simply copied from a different architect for the North Branch Library several years earlier. As Crocker notes, "For once in the history of La Crosse, the north side got the better deal." It is perhaps telling that, while the Applicant has Crocker listed as a source in a bibliography, Crocker's less than flattering evaluations of the South Branch Library are entirely omitted in the historic designation application.

- 4) The claim that the South Branch Library is "representative of the notable work of a master builder...or architect whose individual genius influenced such master's age" is not supported. While Fuchs appeared adept at landing contracts for public buildings, there is no indication that Fuchs had an "individual genius" or that he influenced design at any level. Crocker writes, "From the outside, the South Side Community Library could be a dental clinic or an office building." Crocker also says of Fuchs, "the bareness of this design overcame his abilities" and that the "flat roof was commonly used in the post World War II era even though it makes no sense in our climate." Crocker continues his terse and dismissive explication by saying of the building, "there is a sameness to the whole that is boring" and, "Shape, texture and color are all used according to the rules, but the result is of little interest. The parts aren't interesting enough to command our attention and there is little craftsmanship to admire and no details to delight our senses." The Applicant suggests that some of what is remarkable about Fuchs is the architect's design of the Mary E. Sawyer auditorium. In this withering critique of that building, Crocker says, "I think it is fair to say that Mary E. Sawyer didn't get her money's worth" and, "Architecturally, there is little to say about the building...Visually it contributed nothing to the neighborhood...It provided a large internal space for basketball games and concerts but little else." Again, while Fuchs may have contributed to the

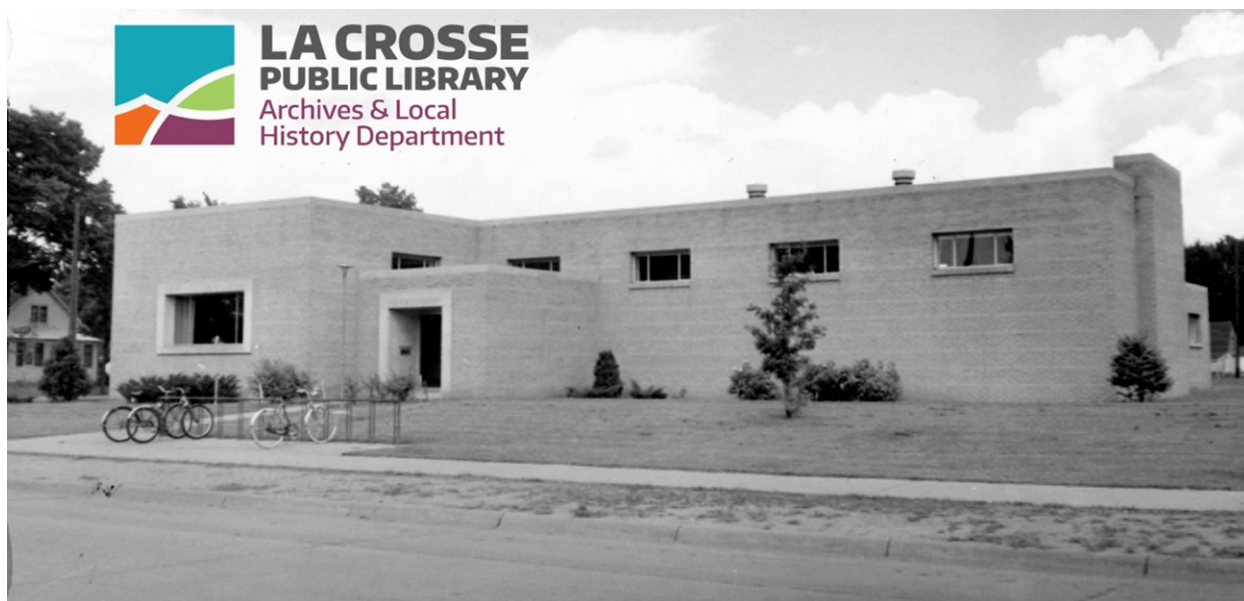
landscape through his designs, it is clear those designs stop short of landing the argument for “individual genius” as prescribed by ordinance. Seeking to check as many boxes as possible, the applicant adds that the contractor for the former library building is also proof of the building’s historic nature by saying the firm was “one of the most prominent General Contractor and Builder firms in La Crosse history” and citing a connection to a few other notable buildings still extant and the longevity of the family-owned business.

In an email correspondence to the Common Council sent on 7 July 2024, the Applicant urges the Council to uphold the historic designation. The reasons to uphold stated in the correspondence focus primarily on the following:

- The goals of a neighborhood association to repurpose the building,
- The desire to support an Economic and Community Development Commission decision on the property made on 26 June 2024,
- The rationale that a significant financial investment already exists within the building; and,
- The urge to focus on the environmental impacts of demolishing a building.

These reasons are clear red herrings that are meant to distract from the lack of foundation in the application and are not in line with the criteria established in the ordinance for the historic designation. This approach suggests the application itself is meant to weaponize the historic designation process to achieve predetermined goals. While all the reasons stated in the Applicant’s email may be laudable, they should not be considered a foundation for upholding a historic designation that is based on specific criteria outlined in city ordinance. Doing so diminishes the integrity of the designation process and creates poor precedent for future actions of the HPC, which is almost entirely an appointed body.

The application for the historic designation of the former South Branch Library at 1307 16th Street South does not meet the requirements set forth in Sec. 20-90 of the municipal code. The Applicant fails to provide adequate evidence to support the claims that the building possesses historic value under any of the four criteria: reflecting cultural, political, economic, or social history; being associated with historic personages or significant events; embodying distinguishing architectural characteristics; or representing the work of a master architect. Expert analysis from Dr. Les Crocker criticizes the architectural significance and craftsmanship of the building, highlighting its lack of notable features and its failure to embody any distinct architectural style. The modifications made to the building over the years do not enhance its historic value. Therefore, based on the city ordinance, the former South Branch Library does not warrant a historic designation and the appeal of such should be granted by the City Council.



South Branch Library, La Crosse, Wisconsin (prior to roof and chimney addition in 1993)



South Branch Library, La Crosse, Wisconsin (since 1993)