

## PD 43 deal gains accolades

[Note- the article below does not indicate whether the University was asked about reasons and thoughts about the steel fire escape at 5711 Woodlawn during discussion with the University spokesperson- GMO]

From Hyde Park Herald December 12, 2012. By Lindsay Welbers

The Woodlawn Home Owner Association and the University of Chicago will receive the Marian and Leon Despres award from the Hyde Park Historical Society for their work on Institutional Planned Development 43.

Institutional Planned Development 43, or PD43, is a document that governs how the U. of C. uses its land and what uses and densities are permitted. Late last year the university hosted a series of meeting with area residents after becoming a major landowner on the 5700 block of Woodlawn Avenues.

PD43 was amended in February to include protections for the residential characteristics of the 5700 block of Woodlawn Avenue. Some residents from the block and surrounding area would like to have seen the block designated a landmark district to protect and restore the historic and architecturally significant buildings. The block includes Frank Lloyd Wrights' Robie House, which has been considered a city landmark since the 1970s. PD43 was the compromise that allowed the university to outline its plans for the buildings including renovations, uses, and potential restorations.

Residents in the area, and those on the block, have mixed opinions on how well the university has handled renovations. They say some changes, like the addition of the Seminary Co-op Bookstore to McGiffert House, 5751 S. Woodlawn Ave., have improved the streetscape. Other things, like the steel staircase leading up to the university-owned 5711 S. Woodlawn Ave., may not respect the spirit of PD43, even if it follows the bounds of the law.

In April, Preservation Chicago put the 5700 block of Woodlawn Avenue on its list of Chicago's "Seven Most Threatened Buildings."

Subsection O of PD43, "The University of Chicago Woodlawn Avenue Plan," details the character-defining features of each building along the 5700 block of Woodlawn Avenue. "Character-defining features" listed for each building in the subsection are to be preserved whenever realistic.

Under the section for 5711 S. Woodlawn Ave., the future home of the Paulson Institute, the "lawn sloping up from the sidewalk and raised entry sequence contribute to the residential character of this building and in concept are character defining." The building is rated orange under the Chicago Historic Resources Survey (RHCS), meaning it "possesses potentially significant architectural or historic features."

The previous owners, Meadville Lombard Seminary, added a wooden staircase and wheelchair ramp to the front of the building to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. U. of C. replaced it with wheelchair access at the rear of the building and a large steel staircase to the front.

“It was great that the university was able to place the ADA access ramp in the back of 5711 S. Woodlawn,” said Roger Huff, who lives in the neighborhood. “During the PD43 amendment process, the university committed to ‘maintain the residential character’ of the Woodlawn Avenue residential buildings. I was really surprised to see the very institutional looking, 10-step steel porch out leading to the front entrance after the construction fence was removed.”

Neighbors said they would have preferred to see a reconstruction of the original porch, instead of the modern addition.

While Sydney Hans, who lives in one of the remaining residential homes on the block, agrees that the steel staircase detracts from the streetscape, she says the university has largely been a good neighbor. “If I would point to one thing to question, as to its appropriateness, that would be a big one,” Hans said, referring to the metal staircase. “That’s part of the reason landmarking is something we would have [preferred]. I really haven’t seen what these wheelchair ramps are going to look like. The Meadville wheelchair ramps were really horrifically awful and detracted greatly from the appearance of the streetscape.”

Though she was a large advocate for creating a landmark district out of the street, a legal protection that would have dictated how buildings could be restored, Hans said the university’s commitment to the street is there. “They have shown more concern, both hearing from the community and going on record about concern for the historic character of those buildings than had been there before.”

The addition of the Seminary Co-op Bookstore and a café to McGiffert House does create a commercial element on the street that wasn’t there before. “I love the bookstore – it doesn’t seem to me to be an intrusion in the community,” Hans said. “It’s a mix of residential and office buildings but things like cafes don’t bother me.”

Linda Thisted, who also lives on the 5700 block of Woodlawn Avenue, is largely pleased with the university’s response to neighbors’ concerns. “They’re good about sending out updates as to what is going to happen in the coming week or two or three,” Thisted said. “I do wish they hadn’t put this alley dumping out onto Woodlawn.”

The university cut down a tree to create an alley that lets out onto Woodlawn Avenue. Thisted said she appreciated that a parking pad was removed from the front yard of one building on the block and replaced with grass.

Huff said he would have liked to see public meetings explain the work done to the exterior of each building before it was begun.

U. of C. spokesman Steve Kloehn said the university is working to keep the public engaged with all invested residents. “As the university’s campus evolves, we remain committed to working closely with our aldermen, community leaders, neighbors and other interested parties,” Kloehn said in a statement e-mailed to the Herald. “That engagement takes place on many levels, in many different forums, depending on the issues at hand. ... We were pleased by the robust dialogue that developed between representatives of the university and members of the Woodlawn Avenues neighborhood over the last 18 months, and grateful to Alderman [Leslie] Hairston [5<sup>th</sup>] for her leadership. That dialogue provides a good foundation for future discussions.”