

July 30, 2011

Gainesville City Commission
200 East University Avenue
Gainesville, FL 32601

Re: HGI appeal of approval for development at 16 & 24 South Main Street

Dear Commissioners:

HGI is appealing the recent approval for development of the property at 16/24 S. Main Street, a project that generated much public interest and controversy when the original structure on this site was demolished due to structural concerns. I was asked by HGI to comment on some of the preservation issues involved because of my experience teaching historic preservation at UF, professional experience with preservation-related architectural and planning projects and my involvement as co-author of the original Gainesville Downtown Preservation Study in the 1970s.

As a professional planner and architect, as well as an academic, who has both served on the City Plan Board and also presented many professional projects for review to the City, I am well aware of the complexity, ambiguity and philosophical conflicts that accompany almost all projects that are reviewed and appealed. Applicability and compliance with multiple community regulations and guidelines; fairness to property owners; protection of the public health, safety and welfare...all are best resolved by appointed and elected officials who can look at an overview of competing interests and determine what is in the best interest of the community. However, please allow me to share some observations with the Commission about the downtown, historic preservation in our community and urban design.

Commercial development occurs in many different urban fabrics within our community. Many are car-oriented strip developments like the Archer Road area while pedestrian-oriented commercial areas like Tioga and Haile Plantation operate at a higher density and create urban environments where vehicles and people share the streetscape. Downtown Gainesville is an urban fabric that is unique in our community where larger scale civic and commercial buildings act as "urban walls" to define the public streetscape. While there are some focal buildings such as the old Federal Building/Hippodrome Theater, courthouses and government structures, the public space of the downtown is overwhelmingly the product of blocks of buildings working together to define a network of streetscapes that tie into larger public environments such as the Downtown Plaza. Downtown is about the street, not the majority of the buildings. Downtown is also unique, in that while not an historic district with an overlay of preservation-related development guidelines, it is arguably our most significant historic area and represents for many citizens one of the primary experiences that describes our "sense of place" as a community. The lack of traditional historic district guidelines is somewhat offset by overlay district and comp plan guidelines that do encourage good historic preservation strategies and development that is compatible with the Downtown urban fabric. These adopted community standards should be considered in reviewing new development.

In terms of specific good historic preservation and urban design practices, there are two primary issues regarding this project: the importance of maintaining the urban fabric of the block and the appropriate architectural treatment of exposed surfaces. Both of these concerns evolve from the desire for new development to be compatible with the surrounding Downtown context which is a goal articulated in both the Comprehensive Plan and the Traditional City Special Area Plan.

Demolition of the existing building created a “gap” in the urban fabric which undermines the consistent “building wall” that defines the Downtown urban fabric. The impact is most significant at corners because the loss of the building wall impacts both intersecting streets and the entire intersection. The best solution in this case would be to insert a new structure that is sensitive to and compatible in scale and surface articulation with nearby historic buildings, reinforcing the consistent urban fabric and historic character of the Downtown.

A second concern of HGI is the treatment of the exposed south facing wall of the building adjacent to the demolished building site. Like the desire for development compatible with the urban design character of the Downtown, exterior architectural expression, sometimes defined in architectural terms as *building wall articulation*, also should be sensitive to and compatible with nearby historic structures. Building wall articulation is the sum of all the architectural elements in a surface including window and door openings; materials and projecting/recessed elements like cornices, belt courses, ledges, trim at openings, ornament, balconies, etc. Windows in a district often have similar sizes, shapes and patterns or rhythms of repetition, even if not identical in design. Certain materials may be characteristic of a place or period in time. Other architectural elements may be common to nearby historic buildings. All these elements together give a building wall a particular “scale” and character which can create a sense of compatibility or a shared sense of place with nearby structures while allowing each building to maintain its own unique identity. Walls that are not articulated to create a compatible scale, rhythm, or shared character can be very disruptive to the urban fabric. Communities struggling to cope with loss of buildings due to urban renewal, fire, storms, neglect, etc. often resort to painted murals to conceal the unarticulated nature of exposed side or rear walls of remaining buildings. While sometimes these can be clever and visually interesting, they are almost always a band aide on a problem: an unarticulated wall that is not compatible with the surrounding fabric.

Another example of buildings losing their compatibility with the surrounding context was the use of metal panel facades in the 1940s and 50s to “modernize” older downtown commercial buildings. Promoted by the aluminum industry and suppliers, the metal skins were applied as a uniform veneer directly to wooden and masonry structures, concealing the original building articulation and often creating new building facades with nothing in common with the community fabric. Downtown Gainesville was not immune from this practice, and in recent years many of the metal “modern” facades were removed and older building articulation underneath restored. Because many of the metal facades do not allow buildings to “breathe” and release moisture condensation and leakage trapped behind the metal, many buildings suffered serious material and structural damage, requiring some buildings to be demolished and others to undertake extensive repairs.

The exposed wall of the building adjacent to the discussed site has been significantly impacted by structural repairs and some form of new “skin” or surface will be required, and metal siding has been suggested. Apart from the concern about moisture problems associated with metal skins, the articulation of this wall is very important to the Downtown. It is a very large wall, is highly visible due to the visual exposure at an intersection and it is located in proximity to the historically compatible character of buildings along 1st Avenue.

To protect the character of the downtown it is important that, if a new infill building is not implemented, then the remaining exposed side wall needs to be articulated in a manner that is compatible with and sensitive to nearby historic buildings as the Traditional City Special Area Plan and Comprehensive Plan call for.

The Commission will sort through the conflicting agendas and legal positions and render a judgment on this particular situation. However, this public debate should not be in vain. Our Downtown is too important for our community. The Commission should clarify the process and procedures for development in the Downtown area and define more clearly how the integrity and character of our historic city center can be protected while still encouraging the investment and development needed for it to continue to be a vibrant and economically successful component of our community.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Peter E. Prugh

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