

TO: Minneapolis Planning and Zoning Commission
FR: Patricia Hampl
RE: 2620 West 44th Street (the Brenda Ueland house)

I'm grateful you are pausing to consider the future of this historic property, and wish to add my thoughts on the subject. I am not automatically in favor of preservation projects, and often see the wisdom of change.

John Berryman once wrote a bitter poem about Minneapolis in the 1960s when so many structures were being destroyed for "urban renewal." He invoked the city as a "site without history." He went on to quote the philosopher Santyana about a city needing markers of past struggle and achievement (and hearbreak) in order to give it "the integuments of a soul" that make it a city. In other words, those who have lived, loved and worked in our midst buoy up our future – indeed, give us a future precisely because we can see that they lived significant creative lives in the past. Right here where we are now.

I have lived my entire life in St Paul, and have seen the city of my childhood destroy places – perhaps most tragically, Interstate 94 decimated the Rondo neighborhood, a sin (what else to call it?) we still can't properly atone for. I have seen – and live in – a neighborhood that was on the verge of ruin (the Cathedral Hill), but was brought back over patient decades, so that today, I frequently find high school students snapping selfies on my front steps on Laurel Avenue. Why? Because it turns out F Scott Fitzgerald's grandmother lived in this rowhouse (who knew? – certainly not me when I moved here in 1980 for the cheap rent). These students are not visiting the house where Fitzgerald wrote anything, but rather where he visited his granny. These students – and the teachers who send them on these field trips – understand that structures of habitation, of personal residence, carry resonance and meaning. They inspire.

In the case of Brenda Ueland's 2620 West 44th this is much more so. It is the residence of a writer whose influence remains intact as a force for imaginative work (Brenda opened the creative process for generations of aspirants in her brilliant *If You Want to Write*), and she anticipated the rise of memoir as the signature genre of our age with *Me*. She was a working writer, a woman writer pulling a professional life together over years of labor – some of it in that house (she wrote a lot of her music criticism there, mostly about the Minneapolis Symphony). But the significance of the house goes to her way of life, her example – as writer, as reader, as success – and yes, as failure too (that essential lesson every creative artist must not only learn, but, alas, live).

I visited her more times than I can count in that house with the fern-green walls, the bookcases floor to ceiling with books old and new, fiction and nonfiction. I was welcomed as “the next generation,” as someone who wanted to be a writer. That house was a campfire where I warmed my future. I probably drank more Manhattans there than bears recounting (I realize now that Brenda didn’t join me, but made me feel I was living the real salon life just by sending me to the kitchen to make a drink for myself).

This is not about nostalgia to which I am allergic and must be as a writer. Preserving her house is about safeguarding the future, oddly enough. It’s a mysterious fact that Minneapolis is now the home to more literary publishing than anywhere outside of New York. We are a literary center. We should act like one, honoring this essential writer who has done much to give the city the integuments that build a soul. Right there on West 44th.

I urge you to give some time to those who care about the “integuments of a soul” in Minneapolis to find a way to use this treasured place for the creative life of future writers and readers.

Sincerely,

Patricia Hampl
Regents Professor
University of Minnesota