

TO: Minneapolis Planning and Zoning Commission  
FR: Patricia Hampl  
RE: 2620 West 44<sup>th</sup> 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 heartbreak) 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 44<sup>th</sup> 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 44<sup>th</sup>.

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