

Statement to the Chicago Commission on Landmarks

Delivered Nov. 2, 2012

Good afternoon and thank you Commissioners for the chance to speak with you today.

Good buildings are a legacy in Chicago, part of an architectural heritage that started with Burnham, Sullivan, Wright and Mies. Buildings matter here.

In a good Chicago building, the different agendas of a building's use, its form, and its engineering and construction are carefully reconciled with each other so that all work together. This is very hard and hard to do well. This is our unique tradition, one that has guided architectural work in this city for decades.

Leading practitioners, both nationally and internationally, have said Prentice is special in this way. They speak not from self-interest: many of them are leading local professionals, who have spoken out at significant damage to their careers. That alone should give you some pause.

They tell us not to rush to judgment. They point out that this building, even with its difficult aspects, is a notable trendsetter. No more august set of eyes can be cast on this building - these are the most knowledgeable people in the world.

Prentice was built forty years ago with groundbreaking engineering now at the root of today's new works. It is as good as any from the office of Bertrand Goldberg Associates. It is one of the office's most pure works.

Any building will suffer after years of neglect. A rejuvenation program can bring Prentice back to its previous honor - as was the Reliance building, recently brought to new glory.

My father's designs came from his meticulous homework. In 1959, he began working closely with obstetricians who served the poorest populations in Chicago, delivering

thousands of babies on tables covered with newspapers. Later his work for Northwestern, Stanford, Harvard, and the Catholic charities grew out of detailed studies of how each medical campus, and importantly, their entire set of facilities, could be best organized to grow for the future. These studies were based on factual and economic analysis, methodical studies of options. He and his clients believed that notable public institutions should be held to higher standards of performance and should not rely on mere lobbying.

Many alternatives have been offered. The partners at SOM, one of Chicago's leading architectural firms, have offered to work with Northwestern to find solutions. These and many other efforts have been turned away without reason.

Not one Goldberg building is landmarked in Chicago. If Prentice building is lost, it will be the first of his major buildings to come down. Chicago will send a clear message to the nation: that no building is safe. Even with reasonable alternatives, architecture can be willingly sacrificed. Other cities across the country will follow your lead. The stain will run long and deep. It will seep into places you least expect. It will last.

Years ago, Liz Hollander, the highly respected Planning Commissioner under Mayor Harold Washington, spoke to me about a similar conflict you face today. Convinced by political forces to clear Block 37, she reluctantly agreed to de-commission two Chicago landmarks on that site. That decision haunted her personally for years.

This Commission was established to be custodians of our city's cultural heritage, our last resort. Please protect it.

Geoff Goldberg

11.2.12