**For Release Wednesday, July 27, 2022**

**Capitol View  
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**Where Have All the Preservationists Gone?**

A demolition permit has been issued for a 100-year-old Lincoln house that once belonged to a retail giant in the Capital City.

A preservationist has come out of retirement to lead the fight against plans to tear down an historic elevator at the Neligh Mills in north central Nebraska.

Out in the Panhandle, the 76-year-old iconic marquee of the Midwest Theater in Scottsbluff is being “decommissioned.” Don’t kid yourself, they’re taking it down in pieces and “replicating” it. That means a new sign that could look something like the old one.

Do you care? Should you care? In this time of cancel culture when tearing down historic statues and changing the names of stadiums and sports teams and prominent buildings has become the norm, I care.

That house in Lincoln sits on a one-acre lot in a prominent neighborhood. Its yard was landscaped by the same person who did the grounds of the state Capitol. The lot was drawn by the guy who also designed the grounds of Henry Ford’s Fair Lane Estate near Detroit.

When it was finished, Donald and Katharine Miller’s home stood out, said retired city planner and historian Ed Zimmer, who wrote the application that landed it, and hundreds of others in the area, on the National Register of Historic Places. “It’s a premier example of a leading Lincoln architectural firm, in an unusual style, on a beautiful site in a premier overall development,” Zimmer told the Lincoln Journal Star.

The owner of a nationally prominent Lincoln tech company purchased the place for $1.5 million and said he was going to tear it down and build a new house. The neighborhood association and the city are helpless to stop it.

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Zimmer’s successor, Stacey Hageman said her phone started ringing, and her email inbox started filling, earlier this year. “People in the neighborhood, people on that street specifically, people on the Historic Preservation Commission. It’s been quite a few people contacting me, and they’re all asking the same thing.” How can we stop this? Short answer: You can’t.

She has been working with the new owner’s architect to make their plans meet neighborhood design standards, so that a new house doesn’t stick out among its neighbors. She said it will be large and traditional and will fit the character of the neighborhood.

Bob Puschendorf, who headed the state historic preservation office at History Nebraska for 25 years, told the Nebraska Examiner that demolition should never be considered for such historic, state-owned structures as the buildings at the Neligh mill, the last, complete 19th century flour mill in the state.

He is calling for the History Nebraska Board of Trustees to hold off tearing down one of the two grain elevator additions and pursue fundraising to restore and save the structure in stages.  “I think there’s a win-win situation there,” he said. “Yes, it will be expensive, but let’s look at alternatives before we jump into this.”

The brick mill, which ground wheat into flour powered by flows from the Elkhorn River, was established in 1873 by the founder of Neligh, a farm town of 1,600 people about 32 miles west of Norfolk.

The executive director of Friends of the Midwest Theater said the Panhandle project is to restore downtown Scottsbluff’s historic icon by using modern materials better suited to withstand Nebraska’s vibrant and challenging weather. Billy J. Estes said the projected cost of the upgrades is $776,000, will take four to six months to complete and includes replication of the original marquee, using the latest in LED technology along with more weather-resistant building materials.

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Since May 3, 1946, the marquee has been showcased in photos and publications featuring Scottsbluff. With regular maintenance, the marquee has endured and was last renovated in 2001.

So, why should we care?

Photographer Joel Sartore, who lives near the Lincoln house, compared the Miller house to fine art, and one of the most preserved vintage homes in Lincoln. Sartore, best known for his work for National Geographic photographing endangered species, told the Lincoln Journal-Star “Nobody would ever dream of destroying paintings or sculptures. But historic homes are even more important creative works because we live our lives in them. In this house, form and function are both on display at the highest levels.”

Save for the likes of Zimmer and Puschendorf and Sartore, where have all the preservationists gone? Where were these people when they heard the sale rumors? When they discovered the building was deteriorating and being infested with diseased vermin? When the last hailstorm broke some more of the neon lighting?

Human nature. They wait for a threat before they demand laws and ordinances and reconsideration. Solutions don’t come until the wrecking ball has been unloaded, until it’s too late.

They don't spend the time or hard work it takes to educate friends, neighbors, and colleagues "why." They don't push city leaders or educate them until it’s decision time. It takes time to build a preservation ethic, to gather the necessary tools.

People say they appreciate history and like to see old buildings saved but aren't there with financial support for preservation or open minds to the options to save and reuse.

Preservation must be proactive, not reactive. Preservationists cannot sit back and wait until there's a threat; there is always a threat. Do things to ensure historic resources never become threatened.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years.*