

WELCH HALL 11 YEARS LATER ...

Eleven years ago, January 5, 1978, your editor sent a letter to James Brickley, then President of EMU, concerning Welch Hall. It was simply an outline, stressing the importance of the building to the University and the community and suggesting a way it might be brought back into productive use. The following is a reprint:

To: President Brickley

From: Jack Harris

Re: Welch Hall

1. Concerned about the **ECHO** report (mid-Fall) and rumors that the administration is considering the possibility of demolishing Welch Hall.
2. Feel a duty to convey not only my own thoughts on the subject, but what I have heard from campus sources, community people, and others.

In talking with Vice-President Smith about my "5 Buildings: Ypsilanti" grant project, I set before him some of the following thoughts about Welch Hall. He urged me to see you.

- a.) Welch Hall is our only state-funded building which survives from the nineteenth century (1896). Sherzer is 1903. Starkweather came as a gift. Welch, then, is a most important building for us historically.
- b.) Architecturally, it is our 'front', our face to the world, facing as it does Cross Street and Washtenaw Avenue and the historic water tower. It presents an excellent classical nineteenth century facade to the public. The details of the front are exceptionally fine. (I have color slides that show details.)
- c.) Economically it may be a problem at this point - I don't know; I would like to have more information about this. As for heat loss, it seems to register about equal to Pray-Harrold on the infra-red map in City Hall - and it is far better in terms of heat loss than many other campus buildings, including Roosevelt.
- d.) The architect's specifications sheet (40+ pp.) (in the archives of our library) indicates the finest materials went into the building. The solid appearance of the structure gives evidence of such durability.
- e.) Most important: Welch serves as the crucial side of a large space, a University Square, so to speak, made up of Sherzer, Ford, McKenny and Welch - with our National Trust Starkweather in the center. This large square, beautifully designed, and now become a focal meeting place for students in good weather, would be destroyed if Welch were removed. This quiet and beautiful enclosed space would be exchanged for the roar of traffic along Cross and Washtenaw. The effect would be an enormous shock; the loss devastating.
- f.) Welch could easily be on the National Register of Historic Places. This means that there would be the ever-increasing possibility of government funds for restoration and/or recycling of the building. Moreover, to tear it down would no doubt make it difficult if not impossible to get funds for recycling of lesser buildings on the campus. This year Columbus, Ohio, lost a \$6,000,000 grant that it had been awarded by the government when the city - after the fact - bulldozed an historic structure in the proposed revitalization area. On the other hand, there is an increasing amount of evidence of the financial benefits of restoration/recycling.
- g.) The effect on public relations of demolishing Welch Hall would be totally negative. First, the town would be deeply concerned. There are a great many people here who attended the Normal School. Secondly, the effect of demolition on alumni relations would, I fear, be seriously detrimental. To lose Welch Hall would be a minus for students, staff, administration and the community.

My personal suggestions for alternatives to demolition:

- I. Appoint a committee to explore the feasibility of recycling Welch Hall – a committee made up of administration, faculty, students, and townspeople (including possibly an architect). This sort of committee, on a larger scale, has been appointed by the President of Wayne State.
 - II. Urge its designation as an historic site. Place it on the National Register and work on getting funds for a larger feasibility study and possible future funds for restoration/recycling.
 - III. Consider the possibility of restoring the exterior to its original glory. It's all there except the balustrade over the front porch.
 - IV. Convert the interior into a totally redesigned space for use mainly as executive offices. (Tear out all the tack work that is now there, restore the ceilings to make use of the wonderful windows, the tops of which are now blocked out.) In other words, make it into a showcase of executive offices. The location – near the Union and Starkweather Center – is perfect.
 - V. If the executive offices could be housed on the second floor, where the best architectural features are, convert the ground floor into a much needed art gallery for the University. We are known in Ann Arbor and Detroit for our creative art department; give it a showcase, place it up front.
 - VI. Every stage of such a progress should be used to the University's advantage in terms of public relations; such a development could serve our image from beginning to end.
 - VII. Meanwhile, convert Pierce Hall – which looks like prison on the outside and a grade school in the halls – into a student services building entirely.
- I HEREBY PLEDGE MY SERVICES TO THE CAUSE OF REVITALIZING WELCH HALL AND THE CAMPUS. I ASSURE YOU THERE ARE OTHERS WHO WOULD BE GLAD TO SERVE AS WELL.

Sincerely,

Jack Harris

NOTE, January 1989: Even as we reprint Jack's letter, Welch Hall is under restoration and will house the University's executive offices. Pierce Hall is being expanded to house all student services (registration, records, financial aid, etc.) Jack's efforts, over so many years, Denis Schmiedeke's major proposal for the adaptive reuse of Welch, the efforts of Preservation Eastern, and the often expressed concern of so many others have all contributed to this splendid outcome. All of us can breathe a big sigh of relief. The saving of Welch Hall is a MAJOR contribution to the preservation of the heritage of the University and this community.