

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

CITY HALL ANNEX, 57 INMAN STREET

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139

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November 6, 1975

To the Honorable, the City Council:

The intent of this letter is to register the opinion of the Historical Commission as to the great value of the Putnam School as an architectural, economic and social resource. In a letter to the City Manager of December 30, 1974, and to the City Council on May 14, 1975, the Historical Commission recorded its concern for the future of this building, stressing that a plan for reuse would be a feasible and desirable alternative to putting a parking lot on the site. Since the Fall of 1974, community groups, developers, and the City Council have supported proposals to study the preservation and reuse of the Putnam School.

Now, developers are still interested in the possibility of rehabilitation of the Putnam School as elderly housing and a family activities center. We endorse this scheme. Distances are greater for the elderly and handicapped, and East Cambridge is conspicuously without such a facility, although it is one of the more remote low- and middle-income neighborhoods in the City.

The Putnam School building should properly be viewed as an invaluable resource to the City of Cambridge. It is still solid, has not suffered major vandalism, and its interior spaces lend themselves easily to conversion into apartment spaces. Its high ceilings, thick masonry and fine detailing represent craftsmanship and elegance impossible to duplicate today; these same features make it an attractive and integral part of the surrounding residential area.

Moreover, a city which so desperately needs good housing stock and usable space can ill afford the waste which demolition of the Putnam School building represents. It is highly doubtful that a parking lot, for example, would offer the City the economic advantages inherent in a housing plan

for the Putnam School. In addition, parking lots and other empty, unwatched spaces have been shown throughout the country to be more of a social hazard than the buildings they replace. A parking lot encourages muggings and vandalism. Constant traffic coming and going to a parking lot disturbs the quiet, and makes the streets less safe for pedestrians and children at play. A parking lot on the Putnam School site would surely help destroy the peaceful and relaxed character of that neighborhood. Finally, it is apparent that East Cambridge's parking problems can only be solved by bringing the community, the business interests, Middlesex County, and the City together to seek a planned solution; piecemeal approaches will offer no long-term relief.

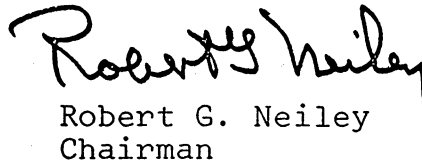
Within the neighborhood, the School is a familiar landmark. It stands on the site of Fort Putnam, which played a key role in driving the British from Boston 200 years ago, and it has been determined to be eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. As a neighborhood fixture, it is a monument to the lives of people who attended school there through the years and who live in its shadow. It forms an integral part of the distinctive streetscape of East Cambridge; with its handsome brickwork and large windows, the building interacts with the other 19th-century homes around it to form an architectural harmony which is fast disappearing in other areas of the City. Preservation of this building is crucial to the architectural heritage of East Cambridge; restoring it to a useful function is essential to the continued social health and stability of the neighborhood. If it is torn down, the loss on all counts will be immediate and permanent.

The Cambridge Historical Commission urges the City Council to consider three additional steps before taking action on this question. First, we urge that the Council direct the City to join with Middlesex County, the East Cambridge Planning Team, and the East Cambridge Businessmen's Association in developing a planned approach to the parking and traffic problems throughout East Cambridge. Second, the Council should direct the City Manager to contract with the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority for a complete feasibility study and development package for the reuse of the structure, taking into account the needs of the community as well as the potential user population. Finally, the Council should hold a public hearing on this issue to allow all sides to be heard.

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I urge the Council to give serious consideration to these proposals as a means of preserving one of Cambridge's finest urban environments. The Commission and its staff are ready to assist in this objective in any way possible.

Yours,


Robert G. Neiley
Chairman

RGN/dl

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Comm. from Robert G. Neiley, Chairman of
of the Historical Commission re: to the
great value of the Putnam School

In City Council,

Nov. 17, 1975

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