



The three single houses, known as "the three sisters" were built in c 1840 and torn down in 1962 for a parking lot. Collectively, these buildings played an important role in the city's ambience. The loss of these buildings is the inspiration for the awards given annually by the CSC to individuals who make exemplary contributions to the quality of life in Charleston. **The Three Sisters Awards will be presented on Monday, January 29, 2007, at 6 p.m. at the Cathedral of St. Luke and St. Paul—at Coming and Vanderhorst Streets.** The event is free and open to the public.

2006 LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN:

In 2003 The Committee to Save the City unveiled its Vision for Marion Square at a reception of over 400 in the Gold Room of the Francis Marion. Now, under the leadership of the Bennett-Hofford Company the first piece of what can become a beautiful classical urban square will come before the BZA in January of 2007.

Our vision is a solution to the plague of inappropriate, dumbed-down, in-your-face architecture that violates our respected BAR ordinance and threatens to destroy Charleston's coherent urban fabric and ambience. Most notable and egregious recent examples include the bland Jewish Studies Center, the incongruous College of Charleston Library, and the insect-like "chapeau" atop the Millennium building at Marion Square.

Sadly, in the late 1950s, the west wing of the "Old Citadel" was demolished for the hideous pink/black elephant of the former County Library, the carcass of which remains as a shameful eyesore to this beautiful public space. As a community we now have a golden opportunity to right the wrongs of the past and move forward to create a magnificent new center of the city. We urge the thousands who have supported a classical design for the streets around Marion Square (and elsewhere) to now come forth and demand that the excellent classical design by the architects of Bennett-Hofford be implemented. As referenced elsewhere in this Alert, the height, scale, and mass are appropriate for this corner of the square.

Jack Simmons



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Hutson Street elevation. The hotel plans are a model of how to keep parking facilities discrete. The garage will hold 133 cars and can be entered on Hutson Street.

Don't Forget...

Tuesday, January 2: BZA Meeting

75 Calhoun Street. 5 p.m. To grant a height variance (not for more height but to reconfigure the zoning envelope).



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The southern facade of the hotel, facing Marion Square, will feature a colonnade over arched doorways and a rusticated base of cast stone. Above the base, the building will be of pale stucco. Though quite simple in design, there is enough small-scale detailing to provide the chiaroscuro effect that is characteristic of Charleston architecture. Sizeable buildings seem much smaller when the detailing is harmonious with neighboring buildings. The Mills House, which is about the same height as the proposed hotel, is a good example of another building which has such pleasing details that one thinks only of its beauty, not its size.

COMMON SENSE AND BEAUTY ON MARION SQUARE

By Professor Robert Russell

(Professor Russell is the chair of the Program in Historic Preservation and Community Planning at the College of Charleston. He teaches classes in urban design and architectural history, and is a resident of Radcliffeborough.)

John Keegan, the great British military historian, has written about how quickly modern battlefields become shrouded in smoke, making any clear view of what is happening impossible. Sometimes this results in mere confusion. But it also allows those who think they know what is happening to continue on their way, confident in the outcome. Until the smoke clears.

The battle of Marion Square is sort of like this. It is taking place in a clearly recognizable space, but that is about all that is clear about it. Alliances have shifted: former co-belligerents (allies might be too cozy a term) have ended up on opposites sides. There is a certain amount of honest disagreement about this battle, and a huge amount of smoke-blowing. Most people are left in confusion.

The opening salvoes of the engagement were fired in October 2003, when The Committee to Save the City and the Mazyck-Wraggborough Neighborhood Association sponsored the Vision for Marion Square. This provided a venue for classical architects from Charleston and elsewhere to argue—by means of architectural renderings—for the possibility of a coherent future for this part of town. Well. You would have thought, listening to some voices, that the totalitarians had arrived: imposing a single, lock-step future on this beloved square. Architects who do not like classical architecture complained that it was a silly and impractical exercise. They should know—it was exactly the way they were taught in school, except, of course, for the classicism.

Once the hubbub surrounding this exhibition died down there was a long period where nothing happened. The old Federal Building just stood there. The old library just stood there. The reality of development—which is that it doesn't happen if it's not going to be profitable—trumped the Vision. But the Vision provided, well, a vision: an image of a square surrounded by buildings that, while not looking like one another, nevertheless shared a common language and so could relate to one another. Simply by existing, this Vision was potentially influential.

So it should not be surprising that someone was influenced by what he saw. When the owners of the site at the northwest corner of Marion Square decided it was time to put something on their property, they did two things that were irritating to various constituencies: they calculated the costs of building on such a prime site and they decided to go with a classical—or classically inspired—building. The first calculation meant that the building had to be big; the second that it was never going to satisfy a large number of Charleston architects who were ideologically opposed to classicism under any circumstances.

The architectural style wars are nothing new to Charleston, having started in 1958, ironically enough on the very site now being fought over again. The old County Library was among the first Modernist

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SAVE THE DATES

Tuesday, January 2: BZA Meeting at 75 Calhoun Street. 5 p.m. To grant a height variance (not for more height but to reconfigure the zoning envelope). Actually the volume of the hotel proposed for the northwest corner of Marion Square would be reduced by seven percent.

Monday, January 29: Annual Membership Meeting and Reception. Three Sisters Awards. 6 p.m. Cathedral of St. Luke and St. Paul—at Coming and Vanderhorst Streets. (There is parking across the street). The event is free and open to the public.

THE HOTEL ON MARION SQUARE

A Beautiful First Step in Restoring Marion Square

With the revitalization of Upper King Street, Marion Square has become the center of Charleston, a center that is also a symbol of urban decay. Two incongruous and much-hated buildings have been empty for years — the county library building at the northwest corner and the federal building on the east side of the square. The drive-in bank, the gas station and most of the buildings along the south side are also sad remnants of a time when Charleston was a dying city. Mayor Riley recalls Christmas in 1975 — “There was no one at all on the street.” The city has since undergone a remarkable restoration, extending well above Calhoun Street. Now it is time to restore Marion Square as an appropriate heart of a unique historic city.

The proposed hotel would restore civility and beauty to the northwest corner. The height, scale and mass of the hotel building were given conceptual approval by the BAR in December 2005. On Tuesday, January 2, the architects will apply to the BZA for a variance to reconfigure the volume and allow the symmetrical shape of the proposed hotel. Current zoning codes call for a bizarrely-shaped structure—not at all the sort of symmetry which distinguishes Charleston’s historic buildings. The proposed building will have seven percent less volume than that which is permitted under the zoning code.

The proposed hotel is a model of how to design for an historic city without imitating another building. It speaks the architectural language of Charleston in its form and in its details. Windows are vertical. They have proper shutters. The hipped roof, the colonnade, the rusticated base and the symmetry are all familiar details in Charleston streetscapes.

The Vision for Marion Square has received considerable attention and acclaim internationally. “Will Charleston Get it Right?” asked *Icon Magazine’s* headline for an article by Anthony Tung, who noted that the, “ambitious holistic plan to revitalize the South Carolina city may set a new standard for urban redevelopment.” In November the Vision was presented at an international conference for architects in Venice.

When the Rally Round the Square Committee presented the Vision in October 2003, the hope was that a savvy local developer would be inspired by its beauty. Michael Bennett and Hank Hofford have risen to the challenge and have actually hired architects of the Vision to design a real hotel for the site of the country library building.

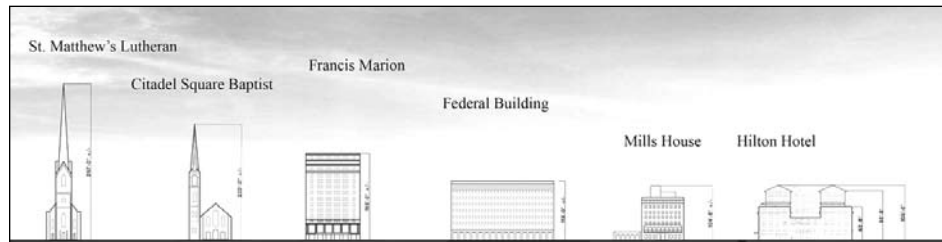
It is crucial that those who want to see a harmonious restoration of the area around Marion Square support the proposed hotel design. ■



The pedestrian entrance to the hotel is on King Street at the northwest corner of Marion Square. Along King Street there will be retail space. The hotel façade has been pulled back from the property line in order to provide a wider sidewalk that could accommodate a sidewalk café. The hotel façade itself is stepped back at five stories along King Street.

There is a parking facility hidden well inside the building, which is entered from Hutson Street.

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The alarm by some concerned with the height of the proposed hotel is curious. As Professor Robert Russell notes, there would likely have been much taller buildings in the area, similar to the Francis Marion, if development had not stopped because of the Depression and later the migration to the suburbs. As the chart shows, the proposed hotel is shorter than other important buildings around the square and only slightly taller than the Mills House Hotel.

Common Sense and Beauty On Marion Square, continued from cover.

buildings on the peninsula and it did not make a good impression. Part of the antipathy generated by the library can be set down to the ingrained reactionary attitude of Charleston towards anything ‘from off,’ but part of it was also a recognition that this new architecture was deeply and permanently hostile to the traditions of the city. Mid-twentieth-century preservationists did not seek accommodation with modern buildings because they recognized them, almost instinctively, as inimical to the city. The modernism that went up in the city was generally mediocre or worse, and this did not help either.

It is still true that many Charlestonians feel a visceral hostility to Modernist buildings in the city. But as the twentieth century wore on and the city defined itself more and more as a heritage tourism destination, objections to Modernist insertions in the city’s fabric took on an increasingly calculated tone, from references to killing the goose that laid the golden egg to the more recent introduction of the marketing idea of ‘branding’ as in a slavish devotion to the Charleston ‘brand,’ which, whatever it might actually be, is certainly NOT modernist.

The novel element in the battle for Marion Square concerns the first calculation made by the developers, however, not with their stylistic choice. This has to do with the size of the hotel proposed to be built on the site of the old library: current plans call for it to rise eight stories in its center (the total height is several feet lower than the Federal Building, facing the Square across Meeting Street), though the King Street wall only goes up five stories. It is this element of the project that has some citizens and preservationists up in arms. They feel—and have stated publicly—that a building of this size is too big for Charleston. Period. It is true that tall buildings have not done well in the city. The half dozen or so, mostly scattered around the edges of the city, are generally unfortunate additions to the peninsula’s skyline. The one exception is the Francis Marion Hotel, at the southwest corner of Marion Square. It looks pretty good if you happen to be standing in front of Millennium Music, looking at the two finished sides of the hotel. The view from the west or the north, though, is not so hot. These sides of the hotel were clearly intended not to be seen, the assumption apparently being, in 1922 when the Francis Marion was begun, that equally tall buildings would soon occupy the sites around it. The 1920s were a decade when important cities were building new centers — New York was creating midtown Manhattan, Detroit was building a new high rise center a couple of miles up Woodward Ave from the Detroit River, Chicago was marching new tall

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Common Sense and Beauty On Marion Square, continued from previous page.

buildings up Michigan Avenue, north of the Loop. But Charleston was none of these places, and the Francis Marion hotel remained the forlorn singular remnant of the roaring twenties at Marion Square. Charlestonians took to the building, however. Perhaps because it had a great ballroom, perhaps because Marion Square was so far away from the places that counted in Charleston in the early twentieth century that it was almost like being in a foreign country. It was no threat to the staid rhythms of Broad Street. People were sorry when it failed and closed.

The Francis Marion never gained a reputation as a too-tall building. When you look at it across the expanse of Marion Square it appears majestic. It does not loom. At least not to most people. It actually sets the scale for that part of town—more so than the much more historic old Citadel (now the Embassy Suites hotel) sprawled across the northern end of the square.

At ten acres, Marion Square is the largest urban open space on the peninsula. Hampton Park is much larger, but a park is not a square. A square is defined as much by the buildings surrounding it as by what is in it. Since before the Civil War, Marion Square has accommodated massive buildings: the old Citadel first, but more importantly the Citadel Square Baptist Church (1855-6) on Meeting Street, whose original steeple soared 220 feet before it was broken off in the hurricane of 1885 and further damaged in the earthquake the next year. A couple of years after Appomattox, German Lutherans built St. Matthew’s church across the square from the Baptists. Their building was not as huge, but their steeple—at 265 feet—was a lot taller. No one has ever complained that these churches are too large for Charleston, or that they are unmannerly upstarts because their steeples rise above St. Michael’s. Put Citadel

Square Baptist where First Baptist is on Church Street, however, and there would be trouble. It would not fit.

Geometry, ratios and proportional relationships do not, in themselves, provide the basis for good urban design. But over the centuries people have figured out some pretty effective rules of thumb. One of these is that big open spaces—be they paved piazzas or grassy squares—can absorb big buildings; much bigger than even broad streets can manage. It is unacceptably crude to insist that there is some one thing that can be identified as ‘Charleston scale.’ Charleston has several scales, and they all work pretty well. The scale of Marion Square is not the scale of lower Tradd Street, nor even the scale of White Point Garden, and what would be out of scale in those other locations is easily accommodated by the square.

Citizens concerned about the proposed new hotel on Marion Square warn of the dangers of the Manhattanization of the peninsula. Fears of concrete canyons are expressed at public meetings and in letters to the editor. This is smoke-blowing. Marion Square is not Bryant Park and if you have ever seen the 42-story Equitable Building on Broadway just above Wall Street (when it was erected in 1915 it provoked the first alliterative fears of concrete canyons), you know it is a long way from an eight-story hotel to this.

This is not to say that all is well at Marion Square. The scale of the square rapidly shifts downward as you move away from the open space. Any building big enough to hold the square on its front will have to modulate to accommodate the smaller scale behind it. And a bad, or even run-of-the-mill eight-story building will be a real stinker. These are real problems that still have to be confronted and dealt with. But at least they are real. The issue of the suitability of this proposed larger scale on Marion Square is manufactured. It is a red herring. ■

Now is the Time to Renew Your Membership!

Membership in The Committee To Save The City is open to all persons or businesses that are interested in maintaining or improving the ambience of urban living, especially as it relates to Charleston, South Carolina. We encourage anyone who has an interest in our goals to join The Committee by completing THIS FORM. Please mail this with check payable to THE COMMITTEE TO SAVE THE CITY.

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THE CHARLESTON CITY GUARDIAN ALERT
The Committee To Save the City, Inc.

was organized in 1996 by residents dedicated to restoring the peaceful ambience of Charleston’s neighborhoods and protecting her fragile historic districts, thereby enhancing the quality of resident life and visitor experience. Our annual Three Sisters Awards are named in honor of three single houses, c. 1840, which were destroyed in 1962 to avoid real estate property taxes. Collectively Charleston’s single houses are crucial to the city’s sense of place. The CSC awards honor individuals who are also city treasures, who make exemplary contributions to the special character and quality of life in Charleston.

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