

March 17, 2021

Alderman Tom Tunney, Chairman Committee on Zoning
Landmarks and Building Standards, City of Chicago
121 N. LaSalle St. Chicago, IL 60602
c/o Raymond Valadez, Raymond.Valadez@cityofchicago.org

Dear Chairman Tunney and Members of the Committee:

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), a Chicago-based international not-for-profit organization that advocates for the preservation of architecture and landscapes worldwide, strongly opposes the proposed Chicago zoning amendment that would restrict or prohibit establishing cultural exhibits and house museums in “R” zoning districts in the city and would require special use permits in others.

This zoning proposal would make the future uncertain for existing cultural exhibits and house museums and could derail efforts already underway to open new cultural institutions in historic buildings in residential communities. Two of those buildings that could potentially be impacted are icons of the American Civil Rights Movement. The first is the Emmett Till and Mamie Till Mobley Home in Woodlawn, which the organization, Blacks in Green, is developing as a museum. The second is the Chicago Landmark Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ in Bronzeville, which Senators Durbin and Duckworth have just proposed be designated a federally protected National Park Service site (cultural exhibit and museum) that would have the highest level of federal support and protection available. Would this proposed zoning change prevent the Emmett Till House from becoming a museum and would it prevent the expansion of the Roberts Temple Church into a National Park Service site? If so, the zoning change would have the effect of putting blinders on Chicago’s distinguished history and denying the important role that the city has played in shaping 19th and 20th century American history.

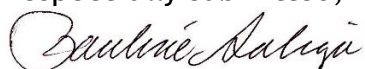
Given the importance of these and other historic sites, which happen to be located in residential areas of Chicago, it is unconscionable that the City of Chicago would consider restricting or prohibit establishing cultural exhibits and house museums in “R” zoning districts. These existing and new institutions would add extraordinary cultural and economic value to the neighborhoods in which they are located, to the City of Chicago as a whole, and most importantly to our Nation. They are the places where paradigm-shifting social movements were forged, such as the advancement of American Civil Rights in the Roberts Temple Church, Immigrant Rights at the Jane Addams Hull House, Labor Law at the Pullman National Historic Site, and LGBTQ Rights at the Roger Brown Study Collection. How could a world-renowned city like Chicago that helped transform 19th and 20th century American society, even consider turning its back on the PLACES where those historic transformations were born and took shape?

The existing cultural exhibits and house museums in Chicago already compatibly exist in “R” zoned districts throughout the city and operate under city-mandated rules regarding size,

parking and tour bus requirements, hours of operation and visitor capacity. There are dozens of reasons why these institutions should be supported. These cultural treasures, including SAH's own historic headquarters, the Charnley-Persky House, contribute to the historic character of their residential neighborhoods. Other of these institutions, such as Wrightwood 659, serve as community, national and international centers for exhibitions and programs focusing on design, social justice, and other societal challenges in the 21st century. This proposed zoning change would jeopardize the ability of Wrightwood 659 to fulfill its crucially important mission which is rooted in inclusion, diversity and equity. In addition, the residents of the neighborhoods themselves feel a sense of pride in their local cultural exhibit or house museum and often benefit from the economic growth and impact that these institutions provide. Finally, many of the existing cultural exhibits and house museums in "R" districts are on the National Register of Historic Places or are National Historic Landmarks, such as Glessner House, Robie House, and the Pullman National Monument, and they represent some of the most significant architectural landmarks in Chicago and the United States. These buildings were recognized, listed, and transformed into house museums and cultural exhibits many years ago. It is important that the same opportunities exist for cultural resources yet to be discovered. As our understanding of our culture expands to be inclusive of everyone, we must ensure that the same opportunities for new house museums and cultural exhibits are carried forward.

On behalf of the Society of Architectural Historians, I urge you to vote against the proposed changes in the zoning code that, at best, would discourage the success of existing Chicago cultural exhibits and house museums and, at worst, would prevent the creation of new Chicago exhibits and house museums. These restrictions and prohibitions would be viewed nationally and internationally as parochial because they would prevent Chicago from taking its rightful place as a city that acknowledges its societal shortcomings, is shaping an equitable future, and is trying to build a sustainable future for its most important historic institutions, both large and small.

Respectfully submitted,



Pauline Saliga, Executive Director
Society of Architectural Historians

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