Pink house v. Metro State

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The expansion of Metropolitan State University’s St. Paul campus has not been without controversy. The height of the parking ramp, for example, didn’t make the university many friends in the neighborhood. However, blowback over the obstructed view of downtown wasn’t the only resistance the school faced. Situated on the southeast corner of Metro State’s new parking ramp, a small, uniquely-styled dwelling at 393 Bates Avenue refused to surrender to the university’s construction plans.

Built in the 1920s and inspired by the Spanish style, the house at 393 Bates had a flair all its own. While the actual structure was standard block wall, the exterior was a pastel-pink stucco surface which, at the front of the house, curved outward where it met the ground. The sidewalk was angled to follow the jutted-out contour of the entryway, which had two slender, single-side windows bookending the front door.

With an otherwise flat top, the only sign of a standard pitch roof was the house’s most distinctive feature of all: two tiny pent roofs perched atop the outside edges of the front of the house. Former Pioneer Press columnist Larry Millett’s described then as “eyebrows above the side windows.” All of these unique features befit a property bent on nonconformity and an unwillingness to go down easily.

This unwillingness began a few years back, when Metro State’s growth created the need for a new science center, student center and multi-level parking ramp. The proposed size of the ramp and surface lot required the purchase of three properties along Bates Avenue, one of which was the pink house. The other two purchases went off in relatively smooth fashion. The 393 Bates location: not so much.

“Our attempts at purchasing the three properties began in earnest around 2012 or 2013,” said Dan Hambrock, who is the associate vice president of Facilities Management at Metro State. When asked what the biggest obstacle was to acquiring the property at 393 Bates, he answered, “reaching an agreeable price.”

Over the years, the house was privately bought and sold several times. Then, in 2009, JTRBSDC, Inc., a corporate partnership based in St. Paul, purchased 393 Bates for $1. Interestingly, in 2015, the house was again sold to one of the partnership’s members for $525,000; this is a seemingly improbable number, given that the house’s market value was well below this figure.

Prior to this, in 2013, Metro State offered to buy the lot for a purchase price of $275,000. The owners accepted, planning to move the house to a new location. But Metro State had to withdraw this offer due to the bylaws of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU). The two properties next door had sold for much less, and MnSCU limits how much can be offered above a property’s value.

This decision is ultimately made at the state level, where both the Minnesota Senate and House have to sign off and approve the purchase offer. When it reached the Legislature, “the House rejected the offer and the Senate was quiet,” said Hambrock. Moreover, he added, “In 2014, the Legislature placed a specific cap on the allowable dollar amount which can be offered, that being no more than 10 percent above the property’s appraised value.” This limitation tied Metro State’s hands even more when it came to price negotiations, eventually leading to a monetary impasse between the school and the owners of 393 Bates.

During this time, Metro State proceeded with its expansion while also accommodating for its singular pink neighbor, which was surrounded by graded dirt and construction equipment.

In an effort to stabilize the ground of 393 Bates, a retaining wall was built from steel I-beams and 4 inch by 8 inch timbers that were driven into the earth. This maintained the integrity of the land around the house as the dirt next door was dug out for the parking ramp. A driveway leading to the back of the pink house also limited the length of the surface lot, which was initially designed to extend along Sixth Street all the way from Maria Avenue to Bates Avenue.

In the midst of this, MnSCU directed Metro State to continue pursuing direct negotiations. Hambrock said that after exhausting this option, “We were given approval by MnSCU’s board of trustees to seek eminent domain,which we didwith the Ramsey County District Court in late 2014. After a judge’s OK, we gained approval in October of 2015, and three court-appointed commissioners were chosen to find a fair price to compensate the owners, which either party can appeal.”

Hambrock added, “We gave them until the end of November to move the house. When they failed to do so, we had no other option but to take it down.” And so the saga ended on an overcast day in late February, with a large yellow excavator culminating the demise of the small, peculiar pink house.

With all properties now acquired and prepped for development, future plans are for some leveling off of the uphill slope in order to extend the surface lot, as initially intended. This will eventually replace the existing surface lot on the corner of Maria Avenue and Sixth Street, which will become a nursing and Allied Health building, with classrooms and labs. In turn, the remaining surface lot, which is yet to be constructed on the corner of Bates and Sixth Street, will later be converted to multi-level parking, an attached addition to the existing ramp.

Photos:

File: Pink house before destruction.jpg

Credit: Kevin Miller

Caption: With an otherwise flat-top design, the only sign of a standard pitch roof was the house’s most distinctive feature of all: two tiny pent roofs perched atop the outside edges of the front of the house.

File: Mid destruction.jpg

Credit: Courtesy of Dan Hambrock

Caption: The saga ended on an overcast day in late February, with a large yellow excavator culminating the demise of the small, peculiar pink house.

File: empty field.jpg

Credit: Courtesy of Dan Hambrock

Caption: Future plans are for some leveling off of the uphill slope in order to extend the surface lot, as initially intended.