

NEW HAVEN HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

165 Church Street, 5th Floor, New Haven, Connecticut 06510

December 19, 2019

Ms. Aicha Woods
Executive Director
City Plan Department
City of New Haven

Mr. Jeromy Powers
Lead Planner
Yale University

Via electronic mail

SUBJECT: 1142 Chapel Street emergency demolition order

During its December 11, 2019 regular monthly meeting, the Historic District Commission (HDC) of the City of New Haven was presented with Yale University's plan to demolish the structure at 1142 Chapel Street. The long-abandoned property was purchased by Yale in June, 2019; the City issued an emergency demolition order on October 22, 2019.

The Commission has several concerns:

1. Emergency demolition: The HDC was told that the City issued an Emergency Demolition Order, although neither the Yale presenter nor City staff was in possession of a copy. The HDC anecdotally understands that the Order requires demolition either "within 24 hours" or "within one week" from its date of issuance. Although the standard wording of the Order contains inconsistencies and confusing language, it is apparent that Yale is in violation of its terms. However, nobody seems ready to enforce the Order. Since the building has stood for 27 years after a fire, it is probable that this is not a true emergency.

The City has an alternative form of demolition order for historic properties which might have been more appropriate in this case: a 90-day Delay of Demolition Order.

2. Role of the Commission: The City is developing an internal protocol, now in draft form, which calls for consultations with entities charged with protecting the City's rich architectural heritage before an Emergency Demolition Order is issued. Failing to consult with these parties bypasses the Commission's role in assessing and preserving historically important assets. Unless public safety is endangered, the use of this type of Order prevents the Commission and the wider preservation community from suggesting

NEW HAVEN HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

165 Church Street, 5th Floor, New Haven, Connecticut 06510

alternative measures to adapt or salvage all or part of the building.

3. Demolition by neglect: The structure has been empty and untended since a substantial fire in 1992. The Commission is on record in several similar instances that the City's failure to enforce public policy regarding abandonment and nuisance eventually leads to demolition. This is a City-wide problem that should be addressed by ordinance, including stiffer penalties for failure to maintain private property.
4. Loss of historic fabric: 1142 is in the Chapel Street National Register Historic District. The nearly century old building has dignified cast-stone architectural details, a human two-story scale, and faces the recently refurbished Graduate Hotel. The fire compromised the roof, but the street façade – the interface with the neighborhood -- remains intact and seemingly in good condition. The loss of 1142 Chapel Street will create a significant void in the streetscape and diminish the entire neighborhood's historic character. Under the draft demolition protocol, this would call for a preservation engineer— not just a civil engineer— to review the building components and make recommendations *before* a demolition order is issued. A preservation professional might be asked to explore how the facade can be stabilized until a new building is constructed behind it.
5. No plan for reuse or replacement: Yale representatives were not aware of plans or options for the lot's future use (post-demolition) and had not considered saving the façade. It was acknowledged to the HDC that Yale now owns two-thirds of the block along York, Chapel and Crown Streets. Destroying historic structures for the purpose of land-banking should be vigorously discouraged.

The Historic District Commission requests that Yale University and the City of New Haven take the following steps with regard to 1142 Chapel Street:

- To avoid any risk to public safety, erect sidewalk protection on Chapel Street but temporarily defer any demolition;
- Engage a preservation engineer to evaluate the building, with particular attention to preserving the façade;
- Stabilize the existing façade and seek alternatives to incorporate it in any future construction on this and adjacent parcels; and

NEW HAVEN HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

165 Church Street, 5th Floor, New Haven, Connecticut 06510

- As a final resort, the Commission asks that the historic façade be fully measured, photographed, and documented then physically deconstructed and salvaged for use at another location.

On behalf of the commission, I urge further consideration regarding the future of this historic structure at 1142 Chapel Street in the City of New Haven.

Sincerely,

Katharine M. Learned

Katharine Mace Learned

Chair, Historic District Commission

Cc: Jim Turcio, City of New Haven Building Department
Mike Piscitelli, City of New Haven Economic Development
Elizabeth Holt, New Haven Preservation Trust
Thomas Kimberly, Clerk, Historic District Commission