



HOW WE GOT HERE

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The short story about the Alpha Chapter Houses, and my perspective about it.

by **Jim Maynard A'06**

I am the chapter advisor for the Alpha chapter, and I have been since 2007– May 28th to be exact. I was initiated after I had worked at UW-Madison for about six years. As an adult member, I did not live in the chapter houses at all. I have some earlier connections to AXE: I helped out in 2002 for the Centennial Celebration, and I swear I tried to get invited to a party sometime in the fall of 1979. I lived in Stoughton, WI for years and liked to come up to Madison some weekends. Needless to say, I did not know the challenge, so, I was not admitted.

Instead, I got to know the people and the structure. I own a very old house and owned it at the time of my initiation. I had heard a lot of stories about the condition of the houses and did a good bit of work on the electrical system in the form of troubleshooting, not replacement. I know firsthand how much work it takes to get ahead of a building that has not been maintained as thoroughly as it has been worn out. I am partly to blame, as membership went up a bit and this only accelerated the rate of wear. I loved going in to “check on” the parties just to enjoy the ambiance. I also learned to DJ from Jay and Ben. Some of the best times of my life. I made some friends I treasure like Aaron and Jordan, Ben and Pony, Lina, Gwen and Jackie, Dmitri, Jake, Tom and Amanda, Mike, Nick and Ryan, Brad and Sylvia, Drew, Liz, Julia, Praki, and Tasha. There are so many more.

I wanted to help get them a new place. I learned through the membership how students and volunteers helped with the repairs, maintenance, and costs. I could see the wear and tear. Later, I found out that

almost every repair we had to make came with the additional cost of code compliance. I watched students grapple with the administrative details of running an organization. It is not easy for adults to manage it— much less so for students. The turnover, loss of institutional knowledge, and rigidity of the local authorities made it harder. Add that to the University bureaucracy and it is a huge lift for the actives. Not to say there were no other concerns; it seemed to me that there was not enough set aside for the houses. The reasons for this were not neglect, but compassion.

I looked into the records and I talked to alumni. The first house was purchased in 1925, and the second was added in about 1952. The 621 N. Lake St. house was built before 1895. I do not know when 619 was built, but I am sure the historic preservation society’s people in Madison can tell you. There was an attempt to build a new place sometime in the late 1970s, maybe 1978. There were property line issues with adjacent ownership. The funding structure was loosely a collection of faculty. The advisor and Alphacorp would simply ask alumni and parents to volunteer their time or money as projects arose. It worked well enough in the early days of the organization, but as the repairs got bigger and the regulations got tighter, the model started to fail.

In 2015, a water main leak on Mendota Court caused some erosion of the soil under the north wall of 621. Soon, we had to pay for giant iron support beams to hold it in place. They were temporary and meant to be compliant for about three years... the clock was ticking. Boiler failures started to get more frequent, and the danger and damage caused by freezing became riskier. It was not common in the early 2000s for students to spend breaks or the summer in the houses as was the norm in times past. Sometimes, if it got really cold, the risk of the boilers shutting down became greater. I would go check on them over winter breaks. I still feel like I failed the frat when I did not check them on a very cold day in the winter of 2019. I was there a

couple of days before and it all seemed all right. A week later they had frozen and piping from both the registers and the recently installed sprinkler piping had burst. This news was even harder to take because the sprinkler system was installed about two years previously with funds from yet another mortgage on 621. Now we had houses that were essentially uninhabitable, no way to rent rooms, and a recent mortgage to pay along with property taxes, water, sewer, and other services like trash collection. We talked about the possibilities in 2016 and 2017 before the “boiler incident.” We asked the actives, the alumni, and the faculty at the chemistry department.

The kids wanted a new “Mega House.” The costs to fully restore the two houses stood at 2.5 million in 2017.

We dallied with FMG and Pennington—another fraternal funds enterprise—but the problem of engaging the past alums remained: many of them did not want to tear down the old houses and they were not prone to act in any capacity. This condition started before I ever was initiated and this lack of

connection is still far from resolved. Even as late as 2020, there is no real consensus even in the face of the very real demise of the rental enterprise of the fraternity buildings. Desperate measures were considered and taken. It was not until the alums whom I had advised became professionally established that a real plan came to be. We paid the taxes out of our own pockets and we formed an executive committee to allow decisions to be made quickly. This committee had the authority to sign agreements and we entertained bids to develop the site, which is exceedingly desirable. We signed with Patrick Properties, a builder with experience in the campus area—but as great a step as this was, we were a long way from the goal of a new place.

We had real concerns about the historical status of the properties—the historical preservation societies in Madison are well-to-do and well-organized. They had immediate opposition to our project from the beginning.

We had looked to grants and public funding to restore but as a non-profit corporation, we were not eligible for much grant money. A committee for the project was created by the alder for District 8, Amol Goyal. The meetings were contentious and vigorously opposed by the historical preservationists, headed by Bob Klebba. After weeks of meetings, a report was filed on a Tuesday in December of 2021. The report was neutral in tone about the approval of the project, but the old version was immediately pulled and a new report was issued the next day—even less in favor of the proposal. A few weeks later, we met with the plan commission. We testified for over an hour as a group. Our proposal was denied with no debate. At this point, the odds of success dropped precipitously. We had already made some irrevocable

decisions, like selling one of the houses to the developer. We had to pay off the mortgage but there might still be enough to remodel 619 to some extent... make it legally habitable at least. It would mean about half our units were no more, but at least it was something.

We appealed the decision to the full city council.

We needed two-thirds of the present alders to vote their approval in order to proceed. We once again called thirty people to testify in favor. We needed a miracle—and we got one with Juliana Bennett, the new alder for District 8. She was incisive, intelligent, and as sharp as an atomic force microscopy probe. She was asking excellent questions about consistency and fairness, student housing, and the death of housing in the campus area. It passed 16 to 3. The alder from my district sent me a nice congratulatory note about it and the long odds we overcame. I told him I asked for a miracle, and I got it. Now we have come so far. The building is going up!

All we need now, after all the hard work, all the worry, all the adversity, is money. This is the easiest task and the hardest task. It would be inconceivable to fail now. So let's not! Here is a document to get started. There are numerous ways to donate and some of them are tax deductible.

