

Clark Lyda

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To the residents of the Hancock neighborhood:

While I have had the pleasure of meeting many of you, there are still many others who I have not had the opportunity to get acquainted with. In making decisions about your neighborhood, I thought it might be helpful to know a bit more about me in terms of assessing my background and intent and credibility. I apologize in advance for the length of this letter – I assure you it is not because I enjoy writing about myself, but rather springs from a desire for you to better understand my earnest affection for your neighborhood and for the Perry Estate in particular.

I was born in St. David's Hospital on 32nd Street in 1961. I spent my childhood on my family's farm between Austin and Round Rock, just north of where the Domain is now located – at that time the northern Austin city limits ended at Burnet Road and Anderson Lane.

My maternal grandparents and two great aunts lived in Hyde Park and one great uncle lived in Hancock during my childhood, so I spent a great deal of time wandering the neighborhood – among my favorite spots were the fishpond at Brown's Flowers, the Ney museum, the Avenue B Grocery, the courtyard of Hancock Center, and of course the Hancock golf course.

I first set foot on the Perry Estate in 1975 when my parents enrolled me in high school at the Christian Academy of Austin (shortly thereafter it became Town-Country School and ultimately Perry School). It was truly a case of love at first sight – I think it was some combination of the history of the place, the sense of mystery and decayed grandeur surrounding the mansion, and just the fact that this very lovely place existed in the middle of the city. I spent large parts of my high school years exploring the grounds of the Estate and Waller Creek and wandering the neighborhood, having lunch at Burger Chef on 41st, running around the perimeter of the golf course (a requirement of gym class that I hated), and hanging out at Hancock Center.

I graduated from Perry School in 1979, from Southwestern University in Georgetown in 1982, and from U.T. Law School in 1985. While attending law school I lived in a house we owned on Washington Square and my study partner lived on Speedway at 41st Street, so once again I spent a great deal of time in the neighborhood. The fork in the road was our standard late night dinner and study place, and it, along with Julio's and Mother's and Trudy's, comprised the bulk of my meal plan during those years.

I continued to be involved with Perry School until its closure in the early 90's, and I maintained my friendship with the family that owned the Estate through the following years, but family matters (my father's death and my mother's descent into Alzheimer's) caused me to move to Georgetown in 1993.

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As I watched Austin grow from a city of 150,000 people to its current size, I was often angered by changes in places that I knew and loved - from the demolition many years ago of the wonderful Green Acres Miniature Golf Course on Burnet Road and its replacement with mini-warehouses, to the more recent demolition of the original Frisco shop on Burnet Road and its replacement with a Walgreens, to the demolition of the Villa Capri Motel on I35 and its replacement with a UT football practice field, to the “remodel” of Hancock Center that eliminated its wonderful courtyards, to the gentrification and rebranding of South Congress Avenue.

It often seemed that the only constants in the Austin of my memory were change and growth, and it often seemed that the majority of the change was for the worse, but I suspect the truth is more nuanced than that. But as a general rule, I think it’s fair to say that the built environment that replaces the demolished places is conventional, less-detailed, less loveable, and far less likely to become a memorable, much less iconic, part of our environment.

I have often been frustrated by a development process in Austin that, I believe, effectively stifles creativity and innovation through ordinances that encourage conventional and/or compromise development, and through an entitlement process that, by its length and cost, encourages pursuing the conventional path of least resistance, rewards design-by-committee and compromise, and ensures that only conventional institutional developers can survive and bring projects to fruition.

This frustration is made greater by the recognition that many of the places we love, and now view as iconic and irreplaceable parts of Austin, were often the controversial product of an individual vision – places like the Hyde Park and Hancock neighborhoods, for example. They were not designed or built by consensus or committee or pension fund or REIT. And most could likely not now be either entitled or built under existing rules and processes.

To drill down even further, many of the places that residents cite as the reasons why Hyde Park and Hancock are extraordinary urban neighborhoods – the retail strip along Duval between 41st and 43rd that includes Hyde Park Bar and Grill, Mother’s, Julio’s, Asti, Fresh Plus, Quack’s, Antonelli’s, and Dolce Vita, for example - would likely never be permitted if they had to be entitled today.

When the opportunity came to purchase the Perry Estate, I knew that I only wanted to take it on if I had the financial means and design resources to do an exemplary job of the redevelopment. To that end I set about looking for, and was lucky to find, a financial partner with a deep understanding of the extraordinary character of the property and a shared vision of the Estate’s possibilities. We have spent the last three years stabilizing the property and thinking about its future, and we are now asking for the neighborhood’s approval of our vision.

Our proposal for the future of the Perry Estate is one that I have been thinking about, and talking with many others about, for well over 20 years. It is designed to preserve the essential character of the Estate while giving it a new and sustainable mission. It is designed to be non-intrusive to its neighbors and to have only positive impacts on its surroundings. It is designed to be a destination property for a very small number of permanent residents and hotel guests – the net impact on the property is designed to be far less than would occur if the property were fully developed for existing permitted

uses, and to be much more compatible with the character of the Estate and the existing neighborhood than development under the current zoning.

The guiding principles of our proposal are:

- it is less disruptive and/or intrusive than current or permitted uses under the existing zoning;
- it enhances or, in the worst case, has no negative effect on surrounding property values and livability;
- it offers direct benefits to the adjacent neighbors and the larger neighborhood and City;
- It is environmentally sustainable and green in design, construction, and operation;
- It is respectful of Mr. Perry's vision and the memories of multiple generations who have loved the property either as students or guests;
- It is respectful of the existing residents of the neighborhood and their desire for privacy and quiet;
- It buffers the neighborhood from Red River Street, Hancock Center, and IH 35;
- It accommodates limited public access and use of the Estate and provides an economically sustainable mission that will ensure the preservation of the Estate;
- It provides for the permanent legal protection of the historic features of the Estate;
- It creates a low-impact development that will become an iconic feature in the neighborhood and the city

I hope that this letter has given at least a few of you a clearer appreciation of why I have undertaken this project and my motives and intent. I am always happy to visit by phone or email or to respond to questions, and I look forward to working with your neighborhood as the future of the Perry Estate unfolds.

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