

ROBERT C. GAEDE, 2835 BROXTON RD., SHAKER HTS., OHIO 44120

[July 8, 2003]

Mr. Ted First, Chairman
Architectural Review Board
Board of Trustees
Chautauqua Institution
Chautauqua, New York 14722

Dear Mr. First:

One of the largest structures to be built in the Chautauqua Institution in quite some time has risen on to the site adjacent to the Presbyterian House, which makes it adjacent as well to the Amphitheater and to the venerable and beloved Athenaeum Hotel. A site so central and so visible would warrant nothing less than an architectural statement of distinction – one sensitive to its neighbors in scale, material, historic details and landscape. It might be more a statement of our times or more a refrain of earlier moments. Even an eclectic building can be brilliantly stylish, subdued or highly personal. But, in an instance such as this, it must be special.

How then, is the building now before us so short of these anticipated qualities as to have stirred a rumbling of disappointment, even despair, among the watchful public who care about how we build and refine our towns and urban settings?

Mindful of the fickleness of public and individual taste, our American communities of noteworthy reputation, historic uniqueness and acclaimed beauty have widely undertaken a protective procedure dedicated to enhancing the building fabric of our ever-changing streets, structures and public spaces. The process is known as "architectural review" and is implemented by requiring that all significant change be first exposed to a body of citizens for preliminary, and later, final approval, once whatever flaws and insensitivities are modified or erased. Such boards of review are rarely perfect in their own composition, but with the inclusion of experts in the design and related fields, they have been serving our nation effectively in hundreds of communities since the mid 1900's. There are safe guards to protect both the petitioner and the public from arbitrariness. The system is, generally, well tooled and much respected.

Chautauqua has had in place such a board for approximately twenty years, long enough to have resolved countless design issues, however thorny. But, are we to believe the massive new infill structure dropped into this critical site bears the approval of the very body established to seek a superior design? What, we must wonder, happened to disrupt the process?

The physical aspects of this building which are troubling in its completion needed to have been challenged and worked out to greater refinement a long way back in the sequence of presentations and modifications. What can we now expect of an architectural review system content to present this building as a major component of the new Chautauqua?

Sincerely,

Robert C. Gaede, FAIA
(Restoration Architect for the Athenaeum Hotel)

Norman K. Perttula, FAIA

cc: Bill Clinger, President, Chautauqua Board of Trustees
Scott McVay, President, Chautauqua Institution