

Presentation to Board of Regents, December 3, 1992

From: Alan W. Friedman, Professor of English  
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Former Chair, Faculty Senate

I speak to you today on behalf of preserving, in its entirety, Anna Hiss Gymnasium, a building of historical, aesthetic, and practical importance. A graceful, beautiful, and useful structure, it is an important part of what made the campus's early design and environment particularly appealing, and one of the few remaining places for quiet contemplation on a campus that increasingly resembles a small city. Further, as a unique home for classes and programs for families, children, non-intercollegiate athletics, and the handicapped, it has long been a facility that created an enormous amount of good will, both within and without the UT community, at minimal cost. Thousands of faculty, staff, students and their families have for decades benefitted from its special programs; countless Austinites who otherwise know little of UT except what they glean from sometimes hostile media have learned to swim there or helped to teach their children. I for one have grown children, the first of whom was born in 1964 (the year I arrived at UT), who both went to summer camp and began to swim there; my six-year-old, who is now an excellent swimmer, began learning in the superb Anna Hiss swimming program when he was a year old.

I know that there has been much discussion over the last several years about the fate of Anna Hiss, and that many of you have probably had your fill of it. But having followed the

unfolding story closely, read all I could about it, and talked to many who have been intimately involved, I remain unconvinced that the destruction of the pool is either wise or necessary. Among the many reasons, I would like to highlight the following ones:

-it would displace over 20,000 people a year and inflict great harm to the Recreational Sports, Children's Sports, and Adult Fitness Programs;

-the pool in Gregory and the Texas Swim Center are already used to capacity;

-alternative designs for the Molecular Biology Building indicate that it could be built without the destruction of any part of Anna Hiss;

-as newspaper articles, petitions, countless letters, and other community responses have demonstrated, the loss of goodwill that this act of destruction would cause would negatively impact many whose support of the University is crucial in what are especially difficult times, financially and politically, for higher education.

The destruction of the pool - as opposed to all of Anna Hiss - is offered as a compromise. But as even those advocating this course must know, the pool is the heart of the building, the center of activity, and necessary for the proper functioning and survival of the courtyard as a space for contemplation and quiet activity. To destroy a major portion of an historic, functioning building, in fact, represents no compromise at all. As even The Dallas Morning News has noted, "when the bulldozers come, the serenity of the courtyard and the integrity of the building's

architecture will be violated forever" (August 1990 2C). For what would then remain of Anna Hiss would lack the coherence and meaning of the original.

And even if this were not so and even if the promises we hear that the rest of the building will remain are sincere, what assurance is there that it would be allowed to survive? Pressures for more space (for example, for administrative offices for Molecular Biology) will surely develop in the future. And what rationale for saving the remainder of Anna Hiss could possibly prevail if the arguments being made on behalf of the integrity of the whole do not? I urge you to seize the rare opportunity that this decision offers: to build as well as the future requires, to perpetuate what is valuable today, and to preserve the best that the past has bequeathed.

I very much appreciate being granted the opportunity of speaking to you on this important matter.