

# Memorandum

4/13/2014

**To:** Mike Elias and Allison Emmerich, Coordinators, Office of Student Activities  
Liliana Rodriguez, Associate Dean, Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Development

**From:** Noah Weinthal '15, Director, *Swaudio*

**Re:** Olde Club Fire and Structural Hazards.

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This past weekend I obtained Olde Club keys in order to work on an installation project for a temporary solution to some of the audio problems facing parties in the space. I believe what I have found warrants the immediate attention of your offices, and **I do strongly feel that no further events should be permitted in Olde Club until the immediate threats to life safety in the building have been rectified.**

## I. Lack of Exit Path Illumination



Many students believe there is only one exit from the building, while few know that there are in fact three. The main exit has an unilluminated<sup>1</sup> exit sign, while the other two simply have no exit signs at

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<sup>1</sup> VIOLATION: International Fire Code (incorporated into PA Fire Code) Section 1011.2, p 118

all<sup>2</sup>. The downstairs exit, seen above right, cannot be easily seen from the assembly area downstairs and there is nothing marking it as being anything other than a broom closet. The exit path is frequently blocked by tables used for preparations of drinks. The upstairs back exit, seen above left, is also not marked. Note also the fire alarm notification appliance is heavily damaged near the upstairs back exit, and has been since at least October<sup>3</sup>. It could be safely assumed that a fire or a report of a fire would cause a panic, and many students, in a moment of panic in concert with potential intoxication, would rush to exit through the main exit only. This raises serious doubts as to whether Olde Club could, on a busy night, be at all safely evacuated.

## II. Insufficient Main Stairwell



The main stairwell joining the ground-level dance floor and the basement-level dance floor is perhaps the most immediate hazard to students. The stairwell has a minimum width of 31 inches. By International Fire Code, 0.3 inches of stairwell width is required for each occupant of the building, so the current stairwell supports a theoretical maximum of 103 students safely. This occupancy has been and is often exceeded during busier parties. Furthermore is no illumination in the stairwell should the party hosts turn off the light switch, and there is no emergency illumination available whatsoever.<sup>4</sup> I personally have observed four falls on these stairs (which frequently clog with partygoers on Saturday

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[https://archive.org/stream/gov.pa.fire/pa\\_fire#page/n139/mode/2up](https://archive.org/stream/gov.pa.fire/pa_fire#page/n139/mode/2up). Facility considered type A occupancy (Includes theaters, concert venues, and night clubs) for purposes of this memorandum

<sup>2</sup> VIOLATION: Ibid Section 1011.1, p 118

<sup>3</sup> VIOLATION: Ibid Section 907.10, p 88. and Section 907.20.1

<sup>4</sup> VIOLATION, Ibid Section 1006.2

nights, as the bathroom is mid-flight), three of which involved strikes to the head. These stairs serve as the only commonly known means of evacuation for downstairs occupants, and an attempt to use them as such would likely have dire consequences.

### III. Ignition Risks

If the compelling interest in maintaining theoretical fire safety is mitigated by the general rarity of fires, it should be worth noting that there are several obvious potential ignition sources that are generally visible.



*1- The Storage Room in Olde Club adjacent to main assembly area*

The storage room is packed with equipment and packaging – much of it old, dry, and paper-based. The masking tape visible on the wall in the photo above reads “**DANGER! Exposed Electrical Contacts!**” handwritten in Sharpie. Paper boxes rest on top of whatever the electrical hazard is.



The area underneath the stage is packed with dry lumber and paper. High voltage<sup>5</sup> electrical cable from the lighting system runs throughout the area under the stage, and as is visible in this photo, sometimes has exposed contacts sitting next to piles of kindling. An accidental short of this connector with, say, a conductive fluid like water or beer could generate arcs of electricity or sparks.

The lighting system itself is a mess of improperly maintained cables and dimmer switches. While lighting is outside my area of expertise, [REDACTED] has offered that the Olde Club lighting system in its current level of maintenance presents an imminent fire risk.

#### IV. General Hazards

In addition to well-documented fire risks, there are a number of general safety hazards present. Guardrails on the upstairs balcony measure 36 inches high, significantly lower than the 42 inches required<sup>6</sup>. The light switches to illuminate the main floor in an emergency are not easily accessible and could potentially be padlocked. **I asked a group of 4 PA's outside of Olde Club if in an emergency, they would know how to turn on the lights on the dance floor in the building. None of them did. I repeated my question to three public safety officers. None of them knew either.**

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<sup>5</sup> Note: Upon discussion with electricians, my original characterization of 'High Voltage' is an inaccurate statement, these lighting cables carry standard 120V electricity. That said, this is still enough to cause an arc capable of starting a fire.

<sup>6</sup> VIOLATION: Ibid Section 1013.2

The cross-braces supporting the stage have in many areas fallen off or snapped, causing the frame structure underneath to deflect dangerously under load. Because of the significant out-of-plane deflection experienced by the wooden frame, I can tell you the stage is in **imminent danger of collapse**, particularly under the significant dynamic loads experienced during dance parties.

The lighting system is poorly maintained, and one of the Fresnel fixtures is literally one nudge away from falling. The pipe supporting it has come out of one of its brackets, so the only thing keeping this 20 pound piece of glass and metal (that gets hot enough to cause severe burns and ignite wood and paper) is the connection between the fixture and the cord it is plugged into.



## Conclusion

In summary, Olde Club suffers from years of chronic neglect and decay. The audio systems have their own set of problems, but as they do not constitute an active threat to life safety, I did not include them in this memorandum. Many of the hazards are integral to the building's design, and as the building is a historical building I understand if they were therefore not rectified. That said, the issues of illumination and maintenance, effective crowd control and operations of events, can all be remedied comparatively easily.

I respectfully submit that the consequences of continuing to use the space could well prove fatal for a substantial fraction of the student body if not immediately addressed.

Sincerely,

Noah Weinthal '15