

STAFF REPORT: JUNE 10, 2020 MEETING

PREPARED BY: B. CAGNEY

APPLICATION NUMBER: 19-6733

ADDRESS: 421 WATSON

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BRUSH PARK

APPLICANT: BILL PURSIFULL – ST. CLAIR CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

PROPERTY OWNER: MIKE ESSIAN – BRUSH WILKINS 2016 L.L.C.

**SCOPE OF WORK: REHAB BUILDING, EXPAND WINDOW OPENINGS,
REPLACE WINDOWS, RAISE ROOF LINE FOR CLERESTORY WINDOWS**

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 5/22/2020

Existing Conditions



South-East View, staff photo, 6/4/2020



South Elevation, staff photo, 6/4/2020



South-West View, staff photo, 6/4/2020



North Elevation, staff photo, 6/4/2020

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The modest, red-brick church located at 421 Watson was built in 1946. Once known as the Starlight Temple of Truth, this church closed around 2005 and the building has been vacant since. **This structure is one of three vacant buildings on an otherwise empty block** at the eastern edge of the Brush Park Historic District. In contrast to the surviving Victorian Mansions that dot the Brush Park landscape, 421 Watson is rather austere. Staff was unable to locate detailed information on the history of the congregation in Detroit, although the **Sanborn Maps indicate that it was constructed as an African American church**. Such small congregations of worship are typical and found across the city.

The simple, streamlined form of the building communicates that the building functions as a church despite being constructed as a rectangular mass with a flat roof. The **front façade faces south** and is defined by the four brick pilasters that vertically span the entire height of the building. Looking closely at brick pattern, one will notice a bond of header bricks every 10 courses. The stone-capped parapet is articulated to a peak at its center, raising the crucifix to the highest point on the structure. A single divided light casement window, embellished by a stone sill and arched banding, is the only fenestration on the south façade. The primary entrance is a double doorway located at the center of the front façade, with a secondary entrance on the same side, just to the right. Simple signage displaying the name of the church and service hours is hung on the façade to the left of the main entrance has been painted black. Basic light fixtures are mounted to the brick façade above both entrances. Today, the window and entrances are covered in plywood, painted black.

The **east** and **west** sides of the building are clearly visible from Beaubien and Brush streets, respectively. Brick pilasters are present on the sides of the building, stopping just short of the roof and feature stone caps. The rhythm of the pilasters elevates the building form from a brick box into a place of worship with a modern nod to the classical church forms that were built with segmented construction and relied on buttressing. A doorway is located toward the rear on the west side. The rear of the building has four (4) windows with stone sills and steps leading toward a doorway in the basement.

Five (5) window openings are located in between the pilasters on both sides of the building and are covered in plywood and have been painted black. The applicant has submitted detailed materials that show **significant deterioration to all of the windows, many of them modified significantly from their original configurations**. A letter was also provided from a contractor that states “**we don’t see any way possible to restore the existing windows due to the frames deteriorating beyond the point of restoration**” and recommending replacement (as proposed in the scope of work). Most of the existing doors do not seem to be original based on photos provided.

HDC staff was unable to find any Certificates of Appropriateness for this address in our online database. BSEED databases indicate Dangerous Building Complaints were filed 5/31/2012, 9/13/2018 and 11/9/2019 and it was listed as a vacant property on 3/12/2019.

The owners seek to turn the church into a commercial / retail space, by white-boxing the interior for a tenant yet to be determined. The current proposal for exterior work seeks to completely **rehab the building, raise the roof line of the building by two (2) feet to create clerestory fenestration, expand many of the existing window openings and create new window openings on the front facade**. The detailed scope of work is as follows:

General Façade rehabilitation

- Existing masonry to be restored by using mild cleaners and soft-bristle brushes to remove staining and discoloration. Power washers will not be used on exterior surfaces.
- Tuck-pointing of deteriorated mortar joints to be repointed.
- Restore existing metal railings by cleaning the surface to remove existing paint, rust, and metal burs with medium-bristle wire hand brushes and files, as needed. Railings will then be repainted.
- Install gutters and downspouts (material cut sheets not supplied).

Replace Windows and doors / Modify Existing Window Openings

- For all replacement windows, the applicant proposes to install **Quaker H-600** Aluminum Simulated Divided Lite Casement Windows with exterior grids, painted black.
- South Elevation:
 - **Replace the existing 48" x 66" casement** window with new Quaker Aluminum Simulated Divided Lite Casement Windows, exterior muntin pattern to match existing, painted black.
 - **Create two (2) new 48"x 66" window openings** –left and right of the existing casement window
 - **Expand existing front door opening** to 12'-0" x 5'4", existing doorway opening dimensions not provided.
 - **Install Commercial glass door between transom fenestration system**, wood frame with glass panel.
 - **Create two (2) new 4'x16' window openings** –left and right of the center entrance door
 - Install **two (2) 4'x16' Quaker H-600** Aluminum Simulated Divided Lite Casement Windows, exterior muntin pattern to match existing, painted black, as proposed.
 - **Tooth in brick** to match existing masonry at existing door opening.
- East Elevation:
 - **Expand five (5) existing window openings** from approximately 4'x5'-6" to 4'x12'
 - Install **five (5) 4'x12' Quaker H-600** Aluminum Simulated Divided Lite Casement Windows, exterior muntin pattern to match existing, painted black, as proposed.
 - **Install five (5) 4' x 2' fixed casement windows** as proposed, *Quaker H-600* series.
- West elevation:
 - **Expand four (4) existing window openings** from approximately 4'x5'-6" to 4'x12'
 - Install **four (4) 4'x12' Quaker H-600** Aluminum Simulated Divided Lite Casement Windows, exterior muntin pattern to match existing, painted black, as proposed.
 - **Fill in existing window and install new 7'-0" x 6'-0" double door way** at location of proposed ramp for ADA access.
- North Elevation:
 - **Replace the existing 48" x 66" casement window** with new Quaker Aluminum Simulated Divided Lite Casement Windows, exterior muntin pattern to match existing, painted black.
 - **Fill in existing window openings with matching brick.**
 - **Create new doorway.**
 - **Replace existing basement door.**

Install new ADA Ramp on West Elevation

- The applicant proposes to **install a new ADA ramp**. Exact dimensions, material and finish not specified.

Roof

- The applicant proposes to **install a new, metal gable style roof system** that will create a 2' band of new fenestration at the roof line.
- The **proposed gable roof will span approximately half the length of the building**, the flat portion of the roof will be replaced with typical EPDM membrane treatment.

- Plans show HVAC equipment installed on the flat portion of the roof.

Staff Observations and Issues:

- **Brush Park Historic District:** Brush Park Historic District features a significant amount of contemporary, new construction as well as large swaths of open space.
- **Visibility:** The location of the particular building is highly visible from all adjacent streets. However, as Brush Park continues to develop, this may not be an issue in the future.
- **Removal of Crucifix:** While not called out in the scope of work, plans indicate that the existing crucifix located at the center of the parapet will be removed.
- **Rooftop HVAC Equipment:** The applicant is proposing HVAC equipment to be installed on the roof, no screening is proposed for rooftop equipment.
- **Previous Modifications:** It appears that parts of the façade have been modified at an unknown date to accommodate the existing door on the west side.
- **Contributing Structure / Change of Use:** Staff feels that the structure does indeed contribute to the historic built environment of Brush Park. However, because of the simple form it may not get the attention that other buildings receive in the district. While the building does have many subtle architectural features that are part of it's character, it is staff's opinion that the building's primary character defining feature is the overall form of the south elevation, marked by the verticality of the pilasters and the peaked parapet. With the proposed modifications, the overall form will remain intact and continue to contribute to the urban fabric of Brush Park. As unique commercial / retail space, the use could potentially catalyze additional development at the adjacent parcels. Further, the adaptive reuse of church buildings to other uses is not unprecedented in Detroit Historic Districts. Finally, if the building is left undeveloped, it will be continually at risk for demolition.
- **No Site Plan:** A site plan was not requested from staff to review for this scope of work. However, staff is curious how this building will fit within the rest of Brush Park as it continues to develop. What landscaping and amenities (if any) are proposed for site, will there be modifications to the hardscape besides the ADA ramp?

Recommendations:

- **North / East / West Façade Window Modification, ADA Ramp and doorway:**
It is staff's opinion that expanding the window openings on the east and west facades would not detract from any character defining features of the building. The proposed windows will maintain the muntin pattern of the existing windows, and the proposed size of the windows maintains a proportional balance with the vertical rhythm of the pilasters. Further, the bricking in of the windows will not result in the removal of any character defining features. However, to preserve the original reading of the north elevation, staff would recommend that when bricking in the windows that the original window frame is preserved by inseting the brick and not removing the sills to clearly mark the location of windows on the structure, and may potentially allow for windows to be installed in the future. Staff recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for this action based on Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, specifically numbers 2) *The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided* and 9) *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.*

...With the condition that staff has the opportunity to review final plans, cut sheets for doors, railings, ramp and brick sample. Windows that are bricked in will be inset 1/2"- 1" to preserve original window configuration.

- **South Facade Window Addition and Doorway Expansion:**

It is staff's opinion that expanding the doorway opening on the east and west facades will not result in the loss of any character defining features of the building at the south elevation. Staff recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for these actions based on Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, specifically numbers 2) *The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided* and 9) *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.*

- **Roof:**

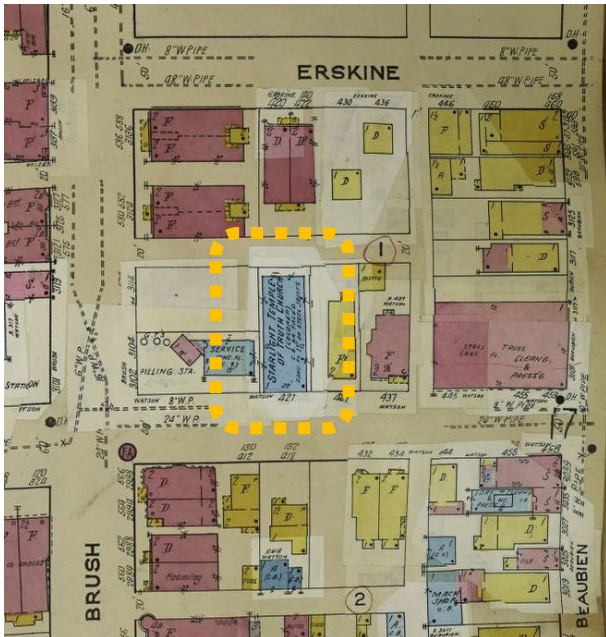
While the proposed roof is of a contrasting form and material to the existing roof, it does follow the form of the character defining parapet. The adaptive reuse and modification of existing structures in Brush Park is not without precedent. It is staff's opinion that the roof proposal does not detract from any character defining features of the building and therefore recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for this action based on Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, specifically numbers 2) *The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided* and 9) *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.*



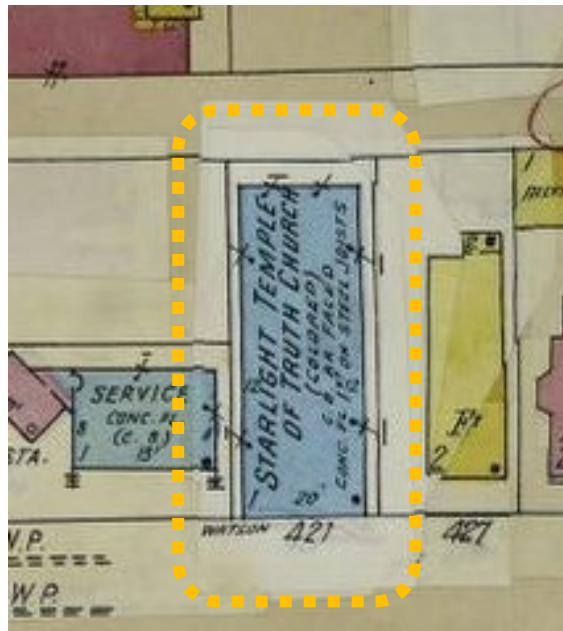
Aerial image of 421 Watson, 2018. Note many adjacent parcels have since been developed, however the highlighted block remains the same as exhibited in this image. explorer.eagleview.com



Sanborn Map Company, Vol. 3, 1921 - Nov 1950.



Sanborn Map Company, Vol. 3, 1921 - Nov 1950.



Sanborn Map Company, Vol. 3, 1921 - Nov 1950.



421 Watson a.k.a. Starlight Temple of Truth, 2007, photo by Kevin Bauman, <https://www.coroflot.com/kbauman/Detroit-Small-Churches>.



Rendering of proposed work for 421 Watson, supplied by applicant



East Elevation, staff photo, 6/4/2020



West Elevation doorway, staff photo, 6/4/2020



West Elevation staff photo, 6/4/2020



Rear staircase to basement door, staff photo, 6/4/2020



Adjacent vacant structures on Watson, staff photo, 6/4/2020