

STAFF REPORT 08-12-2020 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

REVIEW NUMBER: 20-6805

ADDRESS: 7650 E JEFFERSON, AKA R. THORNTON BRODHEAD ARMORY

HISTORIC DISTRICT: R. THORNTON BRODHEAD ARMORY HD

PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT (GSD)

CITY AGENCY/AUTHORITY: DETROIT ECONOMIC GROWTH CORPORATION

PROSPECTIVE APPLICANT: THE PARADE COMPANY

DATES OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 02/14/2020, 07/31/2020, 08/07/2020

PROPOSED SCOPE: SALE OF CITY-OWNED RESOURCE; DEMOLISH REAR (SOUTH) BLOCK; REHABILITATE NORTH BLOCK (INCLUDING DRILL HALL); AND ERECT NEW REAR ADDITION/RIVERFRONT PLAZA. INTERIOR DESIGNATION. (ADVISORY OPINION PER SECTION 21-2-5)



View towards the southeast of principal façade at Jefferson Avenue. Staff photo, 7/31/2020.

RESOURCE DESCRIPTION/EXISTING CONDITIONS

The vacant Brodhead Armory building, completed in 1930, sits at the east end of a large 17 acre parcel spanning between East Grand Boulevard's Belle Isle exit ramp to Baldwin Street, between the riverfront and East Jefferson Avenue. The legal parcel includes a large portion of Gabriel Richard Park. The initial erection of the Armory was completed shortly after the completion of the Belle Isle Bridge and the clearance of Electric Park, a renowned amusement park located on this parcel from the turn of the century until the late 1920s. The land upon which the building was erected was deeded by the City to the State of Michigan in 1929. The armory was built at a cost of \$375,000 (approximately \$5.25M in 2020 dollars), including a contribution of \$125,000 from the City at the behest of its visionary commander, R. Thornton Brodhead.

Between the front of the building and East Jefferson Avenue is a semicircular driveway and lawn. Centered within the lawn is a flagpole erected in 1943.



Detroit Parcel Viewer

The armory building is a large stone structure with a prominent art deco elevation facing East Jefferson Avenue. Per the Historic Designation Advisory Board’s 2001 designation report:

(T)he Brodhead Armory has served the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and their reserve and militia components. The building is historically significant for its associations with influential members of Detroit’s Naval Militia community, who supported its creation, and is architecturally significant as an art deco structure designed by one of Detroit’s leading architects of that era, William Buck Stratton. In addition, Brodhead Armory houses the largest collection of federally-funded Depression-era artwork of any building in the state of Michigan.

The armory is built of Indiana limestone with masonry load-bearing walls, and contains approximately 100,000 square feet of interior space. Designed in two sections, the drill hall occupies the north block, with the south block containing the three-story office section. The well-detailed and substantially intact front elevation of the building incorporates decorative faience tile produced by the nearby Pewabic Pottery; four of these tiles depict naval insignia (including the eagle, globe, and anchor of the U.S. Marine Corps) and one details the seal of the state of Michigan. Emblazoned words across the limestone parapet read: “THE BEST DEFENSE OF A DEMOCRACY IS A WELL TRAINED CITIZENRY,” “HONOR,” “PEACE,” and “PATRIOTISM.”

The armory was renamed for Captain R. Thornton Brodhead, its first commander and the person most responsible for its architectural and artistic distinction, after his death in 1947.

In 1936, via the use of federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) funding, the facility was extensively remodeled and expanded to include a basement motorpool and gymnasium. The third floor was enlarged to include and officers’ wardroom, enlisted mess hall, and kitchen. A fourth floor penthouse wing of eight rooms was built to quarter visiting officers.



Detail view of principal façade, showing pewabic ornamentation, original windows, and stone detailing. Staff photo, 7/13/20



View of East Elevation (north block), showing broken windows and apparent dumping on site. Staff photo, 8/7/2020.



View to south of main drill hall, north block, showing collapsed truss and roof damage at rear. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.



View to the east of transition from north to south block (rear wing). Note the missing Denby Memorial. Staff photo, 8/7/2020.

Several artists, working for the Federal Arts Project from 1936-1941, completed projects at the Armory in a variety of different media. Captain Brodhead, according to the HDAB report, “personally chose the artists and kept the themes of the art naval and nautical.” Among these artists were David Fredenthal, the youngest artist to win a Guggenheim fellowship and later a sketch artist for *Life* magazine, where he contributed combat drawings from the Pacific Theater of World War II and illustrations from the Nuremberg Trials. The HDAB report notes that one expert of Depression-era art states that the Armory contains “the richest WPA art collection of any building in Michigan, with the greatest variety of different media in one collection.”

Fredenthal was commissioned to create the large mural in the wardroom (or officers dining room), which involved the remaking of an entire wall including the installation of a fireplace and bookshelves. His fresco technique included putting up three layers of plaster, the last of which was put on in small areas so that the artist could work on that for a day. His style was expressionistic, emphasizing line rather than form, and achieving definition of shape with color. Per the HDAB report:

What resulted was a sixty foot mural of five panels portraying the range of experiences of shipboard life. Sailors in weather gear strain against the wind and rain on the deck of a rolling ship in the first panel, an exhausted sailor sleeps in the second, a lone sailor looks into the vastness of the sea in the central panel above the fireplace. Two men exert themselves hauling away on a line in the fourth panel, and four men relax and dance to a squeeze box and harmonica in the fifth mural.



General view of the wardroom and portions of the Fredenthal mural, with water damage towards rear (east). Staff photo, 2/14/2020.



David Fredenthal mural (portions), wardroom, south block. Staff photos, 2/14/2020.





Edgar Yaeger mural (portion), south block. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.

Adjacent to the wardroom, WPA artist Edgar Yaeger completed another room-size mural portraying the ships that served the naval militias of Michigan and the other Great Lakes States. Per the HDAB report:

Yaeger approached the difficult task of taking a rectangular room, six feet high by 180 feet around, and giving the ships and their setting a sense of depth and dimension. In each corner of the room, the foreground of the mural presented deck fittings, ship superstructures, masts, and lines to give the viewer the perspective that he or she was aboard a ship, looking out to port or starboard. The other ships were then arranged at different angles around the viewer's vessel, as if they were all cruising in one great fleet. At the time of its completion a Detroit Free Press art critic described the mural as the "work of a sensitive artist and a master craftsman."

Other WPA artists also completed work in the building under the enthusiastic encouragement of Captain Brodhead. These include the experimental "plaster line carvings" of Gustav Hildebrand into the four walls by the main east entrance on the first floor, depicting everyday activities of sailors. Other decorative elements incorporated into the south block include portholes and a steel bulkhead door from a mothballed ship and an ornamental bannister leading up six flights of steps to the penthouse area, which incorporated carvings of mermaids, sea serpents, and other aquatic life (no longer extant).



Inscribed plaster linework by Gustav Lindenthal, south block.. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.



View of stair hall finishes and general condition at south block. Steel bulkhead door visible at bottom. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.

The armory is generally in deteriorating condition, with substantial damage caused by water infiltration, theft, scrapping, and lack of maintenance. At least one truss at the rear of the drill hall has been compromised by cutting, and has collapsed towards the deck, taking with it a substantial portion of the rear roof. In the south block, several areas of roof failure and water infiltration have caused damage to plaster finishes, wood detailing, and the painted frescoes. Many character-defining historic elements, including the majority of the ornamental woodwork and door frames, have been illegally removed from the interior of the building by unknown trespassers. At the exterior, damage is less noticeable, except for multiple broken window panes and an area of the west elevation where scrappers have stolen the Denby Memorial, causing damage to the surrounding stonework and exposing the wall to additional water infiltration. The rear of the site, down to the riverside, is wooded and overgrown, and currently obscures much of the south block. The front apron of the building, including the historic flagpole, is maintained by volunteer veterans and is in fair condition overall.



Damage to an area of the Yaeger mural. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.



Distant view of Armory from Gabriel Richard Park, looking northeast. Note drill hall portion of building visible to left. Building top visible at center of photo is the River Tower Apartments beyond the project site. Staff photo, 8/7/2020.



View to the east of area proposed for riverfront plaza, from east end of Riverwalk. Staff photo, 8/7/2020.

PROPOSAL

The proposal for your body's advisory review, per the DEGC and the prospective applicant's conceptual design, includes the following:

- Sale of that portion of the city-owned parcel generally occupied by the building footprint
- Rehabilitation of the remaining north block (Jefferson Avenue) portion (approximately 31,000 SF), to include the drill hall interior and the north, west, and east sides of the building, including the primary public elevations and landscaped front drive/flagpole area. Windows are proposed to be replaced with aluminum-framed units
- Removal and storage of historic elements from the existing south block
- Removal and salvage of selected limestone panels from the south block for use on the existing north block building and the new addition
- Demolition of the south block, or rear wing, of the existing building, to include everything south of the drill hall
- Erection of a new two-story pre-engineered metal structure high-bay building (approximately 130,000 SF) to the rear (south), appended to the north block portion. New addition will feature salvaged limestone panels, polycarbonate, metal panels, glazing, and exposed concrete foundation walls
- Completion of an exterior riverfront plaza open to the public, extending from the rear of the new portion of the building, to tie into the Riverwalk
- Parking and service drives as necessary, new landscaping

Conceptual drawings and narrative describing the proposal, including renderings and its expected contribution to the community, riverfront activation, and local economy, are appended to this report and have been available on the HDC's public website for this review since July 31, 2020.

SECTION 21-2-5, EFFECTS OF PROJECTS ON DISTRICTS

Since the project involves a discretionary action by a city agency, authority, or corporation (i.e., the DEGC) involving a sale of publicly-owned property in or adjacent to a city-owned historic district, the Commission has the obligation to make a finding concerning the "demonstrable effects of the proposed project and report same to the Mayor and City Council." The intent of this section is to provide guidance to city government prior to committing to a particular course of action. From the code:

A City-financed, licensed, permitted, authorized or contracted physical development project shall be considered to have a demonstrable effect on a designated or proposed historic district when any condition of the project creates a change, beneficial or adverse, in the quality of the historical, architectural, archeological, engineering, social or cultural significance that qualified the property for designation as an historic district or that may qualify the property for designation as an historic district.

Generally, adverse effects occur under conditions which include:

- (1) Destruction or alteration of all or part of a resource;*
- (2) Isolation from or alteration of the surrounding environment of a resource;*
- (3) Introduction of visual, audible, or atmospheric elements that are out of character with the resource and its setting;*
- (4) Transfer or sale of a City-owned resource without adequate conditions or restrictions regarding preservation, maintenance, or use; and*
- (5) Neglect of a resource resulting in its deterioration or destruction.*

The review during this month's meeting is a non-binding advisory review under the Commission's obligation to provide such reviews under Section 21-2-5 of the City Code. If the project goes forward, the Commission will be tasked with another review, at a subsequent meeting, after receiving application for the detailed scope of work for the building prior to the issuing of a building permit. This later review, not yet scheduled, will be for the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) or Notice to Proceed (NTP) for the actual construction and demolition work per Section 21-2-78. This second review will be binding and will include a formal public hearing, with mailed notices to property owners and residents within 500 feet of the parcel.

ISSUES

- The Brodhead Armory is one of less than fifteen buildings city-wide with an interior historic designation. Per Section 21-2-76 of the ordinance, the Commission “may review or act upon interior features” when specifically authorized to do so in the section authorizing the historic district. Section 21-2-174, the section authorizing the Brodhead Armory Historic District, reads as such:

The interior spaces of the R. Thornton Brodhead Armory which are hereby made subject to the Historic District Commission's consideration are those spaces normally accessible to the public from the main entrance doors on East Jefferson Avenue, including the drill hall; those third-floor spaces including the mess hall, the ward room, and the officers' bar; and the formal stair hall areas from floors one through three. Features within these areas subject to the Historic District Commission's consideration include, but are not limited to, wall surfaces, such as woodwork, fresco paintings, and murals, ceilings, floor surfaces, and permanent fixtures including light fixtures. Areas which are not made subject to the Historic District Commission's consideration include the interiors of offices adjoining hallways, rooms adjacent to the drill hall, rest rooms, and all other areas within the R. Thornton Brodhead Armory, being basements, garages, fourth-floor spaces, attic areas, and the interiors of closets and service areas.

- Of the above interior features, only the drill hall is proposed to be rehabilitated as part of the prospective scope of work. The conceptual drawings submitted for the present advisory review do not yet provide enough detail for a permit-level review of the rehabilitation plan.
- The artwork in the remaining protected interior spaces is proposed to be salvaged prior to south block demolition; though the exact method (or feasibility) of salvage, or the ultimate repository for such salvaged art, has not been determined.
- The Planning Department is in support of the proposed project, with the condition that all of the WPA artwork is properly salvaged by personnel with appropriate expertise, and successfully relocated to a public repository. Staff estimates that at least 75% of the murals, and the inscribed plaster, appear substantially intact.
- Although detailed drawings have not yet been submitted for a formal COA review, because the south block exhibits character-defining historic features at the exterior and interior, the proposed demolition of this major portion of the building (even if the artwork is salvaged) is not likely to satisfy the Secretary of the Interior's Standards per Section 21-2-78, in staff's opinion. The Commission, using its own discretion, may ultimately find that the project satisfies the substantial community benefit requirements for a Notice to Proceed which would allow the project to secure a permit.
- The federal General Services Administration (GSA), via its Fine Arts Project, has in recent years reinforced its ownership of artwork produced by the WPA, preventing its sale or disposition. Upon review, staff finds that this appears to be limited to portable works of art. Per the GSA's fact sheet on this issue:

GSA applies this position to movable works of art. However, if the artwork is an integral part of the structure (site-specific murals, bas-reliefs and architectural ornamentation) GSA, on behalf of the United States, no longer maintains an ownership interest in the artwork, unless that ownership interest was preserved in the documents transferring custody of the artwork(s). GSA does request that any institution that has acquired a structure that contains New Deal artwork that is an integral part of the structure, and is preparing to destroy that artwork, contact the GSA Fine Arts Program.

- The applicant team (including developers and design team) has met with PDD and HDC design staff on several occasions throughout 2019 and early 2020. DEGC has a project manager assigned to this project.
- This current review is only for an internal HDC advisory opinion for the consideration of city assistance, based on the project concept. HDC finding of demonstrable beneficial or adverse effect on the district has no bearing on any subsequent review of the project for a Certificate of Appropriateness

(COA) or Notice to Proceed (NTP), which will have mandated public hearing requirements based upon a more fully developed application package

- The prospective applicant has asked that the Commission discuss its expectations for the upcoming COA review with respect to the progress of the design and the level of documentation thereof. Staff can determine when a COA application is provisionally complete, but the Commission has the final determination on whether an application is complete for your review purposes. Staff would appreciate the Commission's direction on this issue so as not to docket an incomplete application.
- At report posting, three letters of public comment have been received regarding the proposed project. Public comment submissions are posted and available on the public website for this review.
- Two members of this Commission, James Hamilton (Chairperson at the time) and Tiffany Franklin, toured the interior of the building with HDC staff and the prospective developer/design team in February 2020 to gather information and make in-person observations on behalf of the Commission. These Commissioners properly did not share with the proposal team, or each other, their assessment of the building, nor thoughts on the proposal, holding such discussion until tonight's public meeting



View of south block from the rear, looking north. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.