

STAFF REPORT 12-9-2020 MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: 20-6981

ADDRESS: 489 HENRY (AKA BERWIN APARTMENTS)

HISTORIC DISTRICT: CASS-HENRY

APPLICANT: KRAEMER DESIGN GROUP, LLC

OWNER: CASS VILLAGE APARTMENTS, LLC/OLYMPIA DEVELOPMENT OF MICHIGAN, LLC

ARCHITECT: NEUMANN/SMITH ARCHITECTURE

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 11-20-20

DATES OF STAFF VISITS: 11-24-20, 12-7-20

SCOPE: REHABILITATE APARTMENT BUILDING



View of the Berwin Apartments, view to the south. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Berwin Apartments building (489 Henry) was erected in 1915. Per the Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board's (HDAB) 2018 designation report for the Cass-Henry Historic District, the architect is not known, but the builder was Frank P. Davey. The English Revival design directly matches its contemporary, Bretton Hall (439 Henry), which shares the same builder. The façade of the Berwin Apartments differs from Bretton Hall only in that the building itself is narrower, allowing for three bays instead of five. By 1930 it was advertised as an "apartment hotel," a period term that HDAB describes as vague, but generally used for buildings that were marketed to a more transient population and included amenities such as communal dining or a concierge service. Architecturally, the building is a four story, brown brick apartment building with English Revival and Arts and Crafts details. A paneled main entrance features a simplified Classical door surround, with "BERWIN" written in raised, sans-serif lettering in the entablature. A central bay features tall center hallway windows with balconettes. Decorative, rectangular stonework accents windows on the second and third stories.

Brick quoins, and string courses at the top floor, further embellish the façade. Heavy metal consoles are similar to those found on the Atlanta Apartments; here, the cornice they support features Classical details.

The Berwin is one of two occupied buildings in the Cass-Henry Historic District, the other being the its near twin Bretton Hall (439 Henry) at the eastern end of the block. Curiously, both occupied buildings feature stonework around the entranceway that is inappropriately painted light blue; a condition noted disapprovingly in the district's Elements of Design (#9, *Relationship of colors*). The lettering, and a circular detail flanking it, have also been painted black. The transom windows feature leaded glass with an ornamental design. Such delicate ornamentation may have initially extended to the sidelights below, but they are now fitted with plain glass set in what appears to be their original wood frames. The wood doors appear original and of historic-age. Puzzlingly, the doors have a complex, modernistic divided light (muntin) configuration (which might be termed "4 small over 2 tall") that matches the balconette doors on the second through fifth floors of *Bretton Hall* several lots to the east, but *not its own* balconette doors, which are more traditionally divided into eight (8) divided lights of the same size. The cast stone surround of the entry features pilasters topped with a simple classical entablature. Sconces are installed on the pilasters; staff has not yet confirmed whether these units are of historic age, but likely not. There is a water meter relay unit insensitively mounted on the left pilaster.

The entrance is approached by concrete steps flanked by brick knee walls and featuring a steel guard rail of non-historic age. The steps appear to have been recently replaced or resurfaced. Because the entrance is elevated, access to the basement is provided at either side via stairs to two doors. At the upper floors on the primary façade, the center bay features Juliet balconies, or balconettes, featuring apparent historic-age double doors with multiple lights and decorative iron railings. The primary façade is crowned with a heavy denticulated pressed tin cornice with large brackets, which wraps around to either side.

All windows appear to be vinyl 1/1 replacements that are perhaps a few decades old. A small number of basement openings towards the public alley are boarded.

The brown face brick (and cornice) extends around to the side elevations and continues for about one bay (somewhat less than Bretton Hall), then transitions to common brick with architectural detail reduced to stone sills. The rear elevation has modest historical and architectural character of a more utilitarian nature, with furniture loading openings at each rear stair landing, and a projecting steel beam (hoist) above, aligned with the center hall; at least two historic-age multi-light wood doors are extant in the openings. The brick is common and has been painted brown up to about six feet high, presumably to obscure or discourage graffiti. There is a short flight of (non-historic) concrete steps to the rear door, joined to a small loading platform adjacent to a dumpster.

Per the architect, and as confirmed by HDC staff to the extent feasible from the public right-of-way, the brick and stone areas of the building are in fair to good condition, with some locations of step cracking, mortar loss, puncture holes, and some efflorescence below stone sills. The stone shows some discoloration and cracking. The two exterior basement doors on the north (primary) façade do not match in style or material. The western basement access door is metal, with a small diamond-shaped light. There is a glazed transom that has been boarded over. The eastern basement access door is wood with four rectangular lights at the top of the door and a chute built into the door structure.

The pressed tin cornice is painted brown, with some corrosion and visible damage in some areas.

The building has a flat membrane roof in fair to poor condition.



Detail view showing conditions at the Henry (primary) facade. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



Detail view showing main entrance at Henry, note "BERWIN" name above. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



West elevation. The lot in the foreground is not in the district. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



View of East elevation, adjacent to parking lot at 481 Henry. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



View of rear (south) elevation at alley. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.



Detail view of brick and furniture hoist beam at top of rear elevation. Staff photo, December 7, 2020.

EXISTING CONDITIONS (DISTRICT)

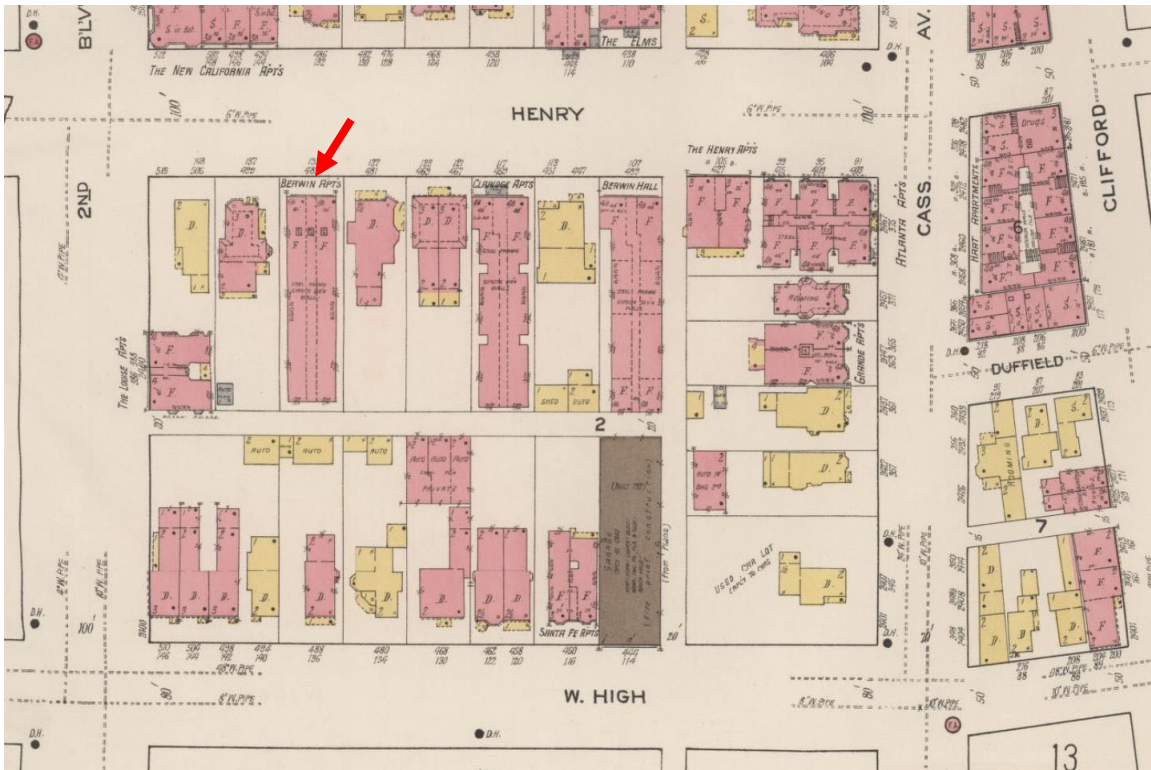


489 Henry, highlighted in blue, in its current district context. Image from Motor City Mapping.

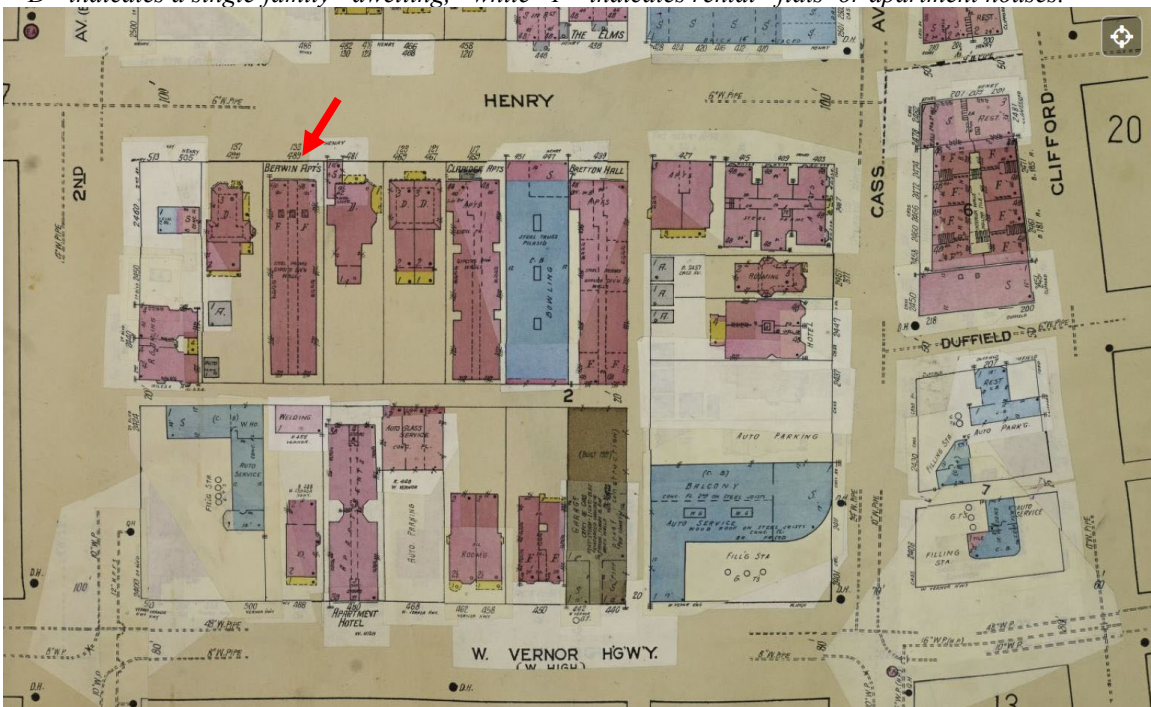
The Berwin Apartments building is one of seven contributing resources to the Cass-Henry Historic District. The district is significant as the “best remaining depiction of the form, scale, and density that once predominated throughout the area,” per the HDAB report. With the single exception of 447 Henry (the William B. Ralston Garage), all of the buildings in the district are flats or apartment houses, built during a period of significance from 1900 to 1923. Currently only Bretton Hall (439 Henry) and the Berwin Apartments (489 Henry) are occupied. HDAB writes that:

During the period of significance the block covered a greater area than it does today, being bounded by Henry Street, Cass Avenue, High Street, and Second Avenue. However, the footprint of the Fisher Freeway, built through the city in the 1960s, eliminated High Street and the southern half of the block. Late-twentieth century demolitions eliminated apartment buildings at 2457 Cass Avenue, 467-469 Henry Street, and 481 Henry Street (now noncontributing open spaces) ...Alterations to the buildings since the period of significance have been minor, consisting of some window replacements and the removal of at least one cornice. Character-defining features of the district primarily include the buildings themselves, though a few mature street trees remain, along with sidewalks and concrete walkways and steps approaching each building. Even where buildings have been razed, walkways, landscaping, and mature street trees remain, helping the district to retain much of its historic residential feeling.

Current district conditions are a mix of well-secured vacant structures juxtaposed with apparently well-maintained, occupied buildings.



Cass-Henry vicinity, 1921 Sanborn map showing original urban density near the end of the Period of Significance. Arrow points to 489 Berwin. Note preponderance of brick (red) buildings, versus frame (yellow) structures. "D" indicates a single-family "dwelling," while "F" indicates rental "flats" or apartment houses.



The updated 1951 Sanborn map shows conditions prior to construction of Fisher Freeway through High Street/West Vernor. The large footprint of 447 Henry, built of concrete block (blue color), has appeared. All frame structures have been removed.

PROPOSAL

The proposed scope of work required to rehabilitate the exterior of the building is depicted in the attached schematic drawings* for this Body's review and, per the applicant, specifically includes:

Brick and stone

- ***Inspected for damage***
- ***Brown paint to be removed*** [process not provided]
- ***Masonry cleaned with a light duty detergent and low pressure water rinse***
- ***Brick and stone will be repointed, and loose or displaced units will be reset***
- ***Repointed mortar will match the color, texture, compressive strength, joint width, and joint profile of the existing historic mortar***
- ***Damaged brick and stone will be repaired as necessary***
- ***Any units too badly deteriorated to repair will be replaced, with salvaged brick to be reused where replacements are needed before new units are used***
- ***If new units are necessary, they will be selected to match the existing in size, profile, color, and finish***
- ***The stone surround at the main entry will be cleaned to remove all paint and return to bare stone*** [process not provided]

Metal cornice

- ***Cornice cleaned and repaired where possible***
- ***Where pieces are beyond repair or missing, a new piece made of compatible metal will be installed to match the existing***
- ***Cornice paint will be investigated to determine the original historic color (TBD)***

Main entrance and doors

- ***Main entrance doors will be inspected for damage and repaired as necessary***
- ***Basement doors will be replaced with new doors to match the appearance of the eastern door (without the chute)***
- ***Balconette doors at north façade will be inspected for damage/condition and repaired as necessary. Doors found to be deteriorated beyond repair will be replaced with doors which match the existing. Aluminum storm doors will be added in front of the balconette double doors on the second through fourth floors. The storm doors will be compatible with the historic nature of the building without appearing falsely historic and will not obstruct vision to the original double doors. The metal guardrails at these doors will be reconstructed to match the original in style, profile, material, and color.***
- ***At the rear elevation, the ground floor steel door and the furniture loading doors will be inspected for damage and repaired as necessary. The metal guardrails at the furniture loading doors will be replaced with a new metal guardrail system.***
- ***ADA lift and new entrance door will be installed on the east façade of the building, convenient to the adjacent parking lot***

Windows

- ***New historic replica aluminum-clad wood windows throughout: Marvin Ultimate Double Hung G2 per attached data sheet (no extant historic windows, color TBD)***

Lighting

- ***Exterior building lighting will be provided and designed to highlight building features***
- ***Lighting locations may include up-lights on the west (Cass) façade and wall-mounted fixtures flanking the entrance***

Signage

- ***Future signage is proposed to be reinstated in the same location as the stone-inscribed “BERWIN” above the main entry door***
- ***Final signage drawings (including size, color, and design) will be submitted for staff approval before installation***

Roof, rooftop mechanicals, and penthouses

- ***Current poor condition membrane roof to be removed and replaced with a new EPDM roof***
- ***Small condenser farm will be added to the rear center of the roof and screened with an approximately 5’ tall metal roof screen in a “Dove Grey” color***

Landscaping/Site

- ***Proposed landscaping and site interventions for all buildings and areas will be incorporated into the staff reports for the site parcels (i.e., 2457 Cass and 467-469, 481 Henry Street), and formally reviewed as part of those applications***

*specifically, drawings 1A101, 1A102 (floor/roof plans) and 1A401, 1A401.1, 1A402, 1A402.1 (elevations)

Additional photographs, renderings, presentation materials, and narrative provided by the applicant in support of this application is appended to this report and posted on the public website for the meeting.



Distant view of the Berwin’s west elevation, marking the western edge of the historic district, as seen from Second Avenue. The parking lot in the foreground is excluded from the district. View to the northeast. Staff photo, November 24, 2020.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- After review, staff finds that the proposed scope of work is well-developed and generally proposes appropriate repairs and interventions to the building, and is sensitive to the preservation of its character-defining features. The applicant proposes appropriately conservative repairs, though staff would seek greater specificity in the construction drawings/specifications concerning what constitutes “too damaged/too badly deteriorated to repair” as it relates to the metalwork, masonry, and other similar features, so as to ensure against wholesale replacement of such features.
- As the building has no remaining original windows, the applicant proposes new historic replica, aluminum-clad wood windows throughout. Staff finds that the proposed product is appropriate and that a 1/1 configuration would also be appropriate in all instances.
- The building’s designation report, excerpted above, does take note of the building’s name “Berwin” as a character-defining feature remaining at the building’s entrance. This feature should be preserved. The application suggests that future signage “will be reinstated in the same location.”
- An ADA lift and new entry door is proposed for a location along the east façade convenient to the parking lot. Staff finds this to be an appropriate intervention.
- Staff has reviewed the comprehensive roof equipment sightline studies submitted by the applicant, and finds the proposed new equipment to be sensitively placed and screened, consistent with the building and district’s historic character

ISSUES

- Staff has identified very few issues of concern, and finds that the proposal as presented to the Commission has the potential to yield a high-quality rehabilitation consistent with historic standards and guidelines
- The retention of qualified historic preservation subcontractors and tradespeople, and the criteria they will use to make critical field decisions regarding repair versus replacement of historic character-defining elements, is always a concern in large and complex historic preservation projects. Standards and expectations concerning field assessment for repairs and replacement should be specified in the ultimate contract documents, if not already depicted in the architect’s construction drawings for review by staff. Normal evidence of wear and superficial damage should not warrant replacement, per NPS Guidelines and Standards.
- No approvable process has been proposed for the removal of the brown paint over the brick, or the blue/black paint over the stonework. A process or specification ensuring the preservation of the historic masonry should be submitted for staff review.
- The ultimate design for building signage should ensure retention and display of the stone-carved “BERWIN” name as a contributing element to the historic character of the building. Staff suggests that, if desired, it would be appropriate to place modestly-scaled additional signage in the landscape in front of the building subject to the Commission’s own sign guidelines and staff review.

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-73, Certificate of Appropriateness

It is staff's opinion that the proposal should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). Staff recommends that the Commission approve a COA for the proposed application, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Cass-Henry Historic District's Elements of Design, with the conditions that:

- Staff review of the submitted construction drawings will include the identification of specific standards concerning repair and/or replacement of deteriorated character-defining features, and related standards concerning the qualifications of historic preservation contractors retained to perform the work.
- Staff review of the submitted construction drawings to specifically include review of specifications/cut sheets for lighting, windows, doors, ADA lifts, signage, paint removal, color choices, and other exterior elements/selections not yet finalized, with staff authority to approve if per the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, the district's Elements of Design, and otherwise consistent with Commission intent and guidelines
- The historic name of the building, set in stone above the entryway, be preserved and remain visible.