

**STAFF REPORT 04-14-2021 MEETING, REV. 4-13-21**

**PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: 21-7176**

**ADDRESS: 2968-2994 BRUSH, 429-437 WILKINS, 418-432 WATSON (AKA BRUSH WATSON)**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: BRUSH PARK**

**APPLICANT: MICHAEL ESSIAN/AMERICAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPERS, INC.**

**DATE OF COMPLETE APPLICATION: 02-22-2021**

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 03-29-2021**

**SCOPE: REVISIONS TO PREVIOUSLY APPROVED NEW MULTI-FAMILY BUILDINGS, INCLUDING ADDITIONAL HEIGHT/STORIES**

**EXISTING CONDITIONS**

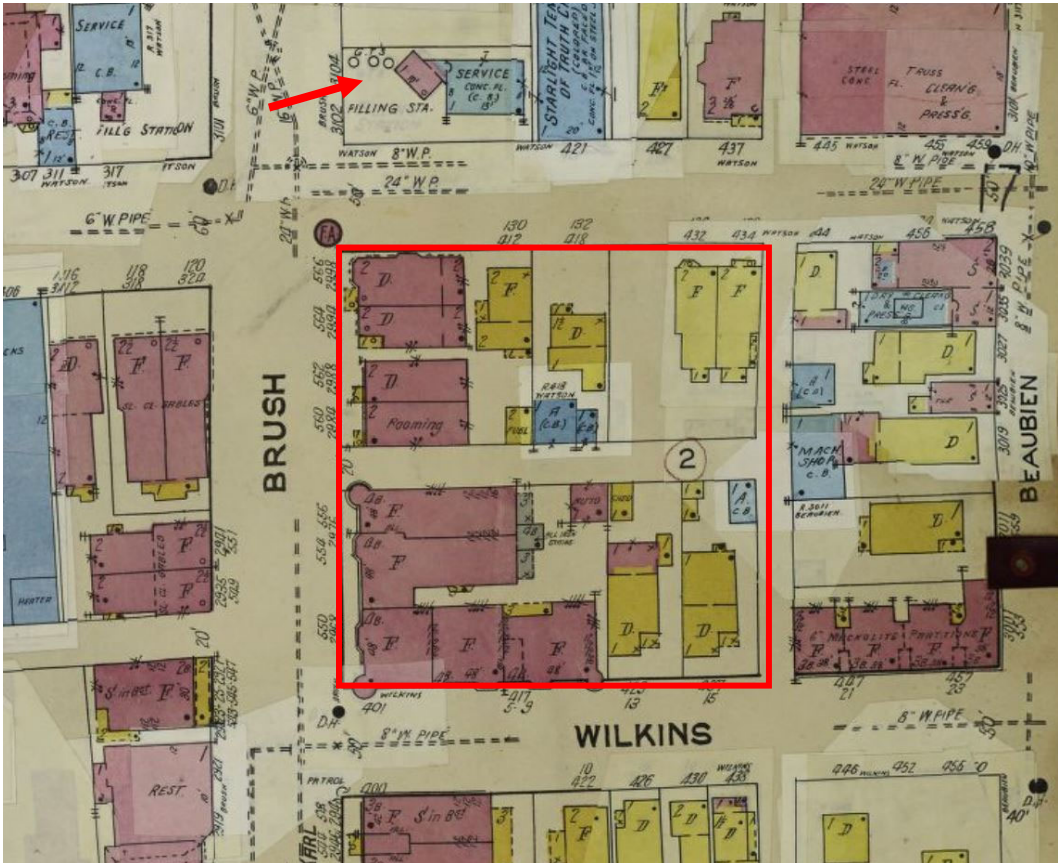
The project site is an entire city block bound by Brush to the west, Watson to the north, Beaubien to the east, and Wilkins to the south. Once densely developed, the block was vacant until the commencement of construction per the previously approved application.



*View of existing conditions at the development site, view to the southeast. Staff photo, March 29, 2021.*



Parcel view of vicinity, development site outlined in yellow. The smaller red square is in the historic district.



Sanborn map of vicinity, c. 1951. Red square defines same area as above; arrow highlights extant filling station.



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The current proposal is a substantial revision of the previously approved project. In particular, the middle building, “B,” alternately referred to as “Urban Studios (Midblock),” is now proposed to be a 10-story building. In September 2018, the Commission approved a 3-story building at this location. Per the applicant, the original building had 60 units, whereas the newly proposed version has 180 units. Overall for the development, there will be 310 units, half of which have been set aside as affordable housing with rent and income limits ranging from 30% to 80% AMI.

The other building in the historic district, “Building A” or “Flats at Brush” is similar in mass and form to the previously approved version. However, the building has, in the words of the applicant, received “updates to the exterior façade materials and colors.” Per staff review, these updates are significant, and include changes from a primary masonry expression to metal panel.

The third building, “Building C” or “Beaubien” is not in the district, though it is part of the larger composition.

The previous staff report for this project (2018) is attached and available on the website.



*View of existing conditions at the development site, view to the southeast from Watson. Staff photo, March 29, 2021.*

## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The revision to Building B, at the mid-block, flips the reading of the site; changing the relationship from a low-rise building subordinate to the flanking buildings to a high-rise centerpiece that towers over its neighbors.
- Staff finds that the new proposed height of Building B has ample precedent in Brush Park, with eleven story buildings, like the now-demolished Hotel Detroit, previously present in the district. However, the Elements of Design do note that this height was traditionally found close to Woodward, west of John R. Given the substantial and nearly unprecedented evolution of the district since the writing of the Elements of Design in 1980, and the form-based code carefully developed by the city for the district, staff finds that the height/density created by a tall building at the east end of the district is appropriate to its current historic character, and especially so for such a vacant vicinity.



*Hotel Detroit, minutes before its implosion in March 1996. It was replaced by low-rise condos along Woodward. HistoricDetroit.org*

- As for the “flipped” reading of the development site, in the previous application the architect presented a carefully crafted argument concerning the low-rise mid-block building based on a translation of old Sanborn maps. This argument, for obvious reasons, has been dropped from the current application. Nevertheless, staff finds that the composition and relationship between which buildings are higher and lower on this block is not significant to the historic character of the district.
- Staff finds the regular opening pattern of the revised Building B appropriate. The proportion of the openings (voids) is larger than observed in the Elements of Design. However, there is a prominent historic precedent in the district at the south elevation of the Carlton on John R, with which this building appears to have an obvious affinity; it boasts large windows in an almost Chicago Style form. Staff finds that this “percentage of openings” quality is less important for preservation of the district’s historic character than other factors/Elements discussed below, and recommends that it be found appropriate.





*The Carlton on John R (between Watson and Edmund Place), with its high proportion of void to solid. Compare to the Hotel Detroit, previous page. Prior to the district designation, the south facing windows (left side elevation) were enlarged to fully span the bays, increasing the “void” percentage even more. An icon of Brush Park. HistoricDetroit.org*

- Staff has more concern about the materials proposed, including the changes in the materials proposed for Building A (the building along Brush). As argued in previous staff reports for Brush Park, staff feels it is important to continue to lean heavily on masonry, stone, and (at a minimum) cementitious elements as a contemporary analog to the material “heaviness” dominant in the historic character of Brush Park, which once practically groaned under the weight of substantial masonry edifices. Even the immediately adjacent historic filling station, a tiny building, bats far above its class in this way. **The revised materials proportion for Building A is 40% brick and 60% metal panel, with the brick concentrated at the pedestrian level. The metal is proposed to be of a dull matte finish, and will patina (age) further over time.** Metal panels, as a modern material, do have a role to play in adding texture and variety to facades in Brush Park, but only as a secondary material. Staff **notes that the Commission has previously approved higher proportions of metal in Brush Park, but per previous reporting staff** is concerned that excessive allowance of “~~sleek and shiny~~” metal, **in whatever form**, as a primary material will erode the historic character that makes Brush Park a recognizable enclave. Ironically, the proposed building *not* in the district, Building C, employs terra cotta shingles to effectively promulgate the historic character.
- Similarly, staff is unconvinced that the predominantly metal expression at the new tower is compatible, especially given the smoothness and reflectivity already offered by the large areas of glass. Staff recommends the introduction of stone, masonry, terra cotta, exposed concrete or cement panel elements to root the building more firmly in its historic context. **Staff acknowledges the historic existence of metal in this district, even zinc, to form cornices, secondary elements, or ornamental flashing; but not at this scale.** Again, the Building C material palette could find some utility at Building B as well.

- Correspondingly, staff recommends that the proposed color palette be moved away from cool whites or grays to warmer, richer, and earthier tones. The original proposal for Building A had red brick, which has now been modified to a cool gray. Building B uses a stark white and dark gray composition at odds with the “natural brick and stone colors” emphasized in the Elements of Design. While color tones have varying importance in other districts, staff has consistently recommended that they are more important in Brush Park, and stands by this recommendation. When lighter colors were used historically in the district, they nevertheless exhibited a particular warmth and natural earthiness, with rare exceptions. Again, the adjacent filling station makes this point well. **Staff acknowledges that black accents exist on historic buildings in the district, but not as a primary expression.**
- There is a minor discrepancy in the submitted materials concerning window types in Building A. On the two-page “HDC Narrative” submission documenting the height change, the revised windows configuration on Building A appears to feature asymmetrical divisions. The regular pattern on the other submitted drawings should prevail.

## ISSUES

- Staff finds the masonry materials in the original 2018 design (juxtaposed with metal used only as accents), to be more appropriate, and recommends that they be retained. For both Buildings A and B, staff recommends that the exterior materials should be modified to introduce more masonry, stone, terra cotta or cementitious finishes, juxtaposed with smaller accent areas of metal panels, if desired. Wood may also be appropriate as part of a composition, as permitted on other new construction.
- Staff recommends that the stark contrast in color between the snow white and dark gray for the new tower at Building B be mitigated, by introducing warmer, less contrasting tones using earthtone colors and materials found among the district’s historic context.



*View of filling station at Watson and Brush immediately adjacent to the site. This view is the same orientation as the red arrow on page 2.. Staff photo, March 29, 2021.*





*View to north along Brush. Staff photo, March 29, 2021.*



*View to south along Brush. Development site visible at left. Staff photo, March 29, 2021.*

## **RECOMMENDATION**

### Section 21-2-78, Determinations of Historic District Commission

Subject to the conditions outlined below, the proposed revisions to the previously approved development are in conformance with the district's Elements of Design and preserve the historic character of the district per the Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

Staff therefore recommends that the proposal should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, with the following conditions:

- The material palette at Building A be generally reverted to the 2018 design, or other masonry, stone, terra cotta, concrete, or cementitious expression acceptable to staff; and,
- The material palette at Building B be revised in a similar manner to create a primary expression in earthier materials (as suggested above for Building A) acceptable to staff, while preserving the juxtaposition between light and dark proposed in the design; and,
- The colors of the brick throughout, and the colors/tones of any materials changed per the first condition, be warmer and inspired from historic precedents in the district, acceptable to staff