

**STAFF REPORT 05-12-2021 REGULAR MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG**

**APPLICATION NUMBERS: 21-7253, 21-7254, 21-7255, 21-7256, 21-7257, 21-7258, 21-7259, 21-7260, 21-7261**

**ADDRESSES: 1501-1567 CHURCH, 1606-1622 CHURCH**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: CORKTOWN HD**

**APPLICANT: JOEL SMITH, AIA, NEUMANN/SMITH ARCHITECTURE**

**PROPERTY OWNER: OXFORD PERENNIAL CORKTOWN PROP LLC**

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 04-26-21**

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 02-26-21, 04-30-21**

**SCOPE: ERECT NEW PARKING STRUCTURE WITH GROUND-FLOOR RETAIL ON VACANT LOTS AT 1501-1541 CHURCH, ERECT NEW TOWNHOUSES ON VACANT LOTS AT 1606-1622 CHURCH**



*View of vacant lots at 1501-1541 Church looking west towards 1567 (AKA 1551) Church (Downtown Self-Storage Building) at far end of block. Staff photo, April 30, 2021*

**EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The proposed project will be erected on ten parcels generally arranged in and around Church and Tenth Streets, in the Corktown Historic District. Current conditions at the proposed development parcels vary and are described below.

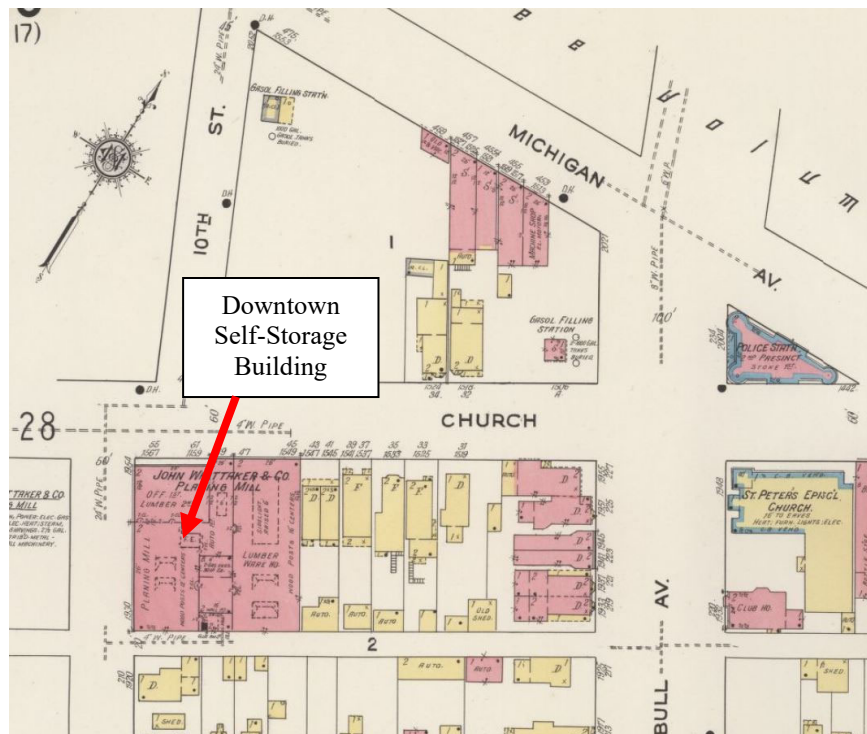
**1501, 1525, 1533, 1537, 1541, and 1567 Church**

These parcels form the northern half of a city block bound by Church Street at the north, 10th to the west, Trumbull to the east, and the east-west alley between 10th and Trumbull to the south. The vacant parcels are paved but do not appear to be in active use. 1567 Church, at the west end of the block at 10th, is a roughly 130' square parcel fully occupied by a two-story brick warehouse/storage building.



Historic district parcels outlined in red.

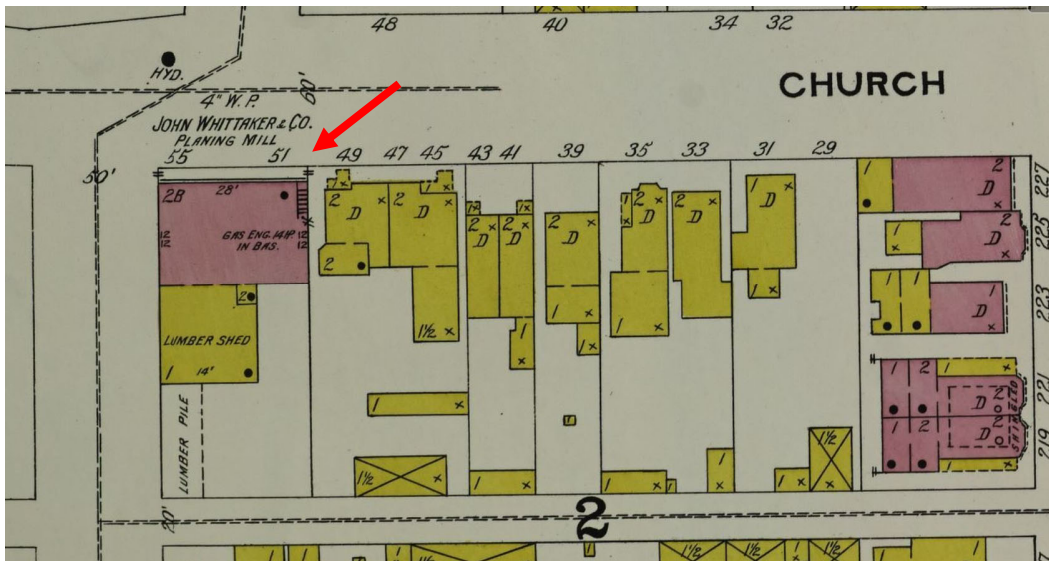
The building on the parcel at 1567 Church (addressed as 1551 Church) was erected circa 1894 and is today referred to as the Downtown Self-Storage Building. For many years, this was the John Whittaker Planing Mill, a sawmill associated with the many nearby lumberyards in Corktown. Later, after expansion in 1916, it was the Red Arrow soda factory.



The building grew from a smaller core that was originally constructed at the corner of Church and 10<sup>th</sup> Streets,

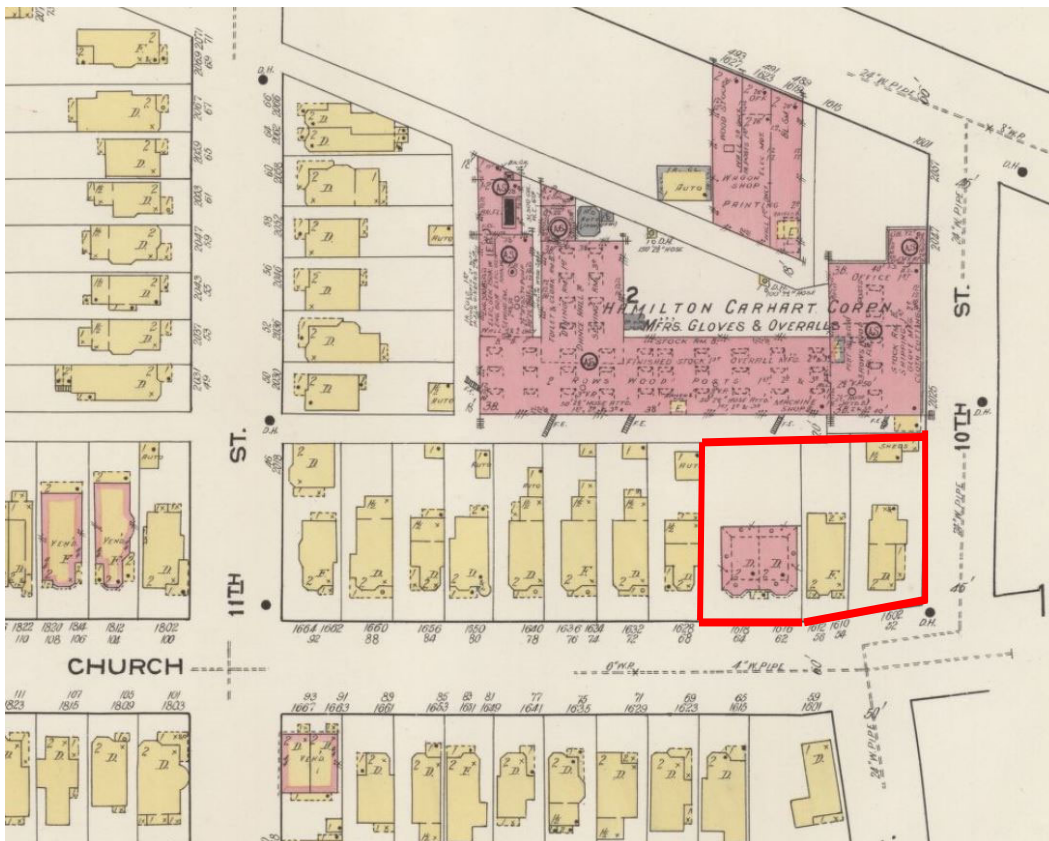


as shown below on an 1897 Sanborn map. This historic core still exists and is readable from the exterior. The building, in its current form, exhibits a high degree of historic integrity, including character-defining brickwork and opening patterns. It is considered a contributing structure to the historic district.



**1606, 1610, 1614, and 1622 Church**

These four parcels are also in the historic district, and are each approximately 33' wide by 115-120' in depth. They are mowed vacant lots at the eastern end of the otherwise dense block bound by Church Street at the south, 11<sup>th</sup> Street to the west, 10<sup>th</sup> Street to the east, and the east-west alley between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Streets to the north. The remainder of the block has historic age dwellings which are contributing structures to the historic district. Historic staff is not clear as to when the buildings on the parcels were demolished.







*View of vacant lots at 1606-1622 Church looking northwest towards Michigan Avenue and the limits of the historic district. Staff photo, April 30, 2021*



*View of vacant lots at 1606-1622 Church looking easterly towards 1501-1567 Church, including the Downtown Self-Storage Building at right. Staff photo, April 30, 2021*





*View of Church Street, running west of 10th, showing site context. Staff photo, April 30, 2021*



*View of north across vacant lots at 1606-1622 Church towards Michigan Avenue, showing additional site context. Staff photo, April 30, 2021*





*View of vacant lots at 1501-1541 Church looking east towards Trumbull and downtown. Staff photo, April 30, 2021*



*View from Church Street of the Downtown Self-Storage Building, northeast corner. Staff photo, April 30, 2021*

## PROPOSAL

The proposed project includes development at two distinct locations outlined below. The design of the project is as depicted in the applicant's accompanying submission materials, which include blockfront elevation studies of surrounding neighborhood buildings, architectural site plans, schematic-level drawings including floor plans, elevations, and building sections, material sample boards, project narrative, and 3D renderings. The project has also been revised in conjunction with community input received during the project's Community Benefits Ordinance (CBO) process, comments provided by this Commission as part of its advisory review at the March 2021 Regular Meeting, and per discussions with PDD, HDC, and other city staff.

### 1501, 1525, 1533, 1537, 1541, and 1567 Church (Parking Structure)

- A 3-story, 35' high parking structure, including 3000 SF of retail and 400 216 parking spaces, will be constructed on 1501-1541 Church per the attached submission drawings and renderings. Please note that the proposed design for the Commission's consideration has been revised per the presentation deck to exclude work at the adjacent building (i.e, 1567 Church), excepting nominal landscape improvements; the present architectural drawings for the parking structure, per the applicant, should be referenced for detail drawings only, as they have not yet been revised. Staff is satisfied that the application is complete enough for proper review.
- The parking structure will be constructed of precast concrete panels embedded with a dark reddish face brick and a precast parapet wall on the upper level to serve as a cornice. The facades of the deck are delineated by brick pilasters at structural bays, and intermediate pilasters between openings. Per the applicant, these vertically oriented openings are intended to be compatible with the Victorian window geometries throughout the neighborhood.
- The first floor openings are proportioned to resemble retail display windows and infilled with decorative metal grilles. The northwest and southeast corners are reinforced by masonry towers with large glazed openings for stair/elevator enclosures.
- The northeast corner of the structure will house a retail business with large display windows on the north and east facades with canopies above. East façade openings on Trumbull have open aluminum window frames to (per the applicant) further the appearance of a warehouse type structure. Vehicle ingress/egress openings occur on the Trumbull and Church Street facades.
- The applicant, in their submitted "request for a Certificate of Appropriateness," has provided an element-by-element narrative of how they believe their parking structure proposal aligns with the Corktown Historic District's Elements of Design.
- Staff was provided with material and glass samples for the proposed building.



*View of proposed parking structure at 1501-1541 Church, from submitted materials. Note that the historic building at the west end of the block is preserved. This is the design subject to the Commission's review.*



### 1606, 1610, 1614, and 1622 Church (Townhouses)

- Seven attached townhouse dwellings will be erected, each three stories (35') in height, with 17 parking spaces and garage door openings at the rear.
- The townhouses will be a three-story masonry structure. Primary material will be a medium gray brick with some gray metal accent details and entrance canopies; the applicant states that these choices are derived from the historical palette of materials in the neighborhood.
- The siting of the building will step back to the northeast to follow the angled property lines on Church Street as it approaches 10<sup>th</sup> Street. Per the applicant, this “stepping” will also serve to break up the massing of the residences and give them individual identity.
- The applicant, in their submitted “request for a Certificate of Appropriateness,” has provided an element-by-element narrative of how they believe their townhouse proposal aligns with the Corktown Historic District’s Elements of Design.
- Staff was provided with material and glass samples for the proposed building.



*View of proposed townhouses at 1606-1622 Church, from submitted materials. The large building beyond is the associated apartment building development at 1611 Michigan, not in the historic district.*



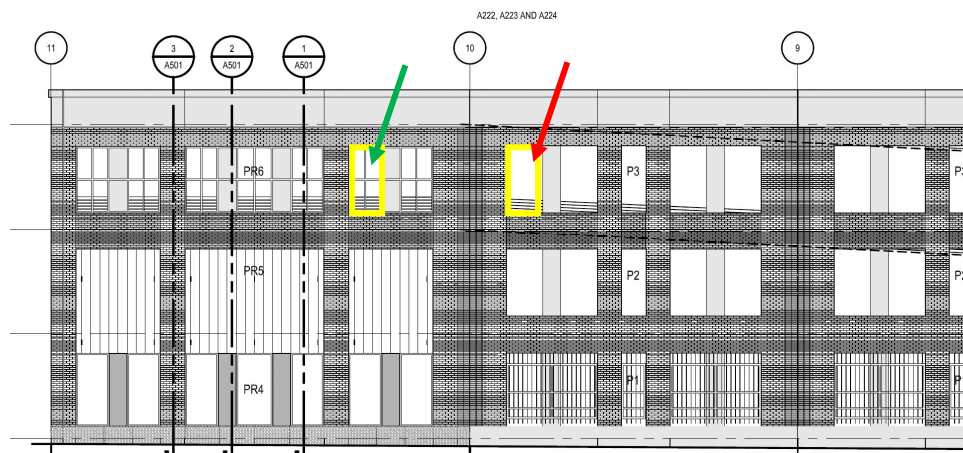
## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

### PARKING STRUCTURE – STAFF ANALYSIS AND COMMENTS

- It is HDC staff opinion that the Downtown Storage Company Building, formerly the Whittaker sawmill, is a contributing resource to the district. While no work is proposed for that building in this application, the new parking structure proposed to occupy the remainder of this block defers to the historic building via a modest setback and compatible height, and incorporates contextual brick materiality.
- Several of the district's Elements of Design (as excerpted below) may be applicable to the proposed parking structure. Starred elements are discussed further, below:
  - **Element 1, Height:** *Commercial and industrial buildings range in height from one to five stories tall*
  - **Element 2, Proportion of buildings' front facades:** *Proportion varies in the district, depending on the age, style and type of building...newer commercial buildings in the district may be wider than tall.*
  - **\*Element 3, Proportion of openings within the facades:** *Window openings are usually taller than wide, but there are also square openings and transom window openings which are wider than tall. Window openings are almost always subdivided...*
  - **Element 4, Rhythm of solids to voids in front facades:** *...post-1880s Queen Anne style buildings exhibit a greater freedom, with their bay windows and combinations of windows in gables...*
  - **Element 5, Rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets:** *The original pattern of spacing of buildings on streets was that of houses placed very close together.*
  - **Element 6, Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections:** *Most houses in the district have projecting front porches, usually on one (1) side of the front façade and sometimes wrapping around to the side...some Victorian houses have a secondary porch on the side*
  - **\*Element 7, Relationship of materials:** *The small commercial buildings, the industrial buildings, the fire station, and most of the institutional buildings in the district are brick.*
  - **\*Element 8, Relationship of textures:** *...Detailed brickwork on brick buildings contributes to textural interest when it exists*
  - **\*Element 9, Relationship of colors:** *Paint colors in the district generally relate to style*
  - **\*Element 10, Relationship of architectural details:** *These generally relate to style...In general, Corktown is rich in its diversity and quality of architectural styles and detail.*
  - **Element 11, Relationship of roof shapes:** *Pitched roofs with frontal gables predominate in the district...commercial buildings generally have flat roofs.*
  - **Element 12, Walls of continuity:** *The major wall of continuity is created by the buildings...*
  - **Element 13, Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments:** *Short concrete walks from the curblineline to the public sidewalk are also frequent in the district.*
  - **Element 14, Relationship of open space to structures:** *Some buildings are situated on the front lot line or very close to it*
  - **Element 15, Scale of facades and façade elements:** *The majority of buildings in the district are small in scale, with the exception of multi-story industrial buildings and apartment buildings*
  - **Element 16, Directional expression of front elevations:** *industrial buildings are either vertically or horizontally expressed, depending on the number of stories*
  - **Element 17, Rhythm of building setbacks:** *Some industrial and commercial buildings are situated directly on the front lot line*
  - **Element 18, Relationship of lot coverage:** *Lot coverage ranges from zero percent to 100 percent*
  - **Element 19, Degree of complexity within the façade:** *Early buildings are simple and straightforward. Queen Anne buildings are more complex in massing and detail but are not overly complex.*
  - **\*Element 20, Orientation, vistas, overviews:** *Garages are oriented toward the alleys...Commercial buildings are located on corner lots within the residential areas. The general overview is that of small-scale mixed-use neighborhood...*

- **Element 21, Symmetric or asymmetric appearance:** Most buildings in the district are asymmetrical in appearance, but result in balanced compositions.
- **\*Element 22, General environmental character:** The Corktown Historic District, with its narrow lots, shallow front yards, and small-scaled buildings, has a low-density, urban, mixed use character of a pre-automobile city...

- Materials used on the parking structure, including two colors of brick, medium and dark gray metal panels used in certain accent locations, and a stone base, are modern products composed of traditional materials, consistent with the range of materials typically approved by this Commission for new buildings, and aligned with **Elements 7, 8, 9, and 10**.
- Consistent with **Element 3** above, staff does make a recommendation to the Commission, as we do with recommendations around other parking structures, that all openings be subdivided and screened, so as not to create gaping, obvious openings disrupting the plane of the building. Such screening should of course be designed to allow the code-required amount of air circulation within the facility, but should be dense enough to obscure or at least de-emphasize the parking usage. Window subdivisions and screening, as added, should be consistent across the building. See image below.



Partial north elevation at east end of building. Articulated “window” subdivision (i.e., crossed mullions) at corner openings (e.g., green arrow) is recommended to continue at the featureless openings at the parking deck areas (e.g., red arrow). Other designs are possible.

- The proposed parking structure, although an urbanistically welcome improvement over surface parking, may be of some concern under a strict and decontextualized reading of **Elements 20 or 22**. However, it is reasonable to recognize that an urban district in an automobile-focused city today will benefit more from vertical parking accommodation housed in an architecturally sensitive form, rather than unsightly and obviously anti-urban surface lots, most of which were created via demolition of far superior historic fabric. While the massing of the proposed structure is large for Corktown, the height is not, and the location along Trumbull and near Michigan Avenue, in staff’s opinion, is not inconsistent with a structure of this size and use. The regulatory purpose of historic districts is not to cast neighborhoods in amber, but to ensure that they grow (or in this case, *regrow*) in ways that permit modern life while not imperiling their distinctive historic character. By accommodating cars vertically, demand for more historically destructive horizontal surface parking is plainly reduced, to the ultimate benefit of Detroit’s historic fabric. Staff’s opinion is that the urban infill represented by the overall development project, including portions outside of the district, and considering the compatible commercial storefront use created by the parking structure building, will not detract from the district’s historic character, and should therefore be found appropriate under both the Standards and the district’s Elements of Design.



## TOWNHOUSES – STAFF ANALYSIS AND COMMENTS

- For the proposed residential townhouses, the Elements of Design for the Corktown offers the following (excerpted) relevant points. Again, starred Elements merit further discussion below:
  - **Element 1, Height:** *Most residential buildings in the district range from one (1) story to two and one half (2½) stories tall*
  - **Element 2, Proportion of buildings' front facades:** *Proportion varies in the district, depending on the age, style and type of building*
  - **Element 3, Proportion of openings within the facades:** *Window openings are usually taller than wide, but there are also square openings and transom window openings which are wider than tall. Window openings are almost always subdivided...*
  - **Element 4, Rhythm of solids to voids in front facades:** *...post-1880s Queen Anne style buildings exhibit a greater freedom, with their bay windows and combinations of windows in gables...*
  - **Element 5, Rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets:** *The original pattern of spacing of buildings on streets was that of houses placed very close together.*
  - **Element 6, Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections:** *Most houses in the district have projecting front porches, usually on one (1) side of the front façade and sometimes wrapping around to the side...some Victorian houses have a secondary porch on the side*
  - **Element 7, Relationship of materials:** *The great majority of buildings in the district are wood frame structures originally clad in clapboard with wooden skirting or brick foundations...There are some brick residential buildings in the district, the majority of these being duplexes and multi-unit dwellings*
  - **Element 8, Relationship of textures:** *...Detailed brickwork on brick buildings contributes to textural interest when it exists*
  - **Element 9, Relationship of colors:** *Paint colors in the district generally relate to style*
  - **Element 10, Relationship of architectural details:** *These generally relate to style...In general, Corktown is rich in its diversity and quality of architectural styles and detail.*
  - **\*Element 11, Relationship of roof shapes:** *Pitched roofs with frontal gables predominate in the district...commercial buildings generally have flat roofs.*
  - **Element 12, Walls of continuity:** *The major wall of continuity is created by the buildings...*
  - **Element 13, Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments:** *The typical treatment of individual properties is a shallow flat front lawn area in grass turf, subdivided by a concrete walk leading to the front entrance and sometimes a concrete walk leading to the side entrance.*
  - **Element 14, Relationship of open space to structures:** *Open space in the form of front yards to buildings is generally very shallow*
  - **Element 15, Scale of facades and façade elements:** *The majority of buildings in the district are small in scale...Façade elements...are moderate in scale. Details within these elements are generally small in scale.*
  - **Element 16, Directional expression of front elevations:** *Two-story Italianate and Greek Revival single-family residences are vertical in directional expression...two-story Queen Anne buildings are either neutral in directional expression or have vertically expressed front facades...*
  - **Element 17, Rhythm of building setbacks:** *Setbacks vary from area to area...although they are usually consistent within blocks. In general, buildings have very shallow front yards...Buildings on the north-south streets and corners are very close to the front lot lines.*
  - **Element 18, Relationship of lot coverage:** *Lot coverage ranges...the average residential coverage being approximately forty (40) percent.*
  - **Element 19, Degree of complexity within the façade:** *Early buildings are simple and straightforward. Queen Anne buildings are more complex in massing and detail but are not overly complex.*
  - **Element 20, Orientation, vistas, overviews:** *Garages are oriented toward the alleys...the general overview is that of small-scale mixed-use neighborhood...*

- *Element 21, Symmetric or asymmetric appearance: Most buildings in the district are asymmetrical in appearance, but result in balanced compositions.*
- *Element 22, General environmental character: The Corktown Historic District, with its narrow lots, shallow front yards, and small-scaled buildings, has a low-density, urban, mixed use character of a pre-automobile city...*
- Per *Element 11*, although a flat-roofed single-family residential house is not common in Corktown, it is more common in multi-family (i.e., commercial) and attached dwelling buildings (both contemporary and historic), and staff finds the flat roof proposed here is not incompatible with the vicinity's historic character nor the building's intended use, and should be found appropriate.
- Staff finds that the materiality, massing, and overall design of the attached townhouses to be appropriate under the Standards and the district's Elements of Design. Though they are of a modern design, they make appropriate references to historic precedents, use traditional materials in modern ways, and do not detract from the district's historic character. Their role as urban infill is also important to the preservation of Corktown's neighborhood scale and expression.

## ISSUES

- **Per the above staff analysis concerning a request for additional subdivision and/or screening at the "featureless" openings at the parking structure, the architect has responded to note that the addition of such additional material will reduce the overall ventilation percentage for the building below the code-required 20% (specifically, from 21.5% to 18% overall). Staff is hopeful that alternate options can be discussed with the Commission.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

#### *Application for Parking Structure at 1501-1541 Church (21-7253, 21-7254, 21-7255, 21-7256, 21-7257)*

Staff recommends that the proposal for a parking structure at 1501-1541 Church should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Corktown Historic District's Elements of Design, subject to the following conditions:

- That all open-air and otherwise featureless "window" openings serving the parking decks be infilled with window-like subdivisions and/or screening to reinforce the vertical plane of the building and mitigate the appearance of large empty openings. Such subdivisions and treatment will be consistent across all window openings in the building to create a unified composition, subject to staff approval.

#### *Application for Townhouses at 1606-1622 Church (21-7258, 21-7259, 21-7260, 21-7261)*

Staff recommends that the proposal for attached townhouses at 1606-1622 Church should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Corktown Historic District's Elements of Design.