

STAFF REPORT 09-22-2021 MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: 21-7399

ADDRESS: 1445 GRISWOLD (AKA 1457 GRISWOLD/ ISAAC AGREE DOWNTOWN SYNAGOGUE)

HISTORIC DISTRICT: CAPITOL PARK

APPLICANT/ARCHITECT: JOEL SMITH, AIA/NEUMANN SMITH

OWNER: ISAAC AGREE SYNAGOGUE

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 07-13-2021

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 07-28-2021

SCOPE: REDESIGN STOREFRONT/REPLACE WINDOWS, NEW STAIRS/ELEVATOR PENTHOUSE

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The contributing buildings of the Capitol Park Historic District, one of which is 1445 Griswold, were erected between 1877 and 1929, and, per the Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB) Report, “represent the best of the outgoing stylistic trends of the late nineteenth century and the modern aesthetic of the twentieth century, as well as the radical change in construction techniques brought about by the use of reinforced concrete and steel.” The Synagogue building, built in 1930, is identifiably rooted in this historic context. In the mid-century decades, and long before its historic designation in 2012 as part of the district, the building was altered at the first and second floors along the Griswold elevation, with the addition of an exuberant rainbow of colored acrylic windows. This expression, as much as the pre-war historic building itself, has become a local landmark.

According to the HDAB report, this building was purchased by the Synagogue in 1964. The Synagogue was originally founded by brothers Nathan and Charles Agree in 1934, and named in memory of their father, businessman Alexander Isaac Agree. Charles Agree, was also the founder and president of his locally prominent architectural firm. The building remains the only existing synagogue in Detroit in its original building.



Street-level view of existing conditions at primary (Griswold) elevation, view towards south. Staff photo, July 28, 2021.

The HDAB report continues:

Sited on a triangular lot at the northern end of Griswold, the narrow end of the four-story concrete frame building on Clifford is just one bay wide, originally containing a single double-hung sash

window. Above its granite base, the building is faced with limestone. The Griswold elevation, or front façade, is six bays wide. The design of the building is utilitarian in nature, with large curtain wall openings containing four double-hung sash windows within each bay of its concrete frame on the third and fourth floors. The fenestration of the first and second stories has been altered with the removal of the original windows and now has rectangular aluminum frames filled with colored windows. Details are spare and occur in the form of diamond shapes centered in the metal corrugated spandrels and metal vertical elements of the parapet wall.



Griswold elevation overall. Staff photo, July 28, 2021.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Per the submitted drawings, documents, and narrative, the applicant is proposing alterations to the primary façade and other areas of the building:

- Remove current brick and aluminum frame window system within the first floor openings on the east and north elevations
- Install new storefront window system with ballistic glass over new black granite base. The storefront window within existing openings will have a 2:1 transom over main window ratio with each vertical mullion division similar to the bay division on the fourth and fifth floors
- The existing wood double hung windows on the third and fourth floors will be restored by BlackBerry Window and Door Systems
- Existing elevator penthouse to be removed
- New elevator with new elevator penthouse to be installed. The penthouse is to be clad in brick to match existing
- New stair extension from the existing interior stair. The new stair extension to the roof to be clad in brick to match existing
- New roof deck to be installed with guardrail around the exterior perimeter of the deck
- New roof vestibule to be constructed with new aluminum storefront window system to enclose the doors to the elevator and stairs
- The existing fire escape will be extended to the new roof deck
- The existing windows along the west elevation, below the extended fire escape, will be removed and bricked in to protect occupants using the fire escape



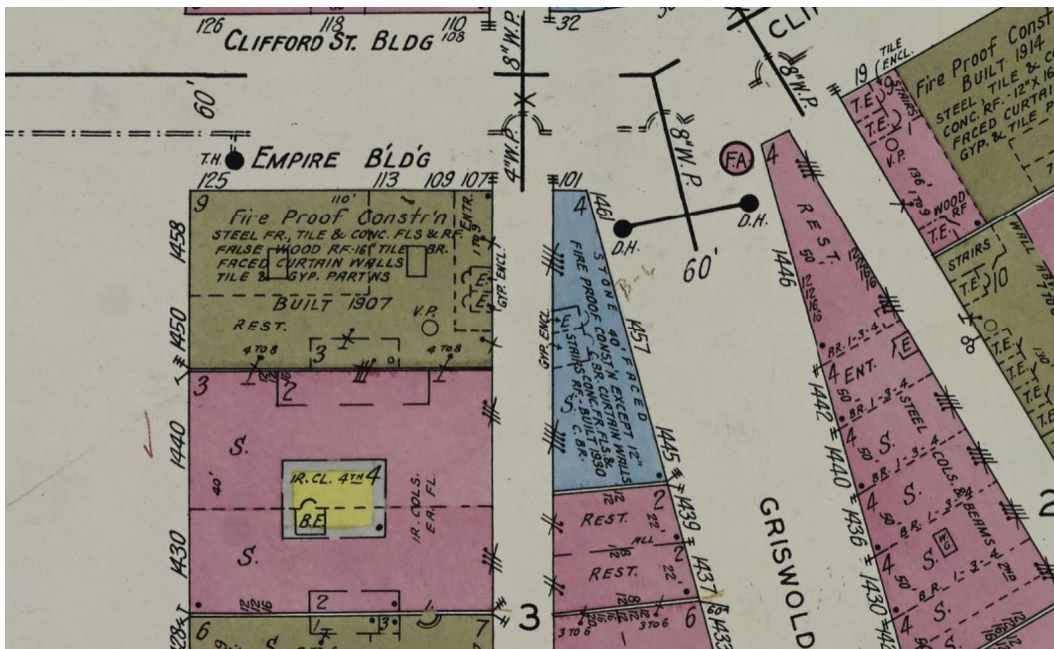
Applicant rendering.



View of the west-facing non-primary, non-character defining elevation (excluding the single character-defining bay at extreme left). Staff photo, July 28, 2021.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Capitol Park Historic District was established in 2012. The subject building is contributing.
- Although the project qualified as provisionally complete for the September 8th meeting, the hearing for the project was deferred at the applicant’s request to today’s meeting, to avoid conflict with the Rosh Hashanah holiday.



1950 Sanborn map of same vicinity. Subject building shown here in blue, indicating it is of concrete block construction. Surrounding buildings are shown in red (brick construction) and brown (concrete/steel or “fireproof” construction).



Subject parcel outlined in yellow, per Detroit Parcel Viewer.

- It is staff's opinion that the multi-colored mid-century windows at the second floor, and extending around three sides are a distinctive character-defining feature of the building that are significant to the building's history during the period commencing in 1964. Though the colored windows are not original to the building, elements found by the Commission to be character-defining features significant to the history of a resource, and more than fifty years old, are subject to review under the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and relevant National Park Service Guidelines.
- The first floor also has colored panes evident, though these are of a different size and assembly from the second floor panes, and are not as distinctive or obvious as the second floor examples. In this zone, staff suggests that the character-defining feature worthy of preservation here is the general multi-color expression at the transom, not necessarily the current materials, dimensions, and elements creating it. In these areas, the exterior is a clear glass pane, and the colored acrylic panels are mounted behind. The proposal, in the narrative, states that these panels will be reused in the interior design. New clear (ballistic) glass transom windows are proposed here, backed with colored film, which will preserve and perpetuate the character of this area, in staff's opinion.



View of north-facing “prow” of the building, at Clifford. Note how the second floor colored glass wraps around. Staff photo, July 28, 2021.

- The colored panels at the first floor are actually mounted at the interior, behind the exterior glazing.
- The proposed roof-level changes do not impact the building’s historic character.
- The proposed design will daylight the long-closed storefront-type spaces at the first level, creating significant re-engagement with the streetscape and community life, principles of the Capitol Park Historic District rooted in its Elements of Design. The distinctive colored acrylic panels at the second floor, specifically mentioned in the Elements of Design, will be preserved. New windows at the first floor transom will be installed with colored films that extend this expression in a contemporary and appropriate manner.
- Though certain mid-century (and later) alterations to the first story will be removed, staff does not find that distinctive character-defining features will be impacted. In particular, the brown brick infill has long been an inappropriately blank expression, and created a wall in a zone designed for transparency. The proposed new materials and design appear to be appropriate and compatible with the established style and expression of the building, and consistent with the district’s Elements of Design.

ISSUES

- Staff has no issues with the proposed design and recommends its approval.

RECOMMENDATION

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

The proposed work is compatible with the massing, size, scale and architectural features of its environment, and does not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. Staff therefore recommends that the proposal should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Capitol Park Historic District’s Elements of Design.