

STAFF REPORT 04-13-2022 MEETING
APPLICATION NUMBER: 21-7735
ADDRESS: 1416-1444 MICHIGAN AVENUE
HISTORIC DISTRICT: CORKTOWN
APPLICANT/ARCHITECT: TIM FLINTOFF/4545ARCHITECTURE
OWNER OF RECORD: ANTHONY O'DONNELL (1444), 1400 MICHIGAN LLC (1416)
DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 04-01-2022

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

SCOPE: ERECT ROOF/SIDE ADDITIONS, OTHER EXTERIOR ALTERATIONS

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The project site is north of Michigan Avenue between Trumbull and Eighth Streets. At Michigan Avenue, the existing building is an early 20th century (pre-1921) brick structure with storefronts below and apartments above. The facade is designed with brick ornamentation and bay windows typical of commercial structures of its period, though it has lost its decorative cornice. In size and scale it is compatible with the older Victorian storefront buildings sharing the block to the immediate east. It has been previously painted and features generally compatible replacement windows.



View of existing conditions at 1444 Michigan, view towards the north, Staff photo, April 1, 2022.

The building, originally an auto showroom/dealership selling Hudson motor cars and later, Chevrolets, rises to three stories at the rear, a somewhat unusual condition for a building not used as a theater. Although originally this 3-story section marked the northern terminus of the legal parcel, through consolidation the parcel addressed as 1444 Michigan now extends fully through the block to include the structure to the north fronting Elizabeth Street. Per Sanborn maps, this second building was built sometime after 1921 and also accommodated auto related uses. 1416 Michigan Avenue, the neighboring parcel to the east upon which the garage addition is proposed to be built, is now an enormous parcel incorporating several historic parcels at both Michigan Avenue and Elizabeth, and most of a vacated alley that once split the block. It is occupied at the rear by a parking lot.

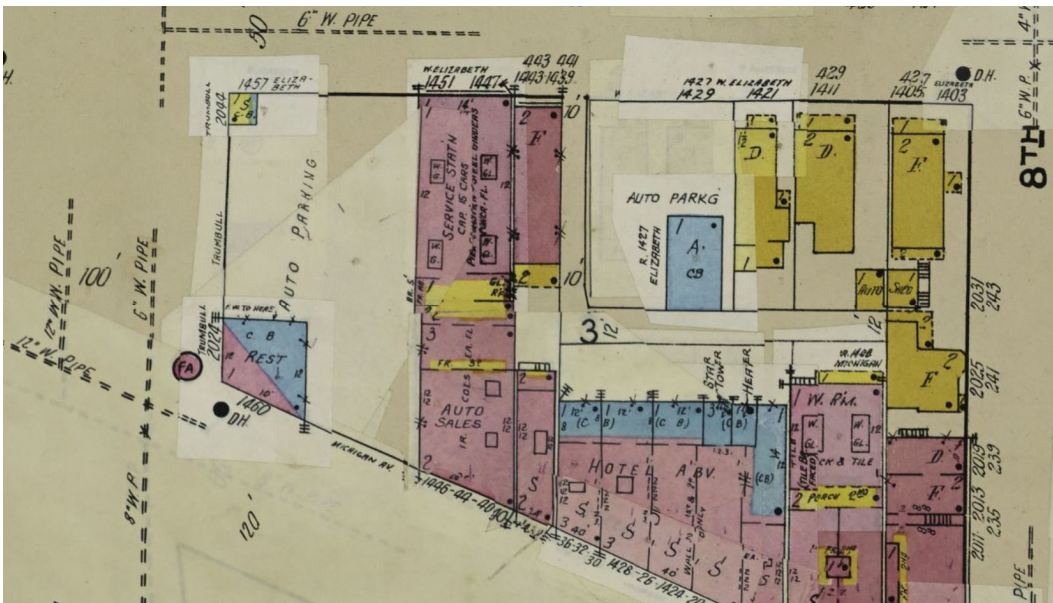


View of 3-story section at 1444 Michigan, view towards the southwest. This is the location of the proposed one-story garage addition, to be placed on 1416 Michigan (foreground). Note substantial brick repair and parapet work recently completed on the 3-story section. Structure at right is the Elizabeth Street building (not in the historic district, though it shares the same parcel). Purple line gives an approximation of the district boundary, and location of what will become the tallest element in this composition. Staff photo, April 1, 2022.

The boundary of the Corktown Historic District in this vicinity requires some discussion. Per the ordinance establishing the district, and official city zoning maps, the historic district boundary transects the subject parcels “79 feet south of and parallel to the south line of Elizabeth Street.” The architect, at staff’s request, provided additional drawings showing the portions of the proposed work that are inside and outside the district. The boundary line appears to be aligned with the north side of the vacated alley now visible only on Sanborn maps. Only scope that is inside the historic district boundary is subject to the Commission’s review; all of the Elizabeth Street building stands north of the boundary, and is thus not regulated by this body. An approximation of the district boundary line is superimposed in purple on the parcel map below; the exact line is visible in the architect’s revised drawings. Note that approximately half of the roof addition (north side) is out of the district.



1444 Michigan outlined in yellow, per Detroit Parcel Viewer. The very large parcel to the east (right) is 1416 Michigan. The purple line gives an approximation of the historic district boundary (79 feet south of the south side of Elizabeth Street). Note that it appears to be in alignment with the historic lot lines of the Elizabeth Street parcels at upper right.



1951 Sanborn map of same vicinity. Note the former and now vacated alley. Subject property at 1444 Michigan outlined in red.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Per the submitted drawings, documents, and narrative, the applicant is proposing to **erect a rooftop addition flanking the historic 3-story section, a rooftop deck, and an adjacent 1-story garage entrance block, and other exterior alterations** including the following:

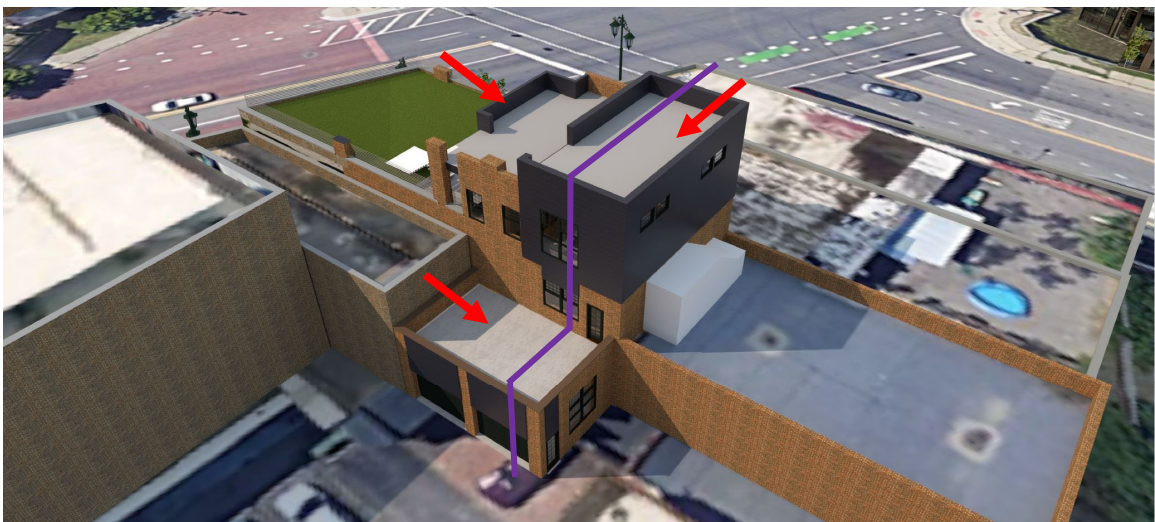
- 2nd story - Replace windows on west elevation
- 3rd story expansion/addition of approximately 650 SF
- Cementitious lap siding (color charcoal gray) proposed to clad new elements
- Fiberglass (Pella Impervia, double-hung, simulated divided lites) windows
- Roof terrace with planters and glass/aluminum railing
- Exterior stair to 3rd floor roof terrace

Renderings provided by the applicant in their submission materials are given below:



Birdseye View Above Michigan Avenue

Rendering of proposed rooftop addition, from applicant's submission. Birds eye view towards the northeast. Red arrows, added by staff, denote proposed additional building massing. Purple line represents approximates district boundary.

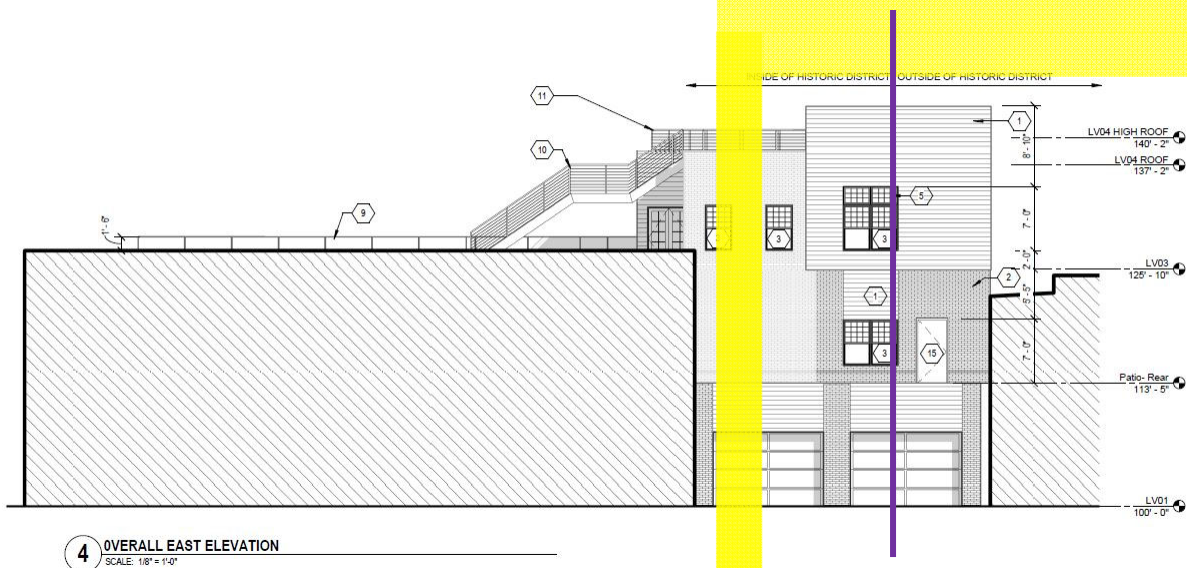


Birdseye View Above Shop Entry

Rendering of proposed garage/addition, birds eye view towards southwest, from applicant's submission. Red arrows, added by staff, denote the new building massing. Purple line represents approximates district boundary.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Corktown Historic District was established in 1984.
- Staff recommends that the Commission weigh additions to historic properties using the following guidelines, which are based on National Park Service guidance and precedent:
 - Should defer to, and not detract from, the historic building
 - Should feature materials and design vocabulary that complements the historic building
 - Should be clearly differentiated as an addition, typically via the use of contemporary design cues
- The proposed rooftop addition takes the precedent established by the existing 3-story section of the historic building and expands it laterally to the north and south, with new massing towards the south including roof access stair and roof decks, and a larger block of new massing to the north (i.e., away from Michigan Avenue), creating a large element that adds perhaps another half-story to the composition. The new massing brackets the top of the 3-story section with modern materials and expression, dramatically changing this portion of the building.
- It should be noted again that somewhat less than half of the northern block addition (the larger element) is inside the historic district. This is not to discount the apparent effect of the entire addition on the resource, but for clarity. See east elevation diagram, below.



- The first question for staff and the Commission is whether the 3-story section's roofline at the rear of the historic building constitutes a "distinctive character-defining feature" meriting preservation. Such features should generally be related to the architecture or historical significance of the building, in its role as a contributing structure to the overall district. Staff recommends that the existing 3-story expression at the rear, a background element and apparently unrelated to any important and significant historic function, is not a distinctive feature of this building. This opens up the possibility that this section may be appropriately altered without violating the Standards.
- The second question regarding the rooftop work is the character of the addition itself. Staff notes that the proposed cladding material of Hardie siding is a modern analog of traditional construction materials, and is used in a way that does not necessarily detract from the building. However, it should be noted that a lapped siding system is somewhat out of place on an addition to a large "Main Street"-type brick commercial building, though perhaps not demonstrably "inappropriate," in staff's opinion. A metal panel, cementitious panel, or other commercial-grade cladding system, as opposed to lap siding more familiar for its residential applications, may be a better choice.
- The doors opening out on to the proposed roof deck and the circulating exterior stair, are all compatible elements of a modern addition. The glass railing, especially its prominence at the Michigan Avenue façade, is less compatible with the historic commercial vocabulary of the resource. As opposed to the rest of the design, the railing appears to be much more of a crowning element for the historic building than an associative element of the addition. An painted steel railing system would be more appropriate

and less obtrusive.

- The proposal features materials and design vocabulary that complements the context, and is clearly differentiated from the historic portions. As the existing commercial building is already large, it does not overwhelm it.
- The proposed garage/workshop addition is much less visible and incorporated into the “back of house” area adjacent to the current parking lot. Its detailing and design are compatible.
- Staff finds that the proposed addition, while large, nevertheless meets the Standards and Guidelines relevant to additions, in that it is sensitively designed to be true to its own era while preserving the massing, expression, and distinctive historic materiality of the Michigan Avenue facade.

ISSUES

- The majority of the proposed roof addition work is set back from the Michigan Avenue elevation. However, the glass/aluminum railing surrounding the large roof deck is proposed to be hard against the Michigan Avenue parapet, potentially becoming a prominent element along this historic streetwall. The potentially jarring effect of this glass panel railing is exacerbated by the missing historic cornice on this building. Staff recommends that (1) either a cornice of appropriate design be added back to the building to de-emphasize the “crowning effect” of the new glass railing, or that (2) the modern glass railing recess at least 5’ from the primary elevation, to limit its visibility from Michigan Avenue, or that (3) the railing be replaced by a dark-painted steel railing system.
- It is staff’s opinion that the proposed new construction generally retains the distinctive historic character of the property and district, is aligned with the district’s Elements of Design, and protects and preserves the integrity of the property and the surrounding district.

RECOMMENDATION

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

The proposed additions, exterior alterations, and related work is compatible with the massing, size, scale and architectural features of its environment, and does not destroy historic materials that characterize the property, and is compliant with the district’s Elements of Design.

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 Corktown Historic District’s Elements of Design, with the condition that:

- The roof deck glass railing system proposed along the primary Michigan Avenue facade be recessed a minimum of 5’ from the outer edge of the parapet

OR

- A cornice of compatible design, as approved by staff, be restored to the building to reassert the historic Michigan Avenue façade and de-emphasize the prominence of the proposed roof railing (and/or the entire roof deck railing, including the sides, be revised to be a dark-painted steel guardrail system that is less obtrusive, approvable per staff review).