

STAFF REPORT: 8/10/2022 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO

APPLICATION NUMBER: 22-7952

ADDRESS: 3960 THIRD ST.

HISTORIC DISTRICT: WILLIS-SELDEN

APPLICANT: PHILLIPS SIGN AND LIGHTING INC.

PROPERTY OWNER: PATRICK HANLEY, DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: JULY 13, 2022

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: JULY 23, 2022

SCOPE: INSTALL PROJECTING BLADE SIGN AND TWO DYNAMIC WALL-MOUNTED SIGNS

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The building at 3960 Third Street is a one-story, three-bay garage built in 1927. It is constructed of concrete block with a brick parapet front with limestone detail. A 2020 façade rehabilitation includes the addition of glass fenestration in bays that formerly contained brick or a roll-down steel door, and the addition of swan-neck light fixtures between each bay. The business sign in the photo below, reading “THE FUTURE HOME OF DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE” is a temporary vinyl banner. An engraved “THIRD AVENUE GARAGE” heritage sign of engraved limestone, centered on the facade with letters painted white, indicates the apparent original occupant of the building.



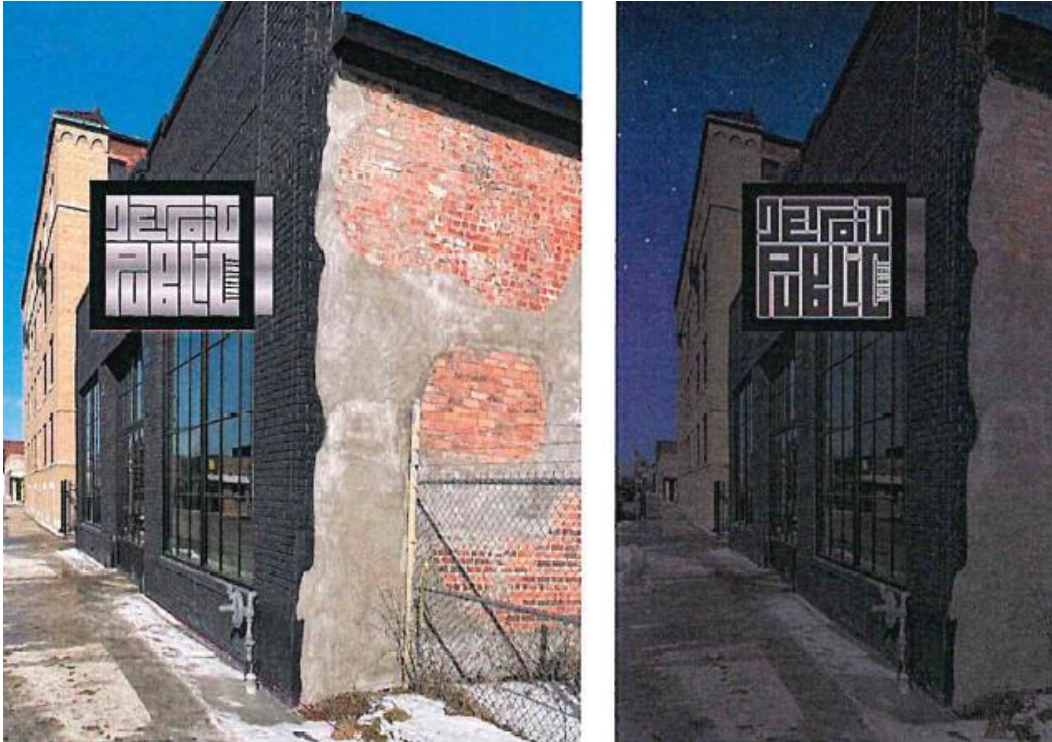
View from Third St. looking east towards west façade of building. July 2022 Photo by staff.

PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes the following two work items:

Install 17.5 square foot projecting blade sign

The proposed sign is to be mounted 9'10" above grade at the south end of the building's front façade. The design features a 48" x 52" aluminum cabinet with push-through acrylic lettering, internally illuminated with LED lighting. It will be painted black in a satin finish and attached to the façade with aluminum mounting plates. The proposed sign will feature the logo of the business, Detroit Public Theatre.



Day and night views of the proposed sign. Renderings from application.

Install two 13.8 square foot dynamic wall mounted signs (video monitors)

The proposed dynamic signs consist of 49 5/8" x 29 3/4" LED panels mounted on frames anchored to the brick façade with screws. They are proposed to be located on either side of the building's central bay, 36 inches above grade, placing them at pedestrian eye-level. Combined, the assembly will project six inches from the façade. The screens and frames are rated to withstand vandalism and the elements. According to the application, they will be used to display information "for the public to see what is showing" within.



Proposed dynamic signs. Renderings from application.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Willis-Selden historic district was enacted by Ordinance 24-11 in 2011. The Historic Designation Advisory Board Final Report mentions a range of contributing buildings from 1875 through 1959, suggesting a Period of Significance. 3960 Third St. is listed as a contributing resource. The Final Report emphasizes the mixed-use character of buildings in the district, highlighting both residential and commercial buildings and a number of “car dealers, repair shops, parts suppliers, garages and gas stations,” such as 3960 Third St.
- The Elements of Design do not mention signs, but emphasize the diverse character of the district:

General environmental character. The general character of the district is that of a medium-density, mixed-use, urban neighborhood of small to large apartment buildings interspersed with other building types. The district maintains a sense of vitality as a result of its mixture of uses and the correspondingly diverse physical appearance of its buildings.

- Throughout the Willis-Selden historic district, there is a clear precedent for projecting signs of similar nature to the one proposed—including some on buildings of similar scale, style, and period. This includes both historic signs as well as recent signs that have been issued a Certificate of Appropriateness. Signs erected within the past decade may include LED backlit acrylic lettering in aluminum cabinets comparable to the proposed sign, while historic signs demonstrate other materials and lighting technologies.



Comparable projecting signs in Willis-Selden. Left: Historic. Center and Right: Certificate of Appropriateness. July 2022 photos by staff.

- The proposed projecting sign is largely in keeping with the *Sign and Awning Guidelines* (revised 2013), with the arguable exception of guideline #7: signage should make an attempt to recognize the stylistic features and characteristics of the historical [sic] districts in their materials and graphics.” However, staff suggests that the proposed sign satisfies the spirit of this guideline as it avoids including any additional text or imagery beyond the business logo.
- The *Sign and Awning Guidelines* further state that building-mounted signs should be ten feet above the sidewalk, while the proposed sign is only 9’ 10” above the sidewalk. The applicant has indicated in an email to staff dated August 3, 2022 that they are willing to raise the sign height if directed to do so. However, staff suggests that the proposed height, in line with the transom window on the building’s central bay, and positioned to avoid obscuring a rowlock course above the proposed sign location, is appropriate with respect to the other elements on the building façade.
- Due to their relatively small, pedestrian-oriented size with respect to the façade as a whole, as well as their location flanking the storefront entrance, staff suggests that the proposed dynamic signs constitute new additions that are “compatible with the massing, size, [and] scale” of the façade (Standard #9).
- A business sign reading “THE FUTURE HOME OF DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE” is a temporary vinyl banner that was not reviewed by the Historic District Commission.
- An engraved “THIRD AVENUE GARAGE” heritage sign of engraved limestone or concrete, centered on the facade with letters painted white, indicates a historical occupant of the building

and is to be retained.

- The proposed projecting sign location is in close proximity to a fire alarm strobe which has already been installed, and a swan-neck light fixture which also presently exists on the façade. This condition is not clearly indicated in renderings provided by the applicant.



Line represents proposed projecting sign mounting location. Illustration by staff.

- Staff is not aware of any precedent within the Willis-Selden Local Historic District for the proposed dynamic signs. Comparable internally illuminated signs (whether dynamic or static) are not found on buildings within the district and are not referenced in the Final Report or the Elements of Design. Wall signs, in general, are not found. However, the addition of the dynamic signs does not alter features or spaces that characterize the property (Standard #2) and is otherwise in keeping with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.
- The proposed dynamic signs are counter to several elements of the *Sign and Awning Guidelines*, including guideline #8: "signage should recognize the scale, massing, style, materials and colors of the building and the district" (a video screen is capable of displaying images of any style or color), as well as the criteria "sign materials should be compatible with the design theme and use of materials on the building where the sign is to be placed," "painted wood and metal are preferred materials for the signs," and "lighting should fit within the building design and its storefront and

be architecturally compatible with the site and context.” Again, however, the addition of these signs is in keeping the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, as noted above.

ISSUES

None; staff recommends approval.

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-78: Determination of Historic District Commission

Staff recommends that the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the proposed work as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.