

**STAFF REPORT 09-14-2022 REGULAR MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: 22-8015**

**ADDRESS: 7650 E JEFFERSON, AKA R. THORNTON BRODHEAD ARMORY**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: R. THORNTON BRODHEAD ARMORY**

**PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT (GSD)**

**APPLICANT: THE PARADE COMPANY**

**DATES OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 02/14/2020, 07/31/2020, 08/07/2020, 09/01/2022**

**SCOPE OF WORK: DEMOLISH REAR SECTION, SALVAGE CERTAIN ELEMENTS, REHABILITATE BUILDING AND ERECT REAR ADDITION FOR NEW USE**



*View towards the southeast of principal façade at Jefferson Avenue. Staff photo, 9/2/2022.*

**RESOURCE DESCRIPTION/EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The vacant Brodhead Armory building, completed in 1930, sits at the east end of a large 17 acre parcel spanning between East Grand Boulevard's Belle Isle exit ramp to Baldwin Street, between the riverfront and East Jefferson Avenue. The legal parcel includes a large portion of Gabriel Richard Park. The initial erection of the Armory was completed shortly after the completion of the Belle Isle Bridge and the clearance of Electric Park, a renowned amusement park located on this parcel from the turn of the century until the late 1920s. The land upon which the building was erected was deeded by the City to the State of Michigan in 1929. The armory was built at a cost of \$375,000 (approximately \$5.25M in 2020 dollars), including a contribution of \$125,000 from the City at the behest of its visionary commander, R. Thornton Brodhead.

Between the front of the building and East Jefferson Avenue is a semicircular driveway and lawn. Centered within the lawn is a flagpole erected in 1943.



Detroit Parcel Viewer

The armory building is a large stone structure with a prominent art deco elevation facing East Jefferson Avenue. Per the Historic Designation Advisory Board's 2001 designation report:

*(T)he Brodhead Armory has served the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and their reserve and militia components. The building is historically significant for its associations with influential members of Detroit's Naval Militia community, who supported its creation, and is architecturally significant as an art deco structure designed by one of Detroit's leading architects of that era, William Buck Stratton. In addition, Brodhead Armory houses the largest collection of federally-funded Depression-era artwork of any building in the state of Michigan.*

The armory is built of Indiana limestone with masonry load-bearing walls, and contains approximately 100,000 square feet of interior space. Designed in two sections, the drill hall occupies the north block, with the south block containing the three-story office section. The well-detailed and substantially intact front elevation of the building incorporates decorative faience tile produced by the nearby Pewabic Pottery; four of these tiles depict naval insignia (including the eagle, globe, and anchor of the U.S. Marine Corps) and one details the seal of the state of Michigan. Inscribed words across the limestone parapet read: "THE BEST DEFENSE OF A DEMOCRACY IS A WELL TRAINED CITIZENRY," "HONOR," "PEACE," and "PATRIOTISM."

The armory was renamed for Captain R. Thornton Brodhead, its first commander and the person most responsible for its architectural and artistic distinction, after his death in 1947.

In 1936, via the use of federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) funding, the facility was extensively remodeled and expanded to include a basement motorpool and gymnasium. The third floor was enlarged to include an officers' wardroom, enlisted mess hall, and kitchen. A fourth floor penthouse wing of eight rooms was built to quarter visiting officers.



*Detail view of principal façade, showing pewabic ornamentation, original windows, and stone detailing. Staff photo, 7/13/20*



*View of East Elevation (north block). Staff photo, 9/2/2022.*



*View to south of main drill hall, north block, showing collapsed truss and roof damage at rear. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.*



*View to the east of transition from north to south block (rear wing). Note the missing Denby Memorial. Staff photo, 8/7/2020.*

Several artists, working for the Federal Arts Project from 1936-1941, completed projects at the Armory in a variety of different media. Captain Brodhead, according to the HDAB report, “personally chose the artists and kept the themes of the art naval and nautical.” Among these artists were David Fredenthal, the youngest artist to win a Guggenheim fellowship and later a sketch artist for *Life* magazine, where he contributed combat drawings from the Pacific Theater of World War II and illustrations from the Nuremberg Trials. The HDAB report notes that one expert of Depression-era art states that the Armory contains “the richest WPA art collection of any building in Michigan, with the greatest variety of different media in one collection.”

Fredenthal was commissioned to create the large mural in the wardroom (or officers dining room), which involved the remaking of an entire wall including the installation of a fireplace and bookshelves. His fresco technique included putting up three layers of plaster, the last of which was put on in small areas so that the artist could complete the area the same day. His style was expressionistic, emphasizing line rather than form, and achieving definition of shape with color. Per the HDAB report:

*What resulted was a sixty foot mural of five panels portraying the range of experiences of shipboard life. Sailors in weather gear strain against the wind and rain on the deck of a rolling ship in the first panel, an exhausted sailor sleeps in the second, a lone sailor looks into the vastness of the sea in the central panel above the fireplace. Two men exert themselves hauling away on a line in the fourth panel, and four men relax and dance to a squeeze box and harmonica in the fifth mural.*



*General view of the wardroom and portions of the Fredenthal mural, with water damage towards rear (east). Staff photo, 2/14/2020.*



*David Fredenthal mural (portions), wardroom, south block. Staff photos, 2/14/2020.*





Edgar Yaeger mural (portion), south block. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.

Adjacent to the wardroom, WPA artist Edgar Yaeger completed another room-size mural portraying the ships that served the naval militias of Michigan and the other Great Lakes States. Per the HDAB report:

*Yaeger approached the difficult task of taking a rectangular room, six feet high by 180 feet around, and giving the ships and their setting a sense of depth and dimension. In each corner of the room, the foreground of the mural presented deck fittings, ship superstructures, masts, and lines to give the viewer the perspective that he or she was aboard a ship, looking out to port or starboard. The other ships were then arranged at different angles around the viewer's vessel, as if they were all cruising in one great fleet. At the time of its completion a Detroit Free Press art critic described the mural as the "work of a sensitive artist and a master craftsman."*

Other WPA artists also completed work in the building under the enthusiastic encouragement of Captain Brodhead. These include the experimental "plaster line carvings" of Gustav Hildebrand into the four walls by the main east entrance on the first floor, depicting everyday activities of sailors. Other decorative elements incorporated into the south block include portholes and a steel bulkhead door from a mothballed ship and an ornamental bannister leading up six flights of steps to the penthouse area, which incorporated carvings of mermaids, sea serpents, and other aquatic life (no longer extant).



*Inscribed plaster linework by Gustav Lindenthal, south block.. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.*



*View of stair hall finishes and general condition at south block. Steel bulkhead door visible at bottom. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.*



The armory is generally in deteriorating condition, with substantial damage caused by water infiltration, theft, scrapping, and lack of maintenance. At least one truss at the rear of the drill hall has been compromised by cutting, and has collapsed towards the deck, taking with it a substantial portion of the rear roof. In the south block, several areas of roof failure and water infiltration have caused damage to plaster finishes, wood detailing, and the painted frescoes. Many character-defining historic elements, including the majority of the ornamental woodwork and door frames, have been illegally removed from the interior of the building by unknown trespassers. At the exterior, damage is less noticeable, except for multiple broken window panes and an area of the west elevation where scrappers have stolen the Denby Memorial, causing damage to the surrounding stonework and exposing the wall to additional water infiltration. The rear of the site, down to the riverside, is wooded and overgrown, and currently obscures much of the south block.

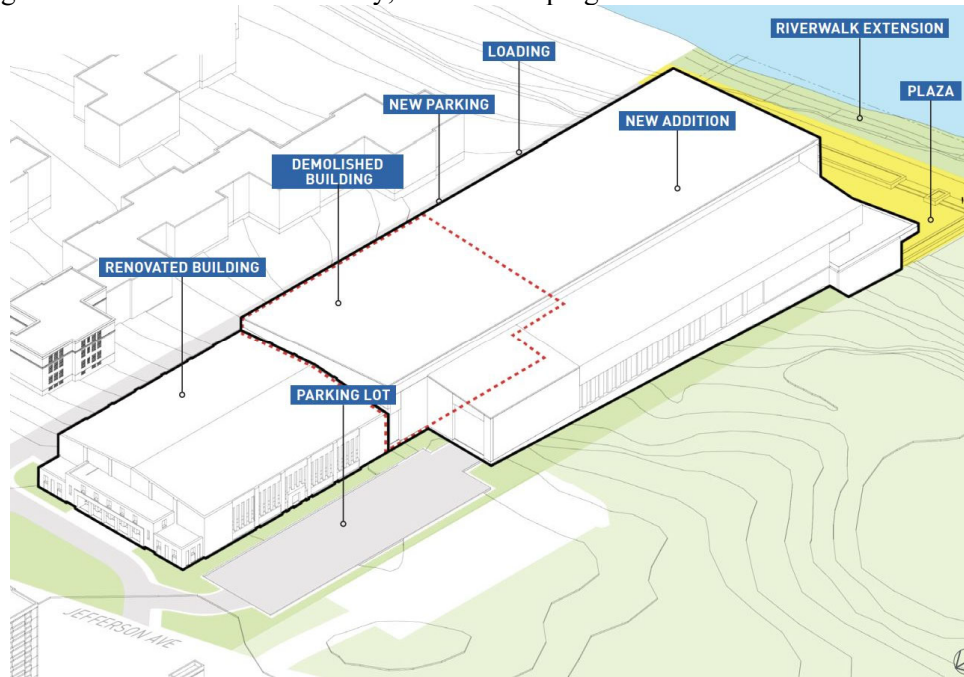


*Damage to an area of the Yaeger mural. Staff photo, 2/14/2020.*

## PROPOSAL

The proposal, per the attached drawings, documents, reports, and narrative, includes the following:

- Rehabilitation of the remaining north block (Jefferson Avenue) portion (approximately 31,000 SF), to include the drill hall interior and the north, west, and east sides of the building, including the primary public elevations and landscaped front drive/flagpole area. The original steel sash windows are proposed to be restored.
- Removal and salvage of WPA-era artwork from the existing south block, based on additional investigation
- Removal and salvage of selected limestone panels from the south block for use on the existing north block building and the new addition
- Demolition of the south block, or rear wing, of the existing building, to include everything south of the drill hall
- Erection of a new two-story pre-engineered metal structure high-bay building (approximately 130,000 SF) to the rear (south), appended to the north block portion. New addition will feature salvaged limestone panels, polycarbonate, metal panels, glazing, and exposed concrete foundation walls
- Completion of an exterior riverfront plaza open to the public, extending from the rear of the new portion of the building, to tie into the Riverwalk
- Parking and service drives as necessary, new landscaping



## STAFF OBSERVATIONS/ANALYSIS

- The R. Thornton Brodhead Armory Historic District was designated in 2001.
- The Commission's review jurisdiction includes work proposed within the parcel boundaries, including the building's exterior *and certain interior features*. The Brodhead Armory is one of less than fifteen properties city-wide with an interior historic designation. Per Section 21-2-76 of the ordinance, the Commission "may review or act upon interior features" when specifically authorized to do so in the section authorizing the historic district. Section 21-2-174, the section authorizing the Brodhead Armory Historic District, reads as such:

*The interior spaces of the R. Thornton Brodhead Armory which are hereby made subject to the Historic District Commission's consideration are those spaces normally accessible to the public from the main entrance doors on East Jefferson Avenue, including the drill hall; those third-floor spaces including the mess hall, the ward room, and the officers' bar; and the formal stair hall areas from floors one through three. Features within these areas subject to the Historic District Commission's consideration include, but are not limited to, wall surfaces, such as woodwork, fresco paintings, and murals, ceilings, floor surfaces, and permanent fixtures including light fixtures. Areas which are not made subject to the Historic District Commission's consideration include the interiors of offices adjoining hallways, rooms adjacent to the drill hall, rest rooms, and all other areas within the R. Thornton Brodhead Armory, being basements, garages, fourth-floor spaces, attic areas, and the interiors of closets and service areas.*

- Of the above interior features, only the drill hall is proposed to be rehabilitated as part of the prospective scope of work, as it is in the north section of the building. The remaining interior spaces that are covered under the historic designation (the third floor spaces, including the mess hall, the ward room, the officer's bar, and the formal stair hall areas from floors one through three) are located within the south block (i.e., the portion of the building that is proposed for demolition). Should any or all of these interior features be salvaged and relocated within the property, they would continue to be subject to the Commission's jurisdiction.
- The proposed project will result in the demolition of the rear (i.e., south) section of the building, which is somewhat less than half of the entire complex in footprint, and substantially more than half when measured in square feet, as the rear section has multiple floors. The exterior walls and expression of the rear section is, in staff's opinion, important to the building's historic character. It is a subordinate and supporting element of the larger complex. Just as importantly, the ordinance-designated interior WPA artwork is in this section of the building and remains a distinctive character-defining feature of the property.
- The Planning Department is in support of the proposed project, with the condition that all of the WPA artwork is properly salvaged by personnel with appropriate expertise, and successfully relocated to a public repository. Staff estimates that at least 75% of the murals, and the inscribed plaster, appear substantially intact.
- The federal General Services Administration (GSA), via its Fine Arts Project, has in recent years reinforced its ownership of artwork produced by the WPA, preventing its sale or disposition. Upon review, staff finds that this appears to be limited to portable works of art. Per the GSA's fact sheet on this issue:

*GSA applies this position to movable works of art. However, if the artwork is an integral part of the structure (site-specific murals, bas-reliefs and architectural ornamentation) GSA, on behalf of the United States, no longer maintains an ownership interest in the artwork, unless that ownership interest was preserved in the documents transferring custody of the artwork(s). GSA does request that any institution that has acquired a structure that contains New Deal artwork that is an integral part of the structure, and is preparing to destroy that artwork, contact the GSA Fine Arts Program.*

- Two members of this Commission, James Hamilton (Chairperson at the time) and Tiffany Franklin (now Chairperson), toured the interior of the building with HDC staff and the prospective

developer/design team in February 2020 to gather information and make in-person observations on behalf of the Commission.

- In August 2020, the Commission reviewed the general conceptual approach to the proposed project under its advisory authority (i.e., Section 21-2-5) and resolved that it was likely to have a beneficial effect on the historic district, “subject to the condition that the applicant preserve as much of the character-defining features as possible and provide evidence of need for demolition where proposed.”
- Since the Commission’s August 2020 advisory finding, the applicant has added to the consultant team an architect specializing in historic preservation projects (Kraemer Design Group), and a sub-consultant (Anthony Kartsonas of Historic Surfaces, LLC), in order to provide more clarity around salvaging of artwork and architectural elements from the south section. Additionally lending their expertise to the problem of art conservation is Ms. Barbara Heller of the Detroit Institute of Arts.
- The reports, observations, and recommendations of these conservators are included in the applicant’s submission. Staff has reviewed these analyses and finds them to be comprehensive and responsive to staff’s (and the Commission’s) previous requests for more detail concerning the artwork. We recommend that the Commission rely on these findings in their decision-making process. In summary, the applicant’s specialists find that:
  - David Fredenthal fresco murals in the wardroom, and Edgar Yeagar’s canvas murals in the dining room should be prioritized for salvage
  - The Fredenthal murals in the bar are “likely too far damaged to salvage”
  - The inscribed relief panels in the first-floor corridor are “severely compromised”
- The proposed approach to the south section artwork is summarized by the applicant as such:
  - Because the extensive testing required cannot be performed until the building’s ownership is transferred to the applicant, “the condition of the various plaster substrates and the conditions of the structural backing of all the murals is unknown.”
  - Once HDC approval is obtained, the objectives of the development agreement are satisfied, and the applicant closes on the property, in-depth testing will begin to initiate the stabilization and removal process.
  - The applicant’s experts caution that “real risk” remains, and “moving these kinds of monumental pieces, in an unstable environment, with unknown conditions, with some pieces attached to CMU blocks and other building structural pieces presents real challenges and risks that the removal may not be 100% successful. But the applicant has assembled a team of experts to help ensure as much of the art is salvaged as reasonably practicable.”
  - It is “anticipated that the art will be displayed in the north block once the rehabilitation of that section of the building is complete.”
  - **Fresco mural by David Fredenthal (wardroom).** Plan is to “save and remove the entirety of this mural, though there are questions as to whether the severely deteriorated area at eastern end of the mural can be successfully salvaged due to its condition.”
  - **Canvas mural by Edgar Yeagar (dining room).** “Because of the extreme labor costs that would be inherent in a full removal of all 174 linear feet of this mural, it is proposed that a large panel or portion of this mural be salvaged. The exact portion and size of the panel(s) to be moved has not yet been decided and will likely depend upon a variety of factors once removal begins (e.g., condition upon beginning, condition as the removal process continues, condition of the canvas after removal, and the pace of the progress of the removal). Once the removal process has begun, if it goes well and goes more quickly than anticipated, then it may be possible to save more of the mural – if that occurs then as much of the mural will be salvaged as possible. The applicant intends to maximize the amount of mural saved in this room based upon field conditions once the work begins.”
  - **Fresco mural by David Fredenthal (bar).** The applicant, after consultation, “believes that this mural is too deteriorated to prioritize its removal and stabilization.” It is proposed that this mural serve as a test area to determine best methods to salvage the wardroom murals, which may result in salvaging a portion of this mural.
  - **Plaster relief mural by Gustav Hildebrand (1<sup>st</sup> floor corridor).** One panel of the Hildebrand mural will be removed and rehabilitated. This panel “is located on the west wall of the corridor and it shows several sailors pulling a large chain.” The applicant additionally notes that “the art conservation experts have discussed potentially casting a mold on the remaining panels to

recreate the entirety of the mural, but this has not yet been conclusively decided.”

- **Woodwork carvings by John Tabaczuk (two remaining).** Will be removed, rehabilitated, and reinstalled in the new facility.
- **Rehabilitation of the North Section.** Per the documents submitted, staff finds that the rehabilitation of the north section promises to yield a historically sensitive and appropriate result to this highly visible and important part of the building. Existing historic windows will be restored to receive new glass, and other exterior finishes and doors will be repaired and retained. This portion of the work has staff’s recommendation as appropriate under the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards.
- **New south addition.** A very large, high-bay south addition is proposed to be built on the site of the historic south section and extend towards the riverfront. This 130,000 SF addition is proposed to be clad with salvaged limestone panels from the demolished south section, as well as modern and complementary materials including vertical metal panels, aluminum-framed windows, polycarbonate, and cast-in-place architectural concrete. The addition is designed to “utilize the sloping topography of the site to reduce the apparent height of the two-story building addition along the river.” The river elevation is enlivened by what is expected to be a key community benefit, a plaza that faces the river and provides a link to the east riverfront walk. The scale of the new addition will be somewhat hidden behind the main drill hall section as viewed from East Jefferson, but still has the potential to overwhelm the remaining historic north section. As such, staff would not support a finding of appropriateness for such a large addition.

## ISSUES

- In terms of application “completeness,” the drawings have only advanced slightly from the conceptual drawings previously shared with the Commission. They are not yet at the “Schematic Design” level of completion typically preferred by your body for permit review, though staff believes that the totality of documentation now submitted is adequate for the Commission to make an informed decision at this time. Staff acknowledges that a new architect with historic preservation experience has recently been retained to develop the drawings for permit based on the Commission’s potential approval. As such, staff will recommend that the Commission require an enhanced review of the drawings by both HDC/PDD staff, and that any newly detailed and specific scope not aligned with the apparent intent of the Commission, the expectations set by this submission package, and a reasonable interpretation of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, be returned to the Commission for additional review. Project manual and specifications should be submitted to staff in addition to the contract drawings.
- Because the south block exhibits distinctive character-defining historic features at the exterior and interior, the proposed demolition of this major portion of the building (even if the artwork is salvaged) does not, in staff’s opinion, satisfy the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation per Section 21-2-78. The Commission, acting in the community’s interest and at their discretion, has the power under this same Section to approve *inappropriate* work via issuance of a Notice to Proceed (NTP). This power should be used rarely, and judiciously.
- The scale and size of the south addition, in potentially overwhelming the remaining north section, is also inconsistent with a recommendation for appropriateness, but is necessary for the proposed occupant to move their operations to this location, and provide the full anticipated community benefit of the project. As such, staff recommends that the large scale size of the addition may be approvable under the auspices of a NTP.
- It is the opinion and recommendation of the Planning Department that a NTP be issued, on the basis of substantial community benefit, with several conditions.
- Staff does not come lightly to our recommendation. The building has clearly fallen into a distressed state under two decades of city ownership. Sadly, this feeble stewardship spanned a period of time when the city was unable to fulfill many core functions; proper care of its buildings, even its most important historic buildings, was clearly deprioritized while the city struggled to provide essential services to its residents in the face of dwindling tax revenue, economic collapse, and ultimately the nation’s largest municipal bankruptcy. During this time, volunteer preservation and veterans groups struggled to guard the building, maintain its public face, and alert the city to the threatened treasures within, with little result. The Commission cannot unring this bell. Ironically, the Historic Commission can only look forward, and not to the past, in terms of what can be done now.

- At this time, at this moment, the Commission is being asked to consider the *future* of the building, and the best path for preservation of its historic character and the artwork therein, given the options still remaining on the table and with a clear eye towards the building's lamentable and rapidly declining state. Preservation is clearly an urgent need here; but what, and how? The applicant, in their narrative, writes that they believe "the mural removal and restoration is perhaps the most important community benefit offered by the applicant as the artwork contained inside the Brodhead Armory is nearing a point of no return," and that "the highest artistic value of the south block is contained in the murals inside the building, and we believe their removal and restoration is of critical importance. The plan put forth by The Parade Company succeeds in both renovating the highly visible north block while also moving and rehabilitating the priceless artwork inside the south block, which considering the condition of things at the Brodhead is a best-case scenario for all parties involved." Staff believes this analysis is generally correct.
- The applicant, on page 13 of their narrative, includes a note about the artwork salvage plan that is worth reproducing in its entirety here for the Commission's consideration:
 

*The applicant understands that there are a lot of questions and uncertainties surrounding the removal of these murals and features but the team is working with a world class group of experts to maximize conservation. As soon as the team is able to verify field conditions of the substrate and begin testing a removal plan, the Historic District Commission will be updated if anything materially changes about the work proposed in this application. Additionally, if the HDC would like a formal follow up application once a firmer plan for the murals has been established, the applicant is willing to provide additional details to the HDC at a later date. Note, however, that the applicant must first close on the property before in-depth testing can occur due to costs and ownership and liability issues.*
- Historic preservation is of course the fundamental mission of the Historic District Commission and Chapter 21 of the City Code. A recommendation for a Notice to Proceed, as opposed to a Certificate of Appropriateness, should not be perceived as casting aside the best reasonable outcome for preservation. As a public purpose declared in Section 21-2-1, the Commission can and should make every effort to ensure the best preservation-focused outcome for this historic property, even in the context of substantial demolition. The architectural treatment proposed for the north section is exemplary, and a great start. Many of the conditions proposed by staff are written to realize the best outcome under the ordinance, and for the public. Specifically, to ensure the salvaging of any artwork that can be feasibly saved, and to ensure that the public will enjoy access to the preserved artwork in the reimagined facility. Additionally, we strive to ensure that no permit is issued until all other approvals are in place, so that the city (and the public) can be assured the project will be completed as proposed, in a timely manner, with experienced technical professionals at the helm. If approved under a NTP, we intend that the project will become, and remain, a true and substantial community benefit while it preserves much of the former Armory.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

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

Staff finds that the proposed work will be *inappropriate* according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the defined elements of design for the historic district, but without substantial detriment to the public welfare and without substantial derogation from the intents and purposes of the city's historic ordinance. Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Notice to Proceed (NTP) for the proposed work, contingent upon satisfaction of the conditions identified in prong 2 of 21-2-78, as such:

*The resource is a deterrent to a major improvement program that will be of substantial benefit to the community. Substantial benefit shall be found only if the applicant proposing the work has obtained all necessary planning and zoning approvals, financing and environmental clearances, and the improvement program is otherwise feasible.*

With the following specific conditions concerning the artwork in the south section:

- (1) That the canvas mural by Edgar Yeagar in the south section dining room shall be salvaged, removed, and preserved in its entirety or as close to it as possible, not merely one section; and,*
- (2) That the plaster relief mural by Gustav Hildebrand in the area of the first floor corridor, in addition to salvage and preservation of the identified panel, shall be molded in its entirety to allow future reproduction; and,*
- (3) That all salvaged artwork shall be preserved and re-displayed in a permanent exhibit(s) established in publicly accessible areas within the completed development project, excepting occasional loans to the Detroit Institute of Arts or other similar institutions for exhibition; and,*
- (4) The applicant shall immediately notify HDC staff if they determine that any of the above conditions able to cannot be fulfilled. Staff shall forward any modifications to the approved scope of work concerning the artwork to the Commission so that they may re-hear and review for approval or denial such modifications at their sole discretion.*

And with the following general conditions concerning the entire project:

- (5) HDC and PDD staff shall be afforded design review of the complete construction documents prior to their submission for permit. Exterior or interior scope that staff finds to be inconsistent with the intention of the Commission's NTP approval, and satisfaction of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for those portions to be rehabilitated or newly erected, shall be referred back to the Commission for adjudication; and,*
- (6) Regular and unencumbered public access to the WPA artwork exhibit(s), and proposed riverwalk plaza, shall be maintained in perpetuity, by this property owner and all subsequent owners;*

And a final additional set of conditions concerning staff issue of the NTP:

- (7) The NTP be suspended, and shall not be issued, until all necessary planning/zoning approvals and financial and environmental clearances identified in Section 21-2-78 and conditions 5 and 6 above, have been satisfied, as determined by the Planning Director or his/her deputy; and,*
- (8) The suspended NTP shall be issued only to the developer/architect team identified in this application for this specific scope of work; and,*
- (9) The suspended NTP, if not issued by staff subject to the conditions outlined above by a date no more than two (2) years after this approval, shall expire.*