

STAFF REPORT: OCTOBER 12, 2022 MEETING

PREPARED BY: J. ROSS

APPLICATION NUMBER: #22-8005

ADDRESS: 2648 W. GRAND BOULEVARD

HISTORIC DISTRICT: WEST GRAND BOULEVARD AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTS AND BUSINESS

APPLICANT: JOHN SKOK/MCINTOSH PORIS ASSOCIATES

OWNER: AHMEND BEASLEY/GORDY CO.

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 9/19/2022

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 10/1/2022

SCOPE OF WORK: REPLACE PORCH RAILING

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Per the Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board:

2648 West Grand Boulevard (1913), Hitsville USA, Motown-related. Purchased by Berry Gordy Jr. on August 2, 1959, this is the first building Mr. Gordy bought for his newly formed record company, Jobete Music Company.

Previously a two-family flat, then a photography studio, the rear concrete block addition became the recording studio, the first floor of the house became offices, and Berry Gordy Jr. and his family lived on the second floor. Studio A continued to be used for limited recording until 1974, two years after the company relocated to Los Angeles in 1972. It subsequently went into use as a museum. The original two-family residence is two-story tall white stucco Arts and Crafts style building on a raised basement with a rectangular footprint; it now has two one-story tall additions at the rear (1948, 1964). Its main roof is a hip with a central shed roof dormer bearing three windows, each containing a nine-pane casement window that has been painted out. Concrete steps lead to the center of the full-length concrete decked front porch, which has metal railings, and connects to the porch at 2644-46 West Grand Boulevard to the west. Over each of the two single-door entrances on the outer sides of the porch are decorative wooden bracketed gabled window hoods. The west door is infilled with a solid panel; the east door is flush with a small diamond shaped window near the top. A sign above the door reads, "Motown Studio A." The original porch structure has been removed to accommodate a large, angled aluminum and glass storefront window on a glass block base. The storefront window is surrounded by a wood frame that angles outward from the bottom to the top. A large sign located above the window spans between the top of the door hoods and reads, "Hitsville U.S.A." At the second floor, there is a single one-over-one double-hung window and a group of three one-over-one double-hung windows. Where the west elevation is connected to the building to the west, the connector, added in 1963, is set back and has a recessed aluminum and glass storefront door with transom and sidelights at the first floor. There are no openings in the second-floor wall of the connector. The east elevation has single sash windows at the basement level. At the first floor the windows have been boarded over but the openings are intact and consist of a small rectangular opening, a pair of what were likely double-hung windows, and a smaller likely double-hung window. At the rear of the east elevation the one-story concrete block addition is painted and has no openings. The second floor of the house has a small rectangular single sash window, a one-over-one double-hung window, a pair of one-over-one, double-hung windows, and two smaller one-over-one double-hung windows. The rear elevation of the building is comprised of the two painted concrete block additions, the east addition extends to the edge of the alley. Mechanical equipment blocks the west addition.





2648 W. Grand Blvd, current conditions. Staff photos taken 9/9/2022

PROPOSAL

The applicant attended the Commission's September 14, 2022 Regular Meeting with a proposal to replace the existing 26"-high steel front porch handrails and guardrails with new 44"-inch high steel railing. The new railing would also include additional vertical pickets when compared to the existing railing. HDC Commissioners discussed the project with the applicant and generally indicated that they felt that the proposed handrails and guardrails were too high. As a result of the discussion, the applicant withdrew their application and noted that they would revise the application and resubmit the proposal at the October 2022 regular meeting.

With the current submission the applicant is proposing to replace the existing 26"-high handrails and guardrails at the property's front porch with new handrails and guardrails which measure 34"-high and incorporate a 4" picket spacing.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- In August 2022, HDC staff has administratively approved a number of in-kind repair and replacement items at the building, to include the replacement of the concrete front porch steps with new concrete steps. Those steps were removed, and new wood steps were installed as a temporary measure to support the museum's recent reopening.
- The applicant has noted that they are seeking to replace the front porch railings because their current heights do not meet the current building code.
- The application proposes to "replicate" the design of the existing railings, with the exception that the new railings will be taller. Also, additional pickets will be added to the porch's guardrails. Finally, new scrolled brackets will be added to the stairs handrails in an effort to replicate the building's appearance as depicted in the submitted historic photos
- As previously noted, the applicant has revised their initial submission and shortened the height of the proposed new railings in response to their September 14, 2022 meeting with the Commission. Specifically, the initial application proposed a height of 44" for the new railing while the current application proposes a 34" height. Also, the current railing design proposes a wider picket spacing, which is more in keeping with the current railing
- The historic district was designated in 2018
- Per the district's designation report, the property was purchased by Berry Gordy Jr. on August 2, 1959 and was the first building that Mr. Gordy bought to house his newly-formed record company. A recording studio and offices were located on the building's first floor while Mr. Gordy and his family resided on the second floor. Between 1959-1968, Gordy purchased six additional adjacent properties and established Motown Records/AKA Hitsville USA. A review of the submitted historic photos indicate that the current railings were extant throughout the building's tenure as Motown Records Studio



2648 W. Grand, ca. 1960. Note that the current railing exists in this photo

- It is staff's opinion that the building holds a high level of significance due to its historic associations with Motown Records and that the existing railings are distinctive character-defining features of the home.
- The application acknowledges the railing's significance and is therefore seeking the Commission's approval to replace the element via the issuance of a Notice to Proceed under the following condition:
 - (1) The resource constitutes a hazard to the safety of the public or the occupants

ISSUES

- The applicant has noted that the existing railings exhibit "moderate deterioration" but that the main impetus behind their proposed removal of the railing is tied to safety concerns due to the height of the current railings and the width of the openings between pickets at the porch's guard rails. Staff does acknowledge that the railing height and picket spacing currently proposed more closely aligns with the existing railing vs the applicant's initial proposal. However, staff still does question if the applicant explored other means to address their safety concerns which might allow for the existing railings to be retained, such as the installation of a clear railing of an appropriate height behind the current railings or adding additional horizontal rails to the existing installation. Staff therefore does not recommend that a NTP be issued as other options which might allow for the railing to be retained do exist.

RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #1) Section 21-2-78, Determination of Historic District Commission

The project proposes to remove a distinctive, character-defining exterior element which is not deteriorated beyond repair. Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the work as proposed because it does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, in particular Standards #:

- *2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.*

And

- *6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.*