

STAFF REPORT: 4-12-2023 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: 20-6663

ADDRESSES: 269-291 WINDER, 2515 BRUSH

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BRUSH PARK

APPLICANT: MHT HOUSING, INC./KEM-TEC

OWNER: MHT HOUSING, INC.

DATE OF COMPLETE APPLICATION: 3-20-2023

DATES OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 03-08-2020, 10-05-2022, & 3-30-2023

SCOPE: REVISION OF PREVIOUSLY APPROVED DESIGN FROM CONCRETE PLANKS TO METAL PANEL

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The site is currently under construction, presumably to the design approved by the Commission at its October 2022 Meeting.



Staff photo at Brush and Winter Streets, looking northeast. March 30, 2023.

The development is a four-story mixed-use apartment building consisting of 58 affordable housing units (100% affordable) at Brush and Winder Streets. The building will be oriented along Brush, providing commercial storefront and a community room at the sidewalk level with residential units above. Along with the associated parking lot and green space, the development will occupy four currently vacant parcels running west along Winder. The building, of contemporary design, was originally intended to feature cementitious materials (concrete planks) as the principal architectural expression.

The parcels have been vacant lots since demolition of the historic buildings on them in recent decades.

BACKGROUND

In April 2020, the Commission issued a COA for the project, based on design improvements made to an earlier version reviewed (and subsequently tabled) by the Commission at the March 2020 meeting. Some of these necessary improvements were specifically related to the articulation/texture of the façade system in order to address concerns regarding the “flatness” of the facades. The approved building design proposed to clad the building with red and tan colored fiber reinforced concrete panels of varied width and grit. “Slotted” fiber reinforced concrete panels were proposed to screen the building’s PTAC/mechanical units.

In October 2022, the applicant presented a proposal to the Commission to revise the approved 2020 design. Specifically, the applicant proposed to replace the “slotted” fiber reinforced concrete panels which were proposed to screen the building’s PTAC units with vented metal screens. The metal screens were proposed to be “painted to match” the surrounding façade. The Commission approved the revision. The overall concrete plank expression was retained, as the metal screens occurred only in venting locations.



Originally approved Hamilton-Anderson design, as approved by the Commission in April 2020 and currently displayed at the project site. Staff photo, March 30, 2023.

CURRENT/REVISED PROPOSAL

With the current submission the applicant is seeking the Commission’s approval to revise the building’s exterior cladding from the previously approved red/tan colored fiber reinforced concrete planks of varied width and grit with vented metal mechanical screens in the following manner:

- At stories 2-4 and 1st story of east elevation, install metal panel siding, color terra cotta, variations of tan with staggered rows, or dark grey per the submitted materials. The parapet will be topped with metal coping.
- Install metal panels with vertical slots over PTAC/mechanical units
- At 1st story, north, south, and west elevations, install dark grey brick cladding

The current application also outlines the location of signage at the building.



New applicant rendering depicting metal panel system. Representative elevations below from applicant submission.



STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- Staff notes that the three previous staff reports and COAs for this project, dated March 2020 [Microsoft Word - Staff Report - 2515 Brush, 269-291 Winder \(detroitmi.gov\)](#), April 2020 [Microsoft Word - Staff Report - 2515 Brush, 269-291 Winder \(detroitmi.gov\)](#), and October 2022 [Microsoft Word - 269 Winder COA 20-6663 HDC 221012 \(detroitmi.gov\)](#), are included with the submitted documents on the HDC website. The Commission is strongly urged to review them in the context of this latest proposed change, to achieve a full understanding of the development of the design since that time.
- To staff's knowledge, the architect for the original submission to the Commission, Hamilton-Anderson, was not involved in these revisions resulting in the current proposal.
- The applicant has stated that they wish to use a metal panel and brick cladding versus the previously approved concrete panels due to "...to inflation, the cost of these concrete panels make the project not feasible to build."
- Staff considered whether the currently proposed exterior cladding modifications were "consistent with the intent of the Commission's approval" per Resolution 19-05. Staff decided that they were not, as the original design proposed a concrete plank system that presented important texture, shadow, and architectural detail to the design. Replacement of the originally approved fiber cement siding with lower quality metal panel system was not, in staff's opinion, consistent with the expectations of the original approval. Staff has also previously noted concerns with the previous use of metal panel as a primary façade material in Brush Park.

ISSUES

- The application includes precedent images of two recently constructed metal panel clad buildings to support their proposal. Note that the standing seam metal panel siding on 498 Division is used as a secondary cladding material as it is located at the rear elevation and a relatively small area of building's the front elevation only. Also, the two buildings were erected as part of a larger, multi-resource development (the City Modern Development) which includes buildings that were largely clad with brick, wood, and fiber cement, materials which better conform to the district's Elements of Design. Within the context of the City Modern new construction, the rear/spare use of metal cladding was meant to provide a "one off" moment of variation within a development which cumulatively is compatible with the district's historic character.
- Staff presented the following observation to the Commission in their March 2020 report regarding recent new development within the district with respect to the neighborhood's Elements of Design/historic character and the applicant's proposed building design. Specifically, staff noted that:
 - *In the last four years, the nearly century-long decline of Brush Park as a stable residential enclave has finally been arrested, and the neighborhood has seen a remarkable flurry of rehabilitation, development and construction. The streets adjacent to this development parcel are lined with new buildings either just completed or well underway. Because of the dozens of demolitions of historic buildings suffered by the district, the cohesiveness of Brush Park as a historic area is beginning to feel stretched. Staff suggests that it may be necessary for the HDC to consider certain aspects of projects which may help preserve the basis of the district's historic character while continuing to allow for dense redevelopment of the district's vacant lots. Several buildings, including two to the immediate north of the project site, are rendered in light or white colors and flat elevations typical of recent development projects elsewhere in Detroit, and nationwide. There are times, in cohesive architectural districts, where a "one off" building that is stridently modern and even geographically atypical helps to sharpen the appreciation of the historic context. The most prominent example in architectural history is the construction of SOM's Lever House on New York City's Park Avenue in the early post-war era, which was a glassy skyscraper effectively juxtaposed against its brick and stone neighbors. However, continued proliferation of "one off" buildings in Brush Park appears to be resulting in the creation of an architectural theme park with no coherent connection to the historic Elements of Design that the Commission is obliged to consider. It is worth quoting the district's Elements on materials (#7) and color (#9) in their entirety: "By far the most prevalent material in the district is common brick; other forms of brick, stone and wood trim are common; wood is used as a structural material only east of Brush. Some later buildings have stucco wall surfaces. Originally, roofs were wood or slate with an occasional example of tile; asphalt replacement roofs are common." "Brick red predominates, both in the form of natural color brick*

and in the form of painted brick. Other natural brick and stone colors are also present. These relate to painted woodwork in various colors, and there is an occasional example of stained woodwork.”

Almost without peer among Detroit’s historic districts, Brush Park once had a remarkably unified collection of red brick and stone buildings with somberly painted trim, architectural heft, dazzling ornamentation, and deeply articulated detailing. Some of the recent developments have gone further than others in incorporating the historic materials and color palette, and reinterpreting it in a reasonable and cost-effective modern form. Others have pursued a contrasting approach, aiming for airiness and freedom in form, which has also found favor with the Commission as a modern interpretation of Victorian playfulness and creativity found historically in the district’s ornamentation. Staff recommends that it is an appropriate time for the Commission to consider a course correction, with the specific intent of reinforcing certain neglected Elements of Design that make Brush Park recognizably a historic district. At a minimum, staff suggests that the Commission consider limiting the preponderance of “flat” elevations and buildings rendered in dominant bright or light colors, which in particular seem to be at odds with the historic context and the established Elements of Design.

- The Commission did take the staff’s above observation into consideration and requested that the design be revised to introduce a more appropriate (darker) color palette and to make the building appear less monolithic/flat. This design was approved in April 2020.
- It is staff’s opinion that the proposed new metal siding and mechanical vent panels represents a backslide of the building design’s compatibility with Brush Park’s historic character as only the color palette of the metal cladding and use of brick at the base align with the district’s Elements of Design. The new renderings provided present concerns as to the flatness of the elevation and the loss of texture and detail previously accomplished by the detailing of the cement panel system. The application’s precedent images of metal panel clad buildings serve to support staff’s concern that the continued proliferation of “one off” buildings in Brush Park appears to be resulting in the creation of an architectural theme park with no coherent connection to the historic Elements of Design and that the Commission should consider a course correction with the specific intent of reinforcing certain neglected Elements of Design that make Brush Park recognizably a historic district. Staff therefore recommends that the Commission deny the current application as the proposed metal siding does not conform to the district’s Elements of Design.
- Staff, consulting with PDD Design Review staff, has additional concerns as to the quality of the selected metal panel product and the detailing of its installation system (joints, corners, etc.), as well as its ability to retain its appearance over decades without “oil-canning” and deterioration typical of these product lines.
- The proposed signage locations are staff approvable.

RECOMMENDATION

It is staff’s opinion that the revised proposal does not qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as the proposed primary façade material of metal panel is inconsistent with the materials, texture, and detailing establishing the District’s historic character, and is of insufficient quality. Staff recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the proposed application, as it does not the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Brush Park Historic District’s Elements of Design; specifically,

Standards #9

(9) New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

and Brush Park Elements of Design:

#7 Relationship of materials, #8 Relationship of textures, and #10 Relationship of architectural detail.