

**STAFF REPORT 04-10-2023 MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: 23-8276**

**ADDRESS: 469 BRAINARD**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: WILLIS-SELDEN LOCAL**

**APPLICANT/ARCHITECT: MARQUES KING/FABRICK DESIGN, LLC**

**OWNER: SIMPLY WELL COMMUNITIES LLC**

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 03-17-2023**

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 03-30-2023**

**SCOPE: ERECT MULTIPLE-BUILDING VILLAGE-STYLE DEVELOPMENT**

### **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The project site is currently designed as a park, with two open air picnic structures, paved paths, and land contours that provide some visual interest. A black chain-link fence/gate currently closes off the parcel along Brainard. The lot is 100' wide and approximately 220 deep, with a bump-out towards the southwest at the alley. A former basketball court exists in this corner.

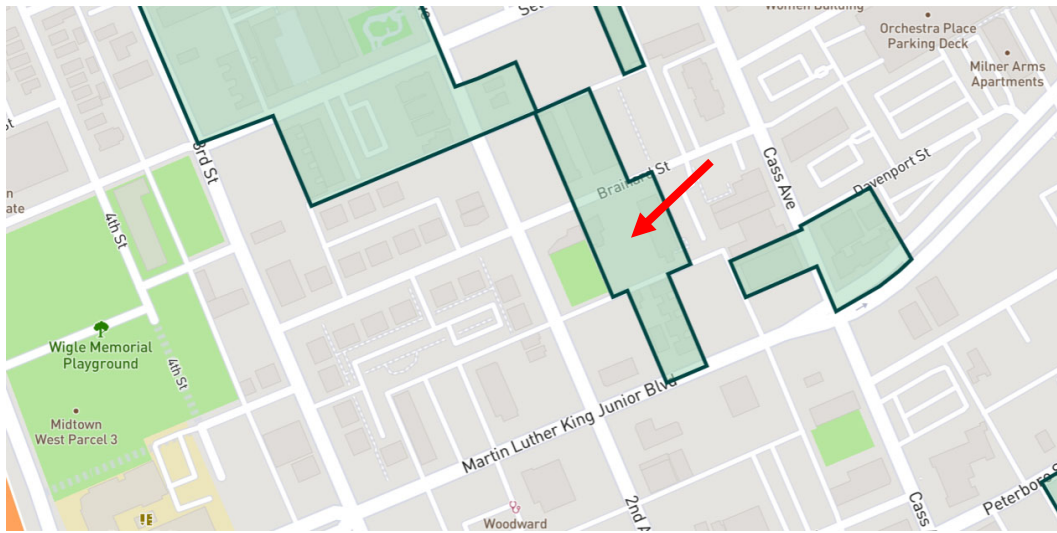


*View of existing conditions at 469 Brainard, looking towards the south. Staff photo, March 30, 2023.*

The context of Brainard Street, much of it outside of the district, is of mid-rise residential and commercial development, marked by several vacant parcels. Buildings formerly on the subject property were removed prior to the district's designation.



*Detroit parcel viewer, 469 Brainard outlined in yellow.*



*The development parcel (red arrow) is located in a narrow peninsular portion of the historic district that extends down to MLK Jr., Blvd, capturing the Kings Arms Apartment Building. As a result most of the surrounding area is not in the district.*



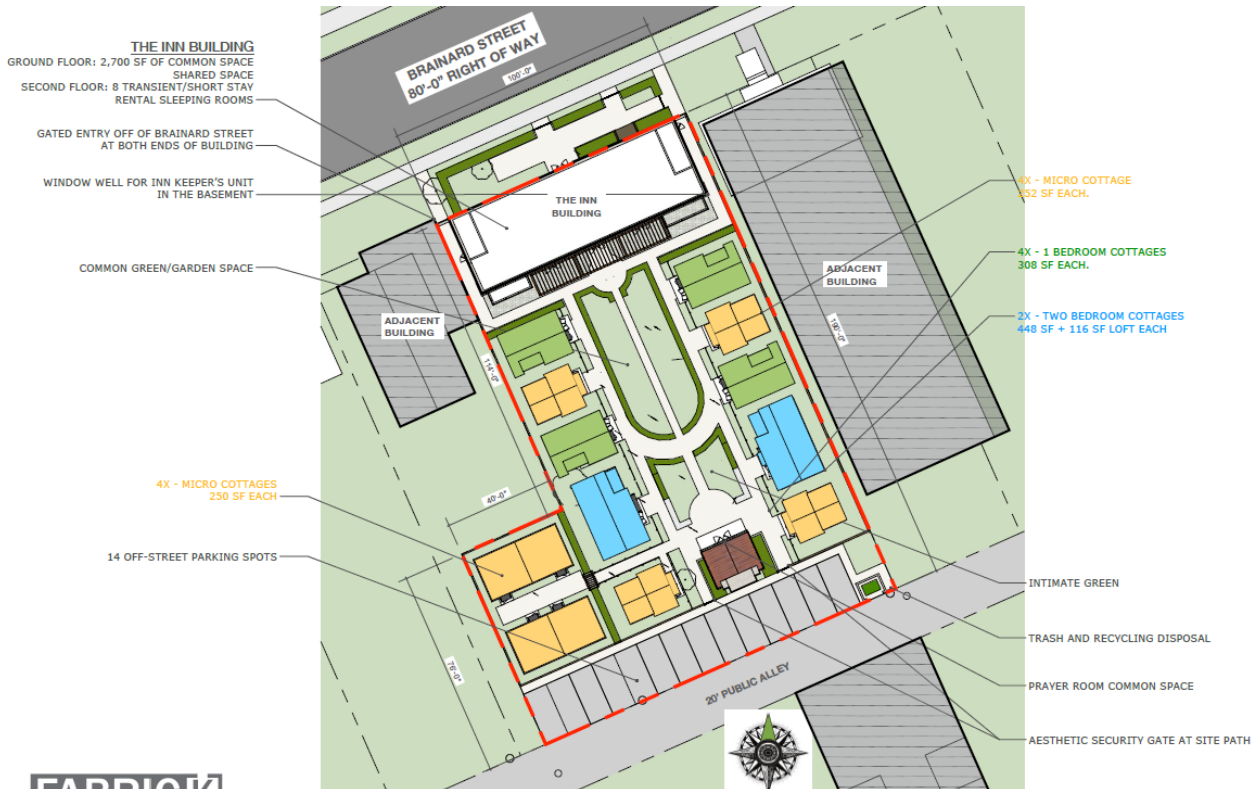
*View of parcel from alley, looking northeast. Staff photo, March 30, 2023.*



*View of existing conditions to the north, across from 469 Brainard. Staff photo, March 30, 2023.*

# PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Per the submitted drawings, narrative, and presentation deck, the applicant is proposing to redevelop a single large parcel into an “urban village.” The development will be anchored by a two-story brick-faced “inn” building integrated into the Brainard street wall, with a collection of mostly detached cottages (both “micro” and “small”) flanking an internal courtyard, extending to the southwest. A total of 13 individual buildings is proposed. The cottages, including the anchoring “prayer room” building at the alley, share a common architectural vocabulary rendered in traditional forms and materials.



## STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Willis-Selden Historic District was established in 2011.
- In the last decade, the subject parcel was private property opened to the public as a gathering space, but holds no historic elements or features.
- Staff has no concern with the proposed “inn” building fronting Brainard Street. The size, scale, and materials are contextual and appropriate. Principal materials across the complex include brick, limestone, wood, copper, and aluminum. Product cut sheets have not been provided for certain exterior elements including doors, windows, and light fixtures.
- Further analysis is required for the collection of small courtyard/cottage houses arrayed across the rest of the parcel. Though historically appropriate materials and forms have been proposed, the village-like arrangement of the several structures, and the design of each cottage as a separate small-scale element, were potential concerns, as they do not have apparent historical precedent in the district. The question before the Commission, as in all cases of new construction, is whether the development is historically appropriate with respect to the existing historic character of the district. The starting point for such an analysis is the Elements of Design as codified in Section 21-2-217 of the 2019 Detroit City Code during the District’s formation by the Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB) and subsequent approval by City Council.
- Staff finds that the Elements of Design for this district does offer the following (excerpted) relevant points:
  - **Element 1, Height:** *Most residential buildings in the district range from one (1) story to two and one half (2½) stories tall*
  - **Element 2, Proportion of buildings’ front facades:** *Front façades of single-story commercial buildings are significantly wider than tall, while multi-story commercial buildings and other non-residential buildings tend to be slightly wider than tall. Buildings often occupy most or all of deep lots, resulting in side elevations of buildings that are often substantially wider than tall.*
  - **Element 3, Proportion of openings within the facades:** *Openings typically amount to between 20 percent and 35 percent of the front façade...Sash windows, taller than wide, predominate on all building types. On apartment buildings, sash windows are sometimes arranged in groupings which, together, are square or wider than tall. A significant minority of buildings feature arched, mullioned, semi-circular, casement, or dormer windows appropriate to their respective architectural styles.*
  - **Element 4, Rhythm of solids to voids in front facades:** *Despite a variety of building types, the overall impression is one of regular, repetitive openings arranged horizontally within façades..*
  - **Element 5, Rhythm of spacing of buildings on streets:** *The overall character of the district is one of densely clustered, yet visually distinct, structures separated by narrow setbacks. Commercial buildings frequently abut adjacent buildings, typically featured no setbacks from side lot lines....*
  - **Element 6, Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections:** *... Doorways on smaller residential buildings are often set beneath gable-roofed or arched openings, while doorways on other buildings are typically centered on their façades...*
  - **Element 7, Relationship of materials:** *A majority of buildings are faced with brick and feature stone or cast stone trim. Single-family residential buildings are generally faced with brick and feature wooden brackets, bay windows, vergeboards, timbering, porch supports, dentils, entablature, or other Classically-inspired elements, and other details depending upon style....*
  - **Element 8, Relationship of textures:** *On a majority of buildings within the district, the major textural effect is that of brick with mortar joints juxtaposed with cast stone or limestone trim. Patterned brickwork is used to create subtle detail on commercial and apartment buildings, such as spandrels and rectangular panels... Rough-cut stone with thick mortar joints creates considerable textural interest on buildings where it exists, while other buildings feature smooth stone with thin mortar joints...*
  - **Element 9, Relationship of colors:** *Natural brick colors in shades of brown, red, and buff*

*predominate on wall surfaces, while natural stone colors in shades of gray, red, and brown also exist.*

- **Element 10, Relationship of architectural details:** *Buildings in the district exemplify a broad range of architectural styles, and their architectural details relate to their style.... Buildings range from vernacular to high style in appearance, with the level of architectural detail varying greatly from one building to the next.*
  - **Element 11, Relationship of roof shapes:** *Single-family residential buildings feature multiple roof shapes, with steps, intersecting gables, dormers, towers, and tall chimneys creating dramatic silhouettes.*
  - **Element 12, Walls of continuity:** *Setbacks of residential buildings tend to vary slightly from one buildings to the next, but generally create a wall of continuity on all streets in the district, except where building demolition has created vacant lots. The continuous façades of commercial buildings, where they exist in rows, create significant walls of continuity in the district...*
  - **Element 13, Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments:** *...Most commercial buildings, and a smaller number of apartment buildings, are built up to the front lot line...*
  - **Element 14, Relationship of open space to structures:** *Front and side yards range from shallow to non-existent, while most smaller residential buildings feature rear yards. Other than public rights-of-way, large areas of open space exist only where they have been created by building demolition*
  - **Element 15, Scale of facades and façade elements:** *Single-family residential buildings are moderate to large in scale relative to typical buildings from the period in which they were constructed. Apartment buildings range from small to large in scale...*
  - **Element 16, Directional expression of front elevations:** *Façades of single-family residential structures are generally vertical in directional expression due to tall window and door openings and peaked rooflines. Apartment buildings generally range from neutral to slightly vertical in directional expression, though a smaller number are horizontal in directional expression. Commercial buildings, especially single-story ones, are generally horizontal in directional expression...*
  - **Element 17, Rhythm of building setbacks:** *...While setbacks may vary slightly from one building to the next, the overall impression is one of a consistent rhythm of building setbacks...*
  - **Element 18, Relationship of lot coverage:** *Lot coverage within the district are generally high, but vary based on building type.. Large buildings may have light courts or central courtyard spaces. Commercial buildings, in particular, often occupy a large percentage of their lots.*
  - **Element 19, Degree of complexity within the façade:** *The façades within the district range from simple to complex, depending upon style. Overall, front façades tend to be simple in their massing and mostly regular in their fenestration, though a variety of window and door shapes, materials, architectural elements, and details of individual buildings increase the overall level of complexity of the district.*
  - **Element 20, Orientation, vistas, overviews:** *Buildings generally face the streets and are entered from the front façades by a single or double doorway...*
  - **Element 21, Symmetric or asymmetric appearance:** *The appearance of front façades in the district, for the most part, is symmetrical. Single-family residential buildings tend to display a modest degree of asymmetry in massing and architectural detail.*
  - **Element 22, 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.*
- As the Commission knows, your professional staff will generally recommend approval of applications unless, in our opinion, the proposal is “demonstrably inappropriate.” This means that specific reasons can be identified that the proposed work is out of character with its historic context, or negatively affects elements exhibiting distinct historic character related to a property’s historic significance, or that several

(typically not just one) of the Elements of Design are definitively failed. Per the ordinance (Section 21-2-78 (3)), the Commission may only issue a Denial if “the proposed work will be inappropriate”; additionally, specific reasons need to be provided for such a finding, to allow for changes to be made and resubmitted. An application should not be rejected if it is “less” appropriate than other options, or does not represent the “best” design. The standard for Denial is “inappropriate.” Other regulatory review bodies, (e.g., PDD Design Review, Board of Zoning Appeals) have different guidelines and standards supported by other laws and ordinances. HDC staff cannot speak for them.

- In reviewing both the historic context, and specifically the Elements of Design excerpted above, staff is satisfied that the substantial density proposed for the cottages/courtyard area is appropriate, as high lot coverages, densities, mixed use/appearance, and cheek-by-jowl development is clearly part of this district’s historic character. Additionally, the various architectural details, materials, colors, and textures are appropriate.
- There is no particular precedent for individual small buildings of varying “historic” forms deployed in this manner in Willis-Selden. However, the obvious solution (e.g., joining the individual cottages into two conventional “wings” extending and framing a courtyard), would seem to require a both a substantial design change *and a substantial programmatic change* with regard to the proposed use for an area of the parcel that is decidedly out of public view. The question, perhaps framed under Secretary of the Interior Standard #1, is whether the proposed use inappropriately changes the “the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.” Staff opinion, though not emphatic, is that it does not. The development is limited to a single parcel, is mostly out of public view, and adds needed density back to the historic district.

## ISSUES

- It is staff’s opinion that the proposed new construction retains the 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 21-2-73, Certificate of Appropriateness

Staff recommends that the proposal should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Brush Park Historic District’s Elements of Design.