

STAFF REPORT: 4/12/2023 REGULAR MEETING

APPLICATION NUMBER: #23-8288

ADDRESS: 1600, 1883 WOODWARD AVE

HISTORIC DISTRICT: GRAND CIRCUS PARK

APPLICANT/ARCHITECT: KRISTINE KIDORF, ROBERT GREGORY (DETROIT 300 CONSERVANCY)

PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT, GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 3/20/2023

DATES OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 3/24/23

PREPARED BY: D. RIEDEN,
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SCOPE: ESTABLISH MASTER PLAN

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Grand Circus Park, consisting of 4.6 acres, is two quarter circles of public space located on 1600 and 1883 Woodward Avenue, about 0.3 miles to Campus Martius. As part of Judge Woodward’s 1805 plan for streets and public spaces, the original idea provided for two additional quarter circles to the north side of Adams to complete the circle. However, the full plan was never carried out. This park has gone through several stages of development throughout its history: from Woodward’s Plan for circular park, to the City Beautiful design of the 19th century which brought in the fountains and symmetrical paths, and finally the 1950s, which introduced a complete redesign to accommodate underground parking. Despite these changes, Grand Circus Park has retained and preserved spatial organization and land patterns of the landscape. A key historic landscape feature is not just the park but its relationship to the buildings that surround the park, as stated in the Historic Designation Advisory Board’s (HDAB) Final Report which notes the following:

“The buildings in the Grand Circus Park Local District form a rim around Grand Circus Park, one of downtown Detroit’s major open spaces which contains significant historic landscape features and public monuments. The result is an open-air ‘drawing room’ for the city, defined by the open space and the structures which form a non-continuous wall at its edges. The district is significant for the design of the park and its civic functions over the years; as a collection of early twentieth century commercial buildings by noted architects including Albert Kahn, C. Howard Crane, George Post and Smith Hinchman & Grylls; for its Gothic Revival Church by Gordon W. Lloyd; and as the hub for the social, cultural and business activities that took place during the early decades of dynamic growth of the City of Detroit as the automobile-manufacturing capitol of the world.”



Site Photo 1, by Staff March 24, 2023: (facing southeast) east park, showing William Cotter Maybury memorial at the corner of Woodward and Adams.



Site Photo 2, by Staff March 24, 2023: (facing southwest) west park, showing the Edison Memorial Fountain and the temporary huts that were approved in 2018 that remain on site with fence enclosures.

The park is tilted along a northwest axis with Woodward Ave cutting through the middle, Adams Ave. along the northwest edge, Park Ave., along the southwest arc, and Witherell St. along the southeast arc of the park. Each side of the park features a central circular fountain. The west side has the Edison Memorial Fountain with

concrete paved features that alternate in colored concrete pavers, exposed aggregate and smoother concrete forms. Paths radiate out from this circular plaza to meet the key sidewalk crossings of the surrounding streets. On the east side the park, the Russell A. Alger Memorial Fountain anchors this circular plaza, with similar concrete patterns, but in a larger diameter. Shaded pathways radiate outward from this focal point /the central fountains toward the main intersections of the surrounding streets. The pathways are lined by *allées* of trees and non-historic age light poles. Each side of the park has matching stone obelisks at their southern shared borders with Woodward Ave., demarking the point from which the Mile roads are measured moving northward from Detroit. On the north corners of each side Woodward, each side of the park have their perspective monuments: William Cotter Maybury (east), Hazen S. Pingree (west). Recent additions to the east side of the park include the Millennium Bell sculpture and a dog park. Because the park was completely regraded for the underground parking garage in the 1950's, there are no trees or features that are older than this time in the landscape. Currently, the park's open space consists of grass/turn and oak, sycamore and other shade trees as well as crab apples and other flowering trees. Parking ramps are located on both sides of the park along Adams Ave., and along both southern arcs, along Park Ave. and Witherell St. Ca. 1960 stair enclosure structures which are associated with the parking garage are located at in southeastern corner of the west park and the southwestern corner of the east park. In 2013, the Commission approved plans that removed raised planter beds and hedgerows that were introduced during a 1996 modification. At this time, the dog park was approved for installation in the east park.



Figure 1 by Applicant: Grand Circus Park, current appearance

PROPOSAL

The City of Detroit has an agreement with Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP) for the management and maintenance of the downtown parks, including Grand Circus Park. The DDP and the Grand Circus Park Conservancy have spent the last two years developing a new Master Plan for Grand Circus Park which will guide future work within the park. The work will be undertaken in phases. The City of Detroit, General Services Department, the park's owner, is in support of the overall direction of the project but defers to the Commission to meet historic district guidelines.

The current submission requests that the Historic District Commission approve the Master Plan and give staff the authority to approve the construction drawings of the phases as they are implemented. Note that the current document presents each of the following areas of work at a preliminary conceptual level. Specific work items outlined in the Master Plan include the following:

WOODWARD AVE

- Install a planted median.
- Relocate the historic statues to areas away from the immediate entrance to the park, off to the side
- Adding planter beds around the statues.
- Relocate the obelisks into the new Woodward median

CAFÉ BUILDING

- Construct a one-story, food and beverage café at the south location of the east park, which includes an outdoor seating plaza. No design drawings are available, only location and scale at a master plan level of detail.

OTHER PARK CHANGES

- Retain the central fountains and mature trees at their current location
- Create a civic plaza around the west fountain, to include the addition of new paving
- Reduce the scale of the east plaza fountain
- Reconfiguration of some pathways and enhancing existing pathways are proposed. Add sidewalk and street landscaping to the outer perimeters of both halves. Add pathways to the west park to create an outdoor garden
- Create outdoor “rooms” with the use of grass, trees, and other landscaping.
- Regrade pathways and lawns on the east park to be barrier free.

MASTER PLAN

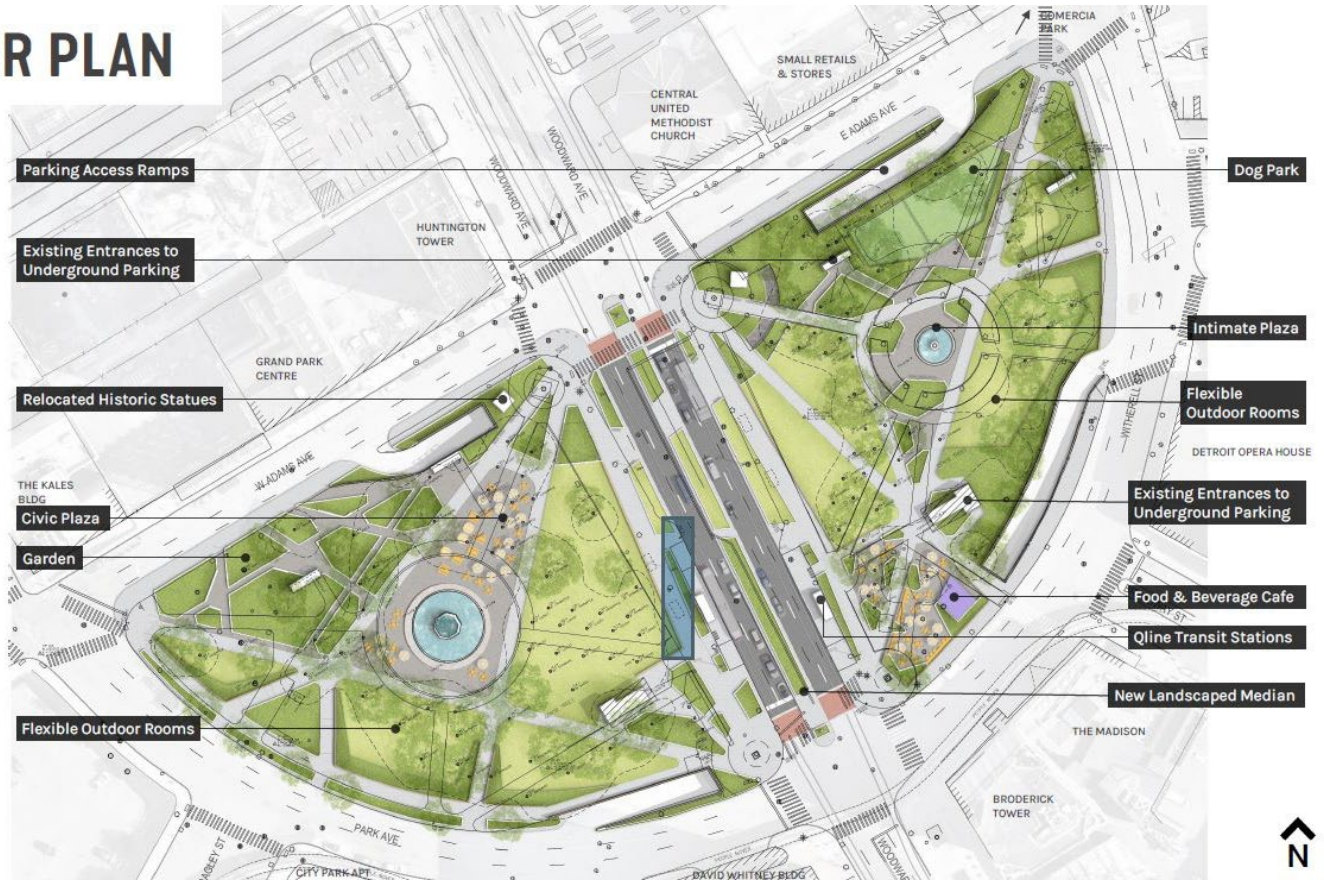


Figure 2 by Applicant: Master Plan, showing proposed concept with existing features overlaid (dark outlines).

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- This property has the following Certificates of Appropriateness (COA) on the Detroit Property Information System (DPI) to include the following:
 - June 2013 COA: Install dog park, rehabilitate park
 - Jan 2017 COA: Erect temporary outdoor sculpture
 - Jun 2018 COA: Erect temporary huts
 - Aug 2019 COA: Install lights on 6 trees
 - May 2019 COA: Cleaning and restoration of above grade elevator stair enclosures
- As an aid to understanding historic context and identifying distinctive historic character-defining features for preservation, a period of significance for a district or resource is important. For Grand Circus Park, staff posits that a Period of Significance from 1867 – 1930 be established, consistent with the National Register Nomination completed in 1971. A later (2000) boundary increase to the National Register listing included some post-war modern buildings further out, but made no mention of post-war significance for the park itself. The park itself was completely removed and rebuilt circa 1957 with the introduction of the below-grade parking garage. Additional changes have occurred in more recent decades.
- A second factor in establishing and maintaining significance is integrity. The National Park Service defines integrity as “the ability of a property to convey its significance,” per *National Register Bulletin 15*. Integrity has seven aspects; namely: *location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and feeling*. Given the complete destruction of the pre-war park subsequent to the Period of Significance, integrity of materials and workmanship are sparse. Other aspects of integrity, more intangible, are however present at the site, including location, design, setting, and feeling. “To retain historic integrity,” notes *Bulletin 15*, “a property will always possess several, and usually most, of the aspects.” It is HDC staff opinion that the park retains

its historic integrity and should therefore be considered a contributing resource to the historic district. The Commission, in reviewing work, is tasked with ensuring that the existing integrity is retained in the context of alterations, thereby allowing the property to continue conveying its historic significance and historic character. This is primarily effected via the preservation of distinctive character-defining features.

- Rooted in the concepts of historic *significance* and *integrity* briefly discussed above, staff has the opinion that the following organizational elements and features of the cultural landscape are distinctive historic character-defining features of Grand Circus Park, and thus worthy of this Commission’s protection:

- OPEN SPACE (& BUILDING EDGE)

- The historic tall buildings surrounding the park create *walls of continuity* that further enhance the edge of the park both visually and structurally.
- Historically, the park has had a flexible use that is primarily, but not exclusively, passive in nature.
- Both the green open lawns and the open plazas contribute to an open space that is flexible because they accommodate temporary changes over time.
- According to the HDAB report, Grand Circus Park is “an open air ‘drawing room’ for the city, defined by the open space and the structures which form a non-continuous wall at its edges”. It is staff’s opinion that compared with the “historic three” parks of downtown Detroit (Capitol Park and Campus Martius, being the other two), Grand Circus Park, due to its size and placement at the historic north boundary of the city, was an open space that was purposely retained as a community greenspace, which as spatial form is a historic, distinctive character-defining feature. Staff therefore, believes that Grand Circus Park’s historic character defining feature is the land use pattern of the open park space and historic cultural use as a space of quiet and repose as well as adaptive to many short-term, temporary uses that bring citizens together.



Site Photo 3, by Staff March 24, 2023: (west) facing Edison fountain, showing the open lawn space of the park and the surrounding “wall” of the buildings.

- CENTER PLAZAS & FOUNTAINS

- The core plazas bring a significant central node to the center of each side of the park. Their modest scale allows room to retain the open green space that both embraces and surrounds each the plaza which, like the green open space, has been adaptable to many uses over time. The central location of the fountains, as a key focal point to the adjacent *allées* of trees, and the surrounding plaza area, are historic distinctive character-defining features of the park, in staff’s opinion. The form of the plaza, its shape and size, however, are not, as they have been altered several times over the course of time.

- CIRCULATION: RADIAL PATHWAYS, GATEWAY ENTRANCES & TREE ALLÉES

- Historically, pathways which radiate from each plaza to the street corners as a spatial concept is a distinctive character defining features of the park. Although the pathways’ footprints have changed locations over time, these pathways have always been shaded with tree *allées* and lined with streetlamps, which align and frame the axial view from the key

corners of the park toward the central plaza's fountains. Note that staff received confirmation from the applicant's historic consultant that the streetlamps in the park are replicas and the trees within the *allées* are not historic aged. Because these pathway footprints have changed over time, the trees and light posts in themselves are not historic, but the spatial axial *allée* that radiates from the center is spatial historic character-defining feature of the park that has been retained.



Site Photo 4, by Staff March 24, 2023: (northeast) facing corner of Woodward Ave and Adams showing the axial view of Central United Methodist Church outside of the park framed by an allée of trees and park light fixtures.

- MONUMENTS

- Staff has determined that the two statues, Pingree and Maybury are historic, character-defining features, but their locations are not.

They have been moved previously and their current location is not historic.

- Regarding the proposed new building, note that its permanence will take away some of the flexible use space of the park. However, it is staff's opinion that the erection of a new building in the park as depicted in the Master Plan is appropriate because it is at a location and scale that largely retains the open space of the park. However, note that Chapter 21 requires the Commission to hold a public hearing for new construction within local historic districts. Staff does not recommend that the Commission grant us the authority to approve the new café at this time as the Master Plan does not provide documentation for public review/scrutiny beyond a footprint to indicate a general location, and a white box rendering to note general form and scale. It is staff's opinion that the DDP should present an application for the cafe to the Commission for review at a regular meeting once they have detailed documentation of the building, that being a schematic design level at a minimum. The proposal would then be subject to public hearing in front of this body.
- The proposed garden in the west park's northwest corner has several newly introduced pathways that impact the open green lawn. Staff recommends that the new pathways in this location be composed of a "lighter" material (such as crushed granite) versus the more permanent concrete pathways which the Master Plan proposes to install. Similarly, the planting beds/plantings in this area should be flexible in nature (ie., no masonry edging or retaining walls, etc.)
- Staff finds that the Master Plan's alterations of the existing, centrally located plazas are appropriate because they retain the key character defining features of each plaza: key axial views to the central focus point of the fountains and the use of flexible open space around the fountains as a feature of the hardscape.
- Staff has the opinion that the master plan retains the historic, distinctive character-defining features of the radiating pathways and their axial features.
- Staff has the opinion that the proposed plan to move the historic statues adjacent to their current locations and adding planting beds around them is appropriate.
- Please note that staff does have the authority to review new landscaping and hardscaping. However, this Master Plan has been forwarded to the Commission for review due to the scale of the project and because the park is a publicly owned asset. Also, note that HDC staff does include a licensed landscape architect. Staff therefore support's the applicant's request that the Commission approve the Master Plan with the following conditions:
 - The applicant present an application for the cafe to the Commission for review and approval at a regular meeting once they have more detailed documentation of the building.

- Staff shall have the authority to review and approve the final design of all other aspects of the work outlined in the Master Plan document prior to their implementation.

ISSUES

None

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-78. Determination of the Historic District Commission – Certificate of Appropriateness

It is staff's opinion that the project generally conforms to the Elements of Design for the district and meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the Master Plan as proposed with the following conditions:

- The applicant shall present an application for the cafe to the Commission for review and approval at a regular meeting once they have more detailed documentation of the building, prior to the issuance of the project's permit, and that review shall be subject to Public Hearing under Section 21-2-77.
- Staff shall have the authority to review and approve the final design of all aspects of the work outlined in the Master Plan document (outside of the proposed new building) prior to their implementation.