

STAFF REPORT: 4/12/23 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO

APPLICATION NUMBER: 23-8277

ADDRESS: 5021 TIREMAN (AKA THE BLUE BIRD INN)

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BLUE BIRD INN

APPLICANT: JONAH RADUNS-SILVERSTEIN, DETROIT SOUND CONSERVANCY

ARCHITECT: SAUNDRA LITTLE, QUINN EVANS ARCHITECTS

PROPERTY OWNER: DETROIT SOUND CONSERVANCY

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 3/20/23

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 3/22/23

SCOPE: DEMOLISH ADDITION, REHABILITATE ADDITION, REHABILITATE FACADE, ERECT WALL SIGN



March 2023 site visit photo by staff.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Blue Bird Inn is a small, single-story, brick commercial building facing north onto Tireman Avenue in the city's historic Old West Side area. The facade has not changed noticeably since the Historic Designation Advisory Board Final Report in 2020:

The front façade (north elevation) is symmetrical and modestly embellished with a decorative brick parapet capped with concrete and defined by a central Roman arch inlaid with a concrete medallion featuring a rosette and egg-and-dart motifs and flanked by single concrete volutes. . . . The original entryway and storefront windows were modified by a significant 1948 exterior alteration and are now comprised of two recessed wooden doors barred by a black metal

security gate and flanked by two vertical column single glass-block windows and two large rectangular openings, the western opening filled with glass-block and the eastern opening covered with plywood. Both storefront openings are covered with a smooth stucco veneer painted cobalt blue and featuring decorative images of birds, musicians with various instruments, musical notes, and cocktail glasses.”

The stucco veneer, murals, and hand-painted lettering post-date the Period of Significance. A black security door was also added sometime in recent decades.

On the rear, a concrete block addition with three window openings was added in 1944.

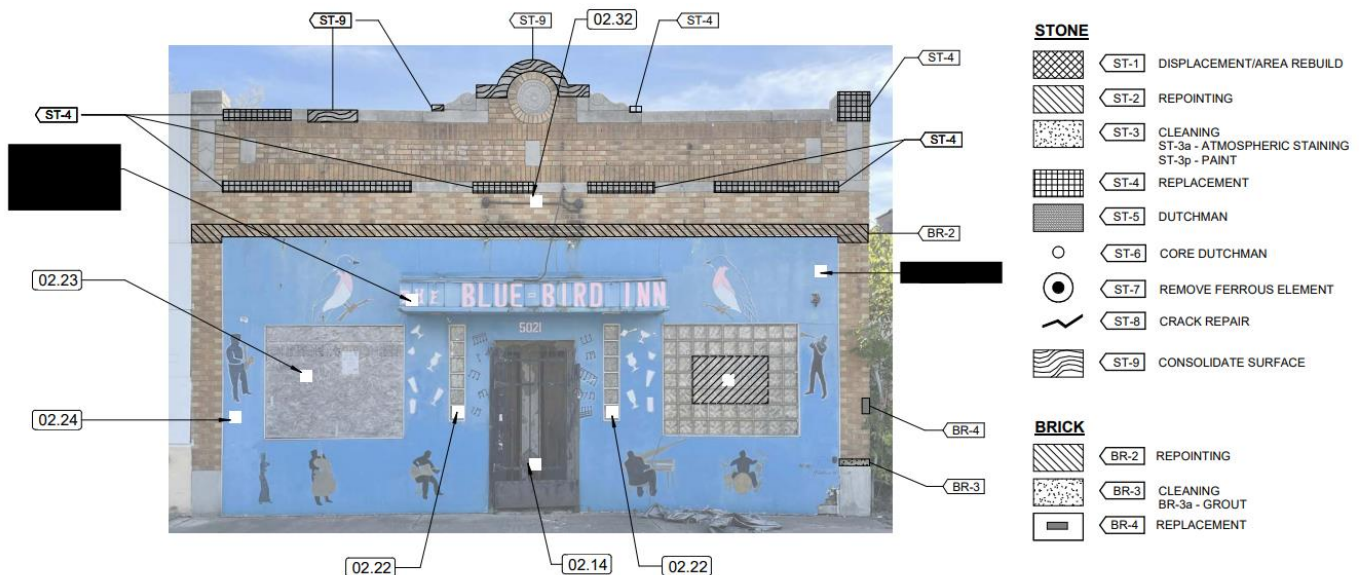
In 2022 the Historic District Commission issued a Certificate of Appropriateness to add sliding aluminum inset windows to the glass block windows on the front facade and to install a new front door. This work has not yet been performed.

PROPOSAL

The submitted application materials propose an extensive exterior rehabilitation including multiple work items, as summarized below.

Masonry Rehabilitation

On the front (north façade), proposed masonry and brick replacement is depicted on sheet A20 (shown, in part, below) of the submitted drawings and shows a minimal degree of intervention. Brick and stone units are repaired when possible, with only relatively few areas proposed for replacement.



Proposed masonry work. Image from application.

Also proposed are brick repointing on the west elevation, south elevation, and chimney, with replacement of “heavily damaged brick that have cracked over time.”

The application proposes the repair or replacement of existing structural elements such as beams, sills, and lintels.

Rear Addition

The application proposes to demolish the rear addition and construct a new, much larger addition that will accommodate the building’s new use as a meeting space and music archive. The addition would be of concrete block, clad in brick veneer, and will be, in part, approximately 7 feet taller than the historic portion of the building. It would include rooftop HVAC equipment, a loading area, and a window.



Historic rear addition. March 2023 photo by staff.



Proposed new addition. Image from application.

Mural

The application mentions “mural rehabilitation” and includes a quote for the repair of cracking plaster. It does not

provide any further details regarding the scope.

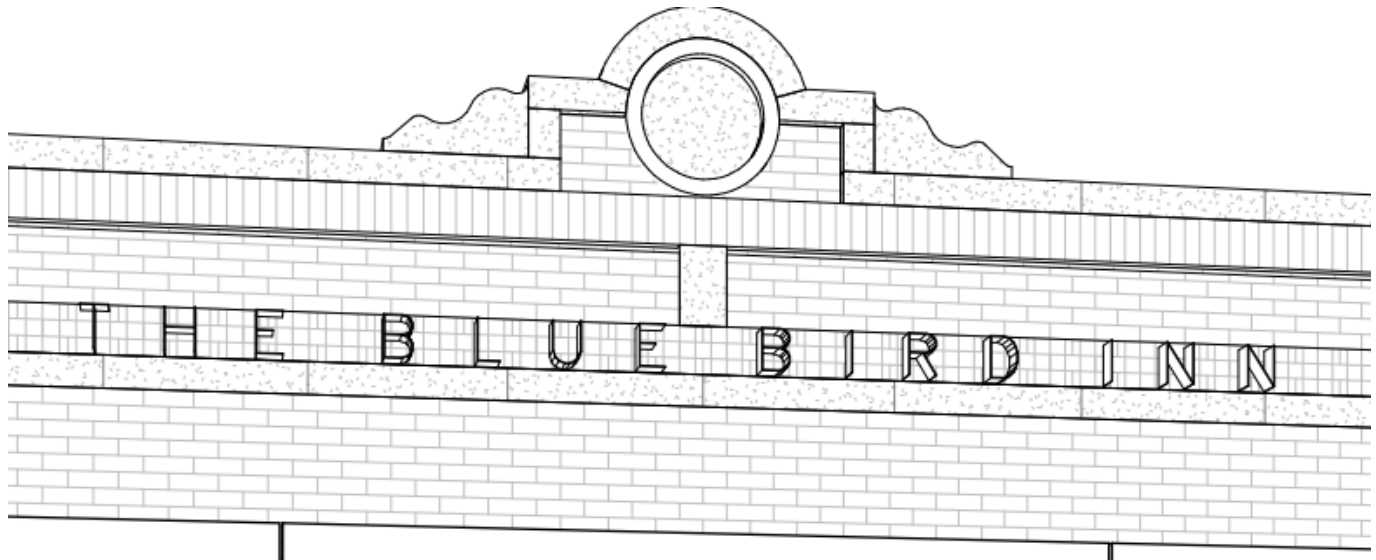
The application expresses an eventual intent to restore the presently stucco-clad, blue painted portion of the façade to its appearance during the Period of Significance. This is mentioned as a future phase and is not a part of this application.

Business Sign and Canopy

The application proposes to install “neon” LED lettering closely matching a historic sign that is now missing.



Historic neon sign circa 1995. Image provided by the applicant.



Proposed new “neon” LED sign. Image from application.

The application proposes to inspect, repair, and rehabilitate the existing entrance canopy.



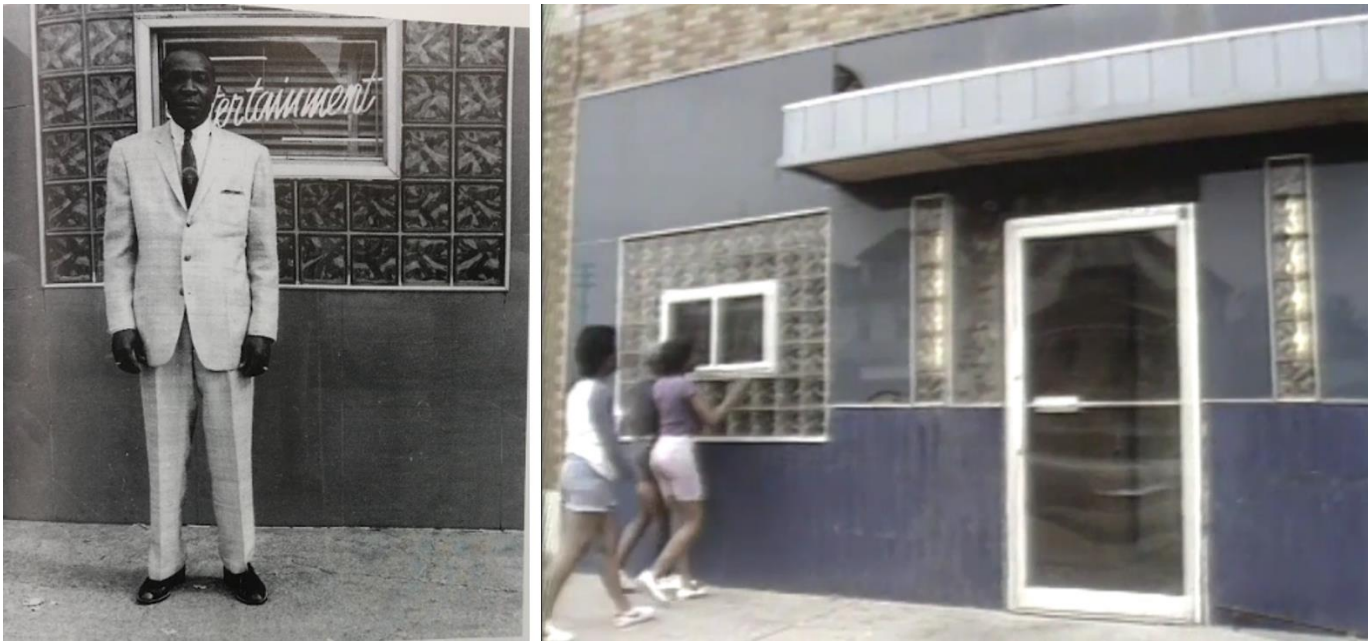
Entrance canopy. Image from application.

Other Work Items

Relatively minor work items such as sidewalk repairs and gutters are also proposed.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Blue Bird Inn Historic District was established by Ordinance 2020-34 in 2020. It is a single-resource historic district with the Blue Bird Inn as its only building. According to the Final Report, the Period of Significance is 1948 through 1960.
- The Blue Bird Inn Historic District was established as significant under National Register criteria A, B, and D. These criteria, respectively, relate to an association that has made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history (A), an association with the lives of significant persons in our past (B), and a finding that the property may be likely to yield information important to history (D). The building was not designated for its architectural significance (criterion C), though any Certificate of Appropriateness issued by the Historic District Commission must nevertheless ensure that integrity necessary to continue to convey its historic significance under the other criteria be preserved and maintained.
- Some elements of the front façade date from 1948. According to the Final Report (citing Bjorn and Gallert, *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit*, 2001) a “distinctive exterior—a pure blue façade accented with a New York City-style awning that ran across the sidewalk and right up to the curb” was added.
- Photographs provided by the applicant show that the current, blue-painted stucco veneer was added more recently. This is consistent with staff observation that the stucco veneer appears to be relatively new, appears to have only a single coat of blue paint, and stands approximately one inch proud of the historic surface. The mural itself is signed by the artist and dated 1994. It is possible that elements of the older façade exist beneath the newer façade.



Undated photographs, provided by the applicant. The left image dates from the 1950s (during the Period of Significance) and the right image appears to be from after the Period of Significance but shows the historic finish from prior to the stucco and mural installation.



Circa 1995 photograph provided by the applicant showing newer stucco façade.

- As the Blue Bird Inn contrasts a high degree of significance and integrity across three National Register criteria, as described in the Final Report, with a small-scale and modestly detailed facade, the relative significance of any given facade element rises in importance. Any alterations should be conservative and minimal. Historic materials associated with the building's Period of Significance, because of their scarcity, should be scrupulously preserved. This is particularly true of elements that are idiosyncratic and unique to the building, such as the entrance canopy (see below).

Masonry Rehabilitation

- The polychromatic brickwork on the front (north) façade is a significant feature, as described in detail in the Final Report and the Elements of Design, and should be preserved.
- Staff observes that the front facade brick and stone masonry units proposed for replacement on sheet A20 are indeed cracked or missing. The proposed replacement with historically appropriate materials, satisfying Standard #6: “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” is appropriate.
- The west elevation and chimney are composed of common brick not apparently intended to be highly visible due to adjacent buildings; they are not character-defining features.

Rear Addition

- The current rear addition was added in 1944 and was therefore in place by the start of the Period of Significance, “reflecting the bar’s growing popularity,” according to the Final Report. Staff’s opinion is that the internal configuration of a music venue is a critically important, character-defining feature on the *interior*.¹ However, the exterior expression of the rear addition is not as significant. Based in the Historic District Commission’s review authority for exterior work only,² staff has no objection to the demolition of the historic addition and the construction of the new addition. The change in height from the core mass to the proposed addition, along with the proposed cladding of the addition in face brick, will render it “clearly differentiated” (Standard #9). Further, the Standards are to be applied “taking into consideration the economic and technical feasibility of each project.”³ The proposed addition facilitates the proposed rehabilitation of the building by making possible its adaptive use as a music archive and meeting space.
- The placement of the proposed HVAC equipment at the highest point of the building is a potential concern, as it may be visible from some vantage points. However, the application states that this is a deliberate choice due to interior acoustic considerations. The application also states that the equipment will not be visible from Tireman Avenue.

Murals

- The hand-painted graphics, including murals and lettering, on the front (north) facade of the building post-date the Period of Significance, as they were painted in 1994. However, it is possible for such elements to nonetheless be a character-defining feature worthy of preservation, such as if the painted images replicate or approximate a condition found on the building during the Period of Significance. Although it is possible that alterations or elimination of the murals would be appropriate, more information will be warranted regarding the building’s historic appearance before any irreversible changes to the images are made.

Canopy and Business Sign

- The proposed LED sign is appropriate in that it closely replicates a lost historic feature based on photographic evidence.

¹ See page 5 of the Final Report for a discussion of the building’s interior significance.

² Michigan Local Historic Districts Act (399.205 §5).

³ 36 CFR Part 68.

- Particular care must be taken regarding any work performed on the entrance canopy, as it is a highly visible and character-defining component of the façade. As discussed in the Final Report, its presence expresses the history of the building and reflects its 1944 transition from a commercial building into a jazz club. Further, it is composed of materials that are likely to be difficult or impossible to replace if damaged. Any inspection of the canopy should be as noninvasive as possible and any rehabilitation work should make every effort to retain existing materials. Any change to the materials or appearance of the canopy would constitute a “removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features ... [to] be avoided” (Standard #2).

ISSUES

Masonry Rehabilitation

- Sheet S300 of the submitted drawings shows significant destructive probing including the removal of five courses of brick and unspecified amounts of the stucco veneer “for structural inspection.” This is not appropriate; Standard #7 directs “physical treatments ... will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.” Less invasive means of examining the underlying structure should be explored before any destructive interventions are considered.
- The number and locations of bricks to be removed on the west elevation, south elevation, and chimney are not specified.

Rear Addition

- The choice of brick for the rear addition is not specified. Standard #9 requires that the addition be “clearly differentiated” from the historic building.

Mural

- Although the mural does not date from the Period of Significance, it is nonetheless a culturally sensitive homage to the building’s history and should not be removed without careful consideration. Destructive probing to examine the structure beneath should be avoided when there are other means of obtaining the same information. For example, probing could be limited to the solid blue fields, avoiding the painted figures. Or, examination from the interior may be feasible.

Canopy and Business Sign

- The application does not include a plan or section of the proposed LED sign.
- The application does not include a detailed scope of work for the canopy rehabilitation.

RECOMMENDATION

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

The proposed work is compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features of its environment, and, subject to the following conditions, does not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. Staff therefore recommends that the proposal should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Elements of Design for the Blue Bird Inn Historic District, with the conditions that

- The removal of any bricks or masonry elements beyond those specified on sheet A20 of the application materials shall be subject to approval by staff.
- The brick veneer to be used on the addition shall be subject to approval by staff.
- Stucco veneer and mural rehabilitation shall be limited to filling existing cracks and voids and repainting with the existing color or colors. Existing material shall not be removed and the painted figures must not be disturbed.
- The final design of the proposed LED “neon” sign, including its color and the locations of its anchors, electrical penetrations, and other supporting elements, shall be subject to approval by staff.
- A full scope of work, subject to approval by staff, shall be provided before any work on the canopy is performed.