

STAFF REPORT: SEPTEMBER 13, 2023 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO

APPLICATION NUMBER: 23-8525

ADDRESS: 12632 (12638) DEXTER

HISTORIC DISTRICT: RUSSELL WOODS-SULLIVAN

APPLICANT: BRYAN COOK, DEVELOPARCHITECTURE

PROPERTY OWNER: VINAYAK PROPERTIES LLC

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: AUGUST 2nd period 1, 2023

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: AUGUST 28, 2023

SCOPE: INSTALL STONE AND STUCCO VENEER

EXISTING CONDITIONS

This property is a single-story, Art Moderne or Streamline Moderne professional office building, built in 1946, facing west onto Dexter Avenue. The curved, brick façade, glass block windows, stone sills and lintels, stone coping, fluted stone door surround, and dentil cornice are important, character-defining features of this minimalist architectural style. Portions of the side (north and south) elevations and the entire rear (east) elevation are constructed of concrete block, also a historic feature. Non-historic components include square tiles surrounding the front (west) entrance, red-painted steel doors on the front (west) façade and side (north-facing, towards the present-day parking lot) elevation, and a stainless-steel identification sign on the front (west) of the building. The latter is likely a newer sign in its historic location.



August 2023 photo by staff.

PROPOSAL

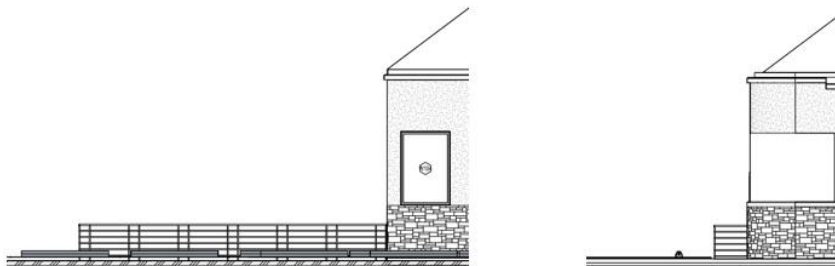
The applicant proposes to install new cladding materials on the front (west) façade and on the north elevation of the building. The materials would be stone veneer on the lower third and plaster on the upper two thirds. Also shown in the application drawings are a new sign on the front façade and a fenced area in the rear (east) of the building.



August 2023 photo by staff.



Rendering of proposed cladding materials and sign, provided by applicant.



Proposed fence, from application drawings, cropped by staff. Left: north elevation. Right: west elevation.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The proposed work is a city-sponsored project, part of a façade improvement program using Strategic Neighborhood Fund funding through Invest Detroit, managed by Life Remodeled and coordinated by the

Planning and Development Department.

- The Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District was enacted by the Detroit City Council in 1999. The Final Report for the district emphasizes significant events, people, and buildings from 1916 through the late 1950s, implying a period of significance. The Elements of Design (Sec. 21-2-168) observe [emphasis added]:
 - The *major texture* is that of brick laid in mortar, often juxtaposed with wood or smooth or rough-faced stone elements and trim. Textured brick and brick laid in patterns creates *considerable interest*.
 - Natural brick colors, such as red, yellow, brown, and buff, predominate in wall surfaces.
 - The architectural elements and details of each structure generally relate to its style.
 - Commercial buildings along Dexter Avenue range in style from Neo-Georgian to Art Deco and Art Moderne.

Contributing (Historic) Resource

- As the subject building is a largely unaltered example of Art Moderne architecture from the period of significance, staff opinion is that it is clearly a contributing resource. Further, the Final Report highlights, among nineteen representative architecturally significant resources described in detail, the Art Moderne Congregation Beth Shmuel at 12837 Dexter Avenue. This further supports the importance of Art Moderne architecture in the district. Other Art Moderne buildings in the district (though not highlighted in the Final Report) are a church building at 12837 Dexter Avenue and a commercial building at 13107 Dexter Avenue.



Congregation Beth Shmuel at 12837 Dexter Avenue. July 2022 Google Maps photo.

Appropriateness of Proposed Work

- The fence shown in the drawings is likely appropriate, as it meets the *Fence and Hedge Guidelines*, is in the rear of the building, does not hide or distract from significant or character-defining architectural features, and does not interrupt significant or character-defining open spaces.
- The proposed sign appears to be larger than the current sign. However, it potentially meets the *Sign and Awning Guidelines* and is potentially appropriate in that it occupies a blank space on the façade, is compatible in proportion to the rest of the building, and does not obscure or destroy any character-defining features.

ISSUES

- In general, the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation require that character-defining features of a building be preserved. “Character-defining elements include the overall shape of the building, its materials, craftsmanship, decorative details ... as well as the various aspects of its site and environment.”¹ As noted above, the curved brick walls, including their color and texture, along with brick dentils, are character-defining features; the smooth block and the contrast that it provides with the brick are also important to the character of the building. Standard #2 directs that the “alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.” The proposed plaster and stone veneer would alter the character of the building, contrary to Standard #2.
- The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards allow for in-kind replacement of historic materials if they are shown to be deteriorated beyond repair (Standard #6). Although staff observes cracking of brick and evidence of past mortar repair, there is no evidence that the brick veneer and concrete block are beyond repair. Even if individual bricks or blocks or expanses of brick or block are damaged, the appropriate rehabilitation approach would be replacement with matching masonry and compatible mortar. This approach is financially and technically feasible using readily available materials and trades. Ideally, the underlying cause of the deterioration (such as moisture infiltration or corrosive expansion) would be addressed at this time as well.



Representative areas of damage and prior repair. August 2023 photos by staff.

- As an additional note, the application does not provide specifications for the “plaster” (the word can broadly include different materials and techniques) or a product name for the proposed stone veneer. Staff has asked for this information. Regardless, stone veneer is not appropriate for Art Moderne buildings in general. Stucco plaster, while sometimes found on Art Moderne buildings, is not historically appropriate for this building and is not found on Art Moderne buildings in the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District as a whole (the examples mentioned above are all brick).
- The application does not provide a narrative or specifications regarding the proposed fence materials, finish, and color. This will be required to make a final determination as to its appropriateness. Staff has asked for additional information regarding the proposed fence.

¹ National Park Service, “Architectural Character: Identifying the Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as an Aid to Preserving Their Character,” Preservation Briefs 17.

- The application does not provide description or specifications regarding the proposed sign, including how it will be mounted to the building and if and how it is to be illuminated. This will also be required. Staff has asked for additional information regarding the proposed sign.

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-78: Determinations of Historic District Commission (Recommendation One, Denial of plaster and stone veneer installation)

Staff concludes that the proposed plaster and stone veneer cladding does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the following reasons:

- The proposed work would alter the character of the building by obscuring character-defining features including textured and patterned brick, mortar joints, and concrete block.
- The proposed stone cladding, specifically, introduces a novel texture and finish that is not compatible with the Art Moderne style of the building, not compatible with the period of significance of the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District, and not compatible with other historic buildings found within the district. The proposed plaster finish is also incompatible with the district.

Therefore, staff recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the proposed plaster and stone veneer installation as the proposed work fails to meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, in particular:

- 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.*
- 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, other visual qualities, and where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be documented by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.*

Section 21-2-78: Determinations of Historic District Commission (Recommendation Two: Certificate of Appropriateness)

Staff recommends that the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the remaining work items as they meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, with the following conditions:

- The proposed fence material and finish shall be subject to approval by staff.
- The proposed sign will be subject to approval by staff.