

**STAFF REPORT: SEPTEMBER 13, 2023 REGULAR MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: 23-8536**

**ADDRESS: 13201 DEXTER**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: RUSSELL WOODS-SULLIVAN**

**APPLICANT: KIMBERLY DOKES, DOKES DESIGN ARCHITECTURE LLC**

**PROPERTY OWNER: MALIK WILSON, DEXTER QUALITY CLEANERS**

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: AUGUST 21, 2023**

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: AUGUST 28, 2023; SEPTEMBER 2, 2023; SEPTEMBER 7, 2023**

**SCOPE: INSTALL STONE AND STUCCO VENEER**

### **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

13201 Dexter is the southernmost storefront of a three-unit commercial building in the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District. The building is subdivided into three separate legal parcels under separate ownership; along with 13201 Dexter, the building also includes 13205 Dexter and 13217 Dexter. For purposes of this report, “13201–13217 Dexter” is used when referring to the building as a whole; “13201 Dexter” is used for the individual property and the associated Application for Work Approval and staff recommendation described in the report.



*Left: Detroit Parcel Viewer image of 13201–13217 Dexter shown as three distinct, rectangular parcels, with 13201 Dexter highlighted in yellow. Right: Google Maps aerial photo of the same building.*



*13201–13217 Dexter, with 13201 Dexter visible at left. August 2023 photo by staff.*

Located at the northwest corner of Dexter Avenue and Tyler Street, 13201 Dexter is a small-scale (about 25 feet wide) storefront facing east onto Dexter Avenue. The building was built in 1947, according to building permits; the façade treatment appears largely original to the building. 13201 Dexter includes several unique and distinctive features including a tall, poured concrete foundation with integrated planter, outward-angled, nonfinish aluminum windows on the primary (east) façade, and a prominent, formerly illuminated, business sign projecting from a tripod bracket above the roofline. A vertical expanse of black-painted EIFS (exterior insulation finishing system, a low-cost substitute for stucco) encloses an area that, as recently as 2015, contained a vinyl awning. 13201 Dexter is clad in square and rectangular, smooth-finished, hardboard (e.g., Masonite or a similar product) panels resembling in appearance the structural glass panels, commonly known by trade names of Vitrolite and Carrara Glass, often found on Streamline Moderne buildings of the 1930s and 1940s. A subtle, yet distinctive feature is the slight S-curve by which the higher parapet of 13201 Dexter drops to meet the adjacent storefront. This element, along with the use of smooth façade panels and the slanted storefront window, evoking themes of motion and transportation, place the building within the Streamline Moderne style.



*13201 Dexter. August 2023 photo by staff.*

Until recently, the hardboard panels created a unified appearance that connected all three storefronts of 13201–13217 Dexter. Sometime between 2019 and 2021, the northernmost storefront, 13217 Dexter, was reclad in EIFS and an internally illuminated, channel-letter business sign was added. This work appears to have been completed without approval, as staff has no record of a Certificate of Appropriateness or Notice to Proceed for the work. It is

not known when the EIFS at 13201 Dexter was added.



13201–13217 Dexter in 2019. Image: Google Maps.



13201–13217 Dexter in 2022. Image: Google Maps.

## PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes three scope items, as follows:

### Lighting

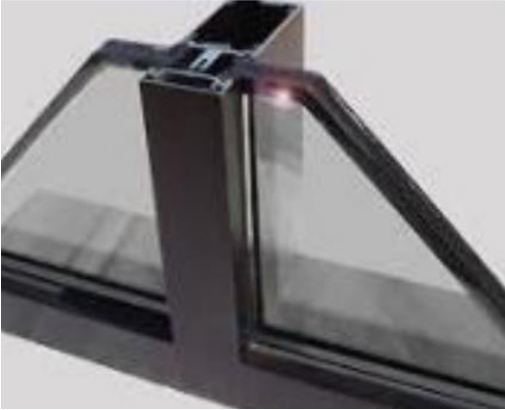
Existing, non-historic, wall-mounted light fixtures are proposed for replacement with Possini Euro Ellis 11 3/4” High Up-Down Modern fixtures.



*Proposed light fixture. Image from application.*

## **Windows and door**

The windows are proposed for replacement with Trifab VersaGlaze fixed aluminum units with 2” wide sightlines. The door is also proposed for replacement; specifications are not provided.



*Section of proposed window system. Image from application documents.*

## **Cladding**

New UltraShield Natural Cortes composite 1x6” decking board, with a synthetic “Peruvian teak” woodgrain finish, is proposed to be installed horizontally as an exterior cladding material.



*Rendering depicting the proposed changes. Image from application. The mural and living green wall depicted are not part of the application.*

## 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) provide the following pertinent observations:
  - On Dexter Boulevard, the repetitive flow of storefront openings, where they exist, create a rhythm along the commercial frontage.
  - Commercial buildings along Dexter Avenue range in style from Neo-Georgian to Art Deco and Art Moderne.

### Contributing (Historic) Resource

Staff opinion is that 13201–13217 Dexter is a contributing resource, despite alterations. 13201 Dexter, in particular, retains its character-defining features from the period of significance. Though 13201–13217 Dexter shows dramatic alterations to the façade, staff notes that the alterations post-date the 1999 designation of the historic district and appear to have been completed without approval. Prior to the alterations, the building expressed a relatively high degree of integrity.

### Lighting

- The proposed work removes non-historic lighting. The proposed light fixtures are both compatible, as wall-mounted downlighting is appropriate for mid twentieth-century commercial architecture, and clearly differentiated, as their contemporary design would not be readily mistaken for a historic feature.

### Windows



*Example of window damage. August 2023 photo by staff.*

- Although the window configuration is certainly an important character-defining feature, it is not clear if the windows, themselves, are historic or are more recent replacements. Regardless, the existing windows appear, to staff, to be deteriorated beyond repair. On both elevations, the aluminum windows are bent due to apparent impact damage; the loss of plane means that they can no longer accommodate glass. They are

presently glazed with acrylic sheets. Straightening the bent aluminum is not feasible.<sup>1</sup>

- The proposed replacement window, in 2” wide aluminum, is a close match to the existing window, meeting 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.” The black anodized finish is an appropriate color and texture for the style of the building.

## ISSUES

### Door

- The door is a historic element that has not been shown to be deteriorated beyond repair. Further, the application does not provide specifications for the proposed replacement door.



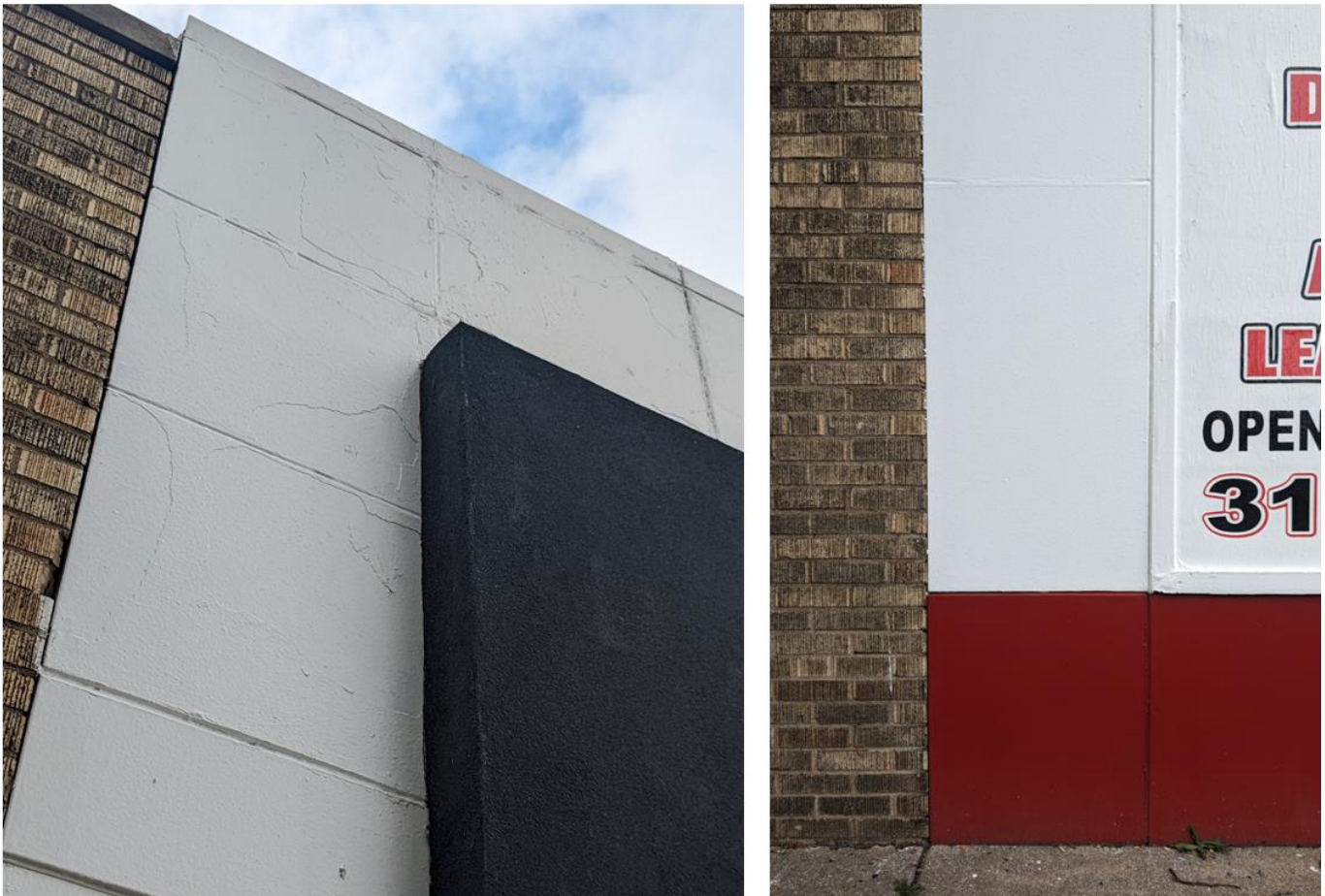
Front (east) door. September 2023 photo by staff.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Park Service recommends replacing damaged aluminum window components in prominent locations with matching components taken from elsewhere on the same building. That is not an option here due to the small number of windows. Preservation Tech Notes 22: “Maintenance and Repair of Historic Aluminum Windows,” 9–11.

## Cladding

- Staff opinion is that the hardboard cladding panels are a character-defining feature of the building. According to Standard #2, they should be retained: “alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.” The proposed synthetic cladding would alter the character of the building, contrary to Standard #2.
- Also, in staff opinion, the hardboard panels represent a “distinctive ... construction technique [and] example of craftsmanship” as described in Standard #5. That standard, likewise, directs that such features be preserved.
- 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). In this case, however, the existing historic cladding appears to be in very good condition, with no signs of deterioration or delamination.



*Detail of cladding. September 2023 photos by staff.*

- Further, the proposed cladding material is not appropriate as neither unpainted wood, nor synthetic wood, nor butt-joint siding of any kind, are compatible with the district as a whole, or with its commercial buildings in particular.
- In conclusion, as this is a city-sponsored façade improvement project, staff points out a few options for façade rehabilitation work items that would likely meet the Secretary of Interior’s Standards at a minimal cost:

- Painting in historically appropriate colors meets the Standards and can be approved by staff pursuant to Resolution 20-03. Moderne buildings often use black, white, silver, earth tones, and pastels; other colors, or a mural, may also be appropriate. The color selection for the façade should match or complement that of the roof-mounted sign (the sign could likewise be painted in an appropriate color scheme).
- Staff observes that the sign, formerly illuminated, is not functional. As a result, the building is not readily identifiable at night. Relighting the sign through repair and replacement of bulbs would constitute “ordinary maintenance” (Sec. 21-2-4) not requiring Historic District Commission review, and would approve the overall appearance of the Dexter Avenue commercial strip.



*The building at night. August 2023 photo by staff.*

- Expanses of non-historic plywood and EIFS on the façade could be replaced with historically appropriate materials such as metal, glass, or brick, or a historically appropriate awning could be added, subject to Historic District Commission review.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

### Section 21-2-78: Determinations of Historic District Commission (Recommendation One, Denial of cladding installation and door replacement)

Staff concludes that the proposed installation of synthetic deck-board cladding, and door replacement, do not meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the following reasons:

- The proposed work would alter the character of the building by covering character-defining smooth rectangular hardboard siding with new material.
- The existing rectangular hardboard siding constitutes a distinctive construction technique and example of craftsmanship that would be obscured and damaged by the proposed work.
- The proposed composite deck board cladding is not compatible with the building or the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District in that it introduces characteristics which are not historically found therein, including an unpainted woodgrain appearance and a butt-joint installation.



- The proposed composite deck board cladding, providing a stark contrast with the other storefronts on the same building and the other buildings on the block, would disrupt the “repetitive flow of storefronts” described in the Elements of Design.
- The proposed door replacement would remove a historic element that is not deteriorated beyond repair.

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.*
5. *Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.*
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 for lighting and window replacement)

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.