

STAFF REPORT: 10/11/2023 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: D. RIEDEN

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2023-00057

ADDRESS: 12512 DEXTER

HISTORIC DISTRICT: RUSSELL WOODS- SULLIVAN

APPLICANT: BETHANY HOWARD, "CITY WALLS"/GENERAL SERVICES DIVISION

PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 9/18/2023

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 9/21/23, 9/29/23

SCOPE: PAINT ENTIRE BUILDING (WORK COMPLETED WITHOUT APPROVAL), PAINT MURAL ON SIDE

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Built in 1947, the property at 12512 Dexter is a two-story commercial building facing west and adjacent to an empty lot on the northeast corner of Sturtevant and Dexter. The corner lot was once occupied by a three-story mixed use building with commercial frontage on the first floor, which has been demolished leaving this current building's south elevation publicly visible for the first time since designation in 1999. This south facing side elevation has both concrete block and brick cladding, which is divided by the location of the former building. This is the proposed location for a mural as part of the General Services Division's (GSD) "City Walls" program. The flat roof has a front facing parapet with art-deco detailing. The front façade's detailing features rectangular metal paneling applied to a brick masonry substrate. The second floor has a series of three ribbons of vertically oriented window openings. The first floor has storefront corresponding to each window series above, with glass door openings between each set of storefront windows. All windows and doors have been boarded with plywood, and some of the metal panels have been removed or have fallen off the front elevation. The building was recently painted on both the front and side elevations by GSD without approval, with a single shade of light olive gray. A concrete public walkway runs between the front elevation of the building and Dexter Avenue.



Site Photo 1, by Staff September 21, 2023: (West) front



Designation photo 1999: (west) front elevation, showing storefront.



Site Photo 2, by Staff September 21, 2023: (South) side elevation, showing mural location.



Aerial#1 of Parcel # 12010532-4, showing extent of mural location (arrows) along the south facing wall.

PROPOSAL

Staff initially received an application from GSD’s “City Walls” program for the installation of a mural as described below and in the attached documents. However, after staff visited the site, the building had already been painted without approval on the front and a side elevation by another GSD program to “beautify” the neighborhood. This application contains two parts: the painting of the building, and the installation of the mural.

Paint building (work completed without approval on May 10, 2023)

- At the west (front) and south (side) elevations, spray latex paint, HDC color chart A:2 Light Olive Gray.

Paint mural

- At south (side) elevation, power wash concrete block and brick walls with water/steam, no abrasives or chemicals added. Rough surfaces will be left in place.
- Apply mural as shown in City Walls project. Please note that the initial image provided by the artist, Sintex, is an initial sketch which will be modified to reach the entire extent of the wall’s length and height, including both the brick and concrete block surfaces. (See Diagram 1)
- Paint product information has been requested and not yet supplied.



Diagram 1, by applicant: proposed concept image provided by the muralist, Sintex.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District was established in 1999. Its Elements of Design (Sec. 21-2-168) provide the following guidance for new construction and the landscape:
 - “Relationship of colors... Paint colors often relate to style...”
 - “Relationship architectural details... Commercial buildings along Dexter Avenue range in style from Neo-Georgian to Art Deco and Art Moderne. Institutional buildings on Dexter Boulevard are Art Moderne or modern in appearance.”
 - “Walls of continuity. The common setbacks of the houses on the residential streets and the placement of commercial buildings on Dexter at the front lot line create very strong walls of continuity.”
“Scale of façades and façade elements. The Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District comprises a neighborhood of moderate-scaled houses and multi-unit buildings and a low-scale commercial strip along Dexter Avenue...”
- The designation photo and preceding photos of the front elevation of the building shows that the structure was previously painted. At the time of designation, different colors denote various businesses occupying the same structure (see designation photo and site photo 3). A consistent characteristic over time, however, is that the windows, doors, and storefront were distinct and discernable features



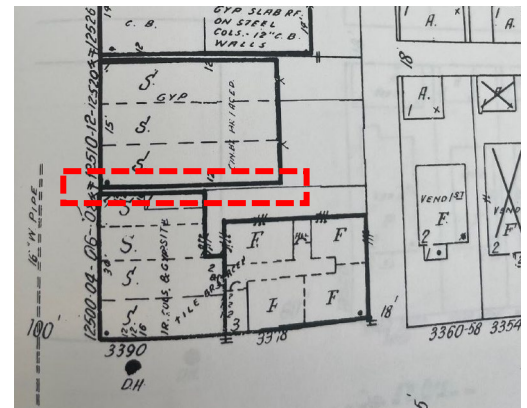
Site Photo 3, by Google Streetview June 2022: (West) front elevation, showing conditions prior to GSD painting the facade.



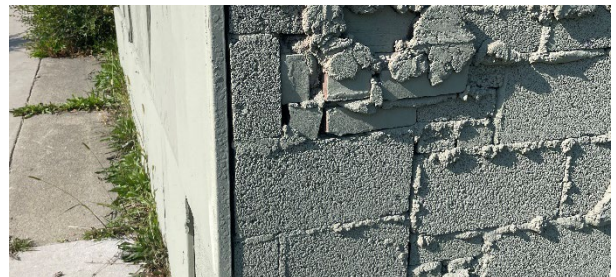
Site Photo 4, by Staff September 29, 2023 (front elevation): showing metal paneling detail.

of the building, even when boarded-up. It is staff's opinion that these distinctive character-defining features of the façade were reduced by the uniform, monochromatic coloration of the painting work, which was completed without approval.

- It is staff's opinion that the rectangular metal paneling of the building's façade is a distinctive character-defining feature.
- The Sanborn map shows that the property adjacent to 12512 Dexter was occupied by a 3rd story structure that obscured the now exposed south elevation. 12512 Dexter had an adjacent wall along a portion of the south-facing elevation, which did not have brick facing. The remaining portion of the wall, which was not publicly visible, was with brick. (See Sanborn image, red dashed area.) This south facing wall, while integral to the building's materiality is not, in staff's opinion, a historic distinctive character-defining feature.
- Staff inquired on whether any of the protruding mortar on the south facing wall would be removed or altered during prior to the application of the mural. (See Site photo 5.) The applicant confirmed that the wall would be power washed with water, but no attempt to remove or alter the mortar would be made. This condition exists because the block wall was originally built against the adjacent building wall, now demolished.
- The proposed mural will cover a non-primary side of the building that does not exhibit historic character or any distinctive character defining features. Graphic signage and murals along commercial corridors' non-primary elevation walls have historic precedence.
- In reviews and staff analysis for art projects in historic districts, the content, expression, and message of the art is not considered, only its potential effect of its installation on architectural character.



Sanborn V16, P80 1997, showing the shared wall with the former corner commercial building and the exposed brick wall, which is the mural site (red dashed outline).



Site Photo 5, by Staff September 21, 2023 (front and side corner elevation): showing mortar and concrete block materials

ISSUES

- The building was painted without HDC approval.
- The windows, doors and storefront were a distinct and discernable feature from the rectangular metal panel cladding of the building that, even when boarded-up, that was lost by the uniform, monochromatic coloration of a single shade of olive gray paint. It is staff's opinion that color separation should be employed, particularly at the doors, windows and storefront with a distinct, contrasting color to emphasize the locations of these character defining features, if glazing of these features is not yet a viable option.
- Staff has not yet received the product data for the primer and waterproof coating for the mural nor for the overall painting of the building at the time of this report.
- Should the removal of paint be attempted, staff is concerned with potential damage to the historic metal paneling and face brick.
- As the proposed mural does not alter, cover or destroy any distinctive character-defining features, staff finds it to be not demonstrably inappropriate.

RECOMMENDATION

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

Recommendation One: Application to paint to entire building with a single color

Staff finds that the painting of the entire building in a single color does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the following reasons:

- The façade's fenestration is a historic, character-defining feature that is lost under the wash of a single, monochromatic color. Legibility, detailing, dimensionality, and color variation, especially while temporarily boarded, is lost under a single color.
- Monochromatic painting of the building reduces the features that distinguishes the historic prominence of the front façade from the secondary elevation of the side wall.

Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the work as proposed, as it does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, specifically Standards 2 and 5:

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.

Recommendation Two: Application of mural to south facing elevation of the building.

Staff finds that the proposal for the remaining work items will not alter the features and spaces that characterize the property and district and therefore recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work as proposed as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Elements of Design for the district.