

STAFF REPORT: NOVEMBER 8, 2023 MEETING
APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2023-00075
ADDRESS: 2990 E. GRAND BLVD.

PREPARED BY: B. BUCKLEY

HISTORIC DISTRICT: JAM HANDY/NORTH END-EAST GRAND BOULEVARD HD
APPLICANT: ANTHONY MORIN (ARCHITECT)
PROPERTY OWNER: 2990 E. GRAND BLVD., LLC
DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: OCTOBER 16, 2023
DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: OCTOBER 18, 2023

SCOPE: DEMOLISH EXTERIOR STAIR (WORK COMPLETED WITHOUT APPROVAL), CONSTRUCT ORNAMENTAL STAIR ENCLOSURE

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The building at 2990 E. Grand Blvd. is a three-and-a-half story colonial revival apartment building constructed ca. 1910. Sanborn Maps indicate the building was originally constructed as an apartment building. The property served as the Detroit NAACP headquarters during the mid-20th century. The building's character-defining features include paired brackets at the eaves, gabled parapets, false chimneys that rise from the façade, and patterned brickwork on the main block of the building.



Figure 1: View of 2990 E. Grand Blvd., looking north-northwest.

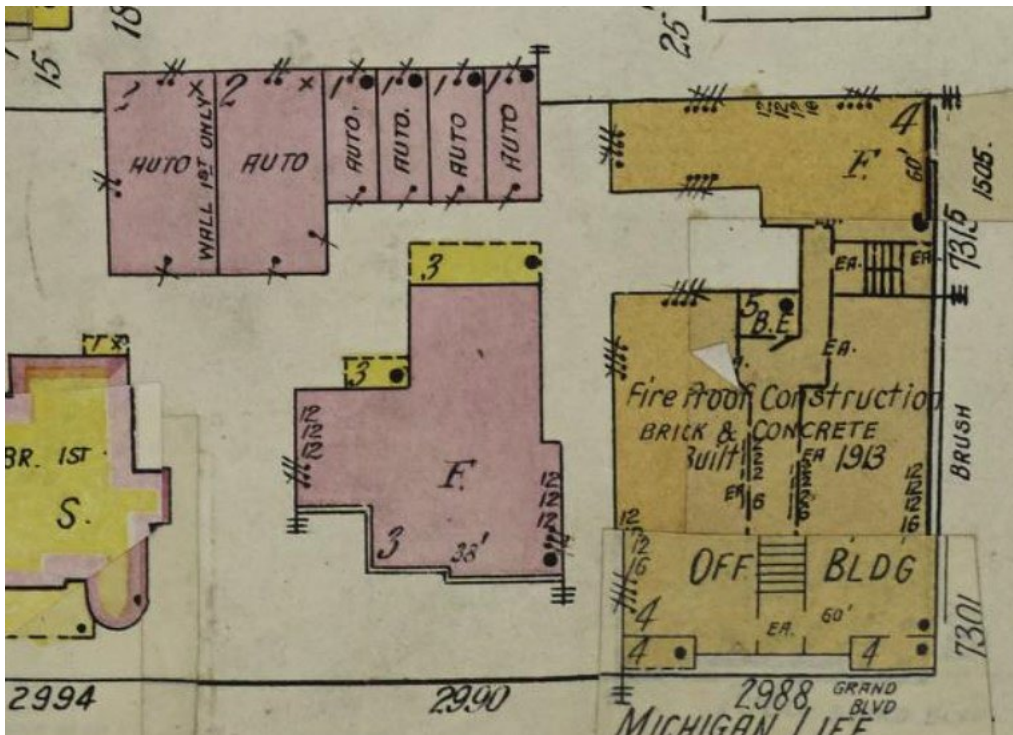


Figure 2: 1950 Sanborn Map of 2990 E. Grand Blvd.

PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes to construct an exterior stair and wheelchair ramp at the rear of the building. The three-story stair will have a steel frame clad with a woven wire mesh and perforated COR-TEN (weathering) steel. The precise pattern of the perforated steel will be finalized at a later date, but the applicant indicates the pattern will be “derived from traditional historic African-American pattern making”. The applicant additionally notes that the weathered patina (stabilized corrosion) of the COR-TEN steel will resemble the reddish-brown shade of the bricks at the front block of the dwelling.

The decks at each level of the structure will consist of steel grating. The roof of the proposed structure will match the ridge and slope of the existing rear block of the building and will be enclosed with standing seam metal in a dark brown color similar to that of the existing asphalt shingles. The sets of stairs will be concrete pan units. One rear door opening at the first floor will be infilled with brick, while the other door will be removed, the opening expanded, and a plain steel egress door will be installed. No changes are proposed for the second and third floor doors. The stair structure will be accessed through a steel frame entry door also clad with wire mesh.

The wheelchair ramp will have a concrete base that transitions to a steel frame ramp with a metal grate deck, metal handrails, and mesh wire panels that mimic the cladding of the stair structure. The construction of the wheelchair ramp will require some minor grading changes at the rear yard. A window opening on the rear of the home will be modified to accept a new painted steel door that provides access to the ramp.

An existing, non-historic concrete block retaining wall that is part of the basement level egress area will be replaced with a concrete wall.

The proposal is part of a planned adaptive reuse project, but no additional exterior work is included in this application.



Figure 3: Rendering of the proposed stair and ramp structure.

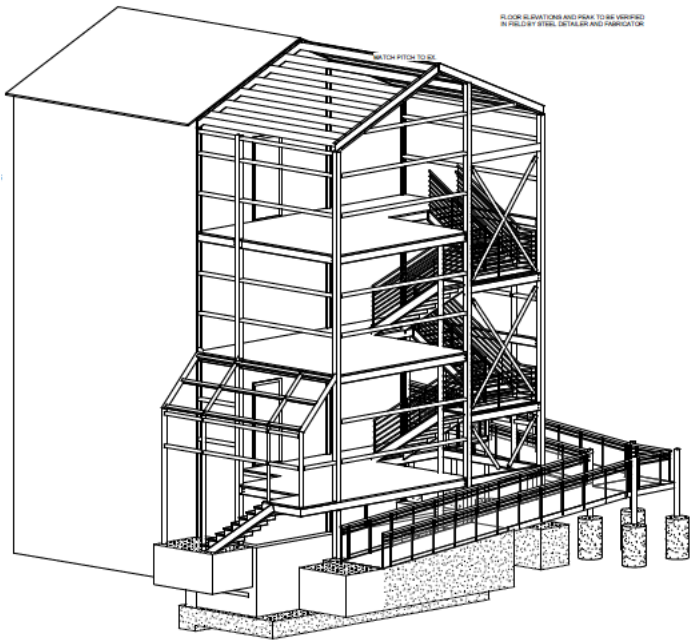


Figure 4: Isometric view of the structural components of the proposed structure.



Door to be removed and opening repurposed for modern, painted steel egress door.

Door to be removed and opening infilled with brick.

Window opening with non-original infill to be replaced with door for wheelchair ramp access.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Jam Handy/North End-East Grand Boulevard was established in 2015. The Jam Handy/North End-East Grand Boulevard is a linear historic district that runs along East Grand Boulevard and contains 38 contributing buildings, including this property. The district derives its significance from a number of themes, including its association with the Jam Handy corporation, early automotive history, and its association with Jewish and African-American history in Detroit. The subject building is most associated with the African-American history of the neighborhood, as it served as the Detroit NAACP headquarters during the mid-20th century. The district is characterized by a diverse collection of commercial, light industrial, and apartment buildings. A number of substantial single-family homes were repurposed as multi-family or office buildings over the course of the 20th century.
- The prior frame egress stair was removed ca. 2020 without HDC review. Available photographs show the former stairway was in poor condition, clad in a variety of modern materials, and was not a character defining feature of the building. Visual evidence, including the incongruous roofline of the stair structure, suggests that it was not original to the building.
- The two doors slated for removal from the rear of the building appear to be early or original units. The window opening proposed for the ramp door is currently infilled with non-historic materials.



Figure 5: View of the previous rear stair in 2019. Image from Google Street View.

ISSUES

- Staff recommends approval of the already completed removal of the former rear stair. Photographs indicate it was not a character-defining feature of the building, likely not original to the property, and was in poor condition.
- Staff finds that the three rear openings proposed for alteration do not contain character-defining architectural features. They are secondary features located at a minimally visible elevation of the building and do not have distinctive architectural characteristics that correspond to the design of the building.
- The design of the proposed stairway does not reflect the architectural characteristics or features of the colonial revival building. However, rear egress stairs on multifamily buildings are often utilitarian structures that do not mimic the character defining features, or materials, of the main building and usually have minimal public visibility.
- The proposed structure will be minimally visible from the front of the building (along East Grand Boulevard) but will be visible from Brush Street. A four-story commercial building historically stood to the east of this property but was demolished ca. 1980. Historically, the location of the proposed structure would have been minimally visible.
- According to the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation, standard Number 9; “New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.” The proposed stair structure is differentiated from the

original building by its design and materials. The materials (steel, COR-TEN steel, and concrete), while not historically used in this fashion on residential buildings, are not out of place in the largely commercial and industrial Jam Handy/North End-East Grand Boulevard Historic District. The scale of the proposed structure is somewhat larger than the previous stairway, but does not overpower the original building. The continuation of the gable roof from the rear block of the building to the proposed structure helps it to blend with the massing of the original structure.

- It is staff's opinion that the proposed stair and ramp structure does not alter the building's character-defining features. The proposed structure also does not inhibit the building's ability to convey its age, original design, or contributing status within the district.

RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation – COA – Construct ornamental stair and ramp structure.

Staff finds that the proposal for construction of the ornamental stair and ramp structure 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.