

**STAFF REPORT 10-09-2024 REGULAR MEETING**

**PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG**

**APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2024-00538**

**ADDRESS: 4881 STURTEVANT**

**HISTORIC DISTRICT: RUSSELL WOODS-SULLIVAN**

**APPLICANT/OWNER: U I 23 LLC**

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 09-16-2024**

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 09-20-2024**

**SCOPE: ALTER PORCH, CONSTRUCT DECK (WORK COMPLETED WITHOUT APPROVAL)**



*View of 4881 Sturtevant. Staff photo, September 20, 2024.*

### **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The house at 4881 Sturtevant is a English Revival-style brick veneer single-family dwelling built in 1925, with a central chimney and steeply pitched gables intersecting over an arched entrance. This is a typical style, form, and type within the district. Until recently, a brick and concrete porch fronted the house, though altered with an inappropriate parge-coat over the brick. An unpainted wooden deck has now been built in the location of the original porch. This work was subject of a recent violation report and subsequently, this application.



*Parcel at 4881 Sturtevant, per Detroit Parcel Viewer.*



*HDAB designation image of subject property showing condition of brick porch in 1999.*



*View of 4881 Sturtevant. Staff photo, September 20, 2024.*



*View of 4881 Sturtevant. It appears that part of the porch still exists below the deck. Staff photo, September 20, 2024.*



*View of 4881 Sturtevant. Staff photo, September 20, 2024.*

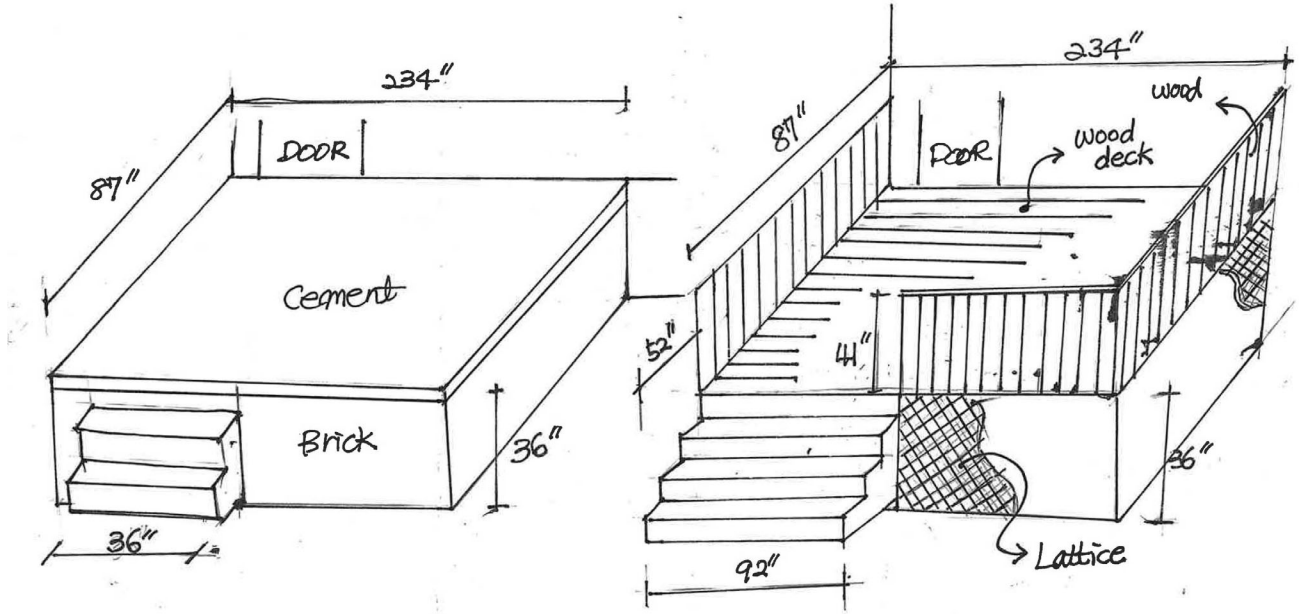
**PROPOSAL**

The applicant seeks an after-the-fact approval for work done in violation, specifically the erection of a contemporary/utilitarian deck at the front of the house, occupying the location of the original historic porch, which was at least partially altered/demolished. The applicant has provided the below before/after sketch.

Project Name :  
RES2024-0796

Before

After



## STAFF OBSERVATIONS

- The Russell Woods/Sullivan Historic District was established in November 1999. The period of significance for its residential buildings, per the HDAB report, is 1920 to 1949. This house, built in 1925, is thus in staff's opinion a contributing (historic) resource to the district.
- The original porch, like many similar examples in the district, was a concrete platform supported by brickwork matching the house. A short flight of concrete steps leading up from grade was framed by a pair of modest brick wing walls, also capped by concrete or stone. The applicant's "before" sketch does not show the wing walls, which were present as late as 2020.
- At some point, likely prior to designation, the original brick porch was parged (coated) with mortar or cement, creating an incompatible and ahistorical monolithic appearance and obscuring the original brick expression. By 2019, the parge-coat was visibly failing, as were the bricks behind it. See images below:



Google Street View images of 4881 Sturtevant. At left, 2009. Center, 2019. At right, zoomed into 2019 image showing brick decay.

- The correct and appropriate treatment for the deteriorating porch, as a distinctive character-defining feature of the house, would be to repair it; or if necessary, rebuild it in matching brick and concrete. Other property owners in the district, including the Detroit Land Bank Authority, have successfully completed such repairs, thus preserving the historic character of the district.
- Instead, the applicant has built a deck of standard contemporary design over the porch. Although it is apparent that some original porch material exists below the deck, the extent of the surviving elements is not clear.
- The [Elements of Design for the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District](#) discuss the importance of brick and porches in the excerpted Elements below (emphasis added):
  - (6)Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections.** Porch types relate to the type and style of the building. .... One common entrance arrangement on vernacular English Revival single-family houses is that of a slightly projecting, steeply-gabled vestibule, either enclosed or open, entered through an arched opening. ...In general, a variety of residential porch types exist in the district; most tend to be shallow, are not always covered, and vary in placement on the front façade. They create an interesting rhythm along the streetscape, especially where a number of any one kind exist in a row.*
  - (8)Relationship of textures.** 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, as does half-timbering, leaded and subdivided windows, and wood-shingled or horizontal-sided elements. Slate and wood shingle roofs have particular textural values where they exist. Asphalt shingles generally have little textural interest, even in those types which purport to imitate some other variety.*
- A "backyard"-styled deck of this style/material is not compatible with the period design of this vernacular English Revival house, especially at the historic and highly visible front façade, and disrupts the historic character of the house and the district. The deck as completed has generic characteristics like outboard-baluster railings, raw dimensional lumber, modern railing heights, and x-cross latticework, all of which bear no relation to the authentic character of the subject property. The approach

steps are much wider and more obtrusive than the original steps, and greatly detract from the expression of the façade.

## **ISSUES**

- The deck is of a standard recreational/contemporary design built of “off the shelf” parts, perhaps suitable for a backyard, but makes no effort to integrate into the historic design of the house, contrary to historic standards and guidelines. In staff’s opinion, the wood deck should be removed and a brick/concrete porch of compatible design rebuilt.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

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

#### **Recommendation, Certificate of Appropriateness**

Staff finds that the proposal for altering the front porch into a contemporary deck does not meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the district’s Elements of Design for the following reasons:

- The former brick and concrete front porch is a distinctive character-defining feature of the house and district, and should be repaired or replaced to match
- The proposed deck is of a standard recreational/contemporary design built in an incompatible modern/utilitarian character, using outboard-baluster railings, raw dimensional lumber, modern railing heights, and x-cross latticework, and makes no effort to integrate into the historic design of the house and district.

Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Denial for the work, as it does not meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, specifically Standards 2, 5, and 6;

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

And Elements of Design 6 and 8 of the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District.