

STAFF REPORT: MARCH 12, 2025, REGULAR MEETING
APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2024-00544

PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO

ADDRESS: 31 E. ADAMS

HISTORIC DISTRICT: GRAND CIRCUS PARK LOCAL

APPLICANT: ERIC ALLEN, ADAMS OUTDOOR ADVERTISING

OWNER: CENTRAL METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: SEPTEMBER 19, 2024

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: NOVEMBER 20, 2024, FEBRUARY 28, 2025

SCOPE: INSTALL LED SCREEN



Central United Methodist Church with original 1866–1867 church building in foreground. View northeast from the intersection of Woodward and Adams. November 2024 photo by staff.



Central United Methodist Church with 1914–1916 addition (31 E. Adams) in foreground, center of image. November 2024 photo by staff.



Detroit Parcel Viewer image of Central United Methodist Church with yellow box highlighting the portion of the building known as 31 E. Adams. Red arrow added to indicate approximate location of proposed work.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The parcel at 31 E. Adams comprises a large, 1914–1916 addition to the Central United Methodist Church building at 23 E. Adams. The entire church facility is individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is also a contributing resource within the Grand Circus Park Historic District, a National Register district. According to the National Register documentation:

Central United Methodist Church is a light gray, rock-faced coursed ashlar, limestone, Gothic Revival-style church with dark stone trim built in 1866–67. Like most of the other Woodward Avenue churches located south of Mack Avenue, Central Methodist assumed its present size as a result of a 1935 remodeling necessitated by the widening of Woodward Avenue. Although it was reduced in length by the shortening of the nave several bays, the facade was reconstructed so as to be virtually identical to its original design. The gabled entrance elevation facing Woodward Avenue is balanced by a tall, buttressed, corner tower with open belfry and tapering slate spire. The doorway is inset within a compound, molded, Gothic arch. Dominating the facade is the oversized, traceried, lancet-arched window over the doorway.

Adjoining the rear of the church on Adams Street is the six-story, cross-gable-roofed, limestone parish house building built in 1914-16. This is a Jacobean-style building with three-part windows, stone hood moulds, gabled dormers, and a steeply pitched slate roof. It was designed to contain rental offices and stores as well as educational facilities for the church.¹

The east face of the building, where the proposed sign is to be installed, is a non-primary elevation consisting largely of painted common brick and blank wall space with a few window openings (see photo on next page).

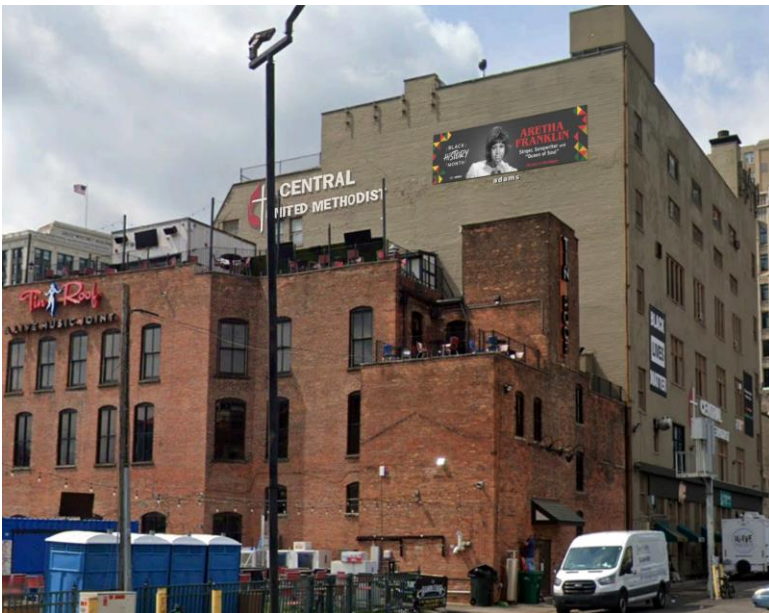
PROPOSAL

The proposal is to install a large LED screen to serve as a “digital billboard” or wall sign spanning much of the top two floors (fifth and sixth stories) on the east elevation of the building. According to the application materials, the sign would be 10’ by 36’ and would be a “digital LED billboard with full-color display capabilities.” It would be dynamic (capable of changing and showing animated images). The sign would be mounted on a steel frame.

¹ National Register of Historic Places, “Central United Methodist Church,” Reference No. 82002895.



View facing southeast from adjacent parking lot, image from application materials. Arrow added by staff to indicate proposed sign location.



Rendering of proposed sign. Image from application materials.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Grand Circus Park Local Historic District² was enacted by the City Council in 2002. It includes the eponymous park and all buildings surrounding the park. The Historic Designation Advisory Board Final Report for the historic district does not delineate a clear period of significance, but states that the significance is based in the area’s history “as the hub for the social, cultural and business activities that took place during the early decades of dynamic growth of the City of Detroit as the automobile-manufacturing capitol [sic] of the world.”
- A corresponding National Register of Historic Places listing, the Grand Circus Park Historic District (with

² The word “local” is sometimes added by the Historic Designation Advisory Board to differentiate between a City of Detroit historic district and a corresponding National Register of Historic Places listing.

somewhat broader boundaries) was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, with a period of significance of 1867–1930. Subsequently, a 2000 boundary increase to the National Register listing recognized a period of significance extending to 1960.

- The Elements of Design for the Grand Circus Park Local Historic District include the following pertinent observations:
 - “Marquees and awnings above first-floor entrances were common and some still exist.” (Element 6, Rhythm of entrance and/or porch projections)
 - “Signage is provided for above the ground floor storefront windows, often in a panel designed for such purpose and sometimes as part of a marquee. Rooftop sign structures also exist.” (Element 15, Scale of façades and façade elements)
 - “Individual buildings are oriented toward the Grand Circus Park.” (Element 20, Orientation, vistas, overviews)
- Historical photos as well as the Historic Designation Advisory Board report show that signs proliferated in the Grand Circus Park area during the period of significance, including roof-mounted signs, painted wall signs, wall-mounted signs, and projecting business signs; these signs were often lit and some of them featured advertisements. A preponderance of signage was a common and typical condition of early twentieth century business districts in American cities, featuring many different arrangements and types.



Clockwise from top left: Unsourced 1931 photo (found on Facebook), undated photo (Detroit Public Library), undated photo (Detroit Public Library), 1957 photo (Detroit Historical Society), circa 1920 photo (source not known, from historicdetroit.org), circa 1915 photo (Detroit Public Library), 1920s photo (Detroit Public Library).

- The proposed sign is inconsistent with the *Sign and Awning Guidelines* (2013); however, the *Guidelines* largely pertain to the administrative approval of smaller-scale business signs and it is possible for a sign to

deviate from the *Guidelines* and still be appropriate. The *Sign and Awning Guidelines* direct:

- “Locate signage above the storefront opening so that it does not conceal architectural details and features.”
 - “In pedestrian areas, orient signs to the sidewalk instead of motorists.”
- Page 11 of the application narrative argues for the compatibility of the sign with the character of the historic building, noting that it will not obscure architectural features, that it will be dimmable at night, that it will be on a non-prominent face of the building, and that its installation will be reversible. The application also states that the sign will be used for advertising to generate revenue for the church in support of preservation efforts and community services.
 - The Preservation Brief, *The Preservation of Historic Signs* (National Park Service, 1991) provides guidance on applying new signs to historic buildings (page 11). Some of the recommendations include “new signs should not obscure significant features of the historic building” and “new signs should be attached to the building carefully” to avoid damage and be reversible (these are satisfied by the proposed sign) and “Sign materials should be compatible with those of the historic building. Materials characteristic of the building’s period and style, used in contemporary designs, can form effective new signs (this is not satisfied, in staff opinion, see “Issues,” below).
 - The appropriateness of any proposed new sign hinges on whether it is “compatible” with the historic building, and the district, if applicable, as required by Standard #9 (quoted in full below) of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.
 - One path for achieving compatibility is that described by *The Preservation of Historic Signs*, quoted above. A large, billboard-type sign on this building, in the proposed location, of the proposed size, might potentially be appropriate if it employed design, materials, colors, and means of illumination consistent with signs of the historic period. (See photos on page 4 of this report.)
 - Alternatively, prior approvals of signs by the Historic District Commission have more often been for signs of more modern materials and illumination, but that achieve compatibility in that they are relatively small in scale and bear a direct relationship with the existing architectural features of the building. For example, signs located within an existing sign band, on an existing awning or marquee, or relatively small-scale signs at the pedestrian level associated with a building entrance, might potentially be appropriate even if they employed non-historic designs or technologies such as animated LED displays.
 - Besides Standard #9, staff opinion is that the proposed work meets the other Standards, including #10 (reversibility).

ISSUES

- The large, billboard-type screen proposed would employ materials and colors (a flat, smooth panel and LED lighting) that are incompatible with the building and inconsistent with historical signs found within the Grand Circus Park Local Historic District.
- The proposed sign would be dynamic (capable of being animated with video or photo content), inconsistent with the character of historical signs found within the Grand Circus Park Local Historic District. Its character would be more consistent with the changeable advertising screens now common alongside expressways.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

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

Recommendation 1 of 1, Denial

Staff concludes that the proposed work will be inappropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Grand Circus Park Local Historic District Elements of Design, specifically Standard:

10. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

And Element:

15. Scale of façades and façade elements. Individual building façades range from small in scale to large, with the majority being in the moderate range. Details within individual façades range from small to moderate in scale; the repetition of small scale detail is common. Signage is provided for above the ground floor storefront windows, often in a panel designed for such purpose and sometimes as part of a marquee. Rooftop sign structures also exist.

For the following reason:

- The proposed LED panel presents a visually prominent addition to the building that is incompatible with the materials, textures, and colors historically employed by signs in the Grand Circus Park Local Historic District.