

REVISED May 03, 2022

Detroit Historic District Commission
Coleman A Young Municipal Center
2 Woodward Ave #808
Detroit, MI 48226

RE: Detroit Waldorf Outdoor Classrooms

Detroit Historic District Commission:

On behalf of the Detroit Waldorf School (DWS), I am writing to the Detroit Historic District Commission (HDC) to request a Certificate of Appropriateness (CofA) for a series of outdoor classroom structures constructed prior to the 2020-21 school year on an emergency basis in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The structures were given a Notice to Proceed on a temporary basis (attached) which was subsequently renewed as required. At this time, the school wishes to receive a permanent CofA for the work.

Building

The Detroit Waldorf School is located at 2555 Burns Ave, in the Indian Village Historic District, at the corner of Burns Charlevoix St. The initial school building was designed by Albert Kahn and constructed on the north end of the site along Charlevoix in 1913 for The Liggett School and later expanded with a 1923 Albert Kahn addition to the south that included an auditorium, gymnasium, and additional classroom space. The Liggett School occupied the building until 1965, when a new school building was constructed in Grosse Pointe Woods, and The Liggett School merged with the Grosse Pointe University School to form University Liggett School, leaving the Albert Kahn building on Burns briefly vacant.

DWS was founded by Amelia and Dr. Rudolf Wilhelm in 1965 with a goal of providing a diverse and equitable educational experience for Detroit children. When founded, it was one of the city's only integrated schools, and continues its tradition and commitment to racial, ethnic and economic diversity to this day. When founded, the school was first located in Detroit's Central United Methodist Church, and soon moved into the recently vacated Liggett School where it expanded quickly to include pre-school, kindergarten and elementary classes from 1st – 8th grades. DWS has served as a proud steward of the original Albert Kahn building with careful restoration of the stucco facades, roof and wood windows over the years. Much of the original school interiors are still intact.

Site

As notable as the school building are the school's grounds and play areas. Essential to the Waldorf educational philosophy is its commitment to outdoor free play and learning for students of all ages. Accordingly, the school has cultivated a welcoming and active outdoor space spanning across multiple city blocks. The school's campus includes a playground to the south of the school building that is original to the school site. The school later expanded across Burns to a series of former residential lots now affectionately known as "Quietland". The school recently expanded again, purchasing several former residential lots on Fischer St, directly across the shared alley from Quietland.

Prior to the recent COVID-19 additions, the school grounds included multiple wooden play structures, two swing sets, shade structures, a vegetable garden and multiple areas for unscripted free play and exploration. These areas are generally arranged around the perimeter of the sites with large open, grassy areas in the middle for open play, and open vistas from the adjacent Burns Ave right of way.

The original school site is bounded with a hedgerow and 4' chain link fence along Charlevoix and Burns with an iron swing gate set on two brick piers framing the formal entry to the school grounds off Burns Ave. The rear of the site is bounded with a tall chain link fence to create privacy with the adjacent residential homes. An open play area sits in the middle of the site with two wooden play structures at the south end of the site, a swing set to the west and the school's vegetable garden directly to the south of the school building. Directly in front of the school, the landscape is more developed. Mature trees flank the entrance walkway to the school with open play areas shaded beneath. Play areas for the early childhood program sit closest to the school with a wooden play structure, swing set, and wooden shade structure clustered at the east end of the school building.

The Quietland site is bounded by an unadorned 4' chain link fence along much of Burns with a main entry gate directly across Burns from the formal entry to the school. The center of the site is an open play area with various wooded areas around the rear perimeter of the site for exploration and play. The north end of Quietland houses the school's parking lot, which is bounded on its NW corner by a 6' tall decorative aluminum fence marked with brick piers. The side of the parking lot and alley lot line then transitions to a 6' tall chain link fence grown over with ivy.

To the east, the newly acquired Fischer lots were vacant grassy fields when purchased by the school with no fence line, limited plantings and no structures.

Outdoor Classroom Structures

In the Spring of 2020, with the school closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the administration gathered a core group of teachers, staff, and interested parents (including numerous architects, planners, and builders) to formulate a way of providing outdoor gathering spaces for each class in the school. These spaces, at that time indeterminate in shape and size, would be used to maintain safe physical distancing between classes throughout the day and create shelters for outdoor classes to take place so the school could operate safely in person during the pandemic. The planning group quickly devised a plan to construct 14 cedar shelters (12 within the boundaries of the IV HD, 2 located outside the district), one for each classroom, sized accordingly to the age and number of children in each class. Landscaped areas would be provided between the shelters to denote boundaries for each class. A donation campaign and volunteer core were quickly marshaled to fund and construct the work.

The cedar shelters were designed to be open on three sides to maintain visibility to/from the adjacent open play areas. A "teaching wall" was constructed of slatted wood on the fourth side, so visibility to/from the adjacent open play areas could be maintained through the structure from all perspectives. The form was a simple shed structure with an open floor area and no built-in furniture to allow for as much flexibility and adaptability for each individual class. Early childhood (ages 3-6) shelters were designed as approximately 12'x16' structures to accommodate smaller classes. (and smaller children) Kindergarten and Grades 1-8 shelters were designed as approximately 20'x24' for larger class sizes.

Material choices were as important to the mission as the shape of the shelter. The character of the new shelters was intentionally designed to be in tune with the natural materials of the existing wooden play structures and mature landscape. Decay resistant (aka "treated") wood was used for all concealed structural elements including the foundation posts, floor and roof framing. Natural, unfinished rough sawn cedar boards were selected over treated wood for all touchable surfaces to ensure the health and well-being of the students. The finish floor boards, teaching wall slats, and rim joists were all constructed of rough sawn cedar. A specialty designed "sandwich column" construction was employed to encapsulate the treated foundation posts between finish cedar column boards, which also serve as the building's primary structure holding up the roof. The roofs were protected with auburn-colored asphalt shingles with a cedar shake replica profile to blend in with the natural materials of the shelters and outdoor landscape. Gutters, downspouts, and rain barrels were limited to non-visible locations along rear fence lines around the site to eliminate having visible synthetic materials visible from the public ROW.

Critical to the plan was the siting of the shelters, all of which were thoughtfully located around the perimeter of the site to ensure proper physical distancing between classes as well as to maintain the general openness of the free play areas on the school's campus. The smaller 15' shelters for the early childhood classes were clustered nearer to the school to follow the previous play area plan as well as to keep the younger kids closer to the school. Grades 1-3 were then spaced around the corners of the south end of the Burns lot. The two Kindergarten shelters were located at the south end of Quietland to be nearer the wooded area. Grades 4-6 were spaced equally around the remaining perimeter of Quietland. The two cedar shelters for grades 7-8 were located on the Fischer lots, the farthest classroom shelters from the school building, and outside the IV historic district.

Elements of Design

Classroom shelters such as these are certainly a novel element in a school campus, and the Elements of Design do not give much guidance on this type of out-building. Most of the direction given is for single-family home buildings. The only mention of either school located in the Indian Village Historic District, DWS and the nearby Nichols Elementary, is to note the presence of open space around the schools as a character defining feature of both. However, from this brief description, some essential design guidance is provided that informed the classroom shelter design.

Relationship of open space to structures. Open space in the district occurs in the form of vacant land, a City park, school yards for the Waldorf and Nichols Schools, and side lots. Where an original or early arrangement of a house and grounds included and still includes landscaped lots which form

part of the landscaping plan for the residence, such landscaped lots are significant landscape features.

The primary point to take from this section is to understand that the open space around the school is the most important feature of the landscape to preserve. Given that, great care was taken in the siting of the shelters to preserve that sense of open space.

When standing inside each of the shelters, open views of the school grounds are framed by the structure itself, creating a great visual connection between the classes out to the grounds. Moreover, the open sides and slatted wood walls of the shelters do not obscure views from the public ROW into the school grounds. Most importantly, the early childhood shelters closest to the school are located so as not to block primary views of the original Albert Kahn school, one of only three schools ever designed by the master architect, and the only one still standing. In all instances, there was both a practical and aesthetic consideration to maintaining and even promoting the open character of the school grounds.

Equal to the impact of having an appropriate location for each shelter, the materials of the shelters also play a significant role on their visual impact within the historic district. Natural wood materials and finishes were purposefully used to blend seamlessly into the mature wooded landscape around the school, and as the cedar boards have already aged, their bright unfinished color has started to patina into a darker, unassuming finish. Many of the existing wood structures on the site (play and shade structures) also have a naturally aged wood finish, and so these new structures blend easily within the school grounds' existing context.

Community Partnership

The classroom shelters have also provided a venue for events for the Detroit Waldorf School and the larger Detroit community. In the spring of 2021, a DWS Music Fest featuring youth performers was held at the shelters alongside a public exhibition of student artwork, both of which showcased the diverse talents of DWS students. Additionally, in the summer of 2021, the Detroit Mosaic Theatre utilized the shelters for two weeks for its summer camp, and this partnership is anticipated again this summer. DWS is also excited to host the free, public Storytelling Festival on April 30th featuring organizations such as the Ruth Ellis Center, Detroit Disability Power, Shakespeare in Detroit, and Inside Out Literary Arts and storytellers Andaiya Spencer, Eradajere Oleita, Jatu Gray, and Jennine Spencer. There are many other intentions to use the shelters for future community meetings and events including camps, performances, scouting groups, DPSCD partnerships, and DWS Winter Faires. DWS has had conversations with churches, The Villages of Detroit CDC, Indian Village Women's Garden Club, Detroit Future City, Detroit Audubon, Detroit Hives, and the neighbors on Fischer, to name a few groups. The shelters have already inspired new partnerships and engaged hundreds in the Detroit community, and their potential for future community impact is without limit.

Subsequent Modifications

- During the 2020 school year, as the season turned towards winter and air temperatures dropped, it became urgently clear that some kind of additional protection would be required on the shelters in order for classes to continue to use them throughout the majority of the day. The solution was found through donated fabric from Carhartt and the work of a local non-profit and DWS faculty and parents to sew and install curtains on three sides of the shelters. The curtains are still installed today.
- During the summer of 2021, teachers raised a concern that some of the shelters were undersized for their mission of providing a dedicated outdoor classroom. In response, volunteers erected shelter floor extensions, approximately 4' x 16' on the small shelters and 4' x 24' on the large shelters, on each side of four shelters. (three for early childhood and the 1st grade)
- Gutters, downspouts, and rain collection barrels were added to some shelters where not readily visible from the public ROW. All shelters located near Burns St did not have the gutters added because of visibility concerns.
- Teachers have made minor ad hoc modifications to individual shelters including addition of furniture, chalkboards, art pieces, small solar powered lights, and other items.

Conclusion

We respectfully submit this request to the Detroit Historic District Commission for your consideration. Additional photos and sketches have been provided showing the current as-built condition for each shelter. The site plan has also been updated with names to correspond to this as-built document. We look forward to meeting with Commission at the May 2022 meeting and will be happy to answer any questions as HDC staff prepares their review of and report on the work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian Rebain". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B" and "R".

Brian Rebain, RA, NCARB
DWS Class of 2021 and 2024 Parent