

April 2, 2021

City of Detroit
Historic District Commission
2 Woodward Ave.
Detroit, MI 48226

Dear Commissioners and Staff,

I am writing with regards to the application for a Certificate of Appropriateness for the proposed rehabilitation of 791 Seminole St. As a resident of the Indian Village neighborhood, a Certified Historic Architect who has worked on many CofA requests with Detroit HDC, and as the next-door neighbor to this property, I take great interest in both the success of this proposed renovation as well as the appropriateness of the work as guided by the Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation.

Early in our 15 years living next door to 791 Seminole, the property was generally kept in fair condition. But as our single neighbor grew in age, and her health deteriorated, the property began to slowly deteriorate over time due to deferred maintenance. The condition of the property then took a severe decline in more recent years as the homeowner's condition worsened, leading to an emergency hospitalization and eventual fire that ravaged the home in February 2018. My family was fortunate to have been travelling when the fire occurred, and nobody, including the occupant, was hurt. But the fire damaged a significant portion of the house.

Subsequently, multiple potential buyers appeared, none with the seriousness or wherewithal to undertake a major renovation of this scale. At first the house was cleared out of all salvageable belongings, but no repairs aside from basic securing of open doors and windows was undertaken. A buyer eventually took ownership of the house in May 2018 and began to clear out the house and eventually rebuilt the roof and reinstalled utilities in the home.

Unfortunately, the work was completed by a series of unqualified contractors who completed work without proper permitting/approvals and in a haphazard, unprofessional way. This work eventually led to the house's original windows, some damaged by the fire - others in fair condition, being removed, and a clearly inappropriate set of new windows installed without HDC approval. A stop work notice was placed on the house, and work ceased at that time. Much money was wasted on this work, and at that point there was no clear path towards stable, long term ownership. At least the roof had been repaired...

Enter the current applicants, a family who does have the financial ability and know-how to undertake a renovation of this scale. As with all the recent interested parties on the house, I made an effort to get to know them as soon as I was able, mainly to offer my assistance and advice, but also to keep an eye on this problematic property located just a few feet from my kitchen window. Because of this outreach, I have had the opportunity to see their proposed plan come to fruition over the past several weeks, and am very excited for their ambitious, yet realistic plan.

The submitted application for the house takes on a number of important historical considerations. First, the addition of stucco to the property at some unknown point in history was always, and still remains,

an inappropriate treatment for this home. As an architect, I can say that adding a heavy traditional stucco veneer to a wood framed home is both aesthetically troublesome (HDC would never approve that kind of work today) as well as being damaging to the home. The wood framed walls cannot take that heavy weight, and there are indications that the layers of stucco have started to pull the façade away from the floor framing. Restoring the original wood clapboard siding, still visible and in fair condition under the stucco, will be rejoiced by myself and the neighborhood at large. Only a few historic examples of this type of turn of the century architecture exist in the neighborhood, and it will be excellent to see this façade brought back to its original appearance.

Second, the replacement of the non-permitted and non-compliant wood windows will restore what is perhaps the most important characteristic detail of the façade, the intricate wood trim around each window. In addition to the basic six-over-one double hung windows, the owner is also planning to restore or recreate several original leaded glass windows on the façade. In addition, many other wood trim details will be recreated from the excellent historic photos used as evidence of the original appearance. These details will make this home into a stunning way to enter the neighborhood from the east.

All of this work will happen without significantly altering the size and scale of the house. With a fire of this magnitude, it would be tempting (and potentially appropriate) to demolish a large section of the house where the fire was centered. But this plan looks to keep as much of the original structure of the building that was salvageable, leaving the original footprint and roofline in place. While these types of unseen details may be invisible to most passersby, this approach is fully in the spirit of Preservation, and should be lauded.

Mostly, we are genuinely excited that this project is going to introduce a new family to the City of Detroit, to the Indian Village neighborhood, and as my next door neighbor! (as well as to save a severely damaged home in the process...) I am writing to offer my full support to the project, and encourage the Commission to unanimously approve!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Brian Rebain". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Brian Rebain
779 Seminole St
Detroit, MI 48214