

**STAFF REPORT:** 03/13/2024 MEETING

PREPARED BY: J. ROSS

**APPLICATION NUMBER:** HDC20204-00047

**ADDRESS:** 2900 ST. ANTOINE STREET (637 BREWSTER)

**HISTORIC DISTRICT:** BREWSTER WHEELER RECREATION CENTER

**APPLICANT:** ANTONIO CUTRARO/M&N GENERAL CONTRACTING LLC

**OWNER:** MHT HOUSING

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION:** 02/19/2024

**DATE OF STAFF VISIT:** 2/27/2024

**SCOPE OF WORK:** INSTALL WINDOWS, REMOVE ENTRY CANOPY\*

### **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

The building was constructed in two phases to include the original Ginsburg Branch Public Library wing, which was built in 1917, and a 1929 addition which was erected when the building's use was converted from a library to a community/recreation center. Specifically, per the Detroit Historic District Advisory Board:

#### ***1917 (Ginsburg Branch, Public Library) Wing***

*The original 1917 library is a one-story frame building with a brick veneer. The building has a rectangular footprint and sits on a raised concrete foundation. Originally green Ludowici tile, the hipped roof is now covered with asphalt shingles. The building's front facade consists of five bays, five bays on the rear, and is two bays deep. The formal entrance is centered on the facade on the southeast elevation of the building. This entrance projects from the building and is framed with stone pilasters and is topped with a stone elliptical hood. A denticulated cornice runs along the hood and along the sides of the entrance. The hood also includes cornice returns. The porch cornice is also denticulate. A secondary entrance is located on the rear of the building. An exterior chimney is on the rear (northwest) of the building and projects slightly past the roofline.*

*Exterior brickwork consists of the English Cross Bond- alternating courses of headers and stretchers with the stretchers moved over half a length of brick so they do not line up vertically-on all elevations. A stone water table is present between the basement and first story. All windows in the building have been completely filled in the brick. When built, the original window openings included one large one-over-one sash and a smaller sash to either side. The arched window above consisted of a two-part fanlight. Narrow window openings to each side of the entrance were originally four-over-four light sashes. All window openings are framed with a border of decorative brick with the narrow windows having flat stone arches. An original skylight on top of the roof has been completely enclosed.*

#### ***1929 Addition***

*To the northeast of the 1917 library branch building is a two-story, steel frame brick veneer addition. Completed in 1929, the building exhibits elements of the Art Deco and Jacobethan styles with cast stone and trim details. The structure sits on a raised concrete foundation, has a stone water table, and a flat roof with stone coping. The building's front and rear elevations are ten bays wide and are asymmetrical. The northeast elevation is symmetrical and is five bays deep. Brick pilasters frame all window openings and the primary entrance. These pilasters are capped by decorative stonework which extends beyond the roofline. The northeast half of the building is approximately a half-story higher than the rest and has larger window openings. An interior chimney pierces the roof on the rear (northwest) of the building and is capped with stone.*

*The primary entrance is off-center on the facade on the southwest elevation of the addition. The doors have been completely removed but a decorative carved stone surround remains. This surround includes rondeau, rosettes, and an egg and dart pattern under the door entablature. The tone cornice projects slightly over the doorway above which is a stone panel inscribed "CENTRAL COMMUNITY CENTER." Directly above this is a carved wood panel reading "WHEELER." The entablature above this entrance includes a denticulate cornice and a large centered circular stone. A secondary entrance, which has been completely enclosed, is centered on the facade and has a simple stone surround. Another secondary entrance is located on the rear of the building and is accessible by a metal fire escape.*

*Exterior brickwork consists of the American bond- three to nine courses of stretchers to each course of headers-on all elevations. Above the windows on the northeast and northwest elevations brick string courses run in a soldier bond. A stone string course separates the second story windows from the entablature on the facade. Symmetrically placed circular stones also appear along the entablature. A majority of the original windows have either been removed or enclosed with plywood. The larger of the original windows consist of forty-eight divided lights in fixed industrial-style steel windows with hoppers. Glass block also remains in a small number of openings. All window openings have cast stone sills and brick lintels. The building occupied most of its site and there is no landscaping.*

Please note that until recently, the building's 1917 wing's main/south elevation entrance included a flat-roofed, limestone clad canopy which extended from the current arched canopy. However, the current applicant removed all of the canopy's limestone cladding without Historic District Commission approval and/or permit, leaving only the structure's steel framing.



**2900 St. Antoine current condition, facing southwest. 1917 original library wing, outlined in red and 1929 community/recreation center addition outlined in yellow. Staff photo taken 2/27/2024**

The limestone cladding was removed from this canopy without HDC approval



2900 St. Antoine, current condition, facing northeast. 1917 original library wing, outlined in red and 1929 community/recreation center addition outlined in yellow. Note the remaining steel framing at the 1917 wing's entry door. Staff photo taken 2/27/2024.



2900 St. Antoine, aerial view aerial view. 1917 original library wing, outlined in red and 1929 community/recreation center addition outlined in yellow. Google Maps, 2024

## PROPOSAL

With the current submission, the applicant is seeking an approval to undertake an extensive rehabilitation of the building. major work items include the following:

### Replace Existing Windows

As previously mentioned, only a small number of historic windows exist at the property. Per the submitted drawings, all remaining windows will be replaced and new windows to match historic conditions. Specifically, the work includes the following:

- The six original steel windows which remain at the recreation center addition's north and south elevations will be replaced with new fixed aluminum units

- The remnants of two, double-hung historic wood windows remain at the recreation center addition's south elevation will be replaced with new aluminum units
- The three remaining glass block windows at the pool wing's north elevation are in poor condition and will be replaced with new glass block to match existing. The two windows which flank the three glass block windows at the is elevation are currently enclosed with plywood and masonry. The infill at these windows will be removed and replaced with new glass block to match the existing three central windows.
- The five remaining double-hung wood windows at the original wing's basement level, at the north and south elevations, will be replaced with single-hung aluminum windows at the north elevation and glass block windows at the north elevation

#### Install New Windows in Infilled Openings

Most window openings have been infilled with either plywood or masonry. Non-historic infill will be removed and new aluminum windows will be installed per the submitted documentation

#### Install New Exterior Doors

Most exterior entrances have been infilled. None of the remaining exterior doors appear to date from the building's period of significance/are of historic importance. New wood doors or steel doors will replace existing doors and infill per the submission.

#### Remove Entry Canopy

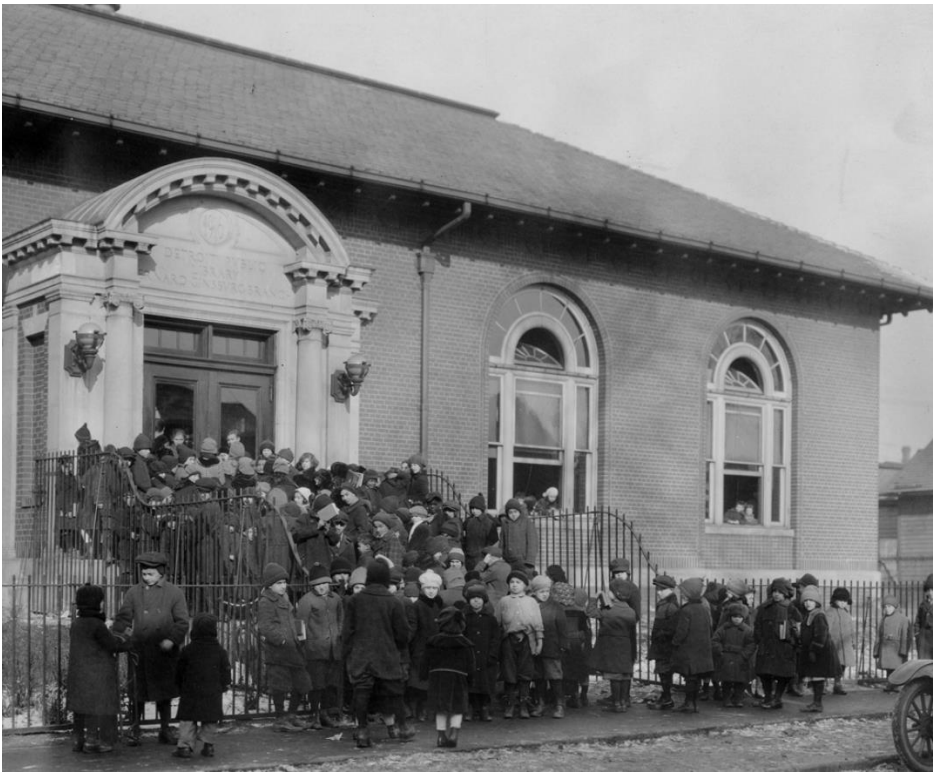
A limestone clad canopy was added over the original wing's primary entrance in 1967. The applicant is seeking to demolish this canopy. Note that they have recently removed the limestone cladding without HDC approval and/or permit, leaving only the steel framing. The stone steps at this entrance will be retained. Where damaged beyond repair, the stone steps will be replaced in kind. New steel handrails will also be added at this entrance.

#### Install New Equipment at Roof

- A new RTU for the gymnasium is proposed to efficiently meet modern ventilation codes. The position of the new RTU is strategically located to minimize visibility. Two new HVAC Heat Pumps and one ERV are proposed to be on the roof above the two story recreation 1926 addition. The height of the new HVAC equipment shall not exceed the height of the parapet.
- Modify roof as required for new elevator. The new elevator roof shall not exceed the height of the parapet. Dimensions are provided in the updated documents.

### **STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH**

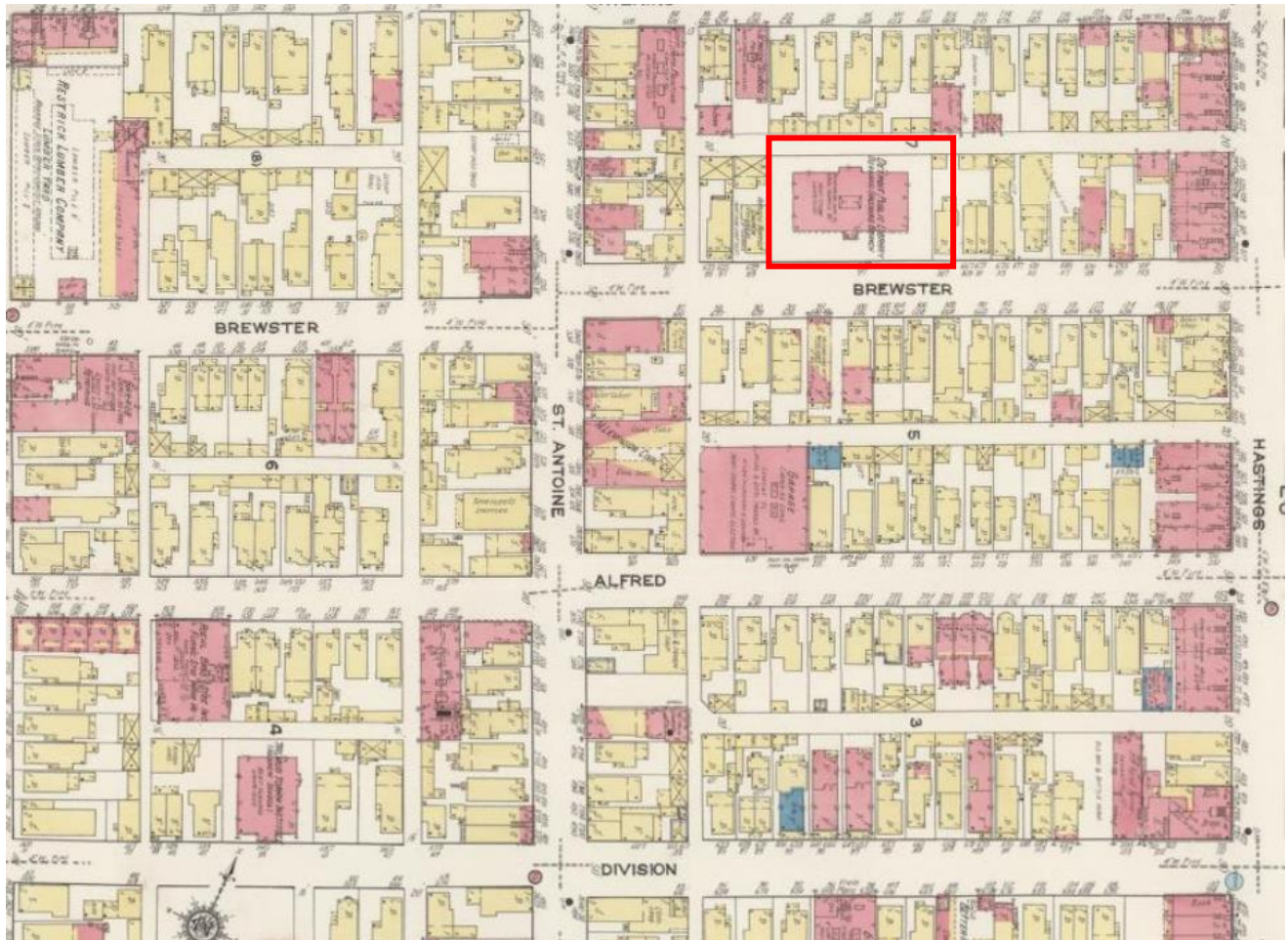
- As previously noted, the original portion of the building was erected in 1917 as the Ginsburg Library to serve the nearby Jewish community (see the below photos). Per the below Sanborn Map, the library's nearby surrounds were dominated by detached single-family houses and low to medium scale multiple-family and commercial buildings.



**Ginsburg Library, 1917. Note the projecting, arched-roofed primary entrance**

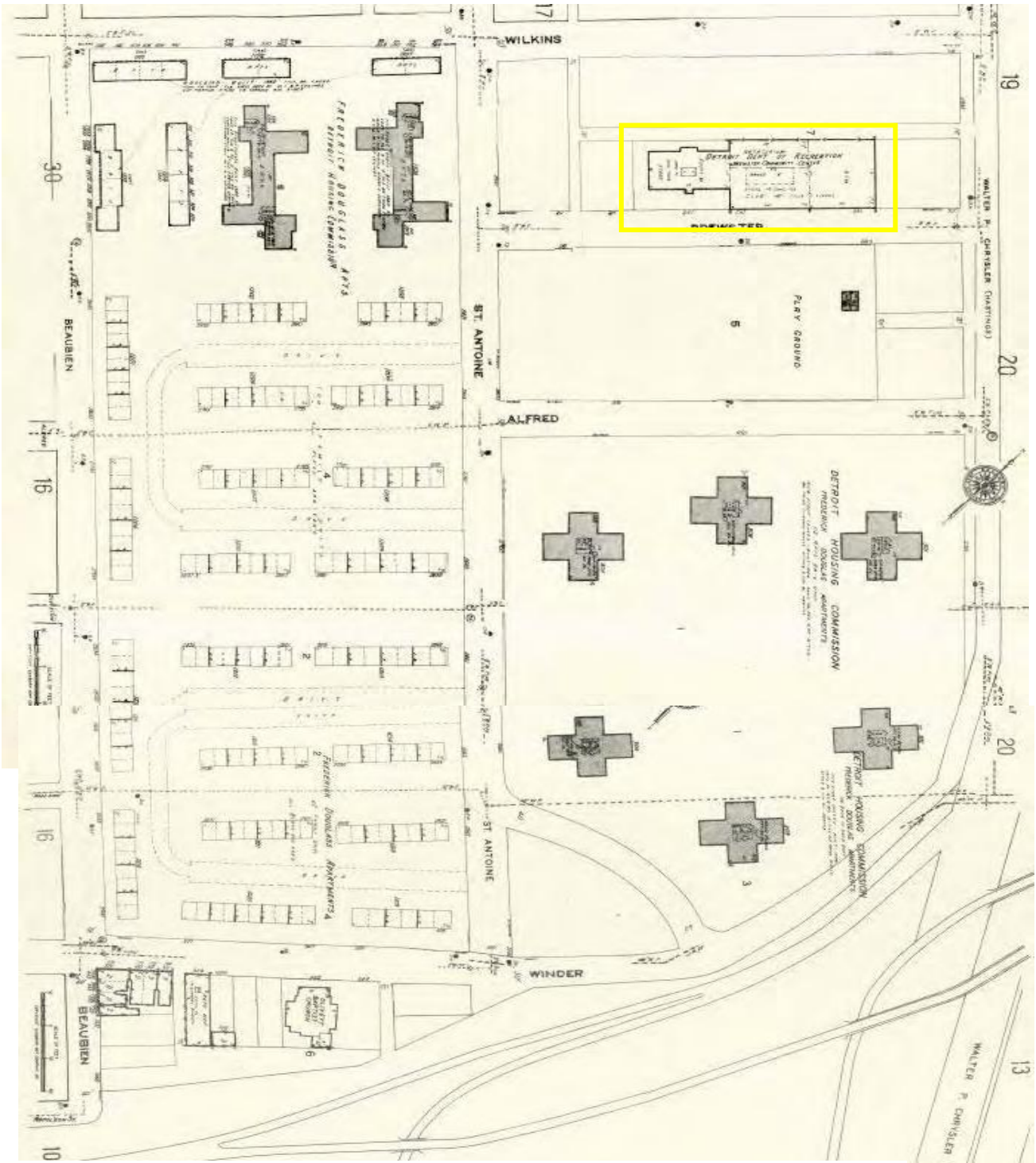


**Ginsburg Library, ca. 1920. Note the projecting, arched-roofed primary entrance**



**Sanborn Fire insurance Map, 1921. 2900 St. Antoine/the Ginsburg Library is outlined in red**

- The library was closed by 1927 and subsequently transferred to the Detroit Parks Department so that it might be repurposed for use as a community/recreation center to serve the nearby growing African American community. At the close of 1929, the Parks Department had completed a conversion of the library building's interior space to an auditorium. A new two-story addition which included classrooms, a swimming pool, boxing ring, and basketball courts was appended to the original building's east side. Upon its completion, the newly renovated building was renamed the Central Community Center.
- In 1935, the Detroit Housing Commission initiated the construction of new multiple-family housing to the north of the new Central Recreation Center. The housing, known as the Brewster Projects, was funded with Works Progress Administration funds and was the nation's first federally funded public housing development for African Americans. Construction on the development ended in 1941. A year later, construction began on the Frederick Douglass Apartments, which were located immediately to the south of the Brewster Project. The last of the Douglass housing was completed in 1955. Upon completion, the Brewster-Douglass neighborhood could house up to 10,000 residents. See the below Sanborn Fire insurance Map which depicts the Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center and the adjacent Brewster-Douglass neighborhood which it served. The recreation center was closed and vacated in 2006. By 2014, all of the housing within the Brewster Douglass neighborhood had been demolished.



**Brewster-Douglass neighborhood. Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center outlined in yellow. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1977**



**Brewster-Douglass neighborhood. Brewster Wheeler Recreation Center outlined in blue. Aerial photo taken in 1955**



**2900 St. Antoine, 1960s**



- The HDAB designation report for the district does not provide a Statement of Significance or define a Period of Significance for the property. HDC staff therefore recommends that the building is significant for the following reasons:
  - Between 1917 and 1927, the original building served as a library for one of Detroit's earliest Jewish neighborhoods
  - Beginning in 1932, the building served as a hub for social, educational, and recreational activities for the nearby burgeoning African American communities of Brush Park and Brewster Douglass
  - Famed boxing champion and Detroit resident Joe Louis trained at the recreation center in the early 1930s
  - The original library wing and the 1929 addition both remain as excellent examples of early 20<sup>th</sup> century civic/public architecture



**Joe Louis (center) in the basement at 2900 St. Antoine, 1930s.**

- Staff therefore recommends that the building's Period of Significance begins in 1917, which is the date of the building's original construction, and ends in 1955, the date the last building within the Brewster Douglass neighborhood was completed.
- As previously noted, the applicant removed the limestone cladding from the flat-roofed canopy that is located at the original building's south façade primary entry without HDC approval and/or permit, leaving only the structure's steel frame. With the current application, they are seeking approval to remove the structure/canopy in its entirety. Per the submitted information, the limestone cladding was removed due to its deteriorated condition. Staff did research the age of the canopy and found that it was installed in 1967 (see below image). As the canopy was

erected after the building's suggested Period of Significance, staff does find that its removal does meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.



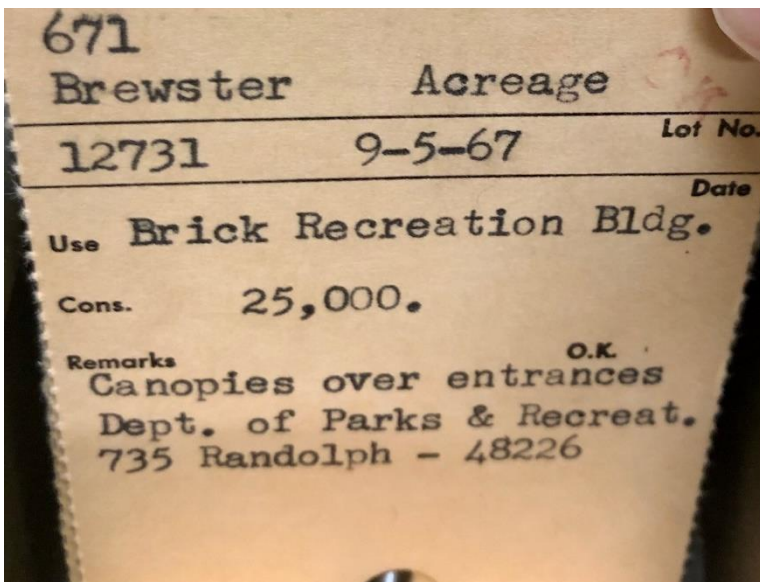
**2900 St. Antoine, flat roof canopy prior to the unapproved limestone cladding removal. Photos provided by applicants**



2900 St. Antoine, prior to unapproved canopy removal. Photo taken by City of Detroit staff in 2017

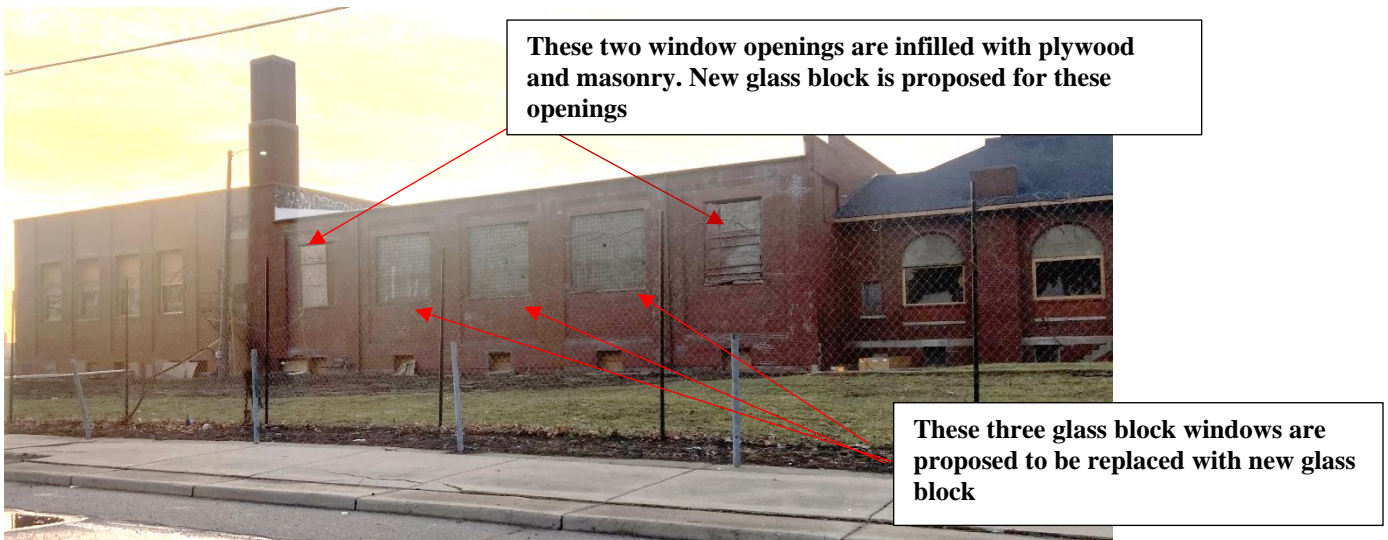


2900 St. Antoine, flat roof canopy after to the unapproved limestone cladding removal/current condition. Photo provided by applicant



**Detroit Building Safety, Engineering, and Environmental Department permit card which refers to the installation of new canopies in 1967**

- See the attached photos of the building, taken in 2017, to note the conditions at that time. The applicant has also provided photos of current conditions as well as a condition report from Blackberry Windows. As noted, the building has been vacant and open to scrapping since 2006. The building has also been subject to several fires. As a result, most of the original windows have been removed. Those few that remain (and are proposed for replacement) do appear to be in a condition that merits their removal. The application does indicate that the new windows will provide an adequate replication of the building's historic windows. It is therefore staff's opinion that the proposed window scope does meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standard's for Rehabilitation.
- The proposal is seeking to replace the three existing glass block windows at the building's north elevation with new glass block. Glass block is also proposed for the two flanking window openings, which are currently infilled with plywood and masonry (see below photo).



**2900 St. Antoine, facing southeast. Photos taken by staff on 2/27/2024**



- Glass block walls and windows are typical to Streamline Moderne and Art Deco buildings of the 1930s and 1940s. However, note that the material was typically employed intentionally as a decorative/design element to emphasize rounded edges and corners. While the 1929 addition is Art Deco in style, the glass block found at the north elevation window openings is likely not original to its date of construction as appears as a utilitarian element employed to affordably enclose a large opening. It is possible that the glass block window infill is of historic-age, however staff was unable to find any evidence that it was added during the building's period of significance. It is therefore staff's opinion that the current glass block is not compatible with the building's historic appearance.
- Although not compatible with the building's historic appearance, the north elevation glass block was present at the time of the property's designation. Therefore, retaining the incompatible existing glass block and undertaking minor repairs/routine maintenance where necessary meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation as it is a condition that existed at the time of designation. However, if these incompatible windows are proposed for removal, the new replacement windows must be compatible with the building's historic character per the National Park Service's (NPS) brief entitled *Replacement Windows that Meet the Standards*, which notes that "replacing existing incompatible, non-historic windows with similarly incompatible new windows *does not meet the Standards*" [Replacement Windows that Meet the Standards - Historic Preservation Tax Incentives \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#) The NPS further states that "replacement of missing or non-historic windows must, however, always fill the original window openings and must be compatible with the overall historic character of the building. The general type of window – industrial steel, wood double-hung, etc. – that is appropriate can usually be determined from the proportions of the openings, and the period and historic function of the building. The appearance of the replacement windows must be consistent with the general characteristics of a historic window of the type and period, but need not replicate the missing historic window. In many cases, this may be accomplished using substitute materials." It is HDC staff's opinion that the proposed installation of glass block at the building's north elevation does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's standards for Rehabilitation.

## ISSUES

- As noted in the above/previous point, the glass block window opening infill proposed for the north elevation is not compatible with the building's historic appearance per NPS Guidelines and therefore does not meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standard's for Rehabilitation.

## RECOMMENDATION

### Section 21-2-73, CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS (COA)

It is staff's opinion that the project as proposed is appropriate to the property's historic character. Staff therefore recommends that the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) for this project because it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standard's for Rehabilitation and conforms to the district's Elements of Design. However, staff does recommend that the Commission issue the COA with the following condition:

- The glass block that is currently located at the building's north elevation is not compatible with the building's historic appearance. If these incompatible windows are proposed for removal or if plywood and masonry infill at this elevation is proposed for removal, the new windows must be compatible with the building's historic character per the National Park Service's (NPS) brief entitled *Replacement Windows that Meet the Standards*, which notes that "replacing existing incompatible, non-historic windows with similarly incompatible new windows *does not meet the Standards*. Therefore, new glass block shall not be installed within the building's north elevation window openings. The applicant shall provide a proposal for compatible/appropriate new

windows to HDC staff for review and approval prior to issuance of the project's permit. Should staff determine that the work does not meet the Standards, the project shall be forwarded to the Commission for review at a future regular meeting.

Current conditions, photos taken by staff on 2/27/2024



FACING SOUTHWEST. 1929 ADDITION IN THE FOREGROUND



FACING SOUTH, TOWARDS ORIGINAL LIBRARY WING



FACING NORTHEAST, TOWARDS ORIGINAL LIBRARY WING AND 1929 ADDITION





FACING NORTHWEST, 1917 ORIGINAL GING ON THE LEFT AND 1929 ADDITION TO THE RIGHT



FACING NORTHWEST, SHOWING 1929 ADDITION IN THE FOREGROUND



FACING NORTHWEST, SHOWING THE ORIGINAL 1917 LIBRARY WING



FACING SOUTHEAST, TOWARDS GLASS BLOCK WINDOWS AT 1929 ADDITION'S NORTH ELEVATION

# Conditions in 2017, photos taken by City of Detroit staff



FACING SOUTHEAST



FACING SOUTHEAST



FACING NORTHWEST



FACING NORTHWEST





FACING NORTHEAST



FACING NORTHWEST