

STAFF REPORT: SEPTEMBER 11, 2024, REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2024-00440

ADDRESS: 311 WATSON

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BRUSH PARK

APPLICANT: JOHN P. BIGGAR, INTEGRITY BUILDING GROUP

PROPERTY OWNER: DANIEL WALDHORN AND ASHLYNNE BASILE

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: AUGUST 8, 2024

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: AUGUST 22, 2024

SCOPE: ERECT CARRIAGE HOUSE



311 Watson viewed from the south. August 2024 photo by staff.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

311 Watson is a two-and-one-half-story, Second Empire house built in 1885 and facing south onto the street. Character-defining features include a rusticated stone foundation, elaborate wood first floor porch and brick bay window, wood two-over-two windows, limestone sills and stone window hoods, offset masonry tower, decorative eave brackets, Mansard roof clad in slate, and shed-dormer attic windows.

As a building that had formerly been vacant and in noticeable disrepair and has undergone rehabilitation, there is an extensive history of prior Historic District Commission approvals and appropriate work that has been performed in recent decades. Wood and masonry façade repairs are currently in progress pursuant to a July 16, 2024, Certificate of Appropriateness.

Subject of this application, the back yard contains a small shed and is otherwise not developed or landscaped.



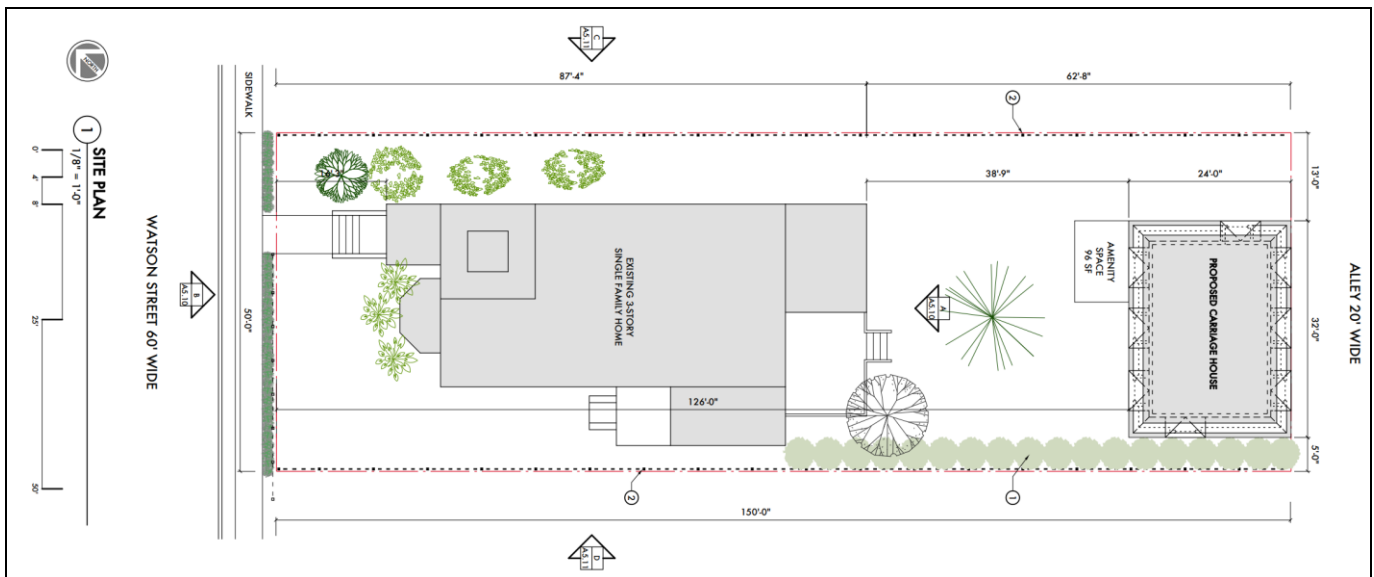
The subject property viewed from the alley. August 2024 photo by staff.



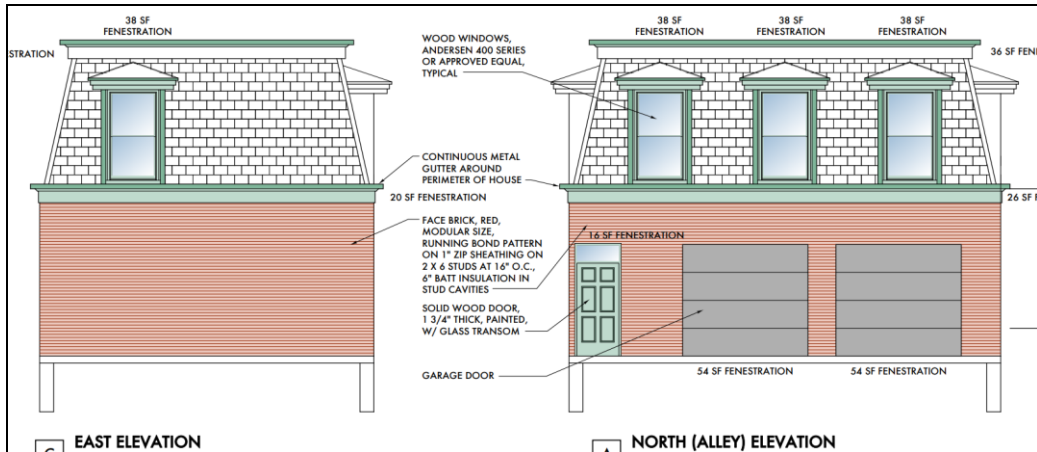
Detroit Parcel Viewer image of the subject property.

PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes to demolish the existing shed and erect a new building, described as a “carriage house,” at the rear of the property.



Site plan depicting proposed development. Image from application materials.



Elevations of proposed new building. Image from application materials.

The proposed carriage house is a one-and-one-half-story building with red, stretcher bond, face brick on the lower story and a fenestrated Mansard roof, clad with true or synthetic slates, on the attic story. The building would feature wood eaves, cornices, and other trim, and will employ Anderson 400 Series double-hung, aluminum-clad wood windows. Doors would be wood, plus a glass transom on the alley-facing pedestrian door. Dormers would be clad in copper.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Brush Park Historic District was established by Ordinance 369-H in 1980. As described in the Final Report, the district is notable for its high-style residential architecture from the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century including numerous two-and-a-half-story houses and some taller apartment buildings, along with commercial buildings of various scales.
- The Elements of Design for the Brush Park Historic District (Sec. 21-2-142) provide guidance regarding the “characteristic relationships of the various features within [the] historic district which are significant to the appearance of the district” (Sec. 21-2-1); appropriate and compatible new development will adhere to most, but not necessarily all, of the defined elements. Pertinent Elements of Design for Brush Park are quoted as follows:

Height. Height varies in the district from one to 11 stories. In the area between Woodward Avenue and Brush, the original development was almost exclusively 2½ story houses.

Proportion of building's front façade. Buildings in the district are usually taller than wide; horizontal proportions exist only in incompatible later buildings, except for row house buildings.

Proportion of openings within the façades. Areas of void generally constitute between 15 percent and 35 percent of the total façade area, excluding the roof. Proportions of the openings themselves are generally taller than wide; in some cases, vertically proportioned units are combined to fill an opening wider than tall.

Rhythm of solids to voids in front façade. Victorian structures in the district often display great freedom in the placement of openings in the façades, although older examples are generally more regular in such placement than later examples.

Relationship of materials. By far the most prevalent material in the district is common brick; other forms of brick, stone and wood trim are common. Originally, roofs were wood or slate with an occasional example of tile; asphalt replacement roofs are common.

Relationship of textures. The most common relationship of textures in the district is the low-relief pattern of mortar joints in brick contrasted to the smoother or rougher surfaces of stone or wood trim. Slate, wood, or tile roofs contribute particular textural values where they exist, especially in the case of slates or shingles of other than rectangular shape.

Relationship of colors. Brick red predominates, both in the form of natural color brick and in the form of painted brick. Other natural brick and stone colors are also present. Roofs of other than asphalt are in natural colors; older slate roofs are often laid in patterns with various colors of slate.

Relationship of architectural detail. On the buildings of the Victorian period, elaborate detail in wood, stone, or sheet metal was common; areas treated include porches, window and door surrounds, cornices, dormers, and other areas.

Relationship of roof shapes. Examples of many roof shapes, including pitched gable roofs, hip roofs, mansard roofs, and gambrel roofs are present. Flat roof areas in the center of hip or mansard roofs are frequent. The generally tall roofs add height to the houses of the Victorian period.

Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments. Side drives are rare, access to garages or coach houses being from the alleys.

Scale of façades and façade elements. In the large houses between John R and Brush, the scale tends to be large, and the façade elements scaled and disposed to emphasize the large size of the houses. Towers, setbacks, porches and the like divide façades into large elements.

Directional expression of front façades. A substantial majority of the buildings in the district have front façades vertically expressed.

Relationship of lot coverage. Older single-family houses between Woodward Avenue and Brush generally occupy about 25 to 30 percent of the building lot, not including coach houses or garages.

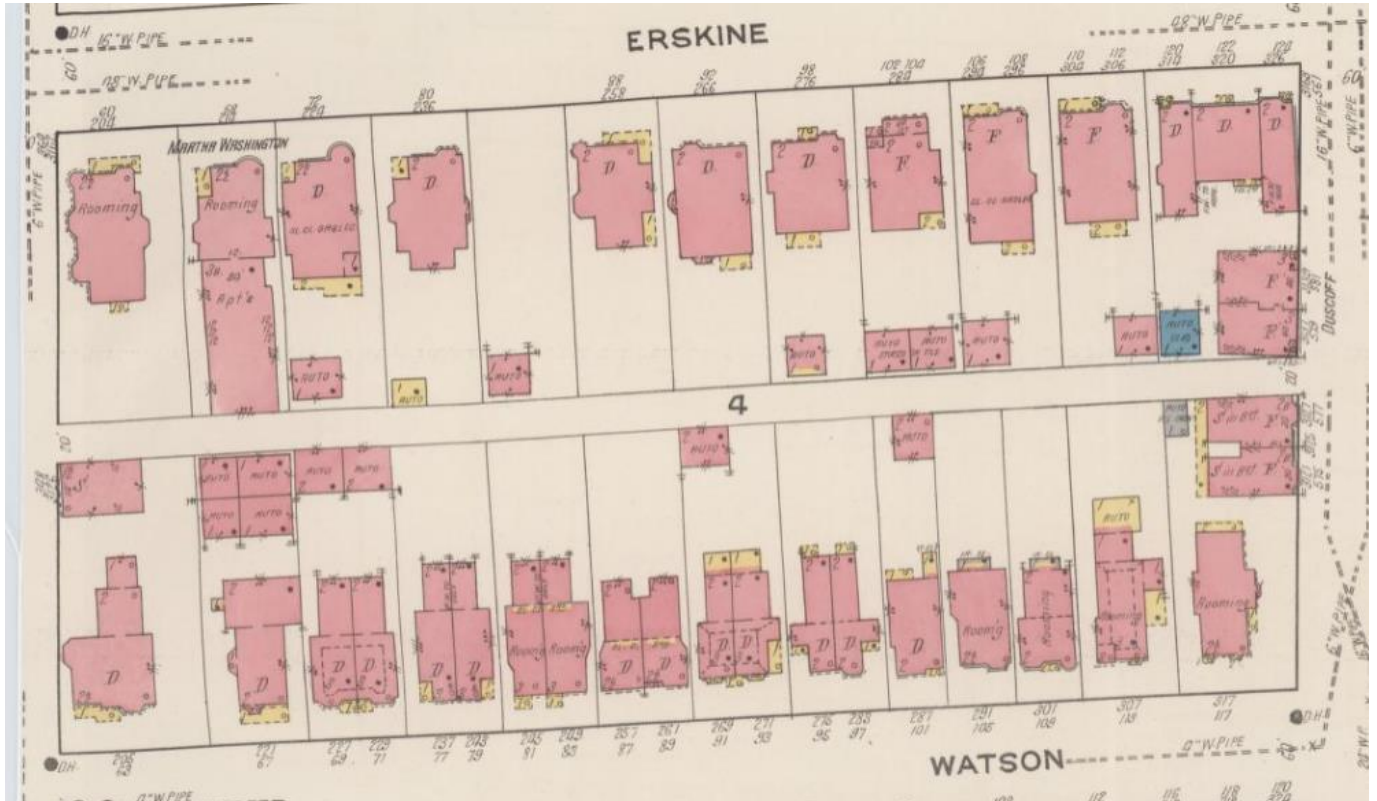
Degree of complexity with the façades. The older houses in the district are generally characterized by a high degree of complexity within the façades, with bay windows, towers, porches, window and door hoods, elaborate cornices, and other devices used to decorate the buildings.

Orientation, vistas, overviews. Garages and coach houses are located in the rear of residential properties and are generally oriented to the alley.

Symmetric or asymmetric appearance. In the Victorian structures, examples of both symmetric and asymmetric design occur; symmetry is more characteristic of the earlier houses, while the high Victorian examples are more likely to assemble elements in a romantic, asymmetric composition. Asymmetrical but balanced compositions are common.

Orientation, vistas, overviews. The vacant land in the area, largely the result of demolition, creates long-distance views and views of individual buildings from unusual angles which are foreign to the character of the neighborhood as an intensely developed urban area.

- The shed is not a historic resource; its demolition is appropriate.
- Sanborn maps and City of Detroit building permit records indicate that garages and carriage houses were once very common in the vicinity of 311 Watson (this property once had an attached, wood garage). The construction of a new carriage house is consistent with the historical character of the area and supports Brush Park as an “intensely developed urban area” as described in the “orientations, vistas, overviews” Element of Design.



The subject block depicted in a 1921 Sanborn map; “AUTO” indicates a garage or carriage house. What is now numbered as 311 Watson is labeled here as 307.

- The overall site plan and location of the proposed building, at the rear of the yard and opening to the alley, is consistent with the character of the district and supported by the “relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments” and “relationship of lot coverage” elements quoted above.
- The form, massing, and detail, especially the Mansard roof, wood trim, and dormers lie within the “invention within a style”¹ preservation approach and are compatible with the property and its setting, in staff opinion. The copper cladding of the dormers, which employs a historic material in a non-historic manner, along with the rectangular slates depicted in construction drawings, provide the differentiation required by Standard #9 of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.²

ISSUES

- The first floor of the proposed building displays a clear lack of texture and depth. This is incongruous with respect to the more elaborate Mansard design of the attic story and in contrast to the highly detailed and

textured house at 311 Watson and the other buildings of the district as a whole. The two floors appear to be stylistically and conceptually disconnected.

- The first floor of the proposed building is also contrary to several Elements of Design: it lacks the expected contrast between brick cladding and stone or wood trim described in “relationship of textures,” the “elaborate detail” and “treated” areas described in “relationship of architectural detail,” and the “large” and “scaled” elements that “divide facades,” as described in “scale of facades and façade elements.” The lack of such features emphasizes the horizontal nature of the stretcher-bond brick, contrary to “proportion of building’s front façade,” which specifically notes “horizontal proportions” as “incompatible.”
- Staff suggests that a variety of potential façade treatments could add an appropriate level of texture and detail to the first-floor façade. These may include the use of common-bond brick (matching that of the primary house) rather than stretcher bond, the use of visible stone headers above garage doors, the use of additional first-floor fenestration, or the addition of a projecting feature (this would necessarily have to be on the north, or inward-facing, elevation), such as a porch.

RECOMMENDATION

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

Staff recommends that the Commission issue a *Certificate of Appropriateness* for the proposed work as it meets the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, with the following condition:

- Additional texture, depth, and detail be incorporated into the design for the first floor, to achieve alignment with the district’s Elements of Design, and present a more cohesive overall expression for the new building (modifications to the second floor may also help to achieve the same purpose). Such modifications are subject to staff approval.

¹ Steven W. Semes, *The Future of the Past*, 2009.

² “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.”