

STAFF REPORT: FEBRUARY 12, 2025 REGULAR MEETING
APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2025-00019
ADDRESS: 4218 CORTLAND
HISTORIC DISTRICT: RUSSELL WOODS-SULLIVAN
APPLICANT: JOHN NOVA, NEW CUSTOM HOMES LLC
PROPERTY OWNER: BLOCK & LOT DETROIT LLC
DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: JANUARY 19, 2025
DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: JANUARY 30, 2025

PREPARED BY: T. BOSCARINO

SCOPE: REPLACE WOOD WINDOWS WITH WOOD WINDOWS; ALTER STUCCO AND WOOD TRIM
(WORK STARTED WITHOUT APPROVAL)



January 2025 photo by staff.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

4218 Cortland, built in 1924, is a two-story house with steep, front-facing (south-facing) gable roof. The building has a complex roofline with multiple, steep gables, including its primary gable, a front-facing subsidiary gable, gable dormers, and a gabled canopy over the front door. The building combines architectural styles: Tudor Revival features include, in addition to the overall massing, flared vergeboards (now missing) and decorative brickwork above the doorway. Italian Renaissance Revival features include the tan-colored brick and three, round-arched, brick window surrounds with diamond medallions on the first floor, front (south) elevation.

At some point between 2007 and 2009, the house was damaged by fire. Google Maps photos show most or all of the historic windows and doors were lost and the attic story was extensively damaged. The fire also revealed stucco and decorative half timbering that had been covered with aluminum siding at some time prior to the designation of the Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District in 1999. Much of the stucco and half timbering was damaged by the fire.



1999 Historic Designation Advisory Board photo.



Fire damage and exposed stucco and half timbering seen in 2009 Google Maps photo (left) and 2019 staff photo (right).

In 2024, staff observed the installation of vinyl windows, the removal of the gable canopy over the front entrance, and the removal of decorative vergeboards (see photo on previous page). This work was done without approval of the Historic District Commission. The area formerly covered in aluminum siding is now covered in house wrap such that its condition is not visible. The property is presently subject to a Stop Work order from the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department.

The proposal described below addresses these unapproved work items, with one exception: the removal of vergeboards. Staff has encouraged the applicant to submit an application for this work.

PROPOSAL

The proposed scope of work would install new, double-hung wood sash windows by Lincoln Windows, per the submitted window schedule. The application also states that the three French doors that formerly existed on the façade (see the 1999 photo on page 2) would be “put back to original double door style with proper individual light patterns,” although these three units are not shown on the submitted window schedule.

Also proposed is to complete the removal of non-historic aluminum siding and to replicate the stucco and decorative half timbering on the front, east side, and rear, based on available photos.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District was established by Ordinance 33-99 of the Detroit City Council in 1999. The Final Report for the district states, “The residential buildings in Russell Woods are among the finest examples of middle class, builder-designed residential architecture in the city of Detroit erected between 1920 and 1949,” implying a period of significance.
- The Elements of Design (Sec. 21-2-168) for the district provide the following observations:
 - (3) *Proportion of openings within the facades*. Typical openings are taller than wide. It is not uncommon for several windows, which are taller than wide, to fill a single opening, which is wider than tall.
 - (7) *Relationship of materials*. The majority of houses are faced with brick, often combined with wood, stone, or stucco. ... wood is almost universally used for window frames and other functional trim. Windows are commonly either metal casements or wooden sash.
 - (8) *Relationship of textures*. The major texture is that of brick laid in mortar, often juxtaposed with wood or smooth or rough-faced stone elements and trim. Textured brick and brick laid in patterns creates considerable interest, as does half-timbering, leaded and subdivided windows, and wood-shingled or horizontal-sided elements.
 - (9) *Relationship of colors*. The buildings derived from Classical precedents, particularly those of Neo-classical styles, generally have woodwork painted white, cream, or in the range of those colors. Colors known to have been in use on similar buildings of this style in the 18th Century or early 20th Century may be considered for appropriateness. Buildings of vernacular English Revival styles generally have painted woodwork and window frames of a dark brown or cream color. Half timbering is almost always stained dark brown.
 - (10) *Relationship of architectural details*. Characteristic elements and details displayed on vernacular English-Revival-influenced buildings include arched windows and door openings, steeply pitched gables, towers, and sometimes half-timbering.
- As the historic windows are missing due to fire, National Park Service guidelines on “replacement windows where no historic windows remain” apply (See *Replacement Windows that Meet the Standards*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/taxincentives/windows-replacement-meet-standards.htm>.) An appropriate window would be “compatible with the overall historic character of the building” and be “consistent with the general characteristics of a historic window of the type and period,” among other concerns. Staff suggests that the proposed windows are indeed appropriate and compatible, with a few exceptions:
 - The relatively thick, vertical mullions on the second floor and attic, front façade windows (already removed without approval), contributed to a strong vertical emphasis that once existed on the façade. Although staff is convinced, from available photos, that the mullions were most likely damaged beyond repair during the fire, staff opinion is that any new work should recreate this muntin pattern in order to be compatible with the vertical emphasis of the façade.

- The three proposed French doors for the first floor, front façade, are not shown in the submitted window schedule. Compatible new units would likely be wood, double doors, subdivided with muntins.
- The proposed alteration of the stucco and half timbering (described as “to be restored” in the application but described as “alteration” in this report as it not clear if the result would be a true restoration) would generally be appropriate. These elements were distinctive, historic features that were covered with aluminum siding prior to the designation of the historic district (almost certainly damaged during the process of being covered) and experienced further deterioration during the fire. The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation (Standard #6) would require that any areas of historic material that are not beyond feasible repair be retained, and that any new material “match the old” in design.
- For areas of stucco and half timbering that are entirely missing and for which no documentation is available, the work would be assessed for its compatibility with the building, the surrounding environment, and the Elements of Design.
- The aluminum siding is a non-historic material, its removal (begun without approval) is appropriate, in staff opinion.
- Although the application states that the stucco and half-timbering would be “restored,” the application does not provide drawings or materials specifications for the work. This is needed to ensure that historic materials are retained when possible and to ensure the compatibility of new work. This would require, at a minimum, that the applicant submit detailed photos of existing conditions and sketches of the proposed work, including material and product specifications, and, most likely, would also require an on-site inspection by staff prior to beginning the work.

ISSUES

- The proposed windows on the second floor and attic story, front façade, would need to be separated by wood mullions in order to achieve compatibility.
- The proposed French doors on the first floor, front façade, are not depicted in the window schedule, a compatible unit would be a wood, subdivided, double door.
- The proposed stucco and half-timbering work should retain historic materials when possible.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

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

Recommendation 1 of 1, Certificate of Appropriateness

Staff recommends that the proposed work will be appropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation and the Russell Woods-Sullivan Elements of Design, with the conditions that:

- The proposed windows on the second floor and attic story, front façade, shall be separated by wood mullions, subject to staff review to ensure compatible design.
- The proposed French doors on the first floor, front façade, shall be wood and subject to staff review to ensure compatible design.

- The proposed stucco and half-timbering work shall be subject to staff review to ensure that historic materials are retained when possible and to ensure compatible design.