



Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission Staff Report

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HPC meeting date: 8/3/2020
Ald. Robert Bauman District: 4
Staff reviewers: Tim Askin & Carlen Hatala
PTS #114998 CCF #200429

Property 229 E. WISCONSIN AV. Railway Exchange in Eastside Commercial Historic District

Owner/Applicant RAILWAY EXCHANGE BUILDING WALLPAPERED CITY
PATRICIA KEATING KAHN STACEY WILLIAMS-NG
759 N MILWAUKEE ST STE 212
MILWAUKEE WI 53202

Proposal Paint mural on south wall of building. Dimensions are not stated, but staff have been told it will be "the whole wall." From that description, staff makes size estimates as follows. Counting nine stories at a floor height of 12' each and a building width of 40', the mural would be 4,320 square feet. Giving an allowance for a slightly narrower mural and one story less gives a low-end estimate of 3,360 sf (8 stories, 12'H each, 35'W).

Staff comments

This review does not speak to the content of the mural, per the advice of our City Attorney. Apart from this initial statement, approval or denial of this application for a Certificate of Appropriateness constitutes a significant policy decision without precedent before this body.

Staff presents the relevant guideline sections for the Commission's consideration. The ordinance provides the following guidance:

320-21-11-g-1. Whether the proposed work would destroy or adversely affect any exterior architectural feature of the improvement upon which the work is to be done or adversely affect the external appearance of other improvements on the site or within the district.

g-3. Whether, in the case of any property located in a historic district, the proposed alteration, reconstruction, rehabilitation or new construction conforms to the objectives of the historic preservation plan for the district as duly adopted by the common council.

The guidelines for the East Side Commercial Historic District, which constitute the "historic preservation plan for the district," speak directly to the issue at hand with the following statements:

X. A. 2. Exterior Finishes a. Masonry (i) Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural stone and unpainted brick. This is likely to be historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.

(ii) Retain painted masonry surfaces. Removal of paint could cause irreversible damage to the masonry. If it is decided to remove the paint from masonry surfaces, use the gentlest method possible.

Paint is known to adversely affect masonry, particularly brick. Over time, it typically causes irreversible damage from moisture retention. Painting of masonry is not readily reversible requiring costly and complex interventions that require extensive testing in each specific circumstance to address the balance between adequate removal of the paint and harm to the masonry. Some older paint removal practices

are specifically prohibited by state law (Wis. Stat. 101.1215). The possible harm is so serious that the law authorizes penalties of up to \$1000 per day for both the contractor and the owner of the property.

Chemical and laser cleaning are legal and approvable options but require the same kind of careful testing previously mentioned. The chemicals involved are typically highly caustic and toxic. The laser option is highly effective on organic paints (e.g., latex and oil), but has high labor costs from the small area that can be reached with the beam by each operator. Typical laser beam size is less than 2 square inches. Laser cleaning has been proven at scales comparable to the Railway Exchange's south wall with examples such as the Driehaus Museum (Samuel M. Nickerson House) in Chicago and the Jefferson Memorial in DC.

Mineral/silicate paints exist and are unlikely to cause harm to masonry surfaces. However, Staff could not find any studies addressing the removal of mineral paints. Removal of mineral paint is assumed therefore assumed to be difficult, if not impossible. The most realistic way to "remove" a mural, given the high costs of all possible methods is to paint over it. This is not true removal and does not count as reversibility. Painting over a mural also adds another layer of paint that can further compromise the masonry surface.

Recommendation Recommend HPC Denial or require painting on a removable surface.

Conditions

**Previous HPC
action**

**Previous Council
action**