

**STAFF REPORT:** APRIL 10, 2024, SPECIAL MEETING

**PREPARED BY:** T. BOSCARINO

**APPLICATION NUMBER:** HDC2024-00144

**ADDRESS:** 1942 GRAND RIVER

**HISTORIC DISTRICT:** G.A.R. (GRAND ARMY [OF THE] REPUBLIC) BUILDING

**APPLICANT:** 1942 GRAND RIVER LLC

**PROPERTY OWNER:** 1942 GRAND RIVER LLC

**DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION:** MARCH 25, 2024

**DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT:** APRIL 2, 2024

**SCOPE:** INSTALL WALL SIGNS AND AWNINGS



*The southwest (Grand River) façade of the Grand Army of the Republic Building. April 2024 photo by staff.*

## **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

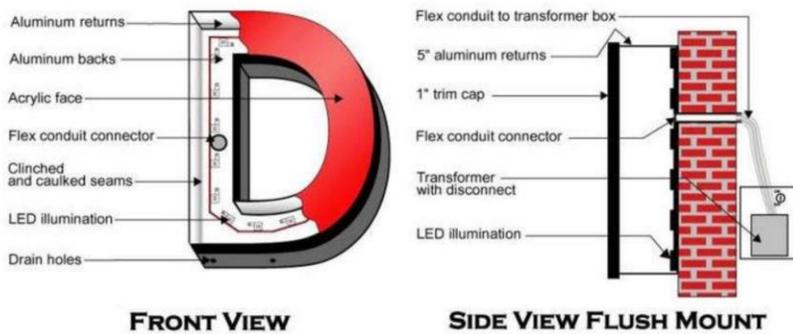
This Richardsonian Romanesque building, built in 1899, is noteworthy for its triangular plan with prominent facades on all three sides of the building. The principal entrance faces southwest onto Grand River Avenue, consisting of a two-story, iron entryway recessed beneath an arched opening. The west and east corners of the four-story building are anchored by crenellated towers. Narrower, engaged towers, beginning above the first floor, divide each façade into three distinct masses. A pronounced belt course separates a limestone first floor from sandstone upper floors. Alterations to the building exterior are minimal.

Signs currently on the building include a relatively small business sign (pertaining to a previous business) on the fourth floor, northwest façade, and several window decals that appear to be in the process of being removed. Staff

found no record of Historic District Commission approval of the existing signs. Additionally, an LED lighting strip was recently added to the underside of the arched, entrance bay on the Grand River Façade. This work was not approved by the Historic District Commission.

**PROPOSAL**

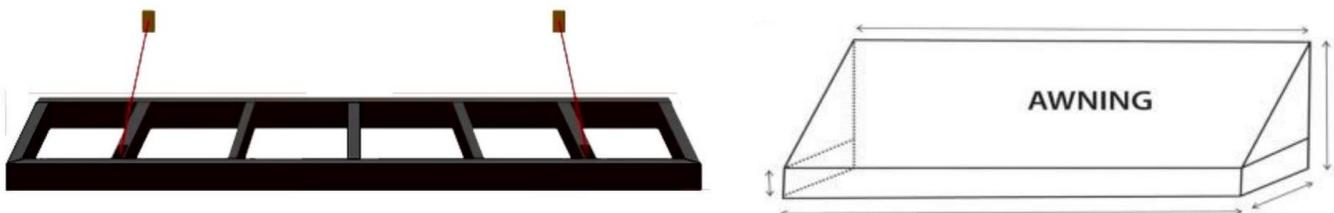
The applicant proposes to install one wall sign: On the west (Grand River and Adams) corner of the building, the words “SEXY STEAK” would be displayed vertically on the third and second floors, respectively. Each letter would be 16 by 20 inches, internally illuminated, with a white acrylic face and aluminum return.



*Left: Illustration depicting west (Grand River and Adams) corner of building with proposed sign. Right: Section of proposed letter (typical). Images from application documents.*

Two projecting, flat, black, aluminum canopies (described in application materials as “awnings”) are proposed. One would be at the recessed, primary entrance at the southwest (Grand River) façade. The other would be at a secondary entrance on the northwest (Adams) façade.

Five canvas awnings in black “Sunbrelle” material are proposed. They would be above entrances at the west (Grand River and Adams) corner, the east (Grand River and Cass) corner, and above a historical storefront opening on the northeast (Cass) façade and both historical storefront openings on the southwest (Grand River) façade.



*Sketches of proposed aluminum canopies (left) and fabric awnings (right). Images from application documents.*



Illustration from applicant with arrows indicating proposed canopy and awning locations. Blue arrows represent two aluminum canopies, black arrows represent five fabric awnings.

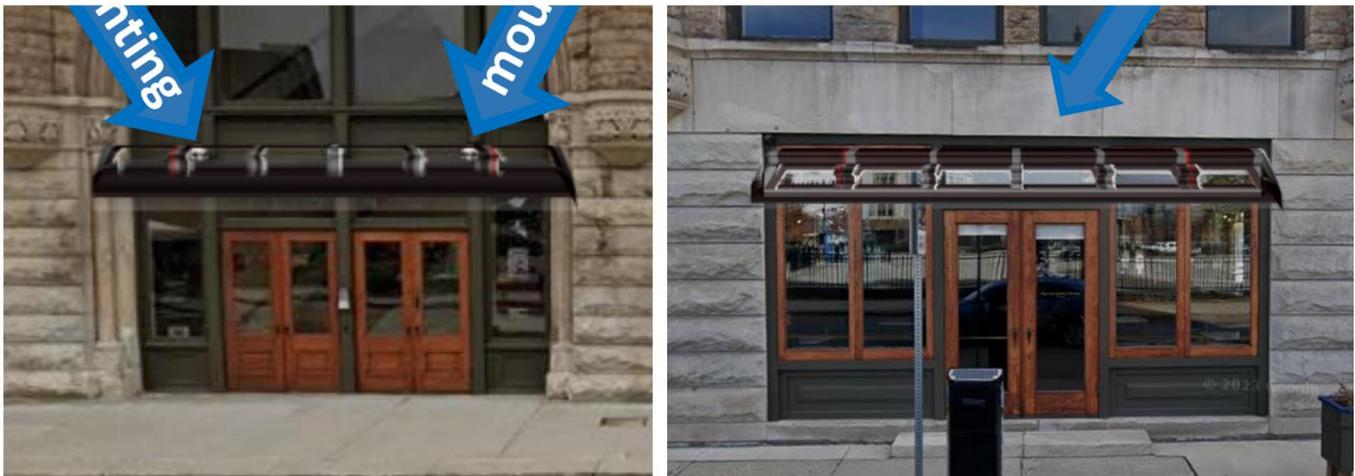


Illustration showing proposed (but inexact) awning locations on Grand River façade (left) and Adams façade (right). Images from application documents, cropped by staff.

The applicant states all canopies and awnings “would be set entirely inside the opening of the windows and doors with no mounting or damage to the existing stonework exterior.”

### STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The G.A.R (Grand Army Republic) Building Historic District was established by the City Council in 2001. (The eponymous organization was the Grand Army *of the* Republic; the lack of the words “of the” as the district is named in the City Code appears to be an error.) The Historic Designation Advisory Board Final

Report states the period of significance is from 1899 to 1973. The Elements of Design emphasize the importance of the building's stone details and overall form but do not provide specific guidance on signs and awnings.



Left: Circa 1900 photo. Right: Undated photo, but likely within the period of significance (Detroit Historical Society). Both show signs that are small in scale.

- Historical photos of the G.A.R. Building show that signs were generally small in scale during the period of significance. Compatible new signs should have a similar character.
- Three globe-shaped sconces (see photo below) within the Grand River entrance bay appear to have been added between 2015 and 2017, according to Google Street View images. They are not visible in the historical photos shown above. Staff concludes that they are likely not historic features.
- Signs and awnings were historically uncommon on Richardsonian Romanesque buildings.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that new signs and awnings should be subdued in nature to avoid distracting from the architectural character of the building.
- The proposed sign is appropriate, in staff opinion, with one consideration (see Issues, below). It is placed to avoid obscuring or distracting from any architectural features and its vertical form is compatible with the tower to which it would be attached.
- Guidance for awnings is provided by *Preservation Briefs 44: The Use of Awnings on Historic Buildings*. A paragraph on adding new awnings to historic buildings reads:

On both commercial and residential buildings, awnings were only wide enough to cover the window openings that they sheltered; a single awning rarely covered two or more bays. On storefronts, they were not higher up on the building facade than was necessary to shade the entrance and display window. Thus, it is important when installing new awnings on historic buildings to ensure that the covering not obscure the building's distinctive architectural features.

Also, new awning hardware should not be installed in a way that damages historic materials. (National Park Service, 2005).

- The proposed canopy and awning locations appear to be consistent with the above guidelines, though clarity is needed on the location and mounting of the Grand River canopy location (see Issues, below).
- The primary (southwest-facing, Grand River) entrance to the building is extremely important to the building's character. Staff suggests that the relatively shallow degree of projection (3.5 feet), dark color, and the fact that it is not illuminated or signed would give the canopy a subdued appearance that does not distract from this important feature. Its placement avoids interrupting or damaging the carved stone capitals and wood spandrel panels that are a distinctive feature of that opening.

## ISSUES

- It is unclear how the proposed sign will be mounted. Anchors and electrical penetrations should drill into mortar joints rather than stone.
- The mounting location of the proposed Grand River canopy is not clearly depicted in the application materials. The proposed canopy is stated to be 12' in width and 8' from the ground, which would correspond to the location shown in the image below (an appropriate location, in the opinion of staff). Further, the canopy must be mounted in a manner that does not damage historic materials.
- The proposed canopy would bisect the glass in the flanking windows, creating an atypical, awkward, and ahistorical condition (see image below).



*Approximate dimensions of proposed awning, stated to be 18' wide and 8' from grade. Illustration by staff based on field measurements.*

## **RECOMMENDATION**

### Section 21-2-78: Determination 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, subject to the following conditions:

- Anchors and penetrations shall be placed in mortar joints rather than stone.
- Awning and canopy locations and anchor points will be subject to review by staff to ensure they do not obscure or damage historic materials.
- The Grand River canopy will be reduced to twelve feet in width to avoid covering the adjacent windows.

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<sup>1</sup> See W. Hawkins Ferry, *The Buildings of Detroit: A History*, pages 147–166.