

HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION
PERMITS IN NATIONAL REGISTER DISTRICTS
JUNE 28, 2021
HR-2021-085748
CONGRESS AVENUE HISTORIC DISTRICT
911 CONGRESS AVENUE

PROPOSAL

Review of a plan to deconstruct, store, and re-erect historic building façade.

PROJECT SPECIFICATIONS

Catalog and store, then re-erect the historic building façades of the Grandberry Building, Mitchell-Robertson Building, and the building at 911 Congress Ave. as part of a redevelopment project at a later date. In conjunction with proposed additions, deconstruction and reconstruction of these façades has received approval from the Historic Landmark Commission on three separate occasions: September 25, 2006 (for 907 and 909 Congress Ave. only), January 26, 2015 (pending development of more detailed plans for treatment of the three façades), and June 25, 2018. See Prior Commission Action below.

On March 24, 2021, the Building Standards Commission (BSC) issued an order requiring that conditions be remedied within 90 days or imposing fines on the property owner. The BSC orders are uploaded as backup to this meeting for reference. In discussion at the April 24, 2021 meeting, Commissioners suggested that the applicant determine if scaffolding erected for purposes of documenting and dismantling the façades would suffice for compliance with the BSC orders. The orders do not mention stabilization or bracing as options, and Code Department staff have confirmed that scaffolding would be insufficient to meet the requirements. Instead, the orders require repairs to fully remedy the violations, which include cracks and openings in exterior walls, roof and drainage issues, and missing windows, among other concerns.

Per the applicant, stabilization and repair of the buildings in place is not technically feasible due to the extent of deterioration, including mortar loss, shear failures and racking, and the inability to adequately shore the façades following demolition of masonry party walls that provide lateral support.

The proposed scope of work entails developing a detailed plan for deconstruction and reconstruction of the historic façades, including as an initial phase: review of existing documentation, visual and non-destructive analysis of building materials and assemblies, structural evaluation, and development of a finalized scope of work and sequence of implementation. Laser scanning has been performed, and analysis of the resulting point cloud is underway. Deconstruction will be done by hand and treated much like an archeological investigation, with specific conditions and hidden elements documented as work progresses. This information will inform preparation of reconstruction drawings and specifications.

ARCHITECTURE

Two-story, two-part commercial block to the left of three historic landmark buildings. The façade is in poor condition and lacks architectural integrity. The ground level is boarded, above which non-original brick infill at the storefront is failing. The second floor is stuccoed brick. The upper portion of the façade was once obscured by a slipcover, and distinguishing architectural features, including hood moulds at the three windows and a decorative cornice, have been removed. Window openings are fully or partially infilled with concrete block.

RESEARCH

The ca. 1881 commercial building was the home to several prominent early Austin attorneys, Gammel's Book Store (one of the first west of the Mississippi River), a Jewish tailor, the Knights of Pythias Hall, a prominent local photography studio, a hardware store, and several restaurants. See Zoning Change Review Sheet from withdrawn 2009 application for historic landmark status, included as backup.

STANDARDS FOR REVIEW

The City of Austin's Historic Design Standards (March 2021) are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and are used to evaluate projects in National Register districts. The Historic Design Standards indicate that if any aspect of a proposed project is not covered by the design standards, the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties shall be used. In certain circumstances, use of the treatments other than rehabilitation may be proposed. This project proposes to apply the Standards for Reconstruction, recognizing that this is a path of last resort:

1) Reconstruction will be used to depict vanished or non-surviving portions of a property when documentary and physical evidence is available to permit accurate reconstruction with minimal conjecture, and such reconstruction is essential to the public understanding of the property.

The applicant asserts that it is not possible to preserve and restore the building in place, and therefore reconstruction is required to prevent a gap within the historic streetscape of Congress Avenue. Further, given the compromised integrity of the building, reconstruction provides an opportunity to recapture its historic appearance.

2) Reconstruction of a landscape, building, structure or object in its historic location will be preceded by a thorough archeological investigation to identify and evaluate those features and artifacts that are essential to an accurate reconstruction. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.

The project benefits from the fact that the building is currently extant, even if in deteriorated condition with multiple missing elements. Thorough documentation of the existing building preceding and as part of the deconstruction process will form the basis of reconstruction.

3) Reconstruction will include measures to preserve any remaining historic materials, features and spatial relationships.

Details regarding the extent to which building assemblies can be removed and reinstalled intact will be developed during further project planning. The intent is to reuse as much historic fabric as possible, including materials salvaged from portions of the building that will not be reconstructed.

4) Reconstruction will be based on the accurate duplication of historic features and elements substantiated by documentary or physical evidence rather than on conjectural designs or the availability of different features from other historic properties. A reconstructed property will re-create the appearance of the non-surviving historic property in materials, design, color and texture.

Through archival research and thorough documentation, sufficient details will be available to ensure accurate reconstruction.

5) A reconstruction will be clearly identified as a contemporary re-creation.

Interpretive signage will be developed in consultation with the Historic Landmark Commission.

6) Designs that were never executed historically will not be constructed.

Not applicable.

While deconstruction and reconstruction of properties within National Register districts is not a recommended treatment, intensive intervention is necessitated in this case due to major, longstanding conditions. The proposed scope of work entails sufficient care to document, dismantle, store, and re-erect the building using original materials to the greatest extent feasible.

STAFF COMMENTS

The building is located within the Congress Avenue Historic District. Rather than contributing or noncontributing to the district, the 1978 National Register nomination describes this building as compatible, used to indicate buildings that are historic in age but have been altered by false façades/slipcovers.

Designation Criteria—Historic Landmark

- 1) The building is more than 50 years old.
- 2) The building has low integrity due to non-historic modifications to the façade. For this reason, it does not meet the criteria for designation.
- 3) Properties must meet two criteria for landmark designation (LDC §25-2-352). Staff has evaluated the property and determined that it does not meet two criteria:
 - a. *Architecture.* Non-historic modifications have compromised the façade to an extent that the it lacks architectural significance.
 - b. *Historical association.* The building has significant historic associations as a 19th-century commercial building on Congress Avenue, with a variety of tenants and uses including one of the first bookstores in this part of the country, a Jewish tailor, the Knights of Pythias Hall, a prominent local photography studio, a hardware store, and several restaurants.
 - c. *Archaeology.* The property was not evaluated for its potential to yield significant data concerning the human history or prehistory of the region.
 - d. *Community value.* The property does not possess a unique location, physical characteristic, or significant feature that contributes to the character, image, or cultural identity of the city, the neighborhood, or a particular demographic group.

- e. *Landscape feature.* The property is not a significant natural or designed landscape with artistic, aesthetic, cultural, or historical value to the city.

PRIOR COMMISSION ACTION

2009: 911 Congress, LLC (c/o Wallace Dalton) acquired the property and applied for historic landmark designation.

2010: At their January 25, 2010 meeting, the Commission voted to postpone consideration of the historic zoning case to allow the applicant to pursue selective demolition of the slipcover and determine the extent of remaining historic fabric. See the [minutes](#) and the zoning change review sheet; the latter is included with backup for the present meeting.

The building was treated as a pending historic landmark, requiring a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) for any proposed work. The commission issued a COA for selective demolition on February 22, 2010. See [minutes](#). On June 28, 2010, the Commission approved a COA for restoration and reconstruction of the building façade, including reconstruction of missing architectural elements. See the [staff report](#) and [minutes](#).

Note that under Land Development Code [§ 25-11-214](#), the Commission must take action within 75 days to recommend historic zoning or the designation is no longer pending.

2014: The Commission voted to pursue potential demolition by neglect cases at their February 14, 2014 meeting. The list included 907, 909, and 911 Congress Ave. The [staff report](#) shows the façades in much the same condition as they are today. See also [draft meeting minutes](#) (approved minutes are not posted). Updates on further progress in remedying site conditions and proposing a rehabilitation plan for the buildings were postponed repeatedly, through January 2015.

The COA Review Committee heard an update on restoration efforts at the buildings at their June 9, 2014 meeting. See the [agenda](#) and a [structural letter](#) provided as backup that indicates none of the three buildings can safely be braced in place during future construction.

2015: On January 26, the Commission heard a request to deconstruct and rebuild the front walls of 907, 909, and 911 Congress Ave. and voted unanimously to **approve the COA**, with the condition that the applicant follow the specification manual drafted in 2010 for the 911 Congress Ave. and with a referral of the completed plan set to the COA Review Committee. See the [staff report](#), [specifications](#), and [minutes](#).

The February 2015 meeting was cancelled. The Commission postponed further consideration of the case at [specially called](#) and [regular](#) meetings in March, but the case does not appear on the April [agenda](#).

2018: Restoration of the façades does not appear again until the COA Review Committee agendas in [February](#) and [March](#) of 2018. See the [application](#), [plans](#), and [scope of work](#) included as backup for the February meeting; the 2014 structural report was again provided.

At the June 25, 2018 meeting, **the Commission approved deconstruction and reconstruction of the façades**, with a request that the applicant communicate where the façades are stored. See the [staff report](#) and [minutes](#), plus extensive backup including 2006 correspondence (above), [architectural proposal](#), [renderings of the restored façades](#), [specifications manual](#), 2014 structural report (above), and a [timeline and bid proposals](#) for associated new construction.

2021: With pending action from the Building and Standards Commission (BSC), the proposal to deconstruct and reconstruct the façades resurfaced. On March 8, 2021, Architectural Review Committee (ARC) members requested the applicant consider stabilization of building façades in place rather than removal and reconstruction; provide a detailed condition assessment or other analysis of the buildings' conditions; and pay particular attention to keeping the corbelled brickwork on the Mitchell-Robertson Building intact. Committee members expressed concern regarding having the buildings down for an indefinite period prior to the redevelopment.

On March 24, 2021, BSC issued an order requiring that conditions be remedied within 90 days or imposing fines on the property owner. That timeline expired on June 22, 2021.

At the April 12, 2021 meeting of the ARC, the committee members indicated a need for more documentation and desire to explore every alternative to demolition before agreeing to that approach. The timeline imposed by the BSC is of concern in terms of the ability to take the proper care in moving forward.

The Commission postponed the case at both the March 22 and April 26 meetings and has requested the applicant consider and present alternatives to demolition.

On May 24, 2021, the Commission voted to advise the applicant that 907 Congress Ave. should be reconstructed in its original configuration, 909 Congress Ave. should be preserved as it stands today, and 911 Congress Ave. may be demolished. The Commission also directed that specific remedies for failure to reconstruct the façades should be detailed in the proposed covenant and, further, that tax exemptions received should be matched and placed in a trust.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Comment on and release the plans for deconstruction. Commission review of new construction within a National Register district will be required, including review of detailed plans for reconstruction of the façade, once developed.

LOCATION MAP



SUBJECT TRACT



PENDING CASE



ZONING BOUNDARY

NOTIFICATIONS

CASE#: HR 21-085748
LOCATION: 911 CONGRESS AVE



1" = 170'

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PROPERTY INFORMATION*Photos*

Historic photograph of 911 Congress Ave. (John B. Vaught Hardware Co.), 909 Congress Ave., and 907 Congress Ave. (Texas State Optical), Historic Preservation Office files, no date.



911 Congress Ave. (slipcovered building two to the left of Texas State Optical sign), National Register nomination for Congress Avenue Historic District, February 1978.



Current condition of 911 Congress Ave. façade, Historic Preservation Office staff, June 2021.



Current condition of 911 Congress Ave. façade, Historic Preservation Office staff, June 2021.



Interior of 911 Congress Ave. storefront, Historic Preservation Office staff, May 2021. Note added steel beam and failing brick storefront.



Interior of 911 Congress Ave. façade at second floor, Historic Preservation Office staff, May 2021.