STAFF BRIEF

This document is the staff’s comparison of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures and Districts, the Landmark Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 30, Revised Municipal Code) and other applicable adopted area guidelines as applied to the proposed application. It is intended to provide guidance during the commission’s deliberation of the proposed application. Guidelines are available at www.denvergov.org/preservation

Project: 2020-COA-074
Address: 538 Emerson St.
Historic Dist/DLM: Alamo Placita
Year structure built: 1921 (Period of Significance: 1889-1942)
Council District: #10 Chris Hinds
Applicant: Mickey Moriarity

LPC Meeting: March 17, 2020
Staff: Abigail Christman

Project Scope Under Review:
Violation for sitework and porch alterations completed without Landmark review/ zoning permit. Work includes:

- Terraced brick retaining walls refaced/rebuilt with stone. Retaining walls feature a stone capstone.
- Concrete steps at retaining walls and front walkway replaced with stone.
- Porch steps refaced with stone.
- Porch floor covered with flagstone.

All stone is buff-colored but there is a high variety of stone sizes, shapes, and textures. Retaining walls and front porch steps feature horizontal strips of stone in various heights and lengths. Strips of stone on porch steps appear to be narrower than those used on the retaining walls. Stair risers at the retaining walls are faced with rectangular strips of stone that are regular in height. Stair treads and front walkway appear to be covered with large flagstones cut with straight edges. The porch floor is covered with irregular flagstones of varying sizes. Dark grey mortar is used on the retaining walls, porch steps, and porch floor; morton on the front walk and retaining wall steps appears to be lighter.

Staff Summary:
Project under review is a violation with sitework and porch alterations done without Landmark review and required permits. The terraced retaining walls, steps at the retaining walls, and front walkway were completed in 2018. The porch alterations (flooring and stairs) were underway in January 2020 when the Landmark inspector identified the violations and issued a stop work order.

538 Emerson is a simple red brick bungalow constructed in 1921. It features a full-width front porch with battered brick piers and is enclosed by a low brick wall. The wall and piers are trimmed with quarry-faced sandstone. Given the date of construction and typical bungalows found in the district, the original porch floor was likely concrete along with the porch steps. The construction date of the brick retaining walls is unknown. Based on google street view images, the terraced retaining walls were constructed sometime prior to 2007. The steps at the retaining wall and front walk were concrete, which was likely the original material.

According to the design guidelines for sitework, the introduction of new materials is allowed as long as the materials are compatible with the historic property and the district context. Durable materials such as stone are generally encouraged for sitework, but the design of site features should be simple and should not compete with the historic property or district and should not create a false sense of history. For front porches, the original materials and design should be maintained. Front porches are key character-defining features and the addition of
new materials that were not historically present is not allowed. If the original materials and/or design has been altered, then the porch should be returned to its original condition. If there is no historical documentation available to indicate what the original porch materials and/or design were, then any alterations to the porch should be based on historical porches found on similar buildings found within the district.

While stone is generally considered to be a compatible material for use in historic district, staff find the stone added at 538 Emerson St. is overly complex in design and texture. Additionally, stone has been introduced on the front porch where there is no evidence that it was ever used historically and where is does not fit the historic style of the property. The flagstone and strip stone used at 538 Emerson St. are not materials typically associated with bungalows. Bungalows typically feature simple concrete site work. Stone is sometimes found on bungalow porches, but it is typically more rustic, natural such as river stone or other unfinished stone. The complicated strip stone design does not fit the bungalow design.

Overall, staff find the sitework and porch alterations overwhelm the property. While a single stone feature might be compatible, the use of stone for the terraced retaining walls, retaining wall steps, front walkway, porch steps, and porch flooring dominates the front yard, distracting from the simple bungalow design, especially considering the small size of the front yard. Staff find that the red brick material used for the previously wall was more compatible with the property and the district. It was simple in design and the color and texture blended with the historic bungalow. While there is stone trim that is a similar buff color found on the historic bungalow, the texture, finish, and design of the new stone work does not relate to the historic property. The dark mortar used on much of the stonework emphasizes the complexity and variety of the stonework and increases the visual prominence of the new stonework. Staff find the work as completed introduces too many patterns, sizes, and textures to the property.

The applicant has submitted example of stone used for sitework and on porches at other historic properties in the district. These examples do show that there are a variety of site treatments that can be found within the district, though many properties retain their original Denver Hills as well. Additionally, the examples submitted tend to show one or two stone elements, not the extent of stone used at 538 Emerson with terraced stone retaining walls, stone steps at the retaining wall, a stone walkway, stone porch steps, and a stone porch floor. However, none of the examples presented by the applicant appear to be historic and none of the work was approved by Landmark. Some of the examples shown are clear violations. The construction date of others is unknown and may date to before the Alamo Placita Historic District was designated in 2000. Non-historic alterations do not provide a reference for new work. Below is the status of the examples provided.

- 337 Emerson St.—stone retaining wall and stone steps at entrance. Based on Google street view images, work done sometime before 2007; may predate the district. No record of review/permit found.
- 331 Emerson St.—stone retaining wall. Based on Google street view images, work done sometime before 2007; may predate the district. No record of review/permit found.
- 600 Ogden St.—located in East Seventh Ave. Historic District, not Alamo Placita Historic District. Different historic context.
- 474 Corona St.—stone retaining wall. Based on Google street view images, work done sometime before 2007; may predate the district. No record of review/permit found.
- 410 Ogden St.—stone retaining wall. Based on Google street view images, work done sometime before 2007; may predate the district. No record of review/permit found.
- 546 Emerson St.—stone entry steps and stone porch foundation. Based on Google street view images, work done sometime before 2008; may predate the district. No record of review/permit found.
- 312 Ogden St.—stone walkway and steps. Based on Google street view images, constructed between 2008-2011. No Landmark review. Property in violation. (A COA was issued in 2009 for a pergola and fence).
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<th>Guideline</th>
<th>Meets Guideline?</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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| 2.4 Replace original building materials in kind, if repair is not feasible.  
   a. Replace only those materials necessary to facilitate a necessary repair.  
   b. Use original materials, historic sizes, and original installation method to replace damaged building materials on a primary façade whenever possible.  
   c. If use of original materials is not feasible, use only replacement materials that have proven durability and are similar in scale, finish and character to the original material.  
   e. Avoid covering historic materials with new ones or using veneers. | No | Concrete on porch has been covered with stone veneers. The concrete porch floor has been covered with flagstone and the concrete porch steps faced with decorative strip stone. Based on the date of construction and typical bungalows found within the district, the original material of the porch floor and steps was likely concrete. If original materials are to be replaced, they should be replaced in kind, i.e. concrete should be replaced with concrete. The stone used has proved durability, but is not similar to the historic concrete in scale, finish, or character. The stone work is much more complicated in design and texture. |
| 2.35 If necessary, repair or replace damaged porch elements.  
   a. Replace missing or deteriorated components and decorative features to match existing components and features.  
   b. Use historical documentation to guide the design of a replacement component or decorative feature, or design simplified versions of similar components seen on nearby historic properties, if no documentation is available  
   d. Restore altered or non-original components and decorative features to their original condition, whenever possible (i.e., if original wood porch steps have been replaced with concrete, consider restoring them to their original, wood condition). | No | Concrete porch flooring was covered with irregularly shaped buff-colored flagstone and concrete porch steps have been faced with buff-colored strip stone in a variety of sizes and laid with a dark mortar. No historical documentation has been provided for the use of the flagstone or strip stone. Based on the date of construction (1921) and typical bungalow features in Denver, concrete was likely the original material of the porch floor and the porch steps. The flagstone and strip stone are new materials that do not relate to the historic property and are not characteristic of typical bungalow porch design. The flagstone and strip stone introduce complexity and variety to an otherwise simple porch design. The dark mortar used increases the visibility and busyness of the design. |
5.3 Plan new site and landscape features to respect the character-defining features of the historic district or individually-designated Denver landmark.

c. When introducing a new site feature or modifying an existing feature, such as a stairway, fence or retaining wall, respect historical patterns in terms of placement, proportions and design compatibility with surrounding historic context.
d. When designing a new sidewalk or path, use colors, styles and finishes similar to those seen in nearby historic sidewalks.
e. Avoid introducing new site features that convey a false sense of history.
f. Avoid introducing new readily visible site features, such as curb cuts, which were not historically present on the property, or prevalent in the historic district.

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<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>The new site work (retaining walls, walkway, and steps) is not compatible with the character of the Alamo Placita Historic District or the red brick bungalow at 538 Emerson Street, which is a contributing property to the district. Retaining walls are not a characteristic feature of the historic district, though some low retaining walls have been added to the district after the period of significance. This property previously featured a terraced brick retaining wall. While stone is generally considered to be a compatible material for new retaining walls and sitework within a historic district, the variety and complexity of the stone used overwhelms the simple bungalow design. The large amount of stone used (retaining walls, walkway, and steps) as well as the varying sizes and textures of stone used, create a visual complexity that is not characteristic of the property or the district and distracts from the historic residence.</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>The Denver Hill is a feature of the Alamo Placita Historic District. But though retaining walls are not a characteristic site feature of the historic district, a variety of front yard treatments have been added after the district period of significance, including a terraced brick retaining wall added to 538 Emerson St. at an unknown date sometime prior to 2007.</td>
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5.11 Avoid adding a new retaining wall unless necessary and all alternatives have been explored.

a. Add a new retaining wall that will alter the slope of a “Denver Hill” front yard area only where at least one of the following conditions is present:
   -The “Denver Hill” is not a character-defining feature of the historic district.
   -There is a high level of variety in the treatment of front yard areas among adjacent properties, including retaining walls.
   -The front yard slope is unstable, threatens the foundation of a historic structure, and other stabilization strategies have failed.

| Yes | The Denver Hill is a feature of the Alamo Placita Historic District. But though retaining walls are not a characteristic site feature of the historic district, a variety of front yard treatments have been added after the district period of significance, including a terraced brick retaining wall added to 538 Emerson St. at an unknown date sometime prior to 2007. |
Locate and design a new retaining wall to minimize impacts on the historic district or historic property

a. Use a low kick wall, up to one foot in height, to help stabilize the yard while maintaining most of the historic slope.

b. Design a new retaining wall to minimize visual impacts on the character-defining features of the historic property, block and district.

c. Use materials that are common to the historic district or that relate to the historic property. For example, if a stone wall is a part of the design tradition, the wall should be stone, or stone-faced.

d. Avoid using terraced retaining walls.

e. Do not completely replace the slope with a tall retaining wall.

The retaining wall as constructed does not meet Landmark guidelines:

- the retaining walls are taller than one foot
- the retaining wall is highly visible, with a visual and material complexity that does not relate to the historic bungalow or the district
- a simple red brick wall that related to the red brick bungalow was replaced with a more complex wall design that does not relate to the historic bungalow
- retaining walls are terraced
- none of the historic slope has been retained

Excerpted from Character-Defining Features of the Wyman Historic District, January 2016

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<th>Character-defining features</th>
<th>Matches features?</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Streets &amp; Streetscapes:</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Frony yard slope has been replaced by terraced retaining walls.</td>
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<td>Streets are laid out in the traditional north-south, east-west grid creating long rectangular blocks. Alleyways run north-south within this district. Wide asphalt street with low curbs of historic sandstone and modern concrete. Historic driveway curb cuts onto streets are not common. Lots have a slope of varying pitch in the front yard, known as the Denver Hill.</td>
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| Walkways:                   | Yes               | Concrete walkway replaced with a sandstone walkway. Sandstone walkways were found within the district historically. |
| Historic sandstone and new concrete walkways about 3’ wide are common. They lead in a straight path to the entryway and often include steps to accommodate the Denver Hill. |

| Walls and Fences:           | No                | Retaining walls are not common in the surrounding historic context. |

Recommendation: Denial

Basis: Historic porch altered with the addition of new materials, changing the original porch design. The extent and variety of the sitework overwhelms the simple bungalow design and relatively small front yard. The sitework and porch alterations do not relate to character of the historic property and the complexity competes with the original bungalow design (Guidelines 2.4, 2.35, 5.3, 5.11, and 5.12).

Suggested Motion: I move to deny application #2020-COA-074 for the sitework and porch alterations at 538 Emerson Street, as per design guidelines 2.4, 2.35, 5.3, 5.11, and 5.12, character-defining features for the Alamo Placita Historic District, presented testimony, submitted documentation and information provided in the staff report.
Map of Alamo Placita Historic District with 538 Humboldt St. outlined in red: