

**COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
STAFF REPORT
July 22, 2014 Meeting**

3. **CAR No. 14-70** (A. Nasser)

**2434-2438 Venable Street
Union Hill Old & Historic District**

Project Description:

**Demolish retaining wall, grade lot,
construct block wall, and paint mural**

Staff Contact:

C. Easterling

The applicant requests permission for a number of work items that were completed without the necessary Certificate of Appropriateness at several vacant lots and a corner commercial building located in the Union Hill Old and Historic District. Work completed by the applicant includes the demolition of a small brick and concrete retaining wall that ran along the sidewalk, grading of the lot, the construction of a low concrete block wall beside the store, and painting a large mural onto a brick wall. Staff issued several Notices of Violation to the property owner, but only recently was able to confirm that the owner had received the NOVs.

The images attached to the staff report depict the previous conditions at the site. The applicant has expressed an interest in improving the two vacant lots for surface parking. The lots are currently covered by gravel. Commission staff advised the applicant that he would need to submit plans for improving the vacant lots to the Commission for review and approval.

Staff recommends partial approval of the project. The Commission's mural guidelines note that the Commission may consider murals painted directly onto the walls of a non-contributing building on a case-by-case basis. The mural in question is located on a secondary elevation of a non-contributing commercial building. Some of the mural covered rough, unfinished brick, while other portions of the mural covered more finished brick. Since the Commission does not regulate content or artistic merit, it is the assessment of staff that the mural adheres to the Commission's mural guidelines. The City's zoning administrator may wish to consider whether or not components of the mural count towards the building's allotted square footage for signage.

Staff is more concerned with the elimination of the small retaining wall by the sidewalk and the construction of the new block wall near Ocean Grocery. Staff fully supports the removal of the non-historic chain-link fence, but the grading of the lot and the removal of the retaining wall (deteriorated as it was) encourages automobile drivers to access the gravel lot by driving over the low curb and sidewalk. There is no curb cut at this location. Since the applicant has expressed an interest in improving the gravel lots for parking, staff recommends that the applicant reconstruct the low wall as a part of a comprehensive landscaping plan

that will buffer the lot from public view, as required under the City's zoning ordinance and Old and Historic District regulations.

The new block wall running along the Ocean Grocery building does not appear to be compatible with the Union Hill Old and Historic District. The placement of the wall is unusual, and the materials are incompatible with the district. The *Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Guidelines* notes that walls should relate to the building materials commonly found in the neighborhood (Fences & Walls #2, pg. 49). Staff recommends that the applicant either remove the wall or re-face the wall with a more compatible material.

It is the assessment of staff that the mural component of the application is consistent with the Commission's guidelines, while the rest of the work is inconsistent with the Standards for Rehabilitation outlined in Section 114-930.7(b) of the City Code and the *Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Review Guidelines*, specifically the page cited above, adopted by the Commission for review of Certificates of Appropriateness under the same section of the code.



Pre-District
2007



Pre - District
2009

2444-2498 Venable St
Richmond, VA 23223 - approximate address
Venable St

Street View - Jul 2012



Image capture: Jul 2012 Venable St © 2014 Google

2012

Adopted Text

Mural Guidelines for the *Richmond Old and Historic Districts Handbook and Design Review Guidelines*

(Insert in Standards for Signage)

Murals (other than historic painted wall signs) may be permitted on commercial buildings, considering the following guidelines:

1. In general, murals should be painted on removable material, not directly on a building wall. Murals should be installed on framing that allows water to weep between the mural and the wall. Attachments should not irrevocably damage the building. Painting directly onto the walls of a non-contributing building will be considered by the Commission on a case-by-case basis. Adding a mural to a previously-painted, non-primary elevation of a contributing building will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
2. Murals painted on primary facades are rarely permitted and strongly discouraged.
3. A mural's appearance, colors, and scale should be compatible with the building and historic district of which the building is a part. The use of dayglow, luminescent, or reflective paint or materials is discouraged.
4. A mural should not obscure or distort the historic features of a building.
5. A mural should have a finished appearance.
6. Murals should be in compliance with the general signage requirements for Old and Historic Districts, where applicable.
7. A mural should comply with the City Sign Ordinance.
8. The installation of a mural within a City Old and Historic District shall meet the definition of a substantial impact.