

December 29, 2021

TO: Decorah Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council
FROM: Decorah Historic Preservation Commission
TOPIC: 508 W. Water St. (Vesterheim Museum Cary Building) C-3 Design Plan

I. The Property

The two sections of the stone/brick “Cary” Building were constructed in the 1850/60s and served over the years as industrial/retail space. The building is a “contributing” property in the Decorah Commercial Historic District. Because Vesterheim has provided a highly detailed building and business history in its C-3 design plan, we won’t provide any further history here.

II. The Proposed C-3 Design Plan

Vesterheim proposes demolishing the current Cary building and constructing a new building in the same approximate space. The plan also includes the demolition of the red brick garage next to the Dayton House and the block building to the rear of the Dayton House.

III. DHPC Recommendation

We would like to begin our recommendation by noting that the Vesterheim planning process has been exemplary in its regular, long-standing consultation with DHPC and other city groups. In October 2017 Vesterheim presented DHPC and others with a conceptual comprehensive landscape plan that was implemented in 2021. By June 2018 Vesterheim involved us in long-term planning conversations with their design firm Snohetta, and in 2020 and 2021 brought us together with board members and with their local architect BNIM. The result of this process is that we have been apprised of Vesterheim’s developing thinking, and we have had the opportunity to informally respond. An important step in this process was DHPC’s June 9, 2021 unanimous resolution “to accept Vesterheim’s current plan to demolish and replace the Cary/Art Haus building, recognizing the challenging condition of the building, and appreciating that Vesterheim has kept DHPC informed as plans evolved.”

A. Demolition

The loss of any Decorah 150+ year-old building--especially one as visible and of as much historic importance as the Cary building--is a cause for sadness. But we have become convinced over the last three years that Vesterheim’s demolition plan is reasonable. We have, first of all, become convinced that the current building is unsound. Of course with enough money and determination, any structure can be stabilized and rebuilt. In the case of the Cary building, that would probably mean dismantling the facade, rebuilding it with salvaged materials, including reconstructing the crumbling parapet that was removed some years ago, and essentially creating a new building behind the facade. Despite the cost, that option might be preferable if the building’s use more or less fit that rebuilt facade. But as the proposed building suggests, Vesterheim has a distinctive building program that includes a prominent street-level canopy/marquee, a large open, interior welcoming space at the street level, and a naturally-lit interior two-story “oculus” that will be a unique Decorah landmark--a program

that is probably incompatible with the existing facade. We are also appreciative that the building plan includes retaining and preserving the east interior brick/stone wall and reusing some of the demolition materials.

The demolition of the red-brick Cary garage and the windowless block building to its rear is a good thing. Neither building really fits the Decorah downtown, and neither would today qualify under Decorah's Chapter 15 code. In addition, the demolition, along with the configuration and orientation of the new building and the proposed landscaping plan, will exponentially increase the probability of the long-term preservation of the Dayton House (520 W. Water St.) on its current, original site--a prominent goal of all historically minded Decorah citizens and organizations.

We note also that the proposed Vesterheim Commons will preserve a continuous pedestrian streetscape, another important historic preservation goal. Without going into too much planning history, it is important to note that one early Vesterheim planning proposal would have required the removal of both the Dayton House and the Cary Building in order to open up space for a dramatic ovoid-shaped building set back from the street. Whatever that plan's advantages, it would have turned a section of the streetscape into a kind of plaza for a building removed from immediate pedestrian access. The current plan provides prominent access points to the interior Vesterheim landscape--which DHPC on one occasion has described as a million dollar park gifted to Decorah by the Museum--but it maintains the continuity of the vibrant downtown sidewalk system.

- B. The standards for review at 15.040.050.D state that the street-level facade should "complement the character of the whole building" and "shall have a minimum of fifty percent glazing." The proposed street-level facade is almost completely glass, and the combination of glass and timber framing, while distinctive, will have a welcoming quality that will complement other historic Water St. retail facades. The wrap-around canopy will have some of the same sheltering/welcoming effect as various awnings in the Commercial District, but will also make a strong, unique visual statement. The canopy on the west elevation will create an effective transition between the building's street facade, which is approximately the width of the demolished Cary building, to the wider street-level building section to the rear. The proposed landscaping will contribute to this same effective transition. The curb bump-out, previously supported by DHPC and approved by P&Z and the City Council, will add to the building's welcoming street-level character, and, again, the proposed landscaping will contribute further to the effect. We want to note here that the smaller western-facing canopy section (a recent addition) will highlight the Dayton House's importance and that the canopy's wooden underside and support posts will complement and highlight the wooden Dayton House and its porch and canopy. (And one final note: Many architectural drawings show landscaping features that somehow never get built. Over the last two years, Vesterheim has shown an admirable commitment to actually building the plans that it publicly presents.)

- C. Code 15.05.010.D “Facades” says that “A building more than forty-five feet in width or length should be divided into increments of no more than twenty feet through articulation of the facade.” The goal, as stated more generally earlier in chapter 15 under “Purpose and Intent” is to “break up the monotonous appearance of long facades” (15.04.010.D). Section 15.04.050.B “Detailing” says “A high to moderate level of design and architectural detail is preferred. Design should harmonize with the detailing of the surrounding buildings in window shape, cornice lines and brickwork.” And section 15.04.050C “Roofs and Parapets” adds this: “Flat roofs (slightly sloped to drain) are preferred with parapets that articulate the rhythm of the buildings. Parapets should be embellished with detailing and be stepped or sloped to achieve a visually interesting yet harmonious sequence along the building facade.”

Initially, the proposed Vesterheim building might not seem to meet these requirements. The street level has six distinctive bays, but the left two-thirds of the upper-story facade is uninterrupted brick, and the cornice line seems to be un-articulated. We have, however, become convinced that the proposed facade meets these requirements indirectly and will have a strong architectural presence that will **nevertheless** feel compatible with the full range of Decorah’s downtown historic buildings.

- a. The brickwork of the upper stories, although under-described in the submitted materials, has in various schematic designs been shown as a kind of woven waffle pattern that will itself provide visual interest.
- b. The submitted plans do not clearly enough show the parapet detailing, although plan A-300 seems to suggest a 3” metal coping extending an inch further out than the brick facade. We argued at an earlier stage that the parapet be more strongly highlighted, perhaps with a section of mass horizontal timber or distinctive border brickwork. The roof parapet on the terrace is cast stone.
- c. But even without extra detailing, the parapet will be punctuated with the distinctive vertical window that rises from the street level to above the roofline of both the new building and of Westby-Torgerson. This window, which somewhat mimics historic downtown movie marquees, which we understand to be the inspiration for the whole facade, is a bold design stroke that will help to indirectly fulfill the Chapter 15 code requirements, even though the western upper story section of uninterrupted brickwork does not strictly match the requirements for facades. One way to think of this: This dramatic window will in itself create the design contrast that might have been achieved with several smaller bays of windows.
- d. Although DHPC’s greatest concern is with the Water Street presence of the proposed building, we want to note with appreciation the substantial second-story pedestrian terrace at the building’s rear, with stair access to a newly-created landscaped outdoor gathering space. This plan provides one model for the potential future treatment of the north-alley elevations of the Water St. Commercial district.

Motion: At its December 29, 2021, meeting, the DHPC voted 6-0 to endorse Vesterheim’s proposal to demolish the Cary building and the adjacent brick garage and block work building and to construct the new Commons building; the demolition of the historic Cary building is regrettable, but reasonable, and creating the conditions for the long term preservation of the Dayton building on its original site is highly commendable.