

**ANN ARBOR HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION**

**Staff Report**

**ADDRESS:** 603 East Liberty Street, Application Number HDC24-137

**DISTRICT:** State Street Historic District

**REPORT DATE:** October 10, 2024

**REPORT PREPARED BY:** Jill Thacher, Historic Preservation Coordinator

**REVIEW COMMITTEE DATE:** Monday, October 7, 2024

**OWNER**

**APPLICANT**

**Name:** Russell Collins  
CEO, Marquee Arts  
**Address:** 603 E Liberty Street  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104  
**Phone:** (734) 668-8397

Mark Chalou  
Mr. Neon  
3458 E Pineview Drive  
Dexter, MI 48130  
(734) 320-1215

**BACKGROUND:** The Michigan Theater Building was constructed in 1927 to house shops, offices, and a lavish theater. The auditorium featured a Barton organ and 1800 seats. The theater underwent the first phase of a major renovation in 1986 which restored the 1927 appearance of the Auditorium and Grand Foyer. A 1998 initiative renovated the lobby and vestibule, and added a new marquee, screening room, restrooms, and HVAC system. In 2010 the HDC approved a solar panel installation.

**LOCATION:** This site is located on the north side of East Liberty, between Maynard and North State.

**APPLICATION:** The applicant seeks HDC approval to replace the three message panels of the marquee sign with digital panels of the same size.

**APPLICABLE REGULATIONS:**

**From the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation:**

- 1. A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.



2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.

5. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.

9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

### **From the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings:**

#### **Storefronts**

*Recommended:* Identifying, retaining, and preserving storefronts – and their functional and decorative features – that are important in defining the overall historic character of the building such as display windows, signs, doors, transoms, kick plates, corner posts, and entablatures.

*Not Recommended:* Introducing a new design that is incompatible in size, scale, material, and color; using inappropriately scaled signs and logos or other types of signs that obscure, damage, or destroy remaining character-defining features of the historic building; using new illuminated signs.

### **From the Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines:**

#### **Signs**

*Appropriate:* Installing signage that is subordinate to the overall building composition.

Installing signage that is compatible in size, style, materials, and appearance to the historic resource and district.

Installing signage that is lit from external light fixtures above or below the sign.

Installing signs that have interior illumination or are backlit.

Installing signage that is subordinate to the overall building composition.

*Not Appropriate:* Installing signs that are overly complex, use more than 3 or 4 colors or use fluorescent colors

#### **Storefronts**

*Not Appropriate:* Removing or radically changing storefronts and their features which are

important in defining the overall historic character of the building so that the character is diminished.

### **STAFF FINDINGS:**

1. The building has had at least four marquees, shown in photos below. By 1956, all of the original marquee, including the huge vertical “Michigan” blade sign, had been removed. The current trapezoidal marquee was installed in 1998 and included a replica of the Michigan blade sign. Elements of the original 1927 design were incorporated into the current marquee, like reminiscent curlicues over the word MICHIGAN that sits on the center panel of the marquee display. It is not a replica in shape or design, however; rather, a sign compatible with the spirit of the original and character of the theater.
2. This application proposes to replace the three changeable-letter sign panels on the marquee with digital electronic message signs. The Historic District Commission will need to decide whether the new signs are compatible with the historic character of the theater.
3. *Staff comments:* Some points to consider:
  - Changeable-letter signs are ubiquitous to theater marquees. Nothing quite says “you’re at the movies!” than words spelled out with individual letters.
  - The current white-on-black changeable-letter sign is different from its predecessors, which had dark letters on a white background (and what was on the original 1927 marquee isn’t clear).
  - Since the current signs aren’t replicas of historic ones, staff is mostly concerned with compatibility with the ornate theater façade. Staff’s biggest concern is whether what is displayed on the screens is fixed in place or animated. Swirling logos, sliding words or moving videos are not allowed by sign code but can be extremely difficult to enforce when owners decide to display them that way anyway (as evidenced by other electronic message signs around the city).
  - The work is very reversible. The electronic panels can be removed and replaced with a traditional sign with no harm to any historic materials.
  - If the message or image shown electronically is fixed in place and changes infrequently (no more than once a day? Or once an hour?) staff believes it could be appropriate. This is included in the possible motion, below.
4. The proposed work also requires a variance from the Zoning Board of Appeals because each of the three electronic message signs exceeds 25% of that sign’s area. The hours of operation would be limited to 30 minutes before the theater opens to 30 minutes after the close of theater business, per sign code.

**POSSIBLE MOTIONS:** (Note that the motions are only suggested. The Review Committee, consisting of staff and at least two Commissioners, will meet with the applicant on site and then make a recommendation at the meeting.)

I move that the Commission issue a certificate of appropriateness for 603 East Liberty Street, a contributing structure in the State Street Historic District, to replace three changeable message sign panels on the Michigan Theater marquee to electronic message signs, on the condition that any images or words shown on the sign may not change more than once per hour, and the images or words may not move or be animated. As conditioned, the work is compatible in exterior design, arrangement, texture, material and relationship to the rest of the building and the surrounding area and meets *The Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines* for storefronts and signs; and *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, in particular standards 1, 2, 5, 9, and 10 and the guidelines for storefronts.

### **MOTION WORKSHEET:**

I move that the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work at 603 East Liberty Street in the Old West Side Historic District

\_\_\_\_\_ Provided the following condition(S) is (ARE) met: 1) STATE CONDITION(s)

The work is generally compatible with the size, scale, massing, and materials and meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, standard(S) number(S) (*circle all that apply*): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

**ATTACHMENTS:** photographs, city code section

Michigan Theater c. 1928 (courtesy AADL Old News)



Michigan Theater Building, January 1944 (courtesy AADL Old News)



Michigan Theater with Remodeled Exterior, 1956 (courtesy AADL Old News)



Michigan Theater Marquee, November 2023 (courtesy AADL Old News)



603 E Liberty (2007)





← NEW COLORED LED BULBS CONFIGURATION

NEW COLORED LED BULBS CONFIGURATION ←

3 NEW PROPOSED READER BOARDS







EAST FRONT  $48'' \times 132'' = 44 \text{ S.F.}$   
 WEST SIDE  $48'' \times 122'' = 40.6 \text{ S.F.}$   
 EAST SIDE  $48'' \times 122'' = 40.6 \text{ S.F.}$   
 TOTAL S.F. 125 SF MARQUEE PANELS

Marquee 241 ft<sup>2</sup>

Blade Sign 127 ft<sup>2</sup>

368 ft<sup>2</sup> total

45"

50' From Sidewalk

34' tall



(JACKSON MICHIGAN)  
READER BOARDS

G  
A  
N

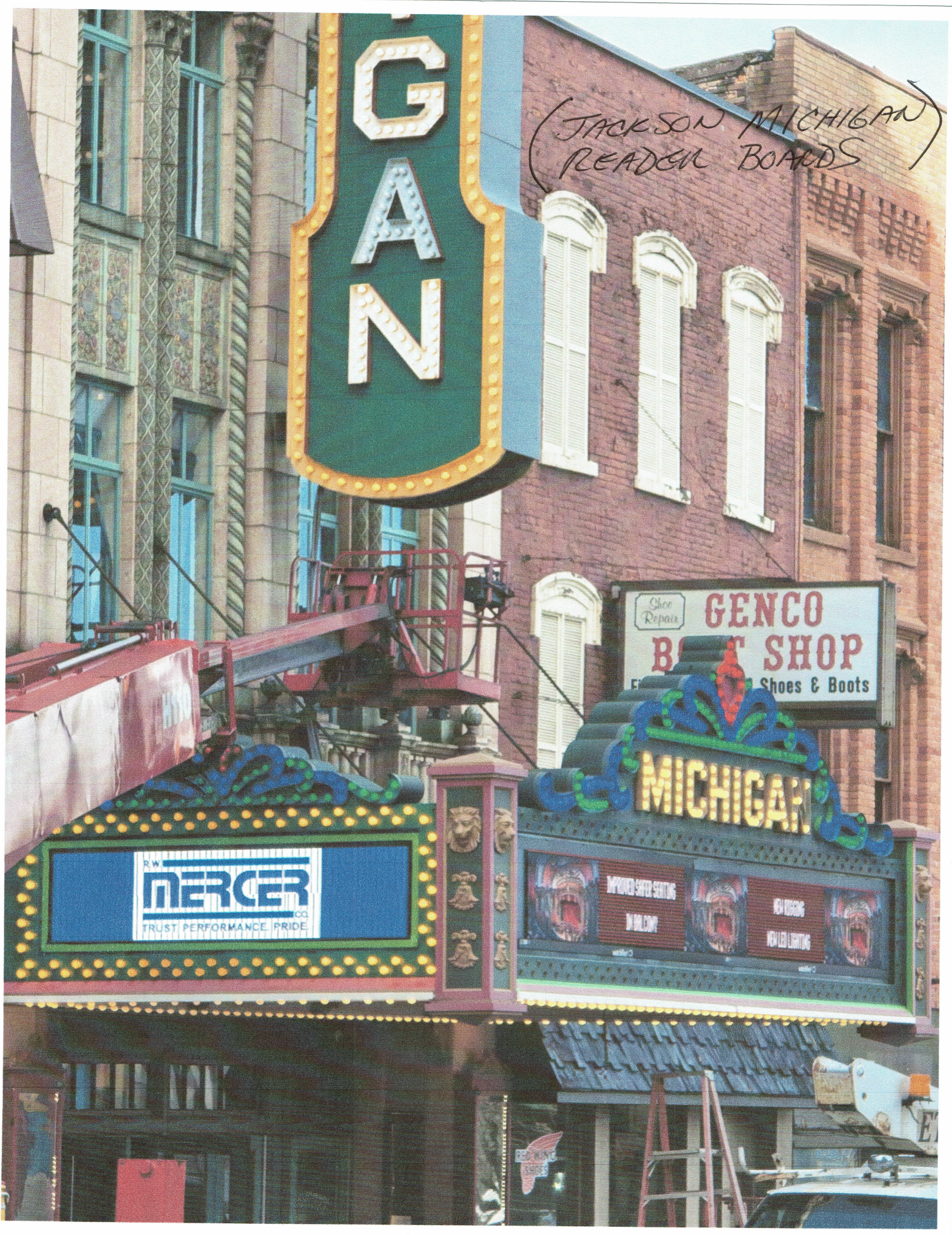
Shoe  
Repairs  
**GENCO**  
**BOOT SHOP**  
FINE SHOES & BOOTS

MICHIGAN

IMPROVED SHEET SEATING  
BY HILSON!

NEW ROSSING  
NEW LED LIGHTING

RW  
**MERCER**  
CO.  
TRUST PERFORMANCE PRIDE



**C. Changeable Copy and Electronic Message Signs**

1. Changeable Copy may not exceed 50% of the total Sign Area of a Sign.
2. An Electronic Message Sign may only be included as a component of a larger Sign and may not exceed 25% of the total Sign Area of the Sign.
3. Changeable Copy and Electronic Message Signs shall not change more than once per minute.

**D. Sign Illumination**

**1. General**

- a. A Permanent Sign may be illuminated by internal or external Light Sources. A Temporary Sign shall not be illuminated.
- b. A Light Source that illuminates a Sign shall have a constant color and intensity, except that it may dim or brighten in response to changes in ambient light as permitted in this Code.
- c. A Light Source that illuminates a Sign shall be installed and maintained in a manner to prevent glare as required by this Code, including through the use of fully shielded fixtures, shields, baffles, mounting height, appropriate luminosity, aiming angle, and placement.
- d. In all cases, Sign illumination shall not project light that exceeds 0.1 foot candles above the ambient light at a Lot Line bordering a Residential Zoning District.

**2. Mounting and Shielding**

- a. An external Light Source illuminating an exterior Sign shall be mounted above the Sign, shall be shielded so that the Light Source is not directly visible from any point on or above a horizontal plane extending from the Light Source and shall not be aimed or directed toward a residential Building on another Lot or toward a Public Right-of-Way.
- b. Exceptions

The following types of Light Sources are exempt from the mounting and shielding requirements in this subsection:

- i) A Light Source wholly within a Sign or Sign Structure constructed with translucent (but not transparent) material, such as an internally illuminated box Sign.
- ii) A Light Source placed behind opaque lettering or other component of the Sign and visible only through reflection off a wall or other surface, such as a halo, back-lit, or reverse channel Sign.
- iii) A Neon Sign.
- iv) An Electronic Message Sign.

**3. Electronic Message Sign Illumination**

- a. An Electronic Message Sign shall not emit more than 5,000 Nits in full daylight and 100 Nits at night (between astronomical dusk and dawn).
- b. An Electronic Message Sign shall have a functioning ambient light monitor and automatic dimming equipment which shall at all times be set to automatically reduce the brightness level of the Sign proportionally to any reduction in the ambient light. In order to verify compliance with this Code or other applicable law, the interface that programs the Electronic Message Sign shall be made available to the City for inspection upon request. If the interface is not or cannot be made available upon the City's request, the Sign shall cease operation until the City has been provided proof of compliance.
- c. When an Electronic Message Sign changes, the change shall be instantaneous, without any additional effect, such as fade, blinking, or dissolve.
- d. An Electronic Message Sign shall default to an unlit black screen when more than 50% of its Light Sources fail or if its Light Sources otherwise are not displaying properly.

**4. Hours of Illumination**

Illuminated Signs shall be extinguished as following:

- a. On Lots that do not contain a Business: Illuminated Signs shall be extinguished between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.
- b. On Lots that contain a Business: Illuminated Signs shall be extinguished between 30 minutes after the close of all Businesses on the same Lot and 30 minutes before the opening of any Business on the same Lot.

**E. Additional Standards**

**1. Addresses**

Addresses shall be visible and legible from a Public Right-of-Way and comply with the requirements of Chapter 2 of this Code. Address Signs with an address that is 12 inches or less in height in Residential Zoning Districts and 24 inches or less in height in Nonresidential Zoning Districts shall be excluded from calculations of maximum permitted Sign Area.

**2. Projections into Public Right-of-Way**

A Permanent Sign, Sign Structure, Flag, Awning, or Canopy shall not be located in, project into, or overhang a Public Right-of-Way or public easement except upon the prior review and permission of the City, receipt by the City of proof of all required insurance, and execution of all licenses, permits, and other agreements required by the City.