

## **Rationale for Relocating 547 South Fourth Avenue to 538 Fifth Street**

**John Rietz and Rachel Thompson**

**22 April 2026**

I have loved old houses since I was a kid exploring my father's workplace in a repurposed Queen Anne Victorian, and for the last several years, most of my dreams (literal dreams, not wishes) have been about reclaiming houses I've lived in when I was younger or searching for a very old house to restore for my family to live in. Historical preservation--of everything, not just houses--is a deep impulse in me. I feel very fortunate to have bought a nineteenth-century house in 1993 on Fifth Street, where the Old West Side streetscape is protected from what I would consider to be disfiguring renovations.

My wife has talked about an ADU from time to time, I am always admiring old houses, and our twenty-two-year-old daughter is wishing she could afford to live within walking distance of our home. That's the setup for this story. Last summer I spent hours watching in disbelief as a demolition crew chewed up house after house to make way for the university's dormitories. In March, when I read that zoning was approved for a high-rise housing development called The Dean on East Madison Street, I visited that neighborhood to see what might be lost in clearing the site. When I saw that a small, 1.5-story house with Greek revival elements was slated for demolition, it dawned on me that if we were able to relocate it, 547 S. Fourth Avenue could serve as the ADU that Rachel had wanted, I could restore it, and our daughter and/or our son could live in it. My family reacted enthusiastically to the proposal.

I have put some effort into researching the house's history, and the documentary evidence is puzzling. But Jill Thacher and local historian Susan Wineberg share my (non-expert) opinion that the architecture suggests that the house was most likely built before the Civil War. Surprisingly, there is evidence that it may have been moved before, around 1898.

Our lot at 538 Fifth Street is ample (66 X 132--or 8,712 square feet), and the footprint of our house is modest (792 square feet). Our house is also only about nine feet from the southern property line, leaving us enough room on the north to move 547 (as I'll call it) straight up the driveway into our backyard, where it will sit in the northwest corner. The lot slopes downward to the north, and that will leave 547 clearly subservient to 538, which will be taller, higher, and in front. The design of 547 is well-suited for that location, too. With the gable facing the street (as it does in its current location), the door and porch will open out onto a shared backyard, and as viewed from the screen porch of the main house, 547 will rise from its single-story porch and addition to the 1.5-story main structure. It seems surprisingly well-suited to the setting.

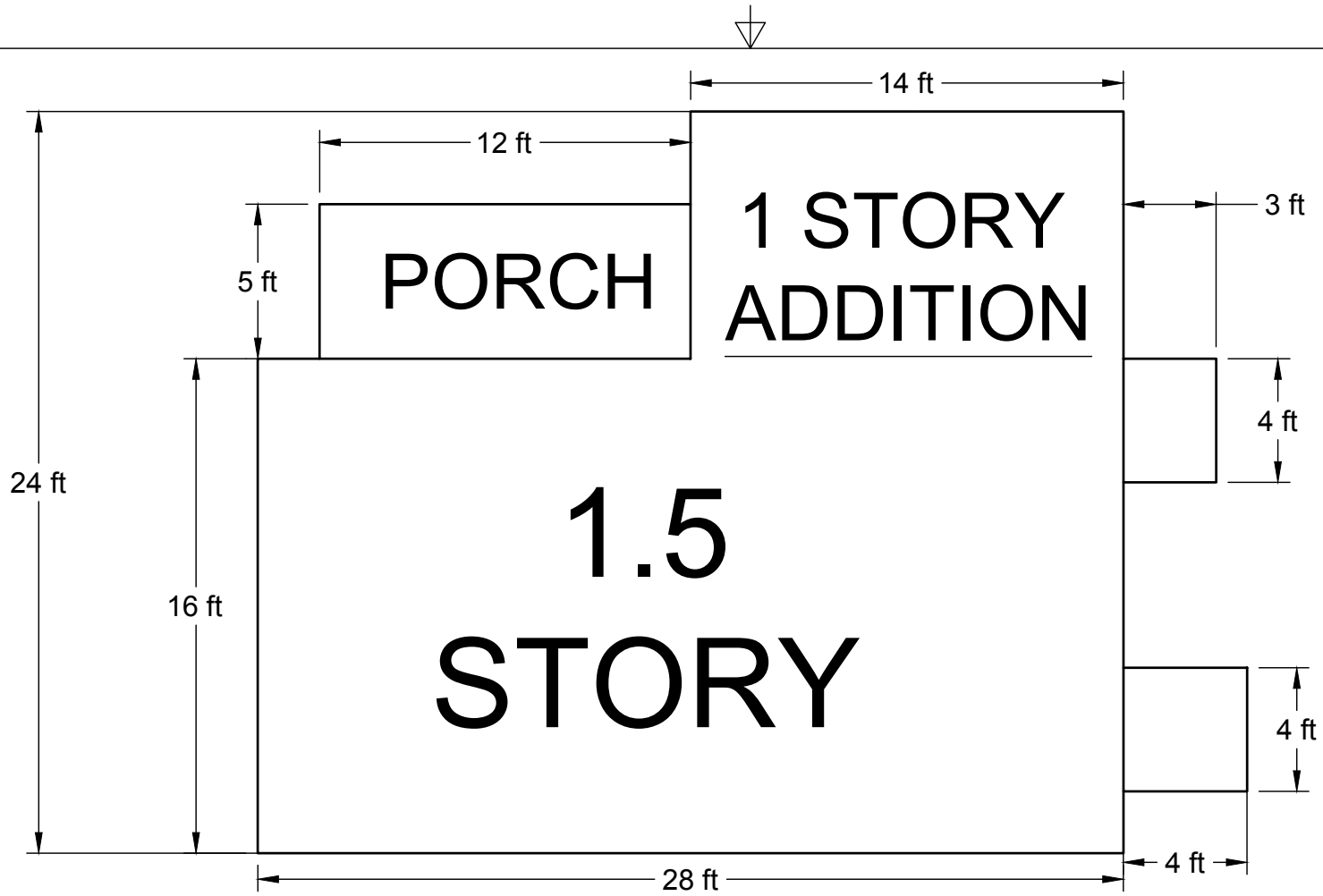
Since hatching the idea, I've learned that zoning will allow an ADU with the dimensions of this house on our lot, and I've gotten bids from two structural movers. Talaski (the movers who relocated the Raoul Wallenberg house for the university last November) inspected the

house, the route, and the destination site and confirmed that they can handle the project. And today, Cabrio Properties agreed to let us take the house, as long the removal doesn't interfere with the developer's forward march. Talaski says that once they know when the house would be available, they will be able to do the job on the developer's timeline.

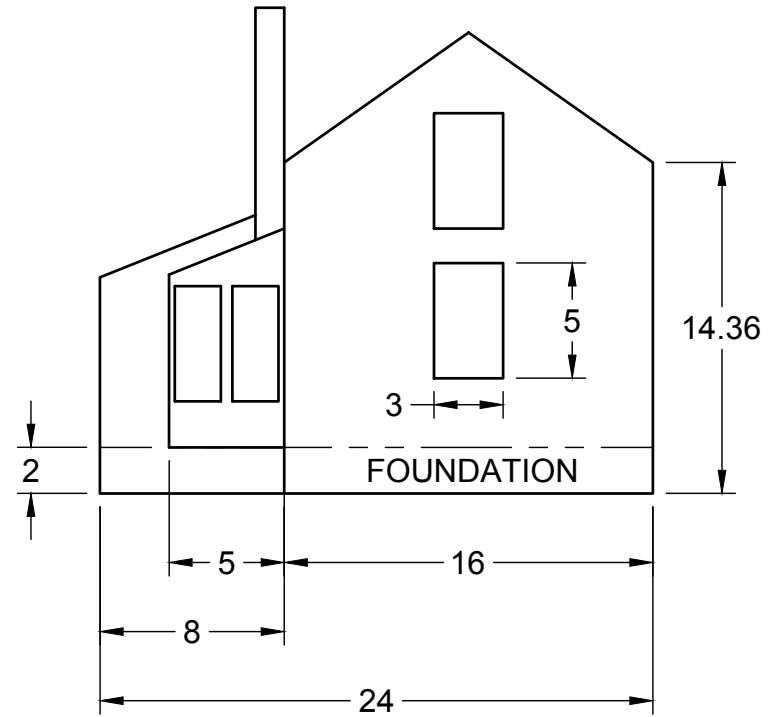
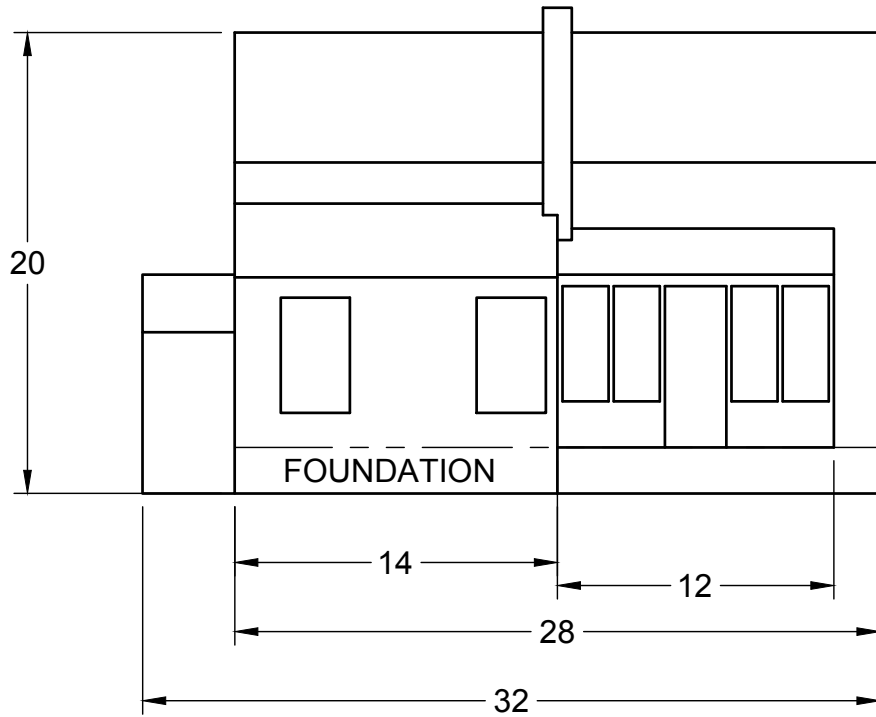
The house will rest on a new foundation, of course. I am planning to make a poured-concrete basement with an 8-foot ceiling under the main body of the house and the one-story addition. The foundation would rise about one foot above ground level on the south side and about three feet on the north (because of the existing slope). We will replicate the placement of the windows in the current foundation: two horizontal, awning-style windows on the wall to the right as you face the front gable. That face of the house will be to the north (downhill), where more of the foundation will be exposed, and so we will not need widow wells. We will also replicate the basement entry on the rear (west) of the house (a passage through the foundation wall and a set of stairs), but we will remove and not replace the chimney, since the house will be all-electric. If cost allows, we would like to put in footings for a possible fireplace at the north wall, beneath the living room. And finally, we would like to face the foundation with brick, to match the brick facing on the rear foundation of 538.

I brought my request to you as early as I was able because HDC approval will allow me to begin lining up permits and contractors to create a foundation to receive the house on our property. I believe that since I'm starting the process now, I can most likely be ready if and when 547 is free to be moved (currently estimated to be in September). But there are a lot of contingencies. Brad More, the Ann Arbor architect working on The Dean, cautions me that such projects can get derailed for many reasons (like cost or financing). And, of course, a project like this rarely meets its ambitious original schedule. But I am cautiously optimistic and will try to adapt to developments as the story unfolds this summer.

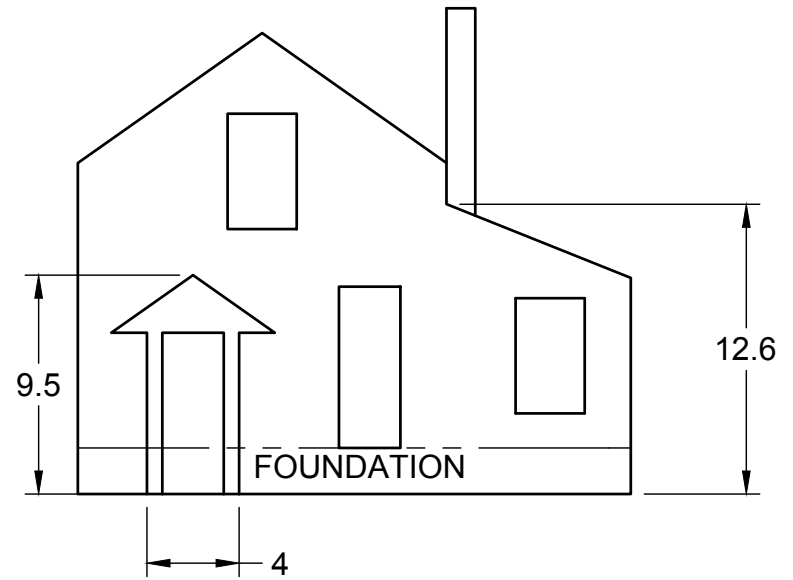
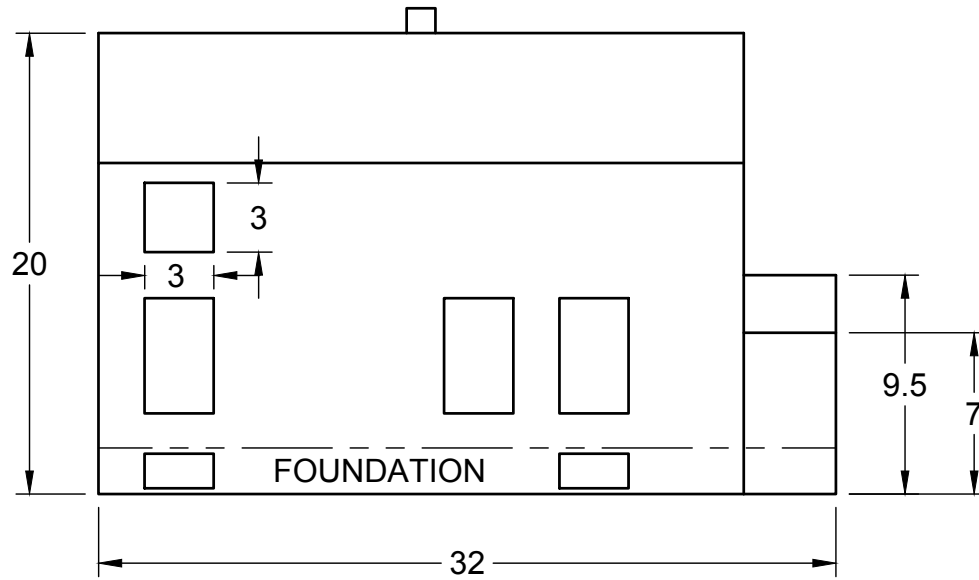
Thank you for considering my application. I think relocating 547 South Fourth Avenue would be a win for everyone: the developer (saving demolition costs, favorable PR), the city (reuse rather than rubble, higher housing density, expanded tax base), and the greater community (preserving a piece of Ann Arbor's earliest history). I hope that you will agree.



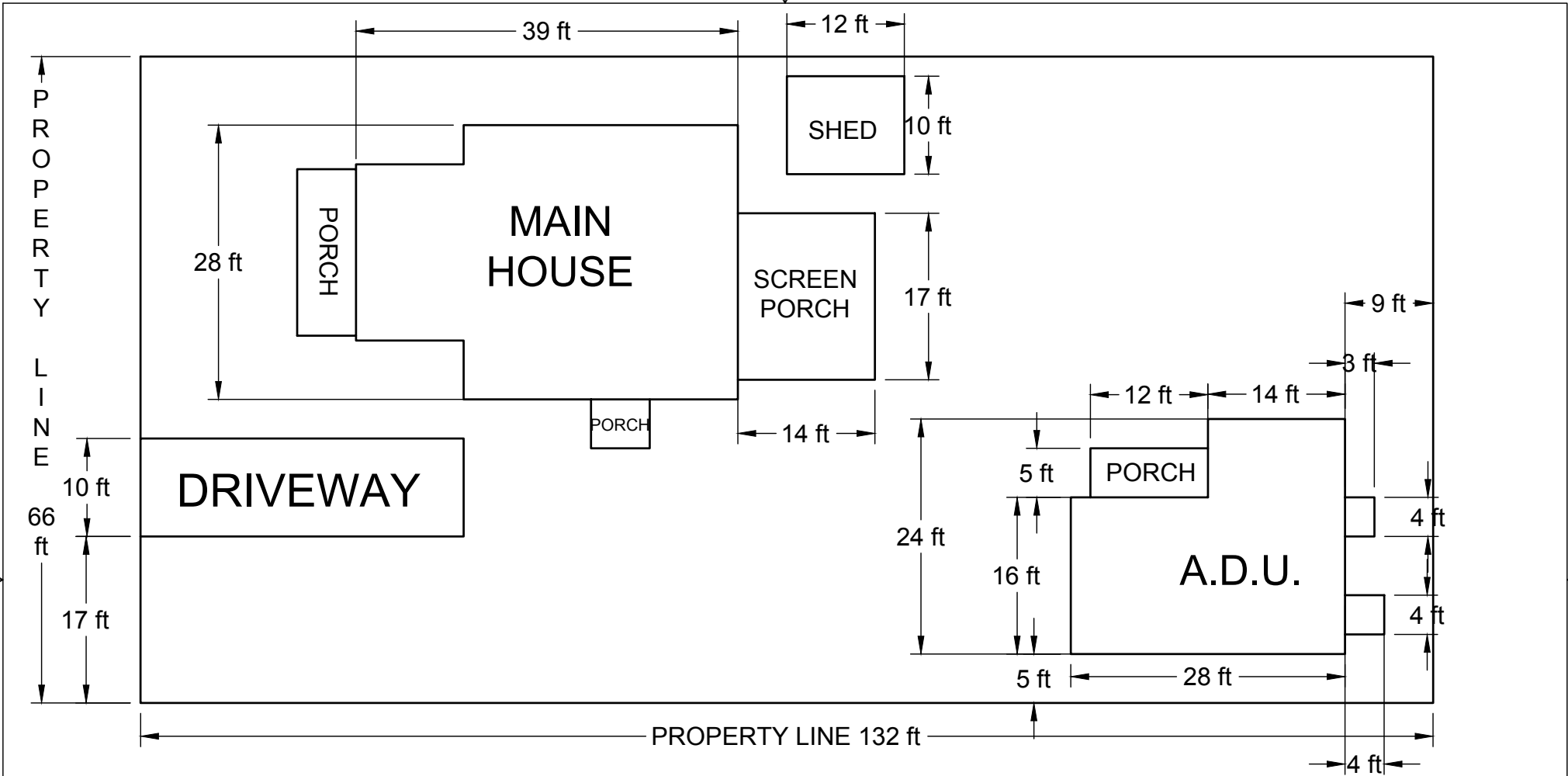
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CHECKED	A			
DRAWN	Sam Rietz	4/19/26	SCALE 0.015	WEIGHT
				SHEET 1/1



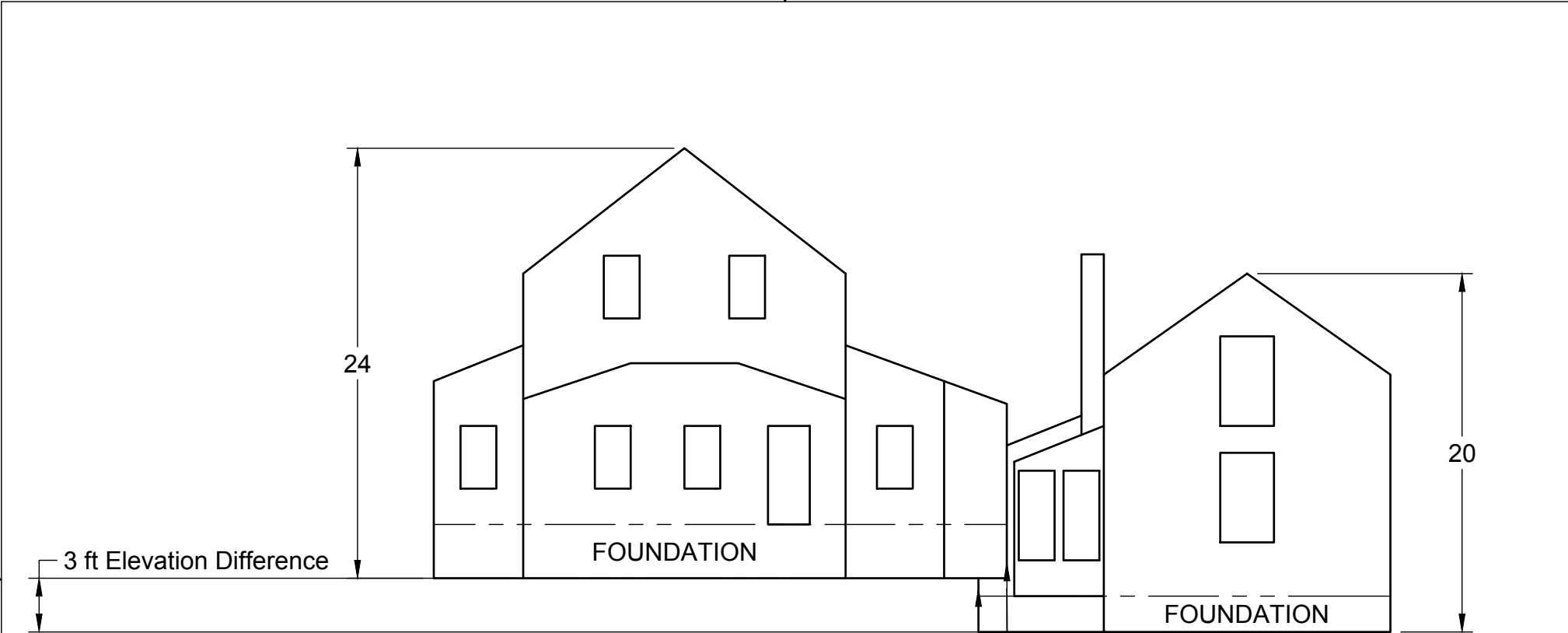
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		TITLE		
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APPROVED	SIZE	CODE	DWG NO	REV
CHECKED	A			
DRAWN	Sam Rietz	4/20/26	SCALE 0.01	WEIGHT
				SHEET 1/2



		PROJECT		
		Proposed A.D.U. at 538 5th St.		
		TITLE		
		Elevation View of 547 S. Fourth Ave.		
APPROVED	SIZE	CODE	DWG NO	REV
CHECKED	A			
DRAWN	Sam Rietz	4/20/26	SCALE 0.01	WEIGHT
			SHEET 2/2	



		PROJECT			
		Proposed A.D.U. at 538 5th St.			
		TITLE			
		Birdseye View of Destination Site			
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CHECKED	A				
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			SHEET 1/1		



	PROJECT			
	<b>Proposed A.D.U. at 538 5th St.</b>			
	TITLE			
	<b>Street View</b>			
APPROVED	SIZE	CODE	DWG NO	REV
CHECKED	A			
DRAWN	Sam Rietz	4/23/26	SCALE 0.01	WEIGHT
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547

RECYCLE  
FD-25810

RECYCLE  
FD-25802

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