

Design Evanston Charette for the Library Parking Lot (LPL) Site

7.18.2019

Design Evanston members participated in a guided Charrette with the intent of providing advice to the City on how this site should be developed. The Charrette was held from 6:00 to 9:30pm on Thursday, July 18, 2019 on the second floor of Firehouse Grille on Chicago Avenue.

The process included:

- presentation of the timeline and history of this site and its adjacent neighbors, the WCTU Campus and the Woman's Club of Evanston;
- review of photographs of the site and its environs;
- analysis of the zoning of the site and adjacent properties;
- review of a proposal for the site from the 2009 Downtown Plan;
- recent history of planning and development in downtown Evanston;
- review of the recent history of the RFP process for the site;
- review of recent proposals for the site; and
- review of proposed major projects near the site (601 Davis Street and The Legacy Planned Development at 1621-1631 Chicago Ave.).

Subsequently the participants were broken up into three tables (approximately 6-8 person per table) and asked to discuss their impressions of what they had learned and to respond to a list of Issues / Questions related to the property including:

1. **Financial:** Should the development of the site provide revenue for the city, and if so, how might this best be achieved? How important is revenue production? Is it immediate or ongoing?
2. **Zoning:** Is changing the zoning of the site recommended or not?
3. **Historical Neighbors:** What is the degree to which the historic location of the site should inform the development?
4. **Private-Public:** From totally public use to totally private use: where on this spectrum should this site fit?
5. **Best Use of the Site:** What should go here? Are there uses lacking or sparse in downtown Evanston that this site could provide? What demographics shall be served?
6. **Transportation Issues:** How best to deal with parking, bikes, pedestrians, truck access, cars, etc.
7. **Height / Massing / Open Space:** If a building is proposed, what limits on height, massing, and open / green space should be defined / sought?
8. **Street Level:** How shall this development impact Evanston at street level?
9. **Future:** Imagine the site in 10-20-30+ years.



813-2 Forest Avenue
Evanston, Illinois 60202
(847) 866-7480
www.designevanston.org

In the end through a process of sharing, coalescing and editing we agreed on the following Principles of Design and Process for the site.

1. What should we do right now?

The consensus was clear that moving forward with a new proposal at this time is premature. There are events on the horizon that will change the context of any future action on this site.

First, Cook County properties are being reassessed. The results of this will take some time to finalize but will have significant effect on any developer's Proforma.

Second, there are currently two large and significant projects in line for City review and possible implementation very near our subject property. These are 601 Davis, a high-rise office building (between The Chase Tower and The University Building at Davis and Chicago Avenue) and The Legacy Planned Development, a high-rise residential building on Chicago Avenue, in the adjacent block to the south of the LPL site.

If implemented, these projects will have a major effect on the market for future development in this area and generate significant tax revenue that will further stimulate the downtown. A smaller property, such as the LPL site with a more sensitive context, might better be held back until the effects of the reassessment and the other projects are better understood.

It is a good time though to look at the ideas generated during the charrette and start to describe a more definitive and less speculative set of criteria for the site that can become the design basis for any future RFP. When the tax situation is more clearly understood and the status and nature of the two large projects are more clearly defined, the city will be in a better position to move ahead.

Some participants in the charrette suggested that a competition among Developer/Architect teams might be an advantageous way to acquire alternative best uses and designs of the property. Others suggested a more low-key "idea competition" to generate possibilities and interest.

2. Revenue

To achieve the quality development we feel is required of this sensitive site, we believe the City should concentrate less on financial gain up front (purchase price) and more on long term revenue (taxes). Long-term indirect financial benefits can also result from an inspired, quality design: one that builds upon and magnifies the unique context, history and values related to the WCTU and Woman's Club of Evanston properties.

3. Siting of the Development

Respect for the adjacent WCTU and Woman's Club of Evanston properties was a consistent topic of all participating members. Any structure built on the proposed site must be a good neighbor. You can dialogue with a good neighbor. A neighboring building built entirely within five feet of adjacent full length property lines is not a good neighbor.

It was also recommended that any future development should make every effort to preserve the two historic bur oak trees along the eastern portion of the north LPL lot line. Any future design would be sensitive to the contribution they make to the overall context, and if a Master Plan of the overall area was generated, they would be a contributing element to it.



Participants felt that being sensitive to the scale and siting of the neighboring buildings was very important. In addition, some even posited, what if the new creation was also sensitive to the values and purposes exemplified by its neighbors?

Looking back in 10, 20, 30 years at whatever happens on this site will citizens be proud of what transpired? Will what became of this property be seen as having had a vision of the future?

4. Zoning

Participants were not as concerned about what zoning was established on the site as they were about achieving a high quality project and a high quality design. The best use of the property will be determined by the market conditions at that time. In that regard, the building can be whatever it wants to be as long as it is of good character, i.e. good design; respectful of its neighbors and neighborhood.

5. Parking Accommodation

Participants felt that a majority of the present public parking spaces on the site should be incorporated into the design. Observations of use at the site and predictions that automobile use within the city will likely go down in the future led the group to think that if between 60-70% of the present total of 74 spaces were provided in the new project that that would be appropriate.

Parking in structures is expensive (some estimated \$100 per square foot or approximately \$30,000 a space). In addition, it utilizes space that might otherwise be used for more laudable purposes. It forces buildings to be larger, taller. It also poses aesthetic challenges in regards to how its exterior walls are treated.

Participants felt that the parking provided in any future building should be accommodated at the rear of the building where vehicle access would surely best be provided off of the alley, and the less than attractive facades of the structure would not be on display for public viewing. Any determination of a final quantity of spaces to be provided should take into account present and future anticipated demand, which over the past decade has diminished significantly. Future development in the vicinity such as 601 Davis Street and/or The Legacy may change those conditions, however.

In addition to providing a place for citizens to take their car when downtown, we should also be engaged in implementing ways to deter them from taking it downtown. That's what good, future T.O.D cities do. To further discourage vehicle parking a drop-off along Chicago Avenue could be incorporated into the design, given the deep parkway and the location of the bike paths on the opposite side of the street.

Furthermore, the alley from Church Street to the center of the block (and to the LPL site) could be envisioned as a true pedestrian corridor. This would be a pleasant back door entry into the subject building and could create opportunities for other permanent or "pop-up" uses in the alley as well. It could even potentially be a shared street or park-like concept. After all, with more of the downtown to the west and Evanston's mass transportation access also to the west, it is very likely people coming and going to the site would like a safe, pleasant path to walk out from the back of the building.



Truck loading should also occur at the rear of the building. Participants were adamant that any future design should not make alley circulation issues worse and proposed that a building's footprint should not extend in the area of the dogleg in the alley.

6. Women's History Site

Frances Willard was more than a champion for alcohol prohibition, which seems to be the first thing that comes to most people's minds when her name or the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is mentioned. Moreover, she was an advocate for women's suffrage, women's rights, and equal pay for equal work. The Woman's Club of Evanston was an outgrowth of former Chicago residents who fled its squalor, depravity and corruption to make a better home here in Evanston.

Some participants recommended a multifunctional public park dedicated to other significant women of history and present day be created at the site. It would include underground, or semi-below grade parking. It could be something similar to the park proposed in the adopted 2009 Downtown Plan. Resourcing The National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, or prominent corporations, and foundations sensitive to women's issues might provide the necessary funds for such a venture.

Other participants, while sensitive to such a use, did not all believe this was a viable option. Such a venture would be costly, particularly if parking spaces were to be provided as part of the design (likely placed underground, which is costly). In addition, it would not generate any revenue other than the cost of parking, and it might not necessarily bring additional people into the downtown.

Nevertheless, a park located at the front portion of the site could serve that purpose. It would provide a pleasant pedestrian-scale linking of the two properties. The setback building with its parking in the rear (likely on multiple floors) would be allowed to be tall now that it was slender and not ponderous at street level. In this context, height was not as much a concern as ground level context and sensitivity.

7. Visioning

What if? What if the occupants or owners of the new building were reflective of contemporary women's values, goals, and aspirations? What entities constitute a present day, forward looking association of and for women? Could any of these be looking for, or be convinced to make, their future home in Evanston? Would they be willing to participate in the creation and design of their place amongst these venerable women's institutions? We won't know unless we ask. Could this area along Chicago Avenue be seen as sort of a Women's Issues Campus incorporating current meaning and history?

Whether the dream of the above happens or not, many of the participants felt that the design effort for this site should include a Master Plan that includes the adjacent properties. The WCTU is already engaging in a process to renovate their longtime vacant Administration Building. And while the Woman's Club is a handsome, well-maintained building, its rear (north) elevation is not the most pleasant of spaces. With the prospect of a fine, contextual new building and green space between them, could they not use that to assist in raising capital for their own projects? Is the creation of a Women's Rights Campus possible?



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8. Thanks for a New Beginning

In closing, the Board of Design Evanston wishes to thank all those design professionals who took valuable time out of their schedules to participate in this process. We should never underestimate the power of a gathering of design professionals intent on serving a noble cause. Thank you all!

The design process involves much more than making something attractive. It is creative problem solving. Designers are typically good problem solvers. Design Evanston hopes that this effort better informs what achieving good design might entail at this site and eases the burden on government by providing this service.

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Contact: Jack Weiss

Phone: 847 866 7480

Email: jw@jackweissassociates.com



813-2 Forest Avenue
Evanston, Illinois 60202
(847) 866-7480
www.designevanston.org