

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Design Evanston reviews proposal for 910-938 Custer Avenue

by Jack Weiss and David Galloway, Design Evanston October 16th, 2024



Rendering of south facade at 910-938 Custer Ave. Credit: Built Form LLC

On Oct. 7, Design Evanston professional members met to evaluate the proposed [910-938 Custer Ave. project](#), as presented by Max Charles Davidson of CDG Capital, Paul Dincin of Catapult Real Estate Solutions and Andy Ahitow of CityPads.

The meeting was at Tapestry Station, 740 Main St. Following is a summary of comments reflecting Design Evanston’s project review standards (criteria listed in bold type below):

General comments

Overall, the general consensus of the reviewing group was that the proposed project is a very appropriate and attractive transit-oriented development for this particular location in Evanston. It is of an appropriate height and massing for its context. It will provide desirable housing, a portion of it on-site affordable units, in an area that is proving to be an appropriate area for such development, “west of the tracks.” The project has minimal impact on its neighboring properties, which include the backside of vintage retail structures to the south, the existing single-family residential structures to the west and the Metra railroad embankment to the east. It improves and widens existing alley configurations. Parking provided is in keeping with recent developments in this area, market trends and municipal policies. The project provides significant benefits to the city with minimal burdens on its existing infrastructure. The specific execution of the facade treatment of the project appears headed in the right direction.

Criteria comments

1. The project should address a perceived need in the city and its respective community.

Yes. There is a perceived market for increased residential development in this area of the city, particularly for younger single individuals and couples without children. The increased population in the area will provide beneficial support to local retail establishments.

2. The project should be of an appropriate and beneficial use within the project’s geographical context.

Yes. See above. The Chicago/Main transit node is an appropriate location for such a development.

3. The project should be of appropriate and complementary size, scale and proportion for its physical context.

The site is an abandoned manufacturing facility in a relatively isolated location. The proposed five-story residential project is of reasonable size, scale and proportion for the site, which has few residential neighbors, only a few houses along Sherman Avenue. The perceived size of the development will have minimal visual impact on views from Main Street. Some residents along Sherman may have concern about the five-story height along their shared alley. Similar configurations have been approved and constructed in locations along Central Street east of Green Bay Road.



Rendering of east facade at 910-938 Custer Ave. Credit: Built Form LLC

4. The project should reflect current progressive, creative and sustainable design goals and practices.

The project will be executed with the intention of conforming to all pertinent energy-saving codes and local initiatives. The development will seek three [Green Globes](#). It will be a predominantly electric building. Geothermal and rooftop photovoltaic systems are being investigated. Unit windows will be state-of-the-art operable fiberglass.

5. The project should provide for current and future economic growth.

It does. It will increase tax revenue in the area, given the abandonment of the existing manufacturing facility. The increased housing units will support existing nearby small local commercial establishments on Main Street and Chicago Avenue, as well as farther away entities such as Jewel-Osco and Binny’s.

6. The project should provide for good city revenue generation with as low as feasible infrastructure burden to the city.

The increase in tax base is significant at a time when city and school district funds are in great demand. This will be accomplished with little burden on the existing utility infrastructure of this area. Few of the residents are likely to have children that need to be accommodated by the school system. There appears to be a negligible increase in vehicle accommodation required, given the relatively few parking spaces provided for the project, though the intersection at Main Street is currently a challenging one and specific data from a traffic study is likely required. The surrounding alleys will be increased in width by virtue of the project yielding 4 feet of additional property to the city, thereby improving their function.

7. The project should provide for a positive, engaging experience at street and pedestrian level.

The project is quite isolated from the nearby Main Street streetscape. The project will significantly improve the streetscape experience along this area of Custer. The walkways along the east side of the property will be of ample width, with areas of planting beds. First-floor units at this location will have direct access off this walkway. The opportunity to improve the west side of the Metra embankment is now certain with the developer of this project and the city working in partnership with Metra.

The design and configuration of the south portion of the property is well done. The building's gateway "flag" facade accentuates and defines a pleasant vehicular and pedestrian entry to the "front" of the building. Full-height glazed entry and common service spaces are very welcoming.



Rendering of entrance at 910-938 Custer Ave. Credit: Built Form LLC

8. The project should complement the practices and goals of "Complete Streets" [the city policy is [here](#)] and encourage multimodal transportation use.

The project is located in one of the most developed mass transit areas of the city, with service by local buses and both the CTA and Metra Rail lines. The project adds relatively few vehicles to the neighborhood and provides ample provisions for resident bicycle use. The recent streetscape improvements along Main Street will have many more users given the additional residents this project provides. In addition, users will increase the use and profitability of the mass transit entities.

9. The project should be a contributor to the City of Evanston’s goals to be energy self-sufficient.

See criteria No. 4 above.

10. The project should provide a tangible complement of public benefits.

The project’s primary benefit is to provide needed, in-demand lower- to middle-income housing units in an area that will benefit from increased tax revenue, increased support of local retail and increased CTA and Metra ridership. It also would improve the alleys behind the building and provide an attractive and energizing experience along Custer.

Design comments

1. Among the attendees there was a general agreement that the project was a useful and attractive addition to the area. The perspective view of the approach to the building from south on Custer was quite appealing. Views of the building along the west alley were not provided.
2. The structural system composed of panelized and “stick-built” wood framing with direct-bearing walls through all floors to grade was an appropriate and economical system.
3. Stairways and elevator accommodations appear adequate.
4. The unit mix of predominantly studio and one-bedroom units was felt appropriate for the perceived market.



Typical floor plan for 910-936 Custer Ave. Credit: Built Form LLC

5. The configuration of the “U-shaped” plan, oriented with its opening to the south, provides for the maximum amount of units on the site and allows for sunlight and daylight to penetrate the interior court of the building. The specific development of the court surface is yet to be executed, and mitigating the narrow height of the space should be one of its goals. Adding art pieces was also mentioned.

6. Fifth-floor interior and some rooftop common area amenities are very desirable.

7. Access to first-floor units off Custer was perceived to be a benefit for the occupants and a way to further activate the street. Similar entries off the alley may not be so beneficial, depending on how the alley is developed.



Rendering of south facade at 910-938 Custer Ave. Credit: Built Form LLC

8. The five-story configuration has minimal impact on adjacent properties except for the residences along Sherman Avenue. One attendee wondered if lowering this portion of the building to four stories and raising other portions to six stories would be a desirable, viable alternative.

9. The expression of facade fenestration at all elevations appeared quite appropriate and attractive. The projecting framed elements at some of the windows along Custer Avenue was appreciated as a nice design detail/ornament.

10. The projecting, “flag” portion of the East Custer facade at the south end of the building was felt to be a very attractive and functional element that offset the larger expanse of the fenestrated facade to its north and framed the entry to the site’s parking court and building entry.

11. The use of EIFS (Exterior Insulated Finish System) on the facades was felt to be an appropriate system. It has had a long recent history of very beneficial and successful use. Attendees felt that the employment of a masonry replicant pattern at the first-floor portions was acceptable and added an additional element of scale to this portion of the facade. The

employment of structurally necessary expansion joints and additional decorative ones across the facades would help break down the scale of the walls and add desirable subtle detail to the expanse of material.

12. The use of insulated glass fixed and operable windows that are fiberglass-framed and steel-reinforced was a very beneficial choice.

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