

Eye on Evanston: Design Evanston reviews proposed Civic Center Plaza plan

by [Jack Weiss, Design Evanston](#) and [David Galloway, Design Evanston](#) January 5th, 2025

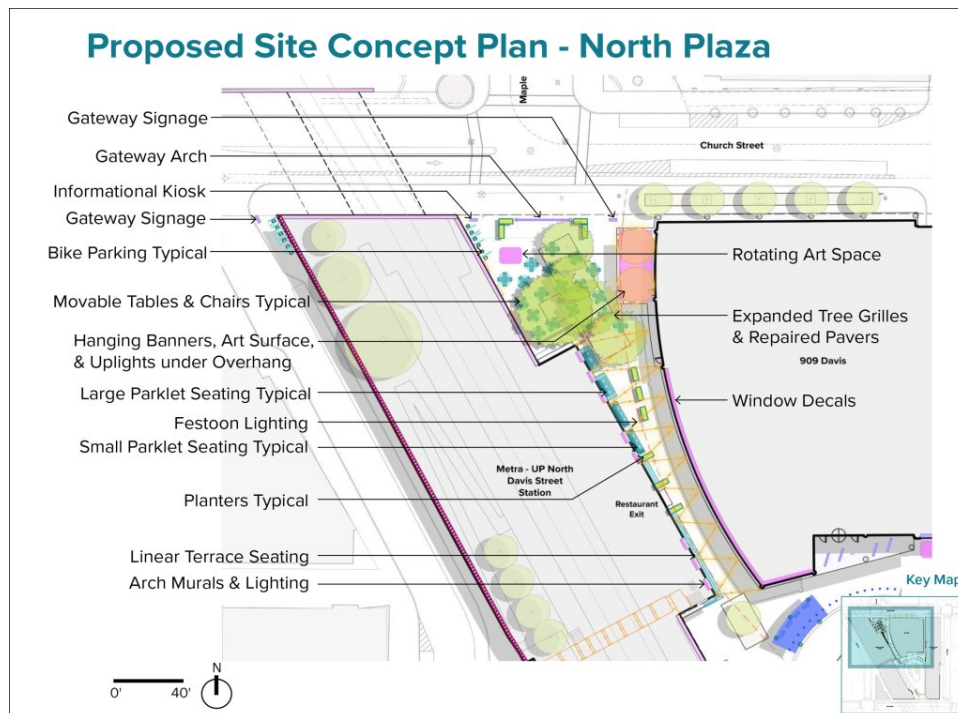
On Nov. 6, 2024, Design Evanston participated in a Zoom presentation of the Civic Center Plaza proposal by City of Evanston Economic Development Manager Paul Zalmezak, Living Habitats consultants; Heidi Natura, and other members of her team. Following is a summary of comments received by Design Evanston’s professional members.

Overview

The new location for the Civic Center poses many challenges and opportunities. Among the challenges are conveying to the public where the Civic Center is located, giving it a sense of identity appropriate for a city hall, and indicating how to get there. Both the north plaza area at Church Street and south plaza area off Davis Street need to be addressed in such a manner as to convey a strong sense of place and at the same time encourage the significant circulation that occurs between them and adjacent to each of them at the CTA and Metra embankment walls.

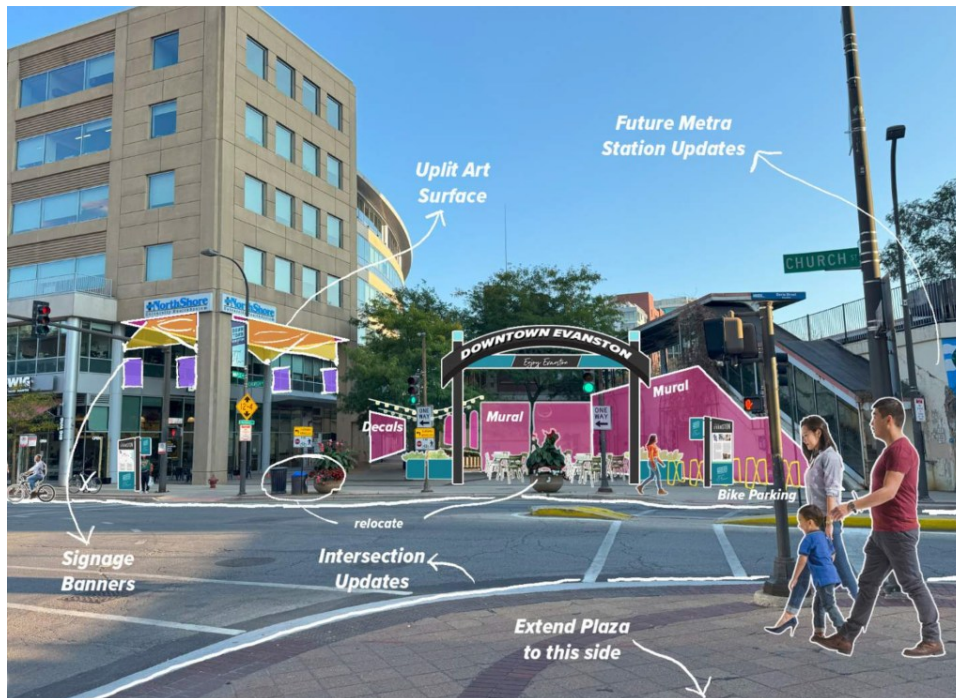
The existing south plaza space is well defined by the south facade of the building, the west embankment walls of the Metra Station and the east embankment walls of the CTA. The north is more formless, less defined, and does not afford a full view of the building or its entrance. The circulation way between the building and the Metra embankment that connects the two plaza spaces is an important element in getting people to the Civic Center entrance, in addition to its current function of providing access to the two train stations and allowing quick access to Davis and Church Street amenities.

The North Plaza



Site Concept Plan – North Plaza. Credit: Living Habitats

The new north plaza space would be best to include in its spatial experience, the northwest and northeast corners of the properties across the street, including Church Street itself. This can be encouraged by road pavement materials more associated with pedestrian plazas that boldly and with texture define broad pedestrian crosswalks. Relocation of the bus stop further east is also a good idea. The current treatment of the northwest corner needs to be redesigned to better incorporate it into this composition, and the northeast corner arrangement of planters and outdoor seating could also be revised to better visually incorporate it into this larger composition.



Rendering – North Plaza. Credit: Living Habitats

The plaza space south of Church Street needs to be better defined and arranged functionally. The circulation path North-South needs to be clear and emphasized. Some members feel the current tree locations do not help this function or conjoin the space to the areas north. There is no need for shade here as there seldom is any sun that gets to this area. Given these observations, the trees could justifiably be removed/relocated to a more suitable location. The recessed area to the west of the circulation way, just north of the Metra train station building, is an appropriate space for passive seating or dining (proposed location for food trucks).

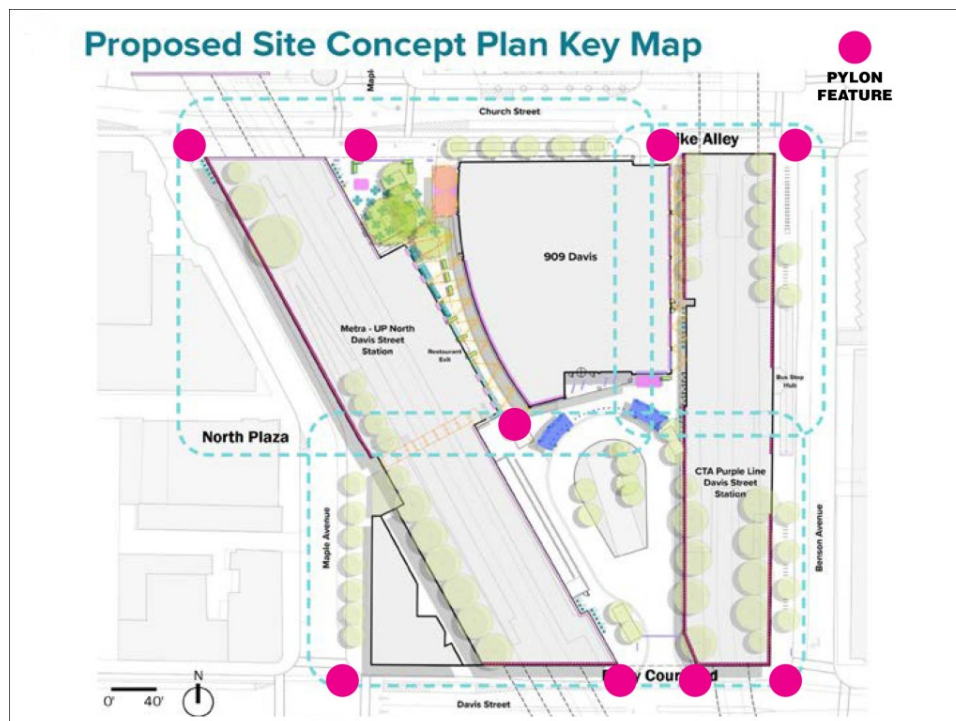
The facade of the Metra building needs a respectful renovation, most importantly at the first-floor pedestrian level. The Metra stairway area at the north end at Church Street is in disgusting condition and a significant detractor to this space.

Food trucks at least would serve as a screen to this awful view (see Metra Improvements Section). This proposal to provide space for food trucks is interesting, but a restaurant located in the first-floor tenant space adjacent to the plaza would be preferred. This could be accommodated by a new restaurant on the first-floor tenant space of the office building adjacent to the plaza or encouraging the existing restaurant, The Chef's Station, located on the first floor of the Metra Station to provide daytime service to this area. They already use

the space just north of them for warmer weather outdoor seating. The current restaurant's service/trash area at the south end of this space needs to be addressed as well.

The pedestrian pavement at the Church Street sidewalks and the plaza areas is quite erratic and does not serve to identify or define this space. In our view the pavement should be an element that better reflects and defines the plaza spaces and serves to connect them as well.

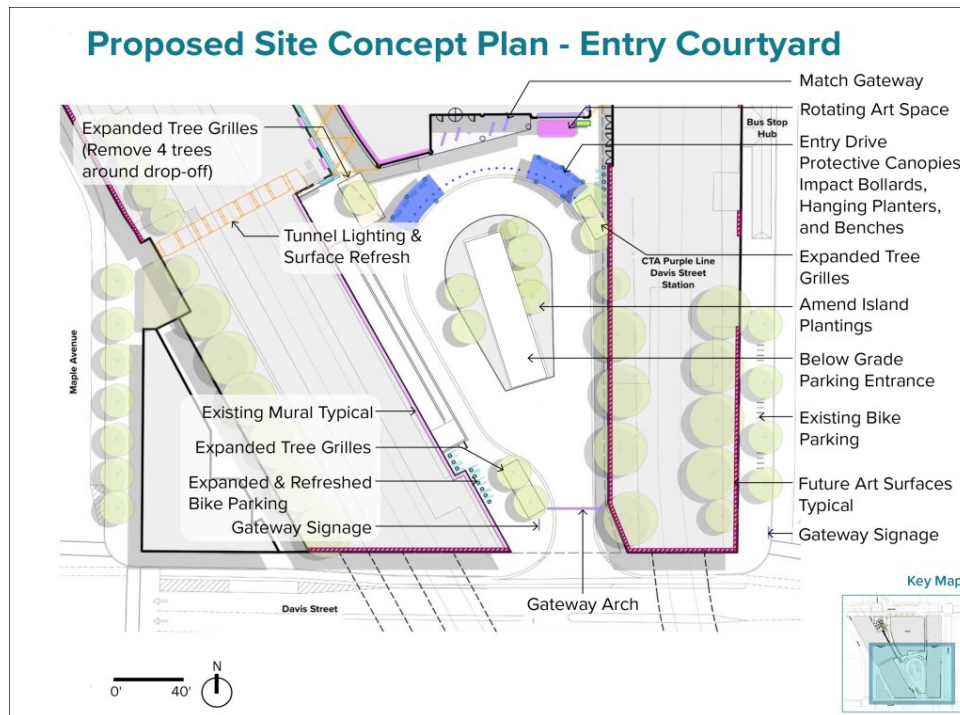
A proposed gateway element at the entrance to the north plaza is not preferred by our members. We feel it would be more a distraction and impediment to the experience of the space (particularly if the goal is to incorporate the corner spaces across the street into the experience). Pylons might be a more effective coherent element to provide direction and identification.



Site Concept Plan – Key Map. Credit: Living Habitats

A challenge will be directing pedestrians and vehicles to the Civic Center entrance. Typical pylon signage could be employed at various locations adjacent to the property at strategic walkway and roadway intersections. The pylon features have been added to the drawing above by Design Evanston landscape architect Jim Gamble of Land Design Collaborative.

The South Plaza



Site Concept Plan – South Plaza. Credit: Living Habitats

The south plaza is defined by the south elevation of the building and the embankments of the Metra and CTA. The multiple walls of the Metra embankment are painted with an expansive mural. It has a significant presence on the space. If it is to be retained it needs a number of plaques explaining its content as well as a budget to maintain it.

Current bicycle parking at the pedestrian walkway at the southwest corner of the plaza and near the entry to the CTA station is inappropriate. They encumber pedestrian circulation and are frequently unattractive. The “U-shaped” individual rack devices do not predictably secure all bikes in the same manner and the result is frequently a disarray of bike postures over the pavement. Bike racks that more consistently secure the bicycles are preferred. If bike parking is needed at the Metra side, there is a recess in the embankment walls that could accommodate some bicycles while not visually or functionally impeding the pedestrian walkway or views to the building entrance or connecting plaza walkway.



Rendering – South Plaza. Credit: Living Habitats

The abundance of bicycles anticipated and encouraged are best accommodated along the north-south walkway between the east side of the office building and the west CTA embankment walls. Consolidated racks that secure the bikes horizontally, or hung vertically, would be preferred and make for a more orderly arrangement at this area which could be a bike-walking connection between the Church Street and Davis Street bike lanes. An air station and possible canopies over the area could also be considered along with appropriate lighting and graphics. If we are going to encourage bicycling, we should treat it with more intent, consideration and respect. This space is perfect for such a purpose.

Metra tunnel

The Metra tunnel from Oak Street to the south plaza needs work likely beyond what may be available given it is not the city's property. Existing wall and ceiling surfaces desperately need a respectful restoration. The scale of this element is unique — narrow and enclosed. With intimate lighting and some attractive additions, this tunnel can be a wonderful, unique experience. A focal element at the east end of the tunnel is desirable, as is an additional one at the west end of the tunnel at Maple Avenue. Decorative historical lighting through the space is preferred over industrial fixtures.

General elements

Paving should be consistent, coherent and sensitive to the functions of the space they define. Current paving is confusing, distracting, and irrational in appearance.

Items of sculpture at the north and south ends of the circulation way between the building and Metra embankment could be employed to add a focal element to the walking experience.

Lighting throughout the plazas can be a strong, consistent identifying element and provide much needed safe walking surfaces at night. The design and arrangement should be pedestrian in scale, NOT automotive as is the case so frequently in our downtown. Shorter

pole fixtures and light bollards can assist in defining the spaces and providing an element of consistency to the whole north-south plaza experience. Lighting to accentuate various specific areas or site elements can be beneficial but should be relatively restrained. Lamp temperatures can have a great effect on mood and visual comfort. Warmer temperatures are preferred. Is it possible to influence / modify CTA and Metra property lighting? Could these plaza fixtures, or fixtures similar in appearance, also be employed at the Metra walkways to the train platform? Could the train platform lamps be of a similar temperature?

Overall comments

Less is more in the creation of successful plaza and circulation spaces. Too many distractions can create an appearance that is confusing, loses integrity, impact and coherence. KIS — Keep It Simple. Clarity is critical in guiding people to specific places. Too much art, banners, murals, amenity items, etc. can be a distraction and create visual confusion. Most successful, historical and contemporary plaza spaces are frequently relatively spare places with a strong sense of spatial definition and strategically selected and located human scale place-making appurtenances. While community input into needs, wants and desires for the spaces is important they must be employed in a manner that is in service to a strong overall design.

Design Evanston's "Eye on Evanston" articles focus on Evanston's design history and advocate for good design in our city. Visit designevanston.org to learn more about the organization.

Source: *Evanston RoundTable* 1.5.25