

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Sherman Gardens, Evanston's mid-century modern gem

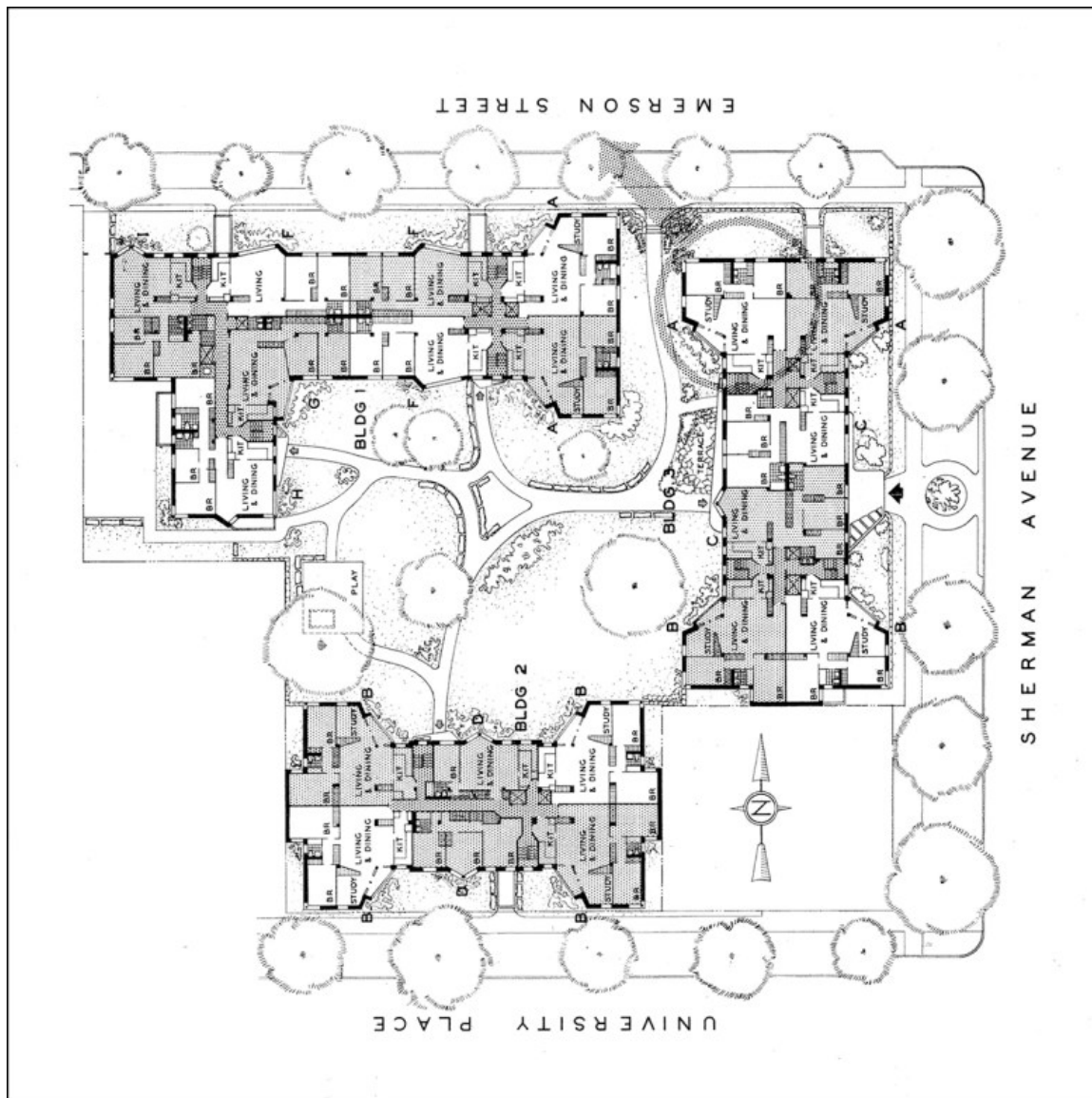
by [Jack Weiss, Design Evanston](#) September 6th, 2022

When Design Evanston authors began working on their book *Evanston: 150 Years 150 Places*, hundreds of homes, multi-family buildings, institutional and religious structures were considered for inclusion. In the yearlong process, a few important places were inadvertently left off the list.

One was Levere Memorial Temple, a landmark, and part of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon building at 1856 Sheridan Road. It has become one of the most popular Open House Chicago sites in Evanston because of its large collection of Tiffany stained glass windows.

Another missing from the list was Sherman Gardens, a grouping of three residential buildings built in 1946-1948 at 1856-1866 Sherman Ave. in Evanston.

Originally known as Sherman Garden Apartments, the buildings and distinctive courtyard were designed by architect Henry K. Holsman. Few other mid-century modern residential structures in Evanston match the unique features of Sherman Gardens.



Sherman Gardens site plan Credit: H.H. Holsman

Henry Kerchner Holsman was born in Dale, Iowa, on July 3, 1866. Following his education in local schools, he entered and studied architecture at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, graduated and practiced his profession for 65 years. Over his lifetime, he designed more than 1,000 private homes, 10 churches, six banks and a number of college buildings. Holsman's "Historic Campus District" at Parsons College in Fairfield, Iowa, comprised of five buildings built between 1903 and 1915, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

Early in his career Holsman was well known in the automobile industry. The Holsman Automobile was manufactured from 1901 to 1911 in Chicago, which was the center of automobile invention in America at the time. Holsman designed, manufactured, and sold the Holsman Automobile.

He applied for and received several patents pertaining to automobiles and is credited with the invention of the first usage of the "reverse" gear.

Thirty years after he designed the Parsons College project in Iowa, Holsman had fully embraced his architectural career in Chicago and he began work on a new project in Evanston.



Typical entrance at Sherman Gardens. Credit: Jack Weiss

When built in 1946, The Sherman Garden Apartments, a residential co-op, was hailed as, “better living thru mutual ownership” and “centrally located in Evanston.”

Among the sales features were a neighborhood that included “lakefront parks and playgrounds; excellent transportation; good shopping; schools and churches; recreational facilities; and Northwestern University” – literally across the street.

Typical for the post-war period, Sherman Gardens touted “modern living” in buildings constructed of precast concrete, brick and steel with decorative stone or glass block detailing at entrances to the three buildings.



Zodiac figures (left to right): Aries, Capricorn and Pieces. Credit: Jack Weiss

Holsman commissioned his wife, artist Elizabeth Tuttle, to design the iconic cast concrete animal figures that activate the facades in vertical groupings on each of the three buildings at Sherman Gardens. On close inspection it appears that three animals of the zodiac are featured: Aries (ram), Capricorn (goat), and Pisces (fish). The three figures are repeated in random positions on the vertical groupings.

Dennis Rodkin, real estate columnist for *Crain's Chicago*, noted that Tuttle applied identical arrangements of the concrete figures on a similar building designed by her husband and son at Grandville and Wolcott in West Ridge in Chicago. It's unclear why the three animals were chosen since none relate to the birthdates of husband, wife or son.

Although there was an attempt to backlight each with incandescent lighting, an effort should be made to improve the effect with an improved, more contemporary solution.

Elizabeth Alexander Tuttle was born in Brownville, Neb., on Sept. 25, 1873. She lived her childhood and early adult years in Nebraska. She taught art at the University of Nebraska and in Missouri. In 1898, she came to Chicago and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she had a distinguished career as a sculptor, painter and lecturer. She was noted for her impressionist landscapes, portrait painting and sculpture.



Sherman Gardens courtyard. Credit: Jack Weiss

One of the most charming and distinct design features of the 132-unit Sherman Gardens is its courtyard, beautifully landscaped with curving pathways leading to the five building entrances. The courtyard was featured in Evanston's 2022 Garden Walk. Plans were recently dropped for

the development of a two-level parking garage adjacent to its west property line with access through the courtyard.

Another feature – pure mid-century modern – is the white, triangular concrete canopy that juts out over the entrance to 1856 and 1866 Sherman creating the Gardens' gateway. Intentional openings through the beams on its south edge permit light to pass through the canopy and illuminate the walkway. Although in need of a little sensitive repair, the canopy makes a unique visual statement as it contrasts with the linearity of the brick facades it embraces.

How many of us have walked or driven past 1856-1866 Sherman without taking notice? Only recently an architect friend was unaware of the charming cast concrete ornaments until I brought them to his attention. In the 46 years since it was built, Sherman Gardens has garnered little critical notice. The charm of this mid-century modern gem is due for its place in the spotlight.

Design Evanston's "Eye on Evanston" series focuses on Evanston's design history and advocate for good design. Visit designevanston.org to learn more about the organization.

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