

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Why Evanston needs an Urban Design Commission

by Jack Weiss, Design Evanston



A rendering of the 31-story apartment building proposed for 605 Davis St. (at center). Campbell Coyle Real Estate is a partner on the project, and Campbell Coyle President Christopher Dillion supports the creation of an Urban Design Commission in Evanston. Credit: Vermilion Development, Campbell Coyle

There is hope that by the end of this summer, Evanston’s City Council will approve the proposed Envision Evanston 2045 comprehensive plan. New in that plan is an idea long overdue for Evanston: an Urban Design Commission. Our own Daniel Burnham, of “Make no small plans” fame, would strongly approve.

Early in 2022, Councilmember Tom Suffredin (6th Ward) introduced an ordinance to eliminate an internal city staff committee, Design & Appearance Review, often known as DAPR. (That committee had been preceded by another, the Site Plan and Appearance Review Committee.) Both committees were staffed by city employees — representing zoning, planning, fire, police, engineering — who addressed practical issues that needed a positive review before projects were approved.

Lacking in that structure was the question of *design*, even though the word was in the committee’s title. How projects would look, how they would fit in context with their neighbors, if they were constructed with proper materials, if they contributed something positive to the community. Only one architect was ever active on the committee who could speak, with experience, on subjects of design. He served only for a short period of time.

Suffredin’s proposal, passed by the City Council midsummer 2022, addressed a problem that had been brewing for a long time. The design committee met only during business hours, and that made it difficult for citizens to attend and participate. According to a May 9, 2022, [memo](#) from city Policy Coordinator Alison Leipsiger, the ordinance would replace the

committee “with a process by which staff will review and approve projects and create provisions for requested reviews and appeals.”

Seeing the need for a more definitive, accessible and legislative design review in the absence of the design committee and its predecessor, in July 2022 a small group of Design Evanston professional members began meeting. They were joined by Councilmember Clare Kelly (1st Ward), Economic Development Manager Paul Zalmezak, and later, Preservation Planner Cade Sterling to research other urban design commissions, speak with officials from communities similar to Evanston, and ultimately draft an ordinance to create one for Evanston.

Mary McWilliams, former chair of the Preservation Commission, said she “agreed with the idea of eliminating DAPR and initiating an appointed citizens’ Urban Design Commission that would deal exclusively with design-related issues.”

In October 2022, Zalmezak had drafted a purpose statement for the proposed commission:

“To ensure the highest quality of design, cultural and community integration; to improve general appearances of all buildings, structures and landscaping and open areas in the city; to encourage the protection of economic values and proper use of properties for all public and private projects in the City; to foster civic pride in the beauty of our city by assuring functionally appropriate, efficient, and a visually attractive city.”

Other cities’ commissions

The group worked through the next months to gather information from two dozen cities across the country that had adopted urban design commissions, including Palo Alto, California; Urbana, Illinois; Madison, Wisconsin; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Madison’s statement of purpose provided a good model:

“It is a matter of public policy that the *design*, appearance, beauty and aesthetics of all public and private buildings, structures, landscaping and open areas are a matter of public concern and as such must be controlled to promote the general welfare of the community.

1. To assure the highest quality of *design* for all public and private projects in the City.

2. To protect and to improve the general appearance of all buildings, structures, landscaping and open areas in the City; to encourage the protection of economic values and proper use of properties.

3. To encourage and promote a high quality in the *design* of new buildings, developments, remodeling and additions to maintain and improve the established standards of property values within the City.

4. To foster civic pride in the beauty and nobler assets of the City, and in all other ways possible assure a functionally efficient and visually attractive City in the future.”

In January 2023, Kelly, supported by Councilmembers Suffredin and Juan Geracaris (9th Ward), submitted [a referral](#) to the Planning & Development Committee to create a new Community Design Commission.

After months of meetings, on June 26, 2023, a [draft ordinance](#) was finalized and presented to the Planning & Development Committee at its July 10 meeting with a recommendation to send to the City Council for approval. The draft statement of purpose, crafted by Sterling was more specific than the Madison statement:

“Statement of Purpose

Maintaining a high-quality built environment positively impacts the health, well-being, and general welfare of the public, contributes toward the City’s unique character and identity, strengthens the local economy, and enhances the vibrancy and resiliency of Evanston’s business and downtown districts.

In order to advance these goals, an Urban Design Commission is hereby established to provide technical assistance and expert advice and opinion on development and redevelopment proposals in both the public and private realm; advocate for human-centered design solutions for projects which have the potential to impact the experiential quality of the built environment; promote the highest quality of design in order to ensure built interventions create and retain economic, environmental, social, and cultural value; and advance aspects of the Comprehensive General Plan.”

At its meeting on July 10, 2023, the Planning & Development Committee rejected the referral. In his [summary of the meeting](#) in the RoundTable, Bob Seidenberg noted, “several council members argued the city shouldn’t tackle the issue until a review leading to a new comprehensive general plan is completed. The city is just embarking on its first new comprehensive general plan, as well as a new zoning code, a combined process that could take 24 months.”

Design Evanston’s response was swift: “Establishment of the new Comprehensive Plan is at least two years in the future. Too many important design issues will occur before that time and will need to be addressed by the UDC,” I wrote, as a founding member and past president of Design Evanston.

Design Evanston didn’t give up. In a two-part Thoughts on Design series in the RoundTable in [July](#) and [August 2023](#), I pointed out, “Two of Design Evanston’s long-standing programs are similar to those mentioned in research on Community Design Commissions: nonbinding Project Reviews and Design Awards.”

In the following months, the organization kept tabs on the issue, and as work began on the Envision Evanston 2045 comprehensive plan, eyes were on the language of the plan as it related to a reference to an Urban Design Commission.

Commission concept reemerges

Members of Design Evanston, unhappy with the apparent lack of reference to an Urban Design Commission in the plan, continued to address the Land Use Commission and City

Council through 2024 and 2025. In the plan's November 2024 draft there remained no reference to an Urban Design Commission. For some time that reference was missing entirely in the 100-plus-page document.

Finally, in a June 6, 2025 update, mention of an Urban Design Commission finally emerged:

“7. Ensure new development supports quality design.

NP 7.1 Establish an Urban Design Commission.

NP 7.2 Promote quality design and site planning early in the development process and before financial commitments to ensure design decisions align with the goals of the Plan and established guidelines.

NP 7.3 Develop guidelines for new development that align with the vision and goals of the Plan and consider the defining features of neighborhoods, sustainable materials, and energy efficiency.”

On June 27, Design Evanston professional member James Michaels drafted an updated mission statement for the Urban Design Commission:

“The Evanston Urban Design Commission is a group of established professionals in architecture, urban planning, and related fields who advocate for thoughtful, context-sensitive, and enduring work. Focused on reviewing new development and supporting high-quality design, the Commission seeks to enhance the public realm, reflect Evanston's rich architectural heritage, and promote a more equitable, sustainable, and beautiful city for all.”

He then itemized [10 guiding principles](#) for the commission.

Roles of city commissions

In a June 24 memo to the City Council — as it finally began the task of reviewing the final draft of the comprehensive plan — Sarah Flax, director of Community Development, reminded the council of the many questions remaining unresolved by the Land Use Commission, which had until then full responsibility for the final draft of the plan. Regarding the Urban Design Commission, she asked, “Does the City Council want to establish a new City-led advisory commission or bolster the duties of the Land Use Commission or Preservation Commission?”

This, of course, led back to a much earlier question by the Planning & Development Committee about whether the tasks of the Design Commission would somehow overlap and conflict with the Land Use or Preservation commissions. The responses were clear.

Councilmember Matt Rodgers (8th Ward) said, “I do not recall anyone on LUC advocating for design as being within their orbit. LUC is charged with land use, massing, height, setbacks, and zoning issues, not with the design of the project. Adding this to their list of responsibilities would muddy the waters.”

Cade Sterling said simply, “The Preservation Commission and staff have oversight of close to 2,500 properties, which is a huge number. The Urban Design Commission would act as a companion body to the purposes of the Land Use Commission and Preservation Commission.”

Design Evanston professional member Shirley Dugdale summarized the group’s views, writing, “It can complement the Land Use Commission and Preservation Commission which are already burdened with their workloads and have specific focus for project review. An UDC would seek commissioners experienced with the complexity of planning the integration of development into a sustainable and resilient city.”

Council reviewing plan’s final draft

The City Council sought to complete its review of the final draft comprehensive plan by the end of July. On June 29, the Design Evanston group revised the language about the Urban Design Commission in the draft. The group felt that the existing draft statement was lacking in substance, definition, and clarity. Councilmember Kelly recommended it for inclusion before the July deadline:

“7. Ensure new development supports quality design

NP 7.1 Establish an Urban Design Commission, comprised of experienced design professionals, appointed by the mayor, and acting as a recommending body to City Council to ensure development reflects the City’s commitment to quality in urban design.

NP 7.2 Develop design guidelines for new developments that align with the policies of the Comprehensive Plan which will consider the defining features of neighborhoods, contextual design, sustainability, architectural diversity, and use of materials.

NP 7.3 Promote quality design and site planning early in the development process to ensure design decisions align with the goals of the Comprehensive Plan and established guidelines and integrate into a predictable review and approval process.

NP 7.4 Provide advisory and technical assistance, to explore models and practices in other places, housing typologies, and emerging building technologies, and to investigate design guidelines for Implementation.”

Concurrent with the Design Evanston group preparing the revised language for the comprehensive plan, Kelly returned her attention to recommending that the ordinance creating the Urban Design Commission, which was delayed three years earlier in 2022, be reconsidered during the comprehensive plan process. Rogers, former chair of the Land Use Commission, has joined other cosponsors, Suffredin and Geracaris, for the referral of the ordinance to the City Council.

If both efforts succeed, in the next month or so the City of Evanston will have a new commission, long awaited by the design community, and ready to address, with objective and professional skill, critical issues of design that our community faces.

Now, after three years of discussion, there's a clear answer to the question, "Why Evanston needs an Urban Design Commission." Planner Sterling puts it this way: "I don't think there is any way around the idea that this [commission] would add a step to the process. However, that added step is one that is meant to make everything downstream easier and avoid costly project delays, continuances during the entitlement process, requests to change the physical design of a building late in the process when that is impractical, etc. It's an early and significant resource to help encourage well designed development that is ultimately successful."

Developer Christopher Dillion also favors an Urban Design Commission for Evanston. Dillion is president of Campbell Coyle Real Estate, a firm that has completed two downtown projects, The Lodge at 1101 Church St., and The Varsity at 1706 Sherman Ave. Dillion's firm is also partnering with [Vermilion Development](#) on the 605 Davis St. building.

He says, "I support the creation of an Urban Design Commission in Evanston. Design Evanston has been an invaluable resource, offering thoughtful, constructive feedback that has strengthened projects and reinforced the importance of high-quality urban design. A dedicated commission would build on that work by providing early, professional guidance that helps ensure new development contributes positively to the character, sustainability, and livability of our city. Done well, it can help Evanston meet its aspirations for design excellence, housing affordability, and climate leadership."

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 7.21.25