

Thoughts on Design: Design Evanston reviews 1103-05 Emerson St. development proposal

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South elevation 1103–1105 Emerson St. rendering. Credit: Robert N. Friedman

On Nov. 20, Design Evanston professionals met with owners Walter Matan and Nada Popovic of PM Properties and architect Robert N. Friedman to review a proposed five-story apartment building at 1103-05 Emerson St.

Below are Design Evanston’s **[project review standards](#)** (in bold) with comments on how the specific apartment building proposal measures up to those standards.

Project review comments

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

There is a need for more housing in the city and in this neighborhood. This proposed project provides an additional 30 non-luxury units of “missing middle” housing in the vicinity of downtown and a transit-oriented development area. The market for these units typically does not require the use of automobiles and accordingly will increase needed residency

density while not adding significantly to automotive density and likely increasing transit use.

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

The project is in an area where Northwestern University student residents mix with local resident housing. This apartment building will provide additional housing for both those markets. The increased residency in this area is appropriate given its location between the Davis Street Metra and CTA stations and near the Foster Street CTA station. It is at the northern edge of downtown, close to downtown amenities and a convenient walk to campus.

The project will also include three Inclusionary Housing Ordinance (IHO) units that will rent to those making 40% or less of the area median income (AMI), which is the lowest rent rate of any IHO units in Evanston. This is a substantial benefit to the area and Evanston's overall diversity goals.

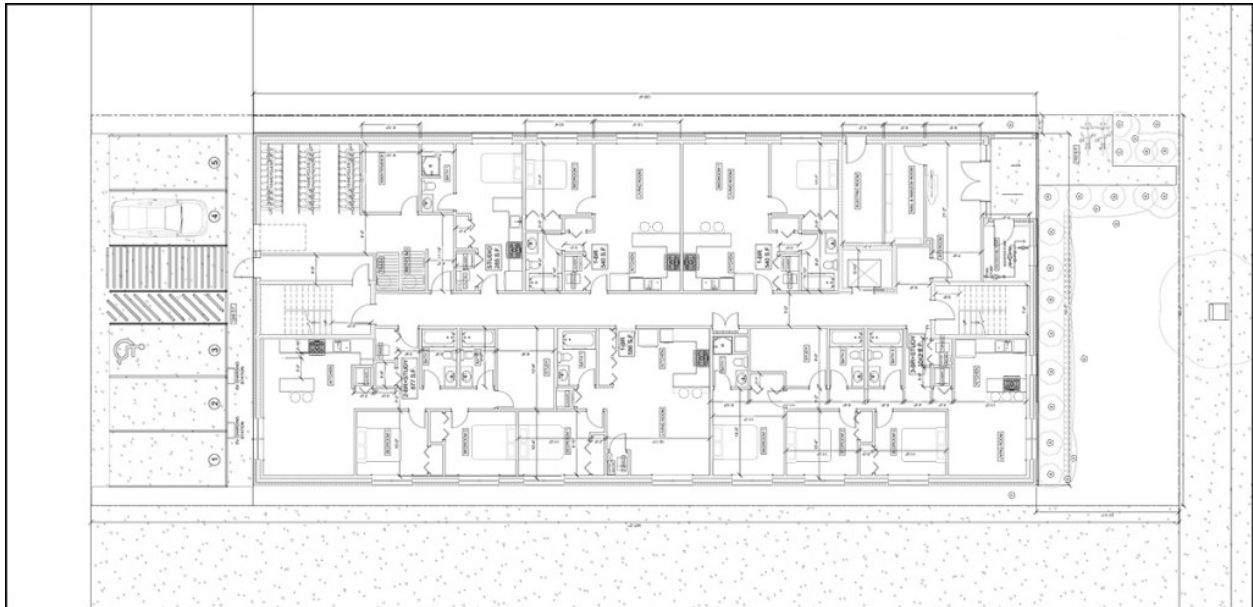
3. The project should be of appropriate and complementary size, scale and proportion for its physical context.

The project is at the north end of the downtown and within the highest-density residential district, which allows a by-right building height of 85 feet. The project does not maximize its height, being approximately 53 feet high, while complying with regulated setbacks and bulk coverage. The building is a complementary height to the adjacent church to the west while projecting about three stories above adjacent older single-family residences to the east. Given market and zoning conditions, these will likely be replaced by similar buildings to this one within the near future. The rectangular shape of the building reflects many similar existing buildings in Evanston.

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

The design of the units is well executed, making a very efficient use of space and providing an appropriate mix of units from studios to three-bedroom units, aimed at a lower-income market. The units will also typically include all basic furnishings, reducing the impact of move-ins and move-outs.

The building will comply with LEED Gold/three Green Globes equivalency, the Illinois Stretch Energy Code (as an all-electric building) and the Healthy Buildings Ordinance, and will include rooftop solar panels for electrical supply.



First floor plan of 1103–1105 Emerson St. Credit: Robert N. Friedman

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

The building will significantly increase resident density in this immediate area and also increase purchasing power to aid local merchants. The project seeks no tax reduction benefits.

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

The project intentionally will not seek any property tax incentives that reduce its property taxes. The project does discount the affordability rate for three units to comply with the 10% IHO requirement at 40% AMI and does not seek a reduction in its tax base to the city or school districts.

The project will provide many additional residents for this needy market, while injecting little vehicle use in this area. The building's solar panels will provide electric power to the grid, and the project will provide its own stormwater retention system to reduce its burden on the city's stormwater system. Additionally, landscaping and a small green roof will further manage stormwater.

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

The design is sensitive to the scale and height of existing and anticipated future adjacent projects. It has a welcoming recessed entry and balconies at street-side units that provide eyes on the street and convey the residential nature of the building. The front yard setback is in keeping with the area. After discussions with our group, the owner anticipates adding a community room to the opposite side of the front elevation from the entry. Creative indigenous landscaping is anticipated in the front yard.

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

The project will provide residents with five on-site parking spaces with 10 additional rented spaces at nearby garages. The market for these units typically has little use of automobiles. A large bicycle room is provided on the first floor. The building is within walking distance of local rail stations and bus stops.

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

The project will be highly sustainable given its compliance with LEED Gold/three Green Globes equivalency, the Illinois Stretch Energy Code (as an all-electric building with gas backup generator) and the Healthy Buildings Ordinance, as well as its inclusion of rooftop solar panels. Additional sustainability measures are expected to be addressed during the design of the building’s mechanical and electrical systems, with the aid of a sustainability consultant.

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

The project is not a planned development seeking variances for specific provision of public benefits. Nevertheless, the project will lease additional parking spaces for residents from a nearby city parking garage. The owner intends to coordinate efforts with adjacent property owners to address diseased trees in the area, improve utility provisions and provide landscaping improvements. The project intentionally is meant to address the market for non-luxury units of housing.

Design-related comments

Facade recommendations — Attendees encouraged the developer to investigate removing typical corner unit balcony end walls and lowering the height of the parapet wall behind them. This “notching” of the massing at the corners improves the scale and intimacy of the building and should also reduce costs. The owner was encouraged to employ brick masonry at the front (street-side) and west elevation, adjacent to the brick masonry church. The brick color should be compatible with the church.

The use of EIFS [exterior insulation and finish systems, also known as “synthetic stucco”] on the facades of the building was encouraged at the east elevation and rear of the building and at the wall areas of the recessed balconies. The color at the facades should closely match that of the brick, while the balconies could benefit from being a more contrasting color.

We recommended that the interior stair at the front wall of the building be provided with more significant glazing, adding to the character of the facade and further activating the building’s presence on the street while providing more daylight in the stairwell. The color of the windows and doors was suggested to be a contrast to the facade color and possibly the same color of the painted balcony railings.

Community room — We encouraged the developer to add a community room mixed-use space at the southwest corner of the first floor. There are 30 very efficient units in the building with relatively small living spaces. Occupancy of the building, given its unit mix, could well exceed 60 people. A community space would be a great benefit for so many residences.

Miscellaneous

A. Rooftop patio area — We recommended that this area be provided with some cooking stations. This area is a great amenity for the residents. We recommend that the elevator be extended to this area, as access via the stair from the fifth floor would likely be burdensome for most residents. The size of the elevator should accommodate the anticipated use by the number of occupants and their frequent comings and goings, move-ins and move-outs, etc.



Rooftop perspective 1103–1105 Emerson St. rendering. Credit: Robert N. Friedman

B. Front yard — It was suggested that the landscape approach for the front yard should be less conventional (grass, traditional plantings) and that the whole area be treated as a garden with a variety of low-maintenance indigenous plantings. The design/install landscape professional could also provide appropriate year-round maintenance to preserve the quality appearance of the yard.

C. Bike and trash room — In lieu of the currently shown overhead door, a pair of metal swinging doors was suggested.

D. Balcony railings — The use of a more opaque design at the sides and a portion of the front railing assembly would conceal furniture from public view and offer more privacy for residents, as well as break up the scale of the railings.

E. Daylight and views at the east facade — The three-foot setback for this property and the adjacent property to the east (when built out) would result in a six-foot-wide area for apartment unit daylighting and ventilation, with meager views of the opposite building's exterior wall. While similar conditions are not atypical at other locations in the city, if the owner sought to address this shortcoming, the best way would be to remove one unit from the east side of the building in order to create an interior court that could provide better light, ventilation and views from the respective units.

F. Unit floor plans — The floor plans for the different units are very efficiently designed and organized. Some of the units may, nevertheless, be short on storage space and living room/dining space.

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Source: Evanston RoundTable 12.22.25