



**Agenda Item #:** 9

**Project Title:** 1601-1617 Sherman Avenue - Residential Building Complex. 12th Ald. Dist.

**Legistar File ID #:** 74227

**Members Present:** Cliff Goodhart, Chair; Lois Braun-Oddo, Shane Bernau, Amanda Arnold, Christian Harper, and Rafeeq Asad

**Prepared By:** Jessica Vaughn, AICP, UDC Secretary

## Summary

At its meeting of April 26, 2023, the Urban Design Commission **REFERRED** consideration of a Residential Building Complex located at 1601-1617 Sherman Avenue. Registered and speaking in support were Doug Hursh and Joe Porter. Registered in support and available to answer questions were Kirk Biodrowski, Darrin Jolas, and Melissa Huggins.

The pedestrian path now connects, and the city street does dead-end but is required by the neighborhood plan and Comprehensive Plan and will eventually connect. There are thirty-two walk-up units along Sherman Avenue and the new city street. The façade facing Sherman Avenue is setback from the street with all of the units having outdoor terraces, with a walking path connecting to the public sidewalk. This façade is further activated with a pergola structure, and a common space is located on the top floor with outdoor deck space. The green roof design is focused around the recreation and activity space, including raised planters for separation and privacy for the individual terraces for units on this level. The Building A entry is located at the corner of the new city street and includes four walk-up units with terraces along this façade. The townhouse designs are now stepped down on the ends, with larger canopies to frame the entries, with brick detailing and reveals between the townhouses to break that up more and provide more rhythm. Cables are shown where vines can grow right next to the unit entry doors. The lap siding has been removed and changed to cement board with battens, and brick has been added to surround all the garage doors and turn the corners. Building C has an additional walk-up unit and the main entry faces the street as well. The robust planting plan includes more than twice the required number of plants, including thousands of native perennials within the bioretention areas. They have replaced several of the Honey Locusts on site with Oaks where appropriate and are preserving as much vegetation as possible, including the two Sugar Maples along Sherman Avenue. The Building A green roof plan includes a synthetic turf area in the center of the space for flexible use of both passive and active recreation with substantial plantings around the perimeter to provide separation between the common area and individual units. The trees in those planting areas are aligned with the structural components and include a variety of woody shrubs and flowering perennials. Building C takes a similar approach in design with a central gathering area orienting views out towards Yahara River with landscaping buffers.

The Commission discussed the following:

- Are those patios facing Sherman Avenue private to a certain unit, or are they for everybody that lives in that building? The ones that are closer to grade.
  - Those are all individual units on the ground floor.
- They feel very exposed. You're going to see grills, personal effects, it feels like maybe those walls or something need to be taller around there to give the occupants more privacy. I think I have the exact same comment on the townhouses.

- The townhouses still really look commercial, the scale of the windows, there's something about them, a lot of gray, flat; the pattern of the mullions reminds me of an office building downtown. And again those patios are very exposed, you're seeing not only the patio but all the way into the units. I like to see a lot of natural sunlight going in there, but they're still really exposed and the materials feel very commercial still, it's very cold.
- I agree 100 percent on the townhouses, it almost looks like a government building, nothing about this says residential, I don't know if it's the scale or materials, or a combination of both. I don't think it's a match to the multi-family buildings but they're so far away from those in design that it's just a huge disconnect. I'm not getting anything residential from these buildings, I feel like they were closer last time. I agree with the privacy issue on the patios. Otherwise the other buildings look good. My main concerns are about the design and materials of the townhomes. On Sherman, where are the doors to these patios? Can somebody just walk right up to that patio, there's no protection or barrier?
  - These two are open, the ones at the other wing, because the grade falls away they do have walls in the front, these two don't.
- Even if it was a gate with a shorter wall or something that gives you a "this is my space" type feel would be better.
- Has this gone to Plan Commission and been sent back to us? I'm confused on what we should be commenting on and would like a little help.
- (Secretary) We have seen this and did make an advisory recommendation to the Plan Commission with a number of conditions. Ultimately the Plan Commission adopted those as formal conditions of approval and our review purview tonight is limited to those items. I'm hearing discussion on #1, the townhomes, and #5, which is more activation of Building A on Sherman. Tonight we'd just be running through that list and checking those boxes.
- Looking at the staff report there are eight bullet points, but they are really focused on landscaping, green roofs, and of course the design of the townhouses.
- Going through the townhouse drawings...I think the backs are a little less successful because of the amount of building above the windows. It almost looks like there is a huge parapet there. The street facing ones, I'm not sure what the concern is from Lois and Rafeeq exactly, but I do think the scale of those buildings is residential. It might be the colors or the way the materials are detailed. Looking at the street elevation, because of the rhythm, the height and the clear delineate of units along the façade, I definitely think they come off as residential townhouses and I certainly don't advocate the designers making them look like they were designed at different times by different architects. If there is more work to be done it should be rather clear as to what that is, what changes need to be done because we signed off on the basic massing and siting of the buildings. It could very well be a matter of bringing a railing on top of the low wall to delineate private space, and adding some landscaping up there to make it more protected and soften it.
- I don't think it's the scale of the building, I think it's everything else.
- Could it be maybe the sort of a cornice at the top that makes it look a little commercial? Could it be some of those design cues making it look like more of a commercial building?
- I think it's that, it's the rhythm of the large openings, the materials, everything else. When you go super modern, this little thin profile for the entry canopy, it's hard to get residential with modern, with this kind of monochromatic material selection.
- Perhaps it is the huge expanses of glass that make it so exposed and less private.
- This looks not like a townhome I associate in an urban setting, maybe that's the modernistic quality of the design. I'm trying to imagine living there, would I want to hang out in the front yard? No. Fencing or a wall, or a little divider set back so you feel like you have your own space. It looks like a commercial retail thing but it's not. This is a really important design for this street to have that kind of street-facing residential, and it's just not quite there yet.
- Sometimes that privacy is augmented by them being elevated a little bit, so you are not looking right in. Maybe the ones down the street have a bit more of a walk up, but these are pretty flat to the ground.
- I'm trying to put my finger on it. This elevation we're seeing, the way it appears that the two units on the ends have the slightly lower roofline then it pops up for the next four. Maybe it could be that that just reads as a

building with two wings on the side, maybe it needs more vertical distinguishing of each unit, which is how I think of a townhouse, repetition in there together. I kept going back to the old version, you had one level roofline but popped out the three. There's not a lot of difference, you still have the panels and battens, it could be the scale of those and the material. The material doesn't have a lot of interest or pedestrian scale there. I think it's a scale issue with the size of the windows, the punched big window with where the mullions are and the large expanses of hardboard or panel, then the massing overall where it's one big thing that's divided into essentially three pieces.

- All of it being kind of monochromatic doesn't help much.
- I want to point out when you look at the landscape there are ornamental trees and vegetation that really anchors this in the landscape, unlike what we're viewing on the screen right now. In particular those corners are just begging for an ornamental tree to anchor them and that's what is on the landscape plan. I think the cornice and raised area, being what appears to be centered is one of the bigger problems, it looks very asymmetrical even though so much about it is symmetrical, that gives it the institutional vibe that if it was offset, might be better. I do think the landscape designed, not as rendered, is helpful and is good. Otherwise I think just to comment on the site in general, I think it's very approvable, looking at the checklist. Street activation I'm still pretty happy with, other than maybe our first discussion about the walls containing those patios, from a site perspective that would be the only condition I have. I think the activation is there, the articulation is there, the detail in renderings and green roof is there. I think the planting adjustments were made, it was mentioned some of the planting was saved, I'm still not sure if we have a full understanding of what mature trees may be lost by the project, but otherwise I think we're checking most of the boxes.
- Overall the changes are appreciated. I had some problems downloading full packages and did not come across the arborist report and tree saving plan, but it appears it was addressed. I know they were working with Bruce Alison on that, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed that efforts were made to preserve as many mature trees as possible. Appreciate swapping out honey locusts with some oak trees for future generations. There was interesting work done on the green roof areas with some more non-traditional type of plants we usually see in there. The activation of Building A to the street goes a long way towards doing exactly that and makes a more vibrant and dynamic streetscape. Addressing these townhomes, I don't think I have as much problem with them as some of the Commissioners. Last time people were mainly concerned with material issues, comments about lap siding on the back half of these. Everybody is right, these do not read as residential, but people are thinking of residential in pretty traditional terms. Clearly this is not that. This would be appealing to myself and a lot of people would like the look of it, the large windows and general feel of the building. It certainly is different. I can't think of any other projects we've seen with this type of townhouse. Viva la difference, not for everybody but fairly attractive. The trouble with some of these renderings are that they don't really accurately show the planting designs, and that goes a long way to allaying some of the concerns people had. The front patios regardless are very exposed, if those low walls can come up another eighteen inches or so would be very welcome and would make them feel much more private. If there was a fairly open and airy pergola, it would make it look less commercial and have a more residential feel, and give shelter from a very exposed area to the sun and south. Nothing says institutional or commercial like a lot of taupe and beige colors. I don't see any reason why the panel parts of those couldn't be something with a little bit more color, or more than one color stretching the span of the building to differentiate one unit from another.
- I'm looking for a motion that addresses the eight points in the staff report. We have to give them definite direction, the Plan Commission had put this back in our lap at our request. Other than the building and the privacy concerns about the individual unit terraces, are there any concerns about the wayfinding, site connectivity, landscaping, green roofs? That was like three, four or five of the bullet points. Item #7 was more renderings and details, which we have. Traffic calming, pedestrian connectivity, landscape plan, and roof terraces.
- I admittedly never look at landscape plans, Shane and Christian do a very good job of that, so I focus on the architecture. In looking at the streetscape in front of the townhomes, I agree more trees here would help with the scale. Colors could help, differentiating where one unit ends and one begins, whether in color variation of material change or even plane change, some of those would help this image. Based on Shane's comments the

plans look pretty good but it's just not coming through in the rendering. I don't have an issue with those other bullets regarding wayfinding and things like that.

- I missed the point about traffic calming. I would mention to potentially narrow the street as it hits Sherman, similar to how they have it on Johnson Street where it comes in at the corners to protect where cars are parked, then you don't have cars parking too close to the intersection. I would say to narrow the street as it approaches Sherman Avenue as a traffic calming possibility.
- (Secretary) We need to be careful about designing the public right-of-way, ultimately that is up to Public Works and City Engineering. I think we can make suggestions and recommendations on refining the design or narrowing it, but we absolutely cannot require anything having to do with street design.
- It asks us to include traffic calming on the new street, so I did.
- They flare those corners out all the time.
- So it looks like there was still concern on Item #1, the development of the townhouses and how A and C address the new street. There is concern on how A addresses the street, C is ok. That's conditions 1 and 2. Lois had a suggestion on street calming. That's 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, would those be considered successfully addressed?
- Yes and one more, we did mention connectivity of all the buildings to the dog park. I would also recommend to the City, if we can, make a raised tabletop or something in one or two locations where pedestrians are most likely to cross that new city street just because there are bends in it and there is parking on both sides and if we are wanting people from Buildings A and C to use the dog park, we should provide a safe place for them to cross, maybe the site plan image is enough, maybe that's all it takes, crosswalks in strategic locations.
- Looking for a motion that gives a direction of items of the 8 that are ok, that do not need other consideration and those that might. And those that might, it would help staff and the applicant to be as specific as possible as to what shortcomings there might be.
- A motion noting we feel the items that have been brought back have been addressed, with exception of delving into increasing privacy with Building A porches facing Sherman Avenue, either by architecture or landscaping or both (Condition 2), and that the design of the townhouses (Condition 1), specifically the two facing the public street be refined addressing similar concerns about privacy issues of the front porches, but also considerations of materials and colors to lend a more traditionally residential feel to them. The applicant can take previous comments on how to tweak it a little more.
- Is this motion for referral?
- I guess from a procedural standpoint that would be what it would be.
- Does the motion find items 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8 accepted and item 4 is traffic calming, which there were some suggestions made?
- I don't have the printed list of all those numbers, I'm not sure exactly what those are. I thought that going through them all we felt they had largely been addressed other than the items I mentioned (Conditions 1 and 2).

## Action

On a motion by Harper, seconded by Braun-Oddo, the Urban Design Commission **REFERRED** consideration of this item. The motion was passed on a unanimous vote of (6-0). The motion provided for the following conditions:

- The motion finds that conditions 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 have been addressed.
- With regard to Condition 1, the design of the townhouses shall be refined with similar concerns about privacy issues of the front porches, but also consideration of materials and colors to lend a more traditionally residential feel.
- With regard to Condition 2, delving into resolving privacy issues with Building A porches facing Sherman Avenue, either by landscaping, architecture or both.