

Chicago's Missing Middle housing initiative aims too low



A rendering of a proposed project in Chicago's Morgan Park neighborhood.
City of Chicago

BY EDWARD KEEGAN

For better or worse, the city of Chicago's Missing Middle Infill Housing Initiative is finally up and running. Originally conceived by then-Mayor Lori Lightfoot's Department of Planning and Development, the Chicago Architecture Center was asked to sponsor a competition and exhibition that would identify good design from vetted architects that could be replicated across the South and West sides on vacant city-owned lots. But while Mayor Brandon Johnson has continued the general outlines — and name — of the initiative, the early results are alarming.

The Missing Middle is intended as an urban repair project. Cities function best when their blocks are full — full of buildings, full of residents, full of prosperity and opportunity. But decades of disinvestment have left many neighborhoods with a lot of emptiness — both literal and metaphoric. The vacant lots are concrete evidence of disinvestment and civic failure.

DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies has estimated that Chicago has 8,800 vacant lots. This reflects the city's population decline from 3.6 million residents in 1950 to 2.7 million today. But the city holds a strong hand to launch a corrective: At the start of the Missing Middle initiative, the city acknowledged its ownership of more than 7,000 of these vacant lots.

Properly filling these lots requires very specific types of buildings that don't often get a lot of architectural attention. But it's these modestly scaled structures — six-flats, two- and three-flats, rowhouses and single-family homes — that most affect the scale and texture of our neighborhoods. Providing well-designed infill buildings across these South and West Side communities is a necessary next step to creating a vibrant Chicago in the 21st century.

Johnson's Department of Planning and Development recently announced the second round of buildings to be constructed under the Missing Middle initiative. These were added to five designs for three dozen sites in the North Lawndale neighborhood with some 110 units that were revealed earlier this year.

The first group of proposals contains developments by Missing Middle Chicago LLC, Westside Community Group, Citizens Building a Better Community (CBBC), Beauty for Ashes Developers LLC and Sunshine Management. One of the five proposes uninspired gable-roofed three-flats, and three will provide the same run-of-the-mill two- and three-flats that have spread like kudzu across many Chicago neighborhoods in the past few decades. Only one proposal holds some aesthetic promise — Beauty for Ashes' two-flats. Designed by locally based DAAM, their smartly articulated masses hold their own with Chicago's more traditional masonry two- and three-flats while being forthrightly contemporary.

The second round will see six minority-led development teams build 30 multiunit buildings in the Chatham, South Chicago and Morgan Park neighborhoods, providing a total of 108 market rate units. This bunch will bring to these neighborhoods six similarly dull designs by Famor LLC, Far South CDC, NHS Redevelopment Corp., Project Simeon 2000, Superior Source Capital LLC and Toro Construction Corp.

An important aspect of the Missing Middle initiative is to provide affordable home ownership and rental opportunities in these communities. The program is structured as an investment by Chicago for Chicago. Land is sold to developers for a single dollar, with grants up to \$150,000 for each completed unit and, when necessary, increased zoning to support multifamily properties.

This is a worthwhile venture, but as the city invests, it has the responsibility to do it well. With investment comes leverage, but the city is allowing subpar design to flourish when it has the opportunity to foster better design. Unlike the designs proposed by the Chicago Architecture Center, almost all the designs that, to date, the city has chosen show little to no architectural ambition.

The CAC-backed design competition in 2023 and resulting exhibit promised designs that are a cut above these dismal market-rate structures that have blighted many neighborhoods in recent years. The CAC chose four winners — one in each category of six-flats, two- and three-flats, rowhouses and single-family homes. More importantly, they identified 32 entries that represented best practices for these categories. These include some esteemed Chicago firms such as Canopy / Architecture and Design; Dirk Denison Architects; ParkFowler Plus; Future Firm; Krueck Sexton Partners; Latent; and Valerio Dewalt Train. And some nationally and internationally acclaimed firms also participated: San Francisco-based David Baker Architects; Mexico City-based Tatiana Bilbao ESTUDIO; Boston-based Höweler + Yoon; Boston-based NADAAA; New York-based MOS; and Los Angeles-based Lorcan O’Herlihy Architects.

Any of these designer’s proposals — and this is not a complete list — would be preferable to the drab and uninspired designs that the city is now moving forward for construction. For an initiative that began with all the best intentions, the initial results promise so much less. When only one of the 11 designs selected so far shows any kind of inspiration or aspiration, we are looking at a project destined to fail from its dreadfully low expectations.

At least two local firms that participated in the Missing Middle competition and exhibition are moving forward with similar projects outside the city’s initiative. ParkFowler Plus is currently working with Domus Group to build 72 infill units in the Illinois Medical District using a refinement of its CAC competition-winning six-flat design. And Krueck Sexton Partners recently announced a new variation on the six-flat that will be built in the Pilsen neighborhood by Ellaree Development Corp. While not directly derived from its “Missing Middle” entry, the Quarry House 1845 proposal will place 16 residential units on a double-wide lot and is clearly inspired by the CAC effort. It offers an appealing alternative to the designs that the city has approved thus far.

The current state of Johnson's Missing Middle initiative is dispiriting. It seems to have rejected the work completed for the CAC's competition — work that represents a broad swath of contemporary design thinking from 32 talented firms. Each firm has invested a good bit of sweat equity in the hopes that many, perhaps even all, might add their designs to Chicago's open-air gallery of architecture.

There's no need to simply toss these well-formed plans in the trash. The mayor is presently building architectural blight, and there's no good reason for it, except it's expedient and profitable for the builders. And the cost will be high: We'll be left with overall ugliness for generations to come.

Chicago deserves better, and it's particularly egregious when the process started with high architectural aspirations.

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