

Jonathan Grothe, architect for Frogtown Square development

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Frogtown Square, Feb. 1, 2011

Q What kind of cues did you take from University Avenue.....

A It was decided early on that we would carry more towards an art deco theme since the art deco theme is very prevalent along the Avenue. So we were trying to continue that basic idea without trying to replicate it and do a poor job. It's more of doing a modern interpretation of an art deco building.

Q Are there any particular buildings or features.....

A Not a specific thing but there are a number of buildings down the Avenue that we kind of took cues from – some of the detailing over the bay windows in the units, the corner element being circular and kind of stepping back. We wanted to bring some character to the corner and a little more vibrancy. There are some things we did with lighting and the tower element at the corner that tried to bring attention to it rather than just being a building that's there.

Q Designing...practical considerations....

A We did a few things to try and give direct access to the transportation area. Because the building itself for the housing has its entrance on the parking lot side and sort of the back side, we still have some other access points so the seniors have a way to come down and be able to directly access the transportation area. The other is we wanted to try and have some kind of services that seniors could utilize – coffee shop, haircutting places, that type of thing that are directly accessible to them. We're hoping a market comes in here, so that they can come down and have everything basically contained within the building.

Q Challenges with the footprint....

A We started with the whole first floor being retail and as we progressed on it was found at this point we couldn't justify that much retail so this portion of the housing came down so we ended up with a community room and an entrance and more living spaces on first floor than what was initially designed, which opened up for having an outdoor patio on the first floor and some other things that way. Otherwise we had planned for the corner to actually be the community room on second floor, overlooking the busy Avenue corners.

Q Basic specs....

A The senior housing portion – we have a large community room that's able to handle 60, 70 people, which will be used for the neighborhood areas also. NEDU will do some meetings here and so on and it's open to the public that way. We have a nice fireside room or library, area for cards and playing games and an area for the residents to receive their mail. And then we have 50 units of housing and the total of the senior housing portion is right around 50,000 square feet and we have about 10,000 square feet of retail, and I believe that's split into 7 different sections that are mostly accounted for.

Q Any other thoughts.....

A I think some of the amenities are just trying to bring a vibrancy to the Avenue. Like I said, we did some things with lighting to try and draw attention to the building. There was a negative connotation about what happened with the Rondo Library so we didn't want to fall short of an initial idea there. And we wanted to bring people down to the first floor, also. We have areas in front along University for a coffee shop or so on to be able to have outdoor dining right on the Avenue and right at Dale and University the restaurant will have outdoor dining space. So we're trying to bring people and bring a vibrancy to the street level and not just be cars passing by.

Q Any issue with the site itself....

A I don't know that we had so much for bad soils. We had to do an underground retention pond area because we want to collect the surface water from draining directly into the sewer system. We also have, I believe, 78 geothermal wells drilled in the surrounding area here so we're collecting heat from the ground and utilizing that to lower our use of power to keep the buildings cool and warm. So we've done a number of things like that with the surface.

Q Any zoning changes....

A I don't believe we did anything zoning-wise. I think if anything, right now the approach from the central corridor group is to get higher density. And we're probably at the lowest density they wanted on this site but we needed to start at some point that we could make it work and then build from here instead of putting too much in and finding it empty.