

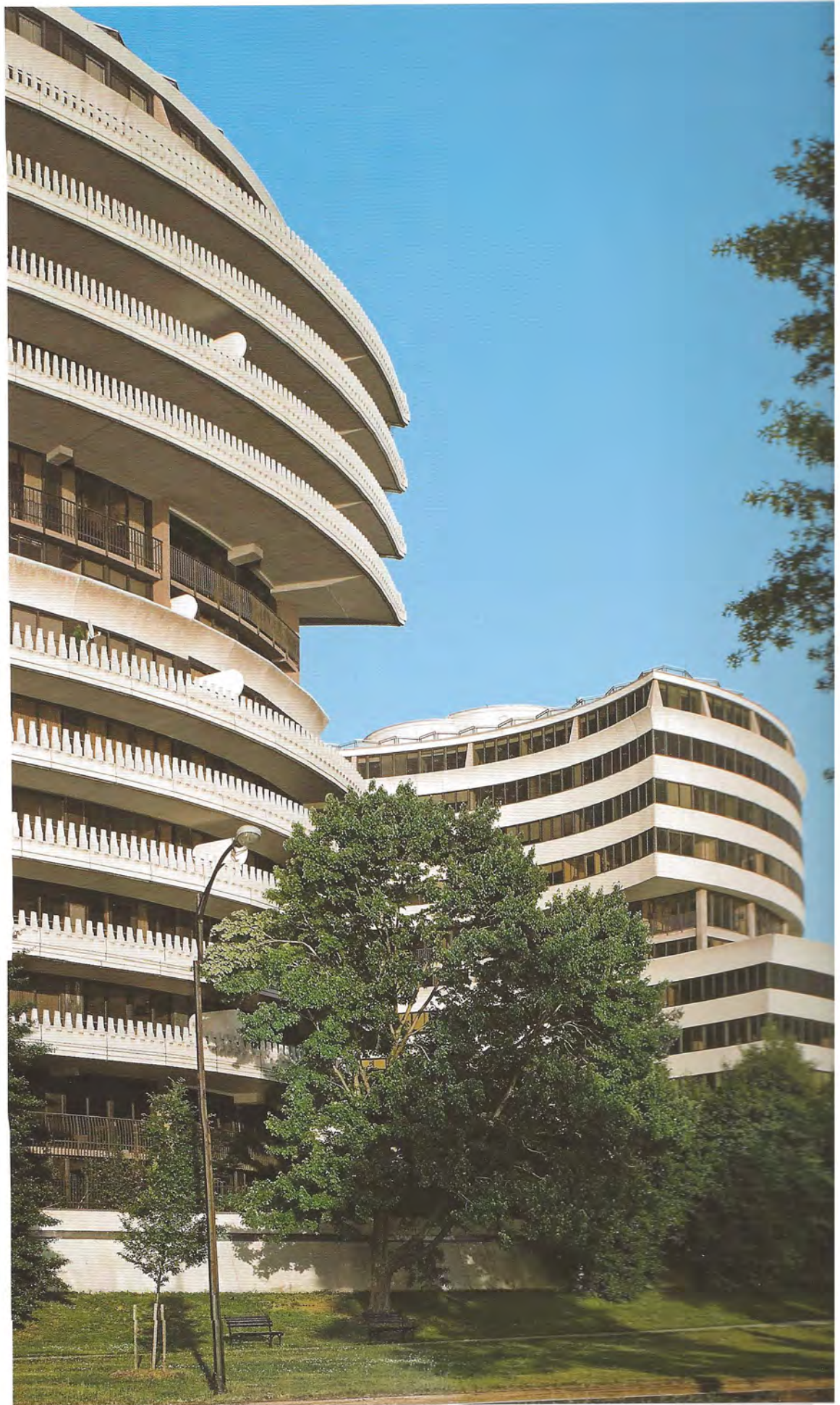
The Italian Legacy in Washington, D.C.

Architecture, Design, Art and Culture



Italian influence in Washington did not end with the final eclipse of Classicism. In the second half of the twentieth century at least two other noted Italian architects met with success in the city. We are referring to Luigi Moretti, architect of the Watergate Complex, built in the 1960s, and to Piero Sartogo, who designed the Chancery of the Italian Embassy. The Watergate (1961–63), designed by Moretti along with the studio of Corning, Elmore, Fisher & Moore, was built exactly ten years after his building on Corso Italia in Milan, one of Moretti's masterpieces. These were the international years for the Italian architect. In the same period he designed the Stock Exchange Tower in Montreal and immediately afterward was asked to design buildings in the Holy Land, in Kuwait, and in Algeria. In 1971, he was asked to design the Madrid exhibition. The Watergate Complex, made famous by the scandal that toppled the Richard Nixon presidency, is characterized by its curvilinear design. While not matching their elegance, it has a number of important precedents: the eighteenth-century Royal Crescent in Bath, Le Corbusier's projects for the large residential units planned for Algiers, and perhaps even the New York Guggenheim. These were not kind years for facades. Just think of the coeval works of American architects such as Minoru Yamasaki or Edward Durrell Stone. But in the Watergate they are treated like a single, colossal molding, expanding the plasticity of Baroque lines onto the urban scale with expressionist effects. Nevertheless, our positive judgment of the Watergate Complex is not limited to its curves. We also admire the power of its space-enclosing volumes and their capacity to highlight a large public space on the urban scale. Even more, we are impressed by its relationship with the landscape, which slopes gently down to the river.

Watergate Complex, detail of the Potomac side.





Interview with Giuseppe Cecchi, Developer of the Watergate Complex June 15, 2007

This interview is part of a research project titled "The American Architecture of Luigi Moretti," conducted by architect Luisa Vecchione for the 22nd cycle of the Architectural History and Criticism Doctoral Program directed by Professor Giosi Amirante at the "Luigi Vanvitelli" School of Architecture, Second University of Naples.

The Watergate Complex was developed by the Italian firm Società Generale Immobiliare, which began its activities abroad in the late 1950s. Its American affiliate, Ediltecnico S.p.A., was founded in Washington, D.C. in 1961 under the direction of Giuseppe Cecchi. He chose a site along the Potomac that had been overlooked by American developers for his innovative project, based on the brilliant plans of architect Luigi Moretti. The complex was built in the 1960s on a lot adjacent to the future site of the Kennedy Center, begun in 1964, and includes offices, luxury apartments, a hotel and stores with a view of the river and the Virginia woodlands. Giuseppe Cecchi, currently president of the IDI Group, a leading construction firm, was the protagonist of this grand project. With his voice still full of youthful enthusiasm, he graciously provided an inside view of the work and spoke of his relationship with Moretti in a telephone conversation with the author.

LV. What was your job at the time?

GC. I was the manager of a company called Ediltecnico, an affiliate of the Società Generale Immobiliare, and was in charge of design coordination and construction management, the technical aspects of the project.

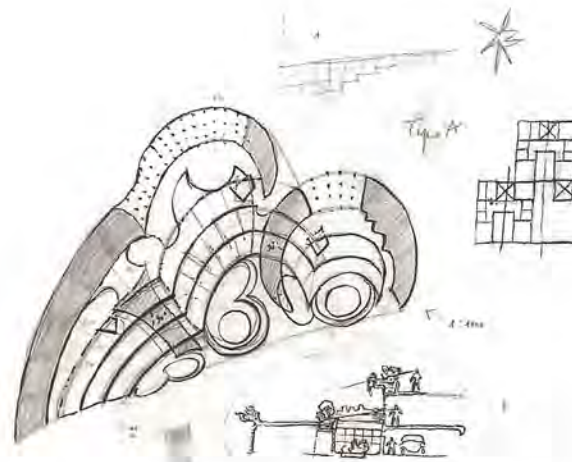
LV. What was the situation in Washington in the 1960s?

GC. Up until 1960, you could only build commercial, office, hotel, or residential units in separately zoned areas. The city did not have a zoning for mixed-use developments. The City Council approved one in 1960 right when we were buying the Watergate site. The new zoning plan allowed mixed-use development on lots larger than 10 acres. The Watergate site was just over 10 acres and so both my firm and the Società Generale Immobiliare, accustomed in Italy to building mixed-use projects in city centers, were immediately taken by this idea and got right to work on it. The Watergate Complex was Washington's first mixed-use project; we put residential co-ops, office buildings, a hotel, and a shopping center all on the same site.

LV. The forms and curves designed by Moretti for the Watergate Complex were something new at the time for the city...

GC. Back then there was a project for the National Cultural Center just adjacent to the Watergate site. The complex was to have a theater, an opera house, and a concert hall. The architect had designed it as three circular buildings connected by circular walkways, so it was a project totally based on curves. When we met with the Planning Commission before developing our project, they told us that the design had to harmonize with the Cultural Center, and this was one of Luigi Moretti's inspirations for creating these curves. Another reason is the nature of the site along the river. Moretti wanted to embrace the green areas along the banks with his buildings. But the main reason was the Planning Commission's directive that the project should interact with the Cultural Center.

Luigi Moretti, sketch of Watergate Complex details.
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LV. ... except the Kennedy Center is rectangular.

GC. Yes. The Cultural Center plans ended up being too expensive. The funds were not available to pay for it. So they sent the architect back to the drawing board and instead of designing three circular buildings Stone conceived a rectangular building with a number of vertical columns. So the curves in the Watergate project were no longer necessary. But Moretti wanted them anyway.

LV. The Washington Post in 1974 sharply criticized the design of the Watergate Complex. What were the impressions and reactions when the complex was completed?

GC. Moretti's architecture was, especially then—because now the city is completely changed—very innovative and different from anything else in Washington. The city was characterized mostly by the neo-Classical architecture of all the governmental buildings, which made up the bulk of the downtown. Typical office buildings were prefabricated rectangles with precast and glass facades and the residential buildings were made of red bricks with square windows and lacked any particularly outstanding architectural features. The talented architects worked exclusively on the design of office buildings, banks, and hotels. Residential architecture was left to minor architects, who put less design effort into it. So when Moretti showed up with his highly innovative architecture there was a lot of reaction. The Fine Arts Commission really put us through the wringer. We had to go through three different agencies to get the project approved. First there was the Fine Arts Commission because they have jurisdiction over certain areas of the city—not all, but ours was one of them. Another was the Planning Commission, which was more progressively oriented and encouraged this type of architecture. And then we had to get final approval from the Zoning Commission, which was composed of three members. You see, at that time Washington did not have a mayor or a City Council. It was a federal district and was governed by three federal commissioners, who also made up the Zoning Commission. So it took us two years to get approval because the commissions all had different visions. The Planning Commission was in favor of the project, while the Fine Arts Commission was against that kind of architecture.

LV. According to Harold A. Lewis, author of the Planned Urban Development provision of the 1958 DC zoning code and one of the members of the National Capital Planning Commission, "There is no question in my mind that Watergate has a special character—that it really is unique. But I also am convinced that there is no question but that the principles of urban design and planning embodied in Watergate offer valuable lessons to cities, to developers, and to homeowners, that can be applied generally." How much influence has the

Watergate Complex had on subsequent zoning plans in the United States? What role has it played and what effects has it had on the city?

GC. Watergate was the first mixed-use project, but many more would follow. Nowadays almost every zoning district encourages mixed-use projects. It has brought innovation to the city of Washington. Previously the downtown was dead at night because it was all office buildings. And then there were the suburban residential areas that were dead during the day. But today, all cities seek to integrate functions, reduce automobile need and bring services within walking distance. Today there is a very strong thrust to design integrated mixed-use projects.

LV. Has the Watergate had any influence architecturally?

GC. In terms of urban planning it helped pave the way for the development of other multi-function buildings. In terms of architecture, there were a few attempts at imitation in a couple of buildings in the Washington area, where the architects were inspired by Moretti's example. Some adopted the continuous balconies and dentils, but the Watergate has remained a unique architectural model here in the city of Washington.

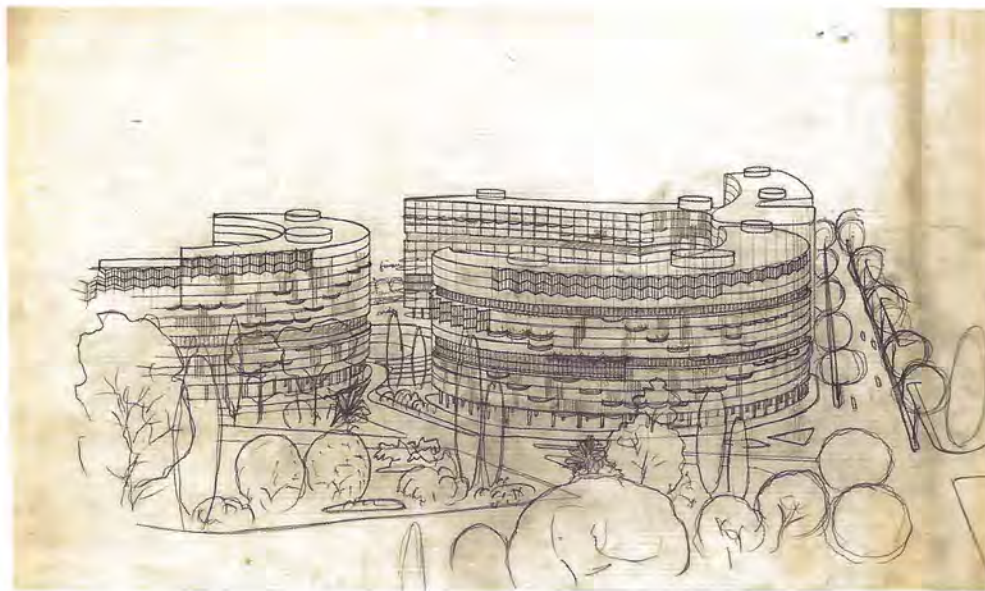
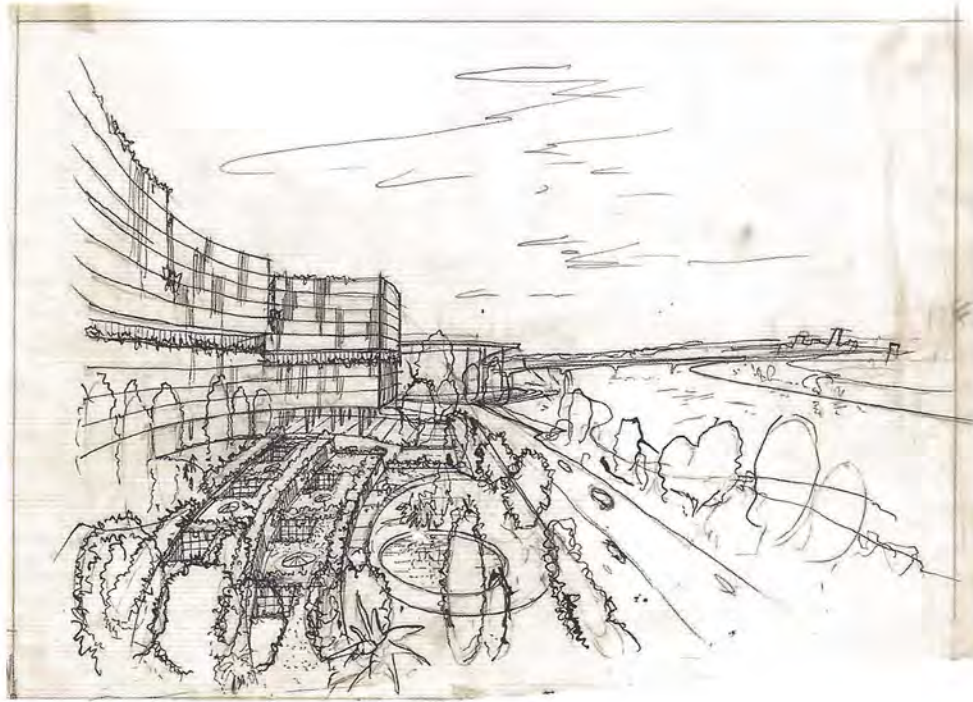
LV. Gio Ponti wrote in 1964: "This architecture by Moretti is not the 'importation' onto American soil of a modern European architect's conformist way of 'doing architecture'; it is instead the fruit of a European, an Italian, way of conceiving architecture in relation to the place, in relation to the atmosphere in which it will rise up." What is European in its design, and what is American?

GC. The construction was Americanized, but Moretti's design is totally non-American. I have never seen anything else like it in America. You might look to Gaudí for its inspiration. Moretti was a great admirer of Gaudí, he always talked about him...

LV. What was your experience working with Moretti?

GC. It was very difficult working with Luigi Moretti. Moretti designed in the Italian mode; all the plans came to us over here in meters. In Italy, architectural design was mainly an artistic expression. The architect drew up the plans and then the details of the technical systems and all the rest were worked out during construction. In the United States there was a completely different approach that demanded extreme detail. Architectural design was followed by design of mechanical systems, air conditioning, water supply, the electrical system, etc. Everything was designed down to the last rivet and screw so that everything could be perfectly coordinated, the holes could be pre-drilled according to designs and not done during the construction phase. So the detailed plans were drawn up by an American associate we paired up with Moretti. Moretti worked with the American architect Milton Fisher to come up with the working drawings. Naturally, the relationship between Moretti and Fisher was always difficult. Moretti designed the curves but they weren't calculated curves. He would draw them and then someone would have to see if they could be calculated. We had to use computers for this, and it was one of the first times computers were applied to construction, to make the curved panels. The first building was a sort of experiment, but the others went up really well because we had organized ourselves so we could transform Moretti's architecture into plans that could be built in America with American methods. Moretti would not allow the slightest modification to his designs, and so when he came to visit—and he came fairly often with his assistants—we always got into arguments because even though we did our best to stick to his designs, the mere fact of having to convert the measurements created the possibility of small deviations. Moretti was very rigid. He absolutely did not want any deviations from his plans and this was another difficult as-

Luigi Moretti, sketch of the Potomac side of the Watergate Complex and overall view.
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pect of the project. In part of the ground floor the buildings are open, that is, you see the pillars. Moretti had designed these pillars in such a way that they didn't have anything to do with the interior layout of the buildings. These pillars were the fruit of the architectural composition of the ground floor, where they were visible to the eye; but then they penetrated on up through the building and in certain cases they did not correspond to the apartments layout, which had been designed without accounting for the placement of the pillars. This was a whole different [part of Moretti's design] that we had to compromise. In the first building we had to modify a great number of apartment layouts so that the pillars could go up through the building. In the other buildings this was all coordinated on the drawing board before we got the plans. It was all a very interesting experience. Moretti was a genius and created extraordinary things, and so even if it was a difficult job, in the end we managed to do it and I think that he too, when it was all finished, was very happy with the result.

LV. In October 2005, the Watergate Complex was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In reference to Criterion C of the Register, we read: "Having had no major alterations and few minor alterations since its completion in 1971, Watergate possesses a high level of historic integrity, more than sufficient to convey, represent and contain the values and qualities for which it is significant. The property possesses a high level of integrity on all seven of the aspects of integrity required for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, including location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association [with the political events that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon]." How much did its political significance, in relation to the Nixon scandal, weigh in here? I mean, were the reasons for attributing historic significance to it more political or architectural?

GC. It all grew out of a dispute actually. The Watergate Complex was originally composed of three buildings of residential cooperatives (condominiums did not yet exist), a hotel, and two office buildings. The hotel was quite successful at the beginning, but in the last twenty years business was declining and the owners decided to sell it. A number of local real estate entrepreneurs put in bids for it, including myself, but my bid fell short of the selling price. Another group bought it with the intention of converting it into condominiums, but the three Watergate co-ops were opposed to having more condominiums and perhaps students from the nearby university as occupants. A rather heated dispute arose between the new hotel owners and the co-ops. In order to prevent the conversion, the co-ops pressed to have the Watergate Complex listed in the National Register of Historic Places, because in this case there are many constraints as to what you can do with it.

Luigi Moretti
Watergate Complex
Washington
1960–1971



One of the large curving residential units
looking out over the Potomac River.

Detail of the facade and balconies.



Designed by the Roman architect Luigi Moretti in the period between 1960 and 1971, the Watergate Complex represents both one of the most significant and also one of the most controversial works in the recent history of Washington, D.C. Standing on the banks of the Potomac just a few blocks from the National Mall, it is one of the first truly modern buildings in a city characterized by Classical and Beaux-Arts architecture.

Built by the Italian firm Società Generale Immobiliare, the Watergate, comprising six buildings with apartments, offices, shops, and a hotel, was closely scrutinized by the authorities responsible for the architectural quality of the capital, who sought to make sure that the complex would integrate well with the city's principal urban landmarks. The result was a slow and complex process bogged down by difficult negotiations regarding heights and volumes. As a result, the

Watergate Complex was not completed until 1971.

The materials used by Moretti, the variable and curving geometries making sophisticated reference to the Roman Baroque style and Moretti's earlier studies of organic forms, the variety of functions in Washington's first mixed-use project, and the richness of design all contribute to making it one of the most recognized modern monuments in the capital.





Details of the Watergate Complex.



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