
DECISION

of the District of Columbia

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD in Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 04-06

The Watergate Complex

2500, 2600, 2650, 2700 Virginia Avenue and 600 and 700 New Hampshire Avenue, NW
(Square 8, Lots 806, 807, 808, 809, 811 and 812)

The Historic Preservation Review Board, having held a public hearing on February 24, 2005 on the application for historic designation of the property known as the Watergate or the Watergate Complex (and originally as Watergate Towne), 2500, 2600, 2650 and 2700 Virginia Avenue and 600 and 700 New Hampshire Avenue, NW, hereby designates the property a historic landmark to be entered in the *District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites* and requests that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing.

The Watergate complex was constructed between 1964 and 1971, specifically:

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| • 1964 | Watergate East, 2500 Virginia Ave. | 13-story residential |
| • 1966-67 | 2600 Virginia Avenue | 11-story office |
| • 1966-67 | Watergate Hotel, | 13-story hotel |
| • 1967 | Watergate West, 2700 Virginia Ave. | 13-story residential |
| • 1969-71 | Watergate South, 700 New Hampshire Ave. | 14-story residential |
| • 1969-71 | 600 New Hampshire Avenue | 12-story office |

The complex's design was conceived by 1961, but it developed gradually. With a fair amount of initial opposition from the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission over height and density, the plan evolved until 1968, and the project was substantially complete in 1971.

The application makes a compelling case for the special nature of the "Watergate Towne" project. The project is certainly unusual in that all six large buildings are connected *via* underground garages and some hyphens on the surface, and they are collectively considered one building for zoning purposes. The Watergate was one of the first developments to make use of the 1958 revision of the zoning regulations that permitted Planned Unit Developments—projects that typically mixed uses in a way not permitted under existing zoning (and could also permit additional bulk), but also provide special amenities to users. The Watergate project did require rezoning too, but unlike many subsequent planned-unit developments, it required the PUD mechanism for its fine-grained mix of uses, rather than just for the relaxation of bulk requirements. Which is not

to suggest that the complex is not large; it was a private project of unprecedented scale, and surpassed most others for the total bulk of its residential buildings and the number of units.

The size and uniqueness of the project is not to be understood in a vacuum. The project was a private effort to renew an aging largely industrial area. It represented a commitment to the center city when residents were already departing in droves for the suburbs. It was intended to combine urban and suburban amenities and qualities. In its location and orientation, the Watergate also represents something of a modern concept for Washington and many other older cities—namely that its site and orientation take advantage of proximity to and views of the river. This is not without significance when most urban waterfronts, as this one, had been working areas instead of living or recreational ones (with outings along the river generally taking place upriver or down from the highly developed areas). Certainly, there had been other housing near the river; Southwest, in particular, had a multitude of row housing within what had been known as “the Island.” But the Potomac waterfront itself included industrial uses at the mouth of Rock Creek and the wharves along what is now Maine Avenue in Southwest and K Street/Water Street in Georgetown, with warehouses and plants and canals (and *then* houses) behind them. The clearance of both industrial structures and nearby worker housing permitted eventual redevelopment with modernist buildings which opened themselves up to what were essentially new views of a newly appreciated waterway—and new federal parkland. In fact, the west end of the Watergate complex, a corner of the site with little available land, must rely for its views principally on the parkland to its west and south.

Like the renewal of Southwest and many other Modernist plans conceived or implemented elsewhere, the Watergate complex was at once urban and anti-urban. The incorporation of mixed uses produced at least a *somewhat* self-contained and self-sufficient unit. In doing so, it replaced older fabric, did not preserve or perpetuate the established street grid, and took an insular form and location—a “town within the city.” The design presented a solid street wall and created a lot of density within high-rise buildings, but then separated the buildings within the complex by expanses of landscaping for recreation, resulting in only about a third of the land area being built upon. This is a higher proportion of built area than proposed initially—or as proposed in utopian schemes by contemporary architects such as Le Corbusier—but the feeling of space and the effect of the enclosure of substantial space is best understood within the yard bounded by the hotel on the west and the New Hampshire Avenue buildings on the east. Architect Luigi Moretti planned these spaces more on the scale of an urban square, rather than the immense no-man’s-lands of Corbusier.

One can scarcely divorce architecture from site plan in this case, at least because the curvilinear forms of the buildings themselves bound the site and the shape of each building responds and visually connects to the next. While Moretti’s work may be unique, the shapes of the buildings, their materials, and their relationships to each other and to the site are consistent with one strain of mid-twentieth-century Modernism—the embrace of organic forms and the use of the plasticity of concrete to achieve them.

Concrete here is both a structural and a finish material, used in a manner more imaginative than the slab buildings that more nearly typify the bulk of contemporary, Modernist-derived projects of lesser inspiration and perhaps greater constraints of cost.

In short, the Watergate represents a striking departure from the city's grid, from the form, scale, materials and relationships of the city's traditional buildings, and so generally from the precedents of local construction. Indeed, the Watergate was a visually striking addition to a city not known for many important Modernist works. It remains an important visual landmark in the truest and broadest sense.

The Watergate's designer was Luigi Moretti, one of the most important Italian Futurist architects, and it is perhaps his most famous work. Moretti completed several important public commissions under Mussolini, but after the World War II, principally designed apartment buildings in Italy, largely for the Società Generale Immobiliare (he designed the company's Rome headquarters in 1963 as well). The other of Moretti's best known works in North America is Montreal's Exchange Tower, a contemporary of the Watergate. The overall concept of the Watergate complex was consistent not only with the evolution of Modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, but also with the Futurist fascination with the new and with movement. But Moretti was interested in a re-interpretation of the baroque and, as one writer has put it, his treatment of volumes was "*neoplastic*," suggesting that while incorporating diagonals and curves, his purpose was not merely freedom of form, but differentiation of a base, body and top to his buildings. He was also interested in the play of color on a building, highlighted here by the various planes and curves that can be seen from a single vantage point and the coarse aggregate used in the concrete. Similarly, he was trying to produce interesting contrasts of light and shadow. Echoing—but not at all copying—the classical colonnades, porticoes, and loggia with which he would have been intimately familiar, Moretti creates with his unique, toothy balcony projections a substantial screen or balustrade permitting the penetration of light and views, the casting of shadows, and more lively but dramatic lines.

Of course, Moretti was ultimately part of a large design and construction team. One of the remarkable capabilities of the team was computer-assisted design; this was one of the earliest projects to employ computers, in this case, to render and dimension the curved exterior surfaces.

The amended application goes into greater depth about landscape features, identifying the swimming pools, fountains, retaining walls, planters and walks as among other largely original and contributing features. The walls and planters are mainly the surface expression of subterranean structures—the garages and shops. The arrangement of the basin fountains and pools takes advantage of the general slope toward the river, and the placement of these on successive gentle terraces allows unimpeded views toward the river from several vantage points at different elevations. The planting material itself is minimal—perhaps in modernist fashion—and ephemeral. It may be that none of the individual elements in the landscape are sacrosanct if a new landscape plan were to promise enhancement of the existing visual qualities. But the essence of the landscape or

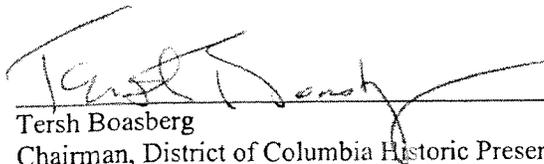
its character-defining features are the extent, shape and openness of the spaces between the buildings, providing their setting and creating their separation; the gentle slope and terracing toward the river; and the provision and orientation of uninterrupted views toward the river and Virginia from the buildings and from within the landscape itself. Moretti himself is more important than the landscape architect Boris Timchenko in crafting this landscape because his buildings' forms carve out, delineate and frame the spaces and vistas—"a scenographic rapport with the surrounding space" characteristic of baroque architecture as well. The landscape here is more important on the large scale than in its smaller details. Elements such as the pools and fountains are nonetheless significant focal points within the landscape.

Finally, one can hardly discuss the Watergate complex or even name it without evoking its notorious position in American history. The Democratic National Committee had first moved to office space in the complex in 1968. During the presidential campaign of 1972, a team of "burglars"—possibly with the direct approval of President Nixon—entered the DNC headquarters in the 2600 Virginia Avenue office building in order to collect information suspected to be possessed by the President's opposition. The subsequent cover-up, investigation and scandal nearly led to the President's impeachment, and did result in his resignation. The consequences were many and important, including general public disillusionment, subsequent electoral success by the Democrats, and a shift in the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches—not to mention the entry of the word "Watergate" and scores of derivative "-gate" scandals and pseudo-scandals into the lexicon. Although the break-ins occurred in only one of the buildings of the complex, it is difficult to conceive of any of the buildings standing alone without the context provided by the others. It is not much of a leap to suggest that in the public's collective mind, the entire complex is the Watergate, and the exact location of the former DNC office is not generally known or not relevant.

The Watergate Hotel itself certainly meets HPRB Criterion A¹ and National Register Criterion A, as the site of a significant, and probably transcendently important, event, namely, the break-ins. It is arguable that it would also qualify for association with an important individual (HPRB Criterion C and NR Criterion B); while Richard Nixon was not present for the break-ins, it is difficult to imagine a site that could be more associated in the minds of the public with the career and reputation of an individual. The complex as a whole meets the criterion as having contributed significantly to the physical development of the city. As a very prominent, rare and unusual example of Modernist planning and architecture in Washington, the Watergate also meets HPRB Criterion D. Similarly, as a product of one of the most influential Italian Modernists, it meets Criterion F as well. Criteria D and F directly relate to National Register Criterion C.

¹ The labeling of the Board's criteria has changed since this nomination was last considered. The new historic preservation regulations put the significance criteria in Section 201.1, subsections (a) through (g). In the future, while it may be a bit confusing because of the similarity with the National Register criteria designations, they will generally be cited as "Criterion A" through "Criterion G." The criterion of integrity is in Section 201.2 of the regulations, and Section 201.3 is the age criterion.

The complex as a whole retains excellent integrity. Despite its being substantially less than 50 years old, sufficient time has passed to permit the evaluation of its historic significance for two reasons. First, the Modern movement came and went quickly, leaving only a handful of significant works in Washington and has since been supplanted by postmodernism and traditional revivals—as well as something of a Modernist revival of the present day, not only allowing appraisal of the era and movement but based upon an appreciation of it. Although there is not an enormous body of scholarship about Luigi Moretti, an extensive monograph has been published, his work has been cited in authoritative references on the period, and he left a substantial body of written theoretical work (as editor of the magazine *Spazio*, for instance) in addition to his realized and unrealized designs. Second, the most important consequences of the Watergate break-ins were apparent within just a few years after the event. It is difficult to believe that any further historical “ripples” will affect the understanding of the building’s role in the events leading to the toppling of the President and the reassertion of Congressional authority—or conversely, that the building itself will shed any further light on the distant repercussions of those events.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tersh Boasberg", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Tersh Boasberg
Chairman, District of Columbia Historic Preservation Review Board