

Watergate: Urban Village With a View

By Linda Wheeler
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Washington is a city of neighborhoods. Some boast of their historic character and others of their cultural diversity. Unusual within the District is a small community that is neither old nor very diverse but is definitely famous. The Watergate, best known for an office burglary that eventually brought down President Richard M. Nixon, is home to about 1,100 people.

The three residential and two commercial buildings that make up the Watergate date from the 1960s when Italian architect Luigi Moretti and officials of the Italian-based real estate company Societa Generale Immobiliare saw the potential for a high-rise planned community on the bank of the Potomac River. More than three decades later, the curvilinear, reinforced concrete buildings have become as much a part of the city landscape as the nearby Kennedy Center.

The Watergate is bounded by Rock Creek Parkway, Virginia Avenue, New Hampshire Avenue and F Street NW.



Henry Winston, an apartment owner, former development company employee, real estate agent and self-styled historian, has kept a scrapbook of the Watergate dating back to 1961 with an exchange of letters between the owner of a nearby restaurant, the Water Gate Inn, and project general manager Giuseppe Cecchi, now a Washington area developer. The restaurant's owner, Marjory Hendricks, knew she was going to lose her building when the federal government built the Kennedy Center but was enthusiastic about becoming a part of the Watergate.

But the Water Gate Inn never made the move to the new complex, Winston said.

"We were very disappointed," he said. "It was a wonderful place with popovers and Pennsylvania Dutch interior. {Hendricks} had a wonderful reputation."

Also lost to the construction of the Kennedy Center and the Watergate was a riding stable, wax museum, natural gas plant and the old Heurich brewery.

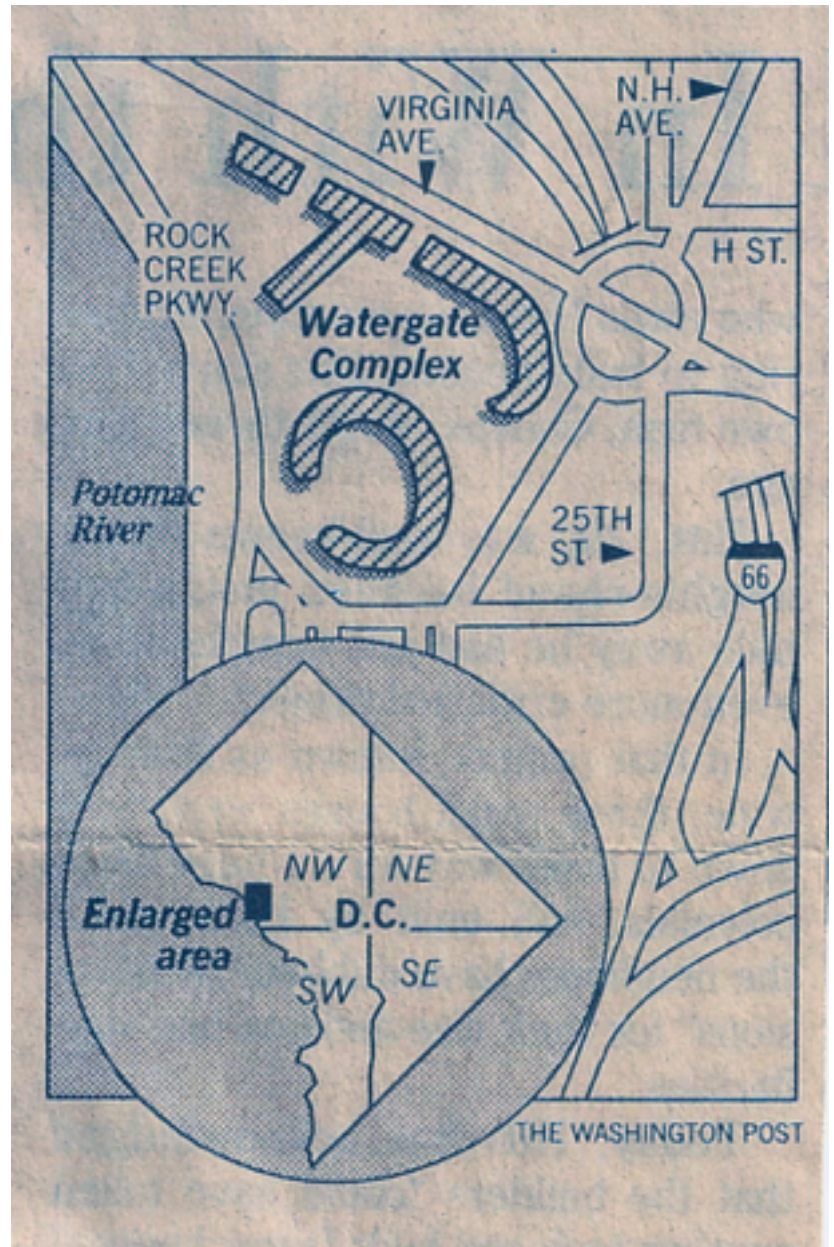
The radical design for the free-flowing buildings, described by one reporter viewing the models in 1963 as resembling the letters I, T, C and a boomerang, met with strong opposition from the Commission of Fine Arts when it was proposed. Worried mostly about the height of the planned complex, the commission forced the developer to scale back the design from 16 to 13 stories. By early 1964, the excavation for the site had begun. The last of the five buildings was finished in 1971.

Besides the expected assortment of Washington professionals who would find the location and amenities ideal, a number of well-known people live at the Watergate, including Sen. Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) and his wife, Elizabeth, head of the American Red Cross. Other prominent residents include Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.) and former defense secretary Casper W. Weinberger.

Although the Water Gate Inn never made the move to the Watergate, the complex did attract several restaurants, a bakery, liquor store, post office, grocery store, designer clothing shop and health club.

These businesses have become a village for one of the few children to live at the Watergate. Three-year-old Brittany Miller and her mother, Susan, make the rounds of the grocery store and pharmacy, pausing to wave at the dry cleaner and saying hello to the bakery staff.

"I was somewhat skeptical about raising a child at Watergate, but the building staff and business people have become one big, extended family for her," said Susan Miller, an executive recruiter for attorneys at a local firm. "The doorman gives her a ride on the luggage cart. Everyone goes out of their way to say, Hello and How are you? to her."



Brittany feeds stale bread to an assortment of pigeons that gather along the walkways outside the restaurants, throws pennies in the central fountain and, in the summer, splashes along with the adults in the community swimming pool.

"She puts on her inner tube and goes out across the pool," Miller said. "She is something of a mascot."

Miller, 41, said she moved to the Watergate from Potomac in 1985. She bought one apartment and when that seemed too small, purchased a three-bedroom, 3 1/2-bath penthouse unit. Her rooftop garden is outfitted as a playground for Brittany, who can swing and slide while looking out at the Potomac River.

The wide, carpeted hallways in the nearby Kennedy Center were an ideal place for Brittany to learn to walk and run, Miller said.

Other residents, Rufus and Patricia Lusk, also like the proximity of the Kennedy Center, but they go there for entertainment. Lusk, whose father founded a real estate information company that bore his name, said the Kennedy Center was one of the reasons they decided to move to the Watergate from the Spring Valley neighborhood.

"The drawing thing was the Kennedy Center within walking distance," he said. "I used to have to fight for parking. Now we just stroll over."

Lusk, 72, said he always seemed to be heading into town for work and events when he lived in upper Northwest. Now that he is retired and living at the Watergate, he can easily walk to favorite museums and restaurants.

"I get to the Mall four times a week," he said. "We are within a mile of the museums. I go to the National Gallery so often that if they change a picture, I notice it."

Lusk, whose family has published most real estate transactions in Washington for most of this century, said information on the sale of shares in cooperative housing, such as that at the Watergate, do not appear as land transactions in District records.

"It used to be frustrating for us," he said. "We would have listings on everything but the Watergate and the other cooperatives. You buy a house, you buy a condo, and a deed is recorded. The only way you can find out about co-ops is through a broker."

Winston, along with his daughter, Gigi Winston, are agents who specialize in the Watergate and they are willing to discuss recent sales there. According to Henry Winston, 72 units have sold in the Watergate in the past 18 months, ranging in price from \$84,000 to \$1.7 million. His firm, called Winston and Winston, has sold 50 of those cooperatives, he said.

Henry Winston said the view and the size of the apartment dictate the price of the 640 units. He said cooperative fees that includes all utilities are figured on the size of the apartment. A 2,000-square-foot apartment would carry a monthly cooperative fee of about \$1,800, he said, which covers utilities, taxes and maintenance.

The Watergate East association refinanced its mortgage recently and was able to buy the land beneath its building as well, Winston said. He said Watergate South and West have yet to purchase their land, but their leases don't expire until 2070.

Winston said there are about 60 apartments on the market now, including one owned by former White House counsel Bernard Nussbaum. The 1,800-square-foot apartment on the fifth floor of Watergate South has a wraparound balcony with views of the Kennedy Center, Potomac River and Georgetown. It is priced at \$649,000.

Others on the market include a 14th floor, 2,280-square-foot penthouse apartment in Watergate East that is on the market for \$350,000. This one overlooks the city, and the flier says it has a great view of the Fourth of July fireworks.

The difference in the cost of the two apartments -- the larger one having the much smaller price tag -- means the view counts, Winston said.

"Way back in the early days when these buildings were going up, everyone said the apartments with the view of the Potomac would sell for more per square foot, and they were right then and they are still right today," he said.

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