

INSIDE: FALL REAL ESTATE

# THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

## REAL ESTATE

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guide

### For Watergate, a golden milestone

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The word "Watergate" brings to mind inexperienced crooks fumbling around in the night, a botched burglary and the resulting fall of an American president.

But as Watergate nears its 50th anniversary, the curving modernist complex in Foggy Bottom is also a symbol of a type of urban renewal that changed the District and remains controversial to this day.

Constructed between 1962 and 1971, the five-building complex conspicuously introduced the District to large-scale mixed-use developments.

Part of the Watergate's approach was to create a variety of buildings that would form a community independent of the surrounding neighborhood. Originally billed as a "city within a city," the Watergate is made up of three residential cooperatives, a hotel and an office building.

The Watergate played an important role in revitalizing the District. At a time when many affluent people were moving to the suburbs, the 10-acre complex brought wealthy residents to Foggy Bottom and helped to trans-



Brian Kaput/The Current

**The complex is credited with pioneering large mixed-use developments in D.C. while moving the waterfront upscale.**



form the formerly industrial Potomac waterfront.

However, other models for urban transformation were also at work at the time.

George Washington University professor Christopher Klemek points to a tension between mixed-use developments and what he calls "bottom-up" urban renewal. In the latter model, wealthy and middle-class families were moving into nearby town houses and renovating them.

Klemek explained that as mixed-use developments became more common, residents established historic districts in order to protect their homes and neighborhoods.

Foggy Bottom was designated a historic district in 1966, four years after construction began on the Watergate. "These two parallel paths continue to be ones that we travel in this and other American cities because sources of capital continue to flow through our real estate markets," said Klemek.

These two forms of urban renewal are also controversial because of their effect on property values.

"Both of these models have the potentially negative impact of pricing out lower-income residents," Klemek continued. "The end game in demographic terms isn't that different."

These two types of gentrification — bottom up and top down — were taking place around the country at the time the Watergate was built. An early example is New York City's Rockefeller Center, completed in 1939, which Klemek called the "godfather" of large

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### WATERGATE: A milestone project

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mixed-use developments. It includes offices, stores and residential apartments as well as the Radio City Music Hall.

In the District in particular, the Watergate was pivotal in establishing the model of mixed-use developments because it was D.C.'s first project to bypass typical zoning restrictions via provisions for a "planned-unit development." This type of project is now common, though often contentious; developers must offset their requested zoning relief by providing amenities to the community. It's rare, though, to see a new project on the same scale as the Watergate, due to the relative lack of land available today.

Now included on the National Register of Historic Places, the Watergate — with its distinctive design and history — stands out as an important symbol in urban development. Its architecture is the brainchild of Italian Luigi Moretti, who also designed Mussolini's forum before World War II. It was meant to harmonize with the Kennedy Center, which was conceived of and built in the modernist style.

Along with the Watergate's distinctive design, Klemek believes the Nixon connection increased its visibility and impact on urban design. "National audiences including developers no doubt noticed this project because of the prominence it received because of the Nixon scandal," he said.

Today, the Watergate appeals to some residents simply because it has the elements of a large, successful mixed-use development. Gaylee Knight, a Watergate East resident, said that she values the amount of open space on the complex.

"On the 10-acre property, only three acres are used for buildings," she said. "That's pretty amazing."

But Knight also said she values the building's history. She helped to organize a 50th-anniversary celebration for the Watergate East last February. More golden-anniversary celebrations are coming soon.

Gaylee described feeling a connection to Watergate's historic role as a forerunner in urban design.

"In 1966 and 1967, residents had construction-watching parties as the last buildings were being completed," she said. "Now they're remodeling the hotel lobby, and we did the same thing."