

BACKGROUND

About Watergate, Washington, DC 50th Anniversary of the Dedication



The Watergate, a unified complex of 6 inter-connected buildings designed and constructed between 1960 and 1971, celebrates the 50th year of the October 27, 1965 dedication throughout 2015.

Its creator, Luigi Moretti, designed Rome's Olympic Village for the 1960 Games, and is considered the most important Italian architect of the 20th century. The Watergate would become Moretti's first and only U.S. project — and Building One (now Watergate East) the only building in the complex where Moretti actually was hands-on.

The undulating Watergate design is still striking today, so it is hard to imagine how modern and stunning it was at a time when Washington was largely a city of Federal landmarks and undistinguished brown buildings.

The triangular site is adjacent to the Potomac River, Rock Creek and Potomac parkways, and Rock Creek Park itself in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood. Moretti called this site "one of the best, if not the best, in Washington." Buildings take different geometric concrete shapes, such as an ellipsis, a polygon, and a rhombus, generating a unique architecture of curves and angles that, together, seem to cruise into the Potomac. The irregularly staggered concrete balconies suggest the decks of a cruise ship. The large, metal-framed windows capture the river and city views. The Watergate West apartment building has a sharp, dramatic projecting corner "bow" at its north end. The heights of the buildings range from 11 to 14 stories, with some upper levels recessed creating an optical illusion of greater height. Mechanical systems on the roofs are disguised by cylindrical, concrete walls—some of which are elliptical—generating a smokestack look, capping the cruise ship effect.

When conceived 5 decades ago, Watergate was the largest privately funded renewal project in Washington, DC – *and* the city's first mixed-use project. The scope was unprecedented too for the nation's capital: a planned urban development of three apartment buildings, two office buildings, a hotel, and a retail plaza for several dozen tenants (along with three levels of underground parking for 1,250 vehicles).

The site covers 10 acres on the eastern edge of Georgetown, near the Mile Zero marker of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. The canal's first lock -- the "water gate" -- gave its name to the project.

In February 1964, ground was broken on the first building: Watergate East. And building it, like designing it, was revolutionary. There were no continuous straight lines anywhere -- horizontally on the floors or vertically on the façade. Because of the complexity of the curved structure, Watergate East was one of the first projects in America built with a precursor of computer-aided drafting (CAD). Watergate East opened in 1965, Watergate West and the Watergate Hotel in 1969 and Watergate South -- the final building -- in 1971. In 2005, Watergate was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

It is a premier example of modern architecture, as well as one of the best-known residential complexes in the world. And with the *Mad Men*-spawned revival of Mid-century Modernism and the rebirth of the American city, what's old is new again.

Apartments range from 800-square-foot studios to 5,000-square-foot penthouses with fireplaces and rooftop terraces. Duplexes fill two of the floors. The typical apartment contains two bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, living room, dining room, and kitchen – often with twice as much square footage as comparable units built today.

Landscape architect Boris Timchenko carried Moretti's vision outdoors with more than 150 modernist planters; fountains tiered like waterfalls; a seven-acre park with three swimming pools; and landscaped roof gardens that offer some of Washington's most breathtaking views.

Although the Watergate residential cooperatives vary in size and location, all share common elements:

- ∞ mid-modern architecture;
- ∞ independent self-governed cooperative;
- ∞ unparalleled views of Potomac River, Washington monuments, and the District of Columbia; and
- ∞ an acknowledgement of our architectural, cultural and political historic significance while recognizing the residences are not museums, but active communities looking and moving forward to the future.

Watergate residences are meeting the challenge of a totally renovated Watergate Hotel by bringing Luigi Moretti's vision into the 21st century.