

Main façade of 5333 Connecticut Avenue, NW.



Geometry and Geography

Slick Modern Building Joins Connecticut Avenue's Apartment House Parade

by Mary Jane Bolle

The stretch of Connecticut Avenue, NW, from Florida Avenue to the District/Maryland line is renowned as the site of one of the country's greatest processions of apartment buildings. Designed in a wide range of styles, they reflect changing tastes, employ diverse building technologies, and exhibit varied relationships to the street and their sites, yet most of them share a certain air of graciousness

that continues to attract residents. A number of them figured prominently in James Goode's popular survey of grand DC apartment buildings, *Best Addresses*.

Until recently, there was one conspicuously vacant large site along the avenue not far from the Maryland line. Decades ago, developer Calvin Cafritz had bought a row of houses on the 5300 block of Connecticut and tore



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them down, expecting to build a single larger building there. Cafritz began to prepare for a Planned Unit Development—a zoning process intended to encourage higher-quality projects by allowing some flexibility in height and density regulations. Those initial plans did not proceed, and the site sat empty until a few years ago, when the Cafritz organization hired **Eric Colbert & Associates** to design a matter-of-right project—one requiring no zoning variances—for the same site.

“Connecticut Avenue is like an architectural history book,” said **Eric Colbert, AIA**. “[It’s] a chronological record of evolving styles over the last 100 years. Our attitude was: ‘What can we add that is a statement of the next style you can experience as you head out from DC?’”

Project: 5333 Connecticut Avenue, NW,
Washington, DC

Architects: **Eric Colbert & Associates, PC**
Canopy Design Architects: **Skidmore, Owings & Merrill**
Interior Designer (Public Spaces): **Jo Fleming**
Landscape Architects: **Parker Rodriguez; Arentz Landscape Architects**
Lighting Designers: **MCLA**
Structural Engineers: **Structura**
MEP Engineers: **Summit Engineering**
Civil Engineers: **VIKA Capitol**
Building Enclosure Consultants: **SGH**
Contractor: **Grunley Construction Company**

View from the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Military Road.





Interior of an apartment unit.

Photo © Greg Hadley



Lounge area off the main lobby.

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View of the rear courtyard from above. Note the diagonal lines cutting across the space.

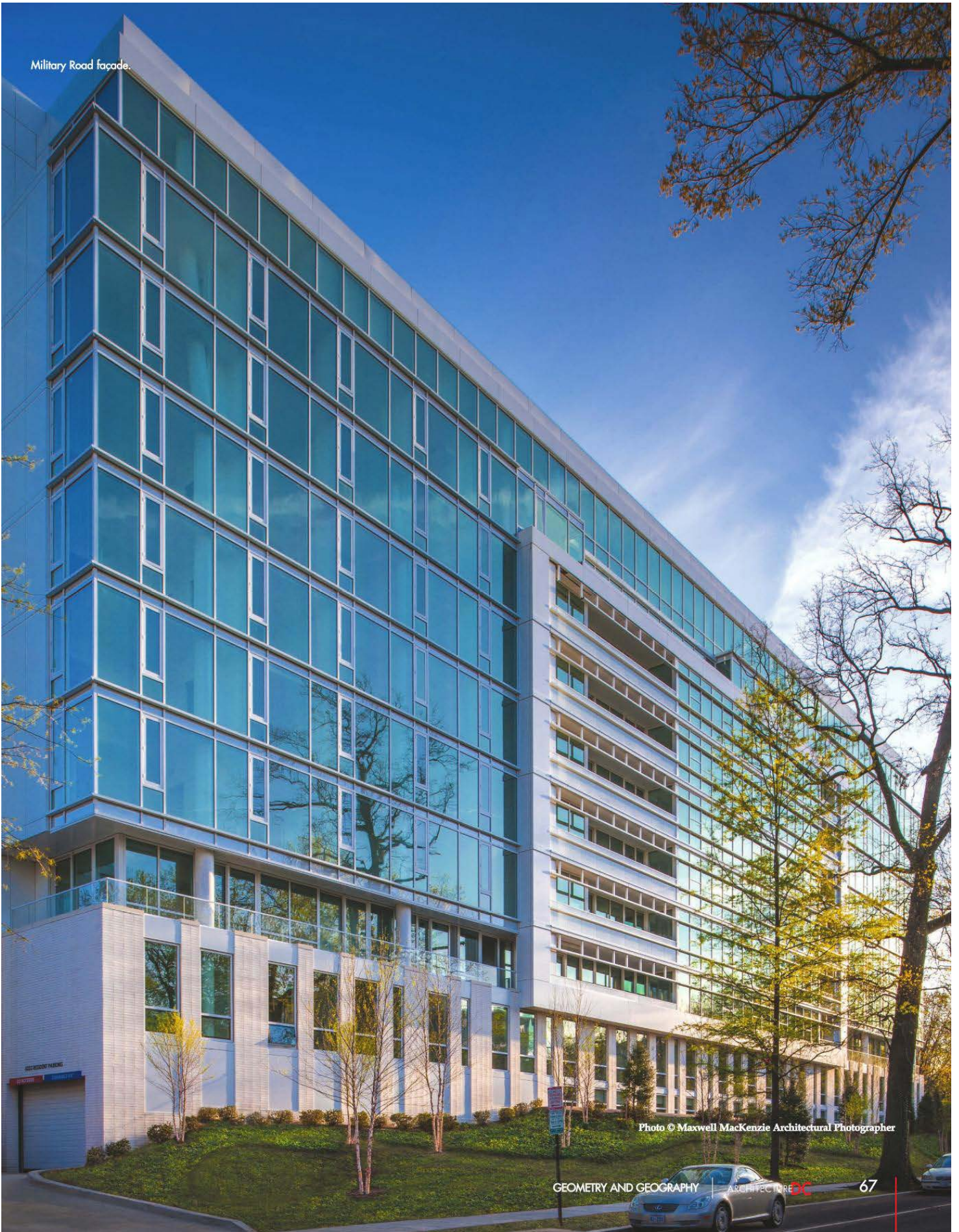
Photo © Jeffrey Sauers

Working with a project team including **Jean-Baptiste Lallement**, **Christena McCabe**, and **Uli Dietz**, Colbert created a distinctly 21st-century building that recalls many aspects of the avenue's historic landmarks. The new project, known simply by its address, 5333 Connecticut Avenue, is a bright essay in glass and white metal. This is no mere plain glass box, however—the façades are highly varied. The street-facing façades are composed of layered grids, with projecting bays and horizontal bands that cast shadows, thus lending depth and interest to the building. The façades lining the rear courtyard, by contrast, are more solid, but still animated by an irregular pattern of windows and balconies.

While the building is utterly fresh in its architectural expression, its plan and massing draw heavily from earlier precedents. It is essentially H-shaped in plan, creating not only a rear courtyard (which serves as a buffer between the building and neighboring single-family houses on the side streets), but also a front entry court much like those of earlier buildings along the avenue. A sleek glass canopy reaches out from the front door to meet a staple of elegant neoclassical and Art Deco apartment buildings: the circular driveway.

In one respect, the plan harks back even further—to the French *hôtels particuliers*, or grand townhouses of the neoclassical period, which often toyed with perceptions of symmetry on irregularly shaped sites. In the case of 5333 Connecticut, the H-shaped plan was adapted to respond to the unique geometry of the lot. The footprint of the building generally adheres to DC's basic north-south/east-west street grid, while the front face of the northern wing parallels the diagonal of Connecticut Avenue. To compensate for this asymmetry, white, wrap-around "picture frames" reach across multiple faces and floors of the building to rebalance the proportions, while adding a geometrical flourish to the principal façades.

More subtly, the architects also inserted a complementary diagonal line slicing through the center of the building. The line enters the building out front, via the north wing's inside wall, passes through the lobby in the form of floor openings to the lower lobby, and continues across the back courtyard as a water channel. This diagonal serves to unite the interior and exterior public spaces of the building, while introducing a dynamic element that creates a sense of event in those spaces. Spanning the crossbar of the H-shaped plan is a tall bank of windows



Military Road facade.

Photo © Maxwell MacKenzie Architectural Photographer

facing Connecticut Avenue and lining single-loaded corridors serving rear-facing apartments on all levels. The quasi-public nature of these circulation spaces is evident at night, when they are lit from within by miniature downlights, creating what the architects describe as a “marquee-like effect when seen from the street.”

Virtually all of the outward-facing apartments in the building enjoy floor-to-ceiling glass, opening up vast views for residents, especially where corner wall-windows meet. Of course, the sightlines go both ways. As a result, some residents intentionally or unintentionally “stage” their windows. A passerby glancing upward from the sidewalk might glimpse a set of drums in one, exercise equipment in another, and a bicycle leaning up against the glass in a third.

From the beginning, views of nature were clearly part of the motivation when the client announced one day, “When I walk into the building, I want a park-like experience!” Accordingly, the architects designed the back two-story wall of the lobby as a glass plane overlooking the courtyard. The courtyard itself was designed by McCabe as “a kind of two-dimensional representation of the angles of the building.” It included a mix of hardscape and lawn, plus shallow pools, outdoor patios, and living rooms. The architects also designed pure and peaceful silence into the mix. They did this by locating the wings of the building where they would block street noise. Except for sounds from the bubbling spillways of the water channel, plus locusts, crickets, tree frogs, and birds, the courtyard is amazingly silent.

The courtyard, which rests atop a portion of the building’s garage, is one of two green outdoor roof spaces. The other, on top of the building, includes, besides gas grills and bistro tables, an infinity-edge swimming pool, a dog park, and plenty of sky. Views from the roof include an ocean of treetops, along with a glimpse of the Washington Monument in the distance.

Many other amenities are provided throughout the building to accommodate sizable gatherings and promote mingling and interactions among residents. These include, in the light-filled lower lobby, a business center and group seating area; a gracious, open, model home-type space for public entertaining; and a large, mirrored, fully-equipped exercise center and separate yoga room, complete with instructors.

Yet perhaps the most powerful design element nurturing residents is the building’s glassy skin. For a resident named Natasha, it was the view of Rock Creek Park from her seventh-floor apartment and the nine-foot-high, wall-to-wall windows that “stole my heart. You wake up in the morning and you see the sunrise, or you see the colors of the sky at night, and you don’t even want the TV on.” 🌿

View of rear courtyard, showing the irregular pattern of windows and balconies.



Pergola in the rear courtyard.

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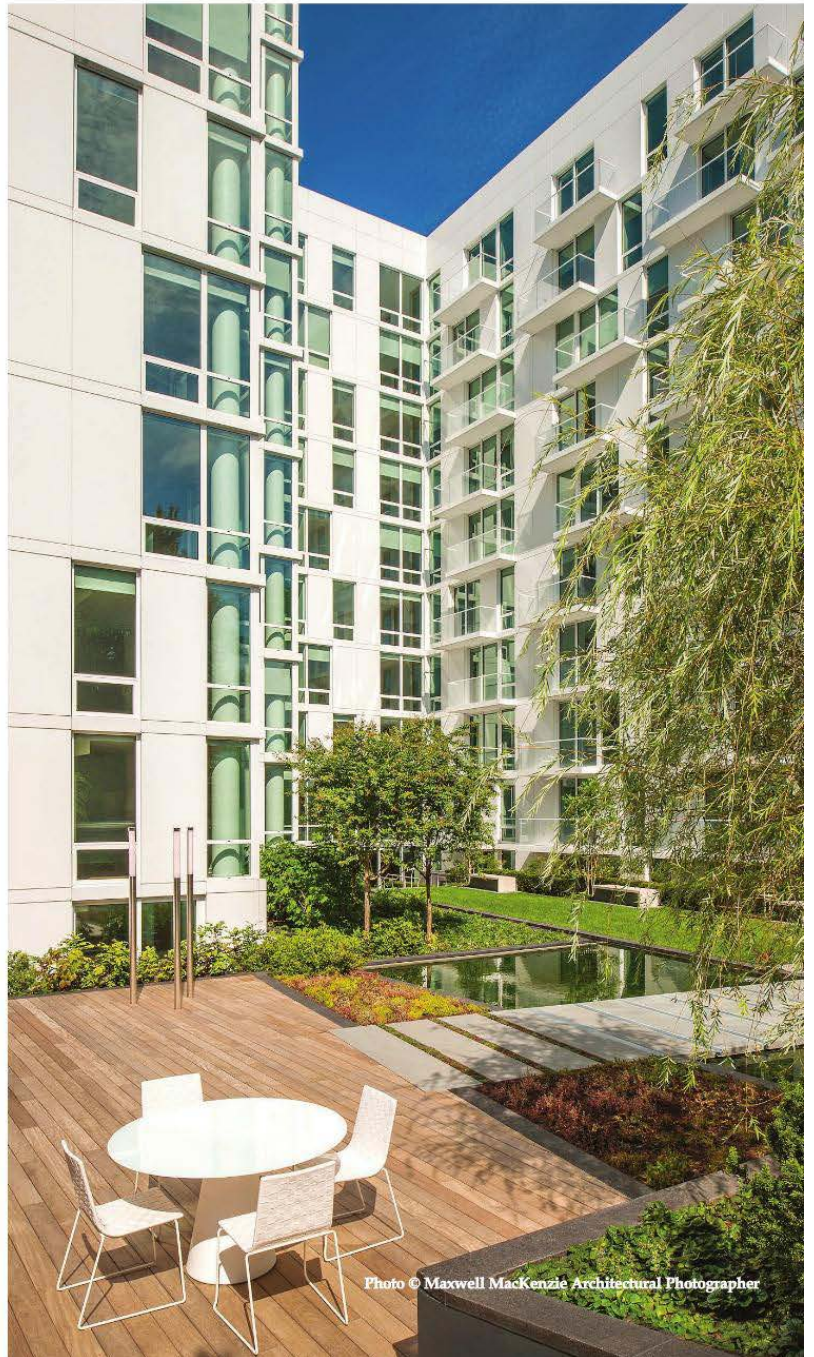
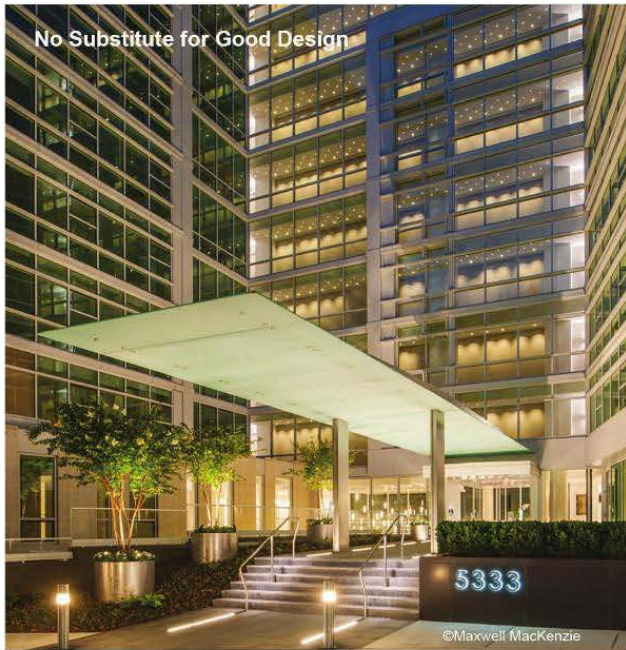


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5333 Connecticut Ave
project team!**

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