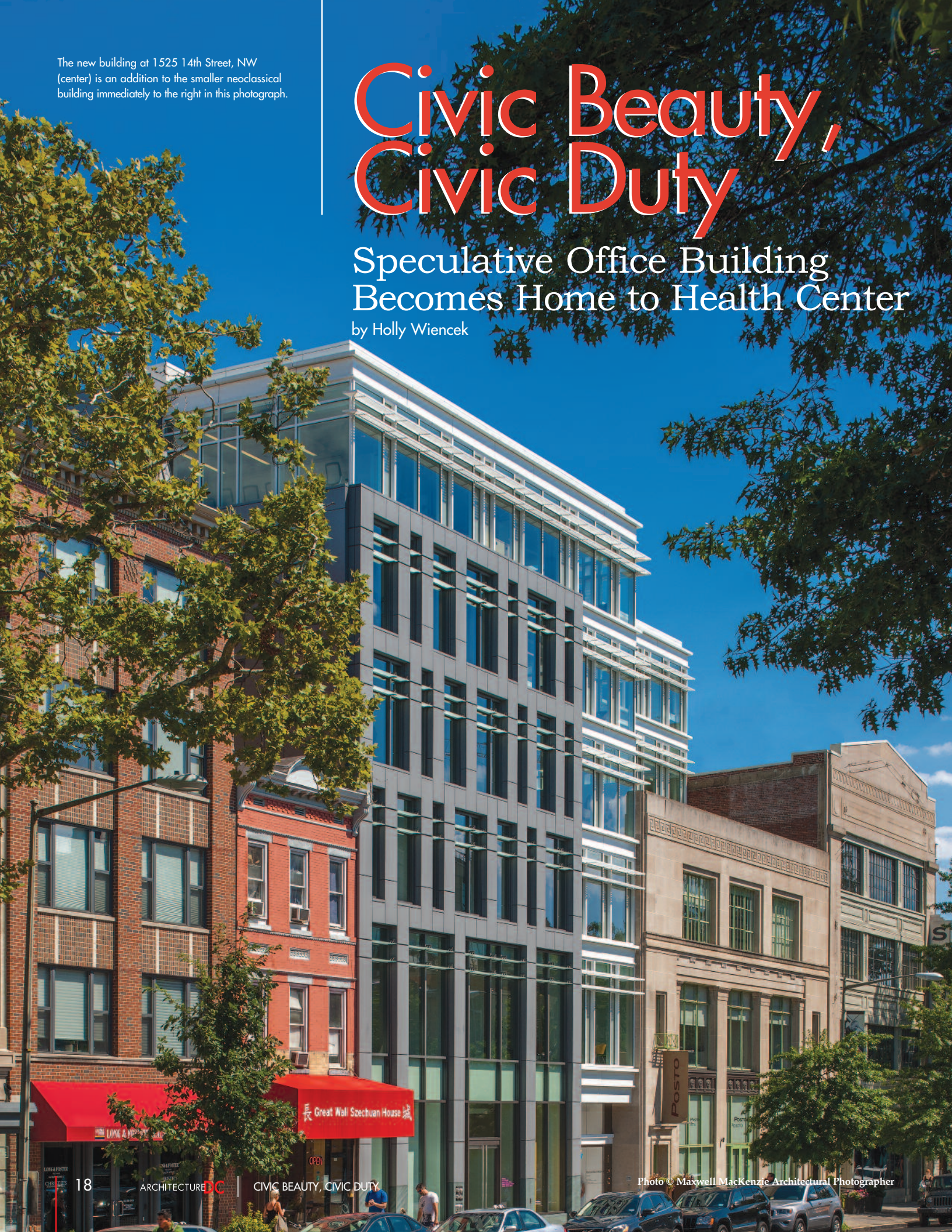


The new building at 1525 14th Street, NW (center) is an addition to the smaller neoclassical building immediately to the right in this photograph.

# Civic Beauty, Civic Duty

## Speculative Office Building Becomes Home to Health Center

by Holly Wiencek







The upper floors of the addition extend over the original building, but are set back from its street façade.

Photo © Maxwell MacKenzie Architectural Photographer

The burgeoning development of 14th Street, NW, between Massachusetts Avenue and Florida Avenue has transformed the neighborhood into an upscale retail and nightlife destination. Trendy restaurants, bars, and shops line the corridor, attracting a hip, professional crowd on nights and weekends. However, anyone who lives nearby or has visited the area on a weekday knows it can be remarkably quiet during the day. While a scattering of coffee shops, cafes, and stores attracts neighborhood residents, a walk down 14th Street during the week can feel unsettling as one passes storefronts with lively colors and graphic logos only to peer inside and see darkened, empty business establishments.

The owner of the property at 1525 14th Street, NW, shared these concerns and sought to bring daytime traffic to the area through the development of a speculative office building on a mid-block “missing tooth” site. The resulting building, designed by **Eric Colbert & Associates**, is an eye-catching design that adds visual texture to the block. As fortune would have it, the developer ultimately leased the entire new building not to an office-based business as he anticipated, but to Whitman-Walker Health, a medical and social services organization founded in 1978 to serve the LGBTQ community and previously headquartered a few blocks away. The interior fit-out, by **Perkins+Will**, balances the need to protect the privacy of Whitman-Walker’s clients while providing a welcoming environment.

The site included an existing, historic building with a stone neoclassical façade and an empty surface parking lot to its side. The design program called for as much square footage to be added to the site as reasonably achievable, plus three underground levels for both parking and commercial use, space for retail and/or restaurants on the first and potentially second floors, and office space on upper



Courtesy of Eric Colbert & Associates

Typical mid-level floor plan (above) and sixth floor administrative level floor plan (below).





Detail view of the main façade of 1525 14th Street, NW. Note the glass light shelves and white metal sunscreens, which modulate sunlight while adding visual depth to the building.

Photo © Maxwell MacKenzie Architectural Photographer



Rear façade.

**Project:** 1525 14th Street, NW  
(Whitman-Walker Health), Washington, DC

**Base Building:**

Architects: **Eric Colbert & Associates, PC**

Structural Engineers: **Ehlert/Bryan, Inc.**

MEP Engineers: **Summit Engineers, Inc.**

Civil Engineers: **KEA, LLC**

Waterproofing Consultants: **Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.**

General Contractor: **McCullough Construction**

**Whitman-Walker Interiors:**

Interior Architects: **Perkins+Will**

MEP Engineers: **Integral Group**

Lighting Consultant: **Patricia A. Kazinski**

Commissioning: **Bios ESP**

General Contractor: **James G. Davis Construction Corporation**



Waiting area in the administrative offices of Whitman-Walker Health. Note the colorful acoustical panels at right.

floors. Additionally, the existing building, once a car dealership from DC's early-20th-century "Automobile Row," housed a popular restaurant and several other small tenants, all of which would need to remain fully operational during construction.

Eric Colbert & Associates elegantly incorporated these requests into a design that is technically an addition to the existing neoclassical building, but neither overwhelms nor competes with the historic building or the block's other existing structures. The architects incorporated deferential set backs over and to the side of the existing structure, respecting its historic fabric. Two stories built above the historic building sit substantially behind the original façade, giving the impression from the street that the original structure remains distinct. The completed project provides 70,000 square feet of office and retail/restaurant space spanning six aboveground floors, one cellar floor, and two underground parking levels.

Photo © Maxwell MacKenzie Architectural Photographer





Photo © Eric Laignel

Working to the side of and above the historic building presented significant technical challenges, and required the use of a lighter structural system to prevent a burdensome load on the existing building and phased construction so as not to damage the existing roof. Similarly, such a tight site necessitated the use of a car elevator to eliminate the need for a ramp, and the strategic placement of two fire stairs and two elevators to provide code-required egress while allowing as much rentable floor area as possible.

Visually, the addition relates to the existing building by respecting its scale while also providing a deliberate contrast through the use of a glass curtain wall and two colors of metal paneling. Gray zinc panels cover the bulk of the façade where it meets the street, anchoring the addition while establishing a set of proportions that echo the width and height of other buildings on the block. The thin, zinc-clad columns of the first two floors also evoke the stone versions on the neoclassical façade next door. By projecting the zinc

paneling out slightly from the glass curtain walls, the architects brought depth to the otherwise flat façade, a detail that subtly yet significantly enhances the building's visual appeal.

White spandrel panels cover the remaining façade, the lighter color helping to draw attention away from what might otherwise feel like a bulky, heavy cap to the historic structure. A narrow, vertical section of white panels both marks the addition's main entrance and serves as a delicate visual transition between the modern zinc and historic stone. The use of two colors of panels also helps to diminish the apparent bulk of the new building. While the addition's sleek, modern style clearly contrasts with the existing neoclassical building, the two styles are in eloquent conversation. For instance, the horizontal louvers at the top of each floor of the addition recall the neoclassical bands that adorn the existing building.





Pharmacy at Whitman-Walker Health.

This project informs and is informed by its place in the neighborhood. For example, rather than covering the rear of the building with an economical brick façade, the owner and architects decided to use a more elegant metal system similar to that on the front, knowing that this façade would be highly visible from the lower-scale residential buildings behind.

Quite appropriately, this sense of civic duty also applies to the building's tenant, Whitman-Walker Health, which has long specialized in the treatment of HIV, among other services to LGBTQ people and those who may face barriers to health care. With the design expertise of Perkins+Will, Whitman-Walker Health sought to create a facility that would counter the stigma surrounding HIV and offer a sense of respite and sanctuary. The adaptation of the speculative office space resulted in a 43,000-square-foot fit-out, including 28 exam rooms, nine dental suites, a

concierge, a pharmacy, health and wellness suites, a physical therapy area, and an entire floor dedicated to collaborative employee work spaces and training rooms.

Central to the program was the creation of a bright, healthful, and hopeful interior that embraces and encourages patients, loved ones, and the neighborhood. This goal was achieved through the use of a lively graphic theme that animates each of the spaces. Bold colors, sculpted acoustic panels, signage, and cheerful upholstery energize the medical floors as wayfinding elements, while also contributing to an upbeat atmosphere. The Perkins+Will team chose to place all waiting rooms on each floor along the 14th Street façade, allowing plenty of natural light in to enliven the spaces. Materials were chosen for not only their aesthetics, but also their contributions to wellness, as the design team sought to eliminate, wherever possible, chemicals known to be detrimental to health.





Photo © Eric Laignel

The design also seeks to be inclusive of all members of the LGBTQ community, an effort that included designing the bathrooms to be welcoming to the transgender population.

As did Eric Colbert & Associates, Perkins+Will also paid particular attention to the ways the spaces relate with 14th Street. Choosing to place the retail pharmacy on the ground floor, though it enclosed the open retail space the base building architects had envisioned, provided direct access to pedestrian traffic, a decision for which pharmacy customers are surely thankful. Perkins+Will's aesthetic also enlivens the exterior of the building, with bright, colorful graphics on the ground floor windows and doors, and a series of colored LED lights that can be programmed to mark neighborhood events or important causes—for example, pink for breast cancer awareness. These lively embellishments promote Whitman-Walker Health's design program while enhancing the building's connection to its surroundings. 🏡

Photo © Maxwell MacKenzie Architectural Photographer



Signage for gender-neutral restroom.

Photo © Eric Laignel



Main entry, part of the base building design by Eric Colbert & Associates.