

Fourteenth Street façade of the Louis.



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# Fourteenth, Amended

## Two New Apartment Buildings Add to a Lively Corridor

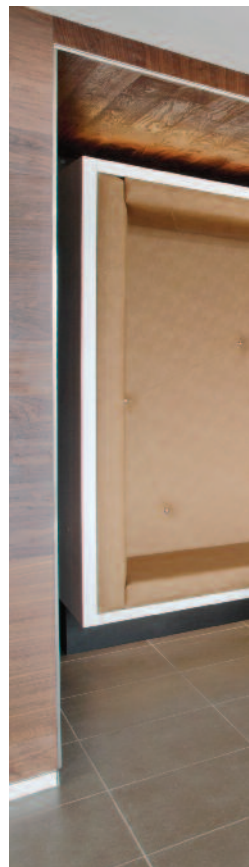
by Ronald O'Rourke

For sidewalk supervisors who enjoy tracking construction projects, the 14th Street, NW, corridor is the gift that keeps on giving. While certain other parts of the city, such as NoMA and the Anacostia waterfront, have experienced bursts of development that have transformed entire areas seemingly overnight, the redevelopment of 14th Street has in contrast involved a steady stream of projects over a period of several years. As a result, the corridor's architecture has been amended in a more incremental and cumulative fashion, one or two buildings at a time, while preserving the street's historic building stock.

Some of the recent projects on 14th Street, like the Northern Exchange building (see the Summer 2015 issue of *ARCHITECTUREDC*), are renovations of historic structures. Others, like 1525 14th Street (see the Summer 2016 issue), combine historic buildings with newly-built additions. And still others, like the two projects reviewed here, are new or mostly new buildings. With developers building

commercial, multi-family residential, and mixed-use projects of varying sizes on 14th Street sites that feature differing combinations of surrounding historical structures, architects are enjoying a rich array of design challenges.

The two projects covered here—the Louis, on 14th Street between T and U streets, designed by **Eric Colbert & Associates (ECA)**, and the Corcoran, a few blocks south at the corner of 14th and Corcoran streets, designed by **Hickok Cole Architects (HCA)**—are similar in certain respects: Both are mixed-use buildings with commercial space on the ground level and a combination of studios and one- and two-bedroom apartments above; both are modernist structures; and both incorporate sustainable design features. But in terms of scale, exterior massing and materials, and how they fit into their surrounding contexts, the two projects offer contrasting case studies in the design of new buildings for the 14th Street corridor.





The Louis as seen from across 14th Street.



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**Project:** The Louis, 1920 14th Street, NW, Washington, DC

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

Interior Designers: **Cecconi Simone**

Structural Engineers: **SK&A**

MEP Engineers: **Summit Engineering**

Civil Engineers/Landscape Architects: **Bowman Consulting**

LEED Consultant: **Sustainable Design Consulting**

General Contractor: **Balfour Beatty**

The Louis as seen from U Street, with preserved commercial row house buildings in foreground.



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One of the amenity spaces at the Louis.



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## The Louis

The Louis is a big building that is hiding in plain sight. With 39,000 square feet of commercial space at street level and 266 apartments plus shared amenity spaces on eight floors above, the client's program easily could have led to a massive-looking structure with an overbearing presence along its stretch of 14th. But thanks to a deft design by ECA, the building presents a much gentler profile.

Key design features that reduce the project's apparent scale and visual weight include upper-floor setbacks, the division of the apartment floor plates into various wings, the subdivision of some of those wings into distinct window bays, and the use of flush, inset balconies rather than protruding ones. The building's apparent mass is further broken up by changes in exterior cladding involving two primary shades of brick (lighter and darker) and two shades of metal panels (grey and black). As a final touch, the building's apparent height is reduced through the use of grey metal paneling for the penthouse level. Thanks to the setbacks, pedestrians walking by the building's commercial storefronts may be barely aware of the residential floors above. Meanwhile, when seen from across the street, the wings and the changes in exterior materials yield a collage-like but coordinated architectural form rather than a single, undifferentiated mass.

"The massing and façade treatments were carefully designed to enable this structure to complement the adjacent buildings and the neighborhood as a whole," said **Eric Colbert, AIA**, principal at ECA. "Although it



Roof deck of the Louis, looking toward downtown Washington.



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clearly reads as one project, smaller building façade elements were incorporated into the south side of the 14th Street façade to help reinforce the feeling of hierarchy. The suggestion of smaller building sections was achieved through changes in brick color and variations in the window mullions. The higher-density portion of the design faces the more highly trafficked U Street. The design then steps down as you move south, reflecting the existing neighborhood massing around our site."

On the building's south end, he continued, "we created a setback above the historic façade to give that existing architectural element some breathing space and to accentuate it. To create balance, we incorporated a similar setback on the north end facing 14th Street. The U Street façade is consistently set back from the historic structures that extend across the U Street frontage. The wings were a natural outcome of our studies to determine which configurations worked best with apartment building design. A double-loaded apartment building [i.e., with living units on either side of a central corridor] cannot be much thicker than 70 feet without creating internal rooms that are dark."

The project's overall color scheme, brick selection, and use of painted steel channels, Colbert said, "are intended to evoke an industrial feel reminiscent of structures that were present in past times throughout this neighborhood," while the external color palette "was a reflection of a desire to incorporate warm colors that are similar to other nearby historic apartment buildings. We wanted to use color to distinguish different façade forms and worked carefully with available brick colors to create a palette that was varied while at the same time being harmonious."

The building's residential entrance is located on 14th Street, amidst the commercial spaces—a placement that required some

clever design. "To encourage as much retail as possible, our client asked us to minimize the footprint of the ground floor lobby," Colbert said. To achieve that while still providing an impressive entry suitable for a building with more than 250 residential units, the lobby was designed as a lofted space with a grand staircase leading up to the second floor, where the building's leasing and office spaces are located.

The project was originally designed with 225 units, but the program was subsequently changed to reduce the average unit size and include an additional 40 or so units. "This 18 percent increase in the number of dwellings created certain challenges," Colbert said. "The outside of the building, including window locations, had been set at this point. An important part of the solution involved creating unit types which included interior bedrooms."

The biggest challenge presented by the site, Colbert said, involved retaining the existing historic buildings facing U Street. "We explored numerous structural options that would assure maximum protection for these structures, which were built with wood floor joists. Since our new construction was required to be all non-combustible, we were required to provide special [fire-resistant] separations between the new construction and the existing row buildings. Circulation between the new and existing construction types had to be carefully detailed to isolate the wood from the concrete floors."

"We also had to adjust the existing buildings' HVAC, plumbing, and electrical systems to satisfy modern tenant requirements," he added. "Drainage from the existing roofs had to be accommodated, and cooking exhaust for planned restaurants had to be carefully routed in order to avoid the introduction of cooking fumes into dwelling units."



Entry lobby of the Louis, which was designed with a minimal street frontage in order to maximize the space available for retail.



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Much of the commercial space wound up being leased to the grocery firm Trader Joe's, requiring some additional design changes. "Normally our garage floors slope," Colbert said. "We had to redesign the parking to incorporate flat floors due to the presence of shopping carts. Another change required adding two large glass elevators from the Trader Joe's retail space down into their parking level."

New market-rate residential projects in redeveloping areas can create concerns about displacement of longtime area residents. In the case of the Louis, Colbert said, "the site was mostly a parking lot. Zero residents were displaced as a result of this project—no residential buildings were present on the site." The design team, he added, "worked extensively with various community groups, attending 25 meetings in a yearlong entitlement process." The one structure that was demolished was a 1980s-era building originally occupied by the Masons.

The building's name, Colbert said, is a play on words. "It's a combination of the French king Louis XIV, since the project is on 14th Street, and Louis Armstrong, who played in jazz clubs on the U Street corridor."

Colbert especially likes the building's roof deck, which includes a swimming pool, a bar, and outdoor grilling stations. "Due to its careful placement and the adjacent historic districts and zoning, the roof deck will always have commanding views on three sides," he said. But his favorite aspect of the project, he said, "is the breakdown in scale that was achieved, especially considering the size of the development. I believe that it fits comfortably into its context and is considerate of adjacent buildings and the broader neighborhood."

## The Corcoran

The Corcoran, with 4,000 square feet of ground-floor commercial space and 35 apartments on six floors above, is a considerably smaller building than the Louis, with only about one-seventh as much total space. Finding ways to reduce the building's apparent size consequently was not as much of a concern for the Corcoran as it was for the Louis.

To the contrary, the Corcoran's compact but somewhat prominent plot at the northeast corner of 14th and Corcoran Streets presented an opportunity to create a building that would call a bit of attention to itself. HCA responded with a design that acknowledges the surrounding historical context while incorporating features that set the building apart from its neighbors and celebrate the project's location in the 14th Street arts overlay zoning district.

Nearby buildings include historic structures on 14th Street clad in buff-colored limestone, a beautiful line of historic brick row houses on Corcoran Street, and the John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church across Corcoran Street—a formidably handsome 1894 red brick structure built in a transitional Romanesque-Gothic style.

Working within this context, HCA chose brick as a primary exterior material for the Corcoran, but selected a

The Corcoran, as seen from Corcoran Street, with the main building entrance at right center.



dark, plum-colored shade. Against the dark brick background, the architects added contrasting white metal window frames on the lower floors, and two additional levels of white-clad living space on top. Some of the white elements are twisted away from the orthogonal, enlivening the façade with windows that point in various directions and creating a series of irregularly shaped terraces on the building's top floors. As one more departure from the conventional approach for a mostly residential building, the building's glass is slightly reflective and has a blue tint.

"Brick is a common material associated with residential buildings, but we chose an unusual color and texture to make the Corcoran stand out along the street," said **Yolanda Cole, FAIA, IIDA, LEED AP**, a principal at HCA and the principal in charge for the project. "It gives the Corcoran a sophisticated feel, which is lightened up with the white windows and the glass." The tinted glass, she added, "reflects the sky and gives the building a cheery appearance. Most clear glass, in contrast, reads as dark grey during the daytime."

"The building's massing and the window openings facing 14th Street are of the scale of other historic buildings on the block," said **Guilherme Almeida, Assoc. AIA**,







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Dusk view of the Corcoran.

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Close-up of the Corcoran's facade. Note the projecting bricks that frame the individual windows, adding depth to the facade.

**Project:** The Corcoran, 1350 Corcoran Street, NW, Washington, DC

Architects/Interior Designers: **Hickok Cole Architects**

Structural Engineers: **Structura**

MEP Engineers: **Capital Engineering Group**

Civil Engineers: **AMT**

Logo/Signage Designers: **Hickok Cole Creative**

General Contractor: **SIGAL**

General Contractor: **Balfour Beatty**

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A corner apartment at the Corcoran.

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**LEED GA**, HCA's project designer for the Corcoran. "The design then steps down [in height], with smaller-scale window openings on the Corcoran Street side, to relate to the smaller townhouses there. The glassy building top and the corner window bay [facing 14th Street] create a jazzy, angular geometry in contrast to the regularity of the brick block. By designing the building in a way that respects the palette, proportions, and attention to detail of the surrounding historic properties, we were able to step outside of the box and introduce a contemporary, sculptural language that speaks to the character and vibrancy of the arts overlay district."

"Our approach to the project was to embrace the intent of the 14th Street arts overlay [zoning] and capture the current vitality and energy of 14th Street," added **Laurence Caudle**, HCA's director of housing. "The top of the building really celebrates the arts aspect of the overlay. We did the right things contextually, but the details, including the windows and color palette, are creative and unexpected."

The building's residential entrance was placed on Corcoran Street, close to the historic row houses, providing a quieter entry zone for building residents and allowing more commercial space along 14th Street. "There was clearly a need, as there always is with developer-driven projects, to maximize leasable commercial space," Almeida said. "The placement of the residential entrance on Corcoran Street allowed us to create a more intimate, almost jewel-like entry pavilion, while maximizing setbacks to the adjacent row of residential townhomes to the east."

This particular block of Corcoran Street is about as picturesque as it gets, and is a huge differentiator between this property and other new rental properties along 14th street."

The location of the entry pavilion and the resulting setback on the building's east façade, facing the row houses, meant that this side of the building would be clearly on view to passersby. "This corner of the building benefits from as much, if not more, visual interest than the façades visible from 14th Street," Almeida said. Consequently, "the east façade was given the same design consideration as the two street-facing façades. We used the same masonry and window systems, and employed the same details at the masonry punched openings and curtain wall. We enhanced the east-facing balconies and terraces by employing a perforated metal panel guardrail. The tree canopy of Corcoran Street served as inspiration for the graphic frit [a ceramic applique] that occurs at all punched window openings, as well as in a larger format, along the lobby entrance vestibule curtain wall."

The project site was a decommissioned gas station that had had been turned into a parking lot used by the car-sharing firm Zipcar, which provided nearby residents with convenient access to cars when needed. "This made our request for a reduction in the required number of parking spaces challenging," Almeida said. "We overcame this challenge by providing the Corcoran with an unusually high number of bicycle parking spaces—about one per unit—as well as by highlighting the site's excellent access to public transport."





Lobby of the Corcoran, looking toward the entrance.

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Given the project's compact site, HCA worked to make the best use of available interior space. "A small footprint is always a challenge in making an efficient building," Cole said. "We were able to design a stair that kept the core of the building as small as possible. We were also limited in the amount of amenity space we could provide, so we put the clubroom at the building's prime corner, where it could spill out onto a terrace."

"To maximize the use of the compact footprint of the units," Almeida said, "we located all mechanical units within the ceiling plenum. We also employed sliding glass and pocket doors in lieu of swing doors at several locations, and carefully positioned doors connecting living and bedroom areas in order to maximize views out to the city and minimize views of potential clutter within units."

Summing up the design, Cole noted that she lives only one block from the building. As a result, "the team was keenly aware that I would see it nearly every day. I was involved throughout the design process and challenged the team to do something that would set it apart from the other new buildings on the street." The result, she said, "is a very handsome and well-crafted building, with some fun elements that give it some pizzazz. We get compliments all the time from people in the neighborhood." 🏡



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