

Renovation of 1510 H Street, NW

A commission to renovate a building just off of historic Lafayette Square, practically within shouting distance of the White House, could prove intimidating to many architects. The area is unquestionably a sensitive one, and it would be easy for an architect of such a project to go for a very safe, quiet solution in order to avoid competing with the many important buildings nearby. Given just this sort of opportunity, however, **Eric Colbert & Associates** opted not to pursue the safest, quietest solution.

The firm was hired to convert a small office building at 1510 H Street, NW, dating from the early 1960s, into a commercial office condominium. Although the structure was formerly home to the offices of United Press International, which sounds rather glamorous, the building itself was a dreary, eminently forgettable affair in grey concrete and glass. No part of the building, other than its basic structure, was worth saving, and thus it could be regarded as a blank slate for design.

The narrow site is in between two larger buildings that could hardly be more different. To the east stands the dignified, neoclassical Union Trust Building, which now houses the American Bar Association, completed in 1907. To the west is one of the Spartan, red brick towers designed by John Carl Warnecke in the 1960s as part of a plan to save the historic buildings on Lafayette Square—the towers allowed the smaller buildings to be preserved, but can hardly be regarded as beautiful works of architecture in their own right. Given the profound contrast between these two immediate neighbors, Colbert and his team felt free to seek an entirely new architectural expression for their project.

In their design, the main façade is unabashedly modern and abstractly composed, and yet manages to mediate between the two adjacent structures in subtle ways. The use of limestone and the balance of horizontal and vertical elements recall the materials and composition of the Union Trust building, while the tautness and proportions of the glass curtain wall allude to the façade of the Warnecke building. Moreover, while the original building at 1510 had an essentially flat façade that aligned with the edge of Union Trust, the redesign includes a projecting bay, which brings part of the façade into the same plane as the edge of Warnecke's tower, which is closer to the street.

Colbert is also making significant improvements to the side and rear of the building, which is due for completion this spring. On the south side, where upper floors have exceptional views of the Washington Monument, the architects added a broad, glassy bay. Perhaps some lucky new office condominium owners will be throwing grand parties to watch the fireworks on the Mall come July 4th.



Courtesy of
Eric Colbert & Associates



Renderings of 1510 H Street, NW,
following renovation.
Above: 1510 H Street, NW, before renovation.

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