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Paired Buildings Provide Affordable and Market-Rate Living



A Fine Pair

Split Development Provides Both Market-Rate and Affordable Housing

by Ronald O'Rourke

Courtyard of the Sonnet

Photo © Anice Hoachlander

Depending on whom you ask, housing affordability in Washington is either a serious and growing problem or a crisis that has already arrived, with many home buyers and renters being driven outside the city in search of affordable options. Washington's population is growing more slowly than it was a few years ago, and difficulties in finding affordable housing are thought to be one of the causes.

Effectively addressing the housing affordability problem will likely involve many individual efforts across the city. Regulatory actions and creative financing arrangements will play important

Project: The Sonnet/Portner Flats,
1441 U Street/1440 V Street, NW, Washington, DC

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

Landscape Architects: **ParkerRodriguez Inc.**

Structural Engineers: **SK&A Structural Engineers**

MEP Engineers: **Jordan & Skala Engineers**

Civil Engineers: **VIKA**

General Contractor: **Clark Construction Group**



Street façade of the Sonnet.

Photo © Anice Hoachlander

roles, but so, too, will smart design, as shown by the Sonnet and Portner Flats, an adjoining pair of new apartment buildings in Washington's U Street corridor designed by **Eric Colbert & Associates (ECA)**, a firm that has designed many of the city's stylish new multi-family residential buildings.

The Sonnet and Portner Flats occupy a 1.1-acre site that fronts onto both U and V streets, NW, about halfway between 14th and 15th streets. A couple of doors down, at the corner of 14th and U, is the Franklin D. Reeves Municipal Center, a government office building that the city built to help jump-start the area's revitalization. The success of that revitalization effort, particularly in the last 20 years, has led to the construction of many new residential and commercial buildings in the neighborhood, including a number that have been covered in these pages.

The 1.1-acre site was previously the location of the Portner Place Apartments, a three-building affordable housing project that the city constructed in 1980. Described as townhome or garden apartment buildings, the three-story structures were sheathed in brown brick and provided a total of 48, two- and three-bedroom subsidized apartments for lower-income renters.

The Portner Place buildings over time became distressed due to deferred maintenance and security issues, and their suburban-style design fell out of keeping with the higher-density urban environment that had developed around them. Rather than attempting to extend the buildings' lives, a decision was made to take better advantage of the high-value site by replacing them with a new, higher-density development in which a market-rate apartment building would help subsidize the construction of 96 new affordable apartments, or twice the number provided by the Portner Place buildings.

The resulting redevelopment project was done in collaboration with the Portner Place Tenant Association, which exercised its right of first refusal under the city's Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA). The association eventually assigned its rights under that law to a joint venture team, and ECA was then hired to design the new buildings.

The city's inclusionary zoning regulation envisions individual new rental apartment and condominium buildings being built with a mix of market-rate and affordable units. Under this approach, separating the affordable units into their



Sonnet reception area.



Sonnet lobby with ornamental perforated metal screens.



Sonnet residents' rooftop amenity space.



Photo © Morgan Howarth Photography



Photo © Morgan Howarth Photography



Photo © Morgan Howarth Photography



Residents' lounge on the first floor of the Sonnet.

Photo © Morgan Howarth Photography



Street façade of Portner Flats.



V Street entrance to Portner Flats.

Photo © Anice Hoachlander

own building might be considered undesirable. The Portner Place tenants, however, didn't want to have their new affordable apartments scattered among a larger number of market-rate apartments in a building whose amenities would be oriented primarily toward more affluent, often childless professionals—they instead wanted a building of their own that would offer a package of amenities tailored to meet the needs of families with children. The tenants asked for their new building to include the same mix of two- and three-bedroom apartments that had been provided by the Portner Place complex, and for their new building to be on located on the V Street part of the site, since V Street is quieter than U Street.

The new development achieves all these things. The Portner Flats building faces V Street, where it sits next to the Berkshire 15 (a new market-rate apartment building designed by WDG Architecture), and across the street from the St. Augustine Catholic Church and its associated school. The Sonnet, meanwhile, faces U Street, with a long wing at its rear that extends back to meet a similar but shorter wing projecting from the rear of the Portner Flats building. Together, the two adjoining buildings span the entire site, enclosing a street-level outdoor space on their west side that is organized into two secure courtyards, one for each building. A single garage entrance on V Street, under one end of the Portner Place building, leads to a common underground garage for both buildings, with 31 spaces reserved for Portner Flats residents and management staff, and 120 for Sonnet residents.

The eight-story, 93,844-square-foot Portner Flats building includes 23 studios, 25 one-bedroom units, and—similar to the old Portner Place complex—36 two-bedroom units and 12 three-bedroom units. The studio and one-bedroom units are for tenants earning 60% or less of the area median income (AMI), while the two- and three-bedroom units are for tenants earning 50% or less of the AMI. Each apartment features a dishwasher and microwave oven, LED under-cabinet kitchen lighting, a ceramic-tile surround for the shower and tub, a programmable thermostat for controlling a quiet and efficient heating and cooling system, access to high-speed cable and internet service, and ample closet space.

The building's community amenities include secure and controlled access, a package locker system, laundry facilities, a playground, a multipurpose room, a business center, a fitness room, a bike room, and a rooftop deck with an event and lounge room and a grilling area. A resident services fund was established to maintain the building's programs for computer training, health and wellness, financial counseling, and employment assistance. The building was designed to meet Enterprise Green Communities standards, and its sustainable-design features earned it LEED Gold certification.

The 11-story (plus penthouse) Sonnet, with a total of 206,998 square feet, includes 288 studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units and 15,300 square feet of street-level retail space. (Locating the development's garage entrance on V Street helped maximize the amount of retail space that could be provided



Photo © Anice Hoachlander



Portner Flats courtyard

Photo © Anice Hoachlander

on U Street.) As might be expected for a new-built luxury apartment building, the Sonnet offers an impressive array of apartment features and shared building amenities, including richly outfitted common spaces on the ground floor and in the penthouse, and a rooftop deck with a swimming pool and a 151-inch television screen. The building received LEED Silver certification.

"A fundamental design challenge at the Sonnet had to do with our uncertainty about the future development of the adjacent Reeves Center site at 14th and U streets," said **Eric Colbert, AIA**, founder and president of ECA. "Knowing that there will most certainly be a high-density development there, we configured our plan [for the Sonnet] to assure that future light, air, and views for the apartments facing the east courtyard would be adequate. We articulated the adjacent exposed east façade, knowing that it will be exposed for many years, but will probably be covered up when the [Reeves Center] site is finally redeveloped."

The exteriors of the two buildings employ projecting bays and shifts in materials and colors to articulate their facades and reduce their apparent sizes. The Sonnet's top two floors are set back and executed in darker brick to respond to the somewhat shorter height of the building to the west. The façades of both buildings incorporate accent panels sporting a fairly bright shade of orange, a color not frequently seen in new Washington-area apartment buildings.

"I have traveled many times to Latin American countries, particularly Brazil, where I observed the exciting use of color on buildings," Colbert said in commenting on the color choice. "Washington, DC, buildings, in contrast, seem to incorporate a limited palette. Our more dramatic use of color started early, with an office building [our firm designed] for So Others Might Eat (SOME) at 60 O Street, NW, and continued later on, where we incorporated it into a residential condominium project at 16th and Church streets, NW. A splash of color can add liveliness to a façade."

While the exterior schemes of the two buildings aren't identical, they do share a family resemblance. "The wood panels and the masonry [in the two buildings] were designed to complement one another," Colbert said. "The color, texture, and configuration of the materials were chosen to be complementary. We incorporated punched windows into both facades, and

the profiles of the window frames are the same." With their complementary exterior features, the point where the Sonnet ends and the Portner Flats begins is not immediately obvious, and the two buildings can easily be read as a single structure.

The Portner Place tenants were provided with temporary apartments during the development's demolition and construction phases, as well as a guaranteed return when the new affordable apartments were finished. Portner Flats was built first, before the Sonnet, so as to minimize the tenants' period of displacement. Of the 47 Portner Place tenants, 37 chose to move into the new building.

"For 17 years, before market-rate apartment buildings were being constructed in DC [again], a majority of our work was producing affordable housing for non-profit organizations like Jubilee Housing and SOME," Colbert said. "Through that experience, we learned to meet with and understand the needs and desires of lower-income residents. That skill came in handy while developing plans for Portner Flats. I hope that the residents feel that we have done a good job of accommodating their priorities."

That would seem to be the case—the building is fully occupied, with a waiting list of hundreds of applicants. "I moved into Portner Place with my mom when it first opened in 1980, [when I was] fresh out of high school, and now I live here with my son," said Marlene Frost, as quoted in a 2018 press release about the project. "Before the new owners took over, the place had started to show its age, but I really love the community and was really happy that we were able to stay at the new Portner Flats. I really love it now. Everything is on one level, which helps with my mobility issues, and I just love my new views on the V Street side of the property. The new rooftop garden access is just awesome. I really am enjoying the new landscaping and other community services as well, and so does my son."

The joint venture team, Colbert said, "did an excellent job of organizing the residents and the development plan. They took maximum advantage of an unusual situation where low-income apartments were present in one of the hottest residential development areas of Washington." It was fulfilling, he added "to be able to design a project which is consistent with its higher-density urban context." 🌱



Residents' amenity space in Portner Flats.