

WINTER 2019  
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# ARCHITECTUREDC

## Fresh Takes

Renovating, Restoring,  
and Renewing



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New Life for a Little Landmark on the Mall  
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Communal kitchen space  
in the Envoy Penthouse.

# Rooftop Renaissance

A Historic Apartment Building  
Gets a Penthouse Amenity Space

by Ronald O'Rourke





Dining, billiards, and lounge areas. Diaphanous curtains can be pulled to separate the dining area from the rest of the space.

Imagine an aging movie star concerned about fading looks who “has some work done” to help hold off competition from younger actors, and you can start to get a sense of what the architectural firm of **Eric Colbert & Associates (ECA)** has recently done for the Envoy, a historic apartment building at 2400 16th Street, NW, directly across the street from Meridian Hill Park. But to fully understand ECA’s work at the Envoy, which entailed more than simple cosmetic changes, it’s best to rewind the movie reel of the building’s history back to its beginnings a century ago, during the silent movie era.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Mary Foote Henderson, the wife of former U.S. senator John Brooks Henderson, campaigned assiduously to transform the area surrounding the couple’s solitary, castle-like house on 16th Street, north of what is now Florida Avenue, from a semi-rural landscape into a

fashionable residential district. Her efforts inspired considerable results, including Meridian Hill Park and a number of embassies and grand residential structures, among them the Envoy at the corner of 16th Street and Crescent Place, NW.

Initially called the Meridian, the building’s name was modified to Meridian Mansions or Meridian Mansions Hotel in the 1920s and early 1930s, when it was one of Washington’s residential “best addresses,” with tenants including ambassadors (i.e., envoys) and Members of Congress. It was renamed Hotel 2400 in 1935, and redubbed the Envoy Towers—or simply the Envoy—in 1965.

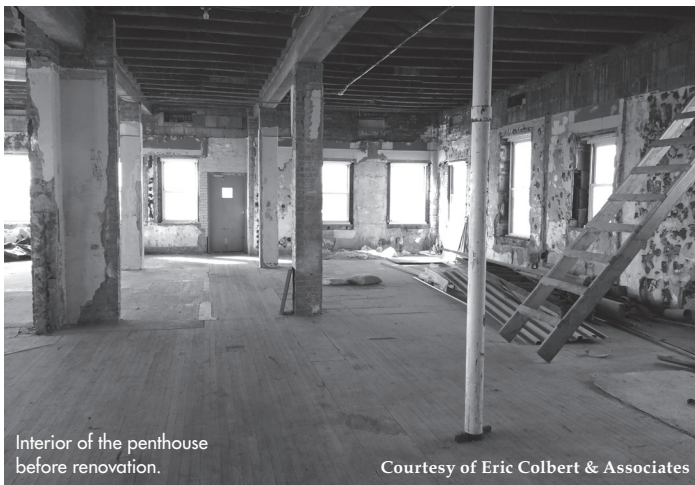
**Project:** The Envoy Penthouse,  
2400 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC

Architects/Interior Designers: **Eric Colbert & Associates PC**  
Structural Engineers: **Ehlert-Bryan Consulting Structural Engineers**  
MEP/FP Engineers: **Dwyer Engineering**  
Specifications Consultant: **Rosa D. Cheney, AIA**  
Furniture, Fixture & Equipment Procurement: **Millennium Procurement**  
Owner’s Representative: **Urban Systems**  
General Contractor: **Donohoe Construction Company**



The penthouse is invisible from Meridian Hill Park.





Designed in the Italian Renaissance style and built between 1916 and 1918, with terra cotta and limestone facing, the seven-story (plus basement) building consists of four parallel wings connected by a spine running down their middle, producing a double-H floor plan. The building was originally topped by two open-air, Beaux-Arts-styled summer pavilions on its 16th Street façade, and another two on its Crescent Place façade. The prominent pavilions, which resembled bell towers, were removed along with an associated roof deck as part of a reroofing project in the early 1960s, giving the building its current less-ornate, flat-topped appearance. Today, the Envoy's most eye-catching exterior features are its formidable ranks of partially inset, stone-bracketed balconies.

Following the reroofing project, the Envoy's fortunes declined, and by the mid-1970s it was dilapidated and largely empty. In a bid to reverse that situation, the building underwent a major renovation in 1980-81 that was intended to convert it into a condominium. The project restored the building's grand, marble-clad lobby, known as the Promenade, to its original 1917 appearance, but otherwise completely reconfigured the building's interior, eliminating its other historic interior features. Two years later, in 1983, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The building as completed in 1918 also featured a nine-room, 3,500-square-foot penthouse apartment that was permitted as an exception to DC's Height of Buildings Act of 1910 (under the original terms of that law, penthouses could be used only for mechanical equipment and services). The exception was granted because the apartment was located toward the rear of the building and consequently wasn't visible from 16th Street. The apartment was used as a residence until 1944-45, when the exception came under legal challenge. The dispute was resolved by a 1952 law that permitted the penthouse structure to be used as something other than private living quarters.

The penthouse's interiors were gutted as part of the 1960s re-roofing project. The 1980-81 renovation then added a small second level to the penthouse while removing a grand staircase that had connected the penthouse to the first-floor lobby. The plan at that time was to convert the penthouse into a social and amenity space. A sharp spike in mortgage rates, however, undermined the condominium market, and work on the penthouse was abruptly halted, leaving its interior in a partially









finished state. The Envoy eventually reopened as an apartment building rather than a condominium, but the penthouse structure remained frozen in its 1981 unfinished condition.

A 2014 amendment to the height act allowed penthouses to be used as rentable or sellable space. “By this time,” according to ECA, “the Envoy was feeling the competition of new [rental] buildings and renovations of existing ones, almost all of which had increasingly elaborate amenity suites.” In comparison, “the Envoy had nothing to offer, aside from the Promenade.” To redress that situation, the Envoy’s owner hired ECA to convert the penthouse into a modern amenity space, including a fitness center, a lounge and party room, bathrooms, and new roof decks.

The penthouse by that point was architecturally a dog’s dinner—a dysfunctional mix of the original 1918 penthouse, some 1960s-era work, and the 1980-81 project’s second level and unfinished interior work. “There were ducts and electrical lines that connected to nothing on either end, and mechanical equipment which had never been turned on,” ECA said. “Interior work at the former apartment had not started at all, and the expansion spaces were enclosed, but remained raw space.”

Demolishing the penthouse and starting over was an option, at least in theory, but working with the existing structure was deemed less expensive and had the advantage of preserving some of the penthouse’s 1918-, 1960s-, and 1980s-era features, all of which could now be considered of historic value, particularly in reflecting the building’s complex history over the last century. The existing penthouse’s structure, moreover, went right to the building’s edge, while a new penthouse would likely need to be designed with a setback from the edge, which would have produced a fairly narrow structure, given the shape of the building’s floorplate.

In designing a new amenity facility for the penthouse, ECA faced three challenges. One was to give the facility proper emergency egress, which the architects met by re-inserting a modern version of the interior grand staircase that had been eliminated in 1980-81, and by adding covered rooftop walkways to separate emergency stairways at the building’s edges. A second challenge was to lend some architectural order to a space that badly needed it. “The penthouse, interior and out, was extremely irregular, [which was] partly a reflection of the various accretions and eliminations that happened over the decades,” ECA said. “No two windows were alike, there were constant shifts of ceiling height and wall plane, and other irregularities.” To address this, ECA organized its design around a regularized central circulation spine modeled after the Promenade, and then carefully fit the facility’s individual spaces into the structure’s remaining areas. The third challenge was to design the facility so that its new plumbing hookups would align with the plumbing stacks of the occupied apartments below.

The overall design goal was “to create a modern amenity suite, but also recall the various periods of the penthouse’s somewhat unusual history,” ECA said. In support of that goal, the new facility’s lobby, circulation spaces, bathrooms, and re-inserted stairway were designed as modernized versions of the Promenade’s Beaux-Arts architecture.

“The basket-weave pattern of the [new facility’s] flooring is a direct quotation from the Promenade, and the material—limestone-look tile—is very much a modern version of the

Tennessee Pink marble in the Promenade,” the firm said.

The new facility’s lighting is similarly a modern take on the Promenade’s mix of direct, indirect, and ornamental lighting fixtures, while gold-toned accent tiles in the pilasters of the penthouse elevator lobby recall gold-painted patterns in the Promenade’s arches.

In contrast, “the shell of the main lounge space was left in its raw state, more or less how it has looked since being gutted in the 1960s,” ECA said. “Raw brick and terra cotta walls, concrete joist ceilings, and exposed wiring contrast with refined modern furnishings and new tile floors.”

Maintaining the raw character of that area “represented a happy alignment of budget and aesthetic aspiration,” said **Steven K. Dickens, AIA, LEED AP**, an associate at ECA [who is also a contributor to **ARCHITECTUREDC**]. “We particularly liked the idea of a very raw space in a penthouse: unexpected, and indicative of the bizarre fact that the space had been abandoned for so many decades.” Visitors, he added, “absolutely do not expect this expansive space, with such clean styling of the floor and furnishings, but such raw walls and ceilings.”

The facility’s dining, bar, television, game, and lounge areas are defined in part by the space’s columns and ceilings. The spaces added in the 1980-81 renovation, which included sloping greenhouse windows, were finished off in a simple manner to become fitness centers. ECA’s interior work also included selecting the new facility’s furniture.

The project’s main exterior element is a new colonnaded walkway that does double duty, leading occupants not only to the emergency roof-accessible stairways, but also to the building’s impressive rooftop viewpoint, which affords vistas of Meridian Hill Park and the city’s monumental core. The colonnade uses iron-spot brick that matches that of the existing building and incorporates some classical detailing to provide visual interest. The penthouse’s exterior, the firm said, “was quite utilitarian, with none of the Beaux-Arts flourishes of the building’s main facades.” Consequently, the new rooftop decks were located not only to maximize the rooftop’s panoramic views, but also to minimize views of the inelegant penthouse exterior itself.

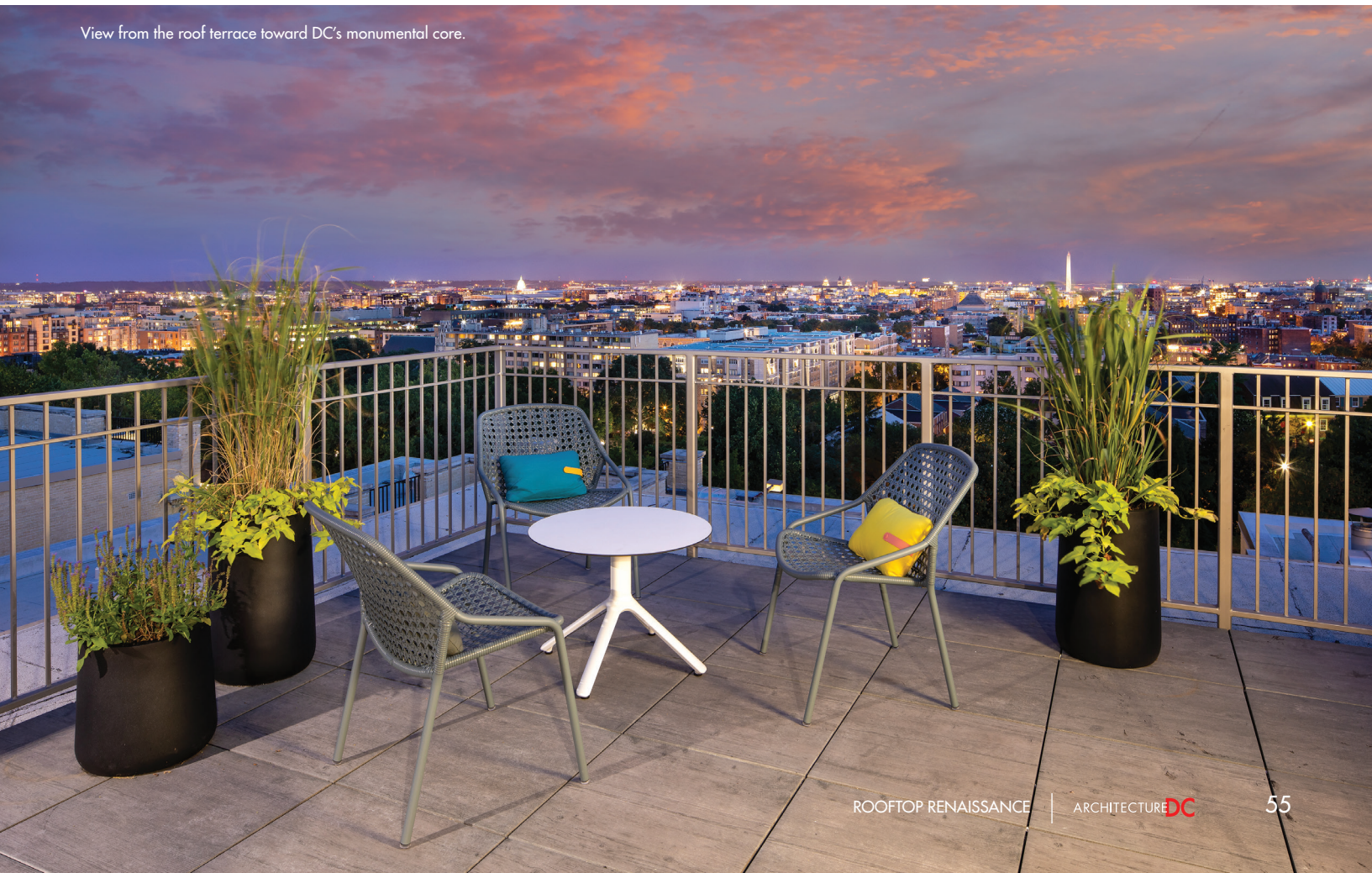
A century after it was first built, the Envoy has now “had some work done” that recalls the building’s past while positioning it better for today’s rental market. “We’ve brought the Envoy into the 21st century, but instead of burying its complicated history, we left a lot of clues,” Dickens said. “This engages users, and roots the modernism [of the new design] into something deeper than the particular year that the project was realized.”

An unusual challenge, he added, was that “over the decades, the penthouse had become somewhat romanticized. Both its storied past and its abandonment were alluring in different ways. As much as tenants would appreciate having a fitness room, roof deck, and lounge, there was a real risk that the emotional reality of a renovation and re-occupation could disappoint. By weaving a lot of clues to the past with a dynamic modernism of the present, however, I think we ensured that very few visitors are disappointed.” 🏠





New rooftop promenade at the Envoy.



View from the roof terrace toward DC's monumental core.