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Stylish Houses and Apartments



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Architect's Own Weekend Cabin Offers Spectacular Views
Narrow Lot Accommodates House, Pool, and Garden
Renovation Makes the Most of Small Studio Apartment
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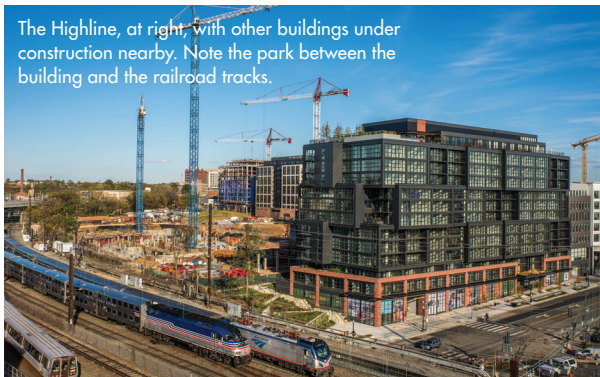
The Highline. A portion of the park connecting the Union Market area to the nearby Metro station is visible at left.

Photo © Maxwell MacKenzie Architectural Photographer

Stacked in Favor

Lively Composition Marks
Gateway to Burgeoning
Union Market

by G. Martin Moeller, Jr., Assoc. AIA



The Highline, at right, with other buildings under construction nearby. Note the park between the building and the railroad tracks.

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Street-level view.

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Rooftop pool.

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The dramatic demographic shifts that spurred DC's economic decline in the late 20th century and its resurgence in the early 21st have been magnified in the changing fortunes of certain specific neighborhoods. One example is Union Market, an area that was totally unfamiliar to many Washingtonians just a few years ago, but is now a booming commercial, retail, and residential hub centered around a trendy food hall of the same name.

Built in the early years of the Great Depression, Union Terminal Market (as it was originally called) replaced the old Center Market on Constitution Avenue, NW, which was demolished to make way for the National Archives Building. Sited between Florida and New York avenues and between 6th Street, NE, and the railroad tracks leading to Union Station, the new complex consisted of a group of low-rise utilitarian structures that provided stalls for farmers and other vendors. By the 1960s, many of these structures were in violation of health and building codes and were

Project: The Highline,
320 Florida Avenue, NE, Washington, DC

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

Interior Architects: **Akseizer Design Group**

Landscape Architects: **Lee and Associates Inc.**

Structural Engineers: **Tadger Cohen Edelson Associates**

MEP Engineers: **Interface Engineering**

Civil Engineers: **CAS Engineering-DC, LLC**

General Contractor: **Clark Construction Group**

shuttered by city authorities. Despite the construction of a new enclosed farmer's market—today's food hall—the complex attracted fewer and fewer retail customers. By the early 2000s, the area was a gritty remnant, largely overlooked despite its proximity to Gallaudet University, two major avenues, and a busy rail corridor.

Nowadays, Union Market is a symbol of DC's urban renaissance. Anchored by the food hall, specialty shops, restaurants, and a pop-up movie theater, several

mixed-use residential buildings have recently been completed. The most prominent of these is arguably the Highline, located at the southwest corner of the emerging neighborhood, which is nearest to the intersection of the two major avenues and the nearby New York Avenue Metro Station, making it a major gateway to the entire Union Market precinct.

Designed by **Eric Colbert & Associates, PC (ECA)**, the 300-unit Highline stands out not only by virtue of its strategic location, but also because of its eye-catching design: an assemblage of projecting and recessed glassy volumes perched atop a two-story brick-and-glass base. The design of the base, which contains leasable retail space, alludes to the area's historic low-rise market buildings. The composition of the upper stories was inspired by the stacked shipping containers that are often piled up along the adjacent railroad tracks. Some architects have been designing buildings using actual recycled shipping containers for many years now, but the limited range of shapes and sizes of those containers imposes significant compositional and functional constraints. Here, while the source of inspiration is easy to grasp, the actual design is more intricate than would have been possible with actual containers. The proportions of the assembled volumes and the depths of their projections and recesses were derived through repeated digital modeling, allowing refinements to the composition while optimizing interior layouts.

In developer-driven projects such as this, architects usually feel great pressure to fill out every possible cubic foot of space permitted under zoning and other regulations. That's one of the main reasons that so many recent DC buildings tend to be disappointingly boxy. One common zoning constraint, which varies from site to site, is the cap on allowable Floor Area Ratio (FAR), referring to the ratio of a building's total floor area to the square footage of its site. For the Highline, lead designer **JB Lallement** exploited a section of the code that allows limited exceptions to the prescribed building perimeter. "We were able to compensate for the loss of FAR of every inset by offset bay projections beyond the property line, which do not count toward FAR," explained Lallement, citing a technique that has become more common in recent DC developments. Having thus literally broken the box, "We intentionally kept the façade design simple, in order not to compete with, but to complement the strong massing articulation," he said. "Facing southwest, we relied on strong shadows to emphasize the 'ins and outs' of the façades."

Those *ins and outs* could have wreaked havoc with the interior layout, since most multi-family residential developers prefer to keep variations in the individual unit plans to a minimum in order to reduce construction costs. "The Highline's unit layouts are fairly typical," explained Lallement, "however, the wide range of unit types is what differentiates it from other typical DC apartment buildings. Our client wanted it this way, and the building's irregular massing helped us achieve that."

While most new residential buildings in DC with more than nine units are required to include a percentage of affordable units, the Highline went through the DC government's Planned Unit Development process, which allows for a larger building than what is permitted by right on a specific site in exchange for certain concessions. One such concession is the provision of a larger percentage of affordable units, including some at



Residents' amenity spaces.



Photo © Eric Colbert & Associates, PC

more deeply discounted rental rates. For the Highline, the clients formed a partnership with Habitat for Humanity, allowing some portion of the affordable units to be built off-site as houses, reflecting the need for larger affordable dwellings than most new apartment buildings can provide.

The building, as expected nowadays, includes a number of tenant amenity spaces both on lower levels and on the roof. Creating such shared rooftop spaces is complicated by DC's Green Area Ratio and stormwater management requirements, two different but overlapping sets of regulations that typically result in at least 50% of the roof area on new buildings being covered in plants and soil. Mechanical equipment takes up still more roof space. Even so, at the Highline, ECA managed to provide reasonably generous rooftop seating areas, grilling stations, and even an infinity-edge pool for residents' enjoyment.

Between the Highline and the railroad tracks is a narrow swath of land that the clients for the project, Level 2 and Clark Construction Group, agreed to



Kitchen in one of the building's micro-units.



Apartment unit living area with bedroom at right.



Photo © Jeffrey Sauers



Living/dining area of a larger unit.



Photo © Jeffrey Sauers



Photo © Jeffrey Sauers

set aside as a landscaped public park providing a pedestrian shortcut from the Union Market area to the New York Avenue Metro Station (the construction of that station along the long-completed Red Line served as a catalyst for the redevelopment of the entire area). ECA collaborated with Lee and Associates Inc., a landscape architecture firm, on the design of the terraced park, which complements the architecture of the building itself.

Most major building projects encounter some surprises during the construction process, but the Highline faced a particularly unexpected challenge as the building was nearing completion. “We were almost ready for occupancy,” said principal **Eric Colbert, AIA**, “when our clients entered into an agreement to convert some of the larger units into co-living spaces. That meant adding a bedroom where the living area used to be in about a third of the units, plus making other necessary adjustments.” Such co-living arrangements, which are intended to cater to younger tenants looking for a more communal living situation, are not new, but are usually designed as such from the start. This last-minute change during the Highline’s construction forced ECA to rethink many aspects of the affected apartments while minimizing disruption to already completed units.

The Highline’s name, of course, is partially an homage to the much-vaunted, raised linear park of the same name in New York City. It also refers, however, to the site’s proximity to the elevated railroad tracks. Seen from passing trains, the project has already become a popular landmark—a symbol of a revitalized neighborhood, and the thriving city around it. 🏡