

The Washington Post

An Urban Retrofit Done Right

By Roger K. Lewis
Saturday, July 25, 2009

At Tenleytown in Northwest D.C. stands a dense, mixed-use real estate complex embodying praiseworthy urban redevelopment policies and laudable architectural design. A model of healthy city evolution, it demonstrates how change can be successfully accommodated and how old and new can happily coexist.

Longtime Washington residents will remember the oldest part of the complex, a two-story Sears Roebuck department store opened in 1941 and bounded by Wisconsin Avenue, Albermarle Street and River Road. Its starkly functional, unornamented form included steep ramps leading to and from rooftop parking. Residents also will remember that after Sears closed in 1993, a Hechinger's home-improvement store moved in -- but it, too, shut down, in 1999.

Today the remodeled retail building has been visually animated with more entrances, display windows and illuminated signage. It now houses a Best Buy, a Container Store and, in the basement, an Ace hardware store.

But the development rights above the retail base offered the greatest opportunity for transformation. Perched atop the repurposed retail base is Cityline at Tenley, a four-story residential structure with 204 condominium apartments, completed in 2005. The apartments sit above one level of parking -- the former rooftop parking area that served Sears and Hechinger's.

Designed by the Washington architecture firm Shalom Baranes Associates, the modern housing adroitly complements the retail base below. Yet it was aesthetic contrast, not emulation or replication, that helped it achieve complementarity.

Designed to avoid alignment with base building facades, the housing seems to float, as if celebrating geometric independence from the base.

In addition to perceptually free-form residential massing, the architects employed a strongly contrasting architectural language for the apartment facades. Instead of concrete or masonry, the material above the base is metal and glass.

The housing's systematically composed curtain wall comprises generously sized rectangular windows and insulated aluminum panels, punctuated by projecting balconies and recessed terraces with finely detailed metal railings.

The color palette is in gray. Dark gray panels are flat with vertical striations; light gray panels are horizontally furrowed, as if corrugated. Together, the varied textures create a rich surface tapestry.

In contrast with the historic, concrete-clad retail area below, the narrow apartment wings with prefabricated curtain walls seem comparatively weightless.

Traditionalists might question the modernist, industrial look of Cityline at Tenley facades, especially in Washington, where masonry-clad apartment buildings are so prevalent. But in this instance, the metal-and-glass vocabulary is visually appropriate. It works well because of strong aesthetic contrast, but also because the architects so artfully handled residential massing, materials and proportions. What enabled this transformation, especially in light of the historic landmark status granted to the former Sears Roebuck store?

In the early 1980s, Metro's Tenleytown Station on the Red Line opened directly beneath the building. With Metro access and a desirable location, plus increasing market demand for sophisticated, in-town housing, this unique piece of real estate invited visionary, 21st-century transformation.

And as sometimes happens in the world of real estate, constructive forces and necessary resources -- creative developers (Madison Marquette and Roadside Development), a talented architect, the right blend of motivated retail tenants and, of course, feasible financing -- converged in a timely manner. Positive attitudes on the part of historic preservation interests and city officials, along with favorable zoning regulations, also proved indispensable.

American cities are replete with historic and not-so-historic properties that can be saved, retrofitted and expanded for new uses. Cityline at Tenley is an excellent example of how to do it right.

Roger K. Lewis is a practicing architect and a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland.