

An Apartment Complex Designed Around a Garden

By Joel M. Lerner

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Wouldn't it be nice to live someplace green? Not just a place with lots of trees and grass and shrubs, but a place that's green in every sense, where architecture, construction, materials and plantings are not only practical and good-looking but eco-friendly?

Welcome to Elevation 314, an apartment complex going up just opposite the Takoma Metro station. Everything about this 52-unit development -- the material for the floors (bamboo) and windows (fiberglass), storm-water management (on site) and courtyard plantings (grasses, mosses, wildflowers) -- is renewable, recycled, eco-engineered or native. "I've always been very focused on green, environmental issues -- design and just living in general," Washington architect and developer Russell Katz said. Katz was not satisfied with other green projects he had encountered. "I haven't seen a lot of good environmental architecture that's also good architecture," he said.

A few years ago, Katz decided to learn how to be a developer. He bought and renovated a couple of apartment buildings in Northwest Washington and began managing them.

Then he found a 35,000-square-foot lot in Takoma Park that, despite being right across from the Metro, had been vacant for 20 years. He liked the area for its history (a getaway community for District folk), its location (seven minutes from downtown) and its well-known environmental and civic consciousness.

He saw an opportunity to build something that would embody his ideals, using traditional materials such as brick and concrete with a strong contemporary look. The lot's proximity to the Metro station was a factor in his design. The trains run above ground at that location, so managing sound from the outside was important. The architect also paid attention to internal soundproofing. "Acoustics are important between units," Katz said, because each space "has to end up being a peaceful place for people to be."

The site is trapezoid-shaped, with two long sides, one wide end (along Carroll Street, the main pedestrian entrance to the complex) and one narrow end (along Vine Street). To use the space, Katz devised a roughly triangular building. The top three stories are apartments and part of the lower level is parking garage and commercial space.

The draw to Katz, and most residents, is the courtyard in the center. "The heart of the building is a garden," he said. "Most of the units look into the garden, into a green space."

Besides being an oasis of greenery, the garden serves as a filter for water runoff that otherwise would run from gutters into the city's storm-sewage system, possibly contributing to overwhelming that system. Because it is such an integral part of the design, great care was taken when planning the courtyard. Katz worked with Charlottesville landscape architect Amy Arnold, who designed a garden that would look good both as you walk through it and as you look down on it from the apartments above.

"The site functions as a whole," Arnold said. "The building and the garden are interdependent."

She created a series of garden experiences with changes of color and scent. Because the space is enclosed, the plantings create a microclimate that relies on indigenous plants and attracts birds.

The enclosure, with the height of the building around it, has a variety of light conditions, from full sun to deep shade "and everything in between," Arnold said. Consequently, each side of the trapezoidal garden has its own character.

The long west side has the deepest shade, so plants there include woodland grasses, moss, ferns and foam flower (*Tiarella cordifolia*). On the east side, with mixed light, a featured plant is the oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia* Pee Wee). The north edge has a southern exposure, so it will be planted with a series of native grasses, including sedges (*Carex pensylvanica*, *Carex appalachica*), nodding fescue (*Festuca subverticillata*) and riverbank wild rye (*Elymus riparius*).

The grasses form a living quilt of color and texture, especially when viewed from above. They will be allowed to establish for a couple of years, then they will be interplanted with flowering perennials such as asters, Black-eyed Susans, and coneflowers.

The grade portion of the garden contains a London plane tree and small trees like serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*), Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica* Little Henry), and summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia* Sixteen Candles). This area of the garden is "probably the most scented area," Arnold said.

Other perennials include anemones (*Anemone canadensis*) and Virginia blue bells (*Mertensia virginica*). A goal was to have something in bloom almost the entire year.

There is a sidewalk area outside the building where Arnold planned for trees. But -- "I have a thing about tree boxes," she said. Trees planted in containers and in concrete-free squares in the sidewalk have lots of problems. Among them: They don't get much water, the soil around them gets compacted, and they may not get

enough light because of overlooking buildings. Arnold wanted something like a "tree lawn," a strip of grass with a group or row of trees, but she wanted her urban trees to have better conditions than most.

The solution was to drop the planting area a few inches below the surface and cover it with a specially engineered grating that is also a perfectly good walking surface -- it's even approved for wheelchairs. "It's just like walking on concrete, except it makes a different sound, which I like," Arnold said.

Elevation 314 -- the name is both the address, 314 Carroll St., and the elevation above sea level -- has been in the works for three years, and Katz is looking forward to finishing the construction and planting and having people move in sometime around June. There's a waiting list of 80 people, and inquiries included one about teaching yoga in the garden. There are one- and two-bedroom units, and one-bedroom-plus-den units. Dogs (one per unit in selected units) and cats (two per unit in any unit) are allowed, and there are 47 bike-rack spaces in the building. (For more information, visit www.momidc.com or call 301-622-7980).

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