

Glass Box in the Sky



Review: Bonstra Architects' Penthouse

by Ronald O'Rourke

all photos by Photographics photography, llc
Furnishings by Contemporaria

Modern penthouse apartments of the kind found in New York are a rarity in Washington—but that may soon change, thanks to an inspiring new rooftop condominium designed by DC-based Bonstra Architects. The two-story apartment, perched atop a recently renovated, 1940s-era apartment building at 1212 M Street, NW, injects a strong note of modernism into the rapidly redeveloping area north of Massachusetts Avenue and east of 16th Street.

For David Tolson, the developer who renovated the existing four-story building, the plan to add a rooftop condo posed a question common to the design of any addition project: should the addition be designed to blend in with the architecture of the existing building or to stand more in contrast to it? Although the first path can appear simpler to execute, in practice it can lead to a design that mimics the existing building's architecture in a clumsy or watered-down manner.

Responding to the growing interest in modern design among Washington homebuyers, Tolson chose the second route.

He selected Bonstra Architects to develop a design for the unit that would act as a modern counterpoint to the traditional architecture of the original building and to the mostly unremarkable post-World War II apartment buildings around it. The assignment was a welcome addition to Bonstra Architects' growing portfolio of modern residential projects in this part of Washington, which includes the Tapies condominium building at 1616 16th Street, NW, and the SoLo Piazza condominium building at 13th and N Streets, NW.

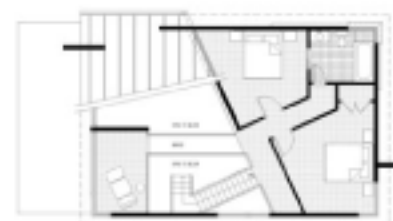
"The original philosophy of this [project] is the glass box," says project architect Julian Piperov. "The concept is the Unprivate House," he explains further, referring to an influential exhibit on modern residential architecture held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1999. "You see and you want to be seen—that's the concept. It's like [being] on a stage."

The exterior of the penthouse, which is viewable at street-level from various angles, is a classic modernist composition that combines large expanses of glass with overlapping and interlocking planes of stucco

and metal, topped by a soaring butterfly roof. When viewed from the south (alley) side, the unit bears some resemblance, on a much smaller scale, to two other recent modern buildings across town—the World Bank building on the 1800 block of H Street, NW, and the new Italian Chancery just off Massachusetts Avenue, NW, in the upper embassy row area.



FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR





The penthouse's large expanses of glass are mostly on its south side. During the day, the windows fill the unit with light and warmth. At night, they turn the apartment into a softly glowing neighborhood lantern. The north side of the unit, facing M Street, is dominated by overlapping planes of stucco, which are painted in cream and ochre tones that complement the warm colors of the brick buildings in the area.

Slicing down through the southwest and northeast corners of the unit are vertical fin walls clad in copper panels that have been pre-oxidized to achieve a green patina. Bill Bonstra, AIA, the principal in charge of the project, says the fin walls act like straps that anchor the unit to the building.

The penthouse's interior is dominated by a spectacular double-height living/dining room, clad largely in glass, that reaches 19 feet up to the sky. A sliding glass door leads to an outdoor deck, and a two-sided fireplace set into the glass wall serves both spaces.

The presence of taller apartment buildings to the north, east, and south restricts the penthouse's lines of sight in those directions. If the unit had been designed in a traditional style, several of its windows might have pointed directly at these buildings, magnifying this limitation. Bonstra and Piperov's modern design approach permits a more creative solution: the penthouse's windows are oriented toward the corners of the unit to take advantage of unobstructed views in those directions.

One of these views is to the northwest, toward the spire of Luther Place Memorial Church at 1226 Vermont Avenue, NW (on the north end of Thomas Circle), which was built in 1874. Another is to the southeast, toward the Ascension and Saint Agnes Episcopal Church at 1212 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, which was built in 1875.

Both structures are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The view toward Ascension and Saint Agnes became a key organizing device for the penthouse's interior layout. The kitchen and the stainless steel stair leading to the second floor (the latter designed and fabricated by local sculptor Robert Cole) are aligned with this view, and the front edge of the second floor is rotated in this direction, splitting the apartment's rectangular footprint along a diagonal that becomes the dividing line for the two halves of the butterfly roof overhead. (The penthouse's green copper fin walls provide an additional exterior visual link to the green copper roof of the church.)

The penthouse's second-floor bridge, which crosses over the living/dining room, leads to a small, glass-enclosed sitting area in the southeast corner. With its large windows and close-up view of Ascension and Saint Agnes, this sitting area is an intimate and privileged space that, along with the living/dining room, helps fulfill the architects' original glass-box concept for the project.

The rest of the second floor is organized into two bedrooms and a full bath. To create an unchallenged zone of privacy—a concession to conventional Washington lifestyles—these bedrooms are closed off from the rest of the unit. Bonstra and Piperov point out, however, that a buyer could easily open the bedrooms to the living/dining room below, in the more open and transparent style of a modern New York loft. The two bedrooms could also be reconfigured into a single large master suite.

For decades, modern design has existed mostly at the edges of Washington residential architecture. Now, however, it is increasingly in demand by local homebuyers. Both long-time Washington residents and people moving into the city for

the first time are seeking modern living spaces in the form of detached houses, townhouses, and lofts. Mid-scale apartment buildings like 1212 M Street, which are below Washington's height limit, provide an opportunity to add modern penthouse apartments to the selection. Such projects, rather than adding yet another historicist note to Washington's architectural landscape, can enliven the city's architectural mix and help move it into the future. Bonstra's new penthouse unit is not only an exciting living space, but an inspiration for Washington developers and homebuyers.



What Is a Fin Wall?

A fin wall is a wall that projects from the edge of a building, somewhat like a fish fin, the fin on the taillight of a '57 Chevy, or the vertical marquee of an old-style movie theater. Fin walls often cross or pierce through other exterior walls, particularly glass walls. They can be incorporated into a building's design to help articulate a façade (i.e., divide it into smaller segments), to visually highlight or punctuate a part of a building, or to create a sense of dynamic movement or openness. Fin walls are often included in modernist designs.