

## The Washington Post

Cityscape

### Up-to-Date Tradition

William Bonstra Rounds Out the Past

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Saturday, November 9, 2002; Page C01

It is one of those striking little buildings that enliven city streets, odd because of its unusual proportions -- only 21 feet wide but more than 80 feet high -- and welcome because of its fresh contemporary style.

The petite new apartment building at 1612 16th St. NW also introduces a promising new voice in Washington's architectural chorus -- that of William Bonstra, a 42-year-old who put in significant time learning "the Washington Way" before going out on his own a couple of years ago.

The Washington Way, of course, is a well-nigh patented approach to designing buildings that fit comfortably into historic contexts. It was a group endeavor that grew from a profound distaste for the debased norms of modern architecture that afflicted the city during the 1960s and 1970s.

Though clearly a much needed correction to modernism's anti-urban, anti-history propensities, the reaction had pretty much run out of steam by the mid-1990s. Dissatisfaction mounted as we began to see more and more formulaic mimicry of old buildings in our new ones -- and as modernism reinvented itself worldwide with astonishing vigor.

Bonstra, then, is part of a reaction to a reaction. His designs for the narrow building on 16th Street and for another new apartment house at 13th and N streets NW are respectful of their surroundings, but they're up to date. You wouldn't confuse them with buildings designed here during the '80s -- the 1880s *or* the 1980s.

The 16th Street site is framed by two prototypical, eight-story Washington apartment buildings. Immediately to the north, at the Corcoran Street corner, stands the Barclay -- a modest essay in classical detailing from the Ionic columns of its recessed entryway to the escutcheons on the stone surface of its top floor. To the south is the Ravenel -- a somewhat jazzier version of classical themes, with stylized fluted pilasters and stone piers that run all the way from bottom to top.

In between the two was a curious 21-foot interstice, filled until recently by an old two-story wood-frame house of no particular distinction. Developers Giorgio Furioso and Phillip Abraham bought the property three years ago and immediately decided to plug the hole all the way to the top, Furioso says, "because it was the right thing to do."



The street-facing facades of William Bonstra's SoLo Piazza at 13th and N Streets NW are quilts of colors and materials. (Bonstra Architects PC)

Right, but difficult. A shorter, more conventional building with no elevator would have been easier to construct but would have continued to look like a missing tooth between the two taller apartment houses. The full-height version, however, has been a monster to build -- there's no room for heavy equipment and Furioso says he can only get two or three workers efficiently in the building at the same time. Construction is into its third year and still is not quite done.

In the old days, a decade and a half ago, the typical response to the question of what to build in that 21-foot slot would have been a vaguely traditional masonry building that took a polite back seat to its larger neighbors. Bonstra's building, by contrast, is an emphatic punctuation mark that's a joyful jolt to the eye.

Bonstra does know how to be polite. Immediately after graduating from the University of Maryland in 1983 he was snapped up for his precocious design skills by Shalom Baranes Associates, one of the key initiators of the Washington Way. Bonstra worked on several of Baranes' important early projects in historic districts, and paid further dues with two other Washington firms before going out on his own a couple of years ago.

Well-learned lessons about fitting in show up prominently in the 16th Street sliver. Like most respectable Washington apartment buildings -- and in particular the immediate neighbors north and south -- this one has a projecting bay. Though the interior consists of full-depth, double-height lofts rather than the usual one-story units, it lines up neatly with architectural features on either side. Even the color scheme fits in nicely with the dark-light-dark-light rhythm of the block.

Yet contrasts abound. There is a bay, yes, but it juts out on a diagonal line. The horizontal bands line up, but they're made of shiny aluminum rather than bricks or stone. Except for the edges of concrete block, the facade is almost all clear glass -- transparency contrasts with opacity, lightness with solidity. Like the adjoining buildings, the sliver is scaled to the human body, but the trick is turned with a shrewdly modulated abstract composition rather than classical proportions. Playful imbalance meets rigid frontal symmetry.

A spine of white-painted, subtly shaped metal strips rises above the off-center entryway. Attached to several of the metal bands are circular braces for planter pots -- eventually, says Furioso (who will move into the topmost loft), the spine will turn into a cascade of green. But even without the plants, this backbone is an inspired device -- it binds the composition and brings it to life.

The context for the nine-story, 77-unit condominium apartment building at 13th and N Streets NW is not nearly as compelling, despite the nearness of architecturally rich Logan Circle, a block to the north. (In the real estate jargon of the day, the building is named the SoLo Piazza, for south of Logan.) On the opposite corners are a gas station; a ponderously forbidding, if oddly interesting, masonry apartment building designed two decades ago by Washington's Arthur Cotton Moore; and an unpromising nine-story apartment house now under construction.

Clearly, architect Bonstra had more license here. As it turns out, he did almost too much with it. The street-facing facades are quilts of colors and materials -- metal-grate balcony rails, aluminum-framed windows and yellow-painted wire mesh planting surfaces on a base pattern of concrete blocks. These shift from earth tones at the base to light grays at the top, with accent bands of black, green or tan.

The syncopation, unlike that of a well-made quilt, is busy and disjointed. Your eyes don't rest here, nor do they bounce around on a well-paced romp. This is a shame, for the disharmony distracts from the building's considerable virtues. One is the overall lightness of tone, a relief from the dark, heavy masonry buildings nearby. The lightness is in part a function of the tremendous amount of clear glass -- another reward both for passersby and residents.

A third virtue, invisible from the street, is the cylindrical hole cut through the building at its rear corner. Ringed by loops of balconies, this is the most dramatic visual feature of the architecture and it gives every rear apartment an expansive feel and a city view. Furthermore, it creates ingenious, interesting floor plans -- because of the circle, every unit is a little bit different.

It's hard to predict, based on the evidence of these two buildings, just what direction Bonstra is going to move in. There are messages here about architecture as collage and pattern, as singular form, as bearer of subtle messages and as partner in the contextual enterprise.

Possibly, if he isn't worn down by the constant pressures toward mediocrity -- visionless developers, vicious community busybodies, vacuous bureaucracy -- Bonstra can forge an unusual, forceful union of these divergent directions. So far, he's off to an interesting start.

Both new buildings, incidentally, still lack their crowns. At the SoLo Piazza, this is but an unexceptionable circular trellis atop the primary street corner. But at 1612 16th St., both Bonstra and Furioso envisage a cloud of wire cable similar to (but much smaller than) the wild sculpture placed by Spanish artist Antoni Tapies above his museum in Barcelona.

The idea gave the building its name -- The Tapies -- and, if it works here as well as it did there, it'll only make a distinguished building better. (It could also turn out to be an ill-fitting hairpiece . . . but let's not go that way.)

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