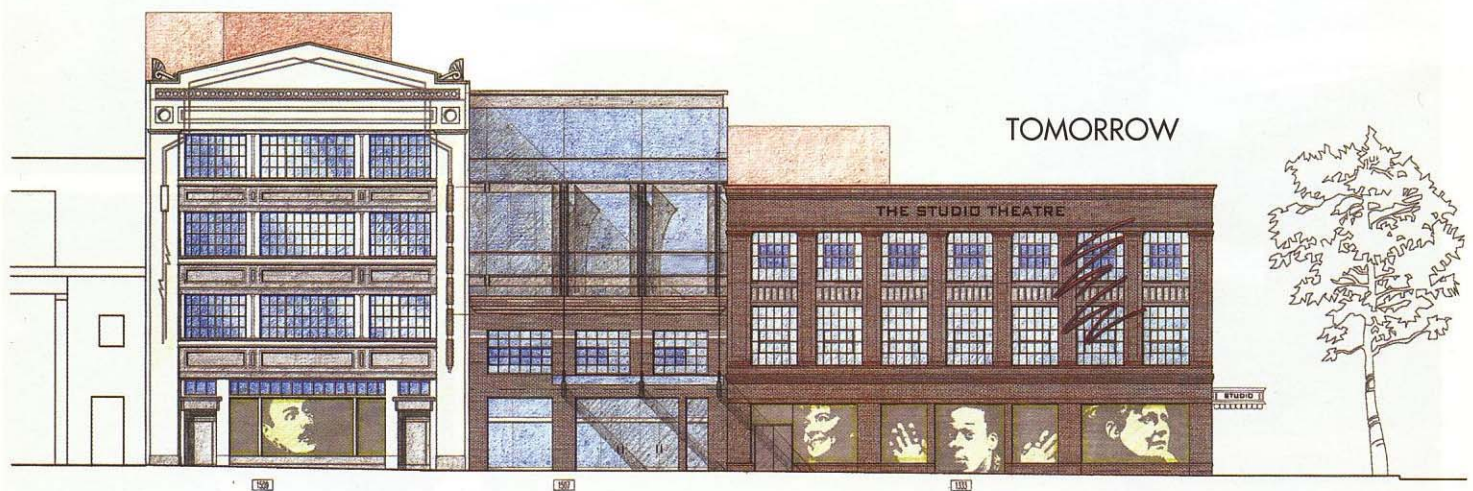


Fall 2004

The Studio Theatre

1509 14th Street, NW

Bonstra Architects PC
with theater designer **Russell Metheny**



More good news for 14th Street: the Studio Theatre is expanding. It was the first theater group to stick its toe in on 14th, initially renting the building at the corner of P and 14th, later purchasing it and renovating the former auto showroom to include two theaters for simultaneous productions. Development on 14th has followed Studio's lead, as stores, restaurants, nightclubs, and housing developments have opened over the past few years.

Now, through the purchase of two adjoining buildings to the north, Studio will add two more theaters, a new 14th Street entrance with lobby and box office, administrative offices, classroom space for Studio's acting school, and a two-story glass atrium that will serve as the nucleus of the expanded complex.

The atrium addition is clearly contemporary but designed to unite Studio's three historic automotive-era buildings. "We wanted the atrium to be a very different place, like an ice cube sitting on top," architect Bill Bonstra, AIA, explains. Projecting structural steel frames organize paired sheets of glass, lit and glowing. "In a way, it's like the big windows of a showroom. People can look up and see what's happening."



Bonstra explains the process for combining new and old as weaving a geometric pattern. "We begin with an analysis of the existing buildings—their texture, rhythm, whether they're vertical or horizontal, their height. We try to create this kind of plaid. Plaid has an overall cohesiveness, but it can be very symmetrical. Like cubism, a Mondrian painting—you can emphasize different colors. This is a tapestry of colors and material thicknesses."



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The original Trew Motor Company building at 14th and P Street in the 1920s. Now it's the Studio Theatre, currently being renovated and expanded by Bonstra Architects PC and Russell Metheny, theatre designer.

14th Street's Architectural Evolution

by Daniel Emberley

Luxury loft condominiums on 14th Street are selling out faster than developers can put them up. Studio Theatre is in the midst of a major expansion. The 14th and U corridor is a hot retail neighborhood. For so many years, 14th Street was a place to avoid; why has 14th Street suddenly become the place to be?

ORIGINS

14th Street developed as a trolley-car-served commercial strip for elite Logan Circle residents in the 1880s. By about 1920, the area was fully built up as a mixed neighborhood on the L'Enfant plan, with mansions on Rhode Island and Vermont Avenues and the Circle, middle-class housing on the grid streets, and housing for the poor on alleys and smaller streets.

Retail on 14th followed the social dynamic of the area. Buildings opened as elite grocers and tailors and then changed hands as the neighborhood changed. Before World War II, cars were luxury

goods sold downtown, with sales floors on multiple levels and offices above. From about 1900 to the early 1950s, 14th Street was "Auto Row," the primary place to buy a car in Washington. Auto sales required a new architecture of display windows, open floors, reinforced upper floors, and generous elevators to move cars within the buildings. Older retail buildings were replaced by or modified to serve as auto showrooms, garages, and service stations. This was especially pronounced on the 1500-1600 blocks of 14th, P and Church Streets, and Johnson Avenue.

The 1950s shift of auto retail to suburban parking lots condemned Auto Row. The showrooms left first; in the 1970s, their open spaces were converted into theaters and nightclubs. Service businesses closed more slowly; some garages only closed in 2004. Buildings that had opened as elite grocers and tailors moved downward to undertakers and construction trades, and most recently they housed

pawn shops and services for the poor. Decline took about a century, from initial construction in the 1880s-'90s to a low point in 1968.

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4th, 1968, sparked a fire that would affect 14th Street for the next 30 years. Upon learning of his death, some began calling for stores to close out of respect for Dr. King. The small group quickly grew to an angry crowd, and polite requests turned to shouts. In the confusion, a storefront window at 14th and U was broken, igniting the looting and destruction that would continue for four days.

Fourteenth Street was greatly damaged by the riots, not only because buildings were burned, but because it changed the way people looked at the street. It was no longer a place to visit; it was a place to avoid. Businesses closed and boarded-up storefronts remained that way, in some cases, for almost 30 years.

Even in its darkest moments, however, 14th Street managed to remain active. Incremental change had allowed property owners to adapt to declining incomes and increasing density through World War II and the suburban flight of the 1950s and '60s. The riots in 1968 forced a response as dozens of individual property owners took steps to protect their buildings. Large display windows were obscured by security gates, and burned-out buildings replaced with barbed-wire-secured parking lots. Broken windows were filled in with masonry, and wooden walls with much smaller openings. The riots did not completely stop new construction; indeed, many building sites were opened up and rebuilt. The new structures, however, responded to the changed dynamic with a language of "Fortress Modernism." Single-story and single-use structures, solid masonry walls, irregular and small windows, and security doors replaced pedestrian-friendly, glass-fronted, multi-story and multi-use buildings. Examples of this trend are on



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Right: Original auto showrooms of the 1930s have evolved into high-design home furnishing stores like Muleh and Vastu.

the west side of the 1700 block of 14th, and the T Street Station Post Office. The changes meant that fewer people lived above stores, and the streets became more dangerous. 14th Street was no longer a pleasant walk, but a place to get something and leave.

Architects who wished to build on 14th after World War II had to deal with this built texture. Unlike in Southwest or the area of Georgetown under the Whitehurst Freeway, large-scale demolition did not take place. Instead, Modern buildings were inserted into the fabric piecemeal, as developers assembled parcels to be redeveloped. The apartment buildings on Rhode Island Avenue between 14th and 15th Streets are good examples of this. These classic International Style structures would feel equally at home in Los Angeles or Chicago, and contrast markedly with the brick rowhouses they replaced.

Social agencies took advantage of the inexpensive rents to locate along 14th Street, serving the increasingly poor population. Once established, they built new structures specifically designed to fulfill their missions. A combination of Fortress Modernism and Brutalist trends in architecture and restricted budgets, the results were massive concrete buildings that diminished the streetscape. The Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind dominated P Street with a major window-free service center

(recently replaced by the Hudson condominiums). The Frontier housing development at 14th and Corcoran replaced the former D.C. Orphans Asylum; its rows of townhouses look inward to a parking lot, walled off from 14th Street by brick, fencing, and landscape.

Modern architecture and social services do not have to detract from the neighborhood. The Reeves Center anchors the 14th and U intersection. It marks the spot where the 1968 riots commenced and creates an urban plaza that has potential for giving back to the neighborhood. The United Supreme Council 33 building for the Masons is *suis generis*—it may not be beautiful, but its small scale allows its remarkable features to be a positive addition to the streetscape. The Elizabeth Taylor Building of the Whitman Walker Clinic is a respectful rehabilitation of existing space; its welcoming corner entry offsets the coldness of its street frontage. Better, the National Minority AIDS Council beautifully retrofitted a rowhouse next to the U Street Metro station to serve as offices and housing.

A NEW AGE

It could be argued that the catalyst for the greatest change on 14th Street was the arrival of the theaters. In the late 1970s, attracted by the low rents and

open spaces of former auto showrooms, Washington’s experimental theaters moved in. Beginning in 1977 with the Source Theatre, followed the next year by the Studio Theatre and the Woolly Mammoth, the stages have anchored 14th Street for more than 20 years. Not only did these institutions provide live theater, they also made a great effort to be a resource for the local community.

Studio Theatre’s building is an old auto showroom; its current expansion is taking over three former garages to its north. On lots once occupied by garages, a row of 1980s townhouses (part of the Bishop’s Gate condominium project) backs onto Johnson Avenue. Empire Lofts replaced other Johnson Avenue garages as the first loft residential building in Washington in 1997. New loft apartments are following the footprint of the old auto structures in massive developments on P and Church Streets. Their architects are embracing the industrial aesthetic of the old buildings.

There is an architectural freedom here. Developers are experimenting with different kinds of apartments: raised ceiling heights, movable walls, and other very un-Washington elements are becoming the norm. While this is happening in

other parts of town as well, the sheer amount of new building on 14th Street makes it a kind of laboratory for new trends in modern multi-family living.

The Whole Foods Market on P Street near 14th Street marked a turning point in the area. Opened in 2000, this market attracts shoppers from as far west as Dupont Circle and as far north as Adams Morgan. It would be easy to say that its construction was the catalyst that started it all, but Whole Foods really just emphasized what was already underway. Its success has encouraged small shops and restaurants to locate nearby. The block of 14th Street between S and T includes new businesses that cater to the neighborhood: Garden District, Pulp, Home Rule, Go Mamma Go, Vastu, and Muleh all reinforce the downtown style of 14th and U. Like a tiny version of New York’s Greenwich village, 14th Street is gradually becoming the place to check out the new and different.

Fourteenth Street is no longer a place described by a single use—an automall or social service center, or even a theater district. It is a brand new neighborhood in DC, adding to the vitality of downtown life. 🌿



Riot-torn 14th Street in 1968.



Reeves Municipal Center at 14th and U, a joint venture of Devroux & Purnell Associates Architects, Robert Coles, and VVKKR.



New stores on 14th and S Streets, NW.