

A CLEAR VIEW

How Glass Buildings in the Inner City Transformed a Neighborhood



SUZANE REATIG ARCHITECTURE



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PREFACE Thomas S. Shiner

INTRODUCTION Suzane Reatig



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INTRODUCTION

Suzane Reatig, FAIA

SUZANE REATIG, FAIA, has been recognized through multiple publications, awards, and honors. She has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Architectural Record*, and the *Washington Business Journal*. She is identified as an enduring contributor to Washington's residential urban fabric.

I grew up in Jerusalem with hardworking, honest people who lived simply and modestly. When I think about the value of architecture I think about people like these and how our work can improve their lives.

A favorite childhood memory is of going to the bakery to bring home a black cast-iron tray, to be filled with homemade pastries and then taken back to the bakery's communal oven. The oven, the smells, the warmth, the neighbors sharing baked goods with each other, made it all unforgettable. Our community felt fulfilling and comforting. Today in our practice we understand that architecture is not about form or style but comfort, both physical and spiritual, and attainable with humble means.

I moved to the US in 1975, soon after completing my architecture degree at the Technion in Haifa, Israel. I now live in Washington, DC, and work near downtown, in the Shaw neighborhood. My work there began in 1989 when Shaw still witnessed much blight and crime. The Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) members took a leap of faith in hiring me, a young architect with no religious design experience, to design what would become the first gay and lesbian community church in the nation. They offered a challenging site and program with a small, unrealistic budget, little financial backing, and an uncertain reception in the neighborhood. Completed in 1993, the building won awards, but more

importantly met members' needs, providing relief, security, and dignity to a congregation that was losing many of its members to AIDS.

The open design of the Metropolitan Community Church invited neighbors to accept the new, controversial congregation. About halfway up, the sanctuary's concrete block walls yield to expanses of glass curtain wall that reach the ceiling, allowing both privacy and openness to the street and community. When *Architectural Record* published it in 1993, architects across the country called to verify that the MCC was indeed constructed for only \$1.2 million. The project's lesson was that good architecture does not have to come with a large price tag. The modest budget was not a hurdle, but an opportunity. The principles that contributed to its success—elementary simplicity, clarity, modesty, openness, transparency, connection to nature, and unmistakable identity—became common themes in our work.

The MCC's completion became the starting point for my long and continuing relationship with Shaw. I bought a three-story row house in the heart of the neighborhood and moved my office there. Property values were depressed due to pervasive social and economic problems, and whole dilapidated blocks stood vacant. I also began my relationship with my now main client, The United House of Prayer for All People (UHOP), a national church with a large presence in the area.



RIGHT Figure ground of Shaw with selected projects
 ABOVE Historic N Street before and after

Together with the UHOP, our firm has become a visible and powerful catalyst in shaping the Shaw community, paralleling a slow, gradual gentrification over the last thirty years. The changes “have not been block by block, but rather house by house, alley by alley, neighbor by neighbor, and brick by brick.”¹ Gentrification benefits communities by attracting business, spurring economic development, and deterring crime. At the same time it can bring negative outcomes, as when wealthier newcomers displace residents unable to pay the higher rents and property taxes, and social and income diversity suffer.

Over the past twenty years gentrification has also pushed churches and their members to the suburbs.

The UHOP, with two churches in Shaw and hundreds of low-income housing units, felt firsthand the power of gentrification and the rejection associated with it.

Many of Shaw’s newest residents did not want to see affordable housing in their up-and-coming neighborhood. However, through adaptation, creative thinking, and hard work, we have produced a viable mixture of market rate and affordable housing to contribute to Shaw’s thriving, diverse community.

Our first building for the UHOP, 1731 7th Street NW, was a small apartment building with retail space on the street level. Having learned from the MCC project, we wanted to show that a limited budget doesn’t have to mean poor construction. The 1731 7th building was built well and delivers the basics of healthy and sustainable living: high ceilings, ample natural light, cross-ventilation, and a connection to nature. Soon young professionals moving to the city discovered the new apartments and the building became fully rented.

Focusing on our core design principles, we’ve been able to build profitable market-rate buildings that enable many of the UHOP’s affordable units to exist. To date we have completed twenty residential projects in Shaw, each freshly imagined to make the most of each site in this once blighted area.

¹ Eric Easter, *Ebony Magazine*, May 2009.

PROJECTS



20
ASHLAND AVENUE



32
METROPOLITAN
COMMUNITY CHURCH



42
SEE-THROUGH
TOWNHOUSE



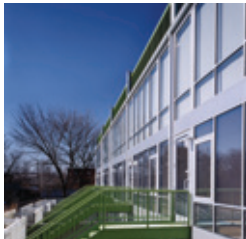
52
THE MADISON



60
N STREET
COURTYARD



70
MADISON
COURTYARD



78
N STREET LOFTS



88
RIDGE
STREET ROW



100
7TH STREET
COURTYARD



110
BAILEY LOFTS



120
BAILEY PARK



METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH

474 Ridge Street NW, Washington, DC

In 1989, just as I started my own architecture practice, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) took a leap of faith and hired me, an unlikely candidate. I was a young Jewish mother with no church design experience. The task was to design the first church built for an openly gay congregation in the nation; a place of worship which would provide physical comfort and spiritual comfort to a group in the midst of a difficult time.

The MCC had been worshipping in a rundown townhouse on M Street NW in the Shaw neighborhood. They were able to purchase four dilapidated townhouse buildings around the corner at 5th and Ridge Streets NW, which would become the site of their new church.

The current state of Shaw was grim. Residents were caught in the middle of crack turf wars. Dilapidated, abandoned buildings and empty lots were home to drug dealers who operated out in the open and with little concern or consequence from the police. Shootings in the streets were the norm. In addition to the drug violence, the predominantly black community that had lived in Shaw for decades was anxious that the MCC members, mostly young urban professionals, would take over their neighborhood.

To understand my clients and their needs, I participated in their meetings, events, celebrations, and funerals. I learned that the young congregation was linked by religious faith but also by belief in the value of being visibly who you are. They had to deal with crack wars in the streets and skepticism from long-time residents in their neighborhood, while also suffering from the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic in their own community.





A row of niches are punched in the rear wall of the small chapel on the second floor, forming the Columbarium for the funerary urns. The Columbarium also overlooks the sanctuary below allowing the dead to participate in the service.

LEFT Exposed structure used throughout
BELOW Columbarium overlooking sanctuary
RIGHT Maximum play on light with four exposures





Making the most of DC zoning regulations that allow projections into the public space, we provided a seventeen-foot-wide bay window on the street façade. For tenants, standing in the bay surrounded by floor-to-ceiling glass, there is a feeling of floating above the street and city.

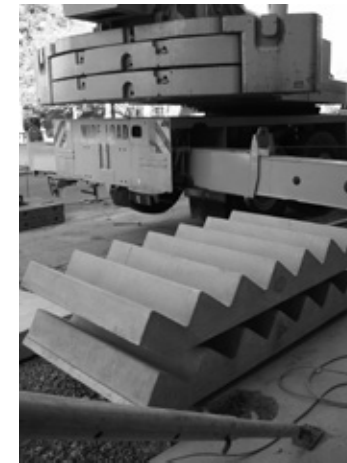
LEFT Bay window overlooking 7th Street NW
ABOVE Street façade (2002)



The layout arrangement of the four apartments around a courtyard not only provides ample natural light, cross-ventilation, and triple exposure, but also promotes communal outdoor living.



LEFT Second floor living (444 N Street NW)
RIGHT View of court from stairs (442 N Street NW)



The building is structured with prefabricated concrete panels for walls and hollow-core concrete planks for floors. The façades are predominantly curtain walls with added brick on the historic street façade. The concrete structure offers durability, non-combustibility, sound absorption, and cost-efficiency, making it ideally suited for high-density urban living.

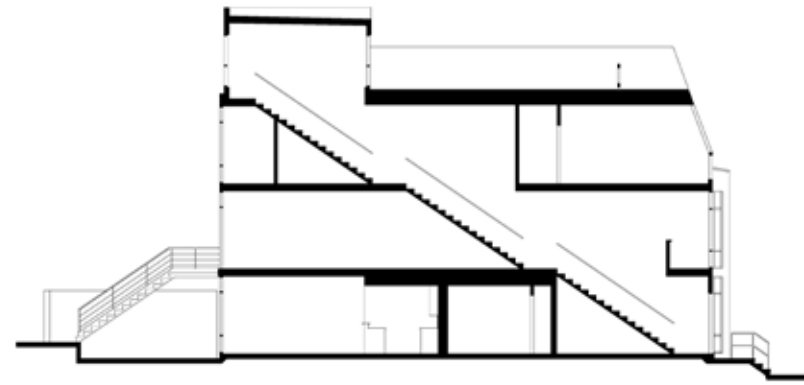


ABOVE Top unit private roof deck
RIGHT Alley façade with parking





LEFT North façade with private entrances to each unit from parking
BELOW Section
RIGHT Upper unit master bedroom





The precast concrete structure is rapidly erected on-site reducing construction duration, and material waste is kept to a minimum. Off-the-shelf standard materials with simple detailing further minimize the cost of the building.



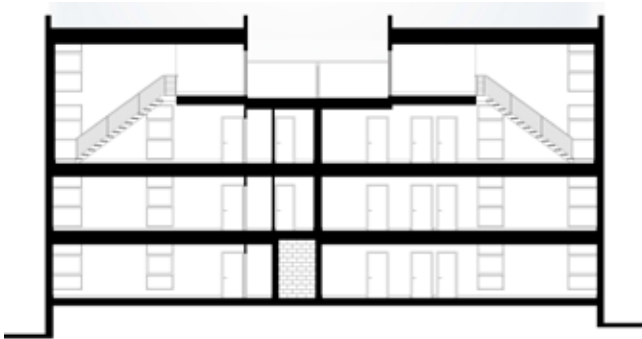


LEFT "Outdoor hallway" as means of a second exit
RIGHT Typical unit living space





Brightly colored aluminum panels draw passersby in, while corner-wrapping windows give residents a feeling of openness and a sense of eyes on the community.



LEFT Detail, corner window
ABOVE Section
RIGHT A clear view





LEFT Courtyard
RIGHT Duplex view of courtyard





LEFT Duplex kitchen/living space
RIGHT Garden façade at dusk



