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Big Squeeze Play on 16th Street

Just 21 Feet Wide, an 8-Story High-Rise Project Is Raising Eyebrows

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What seems to be the skinniest high-rise ever built in the District is going up at 1612 16th St. NW.

At 21.1 feet wide -- that's 18.6 feet of usable interior space -- the new building between Corcoran and Q streets will be nowhere near as narrow as many urban row houses.

But this structure is as tall as its neighbors, eight stories above ground and one story below. It has an elevator and two stairwells.

While no one can prove it is the District's slenderest high-rise, historic preservation officials and others believe it stands alone.

"I'm unaware of any other apartment buildings that are this thin or thinner," said Stephen Callcott, architectural historian for the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board.

Neighbors and passersby, though, are not as intrigued by the building's dimensions as by how and why it came to be and why it is taking so long to be shoehorned into place between two 1920s apartment buildings.

As the ultra-modern structure takes form after two years of construction, curiosity is also building. Workers scramble over an exposed steel superstructure. A tier of bowed white galvanized steel pieces on one corner raises eyebrows.

Developer Giorgio Furioso, an upscale builder who specializes in big and bold condo and rental projects, laughs when asked why he chose to fill in the narrow vertical space with four loft apartments and a large basement unit. A four-story row house condo would have been more typical for a lot this size -- and much easier to construct.

He also laughs when he confesses that this tiny building is taking longer than his much bigger projects.

The framing "could have gone up in six weeks," said Furioso, if he knew now what he didn't know in the beginning. That would have meant using steel framing instead of masonry, concrete and steel.

Because of that building technique, and because the space is so tight, the construction work has had to be scheduled differently than normal.

With no place to hold workers and materials to build floors in stages, "it's been like building five homes on top of each other," he said. The structure will be one unit wide.

Architect Bill Bonstra said the space is also like a "wind tunnel" because directly behind it is the District's tallest residential building, the Cairo Condominiums. "The air whips around that building and then comes through that slot," Bonstra said. "It's at least 10 degrees colder on the upper floors than at the bottom, which has been difficult for the owner to deal with."

But Furioso said he does not regret his decision, nor the investment in the extras that an apartment building that high requires, such as the two stairwells and an elevator. As part of the construction, he also had to underpin the buildings on either side because of the basement unit.

"Most of the developers in town say 'you're really nuts' to have tried this," Furioso said. "Some people I know say things like, 'How's that ship in the bottle?' . . . But we get more calls on this than on anything we've ever done. . . . And it's already been worth it . . . because of the artistic challenge."

He said, "It's going to be a very dynamic building, a very interesting building."

It might have been easier to raze the two-story structure that stood on the site and replace it with a four-story condo, "but then when people would drive by, it would have looked like a tooth was missing between those bigger buildings," Furioso said.

A four-level condo "might have looked better than the little house that had been there, which was kind of charming but looked really ridiculous, but it wouldn't have been the right thing to do," he said.

It is not clear whether the completed units will be rented out or sold as condos. Two neighbors said they had been quoted prices of \$800,000 and \$1 million by on-site personnel recently, but Furioso said no amount had been set.

Furioso and his builder partner, Phillip Abraham, bought the property for \$305,000 in August 1999.

The now-demolished original frame house was built in the 1870s (the D.C. historic preservation office's estimate) or in the 1830s (the recollection of Hunter Huang, who owned it from 1973 until 1999).

Huang ran a Chinese restaurant there for 10 years, then rented it out for five years. He turned it into his residence after the tenant did not pay the rent.

Callcott did not know how the house escaped being incorporated into the Ravenel and Barclay apartment buildings in the 1920s. "It's typical of development in a city to have little holdouts," he said.

The original structure sat far back on the lot, according to Callcott. A one-story addition in the 1950s covered the original Italianate front and brought the building closer to the sidewalk.

Some neighborhood "historians" say the little building survived because for decades before Huang came into the picture it was used as a family-owned American-style restaurant called the Garden, with a big and welcoming dining patio.

Darcy Irwin, a 10-year tenant in the Barclay and a neighborhood resident since 1958, said many a developer wanted to buy the property to convert into a large house or condos, but Huang could not get the price he wanted.

Howard and Maxine Bernstein acquired the neighboring apartment buildings in 1969. Their son, Craig Bernstein of H&M Enterprises in Bethesda, "thought [we] had the building bought a couple of times." But H&M wasn't thinking of turning it into a high-rise. "My architects didn't want to tackle that because of the narrowness," Craig Bernstein said.

The District's historic review board approved Furioso's plan to demolish the building because little was left from the original structure, Callcott said. The board also applauded the contemporary design as unique and yet still compatible with the neighborhood.

The D.C. Preservation League agreed. "It's a very good example of contemporary architecture in a historic district that is compatible with the neighborhood and with existing buildings," league member Tom Mayes said.

Mayes, who is also a neighbor, said architect Bonstra's design "was particularly good" because it lines up with both adjacent buildings, even though they don't line up with one another.

"I have been very curious about how it will look because it's such a difficult site," Mayes said. "I have heard people refer to it as the 'sliver' building."

Though the delays are costing plenty -- the developer won't reveal the amount and will only estimate that it might be finished by spring or summer -- Furioso repeats that the project is "worth it."

The building, with its swaths of glass and steel, will be like "a very beautiful narrow jewel box," he predicted.

The masonry frame of the building will be gold-colored. Balconies on the north end will angle back into glass walls. The tier of bowed steel, three bows to a floor, will jut out in front of the balconies and hold planters. The plan is to weave greenery up to the roof.

The cornice will feature steel hoops and a sculpture inspired by the Tapies Foundation museum in Barcelona. The wiry bramble atop that museum is by famed Spanish artist Antoni Tapies and is named "Cloud and Chair."

Furioso and Abraham are naming the building the Tapies.

Furioso said the interior of the building will also be impressive. Each of the four loft units will run the full depth of the building, totaling 2,000 square feet. The basement unit will be 1,400 square feet.

His optimism amazes neighbor Irwin. "Everybody's dying to see how it turns out. . . . I can't wait to see this thing."

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