

First In Their Class

An innovative mixed-use projects break new ground in suburban Washington.



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It's Academic

In the suburbs of Washington, a student housing tower gives new life to a development that's been more than 50 years in the making.

Say you're a developer who has owned 56 acres in Hyattsville, Md., since the early '50s. Your long-held vision is a vibrant town center less than 10 miles from the White House, but all you've been able to get going is three office buildings (handsome structures, designed by the eminent architect Edward Durrell Stone, but lifeless after 6 p.m. and on weekends). Finally, the extension of Washington's subway system promises a nearby stop, which changes the picture. You get a master plan going that calls for residences, retail, restaurants, more office space, and a multiplex movie theater.

But what's the quickest way to bring instant life to the area? Make that first residential project a 16-story, 910-bed, student housing tower, designed to serve the University of Maryland, just a mile away, as well as other area institutions.

That's exactly what Herschel Blumberg, the 82-year-old president and owner of Prince George's Metro Center did. In August 2006, students from 11 area universities started moving into the Towers at University Town Center. It's the first project in the Washington area to serve so many schools at once.

Architecturally, the Towers building sets the tone for the rest of the master plan, which was developed by RTKL Associates. "We wanted to create something that was warm and inviting, which is hard with a 16-story tower," says a representative from RTKL, which also designed the Towers. To the owners' credit, they were able to use three different kinds of brick and two different kinds of cast stone, which was used all the way up the building and not just on the three lower floors. The design team also pushed heavily that every bedroom should have its own bath.

Under construction now are two for-sale buildings (One Independence Plaza, a 112-unit condo building, and Lofts-Twenty-Two, a 22-loft unit building), as well as a multiplex theater, a new supermarket, and restaurants and retail outlets. "The retail and the theater and the for-sale buildings are all going to come on line at the same time," says Robert Keane, a principal with WDG Architecture, which designed the for-sale buildings. It will be an instant town center that was more than 50 years in the making.

Project: University Town Center, Hyattsville, Md.; **Project size:** 56 acres; **Unit size:** 766 to 1,332 square feet (Towers); 691 to 1,085 square feet (One Independence Plaza); 880 to 1,300 square feet (Lofts 22); **Price:** \$695 to \$930 per bed per month (Towers); \$250,000 to \$450,000 (condos); \$450,000 to \$700,000 (lofts); **Builder/Developer:** Prince George's Metro Center, Hyattsville, Md.; **Architect:** RTKL, Washington (Towers); WDG Architecture, Baltimore (condos, lofts); **Land planner:** Parker Rodriguez, Alexandria, Va.