

## From the Ground Up

### Hip Lofts to Bring Glimmer of Zinc to Hyattsville

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The word "zinc" conjures up vitamins, batteries, pennies. But lofts?

In a section of Hyattsville not particularly known for hip architecture, developers plan in coming weeks to begin installing curved, low-gloss, gray zinc walls on the front and back of a 22-loft building under construction at the University Town Center in Prince George's County. The five-story structure -- the first floor will be occupied by a restaurant -- is one of the first residential buildings in the Washington region to install walls made of zinc, a metal that industry experts say is emerging nationwide as a desirable alternative to traditional materials such as copper or less expensive masonry.



"It has a pleasing gray tone and it weathers quite well," said Bill Zahner, author of a book on metals and president of A. Zahner Co. of Kansas City, which manufactures custom architectural and ornamental metals.

"The technology on how to use the metal correctly has really come together in the last five years, he said. "If they're put up correctly they can last 100 years, and they're fully recyclable."

Some institutions, including Howard University, have installed zinc walls on buildings. Metal salesmen say some developers in the Washington region have inquired about zinc or plan to install it in new multi-unit residential buildings or single-family homes.

The loft building in Hyattsville, the Plaza Lofts 22, is nestled among five office buildings; 112 condominiums that are under construction; a 244-unit student apartment building; restaurants and a movie theater. Those buildings are made of brick or precast concrete.

"This is our jewel building," said Chris Hanessian, chief operating officer for developer University Town Center LLC. "The zinc doesn't discolor. It just holds up naturally."

Zinc's reactions with compounds in the atmosphere allow it to effectively heal itself when scratched, like human skin.

"All the other buildings focus in on this building," Hanessian said. "Thousands of office workers look down at the building. Student housing looks down at the building. It's a focal point."

Matt Lam, senior designer with WDG Architecture of the District, who worked on the Hyattsville project, said another benefit of zinc is that it is lighter in weight, which will put "less stress" on the underground parking garage.

Hyattsville, a city of about 16,000, has an eclectic population that includes a concentration of artists.

But struggling artists, in all likelihood, won't be able to afford lofts in the building, which also has an environmentally friendly green roof with vegetation, Hanessian said. The one- and two-bedroom units, slated to be completed by fall, range from \$400,000 to \$750,000.

Michael Jung, a manufacturer's representative for Umicore Building Products USA, which sold the French-made zinc for the Hyattsville project, said of the metal's growing popularity in the United States: "I call it the oldest new metal on earth. It's beautiful stuff. It's more expensive than steel and aluminum. In price it's equal to that of copper."

But he said some universities have used it, in part, to save money.

"They can afford to save money," he said. "It's like buying a Mercedes-Benz. It's a lot of money upfront, but hey, it's still working years later."

Installing this particular zinc, which is mixed with traces of copper and titanium, won't be a snap.

Dean Jagusch, project manager for Roofers Inc. of Baltimore, said that between prepping the building and the walls and cutting out spaces for windows, the installation will take a crew of eight about two months.

"It's a unique kind of job," he said.