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D.C. Development to Define Fort Totten Neighborhood

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By Jeffrey Steele, Contributing Writer

Washington, D.C.—A new mixed-use apartment community planned for Washington, D.C.’s Fort Totten neighborhood promises to bring to the urban enclave much needed workforce housing, local retailing and a stronger sense of neighborhood identity.

Fort Totten Square, an 826,000-square-foot project that will include 350 apartments and 130,000 square feet of retail anchored by a Wal-Mart, has as its architectural firm Washington, D.C.-based Hickok Cole Architects. The developers are The JBG Companies and Lowe Enterprises, the general contractor Clark Construction Group LLC, and the landscape architect Parker Rodriguez Inc.

The site’s transit orientation was a key factor in putting this development on the drawing boards. “Currently the site is a vacant lot, but it’s within a quarter mile of one of the Metro [rapid transit] stations, the Fort Totten Station that serves the Red, Yellow and Green Lines,” Laurence Caudle, AIA, director of housing and associate principal at Hickok Cole Architects, tells *MHN*.

“There is a bus stop right at one of the corners of the site. And the major road by the site is one of the major thoroughfares into and out of the District.”

Other development catalysts included the lack of housing price point variety in Fort Totten, and the community’s dearth of retail. “This is a well-established neighborhood, and the people who grew up in the neighborhood would love to buy homes there themselves,” Caudle says. “But there isn’t much housing in that neighborhood they could afford. There are very few neighborhoods served by the Metro system that are not well developed, and this is one of them. This one is lacking in retail and in a variety of affordable housing types.”

Apartments will range in configuration from studio to two-bedroom units, with about 15 percent being studios, 20 percent two-bedrooms and the remainder one-bedroom units. Fort Totten Square is being seen as a workforce product, likely to appeal to teachers, fire fighters, policemen and others. “It’s probably not geared to families,” Caudle says. “This demographic will be made up of those who want an urban lifestyle, but are not yet able to afford a downtown location.”

Along with Wal-Mart, retailers are likely to include neighborhood stores and service businesses, such as dry cleaners, bank branches and a coffee shop. Among the amenities will be an outdoor pool, courtyard with grilling areas, a fitness center and what Caudle terms “a good-sized club room.” As for sustainability, the goal is to attain LEED certification.

Two architectural challenges existed on the project. The first was that because Fort Totten Square will fill a 600-foot-long block, the mass of the building had to be broken up to blend into the neighborhood contextually. That was attained via a separation two-thirds of the way down the building. “There is a curb cut that is the means of access into the parking garage and the retail,” Caudle says.

The second was the existence of a 20-foot grade difference from one side of the building to the other. The design leverages that grade difference to bury most of the residential parking below grade on the building’s residential side, but to put retail parking behind in-line retail elevations on the building’s retail side.

Also noteworthy was the choice of materials for Fort Totten Square. “By far the most prevalent [building] material in the neighborhood is brick, so on the residential side we are brick in the elevations,” Caudle says. “But because we wanted this to be read as a modern, contemporary project, we are also using some panels and some reveals, for a very contemporary vibe.”

At present, the Fort Totten enclave lacks anything that might genuinely be called a community hub. Says Caudle: “With this building’s size, prominence and its neighborhood retail, it will begin to define the Fort Totten neighborhood.”

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