

NORTHWEST REAL ESTATE

A LOOK AT THE MARKET IN NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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Watson Place residents celebrate 50 years

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When the market crashed and the Great Depression set in, developers stopped construction of the Westchester co-op apartments on a 15-acre parcel that rests nearly in the shadow of the Washington National Cathedral. Decades later, work began again on two buildings that would become known as 3900 Watson Place.

The 130-unit co-op recently marked its 50th anniversary, a milestone residents celebrated with a party and a D.C. Council declaration for “3900 Watson Place NW Day.”

Though celebrated now, the midcentury modern architecture of Watson Place’s two buildings was once pooh-poohed by the residents of the four older Westchester buildings just across the way.

“They were not overly thrilled,” said Watson Place resident Mary Leonard.

Westchester residents were also dismayed to lose the uncluttered green landscape they had enjoyed for more than three decades before Watson Place was constructed. Plus, the Westchester’s traditional

architecture — replete with Gothic, Moorish and art deco details — seemed to conflict with the clean lines and huge windows of Watson Place.

“This was modern with a capital M,” said Leonard, who was once a member of the co-op’s board and now is chair of its public relations committee.

The recently remodeled lobbies tiptoe the line between a throwback to the building’s 1960s roots and a slicker, warmer, more modern aesthetic. The original lobby’s bamboo wallpaper has been replaced with beige and green-gray walls and black-and-white prints of the District’s well-known monuments. The art deco design features, added to the doors of each unit, were meant to emphasize the building’s past and add architectural punch. New elevators feature textured glass panels, an homage to the 1960s that is still right at home in the 2010s.

The pamphlet that was used to help sell the original units is a throwback itself: “Women who pride themselves on the beauty and efficiency of their kitchens will find outstanding innovations in the scientifically coordinated Hot Point electric kitchens,” part of it reads.

The literature also tried to sell the buildings as a sort of “country estate” within the city.

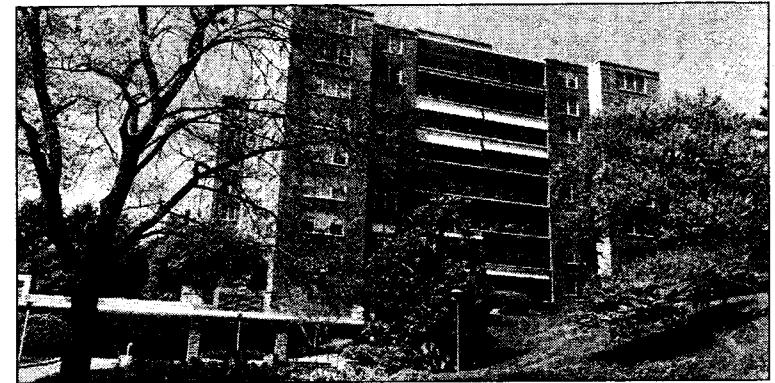
That particular selling point remains: Situated on five acres of its own, Watson Place shares an additional 10 acres of manicured gardens and open green space with the Westchester.

Every resident has at least a 20-foot-wide balcony to view all that space; those who have knocked down walls and taken over abutting apartments have double that. Residents on the ground floor, such as Mary Leonard, have vast curving patios. Leonard’s unit even features a small vegetable garden.

Many of the units remain in the original two-bedroom, two-bathroom, galley kitchen configuration, but many have been expanded and remade into four-bedroom units with expansive kitchens.

Three units of varying sizes are currently on the market. They are listed in the \$350,000 and up range, significantly less than the Westchester’s units, which go for between \$500,000 and \$600,000. Watson’s co-op fees, which include everything but telephone and cable service, average \$1,150 a month.

Three-quarters of the residents are single, but Watson Place is also



Bill Petros/The Current

Each unit at the Watson Place cooperative includes a 20-foot balcony.

embracing the recent baby boom that has arrived among the building’s married residents — several babies were born within the last year, and one’s on the way.

Like many older buildings in the District, Watson Place has had its share of well-known occupants. One was Eleanor Lansing Dulles, a diplomat, author, teacher, the original finance director of the Social Security Board (1936) and sister of Allen W. Dulles, Central Intelligence Agency director (1953-61), and John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State (1953-59). Others include Ellsworth Bunker, who was President Richard

Nixon’s ambassador to then-South Vietnam; and Bob Dowling, a New York real estate magnate whose company developed and originally managed 3900 Watson Place.

The co-op’s pride in its residents reflects the close-knit community that has formed in the buildings during the past half-century.

“When new people move in, we have a party for them,” Leonard said.

“You’re sick, you get soup on your doorknob. It’s unreal. So I ain’t ever moving,” added Elizabeth Jessup, a real estate agent who moved from Silver Spring to Watson Place in 2003.