

Finally, life beyond Washington Harbour

Georgetown's waterfront revitalization edges closer to lively, lush with an embassy, an office building and a public park on the way

By Douglas Fruehling

IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, ALAN NOVAK HAS HAD A STAKE IN THE GEORGETOWN waterfront for 25 years. A longtime art dealer, he served on the Fine Arts Commission from 1980 to '85, casting crucial votes on the waterfront park and Washington Harbour. He later had office space in the complex. And in the 1990s, he bought the vacant site next to Washington Harbour, sold it and bought it back a couple of years later.

But as the rest of Washington grew up around it, buoyed by two real estate booms, the Georgetown waterfront struggled to evolve beyond Washington Harbour, which opened in 1986. Controversy dogged every effort to move forward. Court cases ensued. Flood issues persisted. The real estate market crashed, revived and slowed again.

"I consider the harbor of Georgetown sacred ground," Novak says. "Next to the Mall, it's kind of beachfront perimeter. The Kennedy Center. The Watergate. Teddy Roosevelt Island. The Key Bridge."

Now visions that were born decades ago are coming out of the ground. The new Swedish Embassy is rising between Washington Harbour and the Watergate, and Novak is building the first new office space to hit Georgetown since the first George Bush.

Both will deliver by next spring, and a groundbreaking for the new waterfront park could occur — dare we say it? — by the end of the year.

"It was just serendipitous that they should both come together at the same time," Novak says.

NO DAY IN THE PARK

If talk about a revived Georgetown riverfront seems familiar, it's probably because you've heard it before. Origins of the park date to at least the early 1970s.

Western Development and its partners went through lengthy battles to get approval for the \$200 million Washington

Harbour. They went before the Fine Arts Commission multiple times, getting a rejection, a tentative OK and, in the end, a final rejection (Novak voted in favor). But then-Mayor Marion Barry approved the project anyway, the first time he had overruled a commission recommendation.

Part of the controversy: Many Georgetowners wanted a park on the waterfront. Western eventually agreed to give \$1 million for a park just west of the complex. That park remains, though it's not much more than some benches and walkways.

The grander vision for a 10-acre park extending to the Key Bridge has languished since Washington Harbour opened. The effort picked up steam in recent years, with a successful campaign to raise \$11 million of the \$15 million needed, allowing construction on the first part to begin. Although a groundbreaking was expected much earlier this year, a National Park Service official says a ceremony could still occur by the end of the year.

The Fine Arts Commission and National Capital Planning Commission have already approved the park's design, which was done by landscape architects Wallace Roberts & Todd. It will feature a children's sculpture garden, a labyrinth and a staircase to bring visitors closer to the water.

Although the park will improve the area, other uses would better serve the waterfront, says Roger Lewis, an architecture professor at the University of Maryland who has been writing about the waterfront since the mid-1980s, when he started a col-



SWEDE DREAMS: Alan Novak realizes his dream to build a Swedish Embassy, right, and an office building on the Potomac.

MATTHEW HOUSTON

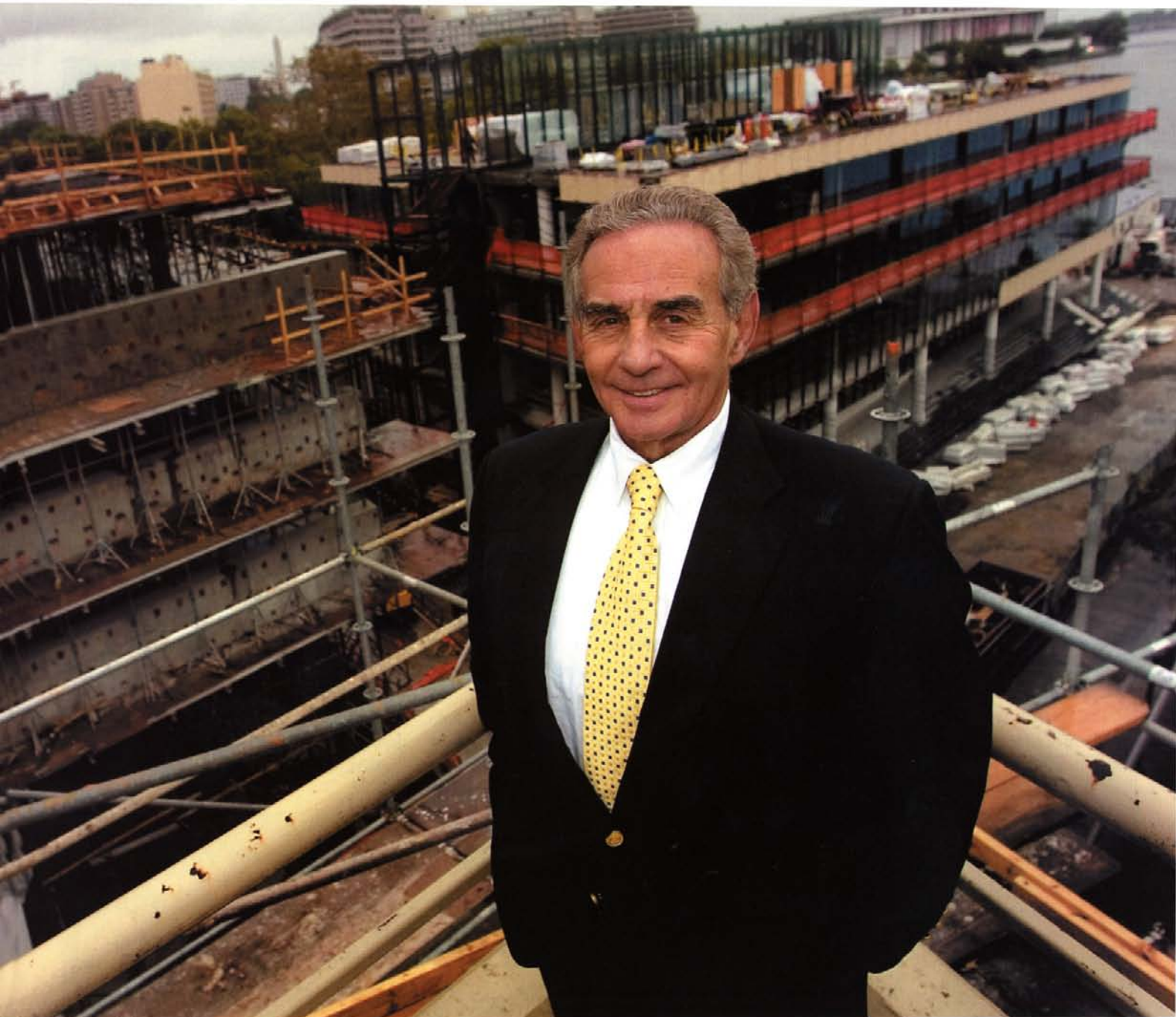
umn in The Washington Post.

"I would have advocated having some additional cafes or restaurants down there," he says. "I don't object to a park per se, but the park could have had a somewhat larger structure or pavilion on it that would be a destination in and of itself."

OLD FRIENDS

On the other side of Washington Harbour, Novak's previously empty lot will continue the park all the way to the National Park Service's Thompson Boat Center, with architecture firm EDWA designing the landscaping that will bridge the two and run along the creek.

With water on two sides, the 1.2-acre site has always been challenging. Envisioned as a second phase to Washington



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Harbour, it was to be a 120-room hotel and 106,000-square-foot office building operated by Rosewood Hotels. But the project faced the same problems as the Harbour and died a quiet death in the late ’80s.

Novak bought the parcel, home to a vacant coal house and a fenced boat storage area, in 1997 from Rosewood, hoping to convince Sweden that it was the perfect spot for the country’s new embassy.

“My wife always thought the Swedish Embassy ought to be on the waterfront,”

says Novak, whose wife, Kitty, is Swedish. “Swedes love the water. It’s part of their genetic code.”

Sweden studied the issue at the time but let the idea lapse. Novak and his partner, Armada Hoffer, considered office and hotel uses before selling the property to Crescent Real Estate Equities, which had just bought the Harbour complex.

The land sat unimproved for the next couple of years — and never really left Novak’s thoughts. He bought it back in 2002,

shortly after Crescent flipped Washington Harbour to Shorenstein.

“I think we just knew more about it than anybody else,” says Novak, who owns Lano International with his son, Jonathan, and also surmounted another difficult challenge by building the Mandarin Oriental hotel at the Portals.

At that time, an old friend of Novak’s, Jan Eliasson, was the new Swedish ambassador. They were neighbors in the 1970s when Eliasson was a junior **CONTINUES >**

officer at the embassy.

Sweden was interested in the site again and this time didn't balk; plans for the House of Sweden were introduced in 2002. The Swedes had one condition: They would hold a design competition back in Sweden, even though Arthur Cotton Moore, who designed Washington Harbour, already had done plans for two buildings.

Gert Wingårdh won with his design of a cantilevered building based on a concept of a "stranded boat." It will be lit at night, creating a glow on the riverfront. The bottom floor will be an exhibition hall for Swedish companies such as Ikea and art shows.

The middle floors will house embassy offices, and the top will be residential. Sweden is leasing with an option to buy.

"We thought that it would be a wonderful showplace for Sweden," Novak recalls. "If you want to be noticed, it doesn't hurt to be in a great building on a great location."

OFFICE WITH A VIEW

A year ago Lano International and Armada Hoffler started construction



The Georgetown waterfront park will stretch from the Key Bridge to Washington Harbour and feature river over-looks. Groundbreaking could occur by the end of the year, a National Park Service official says.

speculatively on the adjacent office building between K Street and the embassy. Called Harbourside, it will be the first major office delivery in the submarket since 1990.

The building contains 130,000 square feet with a top floor featuring condos, though the team has yet to begin marketing the tony residences. Office rents range from the low \$30s to mid-\$40s per square foot triple net, attributable to the views and Georgetown's third-quarter direct vacancy rate of 3.8 percent.

"What a different feel for an office tenant to have as opposed to Connecticut and K Street," says Brendan Owen, a senior

vice president at CB Richard Ellis who's marketing the space with Mark Mallus.

Georgetown space is attracting more attention, says Mark Minich, a broker at Cushman & Wakefield. "The range of clientele that would be interested in Georgetown is growing, and the reason it is growing is that Georgetown has come of age in level of sophistication," he says.

He attributes that to nearby residential projects and retail improvements.

"The other wild card is whether they bring down the Whitehurst Freeway," Minich says, alluding to a proposal to tear down the elevated freeway over K Street. "If that happens, everything changes." ■

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