

Architecture Ahead:

A Silver Lining for Silver Spring

by Michael Tardif

As the transformation of Silver Spring gains momentum, the community confronts a common development dilemma: how to pursue needed growth without losing its local character, that intangible sense of place that lets you know you are in a place not quite like any other. Preservation is not enough; the sheer scale of ongoing development in Silver Spring, if not pursued in a thoughtful way, could overshadow the successful preservation of landmarks such as the AFI Silver Theatre. It's the new stuff that will determine whether Silver Spring will remain a memorable place or become just another exercise in generic mixed-used development and multi-modal transportation.

"Local character" is as much a byproduct of planning as a direct outcome. You can include restaurants in a master plan, but there's no guarantee they will have the local flavor of Silver Spring's Red Dog Café or Jackie's Restaurant, new establishments unlike any you might find in Arlington, Bethesda, or DC. Serendipity and flexibility are key: a community has to recognize unusual ideas and concepts and allow them to flourish, even if they don't neatly fit the "plan."

A new complex of buildings planned for the intersection of Spring and Cameron Streets, one of which is already under construction, will achieve a "local character" in a different way. Unlike Jackie's and Red Dog, whose character is shaped by the personality of the proprietors, the signature quality of the **United Therapeutics Silver Spring Campus** is being shaped by a design that responds to the specific conditions of a difficult site, a

complex building program, and a clear set of principles defined by the client. Resolving such technical challenges, however, is not enough to produce "signature" architecture. A coherent aesthetic vision is needed that transcends the technical requirements and aspires to art.

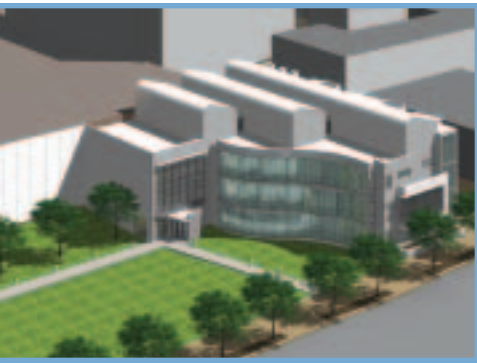
Designed by **Schick and Goldstein Architects, PC**, for biotechnology company United Therapeutics on a site that spans the intersection of Spring and Cameron Streets, the new laboratory and headquarters complex is remarkable for the simple fact that these types of facilities are rarely built in an urban environment. It would be much easier to decamp to wide-open space in a remote suburban office park. But from the beginning, the company, with headquarters in Silver Spring, was determined to plant deeper roots there. The decision can be traced to the local ties of company executives, but it also has a strategic business purpose: the constraints of building on an urban site will give the company headquarters a distinct physical presence completely unlike that of similar bio-tech companies headquartered around the country in faceless office parks. In its application for zoning approval, the company expressed its intent clearly, noting that it envisions "... a design reflecting the same excitement and innovation on the outside of the building as United Therapeutics expects its scientists ... to be pursuing on the inside."

The building site presents its own challenges. It consists of two parcels on opposite sides of Cameron Street where it intersects with Spring Street. One parcel extends from United Therapeutics' existing headquarters at 1100 Spring Street to the southeast corner of the intersection with Cameron Street, while the other is located just across Cameron Street on a site occupied by a public parking lot.

Architects **Jill Schick, AIA**, and **Howard Goldstein, AIA**, have taken full advantage of the technical challenges

Schick and Goldstein Architects, PC





Top: Phase 1, computer rendering;
Above: Phase 1 under construction.



inherent in this project to develop a site-specific design in an exuberant and inviting modern vocabulary. The project will be completed in three phases, the first of which—the three-story laboratory building—is now under construction at the southerly end of the Cameron Street parcel. It will be joined by two eight-story office buildings fronting Spring Street on opposite corners of Cameron Street, which will be connected by a glass pedestrian tube at the seventh floor level supported by a stainless steel exterior spiral. Owner and architects variously describe the tube as a stylized DNA double helix, an umbilical cord, or a giant “silver spring.”

The office building adjacent to the laboratory building is circular in shape, forming a knuckle or hinge that visually ties the three buildings together into a single complex. The lab building curves away from the street, in apparent deference to the convex shape of its future circular office-building neighbor, but also to carve out a substantial public space between the two buildings. The lab building is topped by a series of roof forms angled precisely to support an array of photovoltaic cells that will generate electricity. Its three-story curved façade will be finished in floor-to-ceiling channel glass, the vertical ribs of which will emphasize the double curve both day and night. At street level, a large electronic media screen—dubbed the “Bio-Wall”—will face the public plaza that fronts on Cameron Street.

The two office buildings simultaneously rise up toward the corner while curving away from it. Together with the walking tube, the buildings form a dramatic gateway to the Silver Spring central business district

while opening the corners to public use. By concentrating the bulk of the buildings’ volume at the intersection, Schick and Goldstein were able to carve a series of landscaped roof terraces into both office buildings, creating a varied roof profile while providing garden views and generous outdoor space for the special meeting rooms, lecture hall, and education/training rooms located on the top levels. The varying height and shapes of all three buildings enliven the overall complex and help reduce its apparent size.

Paying attention to the street is essential in an urban environment, and together owner and architects have embraced the public realm to a degree unusual for a corporate headquarters building and far beyond the required sidewalk “streetscape” improvements. The buildings facing Spring Street will be lined with street-level retail establishments set back from the street in a continuous covered arcade. Streetscape and landscape elements extend past the public right-of-way onto the building site itself, with no distinguishing elements to mark the boundary between the public and the private realm.

When complete, the United Therapeutics Silver Spring campus will form a completely secure, limited-access corporate facility nestled into a vibrant and public urban street environment, in a composition of buildings that could only be found in this location in Silver Spring. 