

# Architecture Now

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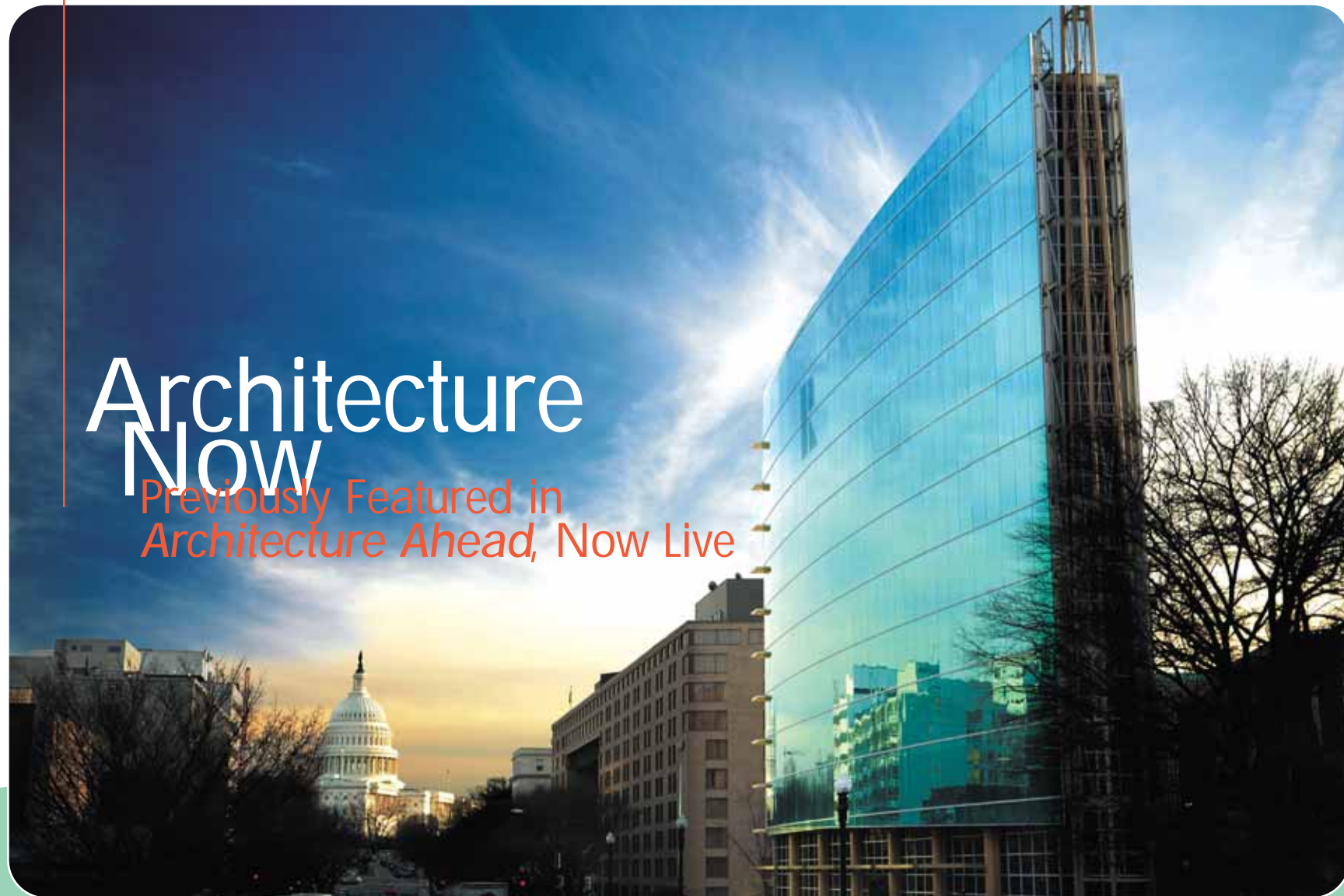


Photo courtesy National Association of Realtors

## Blade of Glass

The Sleek New NAR Building Dazzles the Eye and Raises the Bar

A few blocks north of the Capitol, on a narrow, wedge-shaped lot that was previously home to a gas station, stands one of the most beautiful office buildings in the DC metro area: the recently completed National Association of Realtors building at 500 New Jersey Avenue, NW, designed by Gund Partnership of Cambridge, Massachusetts, in collaboration with SMB Architects of Washington DC.

The design for the 12-story NAR building was featured in the *Architecture Ahead* issue of *ARCHITECTUREDC* two years ago. “Considering the deceiving complexity of actually constructing this building, we’ve all been quite pleased at how closely the finished product corresponds to the initial design,” says John Edwards, Assoc. AIA, of SMB Architects in a recent email. “Of course, there are always times during construction where things simply

aren’t coming together in the way in which you imagined, requiring some unusual last-minute alterations and solutions. The end result, however, is amazingly faithful to the original design intent.”

Sheathed by a pair of curving curtain walls of blue-green glass, the sleek and lustrous NAR building resembles a giant flake of obsidian standing on edge. Depending on the time of day and the presence or absence of clouds, the building’s glass skin can take on hues ranging from light aquamarine to sea green and deep blue.

At the narrow end of the building, where the two glass curtain walls almost meet, the building finishes with a thin, open-framework, metal tower that emphatically punctuates the design. Viewed from the north, looking down New Jersey Avenue, the building acts as a visual

gateway to the Capitol, with the spire on the open-framework tower respectfully echoing the tapered top of the Capitol dome.

The location of the building—a narrow trapezoidal block (almost a triangle) bordered by F Street on the north, E Street on the south, 1st Street on the east, and New Jersey Avenue on the west—pretty much dictated a wedge-shaped building. But there are many ways to design a wedge-shaped office building. How did the architects arrive at this design, which differs so much from the look of most other DC office buildings, wedge-shaped or otherwise?

“We wanted to create a building that was very soft in contrast to the rectilinear nature of the surrounding concrete-panel background buildings,” writes Laura Cabo, AIA, of Gund Partnership in an email. “[The curving design] recalls the curve of the Capitol dome, whose silhouette is of great focus from many vantage points inside and outside of the building.”

“The two curved blue planes slip against the building’s structure almost like an abstract vase, creating a distinct landmark recognizable from quite a distance,” Cabo adds. “The blue [of the glass] is NAR’s brand color.”

And what about the open-framework tower, which differs significantly from the treatments given to the narrow ends of other wedge-shaped DC office buildings?

“The tower essentially acts as an architectural exclamation point at the site’s vertex,” says Edwards, “at the same time celebrating the intersection of L’Enfant’s [diagonal] avenue and [rectilinear] street grid that makes this site so unique.”

“The tower is a symbol of NAR’s purpose as a clearinghouse of information for its one-million-plus members,” Cabo says. “It also marks the point of the site, creating an identifiable vertical [element] in the tradition of the Washington Monument.” Cabo adds that the tower solution created a narrow fourth façade for the building that gives occupants at that end a view through the tower’s open framework to the north. The upper floors on the broader south end of the building, meanwhile, offer spectacular views toward Capitol Hill.

Several “green,” i.e., environmentally friendly, features were incorporated into the building’s design. The architects and clients hope the

building will become the first newly constructed building in DC to win LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.

“A significant aspect of the green-ness of the building is that it achieves a high level of [environmental] sustainability without fitting the stereotypical image of a green structure,” Edwards says. “It demonstrates that you don’t have to sacrifice daring aesthetics for a workplace that is environmentally healthy and responsible.”

“Environmental sensitivity was the centerpiece of our design,” says Cabo. “NAR had the opportunity to create. . . a model workplace for the future, beckoning others to follow.”

With its sleek graceful glass sides, the NAR building breaks from the everyday pattern of DC office building design, and might help take it in a new direction. “Part of what makes DC so great is its sameness,” Cabo says. At the same time, however, she adds, “Part of what makes DC dull is its sameness. If our building can forge the way for glimpses to the future, we think L’Enfant would be pleased.”  
— Ronald O’Rourke



Photo courtesy National Association of Realtors

## Fully Integrated

### U Street Metro Building Fits In

When last seen on these pages, the U Street Metro Building was barely a glimmer in the architect's CAD program, a hopeful rendering of what might come to pass. Now, two years later, the fully operational building is an integral part of a booming, vital neighborhood.

The challenge for the architects, according to Ramon Santos, Project Manager for CORE architecture + design, was always below the ground. A warren of conduit, refrigerant tubes, subway tunnels, air vents, and access ways made for very difficult foundation work. "What's underneath the building is as complex, if not more complex, than what's above it!" notes Santos, reminiscing about the difficulties involved in building on the site.

To break down the scale of the building and not let it appear as one looming mass, CORE used a "book-end" approach, creating the appearance of two buildings at each end of the block bracketing a middle section. This, according to Santos, also worked well in accommodating some of the underground goings-on.

With the Metro station, its escalators, a Quiznos, Starbucks, and Sun Trust bank anchoring the plaza level, and the DC Department of Mental Health occupying the upper floors, the corner makes for an active spot, above ground or below. 🏢

— Ellen Sands



The challenge in bringing this building to life was to build around the subway tunnels and systems below.



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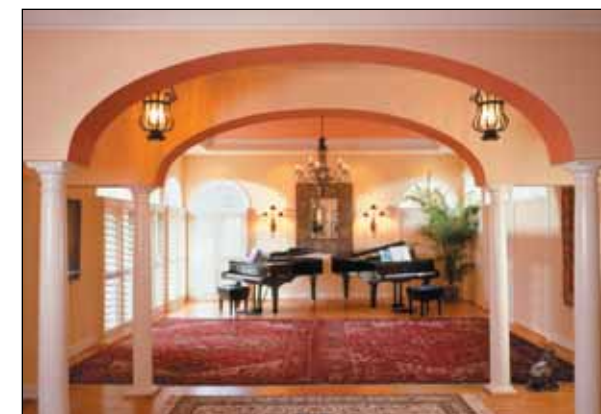
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