

2023 AIA|DC Washingtonian Residential Design Awards

Project Title: Slowe Hall

Location: 1919 3rd Street, NW, Washington, DC

Date of Completion: 11/01/2020

Project Statement:

Built in 1942, Slowe Hall provided housing for African American women supporting the war effort. Post-war, this three-story building was acquired by Howard University for female dormitory housing, where it was officially named after Lucy Diggs Slowe—the first female dean at Howard University and the first African American woman to win a national sports title. And as of late, Slowe Hall has been preserved and transformed into moderately priced apartments. The building's figure-eight plan generates two courtyards as well as the project's biggest challenge—nine different elevations on the first floor. The renovation improved accessibility by replacing most mechanical lifts with ramps and infilling the floors. Turning the buildings' narrow footprints—filled with single rooms and communal public spaces—into spacious, light-filled apartments required inventive interior reconfigurations while enhancing the storied exteriors. Slowe satisfies a need for moderately priced housing in a walkable area, preserves a neighborhood icon, and provides a sustainable future for a building with a meaningful past.

Design Narrative: How does this project address Design for Integration, Wellbeing, and Discovery?

The renovation of Slowe Hall is both environmentally and socially conscious. The reuse of this notable dorm not only preserves a cultural legacy but minimizes new resource consumption. Equipping the building for a new purpose provided much-needed moderately priced housing in a walkable DC neighborhood. Interior renovations targeted resident quality of life. Using low-VOC materials throughout significantly improves indoor air quality. Common spaces afford stronger access and views to the richly landscaped courtyards, giving residents spaces for socializing and connecting to nature. Residents also have a fitness facility. This renovation allowed the architects, contractors, and developers to develop a new future for the dorm typology, creating a new type of home. The design strategies used here influenced the renovation of nearby Carver Hall and have been compiled into a white paper by the Firm to share lessons learned.

Community Engagement: How does this project address Design for Equitable Communities and Economy?

Slowe Hall was designed by Hilyard Robinson, a successful African American architect. The renovation of this historically and culturally significant building preserves a marker of both segregation and achievement. It provides affordable market rate multifamily housing and is the only building in the immediate neighborhood with more than five units. Slowe's extensive interior renovations started on the ground floor, with making nine different flooring height changes more accessible by adding ramps or infilling steps. This strategy for improving access also provided space for new plumbing lines. Exteriors were restored with an emphasis on landscaping to create a more engaging experience for passersby and give residents appealing outdoor gathering areas.

Sustainability and Resilience: How does this project address Design for Ecosystems, Water, Energy, Resources, and Change?

A complete floor plan reconfiguration yielded 101 units flooded with natural light thanks to layouts' horizontal orientation, maximizing the narrow building width and allows for numerous windows in most rooms. Insulated glass in those windows, plus low-flow fixtures, LED lights throughout and energy-efficient appliances ensure comfortable living along with lower utility bills. Renovating the existing building envelope and much of the interiors reduced the use of new resources and construction waste. The challenges of reallocating space resulted in a new, sustainable future for this building. Now multifamily, moderately priced housing supports the evolving community.



SLOWE HALL

LeDroit Park, Washington, DC

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MULTIFAMILY HOUSING



- ⊕ Vicinity Map: LeDroit Park, Washington, DC
- HOWARD U. CAMPUS
- SLOWE HALL
- METRO

In 2017, Howard University made a strategic decision to focus on bringing students closer to campus and leveraging their outdated assets to fund campus improvements. They requested that Slowe Hall and nearby dormitory Carver Hall be removed from the campus boundary by the D.C. Zoning Commission, creating the opportunity for the two Halls to be preserved and adapted to modern residential use.



PROJECT NARRATIVE

Slowe Hall, designed by Hilyard Robinson, a notable African American architect, was built in 1942 in LeDroit Park. For single African American women supporting the war efforts, the dormitory-style housing was named for Lucy Diggs Slowe, the first female dean at Howard University and the first African American woman to win a national sports title. After the war, it was acquired by Howard University for student housing. Recently, Slowe Hall was painstakingly preserved and transformed into moderately priced apartments, providing 101 well-located affordable housing in a transit-rich, walkable neighborhood.

The renovation of this historically and culturally significant building preserves a marker of both segregation and achievement, providing a sustainable future for a building with a meaningful past. Slowe's strong presence on the street was preserved and enhanced through period-appropriate replacement windows and doors, exterior accent lighting, and repairs to exterior brick masonry and cast stone.

The original dorm typology, with 306 single rooms, a consistent window pattern, very narrow room-to-corridor depths, and large amenity spaces, was re-demised into private residences for living and entertaining. Units are reconfigured in the narrow wings for modern apartments, and underutilized utility space is transformed into units now flooded with daylight from new large windows.

Constructed long before accessibility was a requirement, Slowe Hall's figure-eight plan with two courtyards had nine different floor elevations on the first floor. To avoid the use of expensive and cumbersome mechanical lifts, and access strategy replaced five of the six potential mechanical lifts with ramps, infill, and strategically placed two-sided elevators.

An enclosed stair tower at the entry lobby blocked the view to the existing courtyards. The design team shaped the opaque stairwell mass with a curved face containing the stair tower, leading to one of the lounge areas and becoming a coffee bar; the other side becomes the walls of the concierge desk. Direct views and access to two landscaped courtyards for socializing, grilling, and relaxing allow residents to connect with each other and with nature, promoting health and wellbeing.

The renovation of Slowe Hall is rooted in a response to both environmental and social responsibility. The project included the use of green roof systems, energy-efficient HVAC and water heating systems, energy-efficient replacement windows and doors, and low-flow plumbing fixtures. By maintaining the entire building envelope and structure, this project is a prime example of embodied energy maintained through the careful renovation of existing buildings for modern life. The building was recognized as a goDCgo Platinum Ambassador offering residents access to alternative transportation, further reducing the carbon footprint of the building, and encouraging sustainable living.



Lucy Diggs Slowe (1885 - 1936)

First African American woman to win a major sports title when she won the American Tennis Association championship (1917)

Principal of Shaw Junior High School, DC's first black junior high school (1919)

First female Dean of Women at Howard University (1922)

Slowe Hall was dedicated in her honor by Howard on November 10, 1948.



Hilyard Robinson (1899 - 1968)

Prominent African-American architect and engineer, a D.C. Native and 1st African American architect to graduate from Columbia University in 1931.

Designed Slowe Hall during World War II.



Photos: Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress)

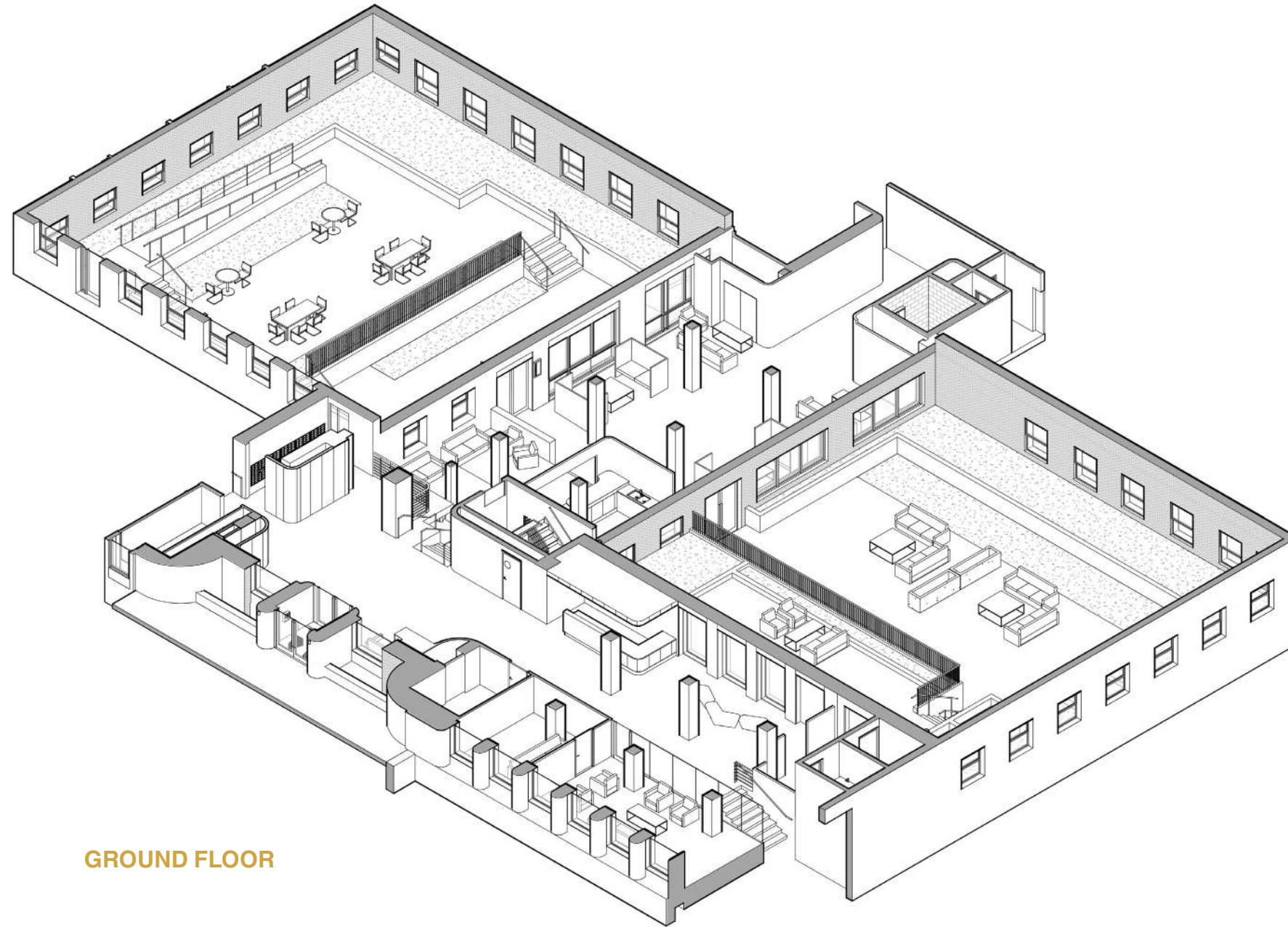




The main entry was celebrated by wrapped the enclosed stair in natural wood and opening walls, allowing natural light to permeate throughout.



Front desk and mail area BEFORE (2014)

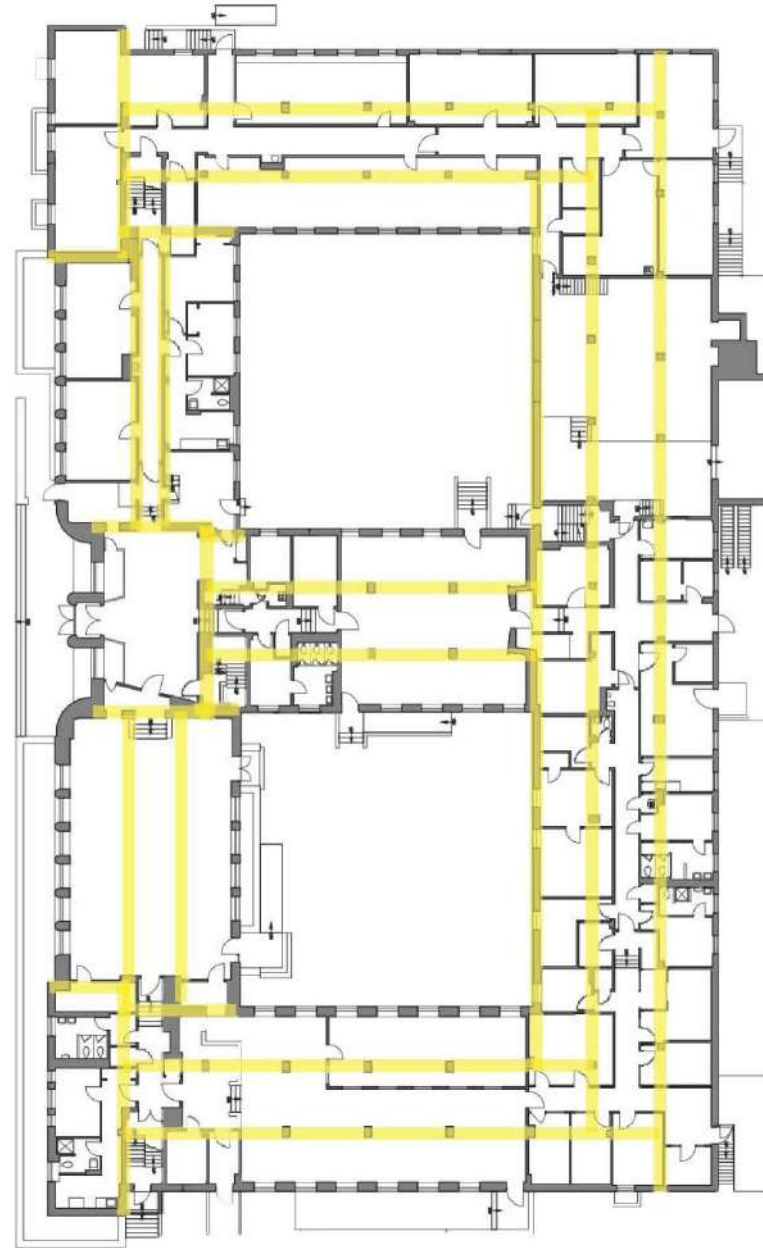


GROUND FLOOR

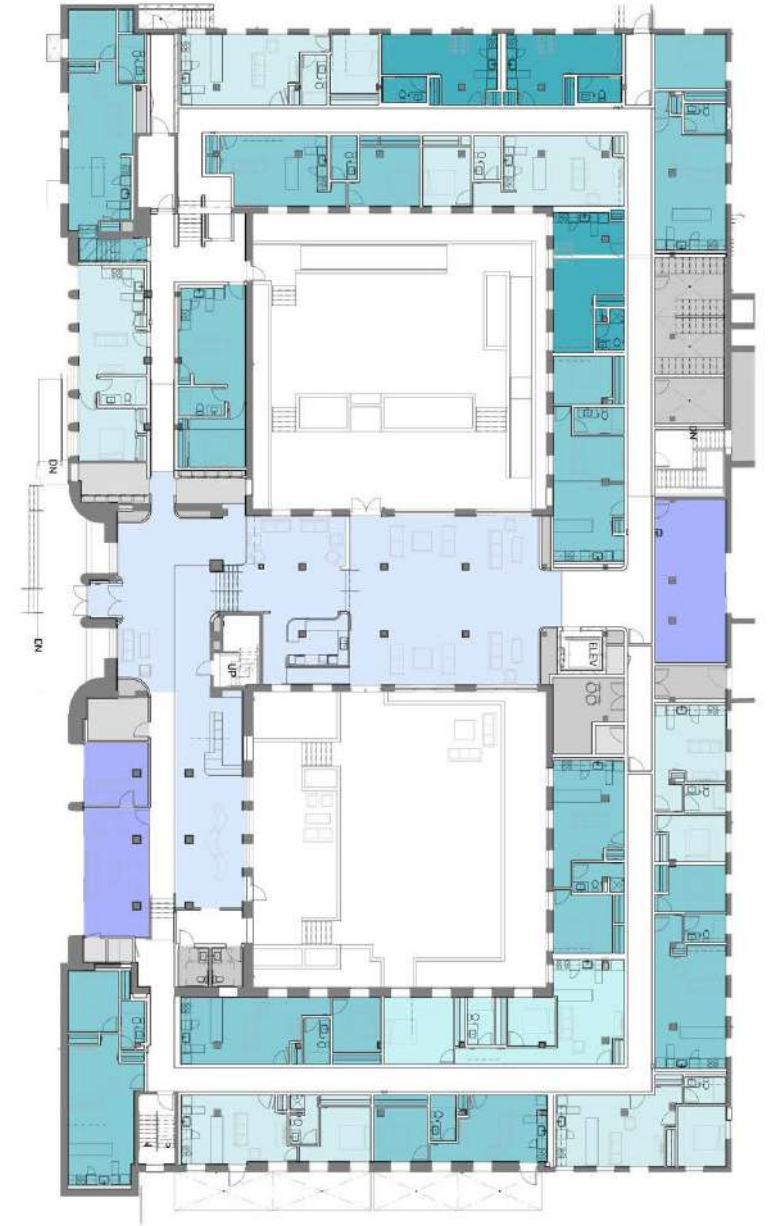




Fixed panes of structural glass replace large wall sections so daylight from the courtyards permeates the multi-level lobby.



⊕ Slowe Hall **existing** ground floor plan

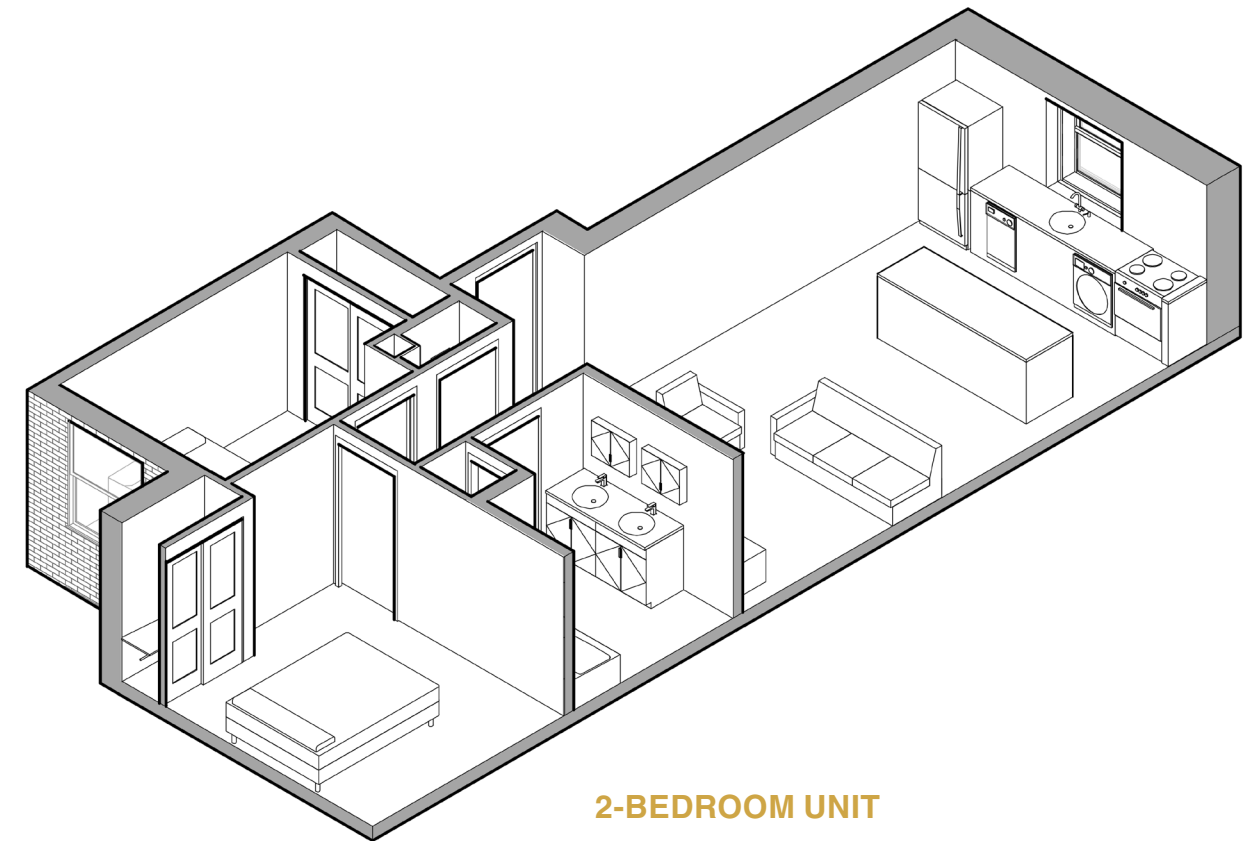


Slowe Hall **new** ground floor plan



 *Slowe Hall courtyard landscape plan*

The building wraps around two courtyards, giving residents myriad options for gathering with guests in neighbors inside and out.



2-BEDROOM UNIT



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