

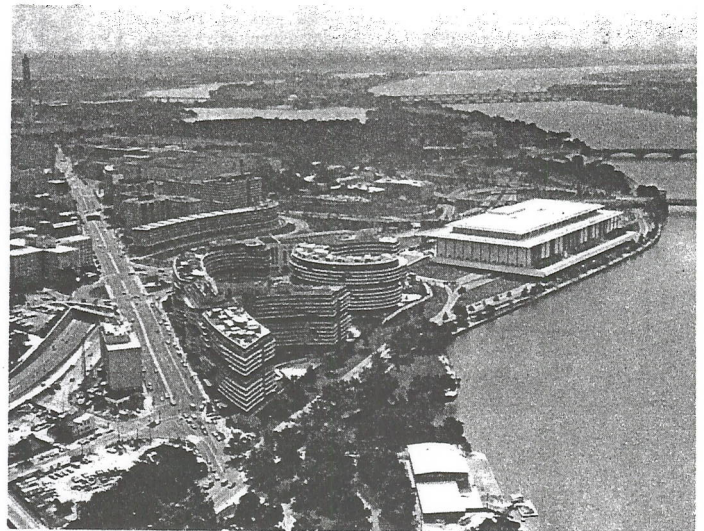
The Watergate is a world unto itself

WASHINGTON: On the sixth floor, police caught five clumsy conspirators, reputedly linked with the Republican party, trying to bug Democratic National Committee headquarters. On the seventh floor, Martha Mitchell raised hell by telephone. On the 14th, thieves burglarized the penthouse owned by Rose Mary Woods, President Nixon's private secretary. And in United States District Court, a group of apartment dwellers—claiming to speak for some half-dozen members of Congress, several Cabinet officers, the directors of the Voice of America, the Agency for International Development and the United States Mint, at least one ambassador and the president of the Na-

tional Academy of Sciences — filed suit. They alleged that their luxury housing in the same building, the most expensive in town, was afflicted with faulty kitchen appliances, cranky air-conditioning, temperamental plumbing and a plethora of damp flaws in walls, windows and ceilings. In short, the sound and fury emanating from the site of all these goings-on has often involved prominent or powerful personalities, has usually been highly audible, and has frequently received attention in the press.

There is only one place in the world, outside of fiction, where such a pretentious *pot-au-feu* of news and newsworthy people could simmer so richly and continuously in such a compact vessel: Washington, D.C.'s Watergate complex. The six-year-old, \$78-million, five-building cluster of ostentatious high-rise apartment, office and hotel units is anchored on the Potomac River bank next to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, just upstream from the ceremonial steps that inspired the development's name.

It is not quite complete today, a dozen years after Italy's giant, 114-year-old conglomerate, the Società Generale Immobiliare, first approached the Washington architectural firm of Fischer and Elmore about developing the old Washington Gas Works property in Foggy Bottom. The Watergate was the first complex built under the District of Columbia's Article 75, an



The Watergate cluster: four swimming pools, two restaurants, a private waterfall, but home to 1,500 affluent Washingtonians. (Right, Kennedy Arts Center.)

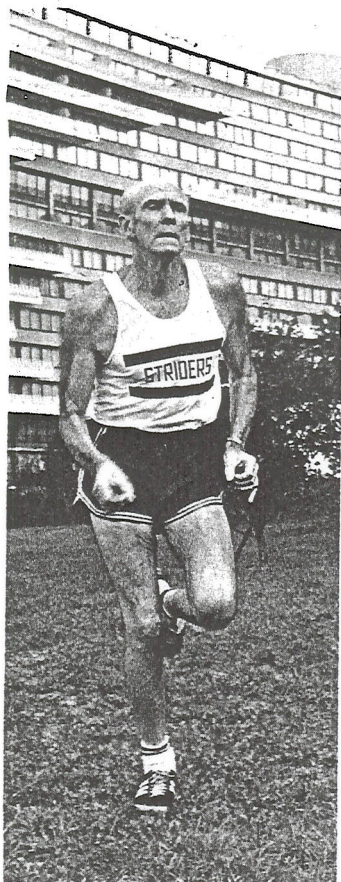
innovat'v'e zoning ordinance designed to encourage urban redevelopment in general and combined living/commercial areas in particular: places that would interact with the city but take the agony out of urban living.

The Watergate has indeed eased city life for some 1,500 affluent Washingtonians, among them about a dozen Senators and Representatives; the Postmaster General; at least two Cabinet members; the Treasurer of the United States; the Directors of the Census and the Mint; a pride of ambassadors, judges and other high-ranking Government officials, and several millionaires. Almost everything they might require for effortless

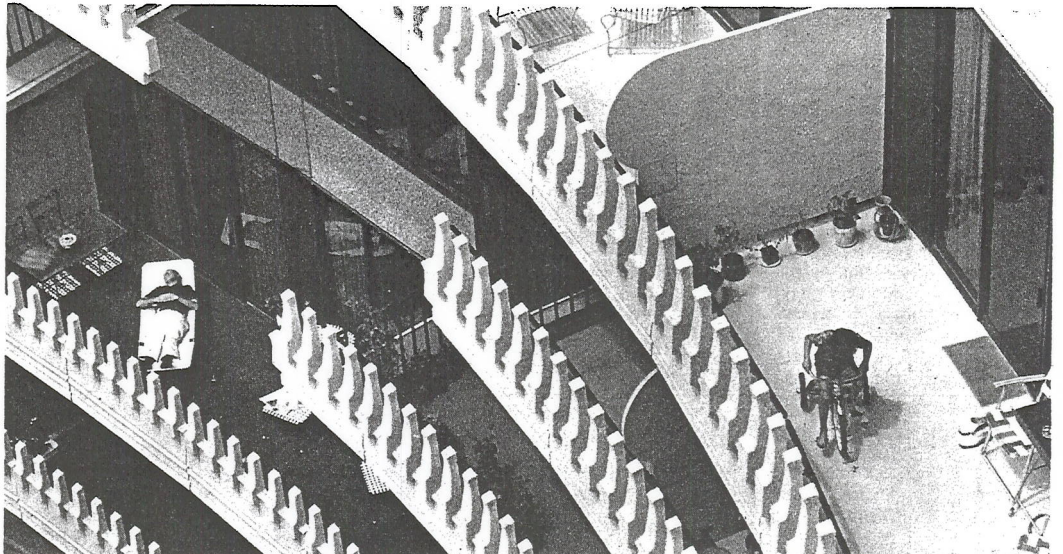
sustenance is available on the premises. There are four swimming pools—one of them indoors—a health club, three psychiatrists, an internist and a dentist. The Watergate's sunken mall, easily accessible to all the buildings and soothed by the sound of water pouring down a graduated series of concrete dishes, features a wide variety of shops, as well as a Safeway supermarket, a limousine service, travel agency, bank, two restaurants and a small post office that looks, rather surprisingly in these surroundings, just as sterile and pale green as any post office in the United States.

Only two of the buildings—Watergate East and West—are devoted al-

Sherwood D. Kohn is a Washington-based freelance who cannot afford to live in the Watergate.



Workout: Senator Alan Cranston goes jogging in his Watergate dooryard.



Siesta: A Watergate resident naps behind the "toothy balusters" of his balcony while a neighbor goes tricycle riding. The \$78-million complex has been the subject of jokes, lawsuits and news stories since it opened six years ago.

most exclusively to cooperative apartments; the Watergate Hotel and Office Building form a totally commercial unit, and the newest building, Watergate South, is divided into office and residential sections. Underlying the totality is a network of walkways, tunnels, corridors and malls where people can shop, eat, park their cars, reach any portion of the agglomerate without surfacing, and almost invariably—get lost. "The Watergate is built like a rat maze," says columnist Art Buchwald. "If you walk out of a door inside the building, you're trapped."

In fact, Watergate East resident Ole Sand, a National Education Association executive and a Democrat in a bastion where the tone is set by Republicans, says that the Watergate is decadent; that the people who live there are prisoners of their own defenses. And indeed, there does seem to be a Marienbad, "La Dolce Vita" quality about the place, a feeling that is heightened by the labyrinthine design; by the sunken walkways, tiered fountains, striated arcs and captive gardens; a Villa d'Este turned to stone, the Andrea Doria's superstructure cast in concrete.

It's unsettling. Once disgorged into an empty hallway, visitors are likely to feel a little desperate. In the curving beige corridors that run through the south and east buildings of the 10-acre development, you can see little more than four doors at a time, and if you're looking for the elevator, there is nothing to tell you which way it lies. And of course you've forgotten which way you came from. Is this what it's like to be eaten by a snail? You have the feeling that you could wander the carpeted halls endlessly and never find the elevator. And what if the elevator doors look just like the apartment doors? Could you pass by them without noticing what they are?

Thank God. The elevator doors are marked by shoebox-shaped ashtrays mounted on the wall. At last. A way out. Past the peephole-pierced beige doors discreetly labeled Long, Morse, Chennault, Di-Salle, Lasky, Dole, Auchincloss, Smathers. Muzak in the elevator. The glass eye of the TV camera staring down at you. Could you hide in a corner, make a face at the lens? Will the desk clerk stop you on the way out and frisk you,

check your hands to see if they're bloody? Could you get away with murder at the Watergate? After all, thieves have done pretty well there, despite magnetic clocks, guards, alarm tape and electronic surveillance. Or would the monitor pick up your guilty look? Nameless, vague, unjustified, paranoid guilt. You're being watched.

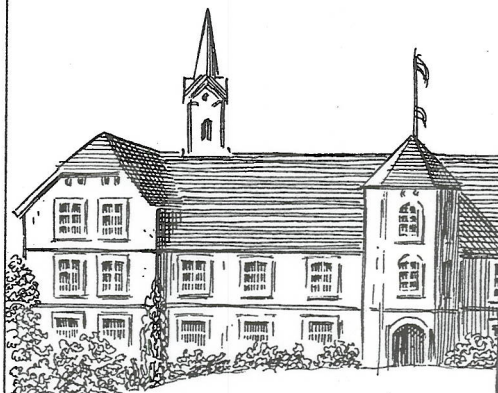
Could you wander the 7-foot-wide halls and knock on doors to find out what kind of people can live without producing cooking odors? You wouldn't dare. That would be gauche. These are private people, very private. "I've never lived in any place where I had so much privacy," said Senator Abraham Ribicoff. Indeed, the Watergate is a world unto itself. Wolf Von Eckhardt, The Washington Post's perceptive architecture critic, has called the complex "a fortress for Martha Mitchell," and Milton Fischer, a disciple of turn-of-the-century urban planner Henry Wright and head of the architectural firm that supervised the compound's construction, proudly points out that the Watergate "walls off the city." Which is exactly what it does. The Watergate's residential sections are determinedly removed from Washington's daily routine—the labor of running a vast and stubborn bureaucracy—and even the presence of Democratic party headquarters in the west office building seems to have little effect on the resortlike air.

Basically, the Watergate complex consists of three curvilinear, 13- and 14-story units shaped, in the order of their construction, like an L, a banana or three-quarters of the Colosseum. Arranged at the corners of a triangular site along the northerly bank of the Potomac, the Watergate buildings open their concave sides to the river, to Arlington Cemetery and to the green hills beyond, turning their backs on the city. The architecture would be fairly unusual anywhere in the United States, with the possible exception of Miami (one wag said that the Watergate was a nice place, but too far from the beach), but in Washington, where most edifices tend toward variations on the Parthenon theme, it is positively unique. Actually, if Edward Durell Stone had persevered in his original cylindrical design for the Kennedy Center, the Wa-

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tergate would have completed what architect Fischer regards as a perfect complement to the curving river bank. As things turned out, however, the two clash harshly and only serve to invite such wisecracks as the one that has haunted them both for the last two years—i.e., that the Kennedy Center was the box that the Watergate came in.

There is, of course, no end to the esthetic opinions, judgments and witty remarks that the Watergate attracts. The Washington Post has described it as "a Republican Bastille" and "a 20th-century vision of Xanadu," among other things, and Life magazine pointed out that it has "a nautical flavor," including a notable array of leaks. One smart aleck, referring to the buildings' toothy balusters, has dubbed the Watergate "the buildings of the broken zippers." Critic Von Eckhardt calls the design, by Italian architect, Luigi Moretti, "a can of concrete worms," "kitsch" and "the last gasp of art nouveau," and Martha Mitchell, who until August occupied a peony-bordered \$140,000 duplex in Watergate East, was once overheard in the Safeway complaining that the place "was built like low-income housing."

Someone might give you an argument about the construction quality, but there is nothing low-income about the Watergate. It is supposed to be among the most expensive properties in town. Its office space rents for \$6.50 to \$9.50 a square foot (the Swedish Embassy pays \$200,000 a year). Its 643 apartments cost anywhere from \$21,500 for an efficiency to more than \$350,000 for a custom-built layout, exclusive of architects', contractors' and decorators' fees. And then there are the assessments, levied by the residents' governing boards, for such items as a new marquee for Watergate East—the old one rotted out, sprouted a jungle of weeds on its upper surface, and eventually cost \$80,000 to replace. The roof, which had to be rebuilt, cost a quarter of a million dollars. According to reports, it still leaks.

Early in the game, the 11-member governing board of Watergate East formed a "Committee on Latent Defects" to deal with the building's bugs. This year, several Watergate West residents banded together and filed suit

in United States District Court against the developers, alleging that (1) more than 45 per cent of their kitchen appliances were defective; (2) air-conditioning was inadequate in about 70 per cent of the apartments; (3) rain had leaked around windows and balconies and into walls and ceilings, causing water damage in some 40 per cent of the apartments; and (4) more than 22 per cent of the apartments suffered from plumbing problems. And, on a more personal level, Mrs. Herbert Salzman, occupant of a \$100,000 apartment in Watergate East, borrowed the use of a stove from her neighbor, Senator Ribicoff, when hers broke down on the eve of an important dinner party. Martha Mitchell fumed that the Watergate "had the cheapest equipment you ever saw."

Reacting to the legal claims, Watergate Improvement Associates Ltd., the developer, filed a \$4-million countersuit, alleging "malicious embarrassment," and the firm's president, Royce F. Ward, pointed out that "in the last three years we've spent more than \$300,000 on corrective work." Lee Edward Elsen, a vice president and sales director of the improvement company, and a self-styled "senior citizen" who favors gray silk suits of Continental cut, minimizes the disputes. "Lawyers," he said, "have taken what would ordinarily be minor complaints and snowballed them. We've tried to bend over backwards. In many cases, we've compromised." In any event, it seems apparent that the rich, even as the lowliest apartment dweller, have their housing problems. But the Watergate agonies have always attracted more attention, perhaps because so many public figures have had so much to complain about.

But even aside from the construction dispute, the Watergate does not seem to offer its residents an exceptional amount of luxury or gracious living, especially at these prices. To be sure, closets are large—some of them are 10 feet square—bathrooms and foyers are paved with marble; floors are walnut-stained oak parquet; suites on the top three floors have marble-manteled fireplaces; and every apartment comes equipped with a bidet (the only really Continental touch). But the rest is rather ordinary. Fixtures are fairly standard, kitchens are Pullman-sized and offer a minimum of cabinet space, bathrooms are

Showplace



Anna Chennault, widow of Gen. Claire Chennault of World War II Flying Tiger fame, entertains Senator John Tower and other guests in her \$175,000 penthouse apartment in Watergate East.

as compact as any suburban split-level's, partitions are dry-wall rather than plaster and ceilings tend to be oppressive (no more than 8 feet, 6 inches high).

Obviously though, luxurious living is possible, for those who can afford it. Dr. Arthur W. Sloan, retired founder of the Atlantic Research Institute and one of the Watergate's genuinely retiring millionaires, owns one of the complex's most lavish spreads, a penthouse atop Watergate South. Anna Chennault, the chic, Chinese-born widow of Gen. Claire Chennault, owns a \$175,000 Watergate East penthouse comfortably cluttered with glass-encased jade *objets d'art*, well-thumbed books and enshrined Flying Tiger memorabilia (including a case full of the general's medals), all topped by an airy pavilion equipped with a wood-burning fireplace and a record player. Maurice Stans, the former Secretary of Commerce, also lives in Watergate East. An Africa buff who sometimes

mer Senator Wayne Morse in the trash room with a bagful of garbage, and was prompted to quip one night that "I don't know whether I could vote for you in Oregon after seeing you throw out the trash."

Perhaps the most expensive apartment of all—actually a custom-built combination of three units—belongs to Byron Roudabush, a Washington-based film processor who gave up a five-acre estate in suburban Potomac, Md., this year and moved into a 12th-floor layout with his wife, two teen-age sons, a dog, a Siamese cat and a three-keyboard electronic organ that would have done credit to the old Roxy. He paid more than \$350,000 for the space alone, converted an entire one-bedroom apartment into a pool-hustler's paradise, hired his own architect to design the place and his own contractor to put it together, and had it all decorated in late Howard Johnson out of Hilton Hotel.

But where are the drunks, the call girls, the crackpots, the vast and Machiavellian political intrigues? Does the Watergate buzz with party caucuses, informal Cabinet meetings, secret plots and lavish society blowouts? Apparently not. Until her departure, the juiciest object of local gossip seemed to be Martha Mitchell. The only newsworthy events in six years have been structural defects, the theft of Rose Mary Woods's jewels and the attempted bugging of Democratic party headquarters. Even political conferences are usually the sort that take place at swimming pools and health clubs.

Nevertheless, it is surprising how often the citadel simile crops up, even among outsiders. For instance, the day after the conclusion of the Chicago Seven trial, several hundred protesters, chanting, "Liberate the Watergate!" tried without success to storm the complex, and a few weeks later, Yippie leader Jerry Rubin actually invaded the place. Appearing at the Saville-Watergate bookshop to autograph his book, "Do It," Rubin inscribed an obscenity on a copy and sent it up to John Mitchell, but that's as far as things went. Later he posed for photographs, making an obscene gesture in front of Watergate East. But even that had an air of futility about it: the Watergate resolutely keeps the world at bay. ■