THE STATION AT POTOMAC YARD
A PUBLIC-PRIVATE CASE STUDY: AHDC AND THE ALEXANDRIA FIRE DEPARTMENT

THE GROWING POTOMAC YARD AREA AND DEVELOPMENT

Potomac Yard had been a historical center for trade since prehistoric times, according to Francine Bromberg of Alexandria Archaeology. After its early Native and colonial inhabitants, Potomac Yard’s first railway was completed in 1857 to connect Alexandria to Washington. The rail yard grew and added lines, employing over 1,500 persons at its peak (White and African American laborers, though in segregated facilities, and including women), and populated the town of Potomac, VA (now the Del Ray neighborhood). After over a century of growth, however, the rail industry’s wane took its toll, and Potomac Yard rail operations ceased in 1987.

BEGINNING STAGES: THE NEED FOR A NEW FIRE STATION

The Potomac Yard planning commission began the early work envisioning the “new town center” in 2005. This would build a new neighborhood that would incorporate housing, retail, office, and open space integrated together to create an unified town character. In 2006, however, the issue of emergency services delivery was raised – with the layout and design of streets proposed for Potomac Yard, the City’s ability to deliver emergency services to this new neighborhood would be impeded. The solution, according to the Arlandrian: “[Potomac Yard Developers] would provide a parcel of land adjacent to the first neighborhood, as well as $6.6 million, to construct Alexandria’s first new fire station facility in more than 30 years”.

Mark Jinks, speaking in 2018, said that the one-story fire department proposed in the neighborhood seemed like “a real waste of that airspace in Potomac Yard, where we’re just about to start building a Metro station”. While the identity of the person who proposed adding the housing is uncertain, according the a City presentation developed in support of the project, planners didn’t want to let the opportunity to use the land to its maximum potential pass by: “The Developer’s recent proposal to provide land and a fire station offers an opportunity to maximize the use of donated land to create a substantial number of affordable units above a civic use.”

With the donated land parcel, the construction of the new station and residential community began to take shape.

A MODEL FOR PUBLIC - PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

According to architects Lemay Erickson Willcox Architects, the “21,953 SF fire four-bay station incorporates offices, day spaces, operational support spaces, including HAZMAT response, private bunk-rooms with pass-through lockers for 15 fire fighters, on-site training features, and 20 reserved parking spaces in the below grade parking garage”. The residential community of the Station includes the 64 one-, two-, and three-bedroom units, a community meeting space, underground parking, and a garden terrace that now hosts an organic community garden, with free produce for residents.

The Station also features elements designed for livability. Environmentally friendly, the fire station is LEED certified, and the residences are EarthCraft certified, a standard measure in the housing construction industry. Additionally, to mitigate noise from the fire station inside the residences. A concrete layer of padding between the first and second floors, window and frame design, and spring-based ceiling attachments in fire station reduce the noise and vibrations from the work below.

This public-private partnership was a first-of-its-kind moment for collaborations. The Washington Post wrote...
about it in 2007, saying

“But housing and a fire station on the same site? It is an unusual combination, except in the places where firefighters bunk upstairs when they are not battling blazes.

“It’s definitely unique,” said Greg Toritto, associate publisher of Chicago-based Fire Chief Magazine, which follows firehouse design trends. “We’ve never heard of residential housing combined with a firehouse.”

This sort of work in “making land,” or finding creative ways to use collaborative solutions for housing infrastructure in already developed areas, continues to grow in our region. Combining residential with fire stations in particular has been replicated in other places in the US, including in D.C., but the collaboration has spread beyond fire stations. (One example, AHDC’s upcoming project The Bloom, combines affordable housing with a homeless shelter.)

EFFICIENCY OF LAND, EFFICIENCY OF COST

When The Station opened its doors, now Mayor-elect, then Del Ray Citizens Association member Justin Wilson said, “It’s a win-win situation for the city -- 64 housing units and a new fire station coming at little expense to the taxpayer”. Employing resources from the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program, as well as this City’s Housing Trust Fund, and with the donation of land, The Station was an opportunity well seized, and ushered in a new way of doing housing in Alexandria, and the region. As the area of Potomac Yard grows (with Amazon HQ2 speculation, planned development of housing and office space, and the Potomac Yard Metro Station in the pipeline), affordable housing will always have a place in the neighborhood’s history.

THE STATION, TODAY

The Station’s 64 units are capped at 60% or 80% AMI - $49,260 and $65,680 for a single person, in 2018 respectively.

The Station is located on the MetroWay Bus Rapid Transit line on Route 1, and a minutes walk from the planned Potomac Yard Metro Station. Nearby Giant, other retailers, and schools add convenience.

The Station’s rooftop terrace plays a significant role in the quality of life of the building. The terrace is directly over the firetruck bay, which ensures that noise from truck operations does not reverberate into the homes above. (Additionally, fire equipment that hangs on the ceiling below the terrace is attached by springs, so movement is absorbed into the coils rather than the structure itself.)

For residents, the terrace is also home to the community garden, managed by garden partner Rooftop Roots in cooperation with residents. This all organic garden grows seasonal produce that is delivered to residents free of charge during harvest season, and also plays host to several garden cooking and growing events through the year.