

Views of VITA Tysons Corner Center, as approached from the Metro station.



Photos © Alan Karchmer Architectural Photographer

clustering of up-to-40-story structures around Tysons' four Metrorail stations. The buildings are to be "iconic," "well-crafted," and "mixed-use," that will "contribute to the skyline" and be "complementary to the urban fabric." The goal is to entice people to jettison their cars and commute to work by subway, bicycle, circulator bus, or on foot. The resulting "vibrant" space would provide homes for the arts, culture, and education, while featuring nature in winding paths, rippling streams, pocket parks, and new street grids with tree-lined boulevards.

VITA (Italian for "life"), a 30-story gateway to the original mall (now called Tysons I), is the first residential tower developed under this plan. It was designed by **Robert Sponseller, AIA**, design principal at **Shalom Baranes Associates**, in Georgetown. The mixed-use building is also home to Earls, a 10,800-square-foot restaurant designed by **Kevin Albaugh** of **MBH Architects** in California, and **Jennifer Hoffbeck** of Earls Kitchen+Bar headquarters in Vancouver, British Columbia. In the classic Italian piano nobile ("noble floor") tradition, the formal entrances to both VITA and Earls are located one story above ground level, on a grand plaza that sits atop the building's stone "citadel" base, and high above the din of circulating traffic.

The plaza itself also serves to deliver pedestrians elsewhere—nearby to the entrance for Tysons I and the Hyatt Regency, opposite VITA; and, farther away, to the pedestrian skyway leading over Route 123 to the Silver Line Metro station and Tysons II beyond. The landscaped plaza is perfect for outdoor dining and ping-pong in warm weather, and ice skating and comfortable seating around a glassed-in fire in winter.

Discerning the shape of the VITA building is something of a three-dimensional Rorschach test. The pedestrian skyway over Route 123 offers three successive views of the building as you approach the plaza from Metro: at first, VITA's folded form looks like the backside of a three-way mirror in a clothing store; next, it reads as a more typical flat, rectangular tower; and finally, as one reaches the point where the skyway turns the corner, the building evokes the looming prow of a ship. If you are driving past VITA on Route 123 going west, the tower's form looks like a zig-zag. But if you reverse your direction and pass it heading eastward, and take an immediate right onto the I-495 South entrance ramp, it is reminiscent of a fish tail. Should you have the rare opportunity to view the building from a helicopter

Pointing to the Future

VITA at Tysons I

by Mary Jane Bolle

Nearly 55 years ago, Tysons Corner Center opened 12.5 miles from downtown Washington, on a triangle of Virginia farmland that had been owned during the Civil War by local postmaster William Tyson. The shopping mall was bordered by the new Capital Beltway (I-495), Dolley Madison Highway (Route 123), and Leesburg Pike (Route 7)—a former toll road charging five cents a head for pigs or sheep, and 10 cents for the horse-and-carriage to drive them to market. The Tysons triangle gradually expanded west as a center for commerce and shopping, to the

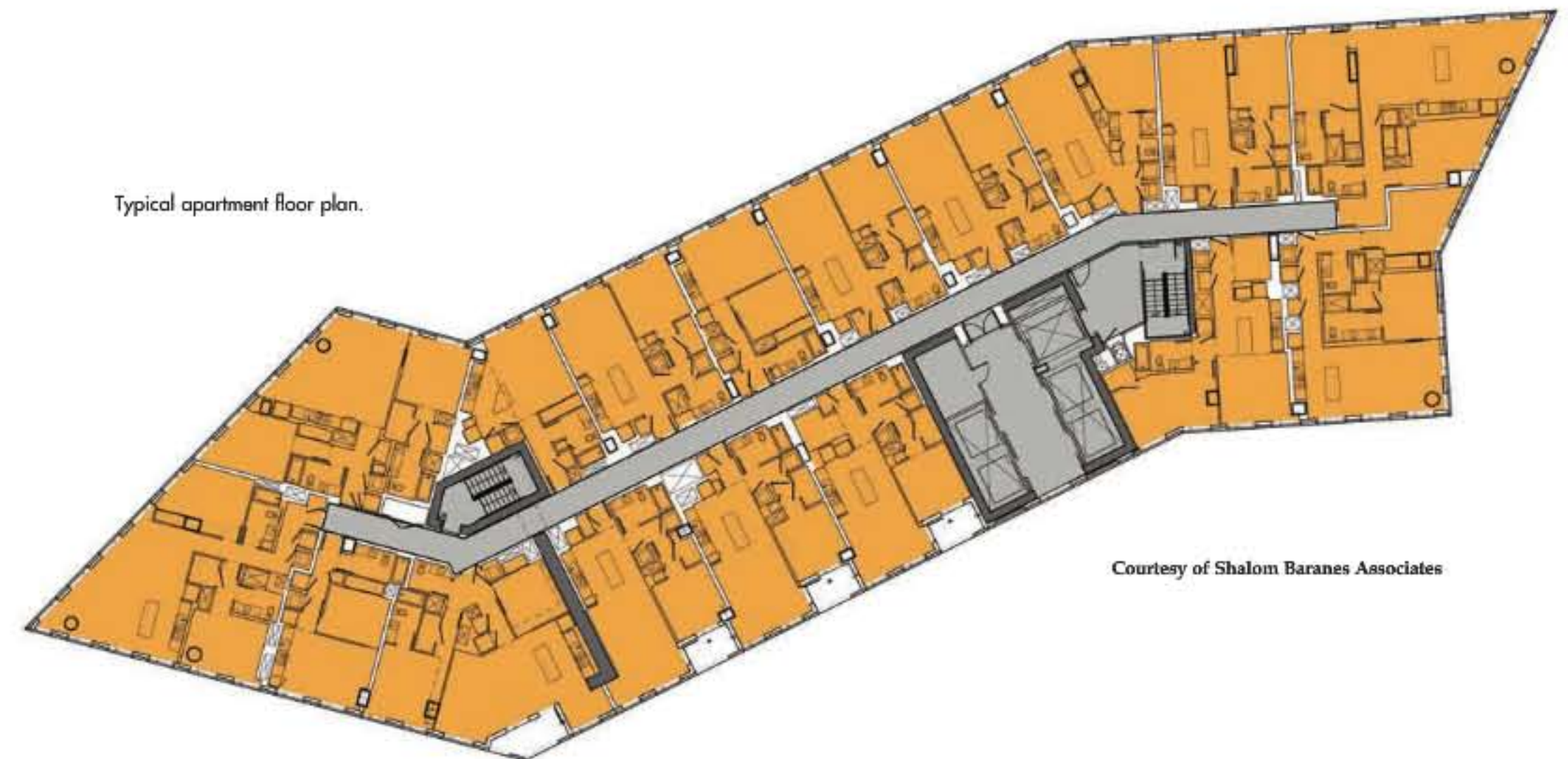
Project: VITA Tysons Corner Center,
7902 Tysons One Place, Tysons, VA

Architects: **Shalom Baranes Associates**
Interior Designers: **Cecconi Simone**
Landscape Architects: **Rhodeside & Harwell**
Structural Engineers: **Cardno Haynes Whaley**
MEP Engineers: **WSP**
Sustainability Consultants: **NORESKO**
General Contractors: **Donohoe Construction Company**

Dulles International Airport access road. Before long, the resulting 3.3-square-mile "edge city" was so popular that it became a traffic congestion nightmare.

To address traffic and other issues, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors released, in 2013, its Comprehensive Plan for the Evolution of Tysons Corner to an Urban Center. It aimed to turn the 3.3 square miles into a full-spectrum downtown with a "sense of place" strong enough to attract 200,000 workers and close to 100,000 residents by 2050. The plan calls for the

Typical apartment floor plan.



Courtesy of Shalom Baranes Associates



Facade of VITA, showing offset window pattern.

Photos © Alan Karchmer Architectural Photographer



Main entrance to building.



Building lobby.

(or just pull out your Google satellite app instead) you can see that, in fact, the footprint actually resembles a blocky, dynamic arrow with an angled shaft, metaphorically pointing to the future.

This forward-looking arrow shape was not pre-conceived, but rather an architectural happenstance. Sponseller was searching for a design to play well with the glass-sheathed, rectangular polygon of the new Tysons Tower office building next to VITA. His priorities were twofold: first, to avoid presenting VITA's windows as fishbowls to the occupants of the office tower; and second, to afford VITA residents spectacular views of Washington landmarks to the east, and more pastoral views of Fairfax County and beyond to the west, south, and north. Starting with a hypothetical brick of clay, he pinched, pleated, and folded the form until its views to near and far were largely unobstructed. Then, he snipped and spread the back end to create the fish tail, capitalizing on the views toward Washington. "It took some gentle persuasion," he noted, "to get the building's owner to go along with every pleat and every fold; but now he loves the design."

The skin of the VITA building was another challenge. Because of all the tucks and bends, Sponseller wanted to soften the exterior by wrapping it in a "fabric" of precast concrete. Whereas most precast concrete is beige, yellow, or grey, the architect wanted it dark, so that the boldly offset windows, integrated with L-shaped panels and spanning two stories each, would appear to shimmer like fish scales. "Taking the precast concrete to a level where it is artistic could have made or broken the project," explains Sponseller. "That was a huge challenge; but the fabricator took something ordinary and made it unique." The skin was also conceived with sustainability in mind, and indeed, the building is designed to achieve LEED Silver certification.

The bends and folds of VITA's exterior make for short, intimate interior hallways. These are bathed in soft beige and accentuated by a rectangular motif that repeats in the carpet and sidewall light fixtures. The 429 one-to-three-bedroom apartments with Italian cabinetry and quartz countertops range in size from about 550 to 1,800 square feet. The plaza entrance level includes two common area sitting rooms, a sports lounge, and two exercise rooms, while the rooftop terrace includes a saltwater swimming pool with views in all directions.

On the plaza level, Earls offers "upscale casual" dining in wide-open spaces featuring wood, stone, and metal, separated into quadrants by related decors. This open plan permits visitors to see and be seen, whether at a booth, table, or the bar. Additional flexible space is available indoors or outdoors, thanks to glazed patio curtain walls that can be opened in favorable weather. Whimsical accents and motifs lend an air of sophisticated friendliness: A cast bronze gorilla greets patrons holding a bronze block sporting two

Viking-type horns. A huge metal wall sculpture at the far end purports to depict the roads in the District of Columbia, but, viewed more nationally, suggests mirror images of the U.S. highway system from Colorado to the Atlantic Ocean. Light fixtures in one part of the room resemble giant, glowing paperclips. What is the combined effect of these elements? At 6:00 on a Saturday evening, the place was ringing with conversation and activity.

What factors, I wondered, might be most likely to attract tenants to VITA? Proximity to shopping? Proximity to work? On the elevator, I encountered Jennifer, a single, forty-something consultant with a doctoral degree who evaluates federal health and human services programs for a firm in Arlington. Why did she choose VITA? "Location, location, location," she responded, referencing the confluence of highways out her front door. Another magnetic pull was her strong emotional link to Metro. Her father was Metro's first personnel director. One of her favorite images is the story of her parents walking hand-in-hand through the new Metro tunnel under the Potomac River, before the tracks were laid. A decade later, in the 1980s, as a high school student, she sold women's clothing at Tysons. She thus has deep roots in the area. Does she shop frequently at Tysons? "Not really," she replied.

Spontaneously, she invited me to view her apartment—a one-bedroom she had transformed into an efficiency with a huge "walk-in closet." Her high-up view was perfectly centered on the plaza. Except for a CB2 sleep sofa, her furniture was exclusively IKEA, complementing the Italian kitchen and bath cabinetry. Her place was immaculate, impeccable, and catalogue-worthy. In the walk-in closet she had created from the former bedroom, two tall, freestanding, ceiling-high wardrobes stood as one against the left wall. Four identical dressers balanced them on the right, and two more, back-to-back, formed an island in the center of the room. Jennifer slowly opened doors and drawers to reveal meticulous patterns and rhythms of shoeboxes and garments in every tone and hue, perfectly stacked, or perfectly spaced on identical hangers. "I thought you didn't shop here much," I noted. "I don't," she smiled. "Mostly, I order online from J. Crew [which has a store at Tysons II mall]."

Jennifer's story, perhaps ironically, suggests that the rationale for VITA's location and design was valid. In dense urban environments, residents have many options for places to shop, eat, and be entertained. While Jennifer may not shop much at the giant mall next door, she clearly feels that her new building offers the right mix of space, amenities, and accessibility to the key places in her life.

When I told Jennifer's story to Sponseller, he replied, "I love to hear how people come in and use the space, and change things. That is what it is all about. The building is not complete without the people. You want people to make the space their own, and to know that what you gave birth to is doing its own thing out on the planet." ☺



Interior of Earls, showing "paper clip" light fixtures.



Interior of Earls, showing stylized map of DC on near wall.

Project: Earls,
7902 Tysons One Place, Tysons, VA

Architects: **MBH Architects**
Interior Designers: **Earls Kitchen + Bar**
Landscape Architects: **Bruce Jett Associates**
Structural Engineers: **RLG Consulting Engineers**
MEP Engineers: **Schnackel Engineers**
Acoustical Consultants: **Charles M. Salter Associates**
Lighting Designers: **WSP**
General Contractors: **Shawmut Design & Construction**



Exterior view of Earls.

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