

CREATING AN IMPROVED URBAN VILLAGE:

THE REDEVELOPMENT OF SHIRLINGTON, VIRGINIA

Imagine a block-long street lined with restaurants and local retailers, a place that is crowded on evenings and weekends with people drawn to one of the few art house movie theaters left anywhere – and then more than double it. That is what Arlington, Virginia’s economic development planners did in the Village at Shirlington. In the process, a new state-of-the-art library was added, along with a new home for a highly successful regional theater company, both housed in a landmark theater-library complex. In addition, we added five new residential buildings with 644 units, a 142 room hotel, 42,000 square feet of retail space, a 195,000 square foot office building, two parking garages with nearly 1,500 spaces, and an urban transit station. All of this replaced an abandoned big box store and acres of parking lots. The new Village at Shirlington has become one of Arlington’s most popular re-envisioned downtowns. The process Arlington took to get there was a long, but rewarding journey.

In the late 1970s, Arlington County, together with the community, developed a plan for the revitalization of Shirlington, a then-aging commercial area

adjacent to a major interstate, I-395, just minutes from Washington, D.C. Shirlington was a relatively traditional suburban shopping center with a grocery store, tire and auto repair facility, a big box retailer, and a few small shops.



Arlington used GO bonds to pay for a new library and the structure of a non-profit theater.

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Renovations in the 1980s created a traditional main street anchored at one end by two office buildings and at the other by the big box store and a movie theater. While an improvement over the previous development, Shirlington Village remained a rather small retail outpost, dependent almost entirely on the theater and a few good restaurants for its survival. By 2000, the

property owner, Federal Realty Investment Trust, the county and the community saw the need for an intensive planning effort to take a fresh look at the entire neighborhood. An extensive and intensive community process – a hallmark of Arlington development culture locally referred to as “the Arlington way,” – guided the creation of Shirlington’s Phased Development Site Plan (PDSP) and the associated Shirlington Design Guidelines. The PDSP established the uses, densities, building heights, parking locations, transportation facilities, utilities, and community facilities for the entire area— in conceptual form.



The redevelopment nearly doubled the land area and more than tripled the density in Shirlington.

The development plan for Shirlington specifically envisioned Campbell Avenue as the “Main Street” of this urban village. The detailed design for the street incorporates pedestrian-friendly elements that make Campbell Avenue a comfortable and exciting place for visitors and residents to walk. While the PDSP helped provide a blueprint for Shirlington, implementation of this plan required both the developer and the county to make significant investments in the area. Almost one million square feet of new mixed-use development was incorporated into the PDSP, along with infrastructure and community amenities, most of which was situated along Campbell Avenue.

Within the PDSP, Campbell Avenue was designed to create an exceptional pedestrian experience, terminating in the Signature Theater, Shirlington Library complex, and its public plaza. Street level amenities ensure that this main public space supports the desired character, in terms of plantings, outdoor dining, signs, lighting, and street furniture. Even the storefronts are an amenity with the high

degree of window transparency which engages pedestrians and invites them into the stores and restaurants. Parking is distributed behind the commercial buildings with entrances from several streets to enhance the ease of access while improving pedestrian flow and safety.

The exceptional quality of the streetscape makes Shirlington one of the most notable neighborhoods in the D.C. metro region. It is important to point out that none of this happened by accident. Every element of the streetscape arose from careful planning and was incorporated into the Shirlington Design Guidelines, which were developed as part of the PDSP in 2000

Anchoring Campbell Avenue on its west end is a landmark theater-library complex that houses Signature Theatre. Signature invested significantly as part of a unique public-private partnership with Arlington County to move from a converted garage, to this beautiful and spacious new home. Signature Theatre undertook a major fundraising effort to build out the interior of their space, with the agreement that Arlington County would fund and own the building which would house both the theatre and a new Shirlington Library. Over \$10



Signature Theater raised \$12 million to do the interior finishes.



The 644 units of housing built above the retail included lofts and flats as well as high-rise apartments and condominiums

million was raised by Signature, with Arlington County underwriting the cost of the entire building's core and shell, at a cost of \$5.5 million for the Signature portion. The result was a fabulous new home for a popular and critically acclaimed theatre company, but also a landmark anchor for the entire neighborhood. "Signature's presence here sealed Shirlington's reputation as a destination spot for the entire metropolitan region," said Chris Zimmerman, then-Chairman of the Arlington County Board. "We are proud that Arlington incubated this theatre, helped it grow, and partnered with Signature on its wonderful new home that showcases Arlington's commitment to the arts," Zimmerman added.

Arlington County provided the catalyst for still more additional development. Campbell Avenue, then S. 28th Street, was extended westward one block and then an additional block to the north. This required that the county contribute roughly two and a half acres of land used by its Trade Center (public works yards) in order to allow the project to proceed. In addition to constructing the theater-library complex, Arlington needed to underwrite the risk and provide public parking. The resulting development agreement had a little bit of everything – a

land swap, co-investment in a garage, and "home run" insurance related to county loans to the developer which provided for an earlier payback to the county should development occur faster, or generate greater returns, than anticipated. All of this helped defray some of the risk for all parties and allowed the county partner to get construction financing with reasonable terms. The overall leverage was \$1 of County funds per \$24 of private funds which, because the project was so successful, ultimately reduced to \$1:\$42.

The end result was an agreement that was equitable to both the county and Federal Realty Trust. By ensuring an anchor, creating viable lots, covering the infrastructure expense and agreeing to pay for parking - ahead of the actual demand created by the new residential and retail uses - Arlington enabled each of the proposed developments to secure financing. Thus, the county was also able to achieve both its planning goals as well as make good use of its capital, leveraging its investment at a ratio of roughly twenty-five to one. In addition to the many restaurants and cafes along Campbell Avenue, a new Harris Teeter grocery store at the north end of the street has provided a much-needed



A grocery store is essential in creating a true live-work environment — you can't eat out every night!



Shirlington's restaurant row was part of an early 1990's redevelopment.

amenity for Shirlington and Fairlington residents, since the departure of the previous neighborhood grocery store in the mid- 1980s. An adjacent, attached parking garage with reserved ground-level parking for customers makes shopping easy whether on foot, bike, or car. Additional theaters including an art-house cinema, Theater on the Run, and Classika Theater make Shirlington one of the most notable arts destinations in the area.

The result of this new development is a neighborhood with both a renewed economic engine and an energized and attractive sense of place. During the day, Shirlington is friendly and relaxing, as young professionals, families, and retirees mix seamlessly, moving up and down the street, shopping, dining, or just enjoying an afternoon stroll. In the evenings,

theater-goers and young people fill the street, enjoying pre-theater dinners or late-night gatherings with friends. The mood is energetic and exciting, yet accessible and safe, as Shirlington welcomes a diverse and friendly crowd. A variety of amenities and 24-7 activity helps create a secure, welcoming environment.

Overall, Shirlington has become one of the most popular and talked-about neighborhoods in the region. Its rise in popularity over the last three years has been well documented. In 2005, a *Washington Post* feature story "Making Shirlington a Magnet" examined the growing popularity of the neighborhood, the vision of Shirlington as an arts and entertainment destination, and the successful efforts of developers and Arlington government planning and economic development officials to create exactly that. Residents and business owners alike support the revitalization of Shirlington. Warren Brown, owner of Cakelove bakery and one of *Inc. Magazine's* 26 Most Fascinating Entrepreneurs, opened a Shirlington location in 2007, noting the neighborhood's amenable character and seamless accessibility to retail. Offering a friendly, exciting, and visually interesting place for the visitor, residents, and workforce, Shirlington is authentic, eclectic, and filled with character. It is truly one of the region's great neighborhoods – and a true testament to thoughtfully planned economic development.

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