

environments for aging

fall 2025 | efamagazine.com

High notes

Inspir Embassy Row, Washington, D.C.

Plus

Remodel/Renovation Competition
and 2025 Buyers Guide



Maplewood Senior Living renovates an iconic Embassy Row hotel in Washington, D.C., into the second location for its luxury Inspir brand

by Brooke Bilyj

LOCATED ON WASHINGTON, D.C.'S illustrious Embassy Row, the iconic Fairfax Hotel was originally built in 1924 as post-war officers' housing before becoming a favorite destination for politicians, diplomats, and celebrities in the 1960s. Decades later, in 1985, the addition of an annex to the west expanded the footprint of the hotel as the property underwent a series of ownership changes. When the hotel closed in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Maplewood Senior Living (Westport, Conn.) purchased the property.

The developer and operator saw the prestigious architectural landmark as a prime location to expand its upscale, contemporary urban brand, Inspir, with its second location. "Looking at this beautiful building with its tremendous historical pedigree on Embassy Row, we wanted to honor its history, prestige, and cultural significance while also honoring the Inspir brand promises of wellness, hospitality, and elevated care," says Maplewood Senior Living co-CEO Tom Gaston.

The organization commissioned Beyer Blinder Belle (BBB) Architects & Planners (Washington, D.C.) as the architect and interior design team for Inspir Embassy Row, drawing on the firm's expertise restoring historic urban buildings. Through a full adaptive-reuse renovation, the team crafted a hospitality-inspired luxury senior living community that honors the building's original style while including contemporary features to support seniors with assisted living and memory care needs.

Creating destinations

The \$200 million, 215,000-square-foot community features 178 residential units spanning studio and one- and two-bedroom options on

Amenity spaces located off the central first-floor corridor are defined by archways that indicate points of transition while offering a contemporary reinterpretation of the building's historic architecture.

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Left: The hotel's former ballroom was transformed into a double-height gathering space and music room that combines bright, contemporary finishes with traditional details like intricate millwork and upscale furniture.

Bottom: The designers applied their urban planning expertise by creating "nodes" along the paths to landmark destinations and amenities, such as cozy seating nooks accented by dramatic artwork.

floors two through eight, alongside a full suite of luxury amenities—from the lower-level Sanctuary wellness suite housing a saltwater pool, sauna, steam room, and fitness center to a new rooftop patio boasting expansive views of downtown D.C. "While it is a preeminent healthcare facility that focuses tremendously on wellness, the design is residential and hospitality forward," says Jill Cavanaugh, partner-in-charge at BBB.

Specifically, the design approach at Inspir Embassy Row draws on BBB's urban planning expertise to define clear paths and distinct landmarks throughout the facility, naturally guiding residents toward amenities. "When you design cities, you create landmarks, and you create nodes along a path to reach those landmarks, like distinct neighborhoods," Cavanaugh says. "We applied that to this sprawling floor plan to create meaningful destinations that each have their own visual character with very clear sightlines and generous wide paths to get there and, at the end of those paths, a landmark: a big fireplace, lovely piece of artwork, an immediate sense of orientation."

For example, just past the first-floor lobby inside the main entrance, a cluster of amenities dubbed The Marketplace provides familiar conveniences including a coffee bar, mailroom, art room, and lounge flanked by cozy reading nooks



and comfy couches. "Very often, people with different levels of mental acuity have agitation, apprehension, and fearfulness in unfamiliar places," Cavanaugh says. "We wanted to mitigate that through intuitive wayfinding by giving people a sense of purpose through space."

As residents progress from the lobby down the

main corridor of The Marketplace amenities, the design gradually transitions from light to dark—not only delineating one space from the next, but also indicating the time of day that each room is most likely to be active. For example, the Garden Bistro, located at the front of the building next to the lobby, is a bright, daylit lunch destination filled with greenery and access to an outdoor terrace, while at the end of the hallway sits the Ember Lounge, which is designed as a cozier, more intimate space that pays homage to the former hotel's famed Jockey Club.

Navigating adaptive reuse

Adapting a historic hotel into a contemporary senior living facility posed challenges for the project team. For starters, the building's W-shaped footprint featured a significant grade change on the first level, formed by the junction between the original 1920s construction and the 1980s addition that doubled the building's square footage.

Inside the entrance to the new addition, visitors encountered several stairs, which "would be problematic for our residents," Gaston says. To bypass this obstacle, the project team repositioned the lobby to the on-grade entrance off of Massachusetts Avenue and also infilled portions of the concrete slab.



Additionally, altering the number of elevators from three to two in order to enlarge one of the shafts to fit a stretcher and enable two-way access resolved both life safety issues and accessibility challenges, particularly the half-floor grade difference between the original building and the addition.

To arrange a variety of units within the irregular building shape, the project team approached each floor as a puzzle—creating 178 unique units, which are designed for future flexibility based on resident requests at the Carnegie Hill community to combine neighboring units to expand their living space without moving. “As part of our design thought process [at Embassy Row], we built in the ability to combine rooms if we need to, because we’re seeing that as a common trend these days,” Gaston says. “People are wanting more space.”

The building also required zero-threshold floor plans with seamless, level transitions to ensure accessibility for residents. Smoothly threading in new mechanical systems and in-laid flooring was more straightforward on the newer side of the building, thanks to its concrete slab foundation, but the original construction’s structural hollow-tile flat-arch floor system proved more challenging.

“Each of the concrete ribs in this terracotta slab



Top: Taking cues from interior courtyards around the city, the Garden Bistro welcomes residents into a bright, daylit space filled with greenery.

Above: The Ember Lounge’s leather chairs, fireplace, heavy textiles, and wood paneling create a cozy, intimate gathering space.



Top: An indoor rooftop lounge opens onto expansive outdoor terraces featuring fire pits, meditation areas, gardens, and views of the monuments in downtown D.C.

Right: Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners sought to preserve the prestige of an iconic 1920s hotel while transforming the building into a contemporary senior living community.



needs to be penetrated in a way that doesn't compromise that rib, so we had to use ground-penetrating radar to investigate underneath the structure," Cavanaugh says. "You're threading mechanical systems through these vertical penetrations in a way that serves the units above without compromising accessibility within the unit itself, so you're working vertically and horizontally at the same time. Finessing these new systems through the building was the largest technical challenge."

Creative design solutions

The building's distinctive W-shaped layout allowed for more natural light, outdoor connections, and sweeping urban vistas. "It's not a terribly deep building because it's not a rectangle, so we were able to minimize the corridor length and take advantage of the natural light, which is critically important for the well-being of seniors," says Gaston.

On the backside of the building, the junction of the original building and the addition created "a significant irregularity" that jutted out from the structure, Cavanaugh says. By carving out this protrusion, "we created space on the second and third floors for outdoor terraces," she says.

The addition of these patios made those two

floors a fit for memory care, too. "It was really important to us that memory care residents have full-time access to outdoor space," Gaston explains. These open-air patios "are designed to get fresh air, outdoor space, and light, but also allow privacy and protection with features like trellises or raised walls to prevent people or objects from falling," Cavanaugh adds.

Additionally, the design team converted the hotel's rooftop mechanical space into an expansive terrace, adding a bar, lounge, fire pits, gardens, and meditation areas with downtown views. "Residents who can't leave the building still have the opportunity to feel as if they're part of the city, engaging in something larger," Cavanaugh says.

Since Inspir Embassy Row opened in February, the feedback from resident families, institutional partners, and even competitors who have toured the community has been "overwhelmingly positive," Gaston says. Cavanaugh adds that the community feels intuitive and inviting. "The way in which each space has a distinct aesthetic translates to a sense of familiarity and feeling like you're home," she says. *efa*

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project details

Project: Inspir Embassy Row

Location: Washington, D.C.

Completion date: February 2025

Owner: Omega Healthcare Investors

Developer and operator: Maplewood Senior Living

Total building area: 215,000 sq. ft.

Total construction cost: \$200 million

Cost/sq. ft.: \$930

Architect: Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners

Interior designer: Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners

Construction Manager: Turner

Art consultant: Morton Contemporary

Carpet/flooring: Signature Flooring, Artistic Tile, Daltile, Florim, Parky, Nydree, Stonetech

Ceiling/wall systems: Armstrong

Fabric/textiles: Perennials, ArcCom, Kravet

Furniture—seating/casegoods: George Smith, Samuelson, CSelect

Lighting: Yellow Goat Design, Lutron

Surfaces—solid/other: Dekton, Caesarstone

Wallcoverings: Wolf Gordon, Koroseal

Millwork: Beaubois

For an expanded list, visit efamagazine.com. Project details are provided by the design team and not vetted by Environments for Aging.

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