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## Space: Special Delivery

From mail sorting station to loft-style apartments, the Railway Express building is no dead letter office

by Marcus Charleston



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When architect Edward M. Hord talks about windows, he always describes them as "wonderful"—at least when he's talking about the Railway Express Lofts, one of his latest projects. Hord, a senior principal at the architecture firm Hord Coplan Macht, is so thrilled about the successful conversion of the former Parcel Post Station on St. Paul Street into a light-filled, mixed-use building that his family's been ribbing him about it. "My daughter keeps giving me a hard time because I hang out there too much," he says.

Built in 1929, the former mail sorting station stretches along the length of the 100 block of Mt. Royal Avenue, with stately pilasters and tall, paned windows along all four exterior walls. "It's great architecture that's built to last," says Marty Azola, president of Azola & Associates and the operating member of Railway Express LLC. "It's designed to make a statement of stability and permanence." The city bought the Classic Revival-style building in 1973 and for years used it as a maintenance facility for the housing authority. In 2005, Railway Express LLC submitted a successful proposal for development, and in December, the building reopened its doors after a whirlwind nine-month-long, \$19 million renovation.

Although quick, the rehab was not without some unique challenges. The two-story building is perched twenty-two feet above the train tracks on concrete pillars—in fact, it was the city's first air rights building, which meant the original builder had to purchase the right to construct the building above the privately owned tracks. In order to develop the building, Railway Express LLC had to clean up environmental contamination on ground level. Because the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, the exterior of the building had to be preserved in a specific way. Plus, electrical wires and water had to be run across the Calvert Street bridge, and work on the below-building parking deck required periodic closures of the tracks. "It was quite a coordination effort with Amtrak," says Azola.

The first floor of the 77,000-square-foot structure is divided into thirteen commercial suites custom designed for its tenants, including Doracon Contracting, the nonprofit Healthy Teen Network, and the

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Cafe Mocha eatery, which relocated from Howard Street. The second level contains thirty residential units, sixteen of which Hord calls "cascading lofts"— deep units, sixty feet from front to back, that boast seventeen-foot ceilings and three levels that stair-step down from back to front (see rendering at left). Each apartment has its own window, and even the rooms toward the back of the unit get an abundance of natural light. "On a day like today," Hord says one particularly gray and rainy afternoon, "you can go up in that bedroom [on the third floor] and you don't need to turn the lights on. It's amazing."

Gavin Hamilton, an internal medicine specialist who moved into a unit in December, appreciated the design immediately. "I like the open layout with long sightlines to the outside from anywhere in the loft," he says. "My apartment faces south, and even in the winter the light pours in." Hamilton, who travels to New York City once or twice a month, also likes the building's proximity to Penn Station, and the fact that the many attractions of Mount Vernon and the arts district are within walking distance.

Azola, a historic builder who recently worked on the conversion of the Bromo Seltzer Tower into artists' studios, shares Hord's excitement about the project. "The truth is it's one of the finest monumental buildings in town and will play a key role in the development of the Station North Arts and Entertainment District," he says. "[There's a] good feeling you get as a rehab contractor, polishing up these old buildings and bringing them back to life. They are often difficult jobs, but when you step back and look at the finished product, you get the warm feeling of accomplishment."

—Marcus Charleston lives in Mount Vernon and produces *Midday*, heard on WYPR.

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