



# SQUASH ON FIRE

*Ian McKenzie visits the host club for the 2019 Men's World Team Championship in Washington – and is impressed*

**Location, location, location! Squash On Fire, the host club for the 2019 Men's World Team Championship, is brilliantly situated in Washington, a 20-minute walk from the White House.**

Why 'Squash On Fire'? It could allude to the exciting and inflammatory nature of this dynamic racket sport, and perhaps it does, but in simple terms it refers to a squash club built on top of a fire station.

It is an interesting building and you can book to play there without any need to be a member, as that is the philosophy of owner Anthony Lanier.

Lanier came to the US from Austria aged 28 in 1980, started in the property business and later became a developer. He has built offices, hotels, retail and residential buildings, including the Westlight condominium complex – all what he calls "high-end" products. In one of his buildings was a squash court and his youngest daughter, Camille, started playing there.

"She didn't have anyone to play with and against the odds she became a good player," explains Lanier. "We travelled to the British Junior Open and to Egypt. Then the grandchildren played."

The family became hooked on the sport. Camille played on the professional circuit and her mother now plays every day.

Camille's sister, Nadine Arsenyev, explains: "My sister travelled from an early age with a squash racket and met all these amazing people and saw the different [squash] centres."

Lanier travelled with her and so saw the clubs, which generally he didn't like.

**"Squash is poorly organised," he says. "It is played in the suburbs in the US in corrugated metal sheds and tucked away. It is a low-yielding, subsidised activity in ugly premises. Centres are not in the middle of the city."**

"I have spent a lot of time disliking clubs, but there were components in some that were likeable – a central viewing station where you could see as many courts as possible and a social area planted in the middle of the courts," he says.

He was particularly impressed by a club in Munich designed, he says, with "social understanding".

Lanier vaguely thought he might build a squash club one day, but didn't specifically set out to do it.

However, an opportunity arose. He explains: "We made a deal with the City of Washington to buy a piece of land and agreed to build a new library and fire station as part of the deal."

To cut a long story short, the space above the fire station was not designated and the architect came back with a design that grabbed his imagination.

"We had to build this building," said Lanier. "It was a long stony path, but we ended up with a squash club above a fire station and below social housing."

The new building had location, space and light, was simple and it worked socially. "We wanted natural daylight, not little boxes," says Nadine. "You don't feel constrained here."

At Squash On Fire the street-side wall leading to the balcony is all glass and floods the building with light. There are eight courts, one all glass, and one where the back and sidewalls fold in to create viewing space.

The mezzanine floor is for gym equipment and viewing. The restaurant/bar, which is open to the public, provides the social area. The spaces work.

Lanier's philosophy is to have an open-access club, using a 'pay for play' model. "Everyone can come through the front door, use the restaurant and play squash," he explains.

There are plenty of activities, ladders, round-robins, a junior academy, clinics and courses. Belgian Ronny Vlassaks is the coach.

Courts and activities can be booked on line. You can even book to video your matches and have a link to the video emailed to you. "It is an Uber-like experience," explains Nadine.

Lanier reports the usage is high compared to the average US club, which is often only busy from 6-9pm. He says they have had 7,000 people through the club in two years, 1,500 regulars and have 50% occupancy.

This is a significant facility for Washington, where you can walk from the office. It is accessible and in an enjoyable area.



*Squash On Fire owner Anthony Lanier bids farewell at the World Championship prize-giving, with the victorious Egypt squad behind him*

The World Team Championship was busy, the US National Championships have been held here for two years in a row and it has also staged the National Collegiate Championships and the Howe (women's team) Cup. All worked well. What's next?