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Essays on the City Form of a Capital

by

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Essays on the City Form of a Capital

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 10, 1985  
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Master of Science in Architecture Studies

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the city form of Washington, D.C. through four independent essays. Each essay examines a different aspect of the city: its monumentality as determined by its relationship with the nation it governs, the linear network of its plan, the 'objectness' of its principal buildings, and finally, the significance of nature. Their structure and the manner in which they view the city are tailored to their respective topics. Together they represent a body of work whose intent is to explore those issues which distinguish Washington.

The premise for this approach is a belief that cities should be understood for what they are, not only for what they are like or what they are not. To this end, the thesis examines what is going on in Washington, so that we may understand it and work with it, rather than transfer attractive 'solutions' from other cities which may be inappropriate.

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to mom and dad
INTRODUCTION

Cities have been studied, observed and written about in all manners. Sometimes we view a city with the cool gaze of a statistician: its bricks and mortar, its streets and parks, and even its citizens become quantified. Other times we may view a city from the standpoint of a set of perceptual criteria, as an economic engine, or we may measure how people react to it.

There is also a long tradition of regarding cities as unique phenomena. This tradition includes Rasmussen and his study of London, Norberg-Shulz and Genius Loci and Banham and his study of Los Angeles. They all try to understand the city for what it is, rather than what it is like.

This thesis will follow that tradition and examine Washington through a set of four essays. Each essay is an individual piece, isolated from the others, exploring a particular aspect of the city. The aspects of the city were chosen for being particularly peculiar to this city. The four essays together attempt to reveal what makes Washington what it is.

The tone of the essays is essentially positive for a purpose. In part it is a rebellion against the fashion of complaining about what is wrong with our cities and what is right with their cities. It stems more from a belief that if the city is quite enjoyable, then something worthwhile must be going on. Rather than lament over what it is not, let us learn what it is and reinforce this where possible.

The topics of the essays dictated the structure of the thesis. Distinct aspects of the city, whose sense of relation might seem forced if treated as one piece, were kept distinct by treating them as essays.
Introduction

Various possibilities for constructing the essays were entertained. The essays could be separate but consistent in structure, to lend coherence to the entire work. This was discarded because it might force topics into unnatural structures. Instead, the essays could have been constructed in an ascending or descending order, adjusting the level of scrutiny. While this is a good way to understand cities, as if uncovering layers, it was not responsive to the topics. Another alternative would be to have one essay encompass the others. This was similarly unsuitable.

The outcome was a set of independent essays. In this manner an essay could be tailored in tone and rigor, as well as structure, to the topic it explores. The first essay, "Positive Olympus or Imperial Disneyland," looks at Washington as the capital, its relationship to the United States and how these shaped the monumentality of the city. The second essay, "Straws on the Landscape," is a study of the city's form as it is determined by its linear elements. "Precious Temples" explores Washington's more important buildings and their quality as objects. Finally, "Emerald Rhapsody" looks at the significance of nature to the city.

The premise of this thesis implies limits to the applicability of "answers" found in Washington. We can learn from Washington, but we mustn't necessarily copy from it.
POSITIVE OLYMPUS OR IMPERIAL DISNEYLAND:

THE MONUMENTAL CITY
POSITIVE OLYMPUS OR IMPERIAL DISNEYLAND: THE MONUMENTAL CITY

... the plan should be drawn such as to leave room for that aggrandizement and embellishment which the increase of the wealth of the nation will permit it to pursue...

Pierre Charles L'Enfant

Make no little plans, they have no power to stir men's souls.

Daniel Burnham

Such was the advice given by the city's designer and one of its more notable subsequent planners. By any measure, their legacy is a monumental city. The length of its boulevards, the breadth of its spaces, and the prospects of its monuments rival or surpass all others, yet the building of
this city is fraught with contradiction. The contradiction is not necessarily singular, nor is it consistently apparent throughout history. It has, however, been the force which has shaped the capital of the United States into a rather unique city. It is this contradiction which this essay will explore.

Idealism and Imperialism: Prelude to Development

In 1789 the United States found itself armed with independence, a new constitution, and, tangibly, little else. Whatever else did exist resided in the minds of the men who had secured the formation of the republic. This included the idealism inherent to their loftier notions of independence and the rights of man, a sense of bravado over their unprecedented accomplishment (defeating a European power in its prime), and an intense restlessness that had first manifested itself in the fledgling colonies. As Amaury de Riencourt has pointed out, "a blend of democratic idealism and imperialistic drive" is one which Americans have had from the start and never lost. This blend was apparent at the inception of the capital city and has persevered to this day.

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, under the Residence Act of 1790, set about, with their planner L'Enfant, to create the capital. The act provided for a seat of government to be located in the vicinity of its present location and to be occupied in 1800. The Act made no provision for the actual design of a town, but Jefferson inferred as much from it.

L'Enfant was hired as a surveyor. Energetic, creative and not just slightly conceited, he took it upon himself to do more: he produced the famous baroque plan. A product of eighteenth century Europe, having spent the bulk of his childhood in residence at Versailles, the plan comes as no great surprise.

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Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, was the product of a more simple environment: the frontier, and its emphasis on versatility, self-reliance and frugality. Certainly a 'gentleman' of his age, his refinement and versatility put him at ease with men like da Vinci and Descartes, both men of an age quite unlike his own. He was, however, not above his simple environment and espoused the virtues of an agrarian society. His was a philosophy of universalism and egalitarianism.

The manner of Jefferson becomes apparent in his architecture and his planning. As noble as his residence at Monticello may be, there is a peculiar attention to the details of its operation. He did not construct this great house with the detached air of a nobleman, but did so with the passion, the attention and the common sense of a pioneer with his homestead. The University of Virginia has a similar feel to it: its qualities as a learning and a living environment take precedence over pomp, ceremony, and symbolism. His plan for Washington was an egalitarian gridiron like that found through most of the colonies. It spoke of equity of distribution, efficiency of initial settlement as well as growth, and an earnest common sense. Particular attention was devoted to such matters as the distribution of lots within a block and the arrangement of housing. A straightforward yet well-developed plan, it was very much like its designer.

A contradiction in philosophy between the two men emerges. This is the genesis of a conflict which will run through the development of the capital. Being a refined and educated man, a 'renaissance man,' Jefferson surely understood as well as anyone the implications and symbolism of L'Enfant's plan. Despite this, the plan went ahead, even without its designer. The frenchman was fired, not over aesthetic or philosophical matters, but due to a lack of progress. His successor, Andrew Ellicott, redrew the Plan with little revision, and proceeded to lay it out on the land. What was ample opportunity to modify or discard the plan of L'Enfant went by without incident.

To understand this lapse, we must understand the United States and the colonies which preceded it. The colonies lay between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains. From the moment passes were
discovered through these mountains, a restless population was pouring into the plains beyond. The colonial wars were fought over whose territory this really was: Indian, French, British, or colonial. Indeed, the Revolution was in part precipitated by the British refusing further access to the territory by the colonists. With victory at Yorktown, Americans became increasingly bold and restless.

Virginians could be seen as the aristocracy of the colonists. Virginia's patriots, like Washington, Jefferson, and Madison, were often estate owners and planters. Their counterparts in New England, while not of this class, were not of the lower classes either. The Revolution was not one of proletarian masses, but one of the bourgeoisie. The model of a baroque city, however inapplicable to the ideals of the new republic, was not abhorrent to it.

When a society has a meager past, when this past is best left behind, yet the society's legitimacy is predicated on civilizations long gone, these civilizations take on great significance. In severing its ties with the British and colonialism, the United States embraced the ideals of democracy and representation as embodied in Ancient Greece and Rome. The past of the nation was mostly on the battlefields, and in colonial cities such as Philadelphia and its Independence Hall. Washington, quite obviously, had none whatsoever. It was a 'clean slate;' suitable for and emblematic of America's fresh start.

Washington would become an allusion to those past civilizations: an allegory of a noble, if disconnected ancestry. It would be a city made out of stone, most often gleaming white marble: a 'Positive Olympus.'\(^1\) Intended to be a 'symbol of Reason and Order,'\(^2\) its prominence and stature were artificially created to satisfy a young nation's thirst for a past and a restless


nation's vision of its future.

This leaves a willing America with a baroque plan on paper and an all but invisible city on the east bank of the Potomac. How democracy proceeds to build this city is an interesting path that wavers between the extremes of de Riencourt's observation.

The Baroque Problem and the Nineteenth Century

The apparent irony of L'Enfant's plan is that a scheme intended as the symbol of democracy has its origin in the absolute monarchies of Europe. Whether one attributes greater influence to Versailles, St. Petersburg, Karlsruhe, or various plans for rebuilding London, is immaterial. This is as grand a baroque scheme as has been attempted. In the eighteenth century, the baroque plan was closely allied, philosophically, from its inception, with the monarchies of Europe and would appear to be inappropriate to the ideals of democracy. Understanding the aspirations of the nation, however, indicates that the plan may not have been all that inappropriate. At the time, the baroque model was the only one available that could reflect these aspirations. The democracy could reconcile the differences by producing a more egalitarian city within the baroque model.

The annexation of territory by the United States makes an interesting analogy. However repulsive colonialism was to the United States, the occupation of territories to the west for economic gain was crucial to its growth and a logical outcome of its restlessness. By introducing the concept of statehood to this growth, all new territories acquire the same status as the original thirteen, circumventing the specter of colonialism.

Given the baroque model as a viable starting point; not an ideological anomaly, the city is faced with a new obstacle. As much as it is a social and political concept, the baroque city is a three-dimensional physical form. A plan on paper cannot adequately describe the baroque city. Washington was faced with fulfilling the prophecy of the plan. For a century, it would not.
Positive Olympus or Imperial Disneyland

The baroque city, as a plan and as buildings, is an incredibly bold design, and must be so in execution. The plan and the buildings should develop together. Though the plan of a baroque city deals with movement and procession internally, a baroque perception of the world, rooted in absolutism, is a static one. As a vision the city is essentially complete upon leaving the designer's hand. It tolerates little change.

The complete realization of a baroque city lies in a form of central authority once common in Europe, but certainly not in America. The plan of L'Enfant was grander than any in Europe at the time or since, yet its execution lay in the hands of a representative government. For decades after the initial settlement of Washington, major portions of the city were known only to surveyors.

In the nineteenth century, Washington would not address the issues of the plan but struggle to build the city piece by piece. Toward the middle of the century, when a Victorian fervor was sweeping the country, James Renwick would design the Romanesque 'castle' for the Smithsonian Institution, and Andrew Jackson Downing would turn L'Enfant's Mall into an Olmstedian park. Features such as these would begin to dissemble L'Enfant's scheme and give rise to bolder plans in the next century.

All was not haphazard nor futile in the nineteenth century, however. Some major elements, such as the Washington Monument were constructed then. The U.S. Capitol was essentially completed. During the Civil War, as most other construction ceased, President Lincoln pursued the completion of Thomas Ustick Walter's great dome for the Capitol, as a symbol that the Union would prevail. Such successes were with isolated pieces and not with the plan itself.

Closing the Frontier and the McMillan Plan

The close of the nineteenth century produced dramatic changes in the United States. The nation had recently celebrated its centennial. One hundred years of internal growth and the fulfillment of 'manifest destiny' had come to a close. America was about overtake Britain as the world's premier economic power. The frontier no longer an issue, the United States would take its 'most strident steps yet toward international ascendancy and eventual supremacy.

The Columbian Exposition had also just ended in Chicago. The influence of this fair, on the other hand, was just beginning. The Great White City of the fair stirred people's imaginations, awakened their perceptions of their cities, and prompted the City Beautiful Movement. City after city would encounter scrutiny from the purveyors of City Beautiful's philosophy. Most would only go so far as to plan (sometimes incredibly, as in Burnham's plan for Chicago); others would build tentative pieces. One city would take City Beautiful and almost turn it into its proprietary trademark: Washington.

Just as the United States was poised for greatness in 1900, so was its capital. That City Beautiful, as the prevailing aesthetic philosophy, would flourish in the capital was almost pre-destined. The tenets of City Beautiful mirrored the national spirit of pride and expansionism. The axial relationships, the prominent siting of crucial buildings and the sheer ceremony of it all were more than suited to L'Enfant's original plan. The white temple-like buildings were structures worthy of a capital. Finally, 1900 marked the centennial of the city of Washington. The atmosphere was ripe for bold moves.

The Senate Park Commission was established to prepare plans for the parks of the capital city. Initiated by Michigan Senator James McMillan, it produced what is commonly called the McMillan Plan. More than any other influence on the city, from the Residence Act to the present, the McMillan Plan is responsible for the visual appearance of the monumental core. A subjective interpretation of the initial L’Enfant Plan, it set out to do what the previous one hundred years could not: create the monumental city.

The Commission was led by the blue-ribbon team of Daniel Burnham.
Charles McKim, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Augustus St. Gaudens. Just as one hundred years earlier an ebullient L'Enfant could not be satisfied with merely surveying, these men saw far beyond a mere master plan for the city's parks. Their vision was one of the masterpieces of American planning. A century of neglect and abuse would be wiped out. The Mall would become the "Grand Avenue" L'Enfant had always intended. Monumental marble buildings would line it from the Capitol to the Washington Monument. On the other side, the axis would continue to a monument to Abraham Lincoln. Another temple would be placed on the shore of the Tidal Basin, on axis with the White House. More monumental pieces would be added between Pennsylvania Avenue to the north and Maryland Avenue to the south, giving the proposal its kite-shaped plan.

That this plan was grand is an understatement. The sheer scale of construction exceeded anything undertaken in the United States and most probably all of Europe. The size the Federal Triangle would prompt one essayist to remark that its vastness made the "Imperial Fora of Rome, the Palace of Diocletian, the Louvre-Tuileries and the Escorial look like boy scout stuff."¹ Such components would ensure that up to this point, in the twentieth century, the largest office building in the world would always be a part of Washington.² One building, the Pentagon, would be so large (over seven million square feet and sixteen miles of corridors) that *Architectural Forum* (January 1943) would comment that, "the distinction between architecture and city planning vanishes." Other components were equally boggling. The distance from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial would be greater than that from the Louvre to the Arc d' Triomphe. The Reflecting Pool in front of the Lincoln would be over 3000 feet long and wide enough to swallow most of the great boulevards of Europe and the facades which

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² The list would include several office buildings such as the Department of Commerce Building of the Triangle and, most recently (since 1943) the Pentagon (actually across the river in Arlington).
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As powerful as the McMillan Plan was, it would be seven decades before the city would even partially realize the plan's potential. The Mall itself would not even begin to resemble its present state until the mid-1930's. Three of the museums which line it today (Air and Space, National Gallery East Wing, and the Hirshhorn) did not exist before 1970. Before the 1930's, the only museums on the Mall were the Natural History Museum, the original Smithsonian and an adjacent victorian structure.

Temporary Structures on the Mall, 1959.

While the restoration and aggrandizement of the Mall was progressing tediously, the rapid expansion of government was providing another impediment. Rapid growth required an equally rapid increase in office space. If proximity of vacant land is an important criteria, the Mall provided hundreds of acres. Beginning with the First World War, temporary office structures (usually five stories high) filled the Mall. The Napoleonic Federal Triangle, begun in 1926, was a first attempt to provide permanent office space off the Mall. It followed the McMillan guidelines for a monumental core and provided copius amounts of office space. The 'temps,' however,
remained and even proliferated. The Second World War brought on even more, and as late as 1960, they littered the Mall. The last ones were removed by President Nixon in 1970.

The Presidency of Richard Nixon is an interesting chapter in the development of Washington. Coupled with some development from the Johnson era before it, a major proportion of the realization of monumental Washington was undertaken during this Presidency. The juxtaposition of what could be called the 'Imperial Presidency' and increasing public unrest would cause Nicholas von Hoffman to reflect on the 'Imperial Disneyland' along the Potomac.¹ As strife, protest, and distrust of an increasingly powerful central authority were mounting, the federal government was undertaking some of its more awesome projects.

Curiously, many of the projects of Nixon (and Johnson) have been some of the least monumental in themselves, but most beneficial to enhancing the plan of the city. Johnson was responsible for the beautification of much of the Potomac shoreline. Nixon, as mentioned, removed the temporaries and provided the Olmsted inspired Constitution Gardens in its place. His involvement with this project was often quite close. At the same time, the most expensive project ever undertaken in the city (or any city, for that matter) was inspired by Johnson and started under Nixon: the Metro subway system.

The Monumental City?

I have discussed the history of development as it is reflected in the contradiction first made visible by Jefferson and L'Enfant. Now I will look at the city as it stands today and explore the resulting compromises.

The monumentality of the city today consists of the buildings and the plan (in its various stages). The plan of L'Enfant would be hardly what it is without the impressive monuments which delineate it, and these buildings would be severely diminished without the relationships provided by the plan. In this regard, both the buildings and the plan are intertwined, but each has met with different degrees of success.

Of any aspect of the city, that which is most readily identified with it is its collection of powerful white temples in the vicinity of the Mall. This is because the tension in the development has had little effect on the buildings themselves.

These famous monuments and buildings demarcate the principal axes of the city, becoming the beacons of its heroic center. Their silhouettes and bearing are familiar to all. Unlike so many monumental relics, these are difficult to place in time. Fastidiously maintained, they are too clean to be 'old,' yet their presence speaks of a distant age. Many visitors are surprised to discover that the Lincoln Memorial did not exist before 1922 and the Jefferson not before 1942.

Another temple of the city, a recent one, (but more distant from the us than the Jefferson is from it) is almost thirty miles from this core. Dulles Airport sprawls over 9000 acres amidst the farmland of Chantilly, Virginia. By such a measure it was the world's largest until recently. To the eye it is an isolated temple in rural Virginia. When it was built it was the ultimate in airport planning. Today, its futuristic aesthetic is still preeminent. Eero Saarinen's design is as pristine as a Doric temple, unable to tolerate change. It forces all to accept it on its own terms. Within, the furnishings and details, down to metal-leaf digital clocks, are as they were twenty-two years ago. Visually, the terminal has been frozen.

Somewhat uncannily, the effect goes one step further. A resonant
voice announces every flight in an acoustically superior environment. "Northwest Orient . . . Flight 78 . . . Direct Service to Seattle . . . Boarding Gate 20 . . . Final call . . . ." It is the same voice throughout the airport's working day. It has been the same voice for the airport's twenty-two years of service. Through taping and careful splicing, the terminal remains the same.

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Once in Washington, the predicament of a baroque city built by a democracy becomes apparent. Not all avenues are lined by robust facades like their counterparts in Europe. At times the streetscape is interrupted by a gasoline station or a surface parking lot. Gladly, such features don't occur frequently, but they or their historical precedents have afflicted the avenues of the capital since its beginning. One need only to refer to Charles Dickens' descriptions of the city for a foreigner's impressions of the incompleteness of the capital's streets.¹

A baroque avenue is a complete concept: it begins, it ends, and it is bounded by vertical development. Washington's phenomenal growth, filling in all available space to the twelve story limit, continues to eradicate the deficiency. Along many of the more important avenues it is no longer an issue. Along the most important avenue it was a burning issue just now being dealt with: Pennsylvania Avenue.

The south side of the Avenue was completed in a burst of building that would surpass Haussmann at his most energetic: the Federal Triangle. Most likely too austere, these facades provide all the monumentality a baroque avenue could ever hope for.

The opposite side of Pennsylvania Avenue has had a much different fate. When the Triangle was completed, the north side was composed of the low structures of Civil War Washington (Mathew Brady's studio still stands). Democracy was unable to deal with them, other than the form of complete

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renewal that transformed the south side, which was not forthcoming. The north side continued to decay. The nation's preeminent street looked anything but.

In the 1960's when the condition of the north side was challenged, a scheme as grandiose as the Triangle was revealed. Far too strong and harsh, lacking whatever quality the Triangle buildings may have, this plan demonstrated the ability to plan with authority, but also the weakness in ability to execute. The scheme was not implemented. One piece, the J. Edgar Hoover Building, was (the north side would have resembled this without interruption). The turmoil of the '60's and early '70's stymied the plans for this street.

In its place is a much more humanistic scheme, composed of varying elements. It was, however, conceived as an entire unit from east to west. It is a very interesting streetscape, perhaps a bit too 'ragged' for its southern counterpart, but humanely pleasant. The inability to produce an avenue in the baroque sense has produced one which seems schizophrenic. The south is severely pompous; the north typical, refined private sector development. The mixing of the two uses as it has happened on the real baroque streets (for all their power, those governments never had the capacity to appropriate block after block) does not occur here.

* * *

The McMillan Commission produced several aerial perspectives of its proposals. Of particular interest are the Washington Monument grounds and the Jefferson Memorial and Tidal Basin. Elsewhere, their recommendations were followed in the broadest sense. In these two instances, they were not.

The difference between what was recommended and what was built is startling. Today the Washington Monument grows out of a grassy knoll. Flowering trees and evergreens are randomly planted in clusters on the grounds. The shaft of the obelisk forces its way out of this hill, no base and no other structures interfering. In a similar way, the Jefferson Memorial, though on axis with the White House far to the north, lies on the edge of the free-form Tidal Basin.
Positive Olympus or Imperial Disneyland

The McMillan Commission perspectives show quite a different vision. A rigid base of steps, terraces, niches, fountains and statues has been added to the Monument (the obelisk had been completed in 1885). The Tidal Basin is partially filled, transformed into enormous rectangular pools that would become a foreground for the yet to be built Jefferson Memorial.

These perspectives are seductive, particularly when compared to similar views of the city as it was built. They have a grandeur and order that make the actual views look somewhat haphazard, it that is possible. From high in the air, particularly over the Monument, it is no contest: the McMillan Plan is superior. This is only an illusion, however, and thankfully not all aspects of this plan were followed.

The scale of the monumental core is awesome. The marble obelisk dwarfs those that were its inspiration. Other superlatives of the area have already been mentioned. The scale and the monuments give the area its presence, without the need for the embellishment found in the drawings. The primary strength of the scheme is that in the details it is quite approachable. As a complete entity it takes on its grand scale.

Every summer, for several weeks the Mall is covered with the "American Folk Life Festival." Americana from every state, from hog calling and steer roasts, to oyster shucking and maple syrup, fills the area. This imposing centerpiece of the nation becomes a giant carnival midway.

While the plan may be French, or even inflated French, the spirit is more closely British. The Mall is more like the Long Walk at Windsor than any 'grand avenue.' The parks around the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials are more like their counterparts in London, with their emphasis on informal arrangements and athletic recreation.1

This produces juxtapositions like that between the Reflecting Pool and Constitution Gardens. The former is a rectangular pool reminiscent of the canal at Versailles. It is fitting for the monuments at each end. Travel several hundred yards directly north, and one comes upon the latter. A

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seven acre lake, islands, flowering trees combine into a picturesque setting.

In many ways, there have been severe compromises to the monumentality of the city. As one proceeds away from the core, the power of the plan becomes lessened (as one would expect), but perhaps more than it should. The true irony may be that in spite of the contradiction and the compromises it forces, the monumental core is the most 'monumental' of any produced by the West. It certainly gives a much stronger impression of authority than either Paris or London.

Constitution Gardens and the Reflecting Pool
Olympus or Disneyland?

Washington is an illusionary place from which to govern, insulated and separate from the nation it leads. Sometimes called the 'Capital Cocoon,' the city inside the Beltway bears little resemblance to the nation. Wealthier, better educated, with more lawyers, doctors, scientists and engineers per capita than any other city on earth, the city has had the sort of workforce to which the rest of the country is now heading. Existing on the resources of an entire nation, the city grows during war and peace; recession and economic boom. As Jane Jacobs points out, capital cities thrive on the decline of others. In a city where some governmental agencies deal with funds greater than the GNP's of all but a few nations; where the size of bureaucracy trivializes that of the largest corporations, reality can seem quite remote.

This heady atmosphere can make for headstrong plans, and as seen, often has. Unlike most other cities, Washington has been consistently growing since its inception, relentlessly so in this century. It seems to know nothing of decline. This inexorable behemoth would have the ability to bury the achievements of past civilizations, but it has not.

Outside the Beltway there is always a wary country, suspicious of power and profligate spending, constantly pulling on the reins. The relationship between the American and his capital is a dialectic one. He makes an infrequent, sometimes single trip, almost a pilgrimage, to the city. Standing on the Mall amongst marble temples, the vast spaces and an almost unurban cleanliness and purity, he revels in what his country can produce. Back in his hometown, he will deride the capital, the authority it stands for, and blame all ills on Washington.

Perhaps it is the office of the President which succinctly reflects the dialectic present in America. The American President is a man who can talk

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to farmers in their fields in Iowa, with the familiarity of a neighbor, yet he is elevated above mere head of the Executive Branch of government, to an office that has the aloofness and trappings of a monarch. Americans want both a strong, resolute figure and a man who is their equal in their own home.

The tension between the need for a Positive Olympus and the avoidance of an Imperial Disneyland has produced today's capital. The resulting city is a balance between these two poles, wavering toward one or the other, but never for long. Herein lies the strengths and weaknesses of the capital.
STRAWS ON THE LANDSCAPE:

THE RETICULATED CITY
STRAWS ON THE LANDSCAPE: THE RETICULATED CITY

City Form and Centers of Concentration

Cities can take on many shapes and patterns. One useful manner in which to describe such patterns would be in terms of centers of concentration. I could arrange a series of patterns in cross-section [figure 1], ranging from a single point of concentration to a state where points of concentration are so diffused that the probability of finding concentration at any one spot is the same as at any other. The first pattern represents an idealized state which describes some very small settlements, but no cities. From this scheme, secondary points of concentration are added, encircling the dominant concentration. Eventually, enough secondary concentrations exist that they rob the central concentration of some and eventually all of its dominance. Diffusion of concentration and proliferation of concentrations are occurring simultaneously. This leads to the final stage, where so many and so fine a pattern of concentrations exist that the concept of concentration no longer exists. The city is now a homogenous field.

Assuming that the extremes of the series represent idealized states, labels referring to particular patterns can be added to figure 1. At the top [b,c] we have the centralized city, a city in which a dominant center is surrounded by relatively few secondary centers. Many cities would fall somewhere in this category. American cities such as Chicago, Boston, or Dayton are good examples. In all instances there are other centers (as shown by Harris and Ullman¹ in their model for internal structures of cities), but

it is always clear which is the center.

The next category [d,e] would be the multi-centered city, in which a dominant center is hard to find among a field of numerous centers. Depending on our orientation, we might at times perceive a more distinct center, but this is hard to maintain as we move through the city. Tokyo and Paris are good examples of such a city. Centers abound within them, yet none really dominate. From the point of view of the centralized city and its hub of skyscrapers, the Shinjuku district in Tokyo, and La Defense in Paris, might appear to dominate, but anyone familiar with those cities knows this is not so.

Finally we have the non-centered city [f]. This is a difficult one to envision because of the relationship of intensities to pattern within the city. One example would be the 'dispersed sheet' of Kevin Lynch.\(^1\) Centers in the city would be dissolved, activities occurring throughout a city of low

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density. Another example, one of high density, could be envisioned. A very high level of intensity could be compressed into a small area. This hasn't occurred at the city scale but Midtown Manhattan could be analogous. Here, each block is extruded upwards from an anonymous grid, becoming a beacon of intensity, yet it is no different from its neighbors. Midtown Manhattan is non-centered.

This model of three cities, the centralized, multi-centered, and non-centered cities, is useful for describing many of our cities, but it has its shortcomings. Every so often, a city which seems non-centered crosses our path. It defies our efforts to place points of concentration within its form. If we look for them, we won't find them; if we create them they seem to diffuse like watercolor pigment striking wet paper. Do we throw up our hands in anguish? No, for what we have is not a lack of concentrations, but concentrations of a different sort—linear ones to be precise. I call this the reticulated city.

The reticulated city is distinguished from the previously mentioned patterns of concentration by the geometry of concentration respective to each. A concentration can be distinguished from the remainder of the city by its relative intensity, the flow of energy into it, and the influence it exerts on the surrounding area. The relationship of these characteristics constitutes the geometry of the concentration.

A rigorous definition of these characteristics would be difficult to achieve and be even a bit counter–productive. Intensity can be seen as an increase in the level of activity in the area. This activity could be measured in terms of population. An increase in the density of construction would be a salient feature, as would the number of commercial enterprises. Of course, any one of these may not always be present. We all know of dense office districts which seem to suffer a dearth of places to eat and shop, or similar districts which are unpopulated at night and on weekends. One criteria, though, is almost always applicable: land values. The essential point is that intensity of activity is perceptually greater in a concentration.

Precisely measuring energy flow into a concentration can be equally elusive. Beginning with our concentration's intensity, we can assume an
attractive force and a destination or destinations within. Energy, in the form
of people, products, money, interest (to be a part of the intensity), etc.
would flow inward, attracted by the intensity. The energy of the
surrounding city is focused on the center of concentration.¹

This concentration exerts influence on the surrounding area. Influence
would be manifested in growth, either upwards or outwards, or both. It is
apparent that intensity, energy, and influence exist in a synergistic relationship.
Intensity draws in energy, creating further intensity, exerting further
influence, and so forth. Why such a relationship does not continue in
perpetual growth, or why it first comes to be, need not concern us here.

The geometry of concentration found in the centralized and multi-centered
cities I will call points of concentration. Such concentrations might be
reduced to an intersection of streets, but not necessarily. Often they are
districts of the city which draw in energy, focusing it toward an intangible
center which evades being pinpointed accurately. What defines the geometry
of this concentration is the flow of energy from every direction toward a
point [figure 2].

The reticulated city is composed of lines of concentration which cannot
be reduced to a point. They can be miles long. The flow of energy is
toward a line from directions perpendicular to the line [figure 3].
Contraction along the line which would reduce the line to a point does not
occur. At times the concentration may be limited to a street and its two
edges, or it may extend out for a few blocks into a district. It does not
matter, the geometry remains linear.

Just as concentrations focus the energy of a city or its districts
inwards, flow travels outwards in the form of influence and growth.
Points of concentration reciprocate the inward flow with a similar outward
flow [figure 4]. As the center grows in area it gathers intensity at its
center. The linear concentration takes the inward flows and channels them

¹ Raymond E. Murphy and J. E. Vance, Jr., "Delimiting the CBD,"
outward along the length of the line, increasing that length [figure 5]. The linear concentration continues to grow but does not increase in intensity.

This may seem a geometric game, but the implications are interesting. Intensity continues to mount in points of concentrations, whether it eventually reaches a crescendo at an intersection or not. Input is from every direction. This does not happen with lines of concentration. Activity is more or less distributed evenly along the lines. The compulsion to coalesce is not present. Inputs are not driving in from every direction. Somehow the intensity of a line of concentration is much less than that of a center, though just as much activity is going on. The peaks that existed in the cross-section of figure 1 can not be found.

Washington, D.C. is a reticulated city. It is a city of concentrations—the avenues—spread across the landscape like a handful of straws dropped on the floor. Where these straws cross have no particular signifigance, other than pretty parks and bronze generals on their mounts. What are signifigant
Straws on the Landscape

are the straws, the channels between the intersections. They lay a reticulated pattern over the city like that on the back of a python. In Paris, more often than not, lines of movement converge on a point of interest in the city. In Washington, the line is the point of interest.
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L'Enfant and the Plan

As with most things about Washington, we must begin with Pierre Charles L'Enfant. In spite of the many deviations from the explicit intent of the planner and his plan, much of the spirit of this great city must be attributed to the tempermental Frenchman. Indeed, the deviations began early, for the actual blueprint of the city is from the plan of Andrew Ellicott, L'Enfant himself having been fired.

The major system of the plan was the array of broad avenues radiating from various key points throughout the city [figure 6]. L'Enfant's intention was to visually and perceptually connect the most distant precincts of the city to the monumental core through a 'reciprocity of sight' along the avenues. Points would be scattered throughout the city at the intersections of the avenues. Many of these points in turn would become the locations for important buildings and facilities of the new capital. We seem to be seeing the genesis of a multi-centered city of points of concentration, not unlike the Rome of Sixtus V or the yet to be realized Paris of Haussmann.

Washington, however, did not follow this course. Which comes first, the line or the point, seems to have some bearing on the outcome. In Rome or Paris, the points were in existence or concurrently created; the lines were drawn to complete the picture. Washington began with the lines waiting for points that might or might not follow.

In the case of Rome, points of religious significance, dispersed throughout the city, were connected by Pope Sixtus V. Thus the Via del Corso connected the Piazza del Popolo and the Capitoline Hill. Similar connections were made throughout the Renaissance fabric of Rome by the superimposition of a Baroque Plan.\(^1\)

Interventions into Paris were made by Haussmann in a similar vein.

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The city and many of the pieces were present. It was up to Haussmann to connect them with lines. At some point aggrandized features may have been added to the city, such as the Opera in Paris or a redesigned Piazza del Popolo, but the outcome was the same. Baroque streets never awaited definition and termination as they did in Washington.\footnote{Lewis Mumford, \textit{The City in History}, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1961. p. 406.}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure6.png}
\caption{The Ellicott Plan of Washington}
\end{figure}

It is amazing in many instances that the proposals of L'Enfant were heeded at all. The capital's first few decades were certainly difficult ones. Between the protestations of Philadelphians and citizens of other established cities over the location of the capital in swampland and the rigors of attending to both a new nation and a local citizenry, the plan often took a back seat to more pressing matters. The plan itself was part of the problem, covering far more area than the city could possibly manage to fill. Charles Dickens ridiculed the "City of Magnificent Distances," calling it the "City of Magnificent Intentions" with "broad avenues that begin in nothing
and lead nowhere."¹ These lengthy avenues were quite a burden. Their justification and eventual vindication lay in their utilization. Without a dominant plan a city might tend to grow by accretion, perhaps in the direction of major trade routes, but still in a consistent incremental buildup based on adjacency.

The City

The geographic center of Washington is what I call the monumental core, that collection of monumental pieces around the National Mall. This is a highly symbolic core. In a sense it is the ultimate concentration in the city: the magnet that attracts tens of millions of visitors each year. It is, however, unique in this respect, and does not really fit into the scheme of concentrations being discussed.

Figure 7. The Concentrations of Central Washington

At the periphery of this core are various concentrations [figure 7] which are relevant. Straddling the Mall itself are the majority of the facilities comprising the Smithsonian Institution [a]. Directly north is the Federal Triangle [b], a concentration of federal departments. To the south is L'Enfant Plaza and another concentration of newer federal departments [c]. To the east of the Mall is the Legislative Branch of government [d]. All these concentrations surround the Mall, providing a good portion of the monumentality associated with it, but they are also large centers of activity.
Continuing with figure 7 the Central Business District (CBD) of Washington lies in the vicinity of the White House. It consists of the old "Downtown" north of Pennsylvania Avenue (actually the original CBD) and a newer portion north and west of the White House. This portion has been recently pushing westward into an underdeveloped area, the West End. Completing the mosaic are facilities associated with the Executive Branch and an area of quasi-public facilities. These latter two are not commonly referred to as parts of the CBD.

Figure 8. Continuous Core
All of the above concentrations can be seen as one continuous office core. This can be done because there is no physical break between them, though they are often segregated by planning departments. This consolidated office core is supposedly the largest in area in the country and ranks third after Midtown and Downtown Manhattan in worker population. Consisting of structures which can only be twelve stories tall, it sprawls in all possible directions.

Figure 8 may seem to be an amorphous shape which stretches from Rock Creek in the west to the Capitol in the east, but it is not. There is an underlying order to it. Certain avenues (and streets) have become centers
of concentration for particular functions of the capital, these functions appropriating the avenue for their use. These avenues and others like them are the concentrations of the capital.

The plan of radial avenues gives emphasis and direction to growth. The city's principal occupants tended to coalesce along the avenues. Coupled with a recurring tendency, especially among federal facilities, not to spread to thinly, a pattern was produced where occupants would evenly and continuously distribute themselves along certain avenues.

This reticulation is not necessarily limited to the federal government. The lavish mansions that lined Massachusetts Avenue, making it the 'Fifth Avenue' of Washington, came to be the perfect setting for ambassadors. Thus, we have 'Embassy Row.'

In the late nineteenth century a streetcar system began poking radial fingers out of the city, its routes coinciding with some of the major avenues. Connecticut Avenue is lined by great apartment houses all the way to the Maryland border to this day. Georgia Avenue became a lengthy retail 'strip' on its way out of the city. Both of these avenues owe their fates in part to the streetcars that operated on them (the last vestiges of any streetcars were removed from the city over two decades ago).

Thus we have Washington, D.C., the reticulated city. It consists of a pattern of linear concentrations [figure 9]. Several of these concentrations and their intersections will be explored further.

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Lines

Of all lines, Pennsylvania Avenue may be the most interesting and the most illuminating. The segment between the United States Capitol and the White House [figure 10] is a principal feature of the L'Enfant Plan. In fact, its name was chosen to appease the grumbling Philadelphians.

Figure 10. Pennsylvania Avenue

Often called the nation's 'main street,' Pennsylvania Avenue has not always worn the title well. For John F. Kennedy's inaugural parade, the 'Avenue of Presidents' was quite dowdy indeed. A hundred years earlier, the area bordering the avenue to the south gave the English language a new definition for the word 'hooker.' It seems that in the waning years of the Civil War, Washington was inundated with soldiers, and of course, prostitutes, the latter estimated at perhaps 15000. In order not to antagonize the troops, no effort was made to eradicate the problem; instead the city chose merely to contain it. The U.S. Army under General Joseph Hooker was called in to corral the women into a triangular area bounded by Pennsylvania Avenue to the north, Constitution Avenue to the south and the White House grounds to the west. Collectively, the subjects of the good General came to be
known as 'Hooker's Division.'

By the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt, his New Deal, and an alphabet soup of federal agencies rode into town, the Avenue was in the midst of its first major redevelopment. The entire area south of the Avenue was flattened to make way for an immense project to be known as the Federal Triangle. In a city where largess seems to know no limits, the Triangle broke all records. For almost 4000 feet of the Avenue's length, excepting three short yet significant interruptions, the Triangle buildings preside with neo-classical severity.

The north side, originally the city's commercial district, fell into disrepair as the center of gravity of the entire city moved westward. It was more or less neglected up until the time Kennedy officially rode past it and resolved to polish the nation's most important street. Plans were drawn up which rivalled the Triangle in monumentality and surpassed all in banality. In the words of an official entrusted with the redevelopment of the Avenue, "fortunately we didn't move to quickly." Since that time, planning of a more humanistic bent has prevailed.

On the south side there were three anomalies to the Triangle: the District Building, the Old Post Office, and the National Archives. All, interestingly, follow not the diagonal of Pennsylvania Avenue but the city's orthogonal grid. The white Beaux Arts District Building has all the trappings of a real city hall, now that the city has had home rule for a decade. The General Services Administration, in its newly found passion as boutique builder, has renovated the Old Post Office into an exemplary festival marketplace. The National Archives Building, of the same cloth as the Triangle, nonetheless exhibits its resolute independence along the Avenue. Signifigant features, these buildings are spaced apart from each other by several blocks, becoming interesting notes along the more repetitive score of the Triangle's facade.

Today the Avenue exhibits the properties of reticulation quite eloquently.

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It seems as if it were a continuous stream, churning, with surprising eddies here and there. It's quite a pleasant stream, quite a pleasant journey, but it never reaches a crescendo, save for the visual one to the east. Activities are distributed over the course of the Avenue, diffused and diluted, but benefiting a much greater area than if they were concentrated into a ball of intensity.

Treasury Western Plaza
Old Patent Office
Pershing Park
Hoover Building
Federal Triangle
Old Post Office

WHITE HOUSE
U.S. CAPITOL

Figure 11.

To appreciate Pennsylvania Avenue is to experience it sequentially. I usually prefer to begin at the western end [figure 11]. Here, the Ionic colonnade of the Treasury Building is at my back, and far away to the east the gleaming United States Capitol dominates an incredible vista. On the right the facades of the Federal Triangle race relentlessly eastward. On the left is a more eclectic yet equally stalwart wall of mostly commercial development.

This western end begins with an anachronistic oasis of aquatic fun sunk in the middle of the avenue: Pershing Park. In here the din of the streets disappears, with only the facades of buildings poking up over the tops of trees and tall grasses. It's a tranquil place and though it's heavily used, it's never aggressively used.

Directly east is Pershing Park's hard surface compliment, Western Plaza. Various shades of granite depict a map of monumental Washington as
L’Enfant had. Inlaid and scattered about are numerous quotes by people who have had something to say about the city. This is where you will find national TV correspondents, propped on boxes, reporting on the latest whims of Congress, while attendants reflect extra light onto them with white cards. Cameramen, microwave trucks, and of course, the Capitol’s dome complete the scene. On most any day you can add some fascinated onlookers, most definitely from out of town, and youngsters on skateboards veering threateningly close to a nervous correspondent.

Surrounding this area are some major hotels, theaters, shopping facilities, and the previously mentioned District Building. It looks like a very important part of the city, probably like the most important part in other cites. Here, strangely, it feels like just a part, one of many similar parts, and not even head and shoulders above others on the Avenue.

About another 1200 feet down the road is the Old Post Office. As robust a Romanesque building as you will find, various groups have wanted to tear this building down from the day it was built (almost a century ago) until we learned to appreciate its eccentricities (two decades ago). Its clocktower makes it the only building to break the city’s canonical height limit. The pleasant theatrics of its marketplace do not diminish its presence.

Eighth Street is the midpoint of the Avenue, and L’Enfant accorded it a great deal of importance in his plan. Present day planners seem to also. On the north side, a fifteen story classical hemicycle will straddle Eighth Street, enhancing the visual link between the National Archives directly across the Avenue to the south and the Old Patent Office three blocks to the north. Somewhere in the midst of the hemicycle there will be a plaza and a memorial to the United States Navy. Several blocks down the Avenue, the built edge terminates with I.M. Pei’s popular addition to the National Gallery of Art and the proposed new chancery of Canada. Still two thousand feet away is the most symbolic building in America.

Pennsylvania exhibits reticulation quite well. Ostensibly the most important street in the nation, it has all sorts of activity occurring along its length. The spacing of this activity and the geometry of the street as a concentration preclude any point on the avenue becoming the ‘hot spot.’
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a point of concentration, some attractive force would be pulling all these activities toward, say, Western Plaza. Here, this does not happen. In a place that already is well-endowed with activities, again Western Plaza, it does not dominate the street because other places are similarly endowed.

The fate of a reticulated concentration can also be seen. Visually, the Avenue is quite attractive, and when finished it will be stunning. There will be interesting things going on along its entire length and it will be an enjoyable street. It will never reach a crescendo at any point. This may frustrate future planners and architects who try to find that 'key' which will intensify that 'special' point. The reticulated city will defy them.

* * *

This portion of Pennsylvania Avenue is of fixed length, so we must look elsewhere for linear centers that increase in length. Connecticut Avenue, western Pennsylvania Avenue (continuing past the White House), and K Street have all been extending themselves. K Street is a peculiar street in the L'Enfant Plan. A part of the orthogonal grid, it was nonetheless accorded the status of an avenue. It travels east–west three blocks north of the White House. When one speaks of the city's business community, they speak of 'K Street.' Since this area began building up after the Second World War, K Street has been lined fairly consistently and sometimes monotonously with twelve story office structures. These buildings trickled off in the transition area of the West End and Franklin Square (a depressed residential area to the east). Intense development pressure has resulted in the lengthening of K Street in both directions so that each area now features new office buildings or yawning holes in the ground.
Straws on the Landscape

Intersections

I asked myself, what happens when lines cross? Well by design they usually cross at L'Enfant's great intersections: the circles, squares, and such which pepper the city. These features are almost invariably parks—green open spaces. Heavily planted and beautiful, they are great attributes to the urban city, but they are hardly centers of activity. It is important to keep in mind that hardly any of the city's major facilities are located at these intersections (the White House and Capital are notable exceptions; the Old Public Library at Mount Vernon Square is one of the few others). In a clear example, the mansions of Embassy Row march down Massachusetts Avenue, take the perturbation presented by Sheridan Circle without blinking and continue down the avenue.

Connecticut Avenue and K Street cross at Farragut Square, northwest of the White House. Intuitively, this should be the city's 100 % corner. Farragut Square is closest to the White House after purposefully underdeveloped Lafayette Square, and the two streets are concentrations for the city's overwhelming legal profession. Farragut Square is not so fortunate.

How about Dupont Circle? Aside from being the name of a park at the intersection of Massachusetts and Connecticut Avenues, it is the name of a surrounding avant garde residential community. Washington's Greenwich Village. It is one of the few instances in the city where such a duality occurs. In the vocabulary of areawide residents, Dupont Circle is quite prominent, yet nothing significantly changes in the vicinity of the circle.

Dupont Circle deserves closer inspection [figure 12]. It comes as close to defeating reticulation as any intersection in the city. Most other intersections are more subdued in character. Dupont Circle is quite active and eclectic in its uses, yet it is underdeveloped. That is, the bulk of its construction is below the twelve story height limit. Five streets, three of them major avenues pass through it. Surely the making of a point of concentration is close at hand.

A variety of uses occur in the area. Shops selling all manner of goods and restaurants as equally diverse, satisfy the residential area that is their
namesake. Embassies can be found in grand old mansions. Even modern office buildings make an intrusion here and there. It is a vital and heterogenous area, a pleasant mix rarely found in office or residential areas elsewhere.

Figure 12. Dupont Circle

Figure 13. The Concentrations

Curiously, the Circle and its edges [figure 13] are not the focus of this activity. Office buildings come up Connecticut Avenue from the south, can be found in places around the Circle, and are trying to encroach further north up the avenue. The embassies do similar things, but along Massachusetts Avenue. The shops and restaurants are more dispersed, but there greatest concentration is along Connecticut Avenue north of Dupont Circle. Here, they adamantly hold against the tide of office buildings.

What is happening is that the lines of concentration continue as if there were no Dupont Circle. The presence of the circle neither produces an intensification, nor a hybrid. Instead, Dupont Circle is just a pleasant, well populated park.
Straws on the Landscape

The Persistence of Reticulation

The formation of a reticulated pattern and its propagation can be attributed to several factors. The baroque plan was its genesis, providing numerous lines and the hierarchy of arteries which are conducive to reticulation. The addition of radial trolley routes along some of the avenues was certainly beneficial, especially where commercial and high density residential concentrations were concerned. Many different activities take place in a capital city, particularly one of this stature. Each activity constitutes a vital center of concentration which requires a certain degree of insulation from the others. The baroque plan offers them the opportunity to appropriate linear districts for their use.

All of the above contribute to reticulation, but another issue has been most effective, at least in recent decades. This is the height limit imposed on the city. The statute limits buildings to twelve stories (fifteen on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue). It was not an original part of the L'Enfant plan, but was introduced toward the end of the nineteenth century. The intent was to ensure that Thomas Ustick Walter's Capitol Dome dominated the city's skyline. There are a few exceptions: the Washington Monument (555'), the Old Post Office (erected before the statute), and the National Cathedral (the world's largest all-gothic cathedral can't be too short). With regards to twentieth century construction, the law is omnipotent.

The government that is the life-blood of the city is by far the largest on earth. The international community is proportionately vast. When this behemoth grows by command, it is overwhelming. When efforts are made to reduce it (as under the Reagan administration) it still grows. Despite this burgeoning entity, government as a proportion of output in the capital has been on the decline for decades. This is because the firms, associations, lobby groups and others that thrive on government grow at an even faster clip.

Washington's growth is comparable to that of American Sun Belt cities. In recent years 5 million square feet of office space have been added to the CBD annually. During the period 1960-1970, it was the fastest growing
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metropolitan area. Land prices are second only to those of Manhattan. In such a climate, even the suspicion of a better location would spur on unprecedented development around single points such as Farragut Square. Of course, this cannot happen. The best alternative is to transfer vertical development around points into horizontal development around lines with cachet—the avenues.
The Reticulated City

Washington does have concentrations. They’re just more difficult to see because their form is not what we are accustomed to seeing within cities. It does bear a resemblance, though not an aesthetic one, to the suburban strip. Being an unconventional form, it is sometimes difficult for the uninitiated visitor to understand. That which Kevin Lynch calls ‘directional differentiation,’ the distinction between moving to or moving away from (a center), is not clear. Where? is a common query. This lack of comprehension disappears with familiarity because the linear concentrations are as strong as points of concentrations.

The dispersal of intensity diminishes the perception one has arriving at a point of concentration, feeling “some exhilaration at being at the very center of such a great place, a point where the entire world seems within reach.” Linear concentrations lack the peaks of vitality found in points of concentration. They do not have the peaks that form the cross-section of figure 1.

To complete the musical analogy, without straining it, the lack of a crescendo in a linear concentration implies a lack of decrescendo. The dispersal of intensity allows a greater area of the city to benefit from it. A large portion of Washington could be described as an ‘attractive part of town.’

Changes in a city are what usually heighten our appreciation of them. The good points seem that much better because they are so much different from their surroundings. In a city without these abrupt differences, such as the reticulated city, there is the danger of becoming monotonously attractive. Washington escapes this fate because of that ultimate concentration at its core—the Mall and its environs.

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Afterword: Metro

Recently, a new pattern has been projected onto the reticulated city of Washington: Metro. The sparkling new transit system represents a departure from the reticulated city as it has evolved and a return to the multi-centered city implied by L'Enfant. Into this city of spreading avenues—the linear concentrations—Metro introduces a pattern of discrete points [figure 14]. These points by the nature of the transit system, and the power of Harry Weese's station designs, become centers of concentration in themselves. They are a pattern of distinct, significant points dispersed throughout the city, contrary to the reticulated city.

Figure 14. Metro: Points of Concentration

The Metro system was never really intended as an inner-city transportation network like many subways. Washington, with its plentiful, wide streets is easily driven through except at peak hours. The congestion that occurs at that time is a result of extremely high automobile use (second only to Los Angeles). The system is primarily a commuter system whose purpose was to alleviate this congestion. The stations, though numerous and frequent (as compared to other modern systems such as BART in San
Francisco) are not as close together as in older systems. They are far enough apart to become significant events.

Metro is also the largest public works project ever undertaken by the United States. Next to other transit systems it is awesomely expensive. It is the concerted policy of Metro to foster and promote significant development around the stations, in order to somehow justify the expense. These significant events of the stations become substantial points of concentration within the city.

At present the system is only a decade old (most of it is half this old) and still a decade away from completion. Thus, its impact is in its infancy, but several stations are demonstrating its effect [figure 15].

The Van Ness Station is located under one of several two-block long commercial strips that mingle with the lengthy apartment corridor of Connecticut Avenue. Before Metro there was one office building among low retail buildings. Today, the area is dominated by the urban campus of the University of the District of Columbia and the world headquarters of INTELSAT. Adjacent to these are new large office developments. In either direction from this point of concentration march the apartment buildings of
the avenue. The surrounding area is mostly detached housing. The concentration may further densify the area of the original strip, but its growth is more or less limited to that area.

The Farragut Square and Metro Center Stations indicate other possibilities. There are actually two Farragut Square stations: one is on the Blue Line, the other on the Red Line. They are not connected. Metro Center is the hub of the entire system and a transfer station for the Blue and Red Lines. Farragut Square is in a thriving office district. Metro Center is under the depressed 'old' downtown.

It would seem that Farragut Square would deserve a transfer station. Being saturated with development at present, however, the impetus that a transfer station would have provided would have been wasted. Instead it was put where it was needed—Metro Center. Already major department stores are consolidating their flagship stores around this station.

Dupont Circle has another station worth considering. An elaborate station, with a long dramatic escalator descending into a circular granite pit, it is a fitting addition to that vital area described earlier. It has not been able to alter the form of the concentration in this area. If anything, it has accelerated the surge of office buildings out along Connecticut Avenue, filling the corridor between Dupont Circle and Farragut Square to saturation.

From these three examples, three scenarios for the superimposition of Metro's points upon the reticulated city are revealed. In the first case, satellite concentrations, in the form of points, not lines, may appear in areas that can experience densification. Secondly, stations within the developed areas will have little effect on the form but would be instrumental in maintaining or achieving vitality. Finally, stations near the developed core will actually enhance reticulation by drawing it out further, without becoming points of concentration themselves. Metro's problem will be that it will deliver people to points in what will remain for the most part, a reticulated city.

Metro accomplishes another interesting and somewhat related feat: the resurrection of L'Enfant's 'reciprocity of sight.' This concept has been upheld with varying degrees of success over the years. In some instances key vistas
Straws on the Landscape

have been blocked by less than judicious siting of buildings. Alas, some of these buildings are now the city’s dearest. More significantly, Washington has spread to such an extent that ‘sight,’ as human vision, becomes an inadequate tool for perceiving these connections. The area’s terrain, which beyond the flatland upon which the core was built, is quite hilly, and adds to the problem. Most major national edifices have been built in this heroic core, leaving less imposing features to occupy L’Enfant’s more distant intersections.

Figure 16. Metro Station Interior

Metro, unconsciously and consciously, is a brilliant solution to this problem. Weese’s stations are incredible, coffered barrel vaults, at once evocative of Imperial Rome and audacious in their futurism [figure 16]. Stations in the vicinity of the Mall echo the buildings above them. As one proceeds away from this core the stations remain the same, the barrel vaults being pervasive. The lighting is devoted to these vaults, highlighting every
coffer, and rendering every distracting feature on the platform a silhouette.

One enters a station gladly and not without a bit of awe. The trip usually begins down escalators, a number of which are among the longest in existence. The mezzanine is strangely quiet, the lighting subdued. Automatic turnstiles 'swish' open as they accept a magnetic ticket. At this point the vault, with its dazzling array of coffers, arches overhead and rushes away, down the length of the station. Here, too, there is quiet. This is not an animated place. The tone is like that of a cathedral's knave. If anything, eyes are pointed to the vault. Lights blink, hundreds of them, at the edge of the platform and a train glides in. You step in and begin a marvelous ride. Silently, the dark tube ahead envelopes the train. Tens of seconds later the darkness turns into another vault, the movement of the train hardly perceptible. One after another the stations pass, each consistent with the one before it; each reminiscent of the core now left miles behind. L'Enfant's reciprocity of sight has probably never been stronger.
PRECIOUS TEMPLES:
OBJECTS IN THE CITY


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PRECIOUS TEMPLES: OBJECTS IN THE CITY

One thing that becomes apparent once in Washington, and quite quickly at that, is what can be called the 'objectness' of its buildings. It is a perceptual quality of the buildings, difficult to quantify or delimit. To do so would be of little help, in any event. To treat the subject with such rigor would probably turn up enough contradictions and exceptions to confuse the issue. Instead, I will delve into a few buildings which exhibit the qualities of objects in the capital. Before this, however, a brief look at the nature of objects and objects in cities will be helpful.

If we look at the fabric of a city as a texture, we can distinguish cities by differences in the grain of the texture. Contributing to the character of this grain are the composition and distribution of objects in the city. The majority of the fabric can be seen as a texture which has a sense of contiguity and continuity, a sense of homogeneity. It is not necessarily tedious or banal, but the underlying order which pulls it together is greater than any constituent individuality which may rip it apart. Changes in this texture occur from area to area, not building to building. The objects are those pieces whose individuality is paramount, segregating them physically or perceptually from the remaining texture. Part of what determines the character of a city is the proportion of objects to the fabric as a whole.

Capital cities are often special cases where the balance is tipped toward objects. Numerous functions are located within the capital which demand a certain degree of visibility and attention not accorded more conventional functions. The capital is the repository for a nation's monuments and artifacts; its history and its aspirations.

When we think of the great capitals, we can divide them into cities that evolved into capitals and those that were designed as capitals—new
towns, in effect. The former group is much larger and contains such cities as London and Paris. Washington belongs to the latter. One city which might have made for an apt comparison, also began as a planned capital in the eighteenth century, but became a non-capital—St. Petersburg.

Capitals of the first sort, whether dense (Paris) or not so dense (London), nevertheless begin with a field of urbanization into which the objects were added. Haussmann carved through the thick fabric of Paris to create the city we love today. In London, land was withheld (Regent’s Park for example) streets carved, and objects inserted. Cities become capitals.

The planned capital city begins with a different premise. We think of what we want, where we want it, and how it should look. In the case of Washington, L’Enfant first considered the most suitable prospects for the objects, then their relationships to each other, and finally added the remaining city. In the previous cases the limitation would be on the authority and power to instill changes. In the Washington, the plan knew nor heeded any limits. The limitations were in the will and perseverance to follow through. As a planned capital, Washington would have a different emphasis on objects.

The Quest for a Style

Since the time of L’Enfant and Jefferson, the quest of an architectural style for Washington has been on. Jefferson saw the virtues embodied in Greek and Roman architecture as appropriate. The middle of the nineteenth century would see the arrival of Victorian architecture to the capital. Later, the Beaux Arts would make a big impact on the city with such structures as Daniel Burnham’s Union Station. The swings in theory and taste that have been present in American architecture have been felt in the capital fairly accurately, though sometimes with a little delay.

This following of trends has been compromised by a recurring tendency to adopt, revert to, or maintain a monumental architecture, usually in the guise of classicism. Buildings which did not conform have often been
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ridiculed from the start. Thus, a large group of nineteenth century buildings, including the Second Empire Executive Office Building (Old State, War, and Navy Bldg.), the Romanesque Old Post Office, and Renwick's unique Smithsonian Institution have faced condemnation from their inception and demolition for most of their lives. Except for the Victorian era which produced many red brick or stone buildings (an era which could be seen as a bit of an aberration) the capital has been built out of white stone. Some Neo-Classical standouts such as the National Gallery and the Jefferson Memorial were produced when modernism had begun to take hold of the rest of the nation. So while the range of architectural development can be found in the capital, the tendency toward classicism has been strong and produced a certain level of consistancy, especially in the monumental core. The consistancy is more perceptual than actual, because a building by building survey, even on the Mall, would not be conclusive.

Some recent spaces have been introduced into the capital which exhibit the tendency toward classicism and the need for a pervasive style: the Metro subway stations. Originally, the design for the station was meant as a prototype for a station. Planners (and local architects coveting possible commissions) felt that stations should be individually designed to reflect the area that was above them. At the same time there was a need to bring about a consistancy in station design to facilitate orientation and perception of safety (a major criterion). This conflict was resolved by the awesome station designs by Harry Weese. He said, "What the Russians did with marble [refering to the Moscow subway which was the standard by which beauty in subways was measured], we do with shadow," refering to the coffered barrel vaults which mimic the most grandiose of Roman accomplishments.
Central Washington, figure-ground.
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U. S. Capitol
The Isolation of Temples

One tendency of objects in Washington is to isolate themselves from the remaining texture of the city in the city's copious parklands. Surrounded by greenery, the most important buildings are isolated from all directions. Whether they are so stylistically or not, the buildings become classical 'temples' in the landscape.

A figure ground view of the mall shows the tendency of buildings to achieve objectness through physical isolation. Important governmental departments and the offices for Congress make an attempt at isolation, but most of their qualities as objects are derived from their appearance and monumental bearing, not any great separation. Museums and other similar facilities remove themselves from the general texture and isolate themselves in the Mall's greensward. Their number and their regularity, however, create a sub-texture. The most important buildings, such as the U. S. Capitol and the monuments, isolate themselves to the extreme and are unique in their isolation so that they cannot be so combined.

This manner of achieving objectness is not the only way to do so, but it is a very successful way to maintain objectness. Unlike objects which achieve their distinction through other means, these objects are temple-like and approachable from all sides. They are designed with this important factor in mind. The Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol and the National Gallery of Art, among many others, are buildings without a true backside. This makes additions problematic and keeps the growing city at bay. The situation this can bring about will be seen later with the National Gallery. In the case of the Capitol, many additions have taken place over the years, but they are carefully considered. The most recent ones (not counting the extension of the east front in the late 1950's) were the large Senate and House wings added in the middle of the previous century. Their addition made the original dome inadequate in scale, so the great dome of Thomas Ustick Walter was added to bring the entire composition back into harmony. These uses had to be accommodated within the bulk of a single capitol building, but the increasing bureaucracy associated with Congress created a
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need for numerous offices which were located in new objects at the periphery of the Capitol grounds.

The benefit of isolation can be seen with the Federal Triangle. As seen in other essays, the Triangle is a massive complex which dwarfs its neighbors on the Mall. In a hierarchy of objects in the capital, the Triangle should defer to the buildings on the Mall. Its relative lack of isolation allows the other buildings to dominate in objectness. In spite of its monumentality, the Triangle, in effect, provides background for the buildings of the Mall.

The Great Interiors: the Pension Building

Buildings as objects in Washington, more often than not, are associated with great interiors. We see this in such obvious examples as the rotundas of the Capitol, Library of Congress, and the National Gallery of Art. We also see it in less significant objects. Objects as great public buildings are not just monuments to be viewed from the exterior. They act as receptacles for the public and are thus endowed with great interior spaces. Monuments themselves are not usually sculptures, but repositories for a sculpture. Both the Lincoln and the Jefferson Memorial have imposing interiors.

Less significant objects (often governmental buildings), due to their large size, were constructed with great interiors in an era when light and ventilation were not as close as an electrical switch. These atria and courtyards addressed the more pragmatic issues, but were designed with much more experiential factors in mind. These interiors would also contribute to the tradition.

In a city of monumental marble buildings, the Pension Building by Montgomery Meigs is not an assuming structure. If it were not for its sheer size and heroic frieze above the first story, it might go unnoticed. Rather than white marble, it is made out of simple red bricks—fifteen million of them. It resembles an overscaled, vaguely Italian Renaissance palace. The choice of material and style reflected the attitudes toward
Precious Temples

architecture in the latter half of the nineteenth century, not an attitude toward the building's relative significance. It was, after all, only a building to house the bureaucrats administering the burgeoning U.S. Pension Program for veterans. This is not a building for heroes, culture or whatever mythology the capital might need to display; it is a building for clerks. The building's exterior seems compatible with its purpose as a beehive for bureaucrats.

Only the building's bulk and the windows at the roof hint at the awesome interior. At the center of the building is one of the great interiors of the capital and certainly one of the most unusual anywhere. A vast courtyard, 316 feet by 116 feet, lies beneath a sky blue roof. What distinguishes this courtyard (other than its size) are the eight columns which support the roof. Among the largest classical columns in existence, they rise 75 feet in two rows of four. Each is constructed of 55,000 bricks and painted (very effectively) to look like veined marble.

Of interest is the immediate derision this building faced. Containing vast amounts of paper, it was constructed entirely of brick to be fireproof. General Sherman commented that the building's greatest fault was that it was fireproof.

The building may be aesthetically out of character with most others of the city, but what truly endears it is its interior. In a city bountiful with great secular interiors, this one can stand with any of them. Upon its completion, it was said that the only function befitting the space (and vice versa) was a presidential inauguration. Indeed, it has held inaugurations ever since.

Schematic ground plan of the 400 by 200 foot Pension Building; its interior Great Hall measuring 316 by 116 feet.

Pension Building Plan

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The Proliferation of Objects: The East Building

One recent addition to the already numerous museum buildings on the Mall has received considerable attention: the National Gallery East Building, by I. M. Pei. The addition demonstrates the power objects and 'objectness' have on Washington. It is, after all, only an addition, but it is one of the most visible and distinct objects in the city.

The East Building was intended to relieve the pressure on the original National Gallery of Art by John Russel Pope. Decades of growth had packed the building so tightly, that there was little room for the traveling 'blockbuster' exhibitions (which were becoming popular in the 1960's), and the administrative functions of the gallery, let alone any ideas of expansion. The concept of a new wing was timely and appropriate. The new building would essentially be two: an office building for the gallery administration and display areas for the traveling exhibitions and the gallery's contemporary collections.

The East Building as a program could have been accommodated in a variety of possibilities. Additional wings complimenting Pope's neo-classical could have been spliced onto the ends of the National Gallery. More anonymous additions, such as those to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, might have been feasible. It must be said that either of these choices might have been difficult, given the strength of Pope's design, its lack of a "backside," and the problem of thus attaching anything to it.

Instead, a distinct building, not really a wing, nor an addition, was built. The architect made the obligatory pronouncements that the pink marble (the same as that on the original) and certain formal devices would perceptually connect the minimalist and unabashedly modern East Building to the original. Pei created a building which fits well on the Mall with all the museums, but any stronger connection with the National Gallery is quite tenuous. The strong prismatic forms, including that now famous knifelike edge, the monumentality of its entrance, and the large interior space all ensure that the East Building is its own object and nobody's "wing."

Though it is a large building (over three-quarters of a million square
Precious Temples

feet), and its interior space is one of the finer in the city, this 'object' is every bit a wing, once one explores its contents. The overwhelming majority of the National Gallery's treasures are in the original building. The new one contains some exhibit space, a lot of office space, and the restaurants and shops which the original never could hold. In this regard, the East Building can be seen as both an anachronism and an example of the compulsion to create objects when one is really not necessary.

The benefactors of the building, the Mellon Foundation and Paul Mellon, are the present generation of the same wealth that created the original gallery: Andrew Mellon and the Mellon family. The association of this family and the National Gallery has been extremely strong from the beginning (the original was called the Mellon Gallery for a while). There is really no need to address the vanity of a new patron with a distinct object. The need for a son to outdo his father is not an issue either, with Paul Mellon (age 77) having established himself as the patron.

As it was built, the East Building satisfies the city's need for objects in two ways. The site of the East Building, as the first buildable site on Pennsylvania Avenue from the direction of the capitol, is one which demands an object. If the program had been entirely for the offices of the gallery, it most likely would have been a strong object.

The interior space, rather than being an entry, a space of orientation and a node for the galleries of the buildings, is really an entity in itself. Its a great public interior for the sake of a public interior. In winter, its skylit space provides welcome warmth for the Mall's visitors; in summer it provides a bright yet cool refuge from the heat.

As an interior, it is a fine one and, for Washington, an unusual one. Its asymmetry is derived from the buildings overall form of triangles, lending a certain dynamism to the space. This is particularly true from the upper levels. The simplicity of the marble surfaces, yet the play of light from the skylights and a Calder mobile, the hushed volume of a museum, yet the crispness of sound reflection from the marble surfaces, produces a mixture of light and sound that is always changing.

The East Building may have its detractors. It may be anachronistic,
but its objectness was almost ordained by the legacy of objects in the city and the need to create more objects.

A Jewel Without Compromise: Dulles Airport

Dulles International Airport lies almost thirty miles out of the city in the rolling countryside of Chantilly, Virginia. The journey to the airport is invariably by car along seventeen miles of limited access highway. Even this highway has a sense of purpose to it. Owned by the Federal Aviation Administration, it goes only to Dulles Airport; once on it, there is no way off until one reaches the terminal.

Mention of this journey is not superfluous. It is a major part of the experience. To describe Dulles merely in terms of its bold form would be only half of the story. The highway twists its way through farmland, the city miles distant. Near the end, the first range of the Blue Ridge Mountains becomes visible, far in the distance. Climbing over one final swell in the countryside, the hills disappear, and a broad plain stretches out to the Blue Ridge. All seems quite pastoral until a glance to the left reveals first the white radar sphere, then the entire control tower, and finally the sweeping terminal structure, all seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

Eero Saarinen’s design for the terminal is revolutionary in its planning and in its futuristic aesthetic. He felt it was his best work, embodying his philosophy of form-making to the fullest. Working without many constraints (the airport occupies 10000 acres), Saarinen was able to employ several radical elements in the planning of the terminal. With vast areas of apron and runways far in the distance, the aircraft are parked not adjacent to the terminal but over 5000 feet away. Mobile lounges (designed by the architect) shuttle passengers between the terminal and the aircraft. This allows gates to be clustered in one continuous row along the back of the terminal. Rather than producing the sprawling concourses common in other airports, the clustering produces a relatively compact terminal that can be treated as an object.
Saarinen certainly did just that. Nearly a quarter century after its completion, its elegant futurism is still unique. The sweeping catenary of the roof, though sophisticated structurally, and the angled columns which raise it, give the terminal a classical simplicity and refinement. As a design aesthetic this is much more applicable to Washington than, say, Saarinen's equally bold TWA Terminal (at Kennedy Airport in New York), with its greater theatricality.

In section the building is also inventive. The catenary, of course, allows for most of the public functions to be located under the soaring roof, adding a sense of celebration to the experience of air travel. The great railway stations of an earlier era did much the same with that mode of travel. What is so unusual about the section is the exit and entries to the terminal. Originally airports had one level serving both arrivals and departures. Later, terminals segregated these two functions into the two levels which are common today. Dulles has three. The uppermost receives departing passengers being dropped off. Arriving passengers can leave through the middle level to the waiting limousines, cabs and coaches. People arriving to the terminal in private cars can avoid the traffic presented by the first two levels and enter on the lowest level.

This acknowledgement of the private automobile brings us back to the journey. As one would be led to the door of a Frank Lloyd Wright house, Saarinen orchestrates the arrival by car. The access road makes a broad loop, lengthening and dramatizing the views of the terminal before one actually reaches the parking lot. The parking lot itself is depressed so as not to interfere with the view of the terminal. There is no apology for this airport.

For any program, the building form is awesome; for an airport it is also contradictory. An airport, no matter how gifted the designer, is at best a planning tour de force like Atlanta's Hartsfield, but aesthetically ranges from inoffensively cohesive to disturbingly haphazard. Hartsfield or Tampa's airport are examples of the former; Boston's Logan or New York's Kennedy are examples of the latter. The realities of airport operation call for a facility that can accept change, can grow, and can adapt, all with minimal
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fuss. Such a facility can rarely be beautiful. Sometimes isolated terminals, such as TWA can be stunning, but as part of the larger complex, their impact is greatly compromised.

Dulles makes no compromises. A temple in the Virginia countryside, it has remained mute to the changing world of the airlines and airports. It was designed when transfer flights were few and far between; when flights were dispersed throughout the day. In today’s climate of deregulation, multiple transfers and peak hours, Dulles struggles to perform. The mobile lounges are inconvenient for transferring flights. The compact form can make peak hours quite congested. That it performs reasonably well is due to its relatively light passenger loads, not any flexibility.

This is, perhaps, as it should be, for this airport, in this city. Just as we would certainly balk at manipulating a temple on the Mall, we do so here. Dulles speaks of more than efficiency (hailed as one of its virtues twenty-two years ago) and pragmatism: it celebrates flight and journeys. In the same way that the buildings on the Mall take individuals and immortalize them, and take trivial artifacts and aggrandize them, so does Dulles airport treat flight.
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Section

Plan
1. Exploring road
2. Ticketing
3. Offices
4. Concessions
5. Waiting area
6. Transportation dock
7. Cross-over

section

plan
EMERALD RHAPSODY:

NATURE IN THE CITY
Emerald Rhapsody

Figure 1. Nature in Washington
EMERALD RHAPSODY: NATURE IN THE CITY

I suppose if there were a time of year when I would not want to be in Washington, it would be winter. This is not because of chilling cold nor inclement weather, but because the trees are bare. With leaves a memory, the lush verdant landscape which envelopes the city is reduced to a skeletal tracery of gray branches. Buildings seem ill at ease, exposing flanks that need not be; relating to neighbors best left unaddressed. The landscape is as often a generator and shaper of spaces as the buildings are themselves. Without this emerald cloak, the city is incomplete and vulnerable.

This loss goes beyond merely an aesthetic one. Not just pockets of relief from urban intensity, nor soft bunting against a city’s harder edges, nature in Washington is part of the city’s soul, inseparable from it. The city’s response to it is energetically peculiar.

Nurtured by the L’Enfant plan and a legacy of grand and beautiful landscapes, nature in Washington is indebted to the status of the city as a capital. After less than respectful treatment to the plan in its first half dozen decades, the city began its international ascendancy. Today, the resources of the wealthiest nation can be heaped upon it, providing it with a spectrum and scale of landscapes which are unsurpassed [figure 1].

Washington has more to take care of and, if playing by the rules of

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1 Figure 1 depicts the park system of Washington, D.C. and certain other features which are appropriate. These are parkland on the Virginia side of the Potomac (intensifying the river park system), Maryland parkland to the south of the city (for the same reason), Arlington National Cemetery (perceptually a part of the monumental core), and campus–like facilities which add to the system. Excluded, but important to keep in mind, are the planted streets and vast areas of the city (such as the northwest) which are extremely well planted. Some minor parks such as playgrounds
Emerald Rhapsody

other cities, less with which to take care of it. Over half of the city's area (the highest proportion of any city) is dedicated to public rights of way: those well-planted streets and avenues which are almost a signature of the city. A significant proportion of what remains is occupied by a tax-exempt federal government. Obviously the city must look to the nation for its resources.

A unique relationship to resources not only implies bigger and better landscapes. It grants landscapes different from those of non-capital cities. Where such cities are best suited to concentrating their efforts on a few centrally located parks, this capital city can effuse with a variety of landscape experiences.

The River

Figure 2. The Location of Washington

and athletic fields are also excluded.
Washington begins and ends with the Potomac. More estuary than river once it begins its gentle sweep past Georgetown, the Potomac has helped shape this city, literally and figuratively. Like so many cities, Washington was founded near the fall line of a river and between two arms of a "Y" formed by the river and a tributary [figure 2]. Unlike so many, the choice of this river was most surely political, with Georgetown and Alexandria already established ports along the banks. The location was a compromise, satisfying to some extent, the Southern and Northern states and, not coincidentally, upstream from George Washington's estate at Mt. Vernon.

L'Enfant was as adept as any baroque planner in relating the plan to topography. The Potomac and the flatlands between the "Y", punctuated only by a few hills, were the most compelling features. The two major cardinal axes of the plan take advantage of this fact. Each beginning at a hill, one pointing south from the White House down the centerline of the river; the other pointing west from the Capitol, bore a satisfying relationship to the river and its vistas [figure 3]. As Edmund Bacon has pointed out, one of the principal strengths of the plan was this 'openended' association with the river.

Figure 3. The Major Axes
Emerald Rhapsody

If the city of Washington as it stands can be seen as the intersection between idealism and pragmatism, then the relationship to the river may be the first casualty. Population and urbanization brought about a rapid silting up of the Potomac, transforming its shoreline into malarial wetlands. The remedy was to fill this area, creating hundreds of acres and pushing the river further away from the city. The Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials were added, 'completing' the axes. The monumental core now turns its back on the river and focuses on the nucleus of the nation, the Washington Monument. While some, like Bacon, lament this shift, they also concede that the result is awesomely beautiful and not necessarily harmful to the sense of the river within the city.

Today, the Potomac is the antithesis of an urban river. Some cities ungraciously straddle their rivers with highways, factories, and warehouses. Others line them with pleasant quays and respectful buildings. London on the Thames, Paris on the Seine, or Pittsburgh where the Monangahela and the Allegany become the Ohio: all maintain a close relationship between the physical city and the river that is its generator. The Potomac is lined by giant swaths of greenery, sometimes broader than the wide river itself. The city has taken a healthy and reverant step away from the water [refer to figure 1]. The only exceptions are Georgetown and Alexandria.

A dozen miles out of the city the Potomac cuts through the bedrock at Great Falls. From here the river makes its way through lush banks and precipitous palisades: an encounter with surging streams or rocky islands far more frequent than anything manmade. The 'city' first really comes into view at Georgetown, as the river enters a serpentine bend. Completing the sweep, the Potomac glides past a large island appropriately named after Teddy Roosevelt. Densely forested, its denizens ranging from red-tailed hawks to red foxes, this 88 acre island ironically is at that point of the river at which the city becomes most urbanized. Flanked by the city's more poetic monuments, the Potomac flows out of Washington.

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1 These towns developed before Washington as ports and have had warehousing and industrial facilities on their waterfronts until the present.
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Forbidden Zone?

Covering around 5000 acres is the great 'local' park in Washington—Rock Creek Park. I say 'local' because though it is part of the National Park System, it is largely unknown to the national visitor. Residents probably take great glee in the fact that what has been called the finest city park in America is their own treasure, unlike the Mall and its environs.

The park just about bisects the city, the Rock Creek meandering southward out of Maryland, through the business district, and ultimately meeting the Potomac at Georgetown [figure 4]. The city lies, on average, several hundred feet above this valley floor. Densely forested, rocky outcroppings vying with twisting ravines at the valley's sides, this bucolic wilderness is worlds away from the urban forms at its flanks. From this valley floor, the city is all but invisible. It is there, however. As the steep slopes turn over, melding into the relatively gentle undulations of the city, the buildings begin. Glassy modern houses perch into the park in its northernmost stretches. These become palatial old mansions, some of the city's finest, as the creek twists southward. Eventually the homes become apartment buildings, which in turn transform into the business district.

Just as the park divides the city geographically, it splits it economically as precisely as any set of tracks. To the west, the northwest quadrant of the city knows hardly a mean street. The other side of the park is a mixed bag. Some of the poorer sections of the city are located here, as well as some of the most prestigious neighborhoods, such as Kalorama.

In many instances such a feature would be a park in name, but really it would be more of a forbidden zone: too large to be manageable, too unknown to be secure. In Washington, it is the city's great breathing space. Immaculately maintained by the Park Service, the valley can fulfill almost the entire range of recreational needs for the city.

Along this path, various unusual features take their place. The National Zoo occupies a 200 acre Olmstedian knot in the valley's center. Dumbarton Oaks, site of the conference which established the United Nations, and its
Figure 4. Rock Creek Park
fabulous gardens, step down toward the valley. Add a few fords, a mill or
two, white tailed deer and a cemetary whose tombstones march up a steep
incline, looking more like the rock outcropping elsewhere in the valley, and
you have an extraordinary and eclectic setting.

Tying this experience and the two sides of the city together is a
highly successful system of circulation. A narrow parkway weaves its way
along the valley floor, shadowing the creek at a discrete distance. Above,
colossal bridges carry the various boulevards across the city. These bridges
are a robust concoction of sweeping arches and massive abutments. As the
parkway snakes below, it every so often skips the creek with a quaint little
bridge of its own. Passing under an avenue, the foliage obscuring most of
the bridge, only a segment of arch and the abutments are visible. They
appear like giant windowless stone buildings rising nearly a hundred feet.
Totally out of scale with the parkway and its own bridges, the effect is
Piranesian. Like those engravings, the effect is very appealing.

Of all the ways to experience the park, edging into it from the
surrounding city may be the most surprising, heightening the transition from
city to nature. From the soaring avenues and their bridges, one sees the
panoramic sweep of the valley. On the valley floor one is insulated from
the surrounding city. Penetrating the park from the city, however, is a
serendipitous experience. Every so often a road or a trail will dive away
from the brick and glass and concrete of the city and descend into the
valley.

I recall fondly lunchtime excursions which carried me away from my
office in a slick curtainwalled building in a growing cluster of commercial
buildings encircling a recently opened subway station. Turning away from
the relative din of Connecticut avenue, my path carried me past older
apartment buildings, and then the castle-like forms of a girl's private school,
steadily climbing. Less than two hundred yards from my office door I
would come to a climactic ridge. Beyond this point the city disappeared
altogether, the land rushed away, a broad meadow plunging into the thick
foliage of the valley below.
Emerald Rhapsody

Promenade

At one time some men thought that connecting Georgetown (a port) with the bountiful Ohio Valley to the west made good sense. The venture was undertaken and became known as the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal. The canal was finished and operated for a while, but its viability was shattered by the almost concurrent opening of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, the nation’s first.

Figure 5. Promenade, C & O Canal

The canal and its mulepath (now called the towpath) remain today, or almost 200 miles of it, as a National Park hugging the Maryland side of the Potomac. The first twenty miles or so out of the city are the most heavily enjoyed, but is possible to walk, bike, or canoe (with detours for the occasional lock) the entire length. Over the stretch from Georgetown to Great Falls one may travel on mule-drawn barges through operating locks. It is quite well-groomed, like all National Parks, but what makes the C &
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O Canal so unusual and so heavily used is its closeness to the city. Indeed, its first half dozen miles are within the city.

There are quite a few people that come here to see the canal and its historic features, but there are many more that come here to promenade. Clusters of youths eyeing fetching young ladies, families with babies in strollers, lovers, and people watchers; all come here to the canal and its towpath [figure 5]. They walk up and down, back and forth, miles at a time, keeping track of the distance by counting locks. Perhaps they turn at a familiar gatehouse or a kink in the canal, the heart still willing but the feet weary. Occasionally they’ll stop at a scenic overlook of the Potomac, now crashing over boulders some 75 feet below the towpath.

A final clue as to what is going on here is revealed by the appearance of the people themselves. At times the canal is rigidly straight, as it was dug so many years ago. At others it follows a natural and rustic fissure in the bedrock. The canal changes moods frequently; the strollers do not. Some are dressed for an arduous hike (which it is not), others are dressed for the street (which it is like). Like its counterpart, the Mall, the canal is the place people go to walk.

Beauty

Every April, awakening from a dreary winter, Washington effervesces in a week-long celebration of its vaunted cherry blossoms. As the trees bloom, crowds swell, fountains erupt, the Park Service musters and the city enjoys its biggest party of the year. The blossoms and their entourage are elevated to preeminence. They are to Washington what Mardi Gras is to New Orleans: a mirror of the spirit.

This spirit stems in large part from the physical beauty of the city, and nature is the underlying theme of this beauty. The beauty of Washington is not the spectacular geography of a San Francisco, nor is it the picturesque charm of a Copenhagen. The beauty of this city, considerable as it is, is a conspicuously manufactured beauty. It is an overt and conscious attempt through design and maintenance to project beauty to the nation and the world. As an emerald backdrop for gleaming monuments
and as a fastidious setting in its own right, nature and beauty in the capital are synonymous.

Definitely the darlings of Spring, the cherry blossoms are the beginning of a half-dozen week pageant of floral excess. Species after species, from appleblossoms to azaleas, bursts in a spectral symphony. In any and every direction splashes of pink arrange themselves on the landscape. Like the indelible picture of a limbful of blossoms arching over a distant Jefferson Memorial, every view is purposefully framed, every effect carefully considered. From the Library of Congress to the Lincoln Memorial several miles distant, the landscape is intoxicating in its color.

The Yoshino Cherry Trees surrounding the Tidal Basin are the stars of this display. The petals are white, the buds crimson, giving these flowers an ethereal color that is neither the dogwood’s white, nor the louder pink of less celebrated cherry trees. The Tidal Basin itself is a pool some two miles in circumference. Surrounding it are a thousand acres of East and West Potomac Parks. The shoreline becomes a pendant of rose with the Jefferson Memorial its brilliant diamond. Situated across the Basin, separated from the Mall and the other monuments, the Jefferson Memorial seems remote, even unapproachable, as such beauty often is.

The appeal of the blossoms has spread far beyond their confines in the monumental core. Throughout the metropolitan area, the blossoms make a presence. Kenwood is not necessarily the wealthiest enclave, nor the most exclusive, but all are hard-pressed to match the appeal of this Maryland suburb. Substantial homes and large mansions line incredibly tight, weaving streets, not unlike adjacent Chevy Chase or Bethesda. What ennobles this community are the thousands of Yoshino trees into which it is immersed. Creating a dense canopy over every street, the blossoms become a gossamer through which dreamlike homes appear.
Nature in the City

Nature in Washington is intrinsically tied to its status as a capital city, the wealthiest one at that. Its passion and involvement with nature can be much more intensive. The commitment of resources can fill vast areas of wetlands, not for revenue producing development, but for passively used green spaces. The river itself need not produce a cent of revenue, rescuing it from industrial or commercial bondage. It can retain and maintain incredible yet problematic features like Rock Creek Park. The tapestry of great landscapes which can be afforded and produced by the capital city alters the perception of residents toward nature in an urban environment. They interact with the landscape differently, nature sometimes usurping the roles of more urban features. In a synergistic twist, the nature which is made possible by the capital city, is the essence of that city. Most importantly, nature is the beauty of this city, the landscape a idyllic setting for the capital.
There is a grand lost opportunity in this city. The National Mall and its extension through the Potomac Parks, Rock Creek Park, and the C & O Canal all come together on the shore of the Potomac, in the vicinity of the now famous Watergate complex. To be sure, the usually broad Potomac Park is a relatively tenuous strip at this point. The valley of Rock Creek is most constricted here, separating Georgetown from the original Washington. It is into this creek that the canal drains less than ceremoniously, its journey over.

The diminished terminations to these features are not all that bad. Perceptually they are different, and their greatest assets lie elsewhere. What does hurt this nexus is the twisting forms of the expressway which hover above, effectively isolating this spot from the rest of the city. Efforts are underway on the Georgetown side, and the highway is continually coming down—in chunks and in the minds of city planners. Now is the time to see this confluence for the potential it really holds.

Figure 6 shows the area as it existed in 1981. Little has changed within the sinuous loops of the freeway since that time. Rather than propose what the redesigned area should look like (which is intrinsically tied to the fate of the freeway), I will issue a caveat and several recommendations.
The fate of the freeway exists among four alternatives: repair and upgrade the existing structure; construct a new elevated expressway in the same easement but closer to the ground; construct a surface expressway; or construct a surface boulevard (a continuation of K Street). The latter two are the only ones which seem to confront the problem of the blight of an elevated freeway on the edge of Georgetown. The boulevard, however, would not adequately handle the traffic. The first two alternatives seem to be creating the same problem for a subsequent generation.

The caveat is this: the roadway (whichever form it takes) must bissect the area in question. At what elevation it does this is crucial. Any surface freeway would make whatever relationship exists now between the Canal and the Potomac Parks a memory. This implies that the elevated alternatives may be the most desirable from this standpoint. Can this be so?

I think it can be effective if the freeway is treated as a piece of the city (the way boulevards are) and not as a piece of highway engineering. I am not against this discipline; I have a fondness for the boggling geometry of a four level freeway 'stack,' but not in this place.

The existing freeway is really not a barrier in the sense that such elevated structures usually are. It is considerably higher than average. The space beneath it has a certain quality not usually associated with such areas. The grid of Georgetown can and does pass under it and on to the waterfront without doing so through dank tunnels. At present, the freeway is only an eyesore.

This aesthetic deficiency can be turned into a major feature of any intervention. The Georgetown waterfront area, with its warehouses and industrial character, has an appearance and an ambience which is coveted by other cities. In Washington, when seen from a distance, this area is ugly, haphazard and at odds with the 'beauty' which permeates the remaining waterfront. Tearing down the freeway would expose more of this anachronism and remove the one element which can help compose it. Keeping the horizontal form of the freeway, however modified, would lend order to the waterfront buildings. The heirarchy of a waterfront park, freeway, and warehouses could be quite pleasant.
Emerald Rhapsody

At present K Street terminates rather tentatively. Does it dive under the freeway, does it become the freeway, or does it end at 25th street? This is not clear at all. Instead, K Street could boldly turn into the new freeway, the junction becoming a major element of the new park. The structure which supports this new freeway could capitalize on the tradition of great bridges in the capital, such as those which span Rock Creek Park [figure 7].

Dealing with the freeway in such a manner would emancipate the land beneath it to become the natural amenity it should be. The freeway, rather than being an anomalous feature could become a powerful one in the tradition of those others in the city. If it seems that I have neglected the most important aspect of this area, the actual junction of the other natural amenities, it is because this is an area which the city has always handled well. The role of nature in the city provides a more than adequate legacy for pursuit of this problem. The more difficult part would be to recognize the gap in the system that this area represents and the potential misery an improper freeway alternative could provide.

Figure 7. A Proposal for the Georgetown Waterfront
Essays on the City Form of a Capital

BIBLIOGRAPHY


