America's Palimpsest: Ground-Zero Democracy and the Capitol Mall
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America’s Palimpsest: Ground-Zero Democracy and the Capitol Mall

This article examines the history of the Capitol Mall from its inception in 1791 to recent legislation prohibiting further development along the Mall’s primary axes. This movement to restrict further development of the Mall’s massive open spaces derives from concerns that fail to fully articulate the iconographic significance these spaces represent. Drawing from the Mall’s 200-year history of master planning, this article examines the Mall’s palimpsestic and emergent qualities and presents planning criteria that make it possible to build future commemorative works within the Mall’s primary open spaces while retaining the overall integrity of its grandeur.

In November 2003, after three years of research and deliberation by an interagency task force and two more years of legislative ambivalence, Congress passed and the president signed into law legislation prohibiting further development of the cross-axes of the Capitol Mall. The bill passed as an amendment to the Commemorative Works Act (CWA) of 1986, legislation that followed the enormously popular opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the subsequent dramatic increase in pressure on federal agencies and Congress to approve commemorative works on the National Mall (Longstreth 2002). Claiming the primary cross-axes of the Mall are now a “substantially completed work of civic art,” the CWA amendment was partially intended to bolster urban revitalization initiatives using commemorative works as “development magnets” around the capital’s core neighborhood districts (Reel 2003; NCPC 2004a, 2004b). But the legislation was also intended to head off bitter congressional and interagency wrangling—such as that surrounding the World War II Memorial—over how to vet design proposals targeting the nation’s most sacred civic space (Mills 2004). Any future commemorative development within the central axes of the Capitol Mall now requires an act of Congress to override current law.1

The scholarship sizing up the symbolic and narrative importance of the Capitol Mall is substantial, a great deal of it rhapsodic for the open spaces that the design and development of the Mall has achieved and that Mall preservationists wish retained (Brown 2002; Griswold 1986; Longstreth 1991; Mills 2004; Reiff 1971; Reps 1967; Reston 1995). Until his death in 2002, J. Carter Brown, the 31-year chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts (one of the principal review agencies responsible for vetting commemorative works on the Mall), captured well the spirit of this sentiment, reflecting on the bicentennial celebration:

The Mall is a people space, even when one is not there for fireworks. I can remember going out on the Fourth of July in 1976, the day of the Bicentennial. One had to climb among the spectators, but I was determined to find the exact spot where the two principal axes of [the original plan for the Mall] cross, over four hundred feet northwest of the Washington Monument. From there one senses the full impact of the history, the planning, and the majesty that is the national Mall of the United States. (Brown 2002, 261)

Brown was himself very critical of the preservationist agenda that had lobbed successfully for the CWA amendment, dubbing it an initiative for “freezing and embalming everything” (Mills 2004, xxxii). Still, Brown’s reverie expresses the basic sentiment driving the initiative to seal the Mall from further development, a sentiment held by many in Congress and by other observers of the pressure placed...
on the Capitol Mall for further commemorative works construction. The staunchest advocate for restricting Mall development, the National Coalition to Save Our Mall, stresses that the Mall’s open spaces are threatened by forces that, if not opposed, will reduce the Mall to a theme park atmosphere. Kindred interests believe the iconography now in place on the Mall will be eclipsed or diminished by ad hoc, intrusive developments. Eleanor Holmes Norton, congressional delegate from Washington, DC, inveighed against the World War II Memorial design before the Commission of Fine Arts during hearings in 2000. Evoking her African American heritage, Holmes plaintively argued that the memorial’s design “trespasses both physically and thematically on the Lincoln Memorial,” a space considered by Holmes hallowed ground for African Americans since Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I have a dream” speech there in 1963 (Shea 2001).

No one visiting the Mall can deny the grandeur induced by its massive open spaces, made majestic by the principal landmarks at the Mall’s center and endpoints. But fathoming the meaning of this or that reverie for such spaces requires knowing more about the Mall than the cursory visit can apprise. The open spaces that currently define the Mall’s grandeur have taken shape only in fits and starts—what historian Nicolaus Mills (2004) dubs an “add-and-subtract” process—spanning a 214-year period of copious plans and development schemes, none of which fully capture and give expression to what the Mall has become. The recent victory to prohibit further development on the Mall would have been viewed as pyrrhic, indeed, had such an initiative succeeded during the mid-1930s, when miles of garden paths and acres of plantings nearly 80 years old were ripped up on the Mall’s east quadrant to make possible the open spaces that define the Mall today.

Every major commemorative work on the Mall has triggered intense and often bitter dispute, even when the Mall was far from being opened up, much less filled up. This historic rancor originated at least partially from the lack of overarching and sufficiently compelling iconography that could assist in vetting design criteria for commemorative works, in spite of the many masterful general plans that have sought to achieve just such an interpretation. Presumably ad hoc designs, therefore, have triggered ad hoc disputes made all the more rancorous for the lack of mutually agreed-upon design precepts and values. Thus, through more than two centuries, the Mall has served, both literally and figuratively, as a testing ground for rendering the nation’s mythic aspirations in living scenery, and so it has served, as at least one observer has noted, as a palimpsest for the nation’s history (Shea 2001). Like a supercolossal Etch A Sketch, this space has left behind the tracings and imprints of those before us while remaining open (at least until recently) to the impressions of successive generations. This article examines the Mall’s history, its champions and contestants, charting the rich and evocative interpretations vying for dominance at what might be felicitously called the “ground zero” of democracy.

Across more than two centuries of master plans, designs, revisions, and intense disputes, two overarching sentiments have shaped the Mall’s development and redevelopment: (1) a trend toward monumentalism and the expression of redoubtable authority, and (2) a perceived need to engender a sense of individual participation in this majesty, to ennoble the individual visitor as an equal shareholder in the American experience and promise. From the nation’s founding through the sectarian strife of the Know-Nothing years, through the Civil War and its aftermath, then Gilded Age Progressivism through 1960s populism: The Mall has staged repeated waves of master plans and public reaction, in each instance serving the expressive needs of successive generations. How to preserve such an open “text” while retaining its legacy requires kinship with the Mall’s history and iconography. This article presents this history, deriving from that story design criteria to assist future regulatory personnel charged with stewarding the development of the nation’s most sacred civic space.

Past as Prophecy: A “Vast Empire”

Indicative perhaps of the inspiration that American revolutionary leaders drew from European influences, the first major planning effort commissioned for the Mall was supervised by a Frenchman, Pierre Charles L’Enfant, in 1791. Notably, L’Enfant’s plan countered the vision for the Mall and the city at large that Thomas Jefferson developed at the same time. Jefferson’s scheme for the Mall grounds drew from an understated interpretation of the picturesque style then popular in English formal garden design—a style Jefferson believed best suited an American urban center carved from wilderness and emblematic of American agrarian virtues—whereas L’Enfant’s plan, from its inception, was conceived to commemorate the nation’s founding and prophecy its fate as “this vast empire” in a single stroke (Scott 2002). Thus, L’Enfant’s plan called for two major boulevards that would emanate in a radial pattern westward from the Capitol (Maryland and Pennsylvania Avenues). From there, a massive greensward was intended to feature formalistic as well as picturesque garden elements extending westward to the Potomac (whose tidal flats then extended just west of where the Washington Monument stands today), bisected by a central east–west promenade and rimmed by residences for government officials and foreign dignitaries, as well as private homes, luxury hotels and cultural centers (see figure 1).

According to Mall historian Pamela Scott’s learned exegesis (2002), L’Enfant’s capital city was to be a symbolic
representation of the country; as such, numerous diagonal streets were to cross cut the city at large, intended for civic ceremonial processions and to aesthetically replicate the basic design contours L’Enfant had planned for the Capitol Mall. These diagonal thoroughfares were superimposed on a simple street grid design and connected by nodes intended by L’Enfant to feature public squares developed and adorned by leading citizens of each of the original 13 states. These nodes were to be interspersed throughout the 5,700-acre city L’Enfant had envisioned, analogically corresponding to their geographic location in the country and the role each played as historic sites in the founding of the nation (Scott 2002). Jefferson’s plan, by contrast, incorporated a tiny fraction of L’Enfant’s basic contour—about 300 acres in total.

The selection of the Mall location derived from this site’s correspondence with the Potomac River’s migration and eventual direct connection with westward waterways. Maryland and Pennsylvania Avenues, originating at the Capitol and radiating southwest and northwest, respectively, each served in this respect as an allegorical Appian Way for the infant American empire. As originally conceived by L’Enfant, the Capitol was to feature a 100-foot-wide water cascade dropping 40 feet to the canal that, at the time, traversed the Mall from its route north and then west past the east base of Capitol Hill. L’Enfant called for two statues allegorically signifying the Delaware and Hudson rivers to be situated on the east terrace of the Capitol, intended to be the source of this westward thrust and flow of both life-giving sustenance and waterway linkage and network. At the foot of Capitol Hill, L’Enfant called for a sculpture group to be entitled Liberty Hailing Nature Out of Its Slumber. Scott succinctly captures the significance of this symbolism:

Liberty Hailing Nature Out of Its Slumber was the iconography of the city: liberty brought the federal city into being, and the city physically and symbolically embodied the country and the history of its founding. The federal government was the agent of civilization, expressed by the federal city carved out of a near wilderness[...]. Not only the country’s size, but its pastoral nature affected L’Enfant, as it did Jefferson. It is the fusion of formal and picturesque elements that gives the L’Enfant plan its unique character. (2002, 42–43)

L’Enfant’s plan has been criticized for its clearly baroque, neoclassical elements—grand boulevards, monumental civic squares, lofty and sublime architecture—which some believe are more evocative of European absolute monarchy than of an infant republic. Jefferson’s plan could be viewed in this context as a tacit rebuke of the formalistic and monumental trappings of L’Enfant’s design scheme (Reps 1967; Scott 2002). Some have ascribed to L’Enfant a federalist inspiration (Griswold 1986), to Jefferson the antifederalist retort (Scott 2002): the former revering monumentalism and centralized authority radiating outward, the latter abjuring such imperialist ventures, seeking instead to simulate and replay on the Mall the agrarian populism revered by those wary of strong and centralized government. Federalist ascriptions to L’Enfant’s
scheme notwithstanding, Alexander Hamilton vehemently opposed westward expansion, fearing it would dissipate national power (Sandel 1996, 140). But the essential tension between the large scale, on one hand, and the intimate and accessible experience, on the other hand, would replay throughout the Mall’s history as master planners sought to justify their visions against the wavering backdrop of always-contested American values.

Natural Science: Adjunct to Liberty

The Mall’s development over the next 40 years would be paradigmatic of the country itself, a new nation struggling to carve the legitimate scope of centralized authority and institutions while expanding westward through “the wilderness.” The history of the Smithsonian bequest and the eventual citing of the Smithsonian Institution centrally on the Mall are instructive in this regard. The illegitimate son of an aristocrat father, with a mother whose ancestry was tied to the British throne, James Smithson in a sense embodied the once-disenfranchised nation upon which he would bestow his sizable fortune (from his mother’s side). A strong consensus has it that Smithson’s resentment over his illegitimacy was a major impetus for bequeathing his fortune to the United States; he once wrote, “On my father’s side I am a Northumberlander, on my mother’s I am related to kings, but this avails me not” (Hellman 1966, 30). Resentment was probably not Smithson’s only motive: He was a member of many scientific organizations dedicated to the practical applications of science to benefit society and was close friends with social critics of his day, including French physicist and astronomer Dominique François Arago, who was notably influenced by the French Revolution and a champion of social reform to benefit the lower classes. Smithson’s good deed would, of course, not go unpunished. Immediately upon the announcement of Smithson’s bequest, a small but vocal minority inveighed against the presumptive authority Congress could claim for accepting such a large private estate on behalf of the nation. Such a gesture, claimed South Carolina senators John C. Calhoun and William C. Preston, illegally usurped state’s rights. After 10 years of factious compromise, including grappling over the scope and mission the “Smithsonian Institution” should serve, Congress passed legislation creating the Smithsonian with the mandate that, in keeping with Smithson’s legacy, the institution serve the “increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”

In 1840, Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett, anticipating that Congress eventually would accept the Smithson bequest, founded the National Institution for the Promotion of Science. A year later, Poinsett commissioned American architect Robert Mills, renowned for his design of several prominent government buildings in Washington, to design what would become known as the “Castle” housing the Smithsonian Institution, as well as the adjoining grounds spanning from the Capitol westward to the future location of the Washington Monument (Scott 2002). With a botani-
cal focus intended for the grounds immediately surrounding what would become the Castle, Mill’s plan for the adjoining area of the Mall included three other distinctive segments (see figure 2).

As Scott (2002, 49) surmises, the intended net effect of Mill’s overall scheme was for a “unity of landscape and architecture,” whereby the experimental botanical gardens (in keeping with George Washington’s hopes for the development on the Mall) adjoining the Castle “provided a transitional zone between the ‘wildness’ of the rest of the Mall and the institution itself.” (The medieval style of the Castle’s exterior design was expressive of American infatuation with European educational institutions.) This symbolic link between the wilds of American nature and the nation’s nascent commitment to science for the “increase and diffusion of knowledge” marked the next major surge in allegorical interpretation of the Mall since L’Enfant’s original scheme. Mills’s design program wedded L’Enfant’s derivation of American culture as progeny of a heroic, revolutionary age to the promise then vested in natural science as a neutral arbiter of human progress. The programmatic direction the Smithsonian Institution would eventually adopt was forged largely by the antagonism then felt by leading American scientists toward “men of public affairs.” This antagonism fueled subsequent debate over who should be vested with authority for the governance of the institution. 3

Work landscaping the grounds near the Smithsonian Castle commenced in 1847. Two years earlier, Mills had been retained by Poinsett to tackle the long, prolonged design of the Washington Monument, originally conceived by Mills as consisting of an obelisk 600 feet tall (in keeping with a mandate by the Washington National Monument Society that it be the tallest in the world—slightly taller than its eventual height of 555 feet) situated on a massive pantheon base 250 feet in diameter and 100 feet tall, circumscribed by 30 Doric columns (signifying the 30 states then composing the Union). Construction of the monument would not commence until 1848. Eight years later, the obelisk had reached a height of just over 156 feet (on a base just over 55 feet square). Lack of funding and engineering concerns forestalled the pantheon portion of the monument indefinitely. Short of funding, the Monument Society appealed to Congress, which appropriated $200,000 on February 20, 1855. Momentously, scores of Know-Nothing Party faithful seized voting prerogative over the Monument Society the night before Congress voted its appropriations. Connected with an earlier vandalism of the monument linked to anti-Catholic sentiment (including the theft of a massive structural stone given as a gift by Pope Pius IX), the Know-Nothings evoked the ire of Congress, which tabled the appropriations bill indefinitely. Construction of the monument would not proceed for another 21 years, when Congress would again vote appropriations to continue construction. The monument would be completed 12 years later, 40 years after its first stones had been laid (Olszewski 1971).

Landscape of Compromise

Geographically proximate to southern plantations, Washington, DC, was by the mid-nineteenth century a major entrepôt for slave trading, thus ineluctably becoming what Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Constance Green (1962) succinctly dubbed the “eye of the [American] hurricane.” To reform the worst abuses of the slave trade, Congress passed the Compromise Act of 1850 to outlaw slave trading in the federal district, resulting in the removal of two slave pens then located opposite the Smithsonian Castle (O’Malley 2002). In what historian Therese O’Malley gathers to have been more appearance than substance of public magnanimity—slave ownership was still permitted in the nation’s capital—Washington elites mobilized to lead the nation as a supporter of public institutions and parks. The pedagogical value associated with public gardens and parks was by this time increasingly linked to the proliferation of public museums, libraries, and free schools. Seizing and promoting public education as a rallying cry for national identity therefore had a distinctive subtext: For a nation then growing increasingly divided over whether African Americans were to be considered fully enfranchised members of the public, popularizing a broad platform for public access to education had appeal across sectional lines, all sides claiming the high ground for what America ought to be, and for whom. The malingering ambiguity over what “the public” signified was, according to O’Malley (2002), redolent in such gestures as the legislation Congress passed inaugurating the Smithsonian Institution, whose motto—to make possible the “increase and diffusion of knowledge among men”—would, through its vague intent, resound the ambivalence of a nation bitterly and perilously divided over who should be vested with the privileges and full rights of citizenship.

The next major planning initiative on the Mall immediately followed and was a result of the Compromise Act, but it was also at least partially an early initiative in civic boosterism by the Washington elite, who at the time were wary of their Virginian neighbors following the retrocession of a major portion of the District of Columbia to Virginia four years earlier (O’Malley 2002). This grant of territory was a political concession to Virginia planters, Alexandria slave traders, and port merchants intended by the Washington elite to stem pressures to move the capital from Washington southward (Green 1967). Forged by a small core of eminent civic leaders of Washington, themselves members of antagonistic political factions on both sides of the slavery issue, the next surge in Mall beautifi-
ducation again focused on the Smithsonian grounds but now pitched deliberately to a national audience. As O’Malley (2002) notes, the Smithsonian had become pivotal to the city’s prestige as capital of the nation, if not the preeminent national capital in the world. Thus, in his annual report to Congress in 1850, the city’s commissioner of public buildings, Ignatius Mudd, exhorted, “The improvement of the public grounds [of the Mall] should not be regarded as some are disposed to do, as a mere local objective. These public grounds are the property of the nation, and were reserved at the founding of the city as a means of beautifying and adorning the national capital” (O’Malley 2002, 65). The prewar jitters of the age propelled such “imagineering” by civic elites who hoped to position Washington above factional dispute, a citadel beyond reproach by the North or South.

By this time, little of what Mills had called for 10 years previously had developed. Seeking the prerogative to again design the Mall as allegory for the developing nation, the Smithsonian Building Commission retained American landscapist Andrew Jackson Downing in 1851. Although it was similar in many respects to Mill’s conceptualization of the Mall space as linked “scenes,” Downing’s plan was distinctive for its more refined integration of design elements through the placement of circuitous paths—highly modulated by distinctive grading, curve lengths, and path widths—intimately connected with the surrounding landscaping (see figure 3).

Drawing heavily on the popularization of rural cemetery design—on which he had written extensively—Downing’s scheme sought to encapsulate a reverence for agrarian values through an allegorical synthesis of scientific learning and popular education (through direct association with the Smithsonian and its grounds) while also suggesting a subtle appeal to gentrified leisure then becoming popular in American urban areas. Also notable, Downing’s plan extended to the White House grounds, thus recouping the thematic coherence between Capitol Hill and the White House that L’Enfant had first proposed. As an apostle of agrarian idealism and, to a limited extent, a protean populist, Downing was unflinching in how he interpreted the American ethos: “Trade and commerce are not the great interest of the country, that interest is as everyone admits, agricultural” (O’Malley 2002, 70). With Emersonian rhapsody, Downing would write in The Horticulturalist in 1849, “The true policy of republics is to foster the taste for great public libraries, sculpture and picture galleries, parks and gardens, which all may enjoy, since our institutions wisely forbid the growth of private fortunes sufficient to achieve these desirable results in any other way” (cited in O’Malley 2002, 70). Several years later, Downing would continue the theme, writing that the work of public parks and educational institutions “takes up popular education where the ballot box leaves it, and raises up the working man to the same level of enjoyment with the man of leisure and accomplishment” (O’Malley 2002, 70). O’Malley sums up Downing’s outlook as based on a conviction that “the refining influence of intellectual and moral culture could equip the common man with the stature necessary to fully participate in the democratic system.” (70). Moreover, Like L’Enfant, Downing knew that the improved Mall served as a symbol of the nation, though L’Enfant’s perception of the country as a powerful, new empire differed from Downing’s romantic
concern with the individual experience of American nature. L’Enfant had laid down his monumental radial and grid plan in order “to take possession of and improve the whole district,” and “to turn a savage wilderness into a Garden of Eden.” By the 1840s and 1850s, with increasing urbanization, the concern had shifted from conquering the natural environment, the “savage wilderness,” to relieving what a writer in 1846 called “the wilderness of bricks” that was beginning to choke the young city. (O’Malley 2002, 71)

Downing claimed his plan counterbalanced L’Enfant’s vision by providing “the ‘healthful intercourse’ and ‘relief’ from the straight lines and broad avenues” of the surrounding urban setting (O’Malley 2002, 71). Creating a contrast between a romantic, intimate, and individual connection with nature and the sublime neoclassicism betokened by broad, linear boulevards would achieve, according to Downing, an “enchanting influence, by which the too great bustle and excitement of our commercial cities will be happily counterbalanced by the more elegant and quiet enjoyments of country life” (O’Malley 2002, 71).

Fate would permanently forestall Downing’s vision. He died, only 37 years old, in 1852, and in 1854, Congress granted lease to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to run tracks directly at the foot of the east slope of Capitol Hill. Authority for the Mall in total dissipated and fragmented for the remaining decades of the century, by which time the Mall consisted of seven separate garden parks, loosely incorporating the plans of Mills and Downing, each presided over by different government bureaus (beholden to separate congressional committees) and contracting their own architects and gardeners (O’Malley 2002; Streathfield 2002).

In the years following the Civil War until the turn of the century, master planning for the Mall took a distant back seat to other imperatives, including sorting out political jurisdiction for the nation’s capital between municipal authority and Congress, wrangling driven largely by white reaction against black enfranchisement and local office holding. Severe economic depression following the panic of 1873, and gross mismanagement of public works financing around the same time made street paving, sewers, and other basic public works a much higher priority for Congress than the Mall’s view corridors, landscaping, and bur- nishing the Capitol grounds. Likewise, elite sympathy for an increasingly fractured populist outlook was curbed. As Constance Green (1962) has chronicled, for the balance of the nineteenth century, Washington’s social culture became absorbed with defining a caste-like hierarchy and strict racial boundaries. The allure the Mall grounds held for the mythic longings of the nation did not now command the attention of Washington’s elite, absorbed as they were after the Reconstruction with defining themselves separate from everyone else.

The White City

The next major planning initiative on the Mall sprouted in 1898 when Glen Brown, secretary of the Washington headquartered American Institute of Architects (AIA) mobilized support for the AIA to sponsor and solicit design schemes for the capital’s improvement in anticipation of the upcoming centennial of the federal government’s permanent settlement in the District of Columbia (Hines 2002). This initiative eventually lured Senator James McMillan, chairman of the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia, who sponsored legislation in 1901 creating a special design commission for the purposes of yet another comprehensive plan proposal for the Mall grounds and surrounding areas. The commission would be headed by Daniel Burnham, who was renowned for his design acumen and leadership savvy in developing the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and would include landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and architect Charles McKim, both of whom had worked with Burnham in Chicago.

What would become known as the 1901–02 McMillan Plan for the Mall drew heavily from Burnham, Olmsted, and McKim’s by then 10-year-old grand scheme for the Chicago World’s Exposition, which had gained nearly instant fame and notoriety, inaugurating the City Beautiful movement (CBM), which would draw American urban development reform into its orbit for the next 25 years. Never before—until the sprouting of Chicago’s “White City”—had Americans glimpsed such an assembly of baroque-inspired architecture within the confines of American urban spaces. This design and planning movement derived from the rapid urbanization of the late nineteenth century and the perceived need by civic elites to overcome popular American antipathy for centralized decision making. Cities then increasingly encumbered by all the problems attendant to scale and density flummoxed traditions of American federalism that did not readily permit or support the kind of centralized planning that had shaped European urban settlements—areas that had garnered intense interest among leading American architects and other design professionals of the era. A key selling point made by CBM boosters was that big-city problems did not require a change in cultural institutions or social class arrangements; rather, in keeping with the Darwin-influenced environmental determinism of the age, the roots of urban problems were believed to derive from inadequacies in the built environment (Phillips 1996). Such optimism (albeit Panglossian) mollified an American elite that was increasingly conflicted over how to accommodate surging European immigration.
Dubbed the “White City” because of its self-conscious use of bright building materials intended to offset architectural monumentality with a sense of light and airiness that was so lacking in the warrens of big American cities, Chicago’s Columbian Exposition (located on massive grounds at Jackson Park and the Midway Plaisance on Lake Michigan) formed the American City Beautiful movement in microcosm (Hines 2002). The association of “white” with “beautiful” by this movement’s promoters was deliberate and self-conscious, becoming, as historian Thomas Hines notes, “an important symbol of purity and freshness in the moral crusade against the dark ‘ugliness’ of the actual urban landscape” (2002, 84). That landscape now included burgeoning populations of non-Anglo European immigrants who had been disregarded in many cases by formal government institutions and so turned for sponsorship to the urban “machine” shadow governments against which Progressive movement activists were simultaneously mobilizing. In cities such as Washington, DC, where the urban landscape since Reconstruction was increasingly being shaped in the crucible of American de facto apartheid, the “white/beautiful” movement for urban design transformation ominously foreshadowed the Supreme Court’s 1896 ratification of the “separate but equal doctrine” in Plessy vs. Ferguson, whereby the Court upheld lower-court rulings permitting the segregation by race of commuter rail lines in Louisiana.

Against the pastiche of garden design elements that had accumulated on the Mall over the previous half-century, the McMillan Plan very deliberately sought to restore the Mall to the open monumental scheme conceived by L’Enfant and to simultaneously recoup the original greensward layout and expand the Mall grounds into what is now its southwest quadrant (formed today by the triangle marked by the Washington Monument to the east, the Jefferson Memorial to the south, and the Lincoln Memorial at what would be the western terminus of the Mall; see figure 4).

Along with this near doubling of the Mall’s acreage (made possible 13 years earlier by the authorization of Congress to drain the tidal flats of the Potomac), the McMillan Plan incorporated architectural design elements derived from the Beaux-Arts design trend then enormously popular in Europe. This movement for a “baroque revival” in design for civic buildings and grounds was denoted by highly embellished exterior and interior moldings and formalistic gardenscapes (parterres) typically featuring freestanding and alcove classic figurative sculpture, all articulated by the intercession of ponds and other water features (much of which, except for the lack of parterres, is represented today in Washington’s Union Station). Thus, the built urban environment was to be more fully expressive of the exuberant optimism and hubris of the Gilded Age. A major innovation of the McMillan Plan called for realigning the greensward a few degrees southwest to bring the Capitol and Washington Monument into axial alignment and then extending the Mall’s westward axis to the site for the proposed Lincoln Memorial. Except for the laying of linear paths, formal rows of elms, and the eventual clearing away of the accumulated landscaping on the Mall east of the Washington Monument, little of the formalistic parterres proposed by the McMillan Plan would ever be built (see figure 5).

The Washington Monument stood on soil deposits that

Figure 4

Source: National Geographic, March 1915
would not permit the massive excavation under its base called for in the plan. Without this as a centerpiece—which would have been prohibitively costly, in any event—similar design elements called for on what would become the grounds for the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials would likewise never develop.

There would be no gainsaying the effect the Mall’s expansion southwestward would have on this space in total. With the eventual completion of the Lincoln and Grant memorials in 1922 and the Jefferson Memorial in 1943, the Mall acquired a dramatic sense of closure that was emblematic of the nation’s closing frontier ethos. The expansive vista that first seized L’Enfant’s imagination was now enclosed by symbols denoting both the triumphant and tragic narratives forming the dominant subtext of American culture: a country glimpsing in Jefferson its youthful aspirations for individual achievement and cultural enlightenment, then facing its hypocrisy before these aspirations; a despair betokened by Lincoln’s pensive, darkened vigil from his own memorial, whence he gazes—behind shadows cast by massive Doric columns—forever to the east and a new day. Nearly two miles east, Ulysses S. Grant himself gazes back toward Lincoln, stone faced and stolid on his stationary mount (Griswold 1986). The locations and designs of the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials (as well as the more diminutive Grant Memorial), which today are revered by preservationists as essential iconic features of the Mall, each evoked intense and bitter controversy when first vetted by Congress. The westward expansion of the Mall toward the Potomac early in the twentieth century evoked the feelings of eastside residents that their relationship to the Mall (formerly defined by the east portico entry to the Capitol) was being displaced. Many in Congress were dubious of the total cost of the proposed enhancements. Others objected that the incorporation of the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials on the sites where they were to be located, along with the proposal for widening Pennsylvania Avenue to make way for more and larger government buildings, tended to seal the Mall off from surrounding neighborhoods, a perception of exclusivity that would be attributed to the City Beautiful movement over the next 20 years.5,6

Toward Abstract Monumentality

The Mall’s development through the mid-1980s simplified the more formalistic elements of the McMillan Plan, deemed in the 1960s a grandiloquent vision that was no longer in sync with the modernist architecture then sprouting on the apron of the Mall grounds, nor with the populist enthusiasm of the era for large crowd gatherings and the use of informal open spaces for recreation. By the mid-1930s, the removal of the accumulated landscaping and paving on the east quadrant had finally made way for a greensward layout with formal rows of elms on either side running westward toward the Washington Monument. Subsequent major developments of the Mall included fountains and other pedestrian-oriented amenities along the east quadrant (kiosks, benches, pavilions, and bandstands); landscaping of the Oval and grading around the Washing—

Source: National Geographic, March 1915

America’s Palimpsest: Ground-Zero Democracy and the Capitol Mall 525
ton Monument, with pedestrian paths cut westward to adjoin the Lincoln Memorial precinct; completed construction of the Tidal Basin and the layout and grounds of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool and adjoining Rainbow Pool; the eventual inclusion of a reflecting pool west of the Grant Memorial; construction of the Constitution Gardens in the northwest precinct of the Mall; and construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The grading around the Washington Monument enhanced its visibility, as well as pedestrian access and viewpoint qualities. The informal landscaping south and north of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool finally imparted a park-like ambience for precincts that, until the 1960s, had been packed with temporary structures built after World War II. Accounting for various ecological constraints and seizing the opportunity to enhance the dominant vistas on the Mall (through the grading and landscaping of view corridors while enhancing the overall pedestrian orientation of the Mall grounds and foot access to the major monuments), the architectural firm Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) developed a plan in 1965 that demarcated the essential contours the Mall retains to this day. With minimal formal ornamentation, the major landmarks on the Mall now expressed a streamlined “abstract monumentality” that many observers believe best synthesizes and arranges the monumental and populist influences always vying for expression on the Mall (Streathfield 2002). The SOM plan is significant also because it represents what the preservationist agenda to-day wishes retained by prohibiting further development within the Mall’s major axes (see figure 6).

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: A Communal Design Logic

Dedicated November 12, 1982, not quite three and a half years after Vietnam War veteran and memorial promoter Jan Scruggs held the first of many press conferences, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial radically challenged the iconographic ballast on the Mall and set the record for the shortest time elapsed for memorial development in Mall history. Spurned, castigated, and reviled by conservative critics on the announcement of its selection among 1,421 design entries, the design of Yale architecture student Maya Lin inverted the monumental and classical iconography expressed by the Mall’s major monuments, memorials, and government buildings. Not only does Lin’s design abjure calling attention to itself (the visitor only becomes aware of the memorial at very close range), its vertex configuration deflects the viewer’s attention wayward toward the memorial’s vanishing endpoints: to the east, toward the Washington Monument and contemplation of the nation’s founding, or westward, toward the Lincoln Memorial and contemplation of the nation’s tragic destiny. Between these two historic points stands a vast empty space to be filled by the visitor’s imagination.

These and other features of the Vietnam Veterans Me-
morial have evoked a great deal of critical scholarly inquiry, including, notably, historian Kristin Ann Hass’s (1998) diligently chronicled and searching analysis examining what would become the memorial’s most startling effect: the ritualistic deposit of countless memorabilia brought to the Wall by visitors who, through these very personal gestures, continuously recreate the memorial’s public meaning. As Hass writes, “The source of the impulse to contribute a personal representation is difficult to pin down. It comes out of the reflective, abstract nature of the design, the impossibility of representing the war, the heartbreak of years of repression of the war and its costs, the social position of veterans, and the traditions of the population that fought in this war” (21). It was this very abstract quality of the memorial’s design—the striking lack of any figurative representation called for by the design scheme and, with this, the Wall’s own palimpsestic functionality—that fueled its detractor’s bitter denunciations. As Marita Sturken observes,

Termed the “black gash of shame,” a “degrading ditch,” a “black spot in American history,” [...] a “slap in the face,” and a “wailing wall for draft dodgers and New Lefters of the future,” the Memorial was seen as a monument to defeat, one that spoke more directly to a nation’s guilt than to the honor of the war dead and the veterans. One prominent veteran of the VVMF [Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund] read its black walls as evoking “shame, sorrow, and the degradation of all races”; others perceived its refusal to rise above the earth as indicative of defeat. (1991, 122)

Sturken interprets these combined criticisms as burdened by sexist and racist overtones: The black walls taken to represent dark and presumably spurned races, and the failure of the memorial to rise above the “feminized earth” a tacit castigation of it as insufficiently potent and powerful. A major critic of Lin’s design was then Secretary of the Interior James Watt, who, with the financial backing of Ross Perot, successfully mobilized demand that Lin’s sculpture be supplemented by a literally heroic, representational, and figurative sculpture—a tacit if not explicit repudiation of Lin’s abstract design and its highly ambivalent connotation toward implied valor and nostalgic patriotism. Sculptor Frederick Hart, who had submitted an earlier design for the initial memorial competition, created the design chosen for the Watt–Perot initiative. Hart aggressively promoted his alternative design to Watt, Perot, and the press. Titled The Three Fightingmen, Hart’s design bid prevailed over the dissenting opinion of the Commission of Fine Arts and Maya Lin herself once Secretary Watt threatened to hold up construction of Lin’s Wall. The Hart sculpture was installed in 1984, about 100 yards southwest opposite the vertex of the Wall. Ten years later, the Vietnam Women’s Memorial was dedicated, itself also a figurative representation. Evoking yet another spin of controversy, this memorial triggered growing concern that the Mall would be inundated by requests for endless “special interest memorials,” triggering the first rumbling for a call to slow down if not completely ban further commemorative development on the Mall (Longstreth 2002; Mills 2004).

In total, the story of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial plaza is instructive beyond the meaning of the memorial’s various evocations and many interpretations. Its central and dominant design feature—the elusive black granite wall carved into the earth, forever demanding that the viewer acknowledge the vast expanse of space it gestures toward—suggests that the meaning of the spaces between the monuments, memorials, and landmarks on the Mall are themselves portentous and deserve explicit acknowledgement—an understanding more succinct than the negative claim insisting that such spaces merely stage a sense of expansiveness, serving primarily to articulate this or that existing edifice. Preservationists who insist the Mall is now “full” or an essentially “completed work of civic art” fail to articulate beyond platitudes how the empty spaces of the Mall do a special kind of “work” themselves, a work that requires some “reading,” some contemplation. One of the unexamined pressures leading to the preservationist push is the way interest groups have insisted on commemorating some noteworthy individual or group of individuals. The fear that such demand will mushroom is a very reasonable one: There is no conceivable limit to the imagination for recognizing this or that outstanding individual or group. On this point, one of the more incisive criticisms of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, written by public participation scholars Harry Boyte and Nan Kari, noted how its overall design rendered Roosevelt as an idol before whom the masses huddled for protection and leadership (Mills 2004, 74), a sentiment that replays an American tendency to mythologize the powerful at the expense of ennobling the common people. The initial ambivalence in Congress to pass the amendments to the 1986 Commemorative Works Act had to do with a push there by Republicans—which was ultimately forestalled—to head off the preservationist juggernaut to build a memorial to Ronald Reagan on the Mall. Promoters of a memorial to another national icon, Martin Luther King Jr. (now slated for a site northwest of the Tidal Basin), who had originally hoped to secure a central location on the Mall, likewise encountered staunch preservationist resistance. In both instances (as well as other recent commemorative proposals for the Mall, including those for Thomas Paine and Dwight D. Eisenhower), the evocation of presumptively enduring American values through the iconic affiliation with this or that (however great) individual is a breach from the byplay of monumentalism and populism that have defined the Mall’s
symbolism through generations and a tacit disavowal of an overarching iconic coherence of the Mall space in total.

Sexist or racist overtones notwithstanding, Hass (1998) considers the intense disagreement surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial design an essential feature of its enduring popularity and profound meaning: “It is as if the still lively controversy about the Vietnam War keeps the dead alive; it will not let them rest, and therefore it inspires a tactile, insistent response from mourners. This uncertainty about the meaning of the war and of dying in it seems to keep the living coming back to speak to the dead” (87). For all the tokens of memory left at the Wall, it has become, as Hass argues, “the only truly living, national memorial in the United States” (63). Capturing the need for Americans to heal and come to grips with this defining moment in American history through its understated design while gesturing to the Mall in total, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial signals an important iconographic moment not yet fully appreciated, raising the question, does sealing the Mall’s axes from further commemorative interpretation imperil this grand space as a dying edifice?

Upon first visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1985, classics philosopher Charles L. Griswold observed, “It is as though an invisible hand has guided the many changes effected on the Mall, a communal logic perceptible as a whole at any given time. The intricate ecology of symbolism that articulates the Mall’s ‘substantive unity’ [...] is not contradicted by the fact that no one consciously designed the Mall with the totality of that symbolism in mind. The Mall provides us with a striking example of a whole that is, in good measure, self-organizing” (1986, 692). Notably for Griswold, the dominant (self-organizing) motif on the Mall is the Civil War and the still-enduring questions that searching epoch bestowed the nation. Such a searching assessment of the Mall’s transcendent meaning has been lost amid the overplayed and retrogressive dissent around the commemoration of this or that particular event or individual. Thus, when plans and development of the Mall have finally brought to fruition the open vistas and pedestrian and crowd-friendly ambience synthesizing so well the dominant design concerns of over two centuries of planning (to which the Vietnam Veterans Memorial so successfully calls our attention), the Mall’s future, ironically, is imperiled by narrow anxieties triggered by truncated visions: At the very moment the forest becomes most coherent, our focus is distracted by this or that tree. Conceived as so many “trees,” thoughts of further commemorative work on the Mall evoke a sense of “filling up” evanescent spaces begging more coherent commemoration in their own right.

From Many, One: Administering Coherent Design Guidelines for Future Commemorative Works

In the preservationist reading of the Mall, the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials stand as a singular class of commemoration—one to individual men first and foremost. Such a reading logically concludes that the Mall space can accommodate only so many memorials before their grandeur and meaning are irrevocably encroached upon. Conversely, a communal logic of design interprets these memorials in relationship to the Mall in total and to one another, recognizing that each commemorative work has only partial meaning in and of itself. Construing the Jefferson Memorial as merely a memorial to “the man”—encountered as 10,000 pounds of bronze 19 feet tall upon a 6-foot pedestal—the visitor is more subdued than ennobled. Key elements of this memorial’s masterful design remain in eclipse, including the way the statue directs Jefferson’s gaze, on center point, to peer forever into the South Lawn of the White House, located one mile to the north. Inscribed on the southern section of Jefferson’s Memorial pantheon are these words from a letter Jefferson wrote to George Washington:

> Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require of man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.

Conceived in a broader context of the Mall’s total iconography, these words resurrect Jefferson as an eternal vigil for the chief executive office of the land, forever exhorting successive presidents to lead the nation’s institutional development, to adapt these institutions to the times, to faithfully challenge anachronistic claims of original intent, and so on. Viewed as merely inscriptions on a wall, these words lack trajectory. Transposed through a gaze peering one mile north into the White House, these words are suddenly animated, conjuring a tireless spirit from 10,000 pounds of bronze.

Enter the Lincoln Memorial and behold the inscription on its southern interior wall, the Gettysburg Address, that solemn and poetic affirmation of Union struggle originating southward in the nation. These words are consummated in Lincoln’s second inaugural address, which is inscribed on this temple’s north wall, as if from the North, from whence these words were articulated through Lincoln. Consider Lincoln himself, shrouded forever in a darkened
chamber seated midpoint between these two testaments, his memorial strikingly distinguished from Jefferson’s superilluminated temple. We see Lincoln’s downward-looking gaze, reflective and pensive. We notice his one hand clenched to a fist, the other draped open over the armrest and seemingly supplicant: one hand signaling resolve and action, the other final submission before forces greater than ourselves. One leg positioned slightly forward—is Lincoln about to stand up, or has he just sat down? Drawn into his gaze, we are impelled to turn our own gaze with his in a long, barely perceptible declining glance (eastward toward the rising sun), resting roughly at the foot of the Washington Monument, three-quarters of a mile eastward. A mile further east, Ulysses S. Grant and his mount both appear stolid and stone faced, almost ghost-like: the mount’s ears pricked, its equine head and neck jutting southward, alert to the coming storm. Flanked to the south by the depiction of a Union charge and to the north by artillermen with caisson, Grant himself is motionless, staring westward toward Lincoln and the future. As Griswold (1986) has noted, the line of sight between these two kindred memorialities magnifies the potency of each, their collective gazes landing at the base of the Washington Monument, the symbolic origin of the nation—ground that Lincoln’s gaze reminds us foretold a tragic conflict. So conceived, Lincoln himself, like his general, seems to await a signal: a response perhaps indicating that the task for which he would give his life is finished.

Four hundred feet northwest, we are at the center of the two great axes of the Mall (the point where Lincoln’s gaze literally bisects Jefferson’s), ground where J. Carter Brown, longtime chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts, recalls, “one senses the full impact of the history, the planning, and the majesty that is the national Mall of the United States,” words reminding us this is not merely empty space. Thus, we feel compelled to consider Thomas Jefferson again: man of learning and self-restraint, devotee of science and the arts. How like the sun god, Apollo, is Jefferson suddenly revealed to us (and how apropos of Apollonian connotation does the Jefferson Memorial make use of light streaming from all directions): one in whom we vest all our aspirations to cultural refinement and individual achievement and through whom we look past our shortcomings to believe in our invincibility. Turning westward, we encounter Lincoln’s withering gaze one-half mile away. Standing at this allegorical and literal intersection, we find ourselves confronted by two great forces irrevocably shaping the nation’s history: that faith in our invincibility fated to encounter the tragic shortcoming, the enslavement of African Americans, forever draws on our consciousness. Thus, we are impelled to reconsider Lincoln: how Dionysian now seems his exhortation for a union not merely between North and South, but between those poles of human consciousness that define us—one revering invincibility and individualism, the other forced to reconcile this aspiration against the terrible suffering wrought by brutal hypocrisy, vanity, and weakness. As Lincoln told Congress on December 1, 1862, after a year of stinging Union army defeats, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. […] As our case is new, so must we think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country” (emphasis added). Arguably, this sentiment deserves a nation’s recognition as much as Ronald Reagan or even Martin Luther King, their greatness notwithstanding. No ground on the Mall is currently dedicated to the memory of the 620,000 who perished in the Civil War. Is there space available at the allegorical and literal intersection on the Mall to commemorate this very American experience? Would it befit Lincoln’s memory (and perhaps Martin Luther King’s also) to acknowledge the hope and reconciliation the man could only glimpse in his own time? Perhaps if conceived of as a process of removal, or an excavation—the chthonic expression of that profoundly humble exhortation that we “disenthrall ourselves” from the dogmas of our own quiet past—as opposed to a building up or an erecting, a nation’s imagination discovers the space for commemorating such powerful sentiment. Doing so may conjure future commemorative works that, through thoughtful design and planning, could be communally linked to one another, ennobling the visitor’s sense of the Mall’s grandeur, now better comprehended by appreciation for those (only apparently empty) “in-between” spaces. Thus conceived, the Mall in total reveals—as if by a guiding hand—a coherence that could guide future public administrators responsible for stewarding the nation’s most sacred civic ground. Two simple principles should guide this process: Commemorative works should (1) further integrate the Mall’s iconographic coherence while (2) maintaining open vistas.

Figures 7, 8, and 9 depict the design for an arced wall that illustrates these design principles. Sunken below grade, situated roughly at that powerful allegorical intersection linking Jefferson and Lincoln, an arcing wall facing the Lincoln Memorial to the west (the Washington Monument can be seen in background of figure 9) betokens Martin Luther King’s frequent evocation that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” The wall imagined here spans south to north, allegorically conducting Jefferson’s gaze to the vision that Martin Luther King left the nation and world: Heroic though he was, Jefferson was a man nonetheless inextricably of his time, one who could not fully forsake slavery. Could not the nation more fully honor its third president by accepting his flaws and, in so doing, face those kindred flaws that malarige with us.
still? The arc faces Lincoln, dug into the earth, itself a solemn testament that our sixteenth president, the first accepted white martyr to a fully American, fully democratic wish, did not die in vain. The world’s continents are arrayed beyond the wall across an amphitheater, ascending eastward toward the Washington Monument and the new day. At the southern edge of this dioramic space, in the direction of the Jefferson Memorial, Europe is rendered, symbolizing in part our nation’s Anglo influences, so well captured by our memory of Jefferson; next, Africa, whose
influence in North America would imbricate so inextricably with a European presence; then, the North American continent at the centerline, followed to the north by South America, then the Asian and Middle Eastern continent northernmost toward the White House, there a reminder for future presidents to beware the nation’s xenophobic tendencies. The arcing wall’s surface could inscribe texts commemorating timeless American values sealed in sacrament by civil war.

**Conclusion**

The rancor and controversy over the World War II Memorial offers a cautionary tale that is mostly misunderstood. A major catalyst of this controversy was the final site selection (from among six other sites, mostly off the main axes) for the memorial on the Rainbow Pool that adjoins the east end of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. A concise account of the site-selection process can be found elsewhere (Mills 2004). Here, it is important to note that the decision to locate the World War II Memorial at its present site illustrates the forces driving a communal logic of design. Located roughly at the midpoint between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, the World War II Memorial calls attention to the lasting significance of the conflict it commemorates: America fought and helped to vanquish a regime whose motive force was racial supremacy. Like the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials before it, many will disagree over the design details of the World War II Memorial for some time to come. Nevertheless, future generations will recognize that, by its location between the nation’s foundling to the east and its commitment to a fully democratic wish toward the sunset, the memorial honors and is fully honored by the ground it occupies. Stylistic flourishes and design signatures and emphasizes notwithstanding, this memorial, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, both deepens and expands the Mall’s overall coherence.

In the 1855 preface to his great ode to America, *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman wrote, “Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista. Here comes one among the well beloved [sic] stonecutters and plans with decision and science and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms” (1937, xxvii). It is doubtful that any other words could better capture our national palimpsest, that ground on which the ardor of a nation continually exploring its vista—a nation dedicated to beneficence toward and substantive due process among all people—has been etched over more than 200 years: our National Mall, the ground zero of democracy. Likewise, one struggles to imagine what poetry could justify closing the book that this ground be tokens to future generations.
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Notes

1. The CWA Amendments, Title II (also titled the Commemorative Works Clarification and Revision Act of 2003) adopted the 2001 Master Plan for the Mall established by the National Capital Planning Commission. In accordance with this plan, a limited number of commemorative works are permitted in Area I, the precincts skirting the Mall’s main axes. The Master Plan’s most momentous gesture was to prohibit further monuments and memorials along the Mall’s primary east-west and north-south axes, now known as the Reserve. A map specifying the contours of the Mall and the Reserve precinct can be found on page 12 of the Master Plan for the Mall, available online at www.ncpc.gov/planning_init/2m/2M1_33.pdf.

2. Notably, King’s famous speech was prestaged by the concert given by American contralto Marian Anderson, Easter Sunday, 1939, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The concert occurred because the Daughters of the Revolution had refused to permit the famous contralto to perform at Constitution Hall because Anderson was black. Before seventy-five thousand in attendance, Anderson sang as part of the concert bill, “My country ‘tis of thee/Sweet land of liberty/To thee we sing” [emphasis added]. The subtle irony evoked by inverting “Of thee I sing” to “To thee we sing” was not lost on the crowd, or history. For a searching, close reading of race symbolism history, and the Lincoln Memorial, see Sandage (1993).

3. In what could be considered a wry commentary on this suspicion—and a roundabout endorsement of federalism—the Smithsonian Board of Regents decided to include a sitting vice president, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, three senators, three members of the House of Representatives, and six private citizens, who would together vote for a secretary.

4. In a learned, searching exegesis of the Mall’s political iconography, philosopher Charles Griswold comments,

In the Mall complex the whole great oppositional struggle of war, and of the Civil War, is oriented to the west [of the Mall]. The presence of the facing Lincoln and Grant Memorials on the Mall, indeed on the same east-west axis, virtually establishes the Civil War as the critical event recollected on the Mall. The VVM [Vietnam Veterans Memorial] too […] sits at the western end of the Mall, and the war it recalls ignited much bitter dispute between Americans—bitterness second only, perhaps, to that which accompanied the Civil War. (1986, 703)

5. The staunchest critic and most implacable foe of the McMillan Plan was Illinois congressman Joe Cannon. Besides his antagonism toward McMillan (whom he believed had usurped the House’s authority by making available Senate contingency funds for planning purposes), Cannon vehemently opposed government spending in general, especially spending on what seemed to him an outrageously lavish plan. Speaker of the House from 1901 to 1911, Cannon ruled with dictatorial authority until his power was finally subverted by an alliance between Republican opponents and House Democrats. Then appointed to the newly re-formed Lincoln Memorial Commission, Cannon went toe to toe with a staunch McMillan Plan proponent, U.S. president William Howard Taft, who had appointed himself chair of the commission. In total, Cannon served in Congress from 1873 to 1923 except for four years (1891–93 and 1913–15). Besides opposing the Lincoln Memorial’s design and location, Cannon also opposed the Grant Memorial (then located on the east terrace of the Capitol building), triggering fierce controversy over what to do with existing large trees as well as the greenhouse of the National Capital Botanical Gardens (Reps 1967). Of the Lincoln Memorial, Cannon exclaimed to fellow congressman Elihu Root, “So long as I live, I’ll never let a monument to Abraham Lincoln be erected in that God-damned swamp” (Hines 2002, 94). Years later, after completion of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922, Cannon conceded, “I have been in many fights. Some I have lost—many I have won—it may have been better if I had lost more. I am pleased I lost the one against the Lincoln Memorial” (Reps 1967, 159).

6. The Jefferson Memorial, first proposed in 1914, was vetted at three sites near the Mall before the Commission of Fine Arts settled on its eventual location at the southern end of what became the Tidal Basin. The first mistake made by the Jefferson Memorial Commission was the exclusive invitation for design submission that it made to architect John Russell Pope (who had submitted a competing design for the Lincoln Memorial). From there, matters became increasingly controversial, including, for Pope, unending vituperative criticisms from other leading architects and critics of Pope’s pantheon design. Battling stomach cancer, Pope died on August 27, 1937, after nearly three and a half years of constant political bickering and professional potshots over his commission. Vowing to not be vanquished, Pope’s widow, Sadie, launched a successful letter-writing campaign that won the approval of President Roosevelt, a distant relative through marriage. Congress authorized funds for the memorial on June 15, 1938, and Pope’s design was eventually retained, but on a slightly smaller scale (Mills 2004, 56–60).
References


