

Washington, DC - Dysfunctional Spaces of Democracy?

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The essence of democracy lies in displacing conflict and difference from the realm of violence to a more peaceable, deliberative realm.¹

Richard Sennett, *The Spaces of Democracy*

Washington, DC is a city of great public spaces but these great spaces, meant to concretize the ideal of democratic governance, may also be seen as spaces of dysfunction, inhibiting the very processes they seek to promote. The urban fabric of the capital city is marked by a quality of openness yet that openness could also be read as a means of control, a device designed more to inculcate the exercise of authority and surveillance than to promote the social processes inherent to functional democracy. L'Enfant's plan, imagined as a sort of physical counterpoint to the Constitution, owes more to the tradition of absolutism and authoritarianism than to republicanism or democracy. The plan manifests a tension in Enlightenment thinking between the establishment of rational systems based on fundamental human rights and capacities and the sublime of Nature which is both the origin of these rights but which also ultimately holds them in dominion. In L'Enfant's plan for Washington, the product of this inherent tension is a concentration on the symbolic function of the urban form at the exclusion of any prosaic quotidian condition. That legacy lingers today in the deep environmental and economic inequities of our contemporary city and presents a unique set of challenges – physical, social and cultural - to overcome. Recent economic data published by the DC Government confirms a major disparity in the distribution of resources in our city continues – a disparity which is profoundly destabilizing. In order to create a sustainable city, a truly functional democratic space, the national/global and local scales must be stitched.

THE SPACES OF DEMOCRACY

Sociologist Richard Sennett, proposes a useful lens through which we might examine the functioning of a physical democratic form. In his essay, *The Spaces of Democracy*, he links space and democracy through process. Sennett's conception of democracy's physical form is necessarily urban, a form which draws into itself the disparate social groups which, left in isolation, react with violence when confronted with the presence of 'the other.' Space as process – the democratic urban form builds within its citizenry, two essential skill sets which make it possible for democracy to function: first, an adroit psychological flexibility which allows for confrontation without the threat of violence and second, the ability to focus deeply and for prolonged periods of time on the words of another so as to achieve a deep and nuanced understanding.

Challenged with identifying physical examples of these types of space in action, Sennett looks to the Athenian model of the Pnyx (the theater) and the Agora (the square): 'the theater organizes the sustained attention required for decision making; the square is a school for the often fragmentary, confusing experience of diversity.'²

The Agora, or town square, is a space which promotes a constantly scanning, psychological flexibility:

'A number of activities occurred simultaneously in the agora – commerce, religious rituals, casual hanging out. In the open space there was also a rectangular law court surrounded by a low wall so the citizens going about their business of making an offering to the gods could also follow the progress of justice.'³

In contrast, the Pnyx, or theater, provided a single focal point, its background mostly sky and therefore devoid of distraction:

‘Through concentration of attention on a speaker and identification of others in the audience who might call out challenges or comments, the ancient political theater sought to hold citizens responsible for their words.’⁴

Sennett terms the social interaction produced by these forms as a type of ‘decentralized democracy,’ i.e., the spatial precondition for a functional daily democracy which depends upon the engagement of its citizens in public life. Sennett also notes that our contemporary culture has yet to produce these spaces, but the promise exists.

AMERICAN ATHENS

One can question the appropriateness of Sennett’s selection of ancient Athens as a prototype for the contemporary city. How can a distant history so far removed culturally and technologically from our own moment still be relevant? Indeed, the precedent has several shortcomings. Unlike the Athenian model, contemporary American society is not a mono-culture and there is no racial or religious heterogeneity. There is also no single power or governmental authority but rather layers of jurisdictional oversight culminating in the federal government. But Sennett is also following in a long American tradition. The framers of the Constitution and the young nation’s capital, lacking any contemporary example of a functional democracy, also cast themselves back to ancient Greece in order to project the form of the new republic. They imagined an American Athens for surely, ‘the obliteration of dependency would presage a flowering not only of industry and economy but also the arts and literature’⁵ which would rival Pericles’ golden age. It was the pursuit of a sublime – a narrative to forge a national identity out of the competing and divergent visions of the new republic. The nation’s capital would be an icon, a physical manifestation which would elevate the spirit and mirror the new republic with its openness and nobility of scale.

In reality, the primary players in the political drama which eventually settled the new capital on the banks of the Potomac, Washington and Jefferson, had little taste for, if not a wariness towards the corrupting effects of cities. They came from the tradition of the Virginia landed gentry whose estates and

plantations projected a sort of utopian ideal – the symbolic authority invested at the physical core, embodied in the institutional family, workers (unpaid) at the next layer of intimacy, and finally industry pushed far to the periphery, its primary function to support the workings of the estate rather than the generation of commerce or income in their own right. In this paradigm, the workers are meant to flow in and out of the core but otherwise are not meant to be seen. Labor and industry are invisible.

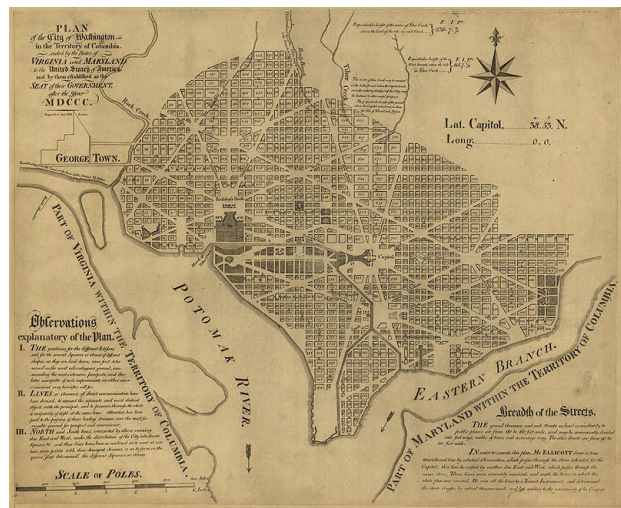


Figure 1. Ellicott’s drawing of L’Enfant’s ‘Plan for the City of Washington’ showing the original three explanatory notes

This paradigm was well familiar to L’Enfant, the aristocratic Frenchman who spent considerable portions of his childhood living at Versailles. When invested with the commission to design the federal capital, he requested that Jefferson, who, as Secretary of State had oversight over the process (and provided considerable input) for plans of the cities of London, Madrid, Paris, Naples for reference – each, with the exception of Paris, the capital of an authoritarian principality. On top of Jefferson’s proposed ‘democratic’ grid for the city, he overlaid the now-familiar radial avenues culminating in public squares and circles, the purpose of which was to establish view corridors to major federal buildings and monuments and create ease of communication as well as movement. These, of course, were inspired by his experience of the landscapes and hunting grounds of the great French estates designed by Le Notre. Unlike ancient Athens whose daily life was focused on the agora, the notation which accompanied L’Enfant plan made no mention of commerce rather; each of the

three notes highlighted some aspect of the symbolic function of the plan. It was a pure abstraction of a city, divorced from any aspect other than infrastructure and architectural form. And unlike the ancient Greek city, whose size and growth were strictly limited to be in balance with the flow of resources from their entailed countryside, the District of Columbia was projected without relationship to its immediate or regional environs. At ten miles square, its vast scale would need a population of a quarter of a million to fill – well in excess of the population of even the largest contemporary city in the former colonies. Philadelphia and New York which both vied to be the federal capital had populations between 20,000 and 30,000. It was an abstraction writ large.

ABERRANT INDIVIDUALISM

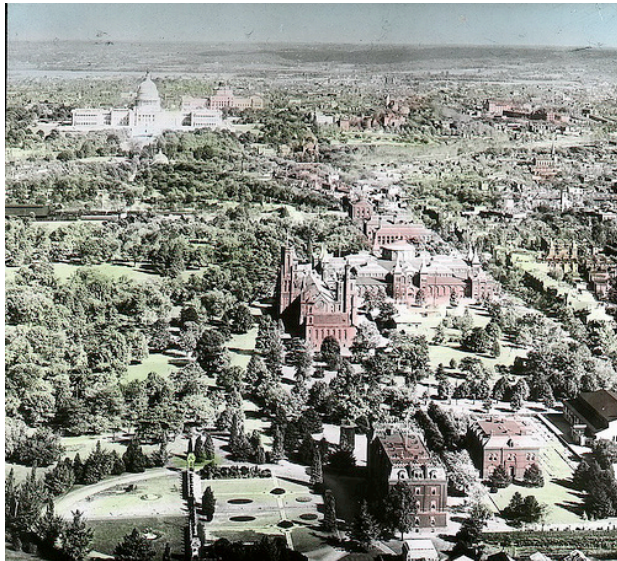


Figure 2. The National Mall in the second half of the 19th Century showing the 'romantic' landscape

Subsequent plans for the city largely followed in the same tradition. The primary initiative of the Parks Commission's (McMillan) plan for the city was to revive the tenants of L'Enfants plan, to restore the vistas and avenues and eradicate the 'romantic' landscapes and utilitarian incursions into the core which had emerged in the 100 years since the drafting of the plan. These aberrations embodied an individualism which was not in keeping with the city's stature as a nation's capital on the world stage. To inform their design proposal, the commissioners, led by Daniel Burnham, conducted

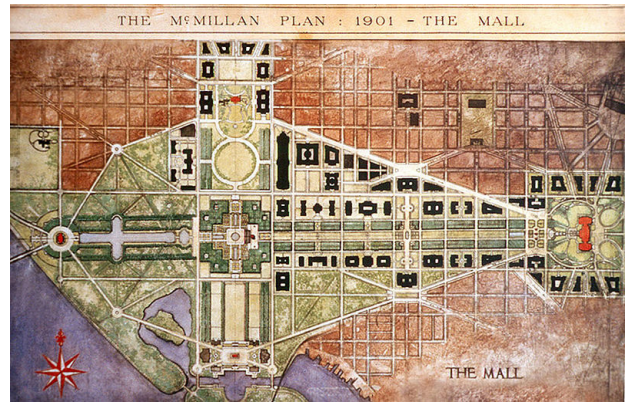


Figure 3. The Park's Commission Plan

a visual survey of the colonial estates on the James and York Rivers as well as a European Grand Tour so that they might: 'see and discuss together parks in relation to public buildings. This is our problem

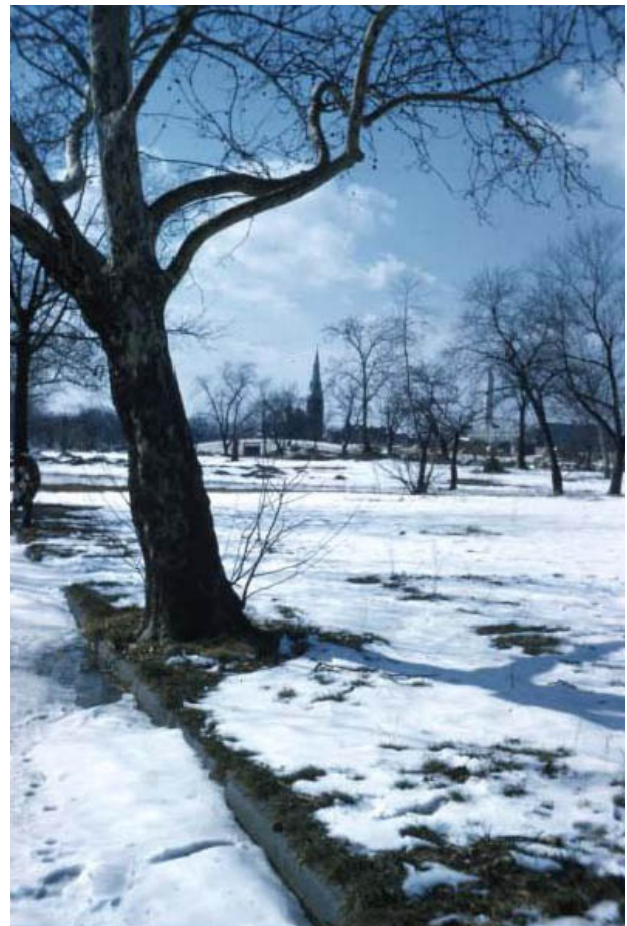


Figure 4. 4th Street, SW after being raised to make way for the Southwest Freeway and subsequent housing projects

in Washington and we must have two weeks when we are thinking of nothing else.'⁶ The eventual plan, focused on the monumental core, restored a formal landscape to the National Mall and extended the parks system to outlying regions of the city, but once again, the federally sponsored plan made no address to the economic or commercial functioning or 'everyday life' of the city. The plan called for the investiture of a commission to ensure the principles of the plan were executed. The Fine Arts Commission was not a planning organization, but an aesthetic authority.

When the federal government was finally forced, in the 1950's (through the persistent press) to address the dilapidated state of the city in its veritable backyard, the response was once again focused on infrastructure and large-scale projects. The 1960's era urban renewal of Southwest's waterfront district, displaced what remained of the working waterfront, traditionally one of the city's primary industrial zones, further separating the working class from jobs and economic independence, and supplanted fine-grain urban fabric with public housing which furthered the isolation of the 'unseen' laboring class. In short order, this 'unseen' class would demand to be seen.



Figure 5. Shaw, Washington, DC in April of 1968

Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in April 1968, Washington's 'unseen' and isolated laboring and working-class neighborhoods erupted in violence. The DC neighborhood of Shaw, long the center of African-American political and social consciousness in the city, a community which had been a center of non-violent civil protest simmered over in frustration over the racial and economic inequity

of a city whose stratified social and physical power structures excluded a majority of the city's population from sharing equally in the city's resources. The destruction and loss of life were significant, federal martial law was declared, and the National Guard deployed to police the smoldering ruins.

This is the type of violent eruption that Sennett describes as the inevitable outcome of an urban fabric which isolates the city's constituents into enclaves that rarely occupy a shared territory.

BLOCKAGES

Washington's urban form is subject to blockages both material and abstract which inhibit the process of democracy from taking shape locally in a meaningful way, prevent the Pnyx and the Agora from supporting one another and binding the diverse local communities. First, there is the issue of the city's geography. Washington's natural boundaries – the Potomac and Anacostia rivers and Rock Creek Park are seams between competing territorial entities which create back-drops and back-doors, often neglected or under-utilized. This is reinforced through the city's natural topography. The 'Monumental Core' is a topographic basin which reinforces the city's traditional divide between enclaves of wealthy, educated communities and their poorer, underserved neighbors nestled in often opposing high grounds. In a strange inversion, the very openness of the National Mall creates a boundary – a scale so vast that easy or local communication is severely inhibited.

Second, there is the myriad of governmental jurisdictions which lay claim to the administration of the urban form – DC ANC's, DC City Council, the Mayor's Office, the states of Maryland and Virginia and their various counties bordering the District, National Park Service, National Capital Planning Commission,

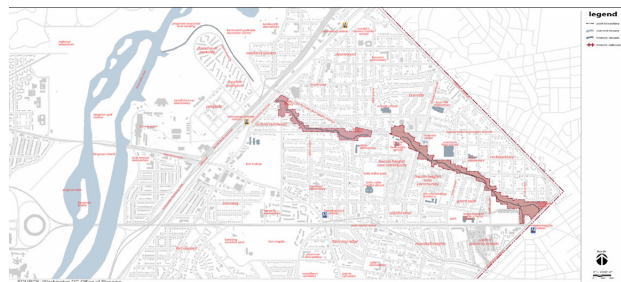


Figure 6. Watt's Branch Park in Northeast, DC

Capital Police Service, US Congress, Secret Service and numerous other federal agencies. The interaction between so many entities is fraught with the potential for lack of dialogue between scales.

Exemplifying the ill-effects of this lack of dialogue is the park adjacent to Watts Branch on the east side of the Anacostia River. Naturally functioning as Washington DC's largest tributary to the Anacostia River, Watts Branch's history is not unlike its own topography varied with peaks and valleys of both thriving activity and neglect and disrepair. Subject to transfer of ownership between federal and local control contributed to a more recent high to low shift in the history of Watts Branch. In 1966 the park reached a pinnacle with the rededication of eight acres of park area by First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson. The rejuvenated area hosted stone lined walls along the stream bed and large green space for outdoor park activities for both local and regional inhabitants. This rejuvenated and newly activated public space merging natural beauty in an urban environment would benefit for only a short while before falling back into decline. In the 70's, the federal government selected specific parks with the district for transfer of responsibility of maintenance and care to local government. The rationale for these selections is unclear as Rock Creek Park and Anacostia Park, each west of the Anacostia River, continued under federal control and care. Watts Branch, however, was handed over to a newly forming local government which, at the time, had no funding or structure in place to handle the newly granted responsibility. The Department of Parks and Recreation was formed during Mayor Anthony Williams Administration and so was not yet a functioning body. Lack of maintenance contributed to a period of disrepair, neglect, and crime lasting nearly thirty years. The park areas became places for drug activity and the stream bed became a receptacle for trash and stolen cars.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Over forty years since the '68 riots, Washington, and particularly the Shaw, is nearly unrecognizable. With the establishment of Home Rule in the 1970's, the political decision-making structure was permanently changed. Vast stretches of property which lay dormant for decades in the aftermath of the riots and crack epidemic of the 1980's have been developed into new housing and commercial

space. The corner of 14th and U Streets is buttressed by a major office complex, The Reeves Center, which houses offices of the DC Government which was invested by Congress in the wake of the riots. The building anchors a vibrant and expanding strip of upscale shops, cafes and design stores. The U Street corridor is the very picture of successful urban 'revitalization' cited by the city's administration as the model for more to come.

The most recent positive improvements to Watts Branch have developed from local non-profit and volunteer organizations including Washington Parks and People and Ground Works. These organizations seek funding, dialogue and work with national parks organizations, organize volunteers, and empower local residents to create change. The National Recreation and Parks Association reported an effort to clean Watts Branch in 2001 removing 3.5 million pounds of trash, 9,000 hypodermic needles and 78 abandoned cars from the stream and its surrounding land. In addition, over 1,000 native trees have been replanted. Additionally, new programmatic features have been added to increase activity and use of the park including lighted trails connecting urban pathways to park space and amphitheatre near the a natural bluff and the newly rebuilt Woodson Senior High School.

But while gains have been made, there are still deep inequities in the District: a recent analysis published by the DC Government of income and earnings data collected in the 2009 American Community Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau Survey states that the median household income for whites in the District was approximately \$99,400 while for blacks it was approximately \$38,950 and approximately \$46,820 for Hispanics. In the 2008 State of Washington, DC's Neighborhoods Report which was prepared by the Urban Institute for the DC Government Office of Planning, the reported median income in Ward 8 which encompasses much of Southeast and Anacostia was \$22,400 while Ward 3, encompassing upper Northwest had a median income per household of \$84,600 (figures rounded to hundred increments).

DECENTRALIZED DEMOCRACY

Do these recent developments constitute Sennett's 'decentralized democracy'? If the revitalized U Street corridor functions as a local Agora, where is

the Pnyx that fosters deep and focused understanding of 'the other' and enables the citizenry to hold their leadership accountable and vice versa? There is a need to create a space of public civic engagement and debate (DC's Speaker's Corner, City Hall).

As the nation's capitol, Washington is uniquely a place where global or national events have local significance. L'Enfant's vision for the national capital preferences the iconographic function of the capital city over its daily function. The realization of the city, to date, has failed to stitch together these two 'scales' – national symbol with the functional spaces of daily 'decentralized democracy.' How can they be stitched? What space can build these two skill sets? The nation's icon must to perform its role, but it must also be a livable, sustainable city which promotes interaction rather than isolation. This is a physical as well as sociological problem. There is a need to create density and connectivity – within and between the federal corridor; to insert another grain with the fine-scale urban architecture which will promote local industry and exchange

To witness major national event such as the Obama inauguration in January of 2009 is to see the promise of both L'Enfant's *voisin* and Sennett's democratic *process* overlaid in a simultaneous democratic *moment*. The city's formal plan functioned just as intended, funneling as many as 2 million participants in and out of the city with little conflict. Around the National Mall a temporary local economy of vendors of all sorts sprung up to meet the demands of servicing the crowds ringing the center with an ad-hoc market. For a brief period of time both the Pnyx and the Agora were present at the heart of the capital. Were that there could be a public space which would cross these scalar boundaries on a more permanent basis.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sennet, Richard. *The Spaces of Democracy*, p. 12
- 2 Ibid, p. 21
- 3 Ibid, p. 18
- 4 Ibid, p. 17
- 5 Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*, p.
- 6 Gutheim, *Worthy of the Nation*, p.