# *DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: DEVELOPER CAPITAL*

*Figure 1. Camille Lane, A synecdoche of development in Southwest Washington, March 2026.*

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## Abstract

This thesis synthesizes the Trump Administration's design strategies of traditionalism and development to argue that Washington, D.C.'s built environment is a laboratory for the political project of Trumpism. Through analysis of Washington's political relationship with the State, its dual identity as a city and a capital, and its history of for-profit development and urbanization, I connect how the phenomena of developerism and Make America Great Again set out a coherent vision for transforming the Nation's Capital into a political project grounded in profit, obfuscated by culture war aesthetics, and intent on eliminating dissent. I use theories of urbanization, capital building, and the politicization of aesthetics to articulate the critical threat that Trumpism poses to architects, D.C.'s residents, and American architectural policy. I supplement my analysis with the work of a variety of researchers, including historians, journalists, and political scientists, to explore how D.C. is a pivotal landscape for the politics of architecture.

## Executive Summary

The second Trump Administration is utilizing Washington, D.C.'s built environment as a laboratory for two ideological movements. The first movement aims to dismantle decades of multicultural hegemony in architecture by enforcing "neoclassical" or "traditional" aesthetics to manifest ideals for a Christian Nationalist authoritarian ethnostate. This crusade, existing for decades, has garnered success under President Donald Trump's narcissistic enterprise to erect monuments in his honor. The second movement aims to revitalize the downtowns of American cities, which are functionally segregated regions that confine private or public office space. In theory, revitalization will offer residents the convenience of programmatic diversity and developers the profitability of residential density. Previously existing on parallel planes, the ideological movement of traditionalism and the economic strategy of developerism are unified under the Developer-in-Chief, who is leveraging federal bureaucracy to administer a reactionary, conservative agenda. Through (1) the construction of privately funded monuments on public land to symbolize conservative ideology and (2) the sale of historically significant federal architecture to private developers, Trumpism aims to whiten Washington, D.C. and further subjugate the city through profit-driven policies. In focusing on the historically charged Southwest, modern conservatives aim to transform the physical space of American bureaucracy into exclusionary class architecture.

Chapter 1 introduces Washington, D.C. through its conflicting identities as both a capital and a city, to articulate that the foundation of D.C.'s development is inherently at odds with the city and its community. Chapter 2 discusses the unifying ideology of Trumpism and traditionalism as a way of depoliticizing architecture and aestheticizing politics, to galvanize his base, who see themselves as inheritors of the American Empire. Chapter 3 outlines a history of development in the National Capital to argue against dominant interpretations of the capital's history and further examine how urbanization occurs at the expense of marginalized communities. Chapter 4 discusses the 21st-

century climate of private-public development projects in the Southwest, alongside the ideological and economic agenda of Trumpism, to argue that the current Trump administration is unifying seemingly disparate agendas into a cohesive architectural project of anti-multiculturalism and laissez-faire capitalism. In my conclusion, I argue that the threat of Trumpism is not only a threat to the material conditions of Americans but also to the future of architecture.

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## Chapter 1: CAPITAL VS. CITY

The District of Columbia is a federal laboratory for design, both on urban and architectural scales. The city's form represents a lineage of political ideology at the federal level. The federal government has always aimed to represent itself and its concomitant political ethos through the built environment. At its conception, the capital was a tabula rasa for the federal government. Almost 250 years later, the capital's form is a richly layered city of often conflicting and contradictory histories.

Washington, D.C. is currently a site of reckoning for the political and economic crisis occurring across the United States. Americans have been discontented with their government and the financial state of the nation since the beginning of the 21st century.[1] D.C. is the national capital and therefore a political symbol that has both negative and positive images in the minds of Americans. Simultaneously, as a city, D.C.'s reality is suffering at the hands of its economic and political deference to the federal government. The result is a District subject to federal hegemony without due representation, disconnecting its identities as both a *national capital* and a *city*. *D.C.: Developer Capital* examines how Trumpism is using the built environment in Washington, D.C. to reify its political agenda, and how this project is antithetical to democracy and architecture. This chapter will foreground how economics and ideology have shaped the city's dual identity. The city of Washington, D.C., without proper representation, is vulnerable to the federal government, which is increasingly leveraging unchecked power to transform the built environment and advance the ideals of Trumpism.

First, I would like to address what forces construct the contemporary city. Architect and educator Pier Vittorio Aureli discusses the relationship of the *civitas* and *urbs* in "Towards the

[1] Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2025*, Opinion Poll (Pew Research Center, 2025), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/12/04/public-trust-in-government-1958-2025/?cb_viewport=tablet.

Archipelago," the introductory chapter of his book titled *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture.* Aureli argues:

> "The ongoing central dilemma of the city…First is the demand for the good functioning of the city as a place for cohabitation through its economic administration and the physical manifestation of administration, its urban plan—the urbs—without which the city would be an uncomfortable and insecure place. Second is the demand of discussion and confrontation, its political life—civitas—without which the city would be the unfolding of a predictable and despotic order of things…. With the crisis of the ancient regime, the advent of industrialization, and the rise of capitalism, the role of the urbs absorbed the idea of civitas to the point that over the last three centuries we have witnessed the triumph of a new form of human association based entirely on the mastery of the urbs. Enter urbanization."[2]

Urbanization has come to dominate the city, no longer as a place for *civitas* or political association, but as a location for *urbs*, the organization of people and space for economic production. The city is still understood as a location of governance, but its governance is primarily concerned with ensuring the efficient and totalizing process of urbanization.

Using Aureli's lens of the city, Washington, D.C., is one of the most sophisticated instances of *urbs* absorbing *civitas.* D.C.'s "bad infinity"[3] of endless urbanization does have limits in the form of height regulations on buildings and a finite boundary. The city cannot, as many American cities have, expand geographically to incorporate suburbs or satellite cities. D.C.'s strategies for expansion become a project of metabolization, of consuming old urban forms to make way for the new. D.C.'s political relationship with the federal government is at best custodial and at worst authoritarian. Washington, D.C.'s residents, until the Home Rule Act of 1973, were under complete legislative authority from the federal government. The Home Rule Act gave D.C.'s citizens limited municipal representation through both a mayor and a council. D.C. does not have representation in

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[2] Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, Writing Architecture Series (MIT press, 2011), 7–8.
[3] Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, 16–17.

Congress but does possess three electors for the Presidential election as of 1961 and the ratification of the 23rd Amendment. D.C.'s government articulates how the Home Rule Act does not provide autonomy:

> "Under the Home Rule government, however, Congress reviews all legislation passed by the Council before it can become law and retains authority over the District's budget. Also, the President appoints the District's judges, and the District still has no voting representation in Congress."[4]

D.C.'s city council gives representation without true authority or agency in the decision-making process. Without true *civitas*, the economic forces of the city are unhindered by law or regulation that comes from the city's community. In this way, D.C. is completely subject to economy and urbanization, evidenced by the vast wealth gap. The D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI) links the city's inequity to its lack of statehood. The DCFPI reported in 2022 that "0.4% of tax units in D.C. have near 50% of all wealth."[5] Five years prior, they reported that "D.C. had the highest income inequality in the country."[6]

Part of the reason that D.C. lacks representation is that its disenfranchisement is by design. The Founders did not want D.C. to be responsible for itself; instead, the federal government gave Congress authority over the capital. The Founders intentionally located D.C. on a *tabula rasa* to avoid the politics of extant cities. Despite this, Peter Charles L'Enfant spoke of a "capital of this vast Empire…. That aggrandizement…. Which the increase of the wealth of the nation will permit."[7] George Washington was a land surveyor and by the end of his life, had amassed 52,000 acres of land

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[4] Council of the District of Columbia, "D.C. Home Rule," Government website, *dccouncil.gov*, n.d., https://dccouncil.gov/dc-home-rule/.
[5] Erica Williams, "DC's Extreme Wealth Concentration Exacerbates Racial Inequality, Limits Economic Opportunity," Non-Profit Organization, *D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute*, October 20, 2022, https://dcfpi.org/all/dcs-extreme-wealth-concentration-exacerbates-racial-inequality-limits-economic-opportunity-2/.
[6] Minahil Naveed, "Income Inequality in DC Highest in the Country," Non-Profit Organization, *D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute*, December 15, 2017, https://dcfpi.org/all/income-inequality-dc-highest-country-2/.
[7] Joseph R. Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries: A History in Maps and Images* (Monacelli Press, 2004), 19.

from his extensive pursuits in land speculation.[8] L'Enfant's strategy of urbanizing the capital aligned with Washington's desire to transform the city into a profitable speculation, and so he appointed him as assistant to the surveyor, Andrew Ellicott.[9]

Thomas Jefferson had a different vision for the capital than Washington and L'Enfant. Historian Tom Lewis postulates that L'Enfant's appointment bothered Jefferson. The anti-federalist devised a simple and small-town grid for the plan of the capital, and L'Enfant designed a Baroque city of magnificent proportions.[10] Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body." American studies scholar David Schuyler points out that Jefferson's disdain for cities was because he "associated the propertyless laborer with economic dependence." In Jefferson's view, the workingmen were the source of moral degradation in cities. He believed the United States should be an agrarian economy to combat the issue of cities. Schuyler claims that "the magnificence of L'Enfant's plan disguises the way in which the city plan embodies this ambivalent attitude toward urban life." For most of the 19th century, the City of Washington remained a small town surrounded by plantations. The city forewent the most integral aspects of a modern city and served only the functions of a capital. Schuyler ultimately argues how the project of Washington, D.C. was influential to American urban planning, promoting agrarian society above an urbanized one.[11]

Jefferson understood the many of the flaws of the 18th century city. But as an enslaver, he sought a return to a kind of feudal society to avoid urbanization, arguing that a nation of plantations would be better for the American spirit. If Washington and L'Enfant designed a *city*, Jefferson only

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[8] Tom Lewis, *Washington: A History of Our National City* (Basic Books, 2015), 11–12.
[9] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 18.
[10] Tom Lewis, *Washington: A History of Our National City* (Basic Books, 2015), 20–21.
[11] Schuyler, "Flawed Visions: The Lessons of Washington and New York," 13-17.

wanted a *capital*—given the important role these two Founders have posthumously play in Washington, this tension would endure within the city until the 21st century. For its first 70 years, the City of Washington was a barebones town for a plutocracy whose primary purpose was administering laws regarding the nation's primary mode of production: chattel slavery.

The Civil War and the 13th Amendment altered labor relationships in the United States, which in turn changed the structures of cities. Additionally, the growing industry in the United States concentrated populations away from rural life and towards centralized manufacturing. People moved to cities looking for employment, especially formerly enslaved African and Black Americans. Immigration from Europe also increased population density. While D.C. was never an industrial city, it now had its own unique industry: a larger federal government. By the turn of the century, the federal government recognized itself as a growing imperial power on the world stage that needed the image of the capital L'Enfant invoked in his plan from one-hundred years prior (Fig. 2). L'Enfant articulated his planning strategy:

> "by making real distances less from place to place, by giving them reciprocity of sight and by making them thus seemingly connected, promote a rapid settlement over the whole extend, rendering those even of the most remote parts an addition to the principal, which without the help of these, were any such settlement attempted, it would be languid, and lost in the extend, and become detrimental to the establishment."[12]

L'Enfant's design strategy predicted an urbanization dependent on the vision of American democracy. Long diagonal boulevards would tether the city's residents to a central capital, which would inspire further expansion. His plan invokes national pride as the engine to power urbanization. The City Beautiful movement, embodied by the McMillan Plan, adopted L'Enfant's plan through a different strategy; rather utilize national identity *for* urbanization, the McMillan

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[12] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 22.

strategy created a National Mall to *escape* urbanization. Instead of responding to the city, the McMillan Plan created a Capital functionally segregated from the city.

The McMillan Plan (Fig. 3) aimed to establish a national identity that legitimized the United States as a powerful Empire worthy of international trust and a descendant of Western civilization. While interested in the conditions of the city itself, City Beautiful was more interested in creating a capital that would embody a particular image on the world stage. The McMillan Plan reappropriated the city's core into a magnificent, grand capital, functionally segregated from the *urbs*, as a magnificent refuge from the chaos of the city. The National Mall was a location where foreign and domestic visitors could marvel at the empire of the United States, removed from a city and transplanted into a vast, impressive monument.

Architectural theorist Lawrence Vale discusses how capital building constructs national identity. Design at the governmental scale is an exercise of power, producing architecture of what Vale calls "national identity." He argues that "national identity is really much more about three other related concepts: international identity, sub-national identity, and personal identity." The state forms an international identity to legitimize itself on the world stage; "dominant culture" forms a sub-national identity; individuals embed personal identity within the state.[13] The McMillan plan sought to represent Washington, D.C. as an imperial power on the world stage, spatialize American power through its historical legacy, and embody the Beaux-Arts ethos in the United States—all in an effort to legitimize America as a worthy rival to European hegemony.

If L'Enfant's design, realized through the McMillan plan, communicates American power, urbanism in Washington, D.C. exemplifies how America achieved its power through exploitation and capital accumulation. Historian and urban theorist Spiro Kostof describes L'Enfant's school of

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[13] Lawrence J. Vale, "Capital Architecture and National Identity," in *Power and Architecture: The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space*, ed. Michael Minkenberg, Space and Place, volume 12 (Berghahn Books, 2014), 32.

planning as the culmination of the Baroque, or what he terms "The Grand Manner." Kostof postulates L'Enfant's ideology:

> "L'Enfant thinks of… natural features in relation to public buildings and their hierarchy—the Capitol, the President's House, the Supreme Court, and a number of lesser ones which he sees scattered across the site. And then he sees these buildings connected to each other grandly. In between is urban fill: a grid there would do fine."[14]

The "urban fill," unconsidered from L'Enfant to McMillan, spatially relegated the working underclass of the city, most of whom were either immigrants or descendants of enslaved Africans. Architect and historian Joseph Passoneau argues that L'Enfant's "unusual development pattern" created interior alleys, which were in "degraded condition" because of government neglect of the material conditions of their occupants, most of whom were Black residents.[15] Under Jim Crow, Southern senators referred to these residents as "alley dwellers," a racist euphemism to demoralize poor Black residents as depraved and crime-driven.

The federal government's systematic subjugation of the city has been justified through its history of racism that marginalizes and disenfranchises Black residents. The New School analyzed how race exacerbated wealth inequality in the National Capital during the Great Recession. The study concludes:

> "The 2007–09 Great Recession and housing crisis erased approximately half of Black and Latino households' wealth, while Asians suffered the largest absolute loss in wealth. Asian and Latino households tended to live in geographic areas that were hit hardest by the housing crisis."[16]

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[14] Spiro Kostof, ed., "The Grand Manner," in *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings through History*, 1. North American ed (Bulfinch Press, 1991), 209–210.
[15] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 76.
[16] Kilolo Kijakazi et al., *The Color of Wealth in the Nation's Capital*, Research Report (The New School Institute on Race, Power, and Political Economy, 2016), https://colorofwealth.org/washington-dc/.

The wealth inequality in D.C. is explicitly racial, and the neoliberal economics that produced the 2008 recession exacerbated this issue. As of 2026, a plurality of D.C.'s residents are Black. The DCFPI reports that "In DC, white households have 81 times the wealth of Black households and 22 times the wealth of Latinx households."[17] This injustice will not change unless fiscal policy in D.C. changes, but D.C. does not have control over its taxes or budget.

In August 2025, Donald Trump asserted his authority over the National Guard to deploy troops onto the city's streets (Fig. 4). He declared: "I'm announcing a historic action to rescue our nation's capital from crime, bloodshed, bedlam, and squalor and worse"; "this is liberation day in DC, and we're going to take our capital back," which has been "taken over by violent gangs and bloodthirsty criminals" as well as "drugged-out maniacs and homeless people." His Chief of Staff, Stephen Miller, claimed D.C. "is more violent than Baghdad, it is more violent than parts of Ethiopia, and parts of many of the most dangerous places in the world." These statements, of course, disregard statistical analyses showing that D.C. has hit its lowest crime levels in 30 years. Trumpism's rhetoric is not genuinely concerned with D.C.'s safety; its real aim is to portray racial diversity as a threat to the image of white nationalist America.

Trumpism's cultural agenda can best be described as a form of extremist nationalism derived from Western notions of individualism and white racial superiority. Vale defines nationalism through its various modes:

> "Nationalism can often be about devotion to some subnational portion of a pluralist nation-state that is attempting to harness and discipline many constituent nations within it. nationalism can also be counterposed to international… Finally, nationalism may denote "aspirations for national independence in a country under foreign domination."[18]

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[17] Williams, "DC's Extreme Wealth Concentration Exacerbates Racial Inequality, Limits Economic Opportunity."
[18] Vale, "Capital Architecture and National Identity," 34.

Trumpism utilizes the various modes of nationalism that Vale outlines. Trumpism embodies the sub-national identity of the white-working class, the international identity of the United States as a world superpower, and simultaneously, a nation that is a victim of the evils of foreign, particularly non-Western, influence. The result of Trumpist nationalism is a perspective that the United States must return to a homogenous heritage to triumph against evil. Trumpism is using Washington, D.C. as a battleground to embody the right-wing nationalist mythology of American heritage.

Politics regarding the city of Washington, D.C. have been less about the organization of people for laws (*civitas*) and regulation and more about the coordination of property and people for profit (*urbs)*. What makes D.C. a particular site for economic hegemony is the city's complete removal from the democratic process, alongside its people's history of slavery and exploitation. The result is a city with vast economic and racial inequality and little voice in any plans the federal government has for it. This inequality produced a city that needs both autonomy and fiscal policy to address its conditions. Instead, it is only experiencing further authoritarianism from the current federal government under Donald Trump. The capital has always been a didactic symbol for the image of the United States, and in the last one-hundred years has come to represent the realization of Western power. The built environment of the nation's capital is a fundamental paradox: it represents, but does not experience, democracy.

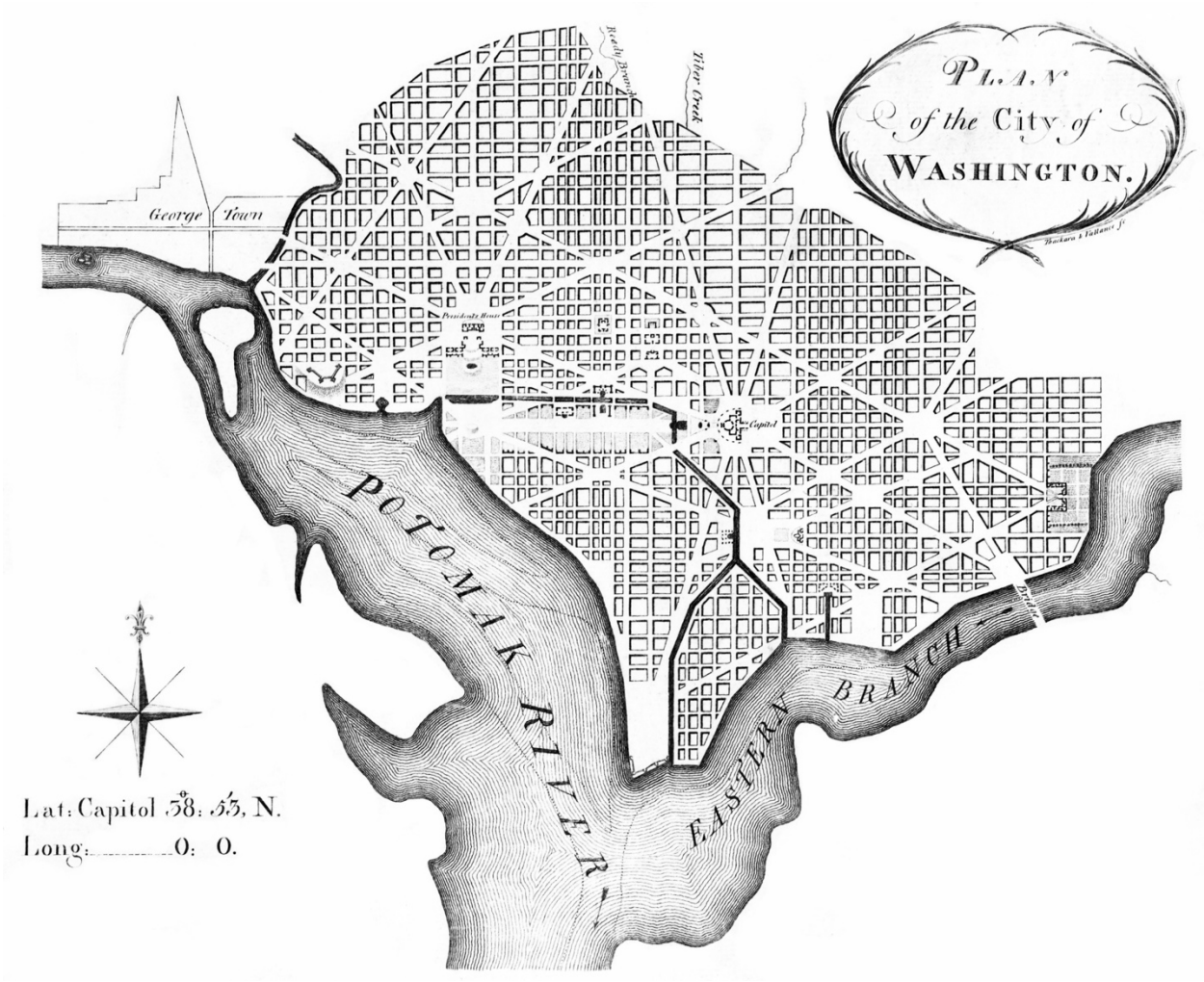


*Figure 2. Peter Charles L'Enfant, Plan of the City of Washington, D.C., 1792. Library of Congress.*

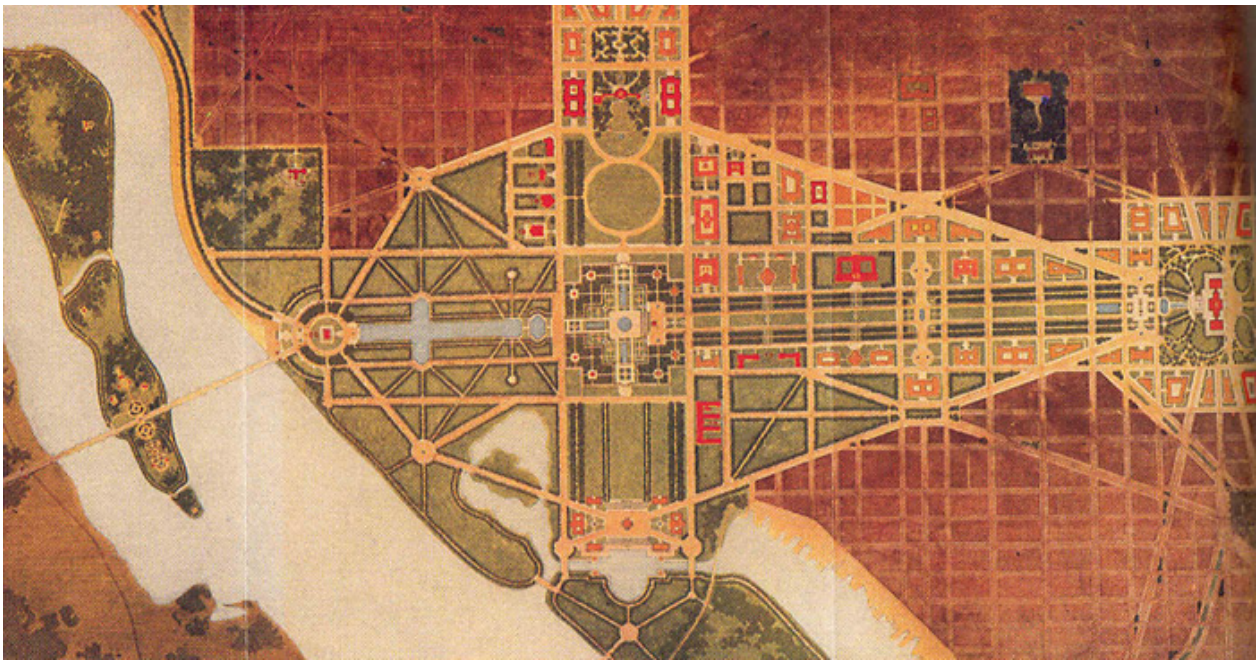

*Figure 3. Daniel Burnham, Charles McKim, and Frederick Law Olmstead Jr, McMillan Plan, 1902. Library of Congress.*

*Figure 4. J. Scott Applewhite, Associated Press. National Guardsmen at the Entrance of Union Station. August 2025.*

## Chapter 2: EXECUTING HERITAGE

In August 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed an Executive Order titled "Make Federal Architecture Beautiful Again," following two previous Executive Orders titled "Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture," which Trump authorized in December 2020 and January 2025. This most recent iteration of decrees that "architecture — particularly traditional and classical architecture — … is the preferred architecture for applicable federal public buildings."[19] This mandate is a stark departure from previous legislation discussing federal architecture, particularly the Guiding Principles of Federal Architecture written by Senator Patrick Moynihan and authorized by President John F. Kennedy in 1962. This document states that "the development of an official style must be avoided. Design must flow from the architectural profession to the Government, and not vice versa."[20]

"Make Federal Architecture Beautiful Again" can be problematized in three ways. The first and most evident issue with decreeing a national style is that it renders architecture as mere symbolism. Federal architecture cannot be, in the Trump Administration, a design process. Rather, it must conform to anachronistic architectural style, and the ability to design within those limits comes secondary. Architecture at the federal level is thus not a site of discourse, but a subjugated performance of symbolism. Secondarily, the order, ironically, resists the forces of capitalism that drive architectural production. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) opposes the order, one of those reasons being that "the presidential-notification requirement adds bureaucratic hurdles that will delay projects, increase costs, and create an unnecessary barrier that eliminates many meaningful

[19] Making federal Architecture Beautiful Again, 14344 Executive Order (2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/08/making-federal-architecture-beautiful-again/.
[20] Office of the Chief Architect, "Vision+Voice: Volume 1," *Design Excellence in federal Architecture: Building a Legacy* (Washington, D.C.) 1 (December 2002): 5.

design options."[21] This may seem contradictory for an administration that supports laissez-faire economic policy, but as I argue, the desire to limit the ability of federal architecture to speak to capitalism's all-encompassing structure is aligned with the conservative project. Thirdly, the order reduces the history of federal architecture in Washington, D.C. as a site of consensus, ignoring how architecture in the capital reifies struggles between political ideologies.

In discussing the aesthetics of Trumpism in Washington, D.C., it is difficult not to mention the militarized takeover of the Capitol on January 6th 2021. I would therefore like to use this chapter to complicate the Capitol building's design history, lending to an analysis of January 6th. I will use the Capitol building to synthesize how the desired result of this executive order is twofold: (1) to depoliticize architecture and (2) to aestheticize politics. First, I will contextualize how Trump's Executive Order depoliticizes architecture, aligning with the policies that alt-right conservatism supports. Then, I will examine, through the lens of Walter Benjamin's writing on the *aestheticization of politics,* how Trumpism utilizes the mediated image of architecture as a symbolic object to participate in his economic project of wealth concentration. Finally, I will synthesize these two arguments to showcase how the professed goals of Trumpism's architectural project are maximizing profit through indirect and direct actions of architectural policy. Trumpism's antagonism towards architecture as a form is both a threat to democracy and a threat to architecture, and this threat is being manifested in the nation's capital.

## Depoliticizing Architecture

In "Can Architecture Be Political," Pier Vittorio Aureli positions the symbolic capabilities of architecture as non-political. Aureli defines political as "the possibility of conflict." If architecture is understood as a universal public good, invoking unanimity and consensus, then architecture cannot

[21] American Institute of Architects, "AIA Statement on federal Architecture Executive Order," Official Statement, September 2, 2025, https://www.aia.org/about-aia/press/aia-statement-federal-architecture-executive-order.

be political because it eliminates conflict. But ultimately, Aureli argues that "architecture is always political." This is for two reasons: architecture organizes labor and "presumes a subject and responds to the ways in which subjects are being governed."[22] I would like to take on this lens to analyze the form of the Capitol building to understand how the political—the possibility of conflict—is dealt with in the Capitol's design, not only to complicate the conservative perspective on neoclassicism, but also to address Trumpism's goal of depoliticizing architecture.

The Capitol Building faced numerous iterations in the first 60 years of the nation: its existing form is not one the Founders knew. Washington and Jefferson intended for federal buildings to connect the American republic to Athens and Rome, however loosely, to assert its legitimacy. Jefferson, in his request to L'Enfant for a design proposal for the Capitol, asked "I should prefer the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity, which have had the approbation of thousands of years."[23] Lawrence Vale discusses how Jefferson's values were less interested in strict interpretations of Ancient Greek and Roman temples, and more in utilizing a "broad symbolic scheme" to emulate European architecture for legitimacy on the global stage.

L'Enfant refused to cooperate, and the Commissioners of the City organized an anonymous competition for the design of the Capitol and the White House, with Jefferson submitting his own design for the latter. Amateur architect William Thornton was chosen after the competition closed, but the commissioners kept the original winner, Stephen Hallet, who was hired to execute the design. The original Capitol design can be understood as an adaptation of the Pantheon, an imperial Roman temple dedicated to the Gods, reflecting a cross-continental neoclassical movement (Fig. 5). The United States, allied with France during the American Revolution, chose to follow French

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[22] Pier Vittorio Aureli, "Can Architecture Be Political?," in *How Is Architecture Political?: Engaging Chantal Mouffe*, 1st ed., ed. Joseph Bedford (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2024), 33–34, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350263093.
[23] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 33.

Enlightenment architecture: Neoclassicism. However, as a capital with limited financial and industrial resources, the city's early architecture was poorly constructed. Additionally, the initial versions of the White House and the Capitol were modest in scale, which later proved problematic for the Nation's scale and the ability of such architecture to project power.

When Thomas Jefferson was elected President, he was determined to bring his expertise as an architect to the Nation's Capital. He dissolved the original commissioners of the City, who were federalists. He replaced William Thornton with architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who was a staunch enemy. Joseph R. Passonneau articulates that "seldom has a group of collaborators been as vitriolic as the designers of the capital's earliest public buildings."[24] Their conflict made construction impossible, and Capitol construction stalled further when British soldiers in the War of 1812 sacked the half-completed building. In 1818, President James Monroe hired Charles Bulfinch, a career architect educated in Europe. Unlike all his predecessors, he was both tactful and diplomatic. Bulfinch followed much of the original scheme but added a copper dome (Fig. 6) that was larger and distinct from the strict classicism of Latrobe and Thornton, who were displeased.[25]

By 1850, Congress desired the expansion of the Capitol building. An expanding nation meant expanding Congress, and President Millard Fillmore selected Thomas U. Walter as one of four architects for the Capitol. Walter designed two symmetrical chambers with prostyle fronts that formally separated the new facades from Thornton's original Greek temple front and dome. The building, now doubled in length, required a larger dome to balance the overall form (Fig 6). A larger dome also enabled the United States to demonstrate its technological capacity in structural engineering. Perhaps one of the most encoded aspects of Walter's neoclassical Capitol is that it is incredibly modern, utilizing all the tools made available from industrialization to design and build

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[24] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 40.
[25] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 30–41.

the form bigger, better, faster, and stronger. The prefabricated cast iron dome is covered and painted to shell the structure from visibility. Modern materials enabled the colossal architectural form of the Capitol Rotunda, one that is symbolically neoclassical but formally modern in scale and structure (Fig. 7). Passonneau describes the technological improvements made to the building in the 19th century --"steam heat in 1865, elevators in 1874, fireproofing in 1881, drainage in 1882."[26] The Capitol Building's classical form was less concerned with Democratic ideals and more with impressing power on its people and European nations. The result is a building that can be read as imagining democracy but practicing it in a fundamentally inegalitarian and hierarchical way. The building sits atop a hill on a plinth, with a towering dome that overlooks the city. Its solid and heavy form obscures the inner workings of the government from the American public. To use Vale's terminology, the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. is just one example of how civic architecture in the United States "promotes this dual sense of alienation and empowerment."[27]

Contemporary traditionalists aim to eliminate or repress conflict by idealizing Washington's symbolic state architecture to legitimize their position in the lineage of American history. Amateur right-wing architecture critic Justin Shubow claims in a post, "Make federal Architecture Great Again" on a conspiracist right-wing blog, *tomklingenstein.com*:

> "Classical architecture is not just about unparalleled aesthetic excellence; it is the architecture of American democracy, the style most associated with our system of government and our highest ideals, the architecture of civic virtue… we must preserve classical architecture most of all because it is ours. While there are other noble styles around the world, it is American classicism that is *our* heritage. It perpetuates and strengthens our wise system of government… America has only had

[26] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 47.
[27] Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, Second edition (Routledge, 2008), 8, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880921.

> one regime, a single Republic… In the face of those who wish to tear down that regime, we must protect and construct edifices that symbolize it."[28]

In this quote, Shubow reduces American identity to a revisionist history that rewrites the context of American classicism. Traditionalism promotes the notion of a dominant heritage, one that does not acknowledge the economic oppression and exploitative practices such a heritage produced. This narrative is also grounded in alarmist culture wars: this blog's main goal is combating "the war" against "the existential threat of the woke regime." America is under threat, and neoclassicism will exert power to return the nation to its former glory. No flaw can be acknowledged, and not all history is relevant. Traditionalists shamelessly legitimize the corrupt social, economic, and political order that Trumpism and its policies desire to maintain. This argument is not interested in the desires of Americans—it's true investment lies in continuing a hegemonic government that subjugates and exploits the American people.

During the First Trump administration, Justin Shubow was appointed as the Chief Commissioner for the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA). As of January 2026, Shubow was appointed as chairman of the Beautifying Transportation Infrastructure Council. Shubow has achieved status in the right-wing aestheticist landscape because he spearheads the National Civic Art Society (NCAS), whose primary objective is to produce a body of propaganda journalism that argues for a return to the classical in federal architecture. Shubow is a student of conservative philosophy who has claimed fame through his criticism of modernist federal architecture.[29]

His philosophy stems from an anti-modernist reactionary movement that began in the Thatcherite United Kingdom. Roger Scruton was the preeminent interlocutor between conservatism

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[28] Justin Shubow, "Make America Beautiful Again," *Tomklingenstein.Com*, August 21, 2024, https://tomklingenstein.com/make-america-beautiful-again/.
[29] Justin Shubow, "I Am Justin Shubow," Personal Blog, *Justin Shubow*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://shubow.com/.

and architecture in the United Kingdom. He inspired much of the philosophical foundation that traditionalists rely on to justify their position on architecture in a world increasingly embracing modernity. To further illuminate Roger Scruton's position, I would like to look backward at a journal article titled "English Conservatism and the Aesthetics of Architecture" written in 1985 by sociologist Michael Rustin. Rustin analyzes Scruton's book, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, to argue that Scruton:

> "Rejects a representational view of art… as inapplicable to architecture. This severing of any specific connection between architecture and other forms of experience which it might be held to symbolise leads him to an exclusive concern with architectural traditions and the sense of propriety and style that make them meaningful. Architecture tends to become, in his detailed argument, an autonomous object of aesthetic understanding, since all definite connections with other forms of experience are rejected as reductionist. The elements of value in society are held to lie within these traditions, and modernism is rejected because of its break with these, but also from hostility to the contemporary social values and qualities of experience to which it has sought to give expression."[30]

The position of architectural conservativism rejects the ability of *form* to construct and politicize space. In essence, it aims to depoliticize architecture as a constitutive agent in the organization of society. Instead, architecture is reduced to decontextualized symbolism that emblematizes the greatness of Western tradition, depoliticizing architecture's political form. It is precisely this perspective on architecture that Trumpism is adopting through the return to the classical. Trumpism is using architecture to symbolize its regressive political agenda, while denying architecture the ability to be political.

Architectural conservativism positions modernism as despotic and authoritarian, equating modernism with modernity and its driver, capitalism. Rather than critiquing modernism, this

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[30] Michael Rustin, "English Conservativism and the Aesthetics of Architecture," *Radical Philosophy* 040 (Summer 1985), https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/english-conservatism-and-the-aesthetics-of-architecture.

philosophy rejects modernism in its entirety. For traditionalists, modernism is a wound in Western history that must be forgotten, not reclaimed or learned from. Many of the problems conservatism attributes to modern architecture—elitism within the profession, structural issues, bad design—are issues in architecture writ-large. The architectural establishment deserves interrogation, but state-mandated classicism is not a solution to problems of contemporary architectural practice. A real solution to these issues would require democratizing the organization of architectural labor, investing research towards building design, and focusing on community-driven design-policy. Traditionalism has no real desire to restructure architectural labor, and only critiques such a system as a rhetorical argument for their agenda. Conservative architecture conflates pro-traditionalism as anti-elite, despite all styles of architecture in the United States being subject to similar economic forces.

Part of Trumpism's strategy to depoliticize architecture to an "autonomous object of aesthetic understanding" is delegitimizing and therefore depoliticizing the modern architect. Danish newspaper *Politiken* quotes Justin Shubow as saying that "he was never brainwashed by architecture school."[31] Shubow lambasts modern architectural education as self-interested and detached from the average American. By aligning architects with the elite, this argument disingenuously aligns people like Shubow, who holds a J.D. from Yale Law, with anti-elitism. The licensed architect, unlike President Donald Trump, who has amassed some billion dollars since taking office in 2025, makes on average $96,690 per year as of 2024.[32] Even if Americans prefer traditional federal architecture, that does not make traditionalism any less elitist or wealth-driven. The attempt to delegitimize architecture as an elite and anti-American practice should ring alarm bells for architects and all

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[31] Lewis, *Washington*, 39.
[32] Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook: Architecture and Engineering*, Occupational Outlook Handbook (U. S. Department of Labor, n.d.), accessed April 13, 2026, https://www.bls.gov/ooh/architecture-and-engineering/home.htm.

educated professionals who are somehow portrayed as the perpetrators, rather than participants or subjects, in the totality of corrupt American governance and its pro-profit interests.

While Shubow is careful to avoid arguing that his goals are not political, he claims that the American public does not see architecture as a political issue.[33] His argument is grounded in the 2020 Harris Poll that the NCAS commissioned (Fig. 9). The poll's methodology compares two federal architecture buildings, one "traditional" and one "modern," "to ask the American public which building they prefer."[34] The poll concludes that Americans prefer traditional architecture for federal buildings, no matter demographic or social position. Shubow uses this Poll to argue that Americans prefer classical architecture because they prefer *beautiful* architecture. However, what this poll really indicates is how architects and architectural journalism has failed to communicate architectural meaning to the public beyond the symbolic. Traditionalist rhetoric successfully exploits this crux of the field of modern architecture.

In Washington, D.C., much of the classical federal architecture has been detached from its context, production, and form. Lawrence Vale notes:

> "In the United States, citizens are socialized to regard the most prominent neoclassical edifices of Washington as the reassuring symbols of such concepts as 'equal justice under the law' and government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people.'"[35]

For an American public disenchanted with their federal government, the symbolic architecture of the Capitol Building, the Supreme Court, and the White House anesthetizes anxieties regarding the state of American democracy.

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[33] Anders Tornsø Jørgensen, "He Hates Brutalism – and Loves Trump's Architecture Executive Order," *Politiken* (Copenhagen, Denmark), September 15, 2025, https://politiken.dk/kultur/arkitektur/art10541136/Han-hader-brutalismen-%E2%80%93-og-elsker-Trumps-arkitekturdekret.
[34] National Civic Art Society, *Americans' Preferred Architecture for federal Buildings*, Poll results (The Harris Poll, 2020).
[35] Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 7.

*Architecture, Media, Populism... and Violence* is a collection of essays that interrogates the event of January 6th to understand how symbolic architecture stages sociocultural issues. In this collection, Peggy Deamer and Ian Volner assess "Architecture Journalism and the Proto-Political" to argue that the popular understanding of architecture is often apolitical because architectural journalism is "proto-political," rarely engaging with architecture's political nature. Deamer and Volner articulate this through Walter Benjamin's analysis in "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production" on the "tactile" and "optical reception of architecture." Benjamin argues that architecture is difficult to truly observe because, as Deamer and Volner articulate, "architecture is not consciously received because it is so pervasive; it resides in our subconscious." Ultimately, Deamer and Volner argue that architectural journalism is failing to communicate the politics of architecture in the contemporary times of Trumpism, because its criticism struggles to analyze how space is a political tool of architecture.[36]

Architecture is communicated not as spatially political, but as a symbolic object trapped in the politics of aesthetics. I argue that conservative critics such as Shubow take this to extremes, and since the liberal architectural media also tends to depoliticize architecture through its aesthetics, most criticism in mainstream journalism focuses on Shubow's *ideology* rather than his *methodology*, which fails to assess the spatial politics of architecture.

Assessing the Capitol Building, I argued that the building's symbolic or interpretive meaning contrasts with how its form constructs and spatializes politics. The monolithic, grand form speaks to an immutable authority that the public must revere, even though its occupants, Congress, are elected officials who represent the public. The Capitol Building does not formally engage the public in governance; rather, it does so by invoking awe. This sense of alienation is, in part, what drove the

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[36] Graham Cairns, ed., *Architecture, Media, Populism... and Violence: Reification and Representation II* (Routledge, 2023), 125–26, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003272076.

Capitol riot on January 6th. Trumpism sees architecture's capacity for public alienation and submission as beneficial to its project. Trumpism's traditionalists rewrite history and condemn modern architecture, censuring its formal legibility and endorsing architecture as a symbolic object with no other capacity. Trumpism's goal is thus to depoliticize architecture.

## Aestheticizing Politics

Trumpism and Trump himself cultivate a particular imaginary through media; one increasingly tied to architecture. The insurrection of January 6th, 2021 provides a lens to understand how Trumpism as an authoritarian movement "aestheticizes politics." Walter Benjamin, exiled in Paris and in observation of the Third Reich and Mussolini, wrote of the "Aestheticization of Politics" in his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

> "Fascism seeks to organize the newly emerged proletarianized masses without touching the property relations that those masses are so urgently trying to abolish. Fascism sees its salvation in allowing the masses to find their voice (not of course to receive their due). The masses have a right to see the ownership structure changed: Fascism seeks to give them a voice in retaining that structure unaltered. *Fascism leads logically to an aestheticization of political life… All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That point is war.*"[37]

Before I address Trumpism's aestheticization of politics, I would first like to address the question: is Trumpism a form of fascism? Davis Markus in *Notes on Trumpspace* discusses this semantics by articulating how fascism expresses itself in a multitude of ways, but it is the underlying core reasons that produce fascism that allow it to be an identifiable movement, and Trumpism meets all the criteria in that regard.[38] Regarding architecture, Trumpism takes on fascist aesthetics because it utilizes symbolic meaning to express a culture war narrative where American values are under threat.

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[37] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J. A. Underwood (1936; Penguin Books, 2018), 36.
[38] David Markus, *Notes on Trumpspace: Politics, Aesthetics, and the Fantasy of Home* (punctum books, 2023), 136–39.

Donald Trump campaigns against multiculturalism, arguing that the fall of the American Empire is due to an increased heterogeneity amongst the American people. Alarmist narratives argue that Americans are struggling because of non-Western influence and a deviation from Christian values, manifested in racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny. Trump's intentions for the national capital are also about retaliating against the previous federal government's adoption of America's multicultural identity. Lawrence Vale articulates how "nationalist movements begin as struggles *against* the state, but, if they succeed, they suddenly have to *become* the state themselves."[39] For architecture conservatives, the buildings of the post-war period emblematize the oppression of Western architectural tradition in favor of a universal modernism deployed worldwide. But now that Trumpism has become the state, the federal government can make sweeping changes to architecture to aestheticize cultural fearmongering through belittling modernism and promoting American classicism. Trumpism deploys the strategy of aestheticizing politics to both organize and empower its base through a "culture war" narrative rather than one that addresses their socioeconomic position. Trumpism has "given a voice" to the white working class through the aesthetics of the culture war so that Trump can "retain that structure unaltered," that structure being laissez-faire capitalism.

There is perhaps no better synecdoche of Trumpism's aestheticization of politics than the storming of the National Capitol (Fig. 10). January 6th was an event that utilized the modern media landscape to propagandize the spectacle of a war against Congress. Jeffery Kruth, in his essay in *Architecture, Media, Populism... and Violence,* discusses how Trump supporters "enact the visual aesthetics of… consensus." He states:

> "Right-wing movements foreground their relationship with state power as a form of reifying consensus. They do so through two primary means: first by visual

[39] Vale, "Capital Architecture and National Identity," 35.

> resembling state power through military-style garb, and second through the relative display of comfort with which they occupy state buildings."[40]

The insurrectionists at the Capitol were not only creating a spectacle for their own enjoyment but emulating power and positioning themselves as heirs to the Founders' white America. The Capitol Building, a formal embodiment of the hegemony of consensus in American liberal democracy, serves as a weapon that Trump and his movement not only physically invade but also metaphorically claim.

In "Exit, Stage Right," Reinhold Martin states that the "threat issued by the NCAS is not to overthrow the state but to take over the theater."[41] But I would argue, in alignment with Benjamin, that the theater is instrumental in taking over the state, because it creates a spectacle for Trumpism's supporters to bask in, abstracting themselves from the communities they dehumanize: the disaffected American public can align themselves with triumph at the expense of their own material conditions. As Benjamin concludes, "humanity['s]… alienation from itself has reached a point where it now allows its own destruction to be savoured as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."[42]

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[40] Cairns, *Architecture, Media, Populism... and Violence*, 87.
[41] Reinhold Martin, "Exit, Stage Right," *Places Journal*, ahead of print, May 2021, https://doi.org/10.22269/210504.
[42] Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 38.

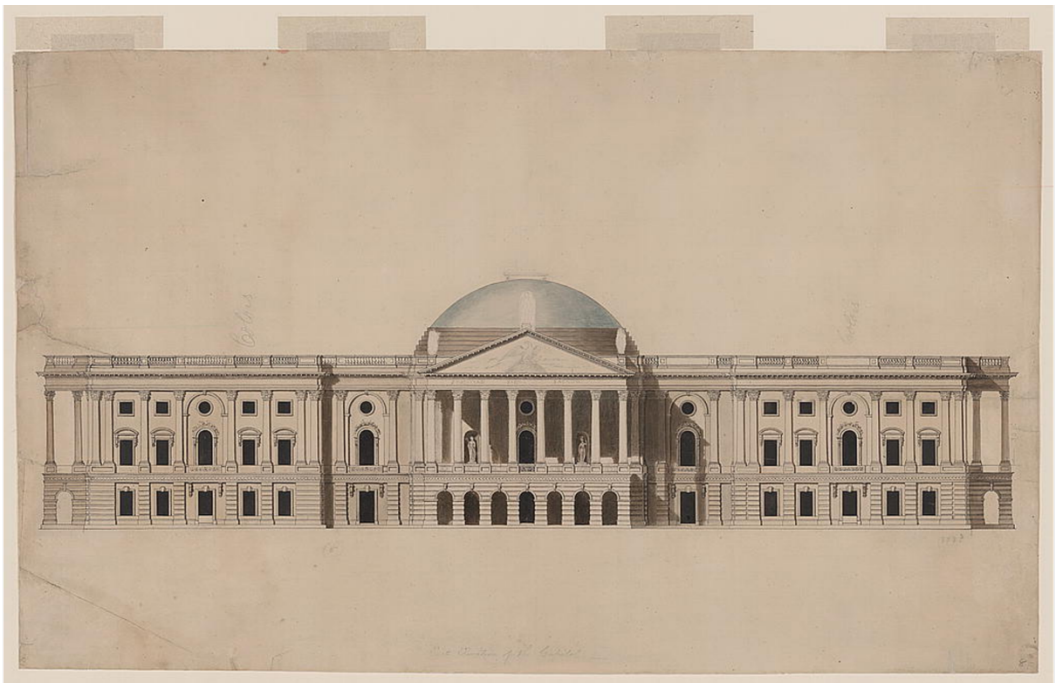

*Figure 5. William Thornton, Capitol Building, 1793. Library of Congress.*

*Figure 6. John Plumbe Jr., Daguerreotype, East front of the Capitol, 1846. Library of Congress.*


*Figure 7. Henry Sartain, Engraving, View of the United States Capitol, 1858. Library of Congress.*

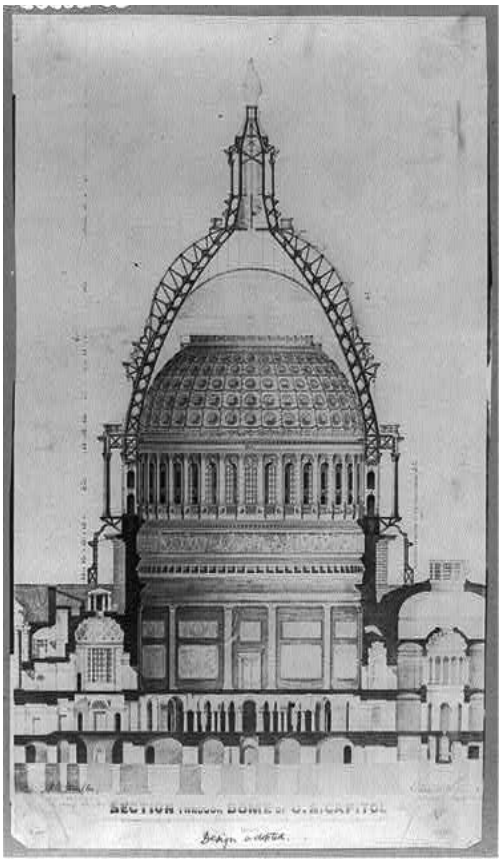

*Figure 8. Thomas U. Walter, Section of Capitol Dome, 1859. Library of Congress.*

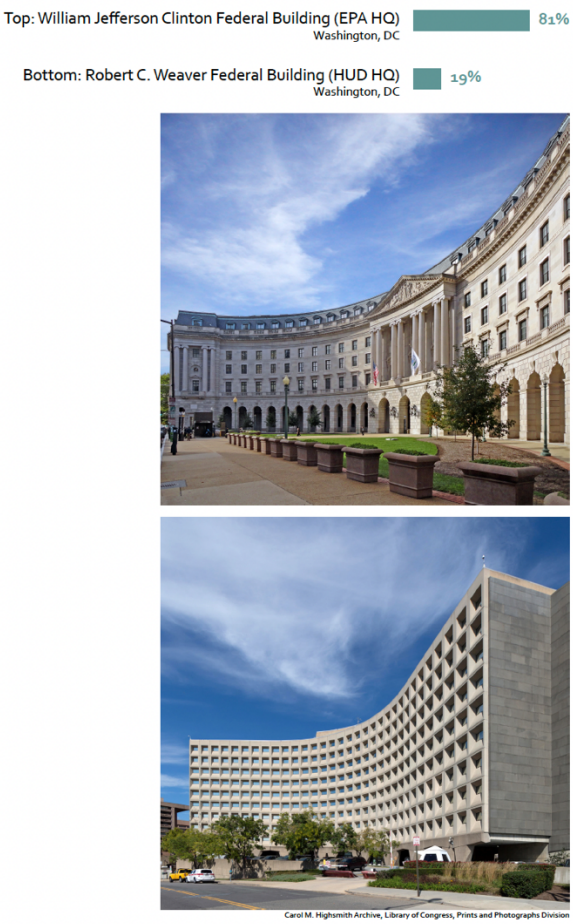


*Figure 9. Screenshot from NCAS Harris Poll, Americans' Preferred Architecture for federal Buildings, 2020.*


*Figure 10. Leah Mills/Reuters, Explosion from police munition at the Capitol Riot, January 6th, 2021.*

## Chapter 3: DEVELOPER CAPITAL

The National Civic Art Society (NCAS) created a documentary titled *Washington: The Classical City*. Stylized as a 20th-century documentary on public television, it was posted to YouTube in 2020. It tells a story of America's benevolent patriarchs who created a grand city for the greater public good, a grand city destroyed by the aesthetics of modernism. The film shifts to a dramatic, harrowing tone to argue that the post-war period and "modernist hegemony" have destroyed Washington, D.C.'s beauty. The film presents the Capital's modernist architecture as equally terrible; no distinction is made between, for example, I.M. Pei's West Wing of the National Gallery and the Department of Energy's James V. Forrestal Building.[43] This video, arguably a piece of propaganda, aims to rewrite the history of architecture and development in Washington, D.C., as an idyllic city destroyed by modernism.

Given the importance of D.C.'s heritage to the conservative architecture movement, I would like to further analyze the city's history as shaped by market forces and the accumulation of capital. I structure this chapter into three sections. The first section discusses how speculation and slavery were instrumental in the economic development of the nascent city of Washington. The second section discusses the McMillan Plan's real impetus: transforming the *image* of the city by erasing low-income Black neighborhoods. The final section on Southwest Urban Renewal provides a history of the Southwest and the goals and failures of urban renewal architecture, foregrounding Chapter 4.

[43] *Washington: The Classical City*, Documentary, directed by Tony Wrenn (National Civic Art Society, the), Youtube Video, 25:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LkKnhtOPnc.

## Speculation and Slavery

George Washington and Peter Charles L'Enfant devised a plan of magnificent proportions for the capital, and executing this plan came at the expense of the city. Residential areas for the working class were unregulated tenements, and Congress was, for a long time, uninterested in putting either time or money into maintaining the city. The popular imagination views the history of Washington, D.C., and its architecture as a manifestation of democratic values, a view the modern conservative movement has capitalized on. But constructing Washington was much more driven by the process of accumulating capital through land speculation, the institution of slavery, and exploitative labor practices grounded in systemic racism.

While Virginia and Maryland contributed small sums for construction, Congress was uninterested in allocating federal funds to the city, partly because there was no money available. Washington and his city commissioners thus turned to land speculators who were equally desperate for money. George Washington and most of the Founders built their wealth through land speculation and slavery, so he applied this strategy to the capital. Early D.C. speculators bet on a simple process: buy land with little value, expect it to appreciate, and then sell for a profit. But it wasn't exactly a safe bet, since the federal government had no other funds to boost land value through surrounding development. Three land speculators—James Greenleaf, Robert Morris, and John Nicholson—acquired 40 percent of the best lots and gambled at the government's urging. As Tom Lewis writes, "land acquisition and financing became an elaborate shell game." Early D.C. speculators cared only about profit, leading to bitter conflicts with little benefit for the federal government.

Slavery was a much more profitable speculation; transforming people into property was a seemingly infinite and infinitely violent way of extracting surplus value. In April 1792, the Commissioners of the city, themselves enslavers, passed a resolution that allowed for the use of

enslaved labor for the construction of Washington, D.C.. By 1798, half of the labor force for the construction of the Capitol Building and the White House were enslaved Africans (Fig. 11).[44] The most important temples of democracy, the Capitol Building and the White House, constructed American legitimacy through architectural form. Without the exploitation of enslaved laborers, the government lacked the capital to construct these buildings. Therefore, slavery was instrumental in developing the new capital in a similar way that slavery was instrumental for a powerful national economy.

Historian Tom Lewis titles the fifth chapter of his book *Washington* "The Bifurcated Southern National City."[45] He argues that the six decades prior to the Civil War, the capital was a distinctly Southern city due to the practice of slavery, despite northern abolitionists in Congress pushing against the practice. During this time, the city saw the construction of the Washington Monument and a new Capitol Building, both of which used enslaved labor.

In 1846, Congress retroceded D.C.'s land south of the Potomac to Virginia, to give slave owners in D.C. an escape from a growing abolitionist movement. Simultaneously, the invention of the cotton gin and the proliferation of slavery in the Deep South changed the structure and relationship of slavery. Enslavers in Washington, D.C. saw the sale of their slaves to the Deep South as an economic opportunity. Additionally, what Lewis calls "speculators in human flesh" captured several thousand free Black residents of D.C. and elsewhere in the mid-Atlantic South to enslave and sell them to Deep South plantation owners.[46] Nat Turner's revolt in Southern Virginia alarmed many enslavers. In Washington, the widow of William Thornton—the architect of the White House and Capitol Building—was attacked in her sleep by an individual she had enslaved, Arthur Bowen.

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[44] Lewis, *Washington*, 51-52.
[45] Lewis, *Washington*, 117–18.
[46] Lewis, *Washington*, 134–37.

This revolt against Anna Maria Thornton emboldened approximately 300-400 whites who congregated as a lynching mob and attacked black freedmen and their property.[47] These events pushed white Southern enslavers in Congress to be even more vitriolic in their legislation, invoking further restrictions on both free and enslaved Black Americans.

L'Enfant's grandiose plan, rendered into an agrarian plantation by Jefferson and his fellow Democratic Republicans, left most of the city undeveloped or neglected. While Jefferson's vision prevailed in the short term, the United States government was discovering the effect of maintaining an undeveloped capital in a growing imperial age. Visitors to the city, both foreign and domestic, found themselves displeased at the state of the town. Charles Dickens devotes Chapter VIII in *American Notes* to a scathing critique of Washington, D.C. after his 1842 visit:

> "Spacious avenues, that begin in nothing, and lead nowhere; streets, mile-long, that only want houses, roads and inhabitants; public buildings that need but a public to be complete; and ornaments of great thoroughfares, which only lack great thoroughfares to ornament—are its leading features."[48]

The Civil War created a paradigm shift for Washington, D.C.. For one, the Civil War destroyed D.C.'s landscape, which was already suffering from 60 years of congressional neglect. Proponents of Western expansion were also interested in relocating the Nation's Capital towards a more central location of the nation, so the state of the war-torn city was only further justification for relocation.[49] Those who desired the location of the capital to remain in Washington, D.C. utilized the federal government's newfound power to erect public buildings to legitimize the capital's location, most of which were not Neoclassical, but Richardsonian: the State, War and Navy Building, the Department of Agriculture, Library of Congress, Government and Printing Office,

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[47] Lewis, *Washington*, 130–33.
[48] Schuyler, "Flawed Visions: The Lessons of Washington and New York," 16.
[49] Lewis, *Washington*, 183-84.

Pension Building, Post Office Department, the National Museum, Botanical Garden, and the Army Medical Museum.[50]

In 1866, the federal government, in opposition to the city council that represented white landowners, gave the vote to black men in Washington, D.C.. The 1871 Organic Act subsequently stripped all D.C. residents of the vote and returned the power of choosing representatives to the President, creating a territorial government. The only vote D.C.'s residents retained was to vote in a House of Delegates that maintained nominal power. Following the Organic Act, Alexander Robey Shepard, the leading political boss during the Gilded Age, was appointed by President Ulysses Grant as head of D.C.'s Board of Public Works (BPW). Shepard, known as the "Boss," employed sweeping urbanization strategies to transform D.C.'s infrastructure while sinking the city into considerable debt. Under the Boss, the BPW paved hundreds of miles of streets, installed 3,000 gas lamps, filled in the Washington City Canal, and planted 60,000 trees, all occurring between 1871 and 1874. Shepard's reign was financially haphazard for the city, and Congress retaliated to the city's accumulation of debt by completely dissolving the city's territorial government. Washington was not only disenfranchised but also lacked any codified government.[51]

[50] Lewis, *Washington*, 186.
[51] Lewis, *Washington*, 193–201.

## The White City

Shepard's public investment into the city laid the groundwork for private development. Millionaires of the Gilded Age saw opportunity for speculation and capitalized on a city which more than doubled in population between 1870 and 1890. The city attracted many Gilded Age plutocrats, Senator James McMillan of Michigan for one. Lewis describes McMillan as such:

> "McMillan's creed was laisse-faire capitalism and limited government; his religion was the Michigan Republican Party, which he bankrolled liberally, running its state committee like a well-oiled machine in one of his factories. He despised reformers, social and political, and championed self-reliant men who through hard work alone determined their destiny. For pleasure he read biographies of Napoleon."[52]

McMillan was a plutocrat who saw the political system as a device to develop industry within his state and ensure profit for railroad and telephone companies, as well as himself. He allied with the American Institute of Architects (AIA) through his assistant's connection with their secretary against a plan for the capital brewing within the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Together, McMillan and the AIA lobbied Congress to create the Senate Park Commission, which would infuse the Capital with the City Beautiful movement.[53]

The City Beautiful movement found its beginnings in Burnham's "White City" at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. Following the turn of the century, the White City referred to more than Washington, D.C.'s marble. President Woodrow Wilson administered Jim Crow segregationist policies that excluded Black residents from most positions they formerly held in the government. The federal budget consistently allocated significantly fewer funds to Black institutions, when compared to their white counterparts. Additionally, Violent white lynching mobs marked the summer of 1919, and in 1924 30,000 Klu Klux Klan members marched on the Nation's Capital.

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[52] Lewis, *Washington*, 248–49.
[53] Lewis, *Washington*, 248–51.

Meanwhile, the federal government was constructing the Lincoln Memorial, part of the McMillan Plan. Chief Justice William Taft's dedication to the memorial made no mention of emancipation or slavery, and the only Black American who participated in the event was Robert Russa Moton. Moton adopted Booker T. Washington's individualist perspective on race relations, which claimed that self-reliance and individualism would allow Black Americans to triumph.[54] This narrative ignored how slavery and Jim Crow systematically subjugated Black Americans to poverty, which the federal government maintained for the purpose of labor extraction.

The goal of City Beautiful was to transform the derelict American city into a beautiful, rational, efficient, and functional urban landscape. Following a period of Victorian Gothic architecture in D.C., the City Beautiful movement reinfused neoclassicism in Washington, to revive the ideals of the Founders, thereby once again positioning the United States in an architectural dialectic with European power. Senator James McMillan and his three commissioners, Daniel Burnham, Charles McKim, and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., returned to L'Enfant's original design to reorder the city into an image of American power. Functionally, the plan added rigidity to the city's urban fabric while incorporating modern sewage and transportation technology. The City Beautiful Movement embraced the industrial and technological advances of urban planning as a method to reform and cleanse the Mall. It demolished neighborhoods to produce a monumental grand axis that represented the power of American governance. The McMillan Plan buried the railroad on the mall, and Daniel Burnham's Union Station displaced 1,700 people and razed 300 homes. Additionally, the Beaux-arts Federal Triangle complex flattened a neighborhood called "Hooker's Division" or "Murder Bay," an area the federal government deemed blighted with disease and crime. Both neighborhoods were home to mostly low-income Black residents, who faced increasingly despotic

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[54] Lewis, *Washington*, 300–302.

conditions under Jim Crow.[55] In this sense, poor urban conditions were useful to the McMillan Plan, as it was easy to destroy these communities because their residents had no real agency to resist. Black neighborhoods, a product of their residents' systematic destitution, were deemed crime and disease-infested and destroyed. The McMillan Plan could transform Washington into a powerful representation of American national identity because slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow created neighborhoods that could be sacrificed under the justification of blight.

## Southwest Urban Renewal

The infilling of the Tiber or Washington Canal was perhaps the largest urban intervention during Alexander Robey Shepard's tenure.[56] While Washington envisioned his city as a commercial and manufacturing center, the economy of slavery and land speculation served as the engine for producing capital in Washington. The city's residents used the canal, part of L'Enfant's original plan, for trash and sewage disposal. The removal of the canal from the urban fabric transformed the Southwest neighborhood. Known previously as "the island," it was a low-income neighborhood home to both enslaved and free African Americans.[57] Following the Civil War and the filling of the canal, the Southwest flourished as a locus for formerly enslaved Black citizens. The region's population doubled from 1860 to 1900, with a nearly 20% increase in Black residents. Continuously marginalized by racist economics and segregation, the neighborhood's residents were poor and forced to live in overcrowded and often unsanitary alleys, but maintained a tight-knit community: Passonneau describes the alley residences as "small villages."[58] But infilling the canal attracted wealthier white residents who resided in newly built rowhomes in segregated enclaves. By 1905, the

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[55] Lewis, *Washington*, 237-238, 251–57.
[56] Lewis, *Washington*, 197.
[57] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 55.
[58] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 93.

population of the Southwest peaked at 35,000 residents, but swiftly declined due to the area's commercialization brought forth by the McMillan plan. Federal agencies encroached upon the Southwest, razing townhomes for the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, designed in the City Beautiful movement. The wealthier white residents soon departed as conditions worsened. What resulted was a low-income black neighborhood that the federal government neglected, refusing to address the community's complaints.[59]

Following World War II, the population of Washington, D.C. decreased from 800,000 in 1950 to 756,000 in 1970 and continued to decline until the year 2000. In D.C.'s suburbs in Maryland and Virginia, the population soared from 200,000 to 1.7 million between 1940 and 1970.[60] What is canonically termed "white flight," many white middle-class Americans left the inner city after desegregation. Suburbs in Virginia and Maryland were now creating satellite cities that depended on Washington, D.C. for the pull of living in the region, but did not directly contribute to Washington, D.C.'s economy. The federal government was desperate to reattract families to the city. The next planning movement in D.C., urban renewal, would utilize the masterplan strategy of the City Beautiful Movement to reform through demolition and reconstruction. However, an increasingly liberal government was interested in the economic prospects of master-planned urban development. Through eminent domain and federal funding, the government could orchestrate public-private partnerships, hypothesizing the creation of viable, profitable neighborhoods for real estate companies and cities alike, reattracting middle-class white suburbanites. Key in this strategy was the figure of the developer.

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[59] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 127–28.
[60] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 164.

In *Developing Expertise*, architectural and urban historian Sara Stevens examines how the developer during the post-war period was instrumental in constructing the modern American built environment. She argues:

> I connect how developers, led by the availability of financing in the postwar period, propagated some of the most clichéd economic processes of the production and reconfiguration of space in twentieth-century America — suburban sprawl and downtown renewal. Combining the logics of political Progressivism and economic Keynesianism with a moral overtone, developers, I argue, advocated for public aid and the use of public powers to manage financial risk and ensure private profit.[61]

The Southwest was one of many playgrounds for urban renewal in the United States. Its proximity to the National Mall and its longstanding infamy as a "blight" on the city created prime conditions for urban renewal proponents seeking to experiment (Fig. 12).

Richard Longstreth, in *Housing Washington,* titles his chapter "Brave New World: Housing Washington and the Promise of Urban Renewal" to describe the overly optimistic strategies offered by modernist planning. Most American urban renewal projects began as a project to eliminate low-income black residents, displace the residents, and suburbanize the city to re-interest the wealthier white middle-class in returning to the city. Congress chartered the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) in 1946 with the specific goal of "slum clearance" in the National Capital.[62] The 1949 National Housing Act funded this program

> "to provide for the replanning and rebuilding of slum, blighted, and other areas of the District of Columbia, by the assembly, by purchase or condemnation, of the real property in such areas and the sale or lease thereof for the redevelopment of such area in accordance with said plans; and to provide for the organization of, procedure for, and financing of such, planning, acquisition, and sale or lease; and for other purposes."[63]

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[61] Sara Kathryn Stevens, *Developing Expertise: Architecture and Real Estate in Metropolitan America* (Yale University Press, 2016), 4.
[62] Richard Longstreth, *Housing Washington: Two Centuries of Residential Development and Planning in the National Capital Area*, 1st ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 258.
[63] Passonneau, *Washington through Two Centuries*, 184.

Private real estate groups would be empowered to clear neighborhoods and transform the character of residential areas, so long as the developer had a plan to accommodate and provide preferential treatment to displaced residents. The newly formed National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) had already invested a planning study for the Southwest. Longstreth describes staff member Albert Peets initial strategy as "conservative, preserving and rehabilitating nearly half of the area's housing stock, weaving new construction…into the existing matrix, and increasing recreational and other forms of open space." This approach was a strategy of quarantining "blight": containing the Black low-income households within their already existing neighborhood would prevent the infection of poverty and crime in other parts of the city. Peets' strategy, written rather than drawn or designed, was never realized because it reflected a similar redevelopment effort in Marshall Heights. Marshall Heights, a neighborhood east of the Anacostia, successfully protested redevelopment, leading Congress to strip funding from the Housing Bill. Fellow NCPC employees who criticized the Peets strategy cited these reasons.[64]

Following the NCPC's initial proposal, the Southwest urban renewal project would face several iterations, all comprehensive and uninterested in preserving any existing urban fabric. The RLA and NCPC hired architects Louis Justement and Chloethiel Woodard Smith, who designed a master plan to transform the region into a functional, organized greenscape dotted with residential superblocks and retail, commercial, and recreational programs. The Washington Post reported on the Justement-Smith Plan, saying, "it is the only way in which the Southwest… can produce enough tax income to justify the city's expense in slum clearance. Such an approach would tend to halt the progressive decay at the core of Washington." The Southwest Urban Renewal project would be only profitable and therefore justifiable to taxpayers if the entire neighborhood were transformed for

[64] Longstreth, *Housing Washington*, 258.

middle and upper-class residents. Then, a member of the NCPC, John Nolen Jr., deemed the Justement-Smith plan too radical, and longtime NCPC consultant Harland Bartholomew criticized it for not including enough housing for existing residents. After much dispute over the master planning, the RLA awarded the development to the lowest bidder: Bush Construction Company, which failed to secure funds for the project. The RLA shifted developers to the New York real estate company Webb & Knapp, who, under the direction of William Zeckendorf and the design of I.M. Pei, produced a master plan for the Southwest (Fig. 13).[65]

Chapter 5 of Steven's book evaluates William Zeckendorf, head of New York real estate company Webb & Knapp, as a developer motivated by "a complicated mix of wanting to seek publicity, leverage available capital, provide steady income to his firm, and experiment with his ideas on rebuilding cities from their cores."[66] Stevens tracks Zeckendorf's investment in the Southwest masterplan. Stevens introduces Zeckendorf through Le Corbusier, who announced at a Columbia University dinner, "there is the man who has done more than anybody else for architecture in America." Zeckendorf's "big vision," in both scope and ingenuity, was the draw for Le Corbusier, as well as the NCPC and RLA.[67] Southwest Washington, D.C. stood out to Zeckendorf because it was in line for redevelopment, something the federal government had already pursued elsewhere in the city. Title I urban development strategy was surgical; something Zeckendorf was not privy to but embraced. Stevens references Historian Hilary Balloon's analysis of Title I, who argues:

> "Disinclined to attribute these problems to property relations and economic forces, American urbanists put their faith in changing the physical order of the city, create a tabula rasa, enlarge the dimension of the grid by merging several blocks into one, and replace street walls with freestanding towers or superblocks."[68]

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[65] Longstreth, *Housing Washington*, 258-262.
[66] Stevens, *Developing Expertise*, 189.
[67] Stevens, *Developing Expertise*, 187.
[68] Stevens, *Developing Expertise*, 229.

The Webb & Knapp plan, designed by Pei, organized residential space through minor gestures and commercial and civic space into vertical superblocks. The plan included a variety of programs, many of which were localized amenities that would encourage community and allow the neighborhood to operate as a closed system. The plan's wispy strings of multifamily units' snake within and around themselves. Peninsular green spaces and courtyards engage with the resident units in back-and-forth, localized relationships. The plan attempts to achieve the density of a city and the sensibility of the meandering landscape in the suburbs. The result is a large, modestly contextual neighborhood that connects into commercial superblocks through walkways above a dividing highway. Stevens describes,

> "the Webb & Knapp plan paid attention to both the grand scale of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's boulevards and vistas, and to the vernacular scale of alley dwellings and row houses…. It was not a departure from the suburban ideal by attempting to be suburbia's opposite, but rather it was both suburban and urban in its amenities, a unique combination of the benefits of both."[69]

Chloethiel Smith remained an instrumental designer in the project. Alongside Zeckendorf, the NCPC employed fellow New York developer James H. Scheuer, who hired Smith to design residential schemes for the area. Many of her designs remain some of the innovative and unique residential projects in Washington, D.C.. She realized residential planning to include both single-family and multi-story apartment blocks, something most contemporary architects and planners were against. Both the Zeckendorf-Pei and Schuer-Smith partnerships faced constant delays and revisions, driven by ideological conflict within the NCPC and economic concerns from the RLA.[70] The RLA would, as the project's costs increased, consistently whittle down residential schemes for low-income families until it was "neither feasible nor appropriate" to include the displaced families

[69] Stevens, *Developing Expertise*, 229.
[70] Longstreth, *Housing Washington*, 262–67.

they once avowed to include in the redevelopment.[71] This strategy in Southwest Washington was successful at creating moderate racial diversity but zero economic diversity, as the cost of living was increased and low-income residents were outcompeted for their community by reformed white suburbanites.[72]

Webb-Knapp eventually pulled out of the project in 1963 and 1964 as the company encountered impending financial issues. Schuer and Smith carried out the residential strategy, and various developers constructed Pei's commercial and retail plan. I-395 divides the scheme so drastically that it is difficult to even read the Southwest as a cohesive master plan. The only path connecting the commercial and residential schemes of Urban Renewal is L'Enfant Plaza, which has endured 50 years of maintenance neglect and was never realized as the cultural or community anchor Zeckendorf and Pei intended (Fig. 14).

No matter the intentions of the Southwest Urban Renewal project, its results were destructive. Modernist strategies could offer new ways of organizing people and space, but they could not fundamentally change the totality of economic forces that drive urbanization. Southwest urban renewal remains a loathed intervention in D.C.: Longstreth articulates:

> "the area became an object lesson in what to avoid more than what to emulate—not just for civic activists, the African-American community, and local politicians, but for federal officials and for members of Congress in whose backyard it lay."[73]

The architecture of this space has come to symbolize the forces of urbanization it desired to circumvent by proposing utopian formal strategies. While Chloetheil Woodard Smith's residential schemes remain a popular and attractive neighborhood,[74] its history shows that redevelopment in D.C. has often been at the expense of low-income communities and dictated by architectural

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[71] Longstreth, *Housing Washington*, 268.
[72] Longstreth, *Housing Washington*, 276.
[73] Longstreth, *Housing Washington*, 279.
[74] Longstreth, *Housing Washington*, 280.

aspirations. I.M. Pei's half-realized L'Enfant Plaza and the surrounding bureaucratic office space developed throughout the 20th century will almost certainly be metabolized into a new planning scheme in the upcoming decades. The following chapter will postulate the future of this region to articulate the federal government's current strategy of disposition and private redevelopment, a project less interested in architecture and more interested in profit.

The history of development in Washington, D.C. is infinite and entropic; it cannot be quantified or distilled into a book nor a chapter in this thesis. But what can be gleaned from these histories is the guiding strategy of economic development, which marginalizes communities and is dependent on metabolizing "blight" to carve out space for new, profit-driven urbanization. The architect, intent on realizing their vision, has intervened not as a constitutive agent for development policy, but as an expendable assistant to the processes of development, accepting conditions as-is and designing architecture that attempts to reform, rather than transform. Almost paradoxically, it is the efforts of their labor—the architecture—that has come to signify the very economic practices the architect was also subject to.

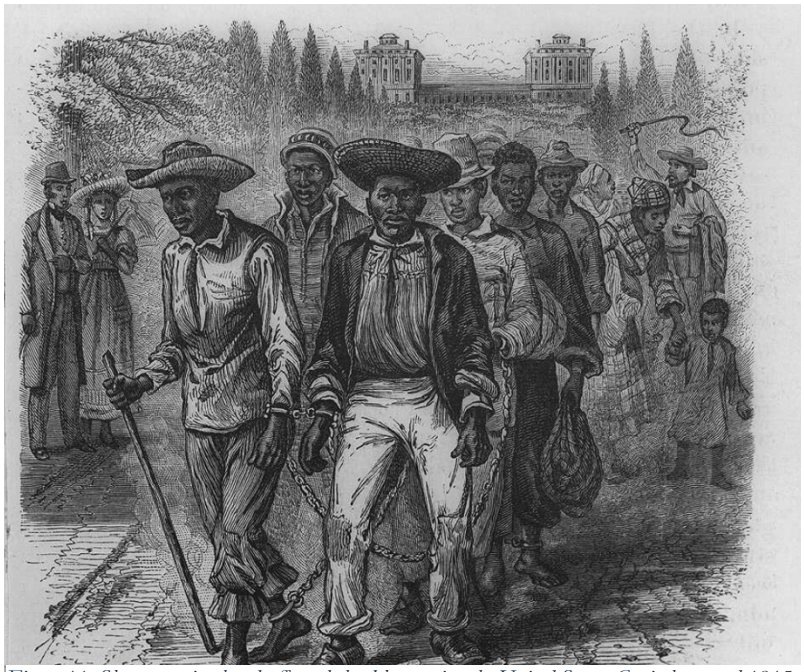

*Figure 11. Slaves wearing handcuffs and shackles passing the United States Capitol, around 1815. Library of Congress.*

*Figure 12. J.R. Passonneau, buildings demolished between 1940 and 1970. Page 187.*

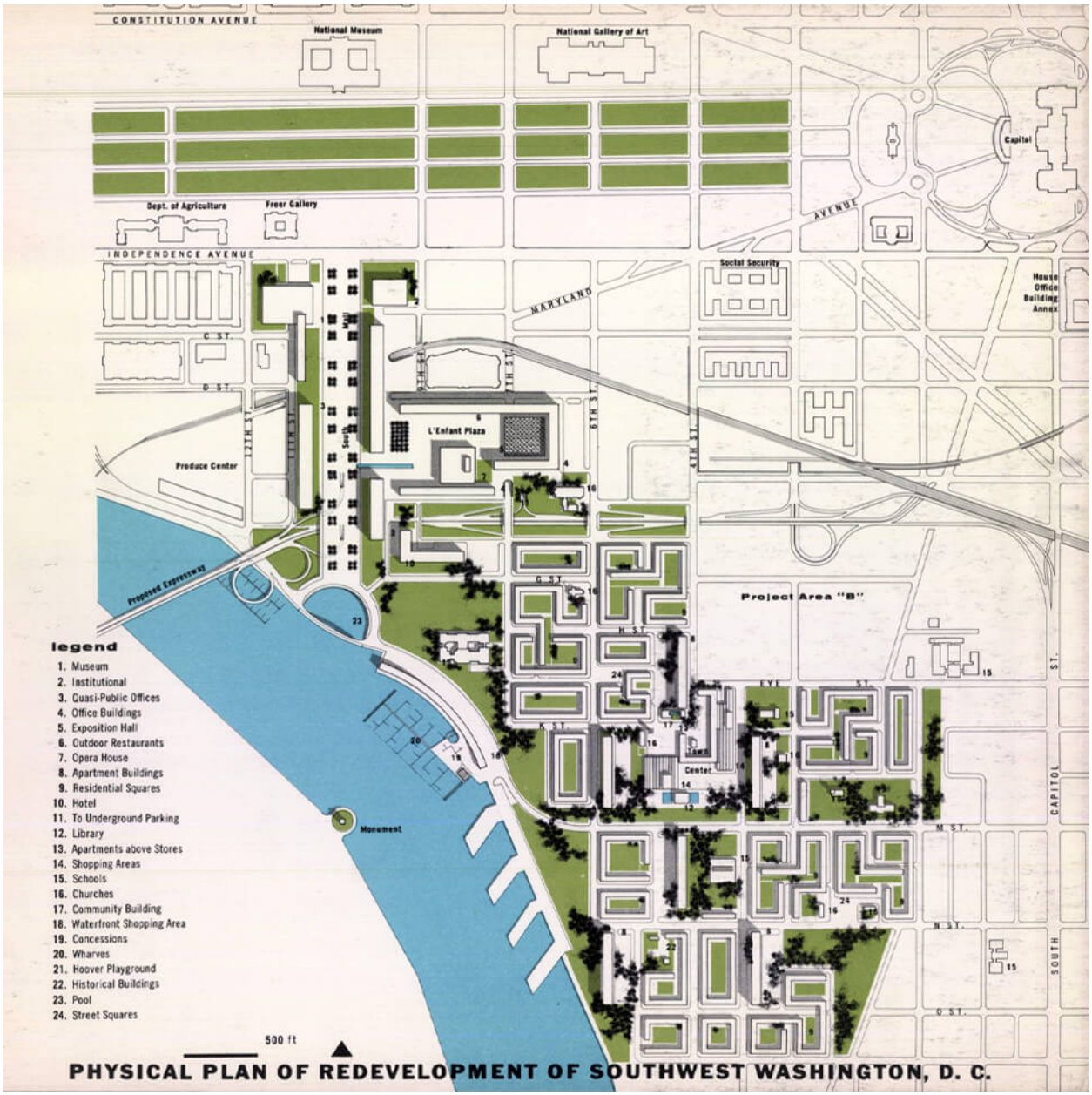


*Figure 13. Webb & Knapp/I.M. Pei, Plan of Redevelopment of Southwest, 1956.*

*Figure 14. Camille Lane, L'Enfant Avenue, 2026.*

## Chapter 4: REVITALIZING THE SOUTHWEST

In 2025, Donald Trump's General Services Administration (GSA) produced a list of buildings for "accelerated disposition." The effort was largely the result of Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which made sweeping decisions on federal downsizing with little regard for the adverse effects that such a rapid initiative might produce. According to the GSA, the Public Building Service (PBS) earned $182 million in 2025 from the sale of federal buildings nationwide and expects to save a total of $3 billion by eliminating maintenance costs for these vacant buildings.[75] The effort to "cut costs for American taxpayers" through the sale of federal buildings will, in reality, make up less than 00.05% of the 7.1 trillion 2025 fiscal spending of the United States.[76] The maintenance of federal property is of little concern to the American taxpayer. Given their insignificant impact on the United States' budgetary concerns, the sale of these federal buildings requires a deeper interrogation of why this is a concern for the Second Trump Administration.

Most of the 40 properties intended for sale are dispersed across the nation—the exception, however, is in "Fedlandia," a nearly 10,000,000-square-foot region directly south of the National Mall. This area includes what William Zeckendorf and I.M. Pei began in their Southwest Urban Renewal project, alongside numerous other 20th-century federal buildings erected beginning in the City Beautiful movement onward. Five buildings have been identified for disposition (Fig. 15). On an initial list, almost all federal buildings in Fedlandia were included, but due to negative public response, the GSA narrowed the list to a smaller set of public buildings. On March 25th 2026, the

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[75] GSA Blog Team, "GSA's Real Estate Sales Generate Revenue, Save Taxpayer Dollars, and Optimize Our Footprint," Government website, *U.S. General Services Administration*, December 30, 2025, https://www.gsa.gov/blog/2025/12/30/gsas-real-estate-sales-generate-revenue-save-taxpayer-dollars-and-optimize-our-footprint.

[76] General Services Administration, "GSA Sells Its Underutilized Federal Property in Washington, D.C.," Government website, *U.S. General Services Administration*, March 25, 2026, https://www.gsa.gov/about-us/newsroom/news-releases/gsa-sells-its-underutilized-federal-property-in-washington-dc-03252026.

Regional Office Building was sold to Dalian Development, a D.C. residential and data center developer.[77] Most of these buildings were constructed in the 20th century to house the American bureaucracy. If this public land were privatized, the district government could tax the land and its occupants. But perhaps the greatest winner in this scenario is the real estate portfolio of investors, who, with some unified effort, can capitalize on already valuable land to transform Fedlandia into an exclusionary class enclave.

Buildings that are not historically significant are likely to be demolished. Those on the Historic Registry might be subject to adaptive reuse that preserves the building's shell and little else, but given the Trump Administration's capacity to destroy, these protections might become obsolete. The federal government dictates the future of federal buildings in the District, like any federally owned land across the nation. Unlike states, the District has less leverage to influence redevelopment because it has no representation in Congress or final authority over its legislation or budget. The strategy of public divestment and private revitalization raises concerns regarding the bureaucracy occupying these buildings, the architecture itself, and the effect of revitalization on the city. Loss in the urban environment was a question that the federal government reckoned with in the mid-century during its massive urban renewal project. Now, the architecture that once displaced residents will be "revitalized." What does revitalization entail, in the context of Trumpism?

## Existing Luxury Enclaves

I-395 separates Fedlandia from the most recent development project in the Southwest, The Wharf (Fig. 16). Part of the argument for the redevelopment of Fedlandia is to better connect the National Mall with The Wharf. Following D.C.'s proposal for the 2003 Anacostia Waterfront

[77] General Services Administration, "GSA Sells Its Underutilized Federal Property in Washington, D.C."

Framework Plan, the city created the Anacostia Waterfront Corporation (AWC) as a private-public partnership organized by the DC Office of Planning. In 2006, D.C. acquired 200 acres of waterfront property from the federal government under the federal and District of Columbia Government Real Property Act of 2006. The precedent of the Anacostia Riverfront development and the acquisition of federal land set the stage for a 20-year long strategy to redevelop the Southwest Waterfront. In 2006, the AWC began accepting proposals for the redevelopment of a mile-long strip of the Southwest waterfront.[78] A joint venture between Baltimore developer Struever Bros Eccles and Rouse and local developer PN Hoffman was awarded the project in 2006. The economic strategy of The Wharf redevelopment relied on tax increment financing (TIF) and payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT), which subsidize private investment through public financing. TIF/PILOT financing, alongside a free 99-year lease for the developer, brought D.C.'s economic investment into the project at the figure of $293 million.[79] Public investment ensured a number of units for low-income housing, but the Planned Unit Development stipulations reduced these requirements to apply only to 150 units, with one-third being a mere 330 square feet. Community leverage was carried out through a Business Improvement District (BID), whose Board of Directors was comprised of a minimum of 51% of local property owners, excluding renting community members. In a 2020 American University report on Phase 1 of The Wharf, authors Arielle Levin and Derek Hyra state:

> "In the case of The Wharf, community members who owned property and who were well organized by condominium boards tended to support the project and appeared to be more influential in the [Planned Unit Development] process than low-income community members who rented their homes and tended to be critical of the project. Even among Southwest's homeowners and public representatives, support was conditional, and sometimes controversial."[80]

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[78] Arielle Levin and Derek Hyra, *The Wharf: A Monumental Waterfront Urban Regeneration Development in Washington, DC* (The Metropolitan Policy Center, School of Public Affairs, American University, 2020), 21–26, https://www.american.edu/spa/metro-policy/upload/the-wharf-project-9-22-20.pdf.
[79] Levin and Hyra, *The Wharf*, 28–30.
[80] Levin and Hyra, *The Wharf*, 39.

Public investment in The Wharf has been successful, as the development generates $70 million in tax revenue for the city, demonstrating that the public investment is worthwhile for taxpayers. However, this revenue has come at the sacrifice of affordability for the community. The 150 affordable units are studios, available only for rent, and not geared toward families. Levin and Hyra calculated in 2020 that "a studio unit for purchase at The Wharf costs more than double the national median home value of $229,700, and a three-bedroom condominium for purchase can cost up to 6.5 times the national median home value." Additionally, the Wharf development has driven up housing prices in the surrounding Southwest neighborhood.[81]

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) categorizes the Wharf development as a resilient, sustainability-focused, and civic-oriented project that engages the community and services the local economy.[82] And while these claims are not necessarily untrue, the Wharf is economically exclusive. Its site strategy, designed by Perkins Eastman, enclaves the region unto its own luxury world (Fig. 17). The horizontally structured development includes a waterfront walkway oriented towards the Potomac. The wall of mixed-use buildings lines one side of the walkway, with each 30-foot span offering another luxury retail or restaurant space to entice the pedestrian. Yachts and other leisure boats occupy the waterfront. Two piers extend off the walkway and provide places to sit and examine the aspirational architecture of luxury real estate (Fig. 18). The Wharf, a divisive instance of gentrification, redeems itself to the public by allowing all to experience the fantasy of luxury through its well-kept, consumer-oriented, and distinctly contemporary environment.

Across I-395, the Cotton Annex, formerly a research facility for the Department of Agriculture, was converted into 550 luxury residential units by developer Carmel Partners and

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[81] Levin and Hyra, *The Wharf*, 43–44.
[82] Urban Land Institute, "District Wharf," *ULI Developing Urban Resilience*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://developingresilience.uli.org/case/the-wharf/.

architecture firm Design Collective. The renovation was completed in 2025—what remains of the original building is the street-facing façades. The federal government constructed the Cotton Annex in 1936-37 and sold the building in 2017. Now the Annex on 12th, the apartment complex website advertises the apartments with the following (Fig. 19):

> "Blending 1930s architecture with modern convenience, new luxury apartments at Annex on 12th are an opportunity to live in an incredible historic building near some of Washington, D.C.'s most iconic landmarks and attractions. Enjoy huge windows and epic views; truly superb amenities that go above and beyond; and refined interiors that add beauty, charm, and whimsy to the everyday."[83]

Living in the Cotton Annex allows tenants to feel as though they are participating in American governance, as they are not just close to the capital, but literally occupy a former building of the American government. The Annex on 12th is the first example of a federal building in D.C. facing the fate of residential conversion. These apartments cost between $2300 and $5000 a month as of 2026.[84] The Cotton Annex's renovation is generic; it is an example of the cost-cutting and profit-driven design of modern residential development strategies.

Both the masterplanned private-public partnership of the Wharf and the smaller-scale private development of the Annex on 12th produced residential schemes specifically geared towards wealthier tenants, with the former displacing low-income residents. If The Wharf and the Annex on 12th indicate the future of Southwest revitalization, the goal will be to create an exclusionary class architecture designed for profit and the leisure of its wealthy tenants.

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[83] Annex on 12th, "DC's Cotton Annex Building: From Past to Present," *Annex on 12th*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://www.annexon12th.com/news/history-of-dcs-cotton-annex-building.
[84] Annex on 12th, "Floorplans and Leasing Prices," Realty, *Annex on 12th*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://www.annexon12th.com/availability.

## Contemporary Strategies

The NCPC has been invested in the revitalization of Fedlandia since 2010, when it began to devise a planning strategy titled "The SW Ecodistrict" (Fig. 20). In response to President Barack Obama's Executive Order that promoted sustainability initiatives within the federal government, the plan is structured through "neighborhood" and "environmental" frameworks. The plan calls for demolishing the Forrestal Complex, once home to the Department of Energy, while preserving most agency headquarters and federal buildings in the area. Beyond the plan's sustainability and economic goals, it aims to reweave the Southwest back into L'Enfant's grid. It selectively redevelops the area to reconnect the then-future development of The Wharf to the National Mall, greening the existing L'Enfant Plaza and burying I-395.[85] The plan is optimistic; it suggests the opportunity for the federal government to set a sustainability standard for architecture and, furthermore, pursues a design that intervenes rather than demolishes. This plan has become largely obsolete, especially given that both Trump Administrations have stripped almost all sustainability efforts from the federal government. In the last 10 years, the NCPC and the GSA have changed their strategy; rather than intervene in the Southwest and renovate and improve existing buildings, the intent has shifted to focus on concerns of profit and divestment.

In 2016, the Federal Assets Sale and Transfer Act established the Public Buildings Reform Board (PBRB) as a bipartisan effort to rightsize the federal building portfolio, to reduce maintenance costs, and identify properties for disposal. As of 2026, the board's members include two real estate CEOs, two real estate lawyers, one former House representative, and a final individual who happens to be all three.[86] In May 2025, the board released a second-round report, identifying three buildings

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[85] National Capital Planning Commission, *The SW Ecodistrict: A Vision Plan for a More Sustainable Future* (National Capital Planning Commission, 2013).
[86] Public Buildings Reform Board, "Meet the Board," *Public Buildings Reform Board*, n.d., accessed April 13, 2026, https://www.pbrb.gov/board/.

in the Washington, D.C. area that should be listed for disposal: The Regional Office Building, the Wibur J. Cohen Building, and the James V. Forrestal Building. In March 2026, an interim report from the PBRB concluded that deferred maintenance and repair costs of the entire federal building portfolio is approximately $50 billion dollars, a "crisis" impossible for Congress to appropriate enough funds to resolve.[87] The result of congressional inaction on allocating funds for repair has led to "a portfolio with massive, deferred maintenance backlogs that increase building lifecycle costs, accelerate asset deterioration and degrade facility performance."[88] The PBRB suggests "large-scale disposals" and "access[ing] private capital" to reduce the federal building portfolio.

In February 2025, the ULI conducted a Technical Assistance Panel for the NCPC to better assess the economic potential of redevelopment in the Southwest, particularly the land on which the Forrestal Complex stands. The ULI suggests a private-public partnership to redevelop the area, and suggests the "catalytic impact" of such a development:

> "Based on the Panel's proposed redevelopment program, it projected the Forrestal Complex would contribute $45.3 million in annual tax revenue at full build-out. Once the Forrestal Complex is redeveloped, the Panel anticipated there would be a catalytic impact on development in Southwest, including the disposition and redevelopment of other federal assets, as well as the redevelopment of private office buildings to other uses, resulting in a net increase of 1.9 million square feet and $150.9 million in new tax revenue."[89]

In 2025, world-renowned American architecture firm Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill (SOM) prepared a presentation for the PBRB that suggests a masterplanning strategy to demolish all federal buildings with less than 50% use rates in the Southwest, including historically significant architecture (Fig. 21 & 22). These buildings would be replaced with generic cultural, recreational, and residential

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[87] Public Buildings Reform Board, *The Cost of Inaction: Deferred Maintanance in GSA's Portfolio*, Interim Report (Public Buildings Reform Board, 2026), 3.
[88] Public Buildings Reform Board, *The Cost of Inaction: Deferred Maintanance in GSA's Portfolio*, 5.
[89] William Rich, *The James V. Forrestal Building*, Technical Assistance Panel Report (Urban Land Institute Washington, 2025).

space, alongside adding additional private and public office space.[90] The proposal represents a sweeping tabula rasa logic that echoes the urban renewal strategies of the mid-twentieth century: clear the existing fabric, rationalize the land, and hand it over to private capital. While SOM presents its masterplan as a forward-looking revitalization strategy, I argue that this proposal is a continuation of the same economic forces that displaced Southwest D.C.'s Black community in the 1950s, reapplied to the very bureaucratic architecture that occupies these lost neighborhoods. The cycle of demolition and profit-driven reconstruction, far from being interrupted, is accelerated. What remains is a development logic that is almost entirely oriented toward maximizing the value of newly privatized federal land.

In the last ten years, the federal government has shifted its policies towards architecture and development in the Southwest; maintenance and sustainability are no longer the objective—the objective is to offload buildings to private developers, increase tax revenue, and prevent federal expenditure.

[90] Joseph Ruccoco, *A New Vision for Our Nation's Capital: The Future of federal Facilities* (Skidmore Owings & Merrill, 2025), https://www.som.com/story/federal-buildings-are-coming-up-for-sale-lets-take-this-opportunity-to-revitalize-the-capital/.

## Orchestrating the Agenda

In the previous chapter, I discuss how the NCAS positions any modernist architecture in Washington, D.C. as a scar on the "classical city." Currently, five buildings in the Southwest are on the Accelerated Disposition list: the Agriculture South Building, the Wilbur J. Cohen Building, the Robert C. Weaver Building, the Liberty Loan Building, and the Regional Office Building, all of which are listed on historic registries.[91] Only the Robert C. Weaver Building, designed by Marcel Breuer, is modernist. The remaining four are either neoclassical or stripped classicism, constructed prior to World War II. If the goal of the NCAS is to maintain classical architecture in the district and demolish modernist edifices, their efforts seem unsuccessful.

Given the buildings identified for disposition, I argue that anti-modernism is really an encoded hatred of bureaucracy. Each of these buildings, while mostly unoccupied, represents the independent bureaucrats of the federal government, which Trumpism seeks to replace with right-wing ideologues. In 2021, then Senator JD Vance professed, "fire every single midlevel bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state, replace them with our people."[92] In 2026, DOGE partially realized this policy by specifically targeting any agencies or departments that either (1) ensure the federal government spends taxpayer money responsibly or (2) administer the social distributive functions of the American government.[93] Trumpism's economic policy desires to exploit the American public and allow the ultra-rich to accumulate exorbitant amounts of wealth. The

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[91] U.S. General Services Administration, "Assets Identified for Accelerated Disposition," Government website, *U.S. General Services Administration*, April 13, 2025, https://www.gsa.gov/real-estate/real-property-disposition/assets-identified-for-accelerated-disposition.
[92] Andrew Prokop, "J.D. Vance's Radical Plan to Build a Government of Trump Loyalists," *Vox*, July 18, 2024, https://www.vox.com/politics/361455/jd-vance-trump-vice-president-rnc-speech.
[93] Jason Powell and Sasha Frank-Stempel, *DOGE's Big Illusion: The Heavy Costs of the Trump Administration's So-Called Efficiency*, Transparency Report (Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), 2025), https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-reports/doges-big-illusion-the-heavy-costs-of-the-trump-administrations-so-called-efficiency/.

independent federal bureaucracy threatens such a possibility, so it has been cast as the conspiratorial "deep-state" and its buildings in the Nation's Capital are to be disposed of.

In December 2025, Mydelle Wright, a former GSA official, testified in a Colorado Courthouse through Cultural Heritage Partners that the White House is bypassing GSA protocol to ensure the demolition of buildings on the Accelerated Disposition list, despite their historical protection.[94] The notion that Donald Trump is operating outside the law for purposes of redevelopment in D.C. is unsurprising, considering the rapid demolition of the White House's East Wing. Furthermore, any governing bodies responsible for holding redevelopment accountable are now controlled by partisan Trump appointees. The GSA, NCPC, and CFA, the primary bodies which advise and propose development in D.C., are stacked with Trump's appointees and primed for orchestrating the agenda of American conservativism.

As of December 2025, the GSA administrator under Trump's presidency is Ed Forst, a former Goldman Sachs real estate investor who has worked in other sectors of American bureaucracy. The Deputy GSA Administrator is Michael Lynch, former executive at both SpaceX and Eli Lilly, appointed in January 2025. The NCPC is comprised of twelve individuals, eight of who are directly appointed by the President. The Deputy Commissioner, Will Scharf, was Donald Trump's lawyer and now serves as the assistant to the President in the White House. The four remaining appointees are delegated by the D.C. Mayor's office.

The Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) advises the federal Government on "statues, fountains, and monuments." All commissioners are appointed by the President. Rodney Mims Cook Jr., a staunch traditionalist, is current Chairman of the commission. He is the founder of the National Monuments Foundation, which has successfully erected two classical monuments in Atlanta. An

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[94] Cultural Heritage Partners vs. Donald J. Trump, Civil Action No. 1:25-cv-03969-DLF (United States District Court For the District of Columbia undecided), https://www.culturalheritagepartners.com/legal-filings-chp-v-trump/.

ongoing project of his, as of 2026, is a bizarre and highly controversial renovation of a Frederick Law Olmsted Park in Atlanta that rewrites the history of settler colonialism and slavery as a peaceful union between cultures through a monumental obelisk. The Deputy Chairman of the CFA is James C. McCrery II, who was the first White House Ballroom architect until his replacement by Shalom Baranes Associates. The CFA approved plans for the White House Ballroom, although not without significant public backlash.

The Trump Administration's restructuring of the federal government has architectural implications that point to a future that subordinates the architect and raises the possibility of exclusionary development. With entire bodies of D.C.'s federal planning and development under Trump's executive control, Trumpist revitalization is not only a fantasy of the current administration but a possibility that would be relatively unchecked. The success of the luxury redevelopment of the Wharf and the Cotton Annex legitimizes claims for a future for the region that should prioritize profit above all else. The expertise of NCPC, ULI, and PBRB have outlined the crisis of federal public buildings in the Southwest and have provided the singular solution of privatization and redevelopment. The Trump Administration has deployed either subservient ideologues or desperate traditionalists to these bodies. Together, these political strategies point towards a future for the Southwest that prioritizes private profit at the behest of historically significant architecture.

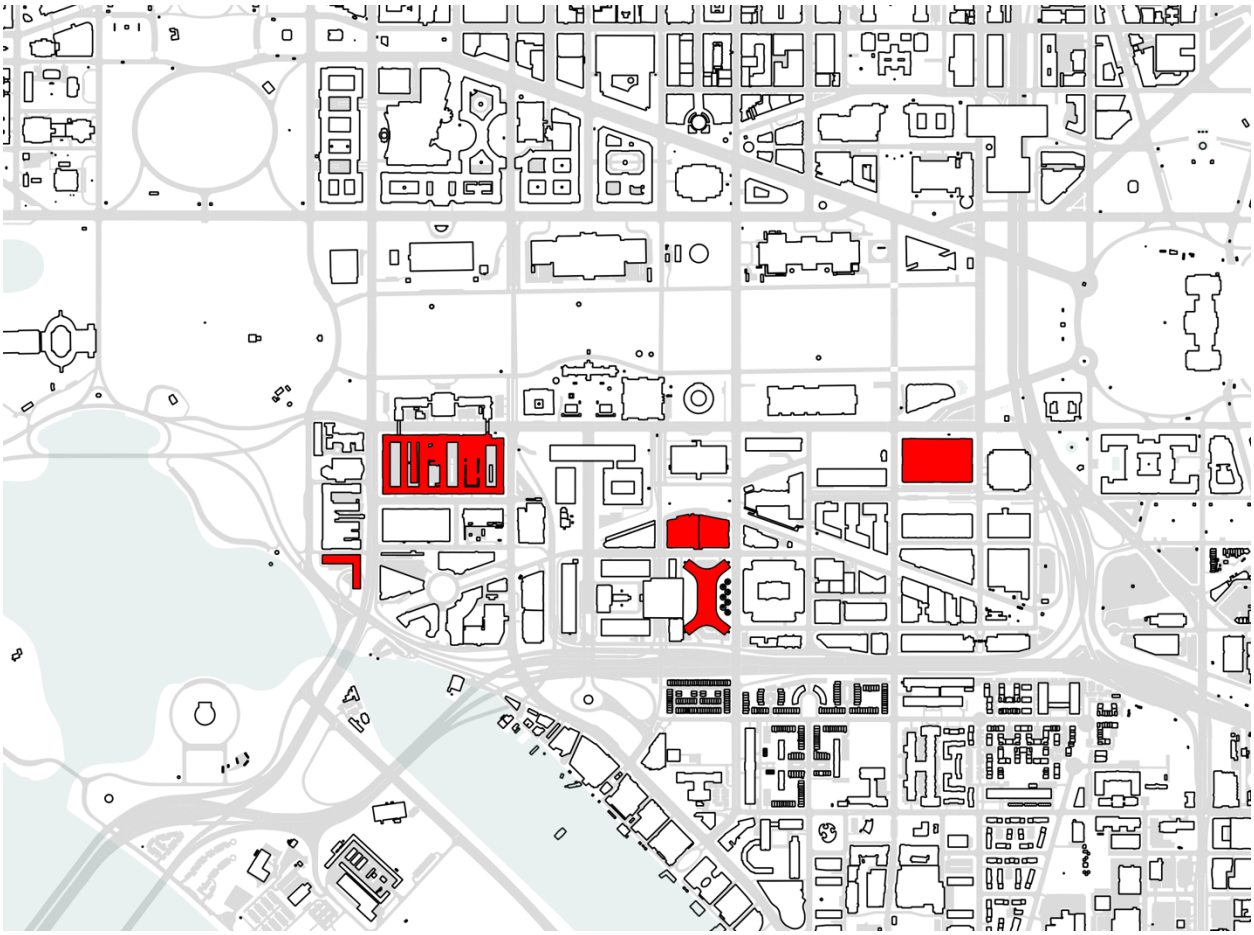

*Figure 15. Buildings Identified for Accelerated Disposition as of April 2026. Q-Gis and Adobe Photoshop.*

*Figure 16. Camille Lane, I-395 in the Southwest, March 2026.*

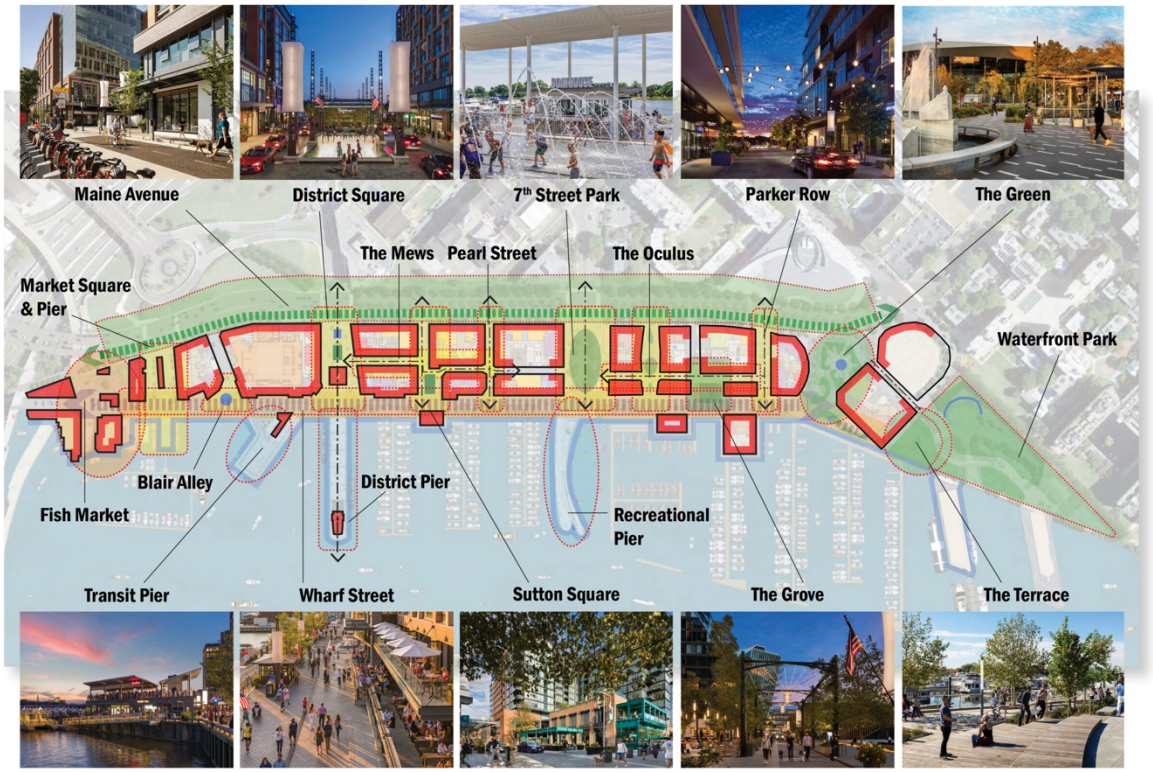


*Figure 17. Perkins Eastman, Site Strategy for The Wharf, 2022.*

*Figure 18. Camille Lane, View from Recreation Pier on The Wharf development, March 2026.*

*Figure 19. Advertisement photo for the Annex on 12th.*

*Figure 20. National Capital Planning Commission, the SW Ecodistrict Plan, 2013.*

*Figure 21. SOM, Properties considered for disposal in the Southwest, 2025.*

*Figure 22. SOM, A New Vision for our Nation's Capital, 2025.*

## Conclusion

In 1992, the GSA, in line with the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture, produced the Design Excellence Program. The aim was to reinvigorate American federal architecture by employing starchitects to design federal architecture across the nation that would endure as generational monuments. In 2002, the GSA published its first volume of *Vision+Voice*, which chronicles the varying perspectives from public officials and designers who have participated in the Design Excellence Program. This document states that

> "the goal of the Guiding Principles has always been to be inclusive, to speak to a broader language that embraces the pluralism of American society. Instead of touting one style, Moynihan urged that new buildings be the freshest and most relevant designs of the times, inspiring architecture of each age to render a unique celebration of our democracy."[95]

While the Guiding Principles emphasize progress and pluralism, it also advocates for the employment of the architectural elite to design buildings. Architectural historian Michael Allen articulates this: "…[Moynihan's Guiding Principles] privileges not plurality but professional practitioners, their revenues, and their dominance of official valuation of architecture."[96] Employing famous architects to design landmark federal buildings allows the federal government to leverage the architects' star power and distinct design strategies that harken to American excellence and innovation. Moynihan's policy was an effort to facilitate the legacy of American legitimacy and power through design excellence. The result of Design Excellence has been the proposal of an architectural form that does not *confront* the city but rather isolates itself into an identity of its own. Pier Vittorio Aureli describes the "iconic building" as such:

> "the iconic building cannot be considered an exemplary part of the city because its *economic* principle is to be unique and unrepeatable. Since it is no longer the state but

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[95] Office of the Chief Architect, "Vision+Voice: Volume 1," 7.
[96] Michael R. Allen, "Trumpism, Neoclassicism, and Architecture as Propaganda," *Platform*, May 17, 2025, https://www.platformspace.net/home/trumpism-neoclassicism-and-architecture-as-propaganda?rq=trump.

> the corporation that builds these *grand projets*, the iconic building responds to a demand for uniqueness as an emblem of market competitiveness. The huge variety of these buildings subscribes to one main criterion: to obey the despotic law of difference and novelty—precisely the attributes that fuel the bad infinity of labor for the sake of production and profit. In the economy of the iconic building, what is considered 'productive' is the personality of the architect, his or her creative ego, which is exploited and used by corporations to oppose the difficult whole of the *polis*—the space in which difference is not infinite variation or commercial competition, but rather a confrontation of parts."[97]

For capital architecture in Washington, D.C. to *confront* the city, to respond to and identify the boundaries of urbanization, it must be an "instrument of separation,"[98] it must reify politics and ensure such legibility to the public. It is the responsibility of the architectural profession to navigate the politics of architecture through its form, and to produce an architecture in the Capital that does not separate or exclude but enters a dialectic with the city itself.

If Washington, D.C. is the architectural project of the right, it must also be the architectural project of the left. In Chapter 1, I discuss the District as a confrontation between its identities as both a capital and a city—as the locus of American governance and the reality of what such power extracts from the city. In Chapter 2, I articulate Trumpism's depoliticization of architecture and aestheticization of politics, as part of its project to consolidate power and radicalize its disaffected base, to enact violence on the social distributive functions of the State. In Chapter 3, I offer histories of Washington, D.C.'s development to emphasize the guiding force of economics to the Nation's Capital, producing urbanization which the federal government has perpetually instigated and reformed. In Chapter 4, I discuss the present interventions and aspirations for the Southwest, all which aim to "revitalize" the region not through community, but through the prospect of an exclusionary class architecture. These chapters aim to unify how the politics of power—the limited

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[97] Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, 44–45.
[98] Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, 46.

power of the District; the seemingly unlimited power of the federal government's economics; the power of invoking anachronistic architectural symbolism to glorify and mythologize the nation; the power of development to subjugate architecture—are critical to architectural practice. What unifies the architectural policy of the Right in its current idiom, Trumpism, is its capacity to leverage such power to rewrite the past, relegate the future, and ensure an economy that prioritizes profit above Americans. Notably, the architect is not in conversation with Washington, D.C. as much as the developer, the politician, the urban planner, or traditionalist ideologues. As architects we must reinsert ourselves into politics. We must advocate for civic participation, relate to the community we practice within, and design according to juxtaposition rather than submit to the totality of economics.

The Southwest's tumultuous legacy underscores the ongoing reevaluation of federal architecture's presence in the city, a discourse that traditionalists seek to grind to a halt. Their argument against change and against the possibility for the future of political architecture suggests that the state must exercise architecture solely to assert its power through symbolic aesthetics. It is therefore the responsibility of the architect to ensure architecture continues to intervene within urbanization, especially in the context of public architecture. Conservativism renders the architect an anonymous and obsolete political agent. If architects desire a future for architecture beyond its economic productivity, we must figure ourselves into political discourse to reemphasize the importance of our labor, the importance of form, and architecture's ability to spatialize politics. We must, in the hyperreality of the information age, communicate the exigency of architecture's future through its constructive capacity to confront the political economy of urbanization. We must, in the face of architectural policy that aims to prevent architecture's capacity to confront and reify politics, re-politicize architecture. We must organize as political agents, and we must use our expertise to

design for a political future that does not subordinate ourselves or the American public to the economic principles of development for-profit.

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