

NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

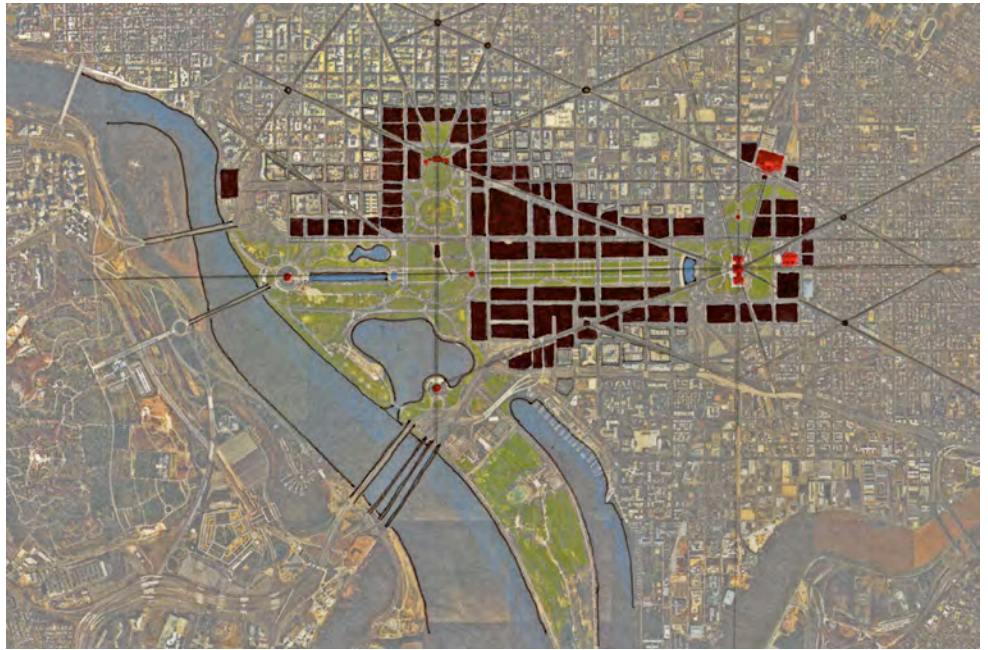
The Axis in Urban Design

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Of the many definitions of the word “axis” given in the Oxford English Dictionary, the most literal is “a main line of direction, motion, growth, or extension.” In spatial compositions--such as sculpture or architecture--the line is implicit, serving as the organizing principle to which elements in the composition are referred. In the composition of the city, axial design emphasizes long formal vistas with strongly defined edges; the vista is frequently terminated by a prominent building or monument. The axis itself is invisible, but the perception it creates--of a well-organized city--is definite.

As a tool of city building, the axis is a primary element in the European Baroque tradition, a tradition which urban historian Spiro Kostof describes in *The City Shaped as the “Grand Manner.”* The most enduring themes of this tradition were first articulated in the master plan of Pope Sixtus V for 16th century Rome: the notion of the vista, the use of the obelisk as a striking spatial marker, and the overarching principle of geometric order for its own sake. France appropriated the Baroque aesthetic, most notably in the replanning of Paris by Baron Eugène Georges Haussmann between 1853 and 1868.

Underlying the Baroque language of urbanism at the time of its inception, according to Kostof, were new ways of considering the relation between streets and buildings. The street is no longer thought of merely as “the space left over between buildings, but as a spatial element with its own integrity.” The buildings defining the street channel are viewed as continuous planes rather than independent entities. And straight streets are used to connect churches and other public buildings--creating “constellations of monumentality.”



Diagrammatic rendering of Washington DC. Note the axes radiating from the U.S. Capitol Building and other major monuments (in red).
Drawing: Gary Gaston

“The European Baroque,” Kostof says, “is a phenomenon of capital cities.” So it is no coincidence that the District of Columbia is America’s most successful experiment in Baroque-inspired planning.

The plan for the nation’s capital was drawn by Major Pierre Charles L’Enfant, a French architect and military engineer who had served as an aide to George Washington during the Revolution. L’Enfant combined his knowledge of French planning--his father worked on the famous gardens of Vaux-le-Vicomte--with the ideals of the emerging nation. A brand new capital of a brand new nation undoubtedly seemed ripe for the Baroque aesthetic because that aesthetic could, as Kostof says, “stage easily perceived, strong urban images that were at once modern--wide, straight streets, open prospects, and the

generous distribution of green--and resonant with historical authority." Baroque planning "had become synonymous with the city as a work of art."

As he surveyed the site in 1791, L'Enfant fixed on the two highest ridges for two centers of government: the house of the executive and the house of Congress. From this symbolic division L'Enfant radiated a dynamic web of diagonal avenues overlaid by a rational grid of streets. Within this framework, L'Enfant envisioned a series of classically-styled buildings to convey the same message as the plan: a government aggressively radiating into the future, yet grounded with stable roots in the past.

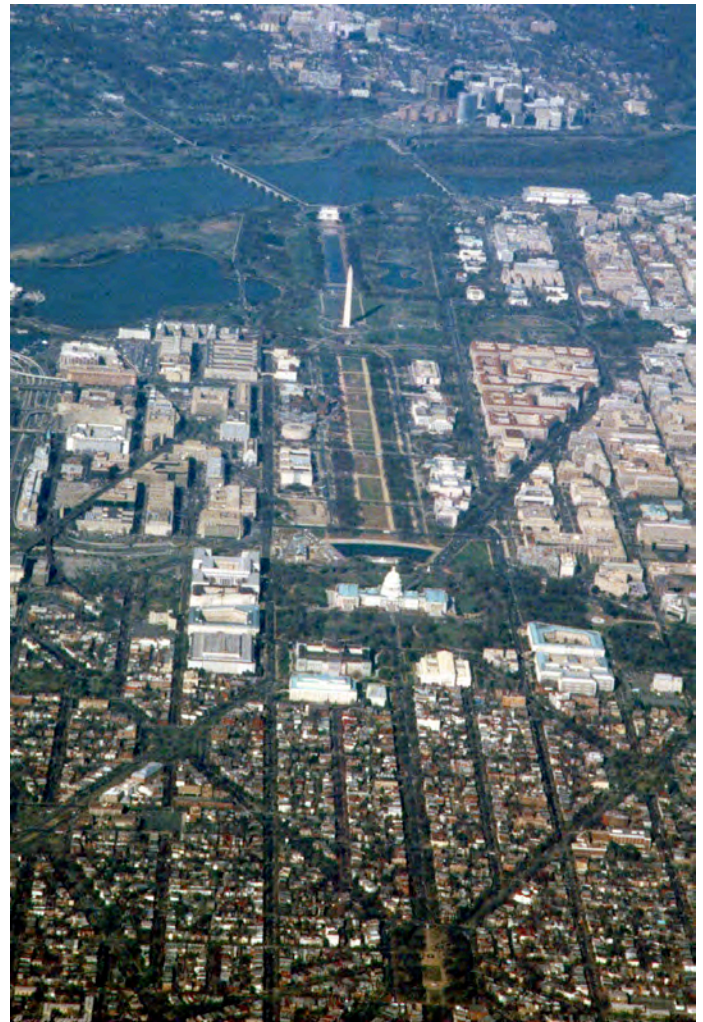
L'Enfant's plan was revived and enlarged by the McMillan Commission--named after Senator James McMillan, who formed it--in 1902. The resulting plan--overseen by a group of prominent architects and landscape architects who were movers and shakers in the American City Beautiful movement, including Daniel Burnham, subsequently co-author of the Plan of Chicago[ital.]--is largely responsible for the Washington, D.C. we know today.

Key elements:

- The physical dominance of the buildings housing the legislative and executive branches of government.
- The siting of monuments on major axes to memorialize leaders and events that helped to form the nation.
- The provision of grand public spaces--most particularly the Mall, which occupies the city's grandest axis--in which citizens can congregate for protest and celebration.
- Definition of the edges of the axes through the placement of prominent buildings. The Mall, for example, is flanked by the National Gallery, the Museum of Natural History, the Museum of American History and the National Air and Space Museum.

In commissioning L'Enfant's original plan, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson understood the importance of symbolism and recognized the need to create an instant history to legitimize the New World to the Old. The evolution of this plan, extending its strongly formalistic nature, reaffirms the capital as the physical manifestation of the nation.

In strengthening Nashville's identity as the physical manifestation of the State of Tennessee, the Plan of Nashville is strongly influenced by the example of Washington, D.C. In Washington, however--as in Rome and Paris--the axes are in geometric contrast to the street grid. The Plan of Nashville employs axes within the existing geometry of the streets.



Aerial view of Washington DC. Axial connectors give the capital a strong visual identity. Photograph, 1999: Project for Public Spaces, NYC

From The Plan of Nashville: Avenues to a Great City. Vanderbilt University Press (Nashville) 2005.