Michael Bednar
L’Enfant’s Legacy: Public Open Spaces in Washington, D.C.
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, 304 pp., 126 b/w illus. $65, 978-0-8018-8318-7

Sarah Luria
Capital Speculations: Writing and Building Washington, D.C.

Zachary M. Schrag
The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro

These books on Washington, D.C.’s planning and architectural history, all published in 2006, represent three scholarly methodologies and address different academic and professional audiences. L’Enfant’s plan is the touchstone for most aspects of the city’s development throughout its history, and the plan threads its way throughout the books under review.

In L’Enfant’s Legacy: Public Open Spaces in Washington, D.C., Michael Bednar provides a systematic synopsis of the genesis and evolving histories of the city’s public grounds. He begins with an excellent summary of the city’s original seventeen parks, squares, and circles, noting that L’Enfant planned them to tame the huge scale (6,111 acres) of the city by using these spaces as magnets for dispersed development. Bednar’s second chapter is a thoughtful discussion of the relationship between public space and democratic ideals, how public space engendered the rights of assembly and free speech. Bednar’s training as an architect informs his analysis of the designs of spaces, both great and modest, that fostered varied uses over time via their shapes, linkages, sculpture, landscaping, and surrounding buildings. Yet, Bednar also grounds the measured historical development of each space in careful readings of reliable sources, from which he abstracts meaningful facts and quotations to focus on their key historical moments. One significant observation is that none of the post-L’Enfant plans, including the Senate Park Commission plan of 1901–2, “adequately considered the placement of memorials” (67).

In the following chapters Bednar organizes the city’s smaller public spaces into types depending on their usage, often determined by their locations and dates of development. The earliest downtown squares served pragmatic uses, such as Center Market, or housed the city government, as at Judiciary Square, while those enclosed by the mid-to late-twentieth-century business district morphed from neighborhood gathering places to serve a new constituency. The final chapter examines new public spaces created for the city’s evolving needs: Union Station Plaza at the beginning of the twentieth century and Freedom Plaza and Pershing Park at its end.

L’Enfant’s Legacy brings together for the first time an integrated overview of Washington’s defining urban characteristic, and its survey quality and light analysis serve well as reference for the city’s landscaped spaces. Throughout, Bednar characterizes Washington’s public spaces as both symbolic expressions of the ideal political rights of citizens and as real, physically concrete places. However, the recurring phrase “democratic ideals” verges on a chamber of commerce–like mantra rather than a demonstrable underlying explanation for the way every, or most, of Washington’s public places evolved or functioned.

In Capital Speculations: Writing and Building Washington, D.C., Sarah Luria casts herself as creative thinker, not merely a chronicler of the creative endeavors of others. In a twelve-page introduction, Luria defines her methodology as the speculative reading of spaces and texts grounded in several academic approaches ranging from documentary to epistemological. She considers her studies as “examples of the concrete ways in which political discourse engages the built environment” (xxviii). Each of the book’s four chapters is a complete study in itself; “speculation” in various meanings of the term unites them, and each is preceded by a headnote explicating the sense in which speculations guided her thinking. Land speculation ties together those aspects of Washington’s founding and founders that Luria discusses in her opening chapter, “George Washington’s Romance.” Unionist business speculation is the ostensible premise for her chapter on Abraham Lincoln’s and Walt Whitman’s residence in Washington during the Civil War. The “risky economic tactics” (72) of the Freedman’s Bank allow Luria to introduce speculation into her discussion of Frederick Douglass’s domestic life in Washington beginning during Reconstruction. Speculation fever afflicting Gilded Age robber barons serves as the vehicle for her discussion of the John Hay and Henry Adams houses on Lafayette Square facing the White House.

This artificial construct provides Luria a setting for her own intellectual speculations focused on the nexus between the public and private lives of her protagonists. Some of her speculations are insightful and valuable; some are contrived, not borne out by the cited sources; and some make leaps seemingly in order to be provocative. Luria’s work is marred by her uncritical acceptance of her sources. What if sources are incomplete, misinformed, or simply wrong?

In The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro, Zachary M. Schrag undertakes to explain the Metro as a “work of planning, engineering, and architecture, but [also] as a work of politics and ideology” (1). He admirably accomplishes this goal in ten succinct chapters, the first seven arranged according to the system’s developmental phases beginning with the city’s transportation history and concluding with the Metro’s financing. The final three discuss the Metro’s impact on the city, its suburbs, and riders, particularly its role in the realm of social change. In clear and engaging prose, Schrag interweaves facts with a wide range of pragmatic, political,
and aesthetic matters with discussions of those who posed and resolved the issues.

The decade of planning (1955–65) began in favor of a rail transit system to move primarily commuters into and around central Washington from its outlying residential neighborhoods and the Maryland and Virginia suburbs. The Metro’s planning phase coincided with the growth of multiple federal, regional, and local agencies, associations, task forces, committees, and citizens’ groups, each represented by professionals in a variety of urban development fields. Schrag tames an enormous body of manuscript and printed documentation, weighing the contributions of each within the evolving political context to reach cogent conclusions, a feat he repeats throughout the book. Particularly notable is his handling of differing areas of expertise accompanied by a changing cast of characters as the chapters move through Harry Weese’s monumental station designs (1965–67); coordination with the region’s other transportation modes (1966–67); the fierce battle to replace inner-city freeways with rail lines (1966–71); building 106 miles of rail and eighty-six stations under and above ground (1972–76); and, juggling the financing of what was estimated in 1969 to cost 2.5 billion dollars but escalated to 6.2 billion dollars in less than a decade.

The collaboration of Weese with the Commission of Fine Arts to achieve the Metro’s strong architectural identity will be of interest to many JS:AH readers. Schrag rescues from oblivion major but little-known players in the long, complex campaign to bring such a usable transit system to the greater Washington area. Metro stations continue to be magnets for sustainable development; many readers will appreciate learning about the successful mix of factors that achieved this goal. The Metro’s triumph includes its architectural qualities above and below ground, as well as greater connectivity to the center and throughout the region, and therefore enhanced livability for metropolitan Washington’s neighborhoods.

In assessing the value of these three books, we might ask more generally about measures of scholarly validity. Success depends variously on the cogent marshaling of reliable factual data and deeper delving into previously mined historical documentation, which revises accepted beliefs. Scholarly value also can rest on expanding the range of issues relevant to the history of a place, through compiling and analyzing scattered information to elucidate an interconnected topic or by judging history through contemporary lenses. All these approaches seem to be valid as long as they respect the basic historic record or prove it invalid.

The fundamental fact of Washington, D.C., is that politics has always intersected every aspect of public endeavor and many aspects of private life, a situation presenting both opportunities and pitfalls for historians. Reports commissioned or produced by government agencies were generally biased because they promoted the partisan points of view held by the administrations that sponsored them. Yet, these reports form the basis of much of Washington’s historiography, and accepting them as definitive primary documentation is problematic. As the interests and approaches of these three authors to Washington’s politics differ, so does their susceptibility to trusting its historical documentation. All three books here reviewed have the common virtue of pushing the boundaries of Washington’s historiography.

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Joan Busquets

Barcelona: The Urban Evolution of a Compact City

Rovereto, Italy, and Cambridge, Mass.: Nicolodi and Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2005. 468 pp., 100 color illus. $38, ISBN 88-8447-204-0

Peter Rowe

Building Barcelona: A Second Renaixença


In ranking the capitals of the modernist imaginary, Barcelona deserves a place not far below Paris or Vienna. The city can, after all, claim Joan Miró and Josep Lluís Sert as native sons; Pablo Picasso resided there at the beginning of his career, and Salvador Dalí always remained tied to his Catalan homeland. In a longer historical valuation, the novel urbanism that Ildefons Cerdà conceived in the mid-nineteenth century, the modernisme of Antoni Gaudí and Lluís Domèneç i Montaner, and the postwar residencies of Gabriel García Márquez and other boom novelists of Latin America all would certify the city’s affiliation with the artistic avant-garde. Beyond that, Barcelona’s service during the Spanish Civil War as a redoubt of the Spanish Republic aligned the city with the prevailing politics of modernism. The distinctive weave of art, culture, and politics represented by this ancient Mediterranean city has recently been the subject of general as well as scholarly studies.

Barcelona: The Urban Evolution of a Compact City and Building Barcelona: A Second Renaixença take up this topic from the perspective of architecture and urbanism. The authors examine the many forces and intentions that shaped the relation between architecture and the city in the historical periods before, during, and after modernism, supplementing existing monographs on individual artists and movements with studies of the city as a political space. As Joan Busquets suggests, legislative decrees, political strategies, and cultural ideas are “the main characters” in these accounts.

Neither book is, or aims to be, a historical text, despite their accumulation of