

Testimony of Justin Shubow, President and Chairman, The National Civic Art Society

Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands of the
House Committee on Natural Resources

June 1, 2012

Longworth House Office Building Room 1324

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grijalva, members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for inviting the National Civic Art Society to speak today. As an educational nonprofit dedicated to the classical and humanistic tradition in public art and architecture, we believe in the importance of preserving and protecting the National Mall, and the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans that defined it, as an essential part of our country's heritage and future. The Mall and the surrounding Monumental Core are arguably the greatest work of civic art in the modern era. We recently produced a documentary film on Washington, D.C.'s classical heritage, which is available to watch on our website, Civcart.org.

To envision the future of the Mall, we must first understand its past. The Mall, as we know it, is just slightly over 100 years old. Yet it appears to have been there for many centuries. It is hard to imagine, but at the turn of the 20th century there was no breathtaking vista from the Capitol building to the Potomac, no graceful boulevard of trees and paths lined with noble edifices, but instead a shabby rambling park, anchored at one end by a sooty train station and on the other by a malarial swamp. It was abutted by flophouses and squalor.

This was hardly the vision for the city that President George Washington had in mind when he directed Pierre L'Enfant to create a master plan for a new capital worthy of a new republic: a grand scheme of radiating streets and avenues whose geometrical arrangement is hierarchically focused on the Capitol, White House, and future Washington Monument. To this day, these are the landmarks by which we orient ourselves spatially and spiritually. Harmonious, luminous, and orderly, the urbanism of the L'Enfant plan and the architecture of its most important structures were to be classical in design, reflecting in physical form our political philosophy. This conscious decision connected the city to the ideals of republican Rome and democratic Athens, as well as to the Age of Reason later called the Enlightenment.

The classical tradition, of which Washington, D.C. is part, time-honored and timeless. In a letter to L'Enfant, Thomas Jefferson expressed his personal desire for a capitol designed after "one of the models of antiquity, which have had the approbation of thousands of years." To be clear, the Founding Architects did not slavishly imitate past or then-contemporary European architecture, no more than the Founders slavishly imitated any political structure when they wrote the Constitution. They created an unmistakably American idiom. Who would confuse the White House or Capitol for a building in a foreign country? The Founders consciously connected their modern time with the two millennia-long tradition of classicism. They recognized its dignity, its aspiration to beauty, its harmony with the natural world and human perception, and its capability of expressing hierarchy and meaning to the citizens it serves. They

were Founders and Framers not just in government but in architecture. They took the wisdom of the past and adapted and improved on it. Why should we be any different today?

Alas, by 1900 the L'Enfant plan for our national capital was largely forgotten. It had been compromised by commercial pressures and aesthetic confusion. Thankfully, in 1901 Congress created the famous Senate Park Commission led by Senator James McMillan of Michigan. Serving on the McMillan Commission were some of the greatest architects, landscape designers, and sculptors of their time, all of whom worked within the classical tradition as did L'Enfant and his contemporaries before them. Influenced by the City Beautiful movement, they not just revived the L'Enfant Plan, they perfected it. Among their achievements, they extended the main axis of the Mall to the Lincoln Memorial site. They also cleared trees and leveled the ground to create one of the greatest man-made vistas in the world. It is transfixing. Empty space in and of itself is made electric, with the Washington Monument as the lightning rod. There is no official rule that the American people must congregate there for our most historic events and communal gatherings, though they do so nonetheless. They are drawn in by Mall's power, which is welcoming and uplifting, not oppressive. It is a vista of optimism and promise.

The McMillan Plan managed to create a symbol and place of national unity, one that even today stands as the visible manifestation of our collective ideals. The classical L'Enfant and McMillan Plans, together with such masterpieces as the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, are what have endowed us with the eternal capital of an eternal republic.

Yet beginning after the First World War, some avant-garde architects and theorists wished to replace the eternal with the putative spirit of the times. Beholden to an ideology that rejected the past, an ideology that had become fashionable in a crumbling Europe, they asserted that classicism had become passé; it was a death-mask no longer capable of expressing the soul of America. To these individuals, buildings such as the Capitol were musty piles stinking of ideas and ideals whose time had passed. Indeed, these architectural radicals opposed the design for the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. Frank Lloyd Wright called the Lincoln Memorial the "most asinine miscarriage of building materials that ever happened." The dean of the Harvard School of design proclaimed that the National Gallery of Art was a "pink marble whorehouse." After World War II, the avant-guardist hegemony was complete.

It is due to this total rejection of our national heritage that the Mall came to be vandalized by the Hirshhorn Museum, an alien spacecraft or gun turret looming over the public. This elitist movement gave us the urban-planning disaster of L'Enfant Plaza was constructed, as well as the Brutalist FBI Building, which looks like the Ministry of Fear. Do the citizens of America and government employees who visit and work in these buildings enjoy and take pride in them equaling the National Archives or the Federal Triangle?

Today we find ourselves in a predicament like that of the McMillan Commission: the guiding classical vision for city and its Monumental Core has once again been forgotten, ignored, and violated by accretions of discordant art and architecture.

Sadly, the National Park Service and other agencies charged with preserving the Mall have been neglecting their mission. If any district deserves the stringent protections of a national

landmark, it is the Mall as created by the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans. Yet when giving official approval to the design of the Eisenhower Memorial—which is entirely inharmonious with our greatest presidential memorials—the Park Service did not even bother to consider its cultural and historical impact on the Mall and other protected sites in the area. Stylistic harmony, dignity, and perhaps even beauty, are of no concern to them. It is as if the National Park Service did not care whether an invasive weed was to be planted in a natural park of evergreens.

Not only are the National Park Service and others not preserving what must be preserved, they are acting to preserve what is unworthy of preservation. Although difficult for average man to imagine, in the process of approving the Eisenhower Memorial, the National Park Service, General Services Administration, and others lavished praise on the adjacent Department of Education Building and are now seeking to place it on the National Register of Historic Places. Can one imagine a more sterile, soulless building? It conjures not education but faceless bureaucracy, with all the character and warmth of a computer punch card. Who would miss it if it were demolished? The aesthetic and cultural confusion demonstrated by these sorts of agency decisions is astounding.

The good news is there is a solution; the future is written in the past. What the country needs is a plan for Washington, D.C. that carries on the vision set by our Founders and their architects: a McMillan Plan for our time that would in equal measure preserve and extend the best of our capital city into a third century. Doing so will ensure that the nation's capital remains the physical embodiment of our political identity and our national aspirations.

It was none other the President Franklin Delano Roosevelt who made sure the magnificent Jefferson Memorial was built over the objections of out-of-touch elites. He explicitly paralleled the importance of continuity of tradition in architecture to that in government:

[T]he principles of harmony and of necessity require that the building of a new structure shall blend with the essential lines of the old. It is this combination of the old and the new that marks orderly peaceful progress, not only in buildings but in building government itself

It is that sort of leadership, which is willing to stand up to architects who think they know better than the American people, that Washington sorely needs today. We believe your vision can equal that of our Founders, and that this bodes well for the future of our nation's capital.

Thank you.