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Spatial Design and American Democracy

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Richard Longstreth proposes a set of historical associations in his essay, “Washington and the Landscape of Fear,” between spatial design and socio-political values. He does so to argue that these associations have been contradicted by a recently imposed spatial logic of anti-terrorist measures that threatens to create a landscape of fear at the institutional and symbolic core of American national government in Washington. One of his central historical claims is that “freestanding buildings set amid grassy preserves” embody and, he implies, produce, realize, or in some fashion instantiate “openness and accessibility rather than closure and confinement,” referring to the social, political, and moral meanings of these terms in addition to the visual. He uses examples of college campuses and the national Capitol and White House to conclude that the ensemble of a vast open unurbanized park with a government building set in it became a prime “emblem of American democracy.” He means by that representation both a sign of and a means to produce openness and accessibility in American democracy. Although I find much significance in these suggestions, and I appreciate Longstreth’s challenge to us to think about what produces a landscape of fear in this context, I want to debate some of his central suppositions concerning the interpretation of spatial design to mean things social and political and the evaluation of its efficacy by taking a contrarian’s position.

There are many good reasons to hold that vast open space came to represent American democracy and its ambitions—to symbolize its democracy in terms of the individual building or person silhou-

ented against the open plain and sky, turned away from the city and facing a limitless horizon. But what I would like to know is whether and how this image is in practice one of openness and accessibility to government and other social institutions. For I could also suppose, that it is rather, or simultaneously, an image of manifest destiny, empire, and imposition, in which the design ensemble of a freestanding building in open space facilitates surveillance, control, and closure.

Longstreth makes an initial contrast in his essay that I find open to question. He stresses that American college and government buildings signal, in their freestanding, figural, and, in that sense, spatially monumental design, openness and accessibility, compared to European colleges and government buildings that are set in the streets of cities, without “dedicated open space,” and that follow a more monastic tradition of inward-turned courtyards. This European design, he claims, presents the institutions of government and education as more closed and confined, separate and guarded. Now it may be that his initial example of Nassau Hall (at Princeton University) is not the best for this argument, as this single building constituted an entire college in the late 1750s—with a two-storey prayer hall, library, classrooms, and student and servant living quarters—constructed in a largely rural landscape. As such, it could hardly have been anything other than freestanding on its plot. Moreover, although it did not have an internal courtyard—as if that feature is a measure of isolation—it was fenced in. Thus, one wonders just how open and accessible it could have been. Nevertheless, I agree that as American higher education developed, college campuses became largely park-like sites with freestanding buildings. The crucial rationale of this development, I would argue, is that planners thought of them as *alternatives* to cities—park-like, suburban, even country-clubbish—indeed as anti-cities in the anti-urban traditions of American thought.

These park-like ensembles apply the same spatial logic to both public and private institutions, to both government and university in the examples at hand: The buildings are always figural and the space around them always ground. It is not that European planning lacks figural buildings. Rather, it is that European planning much more consistently develops an urban spatial and architectural vocabulary that distinguishes public and private in terms of reversible gestalts of figures and ground and solids and voids. In this spatial discourse, visually a running back and forth between figures and voids, the figural generally signals public (or private claims of public importance and ostentation) and can be either a building or a

space.¹ Examples of such figural buildings include the freestanding Council House in Salisbury, the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, the Wool Hall in Bruges, the Customs House in Amsterdam, and many others in nearly all European cities. Similarly, there are countless civic squares in European cities that are designed and perceived as figural spaces, defined as figural by the buildings that line their edges. These figural squares serve as the setting for government and other public institutions and as the stage of the *vox populi*. Think of the central square of Siena which has hosted for centuries not only the everyday comings and goings of citizens but also two Palio races annually, protests and riots, as well as an annual carnival during which pigs were let loose to be stoned to death by the Sienese who, no doubt, mistook them for politicians (cited in Dundes and Falassi 1975).

Thus, I suggest that to evaluate landscapes of citizenship the relevant contrast is, in this historical case, public buildings set in a park and those embedded in the fabric of the city, in its streets and squares. Which are more accessible? How does each spatial logic engage citizens politically and socially? It is not that I have the answers to these questions in advance of studying what might be called the spatial practices of citizens. But my point is that such practices are neither obvious from nor reducible to the mere juxtaposition of forms. Visual access no more guarantees social access than voyeurism intimacy. In fact, I might reasonably think that the urban design in Europe I have described makes institutions more accessible from streets and civic squares and in that way more vulnerable to citizens. Thus, we see that indeed many European city halls on civic square are fortified against the rowdy crowds that regularly stormed them.

It is, moreover, well-known that after many urban insurrections in which insurgents effectively barricaded the streets, 19th-century European politicians and planners concluded that wide open spaces were much more easily surveilled and policed. Hence, they drove wide boulevards through dense working-class neighborhoods and built new universities and government headquarters in park-like and suburban landscapes—a spatial strategy more fully applied in the new cities of the United States and Latin America.

What especially distinguishes the planning of college campuses and government ensembles in the United States is that both are designed as contrasts to the city: as alternatives in a utopian (and no doubt elitist) imaginary that opposes edenic spaces of intellectual and recreational pursuits of high orders to the city's low rumble, its bustle and crowding, business and busy-

ness, dirt and disease, poverty, crime, and aggression, and so forth and so on.

We cannot evaluate this planning only by studying its juxtapositions of form—a building set in an open park. Rather, we have to study the intentions and practices of planners, architects, politicians, and educators in the design of American campuses and government and see how their plans interact with the practices of the people who come to inhabit them. With regard to Washington, I have only a preliminary sense of L'Enfant's intentions for his plan of the national capital. I know that he borrowed the plans of many European cities from Jefferson, who as an architect had an impressive archive of them, and that his design brilliantly synthesizes Wren's gridded plan for rebuilding London and the web of Parisian diagonals. I also know that he suggested that the latter would provide visual relief from the monotony of the grid and grandness in contrast to the grid's convenience (and perhaps crassness) in facilitating real estate sales. The two main monuments of L'Enfant's plan, the president's house and the Capitol, are directly connected by one of these diagonal avenues and, in what is the striking originality of the plan, also linked indirectly by a right-angled green carpet, a parklike mall.

Additionally, I have read that L'Enfant proposed to triangulate the president's house and the Capitol with a "Majestic Column or a grand Perysemid" (the Washington Monument) that would, in his words, "completely finish the landscape." He told George Washington that what he was after was "a sense of the real grand and truly beautiful only to be met with where nature contributes with art." For the Mall itself, he intended not a public avenue but a public walk, "a place of general resort ... all along side of which may be placed play houses, rooms of assembly, academies and all such sort of places as may be attractive to the learned and afford diversion to the idle" (cited in Girouard 1985:253). These statements suggest that L'Enfant envisaged the Mall as crowded with those seeking the pleasures of mind and body, a place where recreational sociality has replaced the politics of a rowdy citizenry. I believe that the Mall has remained fairly true to that intention. It is certainly an extraordinarily compelling space that establishes its monumentality while simultaneously encouraging the personal pleasures of strolling, contemplation, and recreation. In addition, its various memorials are important pilgrimage sites for Americans seeking solace and inspiration, as well as important sites of organized citizen protest (especially centered on the Lincoln Memorial). But, significantly, the Mall is not a space of urban rioting. That activity has taken place elsewhere in the city.

To draw conclusions about the effects of recent security measures in the Mall and elsewhere in the Capital Square, I would have to know much more about their social use, about the habits and opinions of residents. My own impression from wandering around these places is that security measures have not fundamentally compromised the basic edenic intentions and representations of the symbolic core of federal government. In other words, they have not created a landscape of fear—although this core has in recent years (again) become a landscape of loathing to many people by other means.

Let me conclude by restating my argument that although architectural and urban design certainly entails a social logic, one cannot directly deduce its realization from a visual appreciation of form alone. Rather, the efficacy of design as conveyer and conductor of social value is better grasped through an anthropological analysis of the interaction of form, intention, and practice. That analysis generally demonstrates various outcomes of their interaction, often showing in fact that the relation between form and practice contracts the intentions of designers. Let me also add that many of us, as anthropologists, work in contexts where the idea of Washington, as capital of the United States, provokes fear. Many people among whom we work and live have come to fear Washington, as a whole, by means other than its architecture and without ever experiencing its bollards, blockages, and inspections. Thus, it would be worth thinking hard about the various ways in which states and non-states, elites and terrorists, design and media, the physical and the immaterial may all produce landscapes of fear.

Notes

¹For a fuller discussion of this spatial logic (and its negation in modernist architecture and planning), see Chapter 4 in Holston 1989.

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