

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Fixing Symbol Problems Along Pennsylvania Avenue [Speaking of Places]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1vg6q2jw>

### Journal

Places, 15(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Weibenson, John

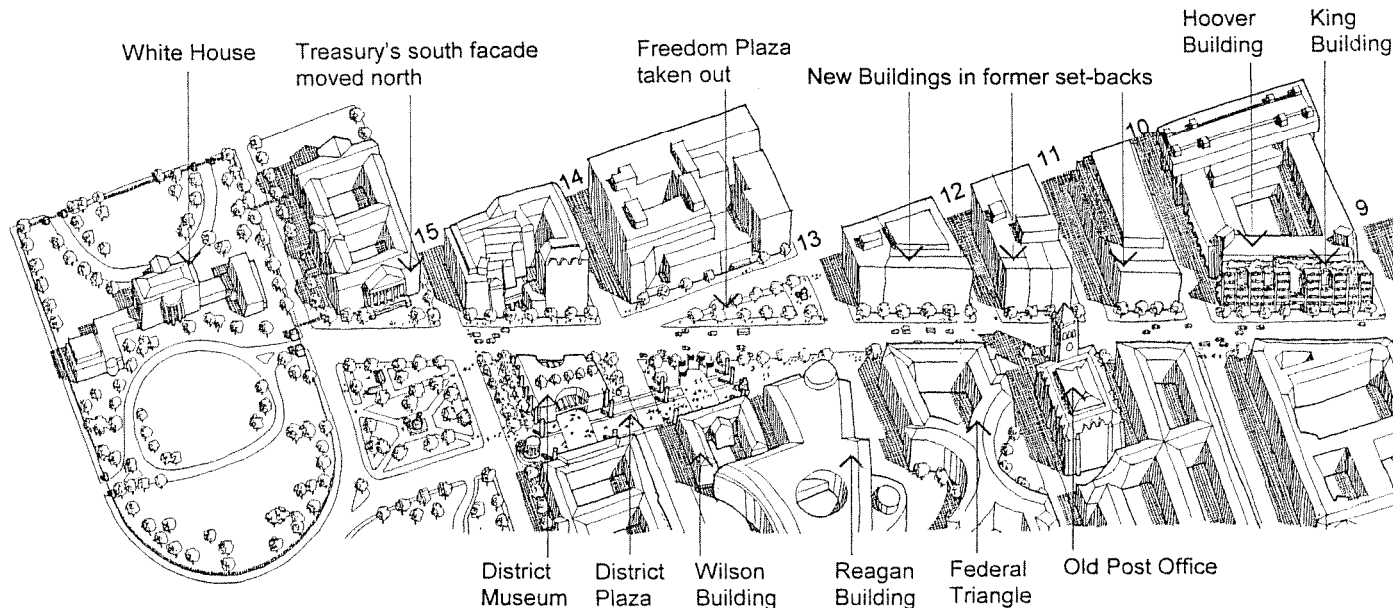
### Publication Date

2003-01-15

Peer reviewed

# Fixing Symbol Problems along Pennsylvania Avenue

John Wiebenson



Our buildings tell us things. They use their shapes and sizes, their styles, materials and locations to form symbols in a built language that tells about their use, their ownership and — often accidentally — about community values.

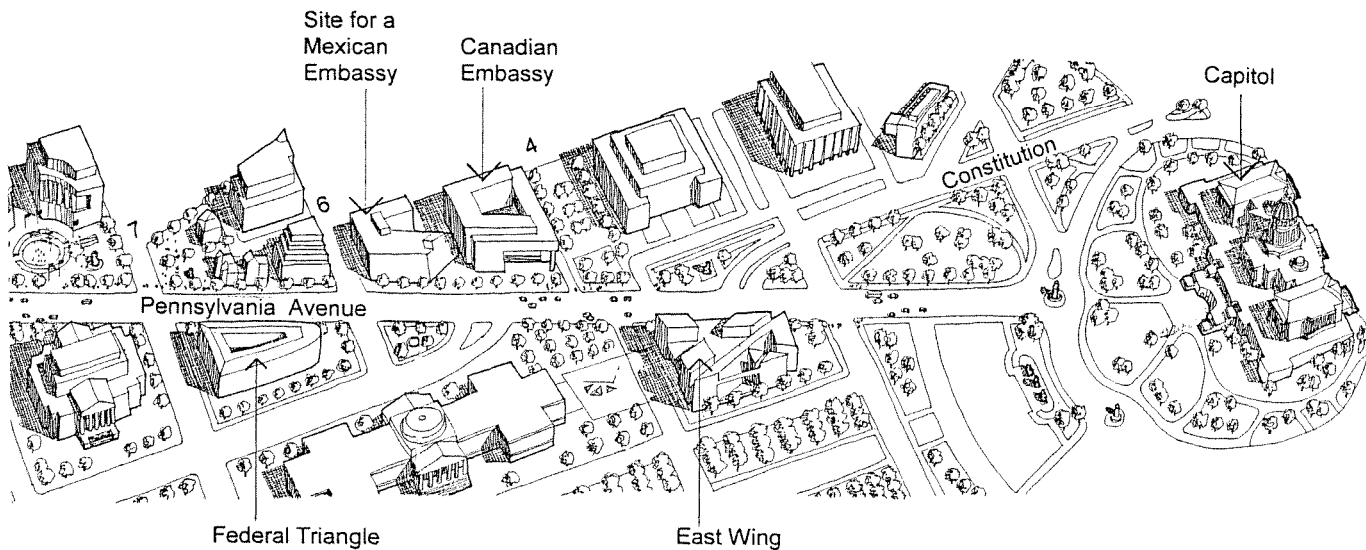
These built-in symbols can speak gently, but they can also speak with such great force and spirit that they can enrage an adversary or rally a citizenry. Two centuries ago, for example, when the British invaded Washington, D.C., they focused their efforts on burning the White House and the Capitol. L'Enfant's plan for the city had made these its principal architectural features. To the British, they embodied the successful challenge of a small, spirited nation to their great empire.

Just as the burning of the White House and the Capitol made them symbols of British wrath, so their rebuilding made them symbols of the American resolve to remain independent and democratic. Today, the White House and the Capitol remain great national symbols. And, by association, the street connecting them, Pennsylvania Avenue, has become another great symbol.

By further association, the buildings along this street have also become national symbols — although on a less majestic scale. After building and rebuilding, we have turned Pennsylvania Avenue into a veritable chain of symbols. Some of these are clear and focused. But the location and/or design of others offer a more muddled expression. Some, as it happens, even challenge what we claim to be our nation's highest values.

## Built Symbols of History

Its great dome rising on axis with this short street, the Capitol has long been Pennsylvania Avenue's most visible built symbol. The Capitol's designers intended their building to be symbolically powerful in form, as well as location. Since there were no domed structures in the nation at the time, a dome was, for George Washington, a means to make the Capitol significant. (As it happened, Washington never lived to see the Capitol — nor the domed Massachusetts State House that shortly preceded it; the only domes he ever saw were in paintings and drawings.)



Other Americans maintained that a dome for their new Capitol would symbolize nature's blessing, since it would replicate, in their thinking, heaven's vast dome.

Years have passed, and the Capitol's dome has so successfully suggested "capitol" to Americans, that domes mark state capitols — even county courthouses and city halls — all across the land.

Another clear symbol on Pennsylvania Avenue is the Canadian Embassy, just west of the Capitol. Its location — in among strong symbols of American identity — allows it to suggest remarkably strong ties between Canada and the U.S. Its vigorous, modern design also implies that Canadians are a spirited people who welcome the times in which they live.

A few years ago, Mexico tried to buy a run-down building beside the Canadian Embassy as a site for its new embassy. The State Department gave its permission, but the cost apparently proved too high. As it happened, State Department aid had allowed Canada to buy its property at half-price. But Mexico was not similarly supported, and

this corner of Pennsylvania Avenue now symbolically celebrates only Canadian-American friendship. The Mexican Embassy's present location, far away and quite out of sight, suggests that Mexican-American relations are not very close, possibly even tenuous.

Another nearby notable building is the East Wing of the National Gallery. Its spirited design suggests imaginative owners. But other buildings on the avenue's south side are more sedate. Most are part of the Federal Triangle, a tidy arrangement of buildings of similar design, unblemished by commercial life and unmarked by intrusive forms. These buildings were generally put up during the Great Depression, when most governments believed that symbols of national continuity and cohesion were vital.

The exception in this area of the city, of course, is the Old Post Office. A great pile of Richardsonian masonry, it once posed such a strong challenge to the government's urge for stylistic order that it was scheduled to be torn

Above: Proposals for change on Pennsylvania Avenue. Drawing by author.



down. Ironically, the threat transformed it into a symbol of the larger grievances of city residents against their government, and inspired them to join a successful program to preserve it.

### Inadvertent Problems

Other challenges to the order of symbols on Pennsylvania Avenue seem more accidental. For example, neither L'Enfant nor any later planner sought to put the Treasury Department building where it is today, partially blocking the avenue. In fact, the city's original layout embodied an inspired symbolism of national government. Since the Constitution divided the day-to-day duties of government between two major branches, it called for symbolic physical separation between the White House and Capitol as well. Connection was also needed if a government was to function, however, and this was symbolized by having Pennsylvania Avenue run straight, without interruption, between them.

Last-minute efforts were made in Congress to halt the work on the Treasury building when it became apparent it would violate this symmetry. But dithering led to what Paul Spreiregen, in an article on Washington planning, has called the present "inadvertent" blockage.<sup>1</sup> Today, neither branch of government has an unobstructed view of the other down Pennsylvania Avenue. Indeed, the location of the Treasury Building is something of a symbol of governmental disconnection.

Federal planners compounded this problem in the 1960s when they sought to replace four blocks beside the Treasury with a plaza big enough to provide a visual destination for parades heading toward the White House. Although this big plaza was never built, the idea lingered, and in the 1970s planners succeeded in building a smaller

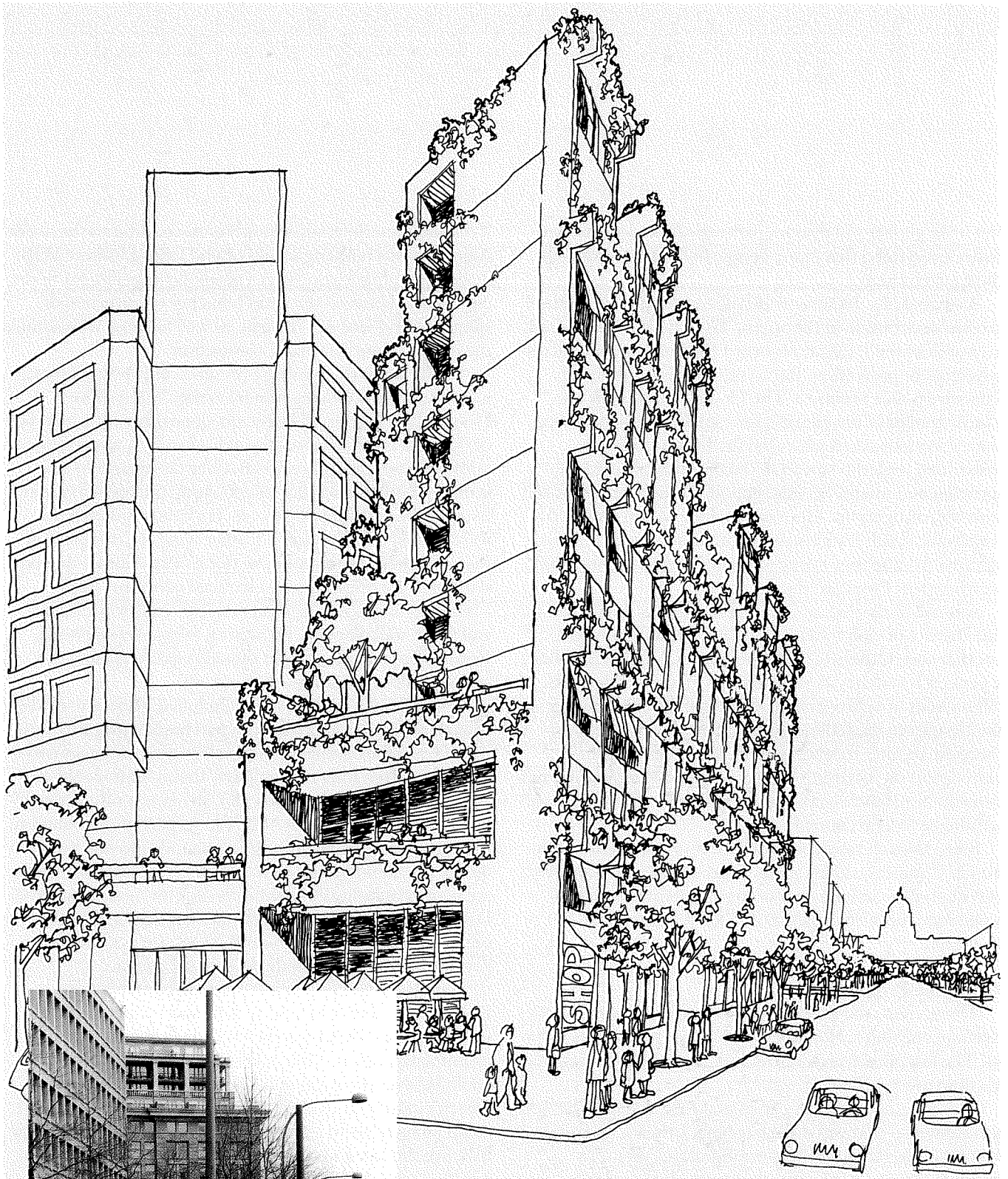
plaza. This plaza was raised above the avenue, adding further to the sense of blockage. And although they named it "Freedom Plaza," it serves as yet another built symbol of the conflict and division between branches of government.

Much about Pennsylvania Avenue's current architectural appearance seems similarly inadvertent. The story goes that as President Kennedy was being driven to the White House on his inauguration day, he was joined by his future Secretary of Labor. In his limousine Kennedy was invited to notice how the avenue's two sides didn't match — the south side's Federal Triangle was orderly, while its north side was not. And he was told this was a symbolic problem, one that signified a "failure of government."

In the years that followed, Kennedy and his immediate successors attacked poverty, communism, and, in Washington, symbolic failure. In particular, a commission was established to draw up plans to line the entire north side of Pennsylvania Avenue with big new buildings, all of which were to be set 50 feet further back. But when these plans were revised in the 1970s to preserve landmark buildings, the result was a different form of disorder. Today, with some buildings on the old alignment and others built to the new 50-foot setback, the sense of facades that advance and recede seems symbolic of yet another "failure of government" — that of irresolution.

### More Modern Problems

Another symbolic challenge appeared in the 1990s when the Ronald Reagan Building was added to the Federal Triangle. Its style was somewhat similar to that of older Triangle buildings, but its bulk was far greater, and its corridors were so twisted that internal destinations often proved hard to find. The appearance of the Reagan Building was probably meant to symbolize a forceful presidency.



**Opposite left:** Construction of the Treasury Building in the nineteenth century blocked the original design intent of a symbolic visual connection between the White House and the Capitol. In the foreground is Freedom Plaza.

**Opposite right:** The Capitol dome rises directly on axis with Pennsylvania Avenue. On the right is the Old Post Office (photo ca. 1900).

**Above:** Proposal for a Martin Luther King Jr. Building between the Hoover Building and Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Inset:** Current unused setback in front of Hoover Building.

All photos and drawing courtesy of author.

But its large size and devious pathways soon came to symbolize everything that many people believed wrong with their government.

A symbol of a darker sort had already appeared on the avenue's north side in the 1970s. To some the block-sized monolith of the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building symbolizes government protection. But to others it is symbolic of a massive police presence. The Hoover Building is also a built symbol of the nation's unresolved conflicts of race, since it honors a man who used the bureau to attack minorities, and who smeared Martin Luther King Jr. in speeches and sought his destruction through wire-taps and leaked investigations. Hoover has since passed on, but his antagonisms still fester in our national soul, and on Pennsylvania Avenue they are celebrated day after day by what seems a giant Freudian slip.

A small, fairly elegant building that serves as city hall for the District of Columbia embodies a symbol problem of another sort. Officially titled the John A. Wilson Building, it generally matches its tidy Federal Triangle neighbors. When built, it appropriately suggested the subservience of the District to the federal government (the district was then just another federal agency). However, time has passed, and the District now has its own elected mayor and council. Nevertheless, the building's style and location still symbolize federal control.

Since District residents still have no voting representation in Congress, such a symbol may still be apt. However, this symbol — and the conditions it represents — challenge some of the nation's most cherished democratic ideals.

### **Fixing the Problems**

There seems to be a cycle in planning for Pennsylvania Avenue, one that seeks improvements every thirty years or so. The last plans were drawn in the 1970s, suggesting that it's time to try again.

This time, there is no need to make the avenue brighter and shinier — that was done last time. Instead, we could make it more symbolically meaningful, helping it to speak clearly and accurately about our values as a nation. In the process, we could also seek to rid it of accident and inadvertence.

Fixing the symbol of blocked connections between the President and Congress would best be accomplished by having Pennsylvania Avenue run straight and true, once again, all the way between the White House and Capitol. This would involve, first, taking out the intrusive Freedom Plaza. Second, as Washington architect Robert A. Bell proposed in an unpublished paper in the late 1960s, the

Treasury's south facade should be moved a bit to the north. Adjusting this building would offend fans of Robert Mills, its designer; but leaving it as a symbolic impediment to the connection between the main branches of government should offend fans of L'Enfant, as well as those who admire the design of our nation's Constitution.

A solution to the symbolic presence of J. Edgar Hoover would start by removing him from the avenue. The Hoover Building could be renamed, possibly for a member of the Bureau actually worthy of honor. But, more importantly, the opportunity exists to clear the avenue of a symbol of police presence by returning the big setback in front of the FBI Building to use. If a new building here were named for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this piece of Pennsylvania Avenue could be transformed into a shining symbol of American interest in racial harmony. Such a building might also be designed with roof-top gardens and front-wall planters. By putting foliage on its facade, Pennsylvania Avenue might thus also gain a symbol of national concern for the environment.

The symbolic problem of an excluded Mexico could be solved by supporting a Mexican purchase of property next to the Canadian Embassy and encouraging an imaginative Mexican design for a new embassy there. This would elevate Mexico to equal status with Canada as a valued neighbor and equal member in NAFTA. As part of this solution, the organization now proposing to build a private museum on the site could be helped to find another location. There are many symbolically significant sites for museums in the District of Columbia, but only one that can suggest that relations between Mexico and the U.S. are as close and cordial as those between the U.S. and Canada.

Finally, fixing the symbol of federal control of the District of Columbia could be achieved by increasing the visibility of its city hall, and by transforming it — and its immediate area — into a District Center. There could be several components of such a solution. First, a District museum (which is now being developed far away) could be installed in a new building beside the existing city hall. Second, the District War Memorial (a classy little marble temple which honors losses in the Great War) could be moved here from the Mall, where it is both lost and unheralded. Third, the statue of a District hero, one "Boss" Shepherd, could be brought back here from where Pennsylvania Avenue planners banished it in the 1980s (despite its originally having been bought and installed by District residents). Fourth, a plaza could be added, along with more statues of local heroes. The result of these initiatives might be a District Center significant enough to lend strong symbolic support to the notion of local





identity and local democracy.

Surprisingly, it would not be difficult to finance the fixes suggested above. To start with, changing the Hoover Building's name would only mean making some new signs. Other repairs might be more costly, but a big subsidy is handy — it's built right in. The big setbacks in front of Pennsylvania Avenue's new buildings could be sold, and used for building sites. Filling in these setbacks would also improve the avenue's appearance, bringing back the coherent sense of linear space originally envisaged for it.

In 1984 these setbacks were estimated to be worth about \$20,000,000, and adjacent empty "vista" land between the Capitol and Union Station another \$150,000,000.<sup>2</sup> Both would clearly be even more valuable today. This would be enough to fix every symbol problem here. It would be enough to erase symbols of hate, enough to install symbols of continental friendship, enough to enlarge symbols of District identity, and enough to bring back symbols of a White House and a Congress meant to work together.

#### Notes

1. Paul Spreiregen, "The L'Enfant Plan for Washington," *AIA Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 1963), 31. For a more complete discussion of the Treasury Building design, see Daniel D. Reiff, *Washington Architecture, 1791-1861: Problems in Development* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, 1971), 37.
2. These estimates appeared in my article "Unless People Live on Pennsylvania Avenue," *Washington Post*, April 15, 1984. The "vista" land is several blocks of tree-lined grass originally intended to afford people arriving by train an unobstructed view of the Capitol and its immediate environs. However, since the trees are now so thick, the original purpose of this open land is no longer served, even in winter. Instead of cutting down the trees, it would now make more sense to build apartments, shops and restaurants on the interior grassy portions of these blocks, creating a pleasant urban environment. There is already plenty of open grassy area on the nearby Mall, and a marvelous view of the Capitol dome could be retained down the short, diagonal Delaware Avenue.

The statue of Boss Sheperd was moved from its former location in front of the John A. Wilson Building to an anonymous new location. Photos courtesy of author.