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Nathan Glazer, Cynthia R. Field, eds. *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monumental Core*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. viii + 220 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8805-2.

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The National Mall without Sweat, Mud, or Water

Every spring and summer millions of people from around the world flock to the National Mall to visit its monuments and museums, join in its festivals, and demonstrate for various political causes. Meanwhile, thousands of local residents utilize the area as a recreational park for picnics and sporting activities. In the words of anthropologist Edith Turner, the National Mall has become the "People's Home Ground" (p. 69). The mall has not always played such an important role in the city and the nation's civic life. In the mid-nineteenth century, it was a mundane space that functioned both as a cow pasture and a railroad depot. While no one seems to fear a return to these uses, many people are concerned that over-development and commercialization will threaten the mall's future.

In response to the controversy over the placement of the World War II memorial, Congress declared in 2003 that the mall was "a substantially completed work of civic art" (p. 146). In hopes of preserving the remaining open space, it imposed a moratorium on the construction of any new monuments or visitor centers. Following the completion of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (adjacent to the National Museum of American History) there will be little, if any, space for additional museum expansion. The problem is that there will undoubtedly be compelling demands for new museums and memorials. With *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monumental Core*, editors Nathan Glazer

and Cynthia Field seek to address the question, "What now?"

The eclectic mix of essays brings together the work of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, poets, planners, and advocates who seek to "rethink" the past and future of the National Mall. The collection offers some intriguing insights into the top-down planning history of the mall. It also offers an effective critique of the present-day management of the mall and addresses the latest plans for the mall's future. Its efforts to address a bottom-up social history of the mall are less compelling. Furthermore, none of the essays addresses the yet-to-be written environmental history of this park.

The essays that focus on the nineteenth-century planning history of the mall draw clear distinctions between the L'Enfant Plan (1791) and the McMillan Plan (1902). Michael Lewis and Witold Rybczynski argue that Pierre L'Enfant envisioned the mall as a public walk or "Grand Boulevard" lined with theaters, cafés, music halls, and other amusements. It held no lofty monumental role. L'Enfant planned for the dispersal of celebratory monuments throughout the city in fifteen separate squares. It was not until Robert Mills designed the Washington Monument and Andrew Jackson Downing presented his landscape plan in the mid-nineteenth century that monuments began to encroach on the open space. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Lewis contends that the Victorian appetite for picturesque irregularity and vital

disorder held sway. The McMillan Plan emerged in opposition to this Victorian aesthetic and subordinated the mall to a visual unity marked by the frosty and unfor- giving nature of a complete work of art (p. 23). Today's approach to the mall, Lewis contends, mirrors the Victo- rians more fragmented and relaxed view.

Richard Guy Wilson and Cynthia Field present celebratory accounts of Charles Follen McKim and Daniel Burnham's contributions to the McMillan Plan. Wilson makes the case that McKim was the real mastermind behind the plan, and Fields highlights Burnham's larger vision and organizational capacities. Both stress the impor- tance of the American Renaissance movement in shap- ing their worldviews, however their essays are limited by the fairly narrow approach of a traditional intellec- tual history. Witold Rybczynski, charged with covering Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.'s contributions to the plan, also attends to the mall's larger landscape changes over the nineteenth century. Contesting Wilson's claim, Ry- bczynski identifies Olmsted, Jr. as the originator of the long greensward bordered by trees. This proposal clearly put the McMillan Plan at odds with the L'Enfant proposal as the trees separated the mall from the surrounding city and gave it a rural feel. Nathan Glazer takes up the next major transition—the shift from classicism to modernism as the prevailing aesthetic on the mall. Modernism triumphed following the conflict over the Jefferson Memo- rial's design in 1938 and 1939. With a few exceptions, notably the Vietnam Memorial, Glazer argues that mod- ernism has not held up well.

It appears that Edith Turner and Richard Kurin's es- says are included to balance out the top-down approach of the other authors. Turner argues that people, through their activities on the mall over the last century, have cre- ated the meaning and significance of this empty green expanse. Their uses have sacralized the park and given it greater resonance. Kurin, the director of the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, ex- amines the history of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. He argues that the festival has created a space on the mall for the expression and affirmation of regional and local cultural practices. The essay's strength rests in its description of the early conflicts surrounding the Smith- sonian's embrace of the festival. Where it addresses the more recent history, the essay's uncritical approach be- trays the author's position.

Frederick Turner's contribution borders on the bizarre. He asserts that the mall is the nation's principal pilgrimage site and that we should consider this role in

architectural and landscape planning. He lists seven cat- egories key to pilgrimage sites, evaluates the mall based on these categories, and offers some unusual suggestions to improve the mall as a pilgrimage center. Turner ar- gues the mall needs to recognize its mazes, grottoes, and wombs, its passageways through into psychic meta- morphosis, its oracles, its altars, its sacred precincts, its communal feasts, and its healing waters (p. 92). While acknowledging that Washington is explicitly secular, Turner sees little problem in explicitly designing the mall to enhance a generalized mystical or transcendent expe- rience (p. 88).

Judy Scott Feldman and Patricia Gallagher promote more practical approaches. Feldman, the president of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall, maintains that the mall has been increasingly divided in two as political expediency, changing fashions, and anti-terrorism mea- sures have moved us away, in her view, from the L'En- fant and McMillan plans. She offers a trenchant critique of the National Park Service's management of the mall, arguing that it has embraced a piecemeal approach to planning and promoted a vision of the mall as a theme park. Gallagher, the executive director of the National Capital Planning Commission, addresses the most recent proposals for the mall. The Legacy Plan (1997) embraces L'Enfant's decentralized approach and seeks to strategi- cally position new memorials and public buildings in a way that can stimulate private investment and urban re- vitalization efforts in Washington DC. The plan extends the axis for development along lines south, east, and west of the Capitol. Gallagher assumes that this approach will integrate the mall with the rest of the city and promote social and economic equality. The last claim requires a significant leap of faith.

While *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monumental Core* offers some welcome insights into the mall's past and future, its shortcomings highlight the need for a more exhaustive study of the topic that take into account the social and environmental history of the park. The contributors make no effort to relate the mall's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century development to the surrounding residential areas. Field maintains that Burnham saw the mall as enhancing a desire for lawfulness and order at the municipal level, but the essay fails to address what the municipal level disorder was that the McMillan Plan sought to counteract (p. 51). Given the emergence of Jim Crow, the disenfranchisement of African Americans, the influx of immigrants, and the growth of labor radicalism at the time, one would think issues related to race and/or class would be relevant here.

Furthermore, while the book addresses visitor uses as well as top-down plans for the mall, the history of the workers who built the mall is left out.

The other weakness of the collection is its failure to address the mall's environmental history. Considering that the eastern half of the mall is built over what used to be the Tiber Creek and the western expanse is built on landfill along the shallows of the Potomac River, one would think nature would play a greater role in this story. While Feldman discusses the existence of Jefferson's Pier (the center of the mall's axis and at one time the nation's first meridian), the relationship between the mall and what historian Ted Steinberg in *Down to Earth* (2009) terms "one of the most far-reaching attempts at rationalizing a landscape in world history" remains undeveloped (p. 62). Intriguingly, the center of this enterprise in abstraction has not been immune to the realities of nature. The Washington Monument could not be built at the center of the mall's axis because there was no bedrock at the location. The memorial to Jefferson himself has been gradually sinking into the mud of the Potomac since it

was built.[1] Furthermore, the contributors ignore the greatest threat to the mall—flooding. A breach in the mall's aging levees could leave the area under ten feet of water. Built on reclaimed swampland at the convergence of the Anacostia and Potomac rivers, the mall is especially prone to floods. Urban development, rising sea levels, and global warming only exacerbate the dangers.[2]

While this collection offers some relevant insights into the planning and architectural history of the mall, it is far from definitive. Caught up in the visual surface of the great lawn, the work fails to get sweaty and dig into the swampy muck below the surface. If anything, the work highlights the need for some historian to grab a shovel and get to work on this topic.

Notes

[1]. Michael E. Ruane, "Jefferson's Memorial Sinking in the Mud," *The Washington Post* (June 16, 2007), A1.

[2]. Brian Westley, "Gaps in Aging Levees Leave D.C. Landmarks Exposed," *Associated Press* (July 25, 2008).

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