

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Lisa Benton-Short.** *The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 296 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-3054-3; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4426-3055-0.

**Reviewed by** Mark A. Barron (Iowa State University)

**Published on** H-FedHist (July, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

In 2009, Lisa Benton-Short, the author of the newly released book *The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space*, was one of approximately two million people who had gathered to hear Barack Obama's inaugural address. As she participated in that historic event and listened to President Obama's call to action that "everywhere we look, there is work to be done," Benton-Short found her eyes gazing upon the National Mall's "cum-filled Lincoln Reflecting Pool, sagging benches, broken water fountains, and crumbling, neglected walls and sidewalks" (p. 3). That her recollection of that day's events is the opening paragraph to her excellent book on the National Mall's history of failures and mismanagement is no surprise. The National Mall is, after all, a designated space for the American people to assemble. As Benton-Short writes, "It is on the Mall ... where national discord has been on display, national problems advanced, national wounds commemorated, national celebrations staged" (p. 5).

Benton-Short's experience in 2009 is not unique. In fact, the National Mall's crumbling infrastructure has been a topic of conversation for residents of the Washington, DC, metropolitan region and tourists for many years. What Benton-Short has done with her book is to ask how the Mall developed as a public space and why, given its historical and cultural significance, it exists in the state that it does. Through the course of her investigation, she states her hope that the book will "stimulate a public dialogue about how to shape the future use and meaning of this special public space" (p. 16).

The book consists of nine chapters arranged neatly

into three parts. The first part dives into the history of the making of the National Mall, with a focus on how, historically, various planning and design theories have often failed to be put into practice. In what is arguably the book's best chapter, "Managing the Mall," Benton-Short exposes the deep institutional problems of the National Mall that contribute to its decrepit appearance and sometimes haphazard spatial organization. As she notes, there are "six federal and local government agencies" responsible for overseeing the Mall's day-to-day operation and for planning its future (p. 71). Through a careful examination of primary source material culled from meeting minutes, public testimonies, and newspaper accounts, Benton-Short finds that not only do many of the agencies have competing ideas about the Mall's use and function but some of the agencies also cannot even agree on the physical boundaries of the National Mall itself. In addition to interagency disputes that hinder how its space is used, budget battles between the legislative and executive branches often delay, curtail, or eliminate the funds the Mall needs to operate as a successful public space. After reading Benton-Short's investigation on the Mall's history of systemic dysfunction at the hands of those who have been entrusted as its stewards, readers may well see that the National Mall's one, overarching theme is one of ongoing mismanagement (p. 85).

The second part of the book examines the "use and development pressures" the Mall has faced over the past two decades by focusing on the design of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, the placement of the World War II Memorial, and the Mall's changing landscape in the post-9/11 era (p. 105). The Martin Luther King Jr.

Memorial and the World War II Memorial are important to study for two reasons: they highlight the role corporate sponsors presently play in helping fund the construction of new memorials and they illustrate the problem of where new memorials will be placed as the National Mall runs out of usable space. In her study, Benton-Short notes that the relationships between corporate money and memorial fund groups raise important questions about the commoditization of the past and historical memory, while arguments over the physical placement of memorials reminds us of how contested public space can be when public opinion and bureaucratic oversight intersect. The security infrastructure put in place on the National Mall after 9/11 has similarly raised questions over public use and right of access. Do the erection of Jersey barriers and chain link fences lend themselves to what Benton-Short sees as the "fear and fortressing of urban space" (p. 131)? Are the post-9/11 security measures indicative of the Mall's history of mismanagement and flawed designs?

Benton-Short closes her book with a third part that explores public participation with the Mall's present and future. While the Mall is often seen through a lens of commemoration, celebration, or protest, it is, as she points out, also a vast urban space within the nation's capital. As such, it has significance beyond the confines of historical memory; it is a vital piece to the everyday

environment of over 650,000 Washington, DC, residents. If readers are looking for a happy denouement to the book, where agencies and the public have come together to make the Mall a better, more accessible space, then they are probably going to be disappointed. While there do seem to be some bright spots, the bureaucratic troubles and public discord that have plagued the Mall since its creation now threaten its future, as agencies continue to bicker among themselves and as the general public becomes more despondent over what it sees as governmental lethargy. In one blistering example, Benton-Short singles out the National Park Service's contract system that stymied both public transportation to and from the Mall and access to food vendors. In another, she discusses how the National Park Service, Commission of Fine Arts, and the National Capital Planning Commission limit public participation in matters relating to the Mall's future by holding meetings on short notice or during the day when most people are at work.

Benton-Short's book is firmly rooted in social science scholarship, but it should be read by everyone interested in the past, present, and future of public spaces. It would not be surprising to see *The National Mall* assigned to students in anthropology, geography, public history, landscape architecture, or urban planning. Readers of the book will learn to see spaces such as the National Mall with a much more critical eye.

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**Citation:** Mark A. Barron. Review of Benton-Short, Lisa, *The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. July, 2017.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49195>



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