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Security with Dignity

By Patti Gallagher and Alex Krieger

A Call for Action

Throughout the world, Washington, D.C. is admired for the sweep and grace of its public spaces, for the city's overall aura of openness, and for the relative absence of, barriers—physical no less than psychological—found between citizens and their public servants and institutions. Today, however, guard huts and planters block the front of the White House, jersey barriers surround the Washington and Lincoln Monuments, and sewer pipes encircle the Capitol. Such fortifications first became features familiar to the Washington landscape following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and since September 11th their frequency and visual dominance has escalated in a profoundly disturbing way. While providing a basic line of security—keeping a bomb-laden vehicle from jumping a curb and crashing into a building—they also evoke insecurity, a lessening of confidence in the public nature of the environment, perhaps even fear and retrenchment. Much seems at stake as we respond to the imperative to better secure ourselves and our institutions.

The National Capital Planning Commission, the federal government's central planning agency in Washington and the surrounding region, began considering the impacts of security measures on the public realm in March of 2001 and this past October released an Urban Design and Security Plan for the Nation's Capital. The initial focus was on assessing the long-term necessity of the closure to automobile traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House by the Secret Service, a highly controversial act that was widely criticized by the city officials and members of Congress. However, soon after the Commission's Security Task Force began its investigation, and tragically reinforced by the events of 9/11, it realized that Pennsylvania Avenue was part of a much larger security design problem, and expanded its focus on the entire Monumental Core of Downtown Washington, DC.

Consultation with security and terrorism experts, local and federal government agencies, planning and design professionals, and the local civic and business community, reinforced the idea that a more thoughtful approach to security design could also yield broader urban design benefits. Virtually any urban street contains an array of artifacts – lights, benches, trees and planting, refuse containers, bus shelters, signage and similar furnishings – with the potential to be adapted to enhance curbside security while not looking like barriers. Incorporating such normal street furnishings would reduce the need for a second row of curbside elements, which only address security while marring the street ambiance. The Plan proposes solutions to more seamlessly integrate building perimeter security into the historic urban fabric of Washington Monumental Core. It offers a citywide program that provides both security and public realm enhancement, even beautification, by expanding the palette of street furnishings and landscape treatments that can provide curbside security.

The insight that one could relate curbside security to overall streetscape improvements was best summarized by Commission Member Richard Friedman, who led NCPC's Interagency Task Force that developed the Plan. "Why must barricades be ugly", he challenged the members of the Task Force? "We can have both good urban design and good security, but now we have neither. The Nation's Capital should reflect an open and democratic society, not one where ad-hoc security sullies the vision of Pierre L'Enfant's time-honored design for the capital." Such became an overarching planning goal of the Security Task Force.

The Plan is the product of an unprecedented collaboration of local and federal agencies working together to improve security around high threat monuments and public buildings and while doing so, to maintain a welcoming and beautiful public realm. "The partnerships that we have developed on this project are extraordinary," said John V. Cogbill, III, Chairman of the Commission. "It has been very gratifying to see the security authorities, the preservation community, federal agencies and District

officials coming together to make the difficult decisions. The American people have been well served in this truly collaborative effort.”

In developing security design solutions for various parts of the Monumental Core, the Commission also called in several of the country’s top landscape design and planning firms, including the Olin Partnership, Peter Walker and Partners, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, EDAW, Chan Krieger and Associates, and Wolff Clements and Associates.

Planning Framework and Objectives

The Urban Design and Security Plan is built upon an urban design framework that defines prominent districts and streets within Washington’s Monumental Core that share architectural, symbolic, and functional characteristics, such as the National Mall and Federal Triangle. The Plan clearly states that “one size must not fit all” in security design. Rather, it outlines and suggests design solutions tailored to those particular design qualities of each special district and, in some cases, provides much needed enhancements to the streetscape and pedestrian environments.

The Plan presents a variety of security design solutions, such as “hardened” street furniture, planter walls, security bollards embedded within and screened by abundant landscaping, and sidewalk planters designed to meet security needs. The result is a far less intrusive, far more hospitable and attractive streetscape that provides security while not shouting “fortified street.”

The Plan also calls for a Circulator, a new transit system planned for Downtown Washington. The Circulator will provide low-cost hop-on/hop-off service and offer a convenient way to make short, quick trips around town. Workers, residents, and visitors will be able to leave their cars behind and get around without having to find on-street parking, thus somewhat easing Downtown traffic congestion.

Federal Triangle and Downtown

The streetscape along Pennsylvania Avenue, between the U.S. Capitol and the White House, was reconceived and implemented in the 1970s as one of the first acts of the Pennsylvania Avenue Redevelopment Corporation. Today, the attractiveness of the mature trees and of the specially designed street furniture has been compromised by the makeshift placement of large planters and other “temporary” security devices along the street. The Urban Design and Security Plan calls for preserving the spirit of the 1970s plan by designing custom-made, security-grade street furniture with complementary aesthetic features, and adding new components where necessary. It will be interesting to see whether a redesign of this stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue in the spirit of its current aesthetic language will survive the challenge of historic preservationists who question the value of the 1970s design. Of course, many others are attached to the 70s design and wish it to be respected. Meeting the new security requirements along this prominent street is certain to bring this design debate to the fore.

On the block between 9th and 10th Streets, NW that contains the Department of Justice and the FBI Buildings, the Plan proposes hardened versions of street furniture including new benches, drinking fountains, trash containers, as well as planters and bus shelters. A regular rhythm of such multiple elements would be only interrupted at building entrances where special elements would be substituted to reflect the significance of these moments along a block. The hardened street furniture would be applied in front of those buildings that must be secured; for buildings that do not require security unhardened versions of the same furniture will be installed so that the continuity of the street experience would be maintained. .

The Federal Triangle, the enclave of federal buildings bounded by Constitution and Pennsylvania Avenues, is a leading example of Washington’s monumental civic architecture and urban design. The proposed security design reinforces the historic layout and character of the area by distinguishing design solutions for the ceremonial avenues and north-south grid streets. Designs for the north-south streetscapes incorporate a fence and bollard wall located on the curbside of the existing tree planting beds. The fountain in front of the National Archives on Pennsylvania Avenue will be redesigned to provide security

as will the fountain at the intersection of 13th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. Where they exist plinth and retaining walls will be incorporated as part of the security system, modified only to achieve appropriate heights. The 12th Street hemicycle and the 14th Street plaza in front of the Ronald Reagan Building will receive custom-designed security solutions.

Washington's Downtown is one area where federal facilities are in close proximity to private buildings. Because only a few of the federal buildings are likely to require perimeter security, security components may be needed on only some blocks or portions of blocks. The design intent here is to maintain the unified appearance of the streetscape around both public and private properties, to conform to the existing standards established by the City and the Downtown Business Improvement District, and to harden streetscape elements only where required. The hierarchy of streetscape designs relates to Downtown diagonal avenues and grid streets. The broader diagonal avenues can accommodate landscape solutions that include a tree enclosure fence wall at the back of the planting strip and next to the sidewalk. In some instances fence segments will be interspersed with bollards and hardened benches. Security along the grid streets, with their narrower sidewalks, will include hardened street lighting, benches, bicycle racks, and tree fence enclosures. Because not every building will require full curbside security, it is even more important that those that do are not made overly conspicuous by security components that are incompatible with the normal streetscape language along the same block.

Monumental and West End Districts

Along with Pennsylvania Avenue, Constitution, Independence, and Maryland Avenues are the most significant ceremonial streets in Washington's Monumental Core. Constitution and Independence frame the National Mall and are key arteries for cross-town traffic. Here, low shrubs that conceal protective bollards offer an elegant, green solution that provides security while reinforcing the majesty of these monumental civic avenues. Landscaped plinth walls and raised planting terraces, already part of the existing streetscape along portions of these two avenues, can be extended to improve security and unify the appearance of these two significant but very different thoroughfares. While the height of the plinth walls may vary, two feet six inches is expected to be the height in most locations. Stone bollards and benches are called for at building entrances and at intersections. Guardhouses in this area will be custom-designed and compatible with either the associated building architecture or with the surrounding landscape setting. Along Maryland Avenue, currently in a state of neglect, a new streetscape design will strengthen the prominence of this historic L'Enfant Street. Here, bollards will be located between a double allée of street trees. Heavy landscaping and new plantings in the tree beds will soften the appearance and help conceal the protective bollards.

As three of the most widely recognized icons in American national civic life, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, have special security needs. All three are surrounded by sweeping expanses of lawn that provide ample space for low stone walls, planters, and subtle grade changes that will achieve security while respecting their historic settings. At the Lincoln Memorial a low wall will enclose the mound on which the memorial sits. Retractable bollards allow limited access to the circular roadway and benches and bollards permit easy pedestrian movement between the memorials and the Mall. At the Jefferson Memorial security needs require that the safety perimeter be located along East Basin Drive at the eastern and southern edges of the memorial grounds. This perimeter will employ low retaining walls, bollards and site grading. At the Washington Monument the National Park Service has proposed a security concept in which existing walkways would be reconfigured as a series of partial ovals extending east and west from the monument plaza. As these walkways negotiate the gentle slope they would incorporate visually unobtrusive retaining walls to serve as the vehicle barrier.

The area west of the White House was originally planned, although never fully executed, as an enclave of federal buildings. This district contains several monumental and historic public buildings, such as the Department of Interior and the Department of State, along with other institutional buildings, such as the Federal Reserve and the American Red Cross buildings. The security designs proposed for the West

End are intended to reinforce the green, campus-like setting of the area. Designs take advantage of the generous setbacks of some of the buildings and include low retaining walls and decorative fences composed of a variety of elements, such as granite pillars, seats, and benches.

Southwest Federal Center

Created in the 1960s by federal and private office development, the Southwest Federal Center lacks much of the ambiance, aesthetic coherence, and urban design integrity of other part of Washington's Monumental Core. Many of the precinct's large modern buildings are set back from the street on plazas, raised roadways, and parking ramps that create a harsh and generally impoverished pedestrian realm. Installation of artfully designed security measures in this area, as the plan shows, can help bring design coherence and pedestrian amenities to the area. Here is also an opportunity to create a contemporary motif for streetscape elements, that would complement the architecture. This district clearly demonstrates how security enhancements can achieve badly needed streetscape improvements.

Planning for security in this area of the city is complicated by the railroad tracks that slice through it, the high-level security requirements and narrow setbacks of many of the buildings, and traffic and parking limitations. Along the 10th Street Promenade, the proposed design concept uses both large round and linear seat planters on both sides of the street to create an improved pedestrian environment. Existing drop-off or pull-out lanes are removed and replaced with sidewalk so that these planters maintain a consistent line at the edge of the street. Because 10th Street is built on structure, large trees cannot be introduced, but large shrubs such as crepe myrtle can provide scale and elegance. The Plan calls for a new green median along 10th Street, landscaped and possibly including a site for a new memorial. While the median is not necessary for security, it demonstrates how ancillary streetscape improvements undertaken as part of the larger security design program can enhance the city's public realm.

Variations on the planter streetscape can be applied to all of the grid streets within the Southwest Federal Center area and custom-designed seat planters and benches are recommended as the primary security components. Where parking lanes must be removed to accommodate these new components, a program will be initiated to identify a central parking facility.

Pennsylvania Avenue at the White House

The White House is one of the most important, symbolically charged, and potentially vulnerable places in the nation. The temporary closure of Pennsylvania Avenue from 15th to 17th Streets in 1995 had serious consequences, not least of which was on downtown circulation patterns. Following the September 11th attacks, any hope that the Avenue would reopen to traffic in the foreseeable future was lost. In response, NCPC called for it to be redesigned as a true pedestrian-oriented public space. The argument can be made that this stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue, closed to vehicles but made into a pleasant, hospitable, welcoming—dare one say, beautiful—pedestrian realm, is likely to become a superior public environment to eight lanes of traffic, an environment whose openness and accessibility is hardly diminished. It is the present condition, of the street crudely barricaded for security without other modification that sends messages of insecurity and, indeed, offends.

Four leading landscape design firms were invited to submit design proposals for this symbolic space, and the Commission selected Michael Van Valkenburgh to move this redesign forward.

In presenting his design to the Commission, Van Valkenburgh said, "The front of the residence of the President of the United States should reclaim a confidence and a simplicity that reasserts what is true about the United States and the position we hold in the world. When you come to the site, you should have a sense of history that is intertwined with a certain simplicity, appropriateness, and dignity."

Van Valkenburgh's concept design, relying primarily on sensitive ground treatment and careful tree planting to reinforce views and vistas, promises a remarkably subtle and easily reversible

transformation of Pennsylvania Avenue (should security needs change in the future). Even the idea of a "softer" paving surface wonderfully evokes a gracious and clearly pedestrian realm. The design uses familiar materials to create a space that follows a historic American tradition of mediating between the European formality of the L'Enfant Plan, the naturalism of Andrew Jackson Downing's Lafayette Park, and the informality of the White House grounds.

Getting the Job Done

NCPC is working with Congress, the Administration, and the City to secure funding and implement the projects outlined in the Urban Design and Security Plan. The Commission has recommended that the Federal Highway Administration serve as the lead agency to oversee the design and construction of the Plan. To mitigate the traffic impacts of closing Pennsylvania Avenue (and the E Street closure following September 11th), the Commission also called for federal support in implementing the new Circulator and is even considering constructing a tunnel underneath either Pennsylvania Avenue or E Street, to replace the lost capacity of 48,000 vehicles, including 13 bus lines, that formerly used these streets, and have since been re-routed.

The Commission has identified Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House as a priority for construction by the 2005 inaugural. Other priorities include Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House to the Capitol, the Federal Triangle, and Constitution and Independence Avenues. It is expected to take two to three years to complete a project once funding is secured and three to five years to implement the Plan's primary projects.

Lessons for Other Cities

While the NCPC Urban Design and Security Plan focuses by mandate on the security and streetscape needs of the Nation's Capital, it offers several lessons for other American cities:

1. Many cities are hastily surrounding (or preparing to surround) their courthouses, city halls, and historic monuments with security components. A similar goal of doing so with the added determination to enhance the surrounding environment should govern these efforts. Endless lines of jersey barriers look no more attractive outside of Washington D.C.
2. Security measures should be pursued in the context of district-wide urban design thinking rather than on a building-by-building basis, so that, again, the results are better public streets not just conspicuously fortified buildings.
3. As the NCPC Plan demonstrates, one can creatively expand the palette of elements that will provide curbside security, avoiding the monotony of one kind of bollard or planter which adds no grace much less amenity to the sidewalk.
4. Ultimately it may be more cost efficient to combine curbside security and streetscape improvements rather than doing each independently or sequentially. It seems particularly inefficient—not to mention unattractive—to invest in elaborate streetscape features only to then add a parallel (and redundant) line of security elements.

Americans today live with an awareness of how fragile public safety can be; how faith in the stability of the public environment can momentarily be shaken as security is breached or threatened. We understandably demand increased protection for ourselves, and for our cherished or most vulnerable institutions. Yet, we should not guard against terror, or the possibility of terror, at the expense of long-standing American qualities such as openness, accessibility, and comfort in the public domain.

Therefore, we should seize the opportunity offered by the need to enhance street and curbside security to make more attractive streets. In so *enhancing* the public realm of our nation's cities we will avoid converting them into fortified, unpleasant, visibly threatened environments that ironically send messages of insecurity. Such is simply unworthy of our national character.

The NCPC Urban Design and Security Plan outlines how the Nation's Capital can—and must—lead in this endeavor. Secure in the knowledge that the civic environment of Washington D.C. belongs to all of its citizens, Americans must continue to feel entitled to move about their Capital freely while feeling safe and comfortable in doing so. Such confidence is precious, and worth holding onto *especially* in an era which calls for heightened security.

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