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Catalina Calachan

## Introduction to the Federal Urban Design Element

*The federal government's goal is to promote quality design and development in the National Capital Region that reinforces its unique role as the nation's capital and creates a welcoming and livable environment for people.*

Urban design is the practice of shaping the built environment of a city, town, or neighborhood. At its best, urban design results in cities that express the ideals of the people who build and occupy them, while adapting to their changing needs over time. Urban design operates on two scales: the larger scale, which addresses urban systems such as networks of streetscapes and public spaces; and the smaller scale, which addresses the pedestrian experience. Good urban design requires expertise in many disciplines including urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, engineering, public policy, land use law, and social psychology. Through the use of these disciplines, it creates functional, sustainable, lively, and engaging places and improves the quality of life for the people who live and work there.

Urban design policy in Washington, DC must meet these objectives at an elevated standard due to the city's role as the nation's capital and one of the world's great planned cities. Washington is unique because the core planning documents that established the city's spatial framework continue to shape its development today.

The city and the surrounding National Capital Region (NCR) continue to evolve as both federal and local planning efforts guide growth and development throughout the region. It is critical for the federal government to engage with local jurisdictions throughout the region to address areas of mutual interest and prepare strategies for the region's overall urban design quality. This element provides guidance for the urban design of federal properties throughout the NCR.



Pennsylvania Avenue looking toward the U.S. Capitol.

## Defining the Federal Interest for Purposes of the Urban Design Element

The *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital* (Comprehensive Plan) sets forth a planning vision for Washington, DC and the NCR.<sup>1</sup> It is a unified document comprised of both District and Federal Elements. The District of Columbia undertook a major update of the Comprehensive Plan's District Elements that was completed in 2006, subsequently the First Amendment cycle was completed in 2011. The Federal Urban Design Element complements the District's element by focusing on areas under federal jurisdiction; planning matters related to Washington's form and character in areas with major, or contiguous to, national assets; and resources that contribute to the city's image or function as the nation's capital. For purposes of the Urban Design Element, the federal government's interests operate at two equally important levels: those related to Washington's role as the nation's capital (national interests), and Washington's role as the seat of the federal government (federal interests).

### National and Federal Interests

The primary national interests as defined in this element are the preservation and enhancement of Washington's defining characteristics as a capital city that were established by the [L'Enfant Plan](#),<sup>2</sup> [McMillan Plan](#),<sup>3</sup> and the [1910 Height of Buildings Act](#)<sup>4</sup> (Height Act). These qualities are important in areas such as the monumental core, where federal properties and national cultural institutions predominate, and along primary streets within the L'Enfant City that establish the city's basic spatial organization (see map, page 9). While the policies in this element apply primarily to federal property, they are also intended to inform the work of the Commission and staff when providing comments on non-federal property and proposals such as amendments to the Comprehensive Plan's District Elements, zoning map, other regulations, or regional development proposals and plans.

The national interest in Washington's design applies most particularly to the city's skyline and setting as typified by the topographic bowl (see map, page 6); the street grid; federal parks and reservations; federal buildings and infrastructure; Congressionally-authorized memorials and museums; and the contributing features of the L'Enfant Plan as defined in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The national interest regarding federally-owned National Historic Landmarks extends beyond the building itself to its setting, especially when that setting is included in the Schedule of Heights.<sup>5</sup>

Like all cities Washington's urban design character is not a simple formula: it is complex and sometimes contradictory. Great urban design calls for a constant reconciliation of tensions among a variety of planning goals. Planning for a capital city and region requires balancing urban design principles that shape the everyday urban condition with additional design principles that focus on reinforcing the image of the nation's capital.

Finally, from a planning perspective, boundaries—political, geographic, or otherwise—are important. However, urban design policy and national interests related to the form and character of the nation's capital do not neatly fit into jurisdictional boundaries. Indeed, an urban design framework is a whole system of built and natural elements. These resources may be managed by different entities, but nonetheless contribute to a visual and functional composition that contributes to the national capital's image and function. Therefore, the related policies within this element are exclusively focused on national interests as described above, primarily within the topographic bowl (as described on page 23) and L'Enfant City. However, the introduction includes broader language to fully capture the scope and complexity of the major contributing urban and natural forms that make Washington distinctive as a national capital and a home for its residents.

Federal interests include matters related to federal buildings, campuses, parklands, operations, and security. Urban design policy is based on best planning practices and urban design principles for locating federal buildings and campuses for the benefit of agencies, employees, and the surrounding community. These policies are in Part II and apply in both a city and regional context.

## Part I: The Form and Character of the Nation's Capital

Great cities evolve in a way that is authentic to their character and their future aspirations. Deep-rooted in Washington's DNA are signature qualities such as broad sun-lit and tree lined streets, and an unmistakable skyline. Equally authentic to Washington's character is a tradition of long-range planning that asserts that the capital's cityscape is more than a random result of economic activity over time; rather, it has aspired to a more explicit civic form. Built Washington—situated and scaled to the natural environment—emerged as a city of form and experience for residents, the nation's citizens, and millions of annual visitors. As Washington continues to evolve towards a vibrant future, its established urban design framework assures that it will do so in a way that retains many of those qualities that distinguish it from other cities.

### Planning Together

The federal and District of Columbia governments share a vision to further Washington, DC as a great capital city that continues to evolve by building upon its extraordinary planning legacy with a renewed focus on elevating the way people experience the city. As joint stewards charged with protecting and advancing Washington as a vibrant capital, the federal and District governments believe it is essential to mutually promote these shared values. Through coordinated planning and project review both governments ensure the established urban design framework supports an evolving city that serves as a progressive 21st century metropolis and a nation's capital.

The foundation of Washington's design and character is based on continuous and deliberate planning to create a capital worthy of our nation. The streets, reservations, and vistas in Washington's urban core collectively establish the historic L'Enfant City as the singular American example of a purpose built national capital solely conceived to physically express the ideals of a new republic.<sup>6</sup> This historic plan serves as a significant urban design framework. Both the federal and District of Columbia governments have extended through subsequent generations of planning and the development of a signature system of public parks, lushly landscaped streets,



and architecturally rich neighborhoods and buildings. Deeply rooted in the city's form are also natural qualities like the topography, streams and waterways, and sweeping promontory views that continue to shape the human experience of this city in both subtle and formative ways.

As a growing city, Washington, DC, must respond to the evolving needs of its residents, workers, and visitors and be cognizant of how technology and innovation are transforming the way people engage the public realm and built landscape to remain vital for future generations. The continued planning efforts by the federal and District of Columbia governments will build upon our planning legacy to meet the new century by shaping buildings, streets, and public spaces of our city as places for people; celebrating the increasing diversity of people and institutions within our city through the design of public spaces; and elevating our nation's capital as a sustainable and resilient place. By weaving the everyday experiences of people and contemporary design into the historic plan of our city we aim to elevate the national image of Washington as a truly great city.

Lincoln Park is a National Park Service site with two nationally significant memorials. The park serves as a local urban park that defines the neighborhood's identity and provides everyday recreational needs.

# Guiding Urban Design Principles

- Reinforce the character of the nation’s capital as a city set in natural beauty.
- Ensure that federal development and lands in the city and region adhere to design quality standards.
- Foster a distinctive visitor experience that befits the nation’s capital.
- Reinforce the qualities that define the form and character of the nation’s capital and distinguish it from other American cities.
- Preserve the physical preeminence and visual hierarchy of the most significant civic structures within the city, including the White House, the U.S. Capitol, and the Washington Monument.
- Nurture a civic quality for streetscapes, parks, and open spaces within the monumental core that inspires people and cultivates a sense of permanence and dignity. Incorporate other attractive and adaptable built and programmatic elements in these civic spaces.
- Support a vital, comfortable, and accessible public realm, which is a hallmark of a good pedestrian experience and an important component of American civic life.
- Site major civic institutions, memorials, cultural landmarks, and other iconic city buildings at key locations with symbolic, spatial, or natural significance.

## Washington’s Urban Design Framework Components

The following map series illustrates and describes the five main components of Washington’s Urban Design Framework.

 **Natural Settings:**  
Terrain (topography), ridges, stream valley corridors, waterways, “Green City” character (vegetation), and climate

 **Street + Public Spaces System:**  
Avenues, streets, civic places, park drives, scenic places, gateways, and street design

 **Open Space Networks:**  
A system of circles and squares, large reservations, natural parks, formal or ornamental parks, urban squares and public grounds, park connections, and settings

 **Urban Patterns:**  
Built-up forms, buildings, and density

 **Civic Art:**  
Monuments, memorials, sculptures, fountains, ornamental gardens, and edifices

## Section A: Urban Design Framework

### A.1 Washington’s Urban Form

Good urban design enhances a city’s vitality, livability, and beauty. Washington’s design emphasizes its role as a national capital with natural, urban, and symbolic identities.

The composite urban design framework is particularly distinctive within the original L’Enfant City. Here, the combination of public spaces created by the L’Enfant and McMillan Plans (collectively known as *The Plan of the City of Washington*), together with the Height Act, resulted in an expansive, elegantly proportioned urban core. The [Public Parking Act of 1870](#) shaped the public space and park-like character of Washington’s system of streets and public spaces across the entire city. These defining documents broadly define Washington’s innovative urban design framework and shape the qualities associated with its unique role as the nation’s capital. These documents are placed within a planning context and described in more detail in pages 1-7 of the Urban Design Element’s Technical Addendum.

As set forth through the *Plan of the City of Washington* and the Height Act, the natural and man-made components form a unique framework of basic physical forms, patterns, and features. These can be perceived as interrelated parts that form a single composition, making Washington a widely recognizable and memorable city.

None of these components can stand alone. From the many overlooks throughout the city, the visual field reveals how the framework components uniquely fit together and create a three dimensional spatial and visual order that reinforces national identity through prominently situated symbols and cultural institutions.

Because Washington is designed to be both seen and experienced, one policy objective is to identify the visual structures and enhance the city’s visibility from publicly-owned overlooks at key vantage points. While many cities have overlooks at the top of buildings, nowhere else is such a premium placed on pedestrian vantage points located on public land. Where these overlooks are federal properties, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) will continue to address the important planning issues associated with balancing agency security needs with public access.

# Understanding Washington's Urban Design Framework



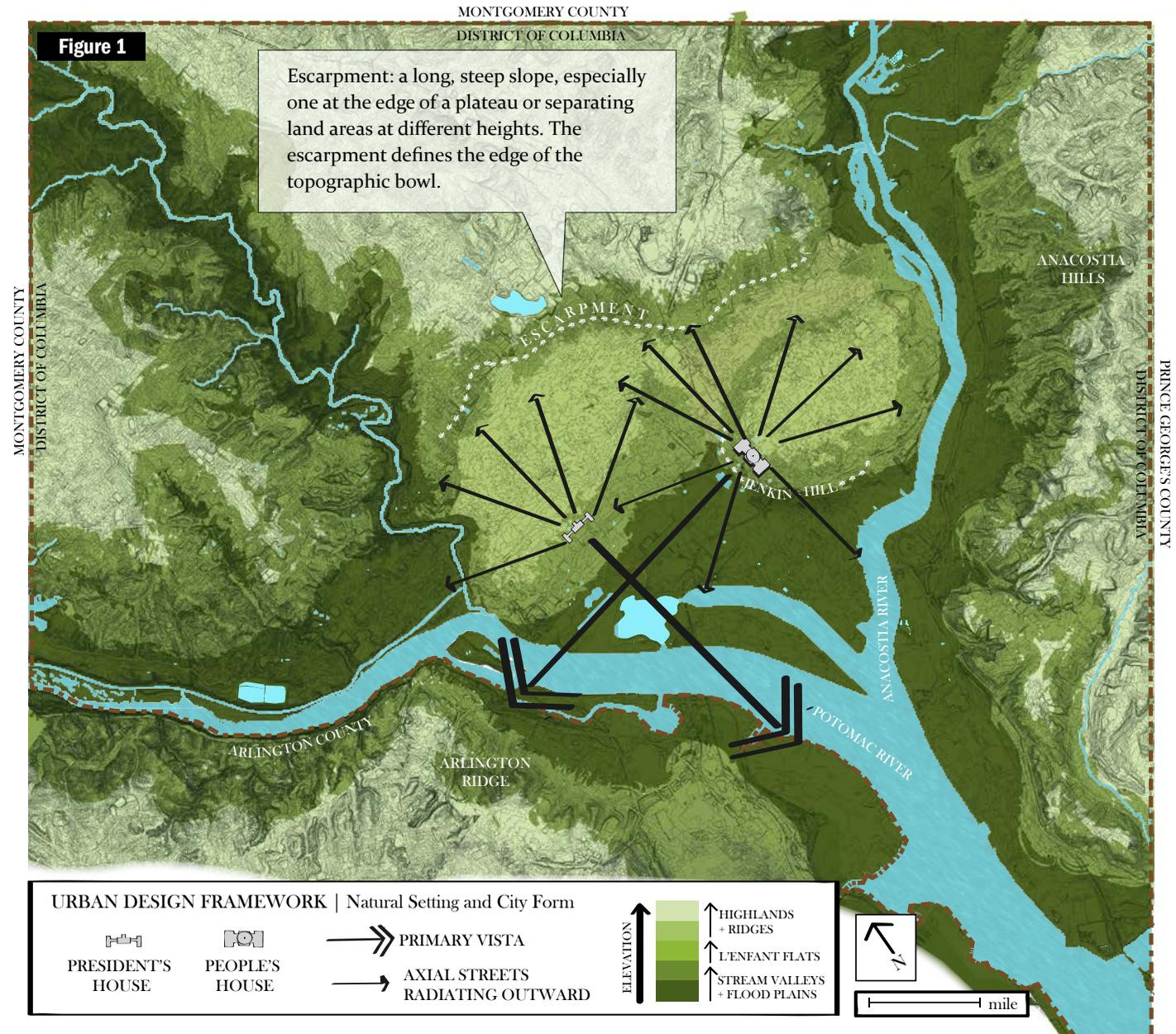
## The Natural Setting and City Form

The L'Enfant Plan integrates a cityscape with natural geography to create an urban framework for the Washington region. In 1791, the city was established as the seat for the federal government. It places two seats of government, the People's House (U.S. Capitol) and the President's House (the White House), on prominent topographic flats (see page 23 for more information on the topographic bowl). A network of diagonal streets radiates outward from these two locations over the escarpment. The plan includes a system of open spaces, streets, and reservations explicitly designed to create a visual hierarchy of important places and to reinforce civic identity.

### Policy Guide

For policies related to the city's natural form please see:

- B.2 Natural Setting: The Topographic Bowl, Waterways, and their Extents
- B.5 Preeminent Viewsheds and View Corridors





# Open Space Network

The existing park and open space system in Washington is influenced by the 1902 *Report of the Senate Park Commission: The Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia* (The McMillan Plan), which recommended acquiring lands to better connect the park system within Washington, DC. It also established a more formal design framework that shapes the appearance of the National Mall, the park system, and parkway drives, illustrated in the map on the left.

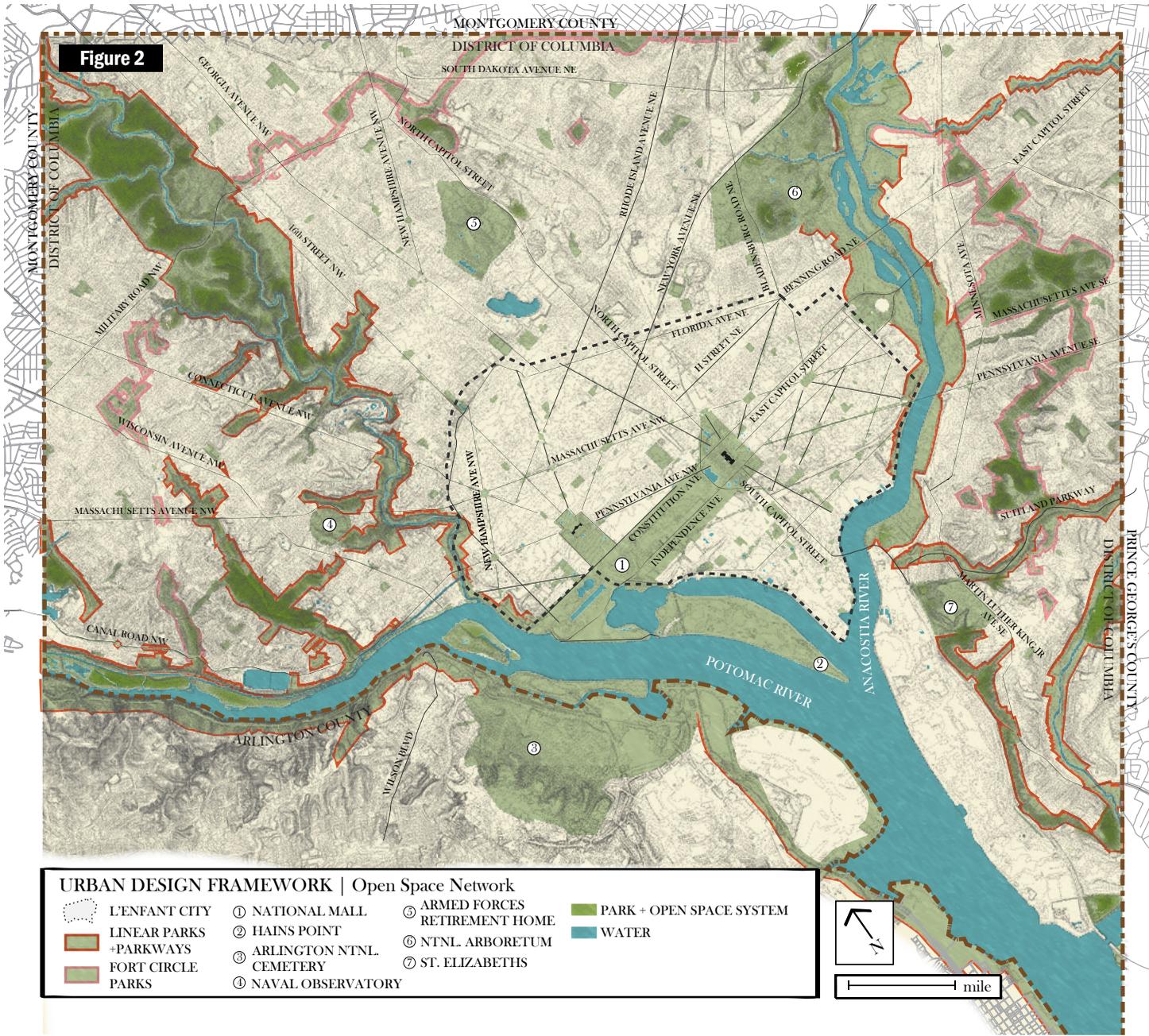
These federal lands together provide a system of public parks and a natural environment at a variety of scales throughout the city. This includes smaller scale urban parks, circles, and squares that are woven throughout the city's core and located at its major extensions. Parkways line the city at its natural edges nearest the rivers. Washington also has an extensive linear parkway system, including Rock Creek Park (the largest park). The Civil War Defenses of Washington (commonly referred as the Fort Circle Parks), define the high ridgelines that encircle the historic city.

There are also several publicly accessible federal lands within the city that provide a natural setting. Some offer panoramic views of the nation's capital and surroundings. These include the Armed Forces Retirement Home, St. Elizabeths, the National Arboretum, and the U.S. Naval Observatory.

### Policy Guide

For policies relating to the open-space system please see:

- B.2 Natural Setting: The Topographic Bowl, Waterways, and their Extents
- B.3 The L'Enfant City and the Public Realm
- B.5 Preeminent Viewsheds and View Corridors





## Streets + Public Space System: District and Environs

Within the L'Enfant City, there is a visually coherent system of streets and public spaces. Broad avenues radiate outward from prominent, civic sites (such as the White House and U.S. Capitol) extending beyond the historic city. These streets retain the formal, baroque qualities of their original design. The diagonal avenues visually connect public spaces, parks, monuments, and important buildings.

Outside the L'Enfant City, these streets and diagonal avenues have varying characteristics. However, many are framed by concentrated activity and higher densities than the local street networks that occur in the interstitial spaces between the avenues.

**Capital Gateway** These designated gateways announce entry into the capital city. They are entry points where elements of the monumental core are visible. For example, the Arlington Memorial Bridge has symbolic significance and provides a formal processional entry into Washington, DC.

**Gateways** Define the city's edge or major entries into the city.

**Major Axial Streets** These streets extend along the primary north-south and east-west cross axes established within the L'Enfant Plan leading to the U.S. Capitol and White House.

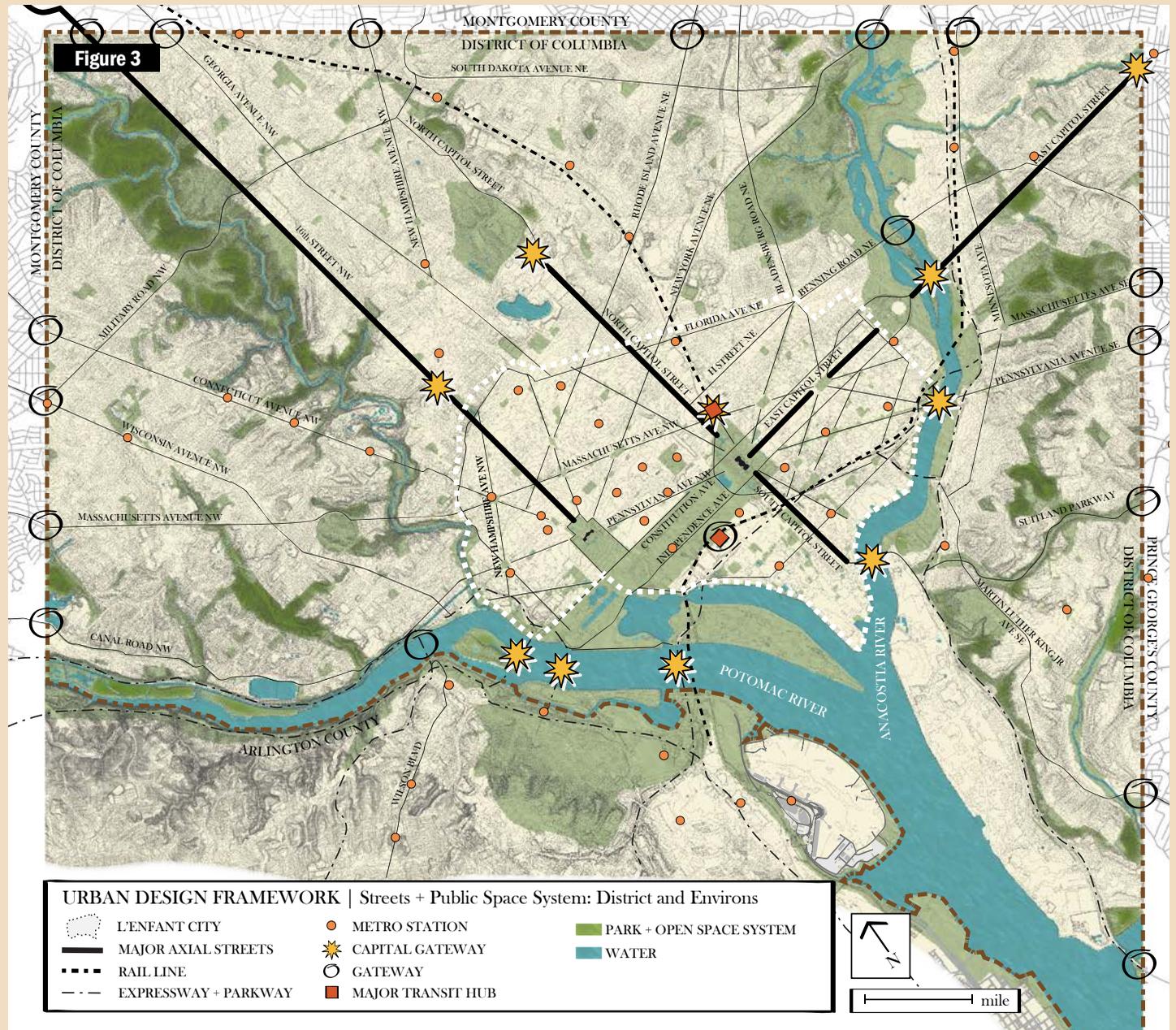
**Expressways and Parkways** The city's expressways serve a primary purpose of moving people through the city. The city's parkways are sited along elevated quays and afford commuters sweeping views of the city and surrounding area from a variety of vantage points.

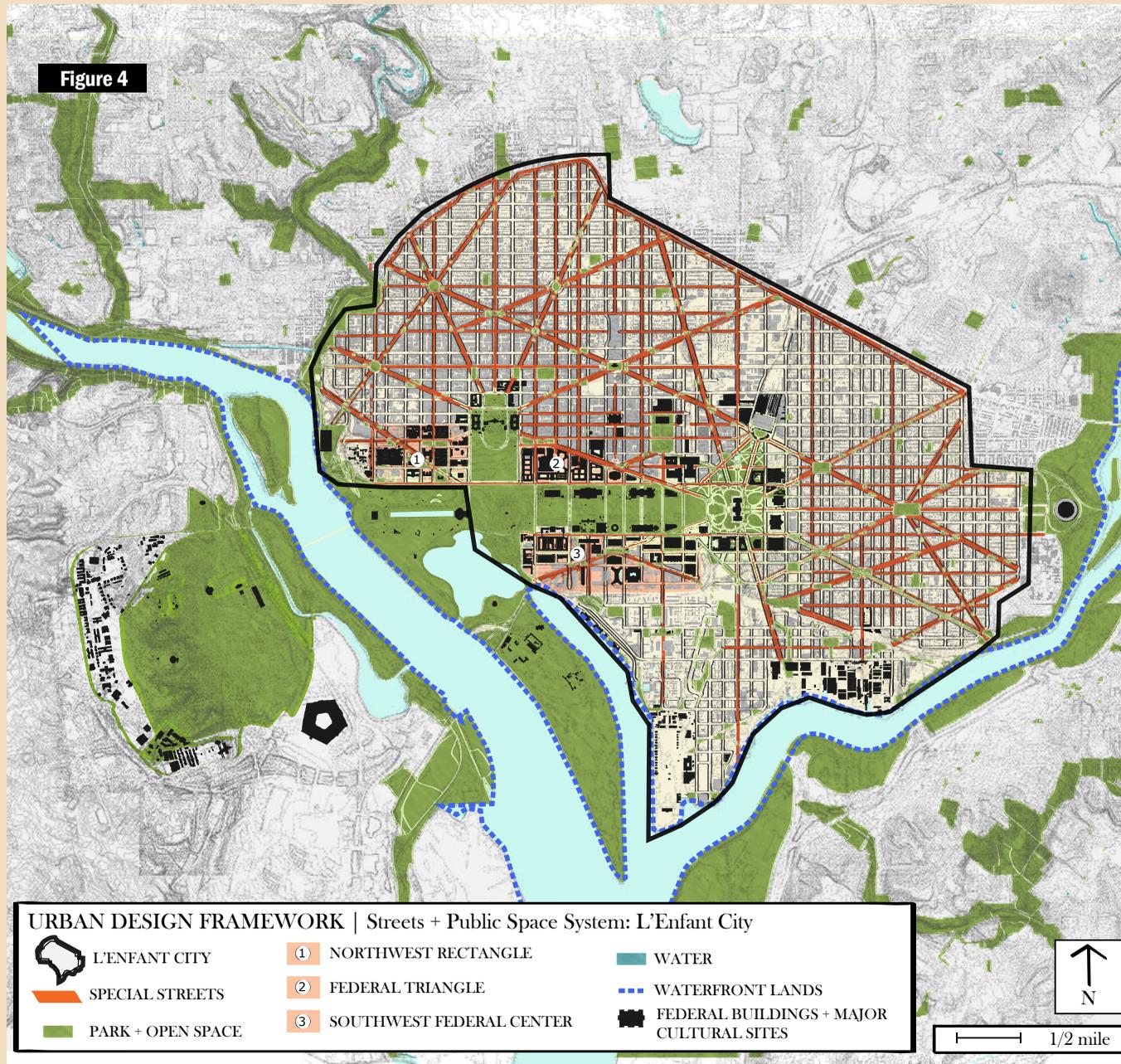
**Major Transit Hubs and Metro Stations** Washington's Metrorail system is an important piece of transportation infrastructure that shapes and connects the city and region. Many parts of the system exist underground and aren't visible with the exception of station entrances.

### Policy Guide

For policies relating to the streets and public space system please see:

- B.1 Capital City Character: General Urban Design Policies
- B.3 The L'Enfant City and the Public Realm





## Streets + Public Space System: L'Enfant City

The visually coherent system of streets and public spaces within the L'Enfant City retain the formal, baroque qualities with which they were originally designed. The diagonal avenues visually connect public spaces and buildings, parks, monuments, and important civic buildings. The significant vistas shown on the map include all of the views documented as part of the [NRHP registration for the L'Enfant Plan](#).<sup>8</sup> There are several additional vistas added outside of those included in the NRHP nomination. For more detailed information on significant vistas please refer to page 32-33 of the Technical Addendum.

The area with the greatest concentration of federal properties and resources surrounds the National Mall and is known as the monumental core. Many of these facilities were built at a similar grand scale as those located on the Mall. These concentrated federal areas, as well as the edges that bound them, present opportunities to improve physical and visual connections and create more engaging and lively spaces.

NCPC undertakes long range planning efforts that focus on specific areas within the monumental core, including the Southwest Federal Center, the Federal Triangle, and the Northwest Rectangle. The [Monumental Core Framework Plan](#)<sup>9</sup> (2009) established planning goals to strengthen linkages between important places, reinforce national symbols, and realize place-making goals. The [SW Ecodistrict Plan](#)<sup>10</sup> (2013) proposed a transformation of the Southwest Federal Center between 3rd and 12th Streets, SW into a more dynamic center with a greater mix of uses, higher densities, and more engaging public spaces. These plans provide more detailed guidance on streets and public spaces.

### Policy Guide

For policies relating to the streets and public space system please see:

- B.1 Capital City Character: General Urban Design Policies
- B.3 The L'Enfant City and the Public Realm
- B.4 The Monumental Core
- B.5 Preeminent Viewsheds and View Corridors



## Urban Patterns

Generally, there is a higher density, or an urban core, within the L'Enfant City. Many federal headquarters and facilities, as well as the city's main business district, are located here. Beyond the L'Enfant City there are concentrated dense corridors with a mix of uses surrounded by lower density residential areas.

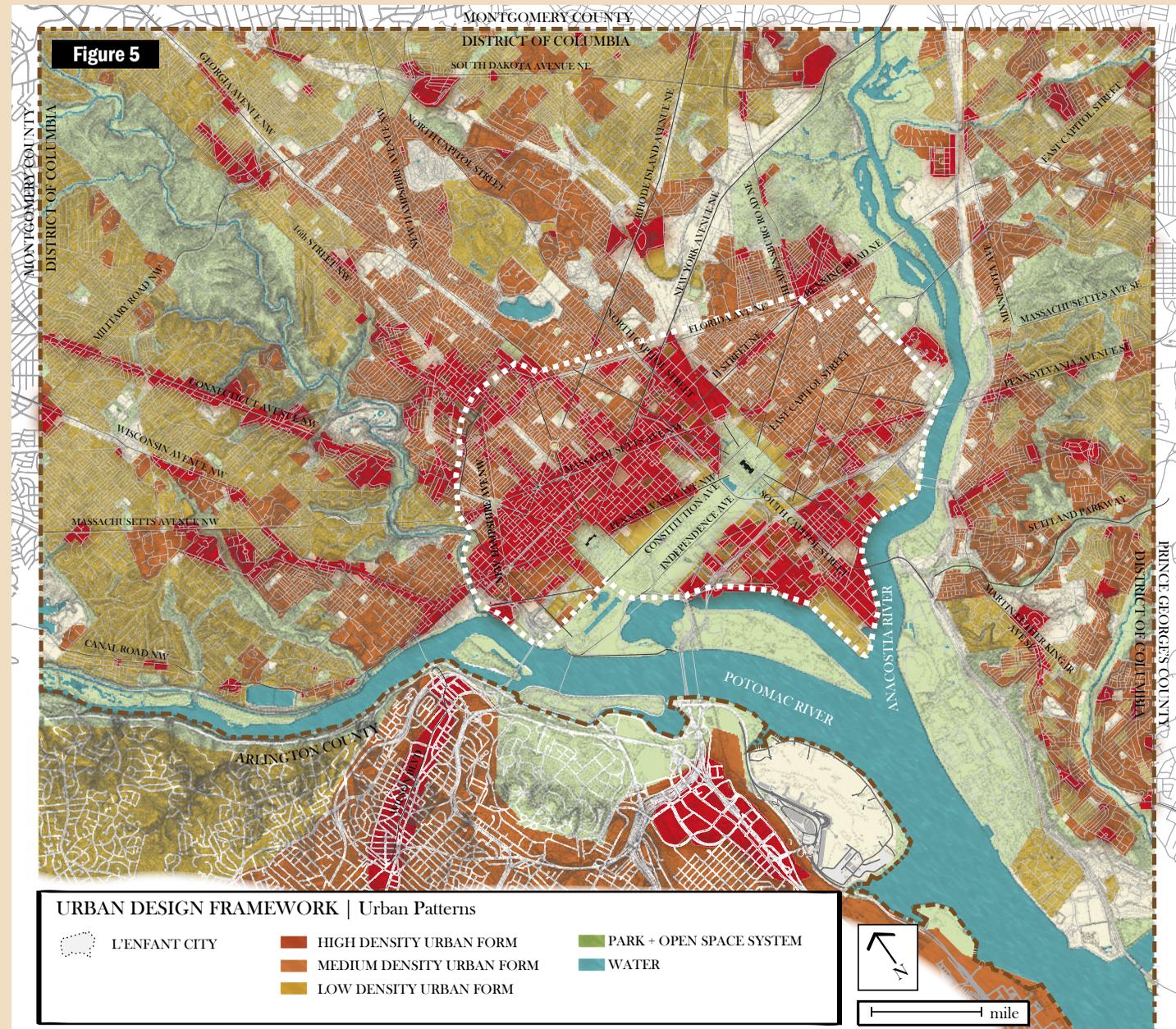
The relationship of building height to geography plays an important role in the sweeping panoramic views of Washington's skyline. The dense urban core is located within the topographic bowl at elevations close to sea level. The urban core is also where the greatest concentration of higher buildings (generally those exceeding 90 feet) are located. The surrounding highlands beyond the escarpment have buildings of lesser height.

There is also a network of dense urban neighborhood hubs throughout the NCR. Examples include Rosslyn in Arlington County and Bethesda in Montgomery County.

### Policy Guide

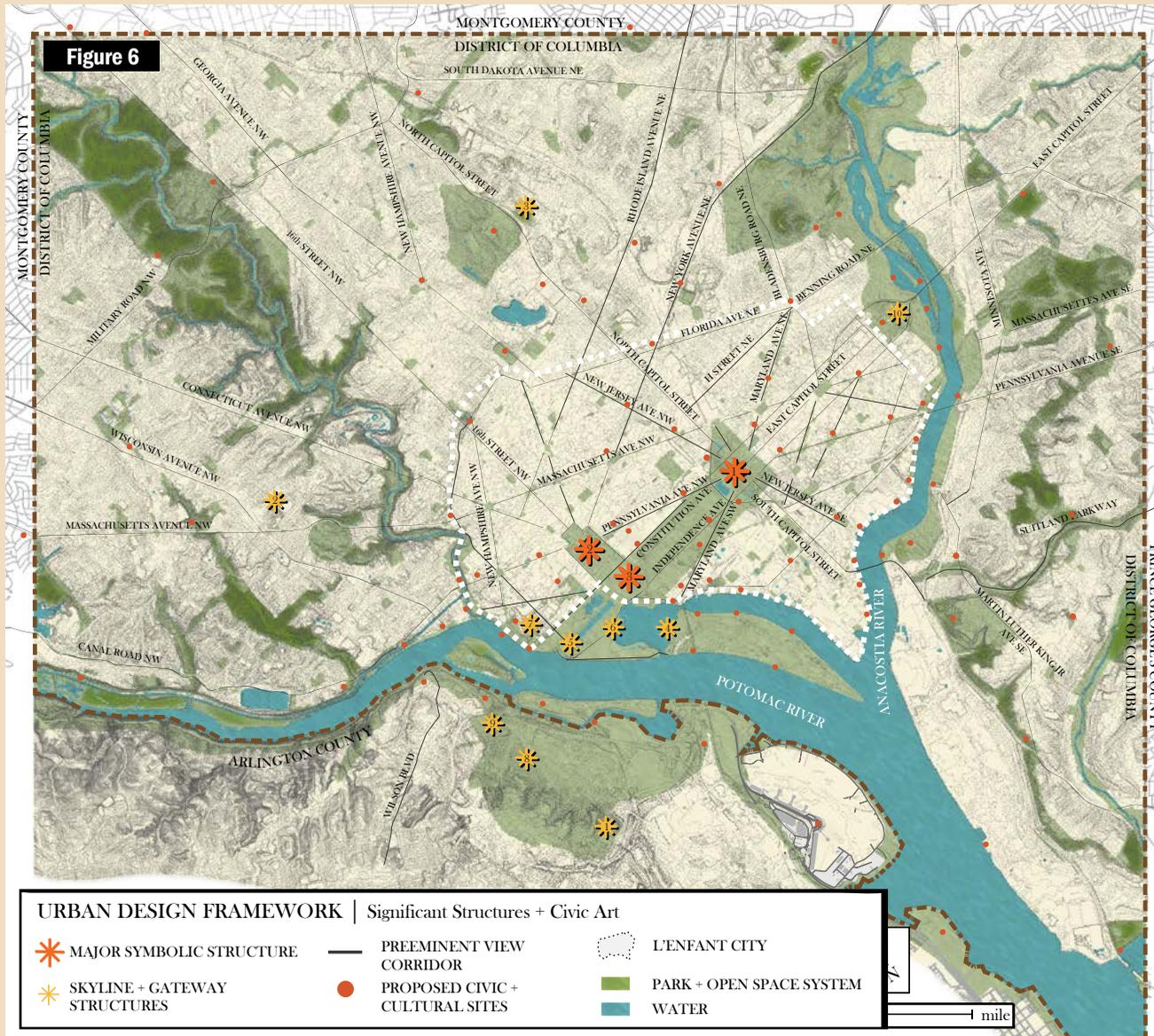
For policies relating to urban patterns please see:

- B.3 The L'Enfant City and the Public Realm
- B.4 The Monumental Core
- B.5 Preeminent Viewsheds and View Corridors





## Significant Structures + Civic Art



### Major Symbolic Structures

These structures symbolize the nation's capital and define its image. The U.S. Capitol dome, the White House, and Washington Monument are the most prominent structures that delineate the skyline by creating a significant break in the consistent horizontal quality of the city's built form.

1. U.S. Capitol
2. White House
3. Washington Monument

### Skyline + Gateway Structures

Structures that are visually prominent due to their spatial location. Some examples of notable elements that define the skyline and others are adjacent to gateways into the city.

#### Skyline:

1. U.S. Air Force Memorial
2. Washington National Cathedral
3. Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

#### Gateway:

4. Jefferson Memorial
5. Lincoln Memorial
6. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial
7. Kennedy Center
8. Arlington House
9. U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial
10. RFK Stadium site

### Proposed Civic + Cultural Sites

These sites reference those designated in NCPC's *Memorials and Museums Master Plan*<sup>11</sup> (2001). This plan, along with other NCPC long-range plans, envisions ways to extend and better integrate the language of the U.S. Capitol and monumental core into the contemporary city and surroundings. These plans established a principle of locating memorials and cultural sites with respect to topography and orientation to the original city plan.

### Policy Guide

For policies relating to significant structures, civic, art, and the symbolic skyline, please see:

- B.1 Capital City Character: General Urban Design Policies
- B.3 The L'Enfant City and the Public Realm
- B.4 The Monumental Core
- B.5 Preeminent Viewsheds and View Corridors



Fort Stevens Park



Westward views along the National Mall

DDIS Photography

## A.2 Washington's Dynamic Character

### A.2.1 Natural Identity

Washington has a strong, natural identity. Its given form is highly varied and has a rich diversity of ridges, stream valleys, waterways, and ecological systems. The natural blueprint was irretrievably lost in many cities, buried beneath buildings and infrastructure. However, the distinctive elements of natural identity persist today in Washington in various conditions. For example, many of the ridges remain fully perceptible and the major summits are emphasized by iconic structures, such as the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception and the Washington National Cathedral. Other natural elements, such as the city's once abundant, but often neglected, street trees are being replanted at greater rates after decades of decline.<sup>12</sup>

One of Washington's most distinctive characteristics is the link between its natural and man-made forms, and the manner by which together they uniquely express civic identity. The site chosen to establish the federal city was a relatively flat area at the confluence of the Potomac River and the Eastern Branch (now known as the Anacostia River). The site was surrounded by a series of low hills (the topographic bowl) which includes the Anacostia Hills, Arlington Ridge, and the Florida Avenue Escarpment (see Figure 1). The natural features of these rivers and the topographic bowl were all-important to L'Enfant's Plan because they gave a sense of place and a green backdrop to his vision for the new city. Today, some of these topographic sites remain under the control of the National Park Service and are protected from development.

The topographic bowl gives visual definition to the center of the L'Enfant City and two man-made focal points. The first of these is the U.S. Capitol. The central feature of L'Enfant's design was the elevated site selected for a People's House, on the brow of Jenkins Hill near the geographic center of the topographic bowl. The U.S. Capitol is symbolically connected to the Potomac River through sweeping views looking west down a "grand avenue bordered by gardens," today known as the National Mall. A less grand but still elevated site a little over a mile and a half northwest of the U.S. Capitol was set aside for the second focal point, the President's House, with its own sweeping views to the south, down the Potomac River towards Alexandria.

The view from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and the western horizon form a major east-west axis. Views of the White House across the Ellipse to the Jefferson Memorial and the southern horizon form the

major north-south axis. The National Register Nomination for the L'Enfant Plan identifies these two axes as primary vistas, and they cross at the Washington Monument. This characteristic integration of a monumental and urban framework with a natural topographic composition creates a unique urban design basis for the nation's capital.

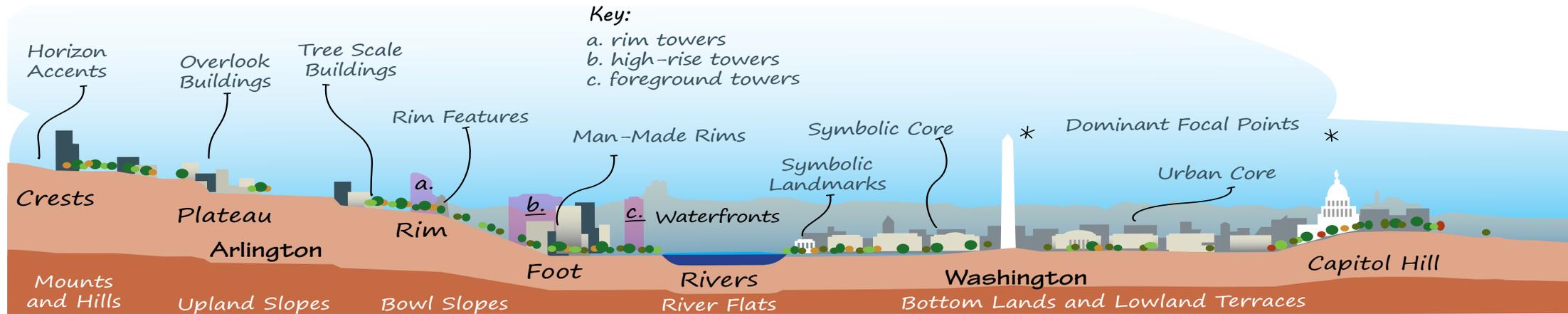
From a geographic perspective, the topographic bowl is the natural frame for the nation's capital. However, the political jurisdictions within the bowl are not the same and their community goals may differ. Therefore the topographic bowl and the primary vistas are no longer characterized as predominately green settings in some areas. This topographic bowl condition presents a singular challenge for envisioning the future design basis for the nation's capital, particularly as viewed from the primary vistas within the monumental core.

For example, Arlington Ridge is an important segment of the bowl, and parts of its natural character were preserved by the presence of Arlington Cemetery, Fort Meyer, and the U.S. Marine Corp Memorial. Parts of Rosslyn are characterized by a corporate office presence and high-rise residential development, creating an urban backdrop in place of a natural setting. Because the Height Act does not extend beyond the District, a conceptual understanding of building height in Arlington with respect to the primary vistas is defined through a resolution of the Arlington Board. This non-binding resolution acknowledges the importance of building height within Arlington with respect to the National Mall, particularly with the east-west axis.<sup>13</sup>

It is critical to engage local jurisdictions to address mutual interests in the overall urban design quality of the nation's capital and region, and to prepare strategies that holistically consider the quality of the primary vistas and their context as viewed from points in Washington, Virginia, and Maryland, as well as from the steps of the U.S. Capitol and the White House. As the surrounding natural and urban landscapes evolve it is important to maintain the monumental core's symbolic image.

Beyond the monumental core, the existing urban design framework integrates natural beauty and nature within the city fabric. The L'Enfant Plan created many circles, squares, and other places that can provide civic identity within neighborhoods. Each contributes to the city's natural identity and are important components of urban design. The natural setting was also a central concern of the McMillan Plan, as described in the Open Space Network map on page 7, which envisioned the parks and open space well beyond the L'Enfant Plan into the rest of the city.

# Built Form and Natural Geography in the NCR



The east-west extent from Arlington, VA to Washington

## A.2.2 Urban Identity

The NCR embodies a rich variety of built elements that shape its urban identity, from the low scale historic districts of Old Town Alexandria and Silver Spring, to the denser areas within downtown Washington and Montgomery and Arlington Counties. While the complete planning context for how the city and region developed is too broad and complex for the scope of this Urban Design Element, some of the most important aspects are found in the Formative Contributors section of the Technical Addendum on pages 1-7. For further reading, see *Worthy of the Nation*,<sup>14</sup> which includes a detailed history of more recent major planning influences, such as urban renewal (1960s), regionalism (1950s-present), and sustainability.

For purposes of the Federal Urban Design Element, there are four central and interrelated themes that shape policy issues and directions within the context of urban identity:

- City form and civic identity: the importance of the public realm in Washington
- The character of the monumental core
- City and symbol: downtown and the monumental core
- Beyond the monumental core: the federal role in city-building

### City Form and Civic Identity: The Importance of the Public Realm in Washington

Plans for Washington sought to join nature into the urban fabric at every scale and link city form to civic identity. The national image is largely achieved through the design and function of the public realm and its relationship to important civic places.

Washington's interconnected system of open spaces shapes the human experience of its built and natural features. These include both visual and physical connections that orient viewers to their surroundings, create visual cues to important places (immediately and at a distance), and move people throughout the entire city.

The *Plan of the City of Washington*, the Height Act, and the Public Parking Act of 1870 are major influences in the functional and visual quality of the public realm. Open space typologies include the spaces between buildings, the settings of federal buildings, and cultural institutions, plazas, and urban and natural park spaces. Decisions about how the public realm and streetscapes are programmed and designed influence how people experience the nation's capital and their perceptions about its character. Within this context, the foremost planning challenge is balancing security and accessibility. Security is a leading factor in decisions about how agencies locate, design, and program federal facilities and the setting around them. Integrating security elements with other urban design goals, such as design integrity, national image, and pedestrian experience, is also a priority.

One public realm feature that is unique to parts of Washington is the long-standing practice of hiding or diminishing utilitarian infrastructure. Examples include the ban on overhead streetcar and utility wires within the L'Enfant City and the 1:1 penthouse setback within the Height Act, which hides building mechanical equipment from street view. These public realm principles created an elegant and orderly quality to Washington's character that reinforces a sense of openness at the street-level and enhances the natural setting. Integrating these qualities into future decisions about modern transportation and utility infrastructure, which also occupy public space, remains an important challenge.



The special visual qualities and monumental forms of the capital city are translated even beneath the ground. The American Institute of Architects awarded its 2014 Twenty Five Year Award to the Washington Metrorail system. “Designed by Harry Weese, Fellow of the AIA with the matching ideals of ‘Great Society’ liberalism and Mid-Century Modernism, the Washington Metro gives monumental civic space to the humble task of public transit, gravitas fit for the nation’s capital.” Further, the American Institute of Architects describes the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority’s goal to provide a ridership experience “radically different from pre-WWII transit systems, an experience largely fulfilled by station design.”

“From the outset, Weese and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority knew exactly what they did not want: the New York City subway system. Metro was defined in total opposition to the most successful urban rail transit system in North America. Despite its status as an iconic set piece for the cultural capital of the nation, the New York subway is largely a haphazard assembly of rabbit warren tunnels dug out with an industrial utilitarianism that stops long before self-aware references to New York’s heavy-industry past. Instead, Metro would be airy, spacious, and ennobling, and it would accomplish this through size and scale. As Weese explained in *The Great Society Subway*, ‘Our whole thrust is to maximize the volume. It would use the formal language of monumental civic architecture, seen so often in Washington’s federal buildings, and watch it seep into the earth, below ground, for the yeoman’s task of public transit.’”<sup>15</sup>

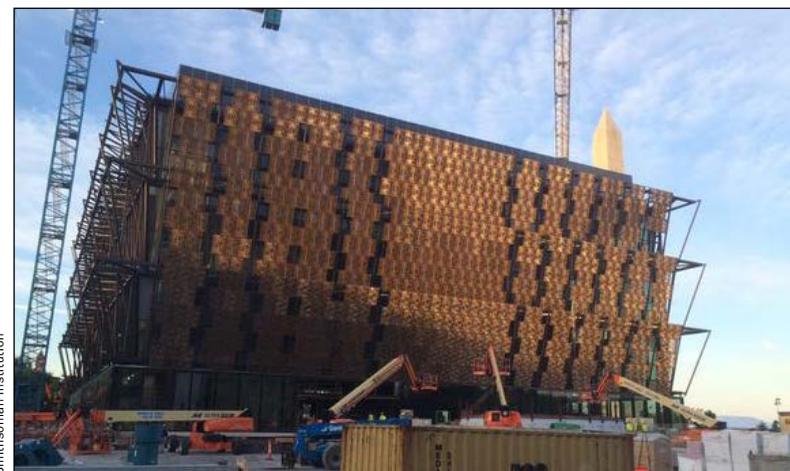
### The Character of the Monumental Core

The spatial and symbolic center of the city is the monumental core, which includes the U.S. Capitol grounds, the White House, Arlington National Cemetery, the National Mall, Federal Triangle, and the surrounding government offices and civic, cultural, and symbolic structures. The monumental core is most closely linked to the distinctive image of the capital city and the functions of federal government. While the major landmarks and resources within the core are perceived, it does not have a rigid geographic or jurisdictional boundary and continues to evolve.

The success of the monumental core first rests on a strong vision for its future, and upon addressing and enhancing the complex relationships between the core and its surroundings. This includes both natural areas and some of the region’s densest neighborhoods, including downtown Washington and parts of Arlington, Virginia. NCP’s *Monumental Core Framework Plan*, an extension of [The Legacy Plan](#),<sup>16</sup> set forth a vision for the core.

This vision continues to be refined. A first impression of this area may be one of distinctive volume, including its gracious building forms and settings, its formal influences, and the predominance of some of the most significant national memorials, including the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Many of the city and nation’s most architecturally significant federal and cultural buildings are also located within the monumental core. Although the core was historically characterized by neoclassical influences and architecture, new projects enrich the city’s architectural quality. Examples include the National Museum of the American Indian, the U.S. Institute for Peace, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Although the monumental core is envisioned as a composition of spaces, parts are disrupted by physical barriers. Residents and millions of annual visitors experience these barriers on several levels. First, on a site specific level, security elements such as bollards disrupt pedestrian circulation and access and reduce people’s comfort. Given the importance of the public realm in the city’s original plans and identity as a capital, planners must continue to identify solutions that protect federal buildings, employees, and the core’s design integrity.



National Museum of African American History and Culture

Second, on a larger scale, major transportation infrastructure cuts across whole neighborhoods in and around the core. These large disruptions in the urban fabric are most prevalent in Southwest Washington which is shaped by urban renewal plans from the 1950s. Some large federal buildings occupy entire blocks and retail may be tucked within indoor malls, which fosters a bleak pedestrian experience. Addressing the unanticipated consequences of these past interventions is a core theme of the *Monumental Core Framework Plan* and continues to be an important priority. The planning community should continue to refine and implement a vision that realizes the monumental core's potential, including steps to address transportation barriers and create a more accessible and welcoming place.

### **City and Symbol: Downtown and the Monumental Core**

The relationship between the monumental core and the surrounding urban environment is an important condition with implications for urban design policy. Creating a place for both government and commerce is integral to the *Plan of the City of Washington*. While the role of nature in national identity is explicitly documented, urban identity has evolved over time.

Today, the downtown areas of Washington and Arlington are growing stronger, more diverse, and more vibrant; and there are many economic and community benefits of this growth. Long-range plans and smaller focused studies have established a vision for improving accessibility and the public realm within these urban areas. For example, the District of Columbia Office of Planning's [Center City Action Agenda](#)<sup>17</sup> (2008) established a place-making initiative for the urban neighborhoods that surround the monumental core. The form that new density should take—whether at a human scale or more grand, whether concentrated or dispersed—is a key question for each community and has implications for national interests.

**Several examples of contemporary urban design principles related to the physical relationship between the monumental core and the surrounding urban areas are discussed below. These principles guided policy development in subsequent sections of this element.**

### **Create placemaking strategies to strengthen the public realm and user experience in the monumental core.**

In addition to the corrective measures necessary to re-knit the monumental core's urban fabric, an important question is what roles are the area's major spaces expected to play? Many parts of the core are shuttered at night and would benefit from strategies to enhance their public spaces and create more active programming—a goal also shared for downtown Washington. The core's design structure and monumentality has the strength to support a wide variety of place-making activities without detracting from its role as a national showplace for visitors and the seat of government. Indeed, the success of the monumental core requires an intermixing of adaptable programming at a range of scales with those elements that are important for the capital city's image.

### **Integrate federal buildings into the surrounding urban fabric.**

One important policy question for federal offices in the monumental core, downtown, and suburban locations is how buildings physically address the streets and public spaces in front of them, in terms of both design and programming. For example, a criticism of the FBI building on Pennsylvania Avenue is that it does not support important principles for a strong downtown. In particular, it is unwelcoming to pedestrians and breaks the “retail wall” along E Street. There are, however, other examples where federal buildings have successfully engaged their surroundings, including the headquarters buildings for the U.S. General Services Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation.

### **Protect the monumental core from impacts of commercial digital signage.**

Digital signage, including lighting, is another example of a policy issue associated with balancing the commercial and civic presence in and around the monumental core. In general, some cities have used lighting to activate public areas and create a more dynamic visitor experience. However, depending on where these programs are situated and how they are implemented, digital lighting may negatively alter the monumental core's street atmosphere and skyline views of iconic national resources. This prompts an important discussion about balancing efforts to enhance the city's commercial and retail presence while also protecting the monumental core's night time image, which emphasizes memorials and major civic structures.

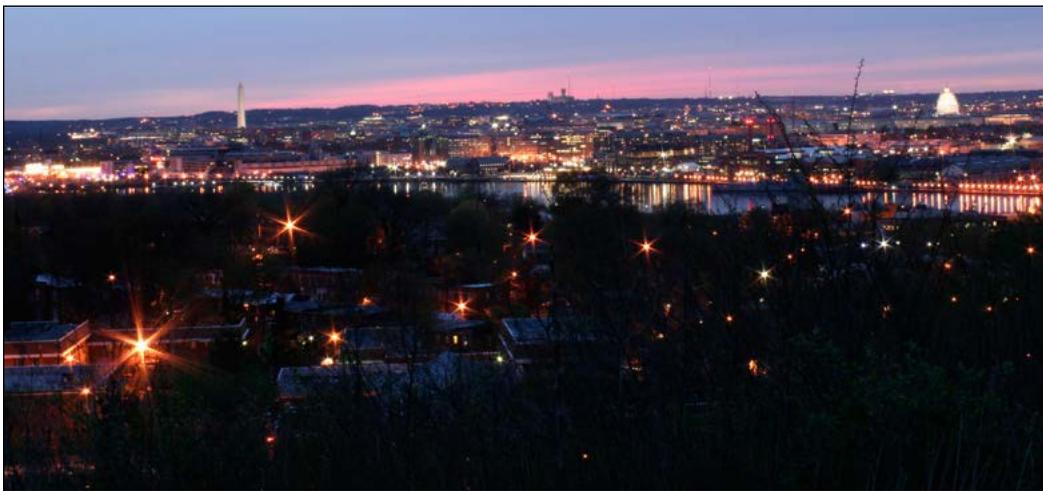
### **Develop transition strategies between densities and land uses to protect national resources.**

A final policy issue relates to physical transitions between lower and higher density areas, particularly with respect to topography. A good example where transitions are important is North Capitol Street, where the street gains elevation as it moves north toward the escarpment. The street is framed by buildings of greater height and higher density on the east side in the NoMa commercial district. The west side remains largely residential.

Another important transition is the scenic and urban backdrop, as viewed from the primary east-west vista towards Arlington, Virginia. Washington's elegant urban pattern is situated with respect to topography. To reinforce this character, policies should identify transition and integration strategies at every scale between the traditional parts of the monumental core and the surrounding downtown and scenic areas. If Washington is historically a landscape image, what is the conceptual understanding of vertical elements, such as buildings or sculpture, within the city's design framework?



View from Cedar Hill at the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, located beyond the monumental core.



Washington's skyline hierarchy is not only a daytime condition but also a nighttime condition. Lighting and signage also follow suit with this hierarchy. View from Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, located in Southeast Washington.

### Beyond the Monumental Core: The Federal Government and City-Building

A final theme is the role of the federal government in city-building. Establishing a seat for federal functions was clearly an important part of Washington's early urban identity. Yet, what role does the federal government play today in city-building? How does it shape the region's urban identity? While the *Plan of the City of Washington* created a holistic approach to establishing federal buildings and grounds that emphasized the public realm, large scale federal planning efforts, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, were generally less successful.

The *Plan of the City of Washington* connected federal buildings to the city around them on a large scale, reinforcing a sense of place with interrelated implications for both federal offices and the city. Today, many new federal buildings are constructed within campus settings. Although the context for new projects within the region is site specific, the relationship between federal buildings and their immediate surroundings remains important.

The legacy of the federal government's contribution to urban design quality in the region is one of successes and failures. Planners today draw lessons from the past when engaged in urban design and city-building. Case studies, such as the relationship between the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives Headquarters and the surrounding NoMa neighborhood, illustrate the potential for federal agencies to positively participate in the city-building process.

#### A.2.3 Symbolic Identity

Washington's iconic cityscape is distinguished through the close relationship between its form and the functional and visual symbols of national civic life—whether a public building, ceremonial avenue, museum, memorial, or national park. Washington's symbolic identity expresses itself in a number of ways:

- A visual order of importance (hierarchy) that emphasizes symbols and structures, particularly the U.S. Capitol, White House, Washington Monument, and places along the National Mall from both composite skyline views and linear views along particular streets.
- The character of the monumental core, including the National Mall.
- Memorials, museums, and cultural resources that represent narratives of national significance.
- Special ceremonies that relate to symbolic and core governmental functions of the nation's capital.

For more detailed information see the Significant Structures + Civic Art map on page 11.



Eastern view along the National Mall from the Lincoln Memorial

DDIS Photography

Major resources that contribute to Washington’s symbolic and civic image include:

### The Symbolic Skyline

As stated in *Worthy of the Nation*, L’Enfant urged “embracing in one view the whole extent from the Eastern Branch to Georgetown, and from the banks of the Potomac to the mountains [the hills surrounding the city].” One of the most important contributors to Washington’s image is its unmistakable and symbolic skyline. For more than a century the federal Height Act has played a central role in shaping the form of the skyline, particularly within the boundaries of the L’Enfant City and the topographic bowl.

As viewed from the many overlooks within Washington, or from across the Potomac River in Virginia, the long views of Washington reveal a composite skyline punctuated not by commercial skyscrapers but by architectural embellishments and civic symbols. The Washington Monument, U.S. Capitol, Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Old Post Office, U.S. Air Force Memorial, and Washington National Cathedral are some of the most distinctive skyline structures. From closer vantage points, the low scale of buildings and spacious settings around other landmarks, such as the White House, Lincoln Memorial, Jefferson Memorial, and Smithsonian museums, creates a fitting character for a capital city set in natural beauty. This park-like quality distinguishes Washington from other major metropolitan cities, though not to the extent it once did due to tree loss.

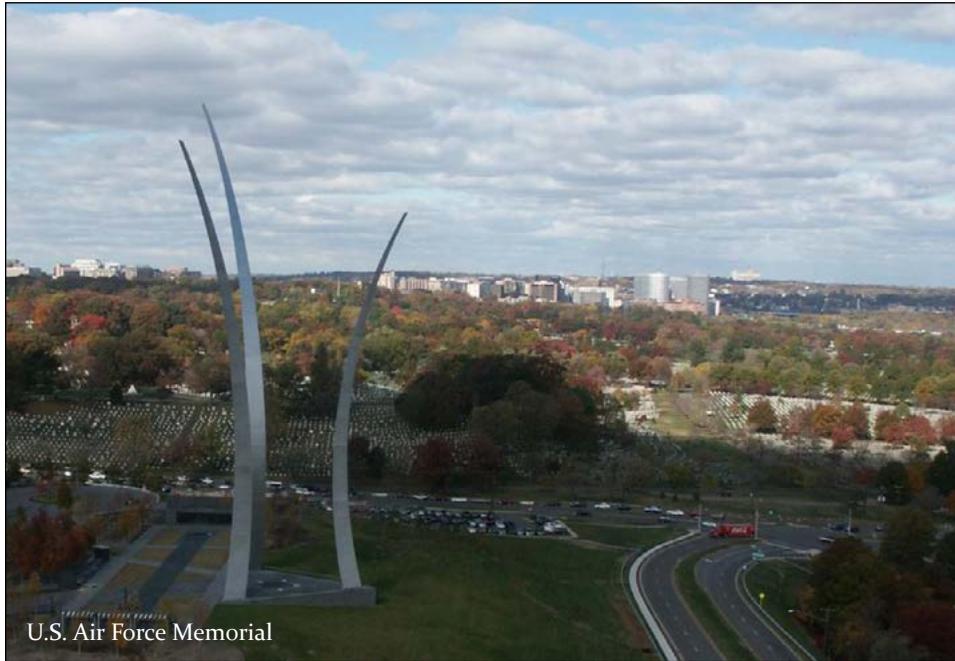
Washington’s skyline and views have evolved over time. However, the urban design principles that give preeminence to its most important national symbols, and particular viewsheds to them, has generally been retained. These principles were reaffirmed through 2013’s [Height Master Plan](#).<sup>18</sup> This plan, requested by the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, included detailed technical analysis and extensive public input that considered the extent to which the Height Act continues to serve local and national interests.

### Viewsheds

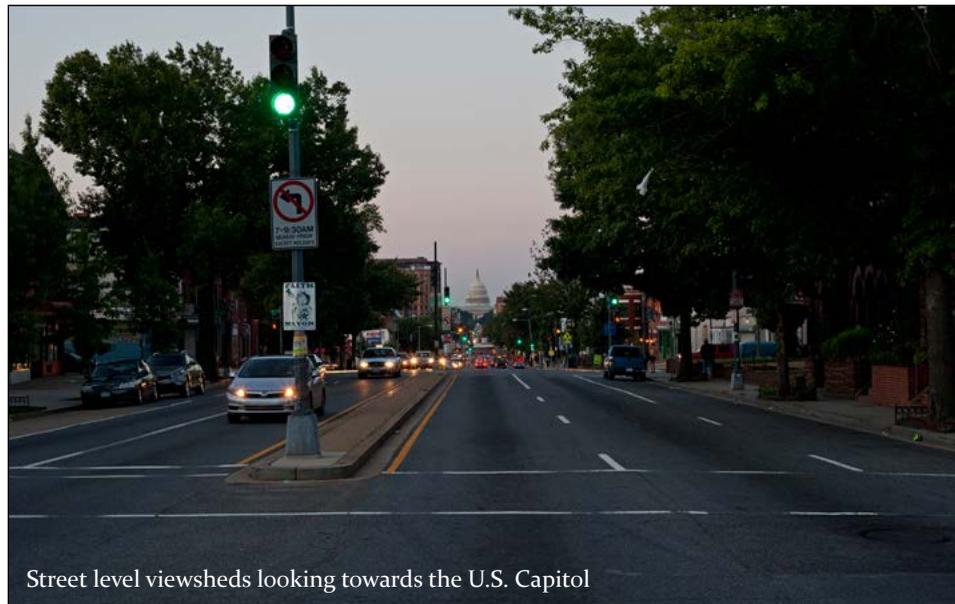
The city’s street-level views and vistas are created by the location and extent of its streets where they intersect with important public spaces or natural areas. These elements help define the pedestrian experience in the nation’s capital and generally prioritize natural and symbolic elements within a viewer’s line of sight. These features are particularly distinctive within the original L’Enfant City, although some street-level linear viewsheds extend well beyond the topographic bowl and at elevated points which give the viewer a wider perspective to enjoy the city.

### Commemorative Works

The memorial, another hallmark of Washington’s symbolic character, is both a ceremonial and permanent fixture. Memorials are often located in national parks among Washington’s high-profile structures, viewsheds, and promontories. They may inspire and broaden civic engagement; enhance their surroundings; and introduce cultural resources to parks. One of the hallmarks of a successful public realm is adaptability; thus, it is important to sensitively locate and design permanent memorials with respect to urban design goals and other open space uses. Since the 1980s, some of the city’s memorial proposals are moving away from single, ornamental objects to large landscape solutions, with multiple commemorative elements. This trend prompts an important question—with implications for planning and design—how to balance a need for a variety of public space uses that typify an urban park system with the sacred, commemorative purposes of a memorial. Policies related to memorials are located in the Visitors & Commemoration Element.



Steven Kent Henry



DDIS Photography

U.S. Air Force Memorial

Street level viewsheds looking towards the U.S. Capitol

It is important to create a sense of arrival to the nation's capital through prominent gateways, such as bridges, and the design and programming of federal reservations and special streets.



North Capitol Street

DDIS Photography



Chevy Chase Circle

DDIS Photography



Proposed East Capitol Street Gateway  
from NCPC's Legacy Plan

Michael McCann

## Section B: Policies Related to the Form and Character of the Nation's Capital

### B.1 Capital City Character: General Urban Design Policies

As the capital city, Washington represents the country and embodies many of its civic identity aspirations. Washington's image is experienced by residents and visitors, and transmitted around the nation and world by media, arts and literature, photographs—even through currency. This resonating and powerful image is formed in part by individual buildings, park lands, and monuments, and in part by the city's overall urban design framework, which was explicitly designed to create a setting that reinforces the nation's democratic ideals.

NCPC is committed to enhancing the urban design quality of the nation's capital and protecting the integrity of the city's essential urban design framework. This especially includes the interconnected system of streets, reservations, and public spaces created by the *Plan of the City of Washington*. Two important, related principles must also be rooted in the vision for the nation's capital: first, the contributions of each new generation have an important place in the city's identity, and second, the federal government should support creativity and innovation in design and planning. While the Urban Design Element will not include guidance regarding architectural style or fine-grained design detail, a principle that Washington is a vital and evolving place, with an urban design framework that can accommodate both the old and the new, is fundamental to the image of America's capital.

The federal government should:

- UD.B.1.1** Express the dignity befitting the national capital's image. Federal development in the city and region should adhere to high aesthetic standards already established by the planning and design legacy of the nation's capital. This legacy encompasses both the old and the new. The capital's rich architectural heritage is continually augmented by the design contributions of each new generation.
- UD.B.1.2** Create a sense of arrival to the nation's capital through prominent gateways, such as bridges, and the design and programming of federal reservations and special streets as described within this element. See Figure 4.
  1. Enhance gateway routes. Distinct and memorable landscaping, public art, building sculpting and/or architectural treatments can reinforce the experience of arrival.
  2. Create gateways for important settings within the monumental core that provide a sense of entry with visual cues and transition points from one place to another.



Catalina Calachan



Ken Lund

Photo Comparison: View of the U.S. Capitol with unobstructed background compared to Philadelphia's Independence Hall

**UD.B.1.3** Preserve Washington’s picturesque, horizontal character, and reinforce the Height Act.

**UD.B.1.4** Maintain the skyline formed by the region’s natural features, particularly the topographic bowl and its symbolic character.

1. Visually reinforce the preeminence of the U.S. Capitol, White House, Washington Monument, and other major nationally significant resources by protecting the visual frame around them. Carefully examine the use of vertical elements within the setting of major national resources.
2. Protect the settings of major skyline elements from visual intrusions such as antennas, water towers and rooftop equipment, or other constructed elements.

**UD.B.1.5** Utilize building, street, and exterior lighting that respects the hierarchy of memorials, monuments, and important civic buildings and spaces in the nation’s capital, with the U.S. Capitol and Washington Monument the most prominent features in the nighttime skyline.

1. Digital and motion signage, illuminated billboards, and/or other lighting should not detract from the setting of the National Mall, capital gateway views of the monumental core, or skyline views to important symbols and civic buildings, particularly in and around the monumental core. Any proposed illuminated signage that could impact the monumental core or other major park spaces and natural areas including waterfronts should be extensively modeled and analyzed for potential impacts prior to implementation.

**UD.B.1.6** Enhance physical and symbolic connections that reinforce the city’s spatial order.

**UD.B.1.7** Use the city’s physical framework of major axial views, vistas, streets, termini, and natural elements to establish new places and create symbolic points of reference and distinctive settings for new museums, commemorative works, and civic spaces.

**UD.B.1.8** Create welcoming and vibrant spaces that enhance the user experience and foster civic and local uses. Design the visual and functional qualities of the public realm to reinforce Washington’s national image, as well as its everyday experiences.



Washington’s iconic nighttime sky

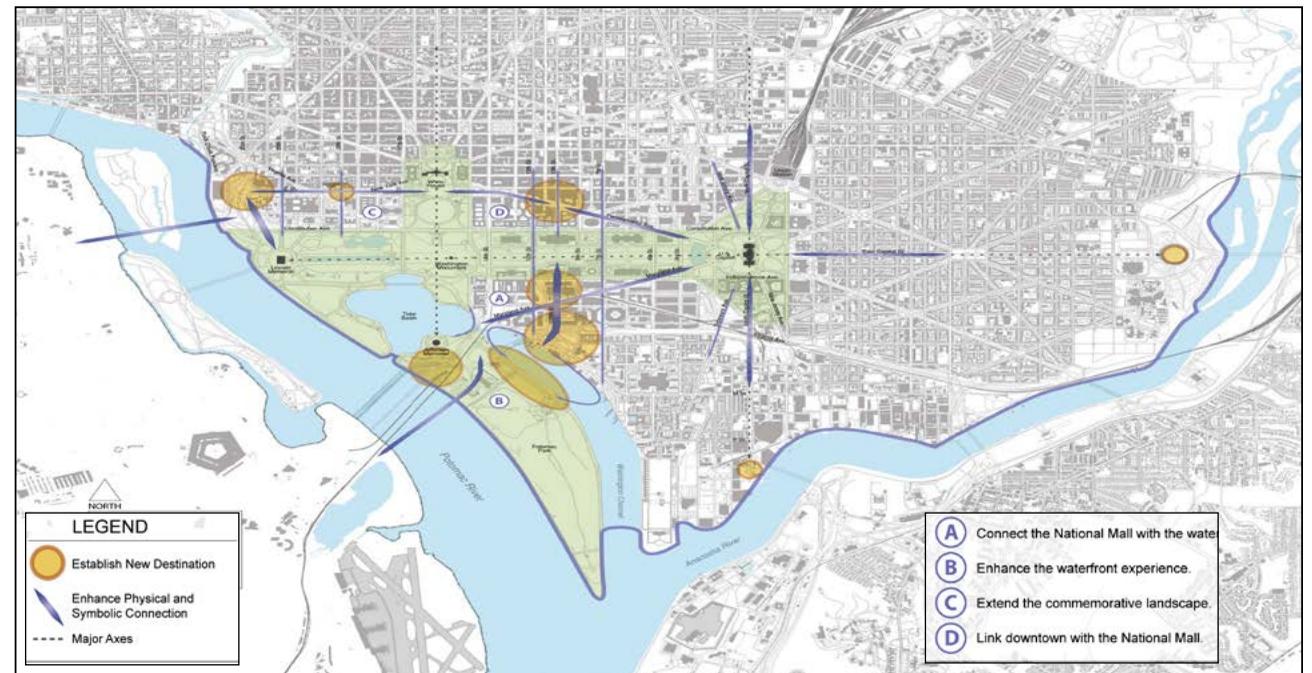
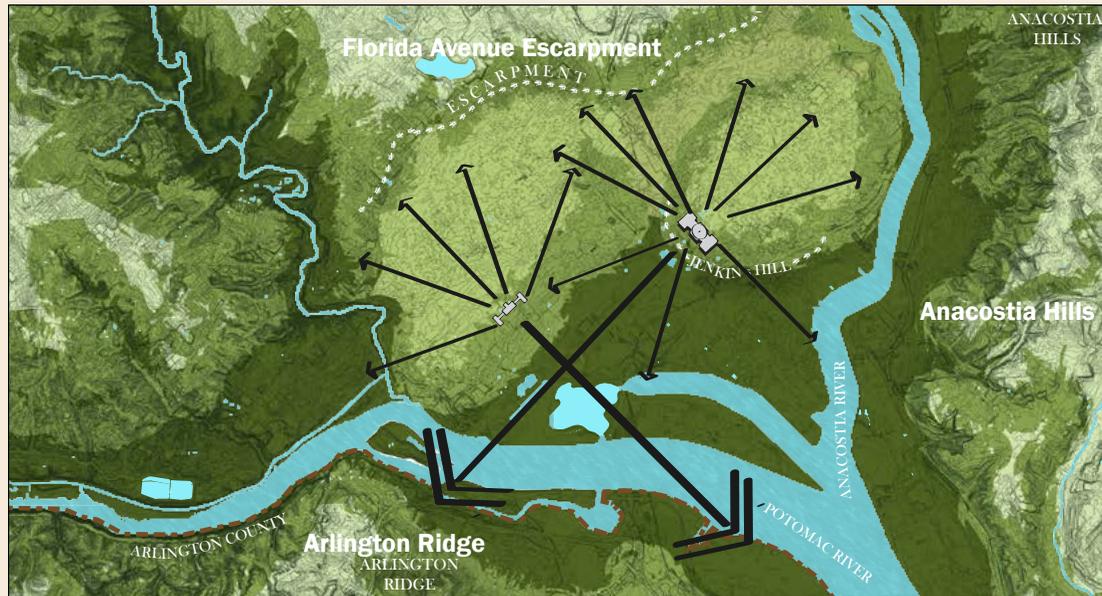


Diagram from the *Monumental Core Framework Plan*



**The three key hillsides that comprise the topographic bowl include:**

**The Anacostia Hills** (Washington, DC) form the eastern rim. Much of this area is characterized by a backdrop of green against the rivers. Development in this area is largely comprised of low-rise development and neighborhoods. There are significant open spaces established along the elevated ridges including several of the Civil War Defenses of Washington.

**The Arlington Ridge** (Virginia) form the western rim and comprise a direct spatial relationship with the National Mall. This area is characterized by clustered downtown development of varying heights (upwards of 300 feet) in Rosslyn which creates an urban backdrop to the Lincoln Memorial. This urban wall is in contrast with the rest of the views from the National Mall, particularly when compared to the green backdrops and consistent, low-lying urban forms found within the other hillsides. Other parts of Arlington have retained a green backdrop, particularly near Arlington National Cemetery.

**The Florida Avenue Escarpment** (Washington, DC) forms the northern ring of hills. Its central terrain slopes steeply and forms a broad overlooking terrace parallel to the L'Enfant Plan's boundary. Its western features, separated by the rift of Rock Creek Valley, are the Georgetown Heights, which rise up from the river and are some of the highest peaks in the metropolitan area. To the east, the escarpment turns northeasterly away from Florida Avenue and terminates near the National Arboretum. This terrain features the most uniformly urbanized portion of the topographic bowl. However, much of this area has the built-up character of a hill town, with low density neighborhoods and open spaces at strategic points, such as Meridian Hill Park (due north of the White House).

## B.2 Natural Setting: The Topographic Bowl, Waterways, and their Extents

The importance of the natural setting as an abiding and foundational component of the capital city's form cannot be emphasized enough. *The Plan of the City of Washington* addresses the city's character through natural elements in a variety of ways, such as creating parks and green settings that surround important federal buildings and civic spaces. The plan utilizes topography in both dramatic and subtle ways to convey the importance of a select few civic structures. While these characteristics are most readily apparent within the L'Enfant City and the topographic bowl, national parkland extends into the city and region, including Rock Creek Park in Washington, Mount Vernon in Virginia, and Great Falls in Maryland. In addition to the region's waterways and hillsides, these parks create a rich and varied setting of natural beauty that contributes to the urban design character and sense of place for the nation's capital.

A key challenge for addressing the historic and future design framework for the nation's capital is the character of the topographic bowl and river settings. The lower elevations or basin areas of the topographic bowl are a central consideration. There are excellent wide and distant views up and across the Potomac River that reveal the natural extent of the local topography and reinforce the monumental core's horizontal character. Because of the broad and open design for the river and lowlands at these points, the encircling slopes of the topographic bowl are particularly conspicuous. From an urban design perspective, these hillsides perform two important functions: they are backgrounds for notable views and vistas in or around the L'Enfant City, and their slopes provide public outlooks for appreciating the capital.

The linear Anacostia Park hugs the south and eastern shoreline of the Anacostia River. The green setting of the prominent Anacostia Hills, which are part of the topographic ridge, are also visible in the background.



The federal government should:

**UD.B.2.1** Preserve the natural setting of the L'Enfant City. In particular:

1. Protect the natural green aspect of federal lands that are part of the topographic bowl, including, but not limited to, National Park Service lands along Arlington Ridge and the Anacostia Hills, Arlington National Cemetery, and St. Elizabeths West Campus.
2. Support the following policies related to natural topography, consistent with the District Elements of the Comprehensive Plan:
  - a. Maintain the prominence of the topographic bowl formed by the lowland and rim features of the L'Enfant City. This should include preserving the green setting of Anacostia Hills and maintaining the visual prominence of the Florida Avenue Escarpment.
  - b. Respect and perpetuate the natural features of the city's landscape. In low-density, wooded, or hilly areas, new construction should preserve natural features, rather than alter them to accommodate development. Density in such areas should be provided as needed to protect natural features such as streams and wetlands. Where appropriate, clustering of development should be considered as a way to protect natural resources.
  - c. Protect prominent ridgelines so as to maintain and enhance the District's physical image and horizontal character.

**UD.B.2.2** Encourage local jurisdictions and federal agencies to reinforce the capital's natural frame.

1. Retain and add trees on hillsides.
2. Scale and strategically locate buildings in relationship to the topography to reinforce important views to and from sloping sites. Protect views outward from the L'Enfant City and views inward from vantage points along the rim of the topographic bowl from inappropriate intrusions. Preserve open space and allow for public use of

## Washington's Waterfront

The city's waterfront is an important piece of the public realm providing a place for public enjoyment, recreation, commemoration, and environmental stewardship. The Anacostia and Potomac Rivers define natural and urban edges of the city and offer panoramic views and settings of extraordinary beauty unique. The waterfront should be accessible to the public, with a mix of quiet and reflective spaces and others actively developed to support programming and urban activities. Much of the shoreline is publicly owned, with significant portions of the waterfront framed by open space parklands under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, including heavily used parks and trails such as Potomac Heritage Trail, Mount Vernon Trail, and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal towpath.

On-going planning work developed by both federal and local agencies continues to enhance this extraordinary natural feature. NCP's *Legacy Plan* envisioned Washington's waterfront along the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers as a national showcase of urban vitality and sensitive design. The plan proposed restoring the city's historic connections to the river and developing a continuous band of open space from Georgetown to the National Arboretum. The [Anacostia Waterfront Initiative](#),<sup>19</sup> a public-private partnership under the leadership of the District Department of Transportation, further developed this vision with planned projects such as the Anacostia Riverwalk and the 11th Street Bridge Park.



## Protecting Washington's Natural Framework

The District Elements of the Comprehensive Plan guide the vision for the densities within the topographic bowl along the Florida Avenue escarpment and Anacostia Hills. They include important guidance about protecting the natural frame of the L'Enfant City. With the exception of the NoMa neighborhood north of Union Station, these areas tend to be characterized by lower density development than found downtown. The federal government should continue to engage the District of Columbia and Arlington County governments to prepare a plan for enhancing the design framework of the nation's capital, including urban design strategies that take into account the natural setting and the visual quality of the primary views.

One of the most important contributors to the urban design quality of the city and region are their trees. Washington was planned to support a lush tree canopy, with green open spaces and tree-lined boulevards. According to Casey Trees, a non-profit devoted to restoring Washington's tree canopy, "some consider Washington the birthplace of arboriculture due to the tens of thousands of trees planted in the city in the 1800s, which earned the nickname the City of Tree's."<sup>20</sup> Sadly, the loss of the city's once abundant street trees is well documented. Washington lost an estimated 64 percent of its urban forest cover between 1973 and 1997 due to disease, development, and natural attrition.<sup>21</sup> The District is implementing plans to replenish the city's tree cover, and an important goal of the Urban Design Element is to reinforce these local, community, and nonprofit efforts.<sup>22</sup>

these views.

**UD.B.2.3** Recognize the contribution of Rock Creek Park, the Anacostia Parks, and the Civil War Defenses of Washington in reinforcing the natural setting and character of the nation's capital. In particular:

1. Complete multi-purpose trails connecting the Civil War Defenses of Washington, and those within the parks along the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers.
2. Improve the transition between the edges of these large, natural parks and the neighborhoods that abut them to be sensitive to the natural setting.
3. Encourage tree planting and natural habitat restoration to meet goals described in the Federal Environment Element.

**UD.B.2.4** Maintain and enhance the characteristics and natural settings of the National Park Service parks and parkways. In particular:

1. Maintain parkways as scenic landscape corridors and protect their historic character.
2. Encourage local jurisdictions to minimize—through planning, regulation, and thoughtful design—the impact of development visible from parkways.
3. Require actions to minimize and mitigate negative impacts to maintain parkway characteristics where transportation system impacts are unavoidable.

**UD.B.2.5** Support public access to, and along, regional waterfronts along the Potomac River, Anacostia River, and other tributaries. In particular, work with federal and local governments as necessary to:

1. Avoid creating physical barriers to the waterfront.
2. Design and locate bridges to minimally affect local riverine habitat, waterways, shorelines, and valleys, as described within the Federal Environment Element.
3. Improve way-finding, signage, and pedestrian amenities on streets that lead to parks.
4. Preserve views from public lands to regional waterfronts, wherever possible.

**UD.B.2.6** Encourage the further development of the urban tree canopy to frame street views, reinforce the human scale on broad streets, and provide critical shade and beauty.

## B.3 The L'Enfant City and the Public Realm

The urban design of Washington's public realm is inextricably linked to its emblematic image and character, and perhaps most importantly, how it is experienced. The public realm includes exterior places, linkages, and built form elements that are physically and/or visually accessible. These elements include streets, sidewalks, bicycle trails, bridges, plazas, squares, transportation hubs, gateways, parks, waterfronts, natural features, view corridors, landmarks, and building yards. The scale, form, and character of public realm elements signify the relative significance of a space within the city and define the human experience. For federal facilities, it is important to consider the accessibility of transit, bicycle, and pedestrian modes with urban design including American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) requirements.

The composition of buildings, reservations, streets, and vistas that collectively establish the historic L'Enfant City is the most important American example of a planned urban core that physically expresses its political role as a purpose-built national capital which also provides a framework for many of the city's oldest commercial and residential neighborhoods. That these values were interwoven within the *Plan of the City of Washington* and continue to be reflected speaks to the ability of architecture and urban design to embody and project a deeper collective consciousness. And while the L'Enfant City's development is based on the city's original plan, it is not fixed architecturally to a particular time period. Indeed, the process of rebuilding and reimagining many parts of the L'Enfant City should be organic and ongoing.

Of particular importance to the Urban Design Element is the pedestrian experience along Washington's avenues and public spaces. This is distinguished by a sense of openness, both within the immediate setting, and in terms of visibility to more distant structures and natural elements. This emphasis on the visual qualities and preeminence of the public realm is a fitting and fundamentally unique contribution to Washington's image as the country's capital city and is a legacy of its original plans.

For policies that further address the public realm for federal properties throughout Washington and the region, refer to Section C: Policies Related to Federal Facilities, Property, and the Public Realm starting on page 35. Additionally, the District of Columbia's [Public Realm Design Manual](#)<sup>23</sup> is a useful resource that provides further guidance for the maintenance of the public realm.

This policy section provides guidance on the distinct system of streets and public spaces within the L'Enfant City as documented on the map on the following page, highlighting special streets as defined within this element, the settings of federal buildings and grounds, parks, plazas and other open spaces that meet the following qualities:

### Special Streets

- Streets that radiate from the U.S. Capitol and White House.
- Streets that radiate from the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, or within the setting of the Jefferson Memorial.
- Streets that frame or contribute to defining major scenic or symbolic areas or that serve as important connections, edges, or boundaries to special settings of national importance.
- Preeminent view corridors as defined within this element. For more detailed information on each specific view corridor listed on this map please refer to pages 17-31 in the Technical Addendum.
- Significant vistas as defined in this element and documented in the NHRP registration for the *Plan of the City of Washington*. For more detailed information on each specific view corridor listed on this map please refer to pages 32-33 in the Technical Addendum.

### Parks, Plazas, Open Spaces, and Natural Features

- Reservations within the L'Enfant City, particularly squares and circles located at the intersection of major radial/axial streets.
- Public spaces that frame or contribute to defining major scenic or symbolic areas or that serve as important connections, edges, or boundaries to special settings of national importance.
- Open spaces that promote a sense of entrance to the capital.
- Places that embody or display a distinctive functional importance by providing settings for ceremonies or activities related to the functions of the nation's capital.
- Open spaces that serve as significant routes for ceremonial, cultural, or governmental activities related to the functions of the nation's capital.
- Open spaces that contribute to interconnected landscapes, architectural settings or activity centers that display distinctive coherence of national importance.

The federal government should work with federal and District of Columbia agencies to:

**UD.B.3.1** Maintain or restore the integrity of the original L'Enfant Plan elements, including original rights-of-way, squares, streets, vistas, symbolic connections, and termini.

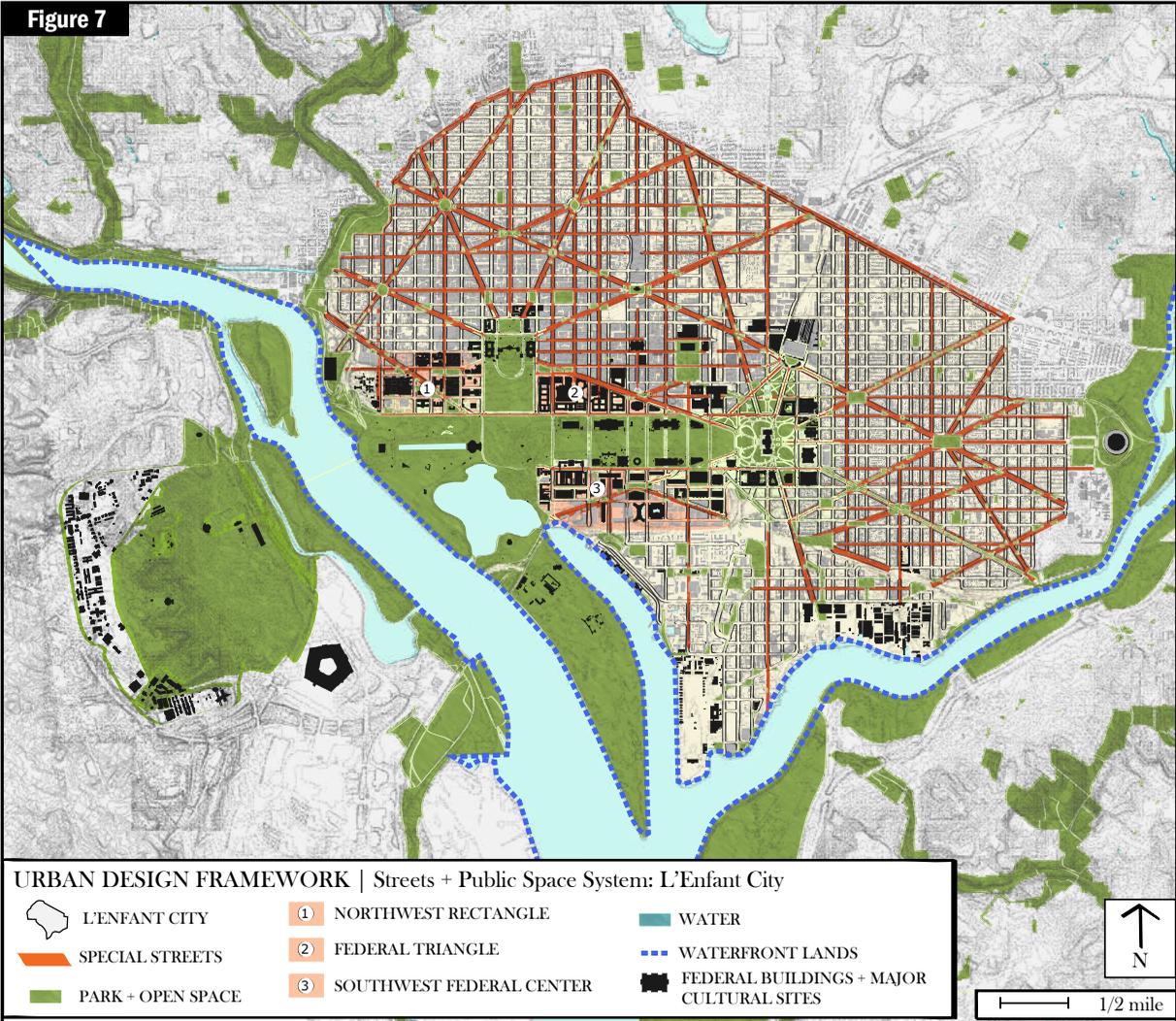
1. Discourage the closure of L'Enfant streets for private development. When L'Enfant streets must be closed for public purposes, ensure that deed restrictions are adopted so streets will be re-opened when the rights-of-way are no longer required for non-street purposes.
2. Protect the visual openness and functional qualities of L'Enfant public spaces by preventing visual incursions into the rights-of-way wherever possible. This protection extends to the public space up to the full height allowed under the Height Act and is particularly important at intersections and termini of radial and axial avenues, on streets adjacent to reservations, and along special streets as described in this element.

**UD.B.3.2** Enhance L'Enfant Plan reservations, particularly those at the intersection or termini of radial and axial streets and avenues, as public open spaces that serve residents and visitors as attractive neighborhood parks and sites for commemorative works. In particular:

1. Provide attractive, well-designed and well maintained amenities such as landscaping, lighting, way-finding, signage, seating, and where appropriate, play spaces for children.
2. Embellish reservations with commemorative works, fountains, and public art in ways that establish focal points for axial views.
3. Work with federal and local stakeholders to program reservations for placemaking, cultural activities, and passive recreation while, in accordance with federal regulations, respecting their historic character.
4. Work with federal and local stakeholders to ensure that pedestrian walkways and other public realm elements are designed to provide safe and appealing public access.

**UD.B.3.3** Protect the open space of the L'Enfant streets. The exceptional width and openness of the street rights-of-way constitutes public space that contributes to the city's character.

**UD.B.3.4** Consider building setbacks, massing, and scale when constructing building facades to reinforce and frame the spatial definition of public spaces and right-of-ways.



**UD.B.3.5** Ensure that streetscape elements including trees, enhance significant vistas, including the major axial and radiating streets that provide views of major buildings, parks, or commemorative works. Provide public realm and streetscape elements, such as street trees, transit amenities, curb cuts, garage access, transit infrastructure, security elements, and signage that:

1. Maintain views and don't obstruct or detract from important views/viewsheds as described within this element.
2. Reinforce the processional experience (spatial order) along important view corridors.
3. Reinforce the visual frame for, and not detract from, the views of major national memorials, civic institutions, landmarks, and park reservations.
4. Enhance the pedestrian experience and reinforce the human scale along Special Streets.

**UD.B.3.6** Sensitively locate and design public realm and streetscape elements along Special Streets and near important places. Public realm and streetscape programs should complement the surrounding area and create a visual cohesiveness to the setting. In particular, these programs should:

1. Maintain Special Streets with a cohesive tree canopy, and public realm and streetscape programs.
2. Provide landscape treatments that reflect the significance of Special Streets as important settings for the nation's capital.

**UD.B.3.7** Reinforce the distinctive character and gracious monumentality of the public realm and enhance the pedestrian experience in those areas that provide a setting for ceremonies or activities related to the functions of the capital, particularly within the monumental core.

1. Create cohesive treatment for roadway and sidewalk widths, building setbacks, and public realm and streetscape elements throughout the length of the street within the monumental core, except where a customized design defines a special precinct, such as the White House.
2. Establish and maintain a vision for a streetscape and public realm design program for all precincts within the monumental core, including, but not limited to the White House, U.S. Capitol, Federal Triangle, and Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the U.S. Capitol.

3. Implement a cohesive public realm program that enhances the formal design, setting, open space character, and visitors' experience to the National Mall, consistent with the National Park Service's [National Mall Plan](#).<sup>24</sup>

4. Establish and maintain a vision for the character of the major entrances to the monumental core, including public realm programs.

**UD.B.3.8** Protect the beauty and visual qualities of the public realm and the pedestrian experience along Special Streets by orienting service functions to the backs of buildings where possible. To the extent feasible, orient all building garage entrances, mechanical equipment rooms, and loading facilities along service streets and designated alleys.

**UD.B.3.9** Landscape treatments should enhance the settings around civic and cultural buildings and grounds.

**UD.B.3.10** Streetscape furniture and other structural elements should be of high quality and design, and enhance the settings around civic and cultural buildings and grounds.

**UD.B.3.11** Work with federal and local stakeholders, as appropriate, to sensitively locate and design interpretive, directional, advertising, and other functional signs in a way that complements the civic qualities of the monumental core and contributes to the public realm's overall visual character. In particular:

1. Establish signs and other graphics in public spaces that respond to the context and aesthetic of the surrounding environment. Signage programs near the White House, the U.S. Capitol, the National Mall, and other nationally significant sites should not detract from the site's visual preeminence nor the civic character of the settings around them.
2. Complement the street-defining elements of the precinct by keeping signs to a minimum.
3. Consolidate street signs and directional signs in one location to the extent possible.
4. Consider the concepts of placement, scale, size, composition, color, texture, lettering style, and readability of interpretive signs and graphics.

**UD.B.3.12** Design and maintain streetscapes and open spaces to be adaptable to changing needs, while continuing to embody the design intent of Washington's urban design framework.



Legacy Plan aerial view of Washington's monumental core

## B.4 The Monumental Core

The heart of Washington's symbolic fabric is its monumental core. Much of the monumental core is a cherished part of the country's architectural and cultural heritage, though parts of this extraordinary civic composition are disrupted by physical barriers. Examples of preeminent civic and cultural assets within the monumental core include the White House, U.S. Capitol, Supreme Court, Smithsonian Campus, major federal headquarters buildings, Kennedy Center, and Arlington National Cemetery.

Where noted, the policies within this section are derived by reference from the Framework Plan that guides the development of the monumental core, including opportunities for placemaking, locations for new cultural attractions, and strategies to increase the economic vitality of the area. The Framework Plan sets forth opportunities and strategies that address key challenges, including identifying new sites for memorials and museums; eliminating physical barriers that impede movement and limit access; creating a stronger diversity of land uses to promote day/night activities; and fostering a more welcoming street-level experience.

The federal government should:

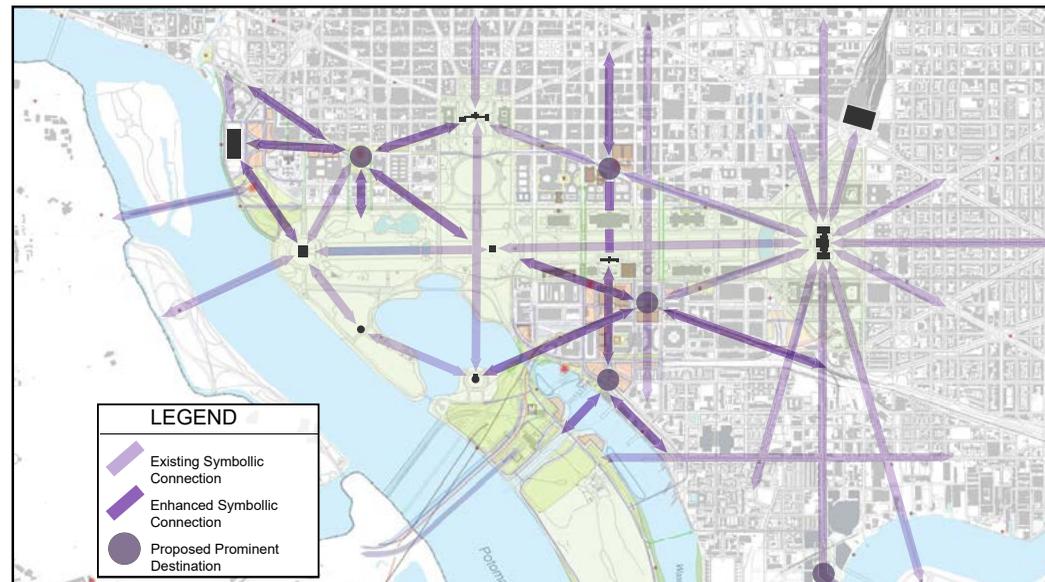
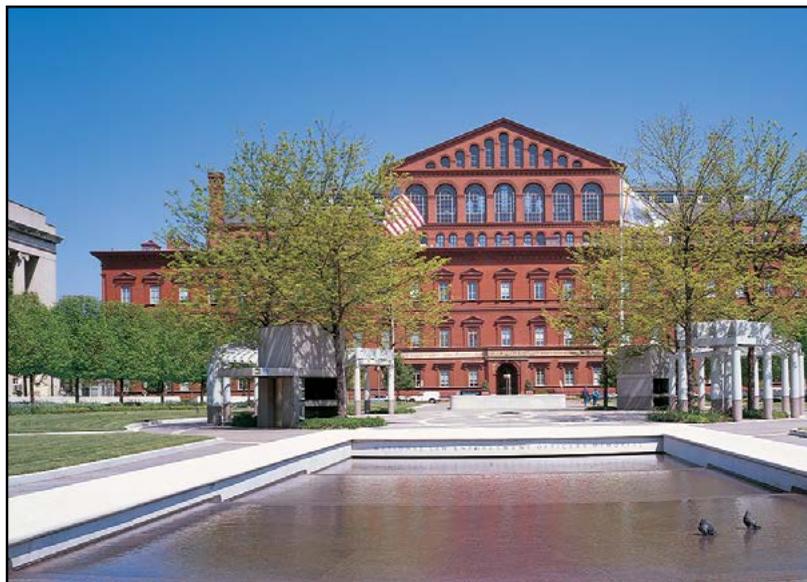
**UD.B.4.1** Plan carefully for the design and land uses in and around the monumental core to reinforce and enhance its special role in the image of the nation's capital. In general, encourage federal agencies and local jurisdictions to incorporate urban design strategies that consider the relationship between the design of new development and significant adjacencies, such as major public spaces, urban and historic fabric, and along the preeminent viewsheds described within this element. In particular:

1. Respect the character of the Federal Triangle buildings and grounds as established in the McMillan Plan. Explore new programming for the public realm and ground floors, including public art and pedestrian amenities, to create visual variety and activate the spaces for the enjoyment of the public and federal employees.
2. Respect the National Mall's historic open space and monumental character for the benefit of future generations. Ensure that new development does not infringe on the civic qualities and integrity of the National Mall and the surrounding monumental core. In particular:
  - a. Protect the experience of the National Mall as a public space within a park-like setting framed by civic and cultural buildings. Sensitive scale development of buildings on Independence and Constitution Avenues.
  - b. Respect existing lines of sight from the National Mall and existing relationships, including height and mass within that line of sight.



10th Street, SW connection to the southwest waterfront

The National Building Museum is the focal point of the terminating vista along 4th Street, NW.



Urban design symbolic relationships shown in the *Monumental Core Framework Plan*.

**U.D.B.4.2** Sensitively sculpt new development and create or maintain public space programs for streets adjacent to major national civic and cultural institutions, such as the National Archives, National Building Museum, Kennedy Center, and Smithsonian museums.

1. Carefully plan development along axial streets that connect major historic cultural buildings, particularly along 8<sup>th</sup> Street, NW (National Archives and the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture).
2. Carefully plan development along streets with major adjacencies, particularly those next to the White House (including 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Streets, NW), and at intersections with historic buildings, such as on F Street, NW at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and the U.S. Treasury Department.

**U.D.B.4.3** Create or strengthen multiple visual and functional linkages that connect reservations and civic spaces within the monumental core to the rest of the city utilizing the principles set forth in the *Monumental Core Framework Plan*. In particular, reinforce linkages with placemaking strategies, including public realm and streetscape programs as described in the Special Streets section of this element, and transportation programs to improve access for visitors.

1. Improve visual and functional connections between the National Mall, waterfront, and the rest of the city, where possible.
2. Improve transitions between places and remove visual and psychological barriers at major pedestrian thoroughfares and open spaces. Eliminate or redesign barriers in locations where historic axes and public spaces were disrupted in a way that supports the urban fabric's continuity.
3. Locate civic attractions such as parks, overlooks, and memorials across the Anacostia River.
4. Achieve a cohesive public realm that welcomes pedestrians and allows civic engagement and social interactions through attractive urban landscapes and functional buildings.
5. Maximize opportunities to create high-quality, pedestrian-friendly public spaces and increase access to major destinations.
6. Wherever possible, deck over high speed roadways and rail lines, and relocate rail and roadway infrastructure where it impedes pedestrian access.

## Edges and Transitions: Independence and Constitution Avenues

Constitution and Independence Avenues, two of the most prominent streets in the nation's capital, serve unique transitional roles in the monumental core. Framing the National Mall's northern and southern edges, respectively, they shift the user experience between the pastoral setting of the National Mall and the built environment in the surrounding urban core. The scale of the federal buildings on these avenues helps to minimize intrusions and provides a frame sympathetic to the culturally significant viewshed.

While the federal presence on Constitution Avenue is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, the federal government is currently analyzing the best use of its land and buildings on and around Independence Avenue. In the future, Independence Avenue could be home to the Smithsonian Campus to its north and a new mix of uses to its south, which underscores its role as a threshold between the monumental core and downtown Washington.

The *SW Ecodistrict Plan* envisioned this area, anchored by Independence Avenue, as a vibrant and sustainable district with residential, commercial, cultural, and office uses joining some of the federal agencies that call this area home. The plan recognizes the need to protect the open sky views and public character of the National Mall in addition to the sense of symmetry of new development on Independence Avenue with the Smithsonian Campus. The plan also recognizes that if some of the federally-owned land on Independence Avenue were to become private, there is a significant opportunity to increase density and the mix of uses that would make this area a more enjoyable place to work, live, and visit.

Therefore the plan proposes development controls such as building setbacks and upper-story setbacks that respect the lower-scale Smithsonian buildings on the north while anticipating greater density to the south. As with Constitution Avenue between the Mall and Federal Triangle, future Independence Avenue development should use design elements such as building massing, roofline sculpting, and material choice to successfully make this transition.

Beyond their transitional roles as a threshold between the Mall and surrounding areas, Constitution and Independence Avenues are part of a larger, interconnected open space network and reinforce linear views of the primary east-west vista (see Section B.5), most notably from Independence Avenue west to the Washington Monument. Both orthogonal avenues are part of the National Register of Historic Places Inventory of Significant Vistas, are home to prominent federal public buildings and cultural destinations, and serve as event spaces for a variety of local, regional and national activities.



Public Realm System Diagram from the Framework Plan.

Constitution and Independence Avenues serve as a transition from the National Mall out to the monumental core. They are also part of a larger, interconnected public realm network of parks, memorials, and streets that reinforce the city's key viewsheds.

**UD.B.4.4** Use the principles and strategies of the *Monumental Core Framework Plan* to identify opportunities to strengthen linkages between nationally significant places, improve the public realm, and enhance the monumental core's character. Examples include, but are not limited to:

1. Promote and maintain Pennsylvania Avenue, NW between the U.S. Capitol and the White House as a distinguished, high quality, mixed-use, multi-modal boulevard for residents, workers, tourists, and other visitors. It should contain an actively programmed, pedestrian-oriented, and inviting public realm that enhances the avenue's symbolic character and function and connects downtown Washington and the National Mall. Enhance the avenue's iconic reciprocal views to the U.S. Capitol and White House grounds through a cohesive streetscape design.
2. Redefine 10th Street, SW as a pedestrian friendly, mixed-use corridor that connects the southwest waterfront to the National Mall and establishes a terminus at the overlook as a premier cultural and mixed-use site.
3. Envision E Street, NW as a primary open space connector and urban parkway between the White House grounds and the Kennedy Center, including several potential sites for major new commemorative works.
4. Establish a strong physical and visual connection between the Lincoln Memorial and the Kennedy Center.
5. Improve walkability and access to key destinations within the monumental core and downtown by enhancing the pedestrian quality of secondary and tertiary connections within and around the monumental core, such as 23rd Street, NW; 20th Street, NW; 12th Street, NW; 10th Street, NW; and 7th Street, NW.
6. Consider opportunities to re-establish the Washington Monument view corridor along Virginia Avenue southeast of Independence Avenue.

## B.5 Preeminent Viewsheds and View Corridors

*L'Enfant urged the importance of “embracing in one view the whole extent from the Eastern Branch to Georgetown, and from the banks of the Potomac to the mountains.”*

One of the most important hallmarks of the capital city’s symbolic image and urban design framework is a three dimensional spatial and visual order that reinforces the preeminence of national symbols and democratic institutions. The city’s street-level views and vistas are created by the location and extent of its streets, the height of buildings, and where streets intersect with important public spaces or natural areas. Public realm and streetscape programming are important contributors to the quality of the city’s viewsheds and the character of its streets.

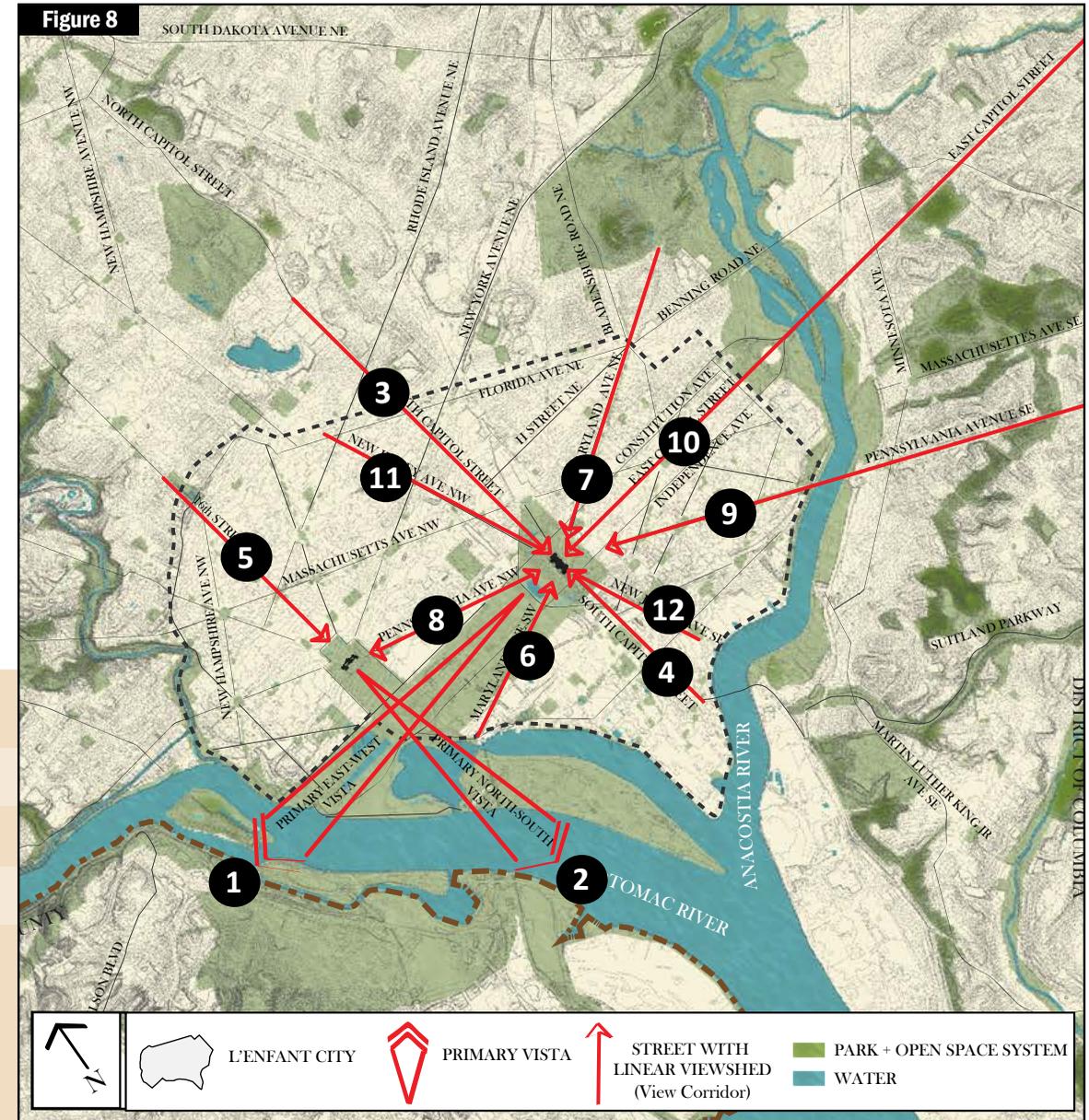
Many of the city’s vistas and street-level views are particularly distinctive within the original L’Enfant City. Sweeping panoramic views also exist from observation points at the edge of the topographic bowl which give the viewer a wider perspective to enjoy the city. These panoramic viewsheds are principally shaped by natural features and are included in Section B.2. The L’Enfant Plan National Register Nomination form documents viewsheds within the plan area. Major panoramic views have not been similarly documented and evaluated in a singular, comprehensive document.

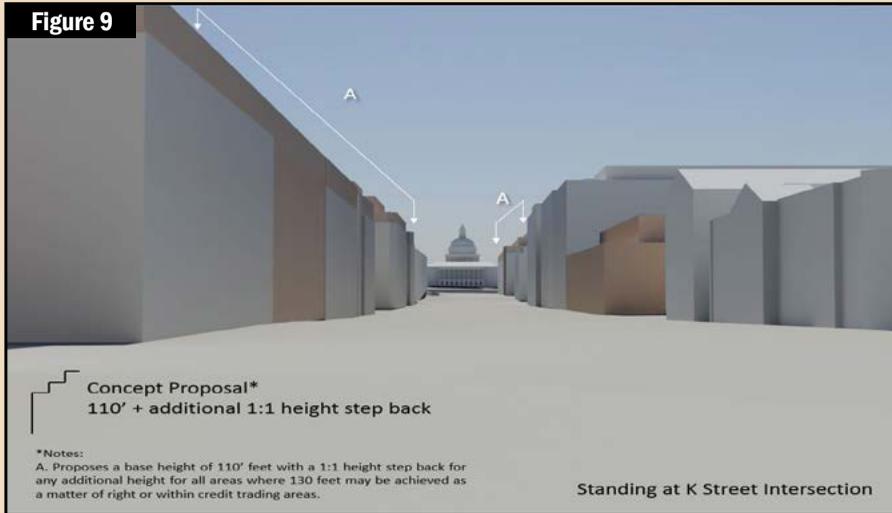
Preeminent viewsheds and view corridors within this section include views to and from the monumental core, specifically to and from the U.S. Capitol and White House. These views are critical to maintain as they contribute to the visual importance and hierarchy of nationally symbolic public buildings. Simple massing studies should be prepared prior to major decisions about zoning, master plans, and development review along any of the preeminent viewsheds listed in this section. Additional documentation and guidance for each viewshed and view corridor listed in the inventory below can be found in the Technical Addendum.

- 1 Primary east-west vista from the National Mall to the western horizon
- 2 Primary north-south vista from the White House to the southern horizon
- 3 North Capitol Street linear view from the U.S. Capitol to Michigan Avenue, NW
- 4 South Capitol Street linear view from the U.S. Capitol to Potomac Avenue, SW
- 5 16th Street, NW linear view from the White House to Euclid Street, NW
- 6 Maryland Avenue, SW linear view from the U.S. Capitol to the Tidal Basin
- 7 Maryland Avenue, NE linear view from the U.S. Capitol to the National Arboretum

- 8 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW linear view between the U.S. Capitol and the White House Grounds
- 9 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE linear view from the U.S. Capitol to Southern Avenue, SE
- 10 East Capitol Street from the U.S. Capitol to Southern Avenue, SE
- 11 New Jersey Avenue, NW linear view from the U.S. Capitol to Florida Avenue, NW
- 12 New Jersey Avenue, SE linear view from U.S. Capitol to Tingley Street, SE

For more detailed information on each specific view corridor listed on this map please refer to page 19 in the Technical Addendum.





In September 2014, NCPD staff offered comments on the District of Columbia Zoning Regulations Review (ZRR) including recommendations on the proposed zoning along North and South Capitol Streets. The image above illustrates the NCPD proposed building massing along North Capitol Street.

The vista of the U.S. Capitol along North Capitol Street is one of two primary north/south axes that establish the urban design framework and fundamental symbolic design basis for the city, and it is one of the important gateways to the monumental core.

North Capitol Street's topography is similar to 16th Street north of the White House. From Florida Avenue, the street generally slopes down towards the U.S. Capitol, therefore, the mass and location of buildings along these blocks strongly influence perceptions about the scale of the U.S. Capitol dome and its preeminence within the pedestrian's line of site. At the same time, North Capitol is at the confluence of the new, high densities of the NoMa commercial neighborhood on the east side of the street, and lower density residential development on the west side of the street. NCPD staff recommended that buildings south of K Street, NW along North Capitol, on lands subject to zoning and not subject to other height restrictions, have a 1:1 step back at 110 feet.

NCPD staff also recommended a 1:1 stepback at 110 feet on South Capitol Street between the SE/SW freeway and M Street, SW. The stepback will ensure that the U.S. Capitol dome is not diminished by the proposed matter of right building heights and will also encourage a consistent cornice line in the blocks immediately adjacent to the Capitol.

The federal government should work with federal and local agencies to:

- UD.B.5.1** Protect and enhance panoramic and street-level linear views of the U.S. Capitol, White House, Washington Monument, and other major skyline elements. Remove visual intrusions to increase visibility.
- UD.B.5.2** Plant and maintain street trees to help frame preeminent and axial views and renew the park-like character of the nation's capital.
- UD.B.5.3** Locate tour bus and commercial truck parking in a way that does not disrupt the preeminent view corridors.
- UD.B.5.4** Reinforce street-level linear views with consistent building setbacks and cornice lines, wherever possible.
- UD.B.5.5** Enhance and protect the primary north-south/east-west vistas within the L'Enfant Plan through appropriately scaled building development, wherever possible.
- UD.B.5.6** Reinforce the U.S. Capitol as the spatial center of the city and restore the prominent role of the radiating streets and important intersections through decisions about public realm and streetscape programming, street-level uses, building mass, and viewshed protections as described within this element. These include: North Capitol Street, South Capitol Street, East Capitol Street, New Jersey Avenue, Maryland Avenue, and Delaware Avenue. Destinations along these streets should reflect their role as prominent gateways into the monumental core.
  1. Visually reinforce the preeminence of the U.S. Capitol within street-level linear views along intersecting streets. Utilize building setbacks and sculpting to protect the visual frame around the U.S. Capitol dome and reinforce sweeping and open views to it. Continue to scale and orient building heights along streets that intersect with the U.S. Capitol with a general landscape vista, where the width of the street is greater than the height of buildings that flank the street.
  2. Protect views to and from the U.S. Capitol from visual competition from new development, wherever possible.
  3. Promote balanced massing and scale along linear views of streets that intersect with the U.S. Capitol to form a coherent composition on a block-by-block level.
- UD.B.5.7** Reclaim Maryland Avenue, SW as a grand boulevard that links the U.S. Capitol to the Jefferson Memorial by enhancing existing public spaces and reconnecting the street grid.
- UD.B.5.8** Reclaim South Capitol Street as a grand boulevard that links the U.S. Capitol to the waterfront by addressing transportation infrastructure and enhancing public spaces. Repair the urban fabric.

**UD.B.5.9** Ensure that any new uses or improvements on Pennsylvania Avenue between 3rd and 15th Streets, NW are cohesively planned, improved, and maintained in a manner befitting the avenue’s national and local role in a 21st century capital city, reflecting the ceremonial heart of the nation and the daily vibrancy of the city.

1. The *Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation Plan’s (1974)*, General Guidelines, and Square Guidelines, as amended, ensure that the siting and massing of any structure or landscape elements strengthen the sweeping open frame around the U.S. Capitol and are compatible with building massing and the public realm within its surroundings.

**UD.B.5.10** Visually reinforce the special importance of the White House and its grounds.

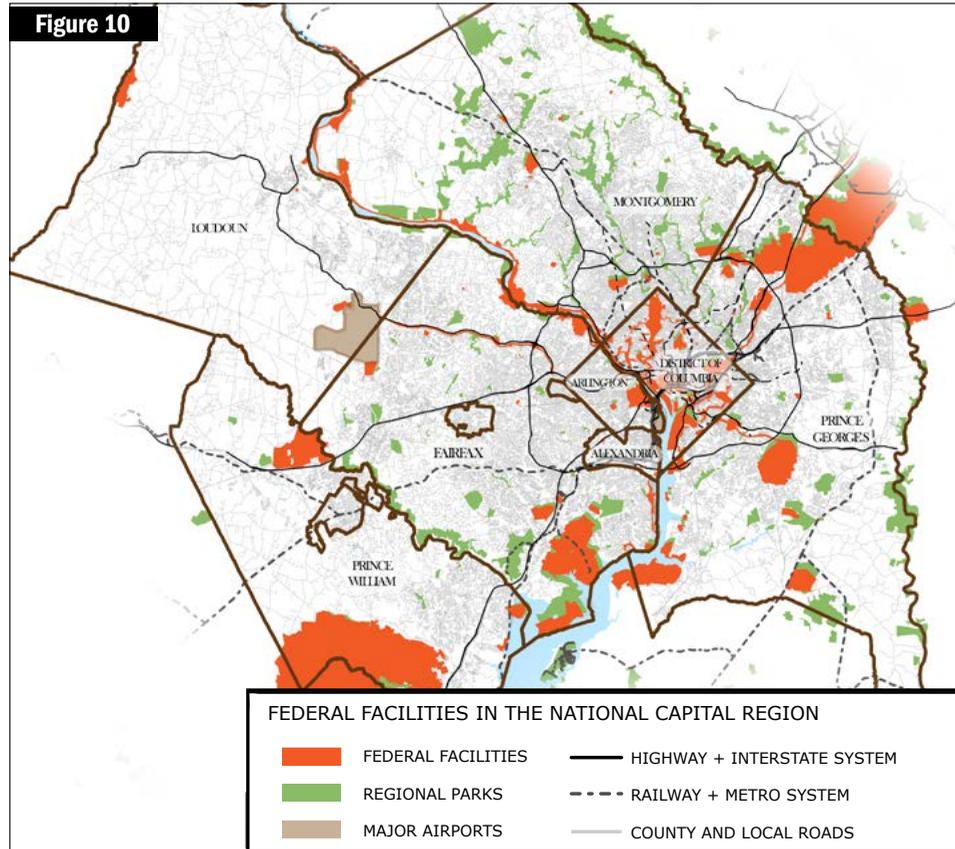
1. Maintain a consistent tree canopy along 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW from the escarpment north of Meridian Hill Park, a key observation point that offers singular views to the White House.
2. To meet urban design quality and security goals, the scale of buildings located on the blocks within the immediate vicinity of the White House should not visually overwhelm the building and grounds, particularly as viewed from 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW and Pennsylvania Avenue. In general, protect the existing spatial relationship of the White House and the mass and scale of adjacent buildings along 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW up to Scott Circle.
3. Ensure that massing and scale of buildings along 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW is balanced and forms a coherent composition on a block by block basis.



**Panoramic Viewsheds: St. Elizabeths West Campus**

The unique integration of Washington’s city plan with its natural geography produces sweeping views of the urban and natural landscape from the surrounding topographic ridgelines. Notable portions of these prominent ridgelines in southeast Washington are the site of federal parklands such as the Civil War Defenses of Washington and federal facilities. For example, the St. Elizabeths West Campus is part of the southern portion of the Anacostia Hills and the open plateau within the campus offers unique vantage points for panoramic views towards the Washington Monument, the dome of the U.S. Capitol Building, and the Washington National Cathedral in the distance. Panoramic views from public lands such as St. Elizabeths should receive further study to ensure these important viewsheds are maintained and enhanced wherever possible.

Figure 10



Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House

## Part II. Urban Design Principles: Federal Facilities & Property

There are many important factors that shape the location and design of federal buildings and property within the city and region, including agency mission, budget, operational needs, and proximity to transit. Urban design is one component that should be incorporated into this decision-making process. This section establishes policies related to the urban design of federal property. How federal facilities are situated and designed plays an important role in the overall character of the environs and of their immediate setting. The quality of a federal property's urban design is an important contributor to the workplace experience for federal employees and can impact the way that the agency conducts its day-to-day operations. Finally and more broadly, the design of federal buildings is an important contributor to the capital's image, and has the potential to shape impressions of the federal establishment more generally.

Many federal properties are concentrated in the monumental core and are important contributors to the visual and functional qualities of the public realm in this important symbolic setting. Similarly, campuses and bases such as the National Institutes of Health in Montgomery County, Maryland and Fort Belvoir in Fairfax County, Virginia are important parts of the urban design and character of the communities in which they are situated. As such, it is critical that federal properties, whether located in an urban, suburban, or even rural context, address the public space around them. This includes pedestrian street-level experience and access. Although each building and campus is unique, each should be developed with an urban design strategy that considers whether and how the buildings should fit and engage the surrounding context, circulation in and around the site, and other related planning goals.

### Section C: Policies Related to Federal Facilities, Property, and the Public Realm

The policies established in the following sections focus on design issues related to federal facilities and property. The policies are organized into three focus areas which reflect the core issues associated with federal building design. These include encouraging quality design; integrating buildings and campuses into their communities; and urban design and security. Interior space, another important contributor to a federal facility's design quality, is not considered. The policies work in concert with those established in the Federal Environment, Federal Workplace, and Historic Preservation Elements, which each provide direction during a facility's design phase.

## C.1 Inspiring Design: Individual Buildings and Campuses

The Urban Design Element establishes policies that guide the design of federal buildings, including modernizations, rehabilitations, expansions, and new construction. The policies do not endorse any particular architectural style. Rather, this section considers how a federal building's outward appearance and orientation can enhance the surrounding context. The policies encourage facility designers to incorporate best planning practices, including those related to sustainability and building design.

While a federal building's design and construction should be of a high quality, not all federal buildings must be iconic in design. The design approach should contribute to an area's sense of place. Further, designers should explore opportunities to relate a building's efficiency and sustainability to the buildings around it. Combining stormwater management systems or sharing energy can minimize design and construction costs and maximize efficiencies. This "district-level" approach to sustainability is a core value in designing high quality federal buildings and is a central theme of the *SW Ecodistrict Plan*. For further guidance concerning stormwater mitigation and other ecological and sustainable practices please refer to the Federal Environmental Element.

The federal government should:

**UD.C.1.1** For the construction or modernization of principal federal buildings, such as headquarters and major offices, should reflect their importance in the National Capital Region. Buildings should be designed and constructed with quality, durable materials to protect the public investment and reflect the National Capital Region's image.

1. Use building orientation, mass, and façade articulation, as well as landscaping and lighting to emphasize the importance of special settings of national importance.
2. Location of vegetation, color, scale, and texture of landscape elements in the settings of federal buildings and national institutions should complement the building's programmatic elements and design.

**UD.C.1.2** For federal campuses and installations, agencies should address specific urban design issues through the preparation and updating of master plans. In conformance with NCPC guidelines, master plans should be updated on a regular basis, in consultation with local governments and the Commission, to respond to changing conditions and agency needs. The urban design component of master plans should:

1. Analyze existing installation characteristics and surroundings, including the qualities and resources to be protected, and problems to be resolved.
2. Propose urban design policies, including topics such as building groupings, massing, and architectural character; streetscape, landscape elements, and character; signage and parking.
3. Include a strategy for the site and design of principal agency functions.
4. Include a strategy for utilitarian or routine support functions, which should generally be sited and designed to avoid or minimize intrusion on principal urban design features.

**UD.C.1.3** Implement sustainable site and building design at a district-level scale, where possible.

**UD.C.1.4** Federal buildings should achieve a balance between iconic design and infill design as appropriate to the building site's location and setting.

**UD.C.1.5** For federal facilities, integrate the accessibility to transit, bicycle, and pedestrian modes into the urban design and comply with ADA and ABA requirements.



U.S. Census Bureau Headquarters, Suitland, MD

Edward Hueber/Arch Photo



The Intelligence Community Campus-Bethesda project in Maryland transformed an inefficient and outdated federal campus into a sustainable, interconnected workplace. Extensive coordination with the community, adjacent federal agencies, and local jurisdictions resulted in refinements addressing parking, building design, and stormwater management. Construction began in 2012.

## C.2 Integrating Federal Buildings and Campuses within the Surrounding Community

Within Washington, DC and the NCR, the federal government maintains modest and large buildings and multi-structure campuses. Facilities such as Fort Belvoir in Virginia, the National Institutes of Health in Maryland, and the Department of Homeland Security Headquarters at St. Elizabeths in Washington maintain a large presence within their communities. Building and site design, particularly as it relates to security and public space, tremendously impacts the character of adjacent neighborhoods. The quality of building or campus design is important in supporting a desirable community character. This section will recommend strategies to integrate federal buildings and campuses into their surrounding context using urban design and planning principles. Security plays an important role and is addressed in the following section.

These policies broadly consider circulation and pedestrian connections through federal properties to maintain continuous local and regional networks. These networks can also assist federal employees in walking or biking between campus locations. The policies also acknowledge the importance of locating amenities such as retail or parking facilities in a manner so that they can be used by local residents and not strictly by federal employees. Federal campuses should consult local plans and design guidelines not only to understand the context in which they are located, but also to balance local goals for neighborhood character with agency goals. For additional policies related to access and circulation in and around federal campuses, refer to the Federal Workplace and Transportation and Elements.

Finally, one critical component of how a building meets its surroundings is its street level presence. The quality of a building's street level design and use reflects its orientation to people. Buildings with active street level uses create a sense of accessibility and comfort for pedestrians. Campuses with inviting edges at the street can support pedestrian movement and connectivity within a given community. This is particularly important for federal buildings situated in downtown areas. This section encourages facility designers to rethink the notion of traditional federal building design and look for creative ways to better fit federal buildings within their surroundings. This policy section is also relevant for the disposition of excess federal property. The future use of disposed sites can contribute to the existing surrounding community and reinforce planning goals and objectives through coordinated place-making strategies. For more policies concerning the integration of federal properties with the surrounding community please see the Federal Workplace and Transportation Elements.

**UD.C.2.1** The site planning of federal buildings and campuses throughout the region should relate appropriately to their surrounding context, including:

1. The surrounding uses and scale of existing street and block patterns.
2. Compatibility with nearby buildings, including height, massing setback, materials, fenestration, and scale.
3. Local community goals.

**UD.C.2.2** Agencies should enhance the pedestrian experience in and around federal buildings and campuses, wherever possible, and in consideration of this element's security section. In particular:

1. Consider flexible and impervious areas, such as plazas, to accommodate congregating and place-making activities within the design program of federal building yards.
2. Avoid blank walls where a building meets adjacent public space and activate street level facades by utilizing art displays, transparent materials, or other appropriate methods.
3. Principal facades and primary public building entrances should face major streets or open spaces.
4. Break up superblocks and introduce mid-block alleys that can either be used for community open space or shared access to service areas of multiple buildings.
5. Incorporate shared open space into new federal office developments, where possible.
6. Habitable building space should be provided along the street frontage to accommodate public space or activated ground floor uses, such as retail or other commercial enterprises, as appropriate. In particular:
  - a. Concentrate retail activity near transit hubs and key intersections adjacent and accessible to public sidewalks and plazas.
  - b. Consider establishing street markets and farmers markets on federally-owned plazas, courtyards and underused open spaces.

**UD.C.2.3** Provide access to, and/or connections through, campuses, building yards, plazas, or courtyards for local and regional trails, bikeways, pedestrian ways, or open space networks where possible. Agencies should explore programming these areas with publicly accessible amenities such as art installations and/or farmers markets.

**UD.C.2.4** Provide strategic multi-modal street connections or extensions to adjacent streets or the local street grid to and through installations to provide a continuous transportation network.

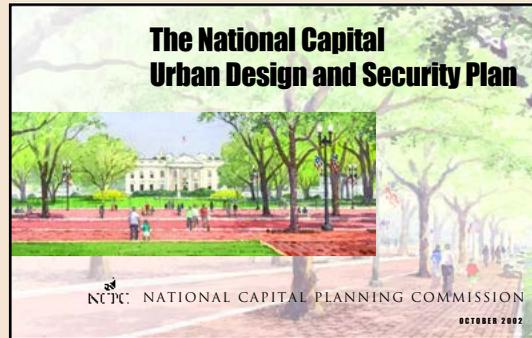
**UD.C.2.5** Design pedestrian and vehicular entrances, or any physical gateways to federal campuses and buildings, to be as inviting and as accessible as possible.

**UD.C.2.6** Locate and design appropriate amenities, including retail, to be accessible to the local community, where possible.



*Farmers market at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Whitten Building*

### Interagency Security Task Force



In March 2000 Congress authorized the Commission to establish the Interagency Security Task Force. This Task Force evaluated the impact of security measures on the historic character of Washington's monumental core. In November 2001, the Commission adopted the Task Force's recommendations contained in a report entitled *Designing for Security in the Nation's Capital*. Among its recommendations, the report called for the preparation of an urban design and security plan to identify permanent security and streetscape improvements for federal facilities in the nation's capital.

The Task Force's recommendations became the basis for the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan (2002)*. The plan was the result of a collaborative effort by the National Capital Planning Commission, federal and District of Columbia governments, security agencies, and civic and business organizations.

Specifically, the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan*:

- Provides strategies for perimeter security against the threat of bomb-laden vehicles.
- Includes a citywide program that provides both security and urban beautification.
- Expands the palette of attractive street furnishings and landscape treatments that can provide curbside security.

NCPC reconvened the Interagency Task Force and produced an addendum in 2004 with updated information.

In 2005, [NCPC adopted an updated set of objectives and policies](#)<sup>25</sup> for reviewing perimeter security projects. The updated policies reinforce the importance of design quality in the nation's capital, and strive to balance building security with the functional and visual qualities of public space.

## C.3 Urban Design and Security

Both federal and local governments are responsible for the safety of those who live, work, and visit the nation's capital while preserving the openness and historic design that have made Washington one of the world's most unique capital cities. Many of these policies are also applicable to federal building and campuses in the greater region.

Washington, DC is admired for the sweep and grace of its historic streetscapes and open public spaces. However, guard huts, street closures, rows of concrete planters, and other permanent and temporary barriers can adversely affect the capital's appearance and people's impression of it. Such security features can also adversely impact the character of local neighborhoods in which federal facilities are located.

There are many aspects to security planning and design that must be considered when designing effective security measures. Risk management strategies for external threats range from infrastructure protection, building construction, and perimeter security to surveillance and operations. The criteria are derived from various Presidential directives and other federal security criteria contained in documents such as the Department of Homeland Security's *Interagency Security Committee's Manual for New Federal Office Buildings and Major Modernization Projects* and the Department of Defense's [Unified Facilities Criteria](#).<sup>26</sup>

NCPC supports the development of effective security systems that preserve the characteristic openness of Washington's public spaces and enhance the city's public realm, as well as the character of adjacent communities in the region. When physical perimeter security is necessary, it should be located within, and integrated into, the design of the building yard. If there is no building yard, as is typically found in urban areas, it may be necessary to place physical perimeter security measures in public space. This should be done in an unobtrusive manner that integrates security barriers and furthers or creates an attractive urban landscape or pastoral green suburban edge.

The policies within this section are derived by reference from NCPC's [National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan](#),<sup>27</sup> which includes context and objectives.

These policies address important city planning and design issues when it is necessary to construct physical perimeter security. This section balances building security with the functional and visual quality of public space, in consideration of: (1) the monumental core's historic resources and the democratically-inspired design principles inherent in Washington's historic city plan; (2) the region's need for mobility, mixed-use development, and activated street level activity to protect and enhance its economic vitality; and (3) the importance of protecting the public realm from the adverse impacts of perimeter security to ensure that residents, workers, and visitors maintain their rights to access, use, and the ability to enjoy the grace and beauty of public space in the capital and the region.

**UD.C.3.1** Permanent closure of streets or sidewalks within right-of-ways established by the L'Enfant Plan should be strongly discouraged.

1. Streets necessary for emergency evacuation should not be closed, blocked, or access restricted except for brief periods when required for extraordinary events or activities.

**UD.C.3.2** Temporary closure or access restrictions to streets, parking lanes, or sidewalks should be limited to only the protection of those uses deemed absolutely essential for immediate continuity of critical government operations. These closures or restrictions should only be allowed during times of extraordinary security threats, or brief periods of time when required for extraordinary events or activities, such as large public demonstrations, the State of the Union Address, or ceremonial parades.

1. Temporary closure or access restrictions should be in accordance with previously established plans and procedures. Coordination should occur among governmental entities directly affected by the closure, or those that can provide meaningful input on a range of potential impacts caused by the closure, such as the Department of Homeland Security-National Capital Region Coordination; the local emergency management service; the local law enforcement agency; the U.S. Capitol Police; the U.S. Park Police; the U.S. Secret Service; the Federal Protective Service; local planning and transportation offices; and the National Capital Planning Commission, as appropriate.

**UD.C.3.3** The placement of security barriers in public space is discouraged and should be minimized.

1. Interior building space programming for new buildings, or for major renovation projects, in urban settings should consider locating critical uses and operations in areas of the building that will minimize the need to place perimeter security in public space.
2. Protection of exterior air-intake systems should be visually and physically integrated into the architecture of the building design. Air-intake protective measures should not prevent access to the building yard or public space, nor impede pedestrian circulation.
3. For existing buildings in urban areas, perimeter security barriers should be located within the building yard when the face of the sensitive building to the outside edge of the building yard is a minimum of 20 feet. If the distance from the face of the building to the outside edge of the building yard is less than 20 feet, then perimeter security barriers may be permitted in public space adjacent to that building.



The National Museum of the American Indian security barriers

4. Existing streetscape, landscape, or building site features should be hardened, or perimeter security should be integrated into the topography of the site to provide physical perimeter security where feasible. If this not achievable, then security barriers should be integrated into the urban landscape in a manner that minimizes their visual impact and physical infringement into public space.
5. When physical perimeter security elements are located at the edge of the building yard, designs should accommodate visual and physical public access to the building lawn and designated entries.
6. The location of perimeter security barriers should minimize interruption of pedestrian circulation. Barriers should not unduly cross sidewalks perpendicularly, causing pedestrians to maneuver between them.

**UD.C.3.4** The location and arrangement of security barriers should be compatible with the placement of security barriers for other buildings on the street.

**UD.C.3.5** Perimeter security barriers at intersections, corners, and near cross walks or other highly used pedestrian areas should be minimized; barriers that are needed should be located to allow safe pedestrian waiting areas and pedestrian movement.

**UD.C.3.6** Placement of security barriers should incorporate best design practices and industry standards and be arranged to:

1. Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Architectural Barriers Act.
2. Provide visual clues to signify important circulation routes and site or building features.
3. Ensure that the public space is visually and physically accessible.
4. Provide sufficient clearances to allow access to and from transit stops.
5. Provide safe pedestrian access to and along sidewalks, public spaces, and building entrances.
6. Provide emergency access to buildings and emergency evacuation from buildings.
7. Ensure that maintenance equipment such as snow plows, utility trucks, and motorized cleaners can access and maneuver within building yards, sidewalks, and plazas.
8. Provide at least two feet from the face of the curb to the face of the barrier to allow for opening car doors, unloading and loading of passengers, and ease of access to public space.

**UD.C.3.7** Security elements located at the curb, or edge of the sidewalk, should not unduly impede pedestrian access to various permitted sidewalk and street activities, such as cafés, kiosks, demonstration areas, or parade viewing areas along ceremonial streets. The designs must accommodate viewing stands, tents, and review stands that are used during significant public events.

**UD.C.3.8** The design of security barriers, including their mass, form, and materials should respond to the architectural and landscape context in which they are located and complement and aesthetically enhance the special character of the associated building and precinct.

**UD.C.3.9** Physical perimeter security barriers within the building yard should be incorporated into the landscape design and include low walls, fences, seating, landscaping, and other public amenities typically found within the landscape. The design of these barriers should be architecturally compatible with adjacent buildings and respect the overall character of the streetscape.

**UD.C.3.10** Perimeter security barriers in public space should incorporate decorative tree wells, planters, light poles, signage, benches, parking meters, trash receptacles, and other elements and public amenities typically found in a streetscape.

**UD.C.3.11** Protection of existing trees, including their canopies and root systems, and new street tree planting is encouraged when the plantings will be in context with the existing or the planned corridor streetscape. This will minimize the visual impact and the physical intrusion of the security barriers in the urban landscape.

**UD.C.3.12** The design of perimeter security should respect the building's use, significance and location in the community, as well as established view corridors.

**UD.C.3.13** Perimeter security design should strive for continuity, consistency, and enhancement of the overall streetscape.

**UD.C.3.14** Perimeter security design should avoid relying on repetitive use of single elements, such as continuous rows of bollards or planters.

**UD.C.3.15** Physical perimeter security should follow design principles to achieve a sense of openness, balance, rhythm, and hierarchy that will improve way-finding and visual linkages along a street and enhance the pedestrian experience. For example, elements can be designed and placed to signify primary or secondary pedestrian entrances.

**UD.C.3.16** Perimeter security barriers should be designed as a family of beautiful, functional streetscape elements that also function as a public amenity.

**UD.C.3.17** Physical perimeter security projects that are located in areas with a previously approved streetscape program should be designed to be consistent with the design intent of the streetscape standards of that associated area.

**UD.C.3.18** Security barrier design (placement, height, spacing, dimensional volume, structural integrity, and other physical characteristics) should respond to the identified threats as well as specific building and site conditions, relational vehicle design speeds, angles-of-approach, and pavement types.

**UD.C.3.19** Curbs, copings, and retaining walls should be incorporated into the design of security barriers to reduce the perceived barrier height.

**UD.C.3.20** Pedestrian screening security operations should not be conducted in public space. If building additions or renovations are required to accommodate this function, the new construction should be compatible with the existing architecture and should not project into L'Enfant Plan rights-of-way, other public space, or viewsheds.

**UD.C.3.21** Guard booths should be integrated into, and designed in context with, the site and building design. When feasible, guard booths should be located in the building yard. Where the depth of the building yard is insufficient, the guard booth should be located to minimize interruption of pedestrian movement along the pathway.

**UD.C.3.22** Vehicular controls at building entries, such as vehicle barriers and guard booths should be located so that pedestrian movement along sidewalks is not blocked. Check points should be designed to allow off-street queuing space that does not block pedestrian movement or traffic flow.

**UD.C.3.23** Vehicular control measures that are visible from public space should be attractively designed and mechanical equipment should be hidden. Solid hydraulic plate barriers should only be used in locations that are not highly visible from public space.

**UD.C.3.24** Signage, electronic signals, or other control measures should be integrated into vehicular barriers and guard booths to minimize visual clutter.

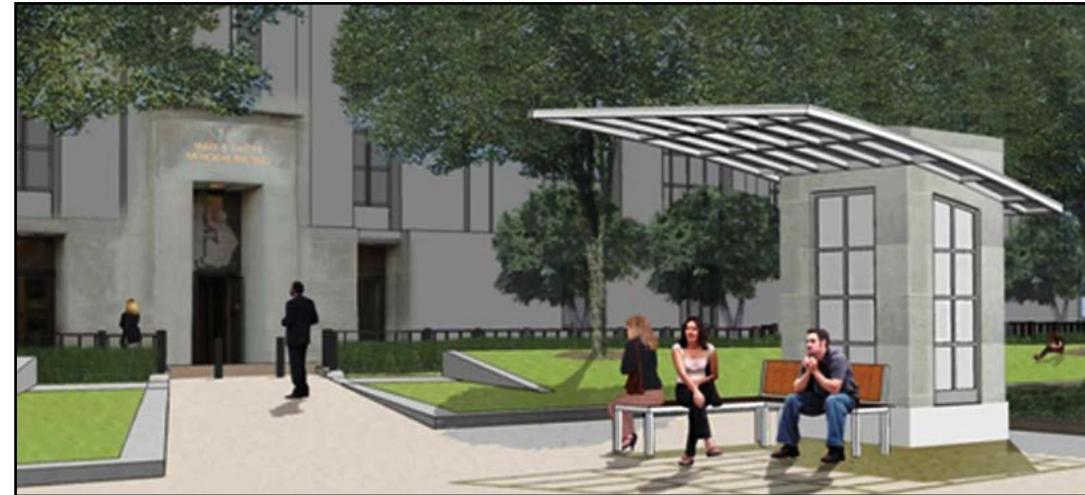
**UD.C.3.25** The *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan* is predicated on a design framework that defines contextual areas and Special Streets. Special Streets, recognized as the monumental avenues and diagonal streets in the L'Enfant Plan, are the great linear connectors of the city and provide an important symbolic and ceremonial function in the nation's capital. Ideally, the physical perimeter security for buildings on these monumental and diagonal streets should be designed collectively as a contextually appropriate, cohesive streetscape. In the absence of funding to design the entire streetscape, it is incumbent upon federal agencies to coordinate their design solutions with their neighbors along the street and consider the larger context.

**UD.C.3.26** The capital's preeminent viewsheds and monumental avenues, such as Pennsylvania, Constitution, Independence, Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey should receive special treatment to ensure that security projects are addressed comprehensively, emphasizing the streetscape as a whole with attention to their axiality and formality.

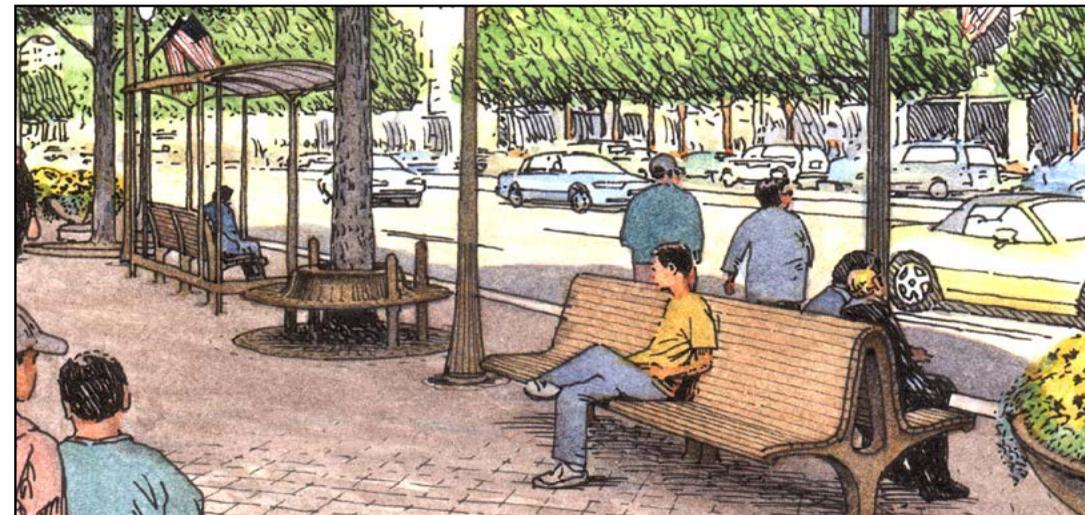
**UD.C.3.27** Diagonal avenues should be treated in a manner that emphasizes their landscape features, including significant tree and ground plantings.

**UD.C.3.28** Special Streets (such as Pennsylvania, Constitution, Independence, and Maryland Avenues), or those that are included in special planning areas (such as 10th Street, SW; 7th Street, NW; and F Street, NW) should be treated in a manner that reinforces their linkages, unique conditions, and individual character.

**UD.C.3.29** Grid streets should be treated in a manner that builds upon existing streetscape standards and minimizes the contrast between security and streetscape elements.



Proposed contextual guardbooth design.



NCPC's *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan* proposed streetscape security furniture.

## Endnotes

1. The Federal Elements are prepared pursuant to Section 4(a) of the National Capital Planning Act of 1952 (now codified at 40 U.S.C. § 8722).
2. **L'Enfant Plan:** [http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main\(T2\)/About\\_Us\(tr2\)/About\\_Us\(tr3\)/History.html](http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main(T2)/About_Us(tr2)/About_Us(tr3)/History.html)
3. **McMillan Plan** [http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main\(T2\)/About\\_Us\(tr2\)/About\\_Us\(tr3\)/History.html](http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main(T2)/About_Us(tr2)/About_Us(tr3)/History.html)
4. **1910 Height of Buildings Act:** [https://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main\(T2\)/About\\_Us\(tr2\)/About\\_Us\(tr3\)/HeightofBldgs1910.pdf](https://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main(T2)/About_Us(tr2)/About_Us(tr3)/HeightofBldgs1910.pdf)
5. The Schedule of Heights are height limitations in 15 different areas of Washington that are adjacent to public buildings, including the blocks around the White House, the Supreme Court, and the congressional office buildings. It functions in addition to the Height of Buildings Act.
6. **National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the L'Enfant Plan:** <http://focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/97000332.pdf>
7. **Public Parking Act of 1870:** <https://comp.ddot.dc.gov/Documents/1870%20Parking%20Act.pdf#pagemode=none>
8. For more information, see the National Register Nomination Form: <http://focus.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/97000332.pdf>
9. **Monumental Core Framework Plan:** [http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main\(T2\)/Planning\(Tr2\)/FrameworkPlan.html](http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main(T2)/Planning(Tr2)/FrameworkPlan.html)
10. **SW Ecodistrict Plan:** <http://www.ncpc.gov/swecodistrict/>
11. **Memorials and Museums Master Plan:** [http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main\(T2\)/Planning\(Tr2\)/2MPlan.html](http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main(T2)/Planning(Tr2)/2MPlan.html)
12. According to Casey Trees, in 1950 Washington, DC supported an estimated 50 percent tree canopy. By 2011, it had declined to just over 35 percent. <http://www.caseytrees.org/about/mission>
13. The Arlington County Board adopted “The Resolution of Concern Regarding Building Heights Related to the National Capitol Mall Axis” in 1982. It is non-binding and addresses NCPC’s concerns regarding the east-west axis.
14. National Capital Planning Commission and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
15. Zach Mortice, Managing Editor, AIArchitect, 2014 Twenty-five Year Award, “Washington Metropolitan Area Transit- Notes of Interest,” [www.aia.org/practicing/awards/2014/twenty-five-year-award/](http://www.aia.org/practicing/awards/2014/twenty-five-year-award/)
16. **Extending the Legacy: Planning America’s Capital for the 21st Century:** [http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main\(T2\)/Planning\(Tr2\)/ExtendingtheLegacy.html](http://www.ncpc.gov/ncpc/Main(T2)/Planning(Tr2)/ExtendingtheLegacy.html)
17. **Center City Action Agenda:** <http://planning.dc.gov/page/center-city-action-agenda-2008>
18. **Height Master Plan:** <http://www.ncpc.gov/heightstudy/overview.html>
19. **Anacostia Waterfront Initiative:** <http://www.anacostiawaterfront.org/awi-transportation-projects/anacostia-riverwalk-trail/>
20. Casey Trees – [www.caseytrees.org/about/mission](http://www.caseytrees.org/about/mission)
21. Benefits of Trees: A Research List. [www.actrees.org](http://www.actrees.org)
22. DDOT’s Urban Forestry Administration accounts for about half of all trees planted each year throughout the District. Casey Trees has a goal of creating 40 percent canopy by 2035.
23. **Public Realm Design Manual:** <http://ddot.dc.gov/PublicRealmDesignManual>
24. **National Mall Plan:** <http://www.nps.gov/nationalmallplan/National%20Mall%20Plan.html>
25. **In 2005, NCPC adopted an updated set of objectives and policies for reviewing perimeter security projects:** <http://www.ncpc.gov/DocumentDepot/Publications/SecurityPlans/NCUDSP/NCUDSPAddendum2005.pdf>
26. **Department of Defense’s Unified Facilities Criteria:** [http://www.wbdg.org/ccb/DOD/UFC/ufc\\_1\\_200\\_01.pdf](http://www.wbdg.org/ccb/DOD/UFC/ufc_1_200_01.pdf)
27. **National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan:** [https://www.ncpc.gov/DocumentDepot/Publications/SecurityPlans/NCUDSP/NCUDSP\\_Section1.pdf](https://www.ncpc.gov/DocumentDepot/Publications/SecurityPlans/NCUDSP/NCUDSP_Section1.pdf)