



## Information Presentation

Commission Meeting: February 1, 2018

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**PROJECT**

**Comprehensive Plan Information Briefing:  
Adapting Designed Landscapes**

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**SUBMITTED BY**

National Capital Planning Commission

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**PRESENTER**

Surina Singh

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The Commission will be reviewing an updated Parks & Open Space Element in the coming months. This information presentation will provide an overview of guidance specific to adapting designed landscapes, which will be included in the upcoming Parks & Open Space Element update. The proposed policy guidance grew out of a staff-driven initiative that explored modernist landscapes in the region.

In May 2017, the National Capital Planning Commission in partnership with the National Building Museum hosted an event, *Modernist Landscapes Reconsidered*, to consider how 20th century modernist urban landscapes can, or should, respond to contemporary expectations for public space. The discussion offered a fresh perspective when considering Washington's modernist public spaces, including sites along the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor. Moderated by Brad McKee, the event featured a presentation by Gary Hilderbrand, who highlighted Boston case studies to show how modernist landscapes can be adapted to address current conditions and needs. University of Virginia Professor Beth Meyer outlined the characteristics of a modernist landscape, noting that they are often in urban areas and reflect the technology and materials of their time.

Following the event, NCPC staff initiated a research study to assess how preservation planning and contemporary design principles can be applied to modernist landscapes in the National Capital Region in order to evaluate and inform sympathetic change and continuity. As part of the study, staff delineated the distinguishing characteristics of modernist landscapes; how they contribute to the city and region's historic urban design framework; the challenges they face in meeting today's public space expectations; and tools available to NCPC to guide planning and review of these landscapes. Building upon the study, staff will compile an online map to document federal and District of Columbia managed modernist landscapes.

Originally focused on modernist landscapes, the study discussion evolved into adapting designed landscapes as staff concluded that many of the challenges of modernist landscapes also apply to landscapes of other design eras. The information presentation will highlight key takeaways from the study and discuss how staff plans to incorporate the findings into the agency's plans and policies.

The study is especially relevant, as the Commission has recently reviewed a series of projects, including the World War I National Memorial at Pershing Park, the Banneker Park Pedestrian Access Improvements, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau Plaza Renovation, and the South Mall Campus Master Plan, which propose adapting designed landscapes to meet contemporary needs. All of these projects involve landscapes that reflect multiple design eras and raise questions about what is an appropriate level of change while respecting the original design intent.

The *Federal Elements of the Comprehensive Plan (Comprehensive Plan)* as well as other NCPC plans and documents establish the *Plan of the City of Washington (L'Enfant and McMillan Plans)* as one of the most important historic resources that NCPC is responsible for preserving and protecting. However, the study concluded that as the capital city has evolved, resources from other eras, including landscapes, are valuable parts of the urban fabric and contribute to the region's planning legacy. Based on the study, staff also concluded that there is a need to address the agency's broader obligation to protect historical and natural features while managing change to resources. In particular, there may be times when there are conflicts between competing interests or resources that date to different design eras and staff and the Commission would benefit from additional guidance.

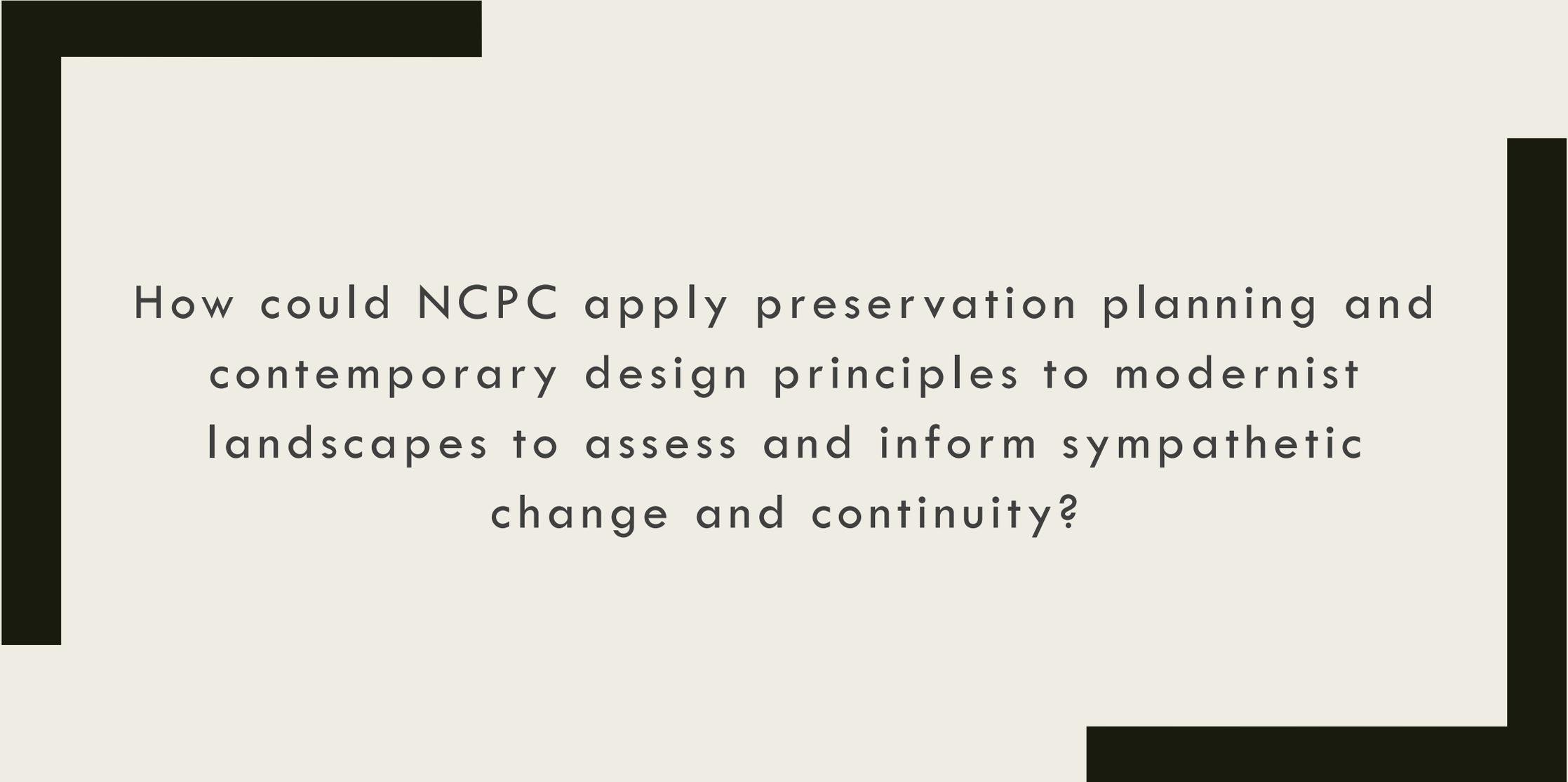
As next steps, the study recommends the development of policy guidance in the *Comprehensive Plan* and long range planning to guide the Commission and staff to assess and evaluate designed landscapes. Staff is currently drafting an update to the Parks & Open Space Element that includes policy guidance on adapting designed landscapes. In the coming months, the Commission will review these policies. Staff also plans to analyze the policy framework in other elements of the *Comprehensive Plan*, for effectiveness in balancing competing interests and reconciling planning, design, and historic preservation considerations with respect to adapting designed landscapes.

ATTACHED: Modernist Landscapes Study



modernist landscapes

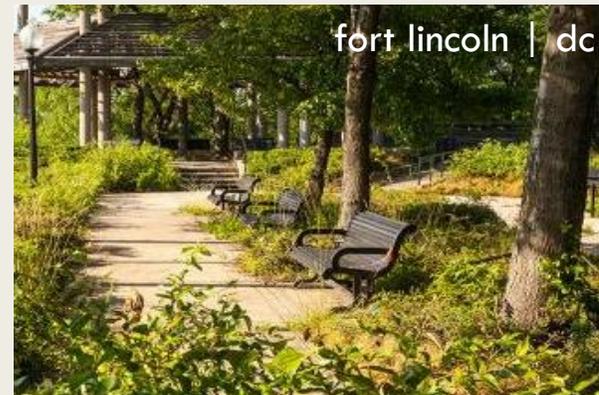
national capital region



How could NCPC apply preservation planning and contemporary design principles to modernist landscapes to assess and inform sympathetic change and continuity?

## *this study identifies...*

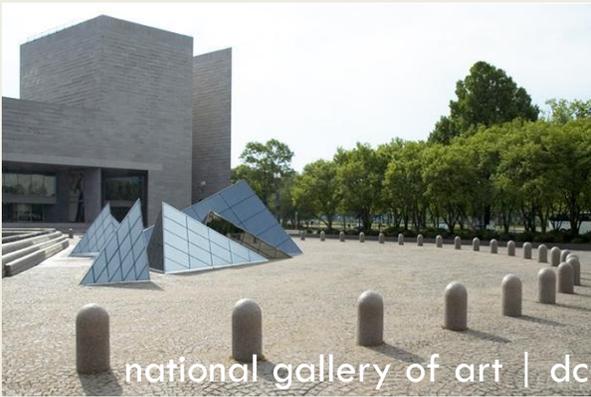
- *what are the distinguishing characteristics of modernist landscapes and how do they compare to other landscapes that contribute to the city's historic urban design legacy?*
- *what challenges do modernist landscapes face in meeting today's public space expectations?*
- *what tools are available to NCPC to guide planning and review of modernist landscapes? is more guidance needed?*





distinguishing characteristics of modernist  
landscapes and how they compare to other  
landscapes that contribute to the city's  
historic urban design legacy





*study considers public  
modernist landscapes  
in washington during  
1960 - 1985*



*modernist landscapes:  
common themes & design principles*

- landscape expression derived from rational approach to conditions created by industrial society, site, and program
- concern for space and volume, pattern and plane
- multidirectional space, instead of a dominant axis
- plants chosen and used for their sculptural qualities
- integration of indoor and outdoor spaces
- design of landscapes for human use, rather than for picturesque qualities





pocket playground | nyc

## notable practitioners

- dan kiley
- lawrence halprin
- m. paul friedberg
- sasaki associates
- i. m. pei
- oehme van sweden



freeway park | seattle



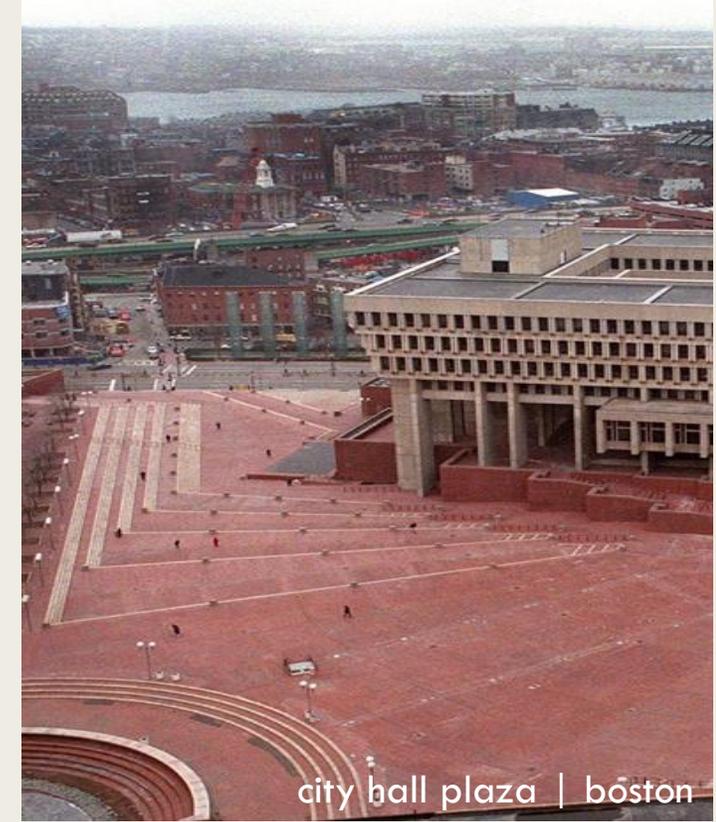
fountain place | dallas

## materials

- experimental & innovative uses
- concrete
- water
- lighting

## style and aesthetic cues

- hardscape > landscape
- geometric > organic
- simplicity of form and surface > historic embellishments
- landscapes complement *great society/urban renewal* architecture of the time

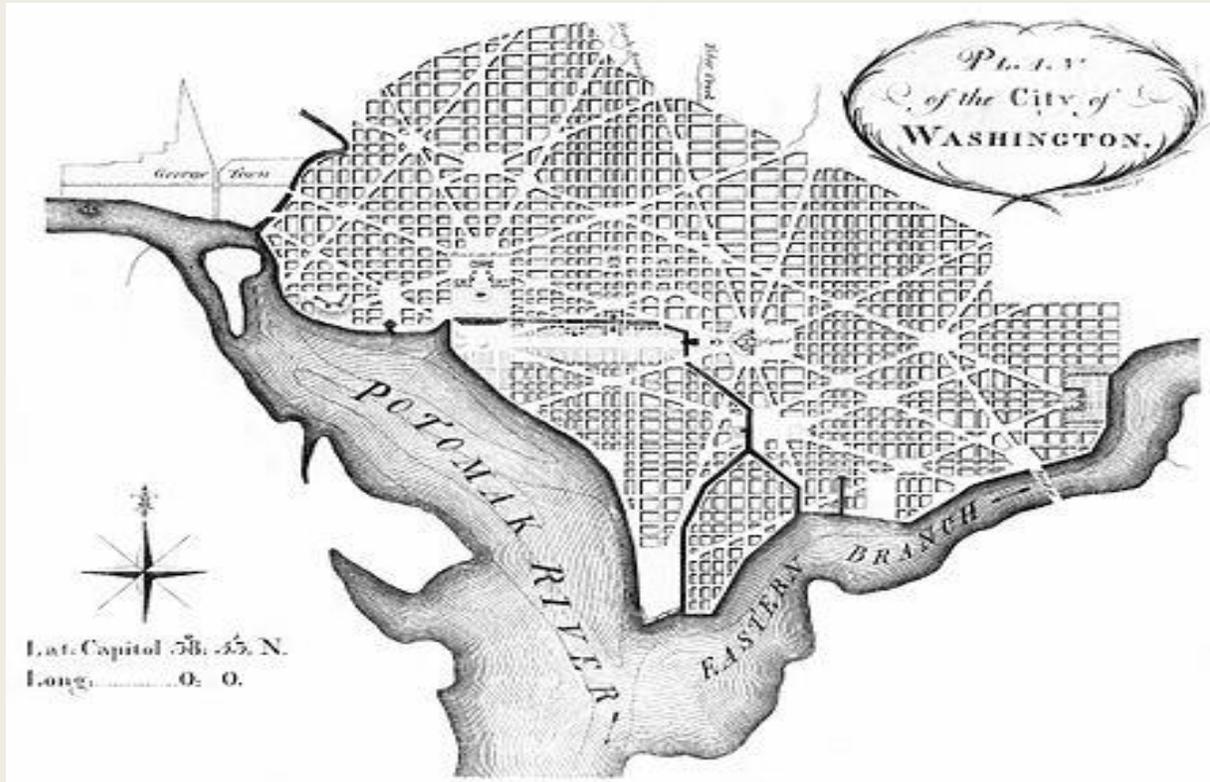


city hall plaza | boston

## Washington's design legacy and influence

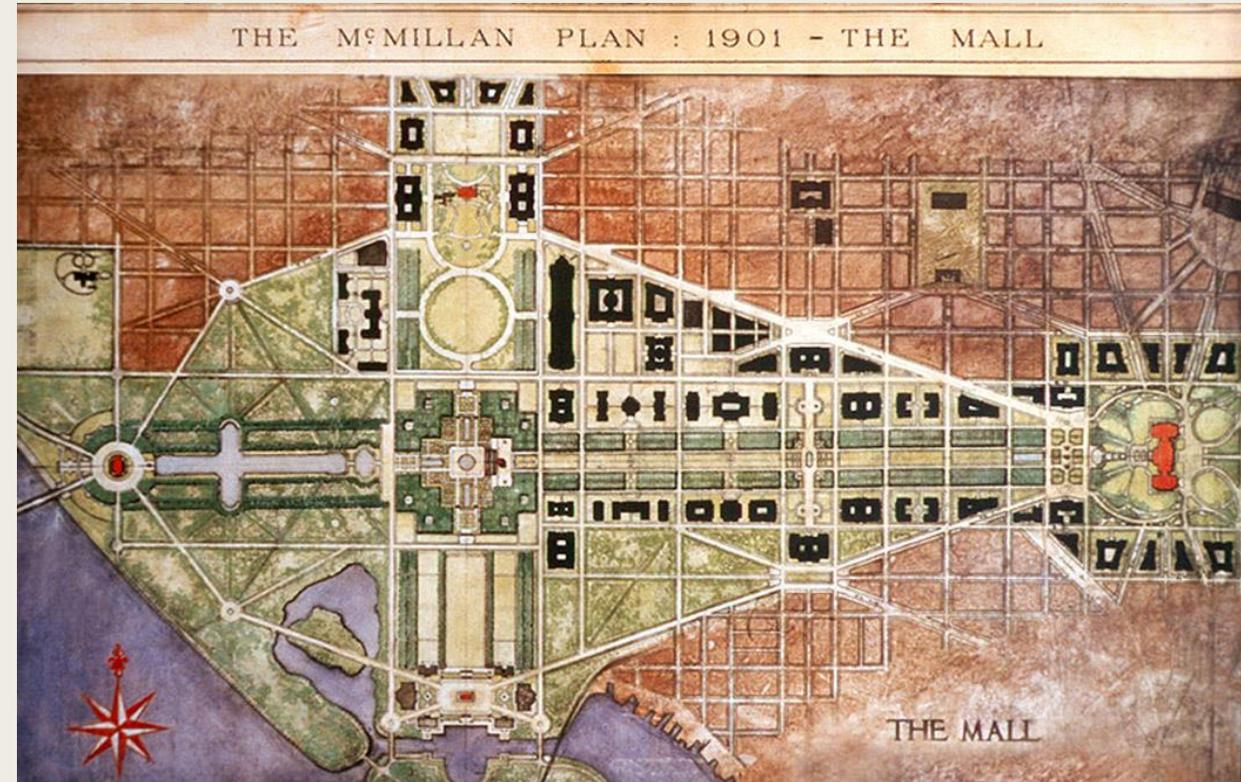
### *L'Enfant Plan for the City of Washington*

- Baroque character
- Inclusion of National Mall, squares, and parks
- Symmetry and formality
- Encouraged classical architecture and landscapes

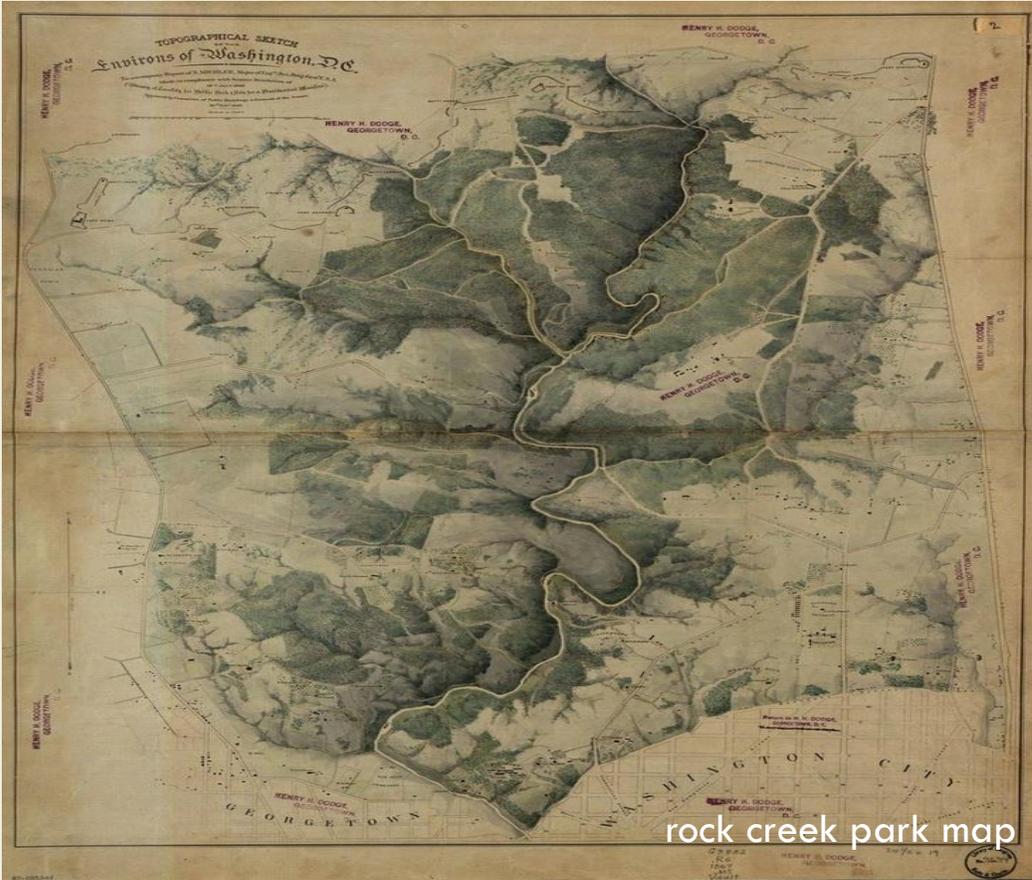


### *McMillan Commission Plan*

- "Return" to Baroque vision of L'Enfant
- Neoclassical architecture and landscapes emphasized and strengthened
- More formal and structured, less natural and organic



## victorian era: downing and olmsted influence



### characteristics

- Lack of symmetry and formality
- Work with the natural topography and contours
- Provide respite and contemplation to visitors

### challenges

- functionality, accessibility, programming, and maintenance



## *beaux-arts/neoclassical influence: White House, President's Park and Lafayette Square*



### *challenges*

- security, public accessibility, visitor numbers, programming, and maintenance



### *characteristics*

- Relationship between buildings and landscapes
- Classical design remains intact and protected
- Emphasis on formal symmetry and expanse of green space

## city beautiful movement influence



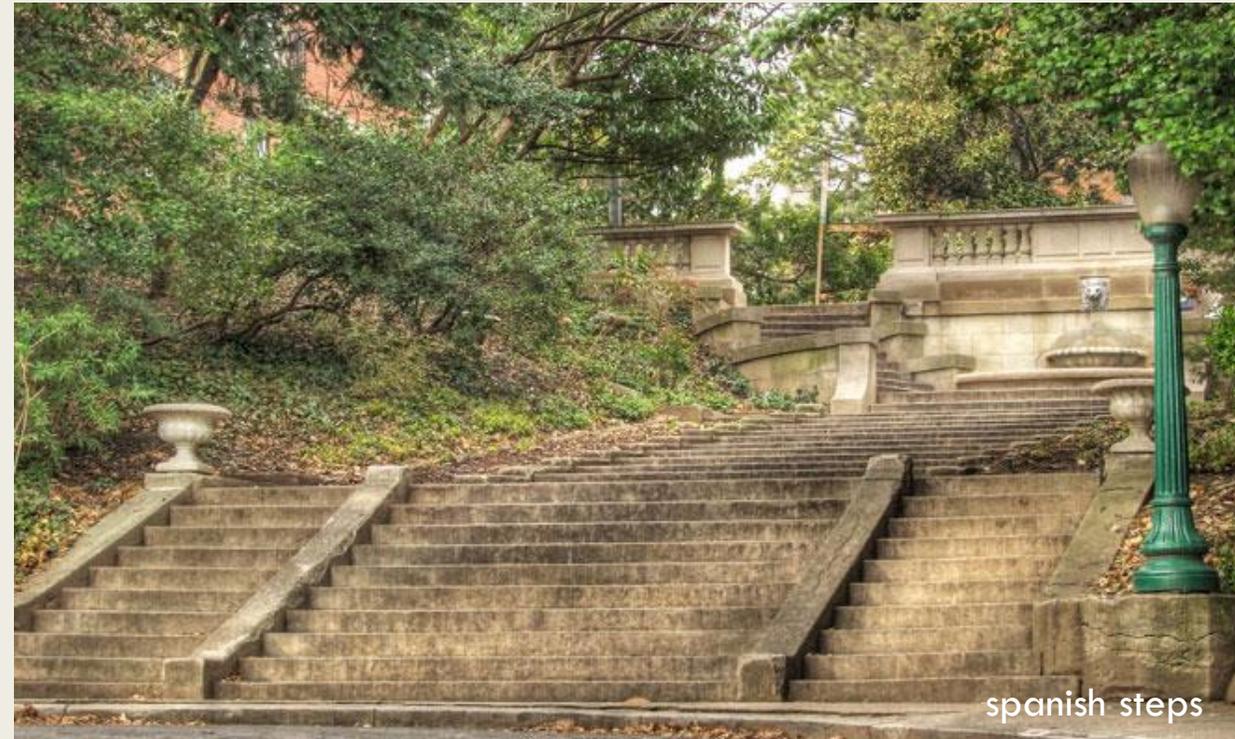
meridian hill park

### characteristics

- Neoclassical Influence of City Beautiful Movement
- Emphasis on formality, symmetry and expanse of green space
- Provide respite and contemplation to visitors

### challenges

- functionality, safety, accessibility, programming, and maintenance



spanish steps

## changing landscapes leave their footprint across the capital city

### *formal versus informal*

Landscapes have alternated between formal (L'Enfant or McMillan) and more informal (Victorian)

*Modernist landscapes tended to the formal, but occasionally relied on plantings to imbue informality (Pershing Park).*

### *response to existing context*

L'Enfant and McMillan generally imposed upon the existing natural or man-made fabric, while Downing and Olmstead considered natural features to a greater degree (Rock Creek Park)

*Modernist landscapes often resulted from urban renewal generally imposed on the existing natural or man-made fabric (L'Enfant Plaza).*

### *experience*

The Baroque and Neo-Classical approaches (Meridian Hill) focus on drama, grandeur and aesthetics above all else in; Victorian era leans more to the picturesque and contemplative aspects of landscapes

*Modernist landscapes are highly-designed spaces. Some considered the human experience while others focus on the sculptural or aesthetic characteristics.*

## *changing landscapes leave their footprint across the capital city*

### *social awareness*

Some early landscapes, such as McMillan were not socially conscious, often sacrificing neighborhoods for their own implementation

*Modern landscapes have been mixed – urban renewal discounted communities, while infill modernist landscapes responded more favorably (Southwest Waterfront versus CFPB).*

### *plants and materials*

Landscapes have broadly moved from more natural materials to increasing amounts of man-made or manufactured objects

*Modernist landscapes experimented with contemporary materials, while plants were used for botanical and sculptural qualities (National Arboretum).*

### *use/function*

Landscape uses have trended to the more complex over time – moving from more general uses (strolling, gathering) to the specific needs (skate parks, ice rinks)

*Modernist landscapes tried to respond to increasing demands and more diverse social needs in more constrained spaces.*

## *changing landscapes leave their footprint across the capital city*

*Modernist landscapes are aesthetically distinct from landscapes of other eras, but face similar challenges and issues related to functionality and operations.*

*As urban environments developed and became denser, contemporary public space expectations evolved. All landscapes (including modernist) must respond to more diverse users and uses.*

*Modernist landscapes often followed or were associated with urban renewal and a general rethinking of cities. Smaller scale efforts were often more successful than larger efforts.*

*The focus of landscapes continue to change and evolve, as evidenced across Washington, DC – aesthetics, place-making, social planning, economic development and ecological awareness are all contributors.*

*Washington, DC is guided by the L'Enfant Plan but made up of an assembly of landscapes representing different eras and styles. Changes are being absorbed into the city's fabric over time.*

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challenges faced by modernist landscapes in  
meeting today's public space expectations

## successful public spaces

## modernist landscapes

### Function & Use

promote opportunities for social and community interaction

monumental spaces with sculptural quality and fewer areas of social interaction

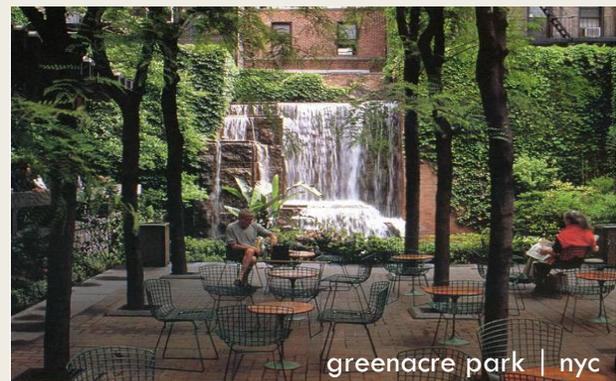
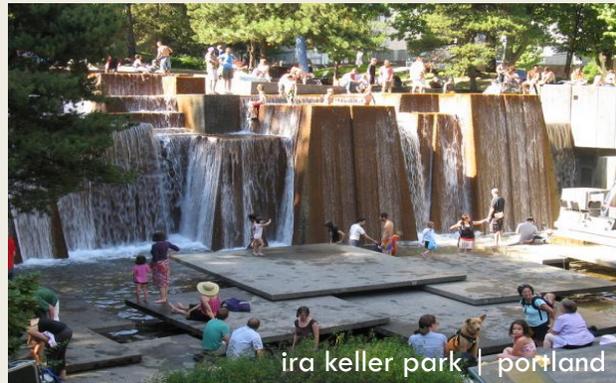
programmed to accommodate a variety of users and incorporate amenities that provide comfort for users

often with large expanse of hardscape, designed for specific use, making spaces perceived as uncomfortable

### Landscape Design

incorporate trees, vegetation and soft landscape elements that reflect a four-season quality

landscape elements incorporated for their form and conceived as sculptures to organize space



## successful public spaces

## modernist landscapes

### Historic Preservation

incorporate distinct qualities and iconic elements making them aesthetically pleasing

often simple forms, surfaces, and materials making it a challenge to determine which character-defining features are worthy of preservation

### Change in Context

### Access & Connectivity

spaces evolved with changes to and introduction of new elements in surrounding areas

physically & visually accessible and facilitate connections between surrounding areas

- limiting physical and visual accessibility, thus leading to safety concerns
- also influencing how spaces were used or how perceived



paley park | nyc



fountain place | dallas



fountain place | dallas



waterfront park | dc



banneker park | dc



waterfront park | dc

## successful public spaces

## modernist landscapes

### Maintenance

well-maintained, minimize safety concerns, and comply with contemporary design standards

distinct features, such as fountains, increase cost of repairs; lack of funding contributes to poor condition

incorporate sustainable best practices

- Maintenance
- stormwater management techniques
- fluctuating water levels

- often used innovative materials which degraded over time or required frequent maintenance
- need to comply with contemporary challenges and design techniques



## *modernist landscapes and public space expectations*

*Modernist landscapes reflect a particular design era. Some of these landscapes were successful and still meet public space expectations. Others, however, face challenges in meeting these expectations as perceptions of success have shifted over the last several decades.*

*Landscapes from different eras face similar issues where they have to conform to contemporary public space expectations.*

*Generally, public spaces today are successful if they are flexible and accommodate multiple uses in a comfortable and safe environment; allow for a variety of social interactions; provide a sense of place; and are sustainable.*

*For modernist landscapes, this may translate into a need to address functionality, accessibility, maintenance concerns, and design and historic preservation issues.*



tools available to NCPC to guide planning  
and review of modernist landscapes

## Planning and review of modernist landscapes

policy guidance

comprehensive plan



urban design element  
historic preservation element  
parks & open space element

compliance and  
review of  
project-specific  
issues

plan review



review process  
section 106 process  
NEPA process

site specific,  
in-depth research  
& analysis

physical planning



master planning  
feasibility studies  
site design

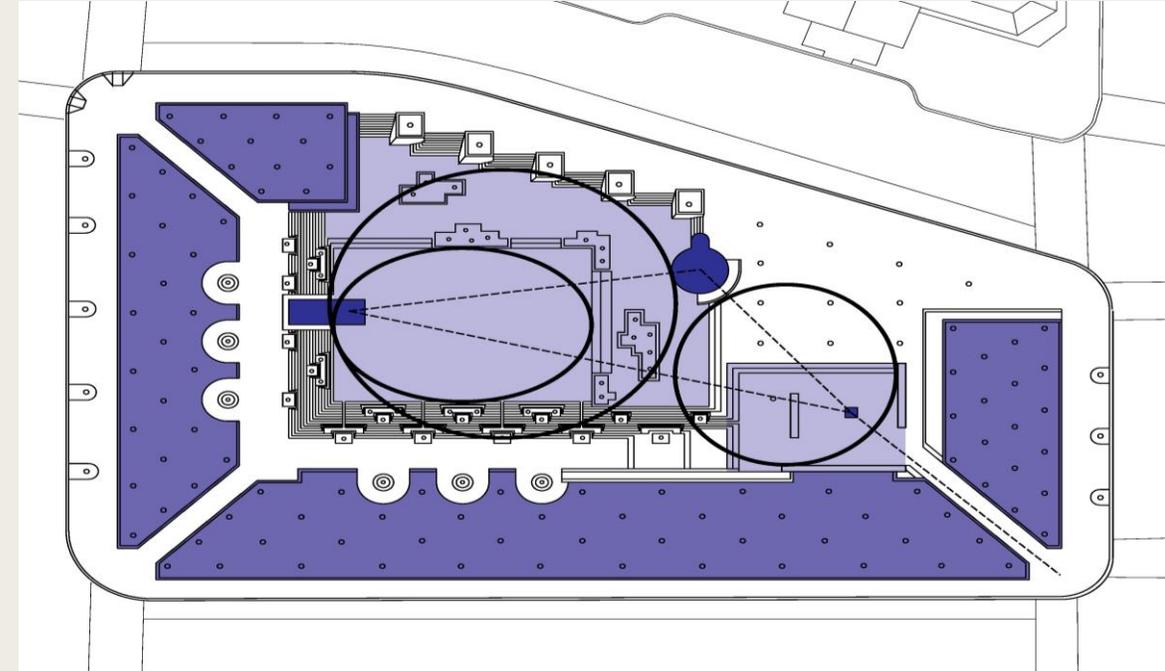
*Policies within the Urban Design, Historic Preservation, and Parks & Open Space Elements provide a framework and guidance for the treatment of modernist landscapes*

	<i>Urban Design Element</i>	<i>Historic Preservation Element</i>	<i>Parks &amp; Open Space Element (2018 update)</i>
<i>Function &amp; Use</i>	✓		
<i>Landscape Design</i>			✓
<i>Historic Preservation</i>		✓	
<i>Change in Context</i>	✓		✓
<i>Access &amp; Connectivity</i>	✓		✓
<i>Maintenance</i>			✓

Both Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act require a deliberative and analytical process regarding historic properties and environmental resources that inform planning decisions

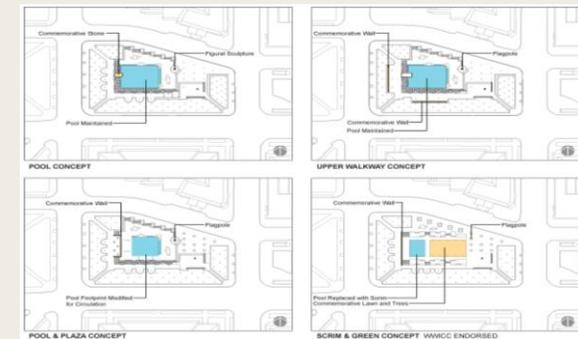
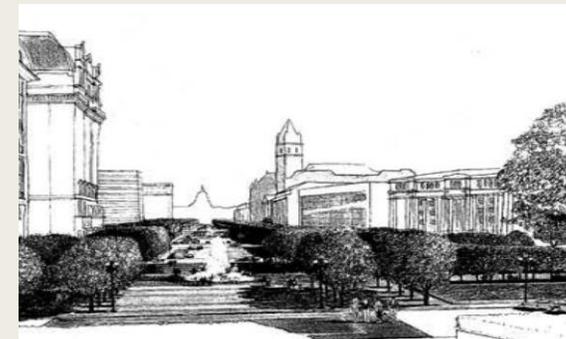
## Section 106 process

- helps identify if a landscape is eligible for national register, and if so:
  - what elements are contributing, and what are the hierarchy of those elements
  - what the original design intent's role is given the current context
- requires consultation with the public & group consensus
- applies whether the landscape is modernist or not



## NEPA process

- assesses the environmental effects of a proposed actions
- identifies and analyzes alternatives



# redesign of a modernist landscape

## Federal Home Loan Bank Board Headquarters, (1974–1977)

- Max Urbahn Associates and Sasaki Associates
- GSA Living Building Program: federal buildings that attempted to engage & contribute to the surrounding community



### Access

- multiple levels
- visual barriers

### Urban Design Policies

- integrating federal sites with surrounding context
- enhanced pedestrian experience

### Function/use

- neglected plaza
- spatial organization of original design intact

### Open Space Policies

- accommodates multiple uses
- connections between public spaces

### Section 106/NEPA

Building, including plaza, found eligible for national register; proposal retained original design intent of connecting site to surroundings



## restoration of a modernist landscape

### Calder Sculpture Restoration & Plaza Rehabilitation

- “Gwenfritz” dedicated 1969
- Moved in early 1980s for historic bandstand
- Relocated to original setting and context within pool



#### Historic Preservation

- spatial relationship & view of sculpture from building
- materials & maintenance of pool

#### Preservation Policies

- restoration of sculpture to original context
- new material for pool bottom will be easier to maintain

#### Accessibility and Landscape

- accommodate new path from terrace to sculpture
- re-establish view of sculpture

#### Urban Design Policies

- new ramp compatible with original design & materials
- sustainable landscape practices & improved views of sculpture

#### Section 106/NEPA

Consultation informed material selection that respected original design

# rehabilitation of a modernist landscape

## *Banneker Park Site Improvements and Rehabilitation*

- Dan Kiley, 1967 – 1969
- Overlook with views of Washington Channel and Potomac River
- SW Ecodistrict Plan: improved pedestrian connections between the National Mall and southwest waterfront



### *Access & Connectivity*

- lack of safe pedestrian connections impacted use of park
- poor visual connection to National Mall

### *Urban Design Policies*

- improve connections between the waterfront and National Mall

### *Design & Visual Barriers*

- high maintenance needs due to water feature & poor soil
- safety concerns due to limited sight lines

### *Preservation Policies*

- balancing rehabilitation with environmental and sustainability goals

### *Section 106/NEPA*

Consultation informed design to minimize impacts on character-defining features

# issues addressed during the planning and design process

## program

what are the existing and proposed uses?

how do they contribute to an engaging and authentic user experience?

how adaptable is the potential program should market/external conditions change?

## function

what works or doesn't; are current codes / standards met?



## design

have the materials and plantings retained their coherence over time; what is the role of maintenance?



## context

how has the context changed, and does it matter to the function and design?



## Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative

- Streetscape design by Sasaki Associates / Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, 1970s – 80s
- Cultural Landscape Inventory (2015) – values holistic landscape composition over specific design elements
- Provides a critical frame to the US Capitol vista, and remains home to important national civic events



### Program

- daily use for transportation, retail, entertainment and cultural
- special use for civic activities

### Function

- aging infrastructure does not conform to current best practices
- deferred maintenance issues in parks and along streetscape

### Design

- custom/special streetscape elements require extensive upkeep
- individual parks do not enhance daily Avenue activity

### Context

- remains an important frame to US Capitol vista
- downtown residential population has expanded since 1970s
- connection between downtown and National Mall remains weak

*Modernist landscapes add value to the diverse range of public spaces in the National Capital Region. While many have been assessed for the National Register of Historic Places, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to adapt these landscapes to contemporary urban needs and ensure their future success.*

*A range of treatment approaches from restoration to rehabilitation to redesign may be appropriate depending on a site's history and condition, surrounding context, and programming requirements. It is difficult to generalize that one treatment approach will work in every case.*

*Policy guidance, design review, and long range planning provide tools for the Commission and staff to evaluate these landscapes.*