

A p o l o g i a

by Julian Hunt

Porque ¿cómo queréis vos que no me tenga confuso el qué dirá el antiguo legislador que llaman vulgo cuando vea que, al cabo de tantos años como ha que duermo en el silencio del olvido, salgo ahora, con todos mis años auestas, con una leyenda seca como un esparto, ajena de invención, menguada de estilo, pobre de conceptos y falta de toda erudición y doctrina; sin acotaciones en las márgenes y sin anotaciones en el fin del libro, como veo que están otros libros, aunque sean fabulosos y profanos, tan llenos de sentencias de Aristóteles, de Platón y de toda la caterva de filósofos, que admiran a los leyentes y tienen a sus autores por hombres leídos, eruditos y elocuentes?

— Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, preface to *Don Quixote*



1. Don Quixote reading chivalric tales in his study, Gustave Dore, 1832-1883. Woodcut Print by Henri Pisan. London: 1864 - 1867.

The faint rumor you may have heard a few years ago of the launch of a new architectural journal was actually just the echo of the report of the idea going off. Conceived in conversation with Stanley Hallet, the idea, long gestated, is now a near thing, the fresh corpse of a body of written ideas, already decaying.

Finding inspiration and precedent in such obscure satirical journals as *Die Frackel*, the single-handed work of Karl Kraus on Viennese society at the end of the Habsburg empire, the impulse to publish a critical journal on the nature of the capital may be due to an affliction similar to the *Stendhal Syndrome* (or the Jerusalem variant that Leon Krier suffered when struck by architectural visions after a walk across the Mall on a foggy winter night). Delusional is beside the point, quixotic it is, admittedly.

The District of Columbia, to deliberately name the geopolitical space separate from its evil twin Washington, is a place permanently obscured by political atmospherics. Beneath the clouds a separate reality, resistant to well-intentioned legislation, persists in sulky defiance of its self-appointed minders in the Congress. Hidden from observation and poisoned by the local atmosphere, the District has been unable to communicate a coherent identity. The national administration pays scant attention to such local problems as trash pick-up, building permits, summer facilities for children when distracted by the seductive pursuit of national power, influence, fame and money. The inverse pleasure in such pursuit is the callow treatment of lesser strata through the abuse of power, meddling oversight, philistine interference, a failure of imagination. This is the nature and cultural expression of hierarchy and bureaucracy in what would be called a court society in another century.

How could you expect me not to feel uneasy about what that ancient lawgiver they call the Public will say when it sees me, after slumbering so many years in the silence of oblivion, coming out now with all my years upon my back, and with a book as dry as a rush, devoid of invention, meager in style, poor in thoughts, wholly wanting in learning and wisdom, without quotations in the margin or annotations at the end, after the fashion of other books I see, which, though all fables and profanity, are so full of maxims from Aristotle, and Plato, and the whole herd of philosophers, that they fill the readers with amazement and convince them that the authors are men of learning, erudition, and eloquence.



2. Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651).

The District is a cultural expression of American society, a deliberate and on-going creation, subject, more than any other American city, to deliberate manipulations of its form.

For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE, (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which, the Sovereignty is an Artificiall Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; The Magistrates, and other Officers of Judicature and Execution, artificiall Joynts; Reward and Punishment (by which fastned to the seat of the Sovereignty, every joynt and member is moved to performe his duty) are the Nerves, that do the same in the Body Naturall; The Wealth and Riches of all the particular members, are the Strength; Salus Populi (the Peoples Safety) its Businesse; Counsellors, by whom all things needfull for it to know, are suggested unto it, are the Memory; Equity and Lawes, an artificiall Reason and Will; Concord, Health; Sedition, Sicknesse; and Civill War, Death.

—Thomas Hobbes, *The Introduction, LEVIATHAN*

The District is in some form a manifestation of the *Leviathan*, and this fact is enough to inspire us to serious examination of the city under the same impulse that drove Herman Melville to write in *Moby Dick*:

"The whale has no famous author."

A n a m o l i a

A U n i q u e U r b a n T e r r a i n

by Randall Ott, AIA

The School of Architecture and Planning at the Catholic University of America is pleased to enter into affiliation with **dcenter**, a new journal of urbanism for the District of Columbia. It is appropriate that our school, the Washington metropolitan region's largest program in the discipline of architecture, should energetically seek to foster such intensive scholarly study of our home terrain.

Washington, our nation's capital and most consciously designed urban environment, has since its inception attracted its share of scholarly attention. Numerous books have examined the city's monumental aspirations in planning, architecture, and landscape. Lately, a more diverse field of analysis has also emerged, with many new volumes appearing on topics ranging far beyond the usual studies of the city's original plan and National Mall. Recent scholarly and popular studies have focused upon the city's Metro system, apartment buildings, Masonic origins, convention center, parks, sacred architecture, and other topics to numerous to mention.

The popular daily press also extensively reports upon the city's contemporary developmental trends and architectural escapades. What DC has not previously possessed, however, is what you now hold in your hands – a scholarly journal devoted to the physical manifestations of Washington's intellectual and social climate. The journal seeks to bring the architectural and planning professions to the forefront of the debate about the core of this rapidly expanding metropolitan area. For too long, urban thinking in Washington has been the purview of public bureaucrats, blue-ribbon committees, and reactionary forces. **dcenter** offers an alternate venue where other voices – those of design professionals, academics, and interested citizens – can be heard and compared. Our city warrants such attention now more than ever. While federal status has always granted Washington a unique character, they city's contemporary situation verges on becoming otherworldly. There are few more fascinating cities for urban research and commentary today.

Our post-9/11 alertness to security has made what once was one of the world's most open and welcoming of capital cities into a rather ominous and more closed place. Originally a quiet Southern town, a place of grandly staid museums and leisurely long walks under the cherry trees, Washington today can turn surreal in seconds. Only here can you witness 10,000 all-powerful politicians and staffers suddenly disgorge from behind their white-pillared monuments whenever a stray twin-prop plane clips the edge of the region's airspace. Ironically, the very bollards and barricades built to protect our leaders from one kind of threat then conspire to impede and trip them when fleeing from another. Responding fighter jets shriek low overhead. At times the jets' lacing contrails seem almost to spell out the warning: "Surrender, Dorothy." It is urban theater of a most unusual sort. Security consciousness within our city has also spawned dozens of immense, amorphous and mysterious federal 'no-go' complexes, often unnamed and void-like, sitting within our dynamic urban cacophony. This was always the case with a place like CIA headquarters at Langley, and the Naval Observatory had to take adopt this detached character upon becoming the Vice Presidential seat. But today even the Soldier's Home and Walter Reed Hospital,

to name just two, have become heavily gated null zones, shrouded and unknowable, like minor versions of Tokyo's Imperial Palace complex transplanted to DC.

Growth, too, has also fundamentally changed Washington. Despite our national government's centralizing proclivities amidst imposing formal monuments and axes near the Mall, this city long remained a collection of small towns. But today it has grown into a ring of major urban agglomerations, surpassing even Los Angeles in polycentrism. Ninety percent of the region's population lives outside the District and nearly as many work somewhere else around the periphery. Despite this, the region's mass transit system still asserts the center's

increasingly weakened primacy. All commutes on the willfully "spoke-and-hub" Metro system must pass under downtown and the Mall. We still lack our equivalent of the "G" train that skips Manhattan entirely. On Metro, a four-mile trip as the crow flies from Bethesda to Silver Springs means a twenty-

mile excursion to the White House and back out. Hence the region's unfulfilled Purple Line aspirations, and also our mournful 'Beltway Blues' – a sad tune about life on the world's most congested linear carpark. Within this region's political fragmentation, the growth of edge cities generates extraordinary consequences: planning even a "hot" lane on the Beltway involves consultation with the dueling governors of Maryland and Virginia on each side. DC proper, our historical center, can only look on in powerless apprehension as it lacks even a single mile of Beltway portfolio. While Washington's urban uniqueness began with federal status, it has evolved substantially in ways no federal planner or visionary could have imagined. It has found a highly individualized and now self-perpetuating urban trajectory.

Consider the District's height limits. Arising out of neighborhood outrage about highrise apartments in the 1890's, the limits visually protected the eminence of our federally symbolic skyline. They also did more than anything else to save thousands of high quality townhouses throughout the District, preserving still to this day an extraordinarily humane urban scale across much of our city. But now that our central core is undergoing economic renaissance, these limits threaten to generate endless miles of oppressive, unrelieved, blocky urban form. Neighborhoods outside downtown begin to resemble the pompous sterility of Pennsylvania Avenue. True highrise development leapfrogs to the uncontrolled areas of Arlington, Roslyn, the Beltway and beyond, furthering edge city growth. For example, a seventeen-story highrise, wide as it is tall, has just arisen in unassuming College Park. I stress all of this not just to tweak our city, but rather to stress that an entity as atypical as Washington must have a journal like **dcenter**. Inside you will find much thought-provoking commentary on the historical development and contemporary reality of this place.

The Catholic University of America's School of Architecture and Planning is duly proud to participate in the launch of this new scholarly venue about our city. It is timely.



1. Base of Washington Monument, Photo by Darrow Montgomery