

The City without Qualities

An argument for greater density

by Julian Hunt



1. The Ten Immortals, 2005, oil stick, 9.5 ft x 27 ft, Y. David Chung.

Where is the viewing platform from which the panoramic drama of the city might unfold? No tourist and very few inhabitants have ever ventured up the Anacostia escarpment to the weedy field below Our Lady of Perpetual Hope Catholic Church from which the best view of the District obtains. The Washington Monument has a tiny window. The Skydome Lounge, a revolving restaurant with a view of National Airport from the top of the Doubletree Hotel across the Potomac River in Crystal City, Virginia, is a trainwreck of neologisms.

The seasoned traveler accustomed to purchasing definitive editions of urban history will be further dismayed by the fruitless search for such a volume on the District of Columbia. Bookstores and libraries are stocked with numerous specialized academic studies by wooly academics or dreadful tourist fare by hired hacks. But a well-written, agreed upon history of the city eludes. Paris had Maxime Du Camp, *ami des Flaubert*, who published his encyclopedic magnum opus, *Paris: ses organs, ses fonctions et sa vie* in six volumes between 1869-1875.

Du Camp describes the entire workings of a modern city in the second half of the nineteenth century: from its sewers and postal service to its libraries and theaters, via prison and prostitution, the guillotine and the madhouse.

-- Julian Barnes, Flaubert, C'est Moi

Given the absence of such a dedicated individual, the District of Columbia, is a city of uncertain identity. Conventional opinion speaks of a rhythmic four-year ebb and flow of successive administrations. Political patronage populates the top of the bureaucracy with regional power brokers who have little relation or vested interest in the city they inhabit except as a commodity -- a temporary rental market or something to highlight on a political résumé.

Much is made of how the transportation revolution, that allows every congressman to return to his or her district as needed, has exacerbated the social dysfunction of a political class that hardly speaks to itself. A brief period of splendor

left its mark a century ago in what are today the ruins of palatial mansions. The city is scarred by a palimpsest of segregation, segmented by profession, and socially organized as a court society that must scale the ziggurats of the three branches of government. The topographical map of this city bears scant relation to an invisible topography of power. Add the presence of a large contingent of journalists from every corner of the globe, foreign embassies and spies, international institutions, all

deeply interested in the political noise and you have, at least in the national psyche, something akin to the Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Tongues. Information is the currency of influence and secrecy it's bank. The surrounding desert of Shinar, outside the green and leafy zone of the limestone and marble enclave of the Federal city, the District of Columbia is a place of opaque, unreadable, sun-baked brick.

The perennial high-school choice (at least on the East coast) to visit either New York or Washington reveals the political predisposition of future participants in civil debate. Whether gape-mouthed credulity or hard skepticism, that predisposition predictably divides along vertical and horizontal lines. The delirious verticality of the New York skyline competes with the crushing length of the horizontal blocks of the District and reveals the tension between the energies of individual enterprise and collective containment.

The District is a convenient object of cultural disdain, unreadable in any coherency, and unable to project an identity *sui generis*.

It was well said of a certain German book that
'es lässt sich nicht lesen'
-- it does not permit itself to be read.

There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told.

*--Edgar Allan Poe,
The Man of the Crowd*

1. LITERARY IMAGINATION

The 'Washington novel' is bound and confined by a number of relatively strict conventions, and by one limiting fact. The limiting fact is that the United States, alone among developed nations with the possible exception of Australia (and the recent anomaly of Germany), chooses to locate its capital city in the provinces. The effect of this on the national letters cannot be calculated; but let us just agree that an aspiring writer in Texas, say, or Wisconsin does not number among his aspirations the desire to relocate the garret to the District of Columbia.

-- Christopher Hitchens, *Ode to the West Wing, Unacknowledged Legislation*

With cruel perspicacity, Hitchens reveals a partial truth, that this city of journalists has never developed a literary imagination. He allows for lesser genera, the political novel with the requisite backgrounds (Vidal), the crime and detective series (Pellecanos), the diatribe and the memoir (seasonal), and the occasional white paper that rises briefly to bestseller status only to rapidly sink out of sight into the vast archives of a borgesian Library of Congress. All suffer from that lack of imagination so familiar in the credulous faces of the Middle American tourist and the busloads of sanctimonious student council types who hardly venture outside the green and leafy zone of the Federal enclave veneered in white marble and limestone. The city of brick remains unseen. The garret, Parisian low-rent attic of bohemians, is a living space foreign to the District, which by a fluke in the zoning ordinances and a congressionally imposed height limitation has only provided the damp basement apartment, the curse low-paid staffers and interns must suffer for their ambition.

Political imagination, constrained by definition, has always subjugated the freedom of mind required for a literary imagination. An object of habitual representation by others, the District as a political representation has never developed a recognizable identity independent of accepted convention; even the postcards lack that flair of independent mindedness.

2. BROKEN GEOMETRY / PHANTOM LIMB

On May 8th, 1846, Representative R.M.T. Hunter of Virginia, future vice-president of the Confederacy, made an eloquent case for **the Retrocession Act** that would reduce the District of Columbia from a 100 square mile enlightenment abstraction, drawn over a pastoral landscape of fields, forests, hills and rivers, to its present 63 square-mile broken and reduced form, returning the 36 square mile Arlington county on the other side of the Potomac back to Virginia. The Act, without any regard for the original and forgotten enlightenment geometry of the L'Enfant Plan (later revived as the Ur-document in the McMillan Plan of 1902) preceded the great fracture of the nation fourteen years later. The District thus redrawn as a tattered form perfectly reflected the unraveling of the Union.

Included as part of his case for the retrocession, Representative Hunter predicted that without the rights of citizenship, residents of the District would continue to

envy their possession by others, or else place no value upon them. Education, habit, and interest would all induce them to take sides with this Government, as against States and the people... The influence of the people of the metropolis upon the Government has always been felt and recognized in despotic government, the public opinion which is felt or known by the rulers. In all old countries, where the seat of Government has long been established, the influence of its metropolitan population, refined, wealthy, intelligent, and voluptuous, has always been deeply and dangerously felt in the conduct of the Government.¹

We might be surprised today by the natural eloquence, erudition and foresight of a Congressman referring, as he must have been, to the relatively recent events of the French Revolution and the role of Parisians in inciting it. Or, he may have been referring to the more distant echo of political revolution in the accounts of the violent crowds in the Forum from Cicero at the end of the Roman Republic. Whatever the case he was well-read by present standards.

The Retrocession Act intended to weaken the power of the federal government in favor of states rights by reducing the potential size of the city and thus its population. However, it has had the unintended consequence of, not only Hitchen's unlettered city, but more dangerously, a more concentrated and powerful elite unexposed to and sheltered from the intensified debates that a greater population might inspire.

This question of the meaning of the influence of the metropolitan population on our government remains today, though now perhaps again at the scale Cicero experienced. In a recent article published just before the 2004 election in the New Yorker, David Grann described the modern day political establishment in the District of Columbia as the "Gang of 500", the chattering class of journalists, pundits, pollsters, campaign consultants and strategists who "still largely set the political agenda for the country", and to a significant extent, the larger world.

The historic loss of a portion of the ideal form of the original District occupies a place in the cultural memory not unlike a phantom limb. Combined with the Constitutional error of creating the District as a special zone of neutrality without a vote in the immediate space around the federal government, the overall effect has been to sever the critical nerve of social consciousness.

The question of the size and population of the District is as important as it is fundamentally unexamined.

3. MEDIOCRITY / SELF KNOWLEDGE

*The natural tendency of representative government, as of modern civilization, is towards collective mediocrity: and this tendency is increased by all reductions and extensions of the franchise, their effect being to place the principal power in the hands of classes more and more below the highest level of instruction in the community. But, though the superior intellects and characters will necessarily be outnumbered, **it makes a great difference whether or not they are heard** [highlight added]. In the false democracy which, instead of giving representation to all, gives it only to the local majorities, the voice of the instructed minority may have no organs at all in the representative body. It is an admitted fact that in the American democracy, which is constructed on this faulty model, the highly-cultivated members of the community, except such of them as are willing to sacrifice their own opinions and modes of judgment, and become the servile mouthpieces of their inferiors in knowledge, do not even offer themselves for Congress or the State Legislatures, so certain is it that they would have no chance of being returned.*

-- John Stuart Mill, *CONSIDERATIONS ON REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT*, Chapter VII: Of True and False Democracy; Representation of All, and Representation of the Majority only.

The urban narrative about the District, the constant chatter of the city with itself, is here so dominated by the "preservationists" that no alternative narrative can be heard. The last stages of a movement launched by the late Jane Jacobs that has degenerated into an institutionalized form of philistine reaction, historic preservation has become the dominant narrative and crowded-out competing species of ideas on what the form of the District should be. The generation

of architects who lead the revolt against Modernism, the post-modernists, are now themselves to blame for having led us into a blind alley and finding themselves now an entrenched establishment resist the succession of a new generation with ideas of its own. As a consequence of this resistance the District finds itself one of the last bastions of a discredited post-modernism. Preservation, like political imagination, is self-limiting by definition and unable to respond to the turbulence of ideas generated by the constant tension of an emergent present from an immediate past into an unknowable future. Preservation is not a steering mechanism, not a conscious form of decision-making, but a reaction of fear to the speed of change and an institutionalized means of maintaining the status quo.

July in Washington

*The stiff spokes of this wheel
Touch the sore spots of the earth.*

*On the Potomac, swan-white
Power launches keep breasting the sulphurous wave.*

*Otters slide and dive and slick back their hair,
Raccoons clean their meat in the creek.*

*On the circles, green statues ride like South American
Liberators above the breeding vegetation –*

*Prongs and spearheads of some equatorial
backland that will inherit the globe.*

*The elect, the elected... they come here bright as dimes,
and die disheveled and soft.*

*We cannot name their names, or number their dates –
circle on circle, like rings on a tree –*

*but we wish the river had another shore,
some further range of delectable mountains,*

*distant hills powdered blue as a girl's eyelid.
It seems the least little shove would land us there,*

*that only the slightest repugnance of our bodies
we no longer control could drag us back.*

-- Robert Lowell, For the Union Dead

The Washington Post is absent from this debate. It was **The New Yorker**, once again, that pointed out the editorial decision, made when Donald Graham assumed the helm, to lower the ambitions of the paper to regional status with greater emphasis on sports, suburban issues and profitability. The editorial page is no more than a megaphone for manufactured opinion on the one side Democratic and the other Republican. The last twenty five years of architectural criticism have been insipid and meaningless when the obligation to make sense of the city and stimulate a consciousness of itself has not been met. For evidence of the scale of this failure refer to the silence and disengagement surrounding the whole issue of the World War II Memorial. The editorial decision of the Washington Post, a significant presence within the "Gang of 500," not to seriously and consistently engage the largest questions of the capital only contributes to the suspicion that mediocrity's most utilitarian function is in both preserving the status quo and limiting the scope of imagination with regard to what the city might be. The market decision to pitch the paper to the broadest demographic has cultivated a dilute,

uninformed readership, a collective mediocrity, unable to genuinely understand the city that contains it.

The result of this closed narrative is a city so fixed in time and place, by an entirely falsified and unexamined idea of "historic," by fossilized zoning ordinances and height limitations, that it is unable to express an urban identity in any way even remotely challenging to the interests of the federal government. The great crowds that have historically gathered on the Mall, the national Forum, no longer have any direct influence on the crafting of legislation since the real numbers are those reached not by direct contact but by sophisticated techniques of mass communication. The city is thus intentionally emasculated as a place of debate, rendered unreadable, and paralyzed while contrary fictions struggle for manufactured credibility. The District, denied the most basic qualifications for democracy, stripped of the political clout (the simple reality of trading votes for money) needed to defend and express itself, is drained of investment as its belting suburban districts in Maryland and Virginia build up in height, population, wealth and investment.

But it is more deeply unsettling that a city of such importance in the decisions that considerably affect broad swaths of human society far beyond the national borders should so poorly understand its own setting. Where is it but here, arguably the most important political stage in the world, that policy is written by the people who live here? And it is even more unsettling to consider that the city, long considered provincial, a southern town, out of the league of great cities, unable to form an identity independent of federal constriction, relatively small and still slowing losing population and density, is the place where the destiny of the nation is hammered out by inhabitants so poorly informed.

Certain weapons systems claimed to be precise; power was not precise. Power was always a monster. And there had never been a monster the size of America. Every time it turned over in its sleep it entrained disasters that would have to roll through villages. There were blunderings and perversities and calculated cruelties; and there was no self-knowledge – none.

-- Martin Amis "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," New Yorker April 24, 2006

Population density is also intellectual weight in that the spatial pressure of proximity facilitates the erosion of boundaries, the freedom of association, and the necessary encounter of unmediated difference, propinquity, disagreement, the chaos of enormous population. Residential density, the town, can only congeal established pattern, fix conventional opinion, preserve the detail of accreted local experience, exclude other ways of looking at things. One of the salient characteristics of social encounter in the District is the constant affirmation of insider knowledge of how things really work, an inert dismissal of symptoms of unorthodox thinking that withers under the glaring presence of manifest power. Individuals situated in key positions understand the need for discretion, modesty toward superiors, adamantine inscrutability toward the uninitiated, how to behave in the presence of mere lumpen citizens. These are the prerequisites for a decision-making apparatus enclosed in group-think.

4. A PIRANESIAN MANIFESTO

At the same time my eye encountered a field of wheat whose limits I could not see. The yellow vastness, dazzling in the sun, bound up with the song of the children imprisoned in the smooth stone school barracks, filled me with such anxiety that I broke into sobs. I ran home to our garden and began to play "to make things seem as they usually were," that is to return to reality. It was the first appearance of those elements which were always present in later sensations of unreality: illimitable vastness, brilliant light, and the gloss and smoothness of material things.

-- Marguerite Sécheyay, Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl

Manifestos are by their nature controversial and typically call attention to an intellectual stagnation where conventional wisdom has become so entrenched that only radical denunciation is sufficient to point out the obvious. The architectural community here has no presence in the national letters and has become so ineffectual that it could not even recognize its own abject state when the first insipid blustering proposal for the region-wide metro canopies was brought down by a well-aimed but piercing *obiter dictum*, describing the original design proposal as an embarrassing “comb-over”. The subsequent “international” competition produced a relative improvement but failed to even acknowledge the markedly better second-place proposal, by Stanley Hallet, under the excuse that such a “modernist” proposal would be more suitable for Chicago than Washington, too modern for the dominant “preservationist” sensibilities of new urbanist philistinism and false modesty.

Enough time has passed since the 1978 publication of ***Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*** by Rem Koolhaas “on a form of urbanism for what remains of the 20th century – in an age disgusted with them...” that the idea might be inverted, the manifesto a necessary and timely jeremiad against the mindless manifestations of entrenched power.

Where, but in the belly of the beast, could the panoramic view be so darkened?

Regard the mural, ***The Ten Immortals***, by David Chung at the head of this essay, note the cunning details so specifically familiar and layered one over another as our quotidian experience of the city is rendered in our own minds. Regard the rotting corpse of the dog below found on the outer banks

of the Anacostia as suggestive of the cruel disregard that power over others has in its most simple manifestation. These are the aesthetic sources from which a new sensibility might emerge.

This city, I would argue, must be re-examined through the eyes of artists, intellectuals, travelers, foreigners, and even schizophrenics to provoke that altered frame of mind associated with the nature of reverie and travel in foreign places. Baudelaire wrote ***The Painter of Modern Life*** in reaction to the stultifying resistance of old ways of thinking on an emergent Paris. For centuries, the architect, product of an ancient profession with a deep well of experience, has been a key intellectual figure, negotiating between the new and the old, in the making (painting) of cities. Yet what architect has ever emerged from the cultural milieu of the metropolitan region of the capital to international or even national status. In this publication, the profession is given the chance to position itself as the progenitor of a broad set of ideas that grapple with the question of whether this urban entity is to become a great, vital and dynamic city or a mere Babylonian satrapy. Any other ambition for the professions will simply maintain the present status quo of declining relevance, marginalized mediocrity, useful idiocy, intellectual stagnation, and deluded self-regard.

Notes:

1 Congressional Globe. 29th Cong., 1st sess., May 8, 1846, Appendix: “Retrocession of Alexandria: Speech of R.M.T. Hunter of Virginia, in the House of Representatives,” 894-898. Quoted from a draft of *The Debates over Retrocession of the District of Columbia, 1801 to 2003* by Mark David Richards.



2. Corpse of a chained dog in the waters of the Anacostia