

Creating a Capital: Instrumental Structures

Anna Minta
**Staatsbauten und Sakral-
architektur in Washington/DC.
Stilkonzepte patriotischer Bau-
kunst.** Berlin, Reimer 2015.
481 S., zahlr. s/w. Abb.,
ISBN 978-3-496-01531-4. € 69,00

On September 24, 2016, Washington DC hosted the celebratory opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Designed by the architectural team Freelon Adjaye Bond/Smith Group, the NMAAHC's external form derives from the tripartite structure of a Yoruban column: base, shaft, and crown. As Anna Minta's thoroughly researched and fascinating *Habilitationsschrift* demonstrates, major state and sacred architectural and urban planning projects in DC from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, including buildings and monuments the NMAAHC joins on the National Mall, represent American culture as more monolithically white, European, Christian, and *virtuous*, than reality reflects.

A DOCUMENT OF AMERICAN SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS?

Minta's study "zur nationalen Repräsentationsarchitektur" is focussed on "die US-amerikanische Hauptstadt als nationales Aushängeschild der USA: Bereits der von dem französischen Militäringenieur Pierre Charles L'Enfant in Absprache mit George Washington und Thomas Jefferson zur Gründung entwickelte Masterplan (1791/1792) legte die Hauptstadt als symbolischen Raum an, in dem sich die amerikanische Geschichte, Politik und natio-

nen Werte in Idealkonstruktion widerspiegeln sollten" (12). The national values that Minta sees reflected in these ideal constructions are primarily "manifest destiny," and the complementary notion of American "exceptionalism." According to this view, deriving from the seventeenth-century Puritan leader John Winthrop's conception of the New England colony as a "city upon a hill," God had preordained Euro-American settlement and domination of the North American continent. Following this predestined course signaled the dawn of a new era in human history, motivating the United States' feeling of superiority (*Überlegenheitsgefühl*) over the old world (39).

In this fractious season of American racial and electoral discontent and upheaval, it is hard to avoid the feeling that DC's governmental built environment may have expressed such self-righteous racism and nationalism all too effectively, making its own contribution to the appeal of Donald Trump's reactionary and racist "program," to "make America great again." While it may seem inappropriate and anachronistic to link the Trump candidacy to DC as an ideological construct first formulated in the eighteenth-century, for this writer it proved unavoidable: As Philip Ursprung has written in these pages, "ich muss mich von heute aus in die Vergangenheit zurückbewegen und nicht umgekehrt" (*Im Strudel des Mainstream: Kunstgeschichte und Gegenwartskunst*, in: *Kunstchronik* 68/7, 2015, 36).

The congressional Residence Act of 1790 established that the new capital city would be along the Potomac River, placing it between north and south, and left the final location to President Washington, who was happy to site it downstream from his residence in Mount Vernon, Virginia, where he continued to live. Less burdened by an

organically developing urban infrastructure than Boston, Philadelphia, or New York, and lacking their active ports, DC developed as plan and idea before it became a real city. In the 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville deemed the sparsely populated swampy site, pierced by the Baroque residence style vistas called for in the L'Enfant plan (*fig. 1*), and dotted with occasional imposing structures, an “imaginary metropolis.” In the 1840s Charles Dickens ironically admired the “public buildings that need but a public to be complete” (56).

STYLE WARS

As Minta argues, tensions were ever present as to whether, and if so in which style, DC's architecture should be derivative of European models. The “battle of the styles,” between proponents of classicism in its various forms and medievalism, progressed as a fluctuating, dynamic process, as Minta shows. Classicism emerged as the reigning answer to governmental structures such as the White House (1792–1803) and its legislative counterweight, the Capitol (1792–1865), as particularly influenced by the amateur architect Thomas Jefferson. Choices still existed between the Greek (associated with democracy) and Roman (republican, imperial), and their Renaissance and Baroque derivatives. Following consideration of the merits of classicism, Washington National Cathedral (Episcopalian, 1907–1990) and the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (Catholic, 1920–1959; *fig. 2*), settled on medieval prototypes as most appropriate for religious structures intended to have national impacts. In each case, stylistic choices had political motivations and also reflected the exigencies of the particular commissioner, the taste of designers and patrons, and technical and material developments and considerations.

As Minta repeatedly demonstrates, from the start styles were decontextualized (for example: “die Hauptstadt nahm beispielsweise Triumphbogen- und Tempelmotive ungeachtet ihrer politischen, religiösen und kulturellen Kontexte für demokratisch-republikanische Repräsentationsaufgaben in Anspruch”, 429), and instrumentalized

(an idea and term she invokes repeatedly) to represent the particular ambitions of an institution or project. DC's monumental structures acknowledge only through critical interpretation the underside of American history, its economic foundation resting on crimes against humanity: the enslavement of Africans and the decimation of indigenous American peoples and cultures (144, note 305). If we “brush history against the grain” (Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in: *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, 1968, Thesis VII), the attitudes and ideas that empowered and enabled this reality stand out: imperialist hubris characterizes many of the structures that Minta studies exhaustively and critically, and Eurocentric white supremacism defines many artworks, such as the Capitol's Senate Wing pediment sculptures, *The Progress of Civilization* (Thomas Crawford, 1863; *fig. 3*), in which a Native American seated in a melancholic pose beside a river and beneath a standing white pioneer represents the passing of “the vanishing race.”

HEROIC CLASSICISM

Most of the voices cited throughout the book echo that of an anonymous 1815 author who stated that nothing is more effective “toward elevating the reputation of any people, than the grandeur of public edifices” (14). Following Winckelmann's concept of Greek art and architecture's “edle Einfalt und stille Größe,” grandeur became associated above all with classicism. Reverence for the classical canon could enable DC's built environment to fit within the “heroic narrative” (420) of American architecture recounted by Sidney Fiske Kimball (1888–1955) – a key figure in the preservation of Jefferson's Monticello – though Minta tellingly also turns up dissent from this narrative. In his 1934 book *Ramses to Rockefeller: The Story of Architecture*, Marxist influenced architect and historian Charles Harris Whitaker identified Palladian Monticello in the Virginia landscape as a stylistically inappropriate and politically imperialist gesture, “ästhetisch wie ideologisch ebenso [...] ein Fremdkörper wie ein ägyptischer Karnak-Temple in Rhode Island”

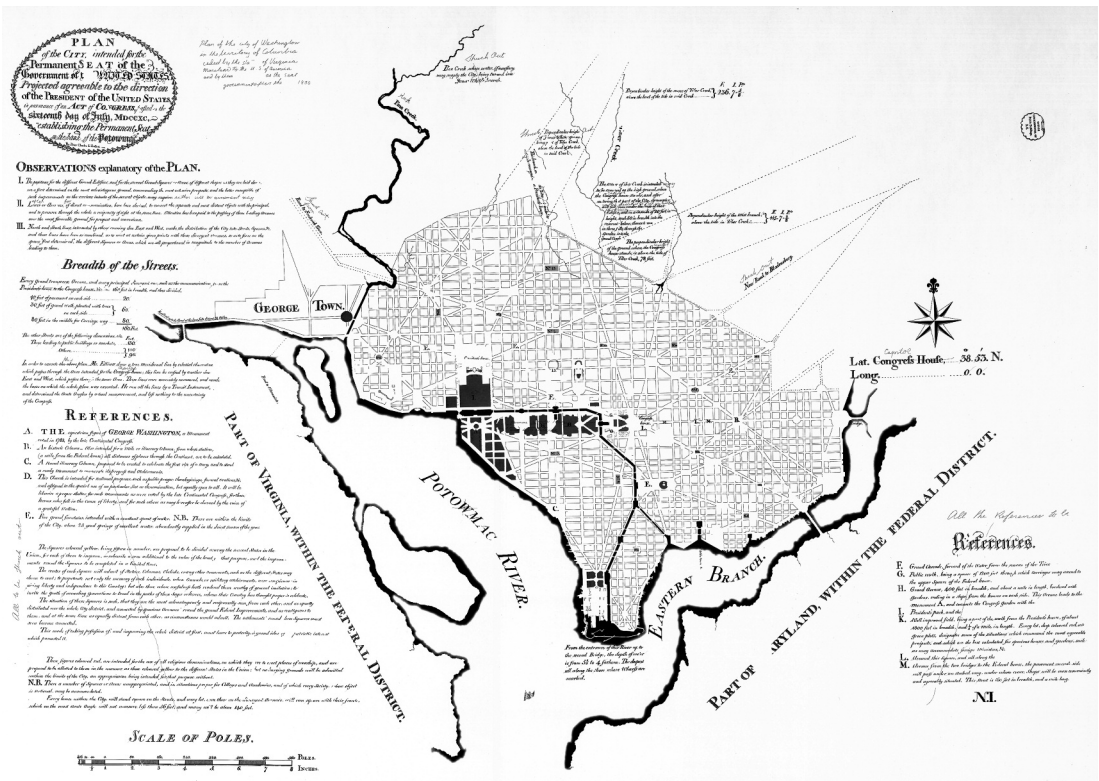


Fig. 1 Pierre Charles L'Enfant, Plan of the city intended for the permanent seat of the government of the United States, 1791. Computer-assisted reproduction, 1991 (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Washington DC)

(424). Whitaker admired instead the homespun craftsmanship evident in Early American domestic buildings, and saw this as feeding into the more rationalist, structural, site-appropriate tradition of Henry Hobson Richardson, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Whitaker portrayed this lineage, as did the more influential Lewis Mumford in *The Brown Decades* (1931), as having a more organic relationship to the American environment than the work of classicists such as Daniel Burnham or Charles McKim, and to be linked to the development of the International Style presented in Hitchcock and Johnson's 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibition. This lineage also ultimately became a heroic narrative, but one from which government and religious architecture in DC, before the 1970s, remained absent.

Burnham and McKim were both members of the 1901 Senate Park Commission (SPC), also known as the (Senator James) McMillan Commission. Further members of the SPC included landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens and

McMillan's secretary, urban planner Charles Moore. Inspired by the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago and by the "City Beautiful Movement," as well as by a European tour, the SPC's "American Renaissance" aesthetic and outlook, supported by the swaggering self-confidence and growing economic power of an expansionist federal government in that era, assured the result indicated in Minta's conclusion: "In der Hauptstadt jedoch hielt sich bis zur Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts die heroische Traditions-konstruktion zur Begründung des Neoklassizismus als Nationalstil" (425).

Minta provides a particularly insightful reading of the precursor to DC's Lincoln Memorial, the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site (1909–11) in Hodgenville, Kentucky (175f.). While it has long been known that the site's log cabin is a stand-in for, and not even a replica of, the one in which the sixteenth president is reputed to have been born, Minta's purpose is not to debunk this myth but to unpack another. She aptly connects the cabin to the eighteenth-century idea

Fig. 2 Charles Donagh Maginnis, Timothy Walsh and Eugene F. Kennedy, Jr., Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington DC, 1920–59 (Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC)

of the “primitive hut” (Laugier, as interpreted by Joseph Rykwert in *On Adam’s house in paradise. The idea of the primitive hut in architectural history*, Cambridge, Mass. 21997). The ersatz cabin’s nesting in the surrounding temple-style shrine, designed by John Russell Pope, portrays Lincoln’s life story not only as a parable of the individual “self-made man,” but also as an allegory for the “progress of civilization.”

There is no humble log cabin inside the classical temple designed by Henry Bacon as DC’s Lincoln Memorial (1911–22), but instead Daniel Chester French’s colossal marble seated sculpture of Lincoln, enshrined like “Athena im Parthenon oder Zeus im Tempel von Olympia” (195). Christopher A. Thomas has interpreted French’s superhuman Lincoln as the embodiment of the expanding powers of the presidency in the age of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who said in 1907: “The President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can be” (*The Lincoln Memorial & American Life*, Princeton/Oxford 2002, 23).



DEMOCRACY’S WORKERS, MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND MEMORIALS

Not only styles, but also materials, construction techniques, and even laborers worked symbolically. For the construction of the White House, for instance, it was considered important to employ French masons, whose origins in a revolutionary republic were thought to cement the building – otherwise clearly modeled on aristocratic and even imperial residences – with *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. “Dabei überrascht es, dass die politische Herkunft von Handwerkern für wichtiger befunden wurde, als der politisch-historische Kontext einzelner Architekturformen” (75). Here it would also have been appropriate for Minta to note that while free French workers were desired, an enormous amount of the actual labor to construct both the White House and the Capitol was

performed by enslaved African Americans, as Michelle Obama noted in her speech at the Democratic National Convention last summer, and that is acknowledged on the White House Historical Association's website and by the Capitol's architectural historian (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/questions/did-slaves-build-the-white-house>, last accessed 18.08.16, and William C. Allen, *History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the Capitol*, 2005, available as of 18.08.16 at http://artandhistory.house.gov/art_artifacts/slave_labor_reportl.pdf).

Congressional debates in 1800 (103) about the proper way to memorialize George Washington presaged those that occurred during and after World War II, when, as Andrew Shanken has shown, memorial sculptures and monuments gave way to useful, "living memorials" integrated into the fabric of civic life, such as war memorial libraries and auditoriums, rather than symbolic forms like the obelisk that South Carolinian Robert Mills ultimately and successfully devised for the Washington Monument, constructed 1836–84 (see Andrew M. Shanken, *Planning Memory: Living Memorials in the United States during World War II*, in: *Art Bulletin* 84/1, March 2002, 30–147). The inscribed memorial stones donated beginning in 1849 by states, organizations, foreign countries, and even by the Pope (this stone was stolen and thrown into the Potomac River by anti-Papists in 1854), and embedded into the structure to represent the block-by-block construction of the building as analogous to the US federal system, also presage the now ubiquitous fund-raising memorial bricks at many American institutions.

To build the twentieth-century cathedrals, traditional masonry techniques were considered more "honest" than a modern steel frame (as was used at Riverside Church in New York, see 404f.). One of Minta's key findings is that for some important structures, such as the Supreme Court Building (1928–1935), the secondary literature remains remarkably sparse, rendering her own work all the more important and welcome. In the

case of this building, one wonders if counselors on their way to argue constitutional cases – over, say, freedom of speech or religion – realize that, as Minta documents, architect Cass Gilbert procured the fine Italian marble embellishing the entry hall with the help of his admired friend, Mussolini?

OF CHURCH AND STATE

Rightly placing Washington National Cathedral and the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception amidst religio-politico debates and each denomination's desire to be seen a national religion, Minta perhaps overestimates the success of these structures in imprinting themselves within our national memory landscape. While the first Washington Episcopal Bishop Henry Yates Satterlee (1896–1908) envisioned a neo-Gothic "American Westminster Abbey" (288), the very fact that the original Westminster, and other European cathedrals, existed and continue to exist in the American consciousness undermines the National Cathedral's emotional resonance. When a chief polemicist for the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Thomas J. Shahan, a proponent of the Romanesque/Byzantine style in which the church was constructed, wrote in 1910 about its future decoration with frescoes and statues celebrating multinational Catholicism, and predicted "no one would think he had truly seen the Capital of the nation unless he had paid a visit to this Church" (369), one has to question whether his optimism was rewarded. While most Americans could identify a picture of the White House and the Washington Monument, I hazard that more would be likely to identify Rome's Saint Peter's or Notre-Dame of Paris than either of these Washington cathedrals (see Richard Emanuel/Siu Challons-Lipton/Kim Baker, *The Cultural Image Literacy Assessment: One Hundred Images Every American Should Know*, in: *The Journal of American Culture* 37/4, Dec. 2014, 404–418, a survey which does not include these cathedrals).

While they certainly attract tourists and host important functions, such as masses, funerals, memorial services, and "national days of prayer," I doubt that most Americans would identify with



Fig. 3 Thomas Crawford, *The Progress of Civilization*. Pediment over the east entrance to the Senate Wing of the U. S. Capitol, 1863. Marble (<https://www.aoc.gov/art/other-sculpture/progress-civilization-pediment>)

either as a truly central national – or even confessional – shrine. Neither possesses what Alois Riegl identified as “age value,” so important for religious structures, to lend them an aura of the divine. Neither cathedral has been the site of a miracle. They also must compete for identification with each religious adherent’s own local church. As Frederick Turner, who admires Washington Cathedral but does not include it among the capital’s significant pilgrimage sites, has stated: “The United States may be a religious nation, but it does not have a religious capital, nor should it” (Washington as a Pilgrimage Site, in: Nathan Glazer/Cynthia R. Field [Ed.], *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington’s Monumental Core*, Baltimore 2008, 88). Still, we are indebted to Minta for her detailed readings of these understudied structures as architecture, as well as loci of discussions about the role and nature of organized, ritualistic religion in American public life. In a country where one hundred million dollars has recently been spent to create an “accurate,” theme-park type recreation of Noah’s ark, as a shrine to fundamentalist creationism (and such sects and structures, as well as Mormonism, may well be America’s most characteristic homegrown religious expressions), attention to religious architecture’s symbolism and social significance should not be confined by modernist notions of quality.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

One would welcome further study of how the L’Enfant plan and its elaboration have intersected with and influenced the growth of DC’s broader urban fabric, particularly in terms of race relations, since DC was the first large American city to become majority African American, and was already one-third African American by 1880 (see for example Allan Johnston, *Surviving Freedom: The Black Community of Washington, D.C.*, New York/London 1993 and Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries*

into Ghetto Culture and Community, New York 1969).

In addition to the numerous press reports Minta cites, it would also be enlightening to know more about popular reactions from locals and visitors to DC’s monuments and buildings, as well as responses, if they exist, from those figures from our history who did not march to the drum roll of manifest destiny, empire, and American exceptionalism, and who might have cast critical eyes on imperious classicism. Did Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Simon Pokagon, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois or other Americans who in their time dissented against this consensus and are now admired in ways that the “founding fathers” are not, have anything to say about architectural developments in DC? Such questions might structure another book or article, the solid foundation for which has now been laid.

PROF. DR. PETER CHAMETZKY
School of Visual Art and Design,
University of South Carolina,
1615 Senate Street, Columbia, SC 29208, USA,
chametzk@mailbox.sc.edu