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Occasional Paper #285
St. Petersburg's Courtyards
and Washington's Alleys:
Officialdom's
Neglected Neighbors

Blair A. Ruble



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Two of the eighteenth century's most ambitious city planning projects—St. Petersburg, Russia and Washington, D.C.—remained mired in noxious swamps for decades. Slowly and steadily, both cities began to take on the outward appearance of their founders' dreams. Long avenues cut across forbidding marshlands, paving of sorts was set down, columned buildings that would have done honor to the gods appeared. All of this was capped by enormous iron-domes—the second to be completed, the United States Capitol, having been modeled after the first, St. Isaac's cathedral.¹ By the beginning of the twentieth century, St. Petersburg and Washington stood as proof that government spending could, in fact, construct major international capitals where no private assembly of healthy-minded citizens would have dared.

St. Petersburg and Washington donned their best architectural clothing just as engravings turned to photographs. The beauty of the two cities filled the lenses of new-fangled Kodaks, catching the shadows of long, straight, low, and wide avenues with important-looking personages dashing by. Both cities also earned the scorn of eminent critics. Fyodor Dostoyevsky observed that inhabitants of the Imperial capital had the misfortune of living in “the most abstract and premeditated city in the whole world.”² Charles Dickens muttered his infamous line that Washington

was a “City of Magnificent Intentions” with “broad avenues that begin in nothing and lead nowhere.”³ But these criticisms took back seats to visual propaganda revealing just how beautiful both towns had become. Such images always seemed to be set in good weather, a rather remarkable occurrence given the truly inhumane climates of both capitals. They were proof that politicians can build cities. Alas, they also revealed the limitations of the aptitude of both Imperial autocracy and citizen democracy for creating vibrant and viable urban communities.

Real life played hide-and-seek with dreams of grandeur along both capitals' grand boulevards. Long straight lines and decorous facades concealed a second life in both towns. Hidden just out of view dwelled hundreds of souls whose presence would have brought ruin to any proper dinner party. Close enough to provide a ready supply of all the servants the households of officialdom might need, the less worthy nonetheless were removed from sight. A starkly different world awaited those who were adventurous enough to open a Petersburg courtyard gate, or turn down a Washington back alley.

I. AN IMPERIAL VISION

Peter (I) the Great (1682-1725)
founded St. Petersburg in 1703 on the
marshy frontier of two competing

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empires (those of Peter's Russia and the Sweden of Charles XII).⁴ The area's strategic importance in this imperial competition demanded fortification.⁵ Glaciers had long before carved out 100 lakes and ponds, 66 rivers, and 101 islands, while the Neva river delta produced flat marshlands, which, though covered with scant vegetation, were nonetheless subject to frequent flooding.⁶ The construction of a world-class metropolis on such a site demanded perseverance and obstinacy as well as the iron-willed determination of an autocrat. No Neva delta settlement could ever become a "natural" extension of its environment.

Peter conceived a well-ordered and regular brick town, similar to the Dutch cities he had seen during his famous excursion through Western Europe.⁷ The Emperor, his governor Prince Menshikov, and his architect, Frenchman Jean Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond, initially focused their efforts on the Vasili Island.⁸ Their overtly geometric plan for the island featured a number of streets and canals intersecting at right angles, dividing the city into strictly organized functional zones. Strains on the state budget—and the hazards of travel to the island across treacherous currents—doomed these early designs to failure.⁹

Following the reigns of Peter and later his widow, Catherine I (1725-1727), St. Petersburg embarked upon a stormy half-century that witnessed the capital's return to Moscow under Peter's grandson Peter II (1727-1730); its restoration to Petersburg by Peter's niece, Anna (1730-1740); and its embellishment during a brilliant explosion of Russian rococo under Peter the Great's daughter, Elizabeth (1741-1762).¹⁰ The

city's distinctive triradial street system centering on the Admiralty spire emerged during Anna's rule, while Elizabeth launched an impressive network of imperial parks and satellite palaces and towns. By the time that Elizabeth's nephew's wife, Catherine (II) the Great (1762-1796), had seized power in a palace coup, the city already had developed a distinctive urban culture; one that was permeated by European ideas despite its overwhelmingly Russian flavor.¹¹

St. Petersburg grew into a great European capital during the reigns of Catherine the Great and her grandsons Alexander I (1801-1825) and Nicholas I (1825-1855). The city's center emerged as one of the world's leading ensembles of neoclassical architecture, and the population, more than quadrupled as migrants began to arrive from the countryside.¹²

Catherine the Great and her progeny expressed their pretensions to European power through a neoclassicism then popular in France. The result was nearly a century of neoclassical construction as extensive as any similar project elsewhere in the world. The Catherinian achievement paved the way for the apex of Russian neoclassical architecture and urban design under Alexander I.¹³ Large scale building efforts were not always practical, so that only a limited number of monumental structures could actually be built. More vigorous buildings were placed for maximum effect at critical junctions, with secondary spaces left for later generations to confront.

The immediate task of finishing Catherine the Great's classical masterpiece fell to her son, Paul I (1796-1801), and her grandsons, Alexander I and Nicholas I.¹⁴ The construction of several

central squares surrounding the Admiralty district and the beautification of the city's main avenue—the Nevskii Prospekt—marked the culmination of planning efforts of the Alexandrian epoch. St. Petersburg was transformed under Alexander I and Nicholas I into a grand spatial composition of seemingly unbroken chains of related ensembles. Their capital's omnipresent order soon faded under the press of industrialization. St. Petersburg had become the most expensive and least healthful capital in all of Europe by the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁵ It had become Fyodor Dostoyevsky's hometown.

II. ST. PETERSBURG COURTYARDS

“With a sinking heart and a nervous tremor, he [the murderous Raskolnikov—B.R.] went up to a huge house which on one side looked onto the canal, and on the other into the street. This house was let out in tiny tenements and was inhabited by working people of all kinds—tailors, locksmiths, cooks, Germans of sorts, girls picking up a living as best they could, petty clerks, etc. There was a continual coming and going through the two gates and in the two courtyards of the house.”¹⁶

Welcome to the Petersburg *dvor*, the enclosed courtyard. The *dvor* holds a special place in Russian life, originating with the farmyards of the village. A fundamental unit of Moscow life, the courtyard took on heightened cultural meaning in westernized and alienating St. Petersburg.¹⁷ It became the space into which Russia could intrude on an otherwise overly rational and geometric cityscape. The yard was the great de-

mocratizing pause in the otherwise overly official Imperial capital.

Political democracy was never a feature of the Petersburg yard. St. Petersburg native and poet Anatolii Naiman recently observed that Peter not only built this “severe, shapely city,” but also severely regulated the life of its citizens.¹⁸ Authoritarian control began in the *dvor*, which was often presided over by the *dvornik*—a Russian-style concierge who reported more frequently to the secret police than to the landlord.

American traveler A. S. Rappoport wrote of the *dvornik* in his account of what may have been Russia's last “normal” year of the twentieth century, 1913. “If every house has its court or *dvor*,” Rappoport informed his readers, “every *dvor* has its *dvornik*. The latter can scarcely be called a porter, as his duties are too numerous. He does all the heavy housework, sweeps the court, and fetches water from the public fountains... Over these manifold duties he is also a *police agent*. He is the official intermediary between the tenants and the police authorities: the post is no sinecure in suspicious Russia, where every respectable citizen has his description at the police station.”¹⁹ For much of the city's life, the *dvornik* thus held both building and community together, providing much needed minor services for a bottle of vodka (or two or three).

The outward clutter of the courtyard brought various social groups dashing together. Urban geographer James Bater argues in *St. Petersburg: Industrialization and Change*—his classic study of the industrializing Imperial capital—that the city's pattern of social segregation was three-dimensional.²⁰ Building on Johann Georg Kohl's observations from the 1840s, Bater maintains

that Petersburg's poor often lived in the cellars and garrets of the very same buildings of which the more desirable floors were occupied by more prosperous citizens.²¹ This configuration survived until the eve of the Revolutions of 1917, a period of excruciatingly slow improvements in public transportation, and the arrival of tens of thousands of peasants throughout the decades following the Emancipation of 1861.

Petersburgers were living quite literally on top of one another, with more than seven inhabitants registered in 1910 for each Petersburg apartment.²² Different worlds challenged one another every time neighbors went through the yard to exit their buildings and enter the street.

Dostoyevsky, not surprisingly, became an afficiando of the *dvor*; for it was the perfect home for the misfits and depraved souls so central to his storytelling. "On the right hand," he wrote of the hiding place for Raskolnikov's axe, "the blank unwashed wall of a four-storied house stretched far into the court; on the left, a wooden hoarding ran parallel with it for twenty paces into the court, and then turned sharply to the left. Here was a deserted fenced-off place where rubbish of different sorts was lying. At the end of the court, the corner of a low, smutty, stone shed, apparently part of some workshop, peeped from behind the hoarding. It was probably a carriage-builder's or carpenter's shed; the whole place from the entrance was black with coal-dust."²³ The world of the *dvor* could be far removed the aristocratic facades that turned toward grand streets and boulevards. Here was real life, Russian style.

III. A SYMBOL FOR THE NATION

As had been the case with St. Petersburg, the site of Washington, D.C. had been chosen for strategic purpose rather than for congeniality. The motives in this instance were political rather than military. Several states within the young American Republic had been sparring for years to secure the new capital city as their own, with major regional divisions emerging between Northern and Southern political factions over this, and many other issues such as slavery. George Washington moved in 1790 to have a new Federal District governed by Congress carved out of several farms along the Potomac River near his hometown of Alexandria, Virginia. The original 100 square mile enclave—which included the tobacco ports of Alexandria and Georgetown, Maryland—was thought to symbolize the merging of sectional interests within a new federal government.²⁴

Washington hired an irascible and impetuous French engineer Pierre L'Enfant to set down a street plan for the new city. His congenial mix of grids and diagonal avenues, circles and squares marked a final achievement of baroque planning principles. His sketches and maps more than a little resembled those of Versailles. There would be no mistaking L'Enfant's village for the French royal retreat, however, when the government finally moved from Philadelphia to their new home in 1800.

Aside from a scattering of grand buildings—the Capitol, Presidential Executive Mansion, Treasury Building, and Patent Office—Washington remained a melancholy infested swamp for many years. American life was hardly disrupted when British marines burned

the town in October 1814 (except, perhaps, for that of the poor President and his family who had been forced to flee town). Cows wallowed in marshes out the White House's back door. Federal investment remained sporadic, while Congress finally enacted the first in a long-string of unworkable municipal charters only in 1820. The local economy was so insipid that residents of Alexandria successfully secured retrocession back to Virginia in 1846. It was only the Civil War (1861-1864) that changed the city's future, launching Washington on the road to great city status.

Washington benefitted from the War both directly and indirectly. The city served as capital of a state that was expanding to meet the challenges of brutal warfare.²⁵ Troops of all ranks, arms dealers, and camp hangers-on flooded the town. The city was a front line post, sitting literally on the border with the secessionists to the South. It served as a major mobilization center for the war effort. Infrastructure expanded, with new rail lines being built quickly to supply the city. Finally, Washington was the solemn site of Abraham Lincoln's martyrdom in the months following the War. Numerous proposals to shift the capital westward with the American population now fell by-the-wayside.

Washington had become the capital of a dynamic and victorious nation believing continental conquest to be its "Manifest Destiny."²⁶ The national economy (and the national government) continued to expand. More and more money flowed into Washington with that growth. The capital hosted American "High Society" during the proper "Season," foreign embassies lent a touch of exoticism to the town, and the city boomed. By the end of the nineteenth

century, Gilded Age leaders declared that the capital must be beautified so that it could be worthy of its status as the seat of American power.

Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition had set a new standard for American thinking about cities.²⁷ A grand world's fair to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in America, the Exposition's architects—a commission of the nation's leading designers of the period—and entrepreneurial sponsors favored the principles taught at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Their glistening white, orderly neoclassical fair site captured the American imagination—for good or for ill—for a generation. Efforts to replicate this famous "White City" sprang up across the United States—with many a municipality building a new town center or city hall. "City Beautiful" proponents had their greatest impact on the nation's capital, where planners' visions were joined for the first time with the power of the State. The Washington, DC of today is as much a product of turn-of-the-last-century architects' beautification dreams as contemporary St. Petersburg is of Catherine the Great's grand buildings and ensembles.

By 1900, the American Institute of Architects were joined by Senator James McMillan and the Senate Park Commission in sponsoring the first major comprehensive plan for the nation's capital since that of Pierre L'Enfant.²⁸ Drawing explicitly on the design principles of the Chicago Exposition and the City Beautiful Movement, Commissioners traveled about Europe and North America looking for fresh ideas. Chicagoans Henry Ives Cobb and Daniel Burnham lent their personal

connection to the 1893 White City, while other prominent Commission participants, such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Charles McKim, had similarly worked on both projects. The 1902 Commission Report proclaimed a grand monumental urban core focused around a series of monuments along the great Mall space stretching from the Capitol to the Potomac. Unbecoming and unsightly activities—such as markets and rail stations—were removed from view. Much of the plan would be achieved, with the vicissitudes of two World Wars and the Great Depression requiring adjustments from time to time. The Mall became the genuine “Symbol for the Nation” that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Pierre L’Enfant, and so many others had been seeking for over a century.

The McMillan Plan ended where the real city began. The Commissioners set out a vision for a symbolic monumental core, a neoclassical pantheon to American greatness. As already noted, many of their goals were realized—though a few odd lapses, such as the survival of the Smithsonian Institution’s Castle Building, persist to this day. The Commissioners created the Washington of diplomats and tourists, lobbyists and Congress people. They hardly touched the real city that had grown up just a few yards away in the city’s back streets and alleys.

IV. WASHINGTON ALLEYS

Washington alleys brought the life of the country to the town (in this case the rural back roads of a vanquished American South.) Despite the alleys’ capacity to sometimes shock the Washington bourgeoisie, their touch of rustic

life often humanized and domesticated the city. As historian James Borchert observes, “most conflicts and differences were moderated and controlled by the tight network of primary relations and social organization, the common alley world view, the need to cooperate in order to survive, and the constant danger of the world outside the alley. Washington’s alley dwellers did not demonstrate the social disintegration and pathology that had been predicted by social theorists and described by students of alley life... Intolerable conditions do not necessarily lead to dehumanization.”²⁹

As in St. Petersburg, back corners were the abode of rural folk recently liberated from bondage, former slaves and their descendants rather than serfs. The alley was the place where Washington remained its most Southern.

Rural African-Americans beat a path to the nation’s capital for the same reasons that poor farm folk have been coming to town for centuries. No matter how difficult life proved to be in Washington’s alleyways, it was better than what the cotton and peanut farms and small towns of the South had to offer. Marie Delaveaux Wilson, a proud old woman created by short-story writer Edward P. Jones, explained what it was all about in his tale “Marie.” “My mother had this idea,” Marie revealed about her departure for the city not long after the beginning of the twentieth century, “that everything could be done in Washington, that a human being could take all they troubles to Washington and things would be set right. I think that was all wrapped up with her notion of the government, the Supreme Court, and the president and the like.”³⁰

The Federal presence made Washington a relatively attractive destination for former slaves, their children, and their grandchildren after 1865. The city offered a variety of jobs in what would today be known as “the service sectors” (and, eventually, in government offices) that were sometimes unavailable to American blacks elsewhere. Nestled in a region long home to slave-holders, Washington claimed a large and vibrant African-American community almost from the city’s founding.³¹ Over ten thousand Freemen lived in the Federal District at the time of the Civil War (1861-1865), and some 190,000 at the turn of the century.³² Nearly 300,000 African-Americans lived in Washington a half century later, a number that would grow to over a half-million by 1970.³³ Back alleys were one of the places in which blacks could gain a hold on urban life.³⁴

Borchert tells us further that turn-of-the-century reformers complained about hidden communities which, nestled away in unobtrusive alleys, were viewed by the middle class as nourishing immorality, crime, and disease.³⁵ Inadequate public transportation—as in St. Petersburg—forced Washingtonians to live within walking-distance of jobs and stores. Rising real estate prices, meanwhile, encouraged construction on the back lots of grand townhouses along central streets and avenues. This arrangement proved advantageous for all involved. The wealthy gained income from the back-alley homes while their servants remained close to their jobs. The result was a higher degree of spatial integration by class, race, and ethnic group than is common in present-day American cities.³⁶

One group of concerned Washingtonians, the Monday Evening Club, estimated in 1912 that 240 blocks of inhabited alleys could be found in the city. 16,000 residents lived in 3,201 alley houses, nearly all of them built prior to 1892.³⁷ The greater mobility provided by the automobile broke down the social patterns that had sustained alley life. Washingtonians increasingly used their new freedom to travel to segregate themselves by race and by class. Borchert reports that “although the number of houses decreased by nearly 40 percent by 1927, 1,346 alley dwellings remained occupied in Northwest and Southwest alone.”³⁸ These homes became targets for the Alley Dwelling Authority established in 1934 by the United States Congress “to provide for the discontinuance of the use as dwellings of the buildings situated in alleys in the District of Columbia.”³⁹

The informal social world of the alley sheltered its residents from the humiliations and hardships of the wealthier world beyond. Alley communities were rich in what social scientists now call “social capital,” that dense network of contacts which supports community members. The alley was a play area for children, an outdoor laundry for women, a refuge for men, and a conversation picture for all.⁴⁰ Only a handful of adult male alley dwellers held skilled or white collar jobs, while nearly all employed alley women worked as maids, cooks, and servants.⁴¹ Residents drifted in and out of the alley every day, much as they might in the country. The world of the Washington alley, like that of the St. Petersburg courtyard, sustained its residents.

V. ST. PETERSBURG'S PLURAL ATMOSPHERES

We must be careful not to romanticize life in urban civilization's back corners. Dostoyevsky wrote, "There are few places where there are so many gloomy, strong, and queer influences on the soul of man as in Petersburg."⁴² Courtyards and alleys were hardly addresses of choice. Those forced to reside in a lane, an alley, or a yard lived a tough life.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, St. Petersburg became Leningrad and the yard overtook the palace. Civil war, mass in-migration, the destructive impact of one of history's longest military blockades, and Stalin's retrograde housing policies delayed the large-scale construction of new residential areas in Leningrad until the early 1960s.⁴³ By the time Leningrad became St. Petersburg once again, the city could claim a higher percentage of residents living in multi-family "communal" apartments than any other major Soviet city.⁴⁴ Nearly a quarter of the metropolitan population inhabited shared, multi-household apartments in older buildings downtown. Sixteen percent of the local housing stock had been constructed prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, often the very same buildings that dominate Fyodor Dostoyevsky's dark universe. By the mid-1980s, St. Petersburg's nineteenth century cityscape had become home primarily to the old (pensioners), the young (students), and outcasts of every age.

More recent trends following the collapse of the Soviet Union point toward a slow and difficult transition back to the chateau world of bourgeois Petersburg. Older buildings are being

privatized, renovated, and frequently turned to commercial use on a piece-meal basis. Englishman Duncan Fallowell captured the spirit of Petersburg's post-Soviet atmosphere in his account of a summer in the city. "And the atmosphere is extraordinary," Fallowell wrote in the early 1990s. "Atmospheres plural. One detects several, interlaced or opposed, generating an eerie momentousness: everything acquires a significance beyond the immediate."⁴⁵ Over a million square meters of interior space in central Petersburg buildings require renovation—a daunting task that threatens to swallow-up available capital reserves for a generation to come. "City of 100,000 courtyards, none of them pretty," Fallowell accurately declares.⁴⁶ We can not yet know which of his interlaced atmospheres will predominate in the old Northern Capital in the years to come.

VI. TEAR IT DOWN!

Twentieth-century development in Washington has proven more varied. Some poor neighborhoods—such as Southwest D.C.—have been bulldozed to fulfill the dreams of government planners and overzealous activists. Other areas—such as the Shaw district in Northwest—have fought back gamely against degradation in spite of overwhelming obstacles. Still others—such as the West End—have been gentrified, with not-so-rich young professionals (the genuinely wealthy preferring suburban mini-mansions instead) coming to live in the same back streets as African-American rural migrants two generations before. Only now, some of those back streets are chic addresses.

Today's Southwest D.C. is the

sort of urban neighborhood that Soviet planners tried to build but could never quite realize. Knock-off Corbusierian towers are scattered about without reference to traditional street plans. It is the city that government planners and local editorial writers wanted, with no alley life left to upset the tourists as they whiz-by on the Southeast-Southwest Freeway.

Led by the clarion voice of *The Washington Post*, social reformers and city planners attacked the old alley neighborhoods of Southwest Washington throughout the 1950s. "No doubt many residents of the area will be loath to lose their homes despite the prevailing slum conditions," *The Post's* learned editors observed. "They should realize, however, that the net effect of this great redevelopment effort will be to make Washington a much more pleasant place in which to live and work."⁴⁷

Government-driven city building once again privileged decorum over the city's indigent. 1960s-era demolition crews quickly leveled a 113-block area about a quarter mile from the United States Capitol, displacing 22,539 residents, eighty percent of whom were African-Americans. The project—funded by the Federal Government and carried out with the participation of major private developers and designers of the era—such as New York builder William Zeckendorf and architect I. M. Pei—required twenty-five years to complete.⁴⁸ Official Washington now extended its reach deep into the city's Southwest quadrant.

Historian Howard Gillette, Jr. reports that "ninety-nine percent of the buildings in the Southwest were torn down. Of the 5,900 new units constructed, only 310 could be classified as

moderate-income... More than a third of the displaced population found alternative homes in public housing, much of it just outside the redeveloped area. Another 2,000 families moved into private rental units, and only 391 purchased private homes, all in other parts of the city."⁴⁹ Today, once sleek buildings—now weary in the way that only two-decade-old cement can become—stand in a district seemingly devoid of meaningful human presence.

Crosstown, residents of the inner-city Shaw neighborhood just north of downtown were not about to let their homes be sacrificed so that Washington could become more pleasant for upper-class whites. Led by the Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy, a native of Shaw who had gone on to Yale Divinity School, 150 community organizations and civic groups organized the Model Inner City Community Development Organization (MICCO) in 1966. MICCO activists worked to stabilize and upgrade their neighborhood without the displacement of current residents and businesses.⁵⁰

Shaw—which was never an "alley neighborhood" but had become home to many African-Americans nonetheless—remains a troubled district today, one that is perpetually on the verge of a better life. MICCO's efforts helped the neighborhood survive as well as it has. Parts of Shaw destroyed in the 1968 riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have yet to be rebuilt. Drug traders have ravaged part of the neighborhood in more recent years. A vital community nonetheless remains. Unlike old Southwest D.C., the patient lives to fight another day.

Northwest Washington's West End neighborhood followed a third

evolutionary trajectory for central DC. The entire area of Washington traditionally known as the “West End” has become increasingly merged in the popular mind with “Dupont Circle” thanks to a metro station of that name. This area is among those D.C. neighborhoods to have emerged full-blown in the boom years that followed the American Civil War (1861-1864). A once neglected no-person’s zone between Washington City and the trading port of Georgetown, the neighborhood took shape when Gilded Age real estate developers tossed up block after block of grand three-and-four-story brick row houses in the ornate Victorian style. Interspersed among the proper bourgeois streets, which are identified by numbers and letters (e.g., 19th Street, 20th Street, 21st Street, M Street, N Street, O Street), were small “courts,” “ways,” “places,” and “alleys” inhabited by the descendants of African slaves now emancipated by four years of bloody internecine warfare. Duke Ellington—perhaps the twentieth century’s greatest American musician—was born in 1899 in a small house on one such tiny street, Ward Place.

Much has changed over the past century, of course. Ten story glass-sheathed office buildings now spread to the south and east of the spot where Ellington’s childhood home once stood. These modern buildings are filled to the brim with lawyers, accountants, and lobbyists. The actual site of Ellington’s birthplace is a large office block—one serving as home to a regional substation of the United States Postal Service. Perhaps fittingly, the Postal Service’s employees are predominantly African-American. They deliver the mail to the surrounding white professionals.

Today, Washington’s West End neighborhood is a visible reminder of the truism expressed by Spiro Kostof that the unique characteristics of streets and neighborhoods are derived from “the urban process.”⁵¹ In other words, social, political, technical, and artistic forces combine to shape the city and the neighborhood: it is impossible to talk about one dimension without running smack into another. The physical environment surrounding Ward Place has changed a great deal, but the urban process has distinct similarities with the past.

VII. THE EMBOURGEOISMENT OF NEWPORT PLACE

The West End fell on hard times with the arrival of the automobile, which carried all those proper bourgeois families in the big houses along the letters and numbers out to the suburbs. African-Americans moved from the back alleyways into the larger houses, which were broken up by absentee landlords into rooming and apartment houses. The area’s architectural grandeur was rediscovered in the 1970s by those with some money—primarily whites—and a slow but steady process of “gentrification” began.

About three decades ago, a certain Carlos, an Hispanic real estate salesman, moved into a small house on Newport Place—like nearby Ward Place, Sunderland Place, Hopkins Street, and Riggs Place, a small street once reserved for the black servant class. All the neighbors came out to help him move in—as was the practice in Washington’s poor, black neighborhoods. After helping Carlos move his couch into the house, a man as large as a refrigerator surveyed

Carlos's pale skin and proclaimed in a bellowing voice to his neighbors a favorite phrase of White America, "Well," he cried, "there goes the neighborhood!" He was right. Within a decade, the only African-Americans remaining in Carlos's neighborhood were a scattering of families who had managed to purchase their own homes when the neighborhood was still declassé.

Washington's West End is no longer poor. Like Carlos's former neighbor, many people have been hurt in this transition to greater wealth. Gentrification and privatization are not housing policies in and of themselves; they are at best only single components of such a policy. Real estate profit maximization is not urban policy, but one dimension among many within a comprehensive approach toward urban ills.

The evolution of Washington's West End neighborhood—together with that of St. Petersburg's courtyards—demonstrates the complexity of urban experience. Emperors, politicians, planners, and real estate developers dislike such complexity. Urban life has a way of obstructing their grand plans. Policies and approaches to the city that are not predicated on process, but focus instead on result—on architectural style, temporary real estate prices, the color or nationality of a neighborhood's residents—ultimately fail to advance anyone's interests. Urban life is continuing process rather than finite results.

VIII. LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

St. Petersburg and the District of Columbia are now coming to the close of the third and second centuries of their existences. History has rendered its

judgment on the work of George Washington's French and African-American surveyors as well as on Peter the Great's and Catherine the Great's Italian masters. Monumental St. Petersburg and Washington are great achievements of human will over nature.

One need only stroll across Washington's central Mall on a June evening to appreciate the democratic prescience of the city's founders. The great parade grounds—defined by generations of planners and architects over the years—has become America's backyard. Tourists and office workers mingle, tossing frisbees, playing softball, eating an early picnic dinner on the Mall's resiliently lush grass. Fat squirrels frolic under robust trees. Memorials to the nation's heroes mix with the gentle pleasures of Americans at play. Great museums—in an eclectic gathering of styles from the neoromanesque Smithsonian Castle to the neoclassical National Gallery of Art, from the neo-airplane-hanger style of the National Air & Space Museum to a huge cement doughnut containing Mr. Hirshhorn's fine collection of modern and contemporary art—define a public space that is, at one and the same time, domestic and grand. The twinkling lights of the Capitol Building's sweeping terraces add a touch of Rome even as a brash carousel brings Luna Park to mind. Poignant reminders of war dead and assassinated presidents convey solemnity. Washington's Mall has evolved over the decades to capture all that is right about the United States. It may just be the one place where the country's diversity melds in languid summer warmth.

St. Petersburg on a white night evening in June similarly inspires, though for different reasons. The baroque and

neoclassical facades of Peter the Great's and Catherine the Great's talented architects bespeak an age that is long past. Detached from their imperial purpose, the grand palaces and ministries and military headquarters that form Petersburg's monumental core now appear homey in comparison to so much that followed in the wake of 1917. Families and tourists mix, munching on ice cream cones; clusters of slightly inebriated youths play out their latest mating rituals; pick-up bands perform and even a poet or two or three may be heard to shout. A muted northern light magically transforms St. Petersburg into the city of its past. To walk along a Petersburg canal in June is to be lost in any century but our own. The beauty of the shadows cast in century-old photographs remains. As in Washington, grand Petersburg still inspires. Monumental St. Petersburg and Washington represent the best of planned urban space.

St. Petersburg and Washington are also quickly becoming symbols of urban pathology. Spiralling homicide rates, shattered families, disintegrating streets, broken transportation systems, ever-more-visible homelessness, economic decline... These cities' reputations for decay are as fully justified as that of their summer sorcery. Twenty-first century St. Petersburg and Washington confront a lengthy list of city ills not because of a lost urban vision. Imperial St. Petersburg and "capital" Washington have persevered. Courtyard and alley life have not fared as well.

High-minded urban reformers and Communist revolutionaries could not quite bring themselves to destroy the precious beauty of official St. Petersburg and Washington—although various proposals over the past decades could

have done the job had they ever been achieved. Planners and bureaucrats had no such self-restraint when approaching the St. Petersburg and the Washington of the less than-well-to-do. Alleviation of social ills from above—either by the paternalistic Soviet totalitarian state or by a less terrifying but ever bureaucratic American welfare state—often destroyed the best single asset both yards and alleys had to offer, "social capital." Both cities now provide powerful testimony that urban health often rests on the state of the most meager section of town, rather than on the most handsome.

Contemporary and historic St. Petersburg and Washington teach important lessons about the urban future. Beautiful buildings age, but never pall. Grand urban spaces continue to inspire, even as the users are transformed by history's vicissitudes. Catherinian ruffled courtiers, Stalin-era cloth-capped proletarians, and the gold-encrusted post-Soviet newly rich all have enjoyed Peter's magnificent gift. Lincolnian soldiers, New Deal social reformers, and New Age dreamers all have discovered a new Washington to make their own.

Most significantly, St. Petersburg and Washington demonstrate that cities must nurture the space that their most destitute residents call their own. Beauty may be found in remote landscapes and grounds. The social capital earned in the refuge of the courtyard and the alley, the forced intercourse of social diversity, and the sudden mix of disparate fates that mark the lives of great cities can not be replaced easily.

St. Petersburg and Washington are dream cities. They hover before our eyes as chimeras of unblemished urban life. That initial image is no more real than any other phantasm. Both still rank

among the world's great cities not because of dunce-capped monuments and straight facades. Rather, their courtyards and alleys have made them uncommon. We must remain mindful of these cities' powerful lessons as we begin the twenty-first century.

Study St. Petersburg and Washington well. Breathe in their magnificence. Find a *dvor* or an alley.

ENDNOTES

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