FROM L'ENFANT TO OLMSTED:

THE CREATION OF A CAPITAL AND A CITY.

George Washington chose the site of the new capital city of the United States, which was to be carved out of the wilderness and the swampy lands at the confluence of two great rivers, the Potomac and the Anacostia.

At that time there were two communities already established on the Potomac River: *Georgetown* in Maryland, and *Alexandria* in Virginia.

Both of those communities were now to be separated from their states and made part of the new District of Columbia, a square site ten miles on each side, whose corners aligned with the four cardinal points of the compass, comprising one hundred square miles of rolling hills, waterways and harbors, in the center of which was to be the new capital city.

President Washington's choice for the designer of the new city was a Frenchman who had been an aide to General Washington at Valley Forge. The Frenchman had fought for our fledgling nation in the siege of Savannah, Georgia, where he was badly wounded, captured by the British and held prisoner in sub-human conditions in Charleston, South Carolina, until exchanged for some captured British officers.

The Frenchman's name was Pierre Charles L'Enfant.

He was born in 1754 on the left bank of Paris, near the Luxembourg Palace and the Gobelins Manufacture where his father was employed as a minor court painter to the king. While some of his father's paintings hang in the palace of Versailles, there is no evidence that the L'Enfants were ever of a position to have even traveled to the palace to be officially received there.

This much is known: young Pierre L'Enfant departed royalist France (as also did his later friend the Marquis de Lafayette) to rebel against the arrogance and brutality of that social order and offer his life on the battlefields of America to assist in founding a new and better society.

L'Enfant was trained by his father to be a landscape painter. He was obviously talented, and those talents were recognized by his peers among George Washington's officers' corps of whom he frequently drew portraits.

He was a founder of the Society of the Cincinnati, our nation's premier patriotic organization, for which he designed the insignia and credentials.

He was asked to design the coinage of this new nation.

He designed the principal buildings in the temporary national capital of New York, as well as the homes and pavilions of wealthy Philadelphians.

L'Enfant became a celebrity and was acknowledged as the pre-eminent artist and designer of the late 18th century United States.

He offered his services to design the new capital and was given the job.

The problems began almost as soon as he started work in March 1791.

Jefferson was politically at odds with L'Enfant's peers and Washington's most trusted associates who were all members of the Cincinnati (for which Jefferson was not qualified) and there likely was an element of jealousy for L'Enfant's successes and reputation which over-shadowed his own in the artistic world; he was certainly unalterably opposed to urbanity and cities.

L'Enfant foresaw the rise of a great nation, a great "empire" within this new society which was modeled on the best of the past and which would – in L'Enfant's opinion – lead the world into the future.

Drawing artistic inspiration from eight great European cities, L'Enfant applied those ideas to the unique characteristics of the site and its advantages afforded by nature to create a city plan unlike any other. His city was predicated on the democratic ideals of equality, opportunity and our new social / political order of consent by the governed and separation of powers, *not* the old order of forced homage to the glory and power of a single ruler and the privileged elite who took the wealth of the people for themselves.

Unfortunately, L'Enfant had not reckoned with petty jealousies. He was so busy looking forward and building for the future -- hundreds of years into the future -- that he neglected to look over his shoulder and watch his back.

L'Enfant was a 'foreigner', an émigré not born in this land. Many of the native Americans (meaning those already born here) distrusted the new arrivals. Furthermore, he was a Catholic and that was unacceptable to most natives whose ancestors had fled Europe because of religious persecution.

Compounding the personal matters was the issue of creating the new city in a location so critical, one with easy access to the unsettled mid-west, which was a real threat to the established financial interests of the east coast's existing commercial centers. It was all about who would make the money.

Eventually L'Enfant realized that some of the men appointed by the President to over-see the work in the new city (including Martha Washington's nephew as well as one of George's close friends), lacked basic ethics. A number of people either already had their hands in the till, or were trying to do so.

L'Enfant became a threat to too many competing interests. He was ordered to Philadelphia to prepare the designs of the new capital's buildings, including the Capitol. While he was gone his quarters were broken in and burgled -- all of his papers, books, drawings and models were taken, including Thomas Jefferson's drawings for the Virginia Capitol, which had been loaned to L'Enfant by the governor.

Oft repeated myths of his high-handedness, arrogance, or that he sailed back to France in a snit taking his drawings with him, are false. Some of the people who started the tales, or delighted in repeating them, were ultimately found to have L'Enfant's stolen documents which they used in attempts to enrich themselves. His drawings ended up in the hands of people who not only had no knowledge of how to create a city, they had no understanding of his words, his intentions or the drawings he produced in the process of developing his remarkable city plan.

They could not understand his creation because, with the possible exception of Philadelphia which was the largest town in the western hemisphere, there were no cities in the United States with which to compare it. Between 1790 and 1800 there were only six (6) communities in the United States with more than six thousand (6,000) population.

In 1790 New York County (not the city which was only a portion of the county's population) held 49,401, while Charleston, S.C., was the nation's fourth largest "city" with a total of 16,359 souls. Philadelphia was the largest "city" in the new United States.

In 1800, when the government moved to Washington, D. C., Philadelphia was still the largest town with a population of 70,280 in the "city" and 81,009 in the county. New York County -- not the "city", whose citizens were only a portion of the county's -- now had 60,515 people an astonishing increase (by their standards at that time) of a thousand new people a year! Suffolk County, Massachusetts, of which the "city" of Boston was but a part, had 46,928. Baltimore County (not the "city") had 23,791, and Charleston, S.C., was now in fifth place with a "city" population of 18,924.

Pittsburgh had 1,565; Williamsburg 1,600; Richmond, the new capital of Virginia, had 5,737; Augusta, Georgia, was right at 1,000 and Lancaster, Pennsylvania was a booming metropolis of 4,000 people.

In 1800 when Washington, D. C., officially became the national capital, its population was about 3,300 people including all government workers, officials, merchants, housewives, children, servants and the laborers who were clearing the land and constructing the city's first buildings.

Thus, when L'Enfant spoke in terms of building a city whose core would hold a population of a million people the Americans thought him crazy, impractical, and his vision impossible. They could not comprehend either his words or his plan because they had never seen a city – they did not know what a city was or could be. Europe was an unknown world.

L'Enfant's stolen documents fell into the hands of a number of people, among them George Washington's secretary (who was also Washington's nephew by marriage), who used the stolen works in various attempts to enrich himself. He ultimately committed suicide, but only after being a principal agent in the destruction of L'Enfant and his extraordinary city design.

L'Enfant died penniless on the outskirts of Washington in 1825, maintained in his final years by friends who stood by him to the end. He was never paid for his work here, and laid in an unmarked grave in Maryland until the early 20th century when his remains were exhumed and re-interred on the front slope of Arlington House over looking the city to which he gave his life.

Ironically, the plan of the city carved into the slab covering his remains is not the city plan he designed but the plan substituted by his surveyors, the Ellicott brothers, who thought they could design a better city than L'Enfant … and were later found to have some of his stolen documents.

George Washington was given the power to decide the city's plan by way of a Deed of Trust from the proprietors of the lands in the District of Columbia who surrendered their rights to their property for the good of the nation, and, because they were guaranteed to have given back to them the title to one-half of the buildable lots left for development after the land necessary for the streets and public buildings were subtracted. The other half of the lots left for development devolved to the government for sale in order to provide the money to stake out the plan, clear the land and construct public buildings.

L'Enfant took the individual proprietor's interests to heart, arranging his plan in such a way that no proprietor had a substantially greater proportion taken for public use than another. Each proprietor had a proportionately equal number of lots which were to be

returned to them.

The city was conceived as a beginning series of hamlets, each with their own purpose and character, which would increase over time and spread across the territory separating each from another. Connecting each of them was a web of streets at right angles criss-crossed by diagonal avenues that led from hamlet to hamlet to hamlet and to the sites of the major public buildings.

Thus there would be hamlets centered around and nearby the new Capitol building, others around the executive offices and president's house, others near the supreme court, others around the navy yard and harbor and yet others around the canals bisecting the city to provide commercial shipping.

There were to be sixteen of these hamlets initially. The first one was to be at the head of navigation of the Anacostia river harbor where L'Enfant's new drawbridge led from the capital to Maryland's eastern markets.

Each hamlet was to have its own character and a large public "square" ornamented and aggrandized by a different state of the Union in honor of its heroes, ideals and state identity. Around each of these states' enclaves would be found all levels of society. The very best sites would, of course, be on the wide avenues and around the ornamented "squares" which would be owned by the social, financial and political elite, since they could afford to pay the higher prices that these more desirable sites would command.

But, within two or three blocks surrounding the "squares" would be found all other classes on progressively more modest sites fronting more narrow streets. Thus, while there was a pecking order it was one that did not allow a single rich enclave where the elite would reside totally removed from the middle and working classes. All classes would reside together in each hamlet. It was to be democratic with a lower case "d."

Connecting these hamlets was the undulating grid of variable street widths and lot depths, all overlaid by the wide diagonal avenues that led to each "square." The avenues were to be grand boulevards 160 feet wide with a center carriage way flanked by rows of trees and promenades. Next in the pecking order were the right-angle grid streets, which descended in importance from 130 feet wide, to 110 feet wide, and, finally, the narrowest streets being 90 feet.

The carriage drives of the avenue / boulevards were the widest because they would carry the most traffic speeding across the city from hamlet to hamlet to public buildings. Each narrower treed street would have proportionately more narrow carriage ways and flanking promenades.

In between each hamlet would be secondary public spaces, "squares" of varying shape that would be given over to the purposes of churches, synagogues, libraries, academies, fraternal organizations, or similar groups that would have a positive effect on the community, and provide sites for monuments to notable leaders, movements and institutions.

In general, no avenue went farther than three eighths (⅜) to one-half (½) of a mile before turning into a hamlet's square, bumping up against public buildings, or twisting into a different direction or along a new axis leading to the next point, hamlet or square. L'Enfant specified that all of the principal places would be no more than 3 (three) to 4 (four) furlongs apart.

Why that precise distance? A furlong is one eighth (⅛) of a mile, or 40 poles, or 220 yards, or 660 feet. Three furlongs, three eighths of a mile, is approaching the outer

limits of normal visual comprehension – that is, the distance that a normal human being can still see and comprehend color, scale and detail. Beyond that distance objects are only seen in mass or outline, and colors degrade to shades of ever lighter grays and atmospheric lavenders. Beyond those limits architectural space becomes de-humanizing wherein the individual becomes increasing insignificant.

There were also height limitations: no house was to be higher than forty (40) feet, and, on the avenues, none were to be less than thirty five (35) feet. Thus along the avenues would be an almost continuous mass and cornice / roof line. This also meant the streets would be continuously flooded with natural light at all seasons of the year.

The "squares" were never square, but rather were all sorts of shapes and were approached in different ways from their neighbors, thus each node or hamlet had its own distinctive character, shape and orientation to the sun and traffic. Each hamlet then became readily identifiable and unique, never to be confused with another part of the city. Thus L'Enfant created physically and visually distinctive neighborhoods.

L'Enfant's plan also has a special arrangement of some building block masses where they border or touch upon the public "squares." Where this occurs he created specific points of some public spaces where the facades of the buildings bordering a portion or the entire "square" could bridge the streets to create partially or totally enclosed architectonic spaces, such as those existing in the cities that he stated were his models.

In a letter to Thomas Jefferson who was then the Secretary of State, L'Enfant stated that his models for the new city included such "grand" cities as London, Madrid, Paris, Amsterdam, Naples, Venice, Genoa, and Florence. Five of the eight were in southern Europe, four (one half of the total) in Italy and two of the three northern European examples -- London and Paris -- had fallen under the influence of Italian design and designers.

It is important to note that L'Enfant never mentioned as models such royalist examples as Versailles or other monarchal or totalitarian enclaves. This city was to be the center of a new social and political order, of the people, by the people, and for the people.

L'Enfant recognized that the area selected for the new city had a climate, horticulture and topography slightly more akin to southern Europe than northern. Washington is south of the U.S. "fall line" in Pennsylvania.

In the north of Europe the landscape is one of softly lit, gently undulating broad expanses of turf, clusters of shade trees, gentle streams and waterfalls, all framed, as in classic paintings, by verdant natural foliage.

In the hot south and more arid west, vegetation is either lush or has a more tenuous existence, manageable turf is not natural and horticulture is used to ornament architectural effects. Regularly spaced trees, patterned paving, sculpture and water-as-sculpture, are all deliberately placed to accentuate those effects. In the more intense southern sunlight, color, scale, texture and detail stand out in vivid relief against deep shadows. The illusion of depth and richness is not so much created by foreground foliage as by the darkened interior of foreground arcading and gatehouses.

L'Enfant might well be considered as America's first environmental designer because he worked ***with*** the existing advantages that nature had given the site in varied topography, high encircling ridges, streams and low-lying swamps, rather than forcing a static geometric plan on a site ill-suited to receive it. Unlike developers who bulldoze sites, cut down hills and fill valleys to level the field for maximum immediate profit, LEnfant had a long-term view of steady development and improvement through a comprehensive

framework that would serve all of the citizens' needs and aspirations.

Identifying the existing surface and ground water flowing down from the encircling high ridge into the city site, he channeled that water into public fountains that made it both useful and decorative to the populace, while simultaneously cutting uncontrolled flow to the low swampy areas.

L'Enfant recognized that the Anacostia River, the city's eastern flank, was the deepest and the best protected natural harbor on the eastern seaboard. If correctly managed the city would become the nation's most essential commercial hub for westward development of the United States. The city was laid out on a peninsula at the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers, and to insure that commerce struck at the very heart of the capital he ran canals through its center and alongside both commercial and public spaces, right where the swamps and uncontrolled streams had been.

A portion of the fresh water coursing down into the city was to be diverted and channeled to erupt as cascades directly below the new Capitol whose high site loomed over the center of the canal system. The power and flow of the high Capitol cascades, would, on the one hand symbolically "water" the seeds of democracy and free commerce, but also had the more practical effect of scouring silt from the rivers' flow at either end of the canals.

L'Enfant designed a city for a democratic people not for kings and courtiers. He designed a working commercial city which would stand on its own as a thriving entity, and which would grow naturally as the nation grew. His plan was for a natural city, a naturally occurring urban environment where employment was dependent upon the normal flow of commerce – not royal or political patronage.

Within this naturally developing city he designed passages of stateliness and monumentality whose final solutions ***could*** be drawn from antique molds, but they were to be distinctly special places, not the general rule of the city's ambiance. L'Enfant understood what so few designers today recognize: when everything is monumental and stately, then nothing is, because the ensemble degenerates into construction that is only big, dull, dehumanizing and intimidating, making the individual citizen appear insignificant.

If the majority of a site is domestic scale, picturesque and of a school that might best be described as "romantic," then it is by contrast that stateliness and monumentality derive their special aura. L'Enfant's Washington was designed to be largely of a domestic scale and picturesque, but with passages of remarkably large scaled stateliness.

Those passages of stateliness were as symbolic as they were practical. L'Enfant fully subscribed to the new democratic social order for which he left France to fight with the revolutionary Americans. The new government was comprised of three branches, each a check and balance on the others, and all were to be represented in his plan relative to their civic function.

The legislative branch was to be popularly elected, and while it was only one branch of the new government it had two equal houses, thus on top of Jenkins' Hill (Capitol Hill), L'Enfant's "pedestal awaiting a monument" he placed two equal facades side-by-side, overlooking the broad plain below that swept toward the unsettled west, which is known today as "The Mall".

"The Mall", at the center of the city and its largest space, was reserved for the public, the electorate, who chose the representatives in the two "houses" on top of the hill. Down its center ran the grandest avenue of all, flanked by gardens and bordered by theaters, places

of assembly and academies that would "*be attractive to the learned and afford diversion to the idle*."

The executive branch of government, the elected president, was to be housed on the next higher hill a mile and a half to the west of the Capitol, and above the banks of the Potomac River. An urban residence sited in what is today "Lafayette Square", it looked south across a terraced park and down the Potomac River toward George Washington's "Mt. Vernon."

The judicial branch, the third branch of the new government, was sited by L'Enfant on the high point part way between the legislative (Congress) and the executive (the President), but not on the direct line between the two. Its site was withdrawn to the side yet between the two, in its proper position to judge their actions and protect the nation's, the people's, interests. That site, ironically enough, is known today as "Judiciary Square," but has never been occupied by the Supreme Court for which it was created.

Water passage in ships was the easiest, fastest and most efficient way to get to "Washington City", the new capital. Visitors would sail up the Potomac River to the mouth of the canal system, passing by the equestrian monument of George Washington on the right bank of the Potomac, set in a field with clusters of shade trees as backdrop. This symbolic George Washington, at the intersection of the axes of the Capitol and President's house, would welcome them as they sailed into the canal to disembark at the city's center.

Unfortunately, L'Enfant was undermined and fired on 27 February 1792. The Ellicott's replaced him, altered his plan, and succeeded in surveying hundreds of lots into the river so that investors who came to claim their newly purchased land found them not just worthless, but nonexistent. The Ellicott's were fired and replaced by James Dermott, a mathematics teacher, who further altered the plan. It is this last iteration that a probably frustrated George Washington signed on 2 March 1797, his last official act as president, making Dermott's plats the official plan of the city

Little of L'Enfant's genius and planning was followed as the city's development deteriorated into compromise solutions derived by incompetent bureaucrats and uniquely unqualified politicians. The city became a laughing stock that was the butt of jokes here and abroad. For foreign diplomats it was a hardship post for which additional pay was provided.

Washington City became a tax absorber rather than a tax producer, where employment was dependent upon the vagaries of political patronage with a resulting turnover of population as one administration's hangers-on replaced another with frequent regularity. No one would or could plan for the future because there was no way to relatively insure success. The city became a stagnant, derelict farce, but one with grand pretensions.

Instead of avenues threading their way, twisting and turning across the city from one handsome hamlet to another, the native born surveyors laid out roadways that, like today's interstate highways, swept straight across the countryside crushing everything in their path and running <u>through</u>, not <u>to</u>, each neighborhood or hamlet.

The Capitol was built in the wrong place on Jenkins' Hill, being constructed too far west and for seventy five years perched precariously on the hill's forward slope, looking as if it would topple over any minute and slide into the mucky swamp at the bottom. The cascades were never installed; the canals predictably silted up, became unusable, and were finally filled in and paved over for streets, Constitution Avenue being one of them.

L'Enfant wrote that the president's house was moved out of the site prepared by him and

"*sunk into a declivity, twenty feet too low*." Instead of an urban residence with an extensive terraced park sweeping south to the river bank, the president's residence became a plantation house dropped down on the intermediate terraces and thus separated from the citizens and the city.

The *Mall* was a wasteland, part sold for development, part eventually taken for railroad sheds and train yards, increasingly bordered by industrial uses, crime and the city's red light district. The Smithsonian Institution's "*Castle*" began in 1846 on the Mall's south side and in 1851 was encircled by Downing's insular landscape unrelated to anything else. In 1868 an equally discordant first Agriculture Department rose between the *Castle* and Washington Monument.

As for Washington's equestrian monument, it was never placed at the site prepared for it at the crossing of the Capitol and White House axes on the Potomac River bank. Instead, a monumental obelisk, the world's tallest and heaviest, was proposed for the site but as they began it was soon discovered that there were underlying beds of marine clay, a substance which is rather like "silly putty"; if you push it down here, it pops up over there. If the Washington Monument obelisk continued to be built on the original site it would be unstable and likely topple over. Rather than return to the simple equestrian monument concept, they abandoned the original location and moved to the next nearest site capable of being made to support the tremendous weight, a site which was not on axis with either the Capitol or White House. For years it sat forlorn on its hillock, with no proper setting, and unrelated to any other part of the national capital city or its people.

Although L'Enfant was raised in 18th century Paris and used his native city as an essential model – literally copying some features of early and romantic Paris into the plan of Washington -- none of those features survived the tampering of his successors. Today's Paris, created in the mid-19th century by Baron Haussmann, likely owes more to the highway mentality of the engineer altered L'Enfant plan than the Washington plan owes to Paris.

Washington never developed much until the 20th century. There was a spurt of growth during and immediately after the Civil War, and again at the end of the 19th century. The Washington, D. C., which we experience today, is the work of a young man who was born in 1870.

His name was Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. "Rick" was the son of the famous Frederick Law Olmsted who designed New York's Central Park in 1857. Central Park was his father's first park work.

In the 100 years between his father's commencement with New York's Central Park in 1857 and Rick's death in 1957, there have been world-wide conflicts, mass murder and migrations, revolutions, famine, unprecedented poverty, social unrest, and deterioration of the built and natural environment.

During that same time a small band of talented designers attempted to bring beauty, social dignity, and a sense of community to the people of the cities, towns and countryside. These were the first landscape architects and city planners. Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., was the founder of the profession. Rick Olmsted, his son, was the first person in history to be specifically educated as a landscape architect. He was also the first teacher to educate others through a curriculum he established while still in his 20's.

As a child he accompanied his father to Washington when the senior Olmsted was called upon to solve the Capitol's problem of looking as if it were about to topple over and slide down the hill. The solution was to construct what was essentially an artificial hill, the "*Olmsted Terraces*", to the west of the Capitol, which provided a proper visual base to

the structure above and masked the fact that the Capitol was built in the wrong place.

At age 23 Rick worked with his father on their plan for Jackson Park in Chicago, to turn it into the famous 1893 "Columbian Exposition" – the astonishing Chicago World's Fair. As a study in ecological thinking and design, it has few equals, for after the Fair closed the monumental "stone" buildings, which were mostly papier mâché, plaster and wood, melted away to uncover the original park's marshes and waterways.

He then went to Asheville, North Carolina, to again represent his father in the work with *George Washington* Vanderbilt and architect Richard Morris Hunt, to create "Biltmore" estate. He was then 24.

It was about that time that he turned his attention to Washington, D. C.

It is he who redesigned the capital city into the picture perfect imagery that has been the manifestation of our national pride for a century.

In order to restore the Mall connection between the Capitol and the Washington Monument, Rick Olmsted proposed removal of (1) the railroad switch yards and terminals that had bulldozed their way across the Mall in the 19th century, where today stand the National Gallery of Art and the Air & Space Museum, and, (2) the disparate landscape treatments in favor of L'Enfant's single cohesive space for the simple pleasures of all the people..

South of the Washington Monument was a large tidal basin created by separating that portion of the original Washington shoreline with the muck dredged from the river bottom by Col. Peter Hains' Corps of Engineers as they deepened the river's navigation channel. The dredged soil was deposited in the middle of the Washington side of the river, effectively cutting in half the Potomac River that L'Enfant knew, to create the great Potomac Parks that stretch the entire length of the city's western waterfront.

Rick is responsible for the design of the Jefferson Memorial on this landfill, not for Thomas Jefferson, but as a memorial to ***all*** of the national Founders, a classical pantheon centering a cluster of six large buildings which were to be public gymnasia and places for wholesome recreation for the public.

Rick then chose a site in the middle of the old Potomac River for another monument, one that he called the "Lincoln Memorial." The Potomac River's marshes and tidal pools which had provided great hunting and fishing to Washingtonians for a century were filled in to connect Lincoln's proposed monument to the Washington Monument's grounds.

Finally, Rick connected Abraham Lincoln's Monument to Robert E. Lee's home, which had been confiscated as war booty and its grounds transformed into Arlington Cemetery; by a bridge he called "*Memorial Bridge*", as a way of physically and symbolically re-connecting the North and the South through their two great leaders. This was Rick's effort at reconciliation and healing of the painful rupture in our national family by the Civil War.

At Arlington Cemetery, Rick Olmsted swept away the multitudes of disparate and artless funereal monuments marring the slopes of this astonishingly beautiful topography. Some monuments were exiled to the far reaches of the cemetery out of the public's view and in their place Rick called for the rows of simple and standardized markers creating the appearance of ranks of soldiers who fell where they stood in formation.

To Rick Olmsted we owe the simplicity, and the quiet satisfying elegance, of the image of stoic citizen-soldiers who have laid down their lives for their friends and countrymen.

All of these, and much more, were conceived between 1895 and 1900, as a celebration of the turn of that century -- which was also the centennial of the city becoming the national capital. Using the Lincoln Memorial as a *rond point*, he spun out drives to connect his proposed park systems up and down river and into the heart of the present, and future, city. He designed a comprehensive urban plan to develop and make useful the waterfronts of both rivers, created Rock Creek Park which threads its way up to Maryland past the Olmsted designed National Zoo, laid out the street extensions and public parks for the enlargement of the city, and proposed the Anacostia water park. The Olmsteds also designed the grounds of the White House.

In 1900 the American Institute of Architects held its annual convention in Washington. The convention was called to address the design and re-design of Washington in order to cure its urban ills, rectify as much as possible the mistakes due to deviations from L'Enfant's original plan, and, to create new solutions to carry this nation and its capital into the 20th century.

Olmsted was the principal speaker. He laid out what should be done and how it should appear. The majority of the speakers following him elaborated on his themes, including how and why to effectively use stateliness and monumentality to advantage in civic space.

Subsequently, Congress provided for the design of improvements to the capital city under the direction of Senator James McMillan of Michigan, by creating the *Senate Park Commission*, known popularly as "*The McMillan Commission*." The first person appointed was Rick Olmsted. He was 30. Its purpose was to lay his design before the public in a more finished form, which had heretofore been suggested only in words, photos and sketches.

On 22 March 1901, Rick met at the Capitol with Senator McMillan and the other initial appointee, architect Daniel H. Burnham, to decide the third commission member and establish a budget for the work. Burnham mentioned architect Charles F. McKim, but proposed John Singer Sargent, to which Rick "*objected inoffensively*" and suggested John Carrere instead. Burnham preferred McKim, and although it was agreed to lay the matter of the third member aside for the time, Burnham, without further consulting Rick, spoke privately with Senator McMillan that afternoon, giving him to understand that McKim was to be chosen.

Regarding the budget and professional fees for the work, Rick wrote that "*Mr. Burnham in first conversation with McMillan expressing his appreciation of the honor and opportunity offered him, said that for himself he would be willing to serve without compensation, though he thought* ***I might feel differently as it is really my business***. [Emphasis added] *I said nothing at the time. When we were together Mr. Burnham spoke of the honorarium and I mentioned $3,000 each as seeming right to J.C.O.* [John C. Olmsted] *and me. He said it seemed reasonable to him and promptly added it to estimate of expenses without further remark about serving gratuitously."*

Both Burnham (55) and McKim (54) were old enough to be Rick's father, but neither of them had ever undertaken anything like *this*. A fourth member was soon added to the commission, sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (53), who was included only for the power of his name, and while he was kept informed he took no active role as he was too ill with cancer. These three were famous, and powerful, artisans who were accustomed to working on a large and grandiloquent scale for the elite, rather than parks and quiet urban passages to give pleasure, inspiration and relief to all the people. Rick knew that it was essential to gain the support of the rich and powerful for an aggrandized monumental core on which they could promenade, in order to get the politicians' votes, and funding,

to achieve his larger end, the public park system for the American people and their national capital.

Rick led his associates, Burnham, who was made chairman because of his administrative skills, and McKim, on a study tour of Europe, the itinerary of which Rick arranged in order to teach them what they needed to know to provide the appropriate illustrative drawings to enthrall the public and politicians. He led them through major cities like Paris, Rome, Venice, Vienna and Budapest (considered one of the most advanced cities in the world at the time) as well as smaller pertinent towns, private estates, parks and public gardens, inspecting streetscapes and landscape, vistas, fountains, bridges, facade treatments, wooded allées, waterfronts and scale, always scale, because no element stood alone but rather was always relative to, or, its importance dependent upon, some other object, space or surroundings.

Understanding that his older colleagues might have some reluctance in taking instruction from him since he was so much younger, Rick had authoritative friends he called upon to provide pertinent lessons, scholar-professionals like Édouard André who spoke to them at Vaux-le-Vicomte on the works of André Le Nôtre, parks and city planning. An entirely new world opened to Daniel Burnham who wrote that "*every idea I ever had, of architecture and landscape is already modified; this is the source of things*." Rick's study tour and influence had such a profound effect on Burnham that for the last eleven years of his life he became not only a confirmed classicist, but a critical proponent of city planning and the *City Beautiful* movement.

Rick was thoroughly prepared to run his tightly controlled and intense study tour of Europe. Charles Moore was Senator McMillan's assistant, secretary of the commission, and, the biographer of both Burnham and McKim: he wrote that *"Mr. Olmsted's tin case of Washington maps and plans was always at hand; his ever-ready Kodak missed no important object; and his file cards recorded heights and breadths with method and without end."* In another place Moore wrote "*Olmsted brought a long tin cylinder full of maps of the District of Columbia; and a tripod camera with a special lens"* and that "*Mr. Olmsted's camera and steel-tape were applied to risers and treads and balusters, to heights and widths."* Those photographs and details were essential, not only to the commission report and the public exhibition, but to the work built in Washington for the next fifty years.

Burnham wrote home from Rome that "*because we must see certain things we have had to work good and hard, and the result has been that in three days I have seen very much more of this city than during the week of our former stay. The gardens of villas in the city we have seen; we have permits for those outside and tomorrow begin to go through them …. We have been in the Baths of Caracalla and in the Capitoline Hill; we have also seen some of the most exquisite bits of the best architecture*." Prior to leaving for the study tour Burnham was chosen to design a new railway station in Washington in order to remove the old station, tracks and sheds from the Mall. Now he received a message from the States that, while he was in Europe, he should visit the railway station at Frankfort-am-Mainz, the third largest station in the world whose floor plan was what was wanted by the American railroad companies. Fortunately, the German station's floor plan fit exactly in the antique Baths of Caracalla that Burnham had just visited, thus was born Washington's *Union Station*.

In Vienna their hotel on the *Ringstrasse* provided first hand lessons on the civilizing social influences of a tree-lined boulevard, promenade and well designed street furniture, of which they took immediate, and satisfactory, advantage. At the Schönbrunn Rick directed them to the classically inspired *Gloriette*, a hill-top open pavilion whose transparency was what he sought in the design of the Lincoln Memorial, for the views through it would include not only the rows of markers in Arlington Cemetery, but the

hills of Virginia and the greater United States farther west beyond the horizon.

Returning from Europe by ship, the sketches and Rick Olmsted's drawings were laid out in the grille while they ate each evening. After landing in New York, each went back to his own office in Brookline, Chicago or New York, to have their respective drawings and illustrations prepared based on Rick's scheme and the 400 photographs he had taken to guide them. They did not meet again until the Senate Park Commission Exhibit opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art on January 15, 1902

Charles Moore later wrote: *"Of the three men, Mr. Olmsted was the only one who had made any study whatever of the Washington problem. In a paper read before the American Institute of Architects in December, 1900, he outlined a general treatment of the Mall calculated to restore that park connection between the Capitol and the White House originally planned by L'Enfant -- a treatment fundamentally the same as the one adopted."*

Rick's design and planning was approved by the President and Congress in 1902, after critical acclaim about the huge Corcoran Gallery exhibition. We have been building toward his solutions ever since.

The monumental core of the city from the Capitol westward to the Potomac River has developed generally along his lines. The eastern portion of the city with its extensive Anacostia water front has been largely ignored because it is working class, substantially black, and lacks the vote-getting clout of the western area between the Capitol and Arlington Cemetery, which contains the monuments upon which politicians can chisel their names for posterity.

Interestingly, Rick's original design concepts were honed during his work for a rich man's exclusive estate, but their genesis was in his social concerns about dehumanizing urban life, his love of natural beauty and his lower case "d" democratic idealism. He thought that it would be far better for the same amount of money to be spent on libraries and facilities for the public rather than the construction of a rich man's exclusive plaything.

The planning for the national capital began at Biltmore estate in Asheville, North Carolina, and it was that enormous private establishment of some 127,000 acres that was the experimental model. The National Forestry Service, the establishment of the first national forests, and the National Park Service are also derived from the Olmsteds' work at Biltmore.

Those who have visited Biltmore will more readily understand the application of its 5-part stately core to the monumental core of Washington, D.C. Rick's Washington plan substitutes the Capitol building for Biltmore house; the Washington Mall for Biltmore's esplanade; the Washington Monument and its grounds for the *Rampe Douce* cross axis; the Reflecting Pool's allée for Biltmore's allée through the woods; and finally, the Lincoln Memorial for Biltmore's temple of Diana the Huntress.

Rick Olmsted lived a quiet self-effacing life designing, with his brother John C. Olmsted, what are now some of the country's most famous cities, neighborhoods and parks – both urban and rural. From 1900 to 1933 Rick gave up one-quarter of his life to design this capital city for all future generations of Americans. He spent one week here each month freely directing the design affairs of the city, traveling by rail, first from his home in Brookline, Massachusetts, and later from his place in California.

He died in 1957, and has been little understood and / or studied since then.

Olmsted's and L'Enfant's similar ideas of social responsibility, beauty, design, and community development might best be understood through a letter Rick wrote to his friend J. P. Fox from Biltmore in 1895.

He first responded to J.P.'s query whether he had seen a certain publication with views of the new Fogg Museum at Harvard. Rick acknowledged that he had seen the article and that he thought the Fogg design was "*a page from a Prix de Roma competition dropped down by accident in Harvard Yard. It was only by luck that it failed to strike one of the older buildings*."

In his letter J.P. had written Rick that the world should be grateful for the Olmsteds because of the great recreational and hygienic value of their park and urban planning "science."

Rick shot back (with apologies for partially paraphrasing his long rebuke):

> "*You are a Philistine.*
>
> *For your information, my 'science' as you term it, is not a science, it is an art.*
>
> *Hygienic and recreational values are mere by-products of a more important undertaking.*
>
> *The citizens who walk through Franklin Park could get just as good air in the Cambridge clay pits, and they would certainly get more and better exercise in the YMCA.*
>
> *The value of my art is, that a person who walks through Franklin Park* [or Yosemite, Niagara, the Fenway, Druid Hills, Rock Creek Park or any of thousands of other Olmsted sites nation-wide], *slowly relaxes, becomes more at ease, and has his mind and thoughts turned gently into more civilized and constructive directions.*
>
> *He / she enjoy themselves, and they relax in the company and companionship of other human beings; they pause to sit on a park bench, and fall into easy conversation with their neighbor. They commune and they better understand the dignity of one another. In short, they create community*."

Those civilizing influences, these stage sets for the advancement of civilization and democracy, was a driving motive of the Olmsteds' works, especially here in resurrecting and extending the genius of Pierre L'Enfant.

By pushing the western boundary of the city's Potomac riverfront out to his new Lincoln Memorial, Rick effectively moved the center of the monumental core from the Mall to the grounds of the Washington Monument. The term "monumental core" does <u>*not*</u> refer to monuments, but rather to the extensive public park spaces and the large-scaled, stately, buildings surrounding it. The Washington Monument and its grounds thus became the keystone, the central connecting link, of our national civic life, our people's park, that stretches north, east, south and west, each with a different descriptive name.

On the north is the *Ellipse*, beyond which is the White House and the office of the president. On the East is the *Mall*, beyond which is the Capitol with the offices of our elected representatives and senators, our democracy in action. On the South is the *Tidal Basin* beyond which is the Jefferson Memorial, symbolizing the constitutional struggles and contradictions in our philosophical beginnings. To the west is the forested *Reflecting Pool*, a sheltered place for solemn introspection beyond which is the Lincoln Memorial,

Memorial Bridge, Lee and Arlington Cemetery, the manifestation of our violent rupture, loss, redemption and the continuing sacrifice required to protect and defend *We the People*.

The Washington Monument, and its grounds, is the center that was supposed to bind together the elements of our national people's park. Unfortunately, none of Rick's planning and design for this centerpiece, the core of our national image, has been executed. The monument stands on its shaggy hillock just as it has for the past 110 years, as awkwardly sited as the Capitol building was until Rick's father's terraces and landscaping finally gave it a satisfactory base.

The "McMillan Commission" design for the Washington Monument and its grounds was an enormous sweep of marble terraces, platforms, balustrades, stairs and pools, beyond anything the ancients could have conceived. It was, however, at least <u>in scale</u> with the monument and provided Washington's huge obelisk with a proper base. Unfortunately, it was also prohibitively expensive and, to some, distinctly un-American because it was derived from classical Rome, Greece and royalist France, rather than being drawn from a uniquely American perspective. The classical solution ***<u>might</u>*** be explained away by the influence and proliferation of the classically inspired great estates then being constructed by the nation's wealthy, merchant princes whose incomes rivaled or exceeded the assets of most European monarchs. Or, even though the origins of the solution was Biltmore's relatively restrained *Rampe Douce*, perhaps the designers saw an opportunity to out-do their celebrated achievement at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

Regardless of the rationale for the enormous marble terraces and classical excesses, it was doomed almost from the start because of the site. The same marine clay that had caused the Washington Monument to be moved to its present hillock also underlay substantial portions of the monument grounds. Some of America's best engineers addressed the issue of the disturbance of the site and the effect thereon by the great weight of the terraces. It was decided to err on the side of conservatism by not taking a chance on toppling the monument if the classical scheme was built.

While work progressed steadily for thirty years on the park elements surrounding the Washington Monument, the monument's grounds were pretty much left alone. The Lincoln Memorial was completed by architect Henry Bacon and the Democrats, wanting to at least equal the Republican Party's Lincoln, saw Rick's "*Hall to the Founding Fathers*", which was executed by architect John Russell Pope, named for just one of the Founders, Thomas Jefferson. The gymnasia and halls for the people were quietly shelved. The Mall was cleared, planted, and preparations begun for the many museums that would eventually line its length.

During World War I "temporary" military buildings were erected on the public park grounds flanking the Reflecting Pool leading to the Lincoln Memorial site. Those on the north side, along Constitution Avenue, were still there into the early 1970s, when they were finally taken down and replaced with "Constitution Gardens" whose newly planted trees promptly died. The only improvement to the Washington Monument was the installation of a ring of flag poles and American flags, an attention getting device reminiscent of fluttering pennants delineating a used car lot.

Rick Olmsted's design of Washington's monumental core became a victim of its own success as the American public came in droves to experience the power and majesty of our nation, especially as its imagery was seen daily in the new medium of television. More and more intense activities were packed into an area that was originally devoted to the simple pleasures of the people, where they could stroll, picnic, fly a kite, bicycle, or sit on a park bench to relax, think, and fall into easy conversation with a complete stranger.

Proximity to the White House and the power of the presidency gave the area extraordinary prestige with which special interests wanted to be aligned in the belief that, by association, they would be seen as more special, elite and deserving, than anyone else. *We the People*, gave way to *Us the Special Few*, as the leaders of these interests looked at the people's park land and, like real estate developers, saw only an underused wasteland that could be turned effectively to advance their particular agenda as a group apart.

From the beginning memorials were conceived of by both L'Enfant and Olmsted as an essential part of the civic experience in our national capital city. But those memorials were to be discreet, in scale to the space allotted, and spread throughout the city where they were a daily part of the city's experience by all of our citizens, especially the elected representatives whose home away from home this was intended to be. Few of them live here now and the only knowledge they have of the United States, its citizens or its capital, is the limited view they have from their office windows, committee rooms or their campaign donors.

Sadly, we have become a nation of observers to be entertained rather than participants in our national civic discourse. Every day hundreds of tour buses pull up to disgorge thousands of spectators who stand slack jawed on immense viewing platforms to be lectured about what that thing out there is and why they are supposed to be impressed by it. Then they are herded back on the bus and driven to the next site to which they could have just as easily strolled, stopping along the way to relax in the shade of the trees, converse with someone from a different place and learn more about the United States.

In the 1970s and 1980s hundred of millions of dollars were spent to tear down parts of Burnham's *Union Station* to turn it into a "visitor's center." A gigantic hole was ripped into the floor of the vaulted "Baths of Caracalla" waiting room to pack in tiers of theater seating that faced a huge screen on which flashed images of Washington. If the visitor just walked through the front door, they could see the real thing, instead of the photo of it inside. A few years later even more money was spent to "restore" Union Station, and in the process turn it into a neighborhood shopping mall where the travelling public is crowded into a constricted, and imminently forgettable, back room.

Like Union Station, both the capital city and the core of Rick Olmsted's park system have been badly treated for the past forty years. This is partly due to each organization or interest group wanting their particular memorial as close as possible to the seats of power, the White House and Capitol, when there were far better locations that would have made their memorial even more remarkable and memorable, while improving the capital city for every visitor or resident. By some strange rationale we have wrongly equated "important" with extensive, meaning the land area covered. Yet, George Washington's monument occupies an area of only 55 feet square, and ***it*** is the most important monument in town.

Too many of us have forgotten what the Olmsteds knew too well: how to create remarkable public space for the people and how to make a monument important and memorable, even one of modest size. One of their techniques was to *darken the foreground, lighten the background, and create the illusion of greater depth and richness than actually exists*. Just as important was allowing the visitor to discover, as if by accident, some view of an object or space, where the surprise of discovering it forever seared into the mind that wondrous moment, making it a very personal discovery.

Extensive viewing platforms occupied by ten thousand gawking tourists snapping the same photo is neither memorable nor unique; it is, however, virtually guaranteed to give the visitor sore feet, exhaustion, and wondering why they did that anyway(?). Thus it was that Rick Olmsted laid down certain rules for the treatment of Roosevelt Island

across from, and slightly up river of, the Lincoln Memorial. The island should be kept natural with no staged architectural platforms to intrude on the experience of meandering along a shady woodland path to stumble quite "by accident" on to its sandy shore, where, across the waters of the Potomac, was the unexpected sight of the Lincoln Memorial's gleaming white marble, its stepped "watergate" and the sculpted arches of Memorial Bridge. Any person falling into this vista would forever remember it, making it a very valued personal experience.

The same design idea dictated the views from the Washington Monument grounds toward the four arms of the people's park. No one walking out onto the west slope of the monument grounds can see the White House or the Jefferson Memorial until they are directly on axis with it. From the monument grounds the only thing seen, aside from the tops of a few roofs here and there, is the sweep of woodland and the crowns of the trees, but as one strolls across the field a vista abruptly opens where a line of trees have been left out, and there, in the distance, is the White House or the Jefferson Memorial, and then taking a few more paces, the view closes and the building disappears. Those brief "key hole", or "proscenium" views are framed by dark tree trunks, shadowy leaves and foreground foliage, thus making the buildings appear more exciting and distant than they really are.

The Lincoln Memorial was originally separated from the Washington Monument by the same sort of "key hole" opening in the trees, which prevented any view of the Lincoln Memorial or the long sweep of the Reflecting Pool until the person was directly on axis. Moving left or right just a few paces caused the view to close. That screen of trees has now been destroyed by the World War II Memorial which has obliterated the linear connection between the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, making the two monuments appear closer and relatively dull.

In recent years the proliferation of mega-monuments in the park has largely destroyed the purposes for which the park was created, as a place for the simple pleasures of all of the citizens of this nation to stroll, contemplate, relax, recreate and meet one another in a pleasant environment. Polo fields, softball fields, picnic areas or places to just sit quietly enjoying the view, or each other, have vanished in a swirl of overwrought stone and gilded bronze.

Few people know it, but Rick Olmsted created a second design for the park's central connecting link, the Washington Monument grounds. Burnham and McKim had died, the overwhelming classical terraces would never be built because of their expense and great weight, leaving Rick to return to his roots and, just as his father had done with the Capitol, solve the problem *his* way. He produced an all-landscape, uniquely American solution that is both inexpensive and seamlessly unifies the four surrounding dissimilar arms of the Mall, Ellipse, Tidal Basin and Reflecting Pool into one cohesive whole – and, it reinforces the "key hole" views of the historic structures at each end. It uses nature to advantage, cupping the land, visually buttressing the Washington Monument, and returns the average American to their proper civic role as the park's most important element.

There was a recent competition seeking ideas for the completion of the Washington Monument grounds. Hundreds of submissions were sent in; 24 were chosen for further development. None have any relevance to the Washington Monument or its site; indeed, most of the proposals distract attention from the Washington Monument, make no attempt to connect to the other parts of the park, and treat our citizens as attendees to be entertained at theater or sports contests, rather than vital participants in our national life.

The parks were created for the <u>living</u>, for the exercise of <u>democracy</u>, for the future of <u>all the people</u> of the nation and those living here. The parks were ***<u>not</u>*** created for monuments to war, death, destruction or division. Washington's Monument was made

the centerpiece of the park system to symbolize the leadership and strength of purpose necessary to guide the nation. The "*Hall of the Founders*", the Jefferson Memorial, was created to symbolize the civil discourse and compromise necessary to establish our revolutionary social experiment that shook the world with our declaration of freedom, equality and justice. The Lincoln Memorial was created to symbolize the healing of our violent rupture, the tragic sacrifices required to unite and defend us, and the wisdom necessary to guide us to the future.

Other than Washington's, only two large monuments were ever intended here: Lincoln's and Jefferson's. No other large monuments were ever intended, and none should have been built here, that displaces the people of the nation in the exercise of our democracy for which the park was created.