



Freed from its tangle of highways and bridge infrastructure, the Northwest Rectangle can build on its abundant open space and prestigious location near the White House, National Mall, and Potomac waterfront to forge an identity as a great cultural and commemorative destination.

# Northwest Rectangle



Aerial view of the Northwest Rectangle

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## Objectives and Strategies

### Northwest Rectangle Objective:

Establish the Northwest Rectangle as a cultural destination and premier workplace that is easily accessible and walkable. Create an interconnected system of beautiful and well designed parks that extend the qualities of the National Mall and link the Kennedy Center with the Lincoln Memorial and the White House and President's Park.

### Primary Strategies

- Link the Kennedy center to the Lincoln Memorial by establishing a premier park and extending the strong symbolic qualities of the National Mall along the waterfront.
- Connect the Kennedy Center to the Northwest Rectangle by establishing expansion space for the Kennedy Center and extending E Street over the Potomac Freeway.
- Link the Kennedy Center to the White House and President's Park by establishing E Street as a beautiful commemorative park corridor with places for cultural enrichment and leisure activities.
- Create new places for parks, offices, residences and shops to increase the mix of uses.



## From Marshland to Federal Office Precinct

In the early days of Washington, this area of the city was best known for its surrounding swampy marshlands. In the years before the Civil War, the riverfront area attracted a variety of industrial enterprises such as breweries, a glass factory, and lime kilns. In 1856 gas storage tanks were constructed at the intersection of Virginia and New Hampshire Avenues and for the next 100 years they dominated the working-class neighborhood.

Later in the 20th century, the New Deal era and the proximity to the White House spurred federal interest in establishing an enclave of major government headquarters buildings, a counterpart to the Federal Triangle complex on the east side of the Ellipse. The newly named “Northwest Rectangle” became known for the modern Classical style of its semi-public buildings. The gas tanks were dismantled in 1947, the same year that the State Department relocated to 21st and D Streets, bringing with it a monumental style of government architecture to the neighborhood.

In the 1960s, the Northwest Rectangle was the site of some of Washington’s most ambitious highway and bridge projects, such as the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge and the E Street Expressway. In 1965, the Watergate apartment complex opened, and a few years later construction began for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on the old brewery site.

Cultural centers anchor either end of the precinct: the Kennedy Center is located to the west and Constitution Hall and the Corcoran Gallery, among others, are to the east. Most of the land is in federal ownership, and the precinct is home to several government agencies, international organizations, and private offices housed in vast, medium, and small office buildings. Once known as the Old Naval Observatory, the Naval Surgical Hospital sits quietly on its hilltop surrounded by highways. With its historic buildings, expansive grounds, and panoramic views of the Potomac River, the site potentially offers character and distinction in an otherwise bland precinct. Numerous small- to medium-sized parks stretch along parts of Virginia Avenue and E Street. There are few shops and restaurants in the area.

For the most part, the precinct is now built to capacity. However, the Kennedy Center has plans to deck the Potomac Freeway to construct cultural and office space. The U.S. Institute of Peace is building a new headquarters that will be a landmark and gateway for this part of the city, and the American Pharmaceutical Association’s expansion will include leased space for federal agencies.

## A Precinct in Search of an Identity

In spite of its prominent location, surrounding cultural attractions, and abundant open space, the Northwest Rectangle has not retained a cohesive identity. Its urban integrity is undermined by the tangle of high-speed roads, interrupted streets, institutional scale, and absence of street life.

The Inner Loop Freeway planned around downtown Washington during the 1960s was finally abandoned in 1977, and the uncompleted portion includes the E Street Expressway and the Potomac Freeway. These “highways to nowhere” are six lanes wide in some places, unconnected to surrounding streets and highways, and not used to capacity. This aborted network with its highway chasms, overpasses, and interchanges, along with the sprawling Theodore Roosevelt Bridge infrastructure, profoundly disrupts the area’s urban fabric.

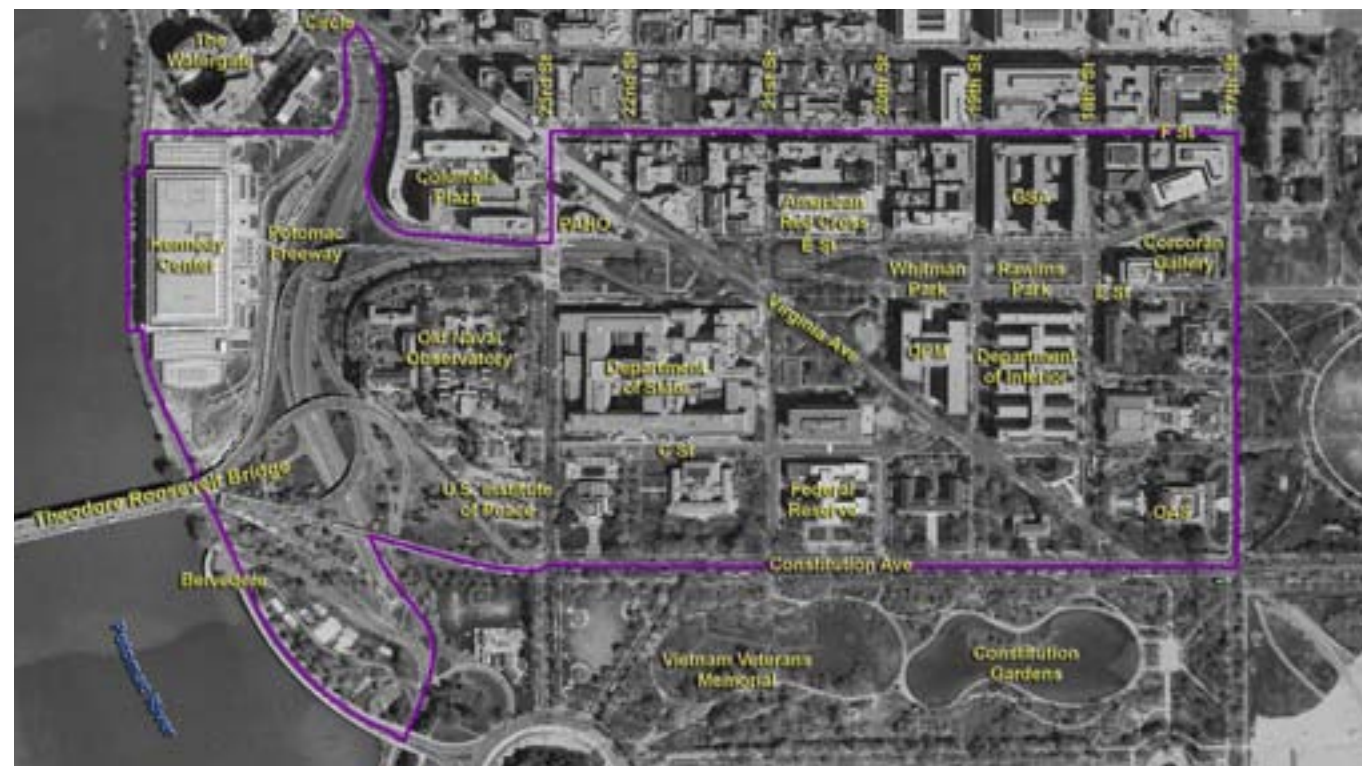
Each year, more than five million people attend performances and visit the Kennedy Center. Reaching the center on foot is perilous. The Metro rail station is six blocks away and there is no direct or clearly marked path to the center from the White House and President’s Park, the National Mall, or the riverfront. Pedestrians, therefore, improvise a hazardous footpath and sprint across either the freeway or the parkway.

Virginia Avenue loosely forms the spine of the precinct although no buildings front on it; the avenue’s main effect is to form a string of chamfered building sites and angular plazas and open spaces. On axis with the Washington Monument, it terminates ingloriously to the west at a “Do Not Enter” sign and parking lot. In recent years, security barriers have proliferated in the area, blocking entrances to government buildings and barricading streets, particularly E Street, a critical east-west city artery.

For an urban setting, the Northwest Rectangle boasts a substantial amount of parkland and open space. However, because of the intrusion of disruptive highways, the absence of street life, and the lack of a clear unifying vision to knit the fragmented parcels together into a coherent ensemble, this open space today stands as a missed opportunity.

The Northwest Rectangle is defined by F Street, NW on the north, Constitution Avenue on the south, Potomac River on the west, and 17th Street, NW on the east.

Intrusive security barricades, highways, tunnels, and overpasses disrupt the urban fabric and discourage pedestrians from traversing the area.



21st Street at the Department of State



C Street near the Department of State



Potomac Freeway in front of the Kennedy Center



E Street looking to the Kennedy Center



## Opportunities to Capitalize on a Prominent Location

The Northwest Rectangle can forge its own distinctive identity of historic, architectural, cultural, and scenic interest by capitalizing on the prominence of the Kennedy Center, a living memorial to President John F. Kennedy, and strengthening its connection to nearby iconic landscapes. Decking over disruptive roadways, creating a new waterfront park along the Potomac River, strategically placing cultural attractions, shops, and visitor amenities along the E Street corridor, and cohesively knitting together the parks and plazas are fundamental to achieving this objective.

In a rejuvenated Northwest Rectangle, pedestrians would easily be able to make their way between the river, the National Mall, the Kennedy Center, and downtown Washington. New streamlined and less intrusive infrastructure for the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge would allow easy access in a beautiful park-like setting between the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Memorial.

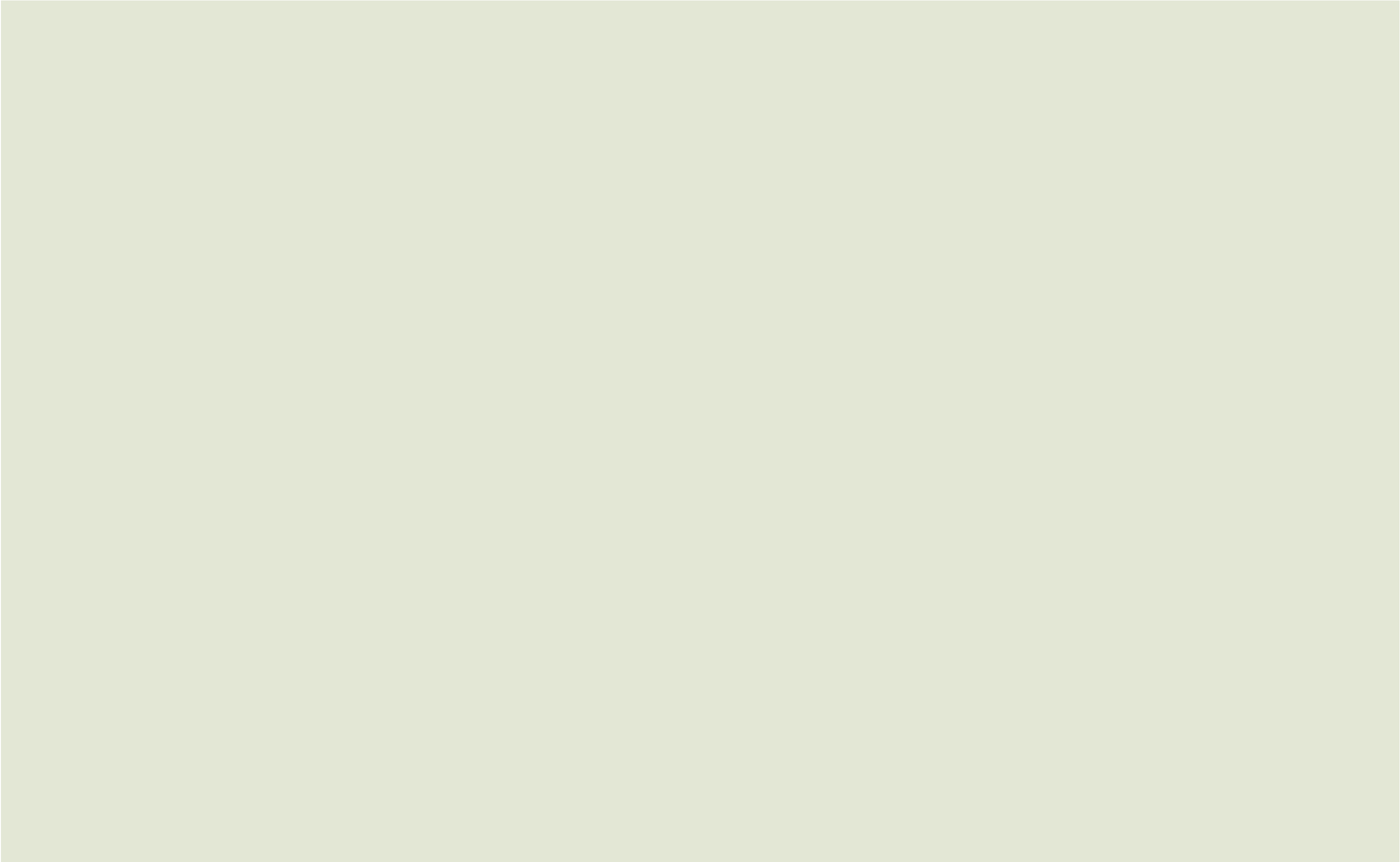
The linear E Street commemorative park would clearly connect the White House and President's Park on the east to the Kennedy Center on the west, and infuse the precinct with some of the special character of the National Mall. The commemorative park could honor figures of the arts, thereby strengthening the identity of the precinct and the relationship to the Kennedy Center.

These strategies would enhance the area's position in the monumental core and offer amenities for workers, visitors, and residents.



Current view looking southeast from the Kennedy Center toward the Lincoln Memorial

Tunneling and realigning the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge infrastructure will permit a graceful connection between the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Memorial.





## A Waterfront Park Linking Presidential Memorials: Kennedy Center and Lincoln Memorial

The Kennedy Center's identity as a national presidential memorial could be reinforced in a dramatic new setting with clear visual and physical ties to nearby memorials and ceremonial areas. These linkages would extend the qualities of the National Mall into the Northwest Rectangle along the Potomac River to the north.

Reconfiguring the maze of interchange ramps south of the Kennedy Center to and from the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge would re-establish this area's connection to the Mall and the waterfront by creating an expansive pedestrian-friendly park. The park would link the Kennedy Center with the Lincoln Memorial, create an urban gateway to the nation's capital, and make space for commemorative, recreation, and leisure activities.

The park would contain a new ceremonial boulevard and commemorative landscape to establish a strong visual and symbolic connection between the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Memorial, reinforcing the commemorative function of the Kennedy Center and infusing the honorific character of the National Mall with the urban identity of the Northwest Rectangle. This new configuration would also dramatically improve the entry experience from Virginia to the nation's capital. The motorist would view an expansive swath of parkland that focuses on a sweeping landscape between the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Memorial before heading into short tunnels that connect the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge to Constitution Avenue, E Street, and Ohio Drive.

Constitution Avenue, which currently terminates as a bridge ramp on the west, could also be restored as one of Washington's most admired ceremonial boulevards. Decking the highway ramps to create a waterfront park would allow Constitution Avenue to be extended and re-

connected to its historic belvedere on the Potomac River, which could then serve as an important place for public waterfront access as well as for a future memorial. The riverfront park would also provide a generous amount of flexible open space that can be used for sports fields, leisure activities, and events to serve nearby workers, residents, and students.



Existing Conditions



Illustrated Framework Plan



The current maze of bridge and highways ramps could be replaced with an inviting waterfront park.

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## The Commemorative E Street Corridor

The Northwest Rectangle's identity can be strengthened through a cohesively designed series of parks centered on E Street, NW between the Kennedy Center on the west and the White House on the east, making the Rectangle a destination in its own right.

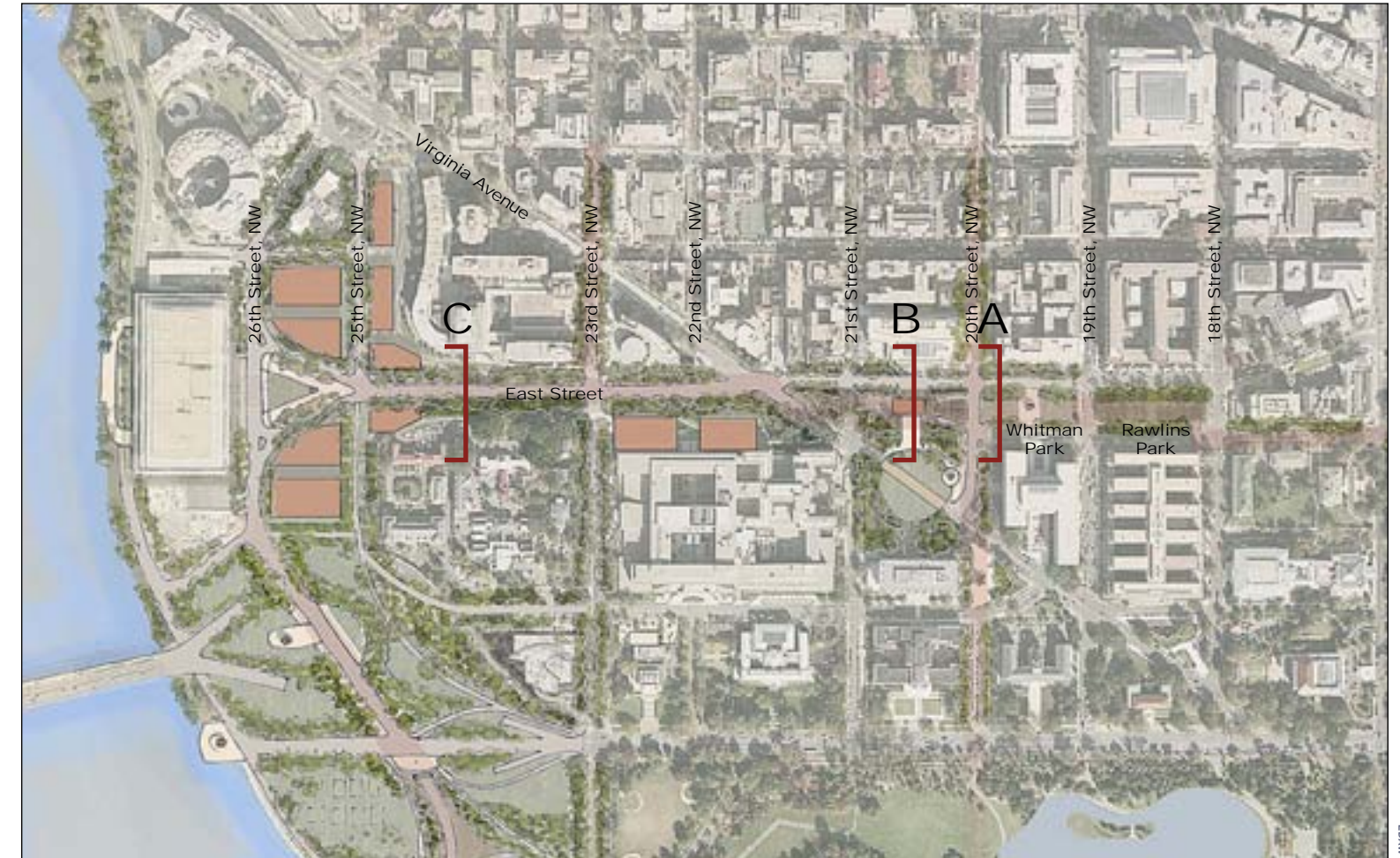
While Rawlins Park at 18th and E Streets is a handsome urban square within the E Street corridor, the open spaces to the west are under-used, not well unified, and abruptly end at 22nd Street, four blocks east of the Kennedy Center. With E Street serving as the organizing spine, a series of cohesively designed open spaces combined with the plazas and building yards of the flanking government buildings will create a well-defined linear commemorative park between the White House and President's Park and the Kennedy Center.

The confluence of open spaces that flank Virginia Avenue between 19th and 22nd Streets creates an opportunity for a new cultural destination and a vibrant public park. This park could include a cultural building, commemorative works dedicated to the arts, and other leisure facilities creating a welcomed outdoor space for the surrounding neighborhood. Located halfway between the Kennedy Center and the White House grounds, this mid-point can provide a prominent setting for a visitor

destination between the cultural hubs at either end of the precinct and between downtown and the Mall.

An elegant approach to the Kennedy Center can be established for pedestrians and motorists by reclaiming E Street as a continuous at-grade landscaped boulevard stretching for one mile between the Kennedy Center and the White House and President's Park. The new connection would be achieved by decking over the E Street Expressway from the Kennedy Center to Virginia Avenue and over a portion of the expressway ramps between 20th and 21st Streets. The decking would also provide infill development opportunities for the Department of State within its northern building yard, south of E Street.

Decking over the Potomac Freeway would reconnect the Kennedy Center to the rest of the city by creating a grand civic plaza that would serve as a dramatic forecourt to this presidential memorial and would also provide two new building sites that could house rehearsal, exhibit, educational, and performance space. The plaza, with its plantings and fountains, would be edged with street-level public uses such as a visitor center, shops, and restaurants to animate it during daytime and evening hours, creating a lively new Washington destination. This decking would also re-establish 25th and 26th Streets and allow C Street to be extended as part of the local street grid.



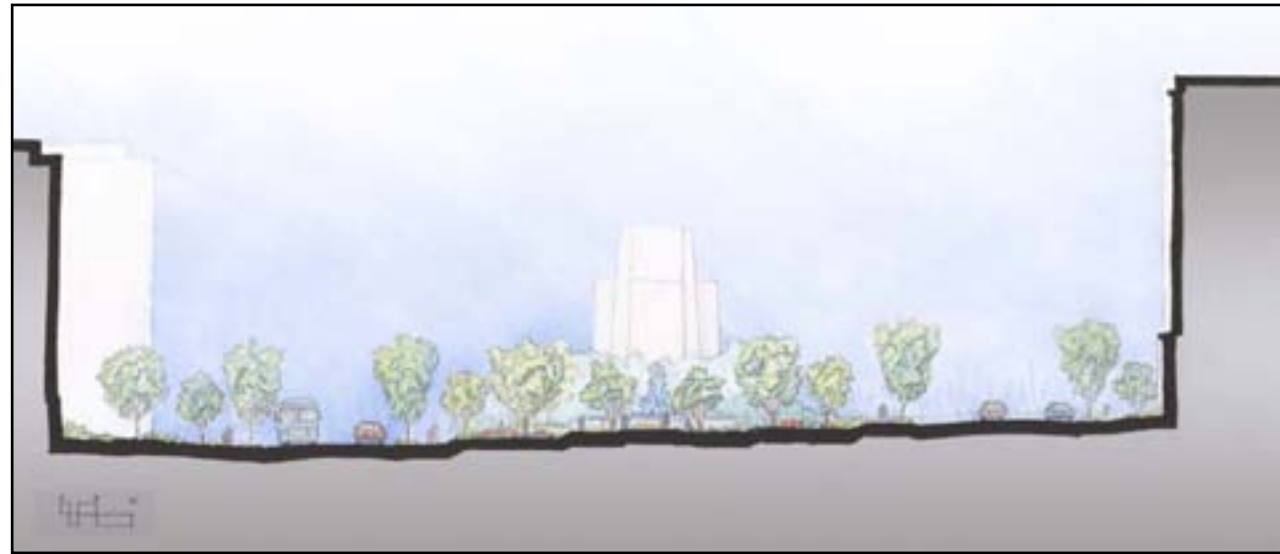
Courtesy of the District of Columbia Government, copyright Pictometry International

The fragmented open spaces along E Street and Virginia Avenue could be unified as a linear commemorative park.

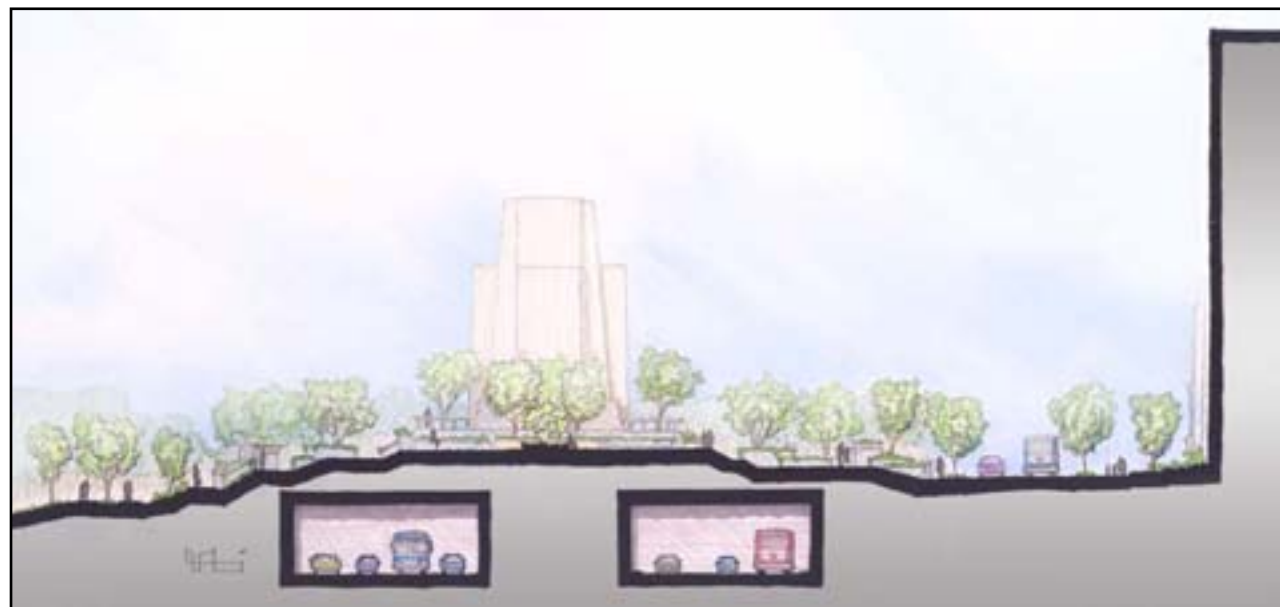
View of new public space and commemorative site at Virginia Avenue and 20th Street







A: E Street looking west from Whitman Park



B: E Street looking west to new commemorative site



C: E Street looking west to Kennedy Center

## An Improved Setting for a Presidential Memorial

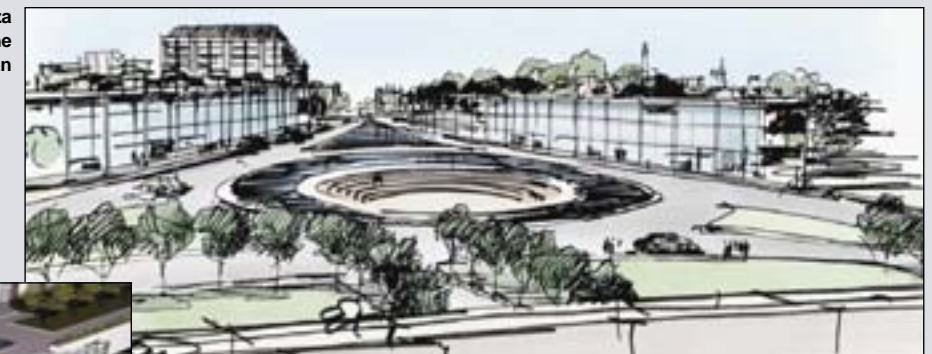
As far back as the mid-1990s, federal planners sought to correct the tangle of highways surrounding the John F. Kennedy Center that effectively isolate it from the National Mall, the Potomac River, and the rest of the city. Since the 1980s there have been numerous proposals to create a monumental connection from the Kennedy Center's western terrace to the Potomac esplanade. NCPC's 1997 Extending the Legacy plan called for highway decking to make space for a lively civic plaza on the east side of the center. In 2003 the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Kennedy Center prepared plans building on this initial concept and detailing how to span the highway to improve access for pedestrians and motorists and expand the Kennedy Center for additional performing arts and support space.

The Framework Plan proposals for the Kennedy Center broadly reflect the Legacy proposals and those advanced by Rafael Vinoly, the New York-based architect hired by the Kennedy Center. Vinoly's bold design includes a four-block plaza, built over the existing roadways and flanked by two new glass-and-steel buildings comprising 400,000 square feet of new space and underground parking. One building would house rehearsal and office space, the other an education center and arts-related exhibits.

Realizing that many of Washington's major monuments are set in circles or ovals, Vinoly designed an elliptical court encircling the Kennedy Center. The court includes outdoor performance space, drop-off areas, an amphitheater, and sculpture garden with a plaza and a 1,000-foot cascading fountain to connect the new buildings to the existing one. A larger elliptical terrace and path would stretch all the way around the building's west side, providing easy pedestrian access with stairs and ramps to the waterfront, with pathways leading to the National Mall. Execution of the Kennedy Center's expansion plan and Vinoly's design depended on some design modifications and federal funding, which was not appropriated.

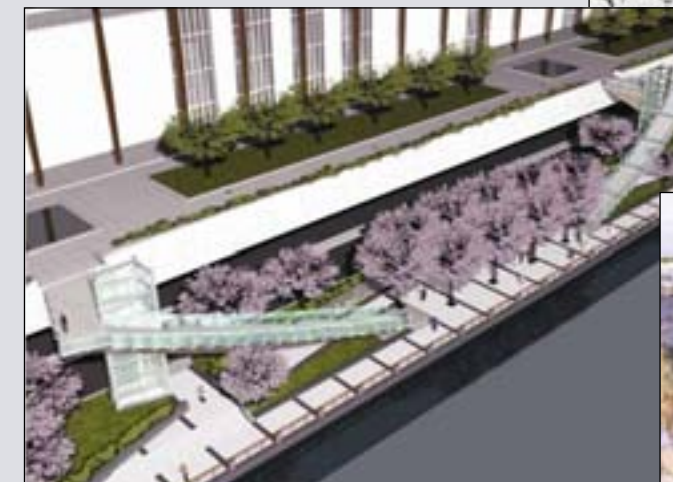
Concept designs are currently being prepared for a pedestrian connection from the Kennedy Center's western terrace down to the waterfront. These designs include two flanking stairways and an elevator bank that land on a landscaped plaza along the river where people can sit and enjoy the water views and breezes.

Kennedy Center plaza as proposed in the Vinoly Plan



VINOLY ASSOCIATES

Concept designs for flanking stairways connecting the west terrace to the river



The Kennedy Center plaza as envisioned in NCPC's Extending the Legacy plan



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## Creating New Places for Parks, Offices, Residences, and Shops

Reclaiming the waterfront by decking the intrusive infrastructure would extend the setting of the National Mall to the Kennedy Center, improve the riverfront experience between Georgetown and the Mall, and establish a desirable setting for two commemorative works. This decking would also increase the amount of open space and available recreation area for leisure and active play, and create a scenic approach to the city's entry between two presidential memorials.

The riverfront experience could be far friendlier by re-routing high-speed commuter traffic from Rock Creek Parkway along the waterfront to the now under-used Potomac Freeway. This would establish a welcoming and safer place for residents, workers, students, and visitors to stroll along the waterfront and at the same time potentially improve commuter movement between downtown and the monumental core. Additionally, the northern terminus of Virginia Avenue, an area of potentially remarkable scenic beauty currently occupied by a surface parking lot, could be used for parks and waterfront commemoration.

Strengthening the open space network along the E Street corridor could establish a setting for two to three new commemorative sites and a new cultural destination along a beautiful walkable corridor between the White House and President's Park and the Kennedy Center. This new setting would support just under 500,000 square feet of infill development for new federal office space and 550,000 square feet of development that could include a mix of office, residential, and retail uses using air-rights over the freeways. These new uses, in conjunction with new performing arts space and a mix of new uses at the Kennedy Center Plaza, could transform the Northwest Rectangle into an esteemed workplace and visitor destination alike.

With street beautification along 20th, 21st, 23rd, and 25th Streets, and improved wayfinding signage, pedestrian movement between downtown Washington, the Foggy Bottom Metro station, the Northwest Rectangle, and the Mall could be made pleasant and seamless. The linear park and commemorative area along E, 20th, and 23rd Streets would encourage pedestrians to move easily between the Northwest Rectangle and the National Mall. The topographical and historic significance of the Old Naval Observatory, which sits atop a prominent hilltop overlooking the Mall, warrants special programming to allow some public access, such as a public event space, or tours highlighting its historic and cultural significance. These strategic actions would establish the Northwest Rectangle's connection to the adjacent National Mall and Potomac waterfront.

## Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, Potomac Freeway and E Street Expressway

To connect the Kennedy Center south to the National Mall and east to the White House will require reconfiguring and decking over the highway ramps and roadways associated with the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, Potomac Freeway, and E Street Expressway. Currently, the tangle of transportation infrastructure provides direct connections between many areas of the city including the West End, Georgetown, the White House and President's Park, Rock Creek Park, and the National Mall. While these connections provide a level of convenience for commuters, they have separated the Kennedy Center from the Northwest Rectangle, and the West End from the National Mall and the waterfront. This infrastructure has also caused severe disruptions to the city's street grid impeding mobility and creating hazards that jeopardize pedestrian safety.

A comprehensive solution to this challenge will require significant changes to the current infrastructure and travel patterns of this transportation system. In order to create a truly accessible waterfront park, and reconnect this portion of the city back to its waterfront and the National Mall, the freeway ramps to the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge will need to be rerouted and buried in tunnels. In order to construct the Kennedy Center's east plaza, ramps leading to and from the E Street Expressway will need to be lowered, modified, or eliminated.

The research required to solve this complex transportation problem falls outside the scope of the National Capital Framework Plan. However, the Kennedy Center Access Study conducted by the Federal Highway Administration, and the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge studies conducted by the District of Columbia Department of Transportation have suggested viable solutions that are worthy of further study.



## Destinations and Connection Opportunities

### Key Improvements Northwest Rectangle



LEGEND			
	Vehicular/Pedestrian Circulation Enhancements		Infill Development Opportunity Envelope
	Regulated Access Corridor		Re-Use Opportunity
	Pedestrian Circulation Enhancements		Plans in Progress
	Open Space/Public Realm Enhancement		Memorials and Museums Master Plan Sites
	Open Space/Public Realm Enhancements in Progress		Additional Commemorative Opportunity Sites



- Establish a premier waterfront park and extend the strong symbolic qualities of the National Mall to link the Kennedy Center to the Lincoln Memorial.

- Deck the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge approach ramps to develop a new waterfront park with visitor amenities between the Kennedy Center and the Lincoln Memorial.
- Construct a staircase from the Kennedy Center's west terrace down to the waterfront.
- Restore the historic terminus of Constitution Avenue and make improvements to the belvedere.
- Develop a more pedestrian friendly riverfront promenade.
- Develop the northern terminus of Virginia Avenue as a waterfront park and commemorative site.

- Establish E Street as a beautiful commemorative park corridor with places for cultural enrichment and leisure activities, linking the Kennedy Center to the White House and President's Park.

- Deck the Freeway to expand the Kennedy Center cultural facility and create a premier civic plaza.
- Rehabilitate and improve the E Street linear parks between 18th and 20th Streets.
- Deck the E Street tunnel portal to create a park and cultural or commemorative work and develop a cohesive park system between 20th and 21st Streets.
- Deck the Potomac Freeway to re-establish E Street west of Virginia Avenue as a beautiful street.

- Create new places for offices, residences, and shops to increase the mix of use.

- Deck the freeway to re-establish 25th Street and develop residences and shops along the street.
- Develop the State Department's northern building yard as expansion office space.
- Program the Old Naval Observatory for public access and feature its historic significance.