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**“Great City Building, Great Civic Buildings”
Robert Peck, Commissioner
GSA Public Buildings Service, Washington, DC**

**BUILDING LIVABLE COMMUNITIES
National Field Officers’ Training Workshop
September 13-15, 1999**

**I Matti Restautant
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Monday, September 13, 1999

This is a great occasion for me. I know about half of you from one prior or present job or another. And I know many of the GSA folks, of course. I know Al Eisenberg, of the Department of Transportation, who worked with me at the American Institute of Architects. John Horsely came in at the beginning of the administration and somehow has gotten hired by AASHTO, the Association of State Highway Transportation Officials. This is a great group.

To paraphrase my mentor Senator Moynihan-- Senator Moynihan once said the government doesn't have to be involved in any art, save one: and that's architecture. Every government that's ever been has had to build buildings. GSA, you've heard, can't help but be involved in urban development. We may not know that we do urban development, but we do it; and we've been doing it for a long time.

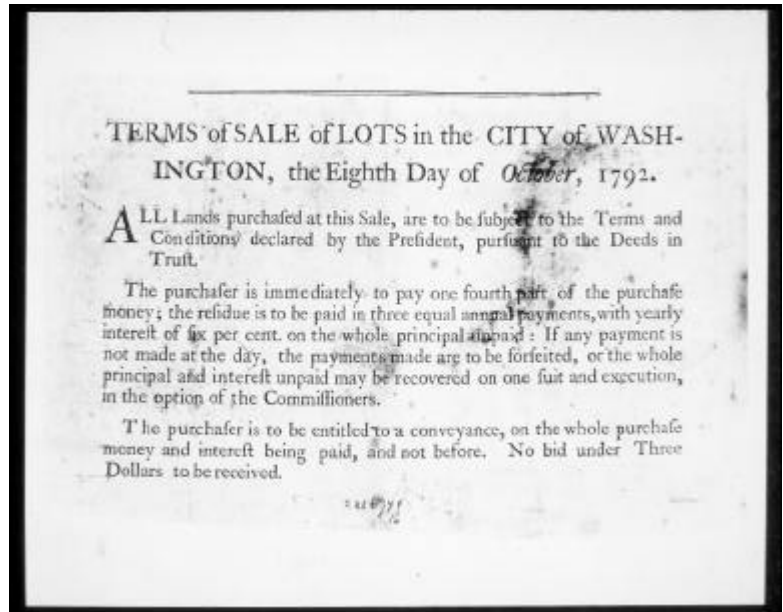
(1) We're in Washington, so I'm not going to let you get away without seeing the L'Enfant plan of Washington. This was the government saying (talk about urban development!) --we're going to plan a city where there ain't one. You can't get more urban development than this. Here's the other lesson that this teaches us: once you're doing the public's business, things get sticky.



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Most everyone knows this as the L'Enfant plan of 1791. Of course, many in the room know this is actually the Ellicot plan of 1792 because L'Enfant, having been hired by George Washington in 1791 to do a plan, made the mistake of thinking the government was going to take it seriously. When one of the three commissioners appointed to develop the city started to build his house right in the way of what L'Enfant thought was going to be a grand boulevard, L'Enfant had his workers tear it down. And L'Enfant was dismissed, which leads me to say to GSA folks that lesson number one in urban development is: do not mess with the commissioner. So L'Enfant walked away with his plans and sued the government and was never paid. So there's another story: litigation, change orders -those things aren't new.

(2) Here's the other interesting thing: the way in which the government was going to go about developing the city. Because the government was broke, of course, the federal government talked to all the landowners in Washington D.C, many of whom were personal friends of George Washington.



2

And the government said, tell you what, I will buy your land from you. I will give you back half the land in different parts of the city, half your acreage, and you'll have a right to share in the proceeds as we develop the lot because your land is going to increase in value, right?

A tax increment financing plan in 1792. These are terms of sale for lots in the city of Washington, 1792. They actually tried to auction off lots in the city. Unfortunately for the landowners, this was pretty much a bust: people weren't interested in investing.

(3) Washington obviously changed. Here is the McMillan Commission plan for the Mall area of Washington, circa 1901. Remember, this is the era of Daniel Burnham, "make no little plans," and we didn't, by God. This was a big one. But plans 100 years after Washington weren't being received any better. We all think, boy,



3

everybody must have jumped up and down and cheered, but the Mall at this time was a holy hell. It had been planned in a romantic style in the mid-19th century by pretty damn good landscape architects, most notably, Andrew Jackson Downing. It had fallen into pretty bad disrepair. So everybody must have loved this, right?

(4) Here is a cartoon in the Washington Star from 1908. It talks about Burnham and McKim and all these “jerks” who had gone to Europe to see what cities should look like. And it shows that they’re going to plant these square trees on the Mall.

So even great plans sometimes don’t get great press. The lesson for us tonight is you’ve got to persevere. Don’t get thrown off base by bad press.



4

(5) But here's what the government was doing in between 1792 and 1900. This was the custom house. The biggest client for the Office of Construction in the Treasury Department, GSA’s predecessor, was custom houses. Customs brought in most of the revenue for the federal government until the income tax came in 1913.

This is the customs house in New York City, at the corners of Nassau and Wall Street. Still there, now a National Park Service site. This building did not just happen to be built in what in the 1840s was the center of town. And there is no question that the idea of meeting on the court house steps or meeting on the custom house steps is a old concept. So our idea that the federal building should be a center of activity isn't exactly new. In fact, the idea that the



5

inside of a federal building should be a center of activity, something that we're having a hell of a time dealing with today with security concerns, is also an historic tradition.

(6) This is the inside of that customs house. Remember, you had to unbundle all those goods, take them into the customs house, let the inspectors see them, assess them, and bring them back out. Anybody could walk in here. And there was a lot of dirty dealing going on in these places, but it was a real sort of an indoor center of vitality, too.



6



7

(7) But, the federal government's presence in cities around the country meant even more. This is Cleveland in 1906. Clearly a pretty important industrial city by this time, and here is a monumental building built by the federal government.

(8) In Chicago, here is a building built in the 1890s. A great building by Henry Cobb, torn down in the 1960s to make way for a building by Mies van der Rohe. An interesting conundrum for preservationists, that we got a pretty good building, a Mies van der Rohe, with an Alexander Calder in front of it, but we lost this, clearly one of the more important buildings in the city of Chicago, the federal building, and everybody knew it.



8



9

(9) Here's my favorite photo from this period. This is after the turn of the century. This is the federal building and court house in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Now, you can't see it too well -- you can see if you look closely enough, the good old days weren't always so good. There is a lot of mess out in the street. Different kinds of waste problems then. This is in a town, which had wooden sidewalks, and wooden buildings and the federal government built a three story stone building.

This said to the people in Cheyenne, Wyoming -- with a big flag flying over it --this said to the people in Cheyenne Wyoming -- there is no internet; there may not be phone service here yet -- but here is a federal government and you are a part of it; and it has enough confidence in your town that even though you're still building temporary structures, we're building a building that is going to last for a couple of hundred years. That said something to the people. That's one way in which the federal government can establish its presence in a town.

We talk about community and the federal government's role in community. I just want to say, there are different kinds of communities.

(10) This is the Ellis Island Immigration Station built in 1898, the place where, when it was rededicated in the 1980s, people estimated that one out-of-every six Americans had an ancestor who had gone through it. All four of my grandparents went through here, so it's important to me.

It is a place that symbolizes a different kind of community. After they saw the Statue of Liberty, this is where people went. Now, I want to be clear, the building is a great building. It is also important what happened to people in there and when you read the history of immigrants that went through the



10

station, you find they didn't have a great experience. The fact that many of our names were changed summarily and on the spot by immigration inspectors is the least of the problem. People were treated shabbily. Some of them were kept in the hospital under suspicion that they had some disease. The point is: buildings don't make it alone either. On the other hand, they do symbolize an awful lot in America; and Ellis Island still means something.

(11) In the center of this picture is the Pioneer Courthouse in Portland, Oregon, a National Historic Landmark. A building that, at the time it was built, was on the outskirts of town. In 1875, the city fathers (I don't think there were too many city mothers at the time) asked the federal government to build a courthouse in this area where they were hoping development would occur.



11

It was such an outlandish location that the local newspapers said that the federal government had picked a site that is so far out, you've got to take the Pony Express to get there. Now, of course, it's in the heart of downtown. Instead of being the only building around, ironically the urban context has imploded and it now sort of creates a punctuation mark by being the smallest building around. But it is still a huge landmark. This plaza out in front of it is filled with people, a lot of civic events happen there and the Pioneer Courthouse is still an important building to that city. It still has, in fact, the U.S. Court of Appeals as a tenant.



12

So here is my pitch. (12) In the 1930s, the federal government tried, under Franklin Roosevelt, an exercise in community building the likes of which we haven't seen, with the Tennessee Valley Authority. The Tennessee Valley Authority could have just been an effort to make the Tennessee River and the Ohio River navigable and to use them for energy, which it did.

But, it was also the vision of the President, and of the people who ran the TVA, that this would be an economic development project in what was then one of the poorest parts of the country.

(13) I love this picture, not only for the quality of the picture of the power house of the Norris Dam, but because of what they wrote over the windows, which I think expresses the point of all of our buildings. And it's our job here in GSA and those of you who have come to help us, to make our buildings resonate this way for the American people. What it says is: "Built for the people of the United States of America."



That's what we now put on our construction signs

when they go up. It's why we do federal buildings, and for those of use who love architecture and love building, it's why we do.

I'll say one final thing that goes back to the immigration station. It's not just the buildings. It's what we do in them; it's what we do with them; and how they relate to a community.

(14) In Chicago, the Calder sculpture in the middle of that plaza in front of the Mies van der Rohe buildings is wonderful. But much more important, are the people who come to the farmers market in that plaza twice a week and who see that space as a place where they belong.



So my charge to all of you, is to help us make that happen. We are determined to make this happen. It's the kind of thing that we have done sort of "hit and miss." Establishing a Center for Urban Development and Livability is our way of making it explicit to the people and their country that we're prepared to make lively federal places.

We are fearless about doing this. Compared to some of the things we spend money on, this is a pittance and the leverage that we can get out of doing this right is tremendous. So again, let's think about building for the people of the United States America. Thank you for coming.

14