Urban Design Workshop

Summary of Stakeholder & Public Comment

January 24, 2012

Introduction

The following is a summarized report of the comments collected at the Urban Design Workshop held at the National Capital Planning Commission on January 24, 2012. The workshop was divided into two sessions. The first session included invited federal and local stakeholders from throughout the National Capital Region. The second session was targeted to the general public.

The workshops focused on urban design in Washington, DC and the greater National Capital Region. The sessions were designed to explore the federal government's role in improving the urban design and character of the National Capital Region. To structure the conversation, participants were distributed into small discussion groups where they focused on the following three topic areas:

1. Federal buildings and property in the **urban context**
2. Federal buildings, property, and campus design in the **regional context**
3. The National Capital Region's **general character and sense of place**

The thoughts and ideas that flowed from the discussion will inform NCPC Staff and the Urban Design Task Force in drafting the new Federal Urban Design Element of the *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital Region.*

The following is a summary of the thoughts and ideas that were recorded during the two workshop sessions. They have been organized by the three topic areas and the questions put to each group are included in the summaries.

Topic Area: The Urban Context

Question 1: The way a building and the space around it engage with the streetscape can have significant impacts on the surrounding area. What are good and bad examples of federal public buildings and building yards?

Question 2: There are many types of federal public spaces Washington, including parks, plazas, and memorial landscapes. Is there a federal open space that you particularly like or don't like? What works or doesn't work about it?

Urban Context Discussion Summary

Security
  Avoid foreboding sense of place due to over abundance of security infrastructure

Design
  Encourage buildings with street-level activity and greater architectural diversity

Public Space
  Make spaces publicly accessible and pedestrian friendly, complete with active programming

Activation
  Integrate federal facilities with surrounding community with the addition of ground-level amenities. Eliminate exclusive services within facilities (i.e.: cafeterias)

Waterfronts
  Prioritize riverfront access, for recreation and new development

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Examples of Federal Buildings and Spaces in the Urban Context

Most "Liked"	Most "Disliked"
Reservation 113 Department of Transportation Headquarters National Gallery of Art US Botanical Garden National Cathedral SE Federal Center (The Yards) Park National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden Constitution Gardens The US Navy Memorial Wilson Plaza McPherson Square The National Mall The US Capitol Grounds (historically)	FBI Headquarters Department of Labor Department of Energy - Forrestal Building Federal Aviation Administration Buildings Education Building Housing & Urban Development Building/Plaza L'Enfant Plaza/Promenade WWII Memorial FDR Memorial MLK Memorial Kennedy Center The National Mall The US Capitol Grounds (currently)

Urban Context Comments

Security

- Physical security is uninviting
- Use operational methods to provide security while keeping buildings accessible
- Eliminate visible bollards
- Explore opportunities to leverage security features by integrating with sustainability and urban design features (I.e.: stormwater, landscaping, amenities)

Design

- Create spaces that are active and reflect the times and current context
- There is mixed interest in more contemporary design reflecting a modern city
- Encourage design diversity of monumental buildings
- Allow buildings to serve as layers of the federal government narrative
- Encourage unique architecture that is both intimate and human scaled
- Get beyond the 'prototypical' federal building
- Proper scaling of buildings to street with setbacks to provide green space is an important value
- Focus on how federal buildings interact with the sidewalk at the street-level
- Federal buildings should be human scaled. They can be monumental without poor proportions
- The base of federal building should be designed to a pedestrian scale, while the upper floors of the same building can be monumental in scale. (The buildings around the Navy Memorial were cited as a good example of this. The buildings around L'Enfant Plaza were cited as bad examples)
- In general, attendees noted that with the exception of iconic, stand-alone buildings such as the White House and the Capitol, most federal buildings within the Monumental Core, whether or not they were agency headquarters, were background buildings. Stakeholder quote: Soldier buildings hold the line, hero buildings stand alone. People thought that, for the most part, new buildings should be "soldier buildings," that that was part of the city's essential character
- Think about bicyclists and pedestrians when designing federal buildings at all scales

Public Space

- Need a greater emphasis on preservation and enhancement of green space – activate it!
- Second greatest amount of parkland per capita in the US, but much of it is inaccessible to the public
- Consider public space design strategies for both new and existing spaces that promote the concept of active "urban rooms"

Activation

- Accessibility along street into plazas and buildings is critical
- Federal buildings in the core shouldn't have cafeterias – federal employees should be influenced to patronize outside retail. This will help make sure the monumental core is integrated and connects

with surrounding areas. Federal buildings shouldn't be insular and there should be avoidance to creating single use federal precincts and enclaves

- Federal buildings should support mixed-use activities and animation of the street to the greatest extent possible beyond traditional business hours and connect to other important public spaces

Waterfronts

- Prioritize access to the riverfronts, whether for recreation or for new development
- Washington's rivers are urban gems that deserve more attention
- Washington, federal spaces do a bad job of meeting the waterfront and there should be more focus on incorporating the waterfront into the city's core

Other

- Reestablish the street grid
- Break-up superblocks

Regional Context

Question 1: There are various types of federal facilities in the region, including individual buildings at Metro stops, campuses, and military bases. How can these types of federal facilities be better integrated into their surrounding communities?

Question2: Large campuses and installations need to work for occupants and visitors, as well as the surrounding area. Are you familiar with an example of a well-designed campus or installation? What works about it?

Regional Context Discussion Summary

Security
    Balance access with appropriate security infrastructure that blends with its surroundings
Planning
    Better balance local needs with federal facility needs, particularly in terms of transportation
Design
    Encourage greater architectural diversity and amenities accessible to public
Connections
    Create publicly accessible connections to and through federal campuses
Sustainability
    Consider campus-wide sustainability endeavors (particularly water and energy systems)

Examples of Federal Buildings and Spaces in the Regional Context

Well Designed Examples	Poorly Designed Examples
Fort McNair National Institutes of Health - Historic Core Marine Corps Museum Federal Courthouse in Alexandria Washington Headquarter Services (Navy Yard) US Patent and Trademark Office Naval Academy in Annapolis Chicago's Daley Center (Picasso) Plaza	Fort Meade National Institutes of Health Suitland Federal Center MARC Center White Oak Federal Research Center Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives

Regional Context Comments

Security

- The balance of access with the need for security at regional facilities was a major concern.
- There was also an acknowledgement that these elements can't prevent every situation so there needs to be a discussion about what level of risk is acceptable
- There were recommendations that there could be a "mixing zone" where security is not "super strict" and then gets stricter as you get into the core of these campuses
- Stand-offs should be minimized and as small as possible
- The overall look of security should be improved and blended into the surrounding
- Avoid establishing a foreboding sense of arrival: fences, barbed wire, guns, and intimidation

Planning

- Regional facilities should benefit from good master planning
- Emphasize walkability and avoid impervious surface parking
- Balance local needs with federal facility needs in the region, especially when it comes to transportation. Consider changing roads/signals/sidewalks when necessary, and look into other community benefits that can help improve the public realm.
- Planning, particularly of federal campuses, should strive to create an environment that responds to the needs of employees, not just visitors.

Design

- The repetition of design elements on a campus are not necessarily optimal because these elements tend to be over used. Often programming for buildings too strongly influences the design of a building and this can lead to problems and a reduction in the design character
- Locate public spaces and amenities towards the campus edge to engage adjacent neighborhood
- Federal campuses can learn from traditional institutional/university campus planning. Older military campuses are well designed.

Connections

- There needs to be more wayfinding and informational amenities to inspire interest and inform people about the federal facilities in their communities
- Connections are important through the campus. Campuses take up significant amounts of land and should not create an island that no one can get through
- Accessibility and integration is important
- Bike and pedestrian connections should be allowed on the perimeter of these campuses

Sustainability

- Regional campuses are an opportunity for sustainable design at a district scale. This includes district energy and district water systems

Capital Character and Sense of Place

Question 1: The federal government has an interest in maintaining those unique qualities that define its character as the national capital. What are some of those characteristics?

Question 2: The District includes areas that are predominately federal and others that are predominately private. What areas of the District of Columbia define it as a capital city (the Federal Triangle, Capitol Hill, the area north of Constitution Avenue and west of the White House) and what characteristics define those areas?

Question 3: What are the places outside of the District of Columbia that help define this area as the Nation's Capital?

Character Defining Characteristics
Iconic sense of place – due to height act, streets, public buildings, and commemoration Human scale of city Urban yet green / Plethora of trees Planning legacy Gateways Civic landmarks that punctuate the skyline

Areas inside the city that define Washington's character
Cherry Blossoms, Tidal Basin, Embassies, Kennedy Center, US Botanical Gardens, Arboretum, Georgetown and Dumbarton Oaks, National Zoo, Flight approach into National Airport, bridges, National Park Service Parkways

Areas outside the city that define Washington's character
Dulles Airport, Shenandoah National Park, C&O Canal, Rock Creek Park, Mt. Vernon, Capital Crescent Trail, National Airport, National Park Service Parkways

General Character/Sense of Place Comments

Washington's Defining Characteristics

- Washington is iconic
- The monumental quality of the core is essential to maintaining its character
- The memorials, the US Capitol, and the size of the buildings (both historic and new) contribute to the city's unique sense of place
- The diagonal streets punctuated by vistas make it memorable
- The block sizes and scale of buildings help make it walkable
- The city is human-scaled
- DC's neighborhoods are very fine grained and maintained
- An abundance of green and trees - "urban yet green"
- Building height and scale in the city overall is very good. The Height Act provides a monumental consistency throughout DC that defines it
- There are important gateways into the city where most landmarks can be seen from a distance. These are the bridges that direct people into the city.
- Build-out of the L'Enfant Plan and the McMillan Plan are the two biggest defining characteristics
- Washington, DC has a unique scale, approaches, and views. Unlike any other American city.
- In Washington, public buildings are on higher priority than private enterprise – this is fundamentally unique and should be celebrated more fully
- The use of stone (particularly light-colored stone, either rough-hewn or dressed) contributes to the character of the federal city

Negative aspects of Washington's character

- Washington should be considered a "riverfront city" but it is not
- The waterfronts could define DC, although it doesn't
- The waterfronts should have more focus
- Areas where there are predominantly massive "superblock" buildings are the worst designed parts of the city -- mostly mid-century federal enclaves
- There is no WOW. We need more WOW in Washington's architecture
- Some of Washington's streets are too wide – they lose context; aren't human scaled
- It would help to occasionally have activated/programmed public spaces along the street for respite
- Walking experience is not consistent, in many areas one feels pushed because sidewalks are narrow
- There needs to be more thought to the experience around and at Metro stations
- The backdrop for memorials needs to be addressed for more impact as a city
- People need to have access to "their" government. Permeability and accessibility are key
- Federal precincts should be more useful, livable, and active for residents
- Need better senses of arrival and wayfinding at federal building, campuses and neighborhoods
- Avoid foreboding sense of place due to over abundance of security infrastructure citywide
- Many existing public spaces lack programming and are desolate