

## Washington's District of Columbia and its Initial Urban Form

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America's Capital, the District of Columbia (DC), encompasses a uniquely designed framework to urban living. The district, a nine square mile area with six thousand acres of land inside it, implemented an innovative plan for urban growth fused from the principles of state-centered republicanism and nation-centered Federalism (Berg, 103). Designed by the French immigrant Pierre L'Enfant, DC came to be known as a capital reflecting the American people's manifest destiny through central, axial, and radial symmetries within urbanism. Winning a commissioned contest for the project, L'Enfant proposed his ideas to the at-time General Washington, where he was granted full access to execute his design for capital of the nation.

L'Enfant's diagram to his plan, or *parti*, was simple. The designated district was designed in a grid, overlaid with a system of public squares linked by a radiant of diagonal avenues. Set on the two highest points inside the bounded territory, the designated locations for America's future Congressional House and Presidential House provided a pair of geometrical and geographical anchors for the road map of the city. However, subtle gestures in the plan of the federal city were emphasized just as equally to that of these visually apparent and grand gestures. The emphasis of L'Enfant's plan was on the principle of scale, the single determination enabling all the others, that was designed to show the situation and distance of objects rather than a detailed block-by-block design. L'Enfant's plan covered these six thousand acres with lots, streets, and public reservations, which focused on the design of a city that will populate itself over time (Berg, 102).

*"[The work] should be begun at various points equidistant as possible from the center; not merely because settlements of this sort are likely to diffuse an equality of advantages of the whole territory allotted, and consequently to reflect benefit from an increase of the value of property, but because each of these settlements by a natural jealousy will most tend to stimulate establishments."* - Pierre L'Enfant

The success of his plan of predestined urbanization counted on people to settle in these places first. Fourteen major squares were implemented in DC's plan, designed with proportioned public places for future civic activities and institutions to take place. To that end, L'Enfant proposed that every individual open space - of the fourteen established - be given to each of the original thirteen states and another to the newly admitted state of Vermont (Berg, 103). Congressmen and other high officials from each represented state would claim the most desirable lots on each square to create a series of impromptu embassies. Other residents and their at-the-time servants would claim the lots to the surrounding streets. Through geometric analysis, L'Enfant's planned lots grew narrower

as they drew further in distance from each other. This practice was an innovative street design done by L'Enfant to decrease the amount of traffic and the prices of lots for these less influential and less wealthy residents (Berg, 102-103).

The city, contradictory to the at-time influential European cities such as London and Paris, would start not as a pair of giant buildings that loomed over their subsequent developments but as a series of small 'towns' that would have its own storefronts, traders, homes, merchants, and taverns. Pride of placement in L'Enfant's plan would be promoted by each of the fourteen state capitals that would fuse directly into the inner workings of the planned federal city. The system of arteries between these small 'towns' were expected to be funded through different state-by-state capital investments. It was presumed by L'Enfant that this idea of prideful state-orchestrated investments would harness itself to speedily develop each of the state squares, respectively. Fourteen hamlets that will grow slowly together to form the seat of the federal government was a poetic metaphor for the 'knitting' together of a newly established country (Berg, 103).

The other squares outside of the pinnacle fourteen squares within L'Enfant's design would provide predetermined spaces for religious structures as well as sundry learned and fraternal societies to be placed accordingly. Some spaces would contain fountains and memorial columns; some would remain untouched until later development opportunities arose. Each square, however, would be visible from the next along the diagonal avenues of the city, none to span more than a half mile from its nearest counterpart (Berg, 103).

Jenkins Hill, the location of the Congressional House, would be the centerpiece of the entire plan. It was designed for the highest elevated natural monument to the District of Columbia. The second highest ground within the district was a mile and a half distance towards Georgetown - from Jenkins Hill - just above Tiber Creek. This was the destined location of L'Enfant's 'Presidential Palace,' selected as such to give its tenant an extensive view down the Potomac. The junction of these two buildings was less important than their respective individual relationships to the Potomac (Berg, 104).

*"From the first settlement of the city they would stand to ages in a central point, facing on the grandest prospect of both branches of the Potomac with the town of Alexandria in front, seen in its full extent over many points of land projecting from the Maryland and Virginia shores in a manner that adds much to the perspective." - Pierre L'Enfant*

The imposing distance between the Presidential House and the Congressional House can be explained in a single statement: a preservation of the Roman Dignity that General Washington imposed on his soldiers with aid from his subordinate Continental Army Officers. The three departments – Jefferson's State, Hamilton's Treasury, and Henry Knox's War – were contiguous to the Presidential House to allow the chief executive readily available contact with his most important advisors when needed. The connection between the President and the Congress would be Pennsylvania Avenue. This avenue was a street designed to be full of social activity as the center for learning and amusement for the city, interrupted midway by a grand fountain (Berg, 104).

L'Enfant's city plan for the district encompassed street designs layered by a grid with overlaid avenues, state squares, public buildings, fountains, a canal, and the grandest processional space of his time to be built. The Mall, as it was to be later called by its users, was designed as "a people's park," an expression of the democratic accessibility of American government (Berg, 109). Called his 'public walk,' L'Enfant created a "vast esplanade in the center of which, and at the point of intersection of the sight from each of the two Houses, would be the most advantageous place for an equestrian statue, which with proper appendages and walks artificially managed, [to] produce a most grand effect" (Berg, 105).

The center of L'Enfant's city was a "system of movement: designed as an open invitation to all its corners" (Berg, 109). The design of the American federal city granted pride of place to the Congressional House, not the Presidential House (Berg, 112). The Congressional House overlooked L'Enfant's public walk, later known as the National Mall, which was designed to be a great civic meeting place. It was originally designed to reincarnate and renovate the cause of democracy. This gesture foreshadowed the ideal of America's Manifest Destiny, as the Mall opened a vista from the front of the Capitol to a great westward view. Metaphorically, the Mall provided a horizon held in trust for the American people (Berg, 113).

Contrary to the emphasis of centralized axial symmetry found in the design plan for Andre Le Notre's Palace of Versailles, L'Enfant's Congressional Hall atop Jenkins Hill took the center stage of DC. The king's bedroom in the Palace of Versailles was placed on its central axis to enshrine the rule of the king's divine right, transferred primogeniture (Berg, 112). It is thought that L'Enfant incorporated a varying form of axial symmetry in his design with an integrated form of Parisian styles to produce the uniquely American influence of DC's centralized marriage between the Capitol building and its Mall. From a less major axial standpoint, the vista from the Presidential House was to overlook the southward direction of the Potomac. An undeniably private view, the Presidential vista was made specifically for George Washington to subsidize his love and attachment for the Potomac with his colonial upbringing and life story in relation to the river (Berg, 113).

The formerly implemented designs of Renaissance Rome are however more appropriately compared to L'Enfant's designed plan for the federal city. The transition phases of urban expansion between Dark-Age and Renaissance Rome were initiated under Pope Sixtus V, a design later to be known as 'Sistine Rome.' This era referred to any of the popes called Sixtus. The revitalization of Rome under his papacy and those like him was an attempt to create a network of roads to take on the form of a star, which radiated from the pilgrimage church Santa Maria Maggiore. Published in 1588 by Giovanni Francesco Bordini, the stellar plan for Rome was made. This plan oriented around the feature of major monuments to Sixtus's papacy and was indicated either by representations of physical monuments themselves or by symbols that were interconnected by the Sistine network of streets.

The star in Bordini's plan should be understood as a symbolic construct rather than as a topographically accurate. As an element in his coat of arms which symbolized the Virgin Mary - the sign that guided the Magi to Bethlehem - the star held great significance to Sixtus. Therefore, it may be reasonable to believe that the stellar plan was an invention of the pope himself. For Sixtus, the star became an abstract symbol of his Holy City. As such, Sixtus wanted Santa Maria Maggiore to be the symbolic spiritual heart of Rome, which made it the focal point of his Sistine Rome (Ostrow, 60-62).

Pope Sixtus V later granted the architect and planner Domenico Fontana the power to clear out public squares around the seven important pilgrimage churches to Rome, marked with obelisks at each of its squares. From this monumental identification, each square was then linked by way of long and wide boulevards that sliced across the city, often ignoring its street pattern underneath (Berg, 109).

The similar characteristic shared between Bordini's Sistine Roman plan and L'Enfant's district is found in the emphasis of scalar treatment between monuments. For Sistine Rome, Bordini's street system was interconnected through obelisk monuments. Sixtus V emphasized Santa Maria Maggiore as the symbolic heart of Rome. To test this theory, a distance was measured from its location to the nearest monumental site - that being the top of what is now known as the Spanish Steps. The obelisk monument found centered at Santa Maria Maggiore is known as the Obelisco Esquilino. The obelisk monument centered at the top of the Spanish Steps is known as the Obelisco Sallustiano. Between these two monuments is a series of four interconnected streets that provide a direct path from one monument to the other. These four streets - the Via Agostino Depretis, Via delle Quattro Fontane, Via del Tritone, and Via Sistina - produce a linear distance of approximately 1.5 kilometers. Shown in the aerial view of Rome from Google Maps on the following page, the roadway is uninterrupted from existing elevations, curvatures, or buildings. Along the Via Sistina, the total distance between these two monuments is 1.47 kilometers. The reason for selecting the distance between these two monuments is mainly due to their connection to Via Sistina. Since the center of Sixtus V's Sistine Rome is Santa Maria Maggiore, the obelisk monument directly connected to the Via Sistina seemed most logical in analyzing the vantage points between two important Sistine monuments. Both monuments, however, are invisible from one other until one reaches the transition of roadways between the Via delle Quattro Fontane and the Via del Tritone. This is due to the topography of modern Rome. Another aerial shot from Google Maps is shown on the following page, extracted from Lecture 12 on page 35, that details the plan for Rome under Sixtus V. This aerial view provides visuals of integrated yellow and blue lines. The yellow lines are streets planned by Sixtus V, while the blue lines are connector streets planned in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is a drastic difference between the symbolic representation of Santa Maria Maggiore's "star plan" and the designs implemented under Sixtus V and his planners. The images on the following page show the different spatial relationships in distance and the interconnectivity between the seven major obelisks of Sixtus V's Sistine Rome. Again, the star in Bordini's plan was to be understood as a symbolic construct rather than as topographic accurate.





Above: *Aerial View from Google Maps of Rome, Italy, showing the distance calculated between Santa Maria Maggiore's Obelisco Esquilino and the Spanish Step's Obelisco Sallustiano*

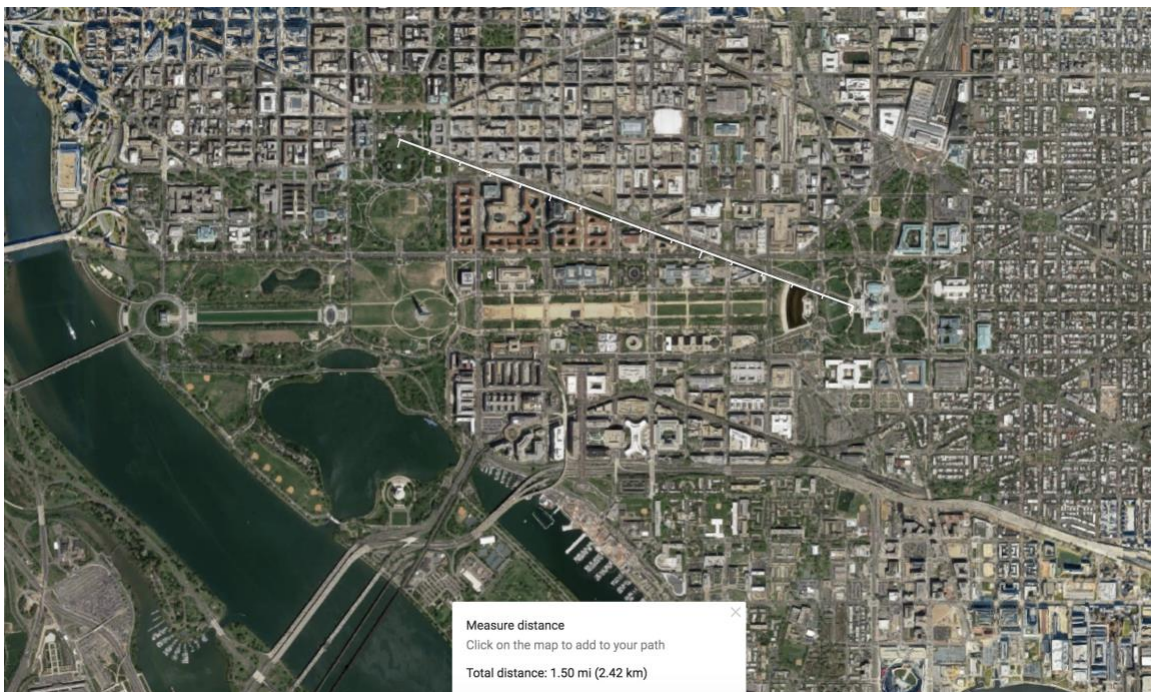
Below: *Aerial View from Google Maps of Rome, Italy, showing the yellow lines as streets planned by Sixtus V and the blue lines as connecting streets planned in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century*



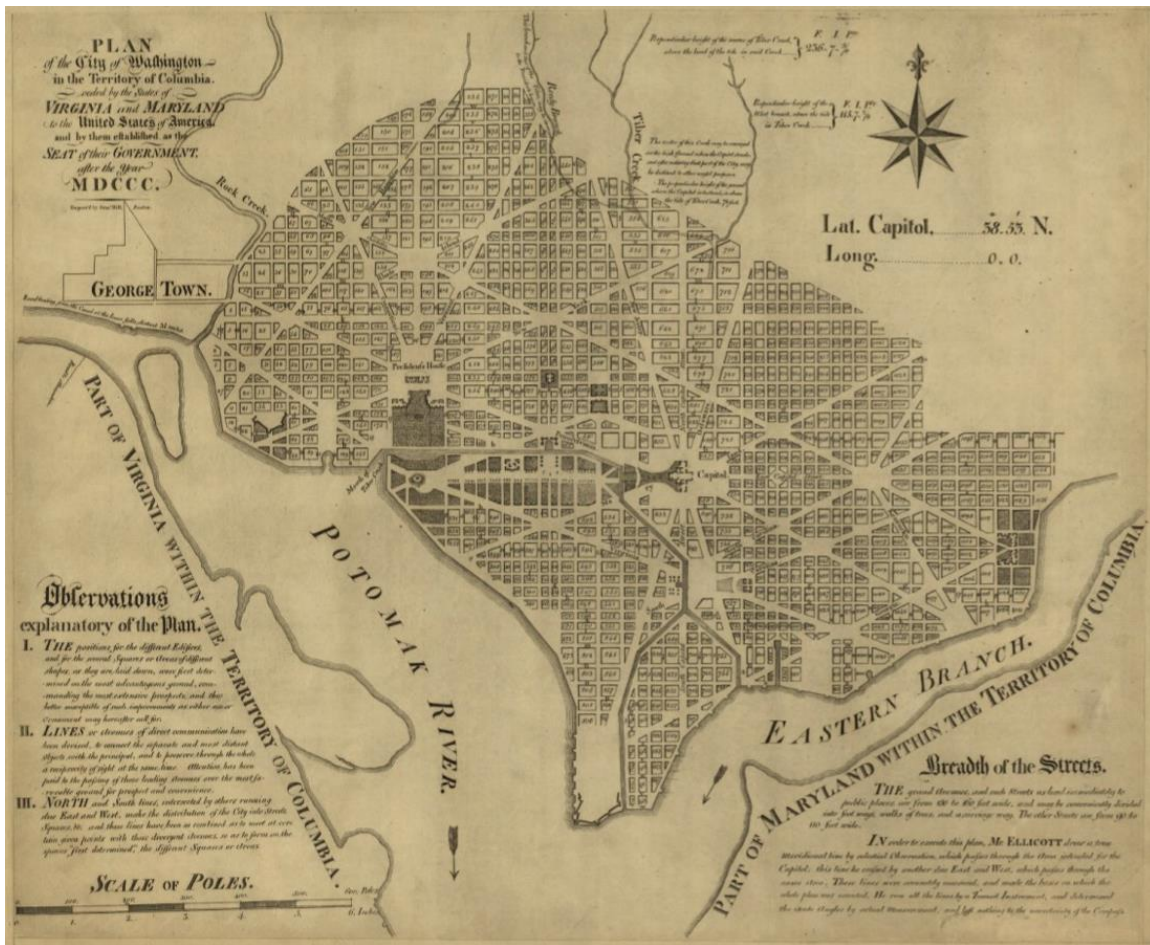


In L'Enfant's design of Washington DC, there is more uniformity found with the emphasized monuments of the city than those correlations discovered in Sistine Rome. The capital's two major monuments of the Congressional House and the Presidential House are shared by one major roadway, Pennsylvania Avenue. Per L'Enfant's initial plan, the distance between these monuments is 1.5 miles long. However, every other square within the capital would be no more than a half mile from its nearest counterpart (Berg, 103). When compared to the whole design of L'Enfant's geometrical patterned city, there is a lack of uniformity between the implemented spatial relationship of these two monuments and the surrounding squares. As all other portions of L'Enfant's plan follow his rules appropriately, a unique scalar comparison can be made between the two monuments of Sistine Rome and Washington DC. Comparing the ratios, and not the distances, between L'Enfant's House monuments and Bordini's obelisk monuments help determine a striking relation between their spatial juxtaposition. The spatial relation between Bordini's Sistine obelisks is 1.47 kilometers, while that of L'Enfant's House monuments is 1.5 miles. Both of these city designs share an emphasized centralized space between two pinnacle monuments in by a 1:1 ratio. By comparing L'Enfant's emphasis of scalar relationships between spaces, one can further argue that his designs for Washington DC can be related to the Sistine influences found within the city of Rome.

Below is a figure showing the distance calculated between the House monuments from Google Maps. Images of L'Enfant's city plan are shown on the following pages, which were extracted from pages 26 and 27 of Lecture 17.

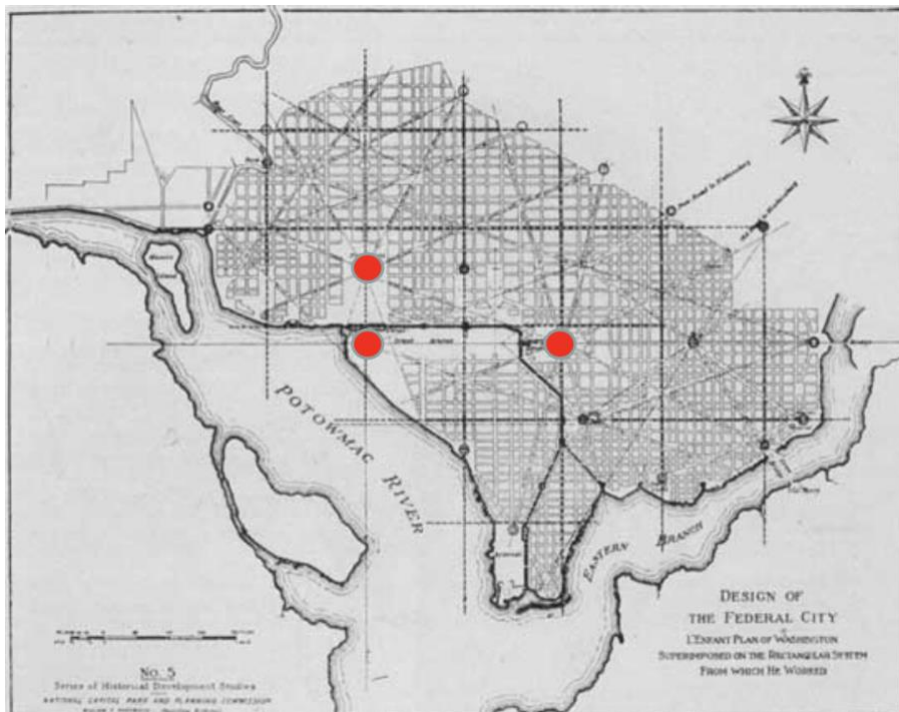


Above: *Aerial View from Google Maps of Washington D.C., showing the distance calculated between the center of the Congressional House and the center of the Presidential House*



Above: Washington D.C. – L'Enfant and co-surveyor Ellicott's Plan

Below: Ellicott's Survey Grid, showing visual representations of the Capitol and Presidential House with their intersecting vanishing point



An emphasis of scalar treatment was used in L'Enfant's design, which can be related to those treatments found within Sistine Rome. From this initial comparative analysis, one can analyze further details between the two designs of these cities. Further comparative analysis can be made between these two cities can help strengthen Berg's argument for similar city designs between the two. Future analysis on the spatial relationships between other monuments within these cities can help provide further insight in L'Enfant's envisioned emphasis of scale in his designs.

To summarize, L'Enfant's designed a city that incorporated fourteen squares which would provide strategized locations for fountains and memorial columns. Some of these squares would remain untouched until later development opportunities arose. The avenue that connected the two monumental Houses he designed – later called Pennsylvania Avenue – was surrounded by active spaces that helped to characterize it as the city center for learning and amusement opportunities. Since Pennsylvania Avenue was designed to be interrupted midway by a grand fountain, further comparative analysis should be made between Washington DC's minor monuments to determine if there were any effects made on their interconnected connected roadways and the intended visual boundaries between other minor monuments.

The city plan of this federal district encompassed street designs layered by a grid with overlaid avenues, state squares, public buildings, fountains, a canal, and the National Mall. Similar city characteristics can be identified from a multifaceted group of European cities outside of Rome. Further analyses can be done between other European cityscapes to show how the House monuments of DC have been replicated from Renaissance styles of Sistine Rome in other ways. The next steps needed to strengthen Berg's relation of Washington DC to the Sistine city of Rome are to determine any new correlations that can be found between the European design practice of symmetry and the American philosophy of the people's democracy.



## Works Cited

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