

FRAMING INDEPENDENCE HALL:
Resisting Purification Through Urban Design

George L. Clafien, Jr.

Visions of a proper architectural presentation of the founding of the nation have motivated architectural and urban design proposals in Philadelphia for nearly a century. Despite significant debate to the contrary, the soon to be replaced present setting, planned and built in the 1950s and 1960s, misrepresents the historic urban context that supported and evolved from these great ideas. Attempts to alter the public understanding of Independence Hall through urban design raise powerful questions of authenticity, ambiguity and interpretation.

The Pennsylvania State House (1732-1748), now known as Independence Hall, sheltered the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the crafting of the United States Constitution in 1787. It became the principal element of one of America's first civic centers when Congress Hall and City Hall (also the first home of the Supreme Court) were built adjacent to it and the Walnut Street Jail was constructed to the south across Independence Square.¹

Despite its crucial role in momentous national events, the complex served most of its useful life as a municipal facility. Within a few years the federal government departed to the District of Columbia and the state government moved, eventually to Harrisburg. By 1818, the buildings had become surplus state property and were purchased by the City of Philadelphia, which used them uneventfully until late in the nineteenth century when the city government moved to a new city hall.² Thus deprived of a function, the complex entered fully the process that links architecture and urban design in the production of monuments and shrines.

Architecture: Independence Hall

Independence Hall reflects a typically derivative and blurred approach to the crucial questions of architectural thinking in early eighteenth-century Britain. The

most artistically advanced work of this period was concerned with a move toward a stricter form of Palladianism as advised by Lord Burlington and Colen Campbell. It is not surprising that Independence Hall is influenced by the earlier and somewhat more casual compositional tendencies associated with the seventeenth-century work of Christopher Wren and Sir Roger Pratt.³

The vehicle for this sensibility was probably James Gibbs' Book of Architecture of 1728.⁴ The design is credited to the lawyer Andrew Hamilton, who worked with Edmund Wooley, a member of the Carpenter's Company. Its most memorable feature is the tower that was added to the south in 1753 and is widely thought to be influenced by that of Wren's St. Mary le-Bow in London (1670-83).⁵

From the beginning the building exhibited some ambiguity between front and back, reflective of its country house model where a formal face could be expected to yield to a garden facade. In Philadelphia the north or front context of Independence Hall was uncontrolled, while the south context was carefully controlled from the beginning through Independence Square. According to one of its principal restorers, Penelope Batchelor: "One gets the feeling that they were more comfortable in handling the rear facade with its traditional and tried details, while at the front one senses the use of untried elements remembered from elsewhere or borrowed from some book."⁶ Although Independence Hall seems small today, when built it was a large and monumental structure relative to the modest row houses of the city. It includes only two floors, but they are tall ones, the facade rising 45 feet above the sidewalk. The main building is only 107 feet wide, but the complex was planned to span the entire block.



**Independence Hall,
north elevation, 1774
Courtesy Independence
National Historical Park**

As to its design, the verdict of history has been decidedly mixed. It was characterized by a local historian as “an outstanding example of colonial Georgian public architecture,” while John Summerson rather misleadingly criticized it for aspirations that its makers probably did not have: “The Pennsylvania State House (Independence Hall) at Philadelphia (1729-34) represents the prevailing style for such buildings—a Palladianism totally lacking in scholarship and virtuous only by a combination of chance and instinct.”⁷

Lewis Mumford found it evocative of larger questions:

*Independence Hall and its adjacent structures are examples of Georgian decency and quiet dignity, without a touch of the grandiose. The scale of the chief structure, two stories high, is as domestic as that of Mount Vernon, and far more so than some of Jefferson's later classic mansions; it was this homely, non-classic, almost anti-classic quality in Georgian work that Jefferson despised.*⁸

Colonial architecture lacked the sophistication of contemporary English building. It was conservative and carpenterly not revolutionary, architecture. The building itself is filled with indications of the mixed feelings of its makers about monumentality, order, precedent, composition and the vernacular. This is not surprising for talented but inexperienced individuals working in an uncritical environment. And it is not entirely dissimilar from the situation of the founders of the nation, self-made men embarking on a prodigious task with only their collective learning to rely upon.

The romantic interpretation of early American architecture suggests that it somehow expresses architecturally the egalitarian politics of the nation. Independence Hall actually reflects the styles and controversies of the British Isles, attenuated by a less sophisticated building industry and a lag time in the flow of information and taste. Consequently, there is a built-in dissonance between its architectural meaning and its symbolic meaning. Whether to eliminate this condition or take notice of it is the essence of the question that citizens, architects and urban designers have been addressing for

the last century.

Urban Design: Representations and Expectations

This dissonance was vastly amplified as the growth of the city re-contextualized Independence Hall. It was located at the city's western edge in 1732, but as rapid growth occurred in the nineteenth century, the city would surround and erase Independence Hall's original neighborhood. By 1900 this condition would be obvious to all—a two-story, red brick and white window framed eighteenth-century “Wrennaissance” palazzo embedded in the brash and competitive urban fabric of the mercantile city. In 1908 an architect observed that across from Independence Hall there was a “row of buildings whose diversity is only surpassed by their ugliness.”⁹



But even more important than the actual dissonance was the symbolic dissonance:

*Views of Independence Hall,... were sold in quantity. The nation's painters and printmakers created in the public's mind an idealistic “Cradle of Liberty” isolated from the rest of the world, a vignette that floated on a cloud. By comparison, photographs of the real Independence Hall came as shock; it was surrounded by uninspired commercial buildings. To conform the reality to the pre-photographic fantasy, a scheme to frame the Hall with a spacious plaza was proposed... but it was another generation before a... vignette like image would be created with Independence Mall.*¹⁰

The State House in 1778, from a drawing of that date by C.W. Peale, corrected by W.J. Breton Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

In 1915, architects Albert Kelsey and D. Knickerbacker Boyd proposed a “reviewing square” in front of Independence Hall. Their design was the first of fifteen schemes for a new setting for Independence Hall that would be produced over the next eighty-one years. Kelsey and Boyd went on to identify the four motivations that would define future debate on the subject: creating a fitting setting for Independence Hall, reducing the fire hazard, reducing congestion and beautifying the entire quadrant of the city.

Kelsey and Boyd’s proposal was characterized by a consistent application of the internationally accepted norms of Beaux Arts design, as well as a modesty brought about by both an explicit recognition of the scale of Independence Hall and the probable awareness of the absence of any mechanism to acquire a large amount of property. Later Jacques Greber (1924 and 1930) and Paul Phillippe Cret (1928) would produce schemes similar in scope.¹¹

By 1937 Roy Larson, who had worked with both Boyd and Cret, had prepared a drawing that would completely recast the project. In a breathtaking application of Beaux Arts principles, Larson linked the city’s most precious historic treasure, Independence Hall, with its newest public work—the Delaware River Bridge (1926), now called the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, in a sequence of open spaces extending five blocks north from Independence Hall to the bridge plaza and beyond to Callowhill Street. This scheme was loosely patterned on the Place de la Carrière in Nancy.¹² Again, nothing happened immediately, but a threshold had been crossed toward giganticism and formality.

Urban Design: Implementation

With the commencement of World War II, there was a heightened sense of patriotism and urgency toward the protection of national monuments. Victory brought an increased role for the U.S. in world leadership that, to many, demanded a more significant architectural recognition of the nation’s founding.

The increasingly monumental interests of local architects found a resonance with new urban renewal legislation. The idea of

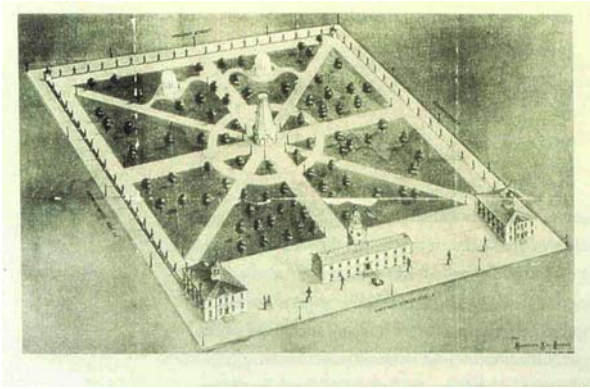
Independence Mall was thus transformed from a Beaux Arts plan to a Modern plan. An opportunity was seen to address what was perceived as the long-term economic decline of the area due to what was considered obsolete infrastructure. The mall became a way to revitalize the area and encourage major businesses to invest in it. Ultimately this would entail the razing of five adjacent blocks to provide sites for three new office buildings, including one for the Federal Reserve, a federal building and courthouse, and a new mint.¹³

This new approach was both the result of and an attraction to a remarkable pair of men who provided the leadership for it. Judge Edwin O. Lewis had done much of the organization and lobbying work necessary to bring the concept forward in the 40s. In post-war Philadelphia he met and commenced working with the new director of planning, Edmund Bacon, who sought a massive renewal of the eastern part of the city.¹⁴



Independence Hall, view to north, 1952
Courtesy Independence National Historic Park

Through the National Park Service a new conceptual element entered the scene. The effort to re-contextualize Independence Hall to the north was combined with a remaking of the area to the east by removing many of the buildings that were thought to be crowding the eighteenth-century monuments. This effort would result in the purification of the Independence National Park to an historically incorrect landscape that preserved only the monuments of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but without much context. It resulted in



Top: Plan for Independence Square, 1874
 Courtesy Independence National Historic Park

Bottom: Jacques Greber plan, 1924
 Courtesy Free Library of Philadelphia

too much in Philadelphia. I [would] hate to see Independence Hall in splendid isolation, landscaped like a rest room."¹⁶ The Peterson position would be succinctly put later by others:

The Independence Hall project is one of the outstanding examples of national interest in the preservation of our architectural heritage, but it differs from the Williamsburg and Old Deerfield projects in that it is located in a city that has grown continuously; hence it is highly artificial to restore the area back to a given date as though there had been no subsequent development....¹⁷

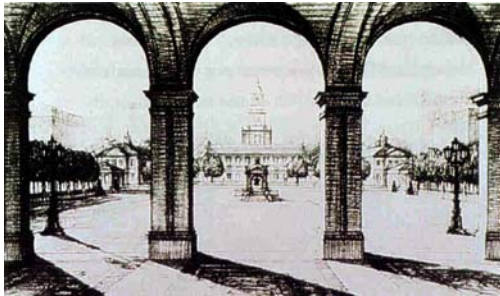
The second advocate of a more balanced approach was Lewis Mumford, who became interested in the issue while teaching at Penn:

If Mr. Peterson's wise lead is followed, the general rehabilitation of this area will not bring about a reign of compulsive Colonialism. There will be, rather, a wider variety of buildings, carried over from the past or newly built, each representing a significant moment in our national development. Only after 1840 did a truly indigenous architecture spring up in American, and one of the merits of Mr. Peterson's approach is that it would insure the preservation of at least one of Frank Furness' characteristic works in this area.¹⁸

On this point the advocates of purification, however, won the issue. The Furness bank and many other significant nineteenth-century structures were razed and to this day the park remains focused upon "the founding of the nation from 1775 to 1800."¹⁹

On the subject of the Mall and its axis, both Mumford and Peterson were again in agreement:

The proposed creation of grand mall on the axis of Independence Hall in Philadelphia threatens to disrupt the eighteenth century character of this unique building. This is not to say that the present adjoining buildings form a suitable setting for the cradle of the republic, but it



the destruction of such significant buildings as an early skyscraper, the Jayne Building by William Johnston and Thomas U. Walter of 1850, and the Provident Life and Trust of 1879, one of Furness' finest works.

Pushed hard by Judge Lewis, the Park Service had placed itself in an impossible urbanistic bind: having declared the nineteenth-century buildings built after 1840 superfluous, while simultaneously proscribing the notion of reconstructing any of the eighteenth-century context, it guaranteed that a falsely bucolic setting would be the only possible result. Commenting on subsequent preservation and environmental legislation a historian would later write: "...the National Park Service can never again destroy so much of the historic fabric of a city in order to create an artificial vision of the past."¹⁵

The First Battle Over Purification

The emerging tendency toward purification was not uncontested. Two powerful advocates for a more sensitive approach came forward. The first was Charles Peterson, a park service architect who argued passionately for incorporating the nineteenth century into the emerging park. He prepared a report in 1947 that drew upon other strong advocates of contextual preservation, as, for example, Hans Huth: "I hope they won't pull down

would [be] equally inept to impose a grandiose neoclassical or Grand Prix *parti* on it.²⁰

Mumford focused on the failure of the designers:

*The problem of designing a pleasant and fitting approach to a building whose architectural boasts are much more modest than its historical claims is so new that one should not be cast down because this first exploration was tempted down a visual alley that turned out to be a blind one...The proper key for such a design is not wholly a visual one. The designers would have come out better if they had thought not of a modernized baroque scheme but of the little shrine itself, what it means and in what mood and for what purpose the visitor approaches it.*²¹

Evaluation

With the completion of the mall in [year], these issues would be put to sleep for almost twenty years. There were a number of evaluations of the mall, none of them particularly good. Even Judge Lewis questioned the quality of the result: "I sometimes wonder if I've created a Frankenstein's monster, whether it's used enough to justify (the extra blocks)... I go by there and I see it all empty and think, 'Now what did you create that for? Maybe you overdid it.'"²²

In the mid 90s the City of Philadelphia engaged in the first serious evaluation of its attractiveness as a tourist destination. The results were deeply disturbing. Studies consistently showed that visitors came to Philadelphia for short visits numbered in hours, not the days envisioned by the planners.

This effort coincided with the development of a new general management plan for the park. The park service produced a thorough study of the mall in a document titled Cultural Landscape Report Independence Mall, which assessed and rejected all possible bases for valuing the mall as an historic or cultural artifact: "The mall as constructed...cannot be considered to be a significant representative work of the City Beautiful movement, of Beaux Arts design, or of International Style design."²³ Or, as a city planner would put more bluntly:

*[The mall is an] empty, barren wasteland that is a blundering, villainous, oversized beaux arts rupture of the City's historic, human-scaled fabric. Feigned City Beautiful artifact, with no soul and no heart, and littered with meaningless, lifeless, ersatz design elements. Little used because it has little function. Anti-urban barrier to exploring the larger historic district. A monstrous, disingenuously conceived, spuriously reasoned, theoretical "construct" which debases, rather than hallows, Independence Hall and the founding spirit of this country.*²⁴

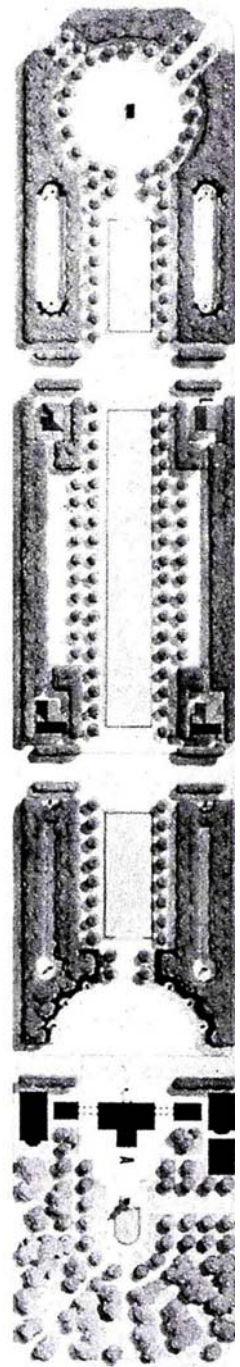
The Second Battle Over Purification

Yet another confrontation between the advocates of Beaux Arts purified monumentality and those of Mumford's complex ambiguity was set in motion when in 1995 the Pew Foundation retained Venturi Scott Brown and Associates (VSBA) to provide preliminary design and planning services for a new visitors' center on the mall. Denise Scott Brown began VSBA's only public presentation with an image of Independence Hall in its pre-mall urban context. Robert Venturi quoted Mumford in a memorandum that included this analysis of the gridiron plan of the city:

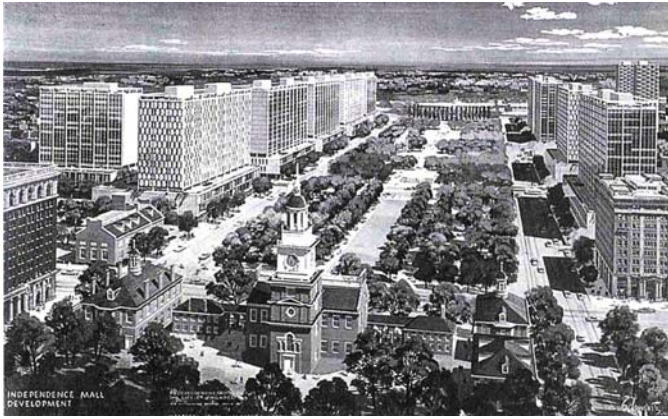
ACKNOWLEDGING THE GENIUS OF PENN'S GRIDIRON PLAN

*The genius of Philadelphia's gridiron plan (which was to become the prototype for the American City) lies in its elemental juxtaposition—that of explicitly varied configurations of building types and forms evolving optionally over time that are juxtaposed within an original street layout that is essentially consistent in its geometric configuration. Here is exemplified order combining with individuality, simplicity accommodating complexity...*²⁵

Aware of the modest scale of the Beaux Arts schemes prior to 1937, and of Giurgola's efforts to confront the scale problem in 1976, VSBA proposed a scheme as radical in its own way as Larson's. The visitor's



Roy Larson plan, 1938
Courtesy
Independence
National Historic Park



City Planning Commission rendering (Howe Hough Livingston Larson), 1956 Courtesy Philadelphia City Planning Commission

center would align east-west—with the city axis—and most crucially south of Market Street, decisively closing the vista of the Mall and incorporating a replacement to the existing Liberty Bell pavilion.

The scheme combined a low-key south elevation facing Independence Hall with an electronic “mural-frieze within the glass-faced gallery extending the length of the block”²⁶ on the north side. This scheme meant a complete rebuilding of the first block. At the same time VSBA also, and reluctantly, proposed an alternative scheme placing a building with a similar footprint north of Market Street, thus leaving the first block relatively untouched. This caught the attention of Edmund Bacon, who launched a vigorous campaign to save the axis. Bacon argued that:

*Our forbears at great expense to the taxpayers, destroyed three blocks of buildings to give Independence Hall a foreground of open space,.... To disrupt this continuity now would be a crime against history and cultural sensibility...I feel deeply that any obstruction of the central open space of Independence Mall would be a terrible cultural blunder ...*²⁷

Bacon built a model of his scheme and aggressively sought the support of the Director of the National Park Service:

*The way things are going now this can become pretty nasty. There is a pleasant and gentlemanly way out of this...I suggest that you thank me ... for producing such a fine personal vision for the development of Independence Mall. ...my plan is carefully considered and unified. Your casual scatteration of numbers is worthless.*²⁸

These efforts ultimately brought the following response from VSBA:

VISTA OBSESSION AND THE IRONIC HUMILIATION OF INDEPENDENCE HALL

it is important to acknowledge the specific shortcomings of Independence Mall in its current manifestation and as originally planned--that 1) IT COMPOSES A POMPOUS-BAROQUE AXIS IN A KIND OF VACUOUS-SPECIOUS VILLE RADIEUSE AND THAT 2) IT CREATES AN IRONICALLY DEMEANING SETTING FOR INDEPENDENCE HALL AS ARCHITECTURE AND AS SHRINE.

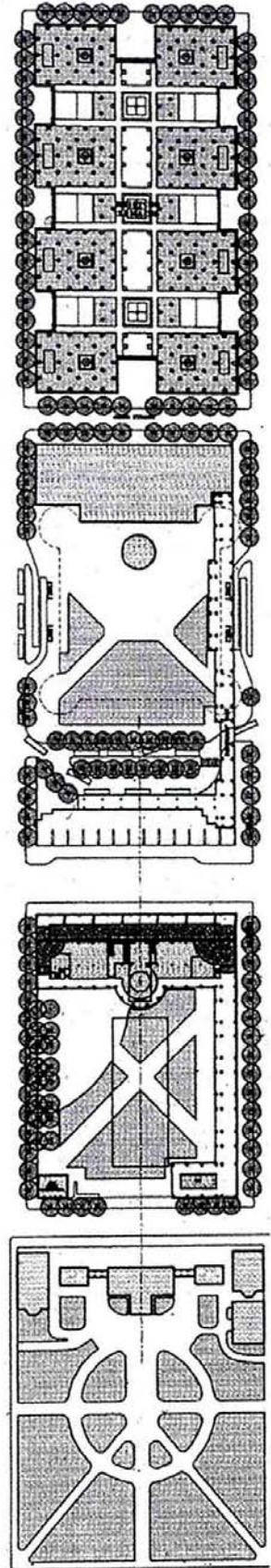
Referring implicitly to the language of urban design implied by Mumford some forty years earlier, VSBA asked:

*Is Bacon unaware of the vital urban tradition of gradual revelation—as in your perception of the majority of palaces and churches that are along streets in Rome and that you approach obliquely—and of glorious surprise—as with the palaces and churches on piazzas in Rome you suddenly come onto? How has he ignored this established tradition as he debases the genius loci of the gridiron city he is a prominent citizen of and an alleged expert on.*²⁹

The reaction of concerned public officials and professionals was mixed. Bacon was not the only one who felt the south of Market site was too close, although the vast majority of architects thought the mall to be a mistake. To still other officials it seemed like a tempest in a teapot, a large-scale 1960s urban renewal battle in reverse. A newspaper editorial reported on the result:

*Architects hired by Pew [VSBA] favored the Mall's first block, with visitor center near or even encompassing the Liberty Bell. That rightly set off alarms among some planners and Mall devotees [read Bacon]... Planners at the Park Service [are] recommending that the visitor center go in the middle block, and that makes far more sense.*³⁰

VSBA completed its work and had no further involvement in the project. The rationale of the next



Venturi Scott Brown Associates proposal, 1996 Graphic: Venturi Scott Brown Associates

design plan that grew out of the ashes of these efforts is described in this issue by Laurie Olin, one of its authors. Each of the major buildings has now been designed: the National Constitution Center by Henry Cobb, Pew's Visitor's Center by Michael McKinnell, and the new Liberty Bell pavilion by Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson.

Although a detailed assessment of these works might best await their completion, it seems appropriate to consider how the present narrative might motivate new critical investigations. Two issues seem provocative now: First, although the VSBA and Olin/Cywinski schemes differ fundamentally in their strategies, they are both seen by their authors as anti-imperial. Will the new scheme as built enable the public to experience the multiple readings that it clearly aspires to? Second, the National Constitution Center, which reads as a reworking of the East Wing of the National Gallery by the same firm, seems to be the least sensitive to the aspirations of the final urban design. Will it serve remind us that, in cases of national image, recognized monumental languages almost always trump hard won locally inflected complexity?

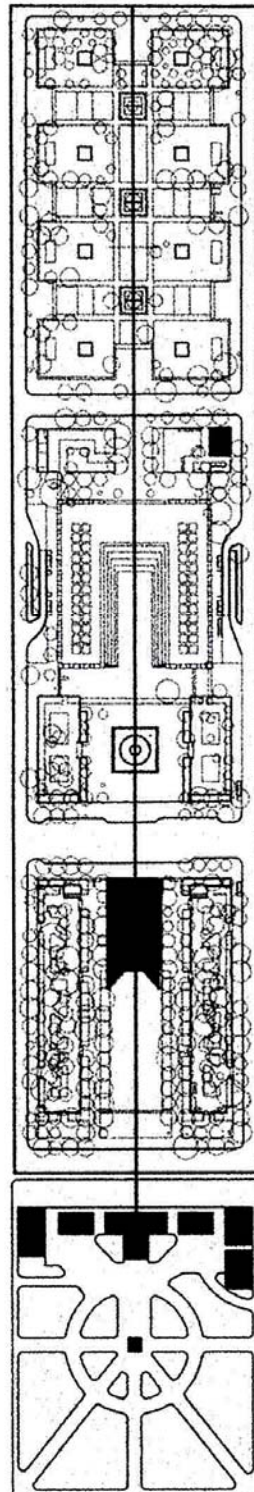


Figure ground, Independence Mall, 1998
Graphics: Olin Partnership

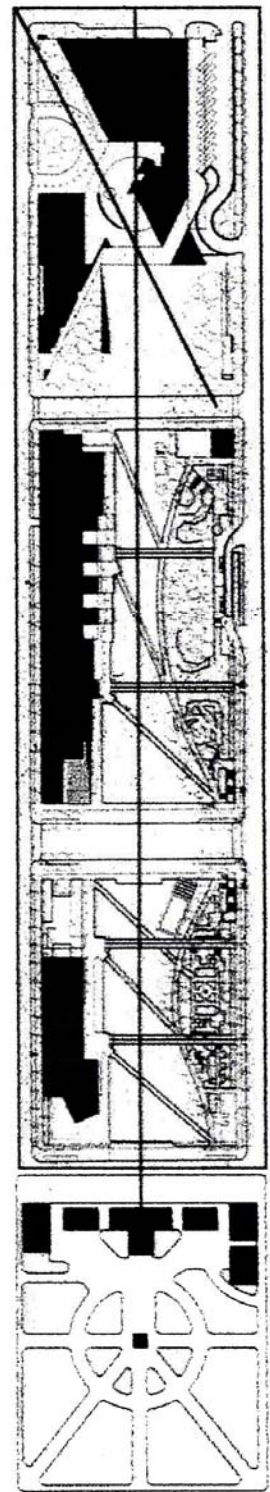


Figure ground, Independence Mall master plan

Notes

¹ Richard Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1976) 77-79. Charles Peterson, "Philadelphia's New National Park," Eightieth Annual Report (Philadelphia: Fairmount Park Art Association, 1952), 20

² Webster, 78

³ This paragraph follows Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 112-128

⁴ James Gibbs, *A Book of Architecture* (London: 1728; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 64

⁵ John A. Gallery, *Philadelphia Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1984), 247

⁶ Penelope Hartshorne Batchelor, "Independence Hall: Its Appearance Restored" in Peterson, ed. *Building Early America* (Radnor, Pa: Chilton, 1976), 299

⁷ Daniel Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1976), 77, and John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1953, 1969), 339

⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Highway in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953, 1963), 184. On Mumford's outlook, see Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast* (Cambridge: MIT, 1995) 73

⁹ Huger Elliot, "Architecture in Philadelphia and a Coming Age," *Architectural Record* 23 (April 1908) 299-300, quoted in Kathleen Cook, "The Creation of Independence National Historical Park and Independence Mall," M.A. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1989, 172, quoted in Deirdre Gibson, et. al., *Cultural Landscape Report Independence Mall* (Denver: National Park Service, 1994,) 22

¹⁰ Kenneth Finkel, *Philadelphia Then and Now* (New York: Dover, 1988), 78

¹¹ Albert Kelsey, INDE Archives, IHA, Boyd Coll. Box 1 1915 Colonnade Plan, quoted in *Cultural Landscape Report*, 24. On Greber and Cret, see *Cultural Landscape Report*, 26-30

¹² *Cultural Landscape Report*, 39-40

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133-134

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-44. and 75

¹⁵ Constance Greiff, *Independence, The Creation of a National Park* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987), 77-112, 267

¹⁶ Hans Huth, quoted in Charles Peterson, "A Preliminary Report, June 1947: The Philadelphia Shrines National Park Commission," 13

¹⁷ Caroll L. V. Meeks, letter to Judge Edwin O. Lewis, 25 September 1956 INDE archives, quoted in *Cultural Landscape Report*, 149

¹⁸ Mumford, 203

¹⁹ Abbreviated Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Independence National Historical Park (Denver: United States Park Service, March 1997), 1-9

²⁰ Turpin Bannister, Chair of AIA national committee on the preservation of monuments, 1947, quoted in Charles Peterson, "Philadelphia's New National Park," in *Proceedings of the Eightieth Fairmount Park Art Association* (Philadelphia: 1952), 16

²¹ Mumford, 193

²² Judge Edwin O. Lewis from the original interview by Eleanor Prescott, 19 January 1971, pp. 31-33 quoted in *Cultural Landscape Report*, 152

²³ *Cultural Landscape Report*, 147

²⁴ An anonymous city planner, 1997

²⁵ Robert Venturi, "Redesign of Independence Mall with Visitor Center: VSBA's Preliminary Analysis and Conceptual Design: Scheme A," copyrighted memorandum to National Park Service, September, 1996, 1

²⁶ Venturi, 2

²⁷ Edmund N. Bacon, letter to the editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, 5 February, 1995

²⁸ Bacon, letter to Roger Kennedy, Director of the National Park Service, 7 October 1995, published in *Abbreviated Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Independence National Historic Park* (Denver: National Park Service, March 1997), 4-93

²⁹ Venturi, 8-9

³⁰ Editorial, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 September 1996