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Rethinking Fortress Federalism

The following discussion took place at the conference session, "Security and Design in the Nation's Capital," held March 30, 2003, at the American Planning Association's national conference in Denver.

The National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan

People and places all over the world were greatly affected by September 11, but some places were virtually transformed, physically, psychologically and economically. One of those places is Washington, D.C., whose design is specifically intended to reflect an open, free and democratic society.

The impact of security measures on the District were apparent long before Sept. 11. When Pennsylvania Avenue was closed to traffic after the Oklahoma City bombing, it created a dead space at the very place where the President's house faces an open, public street.

Since Sept. 11, we have seen more and more makeshift security measures that compromise the beauty of monumental Washington. These fortifications communicate fear and entrenchment, and they undermine the principles of an open and democratic society.

Security design issues are not unique to the nation's capital, and Jersey barriers are no more attractive in your cities than they are in Washington. Most of you are also struggling to provide security that doesn't sap the life and beauty of your communities.

Two years ago the National Capital Planning Commission established an interagency security task force to evaluate the impact of increasing security measures on Washington's monumental core. One of its key recommendations was to call for a comprehensive plan that would integrate perimeter security into the monumental fabric of historic Washington.

The underlying premise of the plan is that it is possible to have both good security and good urban design. The

objective of our plan is to improve the function and the appearance of the monumental core, integrating perimeter security into attractive streetscapes and beautiful landscapes, and to coordinate the design and installation of these security measures. This means providing security around buildings and monuments, and expanding the palette of street furnishings and landscape treatments that can be used for security.

As far as we know, this is the first plan to address this problem in a comprehensive way. We don't think for a moment that we have the last word on this. Rather, we have opened the discussion about how to achieve an appropriate balance between providing security and sustaining livable communities.

We hope this discussion will involve planners and policymakers, designers and developers who are confronting these security issues. This conversation should go on for some time because it is necessary for communities to establish common, civic values that reflect our expectations of urban centers and our understanding of what constitutes a democratic society.

— Patricia Gallagher

Patricia Gallagher is executive director of the National Capital Planning Commission.



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