



## Peer Reviewed

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[Altman, Andrew](#)

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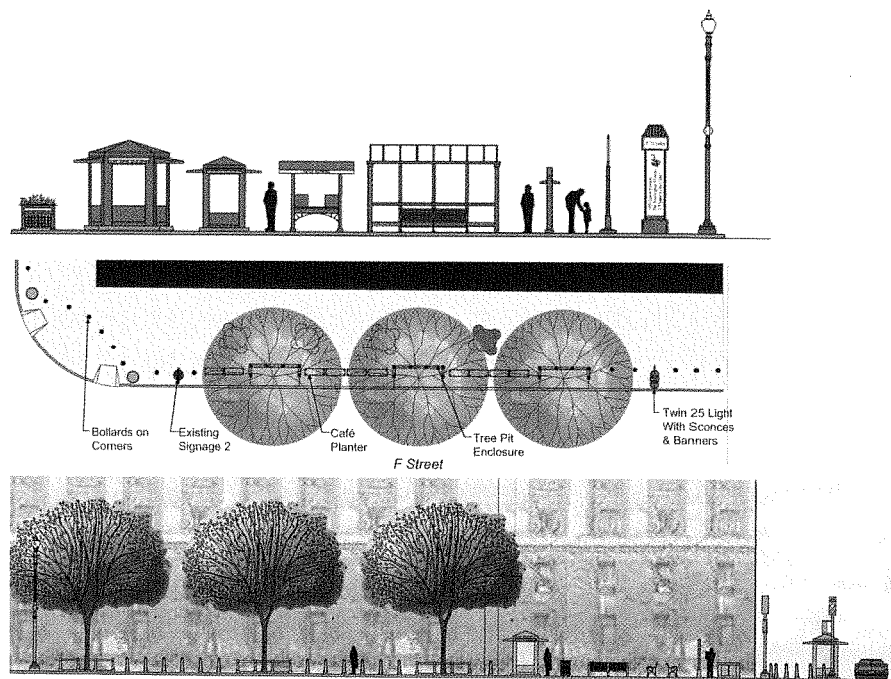
## Security Design: From Streetscape to the Bigger Picture

Everybody seems to have security envy these days; the level of security your agency or building receives has come to be a status symbol.

I do applaud the Urban Design and Security Plan, because NCPC and its design consultants have taken an extraordinary step forward in addressing a fundamental issue in the nation's capital. This should be the place that reflects democracy, it should be beautiful and open. So it is that much more sad and pathetic when, with every security alert, more and more barriers and bollards come out. Nothing is temporary, I've learned; everything winds up being permanent, and these devices mar the landscape.

Having said that, many of the challenges we face in the city's Office of Planning start where the study leaves off. The study is concerned about zones three to five; well, what happens in zones one and two? The challenges we face include setback issues, parking and vehicular access. Downtown, and in the other neighborhoods in which the federal government is looking to site its facilities, these issues have a profound impact on the life of the city, its streets, its vibrancy.

Of course, we would like to have beautiful streets and beautiful building perimeters. But if you don't have transparency and ground-floor retail, if you have to close streets that approach your building, if you have to have setbacks of fifty feet or more, if you are restricted in the kinds of uses you have in buildings, then this starts to affect what your city is like. We have to get into the issue of the building itself, and not let more and more security requirements lead us to point where the fundamental form of the city is distorted.



We see this tension every day in the District. We want to keep agency headquarters and the federal presence in our city; it has been an important source of employment and economic stimulus. At the same time we're seeing more and more restrictions coming in place that could be inimical to that goal.

This is particularly true as the federal government has sited new buildings in emerging areas of the city, along our waterfront or adjacent to downtown, places where we want to grow. Those projects can be catalysts, but as the federal government starts to impose stricter and stricter security requirements, it starts to close itself off. Its buildings are becoming internally, rather than externally, focused in terms of how they relate to other buildings, to the area in which they are located, to the District.

The federal Department of Transportation headquarters is an interesting example. It is a major headquarters that will relocate to an emerging area of our city, the South-

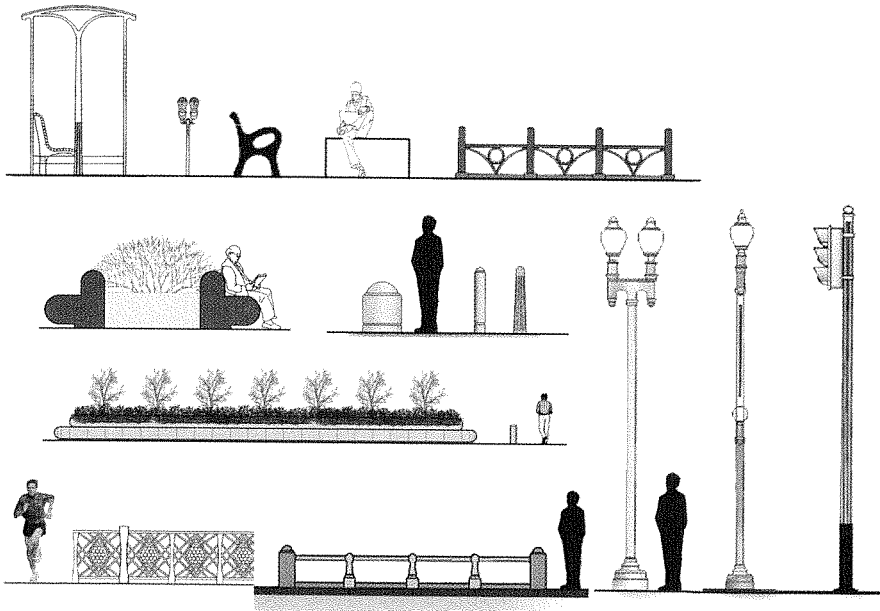
east waterfront. It could have a very catalytic effect in that area. Before Sept. 11, it looked like there would be an opportunity to have retail on the ground floor of the building, to have a street come through for vehicular access, and for openness in terms of the ground floor, so it really would fit into the district. These ideas have been clamped down more and more, with restrictions on vehicular access and retail.

We're seeing this not only with federal buildings, but also with major private institutions that feel threatened, for whatever reason, and feel that they need to emulate federal security requirements. In many cases, this becomes a nonconversation. It becomes an expert opinion that is

**Above:** Proposed streetscape, with street trees and hardened streetscape elements.

**Opposite:** Elements that could seamlessly incorporate building perimeter security into a beautifully designed streetscape.

All graphics courtesy of National Capital Planning Commission.



irrefutable and non-negotiable; that you would challenge this is to suggest, in some way, that you are insensitive or unpatriotic.

Nevertheless, we have to open up this box, because it is a box that is no longer as contained as it may have once been, and it's going to have a profound effect on the cityscape. Cities are going to have to gear up for this, learn about the issues and work with the federal government to find solutions so that we're not shutting down the city at the same time we are trying to be a democratic society. I'm grateful that the National Capital Planning Commission has started to challenge these basic assumptions. This study takes a great step forward, but we can't be satisfied.

— *Andrew Altman*  
*Andrew Altman is executive director of the Washington, D.C., Office of Planning.*

**Gallagher:** Should we be trying to keep these headquarters in the city? What are the challenges you face with new headquarters projects?

**Altman:** Throughout the history of Washington, after the British attack in 1814, after the Civil War, during the Cold War, there was an impulse for decentralization. The cry would be: "We have to move out of Washington! We have to leave the city, move federal buildings out, relocate somewhere in the Midwest!" You are seeing that impulse today. "Here's the threat, the District isn't safe, we have to move further out." And today we have the added complication that suburban vacancy rates are very high, which means they're attractive as well, so you can have your security and your economics work together.

My response is that we shouldn't throw in the towel. To admit defeat at this point, to say yes, just move out, would be the wrong message. Just as other waves of this phenomenon have come and gone, we need to face this and find a more creative response.

My advice is, don't accept everything you hear as fact. Challenge what you hear, even if it comes from the GSA or the NCPC. There are arguments now being made in the guise of security, and we just have to challenge that. I'm convinced these issues can be reconciled in the city; the NCPC plan deals with reconciling one set of issues, and there is clearly another set of issues we have to deal with. Ultimately, these concerns are reconcilable. They are not an excuse to leave the city, particularly as you have strong executive orders that say federal buildings should try to locate in central cities.

Make sure, whatever you do, that it is reversible. Don't build permanently closed buildings and permanently closed districts. You have to take a longer view than the immediate security issue before you. Buildings should not be designed in a way that precludes the possibility of having retail in the long run, or transparency, or open parking. Don't allow streets of the grid to be closed, even if they don't have vehicular access for the time being. We have to make sure that we don't do permanent damage to the urban environment.

Be proactive. You need to think through, if you're trying to attract a federal building, or the expansion of federal facilities, what is your plan? What is it that you want to see in these particular areas? That gives you the ammunition to say: "Here's what we want in this area. You're a part of a district, you don't sit in a vacuum. This is what we're trying to create, how can you be a part of it?" Get on top of that now, don't wait for it to hit you over the head.

**McGill:** For the Department of Transportation headquarters, which Andy referenced, you can argue that the glass is either half empty or half full. The building is going into the Southeast Federal Center (SEFC),

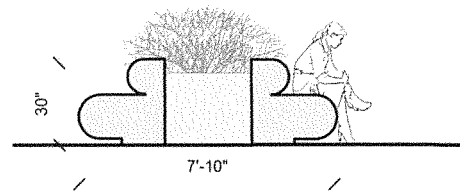
a 55-acre site that has been dormant for the last thirty-six years. Right now, all the streets in that area are closed to the general public. There's a brick wall, about eight feet high, that stretches along the entire length of the SEFC, as well as the Navy Yard next door. (See "Catalyzing a Waterfront Neighborhood," *Places* 13:3) We're going to open up the SEFC. We're going to extend the borders of downtown Washington by putting DOT there, then develop the remaining 44 acres as a mixed-use project, which is innovative for us. Instead of being a federal enclave, as a GSA plan in called for in 1992, it's going to be a mixed-use development that will connect to the waterfront, open the street and tear down that wall.

This is a "build-to-suit" leased building, and DOT has its requirements. The agency is willing to reopen the segment of Third Street that passes through their site, but close it to vehicular traffic; it could be opened to traffic in the future. The developer, the JBG Companies, is building the ground floor so retail space can be added later, should that be allowed.

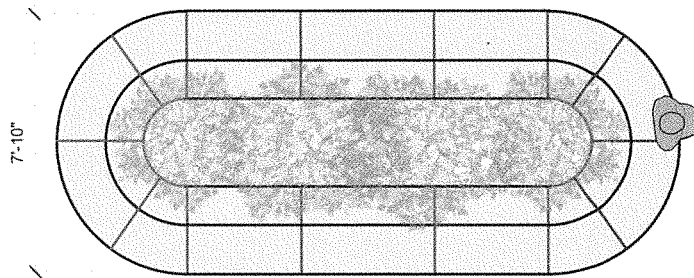
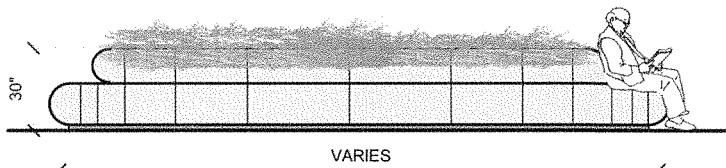
There are certain places right now where we can't do everything, given the threat environment in which we live. But we can try to make what we do reversible, or so attractive that it's not a negative influence.

**Krieger:** This is coming, not just to public buildings but also to private buildings, and cities should be aware of that before trying to approve, on a building-by-building basis, curbside measures that will hardly aggrandize the street environment.

In fact, as we look around the country, particularly at iconic or prominent buildings, the private sector is acting more quickly than the federal government, and it is acting with fewer of these insights.



PLANTING DESIGNED FOR SEASONAL CHANGE AND COLOR  
CUBIC STONE OR PRE-CAST CONCRETE



And it is saying, you can't stop us, because it's a matter of life and death.

When city agencies are confronted with an owner wanting to do this around an office building, they must have a response that prevents the most uninteresting cheap, inexpensive, common barrier to be put up around a building. Cities have to think about developing their own strategies or guidelines about how the private sector, mostly in downtown areas, will achieve security measures.

**Question from the floor:** Have you looked at what cities abroad are doing? What lessons can we learn from them?

**Krieger:** One of the lessons that's not often talked about is that you can overdo it. Where do you stop securing yourself in the public environment? If

you secure all your public buildings, buses get bombed, or other places get bombed. The threat simply shifts.

**McGill:** We have chosen very consciously, across the country, since 1995, that we are going to secure individual buildings. We are not trying what they are doing in London, which has established "secure perimeter areas" inside of which you don't need to defend individual buildings. From a city-planning perspective, taking this approach and the added benefits it offers, such as reducing traffic congestion, might in the long run be a more intriguing idea, though in the present political climate it would be impossible to achieve.

Above: Detail of planter streetscape element. Graphic courtesy of National Capital Planning Commission.