

# H-Net Reviews

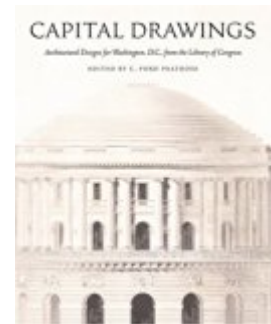
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



C. Ford Peatross, ed. *Capital Drawings: Architectural Designs for Washington, D.C., from the Library of Congress*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. x + 264 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-7232-7.

Reviewed by Zachary M. Schrag (Department of History and Art History, George Mason University)

Published on H-DC (August, 2006)



## Soaring Elevations

“Inviting, even seductive,” are the words C. Ford Peatross uses to describe a 1951 residential design by architect Charles M. Goodman (p. 47). The same terms apply to *Capital Drawings*, the book Peatross edited and helped write. Designed to showcase the Library of Congress’s holdings of architectural materials relating to the Washington area, it does for the library just what Goodman’s rendering did for his proposed house, “drawing the viewer inside and making him want to be there, to stay there, and, with luck, to live there.”

The book is composed of six essays. Peatross’s essay on unbuilt Washington takes up the first third of the book and introduces readers to “intriguing, accomplished, and even absurd” but never completed schemes (p. 3). Damie Stillman, William Seale, and Pamela Scott describe plans for three of the most architecturally contentious projects in the city’s history: the Capitol, the White House, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In contrast, Richard Longstreth and Gwendolyn Wright focus on lesser known, but equally fascinating, vernacular architecture—commercial and residential projects, respectively.

The real seduction is in the images. One hundred and twenty-three halftones and fifty-five color plates are reproduced with exquisite clarity. They appear just one or two to a page (and never as a crossover) with the captions opposite to prevent distraction. Some of the drawings have been reduced from a size of two or three feet, so

not every word is legible. To a remarkable degree, however, both the monochrome and color illustrations preserve the details and texture of the originals. One hesitates to touch the pencil drawings, lest they smudge.

Readers who can pull their eyes away from the images will be rewarded. Woven through the six chapters are three stories about architecture in Washington. The first story is the story of buildings. Although not as varied as that of New York or Chicago, Washington’s architecture does include projects by some of the nation’s most prominent designers, as well as good examples of vernacular forms. The Peatross, Longstreth, and Wright essays are particularly successful in describing the evolution of the city’s architecture, using as examples drawings from the collections. Peatross has the advantage here, since his unbuilt projects exist only on paper.

In contrast, the chapters on specific buildings are hobbled by the requirement that authors limit themselves to illustrations held by the Library of Congress. Stillman repeatedly alludes to the thousands of drawings held not by the library but by the Architect of the Capitol. Adding some of these drawings to the essay would have made it far more complete. Better still would have been a combination of historic images and new illustrations—photographs and redrawings. For example, Stillman’s account of the evolution of the Capitol’s floor plan is illustrated by several drawings, but far easier to follow would be a single page with each plan drawn in the same orien-

tation and to the same scale.

Seale's chapter on the White House avoids some of these problems by emphasizing the book's second story, the story of the architectural drawings themselves. Whether or not a given project was built, the drawings record two centuries of architectural ideas and practices. Gwendolyn Wright's essay is especially helpful at explaining the various types and styles of drawings on file. She notes, for example, that as architectural training shifted from apprenticeships to university programs, "the favored drawings for office study and client presentations shifted from softly colored perspectives to bolder axonometric projections in vivid hues or crisp black and white" (p. 156). Other sections of the book are less informative about how the drawings came to be. Longstreth's real interest seems to be buildings, not plans, and his essay would probably have come out the same were it based on photographs or extant buildings, rather than drawings.

The book's third story is that of the Library of Congress and its collections. Here, the authors seek to lure scholars with hints of a "rich and unplumbed archive" of material (p. viii). The preface explains that the editors have provided an enticing sample, rather than an extensive catalog, trusting that the library's website is better suited to the latter role. Thus, beyond the hundreds of images printed in the book itself, the authors provide Library of Congress call numbers. Entered into the appropriate search box of the website <[\\$http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/mdbquery.html#Number\\$>](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/mdbquery.html#Number$), these call numbers produce more detail about the image and a thumbnail view.

While it is nice to be able to go beyond the printed page, a more helpful approach would have been to provide a web page with links to each image mentioned, sparing readers the need to enter each call number in the search box. A hint of this approach can be seen on the book's associated web page at the Library of Congress <[\\$http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/adecenter/biogess.html\\$>](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/adecenter/biogess.html). The one essay posted there as of this writing, Pamela Scott's "Residential Architecture of Washington, D.C., and Its Suburbs," neatly

integrates text with both thumbnail images and hyperlinks to additional material in the library's database. Unfortunately, concerns about copyright means that for many of the images, only thumbnail versions are available to online researchers. For now, the printed book has no rival.

The one topic that is frustratingly absent from the book is acquisitions. The authors mention in passing that some key drawings, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's plan for a U.S. embassy in Tokyo, came to the library when the architect submitted it for copyright purposes. But they do not explain how architects chose when to seek copyright, or how librarians chose which deposit copies to preserve. Similarly, Longstreth notes which local firms are represented in the library's holdings, but not how their work came to be preserved. And while Michele E. Hamill of the library's Conservation Office has written elsewhere about the challenges of preserving blueprints and other fragile media from the twentieth century, her work does not address the challenges of the twenty-first century. As Wright notes, today's architects visualize and revise their designs on computer screens rather than on paper. As with any digital medium, the longevity of these files is anyone's guess. [1]

Three books in one, *Capital Drawings* is less a coherent, fixed work than, as Longstreth terms his own essay, a "prolegomenon" to additional works on the history of architecture in Washington and beyond (p. 116). Like Washington itself, that history is still being built.

#### Note

[1]. Michele E. Hamill, "Washingtoniana II: Conservation of Architectural Drawings at the Library of Congress," in *The Book and Paper Group Annual* (The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works 12 [1993]), <[\\$http://aic.stanford.edu/sg/bpg/annual/v12/bp12-08.html\\$>](http://aic.stanford.edu/sg/bpg/annual/v12/bp12-08.html), accessed August 1, 2006; Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003), <[\\$http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.3/rosenzweig.html\\$>](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.3/rosenzweig.html), accessed August 1, 2006.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-dc>

**Citation:** Zachary M. Schrag. Review of Peatross, C. Ford, ed., *Capital Drawings: Architectural Designs for Washing-*

*ton, D.C., from the Library of Congress.* H-DC, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12157>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).