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Washington: Symbol and City. National Building Museum.

Reviewed by Kym S. Rice

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Aficionados of Washington, D.C. history take heart! Despite the closing of the City Museum, all is not lost. The National Building Museum has reopened a new and different version of their longtime exhibition, *Washington: Symbol and City*, which garnered much praise in its original form. The National Building Museum (NBM) is no slouch in the exhibition department. During the last decade, it has become the one local museum that audiences can rely on consistently for thoughtful and well-designed exhibitions. Their public and educational programs, including a summer exhibition program for the children of Washington, are highly regarded. Even as some detractors grumble—not completely unfairly—that the subject matter of NBM exhibitions sometimes seem dictated by the interests of funders, the museum’s exhibition developers and curators work hard to place their subject(s) in their historical context as social and cultural markers of our past and present. Even when they miss the target, NBM exhibitions are worth visiting, often more than once. This is an exhibition not just for Washingtonians, but visitors too. It is a very welcome addition to the NBM as well as to presentations of the city’s history in general. *Symbol and City* puts to rest ill-informed comments about Washington, D.C.’s history that appeared in the *Washington City Paper*.^[1] The city does have a history worth learning about. The curatorial team—Don Alexander Hawkins, a local architect with a strong interest in Washington’s early history, and Portia James, curator of the Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia Museum—use text, image, and, to a more limited extent, artifacts to sketch the story of the city that grew up in the shadow of dominant public architecture. Overall, what Hawkins, James, and their colleagues create is thoughtful, interesting, and even, at a few points, whimsical and fun. The exhibition’s main message is clearly spelled out in the introductory panel, which focuses on “the tension between the demands of a working seat of government, and the hopes and needs of an evolving city.” At the entrance, video screens juxtapose serene scenes of neighborhoods like Brookland with the nation-

ally focused “pageants and protests” that take place on the Mall and along city streets. City residents know intimately the strange burden of living at the nation’s seat of government. While the exhibition’s interpretation is certainly not new from a scholarly perspective, it successfully sums up work by scholars and public historians over recent decades, including my own *Southern City, National Ambition*, which was part of five D.C. history exhibitions undertaken by the Octagon Museum in the 1990s. *Symbol and City* also makes good use of local resources such as the photo collections at the Library of Congress and the D.C. Public Library’s Washingtoniana Division. Although historians already know of these collections, the exhibition will introduce many others to the holdings related to the city in Washington’s museums and libraries. The exhibition’s planners literally divide the city’s history into the two separate categories denoted in the title. The first, smaller gallery traces the city’s rise as the symbolic embodiment of the emerging nation. Beginning with L’Enfant, the exhibition recounts the well-known creation of the city’s monumental architecture and landscape. Although it follows a rough chronology, the space is dominated by two huge models of the Mall area. The first was created in 1901 by George Carson Curtis for the Senate Park Commission. The second, topped with a large Plexiglas Washington Monument cutout, illustrates what has come to be called the McMillan Plan. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the plan transformed the Mall to create the monumental core that Washingtonians know today. Distinctive “please touch” models of the Mall’s other major landmarks—the White House, the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, the Jefferson Memorial—used in the original exhibition to good effect reappear here in new form, with accompanying histories. Thermoform maps and charts annotated in Braille are another effective touch. I also liked the judicious use of audio in this gallery, which offers a clip of Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial. The second, larger gallery is uneven, both in appearance and in content, perhaps because it has much more to cover than the first gallery.

Stepping first into a row house vignette, visitors learn about the “evolving city” through thematic topics placed throughout the gallery: housing, community life, commercial developments, infrastructure, and cultural institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution. A long partition that illustrates the changes to Pennsylvania Avenue since 1800 subdivides the space. Generally, the design is less successful, meaning awkward and distracting, here than in the first gallery. The hierarchy of didactic material (though cleanly written and not too wordy), which worked well at the beginning of the exhibition, becomes more difficult to follow. A timeline might have helped anchor the gallery. I wished that the wonderful video, which neatly reasserts the city’s present day symbolic quality by depicting D.C. locations in Hollywood movies, could have been made more prominent. Instead, the exhibition ends a little flatly, with the creation of the African American Civil War memorial. <p> Some who know the city’s history well may quibble with the curatorial choices or certain emphases, but they should keep in mind that exhibitions are not books. Therefore, not surprisingly, much of the story of how Washington became an urban place is necessarily condensed. Hawkins and James concentrate on Washington’s modern post-Civil War history, and as this museum focuses more on buildings than people, that is the focus here. Even so, personal histories of Washingtonians—whether audio excerpts or dramatized readings from primary sources like Montgomery Meigs’ diaries—would be a welcome addition to the exhibition. (Such personal histories were also sorely missing in the City Museum.) Alexander “Boss” Shepherd’s critical contributions, which so transformed the city’s infrastructure in the 1870s, receive only brief mention, although the text does acknowledge his importance, arguably equal to the McMillan plan, in creating the mod-

ern city. More might have been made about Washington’s early, large free African-American community that established itself even as the city remained an “emporium of slavery,” to quote one antebellum tourist. Also overlooked is the conflict that existed between black and white residents from the city’s earliest days. On the positive side, visitors will learn about Howard University’s establishment, alleys and row houses, and U Street. They can leaf through an album replete with wonderful photographic reproductions from the Scurlock Studio. The largely forgotten way in which DC residents blocked a massive federal highway project intended to bisect the city in the 1960s is also well told. <p> Finally, I was troubled by the exhibition’s somewhat benign tone in describing the hegemonic role of the federal government, which has supervised nearly every aspect of city life since Washington’s founding. One wishes for more sharpness and tension in the exhibition’s depiction of this critical relationship or with its engagement with other important subjects such as poverty, racial inequality, and urban renewal. Tourists may know that Congress continues to deny Washington’s residents the representation that most Americans take for granted, but few are probably aware of how the federal government has shortchanged the city financially over time. More discerning visitors to <cite>Symbol and City</cite> will leave the exhibition with a new understanding of how that secondary status continues to shape everything in Washington. <p> It is a shame that the City Museum is gone, but in resurrecting <cite>Washington: Symbol and City</cite>, the NBM has helped to keep Washington history alive for some time to come. <p> Note <p> [1]. Chris Shott and David Plotz, “2004: The Year D.C. History Died,” <cite>Washington City Paper</cite>, December 24, 2004.

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