

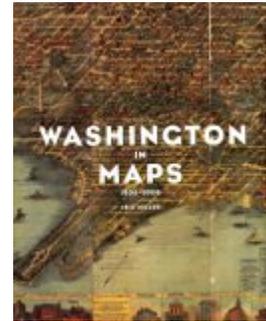
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Iris Miller. *Washington in Maps, 1606-2000*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2002. 176 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8478-2447-2.

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In her new book, *Washington in Maps*, Iris Miller brings the eye of a professional landscape architect and urban planner to bear on the vast and highly varied body of historic maps, bird's-eye views, landscape prints, and engineering drawings that have, over time, represented the city of Washington and the District of Columbia. From the hundreds available, Miller selects about eighty maps and half a dozen other illustrations. Coupling these maps with fifty-two explanatory essays, she crafts a suggestive study concerning reading design intent and urban meaning from cartography.

The book is identical in format and organization to a trio of previous map books published by Rizzoli.[1] Its contents are organized into chapters with overarching themes, ranging from "Discovering the New World" and "Designing Washington, District of Columbia—Spirit of Democracy" to "Place and Space—Government Interventions" and "Straddling Technology and Urban Design." Each individual map is introduced by an interpretive title and a concise bibliographic summary. A typical title is "Essence of a Late-Nineteenth-Century American City," which interprets Adolph Sachse's advertisement-laden 1884 promotional bird's-eye view. The bibliographic summaries include each map's exact title, cartographer, publisher, dates, source collection, and original dimensions (the latter provided sometimes in inches and sometimes in centimeters, apparently depending on the cataloging conventions of the map's repository). Miller reproduces most of her material from the holdings of the Geography and Map Division at the Library of Congress and from the private collection of Albert H. Small, a local businessman and map collector. The author has thoughtfully provided exact catalog numbers for each map reproduced, enabling researchers to find her originals. The text

frequently mentions additional maps that are not shown and usually gives call numbers for those as well.

In her introduction, Miller notes that "Washington's city plans unveil a pattern of a city in flux, accommodating growth, evolving through time—a geographical record of population and place-making.... Rarely can a city boast such a sampling of maps that fully exposes its process of formation and growth, defining its boundaries and geometries" (p. 12). This said, she stops short of explicitly stating the goals for her book or laying out the criteria she used in selecting the maps. Her writing reveals her interest in urban planning issues as well as the perception and representation of place. Moreover, it is logical to conclude that she brought together maps and illustrations that illustrate change in the physical character of the city and the District over time and that reveal the multiplicity of ways that urban space has been constructed, recorded, and packaged.

Consequently, readers familiar with the history of Washington will find many well-known and frequently reproduced maps and illustrations in the book. Not surprisingly, L'Enfant's manuscript plan, its various early revisions, and the 1887 Coast Survey copy figure prominently. A. J. Downing's plan for the Mall, Edward Sachse's bird's-eye views from Capitol Hill, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.'s plan for the Capitol Grounds appear, as does the well-known 1901 Senate Park Commission presentation drawings and the commonplace Metro system map. Less well-known selections include two ink and watercolor Revolutionary War maps depicting French army encampments in Maryland and Virginia in 1782, the Army topographical engineers' 1838 map of the Potomac River and the Alexandria Canal, and sheets

from the Historic American Buildings Survey showing changes to Federal reservations over time. The book's most recent maps tend to be its least familiar ones, including Leon Krier's fantastical and utopian vision for "The Completion of Washington," commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art (1985) and Iris Miller's own "Visions of Washington, Composite Plan of Urban Interventions" (1991).

Miller's text reflects her strong interest in French urbanism and landscape design as well as in the renewal and modernization of L'Enfant's vision by both the Senate Park Commission and urban planners. The most convincing and considered piece of her writing is the extended introduction, which describes the intellectual and artistic atmosphere in which Pierre Charles L'Enfant was trained, and which identifies a variety of eighteenth-century, mostly French, city plans that may have informed his work. (It also reproduces L'Enfant's only surviving art work, a drawing of two wrestlers, for which Miller tells us he received a prize.) Miller's reading of the urban-design intentions expressed in L'Enfant's manuscript plan for the city and her strong, persuasive excoriation of Andrew Ellicott for his alterations of L'Enfant's design are highlights of the book. Unfortunately, her arguments are difficult to assess, because Miller includes no citations to any primary or secondary sources, aside from notes on the locations of the maps she mentions.

Ten of the book's essays are written by or with other authors. This collaboration gives the book a certain stylistic unevenness that is balanced by the quality of some of the contributions. Particularly enjoyable are Herbert M. Franklin's pieces on master-planning around the Capitol, Robert L. Miller's perspectives on reading the cartography of antebellum Washington, and Timothy Davis's distillation of his own authoritative research on the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. Charlene Drew Jarvis's co-written essay examining segregation on a 1926 school system map brings a welcome contrast of social history into the language of the book, although it, too, would have benefited from footnotes to guide readers further into the rich history of African Americans in the District.

Despite these highlights, serious flaws make it difficult to recommend *Washington in Maps* to either general or scholarly readers. Two shortcomings can be laid squarely at the door of the publisher. The first is poor editing, which, though more annoying than detrimental to the book's usefulness, lends the book an unpolished

quality that makes it trying to read. Sloppy copyediting has left typographical errors in the text—from numerous missing letters and numbers and inconsistent spacing to misprinted apostrophes and mistakes in the selection of italic type. Two maps, the informative "Masterplan for the United States Capitol" (1981) and Roger Lewis's sketch for reworking New York Avenue (1986), are printed in reverse. To the editors' credit, the book's maps are cross-referenced, but at least a half-dozen of the references point to the wrong pages.

The book's second shortcoming is its layout. It is printed at a size of nine by eleven inches, and most of its maps, even the considerable number that cover a full page or a page and a half, are difficult to read because they are reproduced full frame (i.e., without enlarged details) on pages with 3/4-inch or greater margins. For example, the authors specifically point out the fine details of the 1838 Alexandria Canal map, the "individual buildings" on Albert Boschke's 1861 topographical map of the District, and the "amusing explanatory notes" in T. L. Loftin's reconstruction of the City of Washington on November 21, 1800. However, these cartographic delights are nearly invisible on the printed page, even when viewed with a powerful magnifying glass. There is an additional layout difficulty: the thematic chapter titles, which are important guides to understanding the flow of the book from one map to another, appear only in the table of contents and in the page footers, so the only way to determine chapter breaks is by closely following the changing footers.

Omnibus books such as this one, which touch on a vast number of topics across time, are challenging to research and write. Moreover, collecting all the right details and crafting accurate characterizations of historical concepts and developments are no easy tasks. Nevertheless, the generalizations in many of the essays may leave readers wishing that the authors had given more thought to what they wrote and provided more rigorous historical analysis. For example, Miller's explanation of Commission government is misleading. "In 1874, after only three years, the Territorial Government was abolished," she writes. "A temporary form of government harkened back to the District's first form of rule—three commissioners appointed by the President and approved by the Senate. By 1878, a new government was established through the 'Organic Act,' a municipal corporation somewhat similar to the present form" (p. 99). To state that Commission government was "somewhat similar" to the current government of mayor and city council is a gross mis-characterization of Washington's history.

The Senate Park Commission of 1901 gets considerable, and well deserved, notice. But the McMillan Commission did not weave the cloth it cut, nor did it accomplish all the things Miller claims of it. It did not originate the idea of the Fort Drive (pp. 87 and 88) and, more significantly, it did not extend “the street system into the undeveloped hills beyond the original L’Enfant City” (p. 127). That planning effort, the Permanent System of Highways, was authorized by Congress in 1893 and completed by an office of the municipal government in 1900. The influence of the Highway Plan arguably equals that of the McMillan Plan in shaping the course of Washington’s development in the twentieth century, and its omission leaves an incomplete picture of how and why the city became what it is.

The book also leaves other vital cartographic and urban planning efforts out of its picture. Without showing any of them, Miller simply notes the “proliferation of promotional maps of subdivisions and suburban communities such as Chevy Chase, Oak View, Brookland, Eckington, Kalorama, 16th Street, and Wesley Heights” (p. 112). These advertising maps, as artificial and optimistic as any of the maps in the book, would have made excellent examples of Miller’s point that “[t]he station point from which the image [i.e., a map] is drawn, the graphic technique and items included or excluded, and sociopolitical implications all expose the designer’s predilections” (p. 12). Instead, as far as suburbanization in the District goes, she makes just a passing reference to “the onset of the ‘in-town suburbs,’ or ‘Edge City,’ ... just birthing on the fringe,” while neither defining these twentieth-century terms nor expanding upon the nature, pace, and extent of this process at the time (p. 110). Equally disappointing is the absence of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey’s 1880s topographical maps of Washington County, created through more than a decade’s work in collaboration with the District engineer department. These beautiful maps are a significant source of land-use and development information for the District before the turn of the century, as well as being the base maps used to create the Highway Plan.

Finally, it is difficult to overlook the factual errors and careless handling of details in *Washington in Maps*. “The redesign of New York’s old city hall by L’Enfant can still be seen on Wall Street,” the book claims, but that structure was demolished before 1834 (p. 21). The author includes the 1887 Pension Building, “with its gigantic glass-roofed atrium” (actually it was roofed in terracotta tile), as one of several “post-World War I ... recent public buildings” in a 1921 map (p. 115). In George Beck’s

familiar 1801 landscape of “George Town and Federal City, or City of Washington,” Miller describes the pastoral quality of the view: “Streets are laid out according to the undulating land, crossing at high points and natural distances,” continuing with the note that, “[t]wo principal civic buildings, the President’s House and Capitol, share reciprocal views, connected by a stately avenue” (p. 66). This avenue and these buildings do not appear in this picture. Similarly, in the midst of describing the “Sketch of Washington in Embryo,” Miller notes, “[f]or each estate, sketch elevation shows approximate locations of the main house plus principal and secondary structures” (p. 56). These do not appear on the map shown. (They appear elsewhere in the book from which this map was taken.) In Dhiru Thadani’s 1991 figure-ground plan of central Washington, Miller explains how this type of map “exposes deviations in the urban fabric” by pointing out that “a variety of edge-conditions can be seen, such as at Rock Creek, the old Florida Avenue northern boundary, and the Potomac River” (p. 154). Florida Avenue is outside the area covered by the map portrayed. Similar mistakes and difficulties appear throughout the text.

A sense of Miller’s research may be inferred by reading her selected bibliography, which indicates that this work is drawn from a variety of mostly older sources and probably from research she performed for two exhibition catalogs (1987 and 1992).^[2] It lacks much of the more recent literature on Washington, including Alan Lessoff’s *The Nation and Its City*.^[3]

Washington in Maps brings together many maps that appear together elsewhere, notably in John W. Reps’s excellent, large-format *Washington on View: The Nation’s Capital since 1790* (1991). While *Washington in Maps* does suggest ways of representing place, reading maps, and seeing the city, its design flaws and incomplete, sometimes inaccurate picture of the development of the District prevent it from fulfilling its potential.

Notes

[1]. *Manhattan in Maps, 1527-1995* (1997); *Holy Land in Maps* (2001); and *Mapping the West: America’s Westward Movement, 1524-1890* (2002).

[2]. Frederick Gutheim, *Worth of a Nation: The History of Planning for the National Capital* (1977); Constance Green, *Washington: Capital City, 1879-1950* (1963); Paul Caemmerer, *Life of Pierre Charles L’Enfant* (1950); and Charles Moore, *Daniel H. Burnham: Architect, Planner of Cities* (1921).

[3]. Alan Lessoff's *The Nation and Its City: Politics, "Corruption," and Progress in Washington, D.C., 1861-1902* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

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