1946-73  The Postwar Period – Decades of Dramatic Change

During the Postwar period, historic Southwest was almost totally transformed by the largest urban renewal project in the United States, which demolished thousands of buildings and displaced a large proportion of the quadrant’s residents. As described by Francesca Ammons in her Historic American Buildings Survey report, the urban renewal area’s boundaries ultimately included: “Independence Avenue on the north, between Twelfth Street and Washington Avenue (formerly Canal Street); Washington Avenue on the northeast, between Independence Avenue and D Street; South Capitol Street on the east, between D and M streets; Canal Street on the southeast, between M and P streets; P Street on the south, between Canal Street and Maine Avenue; Maine Avenue and the Washington Channel on the southwest, between P and Fourteenth streets; Fourteenth Street on the west, between D and F streets; D Street on the northwest, between Fourteenth and Twelfth streets; and Twelfth Street, between D Street and Independence Avenue, to the origin.”

The movement to redevelop what was viewed as increasingly impoverished neighborhoods had begun with the Goodwillie Plan of 1942, which sought to refurbish much of Southwest’s existing housing stock for war workers. The federal District of Columbia Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) was created in 1945 to carry out urban renewal within the city. The National Housing Act of 1949 created a mechanism by which the agency was able to use eminent domain and federal funds to acquire and clear all property within a “blighted area” and resell aggregated tracts of land to commercial developers for large-scale privately owned redevelopment under an approved master plan. In 1950 the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC)’s comprehensive plan for Washington proposed Southwest as the pilot renewal area.

Several renewal scenarios were considered. The Peets Plan (1951) proposed that gradual waves of renovation of existing buildings mingled with new construction would maintain a high proportion of the area as low-income housing. The competing Smith-Justement Plan (1952) sought to maximize economic return, link Southwest to downtown, and build mixed-income housing. The Smith-Justement Plan placed a much higher percentage of housing units in large elevator buildings and small walk-up apartment houses, and a much lower percentage in row houses. It did not include low-income housing or preservation of existing structures. While the Peets Plan would maintain the existing small-scale neighborhood commercial strip along 4th Street, the Smith-Justement Plan

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79 Ammon, 1.
concentrated retail business in shopping centers north of the planned Southwest Expressway.

Figure 30. Capitol Park, Southwest’s first modernist apartment building. Peter Sefton

In 1952, the NCPC defined urban renewal areas A and B. Area A, bounded by D Street on the north, 7th Street on the east, Maine Avenue on the south, and 11th Street on the west, was intended for office construction. Area B, bounded by E Street and the railroad tracks on the north, South Capitol Street on the east, I Street on the south, and 4th Street on the west, included the quadrant’s most deteriorated housing. It was intended for residential redevelopment, including low-income housing and some retail uses. In 1953, the NCPC would define Area C, bounded by I Street on the north, South Capitol Street and Delaware Avenue on the east, P Street on the south, and Maine Avenue on the west. In 1955, it would re-designate the section of Area C east of Delaware Avenue and north of M Street as Area C-1, a zone for light industrial and municipal uses, including parkland.

The NCPC-sponsored Bartholemew Plan presented a synthesis of competing elements from the Peets and Smith-Justement plans. Its key elements were further distilled in the so-called Zeckendorf-Pei redevelopment plan devised by modernist architects I.M. Pei and Harry Weese for New York developer William Zeckendorf and adopted by the NCPC in 1956. The Zeckendorf-Pei Plan incorporated such modern urban-planning concepts as the superblock, the integration of green space into neighborhoods, distinct

80 Ammon, 38-40.
81 Ammon, 44.
separation of commercial and residential zones, and a residential scheme that integrated high-rise and mid-rise apartment buildings with townhouses. The plan merged Area A, the future site of L’Enfant Plaza, and the 10th Street Promenade into Area C, which was to be developed by Zeckendorf’s firm, Webb & Knapp. Retail development was also relocated from Area B to a central location in Area C’s proposed “Town Center.”

Figure 31. I.M. Pei’s Town Center East. Peter Sefton

The reconstruction of Southwest coincided with the rise of the modern movement in architecturally conservative Washington. Because modernism is “not so much an architectural style as … a flexible concept, adapted and applied in a wide variety of ways,”82 generalized definitions often fail to account for the differences among its stylistic sub-classifications of the international style, expressionism, formalism, and brutalism.83 However, characteristics often attributed to modernist buildings include:

- Substitution of simplified geometric forms and surfaces for embellishment and decoration, as reflected in Adolph Loos’ dictum, “ornament is crime.”
- Form that follows function. The building’s form expresses its structure while eschewing symbolic historicist associations, as expressed in the maxim, “Less is more.” The search for highly functional forms created an architectural vocabulary

83 Robinson & Associates, 10.
of flat roofs, horizontal window bands, and pilotis whose presence was frequently considered sufficient to deem a building “modernist.”

- Embrace of new materials and technologies, including prefabrication.
- “Truth in materials” through artistic but undisguised use of industrial materials such as concrete, metal, and glass.
- Integration of structure and landscape.

Modernism’s renunciation of past practices in favor of functionality and efficiency suggested that it represented “progress” in the form of a universalist and rationalist deconstruction of the biases, inequities, nationalism, and parochialisms embedded in tradition. As Diane Ghirardo has written, modernism’s somewhat utopian originality ideology “retained as an underlying constant a belief in the power of form to transform the world, even if it was usually linked to some vague broader goals of social reform. Through modern architecture’s sleek machined surfaces and structural rationalism, architects passionately believed that housing and other social problems could be solved.”

As Ghirardo has pointed out, modernism’s embrace of functionality, efficiency, industrial materials, and advancing technology resulted in “reduced costs and speedier construction [which] made Modernist buildings appealing to developers and city administrators.” To its critics, modernist architecture ultimately represented “the same kind of alliance with modern architectural aesthetics that [corporate capitalism] had with Keynesian economics.”

Although its original principles were largely codified by European theorist-designers like Le Corbusier in France and the German Bauhaus School during the 1920s, modernist architecture continued to evolve in the United States. By the late 1930s, such leading Bauhaus figures as Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Marcel Breuer occupied influential positions at American universities, where the designs and writings of Le Corbusier also had become widely known. Modernist buildings themselves had preceded these political refugees’ arrival. Designed by George Howe and William Lescavage, the Philadelphia Savings Bank, often called America’s first modernist skyscraper, had been constructed in Philadelphia in 1932. Manhattan’s United Nations Headquarters, designed by an international team headed by Wallace Harrison with significant contributions by Le Corbusier in 1947, was an indelible expression of the style’s acceptance for buildings of the highest civic importance and visual prominence.

85 Ghirardo, 10.
86 Ghirardo, 11.
By the early 1950s, modernism had become the dominant architectural style for buildings other than single-family dwellings, a position which it held through the late 1960s.

Classicism still reigned supreme for public buildings, but modernist architecture trickled into Washington before World War II. Eliel and Eero Saarinen’s modernist Smithsonian Gallery of Art, a prize-winning design never built, attracted wide attention in 1939. In 1940, William Lescavage’s Longfellow Building at 17th Street and Rhode Island Avenue NW became downtown Washington’s first modernist commercial building.  

Modernist architecture made rapid inroads in Washington after World War II, giving form to single-family houses in outlying areas like the Forest Hills neighborhood and the Chain Bridge Road corridor. Architect Joseph Abel had participated in the 1935 Museum of Modern Art exhibit, “International Style: Architecture Since 1922,” and during the postwar years the firm of Berla & Abel became Washington’s leading homegrown exponent of modernism, with apartment buildings like the Crestview (1949) at 3601 Wisconsin Avenue and Boston House (1951) at 1711 Massachusetts Avenue, NW. By the 1950s, modernism was becoming the style of choice for major downtown office buildings as well as suburban commercial developments.

Southwest’s redevelopment created opportunities seized by younger architects, many of whom, like I.M. Pei, Harry Weese, Chloethiel Woodard Smith, Charles Goodman, Dan Kiley, and the principals of Keyes, Lethbridge, and Condon, would become extremely influential and widely recognized for their talents. Although these architects came to modernism by a variety of paths, many had common influences. Pei studied and taught at Harvard during the period when Gropius headed the school of architecture, while Weese

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89 Robinson & Associates, 7.
studied under Eliel Saarinen at Cranbrook Academy and practiced in Chicago during the period when van der Rohe both headed the architecture department and designed the campus for the Illinois Institute of Technology. Smith, her partner Nicholas Satterlee, Arthur Keyes, and Francis Lethbridge were all employed by Berla & Abel during their formative years. Before he joined the army in 1942, a youthful Dan Kiley designed gardens and residential additions in the Washington area in connection with the architectural firm of Julian Berla.

Although most of the architects responsible for Southwest redevelopment actively competed for projects, they shared professional associations, many of which were formed during the planning process. Pei and Weese did not collaborate on the designs of their projects but were jointly responsible for the plan that perhaps exerted the greatest single effect on urban renewal in the quadrant. Smith’s involvement with Southwest began with the seminal Smith-Justement Plan of 1952 and continued through every planning iteration of the next ten years. While co-authoring the Smith-Justement Plan, she was a partner in the firm of Keyes, Smith, Satterlee, & Lethbridge, which she left before leaving in 1955 to form the partnership with Satterlee that produced the initial phase of Capitol Park.

Charles Goodman worked with Eero Saarinen and Dan Kiley in the military during World War II, employed David Condon when he returned from wartime naval service,

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90 Robinson & Associates, 6.
and engaged Eric Paepke, who designed the landscape of Tiber Island, to succeed Kiley as landscape architect for his development of modernist residences at Holllin Hills.

![Harbour Square](image)

Figure 34. Harbour Square. Peter Sefton

It might seem that the architects most influential in the redevelopment program were drawn from a small, interrelated network, but the planning process helped ensure that “New Southwest” was constructed to the highest aesthetic standards while reflecting diverse architectural visions. Under the Zeckendorf-Pei Plan, all development in the expanded Area C was to be undertaken by Webb & Knapp, whose design work was handled by a “firm-within-a-firm” headed by Pei. When financial reverses forced Webb & Knapp to relinquish its development rights south of M Street in 1960, Smith formulated a new plan under contract with the NCPC that divided this portion of Area C into six sites, to be developed as separate parcels. While Zeckendorf’s exit cost Southwest additional examples of Pei’s genius, Smith’s solution created opportunities for the construction of such acknowledged masterpieces as Keyes, Lethbridge, and Condon’s Tiber Island, Charles Goodman’s River Park, and her own Harbour Square.

Another factor that maintained the quality of design in Southwest was architectural competition. Four major sites – Tiber Island, Carrollsburg Square, Chalk House, and the Skyline Inn – were awarded through competitions conducted under the auspices of the AIA and juried by such prominent designers as Louis Justement, Hideo Sasaki, and G. Holmes Perkins, dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Fine Arts and chair of the Philadelphia Planning Commission, as well as an instrumental figure in bringing Walter Gropius to Harvard in 1937.  

![Figure 35. Channel Square. Peter Sefton](image)

Rankings of the quality of individual Southwest projects may vary, the overall assessment of the urban renewal area’s architecture have been high, as evidenced by the many honors detailed in the Typology Table, Section 6. As noted Washington architectural historian Antoinette Lee has written, the redevelopment architects created “a Southwest Quadrant style of development distinctive in the District,” and “Zeckendorf presented a showcase of twentieth century architecture and planning” in Southwest Washington. 

In 1963, noted Washington architecture critic Wolf Von Eckardt lauded New Southwest for “some happy ideas which had never been tried before, at least not on this scale. One of them is the gay mixture of low townhouses and tall apartment buildings ... Up to now

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conventional planning wisdom, under the influence of Le Corbusier’s ideas forty years ago, demanded that the ground space between the high-rise slabs be vast, useless and dull. In the Southwest, however, most of these spaces are filled with townhouses and the grounds are designed and landscaped so that people can and do use and enjoy them.”  

Individual complexes have also won critical accolades. When the winner of the competition for the Tiber Island site was announced, prominent urbanist and architecture critic Frederick Gutheim called its plan “a long step toward the goal of combining urban in-town living with many amenities that families have hitherto only sought in the suburbs,” and hailed Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon for creating a “walk-to-work neighborhood looking out over the unequaled open spaces of the Channel … but still close to the conveniences of Town Center and to the commercial and cultural heart of the National Capitol itself.”  

James Bailey of Architectural Forum commented that “KLC’s commanding design and their determination to keep it from being whittled away has paid off handsomely. They have created not only the best addition yet to Washington’s Southwest, but a new standard of architectural quality for U.S. urban renewal.”  

In 1966, author and University of London professor Sir Nikolas Pevsner, one of the most influential art historians of the 20th century, dismissively commented that “Washington’s architecture has been desperately reactionary since 1900,” but excepted “F.D.

98 Ibid, 51.
Lethbridge’s Tiber Island apartments” for its classic sense of intimacy, “wide and narrow and high and low … beautifully interwoven.”

In 1967, Anthony Bailey of the New Yorker found “a series of townhouses and the great set of brown-red apartment buildings called Harbour Square, which did a finer job of being influenced by the Chicago master Louis Sullivan than most buildings do of being original.” In that same year, National Geographic’s Joseph Judge surveyed Washington as a “living postcard” from a Harbour Square roof garden, calling it a “rich mantle of apartments” and “handsome H-shaped block of towers,” while adding that “I found the Federal City’s oldest row houses wearing a new coat of sunshine.” Richard Longstreth later wrote that, “though the city had an impressive legacy of apartment buildings, Harbour Square stood apart in its siting, highly varied exterior aspects, and adroit play between decorum and spectacle.”

Figure 37. River Park. Peter Sefton

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In the *New Republic*, Wolf Von Eckardt raved of Capitol Park, “Seldom outside of Scandinavia has a landlord enhanced rental housing with as many handsome sculptures, fountains, pools, lamps, benches, pavements and such ... It all adds up to a delightful environment.” James Goode wrote of Town Center in *Best Addresses*, his classic examination of Washington apartment houses, that “the most striking aspect of Pei’s buildings ... is the emphasis on glass, which gives them a beautiful skin.”

The *AIA Guide* to Washington cites Town Center’s dramatic originality, noting that “Pei’s original apartment complex, unlike many in the area, has neither townhouses nor balconies, nothing could detract from the buildings’ lean, tight-skinned modern silhouette.” The jury that awarded Pei an FHA First Honor Award for Residential Design at the beginning of 1964 pronounced itself “impressed by the straight-forward design, the dignity of the building, the feeling of quality it evokes, and the use of concrete as an exterior finish.”

Figure 38. Waterside Towers.
Peter Sefton

Although these modernist complexes – Capitol Park, Town Center, Tiber Island, Carrollsburg Square, Harbour Square, Channel Square, River Park, Chalk House West/Riverside, Edgewater, and Waterside Towers – share the elements of a landscaped campus mixed with townhouses and “elevator” apartment buildings, each contains enough unique features

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103 Goode, 409.


to constitute an individual building type. (Typology Table A6.1 through A6.9) Alongside these residences, Macomber & Peter designed a group of 180 historicist townhouses that evoke “a Georgetown flavor” amid this enclave of high modernism. (Typology Table A6.10) 106

Southwest gained so many architectural masterpieces that it has become known as a living “museum of modernism.” However, its modernist complexes were designed for middle- and upper middle-class replacement residents. By 1959 the NCPC advised that owing to higher than expected land prices, low-income housing goals in the urban renewal zone could not be met. 107 No public housing was constructed in the redevelopment area. When the Greenleaf Gardens public housing community was built at the border of Area B and nonresidential Area C-1 in 1959, its site was excluded from the urban renewal area. 108 The Syphax Gardens Public Housing Community, erected during the same period at 1st and R streets, was located just south and east of the urban renewal area. 109 (Typology Table A6.11 and A6.12)

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106 Longstreth, 273.
107 Ammon, 40-41.
108 Ammon, 56.
Significance.

Dwellings of this period represent a significant property type in historic Southwest’s residential evolution. Their architectural forms and patterns of development reflect such period themes as the response to postwar de-urbanization in the face of suburban growth, and the implementation of modernist urban planning and architectural principles. They are unique within the city and represent a departure from previous forms of development, presenting such new residential forms as the high-rise multi-unit building integrated with townhouse clusters in an architecturally planned green space. They include important, architecturally significant works by national and internationally known architects and the involvement of larger-scale builders and developers, many of whom had a citywide base of operations. Their construction represents the implementation of a quadrant-wide urban plan on an unprecedented scale.

Figure 40. Syphax Gardens. Peter Sefton
Registration Requirements.

Dwelling complexes of this period, including Town Center East, Harbour Square, Tiber Island, Capitol Park Apartments, and Capitol Park Towers, have been found eligible for the National Register under Criterion A, Criterion C, or both. Complexes also could potentially be eligible for listing under Criterion B because of modernist Southwest’s association with the homes of civic and political leaders.