

An Architecture Guidebook

Forty Years in the Making

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Documenting the Changing City

The AIA Guide to the Architecture of Washington, DC will appear in bookstores this fall. Photography by Boris Feldblyum.

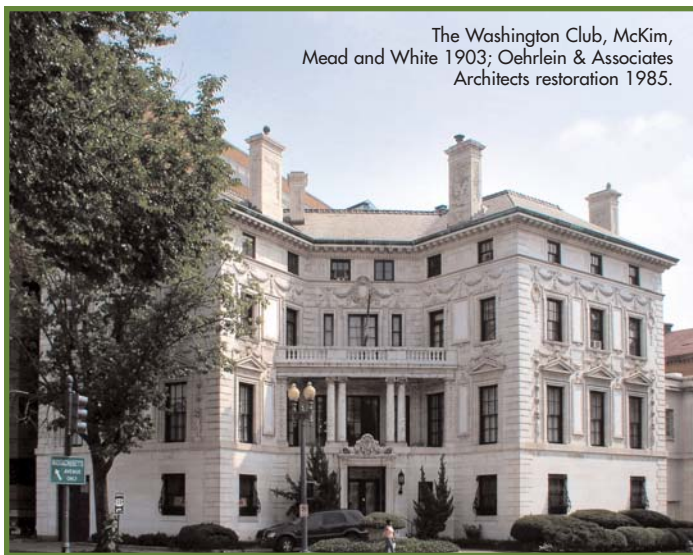
Washington, DC, 1965: The nation's capital, like most major American cities, is hemorrhaging middle-class white families, who are moving to the suburbs in an attempt to flee what they fear is irreversible urban decay. Pennsylvania Avenue, putatively "the nation's Main Street," is lined with the dilapidated buildings that had shocked President Kennedy during his inaugural parade four years ago. Cheap, "temporary" government office buildings that have been standing for nearly half a century still occupy the western end of the National Mall. Area residents struggle to get around by bus or by private car, since the streetcars stopped running a couple of years earlier and there is as yet no subway system. But help is on the way, according to certain transportation officials, who have a plan for a comprehensive network of freeways, if only you don't mind obliterating some of the capital's most historic neighborhoods—the price of progress, they say.

It was in this context that the **Washington Metropolitan Chapter of the American Institute of Architects**, as it was then known, published the first edition of *A Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.* Written by a quartet of young architects who went on to become quite prominent—**Warren J. Cox, FAIA; Hugh Newell Jacobsen, FAIA; Francis D. Lethbridge, FAIA; and David R. Rosenthal**—the first guidebook makes for fascinating reading

today, providing a glimpse into an era of dramatic changes in architecture and urbanism.

Such profound changes were not limited to the design world, of course. The few years immediately preceding the book's publication constituted an unusually turbulent period in the history of the nation, including Kennedy's assassination, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the landing of the first U.S. combat troops (as opposed to "military advisors") in Vietnam. Local events during this time included the opening of the Capital Beltway on the one hand, but also the convening of a commission charged with revitalizing Pennsylvania Avenue, and the successful effort on the part of President and Mrs. Kennedy to save the historic buildings around Lafayette Square from demolition. In short, it was an era marked by a dizzying mix of ominous and promising developments, both nationally and regionally.

Given the confusing time in which it was written, the first edition of the D.C. guidebook was a remarkably balanced and thoughtful work. The authors' concise and often witty entries not only afforded interesting insights into specific buildings, but also revealed broader themes, many of which remain relevant today, such as the city's ongoing struggle to find and come to terms with its own unique architectural identity. While not shying away from critical com-



The Washington Club, McKim, Mead and White 1903; Oehrlein & Associates Architects restoration 1985.

Boris Feldblyum



Boris Feldblyum

Cady's Alley master plan and bridge, Shalom Baranes Associates 2004.

mentary, the authors demonstrated a broad sensitivity to, and deep knowledge of, buildings representing many different eras and styles. The result is a book that holds up very well to scrutiny several decades hence.

The first edition practically flew off the shelves as soon as it hit the bookstores. Before long, the AIA chapter was at work on a revised edition, ultimately released in 1974. This second edition revealed profound developments on several fronts over the preceding decade. For instance, the long-planned Metro system was finally under construction, and a variety of new landmarks had begun to change the face of Washington—the national AIA organization had built a new headquarters for itself, and for better or for worse, the capital had a new cultural nexus in the boxy form of the Kennedy Center. Despite a number of added entries, however, the second version of the guidebook retained much of the character of its predecessor, and in retrospect—knowing of the multiple construction booms that hit Washington beginning in the 1980s—today’s reader may look back on the first two editions of the guidebook with a certain nostalgia.

The third edition of the guidebook did not appear until 1994, perhaps because during much of the previous two decades, most local architects had simply been too busy keeping up with the growing demand for commercial and institutional space in the burgeoning capital city. By that time, the original four authors were committed to their active careers and therefore unable to take on the project again, so the Washington Chapter/AIA hired Christopher Weeks, an independent author, to revise and update the text. Moreover, the committee appointed by the chapter to oversee the project decided that the huge increase in the number of notable buildings in the area necessitated limiting the scope of the third edition to the District of Columbia proper. The resulting book was therefore quite different from its predecessors, reflecting not only a distinct authorial personality, but also the significant influence of the postmodern movement, which by then had profoundly altered the character of architecture in Washington and elsewhere.

Roughly four decades after the publication of the first guide, I was given the opportunity to write the fourth edition (now called *The AIA Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.*), due to be published this fall. At first, I considered the offer with some trepidation.



Boris Feldblyum

World Bank, Kohn Pederson Fox Associates 1997.



Boris Feldblyum

Embassy of Italy Chancery, Piero Sartogo Architeti in association with Leo A Daly 1996.



Boris Feldblyum

The Pope John II Cultural Center, Leo A Daly 2001.

For starters, it was daunting to follow in the footsteps of the four original authors, a couple of whom are now among the most widely known architects in the country. On top of that, guidebooks are notoriously difficult to write, in that they require the presentation of a huge volume of facts in a relatively small number of words. I soon accepted the challenge, however, and dove into what turned out to be a rewarding process of exploration, research, analysis, and discussions with many interesting people.


As I look out over present-day Washington, I am struck by the fact that the broad impression of the city is remarkably unchanged from the time of the first edition of the guidebook over 40 years ago. The city's famous height limit is intact, and by staying the same in this regard, Washington has thus become more different with each passing year from other American cities. Meanwhile, walking through neighborhoods like Georgetown, Capitol Hill, or Dupont Circle, one can still get a sense of the quietly genteel atmosphere in which President Kennedy's "best and brightest" debated plans for ambitious social change. Despite explosive suburban growth, the core in Washington has held, leaving us with one of the few American metropolitan areas in which a pedestrian-oriented lifestyle is still both plausible and pleasant.

And yet, obviously, Washington has changed dramatically over the past four decades. I was reminded of this when a colleague recently gave me a copy of the January 1963 issue of *Architectural Forum*, which featured a special focus on the capital. Published just two years before the first edition of the guidebook, the magazine offered a stark assessment of the physical state of the city at that time. "Conceived in grandeur," the editors stated, "Washington is being executed in poverty of means and spirit." They sharply criticized the curious mix of blandness and pretentiousness that characterized much of the city's contemporary architecture (with the notable exception of the high-quality residential developments in the Southwest urban renewal area). Other articles in the issue contain shocking tidbits, such as the mention of a proposal to tear down the Patent Office Building to make room for a parking lot, or the report that, between 1956 and 1963, only one small new office building had been constructed in Washington's traditional downtown.

As I write this, that same Patent Office Building, now housing the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery, has just reopened after a six-year renovation, overseen by **Hartman-Cox Architects**, which brought its glorious interiors back to life. Under construction is an exciting new glass canopy, designed by **Lord Norman Foster, Hon. FAIA**, which will shelter the building's previously uncovered courtyard. Once marooned in a semi-abandoned commercial zone, the former Patent Office Building now stands amid a vibrant area of shops, trendy restaurants, movie theaters, and a huge sports and entertainment arena. Within blocks of the site are thousands of people residing in newly constructed apartments, many of which sold for more than \$500 per square foot. Meanwhile, the 14th Street corridor in Northwest Washington, devastated by the riots in the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968, now boasts high-end furniture shops, and the U Street corridor once again draws throngs of diners and nightclubbers following decades of neglect. There have been many similar stories of urban renaissance in recent years, and I am certain that the new edition of the guidebook will clearly reflect the generally optimistic spirit of early 21st-century Washington.

I am hopeful that the fourth edition of the guide will simultaneously seem a logical successor to earlier versions and stand as a readable and engaging book in its own right. The average entry is longer than in the earlier editions, reflecting an effort to address more overtly how specific buildings fit into the larger scheme of things. Of course, numerous entries have been added since the third edition—nearly 80 of them—and several dozen old entries were deleted for various reasons (a few of the buildings had been altered or destroyed, while some were eliminated in favor of other entries that could be used to make similar points). All of the existing entries were rewritten, though in many cases the astute reader will still find the occasional phrase or sentence carried forward from one of the first three editions.

The new guide, like its predecessors, is neither a work of pure criticism nor a straight history. Ultimately, the goal of the book is to cause the reader—whether an architect or an amateur—to look at buildings in slightly different ways, and to consider why and how they ended up as they did. Personally, I also hope that the new edition will encourage those who know Washington—whether they love it, hate it, or have not yet decided—to think carefully and creatively about how best to pursue the never-ending work of building a capital city. 🏛️

 *Hear more about the new AIA guide to Washington architecture on Thursday, September 14 when Martin Moeller gives a free lecture at the Chapter House. See Architecture Week calendar (page 37) for details.*



518 C Street, SE, Weinstein Associates 1990.