



Penn Quarter:

DC's Oldest New Neighborhood

by Mary Fitch

Penn Quarter is a new name for an old part of the city. Historically, the area was the location of Central Market, the largest of Washington's markets. It's also where Civil War photographer Matthew Brady set up his studio, and where Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross, maintained her office. In subsequent years, the area became the home of fabled DC department stores such as Kanns and Lansburghs.

In the 1950s, when interest in central cities began to wane, Pennsylvania Avenue and the adjoining Penn Quarter area began to decline. During John F. Kennedy's inaugural parade in 1961, the new president is said to have commented on the sorry condition of "the nation's Main Street." In response to concerns about the area's condition, the President's Council on Pennsylvania Avenue was established in 1962.

Early planning for the area's recovery showed many grand spaces. For the example, the area that is now Pershing Park and Freedom Plaza was shown as single plaza that would have rivaled Moscow's Red Square in size. Building it would have involved demolishing the historic Willard Hotel. In 1972, a special planning body — the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) — was created to guide the recovery effort. Although its area of influence was confined primarily to Pennsylvania Avenue, its plans for the adjacent area helped to knit the avenue back together with the old downtown.

PADC championed mixed-use development with a heavy sprinkling of the arts. During PADC's existence, the Federal Triangle complex was completed with the addition of the Ronald Reagan Building, the Canadian Embassy was built, art galleries were established in vacant Penn Quarter buildings, and the Navy Memorial and Market Square buildings were constructed. In 1996, as required by its original legislation, the PADC closed up shop. By then, much had been accomplished — Gallery Row was in place, and federal offices were moving to the area. But another spark was needed to bring the old downtown fully back to life.

That spark came with the construction of the MCI Center (now the Verizon Center), designed by **Ellerbe Becket**; Associate architects: **KCF-SHG Architects**, **Devroux & Purnell Architects-Planners**. Its construction shifted sports and entertainment

activity from Cap Center in the Maryland suburbs to the old downtown. The resulting influx of people encouraged restaurants and shops to locate there, with the result that 7th Street soon began to hum with activity. Advocates of downtown housing encouraged development of housing in the area in keeping with the ideas put forth PADC's 1977 plan. Doing that wasn't easy — land-use planning for years had encouraged the separation of housing from other uses. But neighborhood activists persisted, and the resulting mix of office, housing, and entertainment has boosted property values and transformed this part of the city into a safe and vibrant urban destination.

Today, Penn Quarter is abuzz with activity. Thousands of people now live in the area, many in new apartments and condos that were built without displacing existing area residents. The Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery (renovated by **Hartman-Cox Architects**) have recently reopened after several years of renovation, and new theatres are moving in, including the recently completed Woolly Mammoth Theatre (designed by **McInturff Architects**), and a second Shakespeare Theatre, larger than the first, that will be completed next year. While it has more theatres than most large cities, it lacks some neighborhood basics like a supermarket or hardware store (longtime resident Union Hardware closed up shop in 1999).

Penn Quarter may be a new name for an old part of the city, but its renaissance has added much to the livability of Washington. Intervention by housing activists and planning professionals helped ensure that this did not become another dead single-use district but an active 24-hour neighborhood. 🏡

AW Come learn about the history and renaissance of this vibrant area in the AIA | DC's eighth annual Architecture Week Tour of Modern Architecture in Washington. In addition to learning more about the projects described above, you'll discover a restaurant built in an old postal loading dock, learn the location of James Bond's 1964 Aston Martin, admire the only DC building designed by Bauhaus superstar architect Mies van der Rohe, visit the only major DC building designed by an African American architect, and learn what's in store for the old convention center site. Reservations required.