

Charles Atherton, FAIA, retired in May 2004 from his position as Secretary of the Commission of Fine Arts, after 44 years with the Commission. On the evening of Thursday, Dec 1, 2005, he was struck by a vehicle on Connecticut Avenue as he was walking home from a restaurant in his beloved Cleveland Park neighborhood. He died several days later. The following is condensed from an interview conducted on the occasion of his retirement that appeared in its original form in the May 2004 issue of AIA/DC News.



In Memoriam:

Charles Atherton, FAIA

by Hannah McCann

So you've been here since 1960?

I came to Washington in 1957 with the Navy, and my first office was in a temporary building on the site of what would become the Roosevelt Memorial, so that was quite an introduction to the monumental core of Washington DC. For three years I sat there looking at the Washington Monument, the cherry trees, and that extraordinary landscape, and thought what a wonderful job it would be to be a steward of this extraordinary land. And that's just the way it happened.

A lot of architect friends of mine said, "Gee Charlie, you should be careful, before you know it you'll be hooked. You'll be in that job for the rest of your life." Well, that's true. But I haven't regretted it at all. I think that the opportunity for making contributions is much richer here than it would be in a normal architectural practice. So much of what you

do in your own practice is so client driven. Your client can be misguided but you can't say anything about it. [At the CFA] we have the luxury of looking at things from a different perspective: the perspective of time, of history, of what this city has been and what it's potential is. That's something that a lot of architects don't have the chance to get a hold of.

One of the things that I feel best about my job is that I've always maintained a close personal relationship with the architectural community, even though I'm not a practicing architect. I've always thought that a person in a job like this should not only have an architectural background but should have a ticket to practice; it gives you a certain validity, if you know what I mean. I sense the architects that are coming to the Commission have more respect for [me] as a person who has actually gone through the rigors of getting licensed. They tend to respect you and listen to what you're talking about. I also think the other side of the coin

is that you have more respect for them.

There's a much greater awareness today of architecture than there was 50 years ago. But you pay a price for it. And the price is that there are an awful lot of people who are interested in architecture and, of course, are opinionated about it. That makes the architect's job that much harder. But I don't think the architecture profession has ever been healthier than it is right now. I think it's thriving. There's a wonderful public perception of architecture's role in society that I don't think existed in 1950. Then, most everyday citizens thought that architecture was something beyond their capacity to comment on. Today, everybody, every taxi driver, will tell you what he likes and what he doesn't like.

How has Washington changed in the last 40 years?

Well, [back then] it was a cow town. I don't think anyone would appreciate

it being described that way, but it was certainly primitive. If you were to look at an aerial [photo] of Washington [from that time], you'd see a vast sea of automobiles everywhere. Every place [that has] a building today was a parking lot in the 1950s and 60s.

The city has literally filled out, despite the fact that a lot of people feel that the height limit in this city prohibits urban growth, and that the only way we could really see this city sing commercially and be a great place to live would be to take the lid off the height limit—maybe by degrees, not totally unrestrained, but at least double the [current] height limit. Thank goodness we haven't done that. There is this new sense of urban growth and activity in the city. It's all being done within the old zoning framework. So

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that's not acting as a wet blanket at all. It's possible to have a vibrant urban fabric and not necessarily raise the height limit to the sky.

I think that the character of the city becomes more and more special over time if we can hang onto this height limit. I think the architectural community has been quite successful in creating something at eye level in this city that you can look at. You go to a big city and you don't see anything much above 20 or 30 feet anyway, unless you're an architect who always goes around with your head in the air looking at stuff. But the average person perceives the city pretty much at eye level. And all this business about creating urban interest by allowing buildings to go higher, I think it's a very spurious argument. It doesn't hold much water, in my view.

On the other hand, I don't think Philadelphia has lost much by allowing the big skyscrapers around City Hall. But we have so much more to lose here than Philadelphia did. When you go to

Harrisburg today, you can hardly see the capital dome. But in this city, that Capitol dome, it just prevails—and it's got to.

I remember one of the things that Bill Kerry said—he was a member of the Commission when I came on in 1960—that inevitably there will have to be an increase in the height limit, but it should occur in this ring around the old city, that is, beyond Florida Avenue (which used to be called Boundary Street), and that everything within that—the [original] L'Enfant Plan [area] of the city—should be kept low; like a meadow in a forest. It was a lovely metaphor. You have the Capitol dome, and the Washington Monument, the memorials, and a lovely low composition around it, but then you would have a great ring of high buildings

all around the city. I don't think that's such a bad idea. I think there's a wonderful opportunity for growth outside this ring.

I think we've got to give and take a little bit on this whole business. I hope we can preserve the height limit within this historic bowl of the city where the L'Enfant plan exists. Outside of that, we

should loosen our collars a little bit and breathe a bit easier.

We have a plaque in the office; it pretends to be a quotation from Daniel Burnham. Actually, it's a collection of things he said. My favorite part is the

very last sentence, "Remember our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us." And that's the thing that government has to remember: there are new generations coming forth that aren't going to think like we do and will have different values. We've got to accept that as inevitable. We may not like it, but it's going to happen. And some of it's going to happen in our lifetime. It's funny, because I feel I've gotten more liberal in the time that I've been in this office. Primarily because I've seen people that have done just the opposite, gotten stodgier and stodgier. And I don't want to be that way ever; I just think it's awful.

What do you think of security in Washington these days?

For the last 10 years, [the CFA has had its offices] in the National Building Museum. For the 20 years prior to that, we had an extraordinary office on Lafayette Square. It was a window on the world like no other. You could sit in my office and look out on the White House, and you knew when there was a [national] crisis because all the lights would be on in the press corps [area] on the lawn. We had our share of tear gas and a few other things during the 1970s, during Cambodia, during the Vietnam War. The demonstrations, anti Shah of Iran, all of those things gave Lafayette Square a very strong identity: it was the spot to be. Now it's totally dead. They've got snow fences, chain link fences, everything around it. It's worth your life just to go in and feed the pigeons. Thank God our office is not

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there anymore. It would just be embarrassing. It just wouldn't work, because we have the public coming into all of these meetings with big crates of models and stuff like that. And you can imagine

the Secret Service; it would just make them crazy. But it was wonderful while it lasted.

Fortress America is what we're coming to. I think it's inevitable that we're going to go through this cycle of creating these defensive perimeters around everything. When you look at the madness that has infected this whole terrorist movement, the price of life is cheap. They don't care about getting killed in the process of destroying something; it's all for their honor. So you [cannot] deter people from inflicting this kind of damage with Jersey barriers. All of these things were fine until about 10 or maybe 20 years ago, when the worst thing that would happen might be a bombing like Oklahoma City. But [physical barriers] are not going to work any more. A lot of what we're doing, I hope can be undone at some point in the future.

I think [Senator Daniel Patrick] Moynihan was very concerned about this toward the end of his life, this sense of being infected by fear. The fact that the Statue of Liberty is closed today to the public, that's just precisely what [terrorists] want us to do: run in fear and close everything down. I don't think we can afford to do that. We have to take a certain amount of risk where we live.

What are you most proud of having done in the last 40 years?

One thing you learn in this job really quickly is that if you have some brilliant idea of your own, the best thing to do is sell it to someone else. Get them to adopt it. I remember David Findley [Chairman of the Commission in 1960] telling me early on—and I've heard every Chairman since say the same thing—"This is the kind of job where you don't stand up and take bows and credit for stuff, if you're smart. For one thing, it immediately offers a target for everyone to shoot at!"

I take a great deal of satisfaction in the Freedom Plaza—not in the design, by any means, because that's not a finished thing at all. And a lot of people have talked about ripping it up and starting over again, which is fine with me. [The important thing is] the notion of having a great space there—an architectural space.

The Pennsylvania Avenue Develop-

ment Commission (PADC) had started in the early 1960s with these grand notions of a huge space at the end of Pennsylvania Avenue. They felt there wasn't anything to counterbalance the importance of the Capitol. So they thought that creating a big civic space at the west end was the solution. And that was fine as far as the idea went, but the big mistake they made was [to go] all the way to 15th Street, and that's where it ran into trouble, because [it would have been] a huge open space next to another huge open space—the Ellipse—and that's not great. That grand scheme began to shrink as the preservation movement began to gain steam in the late 60s and early 70s. The idea for this huge square began to get smaller and smaller and smaller. Finally, in 1973 and 1974, it all but vanished. In fact, it did vanish. They just threw in the towel. Originally, the Willard Hotel was going to be torn down, the Washington Hotel, the National Press Club, the National Theater; I mean, it was a wholesale slaughter. And it would have looked like Red Square; it would have been just terrible.

But there was a need to have some space there; that was very clear. I remember I was over at the Octagon [Museum] one afternoon with Don Myer, who was my assistant for so many years. We were going out the door, looking at Rollins Park, and I said, "How could somebody who planned this city have a beautiful park like that one block from the White House on one side of it, and not do it on the other side?" And we looked at each other, and said, "That's crazy. There has to be something there."

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So we went back to the office and looked at the L'Enfant Plan. Well, it's very fuzzy. There's a big sort of blob of open space there, but it's not defined at all. It's not really quite clear what he had in mind.

But you go to the Ellicott Plan, and it's beautiful! It's the mirror image of Rollins Park between 18th and 19th Streets.

So we went to Carter Brown [then Chairman of the Commission] and asked, "What's happening on Pennsylvania Avenue?" By that time, Dan Kiley, our great landscape architect, had proposed an alley of trees down Pennsylvania Avenue, with the triangular spaces between the Wilson Building on the south side and the National Theater on the north planted like peach orchards. It was like a forest! No sense of civic space whatsoever. We said, "That's just a cop out. This thing is not the solution."

Carter said, "If you pop up and say that this is the answer, forget it. There are going to be all kinds of people fighting." I said, "Well, look at this: it's in the L'Enfant Plan and the Ellicott Plan." And he said, "Good. Quietly go around and get all the support that you need." So that's just what Don and I did.

It's not a Fine Arts Commission scheme; it's a L'Enfant scheme. All we did was discover it. How the federal government could have gone down this road so far without anybody taking a look at the damn thing, it's incredible when you think about it! [Something] that important, and everybody was just blindly going off in another direction. So I feel very good about that.

I [also] feel I can take some credit [for] the Navy Memorial and the big circular plaza there. It's called Market Square, and this name got everybody thinking in the wrong direction. Everybody wanted to build a rectangle there. I remember having a meeting. It

was quite a gathering: the cream of the crop of Navy brass, a pretty intimidating group. They had gone through one scheme after another, all based on squares and rectangles, and hadn't gotten any-

where. Everybody was looking at each other thinking, “What the hell can we do now?” I was looking at this drawing, and I said, “You know, here you’ve got the Hirshhorn [Museum], which is a circle. You’ve got this pool, and the National Sculpture Garden; that’s a circle, too. The answer is another circle. That’s what we ought to do.” And everybody sort of

[though] it will always have some emotional pull when you see the context in which those names appear. I remember one of the architects involved, I don’t think I ought to mention his name, he was just pondering the whole future of the memorial, and thought, “You know, it very well could be an eloquent thing in the future, when these names don’t

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looked at each other and said, “Well, let’s try it.” So they did. And that’s what [worked]. It sings as a space. It’s successful beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, not as a memorial to the Navy, but as a civic space. It’s full of people.

A lot of people wouldn’t agree with me on the World War II Memorial; the jury’s still out, you might say. A big question mark there, on public acceptance. But I’m convinced it’s in the right place. I don’t think it could be any other place.

My hope is that it will be a successful memorial. It’s going to be totally different from the Korean War Memorial or the Vietnam [Veterans] Memorial. It will not be one that either is steeped in the sense of loss and sacrifice, nor will it be celebratory of the military [or] war. There’s none of that kind of drama in this memorial. The excitement of that place is going to be that extraordinary line of history. Look at the Lincoln Memorial, which is, after all, a memorial to the preservation of the union. The WWII Memorial [has the] same kind of repetitive columnar structure representing the states, just like the columns at the Lincoln Memorial. It is a celebration of the union of this country. That was the glorious thing about the Second World War—it brought about a unity in this country that had never existed before.

It will be interesting to see what happens to the Vietnam memorial in another 100 years. Those names won’t mean anything anymore to people,

have that immediate association, to just bury it back into the earth, and just have the “V” appearing at grass level, and all the names would finally be put to rest.” It’s a beautiful idea. The chances of it happening are absolutely zero. The National Park service would never let that happen. And probably just as well.

What are your hopes for the future for Washington?

I think the city seems to be very much going in the right direction. It’s always going to be frustrating getting things done in this city, and for good reason. The more frustrating and slower the progress is, the less likely it is we’re going to make a big blunder. I think the whole character of the city is determined by the kind of government that we have. It’s a democratic free society. If we can keep this city growing in a way that reflects the spirit of its origins, we don’t need anybody to plan it or anything else; it will evolve in a wonderful way, and I think that’s all we have to worry about. We don’t need a lot of master planning; we just need one great idea, which is the nature of this country. And if we preserve that, we’re in great shape. 🇺🇸

