

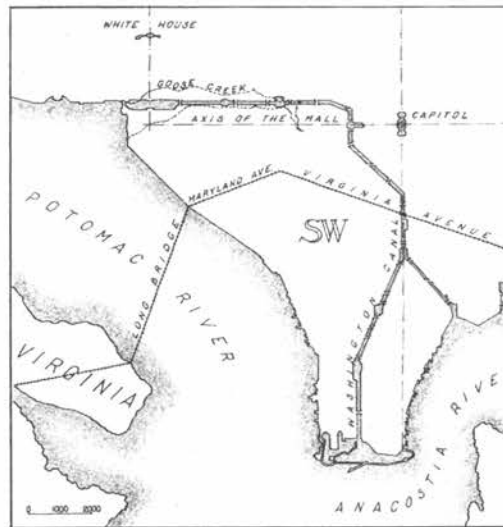
Urban Renewal in Southwest Washington

by I. M. Pei AIA, Member, AIA Committee on the National Capital

When President Washington on June 28, 1791, rode with Major L'Enfant to review the site for the new Federal city, the characteristics of the area which later became known as "the Southwest" were implicit in its geography and topography. The main body of Goose Creek ran some 250 yards north of the present axis of the Mall and parallel to it, emptying into the Potomac just above the site of the Washington Monument. By 1815 the creek had been extended in the form of a canal cutting south across the Mall and slanting off into the Anacostia River near the Navy Yard. By 1873 the canal was filled, but by this time the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad, along the line of Maryland and Virginia Avenues, had compressed and further cut off the area. The Southwest was an island, difficult of access to and from the rest of the city, and its characteristics stemmed from this fact.

In the nineteenth century the natural land-uses along the Southwest's borders were second-commercial: transporting and storing of produce and goods. Inside this ring grew up housing for the workers. By the middle of the twentieth century, the disappearance of shipping, decline in importance of rail, the rise of trucking, and the need for new plants had made existing conditions and relationships of land-use and population in the Southwest no longer reasonable. Similar situations exist in almost every American city—situations where close-in and attractive downtown land, very often waterfront, is ill-used by outmoded plants and slum housing. Nevertheless, the first concepts for redevelopment were concerned with whether the Southwest's existing character should be encouraged or changed. In early 1952 two plans appeared which delineated these opposed viewpoints.

The first was prepared by Elbert Peets as



The Southwest and its historic barriers (before creation of the Tidal Basin and Potomac Park)

consultant to the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC). This plan aimed at a cleaned-up slum, taking advantage of the not uncharming appearance of the seventy-year-old row houses. Private rehabilitation of similar buildings in Georgetown, a fashionable area, had been most successful, but at this time neither private nor public financial procedures were available for rehabilitation of low-income areas. In any case, the time required and costs entailed by projects executed in this manner compared with the net return, both economic and social, to the city and Federal governments made rehabilitation of this sort unjustifiable.

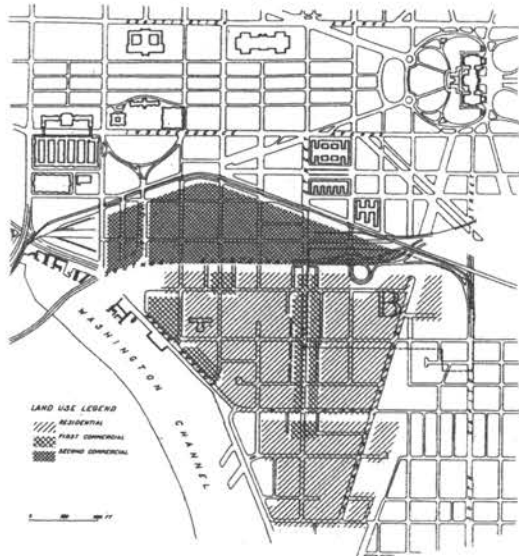
Many felt the Southwest's 427 acres had greater potentiality—especially for residential development. Its intown location, proximity to the Mall, its fine trees, the long water-front and Potomac Park across the Channel were assets which could not be ignored. Accordingly the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA), under the direction of John R. Searles Jr, commissioned Harland Bartholomew and Associates of St. Louis and

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Louis Justement and Phloethiel Smith, two Washington architects, to study the Southwest with the goal of drastically changing its character. The ensuing plan envisioned almost total clearance and redevelopment into a new residential complex of some 5000 dwelling units. To break through the second commercial ring located along the railroad the plan proposed the transformation of 10th Street into an esplanade starting at the bridge over the tracks and running south to Maine Avenue bordering the Washington Channel. This esplanade was lined with restricted second-commercial, residential and retail uses. It also recommended what was to become the alignment of the Southwest Expressway.

Generalized land-uses of the NCPC "Compromise Plan," 1952



The appearance of these opposed plans at almost the same time led to a third: the so-called "Compromise Plan" prepared by the NCPC. This plan stressed redevelopment rather than rehabilitation and filled the triangle formed by the railroad and the Expressway with second-commercial uses. Tenth Street was widened from Maine Avenue up to the railroad bridge where it narrowed and connected in a U to 12th and 9th Streets at Independence Avenue. The street's main function was to act as a traffic connector between downtown Washington and the Expressway.

The Compromise Plan also included a plan for the first project in the Southwest to go into execution—the 76-acre Area B, to be developed as a 800-unit residential complex. The invitation in November 1952 by the RLA to bidders indicated the character of development desired: the highest land price and the lowest rents would be significant criteria in choosing the developer. This made inevitable a low standard of construction and few amenities and therefore was disappointing. Redevelopment of the Southwest seemed to be started on the wrong road.

* This N-S axis connecting the main Mall with the Channel was suggested in the L'Enfant Plan on the present 11th Street right-of-way.

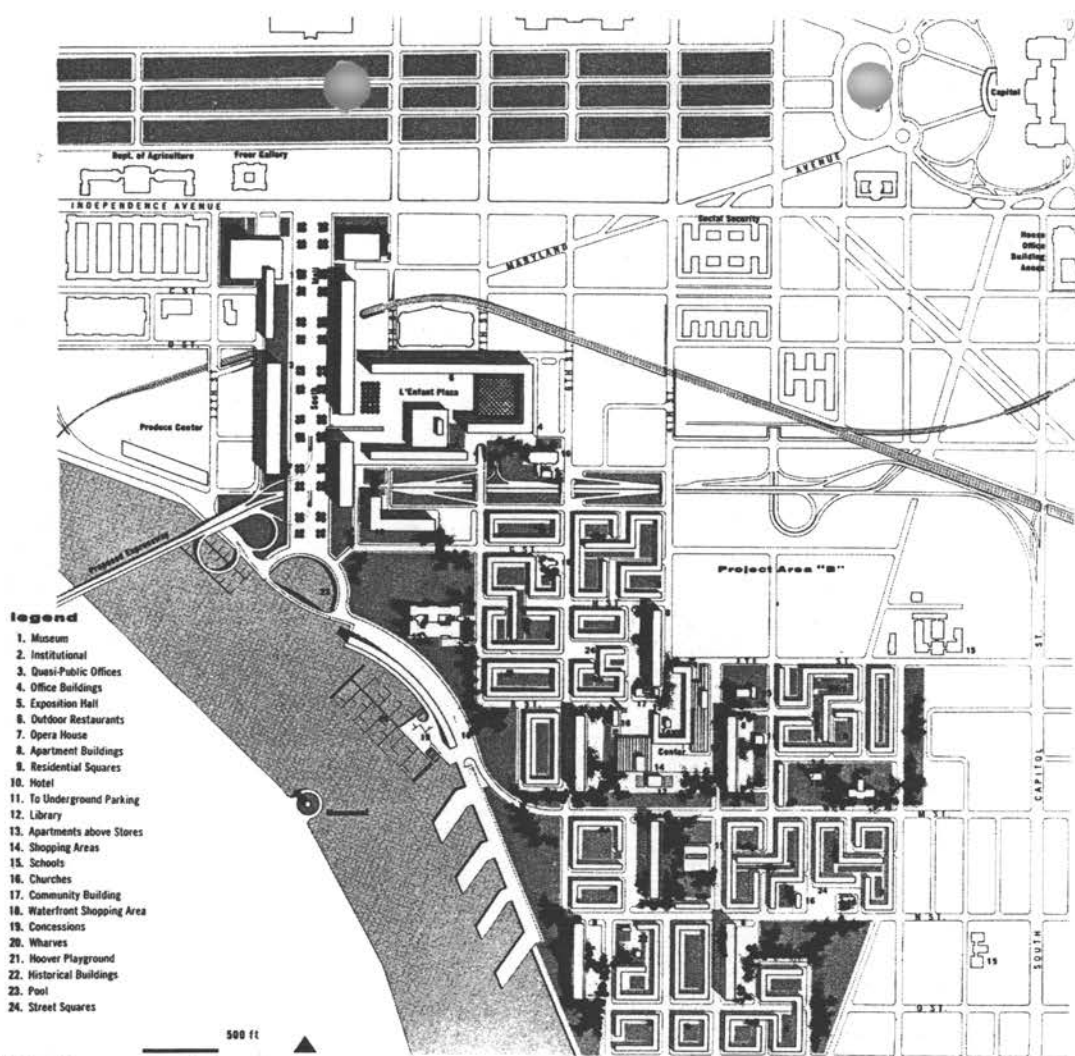
Against this background on March 15, 1953, Webb & Knapp Inc, announced its interest in planning and redeveloping the whole of the Southwest. On April 29, RLA said that a Norfolk, Virginia, construction company had been selected successful bidder for Area B.

By this time the Webb & Knapp architectural and planning staff (which I then headed) together with Harry Weese, of Chicago, were deeply involved in studying materials for a plan for the Southwest. I would like to say that the vision and courage of the developer—William Zeckendorf—brought economics and planning into basic agreement from the very beginning.

In January and February 1954, the developer's plan was presented to business men and officials of the city of Washington. As in the "Compromise Plan" the land south of the proposed Expressway was to be redeveloped as a residential community—a new town in the city. A Town Center, a centralized pedestrian "downtown" for the whole Southwest, mixed shopping, community, and residential activities in the geographic center of the area. Because all streets, except for Maine Avenue and M, were closed to through traffic, an interlocking pattern of high apartment buildings and town houses could be developed. The existing rights-of-way with their fine trees became local access streets and pedestrian ways. The new waterfront of restaurants and marinas was to be located only along the Channel side of Maine Avenue and a broad park buffered the housing from this public recreational area.

The plan recommended three-story town houses with common cornice lines, the facade closed at the block's corners. Inside these "residential squares" were small yards or patios attached to each house with a large open space common to all the houses in the center. Neither town houses nor common areas were new, historically speaking, but in 1954 they clashed with planning and real estate concepts of what was feasible. Also, the mixing of building types, elevator apartments amongst town houses, was not considered desirable.

These plans for the new community, however, were overshadowed by the more dramatic proposals for, and ensuing discussions about, the land north of the Expressway. 10th Street, widened to 300 feet, crossed the line of the railroad, obliterated the tracks as a visual barrier, and reached 1200 feet north to the Renwick Smithsonian Museum on the Mall—a fitting terminus. This breakthrough* finally made contact between the redevelopment area and the heart of



Site plan, Webb and Knapp proposal, 1959

Washington and in the process tapped a strong new re-use for the Southwest—Federal office buildings. Tenth Street became a Mall, a specially designed public street-space. Along this new Mall were arranged public and semi-public office buildings. L'Enfant Plaza was proposed between the railway and the Expressway at right angles to this Mall. It was an enclosed square surrounded by private office buildings and containing, as focal points, a hall for performances and an exhibition building. It was intended to be the cultural center of Washington and was to also include the outdoor cafes and activities seen in the great spaces in Europe. Underneath, adjoining the Expressway, was parking. The new Mall terminated at the channel in a semi-circular reflecting pool surrounded by the waterfront park.

This 10th Street Mall posed a challenge to Washington's planners. Its concept set the course of development for its area and the rest of the Southwest and presented Washington with the first major public space since the McMillan Plan—and one in scale with that great work.

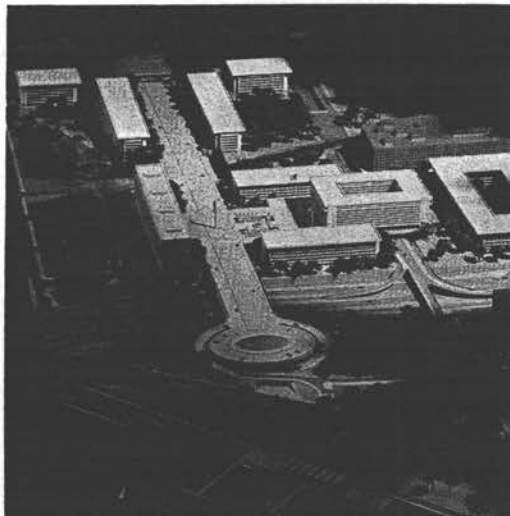
No guiding procedures for redevelopment had been evolved in those days, and the de-

veloper and the RLA had to improvise as they went along. On March 15, 1954, Webb & Knapp and the Agency signed a statement of intentions (called a "Memorandum of Understanding") the purpose of which was to safeguard the interest of each, to commit each to the other to a degree, and to propose the redevelopment of the Southwest, ie, 427 acres called Area C.

In accordance with this memorandum, the Webb & Knapp architects and planners and its redevelopment section, headed by William L. Slayton, now Commissioner of the Urban Renewal Administration, were to do the land, traffic, and site-planning concepts, and the RLA, NCPC, and other agencies, the detailed planning necessary to secure Federal monies to execute the project. RLA, compared with present-day standards, was handicapped by lack of planning personnel but was adequately and ably staffed in its relocation section. The first fact predisposed the Agency to want to combine the efforts of public and private planning technicians; the second lent credibility to success in handling the many relocation problems of Area C. Under the direction of James G. Banks, now Assistant Commissioner for Relocation and Community Or-

ganization of the URA, these problems had been successfully handled in Area B. Heretofore such difficulties in other cities had tended to force changes and cutbacks in redevelopment plans. Proof that relocation if properly handled could turn out to be a social gain helped those working on Area C.

Meantime, all Title I redevelopment was in jeopardy. The estate of a small department store owner in the Southwest had brought suit to test constitutionality of the District Redevelopment Act of 1945. On November 22, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously (8-0) that the RLA had the right to acquire real estate in a redevelopment project by right of eminent domain. In this historic decision, the Supreme Court



10th Street Mall and L'Enfant Plaza, Webb and Knapp proposal, 1959. Site plan for urban renewal plan of 1956 (far right)

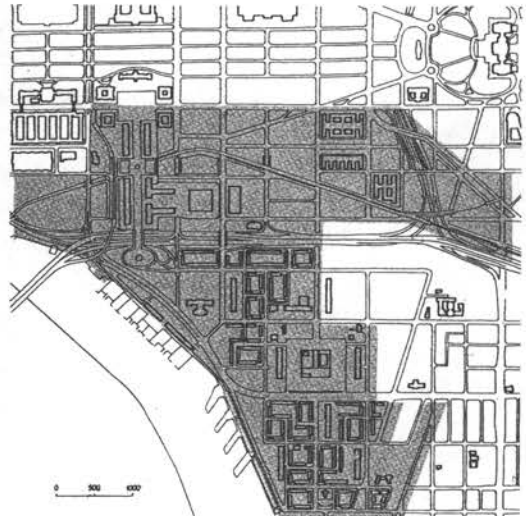
also affirmed that spiritual and esthetic values were as significant for the public welfare as the usual considerations. For all groups the decision was momentous, but for architects and planners especially so; the values with which they were supremely concerned were given a status equal to others and became a legal criterion in planning determinations.

On April 5, 1956, the NCPC approved the Urban Renewal Plan for the 441-acre Project Area C, which incorporated the basic concepts of the Webb & Knapp proposal of 1954. The 10th Street Mall, L'Enfant Plaza, the mixture of town houses in residential squares with commons and elevator apartment buildings, the Town Center, the waterfront development along the Channel were retained. Significant changes in detail were made, however.

Traffic pressures, for example, changed the plan. Many of the local access streets and pedestrian ways in the residential square area were forced open, breaking the structure and texture of the plan into a more typical city block appearance. The Mall as it crossed the Expressway (widened from four lanes to eighteen) became a bridge and

terminated an elliptical overlook. Prevalent feelings against mixed uses broke up the Town Center into separate parcels of housing, community activities, and shopping. It is noteworthy that today the Town Center's final development calls for a return to mixing housing and shopping uses.

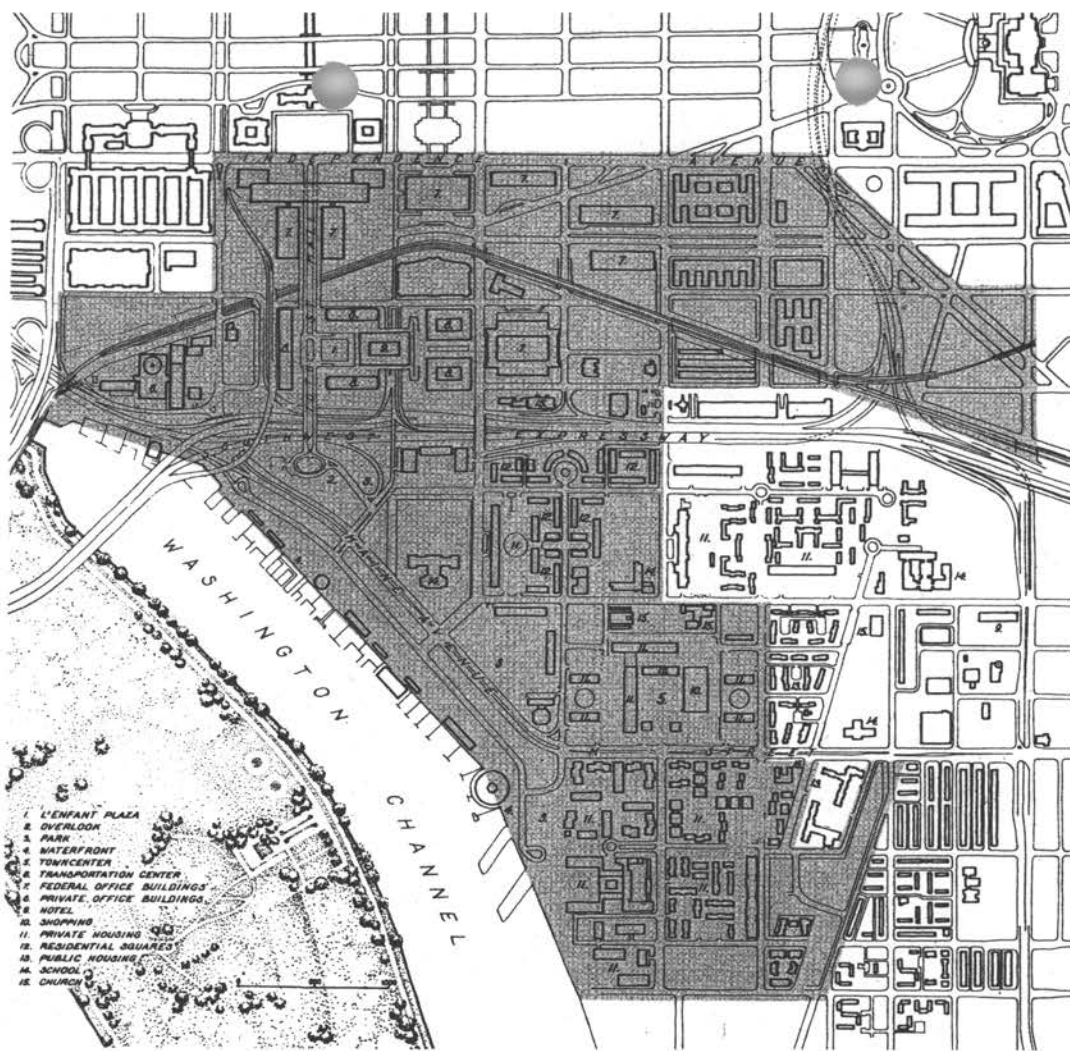
An interesting corollary of the plan, under scrutiny since 1954, already had appeared in Area B. The previous sponsor had withdrawn, and a new developer, Scheuer-Stevens of New York, had been named in the summer of 1955. With their architects, Satterlee and Smith, they had raised the quality of the Area B development and coordinated it with the over-all plan for C. B was not only the first project to be built



in the Southwest but the first Title I project to be acclaimed for design (AIA Award of Merit, 1960)—proof that the redevelopment process could produce a result beyond slum clearance alone.

Upon the approval of a plan by local and Federal agencies certain urban renewal processes leading to disposition took place. In this disposition, Webb & Knapp became developers for L'Enfant's Plaza, the Town Center and the housing north of M Street. This had an important effect on the project's planning from this point on for it removed I. M. Pei and Associates from further work on any other segments of the project.

RLA wished that the land not earmarked for Webb & Knapp or the Federal and district governments be disposed of in many parcels to allow more groups to participate and to achieve variety in appearance. Today, five of the eight parcels south of M Street have been disposed of: two by negotiation and three others by design competition ("beauty contests") where the land price is fixed and an advisory judgment made on the developer's anonymous architectural proposal by an architectural and planning jury.



Site plan showing how Southwest has been and/or will be built

The disposition of these parcels by either negotiation or competition has produced architectural designs of high order. And in the judging of the competitions, the juries have always taken into consideration how well the proposals fitted in with their existing or planned neighbors. In other words, all concerned with this disposition did all they believed was necessary to achieve the best in planning and design.

Today, after nearly ten years of planning action, Southwest Washington is beginning to take form. In retrospect, the case history of this important project is truly representative of many of the urban renewal programs in the United States. It has suffered an inordinate amount of delay in its execution, partly due to a lack of experience in a virgin field and partly due to the multiplicity of agencies and powers so typical of Washington.

In the vital area of planning, Southwest Washington as a project can justly be called the direct result of interaction of social, economic and political forces. From a purely technical point of view, the 1956 Urban Renewal Plan has proven to be a sound plan that shows sufficient flexibility to permit the

inevitable readjustments. In the subsequent years of disposition and execution, it has been compromised for lack of an understanding of the urban design aspect of the original plan and the consequent failure to effectuate a continuity of urban design control (see plans). Without question, the decision on the part of the RLA to dispose of Southwest in many separate parcels with the expressed intention to attract the most qualified developers and the best available talents in the architectural profession was a praiseworthy one. Apparently the urban design objectives were not clearly understood and consequently a maximum "architectural" variety was achieved at the expense of the form and structure of the total plan—a fragmentation of plan has occurred. Despite the most enlightened administrative intentions throughout the history of this project, it would appear that the highest goal of the art of civic design—that of a new urban organism, each part functionally and visually related to the others and to the whole—was not attained. Perhaps this was not possible in those early years of the redevelopment process but it remains a goal for the future. ◀