

WORTHY OF THE NATION:

The Effects of Infrastructure on the Archeology
of Urban Life in the District of Columbia.

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IA Infrastructure

This paper is going to consider how and why a particular square in Washington DC (Sq 530) was affected by the desire of Washingtonians after the Civil War to make their city “Worthy of the nation” by improving its infrastructure. Infrastructure can be looked at from several perspectives. From that of the population at large, it serves to make life better and safer by providing public services and utilities like sanitation (water and sewers), transportation (roads, railroads , canals, airports), and communication (telegraph, telephone, internet) and energy (gas, electricity, power plants). From a Marxist point of view infrastructure projects “expand the basis for the production of surplus value” for capitalists (Harvey 1981:100). For example, better health for the workers means they can be more productive (Harvey 1981:97-100). From the viewpoint of landowners, infrastructure increases the value of their land since they can attract buyers and users. The government (federal, state, and local) also has a stake in producing infrastructure because it increases tax revenues and the gross national product as more businesses become more profitable as a result of the infrastructure. All of these perspectives need to be considered in understand the timing and distribution of infrastructure.

IB CAPITALISM AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure is fixed capital [**SLIDE**] (something which cannot be moved without being destroyed) just like an archeological feature. Individual capitalists are hard to convince to fund infrastructure projects because the return is uncertain and the infrastructure can be used by other capitalists to expand their own ability to compete with the individual who constructed the infrastructure (Harvey 1981:91-96). For example, if someone built a road to transport their goods, others could use it. Within the nation state, the government has a stake in development and can give the road builder a charter to receive the revenues from the road or canal. This is system used in US.¹

¹ In fact most of America’s infrastructure is owned by the private sector but was built with a variety of government support, which made it feasible for such projects to be built (Miller 2000:1). The Federal, state or local governments never have enough revenues to build and maintain all the infrastructure needed by their population and depend on the private sector to build and maintain such facilities (Miller 2000); but government can provide a structure that makes it possible for such efforts to be attractive investments. This two prong funding strategy has enabled the US to produce far more of the world’s movement of people, goods, energy, and information far in excess of its 4.3% of the world’s population (Miller 2000:3).

IC URBAN GROWTH MACHINE & URBAN PROPAGANDA PROJECTS

One approach to urban studies that was particularly useful for my Washington example is conceptualizing the city as a growth machine [SLIDE] (Logan and Molotch 1987). This view attempts to explain the growth of cities by viewing the city as a geographic location in which the land-based interests of the elite are given expression (Whitt 1989:97). To enhance profit-making ability of the land the landowners want to see development, growth, and increasing intensity of land use in and around their land. Government institutions also are crucial to the politics of growth by affecting its distribution (Whitt 1989:99). Progrowth forces attempt to make coalitions and press local governments to create conditions favorable to growth. Efforts do not always result in growth (Whitt 1998:100) nor inspire unity among the different citizen groups, business, and development interests. This orientation focuses on human activism in creating cities and focuses on the local conditions and the different groups that struggle over use and exchange goals (Logan and Molotch 1987; Cox and Mair 1989).

Promoters of growth need to mobilize ideologies that will convince people to accept the development program or at least not oppose it (Boyle 1989:58). These attempts are called Urban Propaganda Projects (or UPPs) [SLIDE]. The propaganda projects try to get agreement by promoting their plans as exchange-value-free growth. That is, they downplay the connection between the growth and exchange values (their profits) to reinforce the link between growth and better living for all (Boyle 1989:58). They also try to stimulate civic pride and concepts of local identity or what we can call aesthetics of urban living in the physical form of the city and the importance of the community. One way to create this atmosphere of support today is to have “hallmark events” [SLIDE] such as World Fairs, major sporting events, etc. While these modern type of events were not happening in Washington in the middle of the 19th century, there was such an event which seems to have mobilized public opinion.

The two main ideologies [SLIDE] associated with city planning in the period before the Progressive era of the late nineteenth century are the exchange-value free and civic pride (boosterism) approaches. Urban Propaganda Projects expressed these as sanitation (an exchange-value free idea of a change better for all—which was generally true but often only for some parts of the city) and aesthetics (how the physical form of the city created a sense of beauty and good functioning). With this background, we can better understand the historical trajectory that created the archeological record that we will eventually be talking about.

IIA THE WASHINGTON STORY

IIA1 Background and Setting

In Washington, even though it was the capitol of a growing country, living conditions were not good and the population was not very large until the Civil War. By the end of the war its population had increased by 75.4% to 131,700 increasing the stress on its limited infrastructure.

Washington did have some early uncoordinated effort to install infrastructure concentrated in the center of the city [SLIDE].² The increase in population due to CW and the continuous traffic of men and materials through the city during the war led to a variety of public problems. There was an increase in water pollution and various epidemics smallpox, typhoid, malaria. The heavy traffic through town as a result of the Civil War made what did exist of the streets worse (Maury p. 396). The 1870 New York *Times* said the condition of Penn. Ave. was “little better than a dirt road,” “undrained, unpaved, and unswept.”

The living conditions and appearance of Washington was so poor that there was agitation for the capitol to be moved back north, or west to Cincinnati or St. Louis (Green 1962:328). Local and government leaders felt the capital must be “transformed into an inspiring urban showcase” (Lessoft 1994:30). One of the reasons little had been done between the end of the war and 1870 was the complex governing structure [SLIDE]. Since 1843 District was composed of three separate units of government: the corporations of Washington, Georgetown and the County of Washington--the land outside the urban areas. Each had a different government and all were subject to control by congress. Such divided authority made it difficult to coordinate policy and control over the whole District. Also Congress was not paying its fair share of the development of infrastructure or taxes. It had policies established during the Jackson administration that they should not spend general tax revenues that would benefit only one locality (Miller 2000:80, 91). On the other hand the local capitalists did not want to spend their money either

² Some streets were paved, especially Pennsylvania Avenue. Sewers to take away storm water and human waste were installed haphazardly as early as 1810. One of sewers was the canal, originally built to connect the Potomac with the Anacostia River. It rapidly became a smelly sewer because tidal action pushed sewage back into the canal. By 1850 most streets along Pennsylvania Ave. from 1st to 15th Street had piped-in spring water. And in 1859 the Washington Aqueduct piped in water to whole city (DC Water 2010; de Krafft 1846).

IIA2 The urban growth group

The two people [SLIDE] most responsible for improving the infrastructure of Washington were Sayles J. Bowen and Alexander R. Shepherd. Both Bowen and Shepherd were Republicans as was the Federal Government during Reconstruction.³ Bowen was mayor from 1868 to 1870 and Shepherd was head of the Board of Public Works of the Territorial Government and then Governor between 1871 and 1874. Shepherd was a self-made man, a leader of the local businessmen, and the prime mover in the urban growth coalition in Washington. Bowen was more concerned with justice for the newly freed and now enfranchised African Americans.

Bowen was a radical Republican in that he supported the African Americans.⁴ In fact he was elected partly because the businessmen felt that as a radical Republican he would be more likely to get money for improvements from the Federal government (Green 1962:316). Bowen lost favor with the public when it became clear that Congress would not fund large-scale public works to beautify the city (Green 1962:318). Although Bowen graded the streets around 223 squares, only 10 streets were paved before he was destroyed by Reconstruction racial politics (Lessoff 1994:34).⁵

Shepherd on the other hand can be classified as an improver Republican who was more interested in growth than the plight or position of the African Americans. He also believed the mayor-council form of government did not allow progress. He used the racist feelings of the majority to help change the form of the District's government to prevent its feared takeover by the Negroes (Lessoff 1994:42).

Progress in Shepherd's terms was growth. In 1867 Shepherd told a business group that business interests were not being protected under the current municipal system (Lessoff 1994:53). He was

³ Founders of Republican Party in the 1850s imagined that the increase in liberty and pursuit of national and personal wealth were complementary goals. During the Reconstruction, growth and liberty proved less complementary than early Republicans had hoped. Political circumstance placed Republicans who favored an economic view of progress in competition with those whose emphasis was more on rights and equality. When the battle over race and civil rights became too heated, modernizers or improvers disentangled themselves from radicals in order to save their special programs (Lessoff 1994:42). This is what happened in DC.

⁴ He appointed them to positions of authority, and used his own money to create schools for African-American children. However, he also tried to respond to the call for more improvements. But whites thought he cared more for giving Negroes work than building a city-wide sewage system as soon and cheaply as possible (Green 1962:318).

⁵ The person who succeeded Bowen, Matthew Gault Emery, was an 11 month mayor as the District became a territory. He also contributed to the development of the infrastructure. He paved and graded 132 streets, and installed a sea wall along Anacostia.

instrumental in getting the territorial form of government established and expressed great approval when the Congress passed the bill establishing the territory. At an 1870 Washington Board of Trade meeting he hailed “with joy the passage of the bill by the House of Representatives this day believing that it will be the beginning of a new era in the development of our business interests” [National Democratic Committee 1880:167]).

While the growth coalition headed by Shepherd was lobbying Congress for a territorial form of government, the man that replaced Sayles as mayor raised taxes to begin repaving Pennsylvania Ave, and dredging the canal [SLIDE] to start a sanitary sewer project. Paving of Pennsylvania Ave was done with wooden blocks by a company in which Shepherd had an interest (Lessoff 1994:37) [SLIDE]. It became a “hallmark” event in developing support for major infrastructure projects celebrated by public parties at each end of the avenue. There is some evidence that it was developed and used by the “improvers” as an Urban Propaganda Project. It was seen later (Webb et al. 1892:196) as the turning point in making Washington a city “Worthy of the Nation” (Gutheim et al. 2006).

In 1871 Shepherd was appointed as head of the Board of Public Works which gave him seemingly unlimited authority to start a major infrastructure program. He developed a comprehensive plan [SLIDE] (Green 1962:345-346) that focused on the downtown area and mostly ignored other areas. There are several tallies of what was accomplished.⁶ The [SLIDE] shows a compilation of such lists. There was an amazing amount of work done—so much so that he vastly exceeded his spending authority in 3 years while he was head of the Board of Public Works or Governor of the Territory. This overspending led to his downfall; but, most of the better class of citizens were quite pleased and visitors expressed an enthusiasm for the “new Washington” (Green 1962:353; Gutheim and Lee 2006:88). The enthusiasm gave rise to faith in the future and more opportunities for more profit as new housing went up and streetcar lines were extended (Green 1962: 354-356).

⁶ His most important contribution was developing the “parking” idea—parking does not refer to cars but to making an area park-like. Washington had very wide streets and this plan narrowed them to cut maintenance cost and beautify the city (narrowed widest streets (120 feet) to 35-ft carriage way, 35-ft strips of parking and 10 ft of sidewalk). The 35-foot parking strips would still be owned by the city and to some extent planted with trees. But the landowners bordering them were responsible for planting and maintaining the 35-ft parking strip, ideally as park-like areas (Green 1962:326.)

IIB Archeological and social Implications of Infrastructure

Excavation of Square 530 was sponsored by GSA in 1995. The block was to be the site of the FBI Regional Washington DC Office. The square was bounded by 3rd and 4th St. and F and G Streets [SLIDE]. The latest yards had been very disturbed by the destruction of the standing 20th century residences and the construction of a parking lot. However at a depth of 2.5 to 6 feet there were 1 and sometime 2 yard surfaces. The original ground surface sloped from the northwest to the southeast [SLIDE-lot 7].

Given the dates of the assemblages, we are assuming the yards were buried during the post-Civil War attempts to improve the infrastructure of Washington. Most of the yard middens had few artifacts, which is unusual. But the presence of features and small artifact fragments, indicative of trampling, proved the yards were in use. Some utility pipes appeared in the back yard also, mostly coming down through the lot fill from alter periods [SLIDE Tr8].

The sunken yards must have created problems for the owners. Shepherd reported that there was nothing they could do about leaving houses elevated above the new road or down in a hole with the street up at the 2nd story. [SLIDE] It was necessary to control the street grades for the sewers and to make it easier for street cars and other forms of transportation to move around the city. Shepherd did try to help these conditions by soding the banks of those left up in the air and paying for sunken houses to be raised one level (Billings 1963:155). This appears to have been done for the Sq 530 house since there was a more or less uniform fill throughout the back yards. Another issue that affected many people was the rise in the value of their lots as the street was improved. These raised taxes that a number of owners could not pay and their homes were confiscated. This does not seem to have happened in the lots investigated because the ownership of the lots does not change.

Summary

The work at Sq 530 was helped considerably by the infrastructure boom in DC after the Civil War. It preserved untouched for more than 100 years evidence of domestic activity of a series of lots occupied primarily by immigrant small merchants.

Besides that information, I found the Urban Growth Machine model very useful in understanding the construction of urban infrastructure. It has been useful in many any case studies since its introduction in the 1970s. It directs our attention to historical data that clarifies where and why infrastructure projects occur where they do and who they may have benefited or not.

Archeological evidence of infrastructure can contribute to this understanding (as Honerkamp and Fairbanks [1985] said years ago). But we have to look for it. We seldom excavate in front of historic lots where we are likely to see water and sewer connection to the street infrastructure. Sometimes if there are alleys the pipes come in from the rear of the lot. We can use geophysical prospecting techniques to help identify the location of such features and then where to dig to see how the features relate to other elements of a house lot. There are other constraints on investigating the distribution of infrastructure. We seldom get to excavate streets which are a major container of infrastructure and we seldom have comparable data from different parts of the city so we can compare installation dates directly. In conclusion if we want to study infrastructure archeologically we need to look where it might be located as well as at the urban coalitions that both promoted and opposed the development of infrastructure.

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