



Today, in many tree panels, younger elms are interspersed with older. (CLP file “view NE through elms from Jefferson” Feb. 18 2005)



The elms growing on the south side of the 3rd-4th Street block date from the early 1920s and are noticeably larger than most other elms on the Mall. (CLP file "3-4 elms 5 BW" May 29, 2006)



In front of the National Museum of Natural History, a cluster of bald cypresses remaining from the historic planting was retained; the reason is not known. Note food service building in left foreground. (CLP file "NMNH elms and cypresses BW" Feb. 18 2005)



This red oak grows directly in the view zone between the Capitol and the Washington Monument (see Views and Vistas for another photo). View looking north. (CLP file "oak tree 3 BW" May 29, 2006)

Spatial Organization

The Mall is a great channel of space, running between two fixed points, the Capitol and the Washington Monument, and framed on either side by lines of elm trees, which form visual walls. This vista and the landscape that forms it are integral to the spatial organization; it is this mutual interdependence that gives this design its profound drama. The lines of elms to the north and south are reinforced by the facades of the imposing monumental museum buildings behind them. This channel of space expands out at the ends, into Union Square at the east, with its Capitol Reflecting Pool and Grant Memorial set at the foot of Capitol Hill, and into the sloping grounds of the Washington Monument at the west. Along the Mall beneath the elms is a more filtered space, regularly defined by the ranks of trunks but permeable, allowing physical passage between the trees and filtered views of the buildings. Other interruptions in the main space occur on the cross streets and the axis of 8th Street, where there are gaps in the lines of elms and view corridors open up to the north and south. None of these, however, undermine the continuity or power of the main spatial volume.



The rows of elms and the flat grass panels define the spatial corridor of the Mall. (CLP file “view to Cap from W BW” May 29, 2006)

Views and Vistas

The Mall is defined by its primary view, the grand vista between the Capitol and the Washington Monument. This vista was an integral component of L'Enfant's plan for a Grand Avenue or promenade connecting the Capitol building, set on Jenkins Hill and facing west to the Potomac River, with the equestrian monument to George Washington he anticipated would be placed near the river, at the point where the Capitol axis intersected with the axis drawn south from the White House. L'Enfant placed other features – residential and other buildings, walks, and gardens – along this promenade, framing and reinforcing the visual corridor.

The McMillan Commission adapted this idea of the visual corridor reinforced by larger buildings and landscaping as the basis for their Mall plan. Retaining L'Enfant's axial promenade, they placed institutional buildings in near symmetry on either side of the central corridor of space. The essential features of the 1930s version of the McMillan Commission's Mall plan – the grass panels or tapis vert, the eight rows of elms, and the orthogonal disposition of walks and buildings – all lead the eye inexorably from the Capitol to the Washington Monument, and from the Washington Monument to the Capitol. There are also important views from the east end of the Mall to Union Square and the Grant Memorial at the foot of Capitol Hill.

Unlike L'Enfant, the McMillan Commission and the planners of the 1930s had to work with a monument to Washington that had been placed southeast of the actual crossing of the two axes, out of alignment with the cardinal directions. They adjusted the axis of the Mall, canting it to the southwest, so that the Washington Monument would be directly on line with the Capitol. The Mall is thus slightly off a true east-west alignment.

The Mall offers a continuous series of other significant views along its length. The sight of people moving along the Mall animates the vista, adding movement and color. Views of the flanking elms and, beneath their branches, glimpses of monumental building facades and of people on the sidewalks, all add to the pageantry. Vistas along the cross axes of museum facades, framed by elms and facing each other across the Mall, provide points of emphasis. Broader views also open up along corridors of the cross streets. The vista along the 8th Street axis, an important design feature of the L'Enfant Plan, is opened by the omission of elms. The red oak (*Quercus rubra*) on 14th Street is an intrusion in the major east-west vista; likewise, the bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) growing in the walk in front of the Natural History Museum intrudes into this north-south cross-axial vista.

Photographs and videos of views to the Mall (including East and West Potomac Parks) from vantage points around the city define the nation's capital and, to some extent, the nation, providing an instantly recognizable image of the United States. These are too many and too diffuse to be calculated, but some significant vantage points can be mentioned: the view from the U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial grounds in Arlington, Virginia, to the Mall, with which it shares a common east-west axis; and the view from Arlington National Cemetery, particularly from the grave of President John F. Kennedy.

List of contributing features:

vista, Capitol to Washington Monument
views to elms from walks & grass panels
views to building facades from Mall
views up cross streets
views from Mall to Union Square



Vista to the Washington Monument from the 10th Street axis, in front of the Smithsonian Castle. The red oak in the view corridor is plainly visible. (CLP file "WM from 10 2 BW" May 29, 2006)

Circulation

One of the intentions for the Mall in the 1930s plans was that it would form a great parkway, part of a larger scenic circulatory route that brought automotive traffic into the District from Baltimore, where it joined with Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, leading to the northwest, and Arlington Memorial Bridge, leading west into Virginia. Thus one reads of the “Mall parkway” in 1930s documents produced by the National Capital Planning Commission.

Streets

The Mall is bounded by four asphalt-paved roads: 3rd Street, Madison Drive, 14th Street, and Jefferson Drive. Fourteenth Street and 3rd Street run north-south and have two-way traffic. Madison and Jefferson Drives are both one way: Madison Drive on the north side of the Mall runs west and Jefferson Drive on the south runs east. These two long roads, each thirty-five feet wide on average, provide access to many museums. Fourth and 7th Streets cross the Mall on grade; 9th and 12th Streets, leading to and from downtown to Interstate 395, have been tunneled, so that the entire area from 7th to 14th Streets is unbroken. All streets have granite curbs; handicap curb cuts are also granite. Metered parking is available along the north-south streets, 3rd, 4th, and 7th, and free parking is available along Jefferson and Madison Drives. Madison and Jefferson Drives are forty-feet wide.

Walks

The current Mall walk system dates from the 1930s. The original walks were concrete, as is evident in historic photographs and references in a few historic memos and letters (for example, MRCE photo “Mall laying sidewalk 1935,” showing sidewalk next to North Vista Drive, and MRCE photos of Beautification plantings showing walk on 10th Street axis 9060-82 1963; 9060-A, 9073-H & 9073-J 1965; and 9060-9k 1966). These inner roads and their walks were repaved with gravel in 1975. Wide sidewalks run along all the streets. Those along the north-south streets are exposed aggregate concrete, and have grassed tree planting strips separating sidewalk and street. Jefferson and Madison Drives have wider sidewalks, paved for half their width in gravel, half in exposed aggregate concrete.

The former Adams and Washington Drives, built in 1934/35, originally known as the Inner Mall or Mall Vista Drives, ran parallel to Jefferson and Madison Drives. They were removed in 1975 following the recommendation of the 1973 SOM plan, *The Washington Mall Circulation Systems*, and replaced with wide graveled walks that run along the inner edges of the rows of American elms. The asphalt roadbeds were not removed for this work. Instead, the asphalt was punctured in many places to allow for drainage, and gravel was laid on top of the existing asphalt beds. It is not known whether the curbs were removed at this time or whether they are still in place. Since the walks are forty-feet wide, they probably encompass the original sidewalks also, which were located along the drives’ outer edges only. (Harry Olinger, Roads and Trails Supervisor, NAMA, through Alice McLarty) The inner walks run between the inner edges of the rows of American elms and the grass panels of the central vista. They are both forty-three feet wide. (Darwina Neal to Assoc. Regional Director, memo, “Mall Walks,” 7/10/89, in CLP Beautification files)

Walks also follow the alignments of all cross axes created by the city's grid of numbered streets, except for the 11th Street axis, which has no walk. Some cross-axial walks are single forty-foot-wide walks, others are paired fifteen-foot-wide walks. (Neal, memo, 7/20/89) Most lead between the central entrances in the symmetrical building facades facing each other across the Mall. One of the bald cypresses retained from the original Mall planting is located in the walk on the 10th Street axis, running between the National Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Castle.

Walks are composed primarily of natural beige-toned gravel, though sections of many walks have been repaved in exposed-aggregate concrete that uses an aggregate matching the gravel walks in color and size. Therefore, many walks have parallel sections of gravel and concrete. The gravel is composed of coarse and fine aggregate, quartz and quartzite with smaller amounts of quartzose sandstone and other materials, bound with clay. It is spread on a prepared base in two or more layers, each no more than two inches deep, and then rolled for compaction. Purchased from Aggregate Industries of Greenbelt, Maryland, the gravel is known as the "Mall mix."

The gravel tends to be kicked and washed off, requiring regular raking and top-dressing. Following numerous complaints from the public, the parallel concrete sections were installed in phases over the last ten to fifteen years to create an accessible walking surface.

In front of the Castle are two curved gravel walks, leading from concrete aprons at the sidewalks, that run down the slope to the Mall walk, the former Washington Drive. It is not clear if these were planned walks or replaced social trails, but the latter seems more likely. On each side of the Joseph Henry statue are triple flights of steps leading from the sidewalk down to the Mall walk. The stairs, and the area of sidewalk immediately behind the statue, have a polychrome design made of red granite diamonds and bands on a field of buff limestone. The stairs and this paving have been installed since 1965; see under "Buildings and Structures."

Social Trails

Several eroded social trails also cross this slope in front of the Castle. In some areas, other social trails run through the grass or tree panels immediately parallel to the east-west walks.

The corners and edges of many of the grass panels are worn and eroded, particularly near the Metro entrance on the 12th Street alignment. In these places the gravel has spread into the lawns, eroding the formal distinction between walks and panels.

Contribution of Mall Walk System

The pattern of the Mall circulation system is contributing. The materials of roads and walks are not contributing; this includes the gravel and concrete of the walkways and sidewalks, which replaced the original concrete walks in 1975 and later. Little information has been found about the historic width of roads and walks. Since the gravel was laid directly on top of the asphalt of the Inner Mall Drives when they were converted into walks, it seems likely that the width did not change substantially.

List of contributing features:

Historic circulation system from the 1930s, including the following:

Roads and sidewalks (north-south roads predate 1930s):

- Jefferson Drive
- Madison Drive
- 3rd Street
- 4th Street
- 7th Street
- 14th Street

East-west walks:

- North Vista Walk (formerly Wash. Drive)
- South Vista Walk (formerly Adams Drive)
- sidewalks along Madison and Jefferson Drives (Mall side of drives – south side of Madison and north side of Jefferson)

Cross-axial walks:

- 5th Street axis
- 6th Street axis
- 8th Street axis
- 9th Street axis
- 10th Street axis
- 12th Street axis
- 13th Street axis

List of non-contributing features:

- social trails
- curving walks in front of Castle
- polychrome paving & steps, Henry statue



North-south Mall walks are aligned with the Washington street grid. The walk running between the National Museum of American History and the Department of Agriculture follows the route of 13th Street. (CLP file "NMAH façade on axis clr" Feb. 18 2005)



A pair of walks, just visible at either side of the photo, follows the route of the tunneled 9th Street. (CLP file "9th St axis 2 BW" May 29, 2006)