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## Places

### Title

Framing Independence Hall [Place Profile]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3r42n16m>

### Journal

Places, 13(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Clafien, George L., Jr.

### Publication Date

2000-12-01

Peer reviewed



George L. Claffen, Jr.

# Framing Independence Hall

The current reworking of Independence Mall follows on a century of increasingly heated debate about the proper manner for framing its central icon, Independence Hall. The strategies for defining the space that surrounds the building, and from which it is viewed, have struggled without success against the nature of the mercantile, ceremonial and corporate city.

Visions of a proper architectural presentation of the founding of the nation in Philadelphia have motivated architectural and urban design proposals in Philadelphia for nearly a century. Despite significant debate to the contrary, the present setting, which was planned and built in the 1950s and 1960s (and is currently being replaced), misrepresents the historic urban context that supported and evolved from these great ideas. A new chapter in this discussion has been raging for several years. Attempts to alter the public understanding of Independence Hall through urban design by raising questions of authenticity, ambiguity and interpretation.

Independence Hall, originally known as the Pennsylvania State House (1732–1748), sheltered the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the crafting of the United States Constitution in 1787. It became the principal element of one of America's first civic centers when Congress Hall and City Hall (also the first home of the Supreme Court) were built adjacent to it and the Walnut Street Jail was constructed to the south across Independence Square.<sup>1</sup>

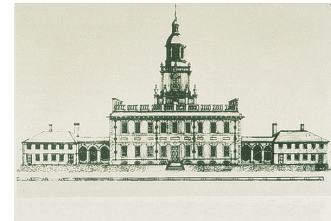
Despite its crucial role in momentous national events, the complex served most of its useful life as a municipal facility. Within a few years the federal government departed to the District of Columbia and the state government moved, eventually to Harrisburg. By 1818, the buildings had

become surplus state property and were purchased by the City of Philadelphia, which used them uneventfully until late in the nineteenth century when the city government moved to a new city hall.<sup>2</sup> Thus deprived of a function, the complex entered fully the process that links architecture and urban design in the production of monuments and shrines.

#### Architecture: Independence Hall

Independence Hall reflects a typically derivative and blurred approach to the crucial questions of architectural thinking in early eighteenth-century Britain. The most artistically advanced work of this period was concerned with a move toward a stricter form of Palladianism as advised by Lord Burlington and Colen Campbell. It is not surprising that Independence Hall is influenced by the earlier and somewhat more casual compositional tendencies associated with the seventeenth-century work of Christopher Wren and Sir Roger Pratt.<sup>3</sup>

The vehicle for this sensibility was probably James Gibbs' *Book of Architecture*.<sup>4</sup> The design is credited to the lawyer Andrew Hamilton, who worked with Edmund Wooley, a member of the Carpenter's Company. Clearly based upon the country house model, it included a colonnade



Opposite: Independence Mall, view to north, 1990s  
Courtesy Independence National Historical Park

Above: Independence Hall, north elevation, 1774  
Courtesy Independence National Historical Park

and dependent building on each side. Its most memorable feature is the tower that was added to the south in 1753 and is widely thought to be influenced by that of Wren's St. Mary le-Bow in London (1670–83).<sup>5</sup> The front (or north) facade includes such refinements as soapstone decorative panels and marble string courses and is distinctly more decorative than the rear facade.

From the beginning the building exhibited some ambiguity between front and back, reflective of its country house model where a formal



*The State House in 1778, from a drawing of that date by C.W. Peale, corrected by W.J. Breton*

The State House in 1778, from a drawing of that date by C.W. Peale, corrected by W.J. Breton  
Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania

face could be expected to yield to a garden facade. In Philadelphia the north or front context of Independence Hall was uncontrolled, while the south context was carefully controlled from the beginning through Independence Square. According to one of its principal restorers, Penelope Batchelor: “One gets the feeling that they were more comfortable in handling the rear facade with its traditional and tried details, while at the front one senses the use of untried elements remembered from elsewhere or borrowed from some book.”<sup>6</sup>

Although Independence Hall seems small today, when built it was a large and monumental structure relative to the modest row houses of the

city. It includes only two floors, but they are tall ones, the facade rising 45 feet above the sidewalk. The main building is only 107 feet wide, but the complex was planned to span the entire block.

As to its design, the verdict of history has been decidedly mixed. It was characterized by a local historian as “an outstanding example of colonial Georgian public architecture,” while John Summerson rather misleadingly criticized it for aspirations that its makers probably did not have: “(Independence Hall) ... represents the prevailing style for such buildings—a Palladianism totally lacking in scholarship and virtuous only by a combination of chance and instinct.”<sup>7</sup>

Lewis Mumford, who implicitly focused upon the relation between the forms of social life and the forms of buildings, found it evocative of larger questions:

*Independence Hall and its adjacent structures are examples of Georgian decency and quiet dignity, without a touch of the grandiose. The scale of the chief structure, two stories high, is as domestic as that of Mount Vernon, and far more so than some of Jefferson's later classic mansions; it was this homely, non-classic, almost anti-classic quality in Georgian work that Jefferson despised.*<sup>8</sup>

Colonial architecture lacked the sophistication of contemporary English building. It was conservative and carpenterly English architecture, not revolutionary. Thus Independence Hall itself is filled with indications of the mixed feelings of its makers about monumentality, order, precedent, composition and the vernacular. This is not surprising for talented but inexperienced individuals working in an uncritical environment. And it is not entirely dissimilar from the situation of the founders of the nation, self-made men embarking on a prodigious task with only their collective learning to rely upon.

The romantic interpretation of early American architecture suggests that it somehow expresses architecturally the egalitarian politics of the

nation. Independence Hall actually reflects the styles and controversies of the British Isles, attenuated by a less sophisticated building industry and a lag time in the flow of information and taste. Consequently, there is a built-in dissonance between its architectural meaning and its symbolic meaning. Whether to eliminate this condition or take notice of it is the essence of the question that citizens, architects and urban designers have been addressing for the last century.

### Urban Design: Representations and Expectations

This dissonance was vastly amplified as the Philadelphia's expansion transformed Independence Hall's immediate context. The building was located at the city's western edge in 1732, but as rapid growth occurred in the nineteenth century, the city surrounded it and erased its original neighborhood. By 1900, this condition would be obvious to all—a two-story, red brick and white window framed eighteenth-century “Wrennaissance” palazzo embedded in the brash and competitive urban nineteenth-century fabric of the mercantile city. In 1908, an architect observed that across from Independence Hall there was a “row of buildings whose diversity is only surpassed by their ugliness.”<sup>9</sup>

But even more important than the actual dissonance was the symbolic dissonance:

*Views of Independence Hall... were sold in quantity. The nation's painters and printmakers created in the public's mind an idealistic “Cradle of Liberty” isolated from the rest of the world, a vignette that floated on a cloud. By comparison, photographs of the real Independence Hall came as shock; it was surrounded by uninspired commercial buildings. To conform the reality to the pre-photographic fantasy, a scheme to frame the Hall with a spacious plaza was proposed... but it was another generation before a... vignette-like image would be created with Independence Mall.<sup>10</sup>*

In 1915, architects Albert Kelsey and D. Knickerbacker Boyd proposed a “reviewing

square” in front of Independence Hall. Their design, elaborated in the Beaux Arts style of the day, was the first of fifteen schemes for a new setting for the building that would be produced over the next eighty-one years. Kelsey and Boyd went on to identify the four motivations that would define future debate on the subject: creating a fitting setting for Independence Hall, reducing the fire hazard, reducing congestion and beautifying the entire quadrant of the city.

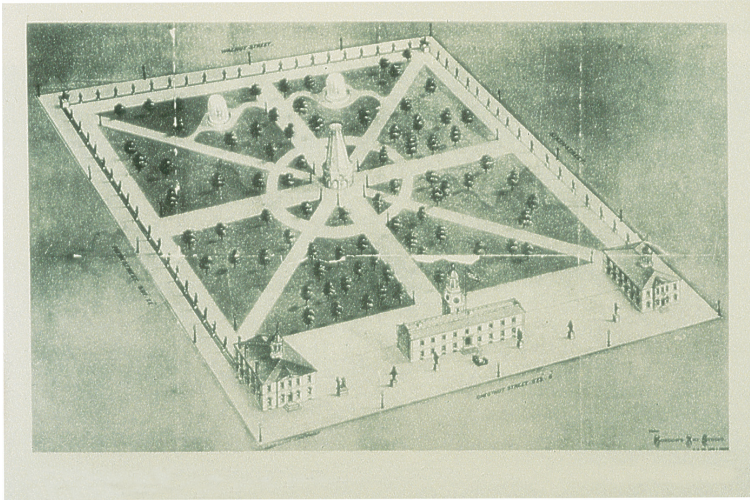
Kelsey and Boyd's proposal was characterized by a consistent application of the internationally



Independence Hall, view to north, 1952  
Courtesy Independence National Historical Park

accepted norms of Beaux Arts design, as well as a modesty brought about by both an explicit recognition of the scale of Independence Hall and an awareness of the absence of any mechanism or funds for acquiring a large amount of property.

Taking only a half-block between Chestnut and Ludlow Streets, rather than the full block to Market Street, would be adequate, Kelsey explained: “Independence Hall was not large enough to be seen at its best from a distance and across such a wide square as would be created.”<sup>11</sup> Later Jacques Greber (1924 and 1930) and Paul



Top: Plan for Independence Square, 1874  
 Courtesy Independence National Historic Park

Bottom: Jacques greber plan, 1924  
 Courtesy Free Library of Philadelphia

kind of plan. Victory boosted national pride and led to an increased leadership role for the U.S.; to many people, that meant there should be a more significant architectural recognition of the nation's founding.

At the same time, the increasingly monumental interests of local Beaux Arts architects found a resonance with new urban renewal legislation. The idea of Independence Mall was thus transformed from a Beaux Arts plan into a Modern plan. An opportunity was seen to address what was perceived as the long-term economic decline of the area due to what was considered obsolete infrastructure. The mall became a means of revitalizing the area and encouraging major businesses to invest in it. Ultimately this would entail the razing of five adjacent blocks to provide sites for three new office buildings, including one for the Federal Reserve Bank, a new federal building and courthouse, and a new mint.<sup>13</sup>

This new approach was both the result and fascination of a remarkable pair of men who provided the leadership for it. Judge Edwin O. Lewis had done much of the organization and lobbying work necessary to bring the concept forward in the 40s. In post-war Philadelphia he met and commenced working with the new director of planning, Edmund Bacon, who sought a massive renewal of the eastern part of the city.<sup>14</sup>

The National Park Service introduced a new conceptual element to the scene. The effort to create a new setting for Independence Hall to the north was combined with a remaking of the area to the east by removing many of the buildings that were thought to be crowding the eighteenth-century monuments. This effort would result in the purification of the Independence National Park to an historically incorrect landscape that preserved only the monuments of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It resulted in the destruction of such significant buildings as an early skyscraper, the Jayne Building (William Johnston



Phillipe Cret (1928) would produce schemes similar in scope.

By 1937 Roy Larson, who had worked with both Boyd and Cret, had prepared a drawing that would completely recast the project. In a breathtaking application of Beaux Arts principles, Larson linked the city's most precious historic treasure, Independence Hall, with its newest public work—the Delaware River Bridge (now the Benjamin Franklin Bridge)—in a sequence of open spaces extending five blocks from Independence Hall to Callowhill Street. This scheme was loosely patterned on the Place de la Carrière in Nancy.<sup>12</sup> Nothing happened immediately, but a threshold had been crossed toward gigantism and formality.

#### Urban Design: Implementation

With the commencement of World War II, there was a heightened sense of patriotism and urgency toward protecting national monuments. By the end of the war several tendencies had come into alignment, creating an opportunity for a new

and Thomas U. Walter, 1850) and the Provident Life and Trust (1879), one of Frank Furness' finest works.

Pushed hard by Judge Lewis, the park service had placed itself in a bind. Having declared the buildings erected between 1840 and 1900 superfluous, while simultaneously proscribing the notion of reconstructing any of the eighteenth-century context, the agency guaranteed that a falsely bucolic setting would be the result. Commenting on subsequent preservation and environmental legislation, one historian later wrote: "...the National Park Service can never again destroy so much of the historic fabric of a city in order to create an artificial vision of the past."<sup>15</sup>

### The First Battle over Purification

The emerging tendency toward purification was not uncontested. Two powerful advocates for a more sensitive approach came forward. The first was Charles Peterson, a park service architect who argued passionately for incorporating elements from the nineteenth century into the emerging park. He prepared a report in 1947 that drew on other strong advocates of contextual preservation, such as Hans Huth: "I hope they won't pull down too much in Philadelphia. I [would] hate to see Independence Hall in splendid isolation, landscaped like a rest room."<sup>16</sup> The Peterson position would be succinctly put later by others:

*The Independence Hall project is one of the outstanding examples of national interest in the preservation of our architectural heritage, but it differs from the Williamsburg and Old Deerfield projects in that it is located in a city that has grown continuously; hence it is highly artificial to restore the area back to a given date as though there had been no subsequent development....the preservation of our architectural heritage is not limited to specific periods but should be a record of continuing development... .<sup>17</sup>*

The second advocate of a more balanced approach was Lewis Mumford, who became interested in the issue while teaching at Penn:

*If Mr. Peterson's wise lead is followed, the general rehabilitation of this area will not bring about a reign of compulsive Colonialism. There will be, rather, a wider variety of buildings, carried over from the past or newly built, each representing a significant moment in our national development. Only after 1840 did a truly indigenous architecture spring up in American, and one of the merits of Mr. Peterson's approach is that it would insure the preservation of at least one of Frank Furness' characteristic works in this area.<sup>18</sup>*

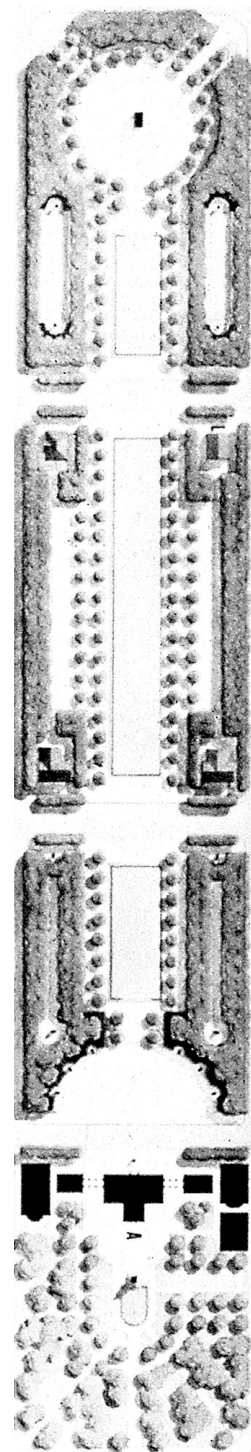
On this point the advocates of purification, however, won. The Furness bank and many other significant nineteenth-century structures were razed and to this day the park remains focused upon "the founding of the nation from 1775 to 1800."<sup>19</sup>

On the subject of the Mall and its axis, Mumford and Peterson were again in agreement:

*The proposed creation of a grand mall on the axis of Independence Hall in Philadelphia threatens to disrupt the eighteenth-century character of this unique building. This is not to say that the present adjoining buildings form a suitable setting for the cradle of the republic, but it would [be] equally inept to impose a grandiose neoclassical or Grand Prix parti on it.<sup>20</sup>*

Mumford focused on failure of the designers:

*The problem of designing a pleasant and fitting approach to a building whose architectural boasts are much more modest than its historical claims is so new that one should not be cast down because this first exploration was tempted down a visual alley that turned out to be a blind one...The proper key for such a design is not wholly a visual one. The designers would have come out better if they had thought not of a modernized baroque scheme but of the little shrine itself, what it means and in what mood and for what purpose the visitor approaches it.<sup>21</sup>*



Roy Larson plan, 1938  
Courtesy Independence  
National Historical Park

## Evaluation

With the completion of the mall in 1969, these issues would be put to sleep for almost twenty years. There were several evaluations of the mall, none of them particularly good. Even Judge Lewis questioned the result: “I sometimes wonder if I’ve created a Frankenstein’s monster, whether it’s used enough to justify (the extra blocks)... I go by there and I see it all empty and think, “Now what did you create that for? Maybe you overdid it.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1976 the Liberty Bell was moved to a modern pavilion facing Independence Hall to better accommodate the large crowds. This small structure, designed by Romaldo Giurgola, closes the axis of the mall south of Market Street. The controversies surrounding it are outside the scope of the current discussion.

In the mid 90s the City of Philadelphia engaged in the first serious evaluation of its attractiveness as a tourist destination. The results were deeply disturbing. Studies consistently showed that visitors came to Philadelphia for short visits numbered in hours, not the days envisioned by the planners.

This effort coincided with the development of a new general management plan for the park. The park service produced a thorough study of the mall in a document titled *Cultural Landscape*

*Report Independence Mall*, which assessed and rejected all possible bases for valuing the mall as an historic or cultural artifact:

*The mall as constructed...cannot be considered to be a significant representative work of the City Beautiful movement, of Beaux Arts design, or of International Style design.”<sup>23</sup>*

One city planner called it:

*[An] empty, barren wasteland that is a blundering, villainous, oversized beaux arts rupture of the City’s historic, human-scaled fabric. Feigned City Beautiful artifact, with no soul and no heart, and littered with meaningless, lifeless, ersatz design elements. Little used because it has little function. Anti-urban barrier to exploring the larger historic district. A monstrous, disingenuously conceived, spuriously reasoned, theoretical “construct” which debases, rather than hallows, Independence Hall and the founding spirit of this country.<sup>24</sup>*

## The Second Battle over Purification

Another confrontation between the advocates of Beaux Arts purified monumentality and those of Mumford’s complex ambiguity was set in motion in 1995, when the Pew Charitable Trust retained Venturi Scott Brown and Associates (vsBA) to provide preliminary design and planning services for a new visitors’ center on the mall. Denise Scott Brown began vsBA’s only public presentation with an image of Independence Hall in its pre-mall urban context. Robert Venturi quoted Mumford in a memorandum that included this analysis of the gridiron plan of the city:

### ACKNOWLEDGING THE GENIUS OF PENN’S GRIDIRON PLAN

*The genius of Philadelphia’s gridiron plan (which was to become the prototype for the American City) lies in its elemental juxtaposition—that of explicitly varied configurations of building types and forms evolving optionally over time that are juxtaposed within an*

City Planning Commission rendering (Howe Hough Livingston Larson), 1956  
Courtesy Philadelphia City Planning Commission





original street layout that is essentially consistent in its geometric configuration. Here is exemplified order combining with individuality, simplicity accommodating complexity...<sup>25</sup>

Aware of the modest scale of the Beaux Arts schemes prior to 1937, and of Giurgola's efforts to confront the scale problem in 1976, vsBA proposed a scheme as radical in its own way as Larson's. The visitor's center would be oriented on an east-west alignment, parallel with the important Market Street axis; most crucially, it would be located south of Market Street, decisively closing the vista of the Mall.

The design of the center combined a low-key south elevation facing Independence Hall with an electronic "mural-frieze within the glass-faced gallery extending the length of the block"<sup>26</sup> on the north side. While this scheme would have meant a complete rebuilding of the first block, vsBA also proposed, with reluctance, an alternative that placed a building with a similar footprint north of Market Street, thus leaving the first block relatively untouched.

This caught the attention of Edmund Bacon, who launched a vigorous campaign to save the north-south axis. Bacon argued that:

*Our forbears, at great expense to the taxpayers, destroyed three blocks of buildings to give Independence Hall a foreground of open space.... To disrupt this continuity now would be a crime against history and cultural sensibility.... Any obstruction of the central open space of Independence Mall by any substantial building would be a terrible cultural blunder.<sup>27</sup>*

Bacon built a model of his scheme and aggressively sought the support of the director of the National Park Service:

*The way things are going now this can become pretty nasty. There is a pleasant and gentlemanly way out of this... I suggest that you thank me ... for producing such a fine personal vision for the development of Independence Mall. ... my plan is carefully*

*considered and unified. Your casual scatteration of numbers is worthless.<sup>28</sup>*

These efforts ultimately brought the following response from vsBA:

**VISTA OBSESSION  
AND THE IRONIC HUMILIATION  
OF INDEPENDENCE HALL**

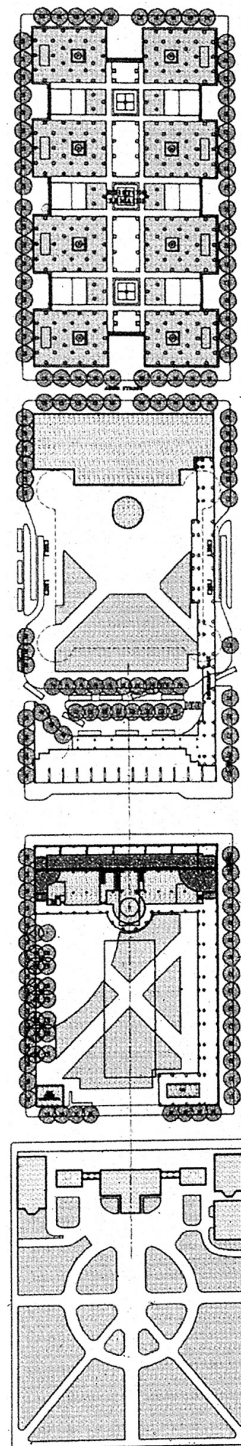
*It is important to acknowledge the specific shortcomings of Independence Mall in its current manifestation and as originally planned—that 1) IT COMPOSES A POMPOUS-BAROQUE AXIS IN A KIND OF VACUOUS-SPECIOUS VILLE RADIEUSE AND THAT 2) IT CREATES AN IRONICALLY DEMEANING SETTING FOR INDEPENDENCE HALL AS ARCHITECTURE AND AS SHRINE.*

Referring implicitly to the language of urban design implied by Mumford some forty years earlier, vsBA asked:

*Is Bacon unaware of the vital urban tradition of gradual revelation—as in your perception of the majority of palaces and churches that are along streets in Rome and that you approach obliquely—and of glorious surprise—as with the palaces and churches on piazzas in Rome you suddenly come onto? How has he ignored this established tradition as he debases the genius loci of the gridiron city he is a prominent citizen of and an alleged expert on.<sup>29</sup>*

The reaction of concerned public officials and professionals was mixed. Bacon was not the only one who felt the south of Market site was too close, although the vast majority of architects thought the mall to be a mistake. To still other officials it seemed like a tempest in a teapot, a large-scale 1960s urban renewal battle in reverse. A newspaper editorial reported on the result:

*Architects hired by Pew [vsba] favored the Mall's first block, with visitor center near or even encompassing the Liberty Bell. That rightly set off alarms among some planners and Mall devotees [read Bacon]...*



Venturi Scott Brown Associates proposal, 1996  
Graphic: Venturi Scott Brown Associates

*Planners at the Park Service [are] recommending that the visitor center go in the middle block, and that makes far more sense.*<sup>30</sup>

VSBA completed its work and has had no further involvement in the project. The rationale of the next design plan that grew out of the ashes of these efforts is described in this issue by Laurie Olin, one of its authors. Each of the major buildings has now been designed: the National Constitution Center by Henry Cobb; Pew's Visitor's Center by Kalman McKinnell, Wood; and the new Liberty Bell pavilion by Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson.

Although a detailed assessment of these works might best await their completion, it seems appropriate to consider how this story might motivate new critical investigations. Two issues seem provocative now: First, although the VSBA and Olin/Cywinski schemes differ fundamentally, they are both seen by their authors as anti-imperial. Will the new scheme as built enable the public to experience the multiple readings that it clearly aspires to? Second, the National Constitution Center, which reads as a reworking of the of the East Wing of the National Gallery by the same firm, seems to be the least sensitive to the aspirations of the final urban design. Will it serve to remind us that, in cases of national image, recognized monumental languages almost always trump hard-won, locally inflected complexity?

## Notes

1. Richard Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1976) 77–79. Charles Peterson, “Philadelphia’s New National Park,” Eightieth Annual Report (Philadelphia: Fairmount Park Art Association, 1952), 20
2. Webster, 78
3. This paragraph follows Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 112–128.
4. James Gibbs, *A Book of Architecture* (London: 1728; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 64. Some sources also refer to Batty Langley with respect to influences on Independence Hall.
5. John A. Gallery, *Philadelphia Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 247
6. Penelope Hartshorne Batchelor, “Independence Hall: Its Appearance Restored” in Peterson, ed., *Building Early America* (Radnor, Pa: Chilton, 1976), 299
7. Daniel Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1976), 77, and John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1953, 1969), 339
8. Lewis Mumford, *The Highway in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953, 1963), 184. On Mumford’s outlook, see Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) 73
9. Huger Elliot, “Architecture in Philadelphia and a Coming Age,” *Architectural Record* 23 (April 1908) 299–300, quoted in Kathleen Cook, “The Creation of Independence National Historical Park and Independence Mall,” M.A. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1989, 172, quoted in Deirdre Gibson, et. al., *Cultural Landscape Report Independence Mall* (Denver: National Park Service, 1994), 22.
10. Kenneth Finkel, *Philadelphia Then and Now* (New York: Dover, 1988), 78
11. Albert Kelsey, INDE Archives, IHA, Boyd Coll. Box 1 1915 Colonnade Plan, quoted in *Cultural Landscape Report*, 24. On Greber and Cret, see *Cultural Landscape Report*, 26–30.
12. *Cultural Landscape Report*, 39–40.
13. *Ibid.*, 133–134
14. *Ibid.*, 41–44. and 75
15. Constance Greiff, *Independence, The Creation of a National Park* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1987), 77–112, 267
16. Hans Huth, quoted in Charles Peterson, “A Preliminary Report, June 1947: The Philadelphia Shrines National Park Commission,” 13

17. Caroll L. V. Meeks, letter to Judge Edwin O. Lewis, 25 September 1956 INDE archives, quoted in *Cultural Landscape Report*, 149.
18. Mumford, 203
19. Abbreviated Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Independence National Historical Park (Denver: National Park Service, March 1997), 1-9
20. Turpin Bannister, Chair of AIA national committee on the preservation of monuments, 1947, quoted in Charles Peterson, "Philadelphia's New National Park," in *Proceedings of the Eightieth Fairmount Park Art Association* (Philadelphia: 1952), 16
21. Mumford, 193
22. Judge Edwin O. Lewis from the original interview by Eleanor Prescott, 19 January 1971, pp. 31-33 quoted in *Cultural Landscape Report*, 152
23. *Cultural Landscape Report*, 147
24. An anonymous city planner, 1997
25. Robert Venturi, "Redesign of Independence Mall with Visitor Center: vsba's Preliminary Analysis and Conceptual Design: Scheme A," copyrighted memorandum to National Park Service, September, 1996, 1
26. Venturi, 2
27. Edmund N. Bacon, letter to the editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5 February, 1995
28. Bacon, letter to Roger Kennedy, Director of the National Park Service, 7 October 1995, published in *Abbreviated Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Independence National Historical Park* (Denver: National Park Service, March 1997), 4-93
29. Venturi, 8-9
30. Editorial, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 September 1996

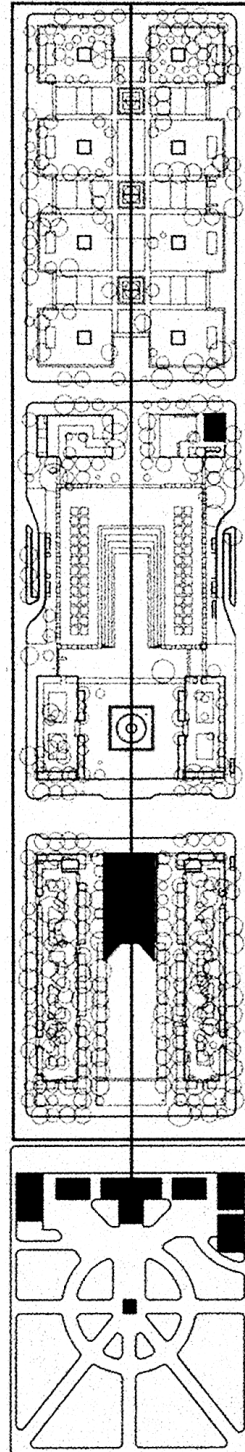


Figure ground,  
Independence Mall, 1998  
Graphics: Olin Partnership

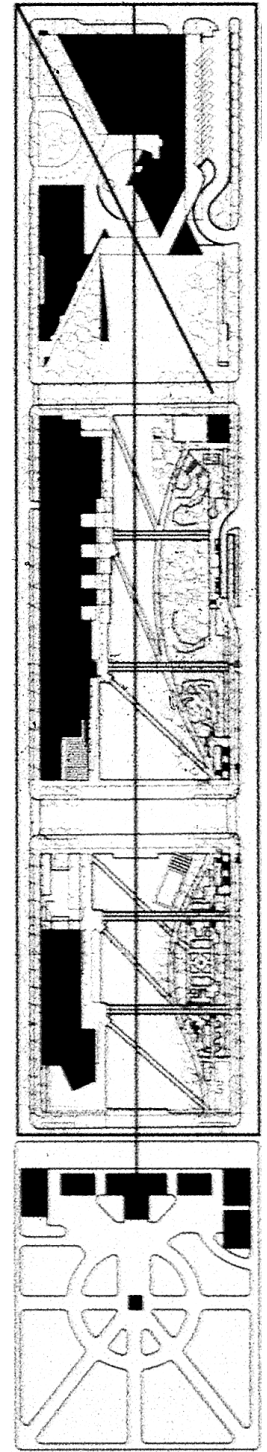


Figure ground,  
Independence Mall master plan