

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Archihorse's Washington Notes

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/60q3h9zq>

Journal

Places, 2(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Wiebenson, John

Publication Date

1984-11-01

Peer reviewed

Archihorse's Washington Notes

John Wiebenson

Archihorse started out in 1971 as Mailman, a talking mailbox who argued for the preservation of the Old Post Office down on Washington, DC's, Pennsylvania Avenue. It seems that ever since this mighty stone structure was put up in 1897, a bunch of Federal officials—GSA administrators, Fine Arts commissioners, even a President—have wanted to have it taken down. They claimed that Romanesque architecture was not appropriate for this capital city, particularly not at its center right beside the path taken by Presidential parades. These people wanted a more neoclassic set of façades put here in order to make a tidy blend with all the other façades the government has built.

It is not unusual for an institution's members to want to express their territory in this way—through continuity of a particular architectural style. The University of California's regents have favored Spanish tile roofs for Berkeley's buildings, while their counterparts at the University of Maryland have pushed for a sort of Georgian style, the kind modified a bit by financial considerations. In Washington, DC, the force of this idea was vigorous enough to have already converted some 15 blocks between the Mall and Pennsylvania Avenue into neoclassic façades. Only the Old Post Office remained,

standing as a towering monument to all the lost theaters, hotels, shops, and apartments that once brought life to this part of Washington's downtown.

Yet, a style can engage as thoroughly as it can offend. Many local citizens wanted to keep this old building, precisely because they like its bulky presence. They also liked the Old Post Office in territorial terms. They looked at it as a massive, symbolic bulwark that could resist further Federal seizures of the city's territory, and, therefore, acted to save the Old Post Office. They formed organizations. They testified at Senate hearings. They badgered newspapers and television stations for coverage. And, during this time of putting together material for the media, Mailman was born.

Mailman's mission was to translate noble, but ponderous, Senate testimony into a more inviting form that would then be made available to newspapers. There was some precedent for Mailman. The U.S. Army used comic books to persuade G.I.'s to ponder over issues of maintaining trucks and tanks. Martin Luther King, Jr., distributed thousands of comic books throughout the South as one means for explaining how nonviolent protest works. These precedents showed that the informal mixed-media of comics can help readers to learn. And,

because comics can present a variety of visual data, they can be particularly valuable in explaining architectural issues. Mailman could, for example, point to something outside the Old Post Office and, in another frame, let the reader look into the building. He could also pop into the planners' offices to point out their errors, and then move on to explain how people could pitch in and help.

Drawing Mailman turned out to be easier than getting him printed. The editor of a major Washington paper was offended by the suggestion that pictures could help make points clear. "Our readers can read," he explained. But, Sam Smith, editor of *The Progressive Review* (then called the *DC Gazette*), asked to run Mailman in his somewhat less major Washington paper. Copies were then sent to the deans of every architecture school in the United States as part of a package asking for their help in saving the Old Post Office. About 45 percent responded by getting letters out to Senators and Congressmen. The Old Post Office is so thoroughly saved that even the Federal Government celebrates its preservation.

Since then, *The Progressive Review* has helped Mailman (and his current manifestation, Archihorse) to win other battles. Zoning for Washington's Dupont Circle area was often a subject

during the several years it took to get better protection from developers there. Archihorse has also helped get a street-car loop included in planning papers for the city's downtown; it may, of course, take years before any real plans are actually drawn. Further, Archihorse has reviewed books, looked at the Denver skyline, cosponsored a competition that produced improvements to the design of Washington's Western Plaza, talked about saving energy, and discussed a self-help housing scheme proposed by an architecture student from Canada.

Archihorse has talked about Washington, DC's, planning and architecture problems for the most part; there always seems to be some project going on that would promote Federal pomp at the expense of the city's life. For example, the same forces that would have had the Old Post Office taken down recently wanted a colossal memorial arch raised up next to Pennsylvania Avenue in Market Square, despite the resulting damage to the Square's historic scale and focus. A couple of Archihorses helped stop the arch, but similar efforts have failed to stir Pennsylvania Avenue's planners into putting in all the housing around Market Square that is needed to bring back its once vibrant commercial and social life.

Future topics might include showing how a proposed

new building for Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC, could be redesigned to offer as much space, but without having to damage two small hotels that happen to be special assets in the Dupont Circle area. And, in order to get beyond Washington, DC's, boundaries from time to time, Archihorse might point out how architecture schools could make their curricula more

relevant to architecture practice, or how the schools could try to be a community resource again, or how those repairing the Statue of Liberty need not change her torch from an incandescent object to a merely reflective one. Perhaps Archihorse will note ways that St. John's College in Santa Fe, NM, could have been more considerate in dealing with its natural surroundings in

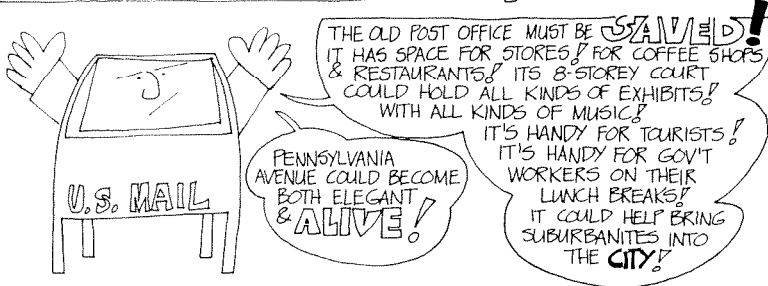
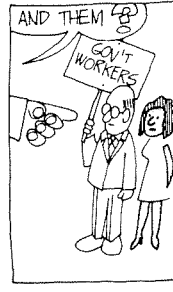
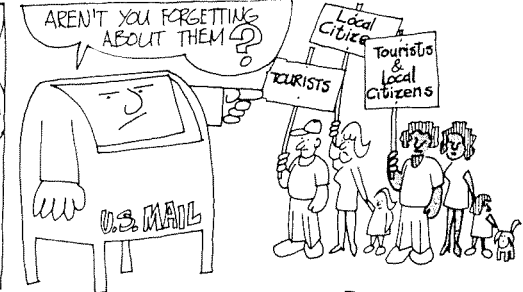
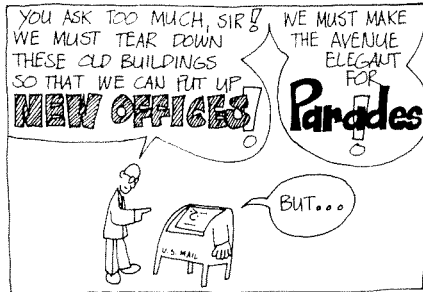
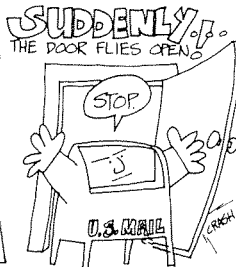
recent years. It seems that as long as there are institutions, governments and developers, Archihorse will always have material for explaining how to do things better. Sometimes the explaining will just lead to another lost battle. But, other times, as has happened in the past, Archihorse's explanations will provide important help for a victory well worth winning.

The Archihorse and Mailmen strips have appeared in the *Progressive Review*, their home base. (Formerly the *D.C. Gazette*.)

DEBBIE FEATURING PRESENTS

MAILMAN

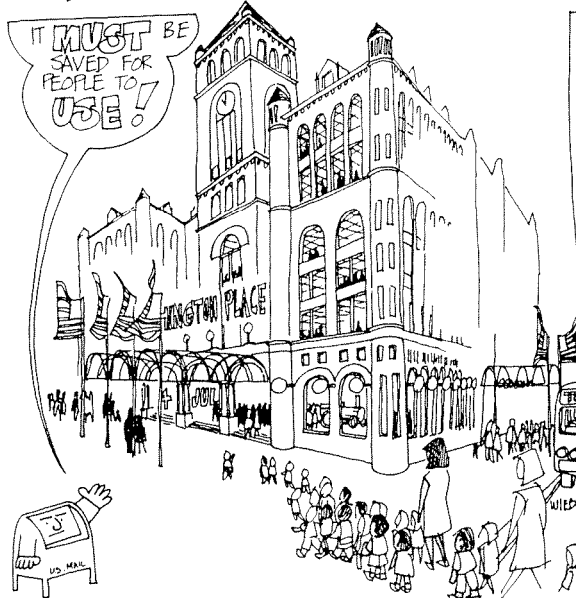
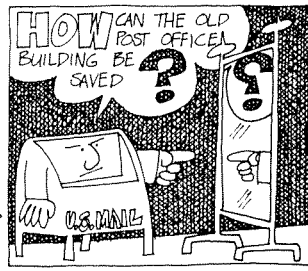
OUR STORY OPENS IN WASHINGTON, D.C. ... CHANGES ARE BEING PLANNED THAT WILL AFFECT THE OLD POST OFFICE...



DEBBIE FEATURING PRESENTS

MAILMAN

OUR STORY CONTINUES AS MAILMAN ASKS HIMSELF QUESTION...





GETTING BACK TO PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE...

THIS PART OF THE DISTRICT HAS BEEN PLANNED AND RE-PLANNED, SOME TIMES WELL & SOME TIMES POORLY: MENFANT, MACMILLAN, MELLON, THE HO'S PLAN, THE HOY PLAN...

THAT'S NOT A VERY GOOD BENCH, LET'S PLAN IT OUT!

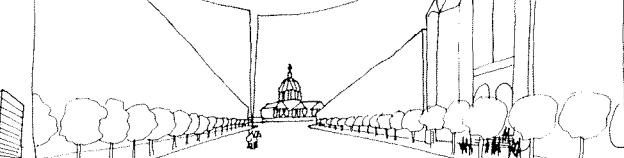
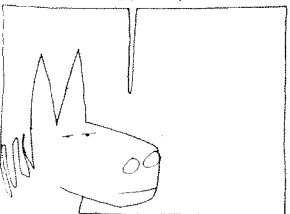
SOME PLANS WERE USED, & SOME THE '60's & '70 PLANS - JUST SORT OF TIED BECAUSE THEY REFERRED TO LITTLE TO SUBJECT...



BUT, THE CURRENT PLAN WON'T NEED SUPPORT TO BE BUILT - IT'S BEING DONE BY A "DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION"...

THE LAW SETTING UP THIS CORPORATION LETS THE CITY TALK ABOUT THE NEW PLANS - WITH HEARINGS PROBABLY TO HAPPEN EARLY IN APRIL...

BUT, UNLESS THE CORPORATION LISTENS TO THE HEARINGS BETTER THAN IT HAS LISTENED TO THE AVENUE'S USERS, THE AVENUE IS IN DANGER OF BECOMING A CORRIDOR OF OFFICE BUILDINGS RELIEVED ONLY BY A LIVELY RE-USE OF THE OLD POST OFFICE!



AND, THE OLD POST OFFICE WILL BE LIVELY - INSTEAD OF BEING DEMOLISHED, THIS GREAT OLD COURTYARD BUILDING IS TO HOUSE THE NATIONAL ENHANCEMENT FOR THE ARTS - AND THEIR EXHIBITS, THEIR WORKSHOPS, THEIR DEMONSTRATIONS, & RESTAURANTS AND STOPS!

RIGHT NOW, THE CORPORATION'S PLANS BARELY BEGIN TO HEAD FOR A GREAT PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE...



WHY CAN'T THE REST OF THE AVENUE BE AS GREAT?

SAVE THOSE STORES FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO OTHER STORES THEY CAN GET TO!

KEEP NATIONAL THEATER!

SAVE THE WASHINGTON TERRACE!

MORE AFFORDABLE RESTAURANTS NOT FEEBLES!

THE CORPORATION'S PLANS SHOW NO ATTEMPT TO ENHANCE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION THROUGH NEW BUS STOPS, ETC.

THEIR PLANS SHOW MAJOR NEW TUNNELS FOR CARS.

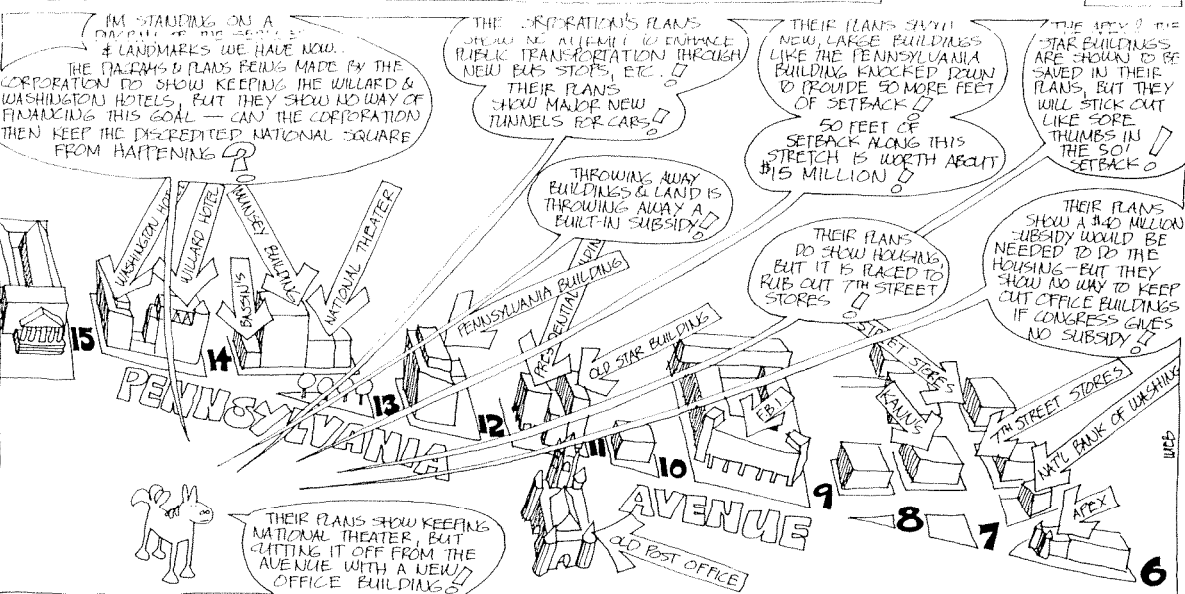
THEIR PLANS SHOW NEW, LARGE BUILDINGS LIKE THE PENNSYLVANIA BUILDING KNOCKED DOWN TO PROVIDE 50 MORE FEET OF SETBACK!

50 FEET OF SETBACK ALONG THIS STRETCH IS WORTH ABOUT \$15 MILLION!

THEIR PLANS SHOW A \$40 MILLION SUBSIDY WOULD BE NEEDED TO DO THE HOUSING - BUT THEY SHOW NO WAY TO KEEP CUT OFF OFFICE BUILDINGS IF CONGRESS GIVES NO SUBSIDY!

THEIR PLANS DO SHOW HOUSING, BUT IT IS PLACED TO RUB OUT 7TH STREET STORES!

THEIR PLANS SHOW KEEPING NATIONAL THEATER, BUT CUTTING IT OFF FROM THE AVENUE WITH A NEW OFFICE BUILDING!

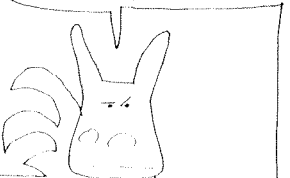


HOW CAN WE KEEP THE GOOD PORTIONS OF THE CORPORATION'S PLAN, MAKE THEM REALLY WORK, & ADD THE OTHER THINGS NEEDED TO MAKE THE ENTIRE PLAN GOOD FOR THE CITY & ITS VISITORS?

YOU CAN KEEP OUT OF IT & LET THE CORPORATION DO ITS WORK, THAT'S HOW!

THAT'S ONE WAY - & IF THE CORPORATION MAKES THE NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS, IT'S A GOOD WAY...

IF THE CORPORATION DOESN'T LISTEN TO THESE, THEN CONGRESS WILL HAVE TO BE LOBBIED - AND AS A LAST RESORT, THE COURTS CAN HELP MAKE THE PLAN BETTER! WE CAN HAVE A GREAT PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE!



ARCHITECT

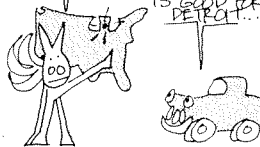
LEARNING FROM G.M.

ONCE EMINENT DOMAIN HELPED CITIES GET LAND FOR REAL PUBLIC NEEDS-LIKE A SCHOOL-WHEN A LANDOWNER WOULDN'T SELL FOR A FAIR PRICE...



BUT IN DETROIT, THEY'RE USING EMINENT DOMAIN TO TEAR DOWN A NEIGHBORHOOD THAT DIDN'T WANT TO SELL OUT TO GENERAL MOTORS...

WELL, WHAT'S GOOD FOR G.M. IS GOOD FOR DETROIT...



G.M. WANTS THE LAND FOR A FACTORY SITE, BUT AN ARCHITECT NAMED RICH RIDLEY SAYS THEY DON'T NEED IT...

THAT'S RIGHT, HORSE...



G.M.'S PLAN WOULD PUSH OUT 3,000 PEOPLE & ALL THE HOUSES, CHURCHES, STORES - EVEN A HOSPITAL - THAT MAKE UP THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD...



BUT RIGHT NEXT DOOR IS AN UNDER-USED FACTORY AREA - G.M. COULD REVISE ITS PLAN, KEEPING ITS POWER PLANT & ALL THE OTHER FACTORY PARTS & KEEPING THE NEIGHBORHOOD, TOO...

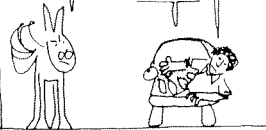
HONK!



BUT DETROIT HAS NOTICED THE FACTORY AREA IS ACROSS A CITY LINE, SO A BETTER FACTORY PLAN WOULD THREATEN DETROIT'S TAX DREAMS...

YOU CAN'T EMINENT DOMAIN PEOPLE!

HONK?



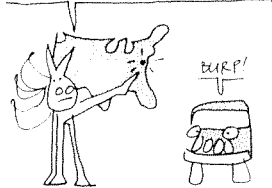
DETROIT IS WRECKING ONE OF ITS OWN NEIGHBORHOODS JUST TO GET G.M.'S TAXES, & G.M. IS HELPING DETROIT SO IT CAN GET A BIG, EMPTY FACTORY SITE AT A GOOD PRICE

WELL, WHAT'S GOOD FOR G.M. IS GOOD FOR RICH RIDLEY

SO LONG, RICH.



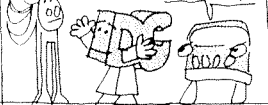
THAT'S LIKE CAPITOL GATEWAY A PROJECT IN SOUTHEAST WASHINGTON, D.C. WHERE D.C. IS USING EMINENT DOMAIN TO TAKE LAND.



THEN, IT'LL GIVE THIS LAND TO THE DEVELOPERS AT SUCH A LOW PRICE THAT DC WILL BE SPENDING \$55 MILLION TO GET \$150 MILLION IN TAXES.

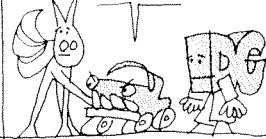
BUT ISN'T WHAT'S GOOD FOR DEVELOPERS GOOD FOR D.C.?

DON'T ABLASSIE - JUST TAX!



SHOULDN'T WE SET LIMITS TO WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH EMINENT DOMAIN? SHOULDN'T WE PROTECT OUR HOUSES & OUR CITIES?

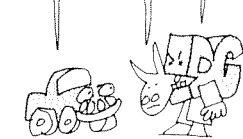
LET ME SHOW YOU - HONK! HONK!



WE CAN HAVE BETTER CITIES THROUGH EMINENT DOMAIN - RIGHT, D.C.

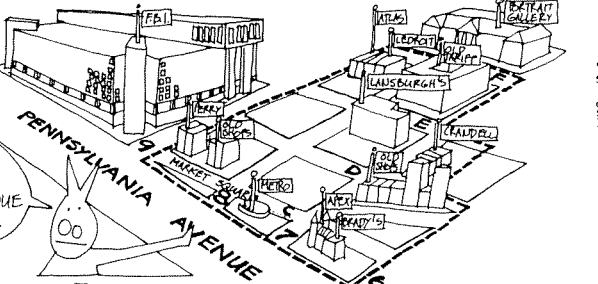
HONK-HONK, G.M.!

THE END



ARCHITECT

THEY'RE STARTING TO PLAN THE HOUSING PART OF WASHINGTON'S PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE REDEVELOPMENT...



AUD, SO FAR, THEY ARE STARTING RIGHT - PADC (PENN. AVE. DEVELOPMENT CORP) HAS ASKED COMMUNITY GROUPS FOR IDEAS...



THESE GROUPS INCLUDED:
 • METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON PLANNING & HOUSING ASSN
 • DON'T TEAR IT DOWN
 • COMMITTEE OF 100
 • CITIZENS' PLANNING COALITION
 • A.N.C. DC

THEIR IDEAS INCLUDED:



MAKE THIS PROJECT A SET OF SMALL PROJECTS THEN SMALL LOCAL BUILDERS & DEVELOPERS CAN GET INVOLVED, HELPING US GET BETTER-SCALED RESULTS THAT COST LESS & THAT SAVE MORE EXISTING BUILDINGS...



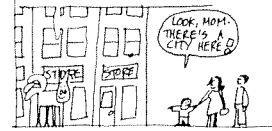
PUT IN AS MUCH HOUSING AS POSSIBLE - IF 2,000 OF 2,500 UNITS WILL FIT THEN DON'T SETTLE FOR 1,500, PARTICULARLY IF WE WANT THIS WHOLE AREA TO COME ALIVE AGAIN...



START THE HOUSING & SHOPS RIGHT AT C STREET - PUSHING THE STARTING PLACE A LONG WAY'S NORTH JUST TO MAKE MARKET SQUARE BIGGER WOULD WASTE GOOD BUILDINGS & GOOD LAND...

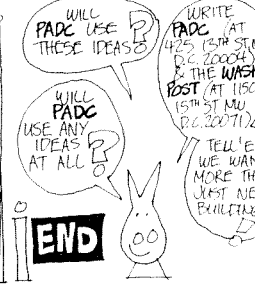
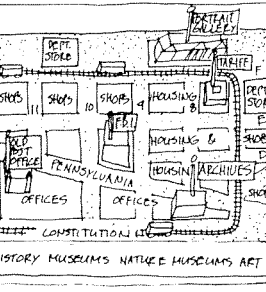


GIVE TOURISTS A WAY TO GET OFF THE MALL & INTO THE CITY - F STREET STORES NEED TOURIST TRADE AND TOURISTS NEED PLACES TO SHOP, TO EAT, TO REST UP FROM ALL THAT CULTURE...



LOOK, MOM, THERE'S A CITY HERE!

TOURISTS CAN BE INVITED OFF THE MALL & UP TO F STREET WITH AN HISTORIC OLD TROLLEY LOOP - IT COULD OFFER HISTORY, FUN & FUEL EFFICIENCY BY PUTTING OLD TROLLEYS BACK TO WORK AGAIN.



END



ARCHHORSE

MENTIONING MASSIVE MONUMENTS

FDR SAID THAT, WHEN HE DIED, HE WANTED ONLY A SMALL STONE PUT NEAR NATIONAL ARCHIVES FOR HIS MONUMENT...

BUT THE SENATE HAS JUST VOTED TO BUILD AN FDR MONUMENT MADE OF VEVEY BIG STONES-LOTS OF THEM.

BIG PUMPS WILL MAKE BIG WATER-FALLS ON THE STONES & THERE'LL BE A MOVIE THEATER & AN INTERPRETIVE CENTER & A BOOK STORE & LOCKERS & PARKING, SO THAT

THIS MONUMENT WILL BE A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR DISMISSAL OF FDR'S REQUEST. FDR GOT IT ALL WRONG, HORSE...

WE'RE TALKING ABOUT A DEAD PRESIDENT HERE - LIKE THAT WASN'T FDR CHATTING FIRE-SIDE-WISE, THAT WAS OUR COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT.

TOURISTS DON'T COME TO WASHINGTON TO LOOK AT SMALL STONES - THEY WANT BIG-TIME STONES, SO IT'S FDR'S DUTY TO GO MEGALITHIC...

BESIDES, WITH TOURISTS HANGING OUT AT FDR'S INTERPRETIVE CENTER, WE'LL BE ABLE TO CUT RUN-AWAY COSTS BY CLOSING THE SMITHSONIAN EVEN EARLIER THAN WE DO NOW.

LATER ON, WE CAN ADD PARKING LOTS & GIFT SHOPS TO WASHINGTON'S BIG STONES...

& WE CAN ADD WATER FALLS TO LINCOLN'S BIG STONES, & SERVICE YARDS & THEATERS & LOCKERS & B & B... INTERPRETIVE CENTERS?

& WE'RE DRAWING PLANS FOR INTERPRETIVE CENTERS FOR NIXON, FORD, CARTER & REAGAN... BUT, THEY'RE STILL ALIVE... WELL, SO FAR.

& WON'T THAT TURN THIS CITY INTO JUST ANOTHER THEME PARK? YEAH, & THE THEME IS WHEN A PRESIDENT DIES, YOU DON'T LOOSE A LEADER, YOU GAIN A MONUMENT!

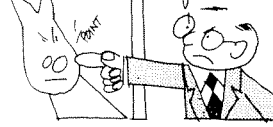
ARCHHORSE

WASHINGTON'S RHODES TAVERN STILL STANDS AT 15TH & F NW... AND NOW IT'S COMING DOWN, NEVER AGAIN TO FURNISH INAUGURAL PARADES...

BUT RHODES HAS BEEN THERE SINCE 1777 WHEN THE DISTRICT WAS ONLY A CAPITAL OF WHAT WE NOW CALL AN 'EMERGING NATION'...

THE BRITISH DROPPED BY IN 1814, AS IT WAS A HANDY & PLEASANT SPOT FOR WATCHING THE FLAMES IN THE WHITE HOUSE

DISTRICT CITIZENS MET HERE ABOUT STARTING PUBLIC SCHOOLS & ABOUT HOMERULE...

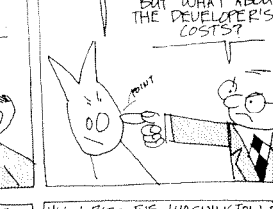
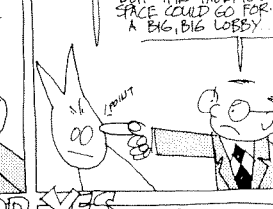
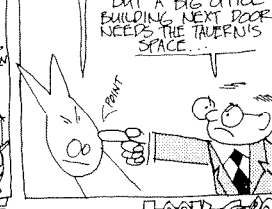
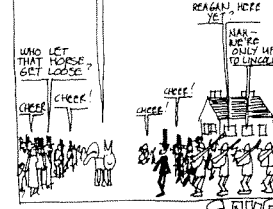


RHODES TAVERN HAS WITNESSED EVERY INAUGURAL PARADE SINCE JEFFERSON'S...

THAT'S OUR HISTORY - WE SHOULDN'T ERASE RELICS OF HISTORY JUST TO PRETTY UP PRESIDENTIAL PARADES...

NOT SO-LOCAL ZONING KEEPS THE OFFICE BUILDING FROM ADDING ANY MORE SQUARE FOOTAGE TO ITS FLOOR AREA...

THAT'S JUST FASHION & FASHIONS CHANGE - BIG BIG LOBBIES MAY YET GIVE WAY TO RESPECT FOR HISTORY AND FOR LOCAL VALUES...

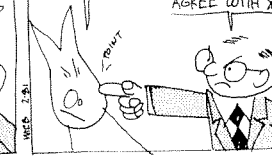
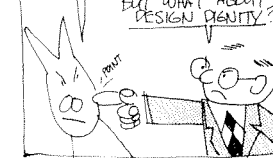


THE DEVELOPER WOULD SAVE MONEY IF RHODES IS SAVED - HE WOULDN'T HAVE TO COOL A BIG, BIG GLAZED LOBBY & HE WOULDN'T HAVE TO BUILD IN 2 DIFFERENT STAGES... BUT WHAT ABOUT DESIGN DENSITY?

RHODES CAN LOOK GOOD - WE FIXED UP THE WHITE HOUSE AFTER THE FIRE & WE CAN FIX UP RHODES - THEN IT & THE OLD EBBETT GRILL COULD ADD HANDSOME SMALL SCALE TO DC'S DOWNTOWN. DOES ANYONE AGREE WITH YOU?

YES - THE DC GAZETTE, THE WASHINGTON STAR, AMERICAN HERITAGE, THE WASHINGTON TRIBUNE, JOE GRANT, A BUNCH OF ARCHITECTS & HISTORIANS & CITIZENS, & MAYOR BARRY, TOO! (BEFORE HE GOT ELECTED) WANT TO KEEP RHODES WHERE IT IS... WELL, GOLLY...

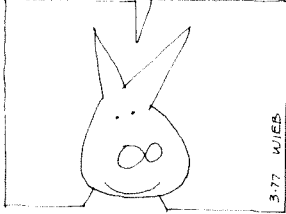
I'LL WRITE THE WASHINGTON POST (AT 1150 15TH ST. NW, DC 20071) & OLIVER CARR - THE DEVELOPER - (AT 1700 PENN AVE. NW, DC 20006) & TELL THEM TO KEEP RHODES & THE OLD EBBETT GRILL! GOOD POINT!



ARCHHORSE

DEALING WITH SPRING

PEOPLE ARE ASKING ME WHAT TO DO ABOUT SPRING. I TELL THEM TO BECOME GOKILLA GARDENERS!

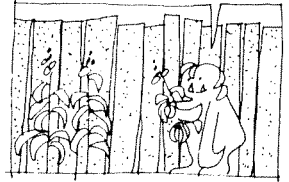


3/77 WJES

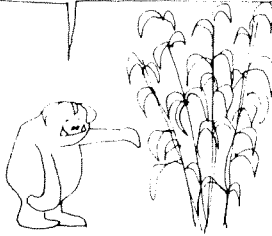
ARCHHORSE IS RIGHT. I WAS ONCE A METER MAN, BUT NOW I'M A GOKILLA GARDENER...



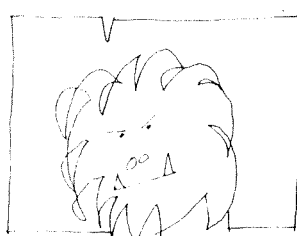
NOW I SNEAK PLANTS INTO GRUBBY PLACES - I PLANT BULBS, FERNS, TREES - ALL KINDS OF PLANTS...



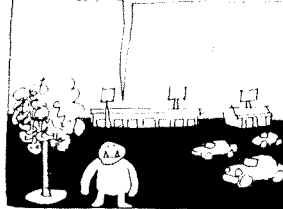
I TRANSPLANTED THIS OLD BAMBOO TO A NEIGHBORING ALLEY...



I'M PLANTING HOLLYHOCK SEEDS IN THOSE DREARY HIGHWAY DIVIDERS IN MARYLAND...



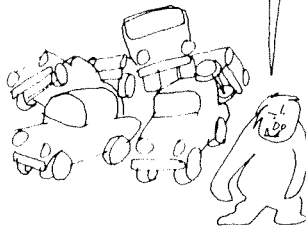
& I'M STARTING TO PUT TREES INTO THOSE BLEAK SHOPPING CENTER PARKING LOTS...



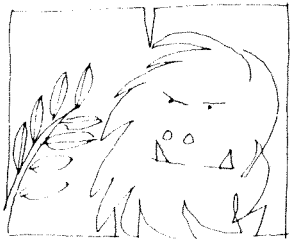
THEY LOOSE A FEW PARKING PLACES, BUT IT'S WORTH IT, DON'T IT?



HERE ARE MORE CARS OUT ON THE FRONT LAWN OF INDIA'S EMBASSY IN WASHINGTON DC.



I'M GOING TO COVER THEM IN RICH POTTING SOIL & PLANT HONEYSUCKLE...



OR MAYBE IVY. I CAN ROOT SOME IVY STRIGS IN WATER TO KEEP MY COSTS DOWN...



THE CITY CAN LOOK BETTER - IF WE ALL GET SNEAKY ENOUGH !!

