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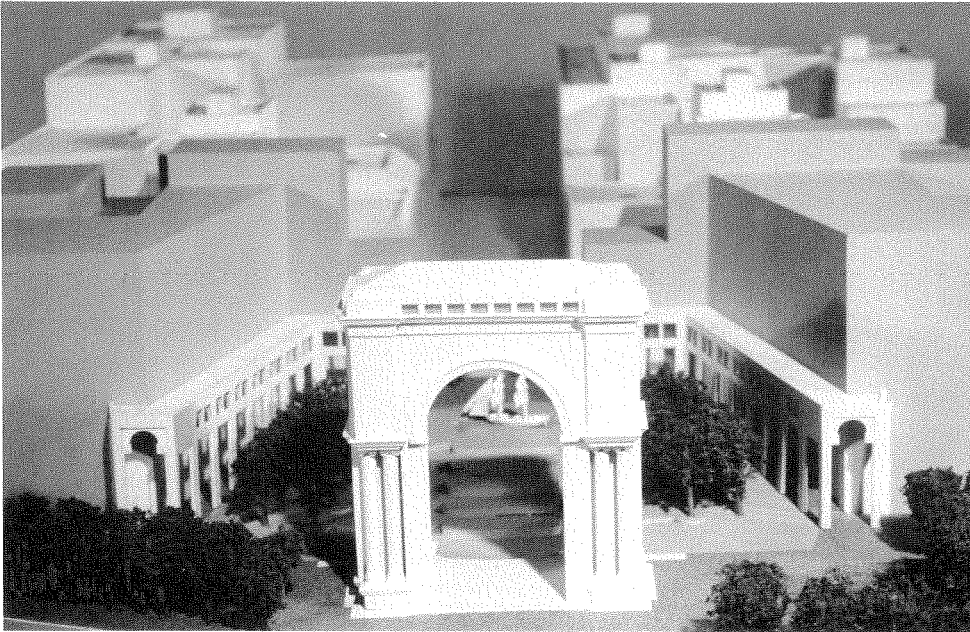
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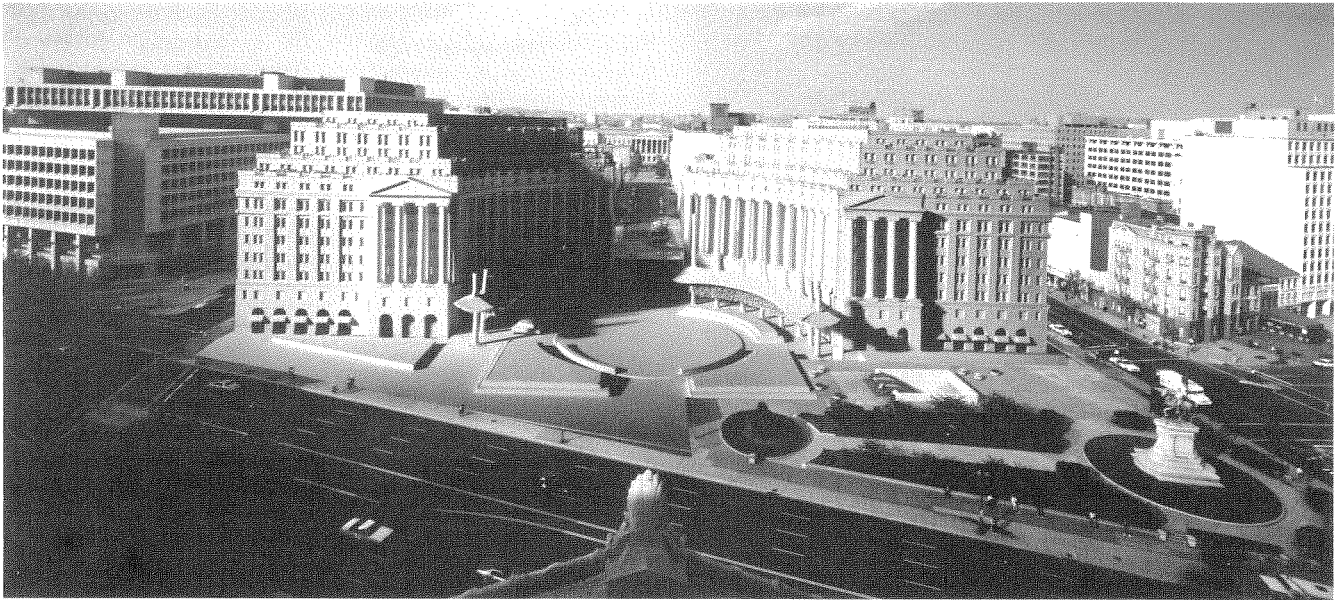
Duck Out of Water: A Late Proposal for the Navy Memorial

Drexel Turner



Pennsylvania Avenue, the nominal Main Street of America, or at least its quadrennially televised approximation, will soon acquire a Navy Memorial as part of an exedra-shaped plaza being built in Market Square Park at Eighth Street across from the National Archives. Despite the best intentions and several extensive revisions to the design, the result is neither particularly monumental nor nautical. It lacks a sufficiently succinct and engaging prospect to make clear its purpose as civic art but appears, instead, diffuse and thematically fragmented. In sensibility, it more nearly resembles the entrance to a Rouse-formula festival market than a monument to a nation's naval heritage, accruing to a street of collective memory. For the aggregate, it offers no convincing gesture to mediate the immense passageway between the Capitol and the White House or to relieve the elliptical quality of monumental Washington, which persists much as Henry James found it nearly a century ago: "vague, empty, sketchy . . . however expectant, however spacious, overweighted by a single Dome and overaccented by a single Shaft . . . never emerging from its flatness, after the fashion of other capitals, into the truly, the variously, modelled and rounded state," a deficiency compounded in James's

I Navy Memorial, first scheme. Conklin Rossant, Architects, 1981–1982. View of model looking north from Pennsylvania Avenue. Photograph courtesy of Conklin Rossant.



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estimation by the city's "absence of salient social landmarks and constituted features."¹

In its present form, the Navy Memorial seems the product of diminished expectations, a sign of the times already implanted several blocks farther up Pennsylvania Avenue between Fourteenth and Fifteenth streets in the diminutive, enfolded maze of the Pershing Memorial and Park (M. Paul Friedberg and Jerome Lindsey, landscape architects; Robert White, sculptor, 1979). It comprises a plaza partitioned within the compass of a much larger square inherited, if imperfectly, from L'Enfant's plan of Washington. In this setting the memorial appears

peripheral and redundant, a double negative constituted as an appendage of the two speculative buildings it prefaces. Its self-effacement may well reflect the initial, implicitly ancillary, conception of the project as a modest band shell and fountain to be built by the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation with funds raised privately by the U.S. Navy Memorial Foundation—the kind of substantially utilitarian, voluntary monument that is by now an inseparable part of the American landscape.

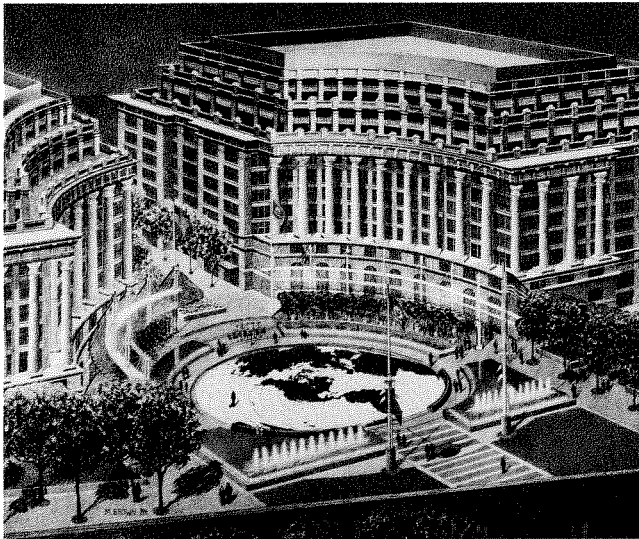
Nevertheless, the first design proposal for the memorial, prepared by architects William J. Conklin and James S. Rossant and submitted to the Commis-

sion of Fine Arts for review in February 1982, attempted to elicit a more monumental effect than the program or its station alone implied by transforming the band shell into a ten-story triumphal arch with a naval museum in its upper two levels.² The arch was placed parallel to the National Archives, spanning Eighth Street at an oblique angle to Pennsylvania Avenue and framing abbreviated vistas of the old Patent Office three blocks to the north and the portico of the National Archives directly across the avenue to the south. Acoustical panels, lowered from the underside of the arch, were to form a partial band shell when needed. A colossal arcade, affixed to a pair of boxy, mid-rise

2 Navy Memorial, second scheme, final version.

Conklin Rossant, Architects, 1984.

Photomontage showing disposition of memorial in Market Square Park looking north from Pennsylvania Avenue. Roof of portico of National Archives appears in foreground; statue of General Winfield Scott Hancock (Henry Jackson Elliott, sculptor; Richard Morris Hunt, architect, 1896) at far right; and Market Square mixed-use development project buildings (Hartman-Cox, Architects, 1984) directly behind memorial. Photograph copyright F. Harlan Hambricht; courtesy of Hartman-Cox.



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3 Navy Memorial, second scheme, final version.

Conklin Rossant, Architects, 1984.

Detail of disc and arcade. Mona Brown, delineator. Photograph courtesy of Conklin Rossant.

buildings planned by the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, defined three edges of a trapezoidal enclosure. Within this compound, a terraced seating area stepped up toward the north end of the site, terminating in a pool with a sculpture of a small sailing ship. Other sculptures depicting naval history were to adorn the arch. The design was criticized for its scale, siting, resolution of multiple functions, and also its formal character, which, however lacking in refinement, was neither inconsistent with the McMillan Commission's vision of monumental Washington, nor, as Philip Johnson pointed out, with the architecture of surrounding buildings. In the face of sustained opposition, much of it mounted by architects and community organizations, the proposal was rejected by the National Capital Planning Commission in July 1982.

The second scheme for the memorial, also devised by Conklin and Rossant, was far less prepossessing, "more a park and less a memorial," as the *Washington Post* noted.³ It was organized about a low, flat disc, one hundred feet in diameter, placed on axis with Eighth Street and set, at its north end, into a hemicycle formed by a pair of classically detailed, thirteen-story, mixed-use buildings.⁴ Although the general arrangement of the second

scheme was accepted by the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation in March 1983, the proposal was revised several times thereafter before receiving final approval from the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission.

The chief issue affecting acceptance of the second scheme was the treatment of the surface of the disc, which was initially left to Stanley Bleifeld, a Weston, Connecticut, sculptor and medalist, who had also been retained to provide sculpture for the previous scheme.⁵ Bleifeld first proposed to cover the surface of the disc with a field of raised sculptural forms representing waves, an undulating lithic obstacle course that was subsequently replaced by a single, giant cluster of waves. This in turn was rejected in favor of a two-dimensional map of the world paved in stone with Washington at its center—an eccentric projection insinuating, if inadvertently, a sort of global *mare nostrum*.⁶ Occupying this considerable rostrum in the final version was the figure of a "lone sailor" by Bleifeld standing just to the west of the Hawaiian Islands, its stature reduced from the thirty-foot colossus initially proposed to slightly more than life size. Other elements were also reduced or modified at the prompting of the Commission of Fine Arts; a fifteen-foot high group of marines climbing

shroud lines was omitted altogether. Still remaining are groups of statuary representing “peril at sea” and honoring “navies of the world” as well as that of the United States, which will be stationed at fountains facing Pennsylvania Avenue to either side of the disc. Bas reliefs by another artist, John Roach, of Alexandria, Virginia, illustrating historic naval events will extend along several low walls following the curve of the disc. In place of the arcade of the first scheme is to be a semicircular, glass-topped canopy supported by free-standing, mast-like posts interposed between the disc and the curved faces of the buildings forming the hemicycle.



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Despite the ostensible profusion of this assemblage and the referential intention of many of its parts, the result seems unfulfilled and ambiguous as a whole, its centerpiece more closely recalling a compressed version of the Unisphere at the 1964 New York-World’s Fair than any naval theme. Washington already enjoys a pair of somewhat equivocal naval monuments, one of which, a stepped podium of allegorical figures meant to commemorate the naval dead of the Civil War (Franklin Simmons, 1877) is situated at the head of Pennsylvania Avenue just below the Capitol. So successfully does it conceal its intention—the only perceptible naval reference is a cherubic



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4 Peace (originally Navy) Monument, Washington, D.C. Franklin Simmons, sculptor, 1877. Photograph by David Blume; courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.

5 Navy-Marine Memorial, Washington, D.C. Ernesto Begni del Piatta, sculptor, 1922–1934. Photograph by David Blume; courtesy of the Columbia Historical Society.

Neptune resting at the feet of Victory on the second tier—that it has since been renamed the Peace Memorial. The other, sited along the George Washington Parkway, consists of a large wave supporting a flight of seagulls (Ernesto Begni del Piatta, 1922–1934) and is meant to honor the navy and marine dead of the First World War, although it would be no less cogent as a monument to oceanic wildlife.⁷

Naval monuments have traditionally made use of such neutral but manifestly civic forms as arches and columns adorned with waterborne quadrigas, ships' prows, and historical figures to provide a necessary measure of thematic explication. Curiously, Washington has failed to acquire these forms itself, despite the imperial ministrations of Burnham and McKim and the prescription of L'Enfant's manuscript plan of Washington (1791), which called for a naval monument in the form of a column "to celebrate the first rise of a navy, and to stand a ready monument to consecrate its progress and achievements." The column was intended to occupy a ceremonial landing on the Potomac River at the foot of Eighth Street, which, falling midway between the Capitol and the White House, was envisioned as a principal cross axis to the mall. Where Eighth Street crossed Pennsylvania Avenue,

the site presently proposed for the Navy Memorial, L'Enfant's plan indicated a vast square with a grand fountain at its center.⁸ If the transposition of the Navy Memorial up Eighth Street from the water's edge to Pennsylvania Avenue deprives it of an element of thematic congruence, it offers in return what is today a far more conspicuous site and also the opportunity to acknowledge the importance L'Enfant attached to that crossing. But the current proposal, with its virtually two-dimensional profile, does little to occupy or define the considerable space that will lie between the great bulk of the National Archives and the two buildings that will form the hemicycle on the other side of the avenue. Neither does it respond to the diagonal sweep of Pennsylvania Avenue through that space or to the processional nature of the avenue itself.

Nevertheless, the most nettlesome aspect of the present proposal is the lack of any more convincing thematic relation to its role as a naval monument. The outline of an eminently more suitable thematic device can be glimpsed at the margin of Conklin and Rossant's first scheme for the Navy Memorial in the form of the ship that occupies the pool beyond the arch. The forms of ships themselves have long served as icons, an aptitude discernible, even at a small scale, in votive reliefs on

tombs of antiquity; as emblems of mercantile aggrandizement in friezes and shields applied to the Palazzo Rucellai in Florence; or as a cap to a marker recalling the settlement of the New England town of Newbury, Massachusetts, by Puritans in the seventeenth century. Still larger representations of ships, in full form, appear in reconstructed views of the ancient Acropolis as offerings beside the statue of Athena Promachos and in Renaissance and Baroque engravings as conveyances for coronation processions and as waterborne follies in immense garden basins. As metaphors for nation-states, ships have served as centerpieces for republican allegories in Beaux-Arts fountain sculptures at the Paris Exposition in 1889 (Jules Coustan's *France Bearing the Torch of Civilization*) and the world's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago (Frederick MacMonnies's *The Triumph of Columbia*). The exploits of the *Bon Homme Richard*, vividly recounted in engravings of the time, were among the first evidence of American success in the Revolutionary War and the beginning of the naval tradition now to be commemorated along the landlocked expanse of Pennsylvania Avenue. The popular campaign to preserve a later embodiment of that tradition—the *U.S.S. Constitution*, now a wharfside monument in

6 First Settlers Monument, Newbury, Massachusetts, 1905. Photograph from *The American Monument*, E. Eakins Press Foundation, New York, 1976; courtesy of the photographer.

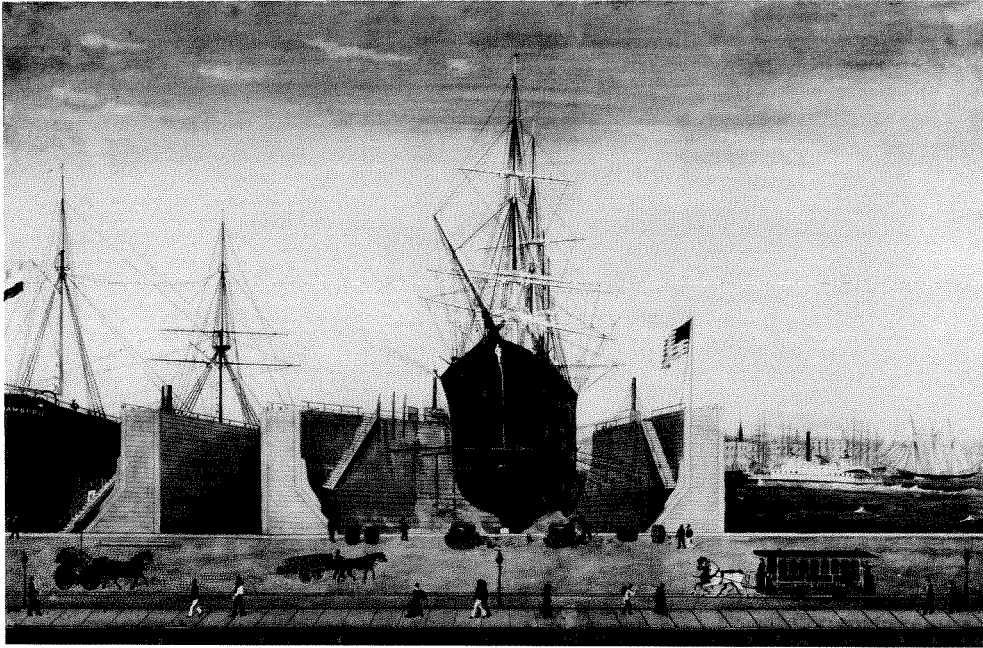
7 The Triumph of Columbia, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago. Frederick MacMonnies, sculptor, 1893. Photograph by C. D. Arnold; courtesy of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.



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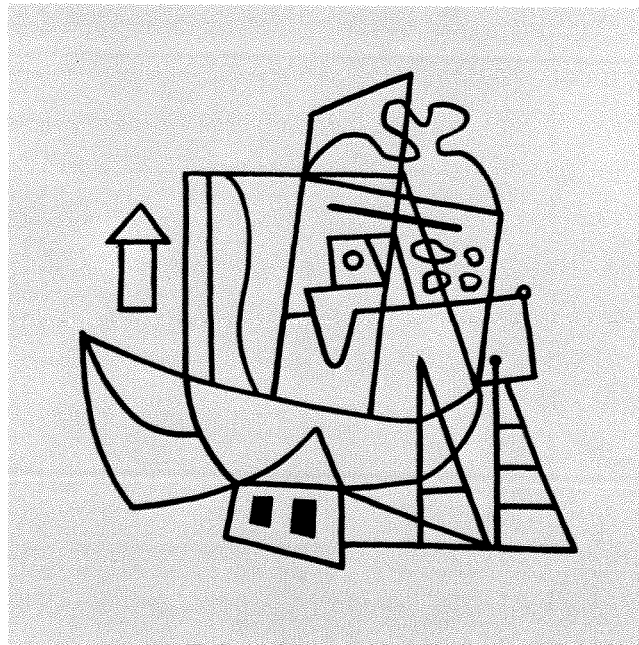
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8 New York Ballance Drydock. Jurgan Frederick Huger, 1877. Collection of Amy and J. Matthew Davidson. Photograph by Geoffrey Clements; courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

9 Nautical Shapes. Stuart Davis, c. 1932. Collection of Shirley Polykoff.



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Boston harbor—also demonstrates the claim such figures can lay to public sentiment. Even today the most prominent feature of the official seal of the Navy Department remains a sailing ship.

Apart from a ship's thematic and romantic appeal as a commemorative device, the nature of its setting can also yield mnemonic effect. For a ship seen out of water, as in a drydock, with the full extent and shape of its hull revealed, is somehow more striking than one afloat—a prospect adopted for Stuart Davis's Cubist *esquisse* of signlike planes. Perception is similarly heightened when the object is encountered completely out of context, for instance along Route 1 which runs past a ship-shaped restaurant near Lynnfield, Massachusetts. Less vernacular, trans-Atlantic appreciation of these attributes can be found at the entrance to the Trinity Almshouses, London, a seventeenth-century mews for the widows of seamen, where miniature sailing ships bracket end pavilions, and in the *Oeuvre Complete* of Le Corbusier, where somewhat larger sailing ships are positioned atop roofscapes and sallyports in projects for marine quarters of Algiers (1938) and Paris (1935, 1961). The Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown unbuilt Nichol's Alley Jazz Club project for Houston (1978), with its rooftop ship fully revealed, noticeably out of

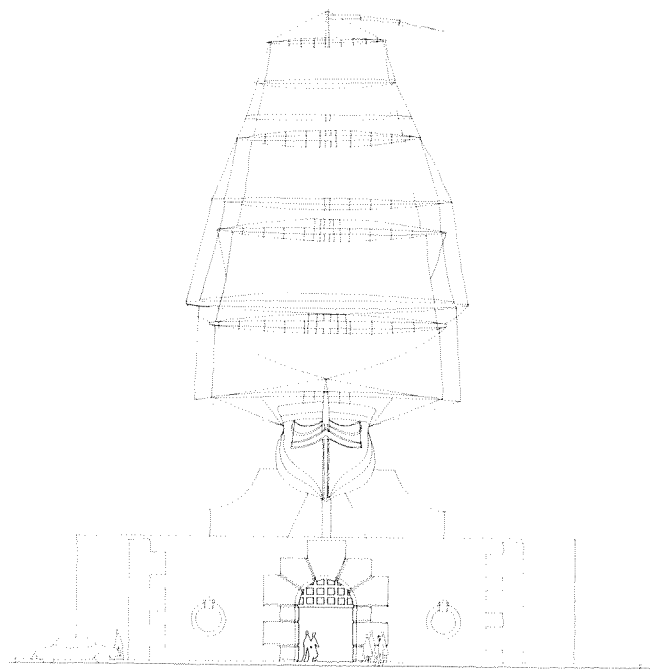
context and much larger than its building “base,” is an almost ready-made naval monument, no less adaptable to the processional needs of Pennsylvania Avenue than those of Houston’s Westheimer strip.

A Navy Memorial using a ship as its principal component would require substantial elaboration in response to program and site. What follows is meant to suggest certain considerations and possibilities, among others, that might inform the development of such a scheme. To begin, it might prove advisable to shift the immediate site of the monument from its presently planned location on axis with Eighth Street to a point several hundred feet southeast, within Market Square Park, at the tip of a triangular promontory that juts out toward the Capitol, reaching Seventh Street. The equestrian statue of General Winfield Scott Hancock (Henry Jackson Elliott, sculptor; Richard Morris Hunt, architect, 1896), which now occupies this sentinel point, would be equally at home astride Eighth Street, guarding the approach to the hemicycle and the Old Patent Office. Such a revision in siting would allow the form of a ship to project more incisively into the space between the hemicycle and the National Archives, where, with profile amply exposed, it would command



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10 **Nichol's Alley Jazz Club project, Houston.** Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Architects, 1978. Section.



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11 **Nichol's Alley Jazz Club project, Houston.** Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Architects, 1978. Elevation.

both slices of L'Enfant's severed square. The monument might then be either inflected to reinforce the gap-ridden north wall of Pennsylvania Avenue or aligned along Seventh Street to provide a third "edge" for (and within) L'Enfant's square.

The ship itself might be a one-half scale representation of the *Bon Homme Richard*, the progenitor of the naval tradition the monument is intended to honor. As a conspicuous example of French solicitude for the revolutionary cause (the *Bon Homme Richard* was a converted Indiaman conveyed to John Paul Jones through the intervention of Louis XVI and renamed by Jones after the French rendition of Franklin's *Poor Richard*), it would also serve to advance the French subtext already suggested along Pennsylvania Avenue by Lafayette Park opposite the White House and by Robert Venturi's *parterred* vignette of L'Enfant's plan, which forms the base of Western Plaza between Thirteenth and Fourteenth streets. A miniature model of the *Bon Homme Richard* is among the holdings of the National Archives across the avenue; the original sank after its engagement with the *Serapis* and lies unrecovered off the coast of England.

The union of the ship and its site might be effected by means of a hinged, two-

armed "drydock" open at one end, an arrangement similar to that shown in the painting of the New York Ballance Drydock. However, the relative size of the drydock compared to the ship should be much smaller, approximating that of ship to "base" in the Nichol's Alley project. The ship might be raised above ground to a height where it would appear to be just barely resting on the base formed by the drydock when viewed from a distance, inducing a palpable suspension of disbelief if not apprehension. The arms of the drydock "base" might be configured as a diminutive revetment to stiffen one or both sides of the promontory and also hollowed out to form a tunnelliike gallery for displays (which might additionally be installed in the void of the ship's hull). The exterior walls of the drydock might receive commemorative legends and friezes and perhaps an illustrated time line of American naval history. Naval figures and artifacts might be ensconced within niches along the walls and possibly arrayed at the crest as acroteria. A platform for bands might be appended to the side of the drydock facing the square while another slightly raised plane might adjoin the leeward side of the base to harbor a Lilliputian flotilla recalling the post-Revolutionary naval past. An intimation of how such an assemblage might appear in context can be

gleaned from a composition by Wassily Kandinsky, with the left-most group standing for the National Archives; the gap, Pennsylvania Avenue; and the two sail forms, a single ship. The pylon to the right might be annexed to the scheme, standing in memory of L'Enfant's column and perhaps offset to provide a terminal feature for Seventh Street.

The particulars of the ensemble and its disposition are, however, secondary to the notion of the ship itself as signal object—an improbably vernacular, peculiarly American addition to a ceremonial precinct. Such a roadside strategem may even conceal a more delicate appreciation of civic possibilities. J. B. Jackson, an observer of the realities of the American landscape, has written that “despite our admiration for the formal square as a feature of the urban scene—there are in fact many signs that the street, or a given fragment of the street, will be the true public space of the future.”⁹ In Washington, this has long been the case, for many of the plazas depicted in L'Enfant's plan were compromised from inception by the overlaying of a Baroque pattern of radial streets on a uniform, classical gridiron, a conceit that tended to erode and distort the edges of prospective squares with an awkward surfeit of

converging arteries. As a consequence, possibilities for civic art are often narrowed to a relatively few opportunities to terminate vistas with imposing objects and to a somewhat more plentiful supply of chances to create processional incidents along the margins of streets. Occasionally the opportunity arises to attempt both at once, as in the case of Western Plaza, where, had they been built, the two pylons proposed as part of the Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown design would have provided an emphatic frame for the oblique, somewhat recessive prospect of the portico of Robert Mills's Treasury Building while at the same time producing an anchor for the plaza in a processional sense.¹⁰ But as a rule, Washington continues to favor two-dimensional realizations of processional incidents, whether through lack of opportunity or ingenuity.

Today, halfway down the ceremonial reach of Pennsylvania Avenue, there remains the opportunity to create both a better approximation of that rarest of Washington commodities—a square—and a monument that speaks more aptly to memory and to its surroundings than does the present scheme for the Navy Memorial. Such an artifact should represent American culture and patronage at its best, embodying what Elbert Peets

described as “L'Enfant's genius for amalgamating . . . the sacred and the profane”¹¹ as well as those virtues that Henry James sought of monumental Washington: tone, resonance, and beguilement.¹²

NOTES

- 1 Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907), pp. 339, 352.
- 2 The progress of the arched first scheme was reported in the *AIA Journal*: “Pennsylvania Avenue: Owings Resigns, Huge Arch Proposed” (March 1982), pp. 21, 25; “Naval Arch Plans Move Ahead; Federal Triangle Scheme Shown” (May 1982), pp. 10, 12; and “Navy Memorial Arch Rejected; Western Plaza Models Revived” (August 1982), pp. 10, 11. An official account of the first scheme and its successor is contained in Sue A. Kohler, *The Commission of Fine Arts: A Brief History, 1910–1976. With Additions, 1977–1984* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985). Another account of the Navy Memorial projects appears in Roger Trancik, *Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986), pp. 167–171. It contains a perspective rendering of the arch, with band shell panels lowered, looking obliquely toward the portico of the National Archives. This view suggests the effect of the arch as a framing device, similar in intent if not result to Ledoux's presentation of the Hôtel de

- Thélusson (1778–1783) which is revealed in an engraved perspective through the aperture of an eccentrically proportioned, prefatory arch (Michael Dennis calls it “half buried”) that is placed close to the front of the hotel and is nearly the equivalent of its central register in breadth and height.
- 3 The second scheme and its revisions were described and commented on by Benjamin Forgey in the *Washington Post*: “Revised Navy Memorial Plan: Design Includes Sunken Plaza, Bandstand and Sculpture,” March 17, 1983, Section D, pp. 1, 4; “Revised Navy Memorial Gets Aye Aye and Full Steam Ahead for Restaurant on Mall,” July 13, 1983, Section D, pp. 1, 6; and “Anchoring the Avenue: For the Navy Memorial, A Redesign That Floats,” May 19, 1984, Section C, pp. 1, 5. The cost of the accepted version of the second scheme is reported to be \$8.5 million; completion is planned for 1987.
 - 4 The design for this pair of buildings, by Hartman-Cox, Architects, was the result of a three-firm, limited competition conducted by the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation in 1984. All submissions were required to incorporate the second scheme for the Navy Memorial by Conklin and Rossant. See “Mixed-Use Scheme Chosen for Washington’s Market Square,” *Architecture* (December 1984), pp. 13, 14. An earlier design for the same site was prepared by Hugh Jacobsen, architect. See “Five Current Projects from the Office of Hugh Jacobsen,” *Architectural Record* (May 1974), pp. 117–119; and *AIA Journal* (March 1982), p. 21.
 - 5 Bleifeld’s previous commissions include reliefs for the Vatican Pavilion at the 1964 World’s Fair and a statue for the Knights of Columbus Father McGivney Memorial in New Haven (1982).
 - 6 The idea of a map as a substitute for the several wave motif versions proposed for the disc in the second scheme is credited to J. Carter Brown, Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts and Director of the National Gallery. See Sue Kohler, *The Commission of Fine Arts: A Brief History*, p. 142.
 - 7 James M. Goode, *The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974), pp. 242, 207.
 - 8 See Elbert Peets, “On the Mutilations of L’Enfant’s Plan,” in *On the Art of Designing Cities: Selected Essays of Elbert Peets*, Paul D. Spreiregen, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), pp. 79–83, 86.
 - 9 J. B. Jackson, “The American Public Space,” *The Public Interest* (Winter 1984), p. 64.
 - 10 See Suzanne Stephens, “Monumental Main Street: Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.,” *Progressive Architecture* (May 1979), pp. 110–113.
 - 11 Elbert Peets, “Washington As L’Enfant Intended It,” *On the Art of Designing Cities*, p. 35.
 - 12 Henry James, *The American Scene*, pp. 357, 358.