

The Battle of Lafayette Square

The fight to preserve Washington's Lafayette Square appears to be lost, and so does one more battle for human scale, history and standards of architectural design.

If the plans proceed, the capital stands to lose more than just a handful of old houses. What is really at stake is the traditionally intimate, residential scale of the square, which has always been closely related to the White House as part of a particularly agreeable and attractive urban scheme. Although there are only a few fine buildings left, it is the "sum total" of the square's surroundings, and the special quality of environment that it creates, that deserve consideration. It has suffered indignities before, but this essential quality of the square has not been lost. It will be now.

The problem is a double-barreled one: it revolves around a proper understanding of the nature and purpose of architectural preservation, and the kind of new building with which we replace the old. Washington has not shown superior sensitivity in either sphere. The desirable factors that now exist in Lafayette Square are architectural character, an all-too-rare human scale, and historical and cultural continuity.

It would be ironic indeed if the history and human values that have only been chipped away by time and change were to be demolished now by official government planning. To place the stamp of Washington's consistent architectural mediocrity on Lafayette Square would be the most unkindest cut of all.