

Malcom X Marks the Spot

The late punk frontman Lux Interior insisted, “The way I walk is just the way I walk.” But on a September afternoon in Malcolm X Park, the way you walk is autobiography—

with all the carefully hedged half-truths, unstated cultural assumptions, and unintended self-revelations that make autobiography a subgenre of fiction.

The park is perched between better known D.C. locales like U Street—home of the “Black Broadway,” Washington’s half-smoked Harlem Renaissance—and Adams Morgan. It was christened Meridian Hill Park at birth, but I’ve only seen its maiden name in two places: District government plaques and local girl Florence King’s autobiography, *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*.

Chris Rock has a riff in which he notes the tendency of cities to honor Martin Luther King Jr. by naming streets in ghetto neighborhoods after him: “I don’t care where the [redacted] you are in America, if you’re on Martin Luther King Boulevard, there’s some violence going down!” By this logic, you might expect Malcolm X Park to be a post-apocalyptic urban wasteland.

But the park makes a stunning first impression. It’s closed off from the street by high stone stairs and fat shade trees, so as you wind your way up, you feel as though you’re stepping into a secret. A wide, ziggurat-layered fountain pours down like God’s own Slinky, spilling between ferny banks. The fountain is Washingtonian in style: monumental, not subtle or stylish. But there’s a pool here and terraced lawns perfect for sleeping off your unemployment.

This park was not designed by some-

one who understood criminals. It’s an array of alcoves linked by narrow paths and staircases, like a complex board game or a pop-up Sicilian village. The high walls and ample foliage make it a haven for people whose professions or hobbies require a talent for lurking.

On this afternoon, despite the man on a cell phone either recounting a past beatdown or threatening a future one, the only crime victim is the nanny state. Lounging men drink illicit beer in unsubtle paper bags. A lithe young mom poses heroically astride two steps. With her Baby Bjorn full of infant, her green cell phone and her golden dog, she surveys her territory like stout Cortés upon a peak in Darien, Connecticut ... until a cop flatfoots onto the scene and ma’ams her into submission to the leash law.

A black man in low-slung pants and a stocking cap rolls through like a cowboy. Across the chessboard square from him, another black man in a purple dress shirt moves with a weary 9-to-5er gait. Three Hispanics in work clothes have the “guy” walk, a quick bearlike lumber, arms swinging slightly from broad shoulders. One of them catches me looking and tips me a wink. A man in a white linen shirt, with a lilting accent—I’m guessing African—and a sexy ramshackle stroll, walks the park trying to borrow a lighter. He comes back puffing happily, his stride now more confident and less appealing.

A courting couple passes, with the

clockless leisure of love. She turns to watch him, her curls shaking, her smile shifting between admiration and the salutary deprecation that women learn to deploy against overconfident men. He tips his head back to grin up at the branch-latticed sky.

You can still hear the cars and sirens here and the kazooing of the cicadas. The wind slants the fountain sprays. The elm trees are dropping their acorns, and yellow leaves mat some of the paths. A faint mist settles over the pool.

At the top of the stairs—past the lightless women’s restroom, where the tap at the sink can’t be coaxed off—there’s a bandstand and a hilltop promenade. There’s a drum circle here on weekends; today there’s a card game, a smoker in a “Swing Voters Have More Fun” T-shirt, and a knot of men betting cash on dice. There are several formally dressed older black men and women in hats, like visitors from the Age of Adulthood (replaced in our time by the Age of Consent). Three girls on the coltish edge of adolescence walk by like a Nikki Giovanni poem, all syncopated rhythms and flirty half-aggression.

As the shadows lengthen, I head out—down through an allegory of D.C.’s hopes and miseries. I pass the noseless, one-handed statue of Serenity; the man proselytizing his wary friend; someone who, I suspect, is a foot fetishist rather than a podiatrist as he claims; and a police poster, seeking information about a man found fatally injured here. Someone has written along the side, “HE WAS NOT KILL IN THIS PARK.” ■

Eve Tushnet is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C. She blogs at <http://eve-tushnet.blogspot.com>

Shopped Out

The changing face of American retail

By Cheryl Miller

GLEN BURNIE, MD. – Harundale Plaza does not look like the kind of place where a revolution occurred. For starters, it's now a strip mall, and not a particularly high-end one. There's a grocery store, a post office, a tanning salon, and a Burlington Coat Factory. The architecture is, if not unattractive, generic. Abandoned shopping carts dot the parking lot. The only indication that this is a landmark—as central to American history as Independence Hall or the Chrysler Building—is a small pavilion outside the post office. There, a concrete marker, rounded to look like a rock, sits:

HARUNDALE MALL
Opened: October 1, 1958

Harundale Mall was not the first true mall, but it was a close second. Its developer, James Rouse, a native Marylander, had very nearly built the first with his Baltimore shopping center, Mondawmin. But to Rouse's lasting disappointment, his creditors lost their nerve, and the center went without a roof. Thus, in October 1956, the same month Mondawmin opened, Southdale Center, in Edina, Minnesota, became the first mall, while Harundale had to settle for being "the first indoor enclosed shopping mall East of the Mississippi."

First or second, Harundale set in motion the malling of America. It was an archetype that could be, and was meant to be, copied. It gave the mall its name. (Previously, the term applied to the open spaces between shops rather than the shopping center itself.) But most impor-

tantly, Harundale, unlike Southdale, was built by a developer, not a deep-pocketed department store, proving to other developers that the mall could be a profitable venture.

America now has around 1,100 enclosed malls, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers. But as the current state of Harundale Mall—now downgraded to a mere plaza—suggests, the mall's heyday as America's premier shopping destination is over. Even before the recession, these "pyramids of the boom-years"—to quote Joan Didion's 1970 paean—had been losing market share: to big-box retailers (so-called "category killers" like Home Depot or Bed Bath & Beyond), to chain discounters like Wal-Mart, to e-commerce giants like Amazon and Zappos, and to other, ever newer, ever larger shopping malls. (Drive a mile and a half from Harundale Plaza, and you'll find yet another mall.)

No new enclosed malls have opened in the U.S. since 2006, and nearly 10 percent of America's malls are expected to close within the next few years. Last April, General Growth Properties (GGP)—which acquired Rouse's company in 2004 and is the country's second largest mall-owner—declared bankruptcy. Websites like deadmalls.com and labelscar.com track the growing number of "greyfields," with odes to deteriorating retail centers across America. The "un-malling" of America has begun.

Or has it? The same people who are declaring the mall dead now champion a

new type of commercial space that looks an awful lot like what Rouse wanted for the mall in the 1950s. The best communitarian intentions of suburban planners, it seems, often go awry.

At a 2007 meeting of the Congress for the New Urbanism, Thomas D'Alesandro IV, senior vice president of GGP, declared the familiar mall paradigm—fashion, food court, and family-focused—over. GGP was no longer in the business of building malls, but transforming its existing malls into "mixed-use centers." Indeed, D'Alesandro noted, he had never worked on a mall; his bread-and-butter has been projects like Virginia's Reston Town Center, opened in 1990. The first "suburban downtown" in America, Reston Town Center promised "the vitality of an Italian piazza and the diversity of a French boulevard"—a mall of sorts, yes, but one with a skating rink, a hotel, a cinema, and high-rise condo buildings. "The big idea," D'Alesandro explained, "is to integrate the mall into a larger urban fabric, kind of like the 19th-century urban arcaded streets were in Europe."

The "town center" or "lifestyle center" is the brainchild of the New Urbanism, an influential movement of architects and planners that advocates a return to traditional neighborhood forms, emphasizing dense, mixed-use developments, open, pedestrian-friendly avenues, and public gathering spaces. The animating idea behind New Urbanism is the reinforcement of community ties through good design. The town center is to be the new "Main