



Mall of America

Nowhere in D.C. is as exposed as the National Mall. Inside the white-frosting museums are spaceships and a giant porcupine and a firetruck-red Calder hung from

the ceiling like playground equipment for alien children. But on the Mall itself, under the red eye of the white monument, the people look small and alone. The carousel calliope sounds tinny and far-off, fainter than the squealing of the gears. The triceratops has gone away to the Zoo—I used to slide down his tail. I don't think children are allowed to ride him now.

There's a noticeable dearth of iPods. A few joggers use the little earbuds to seal themselves off from the tourists and the beggars and the cultists selling knickknacks, but most of the people on the Mall lack that sonic bubble-wrap. Instead, we're treated to the music of the bucket drummers. These guys, with their make-do drum kits held up by repurposed traffic cones, are the opposite of the iPod. They're free, intentionally intrusive, icons of salvage and interdependence rather than consumer solitude. The tourists give them money; sometimes the locals pause.

An Amish family rides the escalators up from the subway entrance. A security guard suns himself on a bench. Four girls in school uniforms breeze by, arm in arm in arm in arm like the joke about the octopus, then unknot themselves as they try to figure out where their museum has gone. Uniforms of one kind or another are as common as foldout maps. They make us easily legible to one another.

Trudge from the metro to the National Museum of the American Indian, and

you'll come to a raised wall with a conchita growing from it. The branches kink like a woman's hair, and in the spring the yellow-green pollen hangs in swaying tapers. A Jerusalem sage stretches out its arms. There are robins and a dove and frondy false cypress. Even this quiet, beautiful place must be made educational somehow, plaqued and paraded like all the other denizens of museum row. So here we learn that this piney creature, lying on its side, its needles flimsy but sharper than they look, is called "prostrate beauty." There's also a Lenten rose, named for its incongruous blooming season.

There are foreign plants here, tourists who can't get home, like the cherry blossoms for which the city is known. These too are labeled with their countries of origin, their passport stamps. There's a coral bark maple from Korea, with veiny red limbs like an anatomy chart. A tiny nest in the high branches lies open to the elements, since the maple hasn't come fully into leaf.

The museums have been rationalized. The giant squid, which used to be dumped in a murky vat to brood like Loki waiting for his revenge on the gods, has gone from squid couchant to squid rampant, and has a cool light-up display showing its beak and suckers. Even the National Museum of American History, once known as "America's attic" for its bizarre displays and rummage-sale aesthetic, has been reworked to teach approved narratives. I remember it for

its display case filled with weird things made from aluminum, from a fiddle to a lady's fan, and its hall of threshers. It seemed like a maze, like one of the old text-adventure games where even the most random object could turn out to be useful when you encountered a monster many screens later.

The museums may have been tamed, but the Mall still hosts emotions that can't be kept safely under glass. It's where we perform our ritualized dissent: placards waving, puppets nodding, a man dressed as Condoleezza Rice pretending to eat baby dolls spattered with red paint. These are carnivals of consolation, what we have instead of effective political representation. AIDS Quilt, March for Women's Lives, veterans protesting the war that claimed their friends' lives, women standing in a line with signs saying *I regret my abortion*—all those private griefs displayed for public purposes. At the March for Life we walked in procession toward the Supreme Court building, with drummers playing and banners snapping in the frigid air like something out of Kurosawa. The theatricality of these protests never salves the helplessness.

But the Mall is where we express our longings as well as our demands. We play out the yearning American restlessness, the dissatisfaction no policy change or cultural shift can ease. My favorite memory of the Mall is from the 2002 Fourth of July, when we were herded through the post-9/11 security cordon just in time to hear the big speakers play "Moon River." *Two drifters, off to see the world ...*

We gazed up at the dark streaky sky and waited for the fireworks. ■

Arts & Letters

EXHIBIT

Architect of the Republic

By Harry Mount

THERE'S ONLY ONE disappointment in the exceptional new show of 31 original Palladio drawings at the Morgan Library, only seen once before in the United States. It's the disappointment that comes with all architectural drawings: not being able to see the actual buildings.

If it's any consolation, the greatest American Palladian of them all, Thomas Jefferson, never saw a single Palladio building either. In 1787, he did a grand tour of northern Italy, visiting Turin, Milan, and Genoa, but he was recalled to his ambassador's job in Paris before he could get to Palladio's heartland, Venice, Vicenza, and the Veneto.

So the designs for Jefferson's Virginia home, Monticello, and his unrealized 1792 design for the White House were transmitted via paper only from Palladio's drawings and books. (Monticello's design and its name, which means "the little mountain," were both borrowed from Palladio's Villa Rotonda outside Vicenza.) That's why the drawings at the Morgan are particularly significant: they are the means by which northern Italian ideas became American stone.

No wonder Jefferson called Palladio's written works his Bible and, in his library at Monticello, he had two London editions of *The Architecture of A. Palladio* by Giacomo Leoni (1715-20

and 1742). His devotion was so great that in addition to the Palladian University of Virginia in Charlottesville and the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond, Jefferson designed a second Palladian home at Poplar Forest in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1806. It has four octagonal rooms around a square top-lit parlor and porticos to north and south.

His quasi-religious devotion to the 16th-century Italian master was so great that Jefferson spent much of his fortune on Monticello. His building debts bankrupted the estate, consigning the house to a century of decay after his death in 1826.

But it's not just Jefferson who fell for the genius of Andrea Palladio. America, more than any other country on earth, is a Palladian nation.

At the time of independence, Palladianism was the fashionable architectural style. By the late 18th century, British and European Palladianism had reached full maturity, so the American incarnation could absorb all the aesthetic and pragmatic lessons of two centuries of Palladian buildings across the Atlantic.

It helped, too, that the Founding Fathers admired the Roman Republic, and so also admired the Roman architectural principles that lay at the heart of Palladio's buildings. The American love of Rome—or, more specifically, Roman Republican virtues—intensified with the birth of the American Republic after the Revolution. The Founders sought a virtuous model of government that could be separated from the monarchy they had just overthrown. The Roman Republic seemed at one and the same time pure, but not too dangerously democratic. Thomas Jefferson and the two John Adamses were particularly keen on the Greek and Roman idea of rule by

the *optimates*—the best or, in Jefferson's phrase, a "natural aristocracy" based on the most talented.

The fashion for all things Roman continued after the Revolution. George Washington's triumphs and celebrity eventually meant that the passion for Rome deviated from ardor for Republican Rome to a cult of Imperial Rome. The first president, who did his best to limit the powers of his office, did not encourage the cult, but he could do little to stop it. A bust of Washington in the Met, by Giuseppe Ceracchi, shows him dressed like a Roman emperor—a Hadrian or a Marcus Aurelius—with a toga pinned at his right shoulder by the traditional rosette brooch. He could hardly look more Roman or more imperial. Gone is the usual wig, replaced by the fashionably short hair of Roman emperors. His wide, strong torso and the incised eyes are recognizable from ancient Roman sculptures. All that's familiar from the famous Gilbert Stuart pictures are the lips, pursed with the pain of badly fitting false teeth.

But Washington and Jefferson's Roman ideals were most clearly manifested to the world in classical buildings. In 1791, Jefferson advised Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the architect who designed the grid and diamond plan for Washington, D.C. and remodeled New York's Federal Hall with its Doric portico, to follow classical designs for the Capitol: "I should prefer the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity, which have had the approbation of thousands of years." A handsome plaster model of the Capitol appears in the Morgan show alongside one of Monticello.

The only problem was, ancient Greek and Roman buildings weren't immedi-