

The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space.* Lisa Benton-Short. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 296 pp.

Review by Cristina Benedetti

Anyone who has tried to learn about some complex aspect of American bureaucracy knows the challenges that come with mapping the various agencies, commissions, enabling legislations, lawsuits, and other conflicts that bear upon a given bureaucratic scenario. In *The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space*, Lisa Benton-Short has done a remarkable job of accomplishing just that: distilling ten years of scholarly research and citizen advocacy around the National Mall into a book that provides a comprehensive look at the historical and contemporary challenges facing this unique public space. Written in straightforward prose, Benton-Short's book is a great resource for those wanting to gain a better understanding of the forces that have shaped the Mall historically and on through the twenty-first century.

Benton-Short is an urban geographer, a professor in the Department of Geography at George Washington University in Washington, DC. As she suggests in her introduction, her work on the Mall builds upon research conducted for one of her first books, *The Presidio: From Army Post to National Park* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), which looked at another urban park managed by the National Park Service (this one in San Francisco). Benton-Short's extensive experience in studying park management and its attendant bureaucracy is evident, especially when she steps back from description to offer an expert opinion or observation: for example, identifying the "attitudes" of various agencies and entities towards their work on the Mall. Benton-Short's assessments speak to the engaged research that she has conducted on this public space over the last decade. She shares her position on the Mall early on and throughout the book—she has participated in various advocacy efforts that encourage greater public participation in the planning process for Mall initiatives, which she and other critics find lacking in Congress' and the National Park Service's management of the space. Benton-Short frequently provides concrete suggestions for problems that she discusses, a sign of her commitment not only to voicing concerns about the Mall, but to offering possible solutions.

The book is organized in short chapters that are grouped into three thematic sections. Before Part 1, chapter 1 gives a concise history of the development of the Mall as a national public space. Part 1 gives an overview of the management of the Mall: it comprises chapter 2, which discusses the neglect of the Mall, and chapter 3, which maps the dizzying number of entities that have jurisdiction over aspects of the Mall. Part 2 looks at the use and development pressures the Mall is facing, including the proliferation of memorials since the 1980s (chapter 4 focuses on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial and chapter 5 on the World War II Memorial), and the increased security measures that have been put in place since the 1990s, especially after 9/11 (chapter 6). Part 3 addresses the topics of planning and public participation in shaping the Mall: chapter 7 critiques the established process for making changes to the Mall, chapter 8 discusses

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popular and citizen-driven events that have used the Mall to make particular claims, and chapter 9 offers thoughts on (and suggestions for) the Mall's third century.

The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space is an excellent reference book for those researching the Mall and its related topics (like the management of public spaces, political representation, the Capital City, etc.). Each chapter can stand largely on its own, and key points are reiterated throughout the book as they apply to the matter at hand. Chapters are divided into short sub-sections, which makes locating particular topics or arguments easy. Relevant literature in history and geography is cited throughout, supplementing quotations from newspaper articles, editorials, and planning documents. Furthermore, theoretical concepts are presented succinctly when they are needed, and include discussions of publics, the public sphere, public space, and the commons.

I was pleased to see *The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space* for sale in the Library of Congress gift shop this winter. Readers who pick it up will find a well-researched, frank assessment of the state of the Mall and its management. Benton-Short's book is certainly timely, and it does an admirable job of quickly bringing readers up to speed on the challenges facing the Mall today, with an eye toward increasing citizen engagement in shaping the future of this vital public space.

Cristina Benedetti is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Comparative Studies at the Ohio State University. Her dissertation project focuses on the use of the National Mall for various kinds of public gatherings, and particularly on the logistical and material concerns of such events. Her research interests include public space and the public sphere, performance studies, and public folklore.

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