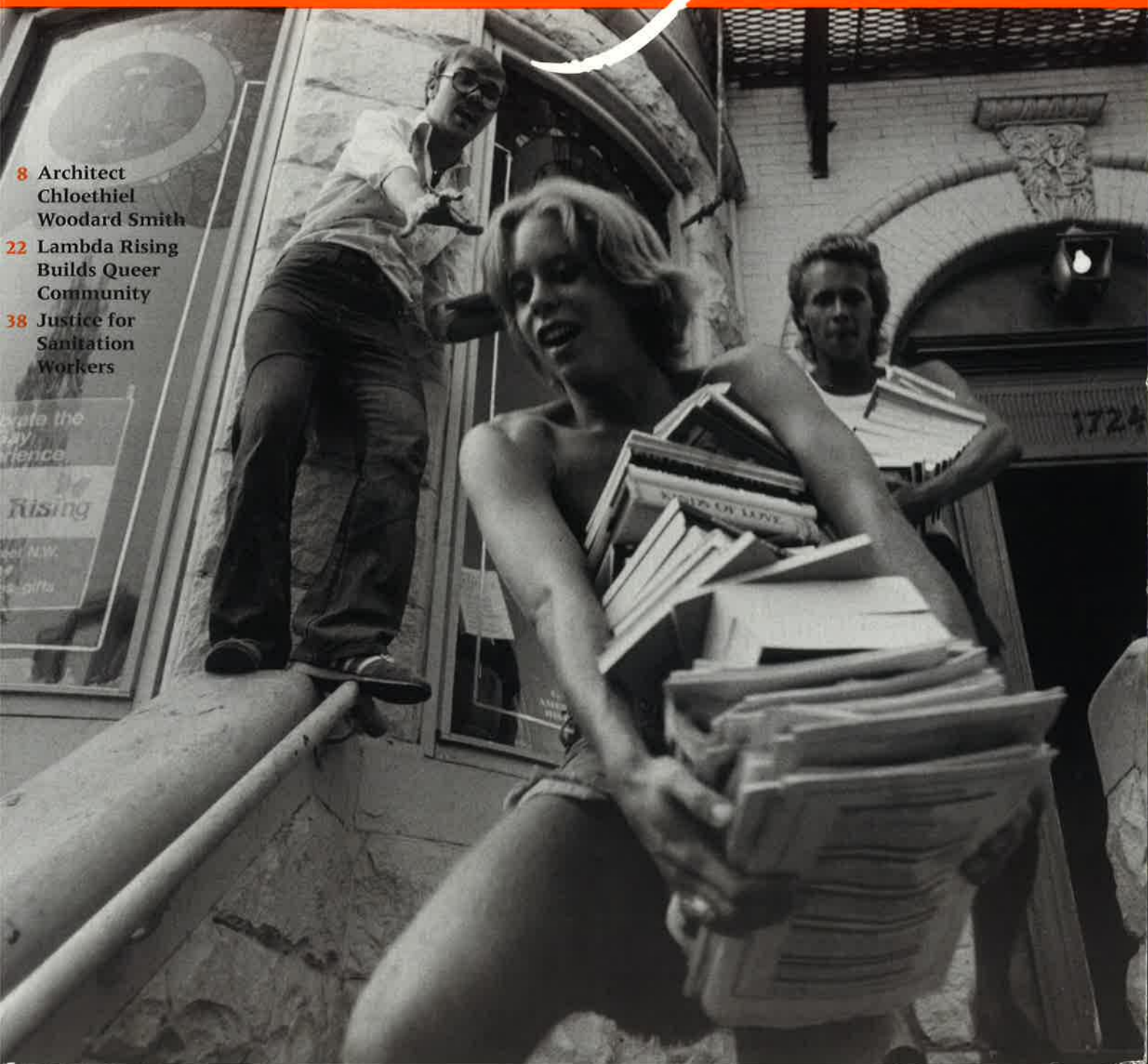


# Washington

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## Chloethiel Woodard Smith *An Architect for Washington*

BY KATHLEEN JAMES-CHAKRABORTY

In 1956, five years before the appearance of her bestselling book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs earned her first byline in *Architectural Forum*, then the top professional journal for American architects. The 23-page feature focused on a new “battleground of city planning”: Washington, DC. While Jacobs would soon become the nation’s foremost critic of urban renewal, here, she went out of her way to support the reconstruction of the city’s entire Southwest quadrant, rejecting exactly the kind of small-scale rehabilitation she would later champion: “though the backyard privies are gone and the interiors are sanitary, they are still fundamentally slum housing” when “not for the well to do.” Instead, she proposed higher density redevelopment, creating Capitol Park where dilapidated housing once stood. She also called for a boulevard connecting the Mall to the riverfront, the germ of what would become L’Enfant Plaza.<sup>1</sup>

Glimmers of Jacobs’s later preference for the small scale are apparent, however, when she championed the inclusion of townhouses in Southwest’s redevelopment. These, in her view, “break with recent planning practice by returning to an old pattern, houses built to the street line.” Consequently “the street becomes an interesting architectural space, instead of a road between ends of buildings.” Grand, new architecture made her

uncomfortable. While she argued to preserve such classics as the Old Patent Office that now houses the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of American Art, she condemned the oversimplified, unadorned massive Neoclassicism of the 20th century as a failure.

Jacobs’s positions on DC’s architecture and urban planning echoed those of one of her key sources: the architect Chloethiel Woodard Smith. Smith had, with Louis Justement, developed the 1952 plan for Southwest DC that Jacobs’s article endorsed. Jacobs explicitly defended Smith’s housing plan for what would become Capitol Park as it faced opposition from local regulators and the Federal Housing Administration. Jacobs noted that “its 28 residential acres were once the scene of many a photo of shocking slums against the backdrop of the Capitol; now they are a ghostly clearing of street planting without the streets.” She worried that if Smith did not get her way, “large scale redevelopment might well bog down under rules which, at worst, helped make the old messes, and, at best, had to temporize with them.” Furthermore, the site, unable to attract a developer and no longer commercially viable, “will be out on a bad, bad limb, and its flop from that limb will have repercussions on middle-income development across the US.”<sup>2</sup>

The redevelopment of Southwest marked a

Architect Chloethiel Woodard Smith rests blueprints on the nearly completed barbecue in the garden of Capitol Park, the innovative apartment/townhouse project she designed for the redeveloping Southwest DC, June 1959. A pioneer known for Modernist designs, she ran the nation’s largest women-led architecture practice and was a leader in reshaping mid-century Washington. Courtesy, Star Collection, DC Public Library, ©Washington Post





Reformers intent on wholesale redevelopment of the aged Southwest pointed to photos such as this one of rowhouses and alley dwellings in view of the Capitol in 1939. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

turning point for both women. Jacobs's article established her prominence as one of the nation's leading voices on urban renewal (even though she turned away from many of its positions in *Death and Life*). Smith, whose American buildings had previously been largely limited to single-family houses, went on to build Capitol Park and other multi-family housing in Southwest as well as in Brookline, Massachusetts; New Haven, Connecticut; Reston, Virginia; and St. Louis, Missouri. She also designed the triumvirate of office buildings at the intersection of Washington's Connecticut Avenue and L Street NW, which *Washington Post* architecture critic Benjamin Forgey admiringly christened "Chloethiel's Corner."<sup>3</sup>

Chloethiel Woodard Smith was a woman of paradoxes. She dismissed women's liberation while

benefiting from coverage by female journalists recently liberated from covering traditional home and social news. She designed Modernist housing while living in historic homes in Georgetown and on Massachusetts Avenue. She was keenly attuned to the plight of the poor, especially impoverished African American city dwellers, but played a leading role in displacing them from Southwest. She was also successful. From 1963 until her retirement in 1983, Smith ran the country's largest women-led architecture practice. Above all, she sought the public eye. Smith published articles in such professional journals as *Architectural Forum* even before she had built anything of her own. She organized exhibitions, gave lectures, and submitted her work to magazines including *House Beautiful*, as well as for awards. Finally, she was

frequently profiled in the newspapers of the cities where she worked.<sup>4</sup>

How did a woman architect, at a time when architecture was the most masculinized profession in the United States, play such a prominent role in the reshaping of Washington, DC?

It was a long uphill battle to get commissions and then have the achievements they embodied accorded the same respect bestowed on her male counterparts. As late as 1974, when Smith was at the height of her career, only 3.5 percent of the architects in the United States, and only 300 out of 24,000 members of the American Institute of Architects, were women. According to Judith Edelman, author of an AIA task force on women, of all the occupations in the United States, only coal miners and steelworkers were more apt to be men. Smith succeeded in part because she simply worked harder than anyone else around her, but also because she understood how to present herself in public as the era's idea of a lady, even as she persistently argued her case. She benefitted as well from her husband's status as a Washington insider, even on the occasions when she ventured outside the city on the kind of federally sponsored urban renewal projects whose bureaucratic details she mastered working close to home.<sup>5</sup>

Few architects played such an important role as Smith in Washington's development across the 1960s and 1970s and into the early 1980s. Beyond her contributions to Southwest and designs for three office buildings at "Chloethiel's Corner," Smith's DC legacy includes the design of the E Street Expressway, service as an expert architect on several public committees, including the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, and the proposal to convert the Pension Building into what would eventually become the National Building Museum. Throughout she took a pragmatic approach. Smith's commitment was above all to the well-planned city rather than any particular style of Modernism. In a lecture delivered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1975, she described herself as designing "applied" rather than theoretical architecture. While the second was embedded in discussions among architects, the first responded above all to the needs of clients and users.<sup>6</sup>

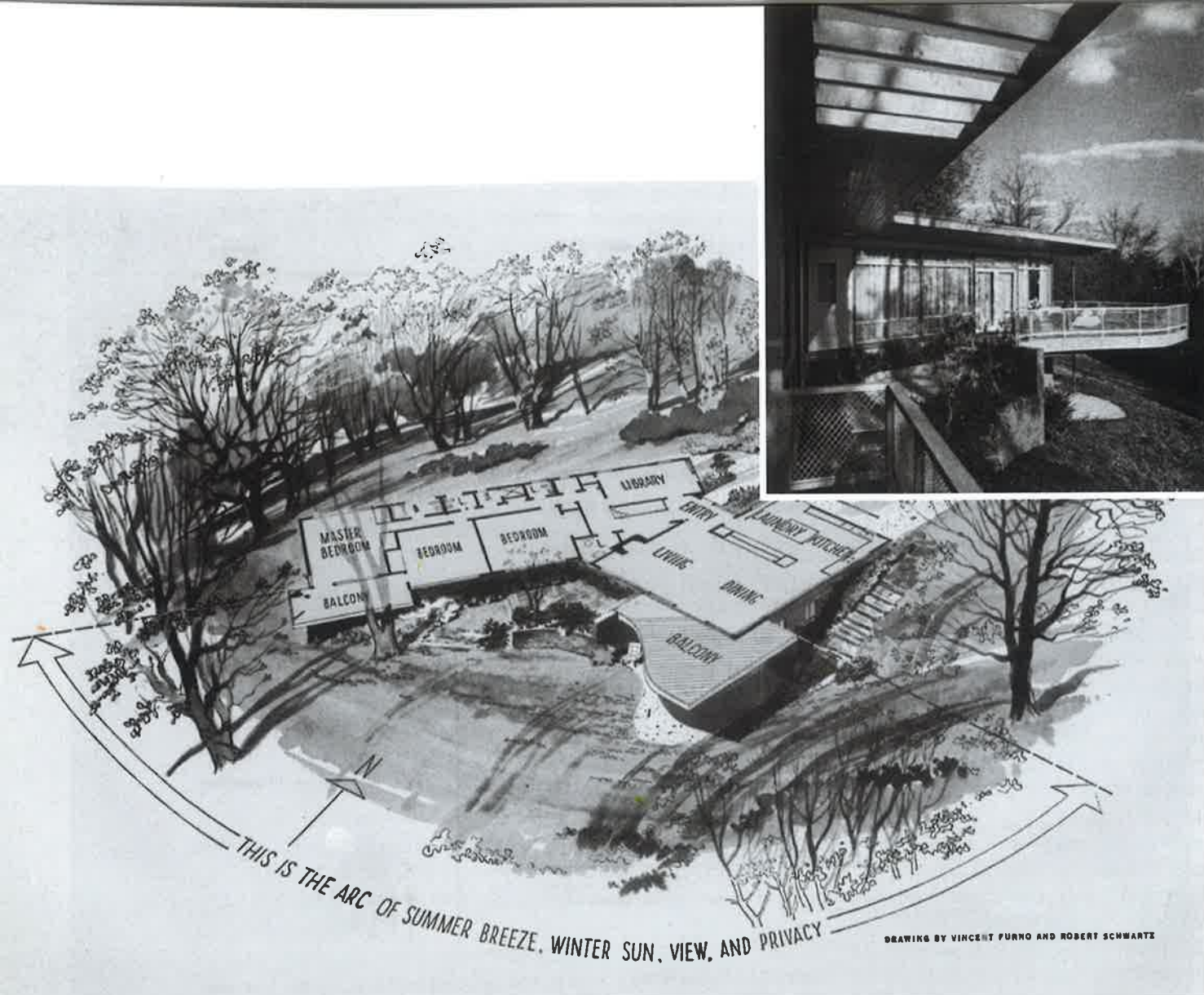
**B**orn in 1910, Smith earned degrees in architecture at the University of Oregon and Washington University in St. Louis before moving to DC in 1935 to work at the newly established Federal Housing Admin-

istration. There she nearly doubled her salary in four years before leaving for private practice. She complained privately about sexual harassment at the FHA to her friend Lewis Mumford, the esteemed author of hugely influential and wide-ranging books, including *The Culture of Cities* (1938), which considered how nature and technology have shaped cities. For decades afterwards she also openly admitted her frustration with the federal bureaucracy, whose narrow-minded regulations she believed often hindered reaching larger policy goals. It was in DC that she began to make her mark, coauthoring an influential two-part article on the most effective layouts of rental apartments in 1936. She also became active in the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Through it she spearheaded the organization in 1939 of the exhibition *Washington: The Planned City Without a Plan*. Here she challenged what she saw as DC's overemphasis on arid and inhumane monumentality since the foundational McMillan Plan of 1902, which had restored the Mall as the formal space around which museums and memorials could be located. She particularly opposed the large scale and lack of nuanced detail that she believed characterized what were then relatively new office blocks at Federal Triangle. Her marriage in 1940 to Bromley Smith, who had



National Security Council Executive Secretary Bromley K. Smith confers with President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House in 1965. His political connections aided Chloethiel's career. *Courtesy, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library*





Smith's celebrated Modernist house on a challenging hillside lot at 2940 Chain Bridge Rd. NW was designed to modulate DC's heat and humidity. The original house is seen from the rear at right. While the footprint hasn't changed, the house has been extensively modified by Robert Gurney. Courtesy, Library of Congress; Robert Lautman photograph, courtesy, National Building Museum

just joined the Foreign Service, initially took her away from Washington, although when he eventually rose to the post of executive secretary of the National Security Council in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, she undoubtedly benefited from his political relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Smith, like most young American architects eager to understand her field's classical roots, had hoped in the late 1930s to raise money to travel to Europe, but World War II intervened. Instead, she accompanied her husband to Montreal, Canada, and La Paz, Bolivia, before returning to the Washington area in 1946. She initially struggled to re-establish herself, despite the impressive professional experience she garnered abroad. She had helped organize an influential exhibition on the importance of city planning in Montreal. While in

La Paz she taught at the local architecture school, worked as an architect, and wrote in Spanish for the local newspaper before touring South America on a Guggenheim grant. Her status as a working mother—Bromley Junior was born in October 1947 and his sister Susanne followed in 1952—did nothing to make her situation easier. Like many new mothers, she struggled to find affordable child care. In letters to Mumford, she recounted her multiple searches for a reliable woman who could come to her house to look after the children while Smith was at the office.<sup>8</sup>

During her first decade back in Washington, Smith's practice consisted mostly of designs for private houses, which were erected on the city's suburban edges. She insisted on building in a recognizably Modern style, rounding off the

sharpest edges in ways that satisfied magazines on home decoration. One of her most interesting houses of the period—specifically designed to modulate Washington's often hot and humid climate in an early example of what is now termed sustainability—was located in the Palisades neighborhood on the DC side of Chain Bridge and featured in a *House Beautiful* article. Others were published in *House and Garden* and in the Argentine journal *Nuestra Arquitectura*. Her most important building from these years was the United States Embassy in Asunción, Paraguay. While the State Department was pleased with her design, it was not widely seen in the United States by fellow architects and potential clients except in photographs; the challenges of building in, what was for both her and the State Department, such a remote setting were widely unappreciated. Nonetheless in 1960 she was elected a fellow of the American Institute of Architects (one of the first women to be awarded this honor) in large part because of her role helping to curate AIA exhibits on contemporary American architecture in Havana and Moscow.<sup>9</sup>

Smith's breakthrough local project was Capitol Park, a housing development covering six square blocks of Southwest Washington south of I-395 between Fourth and First Streets SW. It consisted of five apartment slabs, the first completed in 1959, framing around semi-private shared courtyards. Combining apartment blocks with townhouses was not unprecedented. Louis Kahn, well on his way to becoming the most celebrated American architect of Smith's generation, had already done the same in Philadelphia for Mill Creek, a public housing complex. Other federally subsidized middle-income housing built by private developers for rental used a similar formula, including Detroit's Lafayette Park and Southwest DC's slightly later River Park and Tiber Island. Capitol Park, however, remains distinctive for the quality of the brickwork in the apartment blocks, which clearly drew upon Smith's experience building in Latin America while also respectfully referencing Washington's long tradition of brick rowhouses and apartment blocks.<sup>10</sup>

Capitol Park was built on the site of Dixon's



The architect's rendering for Capitol Park on Fourth St. The project designed for middle-income residents combined nine stories of rental apartments facing Fourth, with common areas and townhouses behind stretching to First St. Courtesy, Library of Congress

Chloethiel Woodard Smith





While feminist Betty Friedan praised Capitol Park as an ideal setting for career women, the 1959 marketing by Shannon and Luchs for the project presented a more traditional view of a female tenant, complete with modern coffee service and high heels. *Courtesy, DC Public Library*

Court, a particularly infamous example of the city's overcrowded and often rundown alley housing. The project was delayed until a developer could be located who would follow the stipulations of Washington's Redevelopment Land Agency and rent to African Americans. Black residents, along with others of African, Semitic, or Asian descent, had long been excluded in practice from the city's high-end and middle-class apartment buildings (segregation extended in many cases to entire neighborhoods, making it difficult for these groups, regardless of income, to buy homes in huge swaths of the city and its suburbs). No local firm succeeded in obtaining financing for this mandated departure from racist local practice, so developers from New York with deeper pockets eventually stepped in. Middle-class champions of integration, White and Black, flocked to Capitol Park. Soon Capitol Park boasted a Who's Who of local political celebrities: Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and Robert Weaver, the first Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, moved into the apartments, while future Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander and his wife, historian Adele Logan Alexander, were among the rowhouses' first occupants.<sup>11</sup>

Also drawn to the complex and to Smith was pioneering feminist Betty Friedan, who profiled both in the January 1965 issue of *Cosmopolitan*. Friedan had met Smith several months earlier at a

White House reception for women who supported President Lyndon Johnson's re-election. She found in Smith an example of the "the feminine frontlash," which for her "consists of any woman who not only breaks through the binds of the feminine mystique in her own life, or her promotion on the job, but achieves the self-confidence to challenge the clichés of her profession that stem from and perpetuate the segregation of a man's world." Friedan was impressed by Smith's architecture. Her piece held up Capitol Park as an ideal setting for career women. She saw the development as "a blueprint for future city living that may replace the dreamhouse which has barred so many young mothers from full participation in professions or education or the complex sciences that are centered in cities," a fitting alternative to the suburbs she had condemned in her 1963 best-selling book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Meeting a group of young mothers in the Alexanders' townhouse, Friedan was pleased that they had organized cooperative daycare that permitted them to pursue other activities, many of them overtly political.<sup>12</sup>

Smith did not attempt to capitalize on the radical feminist's endorsement, but a succession of interviews with society columnists, some of whom went on to become architecture critics, certainly smoothed her way. In the succeeding articles and many lectures she gave across the 1960s to lay audiences, Smith came across as unassuming but



Smith presents the model for Harbour Square, 1961. The water-side condominium project was designed for a range of incomes and incorporated historic houses. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

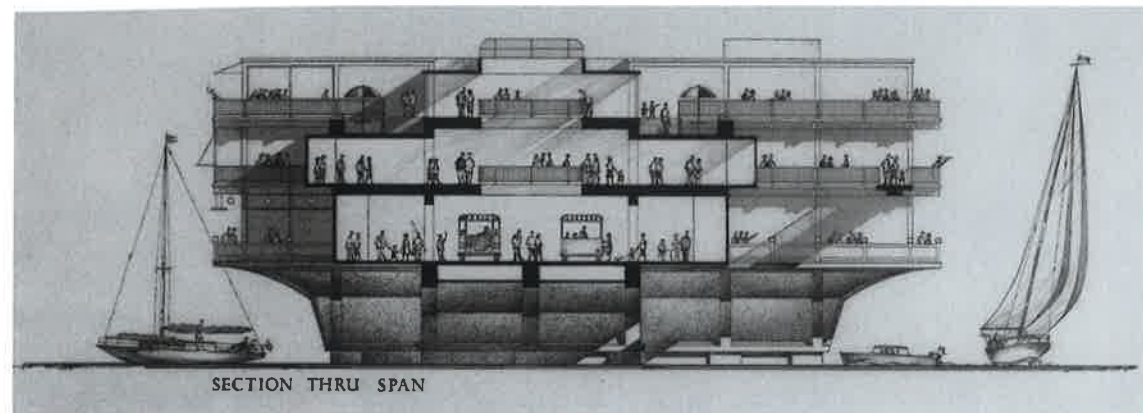
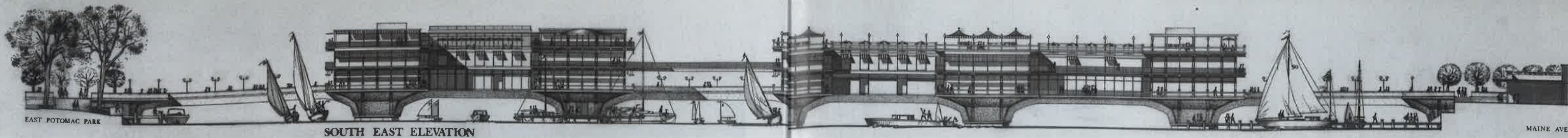
Vice President Hubert Humphrey and his wife Muriel pose on the balcony of their Harbour Square co-op apartment, May 1968. *Ebony* magazine applauded their move to the integrated building from their previously all-White Chevy Chase, MD, neighborhood home. *Courtesy, Star Collection, DC Public Library, ©Washington Post*



professional. Above all, her commitment was to cities as places to live, not least because of the way they brought people of diverse backgrounds and incomes together. She paid close attention to the complexes she designed, to which she often returned for visits. In a talk at MIT near the end of her career she noted, "The other day I figured out how many people live in the places I have designed and supervised construction. Some 12,000 or 13,000 can live in these places at any one time—the largest single place has 4,000 people; the seven or eight others accommodate the

rest. With American mobility, perhaps as many as 40,000—or more—different people have lived in these places—moved their furniture and other 'belongings' into a 'unit'—changed colors of walls, hung curtains, put flowers in pots on terraces and balconies—entertained friends, read the morning paper, waved to a sleepy child at the window, gone along a rainy walk to work, returned at dusk to look up at a lighted window. . . It is a frightening and humbling total."<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most successful of these complexes was Harbour Square, built between 1963



The National Park Service commissioned this design for a bridge to connect an extended L'Enfant Plaza to East Potomac Park. Smith echoed Florence's shops-and-restaurants-lined Ponte Vecchio. *Courtesy, Library of Congress*

and 1966. Located on the Southwest waterfront between N and O Streets SW, it was advertised as an early example of a condominium development in the city and intended to compete with high-end apartments such as the Westchester Apartments on Cathedral Avenue NW and others lining much of Connecticut Avenue north of Dupont Circle, many of which were built between the two World Wars. While Smith had always intended most of Southwest to be middle-income housing, she believed that the prime sites facing the Washington Channel should be reserved for the neighborhood's wealthiest inhabitants plus recreational and commercial space where tourists and DC residents alike could take a stroll and buy an ice cream cone—or maybe even a meal. Despite this, Smith provided for a broad spectrum of unit sizes to, as she put it in a lecture delivered in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965, “attract a wide variety of purchasers of different ages, professions and incomes, which make up a truly urban community.” Like Capitol Park, Harbour Square was integrated from the start in accordance with DC housing law. An additional challenge, which Smith welcomed, was the site's inclusion of Wheat Row, erected in the 1790s and the oldest surviving example of row-houses in DC outside of Georgetown. These and other neighboring historic structures, most of which had long since been converted from residential to institutional use for various neighborhood charities, were subjects of extensive conservation before being folded into her scheme. This was the

first time that historic fabric had been incorporated into an urban renewal project in the District, and it contrasted strongly with most of the neighborhood's erasure before construction had begun.<sup>14</sup>

In the same talk Smith opposed “tower-in-the-park” style housing, which still predominated at the time. Once again foreshadowing Postmodernism's respect for the street line, she declared, “I wanted to do a residential square because I was tired of the formless, open housing schemes that had developed from the ‘standard plans’ that offered identical blocks as the units for group compositions.” She further lamented, “Most site planning had become a dreary game played with these blocks. They were arranged to provide open spaces—but the spaces though open were formless. The groups of these blocks—whether 3 or 30—gave no sense of place. There had been a strong belief that large-scale planning would give some positive design quality. True—it had this potential, but it was rarely realized.”

From the beginning, Harbour Square attracted several well-known occupants, of whom the most famous were undoubtedly former (and later) Senator and then Vice President Hubert Humphrey and his wife, Muriel, who served out his term in the Senate following her husband's death in 1978. A profile of the Humphreys published in *Ebony* magazine in 1967 observed, “At first glance, the couple in apartment 801 South in Harbour Square may seem no different from any other middle-aged white or Negro couple in the luxury co-op apart-

ment complex in Southwest Washington. The silver-haired, attractive wife braves the Friday afternoon rush at the local supermarket like other housewives. The husband, with receding hairline, obstinate chin and friendly green eyes, likes to take a walk around the block, with or without the family poodle. Together they enjoy early breakfast on the balcony overlooking the Potomac and the city's marble monuments, and they worship with their neighbors in the many new, integrated churches in the area.” The piece highlighted the Humphreys' visit to a local public housing project as well as the recent integration of local schools and the number of prominent African Americans who resided in the neighborhood. Clearly the couple, who had previously lived in an all-White neighborhood in Chevy Chase, Maryland, intended to make a statement about the strong commitment to civil rights that was a highlight of their political careers.<sup>15</sup>

**H**arbour Square was a great success, but Chloethiel Woodard Smith was stymied in her most ambitious scheme for the Washington waterfront, undertaken at the request of the National Park Service. The intended bridge spanning the Washington Channel would have run from an extended L'Enfant Plaza to a national aquarium located in East Potomac Park, on the peninsula south of the Jefferson Memorial. The aquarium was never realized due to a lack of government funding; nor was the bridge, which, like the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, would have been lined with shops and restaurants. A large wooden model of the bridge, made in 1966 and now in the collection of the National Building Museum, makes clear that, although she was critical of the over-scaled urban planning schemes of the period, she was quite capable of her own monumental yet entirely Modern ambitions. The model positively bristles with pavilions and docks projecting out in both directions from the roadway. The design, along with her other proposals for converting the underused Southwest waterfront into a major tourist destination, also presages the approach James Rouse, with whom she occasionally worked, would take in Harborplace, his highly lauded rehabilitation of the Baltimore waterfront, which opened in 1980.<sup>16</sup>

Smith's proposal was rejected, however, by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, the independent federal agency charged with judging the aesthetic merits of architecture and planning proposals for the nation's capital. Chair William Walton defended the group's decision in a letter to National Park Service Director George B. Hartzog, arguing, “the proposal is too big and bulky for this site. The model indicates provisions for restaurant and shopping facilities far greater than we think should be included in this over-the-water area. The bridge character of the structure would be almost certainly lost, and though the design is handsome, it would look too much like a large commercial structure merely spanning a waterway.” Only in the 21st century would the full commercial and tourist potential of this stretch of waterfront that Smith had long recognized finally be realized, and then—although her bridge was never built—on a scale far greater than anything she had ever proposed.<sup>17</sup>

Smith repeatedly tangled with the powerful Commission of Fine Arts in the mid-1960s. Most controversial was her proposal to raise the city's height limit in specific places to encourage the construction of office towers. She also proposed covering over part of Rhode Island Avenue NW to create playgrounds for predominantly African American school children in the city's Shaw neighborhood. When President Johnson named Smith to the commission in 1967, Wolf von Eckhardt, architecture critic for the *Washington Post*, was clearly stunned. He commented, with reference to the contemporary Texaco advertisement to “put a tiger in your tank,” that Smith “fought like a wounded tigress for her idea of a Ponte Vecchio bridge across the Washington Channel, now apparently doomed. And she thinks we ought to have some judiciously placed tall buildings around to make the city more cosmopolitan. Some of the tigress's wounds were directly or indirectly inflicted by the Commission she has now joined. It hasn't always shared her tastes and ideas. No one quite knows who and what persuaded President Johnson, who, of course, appointed [John] Walker [the director of the National Gallery of Art] and Mrs. Smith, to put that tiger into the Commission's tank.”<sup>18</sup>

Von Eckhardt also noted that “Mrs. Smith



confesses that she has 'made a pact with myself to keep my mouth shut for three months.' The obvious implication is that she will have a good deal to say after that. She is an architect of decided tastes and opinions with a passionate love for this city."<sup>19</sup>

Smith served two terms on the commission, stepping down in 1976. Her appointment, despite von Eckhardt's remarks, made sense, as she had already served on President Johnson's Council on Pennsylvania Avenue and the first lady's Committee for a More Beautiful Capital. In all these roles she largely turned her back on the bulldozer-driven approach she had taken in Southwest, although the Pennsylvania Avenue council's recommendation that only the tower of the Old Post Office (now the Waldorf Astoria Hotel) be retained aroused the ire of the city's nascent preservation movement, who were able to successfully argue for keeping the entire structure. One reason Johnson may have appointed her was her reputation as a hard worker, doing more behind the scenes than her male colleagues, who usually emerged with most of the credit. At a time when First Lady Bird Johnson was arguing for high-way beautification, another reason may have been the sensitively landscaped way that Smith brought the E Street Expressway to street level just east of what became the site of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.<sup>20</sup>

Today Smith is perhaps best remembered for the trio of office buildings at "Chloethiel's Corner" that occupy the northwest, southwest, and southeast corners of the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and L Street NW. Washington Square, the last and largest of the three, was her grand finale and remains perhaps the city's handsomest mixed-use office block. Completed in 1982, it eschewed the revival of historical ornament that was just coming into fashion, instead embodying, particularly through its two largely glass towers (between which rose the slightly recessed Connecticut Avenue façade) the regard for sensitive placement of her buildings that had long characterized Smith's thoughtful approach to



urbanity. She clad it in the same Tennessee marble used for the National Gallery of Art.<sup>21</sup>

Her final legacy was the idea of converting the Pension Building, on the block bounded by F, G, Fourth, and Fifth Streets NW, into what became the National Building Museum. Smith first argued for such an institution in 1939. Commissioned in 1967 to study possible uses of the Pension Building, she recommended "a museum for the Art of Building," noting, "as a nation we have prided ourselves on our builders, but we have little respect for the art of building." She continued, "At long last we are concerned about the quality of our environment; we have looked at much that we have built and found it ugly, and we now talk of great and beautiful cities." She did not romanticize the structure, admitting "it is not a great building, but it has a measure of monumental dignity. Its interior spaces are quite spectacular and belong to a very small group of major public buildings built in Washington in the Victorian style. For these reasons it is worth preserving and using." In 1978 she served as vice president of the efforts that resulted in the museum's establishment two years later.<sup>22</sup>

Smith's impact on the city where she spent most of her adult life can best be glimpsed from the corner of Fourth and G Streets SW. Here, her apartment blocks for Capitol Park create, along with unfortunate later additions that encroach upon their original landscaping, a buffer for the townhouses just to the east. From here, too, one can look up Fourth Street at a vista that concludes



Smith's Modernist style marks "Chloethiel's Corner," three office buildings she designed for the intersection of Connecticut Ave. and L St. NW. From left, Blake Building, 1027 Connecticut Ave. (1967); Washington Square, 1050 Connecticut Ave. (1982); Rizik Building, 1100 Connecticut Ave. (1968). Photographs by John DeFerrari

with the National Building Museum. An imaginative use of red brick binds the Victorian and Midcentury Modern vista together, while also indicating Smith's undogmatic ability to change her mind. From an advocate of wholesale demolition, she became one of the very first to recognize the Pension Building's potential. What also unites Capitol Park to the Building Museum is her commitment to the public that uses cities. She was committed in equal measure to those who live in what remains relatively affordable housing and to visitors to a museum focused not on the capital "A" of architecture but on the buildings out of which the cities she loved are made.

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Chloethiel Woodard Smith



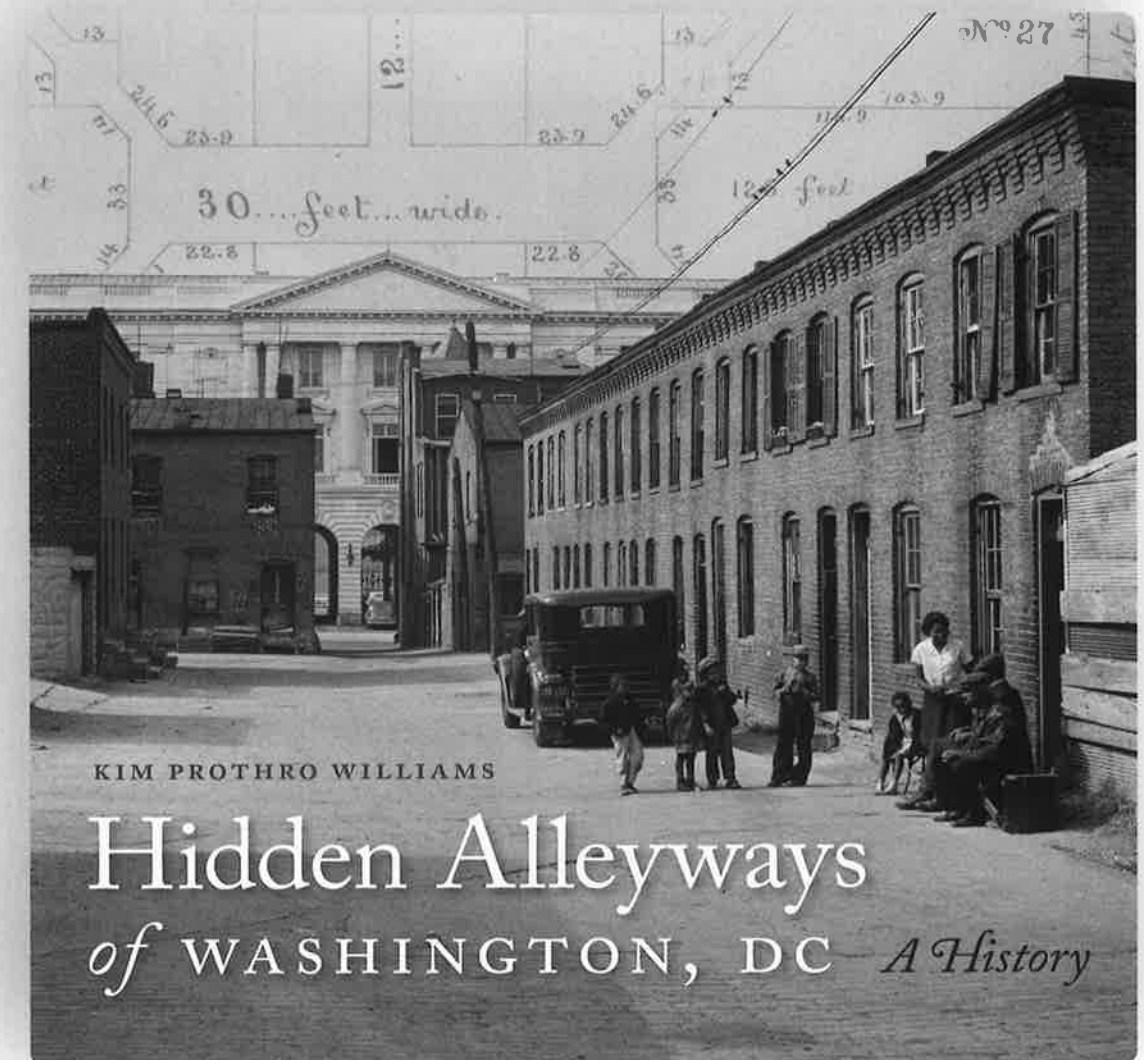
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