Just in time for the arrival of spring, Mickey Mouse turned up in the heart of Washington, D.C.'s Federal Triangle. Once a run-down stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capitol, Federal Triangle is now home to the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. There, on March 19, 2005, Mickey—actually dozens of Mickeys—appeared in the form of large, colorfully decorated statues. These figures, known by the branded term, “InspEARations,” filled the Reagan Center's open-air plaza, a space named after Woodrow Wilson. Each identically proportioned statue had been executed or simply “inspired” by a different real-life artist, actor, athlete, or Disney legend; the brand logos of sponsoring businesses or organizations were artfully woven into the colorful designs. Seventy-five Mickeys in all, among them polka-dot Mickeys, PDA-wielding Mickeys, racer-Mickeys, had been assembled to celebrate the cartoon character's seventy-fifth anniversary. Conveniently located near the entry of the D.C. Visitors and Convention Bureau, the display quickly became a must-see attraction. Vacationers on patriotic pilgrimages and Sunday afternoon picnickers on the Mall strolled through admiringly, children clambered on these mini-monuments from dawn to dusk. The cheery update of Wilsonian internationalism was memorialized in many, many Kodak moments, mementos of an assembly that, the Center's website boasted, would occur nowhere else in the world except in Mickey's homeland, Disney Parks and Resorts.¹

The Reagan Center, designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, is a postmodern interpretation of the Beaux Art buildings of the...
Federal District. As the “first and only federal building dedicated to both government and private use [and]... a national forum for the advancement of trade,” it is suffused with the aura of its namesake. Could there be a more fitting site to celebrate that most iconic ambassador of American empire, Mickey Mouse? The exhibition, its venue and the close coincidence of its opening with the second anniversary of the war in Iraq, tells us as much about D.C.’s “landscape of fear” and its economy of affect as do reclassified documents, security fences, bollards and mysterious bunkers. These ubiquitous reminders of terror make the banal nostalgia of Mickey’s 75th and the consumerist freedom that it celebrates that much more seductive.

The papers in this special section were originally delivered at an Interlocutor Session, “Washington and the Landscape of Fear,” organized by me and sponsored by the Society for Urban, National and Transnational Anthropology as part of the 2005 annual meeting of the AAA. The conference location in Washington, D.C. and its theme, “Bringing the Past into the Present,” made the topic seem a natural choice. As interlocutor, the historian of architecture and planning and Washington’s premier preservationist, Richard Longstreth, was invited to discuss the changes that security considerations have brought to one of the nation’s vistas of democratic value, Washington’s National Mall. Five discussants (James Holston, Cindi Katz, Mark Leone, Setha Low, Geoffrey White), representing a range of regional and disciplinary specializations were asked to respond to Longstreth’s presentation and to reflect on the implications for public life and civic participation that the post 9/11 security measures have brought.

Like New York City and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C. experienced the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The event’s memorialization in D.C., however has been more diffused, spatially and thematically, than at either of the other sites. Informal memorials quickly multiplied near the Pentagon crash site, but because it is a highly secured environment, the work of reconstruction has not been subject to the sort of public involvement and scrutiny seen in Lower Manhattan. Indeed, the myriad measures that re-define and enhance security and so remove public space from the public’s gaze and occupancy are, themselves, symptoms of the landscape of fear. Though recently extended, deepened and made more permanent, this landscape is not new. Washington is a city and federal district, with a social and historical geography deeply inscribed by geopolitical, class and racial boundaries. If the federal core is an iconic space of democratic deliberation, the city’s residents remain colonial subjects, without voting rights or full
representation. Torn along its central axes by racial insurrections of the late 1960s, the District’s African American residents (nearly 60% of D.C.’s population) continue to suffer disproportionately from poverty and its deleterious effects. And, though filled with free, accessible cultural institutions, historic sites and memorials, the district’s escalating property values portend a new landscape of racial segregation. Washington, D.C.’s post 9/11 cityscape, with its guards and security checkpoints and with convoys of black SUVs that emerge from subterranean staging areas at a moment’s notice, is only most recent manifestation of the surveillance and policing that the district’s poor, over twenty percent of its population, have long encountered.

In his paper, Longstreth outlines the architectural history of the federal core, concentrating on the National Mall and on the relationship between it, the White House and the Capitol. It is the Mall on which the ideals of democracy have been most consistently represented, in its use as a space of recreation and assembly, with its memorials and monuments, and in the ways that, with its broad lawn and groves of trees, it has defined the character of place—rendering the Capitol “a potently iconic temple of democracy” (Longstreth, p. 12). Longstreth traces the emergence of the Mall from a fragmented assemblage of spaces to an integrated landscape, on which democracy’s promises of openness, accessibility, civility, and equality have been encoded. It is the contrast between the promise encoded in Mall’s landscape design and the repressive reality of new security devices that, for Longstreth, announces the arrival of a landscape of fear: “No wonder we are repulsed when this great plain of democratic spirit is riddled with Jersey barriers, concrete planters, vehicular blockades, warning signs and other paraphernalia of a hyper-security agenda” (Longstreth, p. 17). While many of these features are temporary impediments, others—such as the redesigned pedestrian plaza that now surrounds the White House and the still-under-construction Capitol visitor center—introduce a permanent spatial narrative that is more about surveillance and control than about access. Perhaps more troubling has been their introduction in the absence of public debate or participation. Longstreth ends his article by inviting readers to compare the coastal fortifications built after the War of 1812 with the new landscape of fear that has appeared on the Mall. The former, he observes, was put to use only once, when “the nation was warring with itself less than five decades later” (Longstreth, p. 20).

Similar allusions to the political terrain of security are made in the blunter critiques offered by James Holston and Mark Leone. Both engage with Longstreth’s genealogy of the landscape of fear;
but rather than regarding current surveillance measures as ruptures with past practice, they find continuities. More fundamentally, both pose questions of how architectural forms encode meaning, whether of “citizenship,” “democracy,” or “authoritarianism.” Echoing work by Lefebvre and Foucault, they ask: How is space made? How does it “mean”? Holston suggests that answers cannot be posed “in advance of studying what might be called spatial practices” and that those logics are “neither obvious from nor reducible to mere forms. Visual access no more guarantees actual social access than voyeurism intimacy” (Holston, p. 37).

Mark Leone takes us outside the boundaries of the district’s federal core, to the “colonial” domain that federal authorities control without the electoral consent of its residents. The landscape of fear, he maintains, is a landscape in which war and preparations for war are paramount concerns; this landscape, sublimated in the Mall’s memorials, is dreadfully real in Spring Valley, a neighborhood in the district’s far northwest corner. There, the comforts of upper-middle class life cannot erase the remains of World War I chemical weapons testing and storage sites nor the threats that they pose to the health and well-being of local residents. This is a landscape of fear about which residents have had few opportunities to learn, given the secrecy that has cloaked both its original military usage and the efforts through the 1990s, also by federal agencies, to mitigate threats to life and property. As Leone points out, residents’ efforts to gain more knowledge and control over decisions in their neighborhood continue to be thwarted, now by increasingly sophisticated forms of surveillance available through the limited openness of the Geographic Information Systems technology used to store and sort information about the neighborhood.

In a comparably skeptical spirit, James Holston asks what is “open” or “democratic” about a monumental building set within the parkland of the National Mall? What is the appeal—and to whom is the appeal directed—of this gentrified, rural idyll of democracy? Noting that Longstreth makes an implicit argument that democratic norms are encoded in the Capitol-as-temple motif, Holston asks how democracy arises in or as spatial practice, noting that “the efficacy of design as conveyer and conductor of social value is better grasped through an anthropological analysis of the interaction of form, intention, and practice” (Holston, p. 33).

It is the latter process of making space, including through affective orientations, that Setha Low explores, drawing on New York’s post-9/11 rebuilding. She acknowledges the impact of state and citizen paranoia in wake of 9/11, but locates its effectiveness in the ways that it conspired with the decades of privatization, widening
class and racial divisions, to create a new structure of feeling that welcomes closure in hope of security. Low probes the effects of the new security landscape and, in so doing, moves from the encoded meanings that Longstreth reads from architectural form to the processes of meaning-making as they are embedded in the political economy of urban development and planning. Hers is not as much a genealogical account as it is an anticipatory query. Rather than asking how we arrived at the landscape of fear, she ends by proposing how we might begin the task of spatializing the promises of democratic participation.

Like Low, another commentator, Geoffrey White, also takes the economy of affect as a point of departure. His paper returns to the park-like expanse of the National Mall, seeing it not only as site of recreation but as a national necropolis, where monumental structures deploy narratives of sacrifice and loss to bind nationalist affect. In a departure from Longstreth, however, White is struck by the absence of fear: “What are some of the emotional absences in the state’s memorial spaces? … Why is it that fear is usually missing in the affective mnemonics of memorial sites which, after all, are signifiers of some of the most horrific violence of human history?” (White, p. 54). Rather than focusing on the fear that narratives and images of terror might evoke, White asks us to attend to the ways that the state and its power are constructed and projected in the memorials that abound in the federal core.

With White’s reflections, we are brought back to the tangle of fear and nostalgia that Mickey Mouse’s D.C. appearance heralded. Memorials—even at their most banal—work by displacing fear and anxiety, by shifting it to the past, to an already-resolved and sometimes triumphalist moment. Such sites loom large in spatial narratives of national belonging. When visual and proxemic access to these spaces is interrupted or destroyed, we feel those absences as profound losses. Equally powerful and affecting, are the reminders of terror that, in the context of capitalism’s creative destruction, have come to organize daily space-making practices and spatial logics, organizing our movements, fixing our boundaries, branding our desires and memories. The new landscapes of fear—spaces of exclusion, surveillance, terrorist threat and counter-insurgency—seem to protect democracy only by dismantling it, by keeping us at ever greater distances from what its iconic spaces seem to promise.
Notes

2http://www.itcdec.com/about.php
3New York City was also the inspiration for Cindi Katz, a geographer whose paper could not be included in this special section. She reflected on the banality with which references to terror are cloaked and on its routinization in the geographies of everyday urban and domestic life, especially since 9/11. Her presentation examined the stealth reminders (and reinforcers) of terror in the landscape, in everyday talk, and in our embodied social practices and argued that practices such as camouflaging, bunkerizing, and fortressing not only obscure the social relations that call them forth, but also mark the repression of deeper issues of insecurity spurred by neoliberal global capitalism. She maintained that with this repression comes acquiescence to state violence and a failure to redress sources of this insecurity. Katz’s presentation was excerpted from her article, “Banal Terrorism: Spatial Fetishism and Everyday Insecurity,” forthcoming in Gregory and Pred.

References cited

Gregory, Derek and Allan Pred, eds.