“Restored to What Was Planned By Washington”: Theodore Roosevelt and the White House Renovation of 1902

By Bill Morales
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In 1902, during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, the White House underwent an extensive renovation by the noted architect Charles Follen McKim. The facts of this renovation are well known and thoroughly documented by the White House historian, William Seale, as well as in more recent works.¹ The purpose of this article is not to contest the facts nor the architectural or artistic insights of these earlier studies. Rather, the question posed here is more along the lines of intellectual history, namely: why did this restoration happen at this particular time and in certain particular ways? And, therefore, what challenges did it present for those involved with the renovation of the White House.² The intent is to place the history of the City of Washington – in this particular case, the White House – within the context of larger historical ideas, trends, and states of mind that characterized late nineteenth century American society.

Beginning in the 1880s, the executive branch of the federal government began to regain the prestige it had lost as a result of the Johnson impeachment, the political scandals of the Grant era, and the controversial presidential election of 1876. In the 1890s a succession of chief executives took steps to free the presidency from the proprietary grip of both Congress and the public. It was indeed an opportune time for chief executives to demand greater control over their own space. A growing list of issues --anti-trust legislation, civil service reform, and immigration policy -- now regularly crossed the president’s desk. By the end of the decade, the President’s administrative duties included overseeing an overseas empire. But the move toward making changes in the look and uses of the White House was also in keeping with what was, by then, the ethos of an industrial capitalist society, which required disciplined, systematic work and exhibited less tolerance for physical and emotional discomfort.³
A White House renovation at this time was propitious for yet another reason. As Michael Kammen explains, “a renaissance of patriotism … began to be manifest in the late 1880s.” America was consumed with “centennial fever.” Evacuation Day, the U.S. Constitution, and the first inauguration of George Washington were all the subject of joyous and elaborate celebrations in 1883, 1887 and 1889, respectively. Feeling the constraints of urban, middle class culture, native-born Americans looked established a sense of continuity with the pre-modern culture of the Founders. The Washington Monument, completed in 1885, had become a major tourist attraction. There was talk of reviving Washington’s idea of national university in the nation’s capital. Writing in The Century in 1896, Frank L. McVey noted that the study of U.S. history had been growing steadily in colleges and secondary schools. That same year saw the chartering by Congress of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. 4

Yet, while “centennial” fever provided the impetus for making alterations in the Executive Mansion, it also inspired an outcry from would-be traditionalists who demanded that there be no changes from George Washington’s original vision of the President’s House. 5 So, the question: how did one create an Executive Mansion suitable for the leader of a rising world capitalist power, one that also responded to the late nineteenth century ethos of rationalization and comfort, while, at the same time, remaining faithful to a heroic past? After a couple of false starts, this question was answered, after a fashion, by Charles McKim’s renovation of Theodore Roosevelt’s White House in 1902.
George Washington envisioned a strong executive presence in the new federal government. But he also knew that Americans, having gained their independence from Great Britain, looked askance at anything in their leaders that suggested the actions or trappings of a closeted monarch. Thus, as the first President of the United States, Washington agonized over how to achieve a balance between “association with all kinds of company on the one hand and from total seclusion from Society on the other.”

Those that succeeded him and actually lived in the White House faced the same dilemma, even more so. Presidents with varying degrees of forbearance submitted to rituals established during Washington’s presidency at New York and Philadelphia -- the throwing open of the Executive Mansion on New Year’s Day, as well as public receptions and state dinners. From the 1820s onward, as the democratic impulse took hold, the Executive Mansion became less and less the President’s House and more and more the province of the congressmen, lobbyists, and curiosity seekers who descended upon it. By the end of the nineteenth century, achieving a balance between total access and the “dignity of the office” – a question that went to the core of Washington’s concern with the “national character” -- had become all the more urgent.

Since Ulysses S. Grant in the 1870s, American presidents had found it convenient to escape from the White House for extended visits on the Atlantic seacoast at Long Branch or Cape May, New Jersey. But they could not ignore the official social season in the City of Washington, and, from December through February, they soldiered through the White House receptions (known as “levees” in Washington’s time). On such occasions, the first floor of the White House accommodated everything
from coats and hats, to musicians, the reception party, and the promenade of visitors. As ex-President Benjamin Harrison recalled, “the visitors make known their names to the President, or pass with a handshake without introduction – often at the rate of forty or fifty a minute.” The discomfort was not just the President’s. At one New Year’s Day reception, six to eight thousand waited on the north portico in freezing weather for the chance to greet Harrison. “Some of them weakened by fatigue and with costumes awry, are shot through the door by the pressure from behind, in a dazed condition, and pass the President, without seeing him.” Such doings obviously added nothing to the dignity of the office that George Washington believed crucial to forming a “national character.”

The demands on a president’s time, and the discomfort it caused, did not end there. Like the myriad of flowers that arrived each day at the White House from the observatory on the west grounds, presidents were constantly on display. Years earlier, President Millard Fillmore was accused of anti-democratic tendencies for having the temerity of installing a private water closet in the White House. Despite growing recognition of the President’s plight, visitors continued to invade his privacy without impunity. The crowds came to their back door and peeped into the kitchens, interviewing servants, walking about the “palace,” and commenting on the furniture. The Washington columnist Frank Carpenter wryly commented on the lack of presidential privacy. “As we came up through the handsome porte cochere we looked over the iron railing and saw the President’s servants ironing his night shirts and other unmentionable garments in the laundry of the basement.” All this had a sense of the carnivalesque, a world turned upside down.
Visitors to Washington were more likely to linger over the sights on the first floor of the White House. In 1883, President Chester A. Arthur had a Tiffany screen installed in the vestibule. Combined with the arabesque wall treatment and multi-colored floor, the Tiffany screen gave the White House the appearance of what one critic called a “fashionable bar at a large hotel.”10 The comparison of the White House to an American hotel is not off the mark. George Washington had bitterly recalled how during the Confederation era the residence of the President of Congress had been regarded “in perfect contempt.” His table had been “considered a public one, and every person who could get introduced to the President, conceived that he had a right to be envited [sic] to it.” As President, living in New York City, Washington simply would not allow himself to be treated as a “Maitre de Hotel.” It was this concern with the “dignity to the office” that led Washington to formulate a middle ground between “total seclusion” and “association with all kinds of company.”11

By the 1820s, however, hotels in the United States had acquired a public character that could not be denied. Unlike their more discreetly situated counterparts in Europe, “the public house in the United States was a peculiarly American institution,” purposely designed to resemble a public structure. Monumental in structure, designed by professional architects, their cornerstones placed to coincide with historical events, the new first-hotels of the 1820s were public and democratic in nature. These “palaces of the public” catered to any white, free, male and family who could afford entry, shocking European visitors with their lack of deference.12 In a sense, the Executive Mansion had come to be treated the same fashioned, the first floor of the President’s
The often slight regard for what George Washington called the “dignity of office,” had a more ominous side as well. In June 1872, Richard F. Jones, a native of Prince George’s County, Maryland, burst into the Executive Mansion demanding to see Ulysses S. Grant. When told the President was away, Jones directed that a telegraph message be sent commanding his return from the Jersey Shore. He intended to “whip” Grant and replace him with the Pope in Rome. At the New Year’s reception in January 1880, Henry C. De Ahna, recently denied an appointment as customs collector at Sitka, Alaska, was physically removed after causing a commotion in the Blue Room. Even President James A. Garfield’s assassination in 1881 did not appreciatively improve security. On July 4, 1886, a man got on his hands and knees in the White House vestibule and was overheard praying to God to give him the strength to kill President Grover Cleveland, the national holiday being a propitious time to commit the deed. Presidents Harrison, Cleveland (again), and McKinley all suffered from unwanted intruders and cranks who disturbed their dinners and sleep, if not their person.¹³

On a day to day basis, the occasional madman was the least of a President’s worries. As Benjamin Harrison remembered, congressmen and senators pounced on him with a myriad of requests no matter how early he got to his desk. And, despite civil service reform, office seekers still scaled the stairs to his second floor office, like salmon swimming upstream to nest. Even the most trivial cases came before the President. In 1891, an Army cadet penetrated the presidential portal and asked Harrison to rescind disciplinary action taken against him at West Point. The presidential staff, which by the
1890 consisted of a private secretary, six clerks, two doorkeepers, and four messengers, was simply not large enough to handle the ever expanding business of government – much less ward off every intruder. That many of the staff worked in cramped quarters ("two large rooms and three very small rooms") on the second floor of the Executive Mansion also did nothing to enhance the comfort or privacy of the President and his family. A glass partition separated the private quarters on the west side from the executive offices on the east.\textsuperscript{14} Given the myriad of problems – time, comfort, safety – in the 1880s, plans for a White House renovation were bruited about, but no action taken.

II

The first plan to receive serious public attention came during the presidency of Benjamin Harrison (1889-93). Harrison was an energetic chief executive who pointed the way to the modern presidency.\textsuperscript{15} Coming into office one hundred years after the inauguration of George Washington, he tried to create a stronger executive presence in the national capital. But as we have seen, Harrison was constantly at the mercy of what he called "the evil combination" of private and public duties, which left little time for private reflection or even rest. A total renovation of the White House was needed, and, for this purpose, the President turned to the First Lady, Caroline Scott Harrison.

At the outset of the 1890s, "centennial fever" was sweeping over the City of Washington. Caroline Harrison was immersed in the nostalgic spirit of the times, having been selected as the first president general of the National Society of the Daughters of
the American Revolution when it was established in 1890. One of the major goals of the DAR was the “securing and preserving of the historical spots of America.” The heightened with historical shrines led the First Lady to promote the long delayed restoration of the White House. The plan she developed, in collaboration with the engineer and amateur architect Frederic D. Owen, however, could not be called in any sense a restoration. Indeed, the plan for the radical enlargement of the White House. The “historic features” of the Executive Mansion would be preserved, but little else in the exterior would remain the same. Two new wings of roughly of the same dimension would be added on either side of the White House, architecturally similar in design to the original pile. The conservatory, which had occupied the west grounds since the 1850s, would be moved to a less conspicuous place on the south side, thus completing a quadrangle of buildings.

The Harrison plan’s radical departure from the “chaste and simple” building approved by George Washington a century earlier seems at odds with the current dedication to preserving and securing historical shrines. Americans, however, were no longer living in the age of Washington – or even Lincoln. Indeed, profound economic, social, and cultural changes that characterized post-Civil War America. Due to the predominance of rail travel in the 1870s, the colloquial phrase, to be “on time,” was beginning to gain currency. Time was no longer to be “passed;” it was to be “spent.” Time clock featured in offices and factories for the first time in the 1890s. This new way of thinking about time was accompanying by a growing intolerance for physical and emotional discomfort. George Pullman’s “vestibule” train had become just another example of the “democratization of luxury” in fin de siècle America. Both the new
conception of time and the greater awareness of discomfort were products of the “bureaucratic imperative” that sustained the growth of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸

That “bureaucratic imperative” is suggested in the Harrison’s plan. The new additions on either side of the original White House would mark a clearer demarcation between the functional and ceremonial duties of the American presidency, as well as provide a greater degree of privacy for the presidential family. There is also a hint of this “bureaucratic imperative” in the Chicago Tribune’s reaction to the changes in the White House proposed by the Harrison plan. Perhaps, the Tribune remarked, one would no longer have to endure the waste of time and excruciating discomfort of presidential receptions; it would not take one hour to traverse the distance between the front door of the White House and the Blue Room where President Harrison stood receiving guests. In the Harrison plan, the new east wing would address these issues of time and space. As the Washington Star explained, “The entire tour of this uninterrupted series of salons, anterooms, corridors, rotundas, conservatories, and would avoid the confusion of returning by the same way.” Presumably, it would no longer take two and one half hours to clear the White House following a presidential reception.¹⁹

A publicity campaign was launched promoting the Harrisons’ White House plan. One of its most fervent admirers, California’s Leland Stanford, Senate chairman of the Committee on Buildings and Grounds, introduced it in Congress on January 9, 1891. Noting that the Executive Mansion “is no long adequate for the accommodation of the public and private requirements of the Executive Department,” as well as its “decayed
and dangerous condition,” the Stanford bill called for a renovation of the White House not to exceed $950,000. With a bow toward “centennial fever,” work on the White House was expected to commence on October 13, 1892, the centennial anniversary of the laying of the Executive Mansion cornerstone as well as the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America.20

The Harrison Plan, however, was destined to have a short shelf life. But by the time the Stanford bill was introduced, the Republicans had lost control of Congress. The new Democratic majority, which had come to power lambasting the lavish spending of the so-called “Billion Dollar Congress,” was not inclined to look favorably on the Harrison plan. Caroline Harrison, the driving force behind the project, was in declining health and died in the White House of tuberculosis on October 13, 1892, about two weeks after the cornerstone was supposed to be laid.21 The new President, Grover Cleveland presented a plan, but it too failed to secure congressional support. The financial panic that gripped the nation during Cleveland’s second term, and which had brought Jacob Coxley’s ragtag army of supplicants to Washington in search of federal relief, perhaps was not an opportune time to entertain an enlargement of the White House. The idea, said the New York Times, did not “appear to strike a popular chord.”22

However, even if the Republicans had maintained control Congress or Caroline Harrison had lived, or there had been no Panic of 1893, there is still reason to doubt that the Harrison plan would have survived intact. The “renaissance of patriotism” that swept the nation starting in the 1880s had hardly abated by the mid-1890s. If anything, the cultural role of sacred symbols had become even more prevalent. Pilgrimages to American historical shrines were the vogue, among the Washington Monument. Those
engaged in the business of preserving historical buildings lived at a time of bitter conflict between labor and capital, growing immigration, and populist sentiment in the countryside. Like others in the Western World facing many of the same problems during this period, native-born Americans wished to use they create a narrative out of a “built environment” that stressed continuity, stability, and familiarity. Despite the obvious improvements in the uses of time and space, and the greater comfort and privacy afforded the presidential family, the additions on either side of the White House hardly evoked continuity, stability, and familiarity. (Indeed, the Cleveland plan corresponded to Hoban’s architectural details and evoked the emerging Beaux Arts classicism). And, as we shall see, a revised version of the Harrison plan would meet vigorous opposition from those who wished no deviation from James Hoban’s original “classic design” of the White House.23

III

The United States regained its economic footing in the late 1890s. The idea of enlarging the White House was revived by the presidential administration of William McKinley (1897-1901). According to a recent biographer, Kevin Phillips, not since Abraham Lincoln had a more skilled political tactician occupied the White House. As President during the Spanish-American War, McKinley presided over the acquisition of an overseas empire that saw the emergence of the United States as a world power. In both his dealings with Congress and his foreign policy, McKinley enlarged the sphere of the executive branch, promoting what George Washington called a “national character.”
The President also took greater control over his own space, reducing the number of callers to the White House. Office seekers and even congressmen found that the new President would not be as accessible as his predecessors had been. McKinley also brought the “bureaucratic imperative” to the executive branch of government. His secretary, George Bruce Courtelyou, devised a handbook for head ushers and White House staff. It covered everything the admission of congressional dons to the handling of peddlers outside the Executive Mansion. An increased White House staff, coupled with the newest communications technology, helped to create what Phillips calls the first “modern presidency.”

McKinley wanted a modern White House as well.

On December 12, 1900, the City of Washington celebrated the centennial of the arrival of the federal government on the Potomac. The highlight of the expansive public celebration was a military parade observed by McKinley from the reviewing stand on east front of the Capitol. Later, inside the House of Representatives, “a brilliant audience” assembled to hear orations commemorating the event. Earlier that day, the President hosted a breakfast reception at the White House for cabinet members, Supreme Court justices, and twenty-one state governors. The East Room, the Red, Green, and Blue parlors, as well as corridors and staircases were festooned with flowers and foliage plants, which in the flood of electric lights “presented a spectacle of rare beauty.” Afterward breakfast, Colonel Theodore Bingham, the Superintendent of Public Buildings, unveiled a plaster model showing the renovations contemplated for the Executive Mansion. Bingham’s model was a modified version of Caroline Harrison’s 1891 plan (one of the people he consulted was the First Lady’s collaborator, Frederick D. Owen). Bingham’s plan would keep the rotunda-like extensions while eliminating the
rectangular wings of the Harrison plan. The restored east wing extension would house a reception room connecting to the original East Room. The passageways between buildings would be utilized as office space.  

Colonel Bingham had no sooner unveiled his plan for the enlargement of the White House, than it encountered formidable opposition. By 1900 a new professional class of city planners was heavily promoting “the city beautiful” movement in the City of Washington. Launched at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893, the movement had lain dormant during the recession years only to emerge full-blown in the more heady days of the McKinley Administration. Prominent members of the influential American Institute of Architects captured the attention of powerful senatorial dons. One of these was Michigan Senator James McMillan, the chairman of the Committee on the District of Columbia. McMillan also presided over the Washington Park Commission and was the nominal author of the McMillan Plan charged with completing Peter Charles L’Enfant plan of the Washington Mall. The Commission (which included architects Daniel Burnham and Charles Follen McKim, and landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.) aimed to realize the original intent of the L’Enfant of the monumental core, approved by Washington in 1791. The commissioners and their allies in Congress frowned on any changes of the public buildings in Washington that departed from the “original” vision of George Washington. 

The day after he unveiled his model at the Centennial celebration breakfast, the American Institute of Architects gathered at the Arlington Hotel on Lafayette Square across from the Executive Mansion. The meeting produced a resolution asking Congress to rely on the “education and experience” of the experts when contemplating
changes in the public buildings, such as the White House. The *New York Times* stated it more bluntly, poking fun at the architectural “trade union” which had taken it upon itself to warn the American people of the nefarious actions of “a ring of army engineers, conspiring “to vandalize the venerable mansion.” Bingham argued that his plan would leave the President’s House “absolutely unchanged,” the second-story wings were merely an extension of James Hoban’s original scheme, one fully approved by George Washington. The *New York Times* agreed, pointing out that Hoban’s building would be “kept absolutely intact …additions made to it are upon the lines which are distinctly indicated in the actual building, in which the necessary lines for future extension is clearly recognized.”

*The Times* had a point. George Washington had a vision of the President’s House – and it was a very practical one. He believed that the Executive Mansion “in size, form, and elegance, should look beyond the present day.” According to Washington, “A plan comprehending more may be executed at a future period when the wealth, population, and importance of it shall stand upon higher ground than they do at present.” America was now on the pinnacle of world power; it required a White House in conformity with both the needs and spirit of the times. But Bingham, like Frederick Owen before him, was by profession an engineer, not an architect. Post-Civil War America was characterized by the rise of professional organizations, its members eager to banish “amateurs and charlatans, from scholarship, law, and medicine. “Like other cultural enterprises,” says historian Jackson Lears, “artistic connoisseurship became professionalized.” Through the efforts of the AIA, Congress passed the Tarsney Act in 1893, which allowed professional architects to plan future government buildings via a
competition not unlike that won by James Hoban in 1793. Following the 1900
convention, the AIA and other artistic organizations launched a nation-wide campaign
against it. The restoration of the White House, they charged, should be left to the
professionals who understood the first President’s original intent much better than
amateurs like Colonel Bingham or Frederick Owen.\textsuperscript{29}

The professionals got their way. Swayed by the A.I.A., Senator McMillan turned
against the “monstrous” Bingham plan.\textsuperscript{30} In September, 1901 an assassin’s bullet
ended William McKinley’s tenure in the White House. The task of renovating the
Executive Mansion now fell in the lap of Vice-President Theodore Roosevelt and his
architect of choice, Charles Follen McKim.

IV

The popular view of Theodore Roosevelt is that of a force of nature, a vigorous
proponent of the strenuous life; as John Higham puts it, “the outstanding fugleman of
the whole gladiatorial spirit.” T.R. was the pugilist who brought boxing into the White
House, his very name emblematic of the jingoism of 1890s America. Such a man might
be expected to defy the “bureaucratic imperative” began in the Executive Mansion by
President McKinley and his aide, George Courtelyou. So, it is, in a way ironic that the
renovation of the White House undertaken by the architect Charles Follen McKim in
1902, with its added comfort, safety, and routinization of time, was carried out on behalf
of a President famously known as the “Rough Rider” and who was widely sneered at for
his supposed lack of self-control.\textsuperscript{31} But this is simply a caricature of the twenty-sixth
President – one, frankly, that he himself promoted. Roosevelt would push the Executive
Mansion forward into modernity – it was he who officially renamed it “The White House.” And, most importantly, he would do it by folding the alterations wrought by McKim in the folds of tradition.

As President, one of Theodore Roosevelt’s major goals was to assert the presence of the executive branch in national affairs, and, for this, the White House would be his stage. Over the years there had been talk of turning the White House into staff offices and constructing a new Executive Mansion elsewhere in the city. Roosevelt readily embraced the Commission’s proposal for maintaining the White House on the spot originally chosen by the first President. The Executive Mansion, however, was nevertheless in dire need of renovation. The first floor of the White House, with its heavy Victorian décor, resembled a “shabby likeness to the ground floor of the Astor House.” The inherited provided scant comfort. The western end of the second floor was reserved for the offices and lodgings of sundry secretaries. The family quarters on the west side of the second floor had only one state guest room and two water closets; one was for the presidential couple; guests and everyone else shared the other. Roosevelt loved to entertain, but official receptions and dinners still presented the same nightmare of over­crowding that bedeviled Benjamin Harrison. The question first posed by George Washington – how to balance “association with all kinds of company” and “total seclusion – demanded attention.

Loosening the Congressional purse strings for improvements demanded a dutiful bow toward two powerful senatorial dons. One of these was the aforementioned James McMillan, who headed of the Senate District of Columbia Committee and was the driving force behind the Park Commission’s recovery of the L’Enfant plan. The other
was McMillan’s crony, William Boyd Allison of Iowa, chieftain of the Senate Appropriations Committee. When the question of White House renovations came up in the Senate in the spring of 1902, Allison demanded that there “be no change from the original structure of the house, nor any interference with the architectural features of the exterior.”

Clearly, any White House renovation project called for an architect who would champion a neo-classical approach that suggested the era of George Washington. Roosevelt found such a person in Charles Follen McKim. A partner in the New York-based architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White, McKim was an ideal choice in a number of ways. A passionate advocate of the Georgian-Federalist revival, the fifty-four year old architect had amply demonstrated his formidable skills in the design of Columbia University and the Harvard Club of New York, as well as projects in Washington, D.C. itself. Moreover, McKim was a well-known figure on Capitol Hill, having served as a member of the Senate Park Commission charged with renovating the National Mall. In April 1902 McKim met with the President and First Lady Edith Roosevelt to discuss ideas for the remodeling of the White House. During the course of their discussion, McKim impressed the Roosevelts with the need for a total renovation of the Executive Mansion. Due to the architect’s influence with Senators McMillan and Allison, T.R. was able to get senatorial approval for the restoration of the White House. A $475,445 appropriation was made for the White House itself; another $65,196 was authorized for the construction of a temporary executive office building on the west side of the White House (a permanent building was planned across the street near Lafayette Square).
And so began, what Glenn Brown, an architect who served as McKim, Mead, and White’s representative in the District of Columbia and who superintended the renovation of the White House, called “the first battle in a large and successful campaign to revive our first President’s ideal of the nation’s capital.” The “battle” was waged between July and December 1902 (to McKim’s chagrin, the White House living quarters completed by November 1). In fighting the battle T.R. and McKim resorted to a Fabian strategy. The building schedule conformed to the congressional recess; improvements at the White House were best carried out without the prying eyes of the legislative branch, particularly House Appropriations Committee Chairman Joseph Cannon. And a smart idea it was because, as William Seale, the historian of the White House, notes, what McKim wrought was not a restoration. It was rather a renovation of the White House that sought to evoke a sense of continuity with a heroic past while, at the same time accommodating the “bureaucratic imperative” of American industrial capitalism.

On the first floor, Charles McKim endeavored to give the White House a look that evoked memories of George Washington’s time. As William Seale notes, “Traditional simplicity was preserved and enhanced.” Gone would be the Tiffany screen in the vestibule, the arabesque wall treatment, and multi-colored floor. James Hoban’s arcade of marble Ionic columns once again graced the entrance hall. Hoban’s plaster architectural decorations in the East Room also survived, but not the thick curtains and heavy upholstered look that spoke of bourgeois restraint. McKim’s design suggested the heroic past of George Washington -- but only to a point. The Federal interior was replaced by a more elaborate Georgian look. Corinthian pilasters were interspersed in the East Room. A new State Dining Room, thirty per cent larger, raised sitting capacity
from 61 to 107. T.R. congratulated himself on the “patriotic services” he had rendered with the McKim renovation of the White House renovation. The White House no longer looked “shabby likeness to the ground floor of the Astor House,” but rather resembled as he told his friend Maria Longworth Storer, “a into a simple and dignified dwelling for the head of a great republic.”

But the dilemma that plagued George Washington – balancing “association with all kinds of company” versus “total seclusion” in a republic that demanded constant exposure – still required a solution. From this standpoint, what is most interesting about the renovation is the way in which McKim re-thought the traffic flow in and out of the White House. The north and south porticos, which had traditionally been accessible to members of Congress and the general public, would be reserved for the presidential family and special guests. Social callers and other appointments would be restricted to the east gate entrance, which McKim fashioned by extending Latrobe’s original colonnade built in the early 1800s (Jefferson, not Washington, was the source of inspiration in this instance). It would no longer be so easy for visitors to amble about the White House rooms, taking note of presidential tastes. With Edith Roosevelt’s secretary, Isabelle Hagner presiding as “sort of head aide, general manager, and superintendent,” the President’s sisters were now required to make appointments.

The White House receptions were now subject to the new rationalization of space and time. These new uses of space would also apply to traditional ceremonies, such as State dinners at the White House. Special guests entered through the south portico, passing through the refurbished basement oval room, through the long vaulted corridor, and then up the elevator to the State Rooms. The first White House reception under the
new order accommodated 2,000 persons. Visitors entered the White House from the east gate entrance; then passed through the refurbished vaulted basement corridor, shedding their coats and wraps to “polite Negroes” who placed them in the 2,500 storage boxes specifically created for this purpose. The promenade continued up a broad flight of stone steps to the East Room. From there, they advanced from the Green Room to the Blue Room (passing through this succession of barriers manned by police guards), where they encountered the presidential party. Having shaken T.R.’s hand, visitors passed to the Red Room and State Dining Room, out into the entrance hall, down the stairway once again, where they recovered their garments in the east wing basement. Ellen Slayden, the wife of a Texas congressman, noted the improvements in comfort and conservation of time that McKim’s changes brought to the New Year’s receptions. The “glacial period” on the “North porch,” when the winds flayed visitors through the open doors as they awaited entry into the White House, was a thing of the past. Inevitably, the architect’s rethinking of the traffic flow of the White House was not universally praised. Writing in Collier’s Magazine in February 1903, the satirist “Mr. Dooley” complained that McKim had arranged it so that guests entered through th’ laundhry an’ proceeded up through th’ ash chute to a pint where they were packed up to be a autmatic distrhrhibutor and disthributed – th’ leg in the east room, th’ arms in the west room … a handsome calcimated packin’ case.”

The reaction of “Mr. Dooley alerts us to the fact that the look and uses of the geography of the White House was very much in tune with the ethos of an industrial capitalist society, which required disciplined, systematic work. Indeed, Charles McKim brought to the Roosevelt White House the impulse for efficiency to the White House
often associated with the captains of industry. To be sure, men such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. were often destructive of natural resources, guilty of acts of gross abuse toward their workers, actions that would galvanize Progressives like Roosevelt. Yet as the economic historian Alfred Chandler reminds us, Carnegie’s dominance of the steel industry originated in “his imaginative transferal to manufacturing of administrative methods and controls developed on the railroads.” Indeed, industrial managers were always looking to increase production by arranging products and workers in more efficient ways, or what some processors called “throughput.” It was the mastery of “throughput” that led to Rockefeller’s ascendancy in the petroleum industry in the 1870s. As a result McKim’s re-arrangement of the traffic flow in and out of the Executive Mansion, these modern business methods became part of the modern presidency. Perhaps the best example of this process in the White House came on January 1, 1907 when Roosevelt greeted visitors entering the east gate for the traditional New Year’s celebration. According to one newspaper account, he shook 8,150 hands in a mere three hours – “through-put” indeed. 

The growing size of the executive branch, couple with industrial capitalism’s ethos of greater comfort and attention to time, required a removal of the presidential staff from the second floor of the White House, leaving it for the exclusive use of the presidential family. To accommodate the staff, Charles McKim constructed a one hundred by fifty foot structure to accommodate the executive offices. The new West Wing office included a Cabinet Room (first used on November 6, 1902) and an office for the President. The new Executive Office building on the west wing with its white brick was rendered in the same neo-Georgian style as the White House proper.
During the Gilded Age American enterprise had been transformed as family-run businesses were replaced by huge enterprises supervised by a new army of middle managers. With the building of the West Wing middle management came to the White House in place as well fact. McKim placed the private secretary's office purposely at the building's central axis. Although he also created an office for the President and built a new cabinet room in the Executive Office Building, during Roosevelt’s presidency the West Wing was more the domain of the president's staff. The President continued to see callers on the second floor office (the revamped Cabinet Room). Conscious of the symbolic importance of the White House, he also utilized it for ceremonial signings. The Oval Office did not yet exist, its present site occupied by T.R.’s tennis court – a nod toward the strenuous life, and, perhaps, a reaction or accommodation, a reaction against routinization of life of White House.

The chief victims of the West Wing construction were the conservatory and greenhouses that had stood in this spot since the 1850s. For over four decades they had stood in quaint defiance, an escape from what the great transcendentalist author, Ralph Waldo Emerson, called the “invasion of Nature by Trade with its money, its steam, and its railroad.” But as Jackson Lears observes, by the end of the nineteenth century “the machinery of production and distribution” necessitated “the habits of mind that had marginalized matriarchal values in the first place: the commitment to technical rationality and systematic productivity, the disdain for genuine leisure and idle curiosity.” Thus, although the Roosevelts regretted the loss, by the end of the summer of 1902 the dear old observatory and greenhouses would be gone, victims of the “railroad principle.”
This new sense of space and time also applied to the day-to-day routine of the White House. In the summer of 1902 the White House staff consisted of 27 secretaries, and clerks, five doorkeepers, and seven messengers. Roosevelt’s private secretary, George Courtelyou, inherited from McKinley, revamped rules and procedures, codified in two booklets, defined job descriptions and office protocol. Roosevelt’s longtime friend and fellow Harvard alumnus, William Roscoe Thayer, noted the difference between the White House in President Arthur’s day and the new changes instituted by Roosevelt. In his earlier visit in the early 1880s, congressman and office seekers treated the Executive Mansion as if it were a “common resort.” By contrast, in the restored White House the doorkeeper, armed with a printed list of senators and congressmen, dutifully controlled the flow of people in the door. No one got to see the President without first encountering Courtelyou’s successor as private secretary, William Loeb. The new system was not without its problems; at times, it was hard to tell the difference between “the pillar of state” and the “private citizen.” But this sense of “orderliness” remained for it was exactly what the Chief Executive wanted. As New York Times reporter William Bayard Hale, who spent a week in the White House, put it: “The popular idea of [Roosevelt] scarcely credits the President with a sense of order. It is, in point of fact, one of his most marked characteristics … His sense of the importance of time is the basis of his fondness for railroad men.”

The new West Wing invited attacks. Congressional critics called it “a carriage factory,” a “barn,” and a “chicken coop,” angering Charles McKim, who had remained mindful of Congress’s admonition “that the nation’s historic house should be kept intact” and intended the building as only a temporary measure. The new Executive Office was
destined to become a permanent feature of American life. Set lower and further back from the White House proper, the West Wing, as it is now popularly known, was meant to remain in the background. The architect Charles Moore, writing in *Century Magazine* in April 1903 observed: “To the American people the White House represents the personality of the president of the United States … Popularly speaking,” the White House is the place not where the President works, but where he entertains … To the great majority, statecraft is a closed book.”49

For the politicians, office seekers, and merely curious who once roam freely through the Executive Mansion might say that the entire White House was now a “closed book.” In the 1820s the spirit of democracy – at least the democracy of white native-born males – had washed over the land. More and more, the President’s House became the people’s house. Charles McKim’s renovation, with its emphasis on order, efficiency, and comfort, would put an end to the White House as a “first class hotel. As Constance McLaughlin notes, almost any well-mannered white person could still wangle an invitation to White House reception.” But the days when the White House was the equivalent of a public house were over. Thus, “While the ramparts are theirs to stroll around, the citadel itself is as securely barricaded against them as though it were the Austrian court.”50 The new White House had now only answered George Washington’s original dilemma. It was also the harbinger of the imperial presidency. Of course, this is not how Theodore Roosevelt explained it. According to the President, the Executive Mansion had been shorn of the “incongruous additions and changes” to which it had been subjected over the years and had finally been “restored to what it was planned by Washington.”51
NOTES


7 Washington believed that Americans had to establish a “national character.” By this he meant two things: first, give up their parochial sentiments and embrace the new “general” government; second, steer clear as much as possible of foreign influences. Failure to do so, Washington believed, would result in the denigration of the Union and the eventual demise of the political structure that he and his fellow members of the founding generation had worked so hard to create. These sentiments were expressed over and over again, most famously in his Circular to the States (also known as Washington’s Legacy) and in his Farewell Address. In my book, The Small Bag of Folly, I argue that for Washington, a strong executive presence in the new Federal Republic, both functional and symbolic, was necessary to promote a “national character.” “Circular to the States,” June 8, 1783, “Farewell Address, September 19, 1796, “John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., The Writings of George Washington, 39 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931-44), 26: 486, 35: 231.

8 Benjamin Harrison, “The Social Life of the President,” Ladies Home Journal (April 1897); Brown, Memories, p. 113.


16 *Washington Post*, October 12, 1890.


29 Lears, No Place of Grace, pp. 187-88; Brown, Memories, p. 200.

30 Seale, The President’s House, 2: 654-56; Brown, Memories, p. 106.


32 Seale, The President’s House, 2: 654.


35 Seale, The President’s House, 2: 656; Moore, Life and Times, p. 205;


38 McKim, Restoration of the White House, p. 9; Roth, McKim, Mead, and White, pp. 252-53; Brown, “Enlargement of the White House,” passim. Brown, Memories, p. 103.

39 Roth, McKim, Mead, and White, pp. 269-70; Seale, The President’s House, 2: 662.


42 Seale, The President’s House, 2: 682, 699; Roth, McKim, Mead, and White, p. 270; Lawrence F. Abbott, ed., The Letters of Archie Butt, Personal Aide to President Roosevelt (Garden City, Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1924), pp. 53-54. McKim, Restoration of the White House, p. 9; Morris, Edith Kermit Roosevelt, p. 223; Brown, Memories, p 126.


45 McKim, Restoration of the White House, pp. 7, 21; Seale, The President’s House, 2: 681.

47 Lears, No Place of Grace, p. 7.


49 New York Times, February 15, 1903; McKim, Restoration of the White House, p. 9; Moore, "Restoration of the White House,"; Moore, Life and Times, p. 220.

