

lars rindsig's view from the right



In Washington DC you'll find a number of buildings used by various branches and institutions of the federal government. Famously, the White House on 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, some distance away from the Capitol area which hosts the Supreme Court, the Library of Congress and the United States Capitol itself, of course, with its dome, which is about as characteristic as the UK Houses of Parliament's clock tower. And like London's Whitehall, Washington's Capitol area also requires a number of office buildings for officials and public servants as well as parliamentarians.

Because the American government is big (both in terms of sheer head count as well as in the degree to which it busies itself with peoples' lives) it needs a lot of office space. Three ruddy big office blocks are located due south of the Capitol—Rayburn, Longworth and Cannon. They're big. They house a lot of people who, being government employees do silly things. But like other people they come to work in the morning and go home in the afternoon. For that purpose the public coffers have paid for a road network (which almost indubitably facilitates buses and taxis) as well as a very conveniently located underground Metrorail stop. And then there's some parking space. And then a bit of grass. To the west of the grass: some parking space. And to the south: there's some parking space.

As the Americans say: Hot diggety, mama, that's a lot of parking space. Now, keep in mind that this is the centre (both physically and metaphorically) of the perhaps most important city in the most important country in the world. Bubba, dat gon' be some dang expensive land. If, for no other reason, simply because it's next to a city centre railroad stop which, as we've seen, drives land prices up, up, up. And what's the best conceivable land use for the area that the planning authorities in Washington DC could come up with? Surface parking. Not a parking house, not underground parking below office buildings. Just a lot of tarmac with white stripes on it. Well, and a bit of grass.

Across from the government buildings, opposite the train station, lies the head office of the Republican Party. I don't know if that's significant, specifically. But this is: land is scarce and should be used effectively and in a way that is best for the community surrounding it. That's one reason land value taxation is a good idea—it makes it more inefficient, more cumbersome and more expensive to not utilise well-located land to its greatest potential. But—then there's government. And government wrecks things because it doesn't dare allow people to decide for themselves and because it doesn't trust the market as a reliable mechanism for expressing those decisions. Government at various levels wants to zone, plan or whichever cryptonym is in vogue to describe what's really going on: government wants to decide how land is used. And government does a poor job of it. The silly business seen around the Capitol is one example. There are many more. But really, isn't it so much more poignant when it's as obvious as this?

The market doesn't work when government is involved. But it works really rather well when people are involved. Government, whether at federal, national, regional or local level has no business interfering in how land is used. That privilege belongs to people and their community.