



Capital Speculations: Writing and Building Washington, D.C. (Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies)

Sarah Luria

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In this lively study, Sarah Luria pursues the vital political connection between architecture and literature in the formation in 1791 of America's grand new capital city. City planners believed that designing Washington, D.C. as a physical model of the Constitution and its balance of powers would help citizens bond with the newly created nation. Although wildly ambitious, this design was made feasible through financial speculation. Dazzled by the plans for an "American Rome," citizens would buy up its empty lots and make the nation's capital their home. Luria demonstrates how political and financial speculation combined to build Washington and, once established, how the capital became a stage for the visions of subsequent reformers.

Luria examines five political reformers and the Washington sites they used to promote their ideas: George Washington and the design of the "Federal City"; Abraham Lincoln and the enlargement of the Capitol dome during the Civil War; Walt Whitman and the capital's Civil War hospitals; Frederick Douglass and his impressive estate overlooking the Capitol; and Henry Adams and the double house that he built with poet-statesman John Hay on Lafayette Square. Although each author's work describes a different dynamic relationship between text and physical space, all five combine political speculation and marketplace psychology. They construct their visions and attract investment in them through their novelty, boldness, and extravagant scale.

Clarifying the dynamic relations among discourse, economics, politics, and the built environment, Luria's book demonstrates how keenly architectural history is interwoven into American literary and political life.

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