

context of the neighborhood

The Shaw neighborhood in Northwest Washington, DC is an area of both rich cultural heritage and dynamic change. The boundaries of Shaw are generally accepted to be Massachusetts Avenue and New York Avenue to the South, North Capitol Street to the East, Florida Avenue and U Street to the North, and 13th Street to the West. The neighborhood was home to Duke Ellington, and its U Street corridor is still at the center of Washington's jazz and performing arts culture. The neighborhood saw almost no new development for 40 years following race riots of the 1960's, until construction of a new convention center in Shaw in 1997 led to a surge in development. As with any urban development boom, gentrification is now the norm, quickly changing the demographics of this predominantly African American, predominantly working class neighborhood.³

3. Padro, Alex. Personal Interview. 29 August 2006.
Alex Padro is a community activist in Shaw, and serves as Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for a 16 block area of Shaw.

Neighborhood Plan

1. Massachusetts Ave.
2. New York Ave.
3. N. Capitol St.
4. Florida Ave.
5. U St.
6. 13th St.
7. 7th St. & Rhode Island Ave.

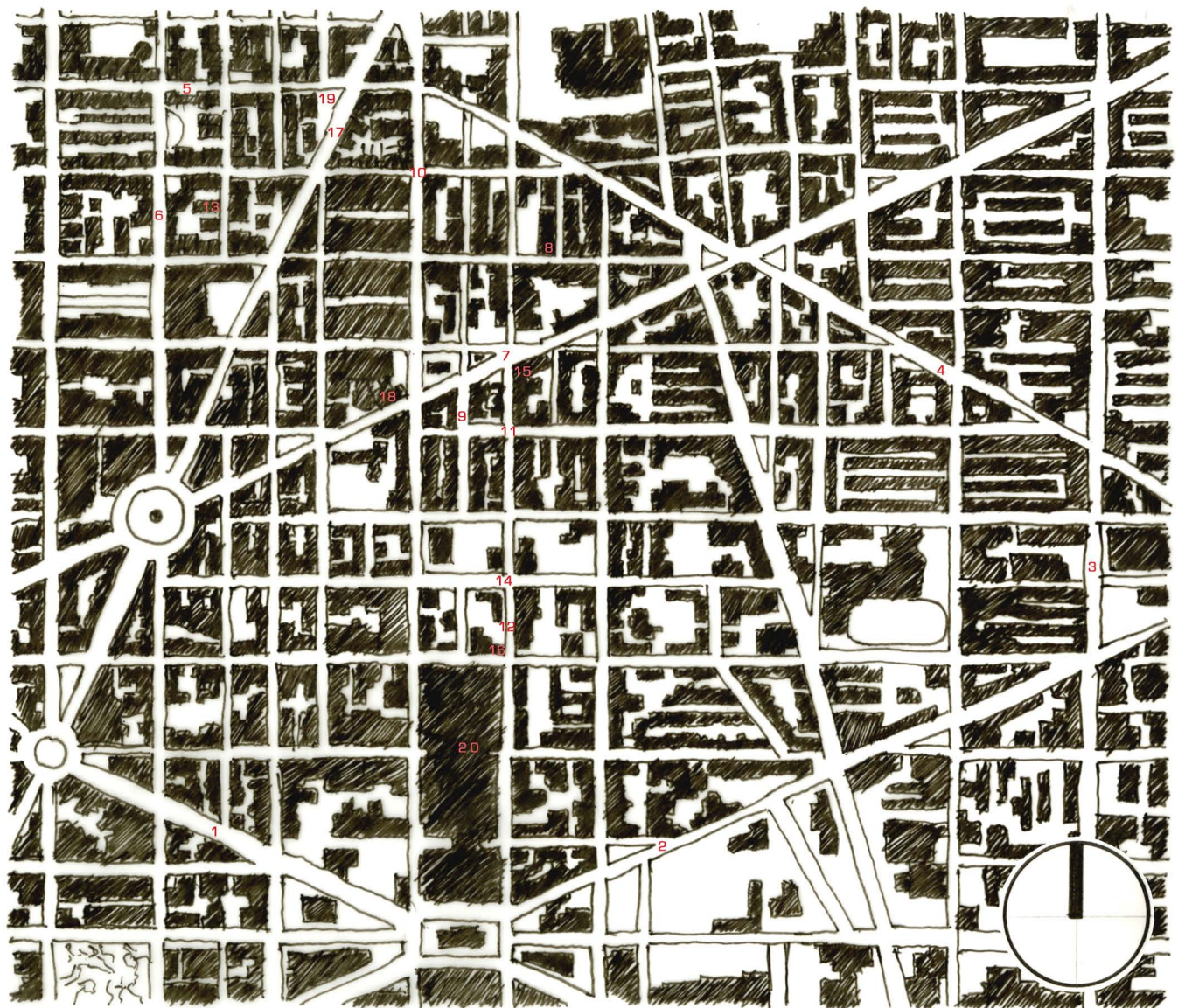
8. S St. & Wiltberger St.
9. 8th St., 1600 Block
10. 9th St., 2000 Block
11. 7th St., 1600 Block
12. 7th St., 1300 Block

13. Thurgood Marshall Center
14. O St. Market
15. Ashbury Dwellings

16. 7th St. Savings Bank

17. The Grimke School
18. Phyllis Wheatly YMCA

19. African American Civil War Memorial
20. Convention Center



Historically, commercial avenues in Shaw are lined with three to four story, mixed-use buildings that leave a minimal setback and are entered from the street level. In contrast, the majority of the neighborhood is made up of residential streets consisting of two to three story row houses whose main living levels are one-half story above the street, and are fronted by small yards. Alleys behind both commercial and residential buildings are utilized for deliveries and trash removal. In this long-established model, building heights remain consistent throughout the neighborhood, and buildings share a clear, purposeful relationship with the street. However, new development has introduced residential high-rises and single story businesses. Here, alleys give way to parking lots, blurring the intentions of a more traditional approach to urban design and adding a wide variety of scales to the experience of Shaw. Sections cut through various streets illustrate the multitude of scales at play in the neighborhood.

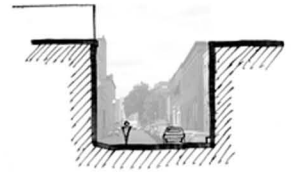
Wiltberger St.

8th St., 1600 Block

9th St., 2000 Block

7th St., 1600 Block

7th St., 1300 Block



The tradition of elevating the living floor of a residence above the street level, leaving space for an 'English basement' below, originates in the *palazzi* of the Italian Renaissance. The main level of these palaces, the *piano nobile*, consist of tall, grand reception spaces, with shallower living spaces above, and storage and servant spaces below.⁴ This trend of elevating the building's main floor is also prevalent in much of Shaw's civic architecture (see the Thurgood Marshall Center, a 1908 interpretation of an Italian palazzo).

In a place where buildings meet the street through such deliberate means, meeting an intersection presents a particularly special opportunity. Many buildings in Shaw that address intersections do so in the form of a tower, or some other shape that is sensitive to the corner's angle.

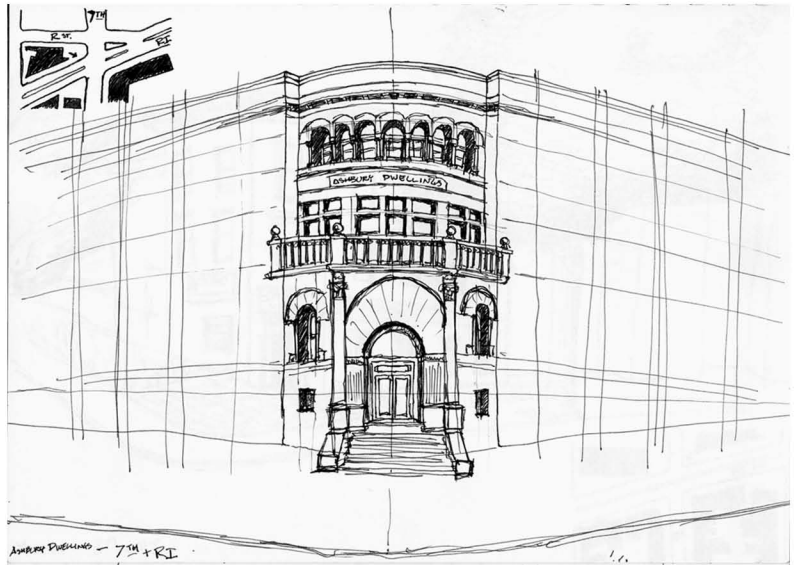
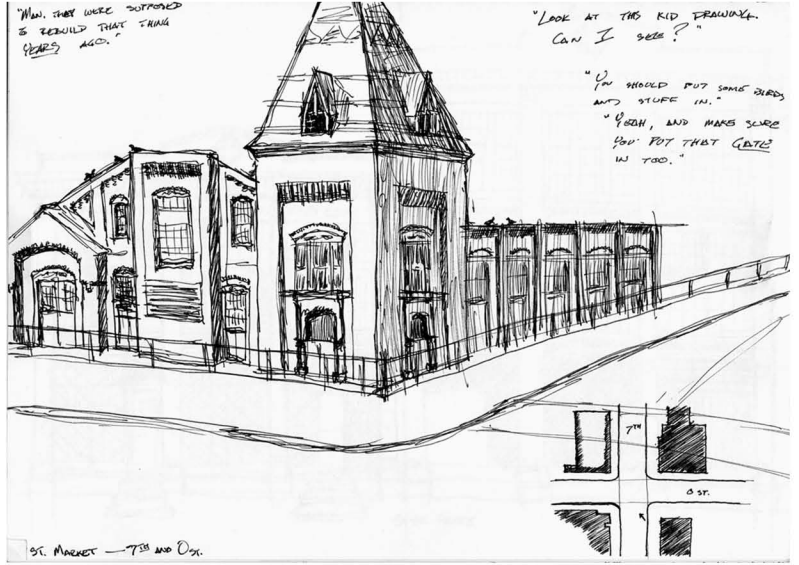
4. Fleming, John, Hugh Honour and Nikolaus Pevsner The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, 5th ed. New York: Penguin Group, 1999. p. 436.

Though the elevated characteristic of the Piano Nobile originally came about to separate the nobility from angry mobs outside, use in a civic context suggests a connotation of 'rising to a higher purpose.'

(Left) The Thurgood Marshall Center - 12th St., 1200 Block

O St. Market, 7th St. & O St.

Ashbury Dwellings, 7th St. & Rhode Island Ave.



Texture and color in the facades of Shaw's buildings bring an animated life to the neighborhood's streets, which reflects the equally animated life of the neighborhood's residents. Load-bearing brick and stone buildings carry a tactile assortment of wood, glass, steel, and masonry upward where they meet the sky with a beautifully articulated cornice. In the case of Shaw's many row houses a comfortable rhythm is felt in the consistent scale of undulating volumes, while vibrant colors serve as protection from the monotony that such a rhythm could produce.

Wonder Bread Building - S St.
& Wiltberger St.

Seventh Street Savings Bank -
7th St. & N St.

Row Houses - 9th St., 2000
Block

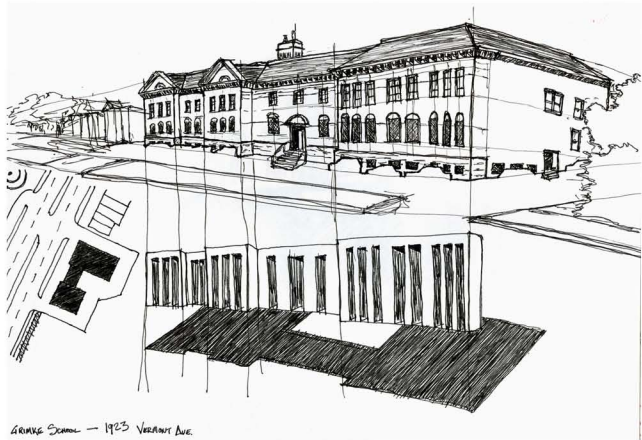


The façade of a building is more than simply a thin layer of skin. In traditional load-bearing architecture the texture felt on the face is actually a direct result of the physical structure of the building. These visual clues lead to a greater understanding of the spatial arrangement within, and of the building as a whole.

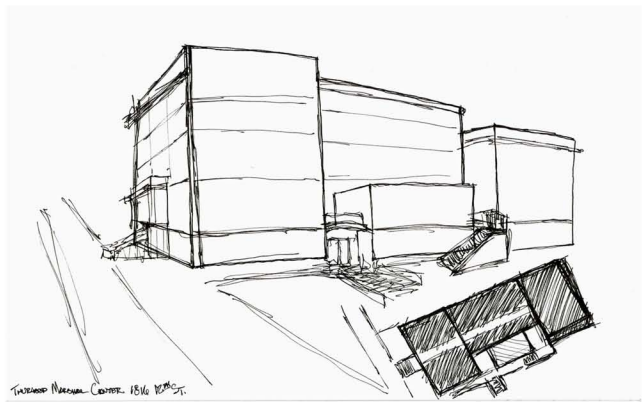
The Grimke School - Vermont
Ave., 1900 Block

The Thurgood Marshall Center -
12th St., 1800 Block

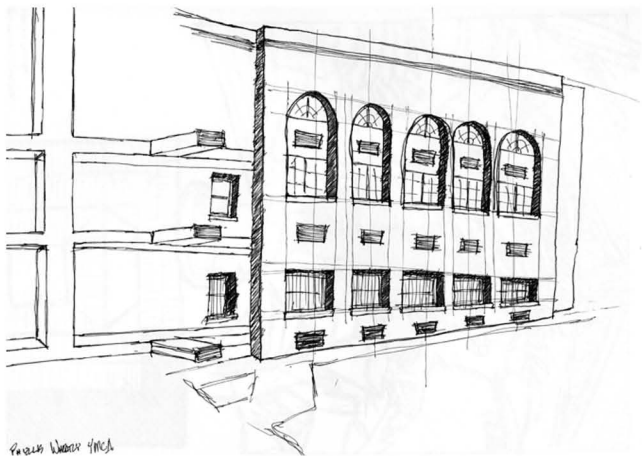
The Phyllis Wheatly YMCA



Grange Exam - 1823 Vermont Ave.



Takemoto Museum Center - 1816 18th St.



Forest Woods YMCA

For all its architectural tradition, Shaw lacks one very important urban entity; public space. Many spaces are isolated, making them ineffective as places to gather. Others are designed as spaces to move through rather than be in. Often parking lots and, more often, alleys are the open spaces where Shaw residents choose to congregate. These are never the safest or most constructive environments.

African American Civil War
Memorial - U St. & Vermont Ave.

Metro Station Entrance - Con-
vention Center Station

Wiltberger St.

