

# Shutter to Think

Photographer Cedric Laurant tries to raise public awareness by going eye to eye with D.C.'s video-surveillance cameras.

By **Chris Shott** • September 27, 2002

Peering through his 35 mm Nikon on Pennsylvania Avenue NW one afternoon this past April, Cedric Laurant spotted something interesting on the upper deck of the Old Post Office Pavilion. "You couldn't really discern it," he recalls. "I had this 200 mm lens,

which did not give me much magnification. It was not like binoculars with 10-times magnification. It was maybe four-times magnification.

"Later," Laurant continues, "I returned to this place as a tourist, and I took my camera. I walked up to the top of this building, and there I saw it."

What Laurant discovered on the roof was exactly what he suspected: a dark-tinted globular device you might mistake for a street light. Inside the glassy shell, he says, is the rotating mechanical eye of a closed-circuit television camera.

Laurant immediately began firing off shots--the first of more than 1,000 photographs he has taken of video-surveillance cameras throughout the District this year. He says that CCTV cameras are easy to recognize once you know what they look like. Some, including those in the Union Station food court, hang barely a few feet above the heads of passers-by. Others, such as the two that Laurant says sit atop the Old Post Office, are situated so high up that they are virtually invisible to the average person on the street. "They have coverage of Pennsylvania Avenue," the photographer says, "from probably 14th Street all the way to the Capitol."

Laurant has captured surveillance cameras at high-security sites including the Capitol, the World Bank headquarters, and the Justice and Labor Departments, as well as at some rather unexpected places, such as the Banana Republic in Georgetown, where a strategically situated rooftop camera provides views down M Street NW and up Wisconsin Avenue. Scouring the city for his subjects, Laurant says, is "like an Easter-egg hunt. It's a pleasure to detect them."

Although Laurant makes most of his photos for his employer, it wasn't his skills

behind the lens that landed him the job. In fact, he says, his resume reveals very little of his background in photojournalism. The 29-year-old Belgian citizen works as staff counsel for the District-based nonprofit Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), a civil-liberties watchdog group. Laurant's typical duties include preparing formal requests to obtain government documents under the Freedom of Information Act and compiling reports on the legalities of video and Internet surveillance.

"I've always been very interested in privacy stuff, in computer law and Internet law," he says. But long before Laurant passed the D.C. bar exam this winter, his passion was photography. "It was something I started at 17 or 18 years old," he says. "When I was 21, I did an exhibit of pictures I'd taken in Turkey--mostly portraits, people, and landscapes."

In 1997, Laurant helped film a TV documentary on government video surveillance in Belgium. "At that time," he says, "there were some discussions about the legality of the processing of images by those video-surveillance cameras." He recalls an interview with the mayor of one small city whose office contained a monitor linked to 20 cameras. "While we were there," Laurant says, "we took pictures of him watching this monitor, and on the screen, there were two people, a girl and a guy, kissing each other on a bench."

Already a law-school graduate, Laurant earned an additional degree in photojournalism from the Universite Libre de Bruxelles in 1998. The following year, he took part in a four-month photojournalism workshop at Columbia University, during which he contributed shots to the weekly Bronx Beat. Featured among his printed photos were, he says, "drug addicts, squatters, and pit bulls."

Bolting New York at the conclusion of his program, Laurant landed in Washington, working for the nonprofit Center for Democracy and Technology and later joining a telecom-law firm before winding up at EPIC just days before Sept. 11, 2001. When news broke in February of the Metropolitan Police Department's (MPD) plans to develop a hi-tech citywide video-surveillance network, city officials and others began clamoring for more information. In April, the MPD responded with a draft order disclosing 14 sites under watch and pledging to "post signage" whenever its surveillance extended into residential areas. So EPIC decided to document the cameras' exact locations. And it turned out that Laurant was just the guy to do it.

"We really wanted to focus on images as a way to provoke debate," says EPIC

Executive Director Marc Rotenberg. Although Laurant set out merely to make a visual record of D.C.'s surveillance cameras, he came back with something more: a collection of striking edgy images.

"The stuff Cedric produced is spectacular," Rotenberg says. "The way he juxtaposes cameras with national monuments and the American flag sends a very powerful message." Pointing to one close-up of a CCTV camera with a wind-rattled U.S. flag in the background, Rotenberg suggests that "the globe seems to be a more permanent fixture than the flag."

EPIC was so pleased with Laurant's work that it put 16 of his photographs on display at the former American Civil Liberties Union office on Capitol Hill, in a one-day exhibition titled "Observing Surveillance." To give the show an added touch, Laurant bought a cheap replica security camera and mounted it to a bookshelf in the gallery. Much to his dismay, most attendees didn't notice the device--"even," he admits, "with the red light blinking."

"You have to be inventive in trying to convey the idea of surveillance while taking the pictures," Laurant says. "The advocacy project is to fight against the widespread use and installation of video cameras in the District. You try to convey this impression of oppression, the creepiness that people feel when they realize they are being watched."

In one shot, Laurant captured two men lounging in the sunshine at L'Enfant Plaza, seemingly unaware of the CCTV camera in the shadows off to their right. In another, two police officers perch on a camera-equipped rooftop overlooking the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and R Street NW. Cutting through the gloomy sky behind them is a National Park Service helicopter, also keeping watch over the streets below. Laurant calls the photo "emblematic" of his project.

The photographer views his work as a public service--a not-so-subtle warning to District denizens of the potential dangers of video surveillance. "They should be aware that they are being surveilled and that it might be recorded," he says. "They should have some concern about what may happen with these images that are collected, especially when they're digital. It may end up on the Internet. It's like a piece of e-mail that you have to consider as a postcard. It may be forwarded over and over again without loss of quality."

For now, Laurant's pictures appear on posters and postcards and are posted on the Web, but EPIC is also in discussions with book publishers and art museums in the

hope of furthering the project.

Whatever happens, EPIC wants Laurant to take more photos. On May 8, he submitted a written request to the MPD, asking for permission to take pictures from the roofs of several buildings where surveillance cameras are installed, including the Hotel Washington and the Smithsonian Institution's Castle. Laurant says he wants to get some shots from the cameras' vantage points.

The request was turned down on June 5. The rejection letter, from Chief Technology Officer Walter Collier, read: "Your request would disclose law enforcement techniques and procedures of a sensitive nature and could potentially compromise the security of the MPD's CCTV system and the effectiveness of our public safety operations."

As long as Laurant takes his pictures from public space, says MPD spokesperson Sgt. Joe Gentile, there's really nothing authorities can do to stop him. But if the photographer should bring his camera to those privately owned roofs, he could face arrest.

That warning doesn't discourage Laurant, who still intends to get his roof shots-- though he won't divulge exactly how. "A little creativity will be required, I guess," he says. "I want to publish those pics on the Web site to give people an idea of how much those cameras could be invasive, what their coverage area is, as well as to do what the MPD said it would do in April: notify the public of the presence of cameras." **CP**

Laurant's photographs may be viewed at [www.observingsurveillance.org](http://www.observingsurveillance.org).

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