ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Museum Upstages The Library

WASHINGTON

The Presidential Library is a curious phenomenon. Intended originally as the repository for a President's papers and related documents, it was brought into existence by a Federal law which stipulated that a museum be included with the archives. Scholars, anxious to see consistent and reliable provisions made for the preservation and use of Presidential papers, were willing to go along with what they visualized as a few discreet display cases, or perhaps an accessory gallery, containing historical objects and memorabilia. It seemed like a small concession in exchange for Federal guarantees of maintenance and operating costs for the library. The buildings were to be constructed with publicly raised private funds, and then the General Services Administration was to take over their expenses and upkeep, running them as part of the National Archives.

What has happened, of course, is that the union of library and museum has gone unexpectedly askew; it has turned into a Catch-22 shotgun marriage. The museum function has expanded to the point where it has taken over more and more overtly from the archives. The result is an odd architectural couple, with the library serving as an excuse for the museum, which has turned into an enormously popular tourist attraction. The Presidential Library may be the biggest draw since Disneyland. Its combination of history, sentiment, politics and patriotism, its glimpses of power and personalities, have proved to be an irresistable lure for the American public and the ideal destination for the family vacation tour.

The dedication of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library in Boston last week was the latest in a growing line of these inadvertant and highly competitive Presidential monuments. Devised by family, friends and associates, designed with varying degrees of ambition or opulence, these monuments will continue to be built until the end of Presidential, or republican, time. Their increasing number, at increasing cost, will be maintained by the Federal Government, or taxpayer, in perpetuity. And since the politician or statesman does not exist who could resist the temptation to write his own history in his own way, in a setting of commensurate dignity or grandeur, these undertakings will instruct, persuade, inform and propagandize, suavely or crudely, depending on the talents employed. Increasingly, the Presidential Library is being designed and constructed as an immensely impressive and skillful exercise in selective immortality.

Costa Manos / Magnum Photos

The Kennedy Library—a questionable alliance of art and politics

Having said this, let it also be said very quickly that the Kennedy Library that has come out of 15 years of fund-raising, controversy, site-switching and reprogramming, is by far the best of the bunch. For what it is, the design by I. M. Pei and Partners is very good indeed — architecturally, symbolically and in the use of the arts of display. Measured against its predecessors for Truman, Eisenhower and Johnson, it is a giant step forward for this peculiarly American alliance of art and politics. At this point, however, the tail totally wags the dog. The museum function is completely dominant and engrossing. In addition, this building is clearly designed as a memorial. That was inevitable, given the short life and tragic death of this President, and the mystique that surround the man and the administration.

The archives are there, but they are more or less tucked into the ceiling. The Presidential and other papers are literally housed in two tightly compressed floors at the very top of the structure with audio-visual material in a kind of ceiling plenum of the main ceremonial hall. Only one of the non-museum floors that wrap around this hall is devoted to the use of the archives by the public; the rest are administration offices of which the greatest part, and most of the staff, are for the museum operation.

The building, understood as a monument, becomes starkly effective. It consists of three intersecting geometric forms of monolithic simplicity. A 125-foot high, nine-story, white concrete tower housing offices and archives, and a low, circular section containing two theaters are connected by a truss-walled, gray glass pavilion that rises a full 115 feet to form the ceremonial heart of the structure. This imposing interior space, light-filled, latticed by the huge steel members, is referred to as a "contemplation pavilion." In combination with the building's almost scaleless exterior, the effect is to create a monumentality beyond its actual size. Finishes and details are neither luxurious nor special; standard components have kept the cost to $20.8 million raised from public gifts and the Kennedy family.

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This austere architectural drama is all the more remarkable when one realizes that its true function is to enclose a circulation system; the primary purpose is to accommodate a sequence of spaces and experiences through which 6,000 visitors a day can be "processed." That means moving people through the museum's exhibits with maximum efficiency while imparting a message that stresses both information and emotional response, an objective that has been carried out with great expertise by the exhibition designers Chermayeff and Geismar Associates. The work has been done with historian-advisers and constant review by an assiduously attentive Kennedy family. The exhibits are a sophisticated blend of the historical and the sentimental, worth studying both for their documentation and a subtly manipulative kind of theatrical drama — a unique feature of these displays that has now been developed to a high art by the phenomenon of Presidential museums.

The site, of course, is not Harvard, as originally planned. After much bitter controversy with the Cambridge community over the prospect of a tourist invasion, plans for the library-museum were relocated to 9.5 acres of a desolate promontory on the "wrong" side of Boston harbor called Columbia Point, at the far edge of the University of Massachusetts campus. The project for the Harvard location was for a much larger, three-part complex which was to include the library-museum, the John F. Kennedy School of Government and an Institute of Politics. Only the School of Government has been built at Harvard, and in what must be the most disturbing side effect of dubious legislation, the research material is not with the school, but is with the memorial at Columbia Point. Another uncalculated side effect is that the expenses of the ever-expanding museum facilities are borne by the National Archives.

Getting there, for the Harvard, or other scholar, is not exactly half the fun. Those who wish to use the research fa-

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J.F.K. Library

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cilities will find the route pure frustration. There is a choice of going circuitously around Boston on expressways, getting tangled up with bridge and tunnel traffic and through-state and Cape-bound cars, or inching through South Boston traffic in what looks like the bombed-out ruins of Berlin.

It is no small design feat that Pei has maximized the site's best features — the view of the harbor and the surrounding open space — to turn a windswept liability into a spectacular asset. The building, poised at the edge of the land, not only looks out over the harbor for magnificent views of its islands and the Boston skyline, but the design focuses the view in a way that makes it an absolutely integral part of the structure and even imbues it with a symbolic aspect. This concentration on the harbor is reinforced by the landscaping, carried out by Rachel Lambert Mellon and Dan Kiley, which raises a bank against the rather grim view of the University buildings on the peninsula side and provides a walk along the water. On what was once a dump, there is now dune grass, and Cape Cod roses.

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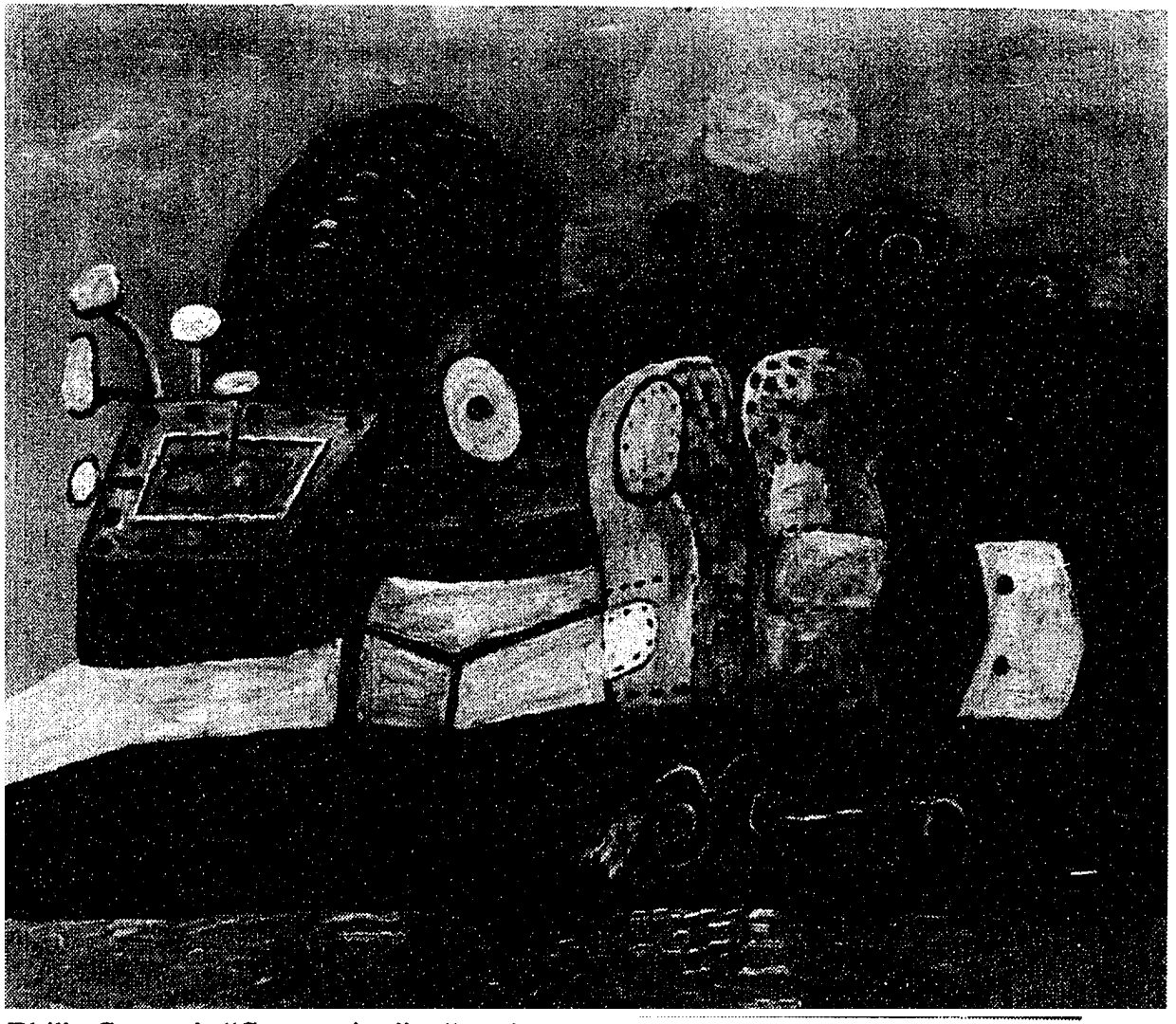
Scholars and museum-goers, like oil and water, will not mix. Although there is to be a concerted effort to have a more general public use the research failities, separation of tourists and students is necessary because of the crowds. Tourists enter a lobby through which they see the great hall and view of the harbor beyond, but they are moved directly into one of the two 250-seat theaters for a half-hour film on John Kennedy. They exit onto a lower level of 18,000 square feet of exhibition space arranged around a central gallery containing a copy of the President's desk (the real one is being used by Jimmy Carter) flanked by the most popular Presidential artifact of all, the rocking chair. This is the centerpiece of John Kennedy's personal and political life, a story that does not end with his death, but continues with Bobby Kennedy.

One comes away with the feeling that all this is presented within the larger context of the Kennedy family, beginning with a huge group photograph at the entrance. A "history line" runs around the top of the galleries in which world events are paralleled by Kennedy events: Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and John F. Fitzgerald was born in Boston's North End; Queen Elizabeth II succeeded to the British throne and John F. Kennedy announced for the Senate. In display cases below, there are a Kennedy christening dress, Jack Kennedy's desk at Choate, Rose Kennedy's file box of her children's lives, the torn flag and Navy jacket of the heroic PT boat rescue, among books, letters and manuscripts. Documents and memorabilia are reinforced by the most sophisticated display techniques — audio and video tracks, animated fiberoptics for the Presidential campaign, rear-projection slides and moving photo montages. A final room contains the gifts and curiosities that "the public expects."

Wall-size photo murals of the two Kennedy brothers, from the President in the Oval Office with his young children, to Bobby embraced by civil rights workers, have intense, poignant impact. As one exits into the great hall, reeling from two assassinations, mourning lost youth and leadership, there is the knock-out punch — an 18-foot-long image of a smiling Jack Kennedy walking through dune grass in the Cape Cod sunlight. And then, seen through the glass wall beyond, in carefully planted dune grass, is his sailboat, immediately invoking an intensely personal sense of the end of life and pleasure, played against the harbor view and the void of the soaring memorial space, which is furnished only with a huge American flag. This is consummate theater, art and politics.

I think it is fair to say that given the phenomenon of the Presidential library and the phenomenon of the Kennedy family, this building is a remarkable synthesis of the two. But it is clearer than ever that the archives are misplaced as part of the museum; the marriage of convenience has turned into an awkward and costly relationship. What this building demonstrates conclusively is that architecture is a powerful instrument of symbolism and an extremely effective shaper of the environment and emotional response. The Kennedy Library succeeds magnificently in the presentation and promotion of a particular Presidential image through an unavoidably subjective kind of history. It makes unanswered questions of cost, logic and purpose more pressing than ever. This is not the definition of library to be found in any lexicon. ■



Philip Guston's "Connection"—"a private demonology set down on canvas"