

CAPITAL PROGRAM

Architectural Light In Washington

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE Administration's release last week of a statement of official policy for government architecture signals its most ambitious entry into the arts to date.

These principles, as set down in a document with the unpromising title of "Report to the President of the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space," have three major implications. First, the Capital's architecture is in for a necessary change for the better. Second the Administration is providing the leadership for this change, and laying down the ground rules in no uncertain terms. And third, the results will affect not only the Capital itself, but Federal building throughout the country.

The report also outlines the needs and priorities for Federal office building and puts forth a monumental proposal for the combined public and private redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House. "To fulfill this responsibility," it states "it will be necessary for the (National Capital Planning) Commission to engage the services of a number of the foremost architects of the nation: nothing less than the very finest established talents available will be sufficient for this unusually significant undertaking."

Current Faults

Every one of these recommendations reverses current accepted Federal procedure. If there is a basic set of unwritten architectural rules that the Government has been operating by—a conclusion to be drawn from much of its work—it is that good design is "optional," and, in fact, an unnecessary economic extra. With few exceptions, there has been pointed and even fearful avoidance of "the finest contemporary architectural thought."

If the new program can get over the hurdle of Congressional taste-making, it is still full of potential dangers and pitfalls. Important questions remain. Who are the architects, for example, whom the National Capital Planning Commission would consider "the finest established talents available," and will they be the same ones the authors of the President's report had in mind? (The committee's own preferences, if it could name them, would be the leaders acknowledged by the more advanced critical and architectural press.) However, other agencies have different ideas.

Questions

Will the commissions go to the men of outstanding creative talent, who are not always the best committee members, or will they go, as is so often the case, to the architects who are the most astute and popular politicians—the professional committee-sitters? How do you define "foremost architect" and "established talent?" Would it be possible or practical to set up some kind of architectural advisory board composed of architectural educators, critics and other qualified, objective experts?

Inevitably, everything depends on interpretation. It is quite probable, and it is certainly intended, that the new policy shall open the door to a period of fine, progressive government design. And it is also quite possible to produce a dreary program out of brave words.

The report offers guidance in some particularly brave words first spoken by Pericles to the Athenians and later quoted by President Kennedy to the Massachusetts Legislature: "We do not imitate—for we are a model to others." Federal building has not been a model to anyone for a long time. In this period of exceptional architectural vitality and potential architectural greatness, leadership should begin at the top.