

Architecture

# Everybody Back Into the Old Rut

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IN a country that has demonstrated a peculiar propensity for tragic violence, the political mortality rate for men and dreams is particularly high.

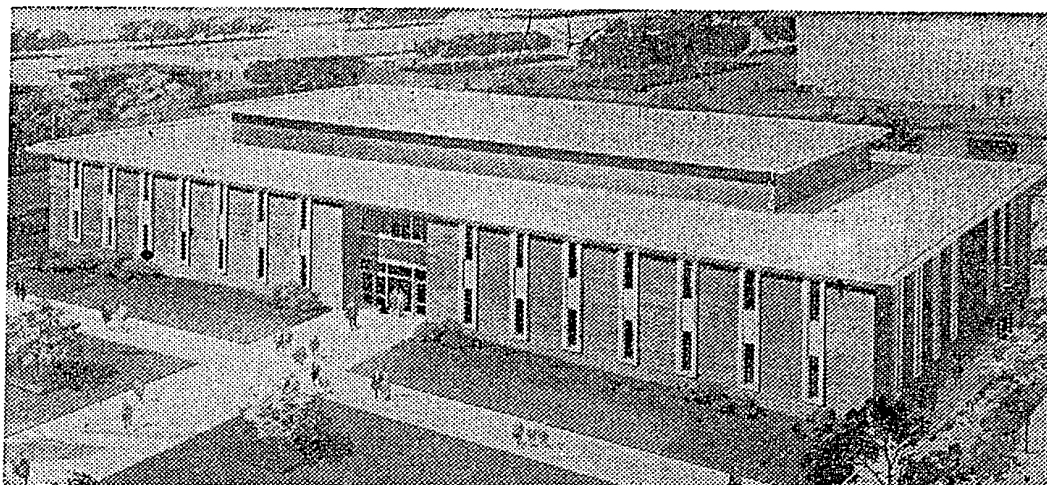
When John F. Kennedy was President, he issued a directive to government departments ordering the elevation of architectural standards in Federal building programs. That was in 1962, and there was heaving and hauling in the General Services Administration, the agency in charge of all Federal construction, which then brought forth a kind of stumbling revolution.

First, Lafayette Square was redesigned under the Presidential eye, and of that we shall treat separately when the essential restoration along the park frontages connecting to the office buildings is complete. But let it be said now that even too much red brick and some unavoidably dubious scale wins hands down over the deadly scheme the President scrapped.

Next, Federal office building commissions went to architectural leaders like Marcel Breuer in Washington and Mies van der Rohe in Chicago, something that had not happened in government building in the living memory of man. Those projects were carried out under the Johnson administration.

But there is a traditional political attitude toward architecture that these buildings flouted. In politics and government it has always been understood that architecture is a prime, accepted source of pork barrel and patronage, from design contracts to building materials. Esthetic results are irrelevant and predictable.

Unfortunately, not only men are assassinated; so are their dreams and programs. The death of a program in the world of government occurs not by rifle or pistol shot, but by a sort of turgid torture in which the dream is gradually destroyed by the relentless, enveloping tentacles of the Federal bureaucracy and its inflexible procedures and standards, which have never changed at all.



Design for a Federal court and office building at Frankfort, Kentucky.  
*Only mediocrity is immortal at the General Services Administration*

Under the bright surface of reform is the vested interest status quo, calculatedly, surpassingly ordinary in everything it produces. Like death itself, this standard always wins in the end. It is the only thing that is immortal.

All this is prelude to the fact that you can now write off the Federal building revolution. The lumbering Federal pace has finally produced the Mies and Breuer buildings and a few others of merit that went into the pipeline under, or shortly after, the Kennedy prodding.

The Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum Air Museum, the Roche and Dinkeloo Aquarium and the Lundy tax court are all waiting for Congressional appropriations which may, or may not ever come. But in the mass of Federal office construction in the Capital and across the country, projects presently coming out of the pipeline and probably being fed into it now are right back in the pre-reform pattern of official sub-architecture.

The tentative tremors at GSA are settling into the same old comfortable ruts to the apparent satisfaction of everyone there, with the exception, perhaps, of a skillfully demoted design director brought in by the Kennedy administration to nurse the reforms through, who fought

the system valiantly and produced those few good buildings until the system did him in.

That took several tries over the last few years, including those curious shifts of title and classification that are the weapons of civil service institutional assassination. But once the pressure from above for better building was off, there could be no doubt about the final outcome. As witness one of the latest GSA releases on this page. It was sent out without architectural credits and kindness lets that omission stand.

The point that we wish to make here is that under the Federal system these results are as inevitable as rain and only incidental to the honesty or expertise, or lack of either, in staff and administrators. What comes out of GSA generally is an entrenched mediocrity committed to a rigid, standardized system of codified values and rules. This system is not going to support revolution.

GSA is essentially a managerial, or housekeeping organization. Among other things, it runs, and maintains massive inventories of, government buildings from coast to coast, and disposes of them when surplus, as it does with stockpiles of nuts and bolts. It also gets the building built. The obvious question, in the

light of results, is whether GSA should be the commissioning agency, or whether the design function, if it cannot be improved, should be removed.

The single objective of GSA's huge design and building program is quite clear. It is to get the most square feet for the money appropriated. This is a measurable standard of economy and efficiency. It is a standard that can be understood by anyone, including a Congressman, and it never gets into trouble except with those whose professional expertise includes architectural values, which are not easily analyzed.

The whole Federal program is tailored to this formula. Every architect's plans are checked on this square footage-cost principle, and deviations are blue-penciled out by GSA space cadet examiners labeled architects, engineers and cost accountants. These variations are, of course, what architectural style, symbolism and creativity are made of. They may actually lead to better functions and better plans and ways of building. To see them x-ed out as "waste space," as this observer has, is a soul-shrinking experience.

In the end, every building is fitted to the process. But the killing of creative design goes further. Any architect

dealing with GSA soon learns the way he must work. The building must fit the mold. The procedure breeds the product. Then out of the warehouses and order books come the stultifying, preordained fittings, selected and specified, again, for economy and efficiency, that include some of the most banal and hideous artifacts known to man.

You can see the battles in some of the better buildings. The quality of the wood-faced courtrooms in John Carl Warnecke's new Court of Claims on Lafayette Square, for example, is totally destroyed by the lighting. That is because GSA orders a singularly passé cold fluorescent tube and installs it universally, in the interests, naturally, of efficiency and economy. A little architectural assassination is incidental.

In Mies's Federal courts and office building in Chicago, the Federal taste-breakers are already insinuating some kind of greenish long-life spot into the lobby ceiling instead of the architect's incandescents. They are ruinous, as is the curious ticker-tape-type moving electric sign inexplicably added to the reception desk, and the plastic wall covering that GSA prefers for maintenance which is already enveloping the painted plaster walls.

Close by, Chicago's Civic Center, housing the same functions, has no problems with plaster walls, well-designed fittings and handsome graphics. If there is a symbol for GSA design it is that wretched little wood-framed sign with the badly-lettered occupant's name that is affixed outside of every standard GSA office door.

What is lost, in this ossified process, all the way down the line, is quality. The product gets cheaper and duller and more tastelessly homogenized. There is not the ghost of a chance for innovation or excellence. That is too bad in a country with stunning reserves of talent and technical expertise that will never serve the national image or the national good.