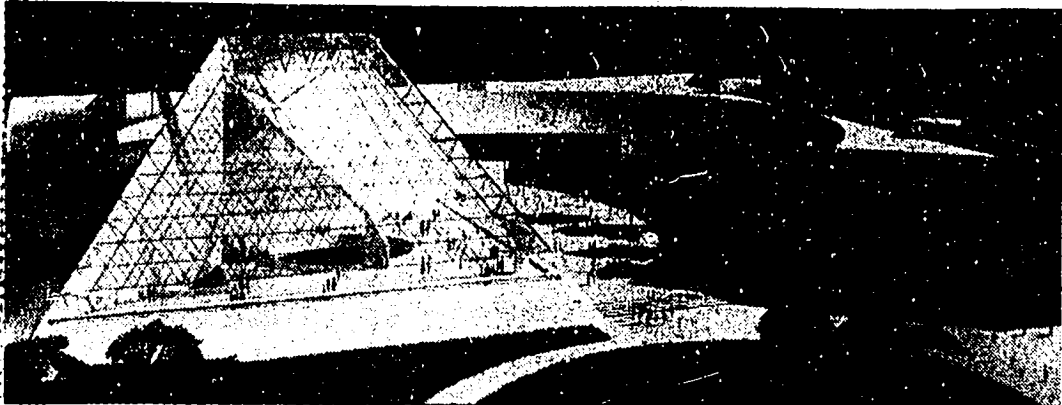


Selling the President, Architecturally

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Architecture



Proposed John F. Kennedy Memorial Library complex at Harvard University
Scholarly need or the competitive manufacture of promotional monuments?

Selling the President, Architecturally

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ARCHITECTURAL foot-note on current political events: the Nixon Library is not dead, only dormant. It is "on the back burner," according to Leonard K. Firestone, head of the foundation that will build it. But he gave an important tidbit of design information. It will be in "early California Mission" style. That does not really represent any giant leap backward for the the Administration's building record, because there has never been any giant leap forward. Although there has been a good deal of impressive talk about architecture and "the design necessity" in this year's Administration-backed First Design Assembly, it obviously hasn't filtered up.

The announcement perpetuates an almost unbroken tradition of architectural-know - nothingness - at the - top, or how to ignore great buildings of the present and the fact that the late 20th century — it is later than ybu think — has its own superlative style. President Johnson alone tried to embrace it, but more of that later. Style is not exactly something that has marked the Nixon Administration. Its style, values and standards have been mostly advertising and expediency, a redundancy of terms, and that leads to a lot of cultural and other confusion.

"Mission Impossible," the professional publication, Architecture Plus, calls the Nixon Library design proposal, but it offers a few suggestions to the architects that might help.

A large section of the building should be white-washed," the editors write. "At least one area should be perfectly clear. All electronic outlets should be exposed. The area dealing with Mr. Nixon's replies on Watergate should be in the form of a rotunda, perhaps engagingly to be called 'the Nixon run-around.' The area dealing with the relationship between Mr. Nixon and some of his appointees should be in the form of a double cross (this is a recurring political motif, rarely an architectural one.)" It might be a little difficult, the editors remark, to fit all this into "early California Mission" style, "but the architects of the world are surely up to the task."

In case you haven't thought about it, there is a link between what's wrong at the White House, what's wrong wjth the world, and what's wrong with Presidential libraries. In fact, it is hard to think of anything that has gone quite as monumentally wrong as the whole idea of Presidential libraries, and it is tempting to speculate on why and how it happened.

One thing that is conspicuously wrong with the world is the fact that its economic well-being rests largely on the creation of false and unnecessary needs and their so-called satisfaction through unsatisfactory and unnecessary products. That rests, in turn, on the promotion of those needs and products at extraordinary expense to suggest values that neither exist nor would be desirable if they did.

All this supports multibillion dollar industries that, generally, people should be ashamed to be part of. The standards are despicable. The goods are shoddy. The perversion of values is insidious and universal. This is a fairly wretched way to guarantee a civilization's viability, and it is also a fairly certain way to corruption in large and small things. But nobody cries on the way to the bank. And too many of the people and practices have found their way to the top levels of government and public affairs. It is salesmanship, not statesmanship, that runs things now.

Presidential libraries have not been immune to the process. The provision of archives has turned into the

promotional manufacture of questionable Presidential monuments. What started out as a rational, scholarly depository for documents has grown into a public-relations monster. Propaganda has replaced appropriate purpose. Scholarship has taken a back seat to masterful image-selling.

This is all fairly clearcut; where the moral quicksand comes in is at the point where scholars and architects capable of giving the stamp of credibility and taste to these increasingly peculiar enterprises lend their names to

them, affected, perhaps, by equal dreams of glory. They package the dubious product with high expertise. Then it is handed over to tourism and head counts. A whole false thing has grown up, icon-conscious and publicity-wise, supersold, with a skillfull eye cocked at the masses. At what moment, one wonders, did American Presidents get into the competitive pantheon business?

These ostensibly above-politics buildings are highly political and partisan. Set up as foundations manned by a President's friends and political associates, they are

funded largely by his supporters, aided by a general patriotic appeal. Once built by private funds, the increasingly enormous and elaborate structures are then paid for in maintenance and operation by the General Services Administration of the Federal government. The expenses have gotten bigger with the buildings, and they are, of course, open-ended for the duration of the Republic.

So now you have a library, a museum, a monument and a memorial, with each element inflated for maximum impressiveness, and with

each President being his own image-maker and all of them playing can-you-top-this. It has evolved into architectural hard sell. Place it at a university, add a school of government or public affairs, and size and status increase immeasurably. It doesn't matter that researchers, usually people with limited funds, have to hop across the country from monument to monument for Presidential papers. It is not important that this extravagant exercise in ego-gratification becomes ludicrous, redundant and gross.

There may be some poetic

or philosophical justice in the fact that the Johnson Library is cracking up shortly after it was built, suggesting both the vulnerability of an overblown concept and the morality of contractors, which is no better or worse than anyone else's today. Here is a building whose joints we personally admired, notable for a Pharaonic air of permanence, falling apart at the seams. No one seems sure who should sue whom. Can you sue an American value system?

One of the most interesting things about the Johnson Li-

brary is that the architect, Gordon Bunshaft, has translated that value system into a truly effective edifice, a paradoxical achievement, if there ever was one. That great travertine hall and stairs, the soaring sweep of scarlet-boxed papers behind glass, holding what the shredder didn't get (one assumes that there were shredders and bugs before the Nixon Administration) is great architectural drama and calculated symbolism. Nagging doubts keep raising their heads as to the purpose and meaning of the drama. Who

is glorifying what and whom, for what purpose? Researchers will just want to know where they keep the tapes.

The trend is toward something that is part Hollywood: part hokum and part Grand Old Flag. How far to the Taj Mahal and Forest Lawn? No one has come up with a "Presidentland" yet, because it is all being done on a very high plane, but there are links. At what point did the archive become instant memorial and did instant memorial become consummate ballyhoo? The ball is

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rolling, and it obviously will not be stopped.

It is rolling right now in Cambridge, Mass., where plans for the Kennedy Library — and museum — and school of public affairs — are in process. Part of the complex was unveiled this spring. There was hesitancy about discussing the full dimensions of the scheme because the community is already passionately protesting its location and scale.

We do not propose a design critique here, since the plans have not been fully revealed, and the architects, I. M. Pei and Partners, deserve that courtesy. Mr. Pei is one of the country's best practitioners, and he admits to considerable soul-search-

ing about the impact and implications of the job. He has even used the word "anguish."

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What has come out of that anguish thus far is an 85-foot high truncated glass pyramid for the public museum and memorabilia, connected by an open plaza to a long, wrap-around, five-story building for an Institute of Politics for Study in Government and Public Affairs, part of Harvard's renamed JFK School of Government. It has a Harvard Square site, adjacent to the university.

The project started as something much simpler, but it soon became clear that it would attract many more tourists than scholars, and the program changed to em-

phasize "imagery" and memorial functions. "Library" has become a thorough misnomer.

Twelve thousand people a day are expected to visit the museum-monument, with 1,500 people at one time in the glass pyramid in summer months. Members of the Cambridge community are quite correctly asking whether the revised concept belongs here in its totality, in terms of urban disruption and appropriate location of functions. They have a right to be alarmed. Someone has to ask these questions, and to answer them.

As a nation, we are creating a most curious set of Presidential shrines. If they don't fall apart, historians and archaeologists are going to have a wonderful time.