

Full Speed Backward: Architecture: Full Speed Backward

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 24, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 137

Full Speed Backward

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT has come, and it is just what everyone expected: the new, \$75 million Madison Memorial Library for Capitol Hill in Washington is to be another mammoth mock-classical cookie from the Architect of the Capitol's well-known cookie cutter for gargantuan architectural disasters.

It follows, as day follows night, the notorious Rayburn Building, the new Senate Office Building and the remodeled East Front of the Capitol, a compendium of

matched errors in moribund academic clichés that Congress has been building for itself on a blockbuster scale, at extravagant expense, and with unabashed architectural know-nothingness.

The list at least has consistency. As an example of legislative Establishment taste it is as expected and American as that increasingly celebrated yardstick, cherry pie. No other country in the world produces this kind of ponderous, passé official architecture. Even the Rus-

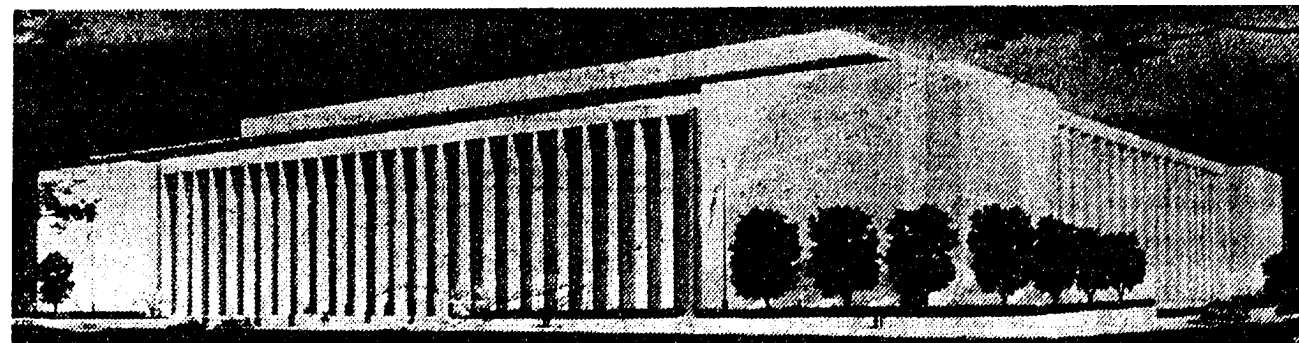
slans gave it up ten years ago.

The design of the library was prefigured and pre-shadowed in a decade of political and architectural maneuvering in the halls of Congress and on Capitol Hill. It was released by the office of the Architect of the Capitol on August 25.

To review the workings of that office, the Architect of the Capitol, J. George Stewart, a 77-year old engineer and political pro who is absolute esthetic mon-

arch of the Capitol environs, builds without review or approval from the Fine Arts Commission, the National Capitol Planning Commission or any of the advisory bodies that function for official Washington. Their jurisdiction stops dead at the foot of Capitol Hill. His immense building schemes are developed behind closed doors and accepted in closed hearings; plans and commissions are shrouded in secrecy, known only to the commit-

Continued on Page 28



Drawing of future Madison Memorial Building of the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

A businesslike building stuffed into a pompous marble shroud

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Architecture: Full Speed Backward

Continued from Page 21

tees for which he builds and from which he receives money. This is, of course, taxpayers' money, for public buildings of national importance.

For a rough idea of the bundle of Congressional red tape through which such buildings must pass, with predictable design attrition, the Madison Memorial Library is a product of the Senate Office Building Commission, the House Office Building Commission, the Joint Commission of the Library and the James Madison Memorial Commission, with a Coordinating Committee composed of members of the three Congressional bodies and the Madison Memorial Commission. Not one of these groups has been put together on the basis of professional competence in matters of architecture, construction or design.

In addition, Public Law 89-260, passed in 1965 to authorize construction of the building, set up a series of stipulations that created an insoluble dilemma of conflicting and self-defeating directives. These included a budget, floor area and a design philosophy, by amateur design philosophers, for a building "in keeping with the prevailing architecture of the Federal buildings on Capitol Hill," a statement guaranteed to open a Pandora's box of conflicting interpretation.

As a result of outcries against the monumental ugliness of the Rayburn Building and in response to some concerned members of Congress, the law also set up an advisory committee of the American Institute of Architects which was meant to be insurance against another \$100 million plus Rayburn Building debacle.

The A.I.A. committee was

duly appointed and immediately presented with another dead-end dilemma by a suave Stewart maneuver in which some of his favorite architects were commissioned for the library without the knowledge of the A.I.A. consultants. Most of these architects have been connected in one way or another with all of the Architect of the Capitol's important buildings. They are known informally to the profession as "The Club." For the Madison Library, they are Roscoe DeWitt of Dallas, Alfred Easton Poor and Albert Homer Swanks of New York, and Jesse M. Shelton and A. Pearson Almond of Atlanta.

This left the A.I.A. com-

mittee powerless to guide program, philosophy or commissions, with only the sticky job of criticizing members of their own organization in what remained of their "advisory" role. They don't like the library, and they have said so in a report issued earlier this month. (Unfortunately, the Fine Arts Commission does not like the A.I.A.-approved addition for its own Washington headquarters, and this is being tossed back at the A.I.A. by everyone who, in turn, does not like the criticism of the library.)

Still with me? Take a deep breath and look at the building that Congress hath wrought. The Madison Library is a badly needed extension of the handsome Victorian Library of Congress, which already has one annex and rents all over town. The Madison Memorial, originally planned as a separate, small, temple-type monument, has been combined with the library.

Inside, the building is thoughtfully programmed, packing maximum library facilities into a minimum site, plus a Memorial Hall. The plan is a tight, efficient, functional response to overdue and urgent needs.

There are three floors below grade, the full size of the site, and six floors plus mechanical equipment above grade, with varying setbacks. These interior floors are huge work areas, broken by one small, token, skyless court requested by the A.I.A. consultants as breathing space for the unrelieved floor mass, that rises only three of the six stories and is topped by more solid work floors. Except for the Memorial Hall, there will be endless 9½-foot ceilings. This is basically a bulk, business building.

The practical, monolithic structure, a whopping 514 feet by 414 feet and 101.5 feet high, is stuffed into a pompous marble shroud. Wrapped around the no-nonsense plan is that weary dodge, a rigidly symmetrical, so-called "classical" design of central, stripped-down columns and solid end walls that is supposed to be a wedding of traditional and modern modes. This is a compromise that never works; it is a redundant Washington disaster. Yet here it is again, in all of its familiar, failed, heavy-handed, stagnant lifelessness, proving once more that the formula produces nothing but hollow and meaningless results. The library is the latest misalliance.

Even the A.I.A. committee, which was strongly critical of the library in urban planning terms, backed discreetly away from design criticism which would have been an esthetic slap at its colleagues while murmuring something off the record about wishing that a "fresher" solution had been found.

Whether this solution represents the last gasp of what all indications point to as Mr. Stewart's almost surrealistically reactionary taste, or if it is the taste of less-than-swinging senior Congressmen convinced of their Olympian omniscience, or the taste of the architects who did the job, is hard to determine. It is probably an interplay of all three. This reviewer, for one, is willing to bet that those architects' offices contain enough up-to-date talent and sensibility to produce less tragi-comic results. Research has suggested that at least one progressive alternative produced during study sessions was scuttled.

One hears constant defenses from Mr. Stewart's of-

fice of the "suitability" of his buildings and how few men can produce the genre any more. That is fortunately true. And one reads pages of debate in the Congressional Record, with sinking heart, in which grown men with distinguished names display the wilful ignorance of stubborn children. They may not know if it's architecture, but they know what they like and they are building about half a billion dollars worth of it.

The new library, with its abortive gestures to debased and worn-out classical formulas, is neither suitable nor compatible to its surroundings nor to the 20th century. It is "in keeping" with nothing. In spite of its wishful esthetic rationale it is totally and tragically out of character with its neighbors and its times.

In fairness, the limitations forced on the architects by the legislation, the site and the program have been instrumental in producing a design that is esthetically, urbanistically and environmentally unsatisfactory. But it is also unsatisfactory because the design process is wrong, the method of architect selection is wrong, the autonomy, powers and procedures of the office of the Architect of the Capitol are wrong, the lack of a master plan for Capitol Hill is wrong, and the perpetuation of such a system is wrong. The building is wrong.

But the Library of Congress needs it and the Architect of the Capitol and his Congressional cronies love and have approved it and the James Madison Memorial Library will join the Rayburn Building as another monument to the bottom end of American architecture. How sad for Mr. Madison and the nation.