ARCHITECTURE VIEW: FEDERAL BUILDINGS NEED NOT BE HO-HUM

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Federal Buildings Need Not Be Ho-Hum

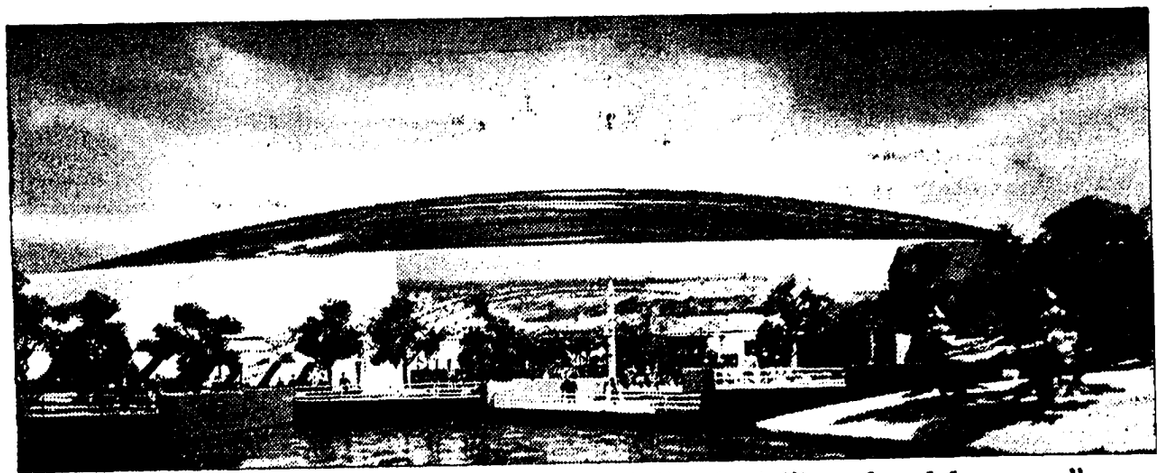
If you think of a Federal office building as a place where architecture and offices have been raised, or lowered, to an environment of consummate ennui, you are right. It is a world of corridors by Kafka and rampant mediocrity. It reaches this entirely predictable state, as a rule, through a consortium of collaborating architects who are clearly political bedfellows. Faced with stultifying contracts and Alice-in-Wonderland regulations and a factor that might be called bureaucratic terror, they produce line-of-least-resistance architecture, or have any try at something better summarily pulled down to that level. It has become a ho-hum state of affairs.

Periodically, the General Services Administration, which is the agency in charge of all Federal construction throughout the country, tries to do something about it. There are spasmodic promulgations of new standards and revisions of procedures for hiring architects, advisory bodies are pulled in and pushed out, and a conscious effort is made at the top to reach for a better product. Until Arthur Sampson tripped over the Nixon tapes, he was an exemplary GSA Administrator in this respect. He probably did more, and made more real effort, to move the Federal government to better attitudes and buildings than anyone since the good-design spurt of the Kennedy years.

Mr. Sampson initiated many intelligent programs, including an inventory of older, Federally owned structures of the kind formerly demolished routinely by the government for parking lots or land sales and now found to be landmarks, and a number of pilot or demonstration projects for the design of energy-saving buildings. He is an astute politician who really worked for quality. His job was also one of the most politically vulnerable to a change of administration, and the Ford-appointed Administrator who succeeded him is a wealthy Florida drugstore chain owner, John M. Eckerd. Mr. Eckerd's architectural tastes are not well known. Walter Meisen, Assistant Commissioner for Construction Management of the Public Buildings Service of GSA, who has been responsible for guiding some of its more enlightened programs, remains.

It is not easy to lift GSA from its traditional slough of the ordinary. Once jacked up, it has to be held up, or it sinks right back into the primordial ooze. Currently, an ongoing, well-launched program by the National Endowment for the Arts that is aimed at the improvement of all levels of Federal design, including the public building, could help keep the spotlight on GSA in this transitional period.

Which brings us to one of Mr. Sampson's better legacies: an undertaking called MEG2, short for Megastructure Environment Group 2—and don't let that handle put you off. MEG2 is a dramatic and exciting project. It is a design for a new kind of Federal office building that is also a study of a new approach to the creation of interior space and environment. The proposal was carried out under GSA auspices as a research and development project that seeks imaginative and practical solutions for common building functions. The result is something called a "controlled environment structure" that has been specifically studied for a Federal office building. But it could have innumerable other, non-government uses, from a possible convention center for New York City to a shopping center anywhere, housing for the elderly, and commercial or communal space of many kinds.



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The next step for the government would be to select a Federal office building for a specific site to be constructed according to this concept. It would then be necessary to submit the project for Congressional approval, as required for all GSA buildings. The project has not gone beyond a model, a slide show and a detailed report.

What this building is, essentially, is an air structure—and don't be put off by that, either. Air structures are proven building technology already in common use for sports arenas or storage enclosures. The United States Pavilion at Expo 70 in Osaka, by the architects Davis, Brody and Associates (who are part of the MEG2 team), was a successful air structure—a 100,000 square foot, column-free exhibit space covered by a cable-restrained, air-supported fabric roof. It survived typhoons that damaged more conventional buildings.

The GSA air structure would cover a space about the size of two football fields. It is a rounded-corner, rectangular enclosure consisting of a triple-layered pneumatic fabric roof on cables anchored to a surrounding "berm," or reinforced earth ring, formed as the space is excavated from the ground. This puts the structure partly above and partly below ground so that it would be low enough to blend into its surroundings. The translucent roof would admit floods of light and also control solar energy, conserving heat in the winter and releasing it in the summer through special construction.

Within this light-filled, climate-controlled space there would be a landscaped mall, almost like an indoor park. Set into the mall is the "office structure" itself, a series of stacked platforms equivalent to a six-story building, enclosed or open to the degree desired, but always in reasonable contact with that light-filled space and the garden mall. These platforms would be subject to expansion and rearrangement, as needs changed. There could be shops and restaurants and even community functions for the lively, mixed uses that Federal construction is committed to embracing after years of bureaucratic sterility.

The design is the result of a rather different kind of consortium than GSA usually puts together, including some of the brightest architectural, structural and analytical talents around. In alphabetical order, the design principals are Building Sciences, Inc.; Cambridge Seven Associates, Inc.; Davis, Brody and Associates; Weidlinger Associates; Geiger, Berger Associates, P.C.; Cosentini Associates; and the Tishman Research Corporation. Tishman Research is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Tishman Realty and Construction Company, Inc., set up to explore innovative building approaches and products for both the public and the private sector. This solution is a joint public-private effort.

In one sense, this is a kind of non-architecture, in that no horrid, exterior slipcover facade can be added to the handsome, functional structure of pneumatic roof and berm. But there can be a great deal of ingenious planning and colorful design inside, and that climate-controlled, park-like interior could be a boon to many kinds of building. The scheme has great flexibility. There might be acoustical problems for some uses, humidity control would be necessary for planting, and entrance design is critical, but these are things that can be resolved.

The environmental amenities of this proposal make the standard office building look like a dated dungeon. Quite aside from its esthetic and environmental advantages, however, this concept saves both energy and money. Comparison of costs to a similar six-story office building shows a $13-million saving over a 30-year period. The project has been thoroughly studied to satisfy all Federal building requirements and energy standards and most city codes. It could be adapted to a variety of uses and places except, for extremely high cost, center city land. Pneumatic roofs are now being built and bid competitively. "There is nothing experimental about this at all," says Joseph H. Newman, head of Tishman Research.

In fact, this design is as realistic as it is imaginative; there is no grandiose, visionary doodling involved. At a time when building activity is slow, such careful studies can open doors to better architecture and environment when construction resumes. This is a fine example of what collaborative, creative thought can offer as a viable alternative to the humdrum, and the Federal government as sponsor deserves chants of praise.

But where does it go from here? Does it get built, or does it just gather dust in GSA's quintessential Federal office building in Washington? It is now a matter of politics, not practicality. In an election year, particularly, it is in the lap of Congress and GSA.