

A Building Fit for Buildings

Sometimes Washington seems to consist of nothing but bureaucracies and museums. There is even a bureaucracy, the Smithsonian Institution, that runs a lot of the museums. It oversees a marvelous and motley assortment of arts and science showcases, from the National Gallery to the Air and Space Museum, which line the Mall in marble monuments of leviathan scale. Not much is missing from the Smithsonian's comprehensive and curious collection, except a museum of the American building arts.

Indirectly, the Smithsonian has done a lot for the art of building. Its commissioned structures have been still-born stegosauruses, but in recent years it has rescued landmark buildings for its collections.

The Old Patent Office, once slated for a parking lot, houses the National Portrait Gallery and the National Collection of Fine Arts in Greek Revival halls and High Victorian chambers. The Renwick Gallery, the stylish Second Empire home of the first Corcoran Gallery, has been restored as the national showcase of design. The Smithsonian has even reached an arm as far as New York to aid in the rescue and marriage of the Carnegie Mansion and the Cooper-Hewitt Design Collection.

There is now in view another such building, ready-made for a museum of the building arts. A committee is studying the feasibility of establishing an architecture collection and program in the Pension Building, at 5th and G Streets, one of the capital's spectacular architectural achievements.

Constructed in 1882, the Pension Building has one of the country's most dramatic interior spaces—a galleried court held up by eight Corinthian columns 75 feet high. When the District of Columbia courts leave in two years, it will be surplus property.

That used to lead to sale or demolition or both. This time it could—and should—lead to a National Museum of the Building Arts, a field in which the United States has made undisputed contributions to art and the environment.