

# FEDERAL STATES OF FLUX

## Switch From Culture to Welfare in Washington Brings Architectural Change and Challenge

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**T**HERE have been subtle changes in the cultural atmosphere of the capital in the last month that strike a regular visitor with almost tangible force.

Washington is a chameleon city, one of the most self-consciously "architectural" cities in the world, and although its marble buildings and broad avenues remain the same, colored warmly rose and gold by this winter's remarkable sunsets, there is also a noticeable coloration of mood and thought that seems to give the city a different look and feel with each administration.

In the Kennedy years, the air was charged with a sophisticated vitality that brought its sluggish, frequently pseudo-classic monumentality to electric life. It seemed more of a continental capital, with serious artistic ambitions, and most of them were architectural. Bureaucrats who wanted to move onward and upward were talking a new language—that of the arts—as the result of Presidential directives on Federal building that made esthetics as important as economics.

Now all this is being transformed. The glitter is gone, the preoccupation with beauty no longer holds top priority, and the emphasis has shifted from culture to welfare. Talk is of the human condition, rather than of the esthetic condition. But the architectural frontier remains.

### New Horizons

The consciousness of the capital's and the Federal Government's physical image has been so firmly established in the public mind that it is unlikely to be lost. And in some of the most important areas of President Johnson's interests, like housing and urban renewal, architecture and welfare are not only mutually dependent in terms of design, but vast new horizons will be opened in the architectural and planning fields that the previous administration had only touched.

The difference is this. The Kennedy Administration stressed what might be called the Museum of Modern Art image of the arts: an emphasis on the highest and most progressive standards of esthetic quality, expressed in a badly

needed crusade for excellence in official building. The Johnson approach might be called the Tennessee Valley Authority or TVA image of the arts: architecture as public works, with emphasis on the sociological and welfare benefits of large building programs.

If the two could be married, of course, the most meaningful of all cultural expressions would be the result. The danger is that physical welfare pursued without the arts of design creates surroundings destructive of spiritual welfare; for proof, we have the tragic evidence of so many of the housing projects of the nineteen-thirties.

### New Building Programs

The President has already called for schools and libraries in his State of the Union message. These buildings have environmental as well as educational importance. A Federally aided housing program of massive size and scope is anticipated. Robert C. Weaver, administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency, speaking recently in Austin, Tex., and Chicago, stated that the present program would be expanded to include better and more complete planning not only of homes, but of entire communities.

This would be done in two ways. First, builders would be encouraged to include complete basic utilities, such as water and sewage systems, at the same time that houses are built, and second, provisions would be made for industrial, commercial and community service facilities as part of large housing developments. The methods will be spelled out in the President's housing legislation and message, probably in less than a month.

The talk in Washington agencies is that this legislation, in preparation now, will not only incorporate these advances, but will be the country's most significant step forward in the positive planning and design of the expanding urban environment. Uncontrolled expansion is one of the most serious problems being faced by almost every country in the world today. But the new solutions will be only as good as the quality of their planning and design, which brings us back to the

matter of architectural standards.

These standards, so strongly emphasized in the Kennedy building programs, are still a matter of concern. Some of the beachheads gained are being held. Others may be lost.

Federal building outside of Washington, without the President's militant insistence on superior architects and architecture to back up the efforts of the General Service Administration's assistant commissioner for design, Karel Yasko, seems likely to slide downhill again into the slough of shameful mediocrity that has always been the comfortable G.S.A. formula compounded of pedestrian solutions, committee compromises, administrative pragmatism and accounting office economics.

In Washington, however, the completely new, Kennedy-appointed Commission of Fine Arts is quietly assuming a role of expanding force and influence on the city's most critical areas. Headed by William Walton, it is a power to be reckoned with. Last week, President Johnson met with the commission and assured its members of his support for the continuation of the Kennedy architectural policies.

### New Standards

Some routine submissions have already received surprising rejections from the Commission. There will be no more rubber stamping of tired formulas. And there will be no "fine-artsing" of imaginative new designs to turn them back into tired formulas. More and more Washington builders and architects will find it harder and harder to get commission approval without producing suitable and creative solutions more sensitively related to the overall character of the Washington scene.

"We are another generation of architects," says John Carl Warnecke, member of the Fine Arts Commission and designer of Lafayette Square and the Kennedy tomb and memorial library. "We are aware of architecture in the total sense, as a complete environment." It is this awareness of architecture as the art of environment that will be crucial to the success of the large-scale building programs contemplated by the Johnson administration.