

Fine Arts Panel Falls to New Frontier

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Washington's Commission of Fine Arts, 53-year-old guardian of the capital's traditional classic image and bastion against the inroads of change, has fallen to the New Frontier.

The coup was a bloodless one, marked by the routine appointment last month by President Kennedy of five new members of the seven-member commission, as five terms expired simultaneously.

After its first organizational meeting with the new members yesterday, the commission announced a new chairman, William Walton. One of the new appointees and a close friend and adviser on the arts to the President, he will succeed David E. Finley.

Mr. Finley, who has served on the commission for 20 years, will resign when a successor is appointed. Burnham Kelly, another new member, is vice chairman.

Modern Design Favored

In the world of the arts, these changes are viewed as a quiet revolution in the capital's controlling esthetic body, which calls the turns on much of its public and private building. The new members are all active practitioners, teachers or critics of the arts and are known for their pronounced sympathies for modern design.

Besides Mr. Walton and Mr. Kelly, the new members are Theodore Roszak, Aline Saarinen and John Carl Warnecke. They succeed Felix W. deWeldon, William G. Perry, Douglas W. Orr, Ralph T. Walker and Peter Hurd.

Burnham Kelly, city planner and dean of Cornell University's College of Architecture, is a grandson of Daniel Burnham, the distinguished Chicago architect who was the first chairman of the commission. Mr. Kelly's record, however, reveals a preference for modern planning theories over the monumental classicism established as official commission policy by the original chairman, and followed ever since.

Spiky Abstractions

Theodore Roszak, the sculptor member, is a widely exhibited, prize-winning artist known for spiky metal abstractions that are in striking contrast to the conventional heroic realism favored by commission sculptors in the past.

Aline Saarinen, art critic and widow of Eero Saarinen, one of the country's leading architectural innovators, has been an articulate and influential champion of modern art and architecture.

John Carl Warnecke is a San Francisco architect with a large production of uncompromisingly contemporary buildings. He is also responsible for the sensitive scheme for Washington's historic Lafayette Square, which will save old buildings and incorporate modern office structures. This preservation project was promoted by Mr. Walton after Government agencies had planned large-scale demolition.

Hideo Sasaki, the only hold-over member, is a landscape architect appointed last year. Chairman of the Department of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University, he teaches and practices an advanced form of landscape design.

All members serve for four

years and must be replaced or reappointed at the end of that time.

With the present lineup, the balance of power in the commission has shifted from conservative to progressive. It is, in fact, a clean sweep, because the one remaining member, Mr. Sasaki, falls in naturally with the new group.

What Washington has now, for the first time since it established legal esthetic regulations in 1910, is a unanimously modern-minded commission. The old guard has given way to the avant garde, and the avant garde has become the Establishment.

Influence is Great

The Fine Arts Commission has extensive powers over Washington architecture, in terms of height, material, style, and detail of buildings in all of the city's major areas. These powers are advisory, but the record of compliance is high. The prevailing philosophy of its members, its receptivity to innovations in design, its definition of what is suitable and compatible with existing capital architecture — always a prickly and debatable issue — largely determine what will be built and what it will look like.

All new or remodeled construction in the controlled area must be submitted to the commission in preliminary design form. The commission may reject or accept the design and suggest modifications. Revised and final designs are reviewed again. The Commissioners of the District of Columbia then have the responsibility of seeing that the recommendations are carried out.

It is the opinion of much of

the profession, however, that the commission has bent notably toward the approval of safe but undistinguished buildings, asking only for "modifications of details," usually in the form of more academic treatment. It has made no secret of its disapproval of the glass box and has considered it anathema on the Washington scene.

Younger members of the architectural world and much of the professional press believe that the changes in personnel and philosophy are long overdue. The capital's traditionalists, clinging tenuously to colonnades, view it as a catastrophe.

Mr. Walton, asked whether Washington would have a new look before long, was a master of the diplomatic statement.

"It is impossible to make a philosophical announcement of policy at this moment," he said. "Our course will be apparent in our actions."