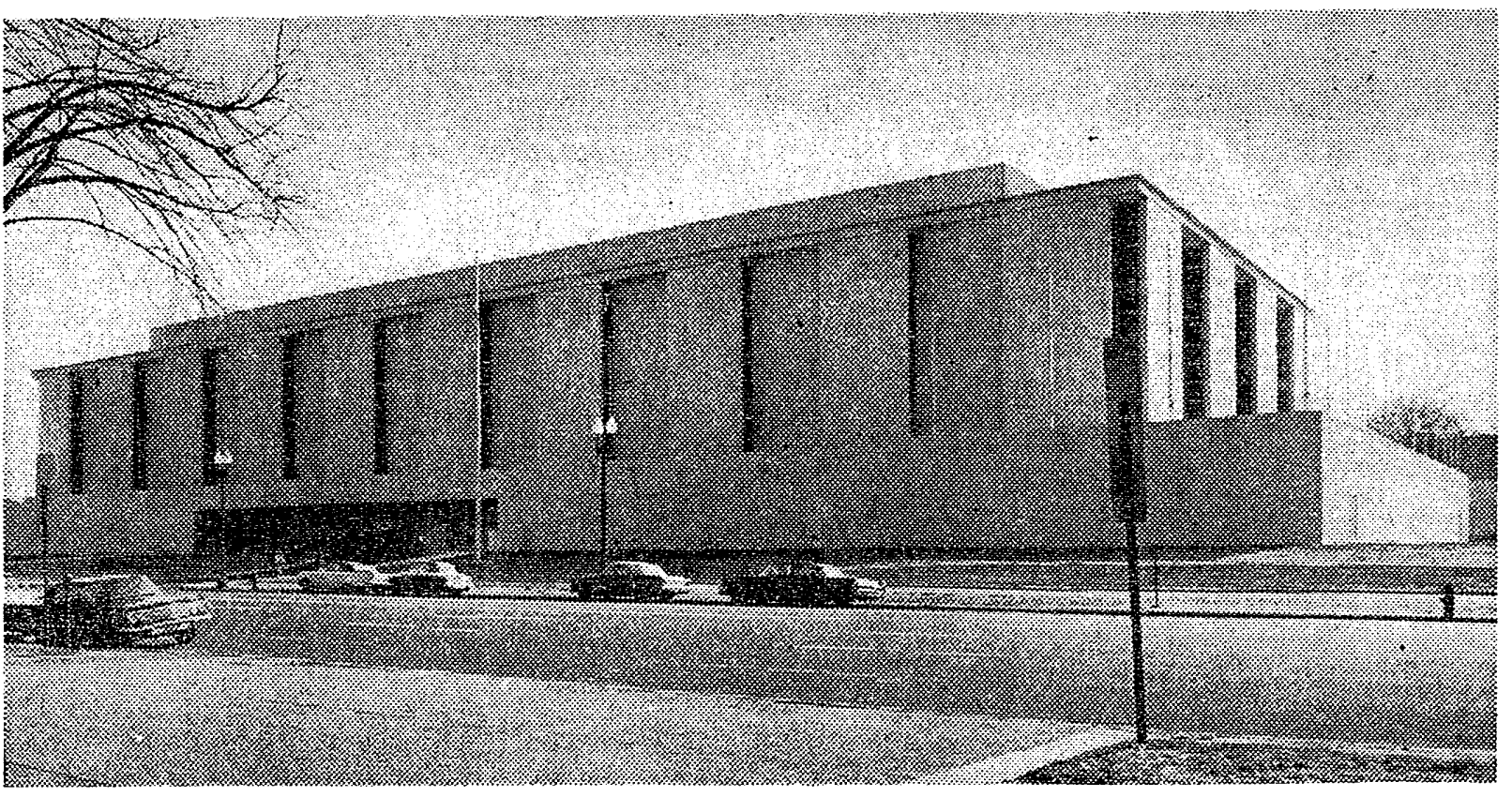
Architecture: Blending the Classical and Modern



Associated Press

The new museum building, on Constitution Avenue between 12th and 14th Streets, is 577 feet long and 301 feet wide

The Museum of History and Technology of Smithsonian Opens Doors Today

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON.

THE new Museum of History and Technology of the Smithsonian Institution, opening to the public today, is the latest of the capital's stillborn monuments on the Mall.

Designed to house that magnificent collection of memorabilia, inventions and cultural castoffs brought together in what is popularly known as the national attic, it could, and should have been one of the most marvelous museums in the world.

In terms of its contents, a completely fascinating mélange of locomotives, clocks, cars, costumes, household furnishings, uniforms, flags, weapons and unclassifiable curiosities, it is an absorbing adventure. In terms of its architecture, it is a disaster.

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An extremely large building, 577 feet long and 301 feet wide with a total public area of 347,760 square feet, it occupies one of Washington's most prominent ceremonial areas on Constitution Avenue between 12th and 14th Streets, cost $37 million, and expects a whopping big audience of 5 million visitors a year. Its architects are McKim, Mead and White, a firm of great luster around the turn of the century, which has not been McK,MandW for some time, and officially became Steinmetz, Cain and White in 1961.

The building is a machine to exhibit in, to paraphrase Le Corbusier's famous dictum that a house is a machine to live in, consisting of a businesslike steel-framed enclosure with open 50 foot spans between columns, all the latest flexible, modular lighting and wiring and few fixed interior partitions. It is a museum-factory to be divided at will.

Outside, the factory is disguised as a monument. The steel is sheathed in stone and an arbitrary system of projecting and receding wall planes form vertical strip windows that have driven the staff to distraction. Most have been blacked out. An awkward attempt to marry the classical and the modern, the building is legitimately neither; it is a monstrous and meaningless misalliance.

Inside, escalators ascend from the basement level to the building's focus—the central flag hall scaled to the original Star-Spangled Banner that flew over Fort McHenry; 50 feet high. It could have been a superb space. But marble has been substituted for imagination.

Structure is denied and confused by busily banal bronze and steel column detailing, and instead of dignity and dramatic impact, we have the pretentious, pedestrian equivalent of a slightly passé office building lobby.

On the main cross axis is Horatio Greenough's famous, giant size George Washington-in-a-toga statue set smack against escalators to the left, and balancing it, the solid marble access door to the machinery of the matching escalators to the right. The escalators themselves are entombed in marble. It would be pointless to continue.

The exhibits are installed expertly and pragmatically; in no case are their considerable esthetic merits emphasized by the fortunate accident of being directly exposed under a clear light, in an A-B-C lineup based on logical chronology.

This is not all bad, because the installations are technically excellent and the exhibits stand on their own merits, with a minimum of the artificial sentimentalizing or "periodizing" currently popular. They are the real thing.

But sensitivity has come off second best to the scientific method; vistas and visual points of emphasis are non-existent. A 17th-century stone carving, for example, that cries for finesse or the fine flair of the Italian exhibition designer, is dumped into a sort of varnished wood public school sandbox. The arts of design are sadly absent.

What went wrong? The obvious thing, in Washington. A Joint Congressional Committee was set up for the museum, authorized to advise the regents of the Smithsonian on the design and construction of the building. This is not the first time that Congress has overstepped itself in the arts. It has proved once again that it is more qualified to legislate than to design, although its recent record might suggest that it has done more designing than legislating.

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What would have been a better solution? For an easy answer, see Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Either Philharmonic Hall or the new State Theater offer an architectural approach that may be a bit stodgy for New York, but would be brilliantly suitable for Washington's problem of classical continuity.

For a harder, but better answer, imagine the new museum and the adjoining National Museum and National Gallery that form the north side of the Mall as a series of enclosures, connected by gardens, arcades and courts, inviting, rather than repelling people, a living group of buildings rather than a row of ceremonial tombs.