

# Lafayette Square

The new plan for Washington's Lafayette Square is a notably sensitive and sensible answer to the problem of preserving historic buildings and areas in urban renewal projects. The character and heritage of Lafayette Square, the traditional "front yard" of the White House, will be saved, and necessary new Government office buildings provided at the same time. These new buildings will be set well back, behind the existing small-scale historic houses facing on the square, which will be preserved instead of demolished. Our only reservation concerns the design of the new offices, which are a curiously timid modern-traditional blend. For a century-spanning urban architecture of enduring value, they could and should be buildings of our own time—creative contemporary work, carefully and sympathetically related to the older structures by scale, proportion and detail.

The general approach, however, is beautiful in its simplicity, appealing in its logic, and has much to teach the rest of the country. Yet, like so many simple solutions, it took years of agitation, opposition and persuasion to achieve, while Government agencies backed and filled and produced a series of execrable plans based on the premise that destruction was necessary and mediocre architecture inevitable.

Demolition of our historic heritage and the architectural character of our cities is not an inescapable adjunct to progress. The Lafayette Square plan proves conclusively that what the "experts" said "couldn't be done" can be done, and those responsible for this fine refutation of current practices are to be congratulated. All that stands in the way of enlightened planning and preservation now are the apathy, unwillingness and low level of creative thought that mark so many of our urban renewal projects.