

Architecture

The Federal Funnybone

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WASHINGTON was enjoying a very early spring last week. The days were languorous with the false warmth that bears false promises of love and life when only December is ahead. In one of those outrageously beautiful corny gestures that the Capital alone can make, the top of the Washington monument was gilded with late afternoon sun, and moments later the Lincoln Memorial caught the magic light of the time between day and dusk with an incandescent glow. The city was never lovelier.

In the bureaucracies, business was as usual. There is a new set of Republican faces in the Public Buildings Service of the General Services Administration, and ties are wilder and hair is longer, but neither as wild nor as long as in other cities. The endless corridors that are the true Washington scene are broken here and there by freshly painted, varicolored doors. There are new, if familiar protestations of the intent to make the system work, to crank up its permanently sluggish momentum and to produce something better than, redundantly predictable mediocrity. Hope springs eternal.

There is one real change at GSA. At the top level, the agency has reversed its disastrous "surplus buildings" mentality. For years, Federally owned and operated buildings that had outlived their usefulness and were not needed or wanted by other Federal agencies were declared surplus and disposed of summarily. What were often delivered into the hands of the wreckers were sturdy structures and historic monuments of considerable architectural merit.

GSA has finally been made aware of the fact that many old buildings of quality are landmarks, and is cur-

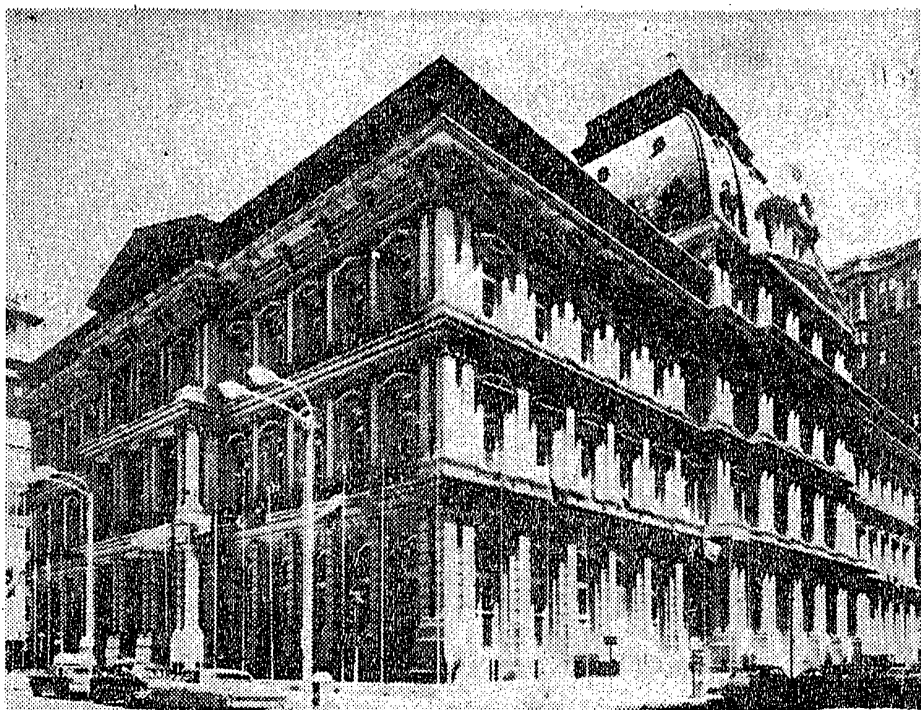
rently surveying its possessions in terms of their architectural and urban value. It is working closely with the Federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, of which public buildings Commissioner and Deputy GSA Administrator Arthur F. Sampson is a member, to list the landmark structures on its roster.

The change of attitude came about largely because of the Old St. Louis Post Office. That has been an off-again, on-again preservation cliffhanger for years, in which citizen groups have doggedly tried to save the ornate and substantial Second Empire structure by Alfred B. Mullett that has been a downtown St. Louis landmark since 1882, while GSA has tried to unload it.

The climax came last year when feasibility and architectural studies proved that the old building could be converted successfully to commercial uses, if GSA would transfer the building to the city.

St. Louis requested the transfer and GSA wrote St. Louis one of those classic bureaucratic letters citing a law that made the transfer impossible. It seemed that under the existing law GSA could only convey the property for non-revenue producing purposes, specifically for non-profit museum or recreational use.

The letter was very detailed about administrative restrictions that had grown up around the law, including such illegal practices as canoeing or campfire building. Visions of forbidden canoes in the dry moat around the Old Post Office building danced in preservationists' heads, alternating with the bulldozer. A column in this space suggested that the law be reinterpreted or changed if this destructive government farce was not to be played out at the cost of



Old St. Louis Post Office, halfway to salvation
A realistic plan and a willing developer.

Robert Aronson

the loss of the national heritage.

It must be said that subsequently GSA leapt, or was pushed, to the barricades. A bill was introduced into Congress, as part of the Administration's environmental program, which would broaden the existing law to authorize transferral of property for revenue-producing activities if the Secretary of the Interior found them compatible with a historic monument. This would not only save St. Louis; it would facilitate the preservation of historic buildings across the country. Without it, in fact, these "surplus" landmarks will simply continue to be condemned to death.

The bill has passed the Senate and is somehow stalled in the House. The caution is incomprehensible. The cause of the national patrimony has the political currency of motherhood at present, and the bill can do nothing but good under any circumstances.

It puts absolutely no burden on the Federal government. It creates hardship for no one. Its great virtue is that it will be helpful to any government-owned building

of national value with an uncertain future, as the occasion arises, by expanding reuse options. Old buildings can live only by paying their way. Whom can the bill hurt except land-greedy speculators?

Meanwhile, St. Louis sits with a realistic plan and a willing developer.

If GSA transfers the Old Post Office to the Bi-State Development Agency, a local St. Louis public transport authority—and GSA is now willing and waiting to do so—Bi-State will turn the building into a satellite airport facility. A passenger terminal would be created at its lower levels, including existing basement rail lines that go to within a mile of the airport and could be extended. Bi-State would issue bonds for the renovation. A developer, Stephen J. Apter, would lease the building's upper stories for commercial use including shops, restaurants and a hotel.

This exemplary plan, with its environmental and transportation benefits, is being held up now by House inaction. As things stand, the House will have a good part

of the American heritage to answer for.

But that is not quite all. There is some additional Federal black humor. If you think about it, we really have a pretty witty government that loves a good joke.

It seems that St. Louis can proceed with the plan, even without the new law, if the Federal Aeronautics Administration will give GSA approval to convey the property for airport improvement purposes. GSA has formally requested the FAA Administrator to consider this possibility.

Evidently FAA has the same lawyers that GSA had, or they have moved over there, or it is a government breed. They have succeeded in finding a law that says, in effect, that it can't be done. There are objections because the St. Louis airport is not owned by the Bi-State Agency, which would receive the property and renovate it. And the improvement, at the end of a railroad connector, would not be literally "contiguous," or some such limiting concept, to the airport.

Here we go again. Semper bureaucrats, louder and funnier.