

Deglaciating the Feds

The image of the Federal Government is monolithic, glacial and dull; it is an image created by Federal buildings, which are monolithic, glacial and dull. In and out of Washington, most of the structures put up by the Federal Government are temples to 9-to-5 bureaucracies, usually devoid of any sign of extra-governmental life. Their distinguishing characteristics are lack of style and soul.

A bill in Congress now would change all that. It would not only revolutionize Federal architecture but profoundly alter its impact on cities and neighborhoods.

First, this legislation, introduced by Senator Buckley of New York and backed by the General Services Administration, would encourage the Government to utilize the country's existing architectural resources. Instead of automatically producing those still-born monuments, the G.S.A. would be required to explore the use of older buildings and existing spaces, where suitable, including landmark-quality properties. Part of the process would be consultation with the National Trust for Historic Preservation on the local availability of such structures. This is a long way from earlier Federal practice of declaring its own historic buildings Government surplus and knocking them down to the highest parking-lot bidder.

Second, and just as revolutionary, the restrictions that have guaranteed the sterility of Government buildings—the prohibition of all non-Government uses—would be lifted. The rental of space to commercial enterprises would be permitted, with an eye to reinforcing the area's functions. Cultural, educational and recreational uses of a building's facilities would be treated as desirable. This would not be restricted just to the ground floor where Government construction habitually assassinates the street, but would take place in auditoriums, courtyards, rooftops and lobbies as well.

The impact would be far more than architectural. Instead of an after-5 o'clock surreal landscape of locked doors and empty, echoing spaces, Federal construction would promote the health and vitality—and even the safety—of a city. Design dedicated to the social and economic improvement of the environment would be a fine substitute for instant Federal wastelands. We are delighted that the approach of the Bicentennial is bringing out the revolutionary in Senator Buckley.