

Complaints Grow on New House Office Building

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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It is moving time on Capitol Hill for 169 Congressmen eligible for space in the new Rayburn House Office Building. The structure's three-room suites complete with refrigerators and safes are being raffled off to applicants who may have a view of the Capitol dome or an interior court, depending on senior-

ity. Even seniority, however, does not give any legislator a door leading from his office, or his aide's office, to his

working staff without passage through a waiting room full of constituents and special pleaders. To correct this small planning error would add \$200,000 to costs already estimated at anywhere from \$86 million to \$122 million for the expensive and controversial building.

Some Congressmen are moving in reluctantly. Representative Thomas L. Ashley, Democrat of Ohio, for one, rejected his office on sight. But he is making the move anyway this week because his present quarters are too small.

"This layout could paralyze us," he said during his inspection tour. "It's an ugly building."

Mr. Ashley is not alone. The professional architectural press has been bitterly critical as construction progressed. (The building has taken seven years and \$22 million more to complete than originally estimated largely as the result of expensive miscalculations; change orders have reached 300 per cent over Government average; bid estimates on contracts have been as much as \$4.5 million off.)

There have been accusations of secret planning, pork barrel commissions and possible misuse of public funds. The fact that the general contractor was Matthew J. McCloskey, Democratic party stalwart of Philadelphia, has not escaped notice. But the storm swirls uselessly around a behemoth that is obviously here to stay.

Defects Are Numerous

Architecturally, the Rayburn Building is a national disaster. Its defects range from profligate mishandling of 50 acres of space to elephantine esthetic banality at record costs. The costs are now being investigated by the General Accounting Office.

Equal to the question of costs, however, is the question of what Congress and the capital have received for the investment. It is quite possible that this is the worst building for the most money in the history of the construction art. It stuns by sheer mass and boring bulk. Only 15 per cent of its space is devoted to the offices and hearing rooms for which it was erected.

Forty-two per cent of the floor area is used for parking. Endless corridors have been likened to "Last Year at Marienbad." Stylistically, it is the apotheosis of humdrum.

It is hard to label the building, but it might be called Corrupt Classic. Its empty aridity and degraded classical details are vulgarization without drama, and to be both dull and vulgar may be an achievement of sorts.

The structure's chief "design features" are hollow exercises in sham grandeur. A super-colossal exterior expanse of stolid, Mussolini-style pomp is embellished with sculpture that would be the apogee of art in the Soviet Union, where overscaled muscles and expressions of empty solemnity are still admired.

A monumental entrance at second floor level is reached by pretentious steps that will never be used. The real entrance, on the ground floor just below, abandons false dignity for no dignity at all.

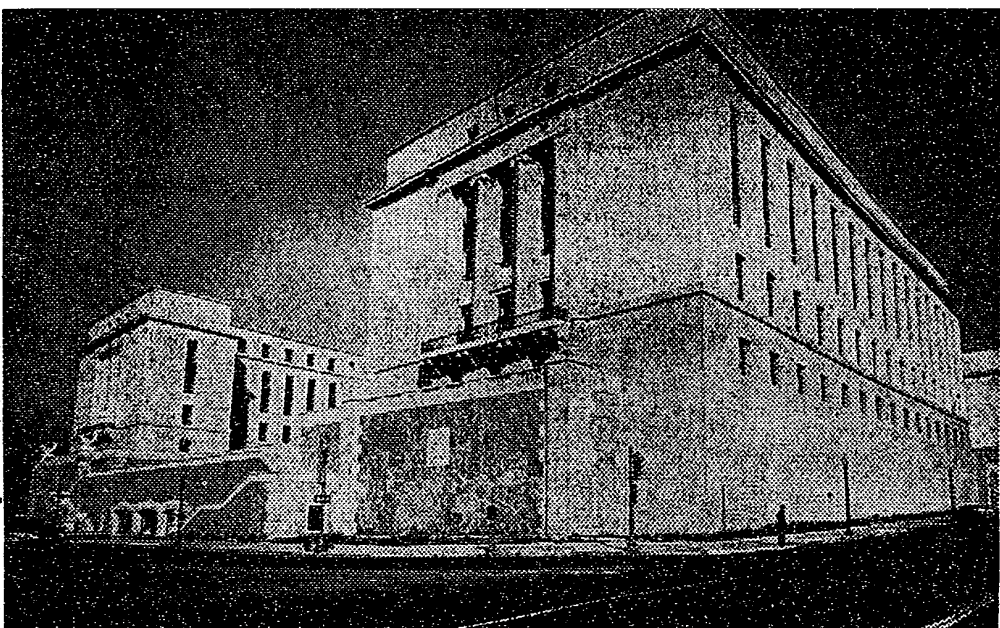
The formal marble front with its blank, machine-stamped look sits on a gargantuan base of informal, random-cut granite of obviously miscalculated proportions, an effect comparable to combining a top hat with blue jeans. Groups of columns meant to dress up the drab, flat facade not only fail to suggest that columns are traditionally supporting members, but they also terminate incongruously on balconies that appear to support the columns—a neat combination of structural illogic and stylistic flimflam.

Artless Central Court

Inside, a pedestrian statue of Sam Rayburn presents the seat of its pants to entering visitors. It faces a huge landscaped central court that is an artless cliché. Embracing Mr. Sam is another cliché, a two-story curved double stair fated to be not only useless but graceless.

In the hearing rooms, coarse, lifeless classical cornices and moldings are joined to stock modern acoustic ceilings and panel lighting for a state of esthetic warfare tempered only by their matching mediocrity. This model comes in red, green, gold and blue.

Behind the scenes, the classic false front is abandoned and



Black Star (by Fred Ward)

The new Rayburn House Office Building, which has aroused considerable criticism from prospective occupants as well as from several professional architectural circles.

working subcommittee rooms use ordinary partitions and fittings of the lowest commercial common denominator. Throughout the building, the design level is consistent: whatever is not hack is heavy-handed.

For \$100 million, give or take a few million (the cost of New York's mammoth Pan Am Building) the gentlemen of the House have got a sterile, stock plan of singularly insensitive design and detailing that was moribund more than half a century ago. Even the basic functional requirements have been insufficiently studied. The making of useful and beautiful public spaces with the power

to inspire and symbolize as well as to serve—the timeless aim of architecture and one that is mandatory for Washington—is conspicuously absent.

The Rayburn Building is the third solid gold turkey in a row to come out of the office of the Architect of the Capitol, J. George Stewart, who is not an architect, but who picks them for Congress. For this one he selected Harbeson, Hough, Livingston & Larson of Philadelphia. He is also responsible for the ill-advised remodeling of the Capitol's East Front and the construction of the new Senate Office Building.

There are no controls or re-

views for Mr. Stewart's work, and none for the House committee that authorized the Rayburn Building's construction and appropriations, generally behind closed doors.

An old architectural saying has it that there's no point in crying over spilled marble. Seven million pounds of it have been poured onto Capitol Hill in this latest Congressional building venture, and there is nothing quite as invulnerable as a really monumental mistake. The Rayburn Building's ultimate claim to fame may well be that it is the biggest star-spangled architectural blunder of our time.