

Of Capital Failure and Capital Crimes

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Washington, D.C. — THEY are turning Washington into a city of wide skies and particular architectural charms. They are not just the speculators with their Ivory soap structures lining streets with die-stamped boxes (many of the buildings look as if they'd lather); "they" are the usual assortment of bureaucracies, banks, government offices and institutional headquarters.

Washingtonians know it. Residents have been complaining for years about the creeping characterlessness that has been eroding this city of wide skies and particular architectural charms. The curious thing is that so many of the crimes are committed in the name of suitability, symbolism, progressive development and other assorted and misleading rot and nonsense. The result is always the same: one more block of exactly the same thing that adds up to even more nothing at all. The effects, urbanistically, are easily analyzed; attrition of interest, elimination of variety, including detail, period, image and use, reduction to one deadly dull style and scale.

The only variations are whether windows are boxed in or out, or which particular cookie mold has been used to form the facade. What has almost disappeared is the real Washington, a city of streets with their own local look, a combination of Federal houses restored or reused as bars, shops and restaurants, with the odd old theater or bank or office building that bespeaks the 19th-century Capital, and that add up to amenity and ambience that are also architectural and social history. It has been a distinct, evocative and recognizable Washington. There is less and less of it all the time.

The problem may be that Washington, the seat of history, fails to understand what history really is. At any rate, it misses the point of urban history abysmally. It is not so much the George-Washington-slept-here syndrome as the classic monument fix.

By focusing on those classic monu-

ments, preserving or restoring them, the city has lost sight of the buildings that provide the framework that sets the stage for the monuments. Without that framework, the monuments become a colossal bore, whether national shrines or local or pseudo-commemorative. Washington's "development" is a wrong-headed that.

Heartache turns to anger when faced with such wrongheadedness. One block between G and H streets, site the Executive Office Building, handsomely restored, that was the old State Department Building) next to the

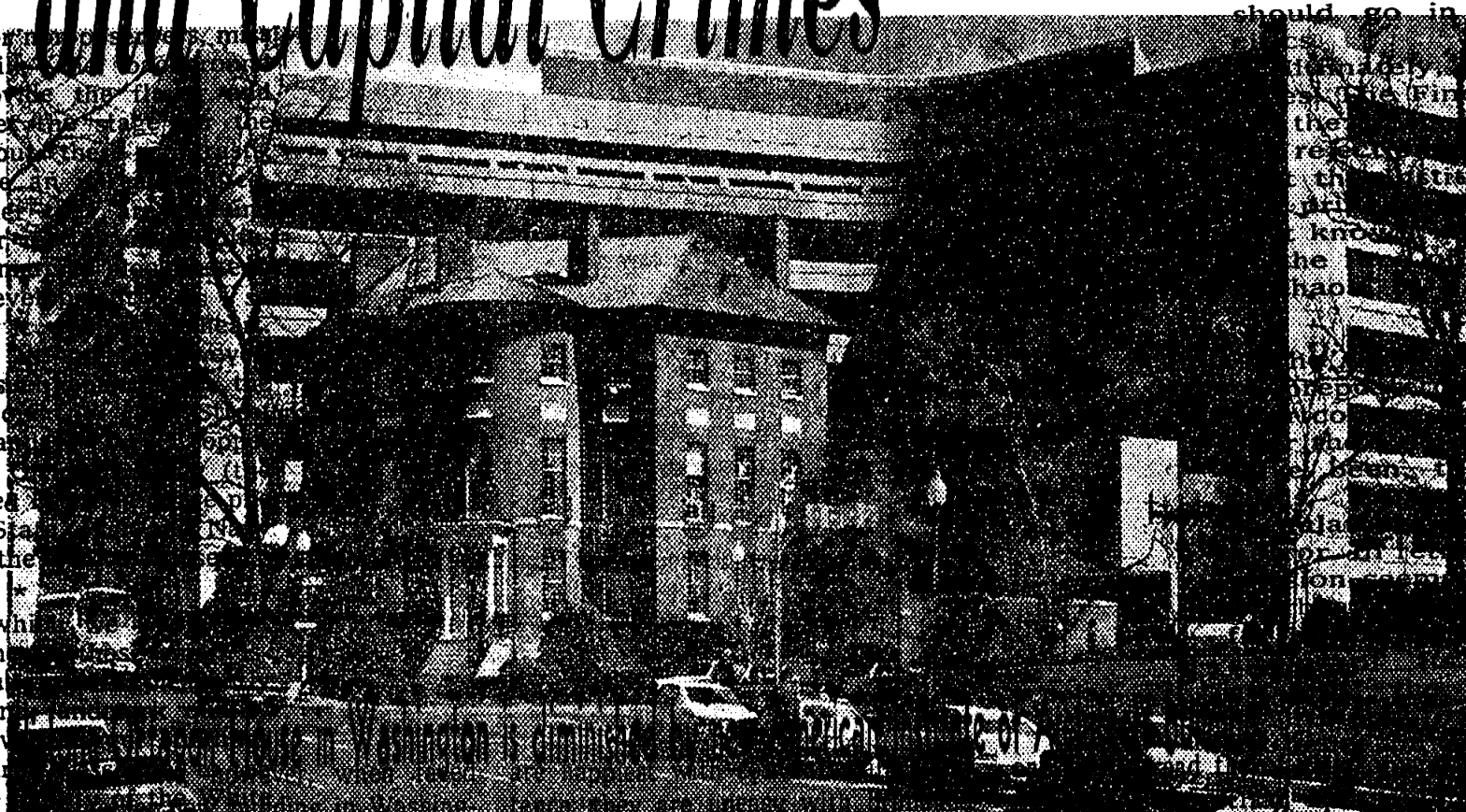
This block, of which one week, is (was?) one of the lands of earlier buildings, mixed character and that work so well and, in this case, the preservation of the House environs. W.

eral Service Administration bulldoze the block. The new headquarters for the American Institute of Design, could not be worse. The new building is a landmark in mental and urban design.

It seems now that this is not only a crime against the surroundings, but that the project may be illegal as well. GSA sent in the bulldozer and has used as headquarters, on a weekend (over the holidays) to initiate prompt, debate-free destruction.

(One building was a landmark; the others had been declared eligible for listing.) A court order stopped the bulldozer on the grounds that demolition might be in violation of the National Historic Preservation Act. One would think that to call GSA's action "inadequate" enough any place reads more like bad faith. GSA should be forced to restore the block by rebuilding appropriately where the damage has been done.

One is subject less to corporate than to



point. The point is that the AIA set itself the conscious and sensitive task of designing and erecting a building to go with the Octagon. It was to be an object lesson in the blending of new and old in the particular way that Washington needs so desperately and muffs so consistently. After all, who but the architects could, and should, set an example?

It was also to be an object lesson in how to go about it. The AIA held a national competition. The solution it came up with, by the firm of Mitchell-Giurgola, promised to be exceptional. Then a lot of traumatic things happened. For two intriguingly different versions of the story, using the same basic facts and cast of characters,

should go in "dictating" design specifications. Everyone fell on their knees. The Fine Arts Commission rejected the design, and the AIA accepted it. They did so on the ground that the committee felt bound to uphold the principle of design review as "the known means of maintaining order" in the face of all the pressures leading to haphazard development.

The action was either chicken or courage. Whatever the design's merits may have been, and whatever the commission's reservations may have been, the scheme was conscientiously considered and able, not a destructive, free-wheeling operation. In respect, the Fine Arts Commission seems to have been guilty of an interpretation of its role as arbitrary and dubious imposition of its own taste. On these grounds, the AIA should, and could, have helped to clarify the review board function, and have helped to clarify the board's responsibilities.

There seems to be little question that some of the leadership and membership was uncomfortable with the quite unorthodox Mitchell-Giurgola design. This was an outstandingly creative answer to the difficult problem of blending scale and style. It dealt in sophisticated subtleties which were at that time, but has ceased to be, an offbeat vocabulary related to the historic property.

Complications immediately ensued. The program and the site were enlarged so that the building had to preserve scale. The design is signed and rescaled. This version was submitted to the Fine Arts Commission. The review process became particularly involved in personalities and serious questions of how the building would fit into the surrounding urban fabric.

But what is more subtly bad is that the new building fails conspicuously to promote a balance between past and present, whatever its declared intentions. Degrees of design quality become moot. It moves the "other Washington," the wrong kind of Washington, right up to the Octagon's back door, instead of cherishing and extending the Octagon's ambience. How fine an architectural act that would have been! One remembers the old brick stables that served as a library and the handsome, neighboring red brick Lemon Building, and wonders how, and where, their obvious lessons of sympathetic materials and urban relationships were lost.

So much is being sacrificed in Washington. It is a city of bureaucrats, with buildings to match. Since bureaucracy has no values or sensibilities, this can be read loud and clear in the Capital's streets. That kind of symbolism is as old as cities, and Washington is too lovely a city to be lost in this shameful fashion.