The F.B.I. Building: A Study in Soaring Costs and Capital Views on Beauty
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Not exactly buried in the Federal budget being introduced by President Nixon today is a $126,108,000 item for the country's largest and most controversial building project—the new headquarters for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It is hard to bury a building occupying

An Appraisal

2,535,000 square feet and an entire block of Pennsylvania Avenue, even though three stories of it are underground and the sign on the site identifies it only as anonymous Federal construction. Eleven stories and 160 feet more of the building are now rising between 9th and 10th Streets, opposite the Justice Department and the Federal Triangle and back to E Street, for the avenue's most conspicuous monument since the Federal Triangle was constructed.

The official $126,108,000 figure about to be released by the General Services Administration, the agency that puts up Government buildings, is an escalation of $17-million to $24-million over the most recent estimates. It is meant to cover further escalation through a projected completion date of July, 1974.

Because of a decade of delays, inflation, soaring construction costs and changing site and plan requirements, costs have already risen from an estimated total of $60-million in 1962, when the proj ect began, to a $102.6-million estimate last September by the General Accounting Office, the Government budgetary watchdog, followed by a $109.6-million estimate by Congressional critics. So far, $102,578,000 has been appropriated.

At $126-million and still going—only the substructure has been completed and it is the rare undertaking that stays within estimates today —the F.B.I. Building promises to make the Rayburn Building look like a piker.

The architecturally notorious Rayburn Building cost $87-million officially in 1964, but less official estimates top $100-million. Staggering as it seems, it was cheaper and smaller.

But more important than its size, the F.B.I. project combines with still another Government construction item, the completion of the Federal Triangle, for one of the most significant chunks of monumental building in civic architectural terms to be undertaken in Washington since the nineteen-thirties.

The Federal Triangle price tag is $135-million; added to the F.B.I., that makes over a quarter of a billion dollars of new construction in a five-block stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue. Work is scheduled for this year.

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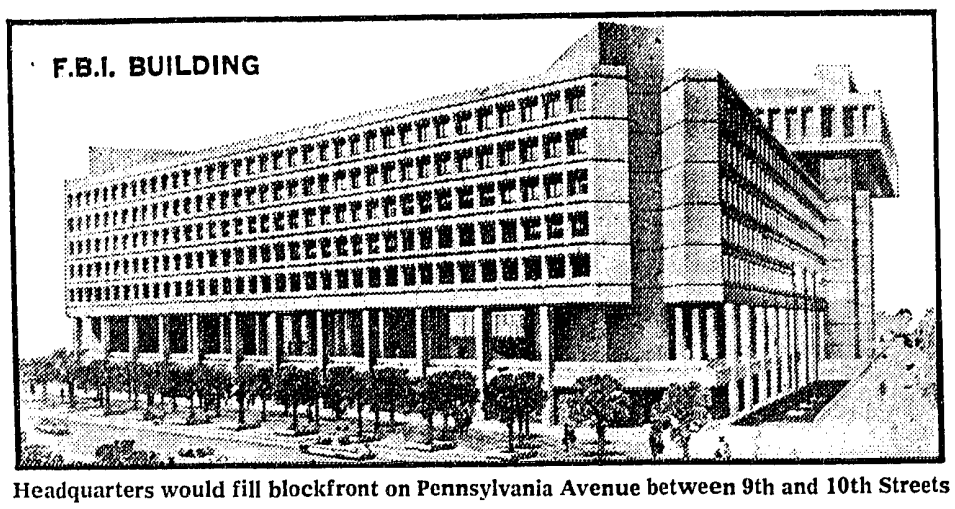
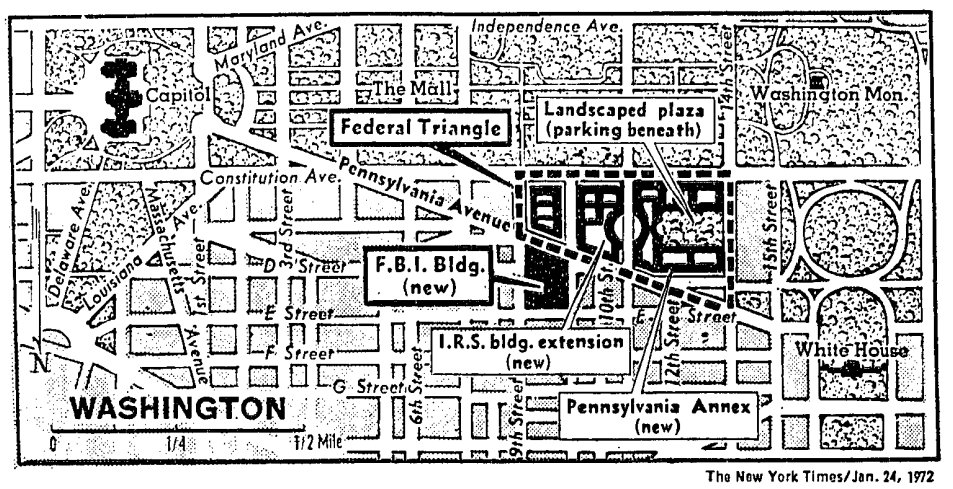
These two projects are the key building blocks of the nationally publicized Pennsylvania Avenue Plan, begun by executive order under the Kennedy Administration, a program meant to revitalize and glorify the processional route of Presidential inaugurations.

This planning scheme, begun boldly with the appointment of the President's Commission on Pennsylvania Avenue, stumbled along for some time and is now moribund. But with the construction of the F.B.I. Building and the completion of the Federal Triangle, both of which have had the review and blessing of what remains of the now unfunded commission, the plan moves to fruition, after a fashion.



Headquarters would fill blockfront on Pennsylvania Avenue between 9th and 10th Streets



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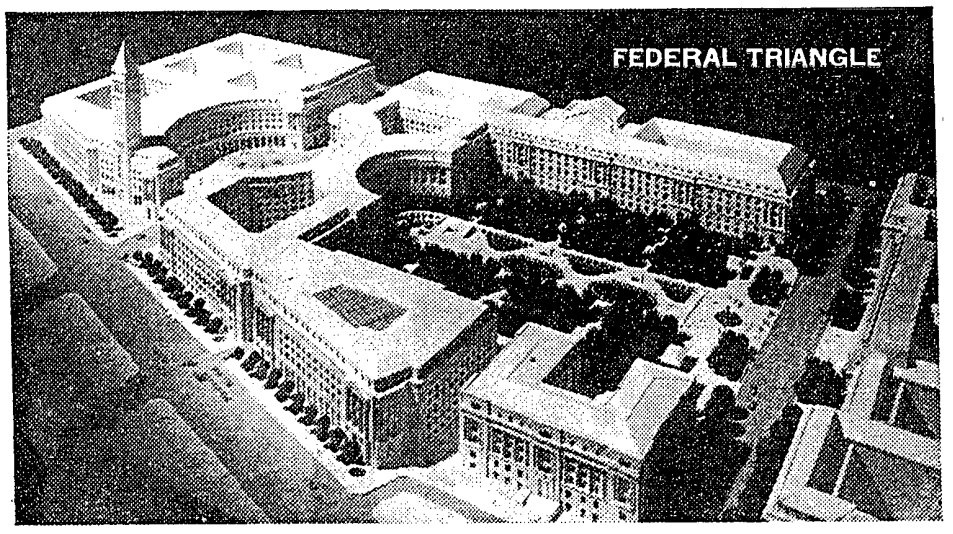

Present building plan would retain Old Post Office Tower, left, and finish I.R.S. office

It also suggests the inevitable scale of Washington bureaucracy in the relentless acreage of precast window frames. No artful efforts can disguise this humdrum reality; it is known as the no-win-Washington-architectural-syndrome.

Given the banal, elephantine problem, the Murphy firm has done a superior job. What would have been a deadly mass is now skillfully rearranged into visually defined structural and functional parts. Even so, it will look like a modern dinosaur. Washington is the great architectural boneyard.

But it could be a lot worse. It could have looked like the Rayburn Building.

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Designing the F.B.I. Building has been full of problems. The recommendations of the Pennsylvania Avenue Plan called for structures with ground-floor arcades to relieve the solid, closed-wall effect of Washington streets. According to the basic planning directives, Pennsylvania Avenue was to be opened up and livened with those arcades and pedestrian pleasures and activities.

The F.B.I. wanted, and got, a solid ground-floor wall. It vetoed arcades, and at street level the building is the inevitable bunker.

The agency would have preferred an inviolate mausoleum from top to bottom, but there were Government review bodies that had advisory powers and used them. The Pennsylvania Avenue Commission, the Fine Arts Commission and the National Capital Planning Commission pressed for changes.

The building lost its ground-floor arcade but it gained a second-floor inner court accessible from the street, as a kind of substitute open public space. It acquired new massing, special paving and planting and additional basement parking. The three commissions' changes raised costs $7,465,000.

Special F.B.I. requirements added $14,350,000 more to standard office construction prices. These needs include a "tour route" for millions of visitors, requiring "secure" escalators and a "security slab" below the open second floor.

Additional floor-load capacity had to be built into the structure for maximum flexibility. More plumbing is required for an "unusual high population," and there are extra fire and safety provisions.

Space is labeled "general purpose" and there is a lot of it. There will be laboratories, classrooms, an auditorium, library, morgue, gymnasium and physical training area, firing range, test-pattern range and ballistics testing area, auto repair facilities, shops, an emergency power system, a "secure communications system, an incinerator for disposal of confidential material and, undoubtedly, files. The General Accounting Office, in its review last fall, found no executive "frills."

The most stunning increase of all is the purely inflationary one of rising construction costs in the last decade. The General Services Administration has estimated this figure at a whopping $38,-212,000, from April, 1962, to July, 1974.

There is no real villain to be fingered. The process is the culprit — interminable, complex, time-consuming and expensive—full of backing and filling, rejection and persuasion, during which the design evolved and costs skyrocketed.

Some of the escalation is due to delays, ranging from routine bureaucratic processing and the Congressional appropriations system to the multiple reviews and subsequent revisions. Other factors are changes that include redesign costs and increased square footage. But the $38,-million in inflationary construction costs—paralleled in private and public building across the country—required nothing more than sitting and breathing.

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The theory that J. Edgar Hoover is building an extravagant monument to himself has little credibility with those who have done the work. He communicated minimally through subordinates and seemed more concerned with logistics and security than art and posterity.

The building will be a monument in spite of itself. And its security symbolism, on the route of Presidents in the nation's capital, is making a lot of people uneasy. Some of its design is aimed at being demonstration-and-protest proof. Many would have preferred it in a distant meadow somewhere, like the Central Intelligence Agency.

If the F.B.I. is making a great leap forward stylistically, the Federal Triangle is the great jump backward.

In the early days of the Pennsylvania Avenue Plan, the completion of the Triangle was undertaken as a study by John Carl Warnecke, who proposed contemporary infill.

Later, the change from a Democratic to a Republican Administration brought a change from Democratic to Republican architects in the unpleasant tradition of using architecture as political patronage. The job went to Vincent G. Kling of Philadelphia with Leo A. Daley of Omaha, and the style went from modern to classical.

The project involves the much-debated destruction of the Old Post Office Building, being vigorously protested by preservationists. According to present plans, just the tower will be kept and incorporated into the new construction, which will copy the old.

The Internal Revenue Service Building will be extended and the circle completed on 12th Street. The Pennsylvania Avenue facade will be finished as far as the District Building, and the sea of parked cars in the Post Office court will be replaced by a classically landscaped plaza with a parking garage underneath.

The General Services Administration has not instituted a master-plan study of the present or optimum uses of the Federal Triangle; the complex is simply being added onto with an impressive carbon-copy cliché.

The sum total of the new construction will be exactly what the Pennsylvania Avenue Plan set out to abolish: the cold, formal, dead stone walls that drain off all the life from Washington streets, a stillborn formula the Government seems destined to build.

Every bit of it, traditional or modern, to use a newly coined phrase of John Kenneth Galbraith, is in the Sub-Imperial Style. He refers to foreign policy, but the phrase applies equally to the Washington architectural scene.

Unlike a genuine Imperial Style, the Sub-Imperial Style is what you get when power is exercised not by individuals but by organizations or a bureaucracy. The Sub-Imperial Style is what the bureaucracy builds for itself.

Apparently, no executive order can change it. Ten years and on the way to a billion dollars worth of building later, we are back where we started. Perhaps there was never any place else to go.