



Drawing by architect Victor Lundy of project for United States Tax Court Building, Washington, D. C.
"A timeless sense of balance, order and serenity that is genuine classicism"

Architecture: Full Speed Forward

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AS a sequel to last week's discussion called "Full Speed Backward," which dealt with the design for the \$75-million Madison Memorial Library for Capitol Hill in Washington, we are concerned this week with another Washington building, moving in another direction.

The design for the United States Tax Court Building to occupy a site not far from the Capitol on 2nd Street N. W. between D and E Streets, represents everything that the Madison Library does not: a progressive, sensitive, contemporary solution fully responsive to Washington's classical tradition and yet fully part of the mid-20th century — a period of exceptional vigor and beauty in the history of structure and design.

The Madison Library, as was pointed out, is a product of the office of the Architect of the Capitol, devoted for the past 15 years to the laying of monstrous marble eggs on Capitol Hill, including the notorious Rayburn Building.

This process is carried on by a favored and familiar syndicate of practitioners who specialize in a kind of consummate conventionality that the Architect of the Capitol and his Congressional sponsors consider "suitable" and "in keeping" with the Washington spirit and style. Contemplating the awesome awfulness of the results, one can only conclude that the country has run out of spirit and style.

The design for the Tax Court Building is evidence that we have not. This building is a product of the General Services Administration, the Federal agency responsible for all Federal construction—except on Capitol Hill which is the fiefdom of the Architect of the Capitol—anywhere in the country, including Washington.

Working drawings for the court building have just been completed, to be followed by bids and construction. The architects are Victor A. Lundy and Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle and Wolff. Approval of the design by the Fine Arts Commission after rejection of an earlier scheme, has been enthusiastic.

For many years the GSA building program projected an image of the Federal Government that could have made any loyal but sensitive citizen defect. (Where to, in this world of esthetic and environmental blunders, is hard to say.) The difference between the monumentally mediocre products of GSA and the banal behemoths of the Architect of the Capitol was largely a matter of pomposity and pretension. GSA did not aspire to any pretensions beyond applying the yardstick of ultimate economy to art, life, government, symbolism and the American ideal. All were reduced to a kind of pragmatic stylistic sludge.

In recent years, under the guidance of Karel Yasko, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Public Buildings

Service, that picture has changed. With a marvelous, ham-handed persuasion and an unbureaucratic willingness to stick his neck out, Mr. Yasko has helped bring a new quality to government work. Still hung up by rules, regulations, reviews and curious internal pressures, he is, nevertheless, managing to nurse through a series of designs in which government standards are being enormously elevated.

It should be noted, immediately, that no comparisons can be made between the functional needs and plans of the Madison Library and the Tax Court beyond the fact that each requires a considerable amount of routine office space. The programs are totally different.

They are both big buildings, but the library is bigger. The library is a nearly square 514 by 414-foot block-buster; the court is a more slender rectangle of 405 by 120 feet. (That is still big; the standard Park Avenue blockfront is 250 feet.) The library has three floors below ground and six floors above. The Tax Court is six stories, with two of the floors forming a podium-base. The court will be built for approximately one tenth the library's cost.

Each building, interestingly, is actually organized in four parts, in spite of different requirements. The library is described as being, in effect, four buildings, each with its own service core. All are enclosed in an un-

revealing semi-classical slip-cover. The Tax Court, in contrast, is four clearly articulated volumes tied together with a soaring central public hall, in an obvious and extremely handsome organization of the building's working parts.

In this case, the mass has been opened up to show how it works, to allow space to flow through, and to give it division and scale, heart and humanity. Space moves under and around the courts cantilevered visibly over the entrance and the end and rear blocks for judge's offices and chambers, through bronze-framed, bronze-tinted glass connecting the four granite-faced blocks with the skylit central hall.

"Inside this building," Mr. Lundy explains, "you will always have a sense of where you are, and of the sky outside." Sky is one of Washington's most agreeable urban assets. This is not a skyless, monolithic mass, as the library is, with an exterior that camouflages an interior or gives promise of an interior that is never fulfilled. Light flows through, with space.

Behind the bold design is equally bold engineering. The court block will be suspended as a "floating" box of prestressed concrete, joined to the rear block by a "compression" bridge at the third, or ceremonial floor level, and a tension link at the roof level. Continuous vertical concrete shear walls

will support precast tees for 40-foot interior divisions.

The difference between the court and the library, however, goes even beyond structure and design. It is a matter of approach. It is in the architects' response to the program. Architecture is the way in which a program is given form. This is at the bottom of the disparate qualitative results of the two buildings, and of architectural success or failure in any age.

It would have been easy to box in the judges' quarters and bury the courtrooms and wrap it all up in an "appropriate" false front. That, however, is begging a creative responsibility and a responsibility to the nation's capital. If Washington still pretends to urban greatness, it needs a much tougher definition of architectural "suitability."

The Tax Court is a "suitable" and "classical" contemporary building; the library is not. The Tax Court Building deals in the generalized and timeless sense of balance, order and serenity that is genuine classicism, not in substitutes of vestigial ornament or stylized recall. It meets the challenge of today's expression and technology as a prime creative objective. It is heart, hand and mind working together for man's most durable testament. It is "truth for today and tomorrow," in Mr. Lundy's words, and truth, or reality, is something that Washington and its architecture badly need.