

## Architecture

# The Architects Design Their 'Dream' Home

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**W**HAT happens when architects build for themselves? All hell breaks loose for eight years. From 1962 to 1970, the American Institute of Architects has been trying to build a new headquarters in Washington, and its role has been a paradigmatic example of the client nightmare. The process offers some shaky illumination of institutions and esthetics.

Since the late 19th century, A.I.A. national headquarters has been the Octagon, a superb historic house at 18th Street and New York Avenue, N.W., built from 1798 to 1801 by one of the country's most illustrious architects, William Thornton. The Octagon is actually a six-sided brick mansion that ingeniously shapes the symmetrical Georgian style to a triangular site. It is one of the Capital's finest landmarks.

By 1962, the A.I.A. had outgrown both the house and a newer structure added onto the stables around the fan-shaped garden at the rear. The gentlemen of the profession decided to practice what they had always preached. They would restore the house and hold a competition for a new building to replace the stable-structure. Competition, the A.I.A. has always maintained, is one of the best ways to get the best design in areas of public concern.

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They got a splendid one. In 1964, a jury of distinguished practitioners selected a competition winner from 220 entries. It was the work of Mitchell-Giurgola Associates, of Philadelphia and New York.

The competition program had called for a structure "that would preserve, complement and enhance the historic residence." It further specified "an exciting demonstration that fresh and contemporary architecture can live in harmony with fine architecture of another period; each statement giving the other more meaning and contributing to the delight of the entire building complex." The program also pointed out that the design would have to be approved by Washington's Fine Arts Commission.

The Mitchell-Giurgola design framed the Octagon and its garden in a five-story,

brick-faced structure with a semi-circular concave glass wall that formed a backdrop for the old house. It was a design of notable subtleties and marked creativity. It exhibited a particular sensibility that may have come out of Romaldo Giurgola's Italian background and training: a way of making the present serve the past with elegant bravura that compromises neither and enriches both. That is called civilization, and the Italians are good at it. The design was a sophisticated and artful professional response to a difficult esthetic and urban problem.

Complications ensued immediately. Adjoining property was purchased and the size and scale of the project were increased, requiring redesign. If anything, the design got better. But it also got bigger. It was more than half again as big, and at that scale it was automatically not a background building. An angled glass facade with stepped-back upper floors was substituted for the simple glass curve. It was clearly a 20th-century building that was intended to be as outstanding as the 18th-century building, and the two were meant to coexist in a cultural continuum.

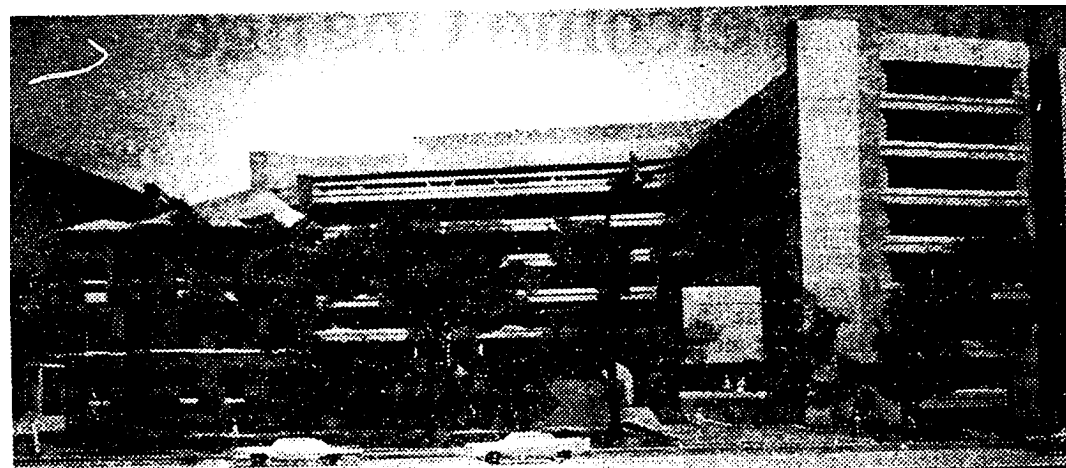
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This design went to the Fine Arts Commission in 1967. It was rejected as being "out of keeping with the feeling of the Octagon house."

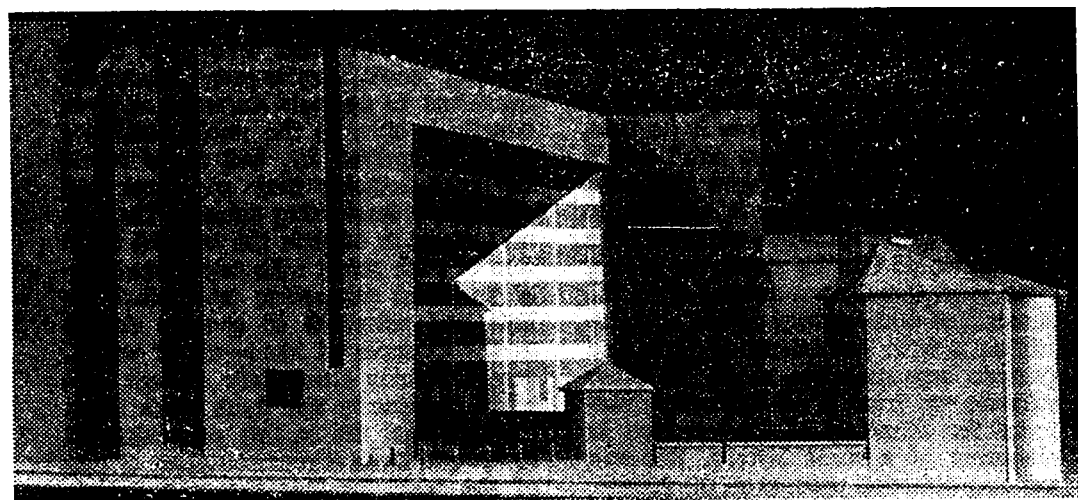
It was a smashing impasse. The press reveled in the A.I.A.'s embarrassment. The architects' own design, selected by their own jury, had been turned down. Should the judgment be appealed? Was the Institute to back or abandon it now?

The institutional solution was an inevitable compromise. Mitchell-Giurgola agreed to redesign to meet some of the Commission's objections. Height was reduced, floor area was cut, the building line moved back from the garden, and the glass facade, which had caught the Commission's particular ire, abandoned for a more conventional treatment.

It was rejected again. It seemed that what particularly inflamed one Commissioner, Gordon Bunshaft, A.I.A., and a principal of the major



Above is the accepted design for the new A.I.A. headquarters in Washington, with the Octagon house at left; below is the rejected design with Octagon house at right. Conservative competence substituted for creative experiment



architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, was a lightwell, or "notch," at the center of the facade. The notch, as the Architectural Forum put it, became a chasm. It had to be eliminated, said the Commission. Not without losing their design integrity, said the architects. You will thank us some day for rejecting it, said one Commissioner. The architects resigned.

The A.I.A. was squarely on the spot. Once again, it could back its own architects, or the Commission, on which some of its most prominent members sit. It opted for the Commission. As a long-time proponent of design review boards, the Institute said, it backed review as "the best-known means of maintaining order in the face of all the pressures leading to chaos." The A.I.A. had been a leading force in revitalizing and staffing the Fine Arts Commission during and since the Kennedy Administration.

The Institute paid off its

architects. It interviewed new ones. The office of Mies van der Rohe declined to be interviewed on the grounds that it did not feel that the Fine Arts Commission would accept anything it would do. The job went to The Architects Collaborative of Cambridge, Mass.

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TAC has now completed its design and the Fine Arts Commission has approved it. The new proposal is also a big building. It has the advantage of going beyond the earlier work to coordinate development of the entire block, if other owners agree. It is all very well worked out. The A.I.A. has substituted high-level, conservative competence for creative experiment, the Commission is satisfied, and Washington has again rejected the exceptional for a familiar formula. Discretion was the lesser part of valor.

The philosophical question of suitability, the basis of the Commission's judgments, remains wide open. It can be

argued that the present project's concrete aggregate and tinted glass exterior in strong horizontal bands gains nothing in compatibility with the Octagon.

What the original architects sought was the creative relationship of two centuries—with style. The Commission didn't like their style. It substituted its own idea of style, which raises the sticky matter of what is review and what is redesign, what is personal taste, and how subjective should the design review process get.

Here the process has sacrificed style and superiority in a city that fears the exceptional. It is the subjective opinion of this observer that the exceptional, in this case, with certain rational adjustments, was suitable. The basis of the conflict, in the words of the A.I.A., has been the "interpretation of the desired character of the new building." We believe that the Commission, the A.I.A., and Washington are the losers.