Must Bad Buildings Be the Norm?: Architecture Must Bad Buildings Be the Norm?
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Rayburn Building in Washington, D.C. — "It would help if the Federal Government [illegible]"

Fred Ward from Black Star

HOPE springs eternal for Federal architecture. And falls on its face with predictable regularity. New people appear, making new proclamations that from now on everything will be different and better; a few exemplary, or near-exemplary products materialize, and then everything settles back in the same old rut.

This is not cynicism; it's realism. And yet we see the latest effort — a "high priority," $100,000 program to raise Federal design standards, backed by President Nixon, aimed at everything the Federal Government controls from postage stamps to highways. The objective is familiar: to demonstrate that good design is not cosmetic but a public service, an aid to efficiency, and a money-saver.

The program is being spearheaded by the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities. A "First Federal Design Assembly" will take place in Washington on April 2 and 3, with its theme "The Design Necessity," funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The announcement of the program and the Design Assembly was made in Washington by Nancy Hanks, head of the National Endowment, and the co-chairmen of the Assembly, New York designer Ivan Chermayeff and Philadelphia architect Richard Saul Wurman.

It backs up a Federal Design Improvement message by President Nixon of last May.

The area of Federal design is huge. It includes building, for which the Federal Government puts up a whopping $4.4 billion yearly, notable chiefly as a sea of architectural sludge. There are exceptions to that, too, born of other crusades. The exceptions, however, are consistently overwhelmed by the rule — the biggest and worst buildings possible. Viz., the Rayburn building and its brethren, such as the upcoming Madison Library, as well as negative Federal landmarks in most American cities.

Everyone involved with the Design Assembly tactfully declines to discuss the past record, as pointless. The point is, however, that these buildings are not mavericks; they are the norm.

Actually, hope springs eternal in this breast, too. It sprang, most noticeably and with [illegible] in 1962, when President Kennedy issued an executive order calling for immediate attention to the upgrading of all Federal construction. Emphasis was put on Washington, which was being slaughtered by elephantine banalities (and still is, cf. the Kennedy Center).

Thus was the Pennsylvania Avenue plan born, under the leadership of such men as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of

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Labor and *éminence grise* of the Federal design program, before the days of benign neglect, and architect Nathaniel Owings, plus a long list of distinguished professionals.

The Pennsylvania Avenue plan was a scheme of high standard and grand vision to create a processional boulevard of dignity and style. What the proposal lacked in intimacy and human awareness was due largely to the times; planning in the early 60's still saw things in bold, abstract masses and dramatic chiaroscuro.

Although the scheme has been whittled away by inevitable compromises, it is still very much alive, with the help of recent Congressional backing. Its original esthetics are now in the process of bowing to the social consciousness of the 70's. Unfortunately — and almost inescapably when art and politics mix — the quality and liveliness called for by the Presidential directive and projected with quite beautiful imagination has been dealt death blows by locating the city's cultural center in another part of town, and by the erection of the Pennsylvania Avenue bastion of the FBI.

Perhaps the most notable of the Kennedy administration's design efforts was the rescue of Lafayette Square. If there are questions now— as to the degree of historical reconstruction and the redness of the new brick buildings — they count as nothing compared to what was originally planned.

Incredible as it seems, both sides of the square were scheduled for near-total demolition. History, human scale, architectural style meant nothing to the General Services Administration. GSA planned flanking behemoths of typical bureaucratic bombast.

The damage was only avoided by direct Presidential intervention. Kennedy put his friend, the painter William Walton, later head of the Fine Arts Commission, in charge of the project, and personally hired a new architect, John Carl Warnecke. Whatever objections may be made to the results, the new, large Federal buildings are a model of the near-impossible task of reconciling intimate, 19th-century scale with 20th-century bulk, the inclusion of unprecedented amenities and attention to urban design detail.

The lesson is obvious. The only ploy that works is the direct power play at the top.

At the same time, Karel Yasko was brought into GSA to guide the construction of a group of new Federal buildings set off by the directive. A half dozen or so of these structures have ultimately come out of the Federal pipeline with some real resemblance to architecture, such as Marcel Breuer's HUD Building in Washington. But it was *sturm und drang* all the way, and the only reason there were any results to count was that Mr. Yasko had that Presidential directive firmly in hand.

That phase of the program was eventually defeated by the system. The system is a kind of ooze that can suck down even Presidential directives, which also die with changing administrations. In Federal construction, it cuts everything to a pattern through rules, regulations and Alice-in-Wonderland design reviews by GSA's "space cadets," who measure by cost per square foot, not environment or amenity, and their spirit is solid cement. This continues, although the present administrator, Arthur F. Sampson, is an enlightened man who is trying to bring fresh air and fresh people into the process.

But the system always wins. Mr. Yasko has been shunted, quite fortuitously, to head something called the Fine Arts Inventory, which is locating, documenting and frequently saving works of art commissioned by the Federal Government, including the WPA effort. He is doing a fascinating, worthwhile and considerably less controversial job.

Unfortunately, design, and particularly architectural design, has every strike against it. It would help if the Federal Government, or more of its representatives dealing with the matter, knew what design was. That is obviously what the First Federal Design Assembly intends to preach to its varied audience. It will be an earnest and interesting convocation, with echoes from the past. For one thing, President Nixon has called for new attention to the 1962 architectural directives.

But a healthy skepticism must be pardoned about what happens when the lessons and the directives bounce off the Federal bureaucracy. One has a feeling that there will be a lot of eloquent talk and examples at the top—including elegantly designed publications of the proceedings — and business as usual at the bottom.

The reason is inescapable. Basically, Federal building is parceled out as patronage and pork barrel; it is one of the most valuable sources of politically maneuvered favors around. The Federal Design Assembly is not going to do much to change or challenge the habits of Congressmen or the way architects are selected and construction contracts made. Politics and good design do not make bedfellows of any sort at all, and eventually politics wins, hands down. There will be good talk in Washington. And bad design, forever.