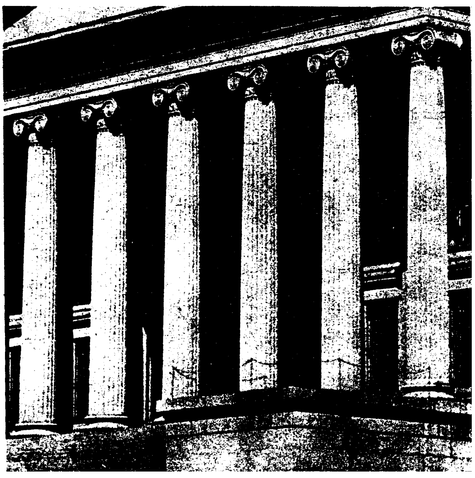

YESTERDAY'S LANDMARKS—Capital structures built in bygone days include the old Department of State Building (left), finished in 1888, and the Treasury Building, completed in 1842.

New (Architectural) Frontier in Washington

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WASHINGTON.

THE city of Washington has an image: classic white buildings, tree-lined boulevards and green parks. It is a pleasing and impressive image, firmly anchored to tradition, cherished by most Americans. It sets the capital apart from other cities and establishes it symbolically as the seat of government. It was created by Maj. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, who planned its broad avenues and vistas in 1791, and by Thomas Jefferson, who established its architectural tradition of classical grandeur.

Today, Washington is undergoing a radical transformation because of two developments: First, there has been an explosion of investment and business construction which has lined Washington's streets with more than $650 million worth of commercial building in the last ten years. This has brought to the capital all the tricks and clichés of the speculative builder's contemporary vocabulary: monotonous and endless curtain walls, unimaginative details, flat-chested formulas that make for good profits and bad buildings.

Second, there is under way an ambitious Government construction program that will cost more than $500 million. These buildings, which include the city's biggest office structures, represent a break with traditional design. For its own space needs in and near the Capitol, Congress has already spent an additional $160 million; their projects follow careful, classic, conservative lines.

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Is all this architectural ferment in the nation's capital useful or harmful? What changes are desirable and which not? And basically what sort of city should Washington be?

Before one attempts to answer these questions, it is instructive to look at the past, first in the official areas and then in the commercial.

The official record begins with the temples—those handsome, Greek-inspired structures of the capital's early years. Only a few genuine examples remain. The Treasury Building, started in 1836 by Robert Mills (he also designed the Washington Monument), the old Patent Office, built by Mills and William Elliott in 1837, and the earlier parts of the Capitol were all conceived or constructed when American sentiment still visualized the young Republic as the reincarnation of ancient Greek democracy, served by Greek architectural styles. These are the buildings that began the orderly march of classical colonnades down Washington avenues.

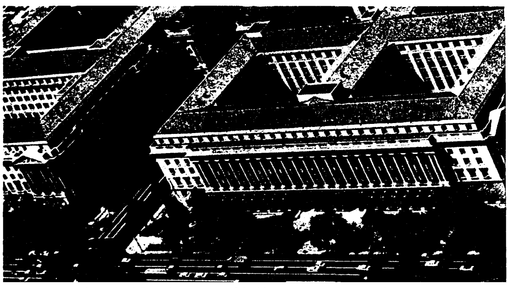
The march was interrupted in mid-century by the Victorians. Red brick and gray granite replaced white stone and marble in a succession of massive monuments that most Washingtonians would like to tear down or wish away. Too large and ungainly to be ignored, they are treated rather like architectural skeletons in the national cultural closet.

They include the somber, turreted Smithsonian Institution, begun in 1852 by James Renwick; the ornate State, War and Navy Department Building by Alfred B. Mullett, now used as Executive offices, which reared its huge bulk in 1888, and the red brick Pension Office of 1883, with its encircling Civil War friezes.

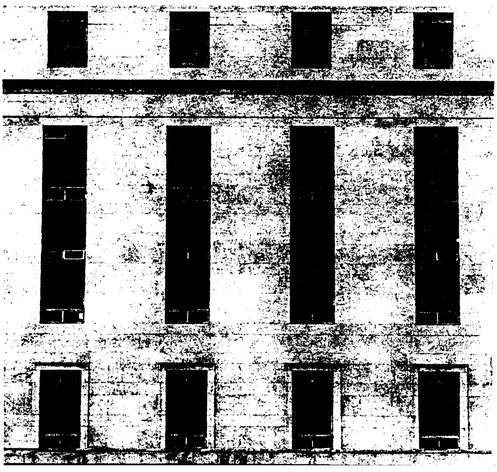
The next generation looked back with nostalgia to Washington's earlier image, and the beginning of the twentieth century marked the return to a cool Correct Classicism. The products of this trend range from the Library of Congress, finished in 1897, and the old House Office Building of 1908 by the celebrated classicists Carrère and Hastings, to the austerely elegant Federal Triangle of the Nineteen Twenties and Thirties and the House and Senate Office Buildings of the same time.

In the late Thirties and Forties, Correct Classic gave way to Government Semi-Modern, a compromise between the classic ideal and twentieth-century needs. These needs were primarily for huge office buildings, and departments like Interior and Agriculture and the General Services Administration erected businesslike super-blocks saved from stark modernity by simplified classical features, shorn of ornament.

In the last few years, Government Semi-Modern has evolved into Government Modern. A sometimes brave, sometimes timorous attempt to climb



COMPLEX—The Federal Triangle, a group of buildings incorporating several Government de-



TODAY'S NEWCOMERS—The "architectural ferment" that grips Washington has produced such structures as this downtown office building (left) and the new House Office Building.

The capital's classic facade is undergoing a radical transformation. The changes —good and bad—give rise to the question: What sort of city should Washington be?

onto the contemporary bandwagon, it attempts to create suggestions of an official manner. About eight large buildings in this style are in progress now and more are on the way. They include the group of Federal office buildings arising adjacent to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the nearly finished Museum of Science and History on the Mall. The new State Department wing is a prime example of this development.

WHILE this evolution in government architecture was going on, changes were being made also in commercial structures, but not at the pace of the Government construction. This was to be expected because, after all, it is the Government buildings that in the past have set the tone for Washington.

The first wave of commercial construction came during the Victorian period. Its effects are still visible on the capital's major streets in the form of brash, sturdy buildings in the strangely assorted, naïvely exotic styles with which our grandfathers catered to their esthetic vanities.

Private construction also accounts for a rapidly growing number of institutional structures that are an increasingly important—although still subsidiary—part of the Washington scene. These buildings — for educational groups, trade associations and labor unions—range from conservative versions of the Government Modern or Semi-Modern styles, like the Carpenters' or Postal Workers' headquarters, to straight Commercial Modern.

The developments in the two areas—public and private—add up to a great deal of building and a wide range of architectural quality. What, then, is good and bad about all this?

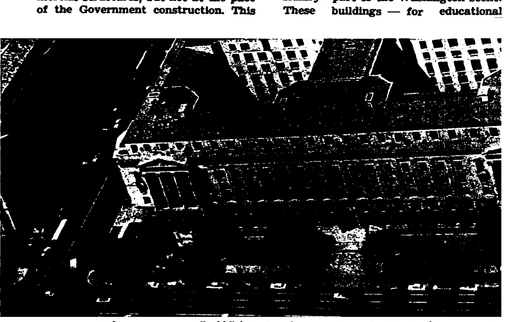
Among government buildings, the best examples are still the early structures that set the city's style and tone. The White House, designed by James Hoban in the late eighteenth century—the result of a competition to which Jefferson contributed anonymously and lost—is the city's most gracious and popular architectural symbol. The Greek Revival buildings of the Eighteen Thirties by Robert Mills and his contemporaries have a simple dignity that often surpasses the more ostentatious grandeur of the capital's later, larger temples—perhaps because they still respected the human scale.

There is superior official architecture, too, among those extravagant Victorian curiosities that are disdained by the public but increasingly valued by historians. The buildings of James Renwick, the designer of the Smithsonian Institution and the first Corcoran Gallery (now the Court of Claims and scheduled for demolition) rank as some of the best architecture of the nineteenth century. The richly modeled and substantially built State, War and Navy Building records an important, if unpopular, phase of the city's cultural tradition with typical Victorian vigor and boldness. It has just been saved from destruction and is to be cleaned and restored, in one of the Administration's bravest architectural gestures.

The Government's Correct Classicism of the twentieth century has received mixed critical reviews. The taste-setting avant-garde has disliked these buildings as cordially as the architects who designed them despised their Victorian predecessors; now the *avant* avant-garde is beginning to see merit in them. Nostalgia marches on.

The Federal Triangle—the group of buildings including Labor, Treasury, the Post Office and other departments located where Constitution Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue come together—is both admired and disliked. Certainly the design of the Triangle cannot be called inventive. Its scale is frequently overblown. Close up, the buildings are often cold—or worse, dull. More positively, these buildings are on a magnificent scale in a style we can no longer afford. Viewed panoramically, in the warming light of late afternoon, they are singularly impressive: dramatic, formal street architecture in the tradition of great city vistas.

AS for bad official architecture in the nation's capital, the source of the most sizable body of undistinguished building is probably the Government semi-modern style. Meant to make functional offices "blend" with more traditional neighbors, it rejects the present and mocks the past with the ritual addition of lavatory marble and a few semiclassical decorations to otherwise businesslike walls. Looking both forward (*Continued on Page* 68)



partments, at close range seems "cold," but viewed panoramically is "singularly impressive."

New (Architectural) Frontier in Washington

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and backward, it loses its balance in the middle. Known also as Castrated Classic, or Penitentiary style, this is the most ambivalent and unsuccessful kind of architecture in the capital.

Government Modern is better, but still not good enough. It suffers from deep-seated feelings of architectural insecurity. Moving forward uncertainly, unsure of its leadership, allegiance or acceptance, it is marked by extreme self-consciousness and the flabbiness of constant compromise. This is "running-scared" contemporary, tripping over its own nervous backward bows while it tries fearfully to look ahead.

OF Washington's commercial construction, one can say only that the new buildings are numerous and consistently undistinguished. The capital's Commercial Modern is like everyone else's Commercial Modern, the same old mold of architectural Jello—several delicious flavors, all alike—served by speculative builders everywhere.

Controversies have raged over the intrusion of commercial fronts among sedate marble facades, for Washington is an extremely architecture-conscious city with a large number of esthetic controls. (They may not know if it's architecture, but they know what they like, and there's a law.) The Fine Arts Commission has even forced some conspicuous design revision. But Washington's spreading business construction has contributed nothing to the elevation of the city's architectural standards.

The effect of these new buildings on the aspect of the city as a whole is to encourage the spread of mediocrity in the capital. Unfortunately, very few of these commercial buildings are well done. Familiar, monotonous examples of Investor's Instant Buildings, they could be in Anywhere, U. S. A., instead of Washington, D. C.

Among Washington's private institutional buildings, concentrated search turns up only one recently completed superior example. It is the new Forest Industries Building, by Keyes, Lethbridge & Condon, whose classically simple contemporary look respects the city's style. Many, like the National Education Association's headquarters, with its enamel kitchen-panel front, have settled for the most routine Commercial Modern mannerisms. Occasionally, a more monumental effort is made, as in the Teamsters' marble temple in the Miami-Mausoleum mode. Certainly little of the private commercial and institutional construction that is so radically changing the familiar face of Washington ranks as a legitimate or desirable successor to the tradition of L'Enfant and Jefferson.

FACED with the scope and nature of these changes, we come to the pertinent questions: Should Washington continue to be a classic city? Or should it reflect changing styles? In either case, how can the architectural excellence of the capital be assured?

As a capital city, Washington has—and must continue to have—a very special character. It is more than a city; it is a symbol for the rest of the nation. Its buildings stand for the dignity and authority of government.

Until the present construction boom, Washington fulfilled this role. Although it was poor in individual masterpieces, the total effect was one of impressive monumentality. This was created by its dominating stone buildings: white structures in green parks.

Even with changes in construction methods and architectural style, there is no reason why this image should be lost. Nor can the fact be ignored that large numbers of

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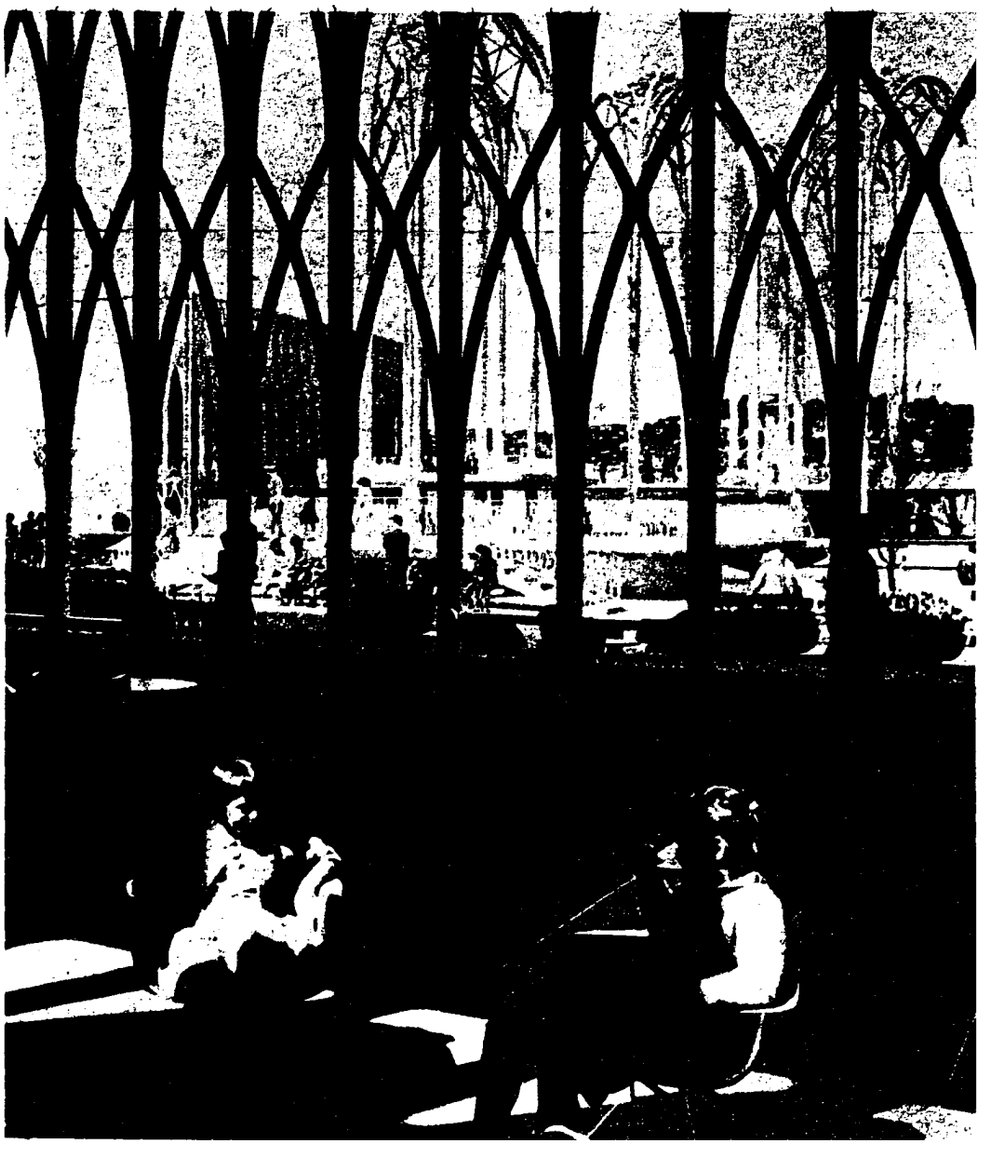
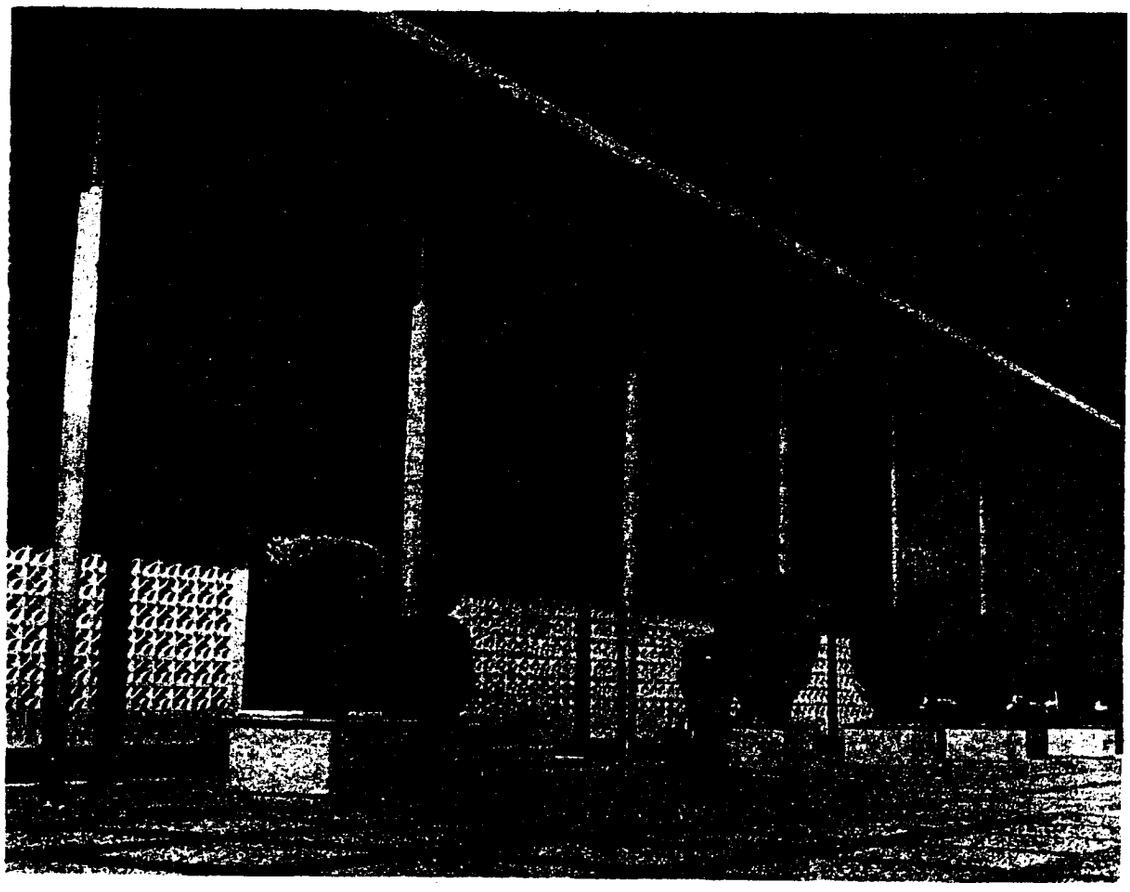


EXEMPLARY—The fact that Government-sponsored architecture need not be commonplace is exemplified by the U. S. Science Exhibit pavilion at the Seattle Fair.



DECORATIVE—The much-praised U.S. Embassy in New Delhi offers another instance of distinctive design.

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buildings erected on the basis of this image already exist. The architect's first job is to maintain Washington's symbolic nature.

However, he cannot do it by the simple expedient of imitating the past. Where this has been attempted in recent times, as in the new Senate and House Office Buildings, even startlingly above-average budgets have produced no more than shallow, debilitated parodies of a once-great style. The moral is obvious. If we can't afford to build Greek temples, we might as well forget them.

The high cost of construction has made the carving of fine Corinthian capitals about as practical as platinum-plating, and the profligate use of ostentatious space is a lost luxury.

AT the same time, we must face the fact that modern buildings in Washington pose serious problems. They must be sensitive to their surroundings, sympathetic to the past, and respectful of the ideal. It is quite possible for a good modern design to do all this, however, and still be an example of the best taste and technology of our time.

Philip Johnson, designer of such elegant, contemporary institutional buildings as the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, N. Y., the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Tex., and the new State Theatre for Lincoln Center—buildings that would not be out of place in Washington—sees the question as one of harmony of scale and material, rather than as a battle of styles.

"There is no conflict between modern architecture and the classic past if the architect respects the size and height of existing structures, and preserves their materials and proportions," Mr. Johnson says. "In Washington, the material is marble or stone, and the scale is human. It is breaking the scale, not changing the style, that leads to total and absolute catastrophe. Beyond that, the building should be as modern as you can possibly make it."

Edward Durrell Stone, designer of the much-praised United States Embassy in New Delhi and architect for the proposed national cultural center in the capital, has a similar prescription for successful Washington architecture. He scores the unnecessary conflict of aggressive new commercial construction with the "wonderful tradition of the white building in the park." The cause: "Everybody in this country is too insistent on his own identity—on building a billboard." The solution: "Unification by color and material, buildings in harmony with their neighbors." As for style: "I live in the twentieth century, and naturally I would like to see the present advances of the art of architecture recorded in our great buildings here."

These architectural advances have already achieved dignity, distinction and monumentality in other places, and for other official purposes. The Government itself has sponsored a striking building for the Federal Science Pavilion at the Seattle Fair by one of the country's most talented architects, Minoru Yamasaki. It has commissioned overseas embassies of superior design. New York's Philharmonic Hall, at Lincoln Center, by Max Abramovitz, is the kind of structure that could supply legitimate grandeur to the Washington scene. The unexecuted project for a Chicago convention hall by Mies van der Rohe would be an adventurous ornament for the nation's capital.

Unfortunately, there is little that can be done about commercial construction in Washington. Zoning and fine-arts controls are only partly effective. Unless the private builder develops a stronger sense of responsibility for the suitability and dignity of his structures, nothing will stop the relentless advance of the flashy commercial facade.

BUT there are encouraging signs. A Presidential directive to department heads, accompanying a report on the new program for Federal construction, calls for "improved architectural standards." The report contains an official statement of progressive policy, instructions to call in the country's most creative designers, and an order to act on the recommendations at once. Already in the works are large-scale plans for the public and private redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House as a model of the new policy. A marked rise in Federal quality, reaching into commercial and institutional areas, could eventually shift the city's esthetic balance favorably.

It will be none too soon, for you cannot hide mediocrity behind handsome trees forever. If Washington has kept its beauty, it is because of the spaciousness of its avenues, the pleasure of its parks and the vision of its plan. It is a city of magnificent scale and vistas, and, with too few exceptions, less than magnificent buildings. It is also currently the city of new frontiers. Not the least of them should be architectural.