

A Success as Architecture and as Monument

A Texas-Big Library Houses Impressive Exhibit of Era

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AUSTIN, Tex.—It is possible, after leaving the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, to feel slightly over-Johnsoned. Only history will know for sure. But in the random way that democracy scatters art and monuments among its leaders, Mr. Johnson has a winner. This is the first unabashed bid for immortal-

ity using that curious new hybrid, the Presidential library - museum, and it has produced a substan-

tial work of architecture. The age of Lincoln and Jefferson memorials is over. It will be Presidential libraries from now on.

This trend is guaranteed by the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955. A legislative slow starter just getting into high gear, the act authorizes the Federal Government to accept and operate any Presidential library presented to it as a gift. That they will be built, and presented, is as sure as the Presidential succession.

The Truman and Eisenhower libraries were modest beginnings. Watch next for the Kennedy dark horse at Harvard. Nixon library studies have already begun.

In With Popes and Kings

The Johnson Library is big —Texas big. The architect, Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, thinks big. Mr. Johnson is known not to think small.

Contrary to popular Johnson mythology, however, this is the building, first that the architect wanted. It is, almost incidentally, the one that Mr. Johnson got. It puts Mr. Johnson in the same class as some popes and kings who were equally receptive clients for architects with equally large ideas. He has done all right; this will be a hard one to top.

If the word monument turns you off, stop right here. Architecture as art and symbol is one of civilization's oldest games and Mr. Bunshaft is one of its most dedicated players.

This is quite evident from the unmistakable Bunshaftian scale and style of the building's 65-foot high monolithic mass topped by giant concrete trusses spanning 90 feet of travertine-clad facade. It has monument written all over it. So has almost everything else Mr. Bunshaft has done in recent years, from Yale's Beinecke Library to Washington's Hirshhorn Museum.

The canted, marble-sheathed walls inside and out, suggest massive antiquities. Even the descent to the men's room is like entering an Egyptian tomb.

Eight windowless stories rising temple-like from a two-story podium base that contains services and an auditorium make no pretense at human scale. Two hundred-foot long walls curve gently from top to bottom. Above the trusses, like a lid on a giant box, is an office and administrative floor with a 16-foot cantilevered overhang.

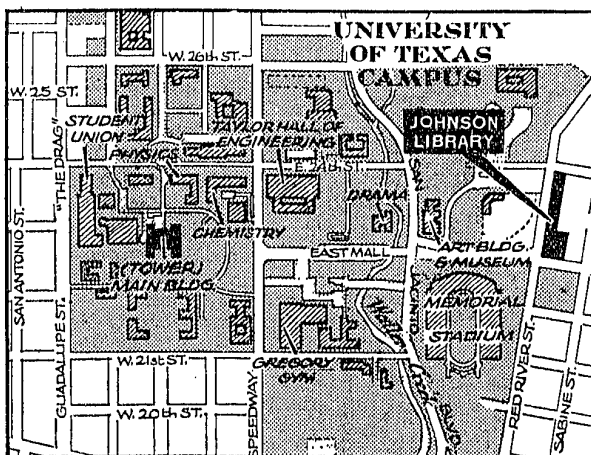
Inside, under a coffered ceiling formed by the exposed girders is a Great Hall, 85 feet square and 55 feet high.

Documents Become Drama

This superb space focuses on a full-height glass wall at one end, behind which four of the five floors of archives are clearly visible, as rows of red buckram-covered boxes with gold Presidential seals. The effect is of a glowing, brilliant abstraction. Documents are turned into high esthetic drama.

The building is as handsome as \$18-million, superbly matched Italian cream travertine, a large design talent and breathtakingly fine construction and detailing can make it. (It helps to have oil on campus; the university footed the bill.)

It is as impressive as the thoughtfully culled documents of an era, selected and installed by Arthur Drexler of New York's Museum of Modern Art, can be. What comes across from the exhibits, right over Mr. Johnson's looming personality, is that this is the record of an important and complex



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oaks of sculptural magnificence.

The complex includes the Sid W. Richardson Hall, a long, low flanking structure that houses rare manuscript collections and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. The associated architects for the entire project are Brooks, Barr, Graeber & White of Austin, with R. Max Brooks, partner-in-charge.

The library building itself is so strong that it easily absorbs a small pimple on the roof and a slight break in the continuous top floor fenestration: the featured reproduction of the Oval Office of the White House. This is a conceit that apparently grips all Presidents. They seem to feel they can take it with them.

Built at 7/8 full size to fit a structure for which it was not originally planned, the distortion of scale has the slightly unsettling effect of a funny mirror. The sense of dislocation is enhanced by its bullet proof "19th-century" windows with a view of the university tower where a berserk student shot 12 and wounded 33 in 1966.

But this, too, is Americana. The Oval Office is, certainly, Johnsoniana. So is the dedication today; it will be a long time before another Presidential library is opened with a barbecue for 3,000.

period, as well as of a man, and that the man is complex, too.

The editing has been done with dignity and skill. Major exhibits coexist with revealing trivia, including those much overpublicized wedding dresses. Sophisticated techniques use film, photography and TV. This is the art, as well as the history of our time.

Much that could be politically or esthetically banal escapes that fate. (Except for a display by other hands in the Temporary Exhibition Gallery which makes the pitfalls all too clear.) What seems, in published descriptions of the building to be overblown and vulgar, is not.

But the heart of it all is those 4,200 flag-red boxes. These archives could, of course, be put physically in a warehouse or a garage or be given to an appropriate institution that might, or might not, provide a separate building. Which

brings up a question as big as the building itself—just what is a Presidential library?

The number of scholars who use such archives are small. But the number of tourists who come are large. They do no research; they come for memorabilia and intimations of personal greatness.

Once, we immortalized our Presidents with statues and carved quotations. Today, the library serves Presidential egos and public curiosity as well as posterity and scholarship. It is a museum-memorial.

What an architect makes of all this is an arbitrary thing. Mr. Bunshaft has made a large statement using the archives themselves for stunning symbolic and esthetic effect.

The building does not stand alone; it is the focus of a 19-acre, gently sloping site. Its setting crowns the main campus with opulent grandeur. There are fountains the size of Roman plazas and giant live