

A Washington Renaissance

There has been much talk about the arts in this Administration, and some commendable action. The most decisive and substantial step, however, was taken the other day with the Government's announcement of an official policy aimed at the "adoption of improved architectural standards" for Federal buildings.

This statement of principles was released simultaneously with an ambitious proposal for the redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol to the White House, and a listing of priorities for a large-scale Federal office building program.

The President's trend-setting order establishes standards and leadership where none existed before. It opens the door to a level of creative talent that has been conspicuously lacking in the nation's capital and in official architecture throughout the country. But it will now take toughness to carry it out. Skeptics are already saying that it can't be done.

Washington's official architecture has been guarded by a true-blue band of academicians, conservatives and Congressional arbiters of taste, waving a flag in one hand and a classical column in the other, who have thus far managed to keep the capital's most important official commissions out of the hands of the modern barbarians.

No one commissions trend-setters, no matter how admirable their professional reputations may be, when the word has never come down from above that trend-setters are approved. The United States leads the world in the quality of its architectural talent, but not one of its internationally esteemed innovators has built a Federal structure in Washington.

In the absence of leadership, it is the nature of government administration to play it safe all the way down the line, and playing it safe seldom produces great buildings. We have hopes that the new statement of policy will bring about a change.