

Extending the Debate Over Extending

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

As the debate on the extension of the West Front of the Capitol grows hotter, the real issues grow dimmer. This is more than an esthetic or patriotic matter and it involves more than one building. It is a question of the Congressional machinery that has produced not only the controversial Capitol scheme, but also the elephantine Rayburn Building, the sterile new Senate Office Building and the Madison Memorial Library which appears to be set on the same disaster course. This is a lot of damage for one decade, and it is instructive to see what makes it possible.

Autonomy Without Review

Unlike any other branch of government, the legislative branch builds for itself with complete autonomy and no review. The functions of the Fine Arts Commission and the National Capitol Planning Commission stop dead at the bottom of Capitol Hill. The process of Congressional construction for the Capitol and all associated legislative buildings virtually begins and ends in the Office of the Architect of the Capitol.

Set up by Congress, the Office of the Architect of the Capitol conceives, commissions and executes its own schemes and plans. It must get money and authorization from Congress, and so the only disclosure of those schemes and plans is at occasional closed Congressional hearings. Examination of the records of these hearings indicates that few of the Congress-

men involved are expert in planning, architectural or structural matters, and few consider the issues critical enough to acquire that expertise personally or through advisory guidance.

That throws the ball right back into the Office of the Architect of the Capitol, where it stays until it bounces out as a building. The only "review" is by an architectural advisory group appointed by the Architect of the Capitol. The only "independent" studies are by consultants approved by the Architect of the Capitol. Both advisers and consultants lean heavily toward architects who get, or may get, the commissions from the Architect of the Capitol. It's a neatly stacked architectural deck.

The present Architect of the Capitol, J. George Stewart, is an elderly engineer—not an architect—appointed by President Eisenhower. His love of the Capitol is genuine, but misguided, and his talents are largely political. The architects on whom he relies for advice and to whom he gives the jobs are a solid, conservative, academic group known in professional circles as the *derrière garde*.

Add to this closed-circuit system the fact that the Architect of the Capitol is actually a combination of super-maintenance man and creator of colossal building projects, and the plot thickens. In this dual role, he controls patronage and favors—jobs in all aspects of building operation, contracts for

maintenance and construction, accommodations or service and a pipeline to jobs and contracts for special-pleading Congressmen who will sooner or later be considering his new building proposals. The average price tag of these projects runs from \$50 to \$100 million. The result is a surprising bundle of power.

Affront to Capitol Design

Until now, that power has pushed through all of Mr. Stewart's pet schemes. Take the matter of the West Front of the Capitol. It is undeniably shaky, and something must be done about it. Mr. Stewart's studies, by Mr. Stewart's consultants, who turn out to be Mr. Stewart's architects for the job, conclude that the only advisable procedure is a \$34 million expansion behind a new wall 44 to 88 feet forward of the old one. They are cozy about how much this redesigns the building's exterior and the extent of destruction of the Olmsted west terraces. The same architects embalmed the East Front and added new office space there of a depressingly ordinary standard of design. The West Front follow-through seemed guaranteed.

A fuming but absolutely powerless Fine Arts Commission made its own investigation. It decided that preservation of the historic building as it exists now is "difficult, but possible," and from the commission's point of view, highly desirable.

What is urgently required, therefore, is not passage by Congress of bills telling Mr. Stewart not to touch the Cap-

itol but a Congressional reorganization of his office and its procedures.

Seasoned observers believe the logical first step is the division of the office into two sections, with two heads. One would be concerned with maintenance, the other with new building programs. Every building project should be subject to appropriate periodic reviews: when it is formulated, when it is authorized, when the site is selected, and at the preliminary and final stages of design. An advisory panel for the director of the new buildings program—who need not be a famous-name architect but must be an able architectural administrator—should be named on the basis of recommendations by an independent professional organization such as the American Institute of Architects. Congressional construction should receive the same Fine Arts Commission scrutiny as any other Federal building project.

Congressional Responsibility

But most important of all are Congressional attitudes. It is inconceivable that a Congress that can organize itself to deal with the problems of atomic energy cannot deal with the problems of contemporary building. It is a question not only of Federal standards of planning and design but of the efficiency of the legislative branch. The nation's patrimony can no longer be treated like low-grade patronage.

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