ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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When Things Get This Bad You Have to Laugh

Anyone in the business of architectural and urban criticism eventually gets bitter or develops a great sense of humor. Frankly, I am finding the world increasingly and wonderfully funny. A laugh a day, and I don't mean to keep from crying. There is endless entertainment in our Catch-22 environment: ludicrous misjudgment, brilliant hindsight and almost endearingly awful buildings keep one constantly amused. Our frailties make us, and our buildings, more lovable.

Last week, for example, the American Institute of Architects listed a lot of particularly lovable buildings for the Senate Committee on Public Works, whose Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds has been holding hearings on the quality of Federal architecture. The Federal Government, said A.I.A. president John McGinty, has created a heritage of great design. He cited the Old Patent Office, now the National Portrait Gallery, the Pension Building and the Old Executive Office Building (formerly State, War and Navy) in Washington, D.C. "We must be conscious of this heritage," he said, "as we strive for future excellence."

These are the buildings—and other lovable ones like them—that the Federal Government did its dedicated best to get rid of for many years. Considered conspicuously expendable by everyone, including architects, they were slated for demolition, left for uncertain fates, declared surplus Federal property, or condemned as parking lots.

A lot of us still bear the bruises of the battles to keep them around. Laws had to be changed, executive orders issued, bulldozers deflected and a new vision created. Suddenly everyone knows they're great. (The Pension Building is currently being proposed as a National Museum of the Building Arts, with a feasibility study being made by the architecture critic Wolf Von Eckardt, on leave from The Washington Post.)

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However, I'm not sure that all the subtleties of this lesson have been learned. Last year, the Senate had the dandy idea of updating the Lincoln Memorial. States added to the Union since the design was completed by Henry Bacon in 1923 were to be chiseled into the facade, with a little rearranging on two sides. I do not know who the joker was who thought this one up, but the bill for this monkey business was well on its way.

Credit goes to the architects this time, since A.I.A. member Leslie Boney heard of the bill and went to Washington to talk the Congress out of the changes. He told the Senators that this curious bit of esthetic sabotage would be something like repainting the flag in the picture of George Washington Crossing the Delaware with 50 stars instead of 13. Alaska and Hawaii and the members of Congress graciously conceded the point, and the idea died.

The never-leave-well-enough-alone club is active in New York, too. The former Savoy Galleries on 50th Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues is a nice example of intricately detailed, street-enriching, skyscraper Gothic style. The building has a new blue awning announcing the New York Health and Racquet Club and signs in the window trumpeting a "remodeling" of the facade. What is indicated is replacement of the irreplaceable carved stone with what appears to be the ubiquitous banality of mirror glass. Must we continue to suffer these acts of architectural obscenity? This one hurts when I laugh.

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New York's undistinguished building derby also goes on without pause. The latest official entry is Uganda's proposed new headquarters for its delegation to the United Nations, which has been playing can-you-top, or bottom-this with its buildings for years. Uganda's Mission on East 45th Street will rise 15 stories at a price of $4.5 to $5 million; undistinguished architecture does not necessarily come cheap.

Generally, U.N. buildings come in two models: plain and fancy. Uganda's will be plain and ordinary on the outside but would seem to be fancier on the inside, with a suite for head-of-state Idi Amin and a ballroom. It will adjoin the U.S. Mission, which is fancy. The U.S. building gets points for being busy and banal at the same time. The facade was obviously doodled by someone listening to an endless debate. The Uganda Mission's 15 stories will top the U.S Mission by three stories, and house a staff of 12.

Not all U. N. buildings are funny or dreary. The new office building and hotel built recently at One United Nations Plaza by the United Nations Development Corporation is a structure of shimmering elegance and sophisticated style. It judiciously complements and augments the original complex on the river in which a noted architectural committee labored to bring forth a respectable camel—a reasonable facsimile of the International Style and New York's first glass-walled slab. What seemed like bold modernity then makes one smile today for its gently dated charms.

New York has no monopoly, however, on contenders for the top prize for Abominable Architecture. If one reads the London Financial Times, candidates keep popping up with side-splitting regularity. The British are rather better in this category than we are, actually, because their gift for understatement gives vulgarity new nuances. They are having trouble enough, heaven knows, but a lot of what they are building (with some notable exceptions, of course), isn't making things any better. The saving grace is a kind of architectural black humor.

A superb case is Barclay's Bank, which has put up something that looks like paired poker chip stacks for a regional headquarters in Poole, England. This almost makes it to aggressively awful but just doesn't have quite enough pizzazz. Another example, built for Yale Lock at Telford New Town, is a stunning exercise in soul-shattering boredom-by-the-mile that puts down any architectural parody that SITE, the environmental sculpture group that specializes in architectural put-downs, could dream up. It was sold recently to a European wine company. (Awesome thought: Could they have seen it double?) The Financial Times editors have a fine sense of humor. They call these things "properties" with a perfectly straight face.

For historic irony you need to know—if you don't already—that the rusty launch pad tower at Cape Canaveral was demolished in December as obsolete. Naturally, there is an appropriate marker. And for you-name-it, the following item comes from "Preservation News."

When the Washington subway was mapping its route through Rockville, Md., it came across a site on which the Maryland Historic Trust had apparently listed for preservation, "an ordinary aluminum and glass telephone booth," which had "attracted national attention" in 1973. Are you ready? All right; the telephone was used by Watergate burglar James McCord to receive his clandestine calls. The subway route is 60 feet away and it won't have to be moved.