

From a Candy Box, a Tardy and Unpleasant Surprise

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

OFFICIAL Washington has just found, to its surprise, that there is a great deal of discontent among architects, city planners and cultural leaders with the site of the \$46.4 million Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Somebody inquired—in this case, the assistant to the chairman of the temporary Pennsylvania Avenue Commission, charged with the rebuilding of the Capital's ceremonial boulevard.

Now, finally, 60 days before construction contracts are to be let for the national cultural center, an investigation was made by the commission, and the extent of the criticism uncovered was "appalling."

If somebody had asked, some time ago, it would have been clear that there has been a good deal less than professional enthusiasm for the site, a traffic island on the edge of the Potomac, and the design, a glorified candy box by Edward Durrell Stone.

Primary Objections

Ever since the Potomac site was chosen in 1958, and an even bigger candy box proposed that had to be cut down to the present large economy bonbon size when funds proved hard to raise, critics have pointed out the inconvenience of the location, its inhospitality to pedestrians, its dependence on the automobile for transportation, and its isolation by encircling thruways.

With the initiation of the Pennsylvania Avenue plan in 1962, the question was raised immediately as to whether a Pennsylvania Avenue site might not be more valid and logical in terms of total Washington planning and downtown rehabilitation.

But although far from built, the center proved to be unmoveable. One of the Pennsylvania Avenue Commis-

sion's architect members, Minoru Yamasaki, resigned in protest when the possibility of locating the cultural center on the avenue faded and an unbroken line of government buildings with an FBI fortress at its center took over. He based his action on the fact that President Kennedy's directive on the avenue had been to seek liveliness and variety and specifically to avoid a solid phalanx of overbearing official structures.

The arguments, then and now, for the relocation of the center were cogent. They stressed the factor of centrality rather than isolation, the need for new vitality downtown, particularly at night, the desirability of bringing people back to the heart of the city, and the regeneration of that heart by the impetus to further building and development that a cultural center would bring.

Those arguments have been reinforced recently by the fact that urban renewal has been made available to Washington for the first time under the housing bill just passed, and by the reality of the long-discussed Washing-

ton subway which has now entered the practical planning stage.

The argument against relocating Washington's cultural center at this late date is, unfortunately, equally strong. It is a question of money, and in the American scale of values nothing is stronger than that. The \$46.4 million cost has been raised, \$15.5 million by public subscription, \$15.5 million by Congressional appropriation, and a \$15.4 million repayable loan.

Total Question

To move the building now would not mean just picking up the candy box and dropping it on Pennsylvania Avenue. It is a question of total redesign for an appropriate solution for a completely different kind of site.

This means scrapping old plans and incurring large additional design costs. Site acquisition and land clearance expenses would be largely underwritten by Federal urban renewal.

Obviously, redesign will not be undertaken happily by any architect who is pleased with a solution that he has brought to the point of construction,

and who is then asked to start all over. Mr. Stone has done this once, when the size of the original project was drastically reduced.

Just as obviously, Congress will howl at the idea of adding new design costs to existing budgets and appropriations. The real question is whether such an expenditure would be justified by the value of the results.

This could be determined by careful professional analysis. How much would the redesign costs be? How would relocation affect the economic revitalization of downtown Washington, one of the city's serious problems? How would these effects balance against the extra costs? Would the long-term central city benefits be far-reaching enough to justify the expenditure? Does all this outweigh the simpler procedure of going ahead with present plans, on the present site, which has little to recommend it beyond a fine water view?

As it stands now, the Kennedy Center is a par-for-the-course example of what might be called the typical *derrière garde* design of cultural centers being produced like good

old American hotcakes in good old American cities.

Promoted by public spirited non-professionals with a warm, if not very expert interest in the arts buttressed by economic and social power and immense good will, these centers have developed a curious identity never envisioned by their well-meaning sponsors. They are monuments to middle-brow culture.

Stifling

With few exceptions they wrap up popular performance in a comfortable cocoon of prettily pretentious building ranging on the conventional scale from dull to pompous. They smother, rather than promote anything that is new, creative, exciting or experimental. They are static rehashes of old esthetic formulas rather than proving grounds for new ideas and contributions, and in architecture, recent American contributions have been notable.

These amateur - bourgeois efforts compound many errors. Site selection is one, as in Washington. Professionals worry about the impact of a major building project on the total city and its processes of growth, change and decay.

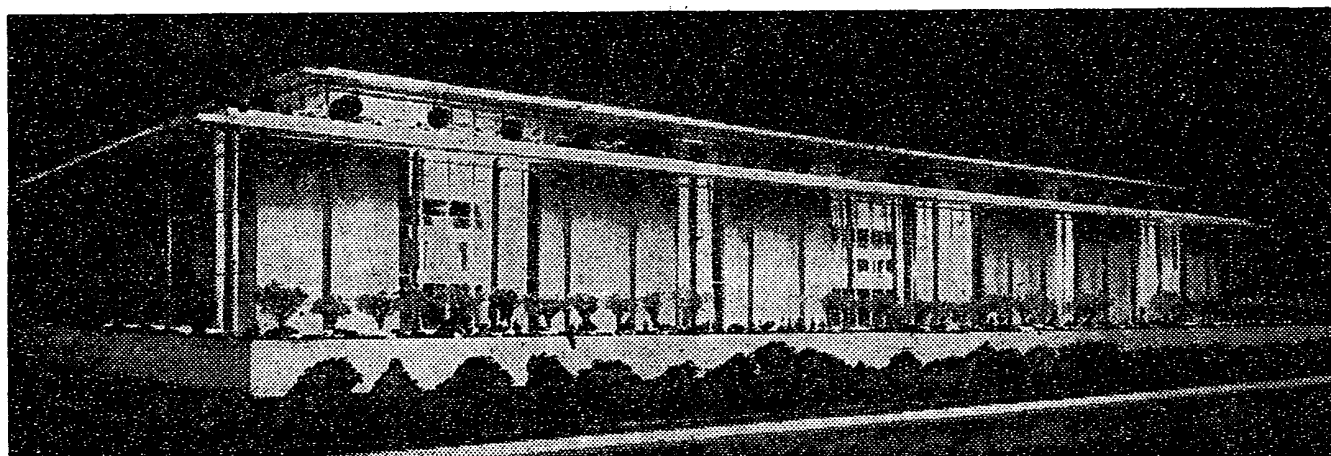
They are concerned with the urban interaction of the social, economic, esthetic and functional aspects of such an undertaking. The potential renewal effects of dispersal of the arts are weighed against one-stop concentration. Amateurs do not think beyond the status value of a monument to culture.

In terms of architecture and planning these centers generally leave the top level of the country's creative talent untouched, settling for something safe and prestigious. Attempts at progressive solutions are reduced to the acceptably familiar. The results, almost uniformly, are dazzlingly mediocre.

Schmaltz vs. Elegance

A small, but telling bit of evidence: Denmark is contributing furnishings to the Kennedy Center by one of her leading designers, Poul Kjaerholm. This raises some intriguing speculation on how Mr. Kjaerholm's uncompromisingly sophisticated, elegant, original and distinctly contemporary furnishings will fit into the determinedly updated schmaltz of Mr. Stone's plushy red and gold interiors as currently planned. There would be no question if the building were a parallel innovation, equally in tune with our times. The standards would match. The best that can be expected is another compromise, by Mr. Kjaerholm, or a revealing contrast that could be fetchingly unintentional high camp.

The boom in cultural centers is bringing the arts to a mass public on a scale never before possible. This is fine. Nobody argues the point. But the real point is that the same job could be done just as well by considerably better buildings and plans. In artistic terms, this design failure is the ultimate cultural irony.



A good deal less than professional enthusiasm for the site and design.