

Architect or Plumber?

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Architect ought to mean—and especially in this context—a professional trained in the art, science and history of building, in touch with his times and the country's top talents. It ought to mean a man able to act responsibly and knowledgeably in selecting designers, maintaining landmarks and programing new construction for the nation's most conspicuous monuments.

The job of Architect of the Capitol has come a long way from the days of Thornton and Latrobe to the days of political patronage. This Administration might remember rule number one of political immortality: never make your mistakes in marble.

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It will be a while until spring, but the first signs of an Ice Age thaw have appeared in Washington. The report of a study of the Capitol, ordered by Congress, says that the West facade is not about to come tumbling down, as declared by the late Architect of the Capitol, and that the \$45-million facelifting he promoted is not only unnecessary but undesirable. Until now, critics of the profligate plan have faced the glacial insistence of the office of the Architect of the Capitol that the building could only be kept standing if buttressed with a new extension (even more monstrous than the East front addition) and tons of new marble.

There were many more cracks in that argument than in the old walls, which the report finds essentially sound. It recommends that they be maintained and repaired. What long-delayed sensibility and what money saved on a destructive affront to art and history! Stones speak, they say, and while the stones of Venice may have told Ruskin more romantic tales, there are at least 100 years of the American past in these colonnades. May this be the end of the great West Wall caper.

What is not ended, however, is the search for a new Architect of the Capitol, a job vacant since the death of J. George Stewart last year. Rumor has tapped a plumber, although it is quite evident that there has already been far too much plumbing on Capitol Hill. The woeful, wasteful East Front extension and the numbing mass of the Rayburn Building have plumbed the depths of wretched excess.

To say that the Architect of the Capitol must be an architect seems like a redundant, self-evident statement. But words are defined differently in the curious purloins of government, where architect can mean plumber, contractor, engineer, party contributor or ex-Congressman.