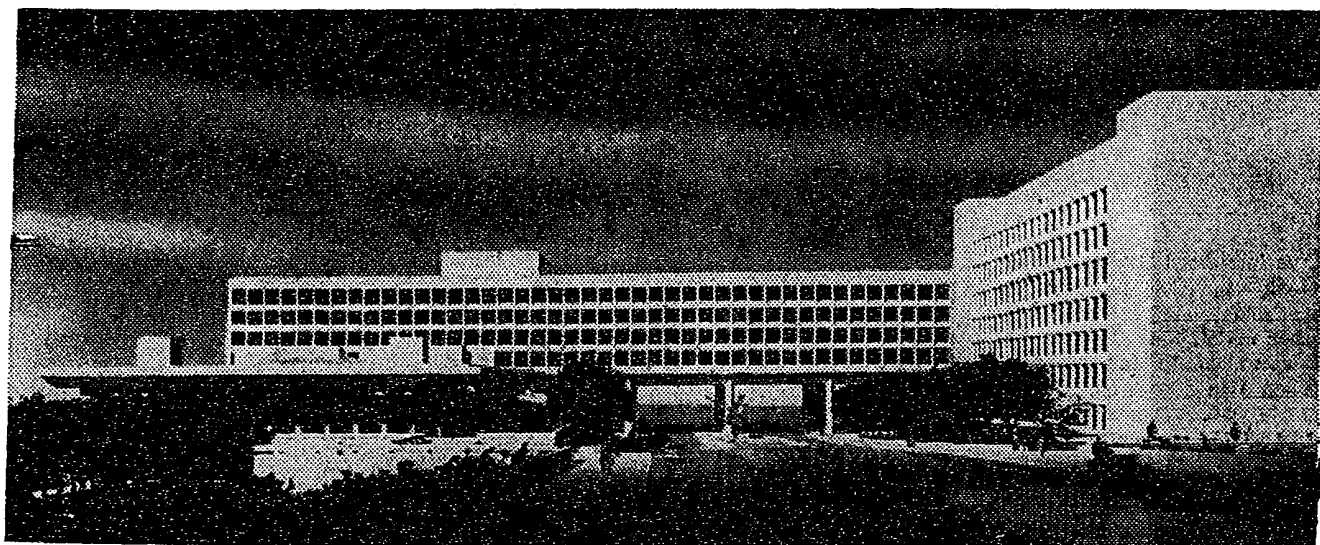


# Architecture: The Federal Image

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Model of Defense Department Forrestal Building for Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D. C. Curtis and Davis, Fordyce and Hamby, Frank Grad & Sons, associate architects.

*"... too big to be trivial and too competent to be offensive"*

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WHEN President Johnson unveiled the Defense Department's James V. Forrestal Building during the American Institute of Architects' convention in Washington last week, he did more than make a gesture toward the architecture profession. His action and words and the building itself summed up the current state of government construction and this Administration's attitude toward the Federal image in design.

At the rate of \$1.4 billion of construction in 338 cities, this adds up to a lot of building and a big image. What is being built, however, and what is being said are still disturbingly far apart.

### Ideals

In its policy statements, this is a notably enlightened, enthusiastic and aware Administration. The President's message on cities, the first of its kind, was so far ahead of previous Government philosophy or practice in the fields of planning, architecture and environment that much of its import was missed by both public and professionals. Those who are equipped to recognize the value of these new attitudes—the intellectual community—are in large part dense or stubborn enough to fail to realize or accept the fact that the Johnson Administration has gone far beyond the Kennedy Administration in embracing progressive architectural standards and ideals.

"If man brutalizes the environment," the President told the architects' convention, "he wounds his own spirit; if he raises buildings that are trivial or offensive, he admits the poverty of his imagination; if he creates joyless cities he imprisons himself."

The rub, however, was that the building that illustrated his words failed miserably to live up to them. Certainly it was too big to be trivial and too competent to be offensive. But it displayed no richness of imagination and demonstrated the end result of several years of struggle by the

General Services Administration, the Fine Arts Commission and the associated architects to raise a large, dull, clumsy building to an acceptable standard of design.

That, in sum, is the paradox of government design at present. Words and deeds still do not match. Agency and department heads, like Robert C. Weaver, administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency, William L. Slayton, director of the Urban Renewal Administration, and Karel Yasko, assistant commissioner for design at G.S.A., are all committed to quality.

But the buildings produced, like the Forrestal Building, represent either the patently bad painstakingly nursed to the acceptably mediocre by these committed officials, or conversely, if the process starts with better than average work, it is reduced by the forces of bureaucracy to a slightly higher level of mediocrity. This we accept gratefully because it is an improvement over the pathetic standard to which we have become accustomed. But it is still much less good than the same architect's work done under private, rather than government sponsorship.

### Actions

If the building that President Johnson unveiled was not the apogée of excellence, his action was still meaningful. It gave necessary official backing and reinforcement to those administrators and their staffs who embarked on programs for better Federal architecture under the Kennedy Administration in response to the original Kennedy directive to raise the Government's architectural sights.

Whenever this backing has been unclear, these men have found themselves in the uncertain position of clutching a small, slippery life raft of higher architectural standards in a sea of deadly, leveling regulation and standardization. Without clear authority from above, the whole

effort could submerge without a trace.

What we are getting, however, is bubbles of improvement breaking through the bureaucratic surface. G.S.A. is about to construct a handful of buildings beleaguered by compromise but light years ahead of previous production. Secretary of the Interior Udall is giving direct commissions to top architects as part of his natural beauty campaign. The H.H.F.A. points with pride to its design awards program.

### Quality

Quantitatively, in terms of total government sponsored or assisted building, the results are a drop in the bucket. But these are the insurgent, revolutionary structures and actions that could break a stagnant government mold.

On the positive side, there is a Fine Arts Commission in Washington now that is pursuing quality for the Capitol with dogged, aggressive insistence. G.S.A. will add an architectural advisory board to assist Mr. Yasko's tireless one-man efforts to upgrade Federal design in all American cities. It is rumored that Mr. Weaver is so convinced of the importance of design quality that he is seeking to make a top level appointment for this specific purpose in his agency, which controls massive amounts of construction throughout the country.

On the negative side, the barriers to better government building continue to be formidable. Architectural commissions have been and still are considered legitimate pork barrel by all branches of government. The pressures for architectural gravy are tremendous, unceasing and scandalous. There have been persistent rumors that the battle within G.S.A. has been particularly strenuous lately.

To get the commission to the best architect, stubborn resistance and calculated deviousness are often necessary. Congress must be bypassed whenever possible on important building programs since it has been notably hostile to

excellence. A case in point is the rough sledding of the prestigious, internationally praised state department overseas building program, hurt badly by a reactionary appropriations committee sitting as amateur architectural critics.

If the commission goes to the best architect, rather than to a Congressman's friend, the design must survive the government's "space cadets." These are the civil servants in planning, engineering and budget bureaus who measure creativity with a strict cost yardstick. They could find economic reasons to strip the petals off a rose. Two horrifying examples came to light recently.

One was a General Accounting Office condemnation of a prize-winning breakthrough in public housing design in California. Although the buildings were brought in within the budget, G.A.O. pointed out that some "frills" could have been eliminated to make them even cheaper. These were the amenities produced by thoughtful design.

### Danger

A large Federal building in the design stage featuring a handsome central court was sent back with "waste space" scrawled in the court area by space cadet hands. The court gave a large clerical structure heart and meaning, and it would have done the same for the occupants.

The present breakthrough in government design, therefore, has a quicksand quality. Originality, freshness, creativity, new solutions and non-standard answers are still put through the bureaucratic and political wringer on every level.

Presidential and administrative hands are pulling the program up from above. A quagmire of conventionally shabby practices and equally shabby standards sucks at it from below. If anyone lets go for a minute it will all sink right back into the sticky mess that has given the United States one of the lowest reputations for government architecture in the world.