

'Drab and Ugly'

In government, as in many places, the right hand frequently does not know what the left hand is doing. While President Johnson stated in his message on cities that "I intend to take further steps to insure that Federal construction does not contribute to drab and ugly architecture," the agency responsible for Federal construction, the General Services Administration, was taking steps to guarantee that "drab and ugly" would be the Federal norm.

The G.S.A. was just about to break out of the drab and ugly with some vastly improved designs. A handful of important buildings now in the construction and working-drawing stage represent a spectacular breakthrough in the standards of governmental architecture. Inasmuch as the Federal construction program puts up some of the largest buildings in major American cities at the rate of \$200 million a year, this is no small matter. This miracle has occurred under the direction of an able architect, Karel Yasko, who came in during the Kennedy Administration and has bullied, bluffed, cajoled, teased and coaxed these projects through to realization.

But now all this will be changed. The 1966 Federal budget proposes to cut Mr. Yasko's authority, salary and freedom to make professional judgments by downgrading his present position and putting it under non-architectural control. If there is one thing that G.S.A. does not need, it is more administrative design decisions. Or more pressure to turn architectural commissions into political hay. Or more of the pragmatic "space cadets" who evaluate design by accounting yardsticks.

If President Johnson means what he says about good government building for better cities, this budgetary boondoggle must go. He could, in addition, turn his words into immediate action by appointing the kind of man to head G.S.A. who would be sincerely interested in the job of elevating the quality of Federal construction. This top spot is now vacant.

The question really is whether G.S.A. is going to be a producer of architectural pork barrel or architectural monuments. As of the moment, it is touch-and-go.