

Topics

Gift-Wrapped Houses

Richard Nixon's Security

The first answer, in 1973, came from a spokesman for then-President Nixon. How much public money had gone into fixing up "La Casa Pacifica," the rundown, 29-acre estate he had bought near San Clemente, Calif.? Less than \$40,000, the spokesman said. Within days, reporters found evidence that the right answer was more like \$100,000, then \$200,000, then \$400,000 — and then the General Services Administration acknowledged it had spent \$703,367.

The second answer, "security," was in response to the inevitable next question: What was all the money for? An example was the \$100,000 spent for landscaping, to create shrubbery screens to protect Mr. Nixon from a possible rifle shot. But then it turned out that "landscaping" included flowers. What kind of cover do begonias, poppies and geraniums provide?

Such skeptical concern led to yet another answer: Not to worry, a White House source told the Associated Press in 1973. Mr. and Mrs. Nixon would bequeath the property to the United States for public use. But now

the Nixons have sold it — with all the Federally financed improvements — quite probably for a handsome personal profit. How could that be? Oh, said a Nixon spokesman, Federal officials showed no interest in having the property.

That leads to another question: Which Federal officials? There has as yet been no response from any Nixon spokesman. But we remain eager to hear one. Perhaps this time it can come from an unimpeachable source.

Change of Scene

New Yorkers take just about anything in stride and it barely ruffled the Lower East Side last weekend when an abandoned building was wrapped in 3,500 yards of white gauze in the name of conceptual art. The building-wrapping was a race with decay. The first house selected for the gesture was declared unsafe and was demolished by a city crew before the bandagers could get to it.

Perhaps the artist, Francis Hines, wanted to say that no one would want such houses even if they were gift-

wrapped. He made it clear, though, that he intended no social statement. Nor did his audience see much of an esthetic statement, either. Conceptual art seeks to focus extraordinary attention on the ordinary through wrapping, tying and other strange devices. That may excite Madison Avenue, but not East Fifth Street. There was one lachronic "I like it," plus a few remarks about the expendability of abandoned structures and the fact that people lived there not too long ago.

Still, the transformation has its points. It is obviously easier in this city to get a permit to wrap a building than to find a practical way to rehabilitate one. And for the two weeks or so that the building will stay wrapped — assuming that it does not get too sooty or too tattered too fast — the street will have a new look.

As for art, one observer ("call me Blood") upstaged all the esthetic statements about "the energy of forms under tension" and symbolic suggestions of new life. "It changes the scene, that's all," he said, with total insight. For street-wise New Yorkers it was just one more broken-down old building and another Sunday game.