

The Emperor of Capitol Hill

If all goes according to schedule, the current Senate-passed resolution before the House Public Works Committee that would authorize proper selection of architects for construction on Capitol Hill will never see the light of day. Since every previous effort to reform or modify the procedures of the office of the Architect of the Capitol have met a similar fate, this is no great surprise. If the bill quietly dies, it will be the way a lot of people on Capitol Hill want it, for the obvious reason that they like things exactly as they are.

There are a number of members of Congress who like the fact that they can build whatever they want for themselves on one of the national capital's great public sites without any required review or publication of designs or plans. There are others who like what they have built, notably the elephantine \$100 million-plus Rayburn Office Building, unmatched for size, cost, banality and desecration of the urban scene since the Victor Emmanuel monument was erected in Rome. They will probably also like the next item on the Architect of the Capitol's agenda, a \$75 million monumental outrage in the same genre, the Madison Library, not to mention the proposed further mutilation of the Capitol itself.

There are people who like the construction and supply contracts for anything from millions of tons of misapplied marble to a few dozen office refrigerators—all with neat distribution possibilities according to political geography. There are a few architects who like the equally parochial distribution of jobs.

According to a recent statement by the American Institute of Architects, a group traditionally loath to step on one another's toes or jobs, the way these immense commissions are handed out is "not in the national interest." This includes the appointment and reappointment of a small clique of palace favorites, without public notification of projects to encourage consideration of other qualified firms. It is a somnolent, closed club. The man who likes it most of all is J. George Stewart, the 78-year old Architect of the Capitol, who gives out the contracts, runs the show, is not and never was an architect.

The bill that the House Public Works Committee is not going to vote on would require preparation and periodic review of a comprehensive plan for the Capitol grounds by an outside firm in consultation with the National Capitol Planning Commission, and the selection of architects by a committee including representatives of Congress, the Planning Commission, the Fine Arts Commission and the architecture profession.

As it stands now, Mr. Stewart doesn't even have to say Good Morning to any of them. No one can blame him for not wanting to give up his kingdom. Louis XVI didn't want a revolution. But absolutism has never been proven to be in the public interest and neither is what has been constructed on Capitol Hill.