The House That HUD Built: Architecture The House That HUD Built
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Architecture: The House That HUD Built

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WASHINGTON.

EXACTLY three years after President Johnson signed the legislation creating the Department of Housing and Urban Development — a Federal agency entrusted, in quasi-Olympian fashion, with the future of an extremely troubled urban America—its 4,200 employees moved from 20 scattered sites to its new home.

The $26-million, 10-story building in Washington's southwest was dedicated on Sept. 9 by the President, the Secretary of the Department, Robert C. Weaver, and General Services Administrator Lawson B. Knott, Jr., builder of all Federal buildings. It was characterized as "bold and beautiful" (President Johnson), "urban and urbane" (Secretary Weaver) and "a lasting architectural asset to our capital city and our country" (Lawson Knott).

They were all right. The house that HUD built is a handsome, functional structure that adds quality design and genuine 20th-century style to a city badly in need of both. Like almost all government construction, it is a supercolossal office building of 700,000 square feet, a genre customarily camouflaged by an overlay of trappings of the past. Washington is an endless series of mock palaces clearly built for clerks, not for kings, their true nature betrayed by the blank stare of fluorescent light tubes from expressionless office windows that mock the royal references of their exteriors. They leave one with the uneasy feeling that, architecturally, one has been had.

The HUD building is not sham anything. It treats the problem of bureaucracy directly and comes up with dignity. Designed by Marcel Breuer—of Whitney Museum fame and Grand Central Tower notoriety—with Herbert Beckhard of his office, in association with Nolen-Swinburne of Philadelphia, it is excellently programed. It will probably function as well as any housing for a bureaucracy can. It has strong good looks growing out of its contemporary technology—incredibly, this is the first modular precast concrete building in government according to the HUD release—and it has contemporary monumentality.

In addition, to answer the

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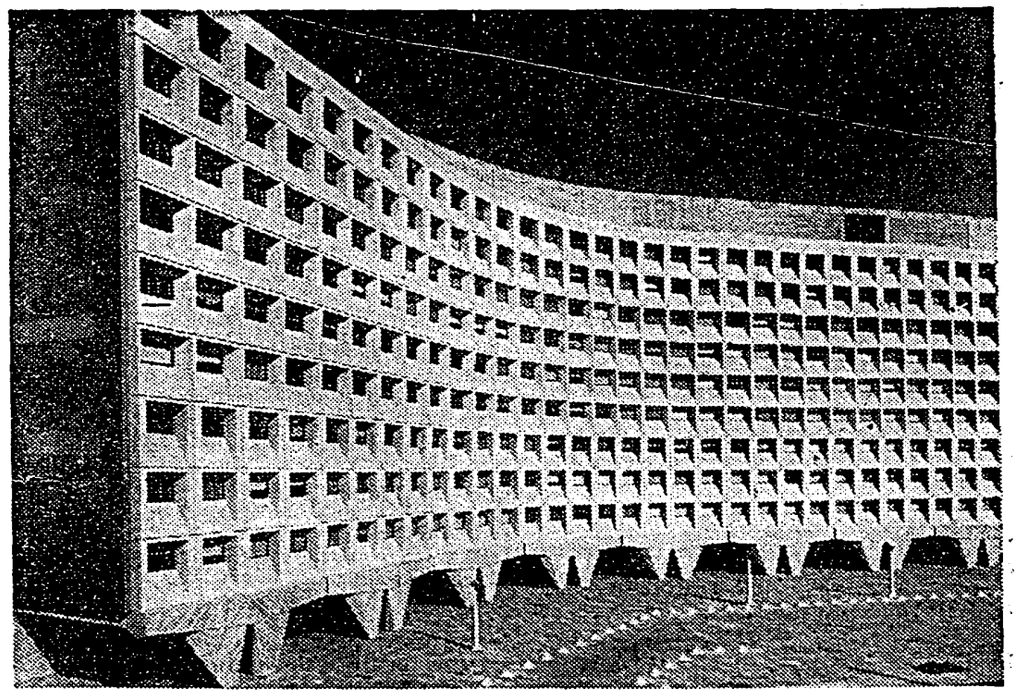

The New York Times (George James)

New Department of Housing and Urban Development building, Washington, D. C.
Quality design and 20th-century style for a city badly in need of both

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perennial argument of the diehards against new or different design, HUD cost less, not more, than a great deal of conventional building. At $17 a square foot, it came in $3-million under the Congressional appropriation and $6-million less than originally estimated. This, at a time when construction costs are rising 10 per cent a year. You can't beat that as an argument against mediocrity. It is cheap enough to please any Congressional watcher of the public purse and good enough to mollify any critic of the banalities and inanities that range from the standard F.O.B. (for Federal Office Building) to the $100-million-and-up pretensions (and that buys a lot of banality) of Mr. Stewart on Capitol Hill.

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The new HUD building is part of a particularly interesting and significant group of public and private structures taking shape in Washington's southwest urban renewal area. This complex has had a checkered history from the time William Zeckendorf first proposed it in postwar years, and it retains something of its original big-speculator-scheme, back-of-the-envelope-design look. Elements have been subjected to considerable revision by the pressures of the Fine Arts Commission.

The group now consists of the HUD building, two completed I. M. Pei buildings with a third scheduled in a setting called L'Enfant Plaza, and the nearly finished Forrestal Building by Curtis and Davis, Fordyce and Hamby, and Frank Grad and Sons.

This last example bridges the much-debated 10th Street Mall, a sweeping road arching over railroad tracks that is a beautifully lit, dramatic grand boulevard ending, surprisingly, in what the English call a roundabout. At present, all that elegance simply sweeps back on itself, leading nowhere.

But the grand Allée planning tradition is right and the 20th-century style is right. These buildings present an important new Washington. They do much to prove that today's architecture can serve the traditional Washington image superbly, if that image is translated correctly as meaning formal urban grandeur, not some half-baked adaptation of the grandeur of the past. We have spent too many decades mistaking the superficial forms for the essential spirit and forfeiting the Capital's greatness.

The HUD building, therefore, has a double significance. It is not only notable in its own right, as an individual structure and as part of the Washington scene, but because it is one of that handful of buildings that is being treated as a kind of Federal demonstration project for better government architecture. It is the final result of the original Kennedy directive for higher standards of Federal design and construction, a program subsequently backed by the Johnson administration. This building, the Forrestal Building, Lafayette Square, by John Carl Warnecke, and a few others here and about the country are being publicized by GSA as examples of excellent government intentions while the customary sea of Federal architectural mediocrity flows on, undisturbed, around them.

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Lafayette Square, which is generally unpopular with the Washington public right now because of its masses of red brick, is going to wear quite well. To see how well those masses have actually been handled in terms of the unavoidably large scale that today's government needs dictate, look at them in the glow of a sunset-backed Washington twilight; with the color softened and the windows lit, an appropriate delicacy of treatment for the historic scale of their neighborhood is revealed.

This kind of design subtlety and artful humanity in the relationships of large-scale new construction to small-scale old buildings, with delightful transitions through inner courts and gardens to the restored historic houses on the square itself, is a plus that outweighs questionable details. It represents a new governmental architectural language and sensibility.

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The HUD building had its bumps on the way to excellence. Breuer's original module had to be changed to fit GSA's standard—bureaucracy is precisely measured. The poured-in-place concrete is less well executed than one could wish or than the development of the technique has made common practice now; it is, for example, far below the quality of Boston's new City Hall. Some materials are compromises with GSA's rigid house-keeping practices—it not only builds, it maintains government structures. The battle for interior design, with the exception of the huge ground floor cafeterias with fittings designed by the architect and furnishings tempered by his taste, has been totally lost to the personal predilections of HUD's hierarchy. The result in many places is a kind of bland ooze that might be called Instant GSA.

But the building still comes through as a strong, creative statement of construction and use. The double Y-shape of the 588-foot long cast-in-place concrete structure, with bearing walls of precast, 10-foot window modules, breaks with the conventional block or wing-type government building design.

Since human orientation disappears at this scale, the building's four quadrants are color coded, with brightly painted doors. The curves of the Y-shape, however, cut the corridor lengths visually, add more window area and afford greater openness on the five-and-a-half-acre site.

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At ground level, there is a severely stony plaza, with sculptural bollards marking the division between pedestrian and auto use with elegant geometry. The entire length of the building is arcaded along the plaza by its massive cast *pilotis*. Glass entrances are set skillfully into the building's north and south ends. Planting will be peripheral. This plaza is the kind of stunningly unrelieved masonry, artfully understood in urban terms, that makes certain European medieval and renaissance squares memorable.

Inside, exposed concrete aggregate panels face the walls of ruggedly handsome entrances and elevator corridors between the inevitable lengths of plain hall. These halls have been spared GSA's preferred washable plastic coverings. A touching human gesture is provided near the south entrance by an unpretentious and informally placed memorial bust of Catherine Bauer Wurster, the warm and brilliant woman whose pioneering housing studies in the 1940's did so much to awaken American consciousness of housing needs.

Like all Federal office buildings, HUD is huge and impersonal. But by the quality of its design, it clearly does not assume the lowest common denominator for humanity or its housing. The point it makes is basic: better buildings, produced in the mainstream of American architectural excellence, can be built for government use. Good design is feasible and economical. That leaves the challenge and the responsibility firmly stated. And the questions are equally clear.

What is GSA commissioning now? What other buildings will approach the demonstration sample? How strong is the recently established design review board? Will it affect the familiar processes of political patronage? Will the HUD example be matched on more than a token scale? Only GSA knows for sure.