Some Sour Notes Sound At the Kennedy Center
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WASHINGTON.

THE John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts opened here last week after more than a decade of planning, fund-raising, design and construction, and it is a cultural bonanza and monumental disaster.

Washington is so delighted to have three genuine, professional performance halls with all the proper facilities in a city that has been culturally underprivileged for most of its history that it is closing its eyes to what they, and the building, look like.

It seems like simple sense to understand that housing the arts is also an act of art, and how they are housed is terribly revealing of the state of the arts, or at least, of the state of mind of the sponsors.

What the Kennedy Center implicitly says about both is that they are consummately conventional, totally lackluster, distrustful of creativity and fearful of greatness. The building flatly declares the ordinary.

That is too bad, because the state of architecture in the United States is one of extraordinary, internationally admired achievement. There is not a sign of this at the Kennedy Center. There is drop-dead size and doggedly popular-pretty posh, but not a single creative contemporary idea or effect. There isn't even a try. The biggest box in the world adds nothing to the art of architecture.

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There is no minimizing the elephantine esthetic poverty of the Kennedy Center, no matter how much talk there is about what goes on in those halls being all that counts, or the absolute nonsense now bruited around about design "from the inside out." Of course it's designed from the inside out. Every proper building begins with its functional requirements. In architecture, appearance is more than skin deep; it comes from the spirit of both architect and client and from the specific way in which the program is executed.

It is a sad commentary on our culture that so many people, in sheer gratitude for those desperately needed theaters, can believe or argue that their design is unimportant. Spilt marble matters. Because it can, and will, happen again so long as the state of mind exists that finds the quality of the Kennedy Center, as architecture, unimportant. After all, architecture is only important for the ages.

What is most important is that this 630-foot no-no on the Potomac is an absolute, guaranteed, national monument. It cannot be otherwise; there is its official status as a Kennedy memorial, its national status as a cultural center, and its inescapable bulk. Even for Washington, it's big, and even for Washington, which attracts inflated mediocrity with miraculous tenacity, it's bad.

It is worth examining why it is bad. First, however, it must be noted that it could easily have been better. The current plans for the National Gallery extension are bold and brilliant, and no Washington institution carries a greater inhibiting burden of tradition and orthodoxy.

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One Washington tradition is that large architectural decisions are made by committees. These committees, set up for worthwhile purposes such as the Kennedy Center, tend to be heavy with people of position, wealth, leverage and national reputation and light on people who might have professional knowledge of the arts of building, design and environment. The Kennedy Center committee was notoriously light in those areas in the decision-making stage.

This means that a lot of fine, well-intentioned people, experienced in business, diplomacy and other prestigious but largely irrelevant pursuits to the task at hand except for fund-raising connections, decide what shall be built and where, and who will design it. They follow their personal taste. They may not know if it's architecture, but they know what they like.

In the case of the Kennedy Center, that taste led directly to Edward Durell Stone. Now the case of Edward Durell Stone is a touchy one. Mr. Stone is a man of great charm and talent, with a reputation made originally in experimental works of the early modern movement, the buildings of which were admittedly full of innovative glory and grievous error. Then he slipped out of the limelight until recent years when he resurfaced with great fanfare and a completely revamped design philosophy and became enormously successful.

Mr. Stone had developed a package that any businessman, layman, or committee could buy. He told them that "modern" didn't have to be austere or difficult. He said there was no reason why it couldn't offer traditional luxuries served up in a "timeless" style. If red and gold, for example, made good traditional interiors, they should make good modern ones. (Interestingly enough, in his redundantly red and gold buildings, they don't. They look cheap, dull or gaudy, because they cannot approximate the traditional arts and crafts that were intrinsic to those traditional decorative effects.)

This formula, he said, would outlast more daring or temporal designs. This is exactly what the amateur sponsor, unequipped to judge "daring" designs, wanted to hear. He could have his fancy cake as long as the cake was simple enough to be called contemporary, and the result would cause neither intellectual nor emotional angst. Somewhere along the line Mr. Stone sold himself on this theory as thoroughly as he sold his clients.

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The test of the theory is in the buildings, and the final proof of failure is the safe and sanitary kitsch that is the Kennedy Center. The demonstrable fault is in Mr. Stone's architectural philosophy.

The fallacy is that you can't deliberately aim for "timelessness" without falling on your face. A great building grows naturally out of a confluence of conditions intrinsic to a particular moment in history. All great buildings are inescapably of their own moment in time; they are the signposts of civilization. They become "timeless" in relation to their greatness, later.

A great building is so magnificently of its period and so perfectly expressive of the creative genius as conditioned by existing uses, beliefs and technologies, that it transcends its time to become one of those historical signposts. Thus Chartres, Sant'Ivo, Ronchamps.

Therefore, when Mr. Stone says, "I did not want to build a 1970's building," he is already crossing up history and the muse. Bernini built 1670's buildings. They express everything of the immediate baroque world. The level of genius by which this particularism becomes a specific esthetic makes them timeless. To aim for something untouched by, or that sidesteps, the moment, is to miss both history and art. The moment contains the stuff of immortality.

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Mr. Stone is a wonderful and beloved man, dear to the profession, and he has known how to enjoy and share the success that his formula has brought. But it has also brought a plague of dreadful buildings. (There are exceptions: the somewhat Wrightian National Geographic Building in Washington keeps within the stream of architectural development, albeit in the backward-leaning way that seems to suit Washington best; it has not abdicated totally to the formula.)

But it is time to see this package of philosophical and esthetic pablum for what it is: a client-pacifier guaranteed to produce non-architecture. In the resulting pastiche of decorative adaptations there is nothing to elevate, ennoble, enlighten or enlarge the esthetic experience or sensibilities of the user in the way that great buildings have always expanded and enriched the spatial and sensuous awareness of man. Decorative recall is no substitute for a creative act. Good architecture is considerably harder to achieve.

The Kennedy Center makes one sad, angry, and considerably ashamed to see art and architecture so shortchanged. The nation deserves better. And Mr. Stone, a man we all love and admire, owes himself more.

The New York Times/Mike Lien

Hall of Nations, the Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C.
Distrustful of creativity, fearful of greatness