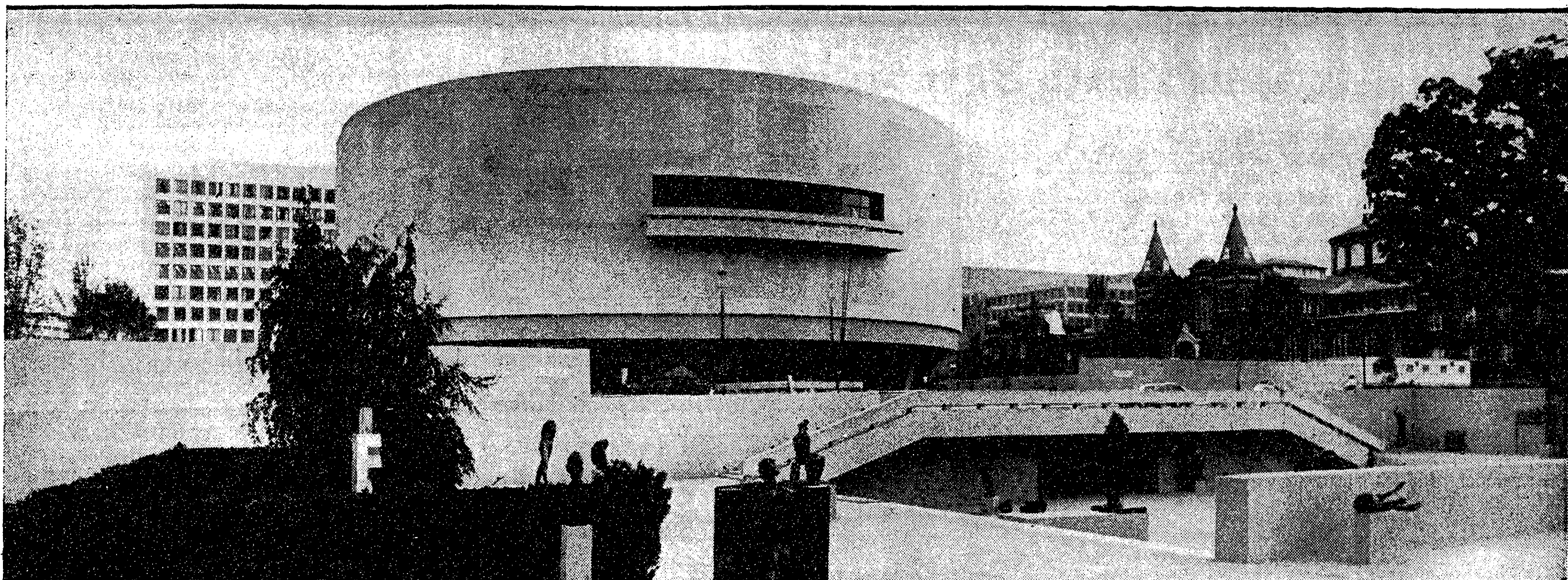


# Article 4 -- No Title: The round museum building impresses a critic ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Photographs by Dennis Brack from Black Star

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WASHINGTON, D. C.

IT is hard to know whether Washington does something to architects or architects do something to Washington. Perfectly respectable practitioners fall on their faces with alarming regularity, unstrung by the Capital's overblown scale and frequently overwrought grandeur. Even in the case of the most secure talent, something seems to go awry.

The last architect in the world it would be expected to go awry for is Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, designer of the new \$16-million Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the well-publicized concrete cylinder that is the latest of the Smithsonian's public museums that line and enclose the Mall like a brontosaurian marble boneyard. Mr. Bunshaft is known for a kind of monumental absolutism so unyielding that the environment crumbles before it. He is not guilty of excessive humility or false modesty. He would therefore seem more than a match for the Capital's jinx.

But in the case of the Hirshhorn, which was officially unveiled to the public on Oct. 4, he has fought the Capital and the Mall to a draw, and

*The round museum building impresses a critic as a 'maimed monument on a maimed Mall'*

alas, nobody wins. The result is a maimed monument and a maimed Mall, and saddest of all, even a major part of the collection that it has been built for is maimed. The sculpture garden or court that is one of the museum's principal features fights the large-scale sculpture to a draw; the pieces seem to do battle with the hard, bleak geometry of their setting, losing scale and power. This garden is so lacking in grace that it will not close the controversy over whether it should have been permitted to extend into the open green of the Mall.

One therefore questions the nature, no matter how good the intention, of the architectural design. And since Mr. Bunshaft is a known aficionado and collector of 20th-century art, one tends to ask anew, must each man kill the thing

he loves? If architecture is the weapon, something is very wrong indeed.

On the positive side, the building contains generous galleries that display painting and smaller sculpture well and work pleasantly for the visitor. The exhibition space consists of a large underground area, the ground level with its outdoor extensions, and two upper floors. (A top floor is for administration.)

The galleries have paintings on a windowless outer ring and small sculptures on a windowed inner ring; the two make up the building's hollow circular shape. The inner ring also provides seats and a daylight view of an open court within the circle. There is no sense of being thrown off balance, as at the Guggenheim, with its ramp and open well and total floor-to-roof view.

According to Mr. Bunshaft, deliberate architectural anonymity has been sought for these interiors. The intent is to display art so that it can be seen without "architectural distractions."

But the architect makes no such claims of anonymity for the exterior, or for the building as a whole, referring to it as "a large piece of functional sculpture."

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# The Windowless Bulk of the Hirshhorn

(Continued from Page 1) as interesting as a book, as the Hirshhorn's bulk is a particularly questionable innovation and a gain to the architectural statement of the site. Unfortunately, it is not a disaster. This is clearly these things. Already, famous, or notorious, for its circular shape and windowless bulk and labeled a marble doughnut by preconstruction publicity (high costs have substituted concrete for marble), it is known the richly coloristic around Washington as the bunker or gas tank, lacking only gun emplacements or an Exxon sign. Its blind mass is broken by a Mussolini-style balcony on the Mall side. But jokes are too easy a dismissal of the undismissible. There are serious reasons why the museum and sculpture court fail as architecture, and they are worth analysis.

To start, there is a heavy, lifeless brutality about the building. But it totally lacks the essential factors of esthetic strength and provocative vitality that make the Air Museum on one side a positive "brutalism" and rewarding style. This is not born-dead, neo-penitentiary modern. It offers a rigid resistance to everything around it or part of it that should properly interact with it. Neither a sympathetic background nor an enriching head of esthetic tensions is created. Its mass is not so much aggressive or overbearing as merely leaden. In response to critical failures are writ large: the building is a hollow cylinder, 231 feet in diameter and 87 feet high, with a 115-foot wide inner court. This court is an eccentric circle, four feet off center. In the court, also off-center, is a bronze fountain 60 feet in diameter; by its size, position, water movement and lighting it is clearly meant to upstage everything else in the place.

The round structure is raised 14 feet off the ground on four immense piers, and the bottom surface of the building, under which the visitor walks, has massive nine-foot deep coffer with recessed lighting. Within the glass-enclosed entrance lobby, escalators slash through the coffer to the upper floors.

The fact that there is a dramatic structural rationale does not help the end result. The system of segmental ring girders and piers and columns that raises the building above the ground and carries its curved walls is a daring and ingenious one. (It's good they didn't run out of reinforcing rods in the piers.) But the structure does not lend itself to any kind of architectural presence beyond sheer bulk.

Big as this all is for anywhere else, however, on the Mall where buildings measure in thousands rather than in hundreds of feet, and with the neighboring Air and Space Museum being built to what seems like marble infinity, the Hirshhorn's round design is clearly meant to command attention through form if not size. But the lesser size cannot be mistaken for intimacy.

Due to budgetary problems, the extravagant materials and details usually characteristic of the architect's work are missing. It is rumored that Mr. Bunshaft has removed more travertine from Roman quarries than the Eternal City has used since Imperial days, and his way with a stainless steel joint is pure panache. And while the difference here does not bespeak modesty so much as economics, it does considerably dull the impact of an excruciatingly tastelessly overstated richness that is his trademark. Without this luxury, the building is

some gesture had been made toward the immediate senses of new surroundings, either in the recognition or in the character of design. The unbending, one-dimensional space design is surprisingly insensitive to anything except its own didactic aspirations. (One reaches the sculpture garden from the building either by tunnel under Jefferson Drive or by walking across the street.) It has not only been lowered; the original plan called for it to intrude twice as far into the Mall.

Why have the public sensuous lessons of paving and planting and procession of spaces of the Museum of Modern Art sculpture garden never been learned? And how has it escaped notice that a first-rate piece of sculpture looks great on a simple swath of green, or in a field, or anywhere as part of something, not in resistance to it?

At best, this architecture is a male chauvinist marriage of building and art. And it raises a crucial point about container and contained that the design never addresses. To what degree can, and should, a museum building be a work of art in itself, and what kind of balance can be struck between the structure and the objects it serves?

Not only has Mr. Bunshaft apparently given a better answer at the Albright-Knox in Buffalo (which is almost universally admired although this writer has not seen it),

The architecture gives skillful support and enrichment to the other arts, and the mutual experience bespeaks the totality, greatness and uniqueness of the esthetic achievement of the 20th century.

Maybe the Pei-designed, massively expensive new East Wing of the National Gallery, currently under construction, will bring this revelation to Washington. Or maybe Mr. Pei, too, will take the Washington pratfall. One earnestly hopes not. The Capital has gained an important collection, but it has yet to have the appropriate expression of modern art and collections deserve.

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**Bunshaft's concrete cylinder 'fails as architecture.'**