Construction in the Capital

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WASHINGTON, D. C.

ABOUT 4,500 architects and allied professionals met last week in the nation's capital for the annual convention of the American Institute of Architects. Washington suspended its May sultriness for a few days of the kind of weather that makes it a dream city of clear skies, caressing sun and lush green in which no architects' mistakes seem beyond redemption.

That was a good thing, because a record amount of construction was going on that may need special dispensation of some sort, from the overpowering FBI Building on Pennsylvania Avenue and a new row of cultural bunkers on the Mall for the Hirshhorn Collection and the Air and Space Museum to an explosion of office building.

With peculiar appropriateness, the convention called for a "humane architecture," a theme and a need with which no one could quarrel, even if nothing that met the eye bore it out. One of the more humane moments was a party for an A.I.A. design award winner, the Olivetti Corporation, in the garden of the 1819 Decatur House, the landmark headquarters of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which offered the style, charm and intimacy that Washington increasingly finds disposable.

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The city's real urban tragedy is the loss of the way the grand L'Enfant plan was humanized by elegant small buildings for a counterpoint of scale that related monumentality to the individual with art and ease. That happy relationship is being progressively lost.

Considerably less humane was a bash for 3,000 architects at the Mies van der Rohe-designed Martin Luther King Library, where waiters bore trays labeled gin, scotch, vodka, etc., for those who read, drink and run, and the austere brick walls were floodlit in candy colors that must have had Mies spinning in his grave.

On the professional side, the keynote speech was made by Mayor Tom Bradley, who left the Hearst shootout in Los Angeles to address the architects. It was a talk notable for its sophisticated urban values. He credited what sounded like a standing army of architectural and urban consultants who assist him (their peers are currently standing idle vis-à-vis the New York administration) but there was no mistaking his highly personal, concerned grasp of the issues.

He came up with one stunning point. Presidential refusal to consider land use policy legislation, he said, begs the issue; in fact, it misunderstands the issue totally. In this country a *de facto* national land use policy exists.

A record amount of construction is going on in Washington, D. C. that may need special dispensation

Laws on highways, income taxes and mortgages, for example, are also building policies. Highways do not just connect lines on a map; they create development. Income tax, beyond raising revenue, gives exemption incentives for home owning rather than renting. F.H.A. has not just provided mortgage insurance, it has determined where homes will be built and who will have them. The formula has virtually dictated abandonment of the older city and appalling misuse of land resources as well as despoliation of the environment. It is land use policy by default.

While the architects convened, a small environmental drama continued to be played out in Washington on the 17th Street block between F and G Streets. As reported in this column in March, the General Services Administration sent in bulldozers to destroy part of the block, one of particular amenity and variety of scale and style (specifically, one landmark building and others) declared eligible for landmark listing for a new monolith for the Federal Home Loan Board Bank.

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The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation was against it, and the Fine Arts Commission (we have since been told) was for it, on the ridiculous basis that if the bank had to be there —which was certainly moot and on all counts totally undesirable—a uniform cornice line might be nice.

A Washington preservation group, called with wonderful, direct, hortatory explicitness in a time of cheesy euphemisms, Don't Tear It Down, got an injunction against G.S.A. to halt demolition on the grounds that the Federal agency was in violation of the 1966 Historic Preservation Act. An Advisory Council meeting was convened to consider the situation, and in view of the damage already done, the group more or less threw up its hands and threw in the sponge. Don't Tear It Down then amended its suit to include the Advisory Council.

By the end of April, with the injunction still in force, everything was at a stalemate. With the urging of Don't Tear It Down, the Washington architectural firm of Hartman-Cox was hired as consultant by the bank's architect, Max O. Urbahn Associates, for the purpose of suggesting ways to design the bank that could also restore some of the character of the mutilated block. Both firms are looking at alternatives and the bank is anxious for a solution. The recommendations are expected shortly, and the bank and the Urbahn firm can accept, reject or modify them, depending on conscience, esthetic responsiveness and the continued likelihood of legal action.

Don't Tear It Down turns out to be extremely constructive as well as hortatory. Does anyone still think you can't fight City Hall or the Federal Government or big business for civic art and sensibility?

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Another Don't Tear It Down campaign was the long and apparently successful battle to save the Old Post Office on Pennsylvania Avenue. The Richardsonian Romanesque rusticated gray granite pile was originally condemned by the Pennsylvania Avenue Commission for the grand plan "redevelopment" of the nation's grand avenue that has been aborning for a decade.

Calling for modern additions to period structures, but with what some observers felt was a tacit classical bias, the Commission eventually offered to leave the non-conforming Victorian tower as a token landmark. The most recent plan, by the current Pennsylvania Avenue Development Commission, calls for retaining the complete building, with the fine possibility of using it as headquarters for the National Endowment for the Arts and allied activities.

Considering the replacement designs often predicated for threatened landmarks, Don't Tear It Down is mock-seriously considering an adjunct organization to be called Don't Put It Up. Good move.

And finally, a correction, or emendation, on a piece that appeared here a few weeks ago on the rehabilitation and reuse of landmark cast-iron buildings in New York. The account of the Cary Building at Church and Reade Streets should have credited Knox Martin with the graphics, including the supersign on the building's side and the continuous, brightly patterned abstract awning sheltering the shops. It is a fine example of combining new with old for practicality, continuity and art. That could stand as a definition of cities, as well.

"One of the cultural bunkers on the Mall" is the Hirshhorn Museum.