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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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THE avenue along which President Kennedy's funeral cortege passed from the White House to the Capitol was one that he had marked for glory. The idea of the grand re-design of Pennsylvania Avenue was conceived during another ceremonial procession, the inaugural parade along the same route three years ago.

In those three years the plan was given authority by a Presidential directive and substance by a Presidentially appointed advisory commission of architects and planners. The proposal for the avenue emerged as one of the most impressive civic plans of modern times—grand in scope, sweeping in scale, awe-inspiring in its potentialities for greatness. As a concept it is worthy of Rome and Sixtus V; it has the clear possibility of providing one of the memorable landmarks of the 20th century.

The plan, with its model, maps and renderings, has been ready for some weeks, waiting for the President's inspection and approval. Last week, as he left for Dallas, and the press showed increasing curiosity, it was put under lock and key pending his return.

The appointment for its presentation that seemed a momentary possibility then will never materialize. The plan, which he had followed and encouraged unofficially and which already had enthusiastic reception from top Government officials and the Fine Arts Commission, may never materialize either. The climate for the arts and for grand civic designs has already undergone subtle change. With the shock of tragedy and the more pressing affairs of state, it is a question whether the plan will survive at all.

For the curious and disturbing factor about the President's program in the arts was that it depended almost completely on his personal leadership. The well-qualified people that he drew about him, and on whom he depended, could not have functioned without his sponsorship. He created an Advisory Council on the Arts by Executive Order — the appointments are still pending—but it had to be done by a personal gesture because he saw the hopelessness of trying for Congressional action. He brought Government architecture out of the dead past and into the living present, again by Executive action, when he issued his directive to Government agencies last year demanding the highest and best in modern design.

Only now does an entire generation realize that he gave it a special kind of existence by recognizing its creative contribution at an official level, bringing it into the mainstream by making it clear that today's art is part of today's world.

If the Pennsylvania Avenue plan is to be carried out, it can probably be done only by Executive action. The most likely course would be the creation of a joint commission that could coordinate the many jurisdictional problems that will inevitably arise from such a vast plan. It will take leadership, based on vision and conviction, to swing the necessary appropriations in Congress. The architectural world is wondering where that leadership will come from.

The only guarantee of excellence in government architecture is a knowledgeable court of appeals at the top; the specter of compromise and mediocrity has not been exorcised from the General Services Administration. One ray of hope: the all-new Fine Arts Commission appointed by President Kennedy is a continuing instrument of the standards that he set. Its sense of excellence and contemporary esthetic vitality are bound to be reflected in the decisions that it will make concerning the physical appearance of the capital in the next few years.

These standards have not entered the political world since the days of Jefferson, and there is serious concern that they may disappear again. The kind of architectural distinction and civic beauty proposed by the Pennsylvania Avenue plan is a poignant tribute to the vision and ideals of Mr. Kennedy. Its execution could be his most fitting and permanent memorial.