

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Keeping Up to Date With the Outskirts

For New Yorkers, who can use it, here is a little good news from other places, and progress reports for those who wait for the other shoe to drop. The Governor of Pennsylvania has signed a bill in which the State Legislature has authorized the purchase of the architectural drawings of the late Louis Kahn, which were threatened with sale and dispersal to pay his debts after his sudden death last year.

The Kahn archives will be given by the State to the University of Pennsylvania, which will seek funds to house them as a research facility and set up a professorship in Louis Kahn's name. The important point here is that this was not a sentimental act spurred by Kahn's tragic and untimely loss, but a responsible act motivated by a realistic appraisal of the architect and his work. Equally important, it was an act of government, not just of concerned private citizens, that secured this national cultural heritage. That is indeed good news in a country that has traditionally considered its culture expendable and thrown its heritage to the wolves or the highest bidder.

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Another encouraging departure from time-honored practice, in Washington this time, is a demonstration of professional concern for the planning of the nation's working spaces and monuments on Capitol Hill. Concern means money, in this case an appropriation of \$350,000 for the Office of the Architect of the Capitol—another legislative first—for the purpose of creating a master plan for the Hill in which, theoretically, art and function will be nicely balanced.

In the past, the Architect of the Capitol has expended his energy and the country's money on such monstrosities as the controversial extension of the Capitol itself, a bathroom-marble fait accompli on the East Front and an unresolved threat on the West Front, and the notorious Rayburn Building, a \$120-odd million exercise in monumental overruns and underdesign that was obsolete when it opened its doors. At present, the unfinished \$90 million Madison Memorial Library, intended as an addition to the Library of Congress, is being battled over by the Library and Congress as potential new House office space. (The Congressmen are not fleeing, just overflowing.) It promises to be a tiresomely undistinguished structure for either purpose. There is more bad architecture for more big money on Capitol Hill than anywhere in the public or private sector.

The present Architect of the Capitol, George White, who was not responsible for this unblemished record of disaster, differs from his immediate predecessor in actually being an architect. He is also taking a different approach to the problems of government building. He intends to survey needs and resources, ranging from availability of land to such things as the future functioning of the legislature and the judiciary, to decide what can and should be built where, in terms of immediate and long-range requirements. (One fascinating example is a belated grappling with recognition of the need for computer retrieval of information for members of Congress dealing with a vast range of specialized and complex subjects.)

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Official construction has been ad hoc and ponderous or ludicrous. Whether this system is destiny remains to be seen. Some members of Congress are becoming more sophisticated about planning and design, along with the rest of the population. Right now, Mr. White is interviewing architects and planners and expects to announce the selection of one firm, or of a coalition of firms, sometime next month, to undertake the job of developing the master scheme.

This is not going to be an easy job. It is late, it is bound to be bugged politically, and it is going to require all the vision, talent and practical genius that the profession can muster. The closer the result is to a conceptual rather than a physical plan, the more it embraces process over product, the greater the emphasis on ideas and functions of government and environment rather than on actual buildings, and the less resemblance it bears to one of those superduper conurbation-models of the future, the more hope of success there will be. To Mr. White and the gentlemen he appoints, lots of luck.

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From St. Louis, Professor Buford Pickens of Washington University sends news and dissent about the restoration of Adler and Sullivan's Wainwright Building, which is part of a proposed office center plan for the State of Missouri that has been reported on in this column. The rest of the Wainwright block is supposed to be replaced with a prize-winning design by Mitchell-Giurgola of Philadelphia that ties a new office annex to the rehabilitated Wainwright Building, as the result of a State-sponsored competition.

Professor Pickens wants it known that there is a respectable body of objecting opinion in St. Louis, which is less than enchanted by the winning annex design and specifically does not want the destruction of another handsome old structure, the De Menil Building that adjoins the Wainwright. The opponents of the plan claim that by cutting out the new construction, a sizable sum could be saved for the work on the Wainwright, now receiving minimal treatment, although Professor Pickens reports that a grant has been received from HUD for exterior cleaning and repairs. The opponents also claim that the annex does not have to be built because the Legislature appropriated funds for the Wainwright's rehabilitation independently of any new construction. They add that if extra office space is needed, the De Menil should be used, and that new construction would be better divided between downtown and midtown.

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It appears to be anybody's ball game at this point, and the arguments can be made forwards, backwards and diagonally. The dilemma now is clearly between a good new building and a good old building, and St. Louis is going to have to be Solomon to decide. With supreme irony, the State of Missouri finds its role recast from hero (buying and saving the Wainwright in the first place and holding a competition for a quality solution in the second place) to villain (destroyer of the De Menil and champion of the annex the dissenters oppose). Subsequent newspaper reports suggest that a lot of good things seem to be snarled in protest, paranoia and politics.

The news from Cincinnati is considerably better. The New York architectural firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer Associates is proceeding with the restoration and remodeling of the vast Union Terminal for a regional bus station and the Cincinnati School for the Creative and Performing Arts. Funds are coming from the Cincinnati Board of Education, the city, and a Federal urban mass transit grant. If this Art Deco masterpiece, which could be called one of the great white elephants of the century, can find new life and money, no cause is ever hopeless.

Which brings us back to New York, where hope springs eternal. The truth is that optimism, not cynicism, is what makes New Yorkers run.