ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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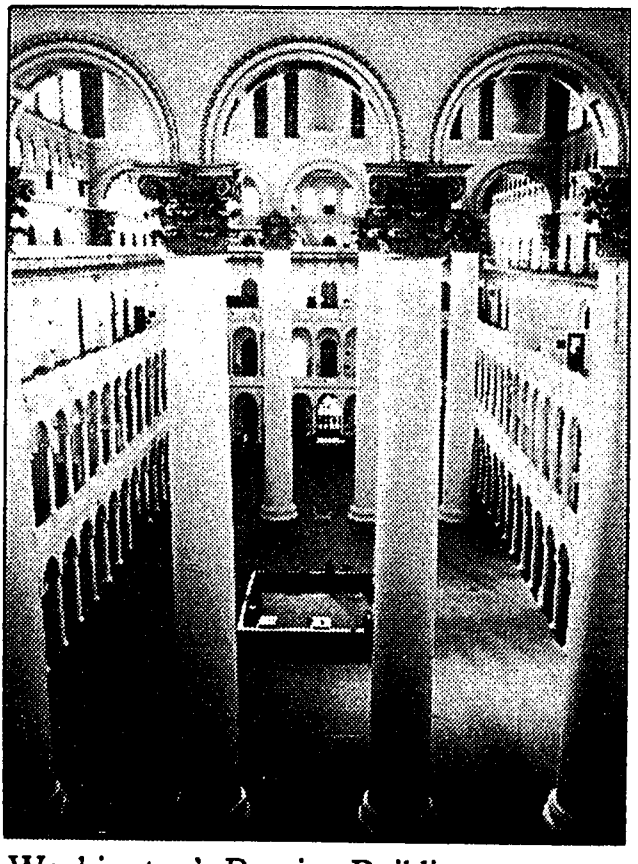
A Wrongheaded Museum



Washington's Pension Building, proposed as an architecture museum

It would be foolish to think that the days when we all had to rally round the flag to save surplus (read historic) government buildings from the bulldozer in Washington are over; complacency is always unwise. When I recently received an announcement that the National Collection of the Fine Arts is celebrating its 10th anniversary in Robert Mill's splendid Greek Revival temple, I felt my bruises ache again from the battle to save those handsome colonnades from being pulverized for blacktop.

But the climate has clearly changed. The General Services Administration, which controls Federal property, now not only inventories its historic buildings but, under its present administrator, Jay Solomon, has established an official policy of giving the highest priority to recycling sound older properties for public space needs. And so the fact that one of Washington's most spectacular 19th-century government structures, the Pension Building at 5th and G Streets, N.W., is soon to be empty, is not the alarming danger signal that it once was.

Still, one cannot be sanguine. What does one do with a massive red brick monument designed for a Civil War bureaucracy in the 1880's by an army engineer, General Montgomery C. Meigs, that contains one of the most dramatic spaces in the country—a huge interior court with eight 76-foot-high Corinthian columns surrounded by tiered galleries? The building has been the site of nine inaugural balls, but that is not an everyday event. One persistent idea has been that it would be the perfect structure for a National Museum of Architecture, and for a while it was hoped that the Smithsonian

Continued on Page 35

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

A Wrongheaded Museum

Continued from Page 27

would see this as an inevitable addition to its institutional arts lineup.

Probably because such a museum would need major funding, the Smithsonian has been lukewarm, if not frigid, toward the plan. But since it is now unlikely that GSA would undervalue the Pension building or not try to find a tenant for it, the proposal is less compelling as a crash rescue operation to save the landmark, although it is still an idea that deserves serious consideration. Which brings us, unhappily, to the proposal itself.

The plan worked out for what is now being called a National Museum of the Building Arts has been issued in a descriptive brochure called "The Building Building." Last month, a bill was introduced into the Senate, on the basis of this proposal, to establish a National Museum of the Building Arts in the Pension Building. The plan has received the official backing of the American Institute of Architects.

This action makes it necessary to evaluate the proposal, a task that I approach reluctantly. I believe that this country needs a National Museum of the Building Arts. The work on the plan has been done by one of the ablest architecture critics in the country, Wolf von Eckardt, a professional of great talent and conscience, with a committee of some of the most distinguished architectural practitioners, scholars and administrators, headed by a dedicated architectural historian, Cynthia Field.

When, where and how, then, did the whole idea go off the rails? As it stands now, the proposal is about 20 years behind the times in its dated, naïve, didactic, media-oriented educational programs and displays; its hype of building processes and products; its soupy, messianic, second-hand approach to the art of architecture through participatory exhibits and games, rather than through an emphasis on this country's authentic architectural riches.

Most discouraging of all is the failure to address what should be the overriding concern of such a national institution —the highly selective collection and conservation of original artifacts and archives of esthetic and documentary material of undisputed national importance. This is the manifestly pressing issue today, in view of the rapidly rising consciousness of the art of architecture and the endangered American architectural heritage.

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It is not that the last point was not thoughtfully considered by the plan's sponsors; their preference is for a building the stated purpose of which would be "to educate the public." The role would be that of an information center and a design clearinghouse; it would be set up as a headquarters for design services, which would include assistance in "problem solving" and "design improvement." There would be educational and exchange programs, in a setting of giant cranes, against the sound of jackhammers.

The plan's sponsors have made it clear that they wish to break out of the traditional museum concept. The building center—because that is what it would be, not an architecture museum—would seek no collections; it would only be the "collector of last resort" for material that could not be placed anywhere else but that was too valuable to lose.

What one cannot help seeing as one reads the proposal is a building trades' public relations dream—one of those image-boosting public service efforts that can surely do the building business no harm. One has to stretch one's sympathy and imagination to see how, except in the most indirect and peripheral way, it could do the art of architecture much good.

Instead of preserving and displaying primary and original documents in the history of American architectural art—beautiful and valuable artifacts and drawings that are being lost and destroyed—there would be two permanent exhibitions of an educational nature. "Building America" would tell the story of the country's growth "from log cabin to skyscraper," including films of such things as whitewashing rituals and displays of tools of the trade. "People and Building" would be a mechanized show in which young and old would "experience" the effects of construction, in "personal" and "community" terms. These, of course, are perfectly laudable subjects and activities, as supplementary programs. There would also be special displays by building products manufacturers and professional organizations from whom, presumably, some of the Museum's funds would come. It is even suggested that one room might be devoted to each of the building trades.

I have never yet known anyone who was really influenced or enlightened by this kind of well-meaning expository brainwashing; in the past, I have prepared enough of these "teaching" exhibits myself to find that they tend to be a pious bore no matter what multi-media tricks or "participatory" devices are used. But what really is disturbing about this kind of architectural McLuhanism is that while the fun and games are going on, whole chunks of the American architectural heritage are crumbling away or being carted to the incinerator.

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It took three years to safely place the papers of Louis Kahn, and it was hard work all the way to their final home at the University of Pennsylvania. Someone had to rediscover the superb watercolor rendering of Brooklyn Bridge two or three times between disappearances. At least one firm of skyscraper pioneers threw out their historic records and drawings when a local museum wouldn't take them. Another museum turned down a foundation grant to establish an architectural archive. Frank Lloyd Wright drawings were found in a furniture manufacturer's old files—by luck. Research traced Bertrand Goodhue drawings to a private safe-deposit box. Other materials are not so lucky; they languish, without proper acquisitioning, in historical societies that have neither space, money, equipment, personnel or the desire to do anything about them. For these institutions, such collections are an albatross. Their neglect is almost as destructive as the not infrequent trip to the dump.

Clearly, there are serious problems of funding, equipment, curatorship and services in handling this kind of art and archival material. First, in spite of serious losses, there are still mountains of such documents to be dealt with. Not too long ago, these collections literally could not be given away; few institutions would take them. Now, with the increasing awareness of the art of architectural drawing and the importance of documentation, masses of papers are being made available.

The museum proposal quite correctly concludes that local materials should generally remain in local hands, where they have the greatest interest and use. Columbia's Avery Architectural Library is selectively accepting New York collections. The university libraries at Cornell and Minneapolis are doing an exceptional job. The Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, a centralized effort based in New York, is carrying out the heroic effort of recording sources and resources around the country.

But a museum by any name must be, first of all, a home for primary documents of art, in this case the art of architecture. The Museum of Modern Art's Mies van der Rohe archive is an outstanding example. Obviously, a national museum must concentrate on material of national importance.

With so many irretrievable losses and future uncertainties, it is very hard to be enthusiastic about "design your own neighborhood" gimmicks. Electrical wiring demonstrations become ludicrous when irreplaceable documents are being used to stuff cracks in windows. I just cannot feel pepped up at the thought of children clambering over geodesic domes while drawings rot in private files and uncaring municipal offices. I am not intrigued by mechanized exhibits and computerized scoreboards when Chicago's Art Institute snatches the Adler and Sullivan Trading Room from the wreckage of the Stock Exchange and New York's Metropolitan Museum plans to reconstruct a Frank Lloyd Wright room and a Tiffany loggia as prime elements of its new American wing.

These are tokens; so much has been lost and so much more is going. The importance of American architectural art is only beginning to be recognized. A national museum is already much too late. ■