

# Architecture: A Look At the Kennedy Center

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 6—  
This capital city specializes  
in ballooning monuments and  
endless corridors. It uses  
marble like cotton wool. It  
is the home of government  
of, for and by the people,  
and of taste for the people—  
the big, the bland and the  
banal. The John F. Kennedy

Center for the  
Performing Arts,  
opening officially  
Wednesday, does  
not break the

An  
Appraisal

rule. The style of the Ken-  
nedy Center is Washington  
superscale, but just a little  
bit bigger. Albert Speer  
would have approved.

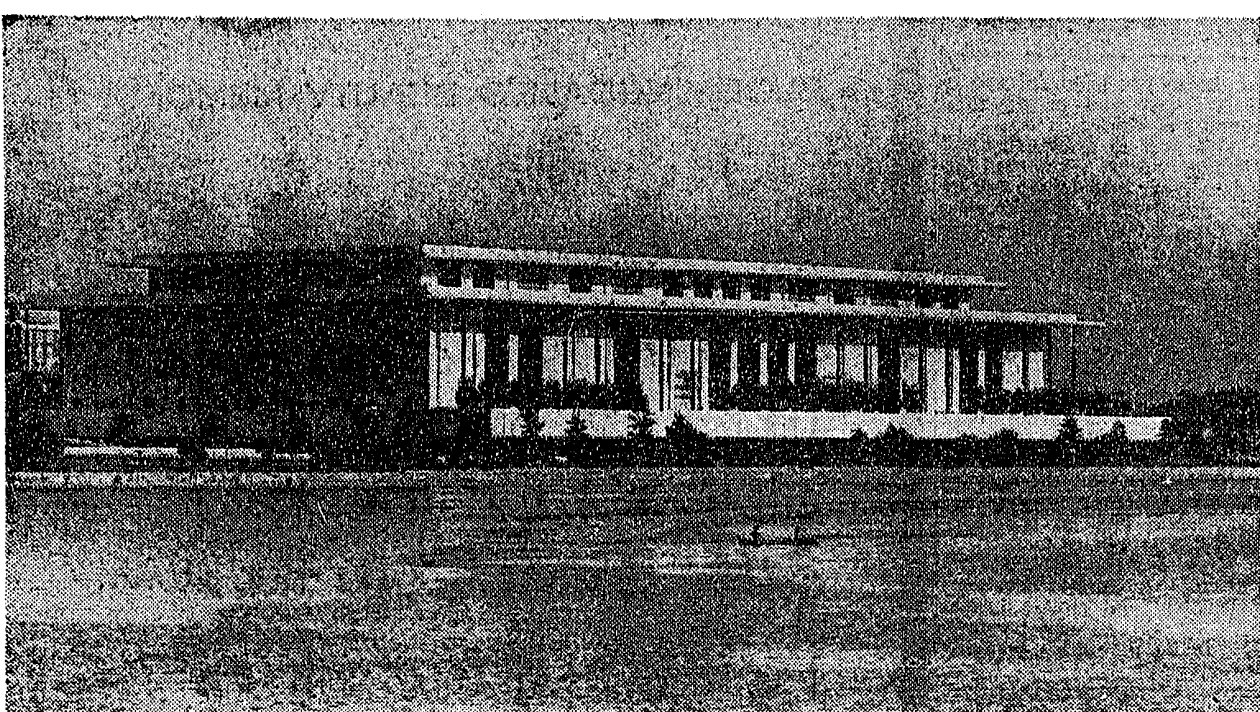
It has apotheosized the  
corridor in the 600-foot-long,

60-foot-high grand foyer (the  
length of three New York  
City blockfronts), one of the  
biggest rooms in the world,  
into which the Hall of Mirrors  
at Versailles could be cozily  
nested. It would be a super-  
tunnel without its saving Bel-  
gian gift of mirrors.

The corridor is "dressed  
up," in the words of the  
architect, Edward Durell  
Stone, by 18 of the world's  
biggest crystal chandeliers,  
with planters and furniture  
still to come. There is enough  
red carpet for a total environ-  
ment.

There are two other flag-  
hung, polished marble-

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The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, on the northern bank of the Potomac River in Washington

## Architecture: A Kennedy Center View

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walled, red-carpeted, 250-foot long and 60-foot high corridors called the Hall of States and the Hall of Nations. They are disquietingly reminiscent of the overscaled vacuity of Soviet palaces of culture. They would be great for drag racing.

The two halls separate the three theaters that are the structure's raison d'être: the Opera House, the Concert Hall and the Eisenhower Theater. The grand foyer is the entrance to them all.

The building itself is a superbunker, 100 feet high, 630 feet long and 300 feet wide, on the Potomac. One more like this and the city will sink.

Because it is a national landmark, there is only one way to judge the Kennedy center—against the established standard of progressive and innovative excellence in architectural design that this country is known and admired for internationally.

Unfortunately, the Kennedy center not only does not achieve this standard of innovative excellence; it also did not seek it. The architect opted for something ambiguously called "timelessness" and produced meaninglessness. It is to the Washington manner born. Too bad, since there is so much of it.

The center sets still another record—for architectural default. What it has in size, it lacks in distinction. Its character is aggrandized posh. It is an embarrassment to have it stand as a symbol of American artistic achievement before the nation and the world.

The interiors aim for conventional, comfortable, gaudy grand luxe. This is gemütlich Speer.

The Opera House, a 2,200-seat hall with superior sightlines and equipment, looks like one of those passé, red-padded drugstore candy valentines.

Its dark red fabric walls are buttoned down with rows of gold knobs and its Austrian crystal lights suggest nothing so much as department store Christmas displays. To this observer, it is singularly depressing.



Flags in the Hall of Nations in the \$70-million building

The 2,575-seat Concert Hall, its acoustic wood walls painted white, has red seats and carpet and is buttoned down with Norwegian crystal fixtures. This at least is cheerful and suggests 1920's modern.

Restaurants on the top terrace floor are in expense-account French by way of Aus-

tria, and nearly Scandinavia. They are red.

There are two ways of defending the center's design. One, already popular, is to say that it doesn't really matter and that the only things that count are those badly needed performance halls and how they work.

But nothing justifies wrap-

ping those halls nearly \$70-million of tasteful corn and 17,000 tons of steel—all a conscious design decision—and ignoring it. If you could ignore it, which is hard.

To say that everything else about a landmark structure of this stupefying size is irrelevant is nonsense. The emperor, unfortunately, is wearing clothes. And the world is looking.

The second defense is simply to accept the fact that the center probably represents the norm of American taste. But it is a fallacy to equate the great middle common denomination of popular taste with the country's actual and potential level of creative achievement.

From this point of view, however, it is almost an interesting building. If Mr. Stone has been aiming for an architecture that all America can love, he has found it. This is architectural populism. He has produced a conventional crowd pleaser. It is a genuine people's palace.

People have been pouring in, before the opening, through every available crack, in T-shirts and sneakers, hotpants and bermudas, barefoot and barebelly, backpacking babies, tracking across the red carpet and under the chandeliers. The pre-opening charge of elitism because of all that lush décor was rubbish. They are obviously loving it and perfectly at home.

Because it so lacks the true elegance of imagination, it does not put them off at all. They are awed by the scale and admiring of the decoration, which is a safe, familiar blend of theatrical glamor and showroom Castro Convertible.

Stringent economies have made saving simplicities, but the popular style is loud and clear.

For the more architecturally sophisticated, it is hard to admire a failure of vision and art. And it did not have to be. It is not easy to commission creative courage in Washington, but it can be done, as proven by the current plans for the National Gallery extension.

It is particularly hard to know that the one creative design for a new kind of experimental theater remains an unfinished shell within the building, lacking funds.

The center was probably wrong from the start. It was conceived as a giant economy three-in-one package. If it hasn't cost more than three separate buildings, it certainly hasn't cost less, and it has had formidable construction problems as a result of the "simple" concept.

The three houses have had to be separated and insulated from each other for vibration and sound inside and jets outside, and from other floors and functions.

Suspension and soundproofing have been achieved through incredibly complex and expensive concrete and steelwork that belies the apparent logic of the plan. Structurally, the achievement is considerable, and economically, it is almost a bargain.

The giant steel trusses hidden behind the scenes are far more impressive than the truly awful, gold-epoxy-paint-steel columns that run visibly through the building, which add decorative aluminum fins along the facades.

Environmentally, the center has been severely criticized for its setting and isolation from city life. But many Washingtonians like the idea of driving to a "safe" bastion of culture. Again, it's what people really want.

As completed, the center's plusses include its public amenities—its entrance plaza, riverfront promenade, eating facilities and outdoor terraces with views. And credit as well as sympathy must go to the dedicated and hard-working sponsors who have actually brought three major performance halls to Washington.

May all the performing arts flourish. Because the building is a national tragedy. It is a cross between a concrete candy box and a marble sarcophagus in which the art of architecture lies buried.