

How to Slipcover a Building, Washington Style

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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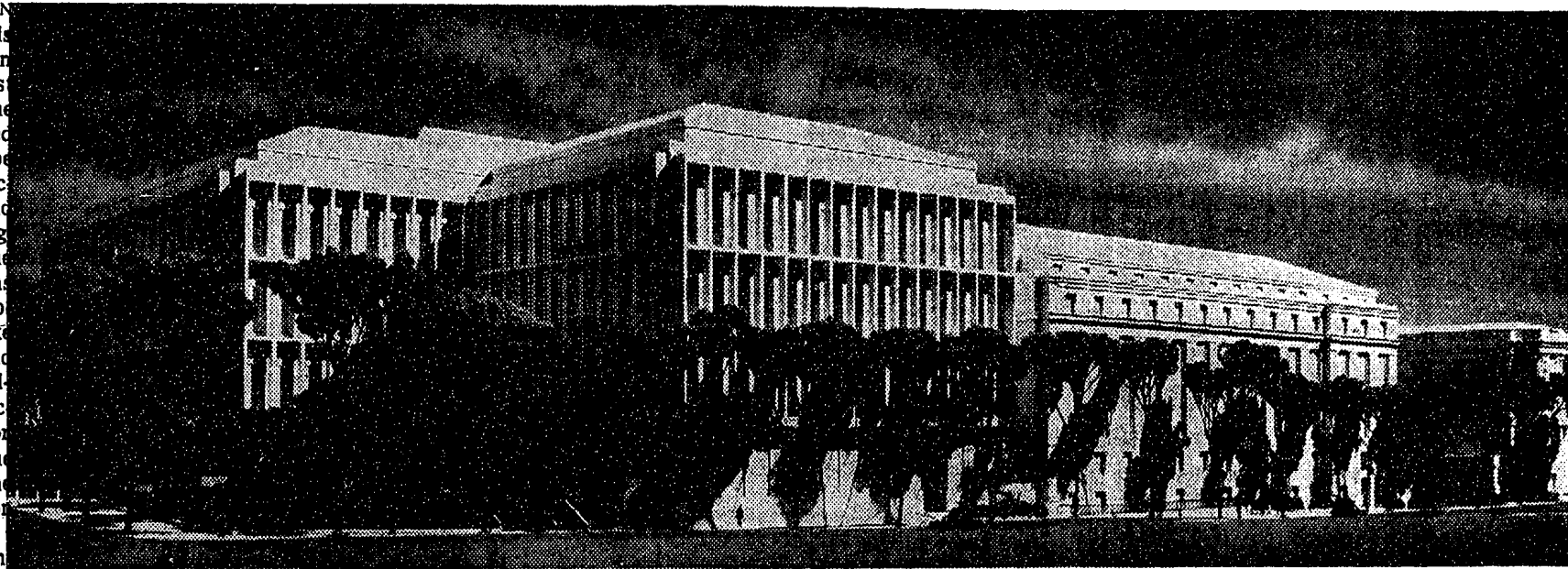
WASHINGTON
A NEW Senate Office Building is about to be constructed on Capitol Hill, and for the first time a major building for the Hill is not being planned behind closed doors. Even for Washington, it is to be a very expensive and important structure, loaded with symbolic values and office space. It will also be very big.
In a virtually unprecedented step, the Senate Public Works Committee has just held an open hearing on the proposed design by John Carl Warnecke and Associates, preceding approval and construction. Traditionally, the Architect of the Capitol, under whose auspices this and any other structures for Congress are designed and built, is the King of the Hill who answers to no one—review board or planning commission—except the Congress and God.

The Senators were probably as interested in protecting themselves from an architectural disaster of the magnitude of the Rayburn Building (the New House Office Building of 1968) as in soliciting design review and informing the rest of the Senate and the world of the project's details. The approved political end run in such touchy situations is to be sure that everyone else shares the knowledge and, if necessary, the blame.

Considering the fact that the Rayburn Building was, and is, an esthetic and most overpowering addition to the economic scandal of monster magnitude group, at an estimated cost of \$60 million, which is already being pushed not escaped observation that in the way of such edifices, the image of Mr. Sam has become fused with a solid gold turkey rather than with his sterling virtues.

The building under study now is the new, New Senate Office Building, be it advised monkeying with the Capitol cause the last New Senate Office Building was completed in 1958 and named the Dirksen Building in 1972, and the Russell Building was characterized as the most costly of its day, and each was also a solid gold turkey.

It followed the original Senate Office Building with ludicrous functional failure and laughable details. (If you can laugh at the Rayburn Building's \$120-million cost, which was an impressive classical with record overruns and the mutilating



"Capital design rules say: Make it white, make it marble and make it reminiscent of something vaguely Greco-Roman. Above, a model of the new Senate Office Building (left) the Dirksen Building (center) and the Russell Building (right)

extension of the Capitol's East Front.) Most of these earlier Congressional building misadventures took place during the tenure of the late non-architect Architect of the Capitol, George Stewart, who was notably consistent in producing bombs. There is now a new real-architect Architect of the Capitol, George M. White, approved by the American Institute of Architects, and it is under his aegis that Warnecke has developed the present design.
This is a turkey of a different feather. In fact, it is a distinctly better bird. It is so far beyond the recent buildings in quality of planning and design that one is tempted to leave it there.

But where it is weakest, in its facade treatment—which wraps around an extremely well thought-out office and circulation plan—is where most Washington architecture falls on its face, or its rear, hamstrung by a set of inexorable rules that the capital imposes on its official buildings. And there are 450 feet of this facade on both C Street

and Constitution Avenue, and even more on Second Street where it will seem to stretch to infinity.
In sum, what is required is an extremely large, but low building, to accord with a zoned, low skyline, in a non-style tortured to conform to something viewed as a "classical" tradition. This tradition has gone through assorted stages and standards of real and spurious historicism from commendable to meretricious, from the 19th to the 20th centuries, with degrees of distortion and dilution that make it increasingly clear that the battle for both contemporary expression and classical recall have been lost.

The problem might be called how to slipcover a building, according to the Washington cut. Sometimes the outside relates to the inside, and sometimes not. What is wanted is not a really classical cover, of course, because inflationary dollars can no longer pay for that kind of detail in any legitimate form. The accepted rationalized version is one in

which the architect says, look, boys, no hands (columns), but we are using proportions and forms that with a little double-talk and double-take create the illusionist trick of classical order. At the same time, we are being true-to-ourselves modern.

The answer is — no way. The result is an esthetic bastard, by any measure. But the fact is that in official Washington there is hardly a choice. Capital design rules say make it white, make it marble and make it reminiscent of something older and vaguely Greco-Roman. By comparison, it is an eagle. Accepting the crippling reality that genuine 20th-century creativity is out no matter how farfetched or tenuous the connection may become. Architects who do well in other places flunk out in Washington with predictable regularity.

These restrictions will never produce great architecture because great architecture might as well go ahead and build it. The texture, like all great art, rarely, if ever, comes out of this kind of compromise. The best architecture not only reveals structure and function with direct, creative clarity, it is also a powerful, un-

adulterated expression of its time. It cannot be less.
Washington architecture is all soporific accommodation, done with varying degrees of skill. On the other hand, what could be more suitable for the capital than compromise? There are symbols and symbols. Even if it is at the expense of art; this has the virtue of retaining the city's lulling, sunlit serenity, a character so worth keeping that we continue to build stupefying non-monuments to it.

The Warnecke design is more skillful than many. It makes the most of the handsome, tall windows of duplex Senatorial offices and adds a marble brise-soleil with measurements comparable to the modules of columns and column-to-wall interstices of the Capitol dome—a truly monumental rationalization. The addition looms higher and bulkier than its predecessors, a skyline encroachment that could cause real pain if, on a direct lateral axis, the far more offensive bulk of another gilded turkey, the Madison Memorial (Congressional Library, were not taking awful shape. In the end, these slipcovers don't wrap up much more symbolism than a monumental amount of work space, and this building is a little more honest in that respect than most. One look at the flaccid, overblown phoniness of the Rayburn Building's pompous facade with its intellectual and esthetic insult to the classical tradition, and it is easy to love the new Senate Office Buildings. By comparison, it is an eagle. Accepting the crippling reality that genuine 20th-century creativity is out no matter how farfetched or tenuous the connection may become. Architects who do well in other places flunk out in Washington with predictable regularity.

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