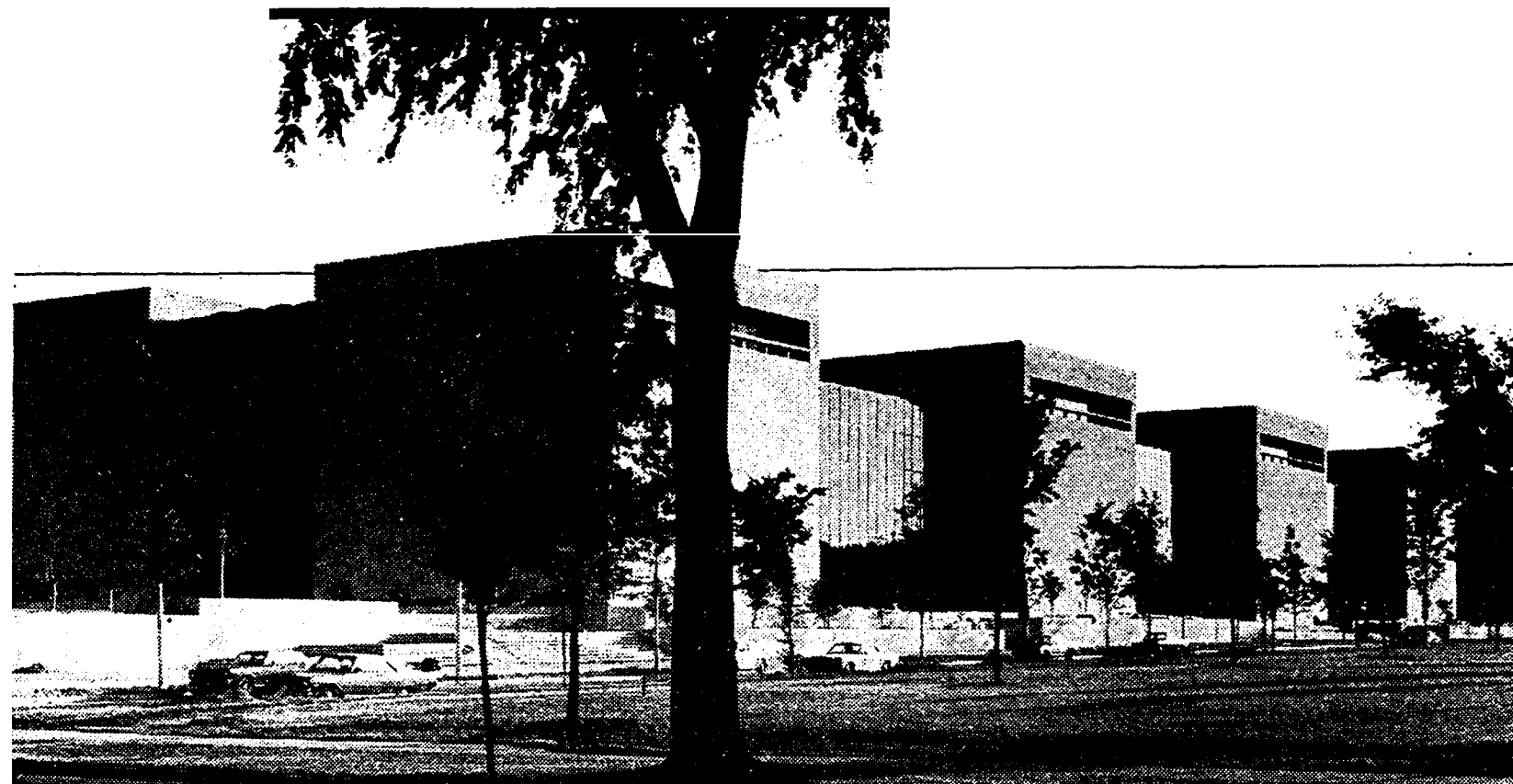


# ARCHITECTURAL VIEW: SUPERMUSEUM COMES TO THE MALL

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## ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Supermuseum Comes to the Mall

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Supermuseum! It's the Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, dedicated this week for the Bicentennial, and it stretches 685 glass and marble feet, or more than three city blocks, along the Mall. Air and Space is the latest of that crushing group of megaliths that house the Smithsonian's remarkable collections of American art, history, science and culture.

With the Air and Space Museum, Washington and the Smithsonian have finally moved into the 20th century architecturally—when it is almost over. It has been a slow, hard trip. The Museum of Science and Technology (1964) was badly aborted modernism; the Hirshhorn (1974) was born-dead, drop-dead modernism; Air and Space is sober, non-shock modernism; and the East Wing of the National Gallery (scheduled for 1977 completion) is probably going to make it all the way, no holds barred.

There is a certain treacle-like logic about the process and the result. The way to look at these buildings is through marble-colored glasses and over their total time span. They have a special kind of architectural dignity, like the dignity of statesmen in togas, that grand, false and funny conceit so dear to the hearts of 19th-century sculptors, and so much a part of Washington's Romantic Classical image. This quality characterizes the whole solemn parade down the Mall, from James Renwick's aberrant ruddy castle to I. M. Pei's angular geometry for the National Gallery addition. The Mall and the museums are beginning to have their own esthetic interest and history.

Through Washington's architectural looking glass, Air and Space is a building of less than startling effect but of considerable design merit. The most striking thing about it is the huge, Ledoux-like scale and impact of its repeated, glass-joined marble cubes. This is a rational and appropriate struc-

ture, stuffed with the treasures of the Air Age—those incredible 66 years from Kitty Hawk to the conquest of the moon—from the most banal to the most spectacular.

The problem was really to design a building that couldn't possibly hold the contents that it was meant to display. Many of the artifacts are simply too large, even for this vast a container. A complete Saturn V rocket is four times the building's height; the fuselage of a Boeing 747 is longer than the building is wide. They have had to be shown in part or through explanatory devices.

The architectural solution, by Gyo Obata of the St. Louis firm of Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, has been to make the building as big as possible, with a modular structural system strong enough to hang planes from, and flexible enough to accommodate the rockets that used to stand in surrealist phallic splendor in front of the red brick Smithsonian. (They've dug a hole in the floor called a missile pit for them here.)

The immense 685-foot-long and 225-foot-wide structure is divided into seven bays: four marble boxes connected by three glass bays that face the Mall. The structural system is a very simple one, consisting of steel framing and tubular trusses. The marble facade of the boxes is a curtain wall hung on the steel, and the exposed trusses span the large glass-enclosed bays and support the planes. Their web-like pattern of L-shaped bents suggests a giant hangar. The system works as both structure and symbolism.

The three glass bays measure 120 by 115 feet each, and rise 62 feet, or to almost the full height of the three-story building where they are topped by bubble-dome skylights. These are the main exhibit halls and the building's chief drama.

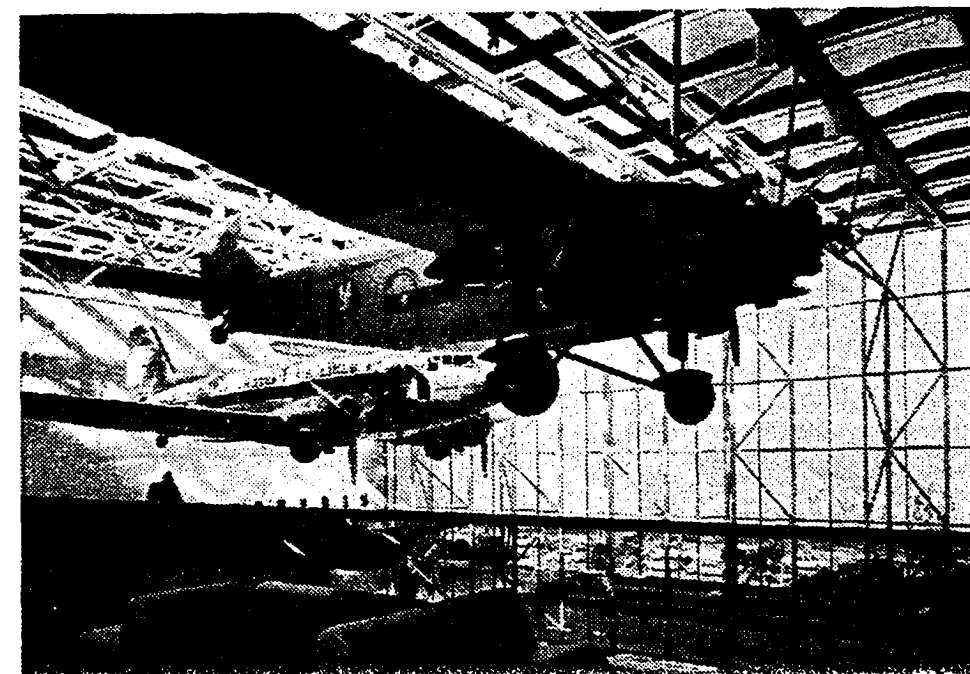
"Milestones of Flight" occupies the center, entrance bay,

which is directly on axis with the National Gallery across the Mall; John Russell Pope's cool classical temple is seen as an elegant vista through the truss-framed glass wall. (Both buildings share the same Tennessee "pink" marble by request of the Fine Arts Commission.) The East Bay is "Space Hall," with a walk-in Skylab, and the West Bay is devoted to "Air Transportation." Two immense murals flanking the entrance reduce the miracle of flight and moon exploration to super-Saturday-Evening-Post illustration.

The boxes between these glass bays are a Spacearium (called a planetarium in my day) and a 400-seat auditorium. The other boxes contain 200,000 square feet of exhibition space with over 20 theme exhibits covering everything from the fall of Icarus to the flight of satellites. All the galleries are connected by a central circulation spine. On the third floor, the boxes accommodate a library, cafeteria and administration offices.

The building cost \$41.4 million, and much is made of the fact, quite properly, that it came in at cost and on time. An earlier design of the 1960's, that was not built because of the Vietnam War, had to be radically revised to meet inflated costs and the objections of the Fine Arts Commission. The use of an outside construction manager (The Gilbane Building Co.) with authority to supervise and coordinate all bids and contracts, helped immensely; it got around the Federal rule that "low bid" gets the job, a system that has totally corrupted Federal building processes and sent Federal building costs sky high. The museum's director, astronaut Michael Collins, saw the building through with the same efficiency with which he piloted the first trip to the moon.

The exhibits defy description. They move and talk; they are horizontal, vertical and at 45 degree angles; there are stagesets, cycloramas, games and puppet shows. Balloons rise and fall, engines open and shut, Madame Tussaud-type air traffic controllers age before your eyes, filmed planes



Barbara Martin

The new Air and Space Museum houses treasures of the air age, from early planes to moonships.

zoom over a recreated flight deck; mysteries from life to motion are explained. Present, but not automated, are stunt pilot Roscoe Turner's pet lion—stuffed—and the cabin tableware from the movie "Hindenburg."

Every audio-visual and electromechanical device known to man has been used in settings of overreaching gimmickry or rich corn. A computerized monitoring control is needed to mind all the tapes. Many of the displays are perfectly appalling, though all of them are extremely well done technically, as they should be for an installation cost of between \$5 and \$6 million. With all that material and all that money, the Smithsonian's designers, a heavy-handed group, went bananas, and the result is a cross between Disneyworld and the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

I hasten to add that the exhibits will bring joy, instruction and wonder to—as the expression goes—children of all ages. The artifacts of the space program are awe-inspiring: the aircraft, from the fragile Wright Brothers planes to supersonic transport, are often breathtakingly beautiful.

Beyond its primary function, the Museum is having an impact of an unexpected kind. This building, and the National Gallery wing under construction almost opposite, are finally giving scale and meaning to the Mall and its elephantine company. There is, at last, a monumental coming together, as if it were all moving into focus.

With the virtual completion of the two flanking rows of buildings, there are now impressive and dramatic sightlines established between buildings and beyond to the Capitol. The Mall space no longer "leaks" desolately out. Unlike the design of the Hirshhorn, where the structure is enclosed and walled off and turns in on itself, the large glass expanses of the Air and Space Museum reveal these vistas spectacularly and capitalize on the range of related images. Long a wasteland, the Mall is developing relationships of a quite singular grandeur.

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