

A NARRATIVE HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

1963-1968

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The Commission of Fine Arts is the architectural review board of the Nation's Capital. Its primary duty is to protect the appearance of the city, to guard its unique character, to guide its growth. Consequently, the Commission's history is peculiarly visible. Its record is written in the monuments, public buildings, streets, and spaces that constitute the landscape of Washington, D.C.

During the years 1963-1968, hundreds of projects were considered by the Commission of Fine Arts. Some -- such as proposed designs for the Washington subway, for elements of the highway system, and for memorials, office buildings, and museums to be constructed at the city's monumental core -- were of crucial significance. Many others -- such as proposals for detailing the window of a particular Georgetown shop -- were of secondary importance.

The history outlined here will not attempt to itemize these projects. Lists are already available. The Commission's decisions are a matter of public record. This history will concentrate instead on the Commission's most significant decisions. It will stress the Commission's policies, the evolving aesthetic standards inherent in those policies, and the vision of the Capital that its assembled rulings illustrate.

The Commission has participated in:

1. A sharpening and re-defining of both the original L'Enfant Plan and the McMillan Plan of a century later.
2. Fitting a half dozen large new structures into central Washington in a manner which demonstrates how the best contemporary architecture can dwell in harmony with classical.
3. Shaping plans for a half dozen more buildings, now in the pipe line, which will bring new excitement to the Capital in the next few years.
4. Prevented a number of mistakes both major and minor which, in the Commission's view, would have disrupted the city's unity and repose.

A number of projects of special interest have been selected for detailed examination. This history will discuss not only concrete proposals, but the issues confronted by the Commission and the policies it followed in formulating its rulings. It is hoped that these discussions will form a mosaic illustrating the history of the Commission of Fine Arts, 1963-1968.

Major Charles L'Enfant conceived his grand design for the Nation's

Capital in 1791, but the ordered park at the city's monumental core is a product of this century. The Mall, with its monuments and vistas, its level lawns and even ranks of trees, is a child of the Park Commission of 1901.

So is the Commission of Fine Arts.

The Chicago World's Fair of 1893, with its neo-Classical temples and imposing vistas, its formal landscaping and placid ponds, was greeted by its enthusiastic visitors as an unparalleled manifestation of monumental grandeur. In the 1890s, no such Classical order characterized the Mall. The park that wandered westward from the Capitol was little more than a casual garden, patterned with curving paths, dotted with shrubs, and sliced by railroad tracks. Shamed by the example of Chicago, Congress declared itself dissatisfied with the Mall's appearance. Senator James McMillan of Michigan headed the Commission that was assigned the task of remedying the situation.

The Commission's members -- master architects Daniel H. Burnham and Charles F. McKim, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, and sculptor Augustus Saint Gaudens -- were neo-Classicists all. The report they submitted to Congress reflected their stylistic preferences as well as their admiration for the original L'Enfant plan. Its specific recommendations included the relocation of the railroad tracks, the construction of Union Station, and the erection of a new Memorial to Abraham Lincoln. In general, it recommended classicizing the architecture and landscaping of the Mall.

The Commission of Fine Arts was established by Congress in 1910. Its initial duties included supervising the realization of these recommendations. The preservation of the Mall and the revitalization of the Classical spirit that controls it remain central duties of the Commission of Fine Arts today.

The plan of the city's monumental precinct is organized by two great axes that intersect at the Washington Monument. One, the east-west axis, runs from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. The other, running north and south, connects the White House and the Jefferson Memorial. In 1964 the Commission was asked to approve the construction of a new monument whose presence would have permanently altered the axial composition of the city's sacred core.

In June of that year, after much agonized discussion and despite strong misgivings, the Commission reversed an earlier decision and by a four-to-three vote of its seven members approved a modified design for a new Memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt to be erected between the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials on the shore of the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. The proposed monument had been designed by architects Pedersen and Tilney and sculptor Norman Hoberman. The design considered by the Commission had been selected in accordance with Congressional

directive, through a national architectural competition.

Although the winning design had been disapproved in February, 1962, Congress had subsequently requested that the Commission reconsider its decision. By joint resolution, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Commission was "authorized and directed" to resubmit the architects' proposal to determine whether it could be "so changed or modified to secure the approval of the Commission of Fine Arts." In approving a modified design (the Memorial's components had been reduced in height and slightly rearranged) the Commission had ruled not only on the merits of a particular piece of architecture, but on a number of larger and knottier questions.

Should any structure of contemporary design be constructed among the neo-Classical memorials at the city's monumental core? Did the proposed scheme -- an open sculpture of tapered, vertical slabs -- adequately memorialize President Roosevelt? Did it complement -- or desecrate -- the axial and harmonious composition established by the placement of the existing monuments? Their forms -- the obelisk of the Washington Monument, the spherical dome of the Jefferson Memorial, and the Lincoln Memorial's rectangular block -- share, despite differences, a geometry of extreme simplicity. Could a decidedly non-Euclidian arrangement of slabs be properly added to this complex? In judging the design submitted, the Commission also confronted a question of protocol. Should its opinions overrule those of a distinguished jury, which, after conducting a Congressionally sanctioned competition open to the entire architectural profession, had enthusiastically approved the proposed design?

All of these questions eventually became moot. Congress, ignoring the Commission's approval, rejected the controversial design. An alternative (but not altogether dissimilar) proposal was submitted three years later by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Commission. The new scheme, designed by Marcel Breuer, was characterized by a pin-wheel arrangement of triangular stone slabs. It failed to secure Commission approval. This time the vote was unanimous.

These schemes for a Memorial to President Roosevelt were but two of the more than 800 projects considered by the Commission during the years 1964-1968. Numerous contain proposals that would have altered -- and will alter -- the traditional appearance of the Mall.

The most significant of these may well prove to be a twenty-year master plan designed to guide the redevelopment of the Mall. Sponsored by the Department of the Interior, the plan was produced by the San Francisco office of the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill.

The Commission recognizes the desirability of redeveloping the Mall and acknowledges the need for such a master plan. Nevertheless, it seriously questions numerous elements of the Interior Department's proposal.

The plan recommends thickening the ranks of trees that flank the central greensward of the Mall. Responding to the example of the parks of Paris, to major expected increases in tourism, and to other considerations, the plan proposes adding children's rides, hot-dog stands, and other amenities to the monumental precinct. These things would be placed beneath (and be screened by) dense stands of trees lining both sides of the Mall's linear lawn. The addition of these trees would require a diminution of the width of the central greensward. Though the Commission supports the Interior Department's desire to hide visually disruptive amenities, it doubts their value and the need to conceal them would justify radically altering the proportions of the space between the trees.

The master plan calls for the construction of an underground visitors' center at the foot of the eastern slope of the hill that supports the Washington Monument. The Commission, noting that recent legislation would provide just such a facility at Union Station, feels a second is not required and believes every effort should be made to preserve the rise and fall of the Mall landscape and the sanctity of its central hill.

The Interior Department's plan proposes closing the Mall to private automobile traffic. It suggests the creation of a "minibus" system for the transportation of tourists and the closing of those portions of 4th, 15th and 17th Streets that cut across the Mall. Although the Commission recognizes the difficulties in providing parking for out-of-town visitors and the consequent arguments favoring the creation of a "minibus" system, it feels the Mall should remain open to normal cross-traffic. The automobile-borne residents of the city are now offered regular views of the Mall and its monuments by the streets that cross the greensward. They should not be denied them.

Street patterns and landscaping only partially determine the appearance of the Mall. Equally important are the parallel rows of monuments and museums that flank and define it. The Commission has considered a number of projects of crucial significance that will be built in the near future along the borders of the Mall.

One of these projects is not a building but a garden. It will be located on the landscaped square formed by Constitution Avenue, Madison Drive, and 7th and 9th Streets, and it will serve as an outdoor sculpture garden for the National Gallery of Art.

Its siting is significant. Not only is it framed by monuments and museums (the National Gallery to the east, the National archives to the north, the Smithsonian Institution's museum of Natural History to the west, and the proposed sculpture garden of the not-yet-constructed Hirshhorn complex to the south), it will be a central element of the major secondary cross-axis of the Mall.

The Mall's primary cross-axis connects the White House, the Washington Monument, and the Jefferson Memorial. The L'Enfant plan of 1791 recognizes another cross-axis seven blocks to the east.

At present this axis is only implied. A number of major projects approved by the Commission of Fine Arts will eventually combine to provide it with far greater definition. When completed they will connect the cylindrical Hirshhorn Museum, its linear, sunken garden, the Sculpture Garden of the National Gallery of Art, and the National Archives.

The Pennsylvania Avenue Plan of 1964 proposes extending it yet further to the north. This plan recommends the development of an imposing Market Square just north of the National Archives and the creation of a new Eighth Street Mall that would link the square with the twin museums of the Old Patent Office Building. The Eighth Street Mall has been suggested as a suitable location for a new Woodrow Wilson Center for international study, a suggestion approved by the Commission of Fine Arts.

The Commission approved the first new major element of this axis, the Sculpture Garden of the National Gallery of Art, in 1967.

The Sculpture Garden, as approved, will be fringed by trees and focused on a large circular pool. The design of its landscaping is crucial. The National Gallery of Art has in its possession at present only a small percentage of the pieces of sculpture that will eventually be located in the garden. Others will be acquired in the future. The Commission believed its design should be visually strong enough to both contain the major greensward of the Mall and simultaneously define the above-mentioned cross-axis that it helps establish. At the same time it was necessary to provide its design with sufficient flexibility so that the garden will be able to gradually accept all of the works of art that will eventually be installed within it.

The sculpture garden approved by the Commission of Fine Arts fulfills these requirements. The definition of the Major axis of the Mall has been achieved by the trees that line the southern side of the garden's square. These trees reinforce the space-containing wall established by the southern facades of the Museum of History and Technology, the Museum of Natural History, and the National Gallery. A significant gap in this line of trees simultaneously expresses the secondary cross-axis and frames a view of the National Archives to the north. The circular pool at the center of the garden echoes the form of the Hirshhorn Museum across the Mall. In addition, since it will be suitable for model boating in the summer and for ice skating in the winter, it will serve as an amenity that is not dependent on the presence of the sculpture collection that will eventually surround it. It is hoped that the pool's materials will complement those of the pool of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden which will cut across the Mall immediately to the south.

Unlike other collectors of great wealth -- Mellon and Frick, Freer and Dale -- whose gifts to the Nation line the Mall, Joseph C. Hirshhorn has assembled a collection devoted not to the old masters but to the artists of his time. Like the collection, the proposed exhibition complex that will eventually contain it, is recognizably 20th century in mood.

Designed by Commission Member Gordon Bunshaft of the New York office of the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, it secured preliminary Commission approval in July, 1967.

Its modernity astonished many. The Hirshhorn complex seemed, at first glance, wholly unlike the neo-Classical monuments of the Mall. They were, with the sole exception of the Jefferson Memorial, rectangular solids, heavy and earthbound. The cylindrical Hirshhorn Museum, in contrast, seemed to float. The elegant facades of the older buildings were carefully detailed and decorated. The rounded exterior walls of the new Museum were plain and smooth. The neo-Classical buildings guarded but did not penetrate the lawn that stretched before them. The Hirshhorn Museum presided over a sunken garden that cut decisively through the previously inviolate greensward of the Mall.

While acknowledging these contrasts, the Commission, in granting its approval, insisted the new Museum reinforced the spirit of Classical harmony that ordered the other Monuments of the Mall. The Commission found its cylindrical geometry Euclidian, timeless, and restrained. Though its rounded stonework walls were plain, the coffered underside of the "floating" museum presented an intricate geometric play of light and shadow that recalled but did not mimic the traditional architectural decoration of the Mall. Furthermore its roundness, its apparent lightness, and the sunken garden that stretched before it, all worked together to solve a formal architectural problem of great complexity.

In terms of the axial planning of the area, the Hirshhorn Museum, unlike the other buildings of the Mall, plays a dual role. It strengthens the major east-west axis while simultaneously anchoring and establishing a secondary perpendicular axis that stretches from it to the north. By virtue of its cylindrical form it functions as a pivot. Its peculiar shape furthermore permits it, as would no other, to gracefully link and coexist with the disparate volumes that flank it -- the huge block of the New Air and Space Museum immediately to the east and the smaller, fussier and darker Arts and Industries Building of the Smithsonian Institution that stands just to the west. Space flows around the curving walls of the Hirshhorn Museum, and though it works with both of its potentially quarrelling neighbors, it is sufficiently strong and independent to succumb to neither.

The wide trench of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden has no precedent in the monumental precinct. The Garden's reflecting pool (which is 80 feet wide and almost 500 feet long) and the 45-foot wide pebbled walkways that surround it are located seven feet below the grassy surface of the Mall. Had the round Museum been tied too closely to this lower grade, it would have disassociated itself from the trees, the lawns, and the older buildings that surround it. It "floats" for a reason. The paved plaza beneath it recognizes and reestablishes the surface of the Mall. Were its walls to touch and visually penetrate that plaza, the Museum would have appeared to be a giant column shoved into the earth and resting not on the pre-

established surface of the Mall but rather on the lower grade of the Garden. The space between the plaza and its coffered overhang also serves to reveal the circular light well that pierces the Museum's stone cylinder. Though the Museum's geometry seems wholly formal, the circle that defines the light well and that that defines the building's stone work walls are not concentric. This eccentricity, though it does not contradict the formal appearance of the building, permits it to contain a wide variety of exhibition spaces. The glass walls of the light well admit daylight into these exhibition spaces without forcing the cylindrical building to abandon the fortress-like blankness that characterizes the other art museums of the Mall.

The Commission believes the design of the Hirshhorn Museum sensitively and successfully solves the architectural problems generated by its crucially significant location. In granting its preliminary approval, however, it called for further study of the details of the Sculpture Garden that cuts across the Mall.

No single element of the monumental area is more important than that tree-fringed lawn that connects the Capitol and the hill of the Washington Monument. Despite the streets that interrupt it, it appears from either vantage point to have the open sweep of a golf course fairway. The Commission believes this visual continuity must be preserved. In approving the construction of the sunken Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden, the Commission insisted that it be invisible, that its presence not destroy the unbroken sweep of the central panel of the Mall.

The Garden, its pool, its statues, and its visitors will be located sufficiently below the greensward's grade so that sight lines pass above it, uninterrupted. As originally designed, however, its sheer walls extended a few feet above grade level so that visitors would not tumble unawares into its seven foot trench. The Commission asked the architect to redesign this detail to increase the Garden's "invisibility." It suggested that the surface of the Mall be sloped towards the trench from both the east and west so that the top of the low protective walls did not penetrate the plane generally established by the surface of the grass. It believes this adjustment will eliminate the trench-like effect of the original design.

The Commission believes that this new complex will add immeasurably to the grandeur of the Mall. It believes further that this construction, and the creation of the major cross-axis that it establishes, constitutes the most significant addition to the Capitol's monumental precinct since the completion of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922.

The Hirshhorn complex is not the only major addition to the Mall approved by the Commission during the years covered by this history.

In 1965, despite unavoidable misgivings, it approved the erection of the largest building ever constructed in the Capital's monumental precinct.

The older buildings that line the Mall are modest in size. Distant relatives of the Classical monuments of ancient Greece and Rome, their scale is human. In comparison, the new National Air and Space Museum is gigantic. Its scale is not that of man but of his largest machines.

The Air and Space Museum was designed to hold the airplanes of the past as well as the space ships of the future. It occupies not one square block but three. It will be built immediately to the east of the Hirshhorn Museum on a site bounded by 4th Street, 7th Street, Independence Avenue, and Jefferson Drive.

In considering this design, the Commission focused its efforts on the visual diminution of the museum's enormous size. In comparison to the fortress-like solidity of the other museums of the Mall, the new Air and Space Museum will appear open. Its stone piers will be separated by large expanses of glass. In considering its design, the Commission attempted to increase the contrast between the solid piers and the transparent panels that stand between them, so that the building is read as a series of elements rather than as one enormous block. The Commission suggested that the windows of the cornice be continued frieze-like around the entire building, thereby transforming the cornice into a continuous band that unifies the disparate materials below. The Commission furthermore recommended that the depth of the cornice windows be increased. It was hoped that this would help lighten and dematerialize this three-block band. The Commission feels the play of light and shadow produced by the deepened windows will complement and recall the human-scaled decoration of the older neo-Classical buildings on the Mall.

The Commission believes the new Air and Space Museum, which was designed by Hellmuth, Obata, and Kassabaum in association with Mills, Petticord, and Mills, is a bold and contemporary building of Classical spirit. The Commission believes that the architects have done all that is possible to diminish the impact of the museum's size.

The original designers of the Mall, L'Enfant and the distinguished members of the turn of the century Park Commission, were of course unable to anticipate the future construction of projects of such enormous scale. A central duty of the current Commission of Fine Arts is to lubricate the confrontation between the older, established scale of the Mall and the numerous mid-century projects that impinge upon it. Nowhere are the Commission's efforts in this regard more important than in its handling of contemporary superhighway design.

The street system originally designed by L'Enfant (a formal Cartesian grid upon which a secondary system of wide radial avenues has been superimposed) has proved in recent years unable to handle the ever increasing automobile traffic of Washington. Congress has consequently authorized the construction of a new system of super highways within the boundaries of the Capital. These roads are scaled to automobiles moving at 50 miles-per-hour. The Commission has been forced to give lengthy consideration to the design of these highways and their penetration of the city's monumental core. It has attempted to accommodate such roads in such a way that their introduction only minimally disrupts the planting, the scale, and the harmonious neo-Classical order of the Mall.

One such highway known as the Center Leg of the Inner Loop, will connect the Northwest and Southwest quadrants of the city. Its path forces it to cross the Mall at the western foot of Capitol Hill. This point is crucially significant to the entire monumental area of the city. Eight lanes of concrete at this point would have forever severed the Capitol from the monuments to the west. To prevent such disruption and to preserve the established composition of the sacred precinct, the Commission of Fine Arts insisted that this portion of the Center Leg be tunneled beneath the surface of the Mall.

The proposed burying of the highway introduced as many problems as it solved. The road's construction would inevitably destroy an imposing stand of elms that for generations had shaded the western slopes of Capitol Hill. Furthermore the construction of the tunnel required the placement, at both portals, of enormous complexes of machinery needed to expell the automobiles' exhaust fumes and to provide the tunnel with constantly circulating air. The Commission understandably argued that a pair of 80-foot exhaust towers constituted a less than desirable addition to the ordered marble-and-greenery landscape of the Mall.

The Commission's lengthy considerations of this project involved not only questions of traditional esthetics, but problems of complex modern engineering. It set out to find a solution that would accommodate the proposed highway while at the same time preserving the landscaped character of the Mall.

The Commission first searched for a suitable replacement for the ancient elms that the tunneled highway was certain to destroy. A District of Columbia Highway Department proposal suggesting the introduction of new trees was rejected by the Commission. The Commission noted that it would take two generations, perhaps three, before new trees achieved the mature grandeur of their predecessors, and it argued that this time gap was intolerably long. It approved the re-

placement of the old trees not with new planting, but with water.

The buried highway will eventually be covered with a formal, six-acre reflecting pool that will mirror the Capitol above and complement the pool that reflects the Lincoln Memorial at the end of the major axis of the Mall. (An Interior Department proposal to artificially refrigerate the new pool so that it could serve as a winter iceskating rink was rejected by the Commission on the grounds that the Capitol should not overlook a playground. The Commission assured the public it is not opposed in principle to iceskating. It felt only that such a facility should be located somewhere else.)

Construction of the pool would only partially solve the visual problems generated by the construction of the Center Leg tunnel. An acceptable means of handling the twin exhaust towers remained to be discovered.

Monumentalized designs for the exhaust towers proposed by the city Highway Department were rejected by the Commission. At last the Commission decided that the only suitable solution was to conceal not only the new road, but also the paired towers that it required. The necessary machinery would be buried not underground, but within the bulk of two new buildings that would be constructed at the northern and southern fringes of the Mall.

The site of the southern tower had been previously set aside as the future home of the Reserve Officers Association. The Association had hoped to erect a small building at One Independence Avenue. Told that its new Washington headquarters would have to incorporate an equipment tower larger than the small building that surrounded it, the Association submitted a number of proposals attempting to show how this could be accomplished. One proposal transformed the exhaust tower into a monument memorializing the Minute Man. This, and numerous other Association suggestions, were rejected by the Commission of Fine Arts.

At the Commission's urging an alternate site, to the east of the Capitol, was offered to the Association and accepted. A new Federal Office Building, whose tenant has not yet been designated, was subsequently designed for the site once owned by the Association. A preliminary scheme for this new building was submitted to the Commission in 1968. The building, which will include the necessary exhaust towers, will be located on a site bounded by 2nd Street, 3rd Street, C Street and Independence Avenue S.W. It was designed by Marcel Breuer and Herbert Beckhard. The Commission believes it will prove to be a distinguished addition to the Mall.

A comparable building, this one housing the Department of Labor,

was designed for an air-rights site above the depressed highway just beyond the northern boundary of the Mall. This building will contain and conceal the other complex of exhaust equipment. It also received the approval of the Commission of Fine Arts.

When first introduced, the proposal to tunnel the Center Leg of the Inner Loop seemed to set insoluble problems. However, the Commission, through much discussion and careful consideration, was able to generate a complex solution that improved, rather than damaged, this important portion of the Mall. The Commission believes that the new pool enhances the beauty of this precinct. It feels the two new tower-containing office buildings will help contain the space that previously leaked out of the western portion of the Mall.

The Commission is considerably less optimistic in regard to another tunnelled highway that has been proposed for construction beneath that portion of the Mall that connects the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument.

This freeway, known as the West Leg of the Inner Loop, has been assigned a route that would run under the Lincoln Memorial's reflecting pool, continuing under the Tidal Basin to emerge in the vicinity of 14th Street where it would connect with the already completed Southwest Freeway. Its construction threatens to leave two enormous gaps in the parallel ranks of trees that flank the reflecting pool. Here these trees could not be replaced with water. The Commission believes this planting must be preserved and that a preferable route, perhaps to the west of the Lincoln Memorial, should be selected. It has advised the District's Highway Department and the Department of Interior accordingly. Since few sites suitable for the construction of exhaust towers or of office buildings that might contain them can be found in the vicinity of the Lincoln Memorial, the reflecting pool, the Tidal Basin, or West Potomac Park, it seems this project will require considerable further study before it receives Commission approval.

The Commission of Fine Arts is the official guardian of the Mall. In offering suggestions, in granting or withholding its approval, the Commission acted in accordance with esthetic criteria so clearly defined as to be almost self-evident. In each of the projects discussed above, the Commission responded not to the personal preferences of its seven members, but rather to the architectural standards established by the rigid geometrical order and historically sanctioned neo-Classical character of the monumental precinct. The Mall sets its own rules. Only projects that comply with those rules, that wholeheartedly accept the character of the environment to which they may be added, receive the approval of the Commission of Fine Arts.

The Mall makes its demands in a strong clear voice. Other areas of the city -- where the prevailing architectural character is either undistinguished or indistinguishable -- speak only in a whisper. In judging projects proposed for these areas, the Commission acts in accordance with standards that are not rigid but varying and occasionally difficult to define.

Consider, for instance, the initial design for a new Federal Tax Court to be built on Second Street between D and E Streets, N.W. The site is undistinguished. It makes no harsh demands. It faces the wide trench that carries the Center Leg of the Inner Loop and is well beyond the neo-Classical force field established by the Mall.

The General Services Administration commissioned Victor Lundy, a young architect of significant reputation, to design the new Tax Court. Lundy examined the area, discovered its blandness, and subsequently designed a highly personal building of sculptured concrete. The design he submitted for consideration was imaginative and highly unusual. It was unanimously rejected by the Commission of Fine Arts.

The members here based their decision not on massing, siting, or on other practical considerations, but on esthetics. They objected to Lundy's scheme because, in their opinion, it did not look like a Federal building. It clashed not with the character of its site but with that of the Government it was designed to serve. Lundy had submitted a romantic, individualistic structure that bore no resemblance to any other Government building in the Capital. True, many of its neighbors were esthetically defective, but their designs shared a character, an attitude, an historically sanctioned tone. In rejecting the architect's initial submission, the Commission noted its preference for an architecture more Classical, ordered and restrained. Though these adjectives apply to most of the city's carved-and-columned monuments, the Commission was not requesting an anachronism. Nor was it proposing a formula to be followed by the architect in developing his design. But the Commission was insisting that Lundy make some attempt to acknowledge and complement the thread of tradition that connects the other Federal buildings of the Capital.

There are critics who regard this sort of insistence as proof that the Commission of Fine Arts is committed to a Federal architecture that is unredeemably reactionary and dull. The revised design that Lundy eventually submitted argues convincingly to the contrary. Strong and symmetrical, it manages to combine Classical order and extreme simplicity while exhibiting a "look" and a structural ingenuity that is distinctly mid-20th-century. The building, which presents a facade of dark Royal Pearl granite and bronzed glass,

will be entered by a broad stair which recalls the august and ceremonial entrances of the Archives, the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, and other older Washington monuments. The stair of the Tax Court Building will be overhung by a "floating" cantilevered mass -- a huge rectangular block supported by a network of concealed steel cables arranged in accordance with a structural system of great complexity. The architect said he believed this design far superior to the one he had initially submitted. The Commission of Fine Arts, in granting its approval, agreed.

In its actions in regard to the Tax Court Building, the Commission revealed an attitude -- one is tempted to say an esthetic -- that has governed many of its decisions. The architecture of Lundy's cable-supported building is unusual and distinctly contemporary. The character of the city in which it will be constructed is distinctly traditional. Architectural traditions, sanctioned by history, control the appearance of official Washington. The imposing blockiness of Federal buildings, the predetermined skyline to which their cornices adhere, their stylized exterior decorations, the precise mathematical order of the grid of the streets and the network of radial avenues that surround them, all combine to generate a mood of relatively unbroken harmony. The visitor who wanders through the Capital senses old order everywhere. Each new building added to the city threatens to disrupt and contradict this pre-established harmony. If the Commission of Fine Arts, in influencing the design of new construction projects, follows an esthetic, it is this: Preserve the order of the old and the beauty that it generates, but avoid the numbing ugliness of vapid imitation. Acknowledge the validity and vitality of the unprecedented and the new, but avoid the chaos of purely personal unrestrained expression. Diminish wherever necessary the clashes between the architecture of the present and the traditions of the past.

The Tax Court Building, despite its steel cables, its bronzed glass, and its look of startling modernity, complements rather than contradicts the established order of the Federal city. Equally complementary and equally modern is a design approved by the Commission for a new Central Public Library to be constructed by the Government of the District of Columbia on a downtown block bounded by Ninth Street, Tenth Street, G Street and G Place, N.W.

Across the intersection of Ninth and G Streets from the site of the new library stands one of the oldest and grandest monuments of the Capital. The Old Patent Office Building (which today houses two new Smithsonian Institution museums, the National Collection of Fine Arts and the National Portrait Gallery) is a Greek Revival structure of grey stone whose fluted columns and frieze-less pediments are said to be limestone copies of the Parthenon. President

Lincoln danced here on the evening of his second Inaugural Address. The Building is encrusted with tradition. Nevertheless the Commission of Fine Arts enthusiastically approved the construction directly across the street of a new building of steel and glass.

The new Central Public Library was designed by Mies van der Rohe of Chicago, perhaps the most influential architect of the century. His library, a transparent box of exposed steel I-beams and tinted glass, might seem at first glance to contrast starkly with the opaque Grecian monument across the street. Yet the Commission, in approving its construction, recognized that these two buildings will eventually be considered spiritual twins. Both comply in every detail with the dictates of a pre-established esthetic system, and both express an influential architectural style with undeviating and uncompromised purity.

In approving Mies's design (and in informally urging the Government of the District of Columbia to secure his services) the Commission was responding to tradition in another way. It was anticipating the city's future understanding of the past. Many of the nation's greatest architects died without building anything in Washington. The Capital contains no structure designed by Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Sullivan. The city of Washington, which is dedicated to the preservation and recognition of the glories of the American past, is poorer for their absence. Had Mies died without building here, it would have been poorer yet.

Though Mies's library is immediately recognizable as "Miesian", though it is, in many ways, as personal as a signature, the tone it projects is one not of self indulgence but of discipline. The Old Patent Office Building is a textbook example of the architectural rules established by the Greeks. Similarly, every detail of the proposed new library is subservient to the strict abstract order that controls the master's architecture. Both of these buildings, by virtue of their purity and restraint, perfectly complement the neo-Classical geometry of the city that surrounds them.

The special beauty of Washington is produced in large part by the superimposed systems of order that control the various elements of the city. The number-and-letter street grid, as formal as a checker board, represents one such system. The network of broad avenues, each of which responds to the topography of the landscape, represents a second system that has been superimposed upon that of the streets' rectangular grid. The low enforced skyline of the city, to which almost all of its major buildings rigidly adhere, represents yet another prevailing order. Additional systems control other components of the city. Some of these systems are old, some new.

A number of major construction projects considered by the Commission

of Fine Arts have attempted to establish new systems of order, new architectural rules strong enough to unify large areas of the city. Unfortunately, not all of these attempts have been entirely successful. Take, for example, the proposed redevelopment of the northern side of Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

As originally designed, Pennsylvania Avenue was to be the city's most significant thoroughfare. The Avenue is the symbolic link that connects Capitol Hill, the seat of the Legislative Branch, and the White House, the seat of the Executive. Regretably, the uncontrolled growth of the city has deprived the Avenue of much of its symbolic power. Though the buildings that line it nicely frame the Capitol, the Avenue at the other end arrives not at the White House but at nowhere in particular. It sort of peters out. The neo-Classical bulk of the Treasury, immediately to the east of the Presidential residence, interrupts the Avenue's axis and screens the White House from public view. Relocating the Treasury, or chopping it in half, as some wags have suggested, would provide no solution. The White House, despite its beauty and gracious landscaping, is far too small to receive the thrust of that monumental avenue.

The weakness of its northwestern end is but one of the Avenue's defects. Its northern side, as President Kennedy noted on the day of his Inaugural Parade, is a mess. A sloppy line of hotels, restaurants, parking garages, liquor stores, and offices stretches from the slope of Capitol Hill to the Treasury at 14th Street. The buildings of the Federal Triangle that define the other side of the Avenue exhibit some dignity, but they look across the street at chaos.

In 1964, the President's Council on Pennsylvania Avenue, a distinguished body of planners and administrators headed by architect Nathaniel A. Owings, released an ambitious plan for rescuing the Avenue. The plan called for framing the Avenue with dense rows of trees, the ordered reconstruction of its northern side, and, perhaps most importantly, the creation of a vast new National Square that would provide the thoroughfare with a northern destination strong enough to balance the Capitol at the south. In accepting the Council's preliminary proposals, the Commission of Fine Arts expressed some misgivings in regard to specific elements of the plan.

The proposed design for National Square failed to satisfy the Commission. The Commission noted that the problems presented by the Avenue's traffic flow, which threatens to cut diagonally across the rectangular expanse of National Square, have not yet been acceptably resolved. Nor, in the opinion of the Commission, have the difficulties

presented by the proposed White House Gate that would define the western edge of the new plaza. The Commission believes that the proposed gateway and the landscaping to be installed about it are elements of insufficient strength to spatially contain the Square. The thought of sweltering summer days and acres of shadeless paving urged the Commission to strongly recommend the diminution of the plaza's size. This recommendation was eventually accepted. Current plans call for a square approximately half as large as that originally proposed.

National Square was conceived as a unifying element. It was hoped that its introduction would provide the northwestern end of the Avenue with some semblance of architectural order. The Commission, though it would very much like to see an ordered Avenue, is worried that National Square, as currently proposed, would raise architectural problems quite as knotty as those it was designed to solve.

The Federal Government has the power to construct National Square when it so desires. It will not, however, be able to improve the entire avenue. Much of the real estate on the northern side of the Avenue is privately owned, and it seems certain that many of the hotels, restaurants, stores and garages, that stand there now will eventually be replaced by new private construction. In order to prevent further chaos from characterizing this new construction, the Council suggested a number of rules that it hoped all new buildings would agree to follow. These included a new building line fifty feet further north than that established by the Avenue's present structures. In addition, the Council suggested that all new buildings include a second-story arcade, a pedestrian walkway suitable for parade watching. It was hoped that this arcade would prove to be an architectural constant unifying the new buildings' disparate designs.

Comparable regulations, designed to order a potentially chaotic mix of private and public construction, have proved successful in other cities. The pre-Renaissance palaces that line the most significant piazza in Sienna were required, by city law, to exhibit a predetermined set of details and materials. The buildings that line the broad avenues of Paris share a common roofline and a limited family of forms. The Commission of Fine Arts is worried that attempts to lend similar unity to the northern side of Pennsylvania Avenue will fail to prove successful. Both of the Council's unifying suggestions -- the common setback and the continuous pedestrian arcade -- seem likely to be ignored. Although the only privately financed building constructed on the Avenue since the release of the Council's plan adheres to the proposed setback, it is by no means certain that all future private construction will agree to do so.

The proposed pedestrian arcade has already been wounded, if not dispatched, by a decision of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

A new and enormous headquarters for the F.B.I. is currently being constructed on the northern side of the Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Streets, N.W. Arguing that a public second-story walkway would be likely to attract muggers, drunks, necking teenagers, and other undesirables, Bureau officials refused to permit incorporation of the proposed arcade into their headquarters' design. The building secured Commission acceptance despite the minimal success of the Commission in diminishing the coarseness and brutality of the proposed design. Some Commission members furthermore have expressed strong misgivings in regard to the perhaps unintentional symbolism that the new building promises to generate. They are aware that Major L'Enfant designed the Avenue as the symbolic link between the Legislative and Executive branches of the Government. The Federal Bureau of Investigation will soon be housed midway between the Capitol and the White House in a new headquarters that is not only much larger but architecturally far less modest than the headquarters of the Department of Justice across the way.

The redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue is not the only large scale construction project undertaken in the recent past in downtown Washington. Almost as ambitious, and thus far considerably more successful, is the creation of the L'Enfant Plaza and the new Tenth Street Mall. This project, like the proposed improvement of the Avenue, includes both public and private buildings. Here, however, the designers were not forced to attempt to superimpose order on the chaotic leavings of decades of inattention. They were able to begin from scratch.

The Tenth Street Mall is an entirely new monumental street that runs southwards from Independence Avenue to the northern shore of the Washington Channel. The mall, the numerous buildings that define it, and the gracious fountain-enhanced plaza that opens to the east midway along its run, are all elevated. They cross a mess of small streets, railroad tracks, and super highways, and in so doing provide a significant new link between the Capital's monumental core and the heretofore relatively isolated Southwest Quadrant of the city. The visitor who enters the mall from the north passes first beneath the new Forrestal Building at Independence Avenue, continues past L'Enfant Plaza (and the distinguished buildings designed by I.M. Pei of New York that flank it), and eventually emerges at a landscaped Overlook, so named because it overlooks the boat-dotted waters of the Channel, the redeveloped Southwest, and the greenery of East Potomac Park. The Commission believes this complex, despite some imperfections, is an admirable example of large scale urban architecture. In considering this complex, the Commission of Fine Arts

focused its attention on three elements of the composition: the design of the Forrestal Building at the North, the design of the overlook at the south, and the topography of the elevated street that connects them.

The Forrestal Building, which will provide office space for the Department of Defense, was originally designed as an 800-foot long structure flanking the south side of Independence Avenue. Two additional wings, parallel to one another and perpendicular to Independence Avenue were to run southwards along both sides of the Tenth Street Mall. This scheme had secured preliminary Commission approval during the Eisenhower Administration. In 1963, the Commission, now dominated by members appointed by President Kennedy, reversed itself and asked that the building be redesigned.

At the Commission's insistence, the building's architects, Curtis and Davis of New Orleans, submitted revisions in such number that the structure eventually constructed bears almost no relation to the original design. The architects initial proposals showed a building that was rigidly symmetrical. The Commission, citing monotony, objected, and the massing was completely rearranged. The parallel north-south wings originally proposed were supposed to contain the space above the roadway of the Tenth Street Mall. In discussing the design of these symmetrical wings, the Commission spoke not of containment but of constriction and strangulation, and the wings were designed out. The 800-foot wall along Independence Avenue was to have been a curtain wall of transparent glass. The Commission preferred a somewhat shorter building characterized by concrete rather than by glass, and the architects complied.

The Commission, of course, is only a review agency. Its powers are only advisory. It has no legal authority to design buildings. Yet in this case -- and in a number of others -- it exercised those powers with such perseverance and precision that the Forrestal Building eventually constructed seems to have been designed to Commission specifications. Some Commission members consequently feel that their agency deserves credit for the appearance of the building. Others, noting that the wing along Independence Avenue might not be high enough and that the Forrestal Building in situ appears unfortunately squat, feel the Commission also deserves a certain degree of blame.

The roadway of the Tenth Street Mall is not quite flat. It rises slightly as climbing an invisible hill midway between the Channel and Independence Avenue. This rise, which unfortunately damages the views from L'Enfant Plaza towards both the Overlook and the Forrestal Building, is necessitated by the railroad tracks that pass beneath the Tenth Street Mall. The Commission has long been

irritated by the presence of these tracks so close to the monumental precinct of the city, and has frequently suggested that they be re-located. Thus far its suggestions have been ignored.

One other element of the new complex has produced some misgivings among the membership of the Commission of Fine Arts. The Overlook was originally designed to serve as more than a viewing platform. It was to serve as a key element in a plan to connect the museums of the Mall with a new National Fisheries Center and Aquarium that will be constructed across the Channel in East Potomac Park. As originally proposed the Overlook was to conceal a large underground parking garage. Tourists wishing to drive from the museums of the Mall to the new Aquarium would have passed beneath the Forrestal Building, driven down the Tenth Street Mall, and then, after depositing their cars in the underground garage, crossed a footbridge into East Potomac Park. The garage beneath the Overlook would have stored automobiles that otherwise would have to be parked on new lots across the Channel. The construction of these lots would, of course, necessitate the diminution of the open green space of the Park. The Interior Department has stated that the Park and its golf course will be preserved and that no such lots will be constructed. But the Overlook has been constructed and there is no garage beneath it. Present plans for the Aquarium include provisions for only minimal parking. Tourists will most probably find it exceedingly difficult to drive to the Aquarium. Though a new Overlook garage or the establishment of a year-round minibus system may someday remedy the situation, the Aquarium's continuing isolation from the monumental precinct of the city seems, at this point in time, to be assured.

The Commission of Fine Arts is well aware of the Aquarium's isolation. In approving an imaginative and highly unusual design for the new facility, the Commission noted that there are few public areas in the city as stylistically undemanding as the Aquarium's site in East Potomac Park.

An almost impenetrable stretch of roads and railroad tracks screens the site from the formal complexities of the Tidal Basin and the Jefferson Memorial immediately to the west. The nearby highway bridge across the Channel is an effective visual barrier between the Aquarium and the neo-Classical monuments of the Mall. The view across the water towards reconstructed Southwest Washington reveals a welter of architectural styles. This view provided the Aquarium's designers with no esthetic guidelines whatsoever. The Commission considered these factors before approving the proposed Aquarium. Had the same building been proposed for construction in a more sensitive area of the city, it would almost certainly have been summarily rejected by the Commission of Fine Arts.

One should not suppose, however, that the Commission decided that any building, no matter how undistinguished its architecture, would be a suitable structure for this site. On the contrary, the Commission rejected one design after another before approving a proposal submitted by architects Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo, and Associates, and designer Charles Eames. The rejected designs failed to secure Commission approval not because they neglected to conform with the demands of their environment, but because they threatened to produce weak and unimaginative architecture. When the California architectural firm that had produced these designs resigned, the Commission of Fine Arts raised no objections. The Government subsequently secured the services of Roche and Eames. The first design that they submitted was quickly and enthusiastically approved by the Commission of Fine Arts. A simple composition of two strong geometrical elements organizes their design. A large square podium of concrete -- whose form is powerful enough to govern and command all of the ramps, lawns, skylights, trees, walks and pools that activate its surface -- will be constructed in East Potomac Park. Rising 114 feet from the surface of the podium will be an enormous "greenhouse" of tinted glass. The "greenhouse" is semi-circular in plan and triangular in section. It is quite possible that the appearance of the Aquarium will startle many. But the geometry that organizes its design is simple in the extreme.

In considering projects for the monumental precinct of the Mall, in rejecting Victor Lundy's initial proposals for the new Tax Court Building, and in dozens of other cases, the Commission urged the architects that appeared before it to respect and reinforce the prevailing order of the environment in which the buildings they had designed were to be erected. The Aquarium site presents a problem of a different sort. No neo-Classical architecture characterizes the surroundings. No street grid organizes the greenery of the Park. In short, this is a site of numbing blandness in which no order of any sort prevails. The men who designed the Aquarium had to establish an order of their own. They did so. The Commission of Fine Arts has struggled to convince other designers, working in other indistinct outlying areas of the city, to take a similar approach.

Washington is surrounded by military establishments, camps, and fields, and forts and bases, that have been growing in a casual and uncontrolled fashion for more than a century. Prior to 1963 no attempts had been made to supervise their growth. In that year an exceptionally sensitive Secretary of Defense issued an executive order requiring that all military construction in the area of the Capital receive the approval of the Commission of Fine Arts. In terms of staff and budget, the Commission is the smallest and weakest agency of the Federal Government. The Department of Defense is the largest and most powerful. It is not surprising, therefore, that

the Commission's efforts to govern the physical growth of local military establishments have occasionally produced almost invisible results. A number of military projects considered by the Commission since 1963 -- particularly those at Fort Myer, Virginia -- were begun prior to Secretary McNamara's executive order. By the time these projects were considered they had accumulated such momentum that the Commission was powerless to deflect their designs. Elsewhere, however, the Commission was consulted before damage had been done. The Commission is particularly proud of its role in guiding the development of the Anacostia/Bolling installation on the banks of the Potomac.

Anacostia/Bolling is an old air field located directly across the Potomac River from National Airport. The Departments of the Air Force and the Navy have been authorized to transform its abandoned runways into a vast new complex of residential quarters, offices, and other military facilities. A master plan, designed to guide the area's development was accordingly submitted to the Commission of Fine Arts. Master plan is perhaps too strong a term for the initial document submitted. It showed an unplanned and disorganized development of parking lots and roadways and buildings large and small. The chaos that characterized this proposal would have been clearly visible to every visitor entering the Capital by air. The Commission, in rejecting this non-design, suggested that an architect be commissioned to produce a new plan of sufficient strength to govern the entire development of the Anacostia/Bolling area. The Department of Defense subsequently secured the services of Vincent Kling and Associates of Philadelphia. The proposals eventually submitted by this firm were enthusiastically approved by the Commission of Fine Arts.

Kling's design, which is organized about a central mall, will provide the development with a clearly discernable, almost authoritarian order comparable to that imposed on the city of Washington by Major Pierre L'Enfant. The architect, working closely with the Commission, subsequently designed most of the major buildings to be constructed at the installation. All details of the proposed development, its landscaping, the materials of its buildings, even the color of the roof tiles that will be so visible from the air, were carefully considered by the Commission of Fine Arts. The Commission believes that this complex, when completed, will reflect an architectural excellence that few military installations can begin to match.

Here, as at the site of the Aquarium in East Potomac Park, the Commission encouraged the establishment of an architectural order of harsh geometrical power. The hard-edge clarity of Kling's master plan for Anacostia/Bolling was imposed upon a vast expanse of abandoned runways. The Anacostia/Bolling viewed from the air by future

travellers will appear organized and man-made. In at least one other major open area of the city, the Commission has urged designers to follow an opposite approach.

The National Zoological Park of the Smithsonian Institution bears no resemblance to the imposingly formal animal gardens of Rome or London or Manhattan's Central Park. No neo-Classical axes organize its spaces. The Washington zoo occupies nearly 200 acres of the valley formed by the stream that wanders through the Capital's Rock Creek Park. Its cages and animal houses are scattered among grassy hillsides, thick stands of old trees, forest glades. The mood it generates is romantic and naturalistic.

The zoo was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the great landscape architect who served on the McMillan Park Commission of 1901, whose father designed New York's Central Park. The visitor who wanders among the rocky crags and leafy chasms of that older masterpiece of landscape architecture feels he has been transported as if by magic to a place far from the urban order of Fifth Avenue. The zoo designed by the younger Olmsted is similarly isolated from the city that surrounds it.

The Commission of Fine Arts has attempted to preserve the unique and romantic character of the National Zoological Park. In rejecting a revised master plan for future development submitted by Smithsonian Institution officials, the Commission insisted that future construction be so designed as to merge into the landscape. At the Commission's urging, a landscape architect was retained to insure the preservation and reinforcement of Olmsted's original design. The Commission withheld its approval of designs for an animal hospital, research facilities and an administrative building until it was satisfied that damage to the landscape of the zoo had been minimized and that utilitarian facilities had been effectively concealed from public view.

The approved plan for Anacostia/Bolling imposed a new and powerful geometry upon a previously barren landscape. No such aggressive design would be suitable for the zoo. Here the Commission urged the construction of buildings of singular modesty, structures capable of blending invisibly into the romantic landscape of Rock Creek Park.

In the opinion of the Commission, the special environment of the zoo makes special architectural demands. Equally special, and equally demanding, are the environments of the Mall, of Pennsylvania Avenue, of Capital Hill, and of many other areas of the city. In general, the Commission feels that projects added to the various

precincts of the Capital should be sensitively responsive to the particular prevailing characteristics of their particular environments.

It should be remembered, however, that the Commission of Fine Arts is constrained by no unadjustable policies. Its decisions follow no iron-clad rules. The Commission may tend to support the principle of thoughtful response to the peculiarities of the environment, but it does not always insist on this approach. On the contrary, in regard to one major project of enormous significance, the Commission of Fine Arts insisted that particular demands of particular environments be utterly ignored. This project, which will alter forever the fabric of the city, is the underground rapid transit system soon to be constructed in the Capital.

When the subway's design was initially considered, many residents of the Capital and its suburbs suggested that each stop, each station, be given a unique and instantly recognizable design. They pointed out that travellers riding underground tend to lose their bearings. Tourists unfamiliar with the city will no doubt worry about exactly where they are. Why not comfort them by providing each station with a unique design perhaps reflecting the particular character of that portion of the city that stands above it? A stop in the central business district might, for instance, be decorated with store windows reflecting the commercial character of the neighborhood overhead. Other devices might inform the traveller that he is, at the moment, below the White House or the Capitol or the zoo. In Stockholm, for example, different artists were commissioned to design each station. A wide variety of materials, color schemes, and decorative compositions characterize the new subway stations of Boston and Montreal. Harry Weese, the talented young Chicago architect hired to design the system for the Capital, initially experimented with a similar approach. He considered, for instance, differentiating the stations by such devices as exposing the varieties of rock that underlie various areas of the city. He intended, he said, to make every station different. These and similar proposals were rejected by the Commission of Fine Arts.

The Commission, sharing the opinion of one of its members who noted that "folk art underground is for the birds," insisted on a design characterized not by diversity but by unity. The Commission urged the architect to consider the subway as a special urban machine, a machine whose design should reflect the beauty of logic, clarity, and order. Weese responding eventually submitted a revised design that received the enthusiastic approval of the Commission of Fine Arts.

Each underground station will reveal a structural barrel-vault of coffered concrete. A passenger platform at each stop will "float" in the monumental space defined by the vault. At no point will the platform touch the coffered, dramatically lighted wall of the

structural tube. Though no two stations will be exactly identical, a sense of continuity and precision will prevail throughout the system. The Commission believes that such words as "beauty" and "elegance" apply to the approved design.

The Commission's efforts to secure an architecture of comparable quality for other projects in the Capital have not always been successful. An unfortunate number of buildings and construction projects considered by the Commission in recent years reflected architectural standards that were not the highest. Law requires that the schools, police stations, firehouses, and other public facilities constructed by the Government of the District of Columbia be submitted for approval to the Commission of Fine Arts. The Commission does not hire the architects that design these projects, nor does it set the budgetary limitations that control them, nor does it establish the program requirements that they are designed to fulfill. It examines the designs submitted, criticizes them, and strives with occasional success to correct their most obvious defects. The city Government has tried, wherever possible, to comply with Commission suggestions. In recent years it has responded to Commission urgings and commissioned a number of architects of exceptional ability. The Commission continues to feel that in Washington, as in most other large American cities, there remains considerable room for improvement in the quality of civic architecture. The construction of new schools, new roads, new bridges, new highways, requires, in the opinion of the Commission, the application of the highest standards of contemporary engineering and contemporary architecture. In other projects considered by the Commission during the period covered by this history the application of peculiarly contemporary standards was discouraged.

Among the primary duties of the Commission of Fine Arts is the preservation of the architecture of the past. The Commission has frequently struggled to minimize proposed alterations in the appearance of the parks, squares, monuments, and historical buildings of the Capital. Proposals to significantly "improve" the rather casual landscaping of Lafayette Square, immediately north of the White House, were drastically toned down by the Commission of Fine Arts. Park Service plans to add decorative planting to the Ellipse south of the Presidential residence were handled in a similar manner. Leave it, the Commission suggested, as it is -- its beauty is its great simplicity. Commission members working closely and sometimes informally with the First Lady in her unceasing efforts to improve the landscaping of the city, urged that such improvements be limited to those areas of the Capital where unacceptable conditions demonstrated their necessity. Commission members, again acting occasionally in an informal capacity, worked to preserve the Old State, War and Navy Building, the Old Patent Office Building, the Court of Claims Building, and other structures of esthetic and historical significance in the

Capital. One such effort focused a bit of public controversy upon the Commission of Fine Arts.

In 1965, the Architect of the Capitol, noting the rapid deterioration of the West Front of the Capitol, released a plan calling for the removal of the ancient sandstone and its replacement with gleaming new marble. He implied that the safety of Members of the Congress, their aides, and their visiting constituents, was threatened by the weakening of the facade. There was talk in the Capital of crushed bodies and a crumbling dome. The Architect further suggested that while the building was being repaired it should simultaneously be improved. His office suggested constructing a new West Front at a considerable distance from the old wall, the intervening spaces to be filled with a cafeteria, hideaways for Members of the Congress, and other "urgently" needed facilities. He then released a detailed technical report that filled many volumes and, he said, justified the proposed construction.

The Commission, noting that a previous similar extension of the East Front had failed to improve either the appearance or historical significance of the Capitol, noting further that efforts to preserve yet older monuments in Europe had proved not unsuccessful, responded to a number of Congressional requests for a brief evaluation of the technical report issued under the auspices of the Architect of the Capitol.

The Commission's members, none of whom are structural engineers, found the report a lengthy and difficult document and consequently commissioned another engineering firm to prepare a brief summary of its findings. On the basis of this summary, the Commission provided those Members and Committees of the Congress who requested it with a Commission opinion to the effect that it was by no means impossible to repair and restore the West Front without drastically altering its appearance. This opinion was shared by, among others, the American Institute of Architects.

Certain Members of the Congress, citing the Constitutional separation of powers and noting that Congress needed no help in handling its own architectural affairs, implied that the Commission had spent Federal monies on its brief engineering evaluation with insufficient authority. The Commission, noting that it was established in part to advise the Congress on matters architectural and esthetic, continues to believe it was well within its powers to do so.

The vast majority of the Commission's efforts in regard to historical preservation were directed not at Capitol Hill but at another area of the city. Here the Commission's authority to minimize

the alteration of traditional architecture is clearly established by the law. Public Law 808, approved in 1950, places under the guardianship of the Commission of Fine Arts that area of the District of Columbia known as Georgetown.

Georgetown is a residential neighborhood characterized by narrow shaded streets, quaint shops, and numerous old houses built in the Federal style. The Commission, despite charges that its opinion demonstrates an intolerable prissiness and lack of imagination, has worked to preserve -- in detail -- the unique character of this precinct of the city. Aided by a three-member board of advisors, the Commission rules not only on the merits of proposed new buildings but on such details as the spacing of window mullions, the design of porch lights, the lettering of signs, and all other improvements and alterations subject, in the words of the Old Georgetown Act, "to public view from a public highway." Noting that the law was passed "to improve and protect...examples of the type of architecture used in the Capital in its initial years," the Commission has attempted, in general, to insure that new developments conform with the characteristics of the Federal Style rather than with those of the Victorian residences that contribute so much to the peculiar charm of the Georgetown area. Occasionally (as in cases when a Federal carriage lamp is affixed to a Victorian facade) the stylistic conformity supported by the Commission produces anomalies. The Commission continues to believe, however, that strict supervision, despite occasional stylistic embarrassments, has succeeded in preserving and enhancing the area's special charm. A tour through Georgetown will support this contention.

To insure the preservation of the area, the Commission in recent years has initiated a number of studies and surveys of Georgetown architecture. Studies of the structures of the Potomac waterfront, of the commercial buildings of M Street and Wisconsin Avenue, and, it should be pointed out, of the significant non-Federal buildings of the area, have already been released. This program is continuing and additional information will be published in the future.

In recent years, the Commission has sponsored a number of other studies of the Washington area. These include proposals dealing with street furniture and design and a detailed booklet aimed at diminishing the ugliness of the exposed surface parking lots that blight the city. Like the Georgetown studies, these publications are appended to this history.

One final note. The Commission is empowered by law to review the commemorative coins and medals issued by the Executive Departments

of the Government. Generosity prompts the Commission to note that the vastmajority of these were mediocre. The term "Mickey Mouse" was used by the Commission in both its literal and figurative senses to describe one medal bearing the image of the rodent of that name.

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