

The Style of the City

The vicissitudes of the Watergate development in Foggy Bottom illustrate the reasons for the general mediocrity of commercial architecture in Washington. There is not one recent apartment or office building here that approaches the outstanding new work in cities like Baltimore and Detroit, let alone the traditional centers of good design.

The official critics, that plurality of agencies who exercise authority over the style of building, must bear much of the responsibility for this aesthetic blight. The imaginative architect is confronted with public policies no more stable than the personal tastes of the constantly shifting memberships of the various boards and commissions, the most important of which like to work in the closet atmosphere of personal negotiations and private meetings. As a measure of official indecision, there have been some 15 repetitive formal hearings on the Watergate designs.

Watergate's architects originally cooperated with the Planning Commission's staff to the point of collaboration, only to find themselves vehemently attacked when the management of the Commission passed into new hands. The builders thought that they had reached an accommodation with the Fine Arts Commission, but now the membership of that Commission has also been changed and the new arrivals announce that there is no agreement.

After more than two years of continuous arguing, the issue at Watergate has now been narrowed to the height of the buildings along the river front, and whether they will rise 90 feet or 160. The Fine Arts Commission seems to follow the view that height adjacent to water or a parkway must necessarily be offensive. To the contrary, height alone is vastly less important than proportion. The Commission must decide whether to encourage high narrow buildings covering small areas of their sites and opening wide spaces at pedestrian level, or low broad buildings covering large areas. Foggy Bottom's leading example of a truly oppressive architectural mass will continue to be the State Department, only seven floors high but two unbroken blocks long.

As long as the city rigidly limits height everywhere, its new buildings will continue to be the squat cubes that already line its principal streets shoulder to shoulder. In this stage of the city's growth, the clearly preferable choice is to let buildings at selected sites rise to considerable heights, to save space at ground level. Fortunately the Fine Arts Commission now seems inclined to experiment, in a gingerly fashion, with that idea.

Most builders, lacking the patience and the resources of Watergate's backers, will not risk good architecture until they are assured that innovation does not automatically subject them to delay and political attack. Washington requires an explicit and firm policy for good design, and that policy will be judged by its success in bringing grace and style to a densely inhabited modern city.