



Design Aspects of Today's Architecture

Henry S. Churchill, F.A.I.A., A.I.P.

A lecture given at Howard University, 8 February 1961

In talking to you here today I want to talk not so much about the appearance of architecture as about some of the things which are effective in controlling its appearance. I think we all know that architecture, more than any other art, depends for its looks upon the materials of which it is made, which must be put together to make a weather-tight, serviceable and reasonably economic building. Because of certain peculiarities in man's consciousness these mere requirements of sound building are not enough to satisfy him. To *Commoditie* and *Firmnesse* we must add *Delight*—a building, to be architecture, must not only serve but it must please.

This business of pleasing is the art of design, and the art of design is made manifest through the technique of construction. *Delight* presupposes *Commoditie* and *Firmnesse*. The reverse is not true: a master of construction is not necessarily a master of the art of design in any creative sense. He may be competent and adequate as a builder and he may be dull and unimaginative as a designer.

Now it is strange that in most of our schools, and to most of the students in those schools, it is a terrible thing to be thought just adequate. To be original, different, a so-called leader, not in competency but in superficial appearance, is the great goal of most young men and some of their elders. I think this is unfortunate because most of us, after all, are neither very original nor very different; and if we are different and still lack the overpowering passion and drive of true genius, it is likely to be so silly an originality and so superficial a difference as to lead only to fashionable eccentricity.

By this I do not mean that one should not stretch one's mind, that one should accept blindly only what is taught. What

I mean is that the mind is not stretched by mere repudiation, either. "Examine all things, hold fast to that which is good" is an excellent precept still. From the good comes the better, and in our devotion to architecture we can be content to do better.

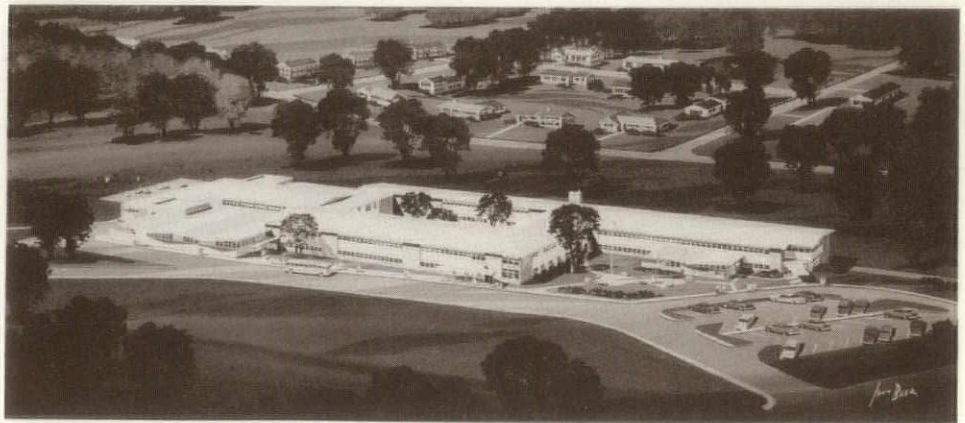
For I assume that we all have a devotion to architecture, that it is this devotion which has made us choose this field of effort, rather than another, in which to earn a living. It is, I believe, possible to earn a living and to have devotion, to make a contribution to the art of architecture by knowing it not superficially but in depth. If there is not this satisfaction of knowledge and contribution to be obtained from service to architecture, it is better to do something else for bread. I will try to explain. You young men are on the doorstep of a new era. Pandora's box has been opened, and the miraculous is become commonplace. This is a new world you are coming into. A new world of art because it is a new world physically and psychologically. Physics and chemistry have brought a final and conclusive end to the Age of Masonry in architecture. This is the era of synthetics, glass, steel, concrete, plastics. The natural materials

are relegated to a minor place — brick, wood, stone, marble, these are no longer structural but decorative. Psychologically we no longer build houses, but housing, and our public buildings are not symbols of civic pride and honor but are for filing cabinets and rubber stamps. Even our clients are no longer human — they are faceless, corporations or unresponsive delegates of government agencies. Because these clients have no reality, we design for statistical abstractions. The paradox is that the more we talk about architecture for humanity, the more inhuman it becomes.

In order to meet this situation there has already been evolved a style of building appropriate to it, and it is within this singular style that you will be expected to work. Do not disdain it. Architecture has always been the progressive perfectionment of a series of specific conditions: a greater mastery of these conditions becoming, in time, a series of adequates in the hands of many and eventually a masterpiece in the mind of someone.

It was so with the Greeks: the slow polishing of detail and detail, of delicate refinement until at last from Paestum

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WILSON BETHESDA JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, Stanley H. Arthur, Architect.

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NEXT REGULAR MEETING

12 Noon, April 5, 1961

Brook Farm Restaurant

7101 Brookeville Rd., Chevy Chase, Md.

May Meeting — May 3, 1961

C.S.I. 'Spex School'

The Construction Specifications Institute, Metropolitan Chapter, is sponsoring its free monthly "Spex School" on the subject of "Finishing Hardware" at the April 18th meeting. Other meetings on other topics are scheduled for May 16th and June 20th. Architects are invited to participate. Time of meetings, 7:30 p.m.; the place, the National Housing Center, 1625 I Street, N.W.

Company for Lunch

The President of the Baltimore Chapter, AIA, and the President of the Washington Metropolitan Chapter, AIA, will be present at the April 5th meeting. Mr. David Wilson will discuss the new fee schedule of the Baltimore Chapter. Mr. John McLeod will tell amusing stories.

Italian Holiday

The firm of Cohen-Haft Associates will be temporarily divided. Haft is going abroad, for three weeks, to continue his research in Etruscan architecture. Leonard is very interested in the north of Italy. When last in Sienna he almost got burnt in the Siennese version of the "shell game". We look forward to being regaled with more interesting anecdotes of Leonard in Italy. He returns early in April.

ROBERT LAUTMAN PHOTO



RESIDENCE of Alan Kander, 3550 Williamsburg Lane, N.W., Washington, D. C. Brown and Wright, Architects.

To the Barricades

We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Much that is wrong with our society is beyond the power of the ordinary citizen to influence, but here at home in our own community we have the right, the opportunity, and the representative and responsive government to institute the measures necessary to improve our civic life. It is the responsibility of the citizen to be critical, to make suggestions and to insist on the execution of measures to improve the public welfare.

Most of us are in the main too patient, too docile, too willing to bear things as they are. Why is it necessary for every family to have two automobiles? Where is the impetus for public rapid transit systems in the county? Why have we permitted subdivisions to exist and be maintained without sidewalks, so that children walk to school in the streets? Why have we not planned and provided pedestrian walks to shopping districts located within an easy walking distance of every housing district?

We have made the automobile into a monster that strangles our society with its space consuming demands, and for this monster we have sacrificed the needs of people. It has come to be realized that automobile traffic and parking requirements can never be satisfied. Pacify one of the beasts and you breed two.

The bicycle provided interim transportation for individuals, in this country, between the passing of the horse and the development of the cheap car. In Europe the bicycle still serves in many countries as a prime means of transportation for adults. We have permitted this delightful machine to decline in use to the point where only the kids have the pleasure and the danger of its operation in the streets. We could of course plan for bicycle paths and pedestrian walks, but first we would have to recognize the reality of our situation; we are becoming an urban society on our 6,000 sq. ft. lots, suburbia is vanishing in a cloud of automobile exhaust and the imminent danger of big-city smog.

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came the Parthenon, which is not very different from Paestum except in detail and refinement. The many contributed to the one.

Later, in the Gothic time, it was the same, and so too in the Renaissance. We see, today, the peaks; and we are too impatient, too hurried to look down during our flight and see what is in the valleys. But if we do look, we will see that the parish churches are of a piece with the cathedrals; and that the buildings of the Renaissance are all related. These resemblances are the formative relations of style. The recognizable architectural elements which make a style are not clichés. A cliché is something that is used only because it is fashionable, like corner-windows were once upon not so long ago a time, and sun-shields on the north side now.

The present style, suitable to the work and ideas of today, is as you all know, the two-faced shiny slab with the panted on ends. It is interesting how these dead-ends came about. Many years ago Le Corbusier built some exhibition apartments to explain his ideas. These apartments, although free-standing in the exhibition grounds, were supposed to be part of a long row. Hence the end walls had no windows. And so, by a logical progress, free standing slab buildings have no windows in the end walls either. Nevertheless, his basic type of building is here to stay, because it ideally fills the needs of contemporary society and technology. The kind of space it provides is uniform and impersonal; the kind of materials it uses are industrially correct; the economic needs of the building industry are properly met. It is from the framework of these things that you will find the architectural forms of the modern world are derived and not from esthetic theory. Esthetic theory can modify structure, but it cannot control it.

The needs which these boxes fill are very simple. Clear, open floor space which can be partitioned as desired, room for mechanical equipment, and that's all. No subtle specialized areas that confuse or confine. This simplicity and duplication applies also to the stacked up living quarters of urban housing, and consequently the same outward form can be used for any tall building. This lack of differentiation, both horizontally and vertically, is perfectly met by the thin skin covering of aluminum or glass or plastic which is prefabricated and hung on the

frame. The unit of design and the unit of construction are the same, they become a module which, without thought or effort on the part of the designer, can be repeated up to any height or along to any length to provide the required enclosure. Like a sausage, it can be cut off at any place. It is interrupted only by an entrance motive which is put there to make it easy to find the way in. In extreme cases, as in some of the newer Scandinavian building, there is not even that.

Thus, social need, material, the processing of the material, and the form of the function all become one and an architecture is born. The theme is established, and as in previous great periods of architecture, there are possibilities for a great variety of minor changes to be rung upon it. To the layman there is little difference between Chartres and Amiens, and almost none between the Ecole Militaire and the Invalides. Why should there be a difference between one building on Fifth Avenue and one on Sixth?

What difference there is should be in the fineness of the detailing, the perfection of the use of color and of surface textures; it should lie in the relation of the first two or perhaps three floors to the street and to the adjacent buildings. For the new architecture has become deeply concerned with the street, which the last years of the old architecture had pretty much ignored, or rather had taken for granted. This return of a concern for the street provides the architect with a wider vocabulary. Minor plazas, indentations, covered sidewalks, recessed showplaces, small plantings, pools, fountains, breakthroughs to the sky, changes in levels and in paving, all offer ways of adding to the element of Delight. Here, quite within the acceptable structural convention of our time, are the only variable esthetic motives available to you.

But, I hear someone saying as soon as he gets a chance, what about the new romanticism? — the work of Louis Kahn, the work of Nervi, the doodling of Saarinen, the sculptured work of Corbu? These are specials, these are the builders of the singular building for a particular purpose and have little to do with the main stream of architecture. There have always been such men and such buildings: the Erechtheum, Antonio Gaudi, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Such contributions have always been important, but their importance has been in-

direct. They have introduced emotional upsets into the academic concepts of the well-received architects, and they make young men think. You will do well to study what Louis Kahn is doing, and compare it with what Nervi and Corbu are producing, for this is an exercise into philosophies and integrities. But don't for a minute try to apply their concepts to the structure on the Avenue, for they are not applicable to the conventional use. Kahn's and Corbu's and Nervi's architecture, like Bucky Fuller's, comes about not because they see differently with their eyes but because they think differently with their brains. And, I strongly suspect, they also feel very differently than we do about what it is that they are doing and why. To them architecture is religion, not a trade.

I once said somewhere that the architecture of Mies van der Rohe had, in the Seagram Building, attained a perfection beyond which it was not possible to go, and here I am talking about the continuation of his architectural concepts as the only possible ones for the immediate future. This is not a contradiction nor a retraction. The work of Mies, the classical ideal which has been his successful attainment, in the Seagram Building, cannot be surpassed. It happened that the superficial aspect of his ideal corresponded to the technical possibilities of the time, to the current methods of production of the Building Industry. I said "superficially," and I mean superficially, on the surface: the great architects of our commercialism bought the Miesian concept because it was easy, in a cheap and superficial way, to adapt to their client's ideas, the manufacturer's production line, and their own abilities. This has left Mies on the mountain-top, and I suspect he is pretty lonely, even if he does have Philip Johnson as a sort of Aaron to hold up his arms. What he did is now being eroded into fantastic and meaningless shapes. He has been hoisted on the petard of his own passion for rationalization. His copiers do not know what "less is more" means: they only know that less is less. Nor can there be less than least, which requires no effort at all.

Besides the two major forces which I have mentioned, there is a third influence affecting design which I have only hinted at; that is the increasing importance of collective building and of Civic Art. This is a particular, and perhaps narrow aspect of what is now usually

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called City Planning, although it was at one time its principal aspect. But City Planning, both in concept and in practice, has broadened itself so much that physical design has become a minor matter to it. City Planning is now the realm of all the doubtfully scientific disciplines — economics, sociology, demography and so on. It uses the crystal ball of statistics and the scientific integrity of a Cagliostro its wonders to perform.

City Planning is supposed to make our cities beautiful, efficient, economically stable and desirable to live in. It has found a means of doing this by what is called Urban Renewal. Urban Renewal provides for the use of the power of eminent domain to assemble land and, by the use of taxpayers' subsidy, make the assembled land available to investors at a price they can afford to pay, whereupon they will erect new and beautiful buildings which will repay the subsidy by paying more taxes. Actually, it has turned out to be a process by which property is taken from the Have-nots and turned over to the Haves. Since the Haves do not wish to become Have-nots, they will only erect buildings when they are absolutely sure of a profit. As a result of an insufficiency of absolutely sure profits, the Urban Renewal program is largely a failure, economically as well as socially.

It is highly probable that this state of affairs will change, and that profits will be not only permitted but even guaranteed. This will be a great boon to the architects, and that is why the young architect should take more than a passing interest in civic design. I do not mean that architects should be city-planners. The architect is not an economist nor a sociologist, nor should he try to be one. He is a shaper of three-dimensional things: that is his specialty, but in order to best carry out his specialty he can, and should, have a voice in planning policy. To be an effective voice the man who sits in the room with planners must represent not just himself but his fellow architects. In order to have him represent them, they must have ideas of their own, well-formulated and well-informed. This means all of you.

When all has been beautifully laid out by the Planners, there still are buildings to be built, and it is the relationship of those buildings one to another and the shape and feeling of the open spaces which they define, that make for a beau-

tiful and delightful city. Both the buildings and the spaces are, or should be, the business of the architect. We have never done very well in this, as may be judged by the sad little efforts that we have made, here and there, when we have made any concerted effort at all, to organize urban things in a Big Way. The World's Fair of 1893 was perhaps our best achievement; the meagre plan of Lincoln Center for the Declining Arts is perhaps our best effort. As for charm, we do not know what it is.

Charm is associated with small things. We like to Think Big and not waste our time on small efforts, on the graceful, the incidental, the merely delightful.

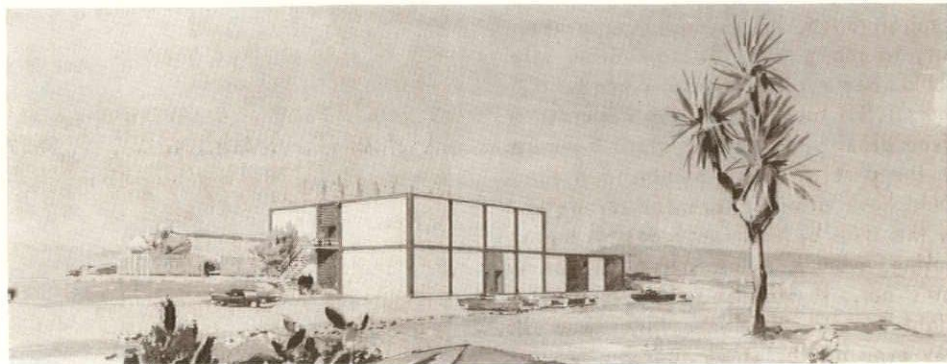
This is a mistake, as careful attention to any—well, almost any—small European city proves. I remember particularly when I was in Portugal how impressed I was with the city centers of many small towns. They were both formal and elusively informal; they derived directly from the French Grand Plan, but were modified by an instinct for the suitably small. They were irregular, presenting unexpected vistas and angles, and yet, as I said, they were quite formal and not at all medieval.

Such subtleties come from an understanding that site planning must always and primarily consider movement on the horizontal plane. People and things still move on a surface which is defined by the third—the vertical—dimension. We do not see the surface on which we move as a pattern; we are only aware of it by vertical definition. The best example, perhaps, is an old-fashioned garden maze. A maze is never visible as a pattern for movement unless it is seen as a plan, when it becomes comprehensible. When you are in it, you do not see it as plan, you see only the limiting walls, which are meaningless. A person in a maze is a frustrated person. What the civic designer must do, of

course, is work for the exact opposite of the maze. Things seen must clarify the space moved in, or through, or towards. The space is without meaning except as the third dimension gives it meaning. Let me give a simple example. Suppose the plan of a simple building, in the center of which is a perfectly square room. Now when you enter that room in the center of the building you pause and do not know where to go. It has no direction, it is a point of rest. If, however, there is a door directly opposite the one by which you entered, it has direction: the door gives it to you. You want to go through, it has very positive direction in spite of the square plan. But if there are doors in all four walls, it is again directionless. The same principle applies to the design of open spaces. The Place Vendome in Paris has direction; the Amalienborg Square in Copenhagen is static; the famous Place Stanislas has an emphatic axis, like Versailles; Dupont Circle has no form or direction at all.

The esthetics of the city of the future will grow, I am inclined to think, from the development of the street rather than from any attempts to modernize the Grand Plan of the great days of the monarchies. The street is the place for people, the grand plaza the place for pomp and circumstance. A forecast of what I mean is taking place in Stockholm. There, in the very center of the city, they have built a new multi-level business complex. What goes on below ground is excellent and efficient, but no concern of ours at this moment. The ground-level is the creation of a pedestrian shopping street which extends the fine old market square in front of the Concert Hall, and gives an additional value to the wonderful gay fountain by Milles. This street is "modern," as we say, and it is scaled to people, and is quite urban and busy. From it stairs

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RAPCON FACILITY, Edwards Air Force Base, Calif.
Albert Goenner and Associates, Architects-Engineers.

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and escalators lead to an upper level of stores opening from a balcony-street, and from this level one sees five immense slab office buildings which rise in a solemn and didactic row from the opposite side, their blank ends facing the street. They are immense, hideous and totally out-of-scale, just like ours are. But until you reach that second level of the Centrum, they are out of the sight-line and, unless you trouble to crane your neck, virtually not there.

Therein is perhaps a lesson for those city officials who feel that Urban Renewal should produce masterpieces, who are filled with an uneasy belief that they are not getting their money's worth of Art in their projects. They think every project should thrill the beholder like St. Mark's in Venice or, at least, like the first sight of the Palace of the Teamsters Union. Since the masterpiece is, by definition, unique, their squawks will be in vain. I advise you to pacify them by putting as much architecture as possible out the normal sight-line, as in Stockholm.

So one more thing, and I have done for today. I just said that architects have an obligation toward the public. This obligation goes beyond, I think, the negative virtues of a code of ethics and the natural desire to do one's best. It involves the civic side of architecture, and not only that side of it that requires mutual cooperation with one's fellow architects and with the purposes of the city planners to achieve splendid and shining goals. It sometimes may involve what might be called positive negativism — refusal to do what the client wants when it is obviously against the best interests of the public. The architects, more power to them, who resigned from the World's Fair Committee, took such action. The prominent consulting architects who went along with the design of that outrageous building over Grand Central failed, in my opinion in their duty to the public. So somebody else would have taken their place? Of course! But their resignation would have given great weight to a great concern on the part of many laymen, and they could have attained greater reputation by this than by their unsuccessful try at making even a nylon purse out of a sow's ear. It will be a curse and a blight on mid-city for a long time; it may even be the straw that breaks the back of the transportation system and brings ruin on the whole area.



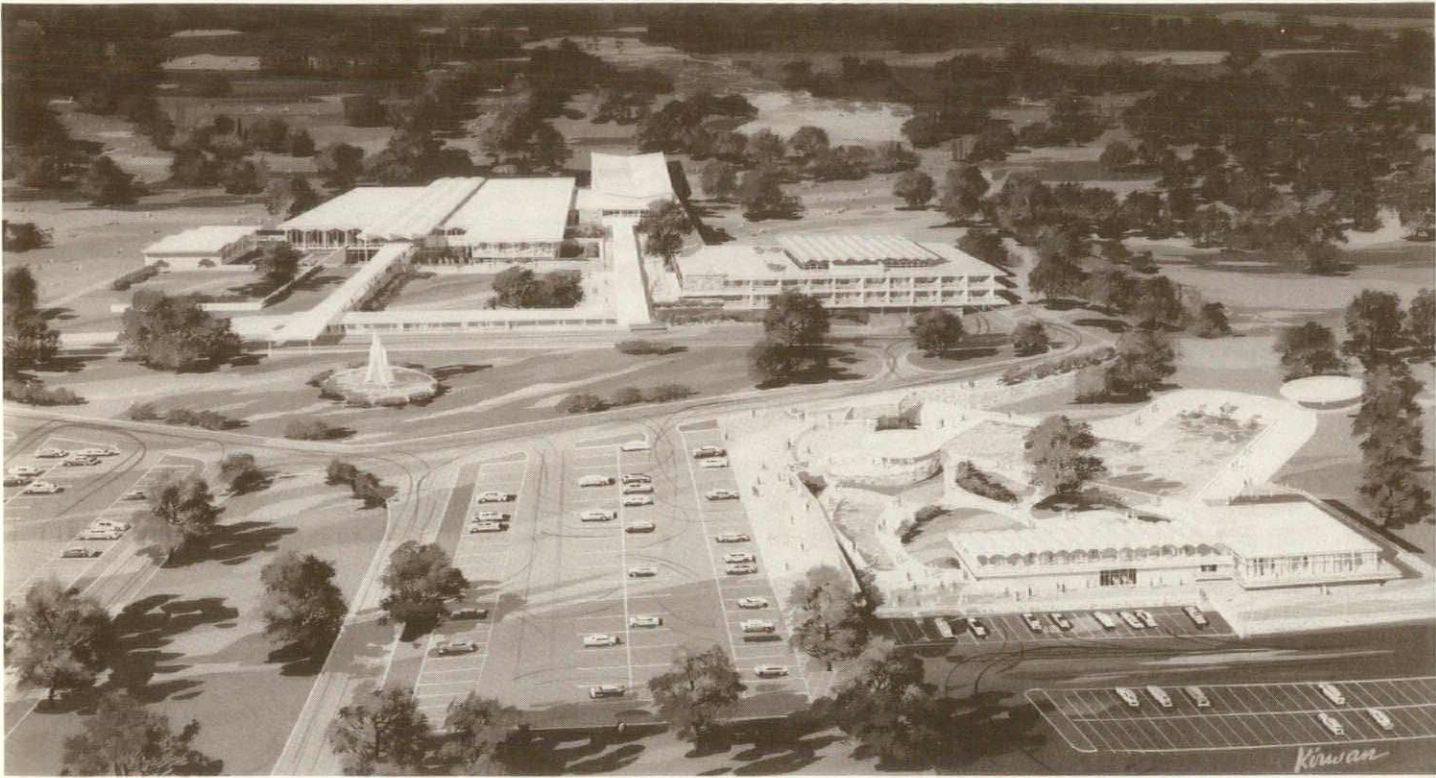
YEAGER OFFICE BUILDING, Silver Spring, Maryland. Thomen and Cromar, Architects. Gross floor area 14,000 square feet. Cost approximately \$215,000.



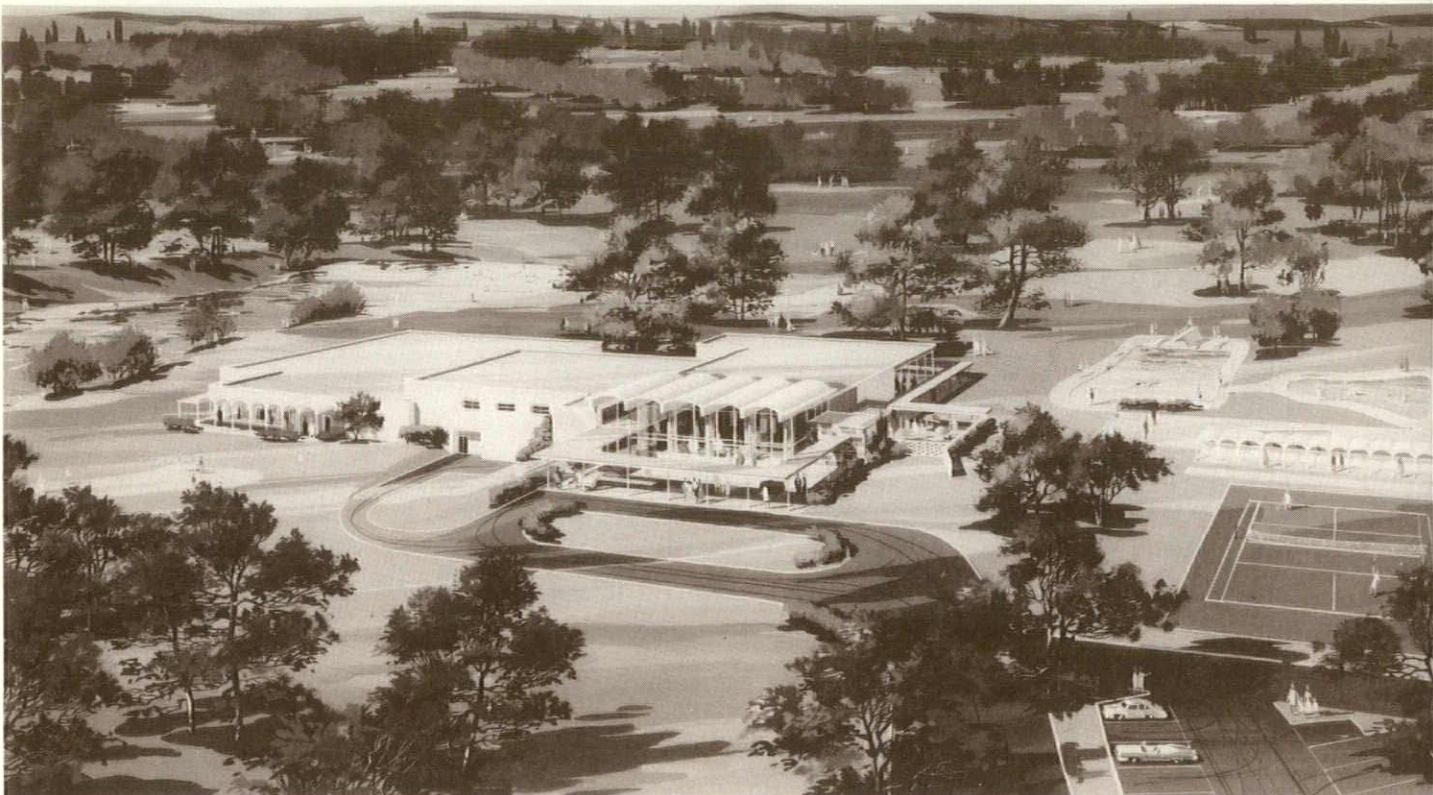
PROFESSIONAL BUILDING, 2100 K Street, Northwest, Washington, D. C. Architect, Morton W. Noble.

TWO COUNTRY CLUBS

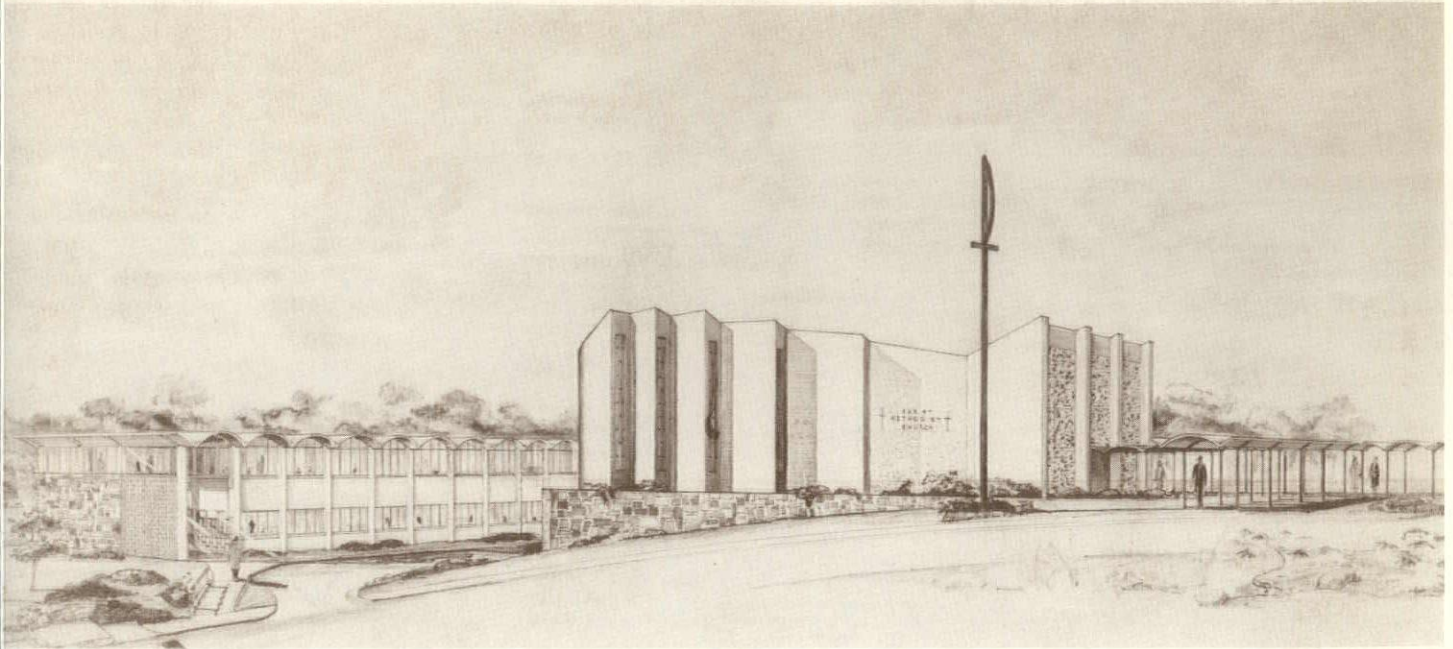
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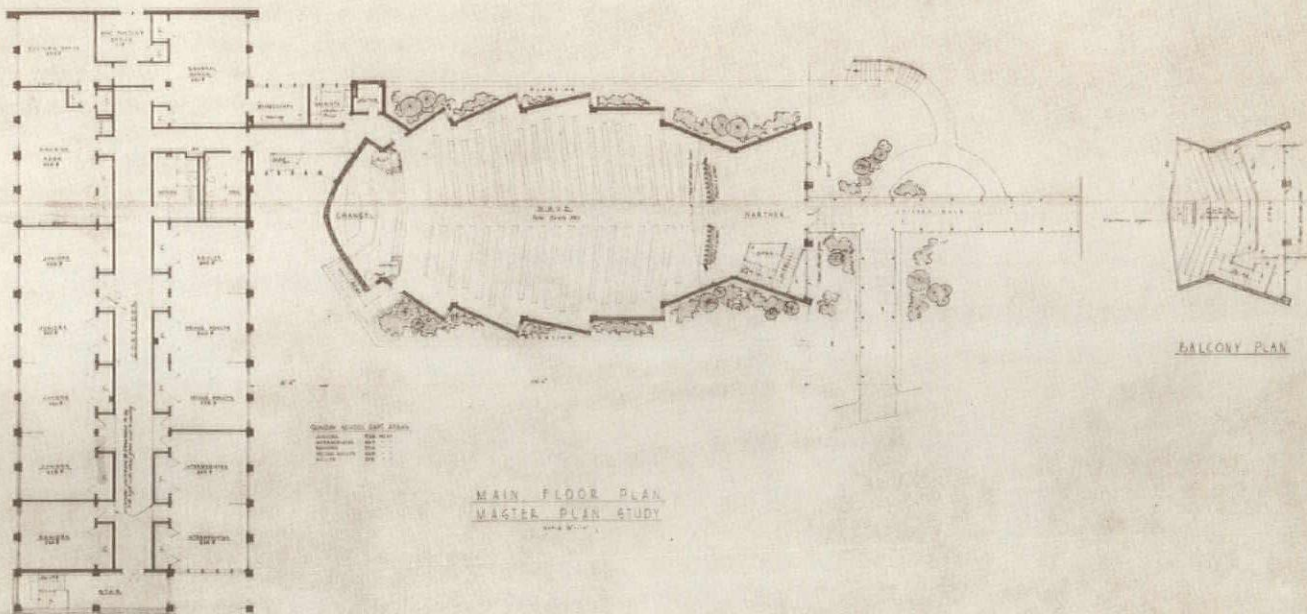
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922 New York Ave., N.W., Wash. 11,
NA

McCormick & Son, Inc.
Distributors Devco and Reynolds Co.
Color Consulting and Coordination Se-
ROY J. MORRIS, Color Consultant
5918 Georgia Ave., N.W., Wash. 11,
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PLUMBING & HEATING

**American Radiator and
Standard Sanitary Corp.**
Specifications for Plumbing and Heat-
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Crane Co.
For Specifications Contact
Washington Sales Office
6310 Chillum Pl., N.W., Wash. 11,
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Subsidiary of Caloric Appliance Corp.
Architectural Porcelain - Curtain Wall
Panels - Store Fronts - Service Sta-
912 Thayer Ave., Silver Spring, Md.
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Blueprints, Architectural Photos,
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Test Borings - Auger Borings
Rock Core Drilling - Soil Testing
1908 Sunderland Pl., N.W., Wash.,
CO

Joseph P. Sullivan
Estimating and Cost Analysis
Government and Private Projects
10005 Edward Ave., Bethesda 14, M
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Mickelson's
Prints and Paintings
Fine Picture Framing
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The Mosaic Tile Co. of Virgin
Tile Manufacturer
Warehouse and Showroom
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Standard Art, Marble & Tile C
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117 D St., N.W., Wash., D. C. NA