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Official Publication
Potomac Valley Chapter
of Maryland
M A Y
Vol. 5 No. 8

POTOMAC VALLEY AMERICAN INSTITUTE ARCHITECT OF ARCHITECTS

MAY 10 1961

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The Role of the Architect in the Federal City

Address at the Conference on the Appearance of the Federal City, Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D. C., January 10, 1961, by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Professor of Architecture, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N.Y.

You might consider it presumptuous of an outsider to talk to you about the appearance of your own city, and to offer suggestions for changes. My justification derives from my double status as an architectural educator and as a taxpayer. These qualifications give me a stake in the Federal Capital. As a taxpayer I believe that those agencies to whom the people of America have delegated the authority to look after government architecture, no longer invest my tax dollar wisely; and as an educator I am faced with the unpleasant fact that the architectural student can use the most costly public building investment in his own country only as a negative example.

In analyzing Federal building policy in the 20th century, a basic contradiction becomes at once evident. This contradiction is the claim to historical eclecticism on the one hand, and the disregard for the most consistent law of architectural history on the other. Our government designers try to justify the perpetuation of obsolete style concepts with reverence for tradition; yet, the architectural record of Western Civilization from Egypt to Williamsburg consists of a chain forged from the links each generation fashioned according to their own standards. The Greeks built

like Greeks, the Moslems like Moslems, the Baroque rulers in the form vocabulary of the Baroque, and the Pilgrim Colonials like Pilgrim Colonials. In spite of the utilization of formal elements, developed by their forefathers, genuine style periods developed because the social and spiritual characteristics of the times were cast into distinct, unduplicable features. The Romans showed their lack of religious creativeness by perpetuating an odd hybrid style of Greek and Etruscan temples; but their Basilicas and their Thermae are truly original architecture because they testify to a new social order. And it would have never occurred to the Archbishop of Frankonia to commission his new palace at Wuerzburg in the Gothic tradition of his church, when the Counter Reformation demanded at that particular moment in history the exact opposite in architectural expression. Historicism in architecture can have no other meaning than the acknowledged obligation to dynamic continuity as men's gift to future men. True reverence for tradition shows itself in preserving the best of that record, not by imitating what has past.

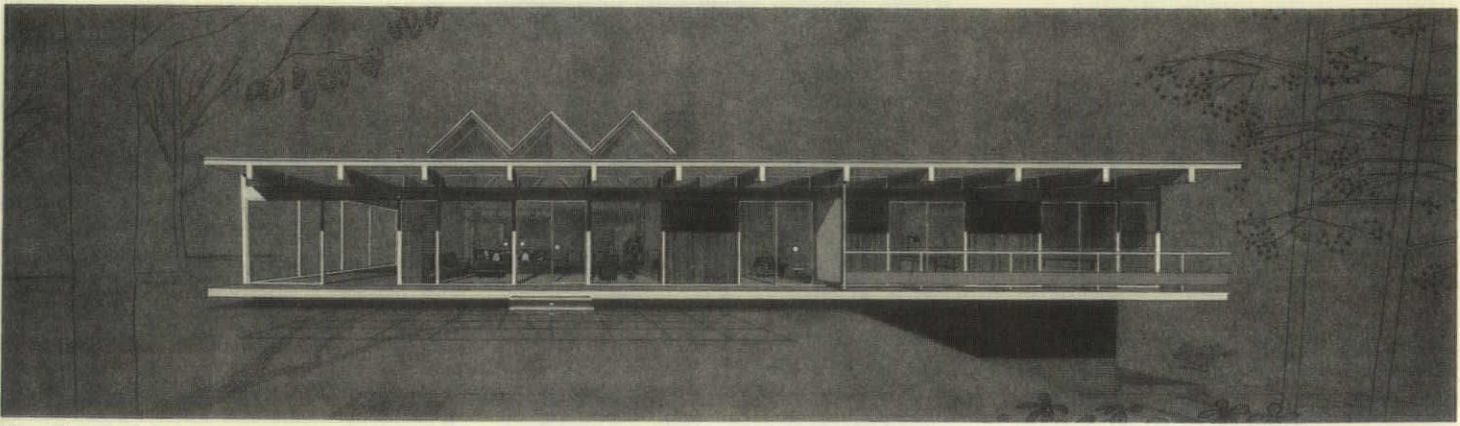
I can think of only 3 countries where this law of architectural continuity has been persistently ignored. In Prussia, the epaulette Renaissance facades of the

Wilhelmstrasse interpreted the very same Roman tradition, that had spelled out the Four Freedoms to Jefferson and Latrobe, as the fit architectural expression for the totalitarian state. On the contemporary scene, the other 2 anti-historical governments are the Soviet Union and the United States. Not an eyebrow would be raised or a single letter dispatched to a congressman if these two buildings were erected this year in Washington or in any other of the fifty American government reservations. They happen to be the Communist Party headquarters in Stalingrad and Katowicze!

But it is equally evident that no Russian would cry out against Imperialistic pollution if these two Washington buildings were duplicated in Moscow.

I would like you to take a good look at these two buildings because they exemplify the fallacy, and, in a way, the dishonesty of our government building policy. On November 10 of last year, the Washington Post quoted the Assistant Commissioner in charge of Design and Construction of the General Service Administration as saying that "in the National Capital at least, architecture should retain a link with the past," yet, he also asserted in the same breath

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Residence for Dr. and Mrs. Kurt E. Shuler, Bethesda, Md. Harold Lionel Esten, Architect.

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NEXT REGULAR MEETING

12 Noon, May 3, 1961

Brook Farm Restaurant

7101 Brookeville Rd., Chevy Chase, Md.

June Meeting — June 5, 1961

Robert J. Lewis Honored

Robert J. Lewis, of the Evening Star of Washington, has received an award in The American Institute of Architects' Eighth Annual Journalism Awards Competition. The award was presented for two series of articles which constitute an admirable example of the kind of service a real estate editor can perform in the coverage of current city development problems to create an informed public.

The articles appeared in 1960. One series had as its subject four restoration areas in the city of Washington: Capitol Hill, Georgetown, Foggy Bottom and the Kalorama Triangle, and described what had taken place, how the changes had been accomplished, the benefits to the public and the significance for the future. The second series dealt with the "Quality of the City" and was based in part on ideas synthesized by the planning philosopher Camillo Sitte.

Mr. Lewis was the first person to receive the top award in this competition in the year of its inception, 1954. He received an award in 1953 from the Washington-Metropolitan Chapter AIA for "Service to Architecture" and has been prominent in the list of winners of awards in journalism in several other years. As the writer of a new column called CITIES AND PEOPLE, now appearing in the Evening Star, Mr. Lewis has even wider scope to write of aspects of the city.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

A recent proposal to build a transmitting tower 175' above the street at the Telephone Building in Silver Spring has focused our attention on the skyline of Silver Spring. Depending on how long your attention span is, this can be a devastating experience. The center of our rich county is topped by an assortment of clocks, cooling towers, thermometer, and calendars, signs and sometimes even a car.

Two recent signs of the billboard variety went up comparatively unnoticed among the moving signs, the banners at the filling stations, and the pylons posed seemingly for a trip into space and if these signs keep going up fighting for prominence, we may have the first sign into orbit over Silver Spring.

When we permit non-functional gadgets and signs to clutter our skyline, it is difficult to object to a tower which has a purpose, and if this tower can stimulate the community into some action in devising controls for our skyline, it will have served a worthy purpose beyond that intended by the Bell Telephone Engineers.

A realistic approach of the situation would call for the elimination of all existing signs that are mounted above the roof line and a review of all signs by a committee of vigilantes made up of interested members of the business community, for it is they that will most directly benefit from the introduction of some controls in the skyline of Silver Spring.

Sincerely,

Jack C. Cohen



Dear Editor:

Allow me to congratulate you for the wisdom of your commentary on the role of the automobile in our society as reported recently in the Washington Post. I see that Lewis Mumford in his recent book on the City in History has given considerable backing to your argument and, I might add, my own, that the use of the automobile as a means of mass transportation in our great cities is a blunder which will destroy our cities eventually.

As a commuter myself I can testify to the physical and mental burden which is placed upon urban workers by twice daily guiding an automobile through miles of agonizing traffic.

Thousands of workers in Washington live within easy bicycling range of their place of employment. If only the planners had provided cycling paths, perhaps paralleling existing roadways, sufficient numbers of health conscious citizens would pedal to work, thereby relieving some of the load which the roads must carry.

Having just returned from several years residence in Europe, my wife and I have quickly noticed that our cities have lost much of their liveability since they've been taken over by the automobiles. We've noticed too that many of the quiet, winding country roads which we remembered from years gone by as lovely places for cycling and walking have vanished. It would seem as if even those who love to walk and cycle are being slowly forced to remain in their automobiles by the ever increasing swarms of traffic.

I hope that you and your organization can actually do something to improve the mass transportation situation along more rational lines before we're all engulfed in the smog and traffic jams beyond hope of salvation.

Sincerely,

Ernest F. Fisher

Duane-Lawrence Award

The firm of Duane and Lawrence have received first prize in the public buildings division of a competition held by the Masonry Institute. The building for which they received the award was the Memorial Evangelical United Brethren Church located at Colesville Rd. and Sligo Pkwy. in Silver Spring. Picture at left.

Role of the Architect

(continued from page one)

that the 10 public buildings now in the planning and construction stage would be "of contemporary design". Well, what IS contemporary, if this statement is to make any sense? Is it more than the omission of pediment and portico, the substitution of square piers for round columns? You can easily see from a juxtaposition of Mr. Pope's shameless eclecticism and Mr. Cret's so-called modern design, that they are twins—not identical twins, to be sure, but of one kind, born of the same mentality, at the same unfortunate moment in Washington's history.

You might object that Mr. Cret's building was designed before the Second World War, but this slide will show you that although government architects die, their influence does not fade away. Here you see three post-war structures of the most diverse functions: a Memorial Chapel for American Soldiers in Cambridge, England; our National Airport, and the Museum of History and Technology, known better as the Smithsonian Institution. And what do you get—I mean, what do I, the taxpayer, get in 1960? Merely the next edition of the Pope-Cret blueprints, the same pillar and architrave design, made contemporary by the extremely simple process of omitting capitals and sculptured pediment but adhering otherwise to the same heavy-handed, serial uniformity. The report in the Washington Post I have already quoted promised that "the Smithsonian Institution . . . will harmonize with the more massive monumental buildings of the nearby Federal Triangle," the architectural disqualifications of which I am recalling for you with this slide, refraining studiously from any comments which might tempt me to use non-parliamentary language. When James Renwick designed the first building to house the bequest of that wonderful non-conforming eccentric, Mr. James Smithson, he did not feel compelled to adhere either to the traditional Federal Classicism, nor to an archeologically precise Gothic Revival; the romantic nature of a unique collection consisting of exotic flora and fauna and curious scientific experiments, seemed to him—the artist of a Romantic age—most adequately expressed by a curious and non-conforming structure that served its purpose for 100 years.

The tragedy of the new Smithsonian building, and its significance as test case

for the incompetence of Federal design selections, lies in the fact that a brilliant solution was available. In 1939, Eliel and Eero Saarinen submitted for the then open Smithsonian competition this design. There is no time in this very limited speech to analyze the excellence of its plan and form composition. I would, however, like to point out to you that the Saarinens understood and expressed the profound difference between classicism as inspiration and classicism as imitation. Even if we frown today at the lusty individuality of the old Smithsonian, the switch to Classicism is only justified if the architect knows that Classicism is not a style but an attitude—as the Saarinens did. By definition "classical" derives from what we still today call "class", meaning the best, and by usage it indicates a coherent system of thought and execution based on a geometrically ordered relationship of all parts to the whole.

The building of the Saarinen design would have been the first public recognition of a profound and fateful change in the government image since the founding of the United States. By knowing history one can understand the idealistic motivations of Jefferson and Latrobe, and forgive them their architecture. And by recalling the relish and exuberance of an immigrant society one can at least explain the 19th century habit of quarantining government power in a mausoleum while the city below "the hill" tasted unfettered freedom. The "Decumanus Maximus" in Wisconsin and South Dakota, leading to an ersatz Capitoline Hill, was an adolescent dress-up party. But this phase of American History is over. Government has become a public enterprise in which each taxpayer and each draftee own shares. Business and administration have become partners. Whether we call it "democracy in action" or Welfare State, we all know that America is a collective obligation, survival depends on efficient cooperation in a multitude of fields, none of which calls for expressed monumentality. SACRED DISTRICTS IN CAPITALS HAVE BECOME OBSOLETE.

This historical development must be recognized to serve as design incentive for Washington. This new relationship of government to people is the next link, OUR link, in the chain of architectural continuity. If we fail to grasp its design potential, we shall go down in history as the Barbarians of the 20th century

who lacked dedication and cultural insight for an original creative effort and who had no public architecture because they had no public ideals.

The question then must be asked in conclusion: what is the attitude toward creative effort if we reject both the historical pastiche, of which the new Senate Office Building is a very telling example; and if we reject also the contemporary triple-action die, cast by the spiritual unanimity of the Fine Arts Commission, the General Services Administration, and the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. The first of these two factors is the absolutely essential interaction of planning and architecture—not as two separate functions, but as the closest possible collaboration within the same office. Cities of today, but quite particularly a Federal City, can no longer be designed by putting up a succession of single buildings wherever a vacant site happens to be. This fact has long been recognized in Europe, where, to give you just one example, the London County Council employs 250 trained planners and designers, working under one roof—and London has the finest contemporary city sectors to show for it.

The second decisive factor in a new architecture for Washington is the active participation of America's private architects without the interference of a Fine Arts Commission unless it is staffed by men of qualifications to meet the standards of the best American architects. The reluctance of private firms to work with the government can be overcome if the commissioning agencies respect creativeness. So far, this has only happened abroad in Embassy projects, while here at home the list of fatal omissions keeps growing. It was an inexcusable lack of conviction, foresight and courage, when the responsible Federal building agencies permitted the 1964 World's Fair to go as a political sop to New York which needs it like a hole in the head. No efficient fight was put up to save the incalculable advantage of a Fair site, designed as a magnet for the capital and as a new town for the region. The detailed design submitted by Victor Gruen Associates embodied precisely that interaction of planning and architecture, born from one contemporary concept, which is a basic condition for a thriving 20th-century Washington.

If controlling committees must be, then let them be run by men who KNOW

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Role of the Architect

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the business of modern planning, who have the discernment to recognize architectural talent when they look for it, and who are young enough to develop with the developing, planning and design revolution. Only under their influence can Washington become a city in which government LIVES as part of every day's activities, and where every day's existence is part of the collective responsibility for government.

On the Boards

In the office of
JOHN HENRY SULLIVAN, JR.

County Federal Savings and Loan Association, Interior, Rockville, Md.

Addition to Residence for Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Katzenbach, Washington, D. C.

Addition to Residence for Mr. and Mrs. Howard Jobe, Washington, D. C.

Addition to Rock Creek Kay-Cee Club, Inc., Bethesda, Md., approximate construction cost, \$75,000.00, scheduled for completion July 1961.

St. Mary Star of the Sea School and Convent, Indian Head, Charles County, Md., approximate construction cost \$260,000.00, scheduled for completion September 1961.

St. Matthias Church, School and Convent, Seabrook, Prince Georges County, Md., approximate construction cost \$350,000.00, scheduled for completion September 1961.

In the office of
EUGENE A. DELMAR

Work Recently Completed:

Radio Station, Washington, D. C., for United Broadcasting Company

Pyrotechnic Tunnel, White Oak, Md., for Naval Ordnance Lab

Cancer Chemotherapy Lab, Bethesda, Md., for Microbiological Associates, Inc.

Work in Progress:

Apts.—700 units—Laurel, Md., for Laurel Limited Partnership

Apts.—15 units—Riverdale, Md., for Rite Development Co., Inc.

Development Houses—85 total—Annandale, Va., for Michnick Bros.

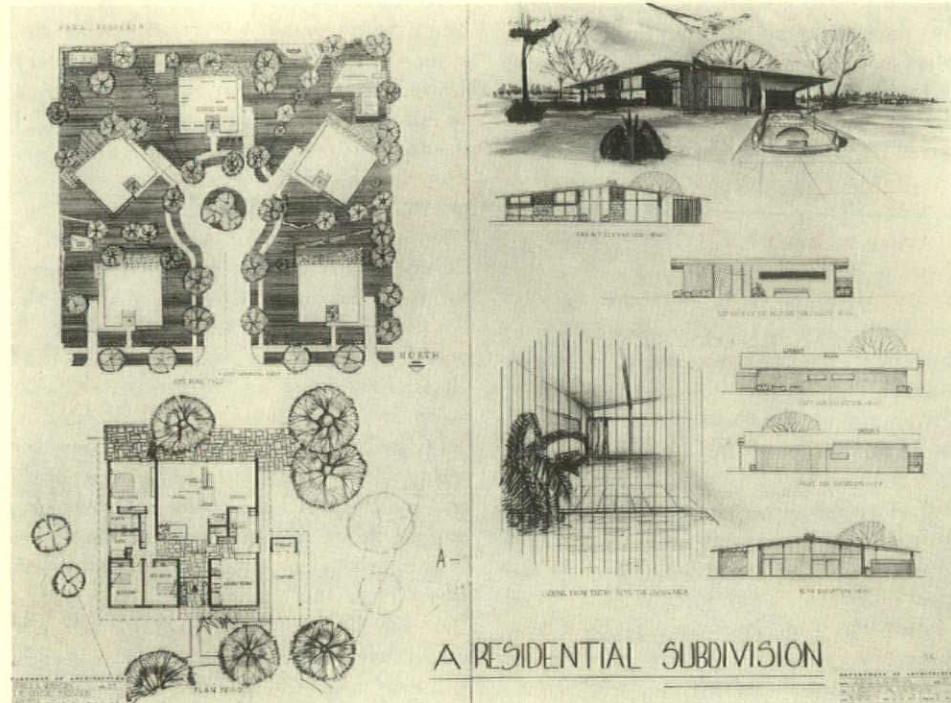
Work on Boards:

Apts.—42 units—Takoma Park, Md.

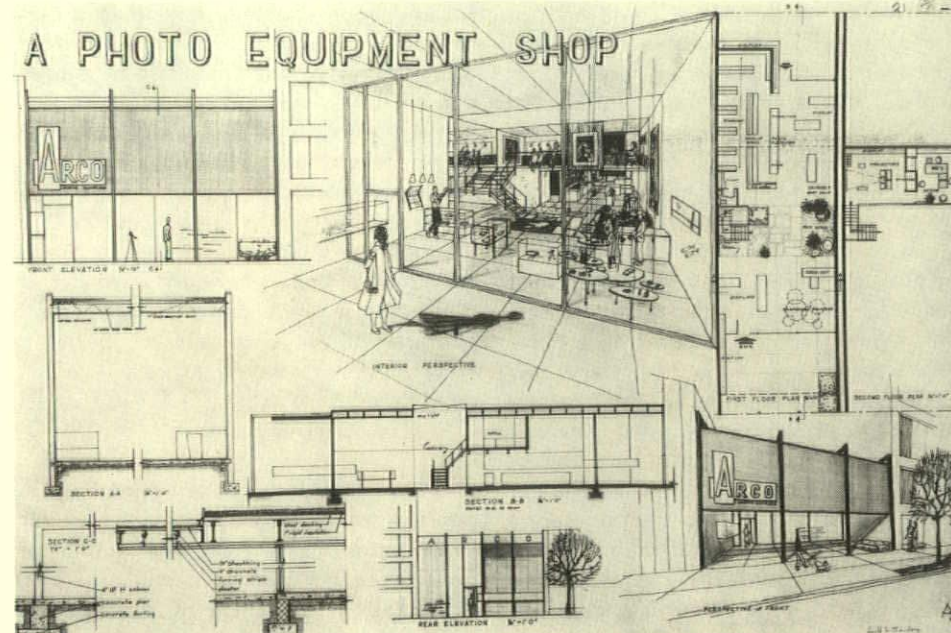
Development Houses—6 models—1,000 projected—Fort Washington Estates, for Dilston, Inc.

Warehousing—Rockville, Md.—for Sanstig, Inc.

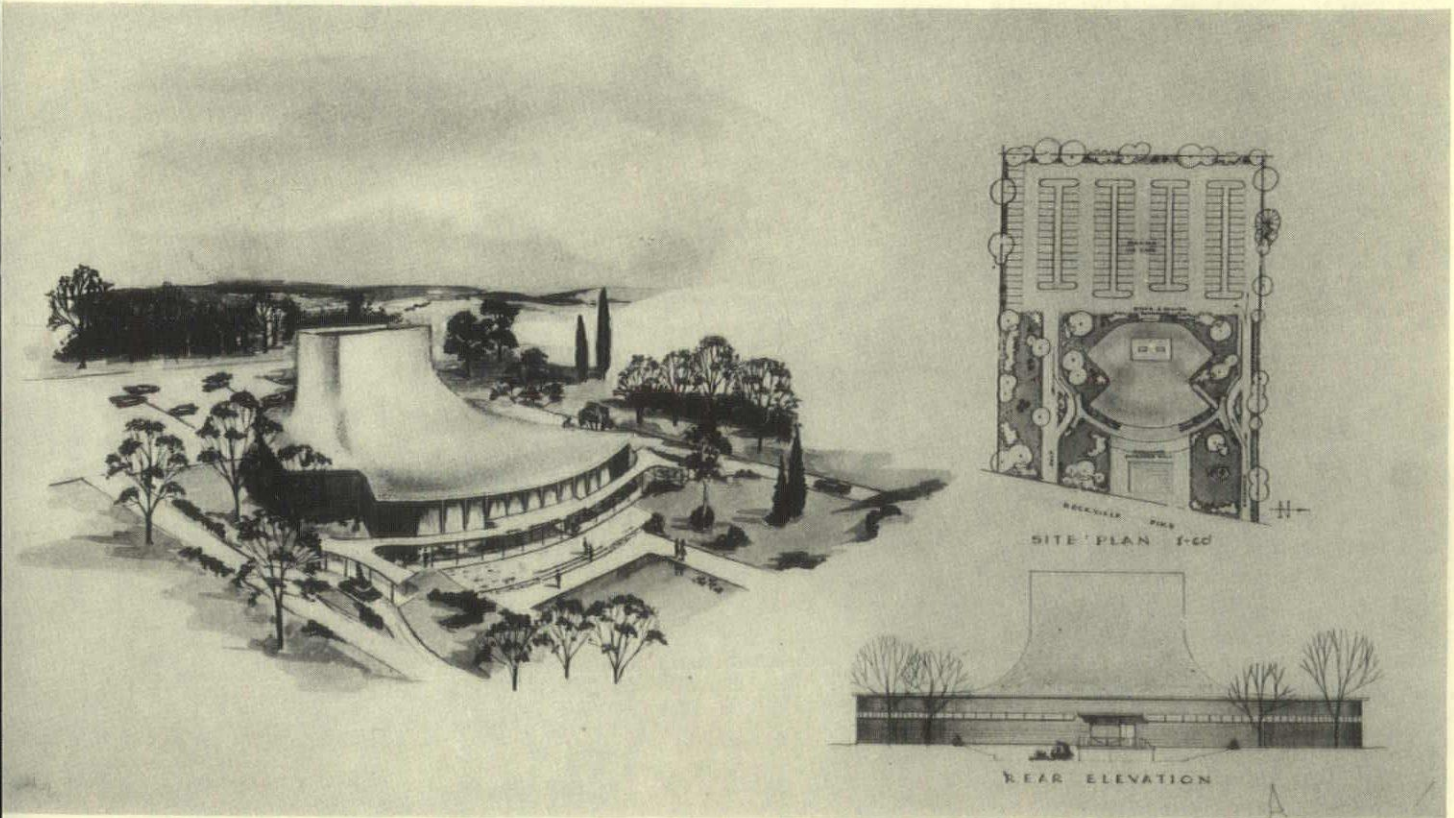
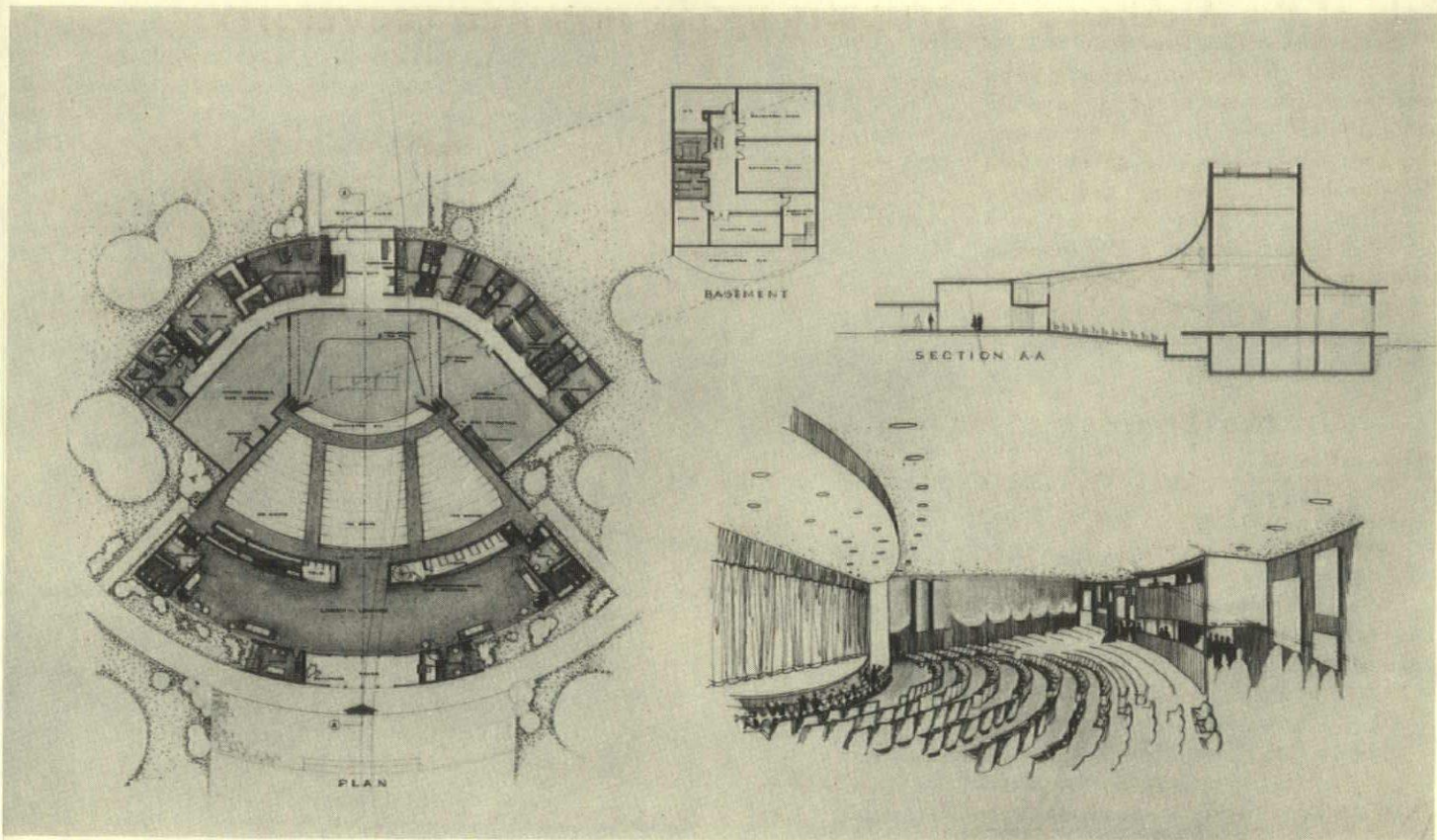
STUDENT WORK HOWARD UNIVERSITY



A Residential Subdivision, designed by Gerald A. Winston.
A six-week problem in Architecture 37.

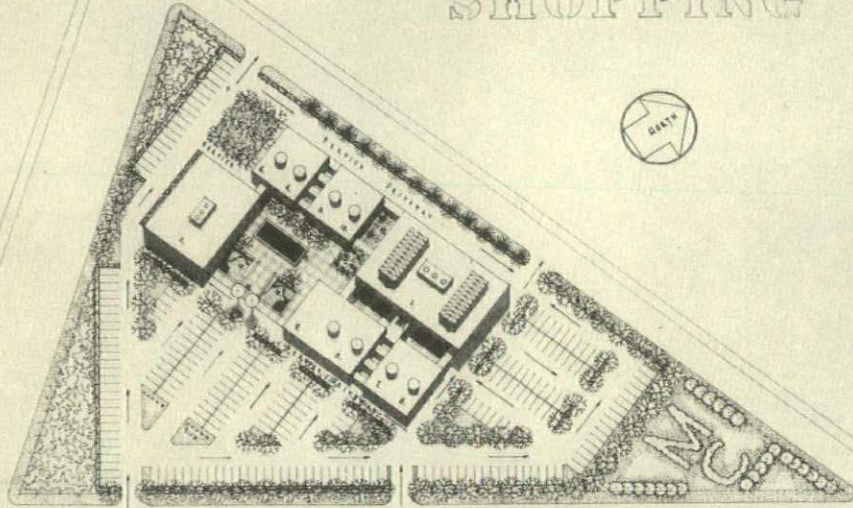


A Photo Equipment Shop, designed by Harold L. Sanders.
A five-week problem in Architecture 37.



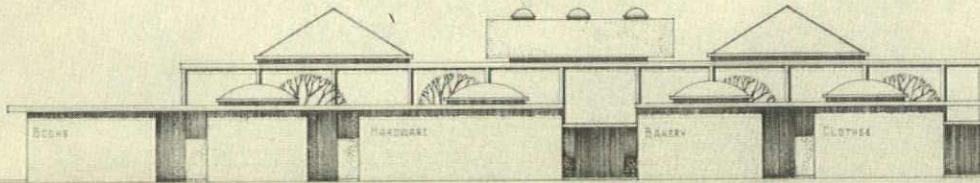
A Theatre for the Drama, designed by Gary Bowden.
 A six-week problem in Architecture 101.

A NEIGHBORHOOD SHOPPING CENTER



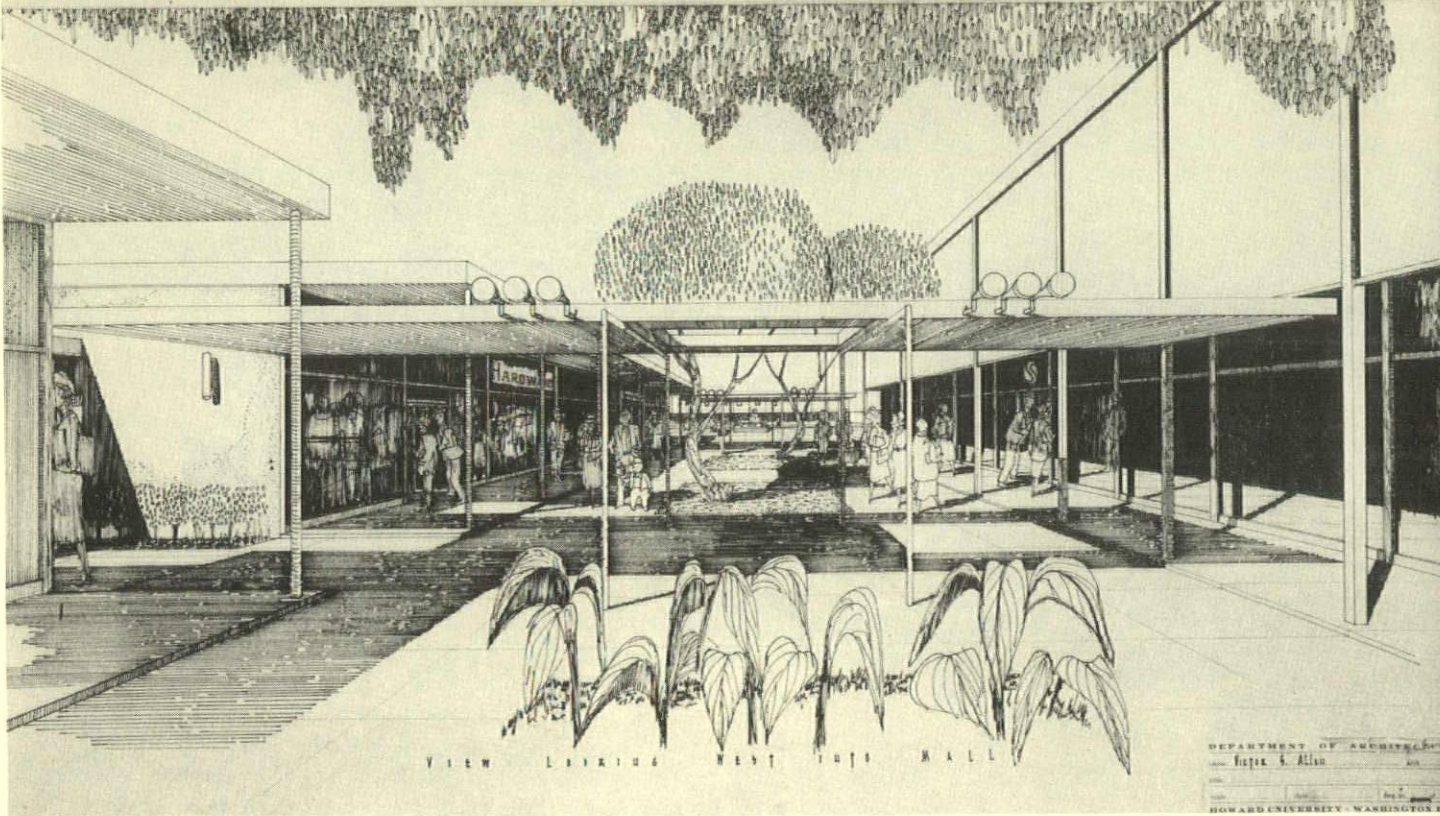
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 11. Fountain Food
 12. Souvenir Shop
 13. Dining Terrace
 14. Umbrella Garage

SITE PLAN SCALE: 1"=40'-0"



SOUTH ELEVATION (GROUP OF STORES INCLUDING SUPERMARKET) SEVENTH VIEW

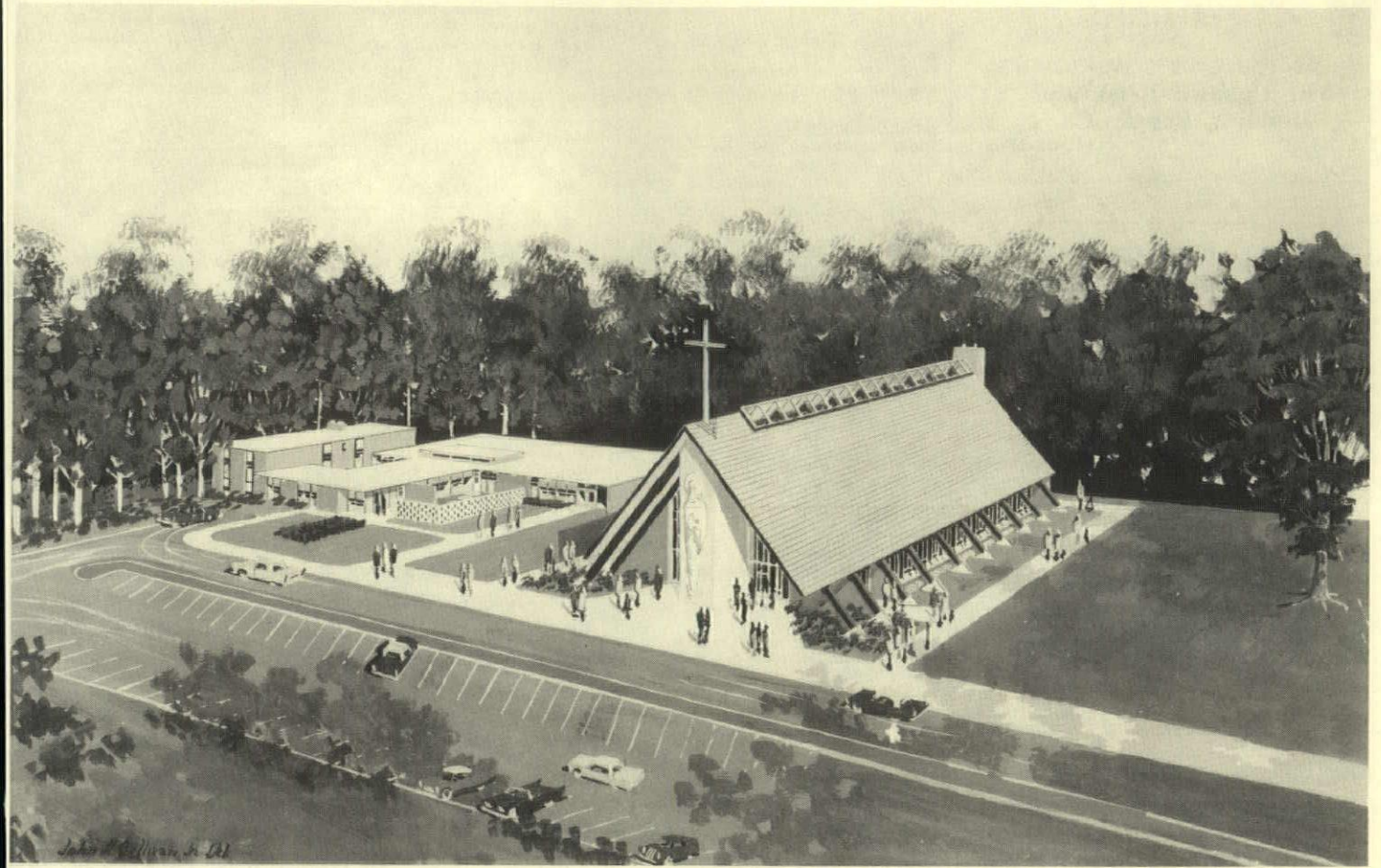
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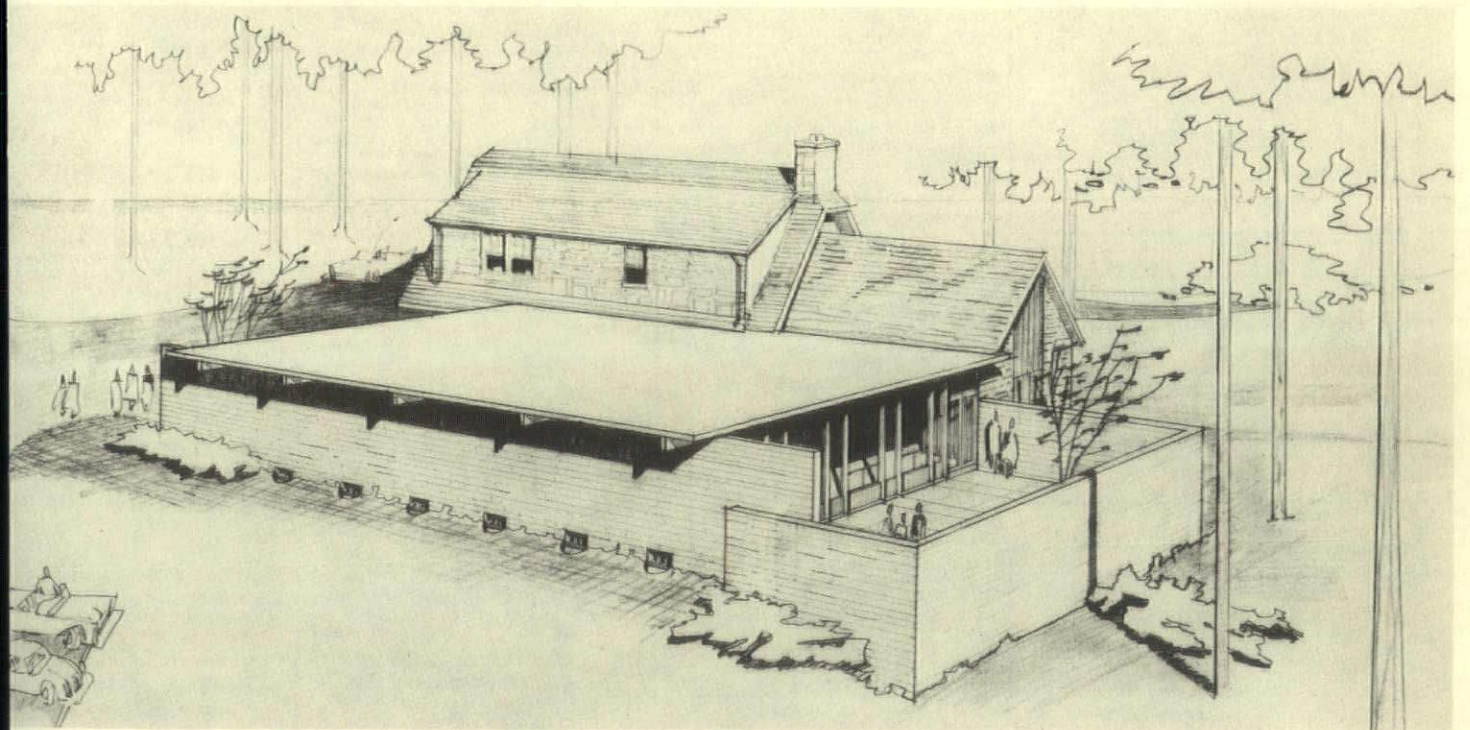
VIEW LOOKING WEST INTO MALL

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE
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A Neighborhood Shopping Center, designed by Victor S. Allen.
A five-week problem in Architecture 102.



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