

tells me that I'm needed, but that all this isn't about me, much less about my vanity. And I'll have a good

lunch, with coffee and fruit and nuts and pasta and an egg and a slice of squash, enough to satisfy my hunger

and fuel my work, because God gave the food and the work both in answer to my prayers. ■

Monument to Failure

by Justin Shubow

The General Services Administration, together with the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office, has determined that one of the most banal buildings in the nation's capital is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. It is the Department of Education's headquarters, originally dubbed Federal Office Building 6 (FOB 6) and later renamed the Lyndon Baines Johnson Building, located just south of the National Mall across the street from the Air and Space Museum. The adjacent four-acre plaza has also been found to be eligible for the register. The site is where the National Memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower is to be constructed.

The LBJ Building is a generic mid-century modernist box faced with a grid of identical, unadorned windows. It fills an entire superblock. When the sterile and forgettable structure was completed in 1961, nearby tenants said it looked like an IBM punch card. One of its accoutrements is an abandoned sunken courtyard that the building's occupants call "the pit." The plaza, diagonally bisected by Maryland Avenue (an important boulevard radiating southwest from the Capitol), is a paved hardscape that is mostly a parking lot, with nary a tree

or human being in sight. The former chairman of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts said that the desolate plaza "frightens you a little."

The LBJ Building stands out as a key mid-century modernist building that the GSA is trying to put on the register. Architecture from that period contained a number of strands, all of which were united by their minimalism, abolition of ornament, and use of exposed industrial materials: steel, glass, and reinforced concrete. One of the leading strands of mid-century modernism was the International Style (which actually dates back to the 1920s). As its name suggests, the style eliminated any concern for local context and national traditions, as did all forms of mid-century modernism. Its primary form is that of a sleek, sharp-edged box with a flat roof and flat walls, especially glass "curtain walls," sheets of glass hung from the exterior steel skeleton. The ethos of the style is that of efficient, faceless corporate bureaucracy.

Another strand of mid-century modernism was brutalism, an intimidating, fortress-like style inspired by concrete Nazi flak towers and first displayed in Britain's socialist public housing. Brutalist structures are massive, with expansive rough-concrete walls and deeply recessed windows.

Brutalism was a dramatic departure from the International Style in its rejection of sleekness and flatness. Its spirit was not that of transnational corporations but of utopian totalitarianism.

The move to preserve the LBJ Building and plaza represents a striking lack of aesthetic judgment. The GSA has said that it intends to add other mid-century modernist buildings to the register in the future, too, including some in the vicinity, thereby constraining future development in the neighborhood. They have completed a forty-four-page single-spaced report (at who knows what cost) justifying the buildings' eligibility by, for instance, claiming that the austere windswept plaza demonstrates the work of a "master" landscape architect. The GSA now seeks to preserve what it has neglected for decades.

If the administration is successful in placing the LBJ Building on the register, it will be not only according it a symbolic honor, but qualifying it for certain financial provisions that encourage preservation. Placement on the register will also affect future development in the area, since the government must evaluate the effects of new undertakings on adjacent historic properties. Since the LBJ Building is modernist in style, that move could cause the government to require that

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new buildings nearby be modernist so as not to have an adverse effect on the historic property.

The GSA report acknowledges that the building was designed by an undistinguished firm that treated the project as a simple business job, not an architectural creation. Square footage mattered more than aesthetics. The undecorated, mute exterior features no symbols of education or even of government. (By contrast, the logo of the National Education Library, located in the building, is a classical Ionic column supporting an open book.)

The report nevertheless claims that the building satisfies two of the criteria for historic preservation under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the law that created the National Register of Historic Places. The first criterion is that the property in question embodies “the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values.” That criterion is satisfied because the building introduced “Modernist architectural and landscape design aesthetics of the late 1950s into the federal vocabulary of Washington, D.C. The starkly mid-twentieth-century imagery of FOB 6 sets it apart from earlier federal buildings within Washington, D.C.”

The second criterion requires that the property be “associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.” This criterion is satisfied, too, since

FOB 6 embodies the seminal efforts of the newly created General Services Administration (GSA) to implement . . . a master plan for the design, construction, and funding of federal office buildings in the District of Columbia. . . . FOB 6 also reflects the direct participation of the federal

government in the redevelopment plans for Southwest Washington, becoming the first federal office building constructed specifically as part of the Southwest Urban Renewal Plan.

In other words, the GSA argues that the LBJ Building is important because it signifies the heavy hand of the federal government in Washington’s built environment.

The report fails to mention that the urban renewal project (which displaced 23,500 residents and more than four hundred acres of row houses and businesses) was a disaster. It gave rise to a brutalist federal enclave inspired by the rationalist, totalitarian principles of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier. It includes such hated projects as L’Enfant Plaza and the headquarters of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The GSA considers the latter an exceptional example of architecture and urban planning. The “renewal” razed the walkable street grid in favor of highways and superblocks, whose enormous buildings choke corridors and obscure vistas. The district lacks greenery, retail space, and other human amenities. The only reason anyone voluntarily goes there is to find parking near the Mall.

There is, however, precedent for reviving a derelict neighborhood in the city, one that takes a quite different approach. In the 1960s, Pennsylvania Avenue was dilapidated after years of neglect. The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation was created to refurbish the boulevard, and it was a resounding success. Many Americans would like to see Maryland Avenue—the forgotten “sister” to Pennsylvania Avenue—and the surrounding district revitalized along similar lines. Preserving the LBJ Building would make this difficult if not impossible to do.

Nowhere does the report consider whether it is a good or bad thing that

the LBJ Building incarnates the federal government as the most gigantic business on Earth. The building conveys the ethos of massive government and social engineering in which workers and citizens are cogs in a machine—compare the IBM punch card mentioned above. The building inspires anomie, not civic order; vandalism, not virtue.

It is true that the LBJ Building is harmonious with its ugly surroundings. But the whole precinct violates the integrity of the founders’ classical vision for the capital as initiated in the L’Enfant Plan and perfected by the 1901–1902 McMillan Plan, which created the Mall as we know it. Those masterful plans led to buildings that are national landmarks and embody American democracy. The decision to allow modernist buildings and modernist urban planning to deface the Monumental Core was like permitting a shopping mall to be planted in the middle of Yosemite. If constructing shopping malls in national forests had been the trend at the time of construction—suppose there had been a “Destructionist Movement”—the GSA’s preservation philosophy would find the shopping malls eligible for the National Register.

The GSA’s official history of its modernist buildings admits that its mid-century modernist buildings are largely failures:

Many buildings were considered to be lacking in quality or innovation or both. Common faults found with buildings of this era include bland exteriors that were uninviting and a general impersonal feeling to facades. Architectural critics cite a lack of noteworthy designs that offer a sense of timelessness to the buildings. . . . Critiques of GSA’s buildings of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s were generally harsh, and while GSA and the Federal

government attempted to rectify design issues, few positive reviews of Federal architecture from the study period exist. . . .

A skeptical general public often sees buildings of the Modern era as being expendable, or cold and offensive, or functionally obsolete. Others may overinflate the importance of individual buildings as judged against the large number of buildings of the Modern era. It is important to avoid the tendency to allow personal taste in architecture to outweigh legitimate criteria for determining the historic significance of these buildings.

Apparently, the taste of the general public, even if there is widespread consensus, is of little import. The bureaucrats—namely the historic preservation officers and architectural historians who work for the government—know better. A building might make the general public's lives worse, but that is irrelevant.

The historical preservation movement was originally founded after World War II to protect *good* buildings that were threatened with being torn down and replaced by far worse architecture. It was not about preserving the old simply because it is old. But the movement came to be captured by modernists, who now dominate historic preservation boards. Today, banality, coldness, offensiveness, and functional

obsolescence can be *grounds* for preservation if these qualities represent the relevant architectural era. They do not admit the possibility that an era could be *bad*. Architecture, to them, is a self-contained field with its own evolutionary imperatives. This is warmed-over Hegelian spiritualism: Everything—whether art or architecture, morality or politics—is to be judged according to whether it advances or retards the inevitable unfolding of History, the self-revealing “logic” of its time. Hegel himself said that a great man, a mover of History, “must trample down many an innocent flower or crush to pieces many an object in his path.” Modernists apply this destiny to “great” architects, too. The logic of preservation, in other words, triumphs over living, breathing people. Critics call this “historicism,” the philosophy that underlies both communist and fascist theories of progress.

Architectural elites know just how foreign their values are to the public and its leaders—which is why they rarely articulate them. In 2011, at a talk at Georgetown University in front of a small audience, former GSA chief architect Edward A. Feiner, whom *Esquire* called the most powerful architect in America, bragged about the agency's success in achieving the aggressively modernist agenda of its leadership: “It's amazing what you can do when no one's looking.” And he said about George H. W. Bush that, while

president, “he was kind of oblivious as to what was going on in government, which was good.” Under Feiner's tenure, the GSA hired some of the most avant-garde architects in the country, including the “starchitects” he personally admires. This resulted in, among other things, a courthouse that resembles a spaceship and a federal building that looks like a schizoid robot. Feiner knew that this was not the sort of architecture the president or the American people are looking for in their public buildings. The personal taste of the GSA leadership reigned supreme over those of the common man.

This is no small matter. Our civic buildings don't just shape our shared culture. The GSA's Public Buildings Service is America's largest development agency; it has a budget in the billions. The agency has succeeded not only by flying under the radar. For half a century, our elected and appointed leaders have been failing us. Either they do not “see” the excrescent federal buildings that are being constructed before their eyes; or they do not understand the significance of architecture in the polity; or they lack the backbone to stand up to our architectural high priests. It is high time that our leaders reclaim federal art and architecture.

One place to start is to reject the obviously self-serving and ill-considered effort by the GSA to secure historic designation for the LBJ Building, a monument to architectural failure, not excellence. ■