



Architect Marcel Breuer overcame a particularly difficult design problem in planning the HEW building (center of diagram, photo at right) because a major sewer and tunneled leg of a freeway run under a good portion of the site. Breuer "wraps" the building around exhaust shafts from the freeway tunnel and suspends it like a bridge from steel columns.

Breuer's New HEW: Fine Designs, Dollar Signs

By Wolf Von Eckardt

Marcel Breuer has wrought another minor miracle.

For the second time, the famous architect has designed a federal office building which turned out to be less expensive than originally estimated.

Breuer's first building here is the headquarters for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, a gracefully curved giant that is somewhat incongruously tucked away in an ill-

planned mess of enormous and enormously mediocre government buildings between the Southwest Freeway and L'Enfant Plaza.

Commissioned in 1963 and completed in 1968, the HUD Building is the only federal building in Washington that truly answered President Kennedy's call for "the finest contemporary American architectural thought."

It cost \$20.9 million—29 per cent less than the government's Public Building

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Service had estimated. Per square foot it was, no doubt, the best construction bargain we taxpayers have received in a good many years.

Breuer's second building, on which construction began early this month, will house the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. It is located at the foot of the

Capitol, opposite the Botanical Gardens, and will lead the parade of government offices that marches down Independence Avenue.

The HEW Building is now estimated to cost \$33 million rather than the \$39-\$40 million the government thought it would cost—a 19 per cent saving.

That is quite a feat in these days of galloping building cost escalation. It is quite a contrast to the FBI

Building, for instance, which was to cost \$60 million when it was first conceived in 1962 and has now run up to \$109.6 million.

Yet, like HUD, the new HEW Building looks far from cheap. On the contrary. Esthetically — and functionally, too—it promises to be a far superior work of architecture than other recent office buildings hereabouts.

"I wish I could say we kept the cost down because

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Breuer's New HEW

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we are such wonderful architects," says Breuer, who is nevertheless—in my view, at least—a wonderful architect. "But that is just not true."

What happened, Breuer explains, was that "the basic structural design is so simple, the government estimators could not grasp it."

"But when the contractors looked at the drawings, they would say: 'You mean all we have to do is put up this wall?'"

"And we would say: 'Yes, that's all. The ducts and pipes and fans are all inside the prefabricated wall panels.' The contractors saw that we saved them a lot of labor, complications and cost."

That was what modern architecture was to be all about when Marcel Breuer helped pioneer it half a century ago, back at the Bauhaus. It was to be the architecture of the new technology. Sensible, clean and honest. Like that good old Model T. Or a bicycle, say, which is what inspired Breuer to design the world's first tubular steel furniture.

Breuer, who will turn 70 on May 22, is the last survivor of the first generation of 20th century modernists, the school of architecture which, dominated by Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, created the International Style.

He worked in partnership with Gropius when he came to the United States in 1937. But when he began his independent practice after the Second World War, he also developed his unique style.

That style might best be described as Rational Expressionism. It fluctuates, at any rate, between the cool rationalism of Mies and the evocative, often arbitrary sculptural forms of Le Corbusier, though, unlike Le Corbusier, Breuer never loses a disciplined, intellectual control.

Even his most monumentally sculptural buildings, such as St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., for instance, derive their forms from the building's struc-

ture. Like Gothic cathedrals with their pointed arches and flying buttresses, Breuer's forms follow structural necessity. In that sense, Breuer is the most honest architect alive.

He is also a master of his craft—a master in his understanding and use of building materials and meticulous attention to detail. Now that Mies is dead, Breuer is, I would say, our greatest master builder in the old, medieval sense of the word.

It is that mastery of the art and science of architecture, rather than chasing short-cuts, that enabled him to "bring in" the HEW Building below the budget estimate. It will not be the most exciting building in Washington, nor should it be. An office is after all just an office that should modestly blend into the cityscape.

But the HEW Building (the credits for which read Marcel Breuer and Herbert Beckhard with Nolen-Swinburn and Associates) is surely a most ingenious solution to a difficult design problem.

The chief difficulty is that a major sewer as well as the tunneled Center Leg Freeway run under a good portion of the site. The building, in fact, is wrapped around the large exhaust shafts of the freeway tunnel.

Unable to rest the building on conventional foundations, Breuer suspends it like a bridge, as it were, from a few, strategically placed steel columns.

These columns support a grid of steel trusses that will be clearly seen on the roof of the building. Some of the trusses taper toward the facades and look like triangular fins.

The floors and exterior walls hang from this steel grid down to the second floor. The space below that is practically open, except for the stairs and elevators. It will be enclosed with glass, however, and partitioned to accommodate not only an entrance lobby but also exhibition space and an auditorium.

As on the HUD Building,

the facade of the building consists of deeply molded, precast concrete panels finished with granite. The projections provide shade and contain the ducts and pipes that normally take up interior space.

Another difficulty was that a part of the site belongs to Congress rather than to the city and George Stewart, the late architect of the Capitol, refused to trade it, presumably because he did not like the idea of a modern building facing his—well, hardly modern—Sam Rayburn House Office Building. As a result, the HEW Building had to be considerably set back—way out of line with the other buildings along Independence Avenue.

This gives us a sizeable plaza opposite the Mall where we least need one. Nor can it be landscaped because trees won't grow over the freeway tunnel. Breuer's solution is to turn it into a kind of urban landscape with granite paved depressions and pyramids to give it some interest and perhaps—I am keeping my fingers crossed—delight.

The question now is whether the Government Services Administration will use some of the money Marcel Breuer saved us to turn an exceptionally good building into an exceptionally good working environment. At HUD, GSA muffed this opportunity. Needless partitions and office cubicles, that serve no purpose other than the stratification of status, and humdrum interior design and furnishings have turned the interior of this fine building into a depressing rabbit warren.

I suppose that's what they will do with this one. But one can always hope.

Breuer, at any rate, has done his best. Our world, he told me with a sad smile, is being polluted not by modern architects and planners like himself, but by the bureaucrats and planners who fail to understand what modern design is trying to do for us.

BREUER M.
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Magyarazat:

HUD = Department of Housing
and Urban Development
(Lakásügyi és
városfejlesztési
minisztérium)

HEW = Department of Health,
Education and
Welfare (Egészségügyi,
Közüktatási és
Népjóléti
minisztérium)

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