



Cityscape Cool Design Ices Hot Air Of Routine Buildings

By Wolf Von Eckardt

Architectural Writer and Critic
IN THE WASHINGTON climate, noble words—even about architecture—have a way at times of turning into



Von Eckardt

hot air. But this fall's early breezes bring a refreshing announcement from the Government Services Administration's Public Building Service.

Marcel Breuer and Nolen, Swinburn & Associates, have been chosen to design the new Housing and Home Finance Agency building on 9th and D sts. sw.

It has been 14 months and a good many mediocre buildings since President Kennedy issued his architectural directive. Government buildings, he proclaimed, shall henceforth "embody the finest contemporary architectural thought."

It's hard to detect such thought in the new Federal building for Baltimore, for instance. Yet the drawings for this uninspired utility package were released three months after the ebullient Karel Yasko declared the directive "my creed and my banner."

Yasko, former State Architect for Wisconsin, came on the heels of the directive to take charge of GSA's design and construction as assistant commissioner. From where he now sits, he declared last spring the trouble with government buildings is only lack of talent.

"The profession of architecture in the U. S. can claim only a handful of pros, another little fistful of semipros, and the greater number are pedestrians," he said.

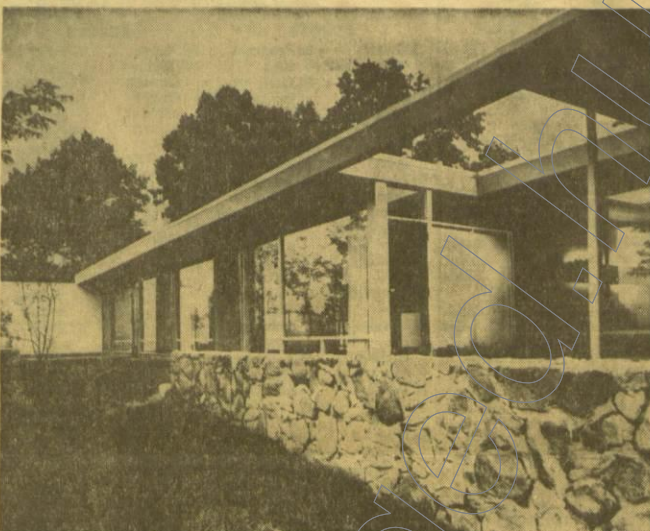
But no one can dispute either Breuer's talent or world-wide fame. He's tops. Right now he is building a whole new town in the French Alps. Parisians and tourists alike rave about his UNESCO building. Rotterdam has put his Bijenkorf department store on picture post cards.

His most inspired work to date is in the United States, however. The abbot of St. John's Benedict monastery in Collegeville, Minn., asked Breuer "to think boldly and to cast our ideals in forms which will be valid for centuries to come, shaping them with all the genius of present-day materials and techniques."

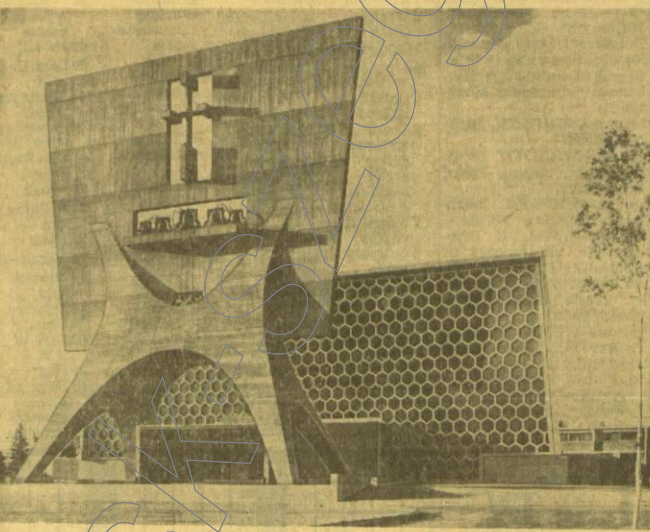
To judge from the photos, Breuer has done just that. In this area, Breuer has so far designed only one building, the home of Mrs. Seymour Krieger in Bethesda. As with his numerous other private residences, it shows that Breuer has not only had a great influence on this country's new architecture. This country's old architecture has had a great influence on him.

You see it in the simple frame structure and the use of wood and rough field stone, typical of the vernacular New England houses. The Krieger house, built in 1958, also displays Breuer's great gift of happily marrying the land with the building.

Breuer, at 61, is a somewhat stocky man with very light eyes and short, whitish-blond hair swept into a marvelously open face. For all his debonair, Continental manner, one can still see in him the precocious young sculptor who joined the Bauhaus in Weimar back in 1920.



The Breuer home of Mrs. Seymour Krieger at 6739 Brigadoon dr. Bethesda.



Breuer's St. John's Abbey Church, Collegeville, Minn.

"It would take me at least five hours to explain what the Bauhaus was like," he said over a drink the other day.

"I came there straight from Pecs, Hungary, and didn't know much German. No one much talked to me at first. Then a girl came up to me and said: 'The only way to paint is in the dark!'"

"Today this sounds crazy. But in those days we were all searching and tried everything. Everything was possible. And not one style but all manner of things emerged."

One of the first things to emerge was Breuer's tubular steel furniture. It gained both the Bauhaus and its gifted student immediate fame. At age 22 Breuer was put in charge of the carpentry shop with the title of Bauhaus master.

THE STEEL FURNITURE, still considered a classic in its field, was inspired by bicycle handlebars. It started Breuer on his life-long search for a new aesthetic, appropriate to our new way of life with its eight-hour day and gadgets even our fathers didn't dream of.

Breuer left the Bauhaus in 1928 to civilize technology in private practice first in Germany and then in England. In 1937 he went, with Walter Gropius, to Harvard—helping to bring the new architecture to this country. In 1946 he established his present firm in New York.

The site of the new HHFA building is less than ideal. It seems sort of tucked away in an awkward corner of the new Southwest. The government agency which will sooner or later become our Department of Urban Affairs or Community Development, deserves a more prominent position. It will symbolize our efforts to renew America's cities.

But Breuer doesn't complain. He is happy that much larger requirements have been reduced to a manage-



MARCEL BREUER
... inspired by bikes

and cables that ordinarily clutter up usable space.

Simple as it seems, this is a revolutionary idea, bound to have considerable influence on future building design.

The Breuer facade treatment, furthermore, promises to harmonize well with Washington's monumental buildings. Efforts to achieve this with curtain walls, no matter how marble, have not been very successful.

Harmony with surrounding buildings, Breuer feels, is mainly a matter of color, height and intangible artistic skill. It cannot be done by compromising traditional forms. "The Piazza San Marco in Venice," he said, "is perhaps the most harmonious work of urban design in the world. Yet every building is different. St. Mark's is Byzantine, the Doge's Palace is Gothic and the Procuraties are Renaissance. Each was built according to the needs and tastes of its time."

And that is what Breuer will do with HHFA. "It must be a modern building," he said. "But not, you understand, *schoengeistig*, affectation modern for modernity's sake. We must seek the right solution for our needs and our time."

"I am very excited to have been entrusted with such an important building in the Nation's Capital," he added, beaming like a boy.

And so are we.

ble 1,300,000 gross square feet of office space. The first design is due in about three months. Naturally, Breuer couldn't possibly tell yet what it might be like.

It's a fair guess, however, that he will further pursue his search for a new and more rational facade. He believes the curtain wall is not the end-all of architecture.

The now almost ubiquitous curtain wall structures with their glass or opaque panels are supported by a skeleton some distance behind the facade. "All well and good," says Breuer, "if the building needs only open spaces with no partitions. But if it must be subdivided, these interior columns are very much in the way."

FOR HIS IBM Research Center in France he has therefore designed a deeply sculptured facade which carries the load of the floors and roof. It is of reinforced concrete. The concrete is folded to give it strength. And within the folds is a host of mechanical devices, such as air-mixing boxes, pipes