

The Washington Post

U.S. Commission of Fine Arts achieves better architecture through review process

For 100 years, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts has ridden herd on Washington architecture, especially within the city's ceremonial core. In its role as design reviewer and adviser to the government, the CFA judges the aesthetic quality of every federal building; avenue, bridge, park, museum, monument, memorial, and every structure abutting federal property.

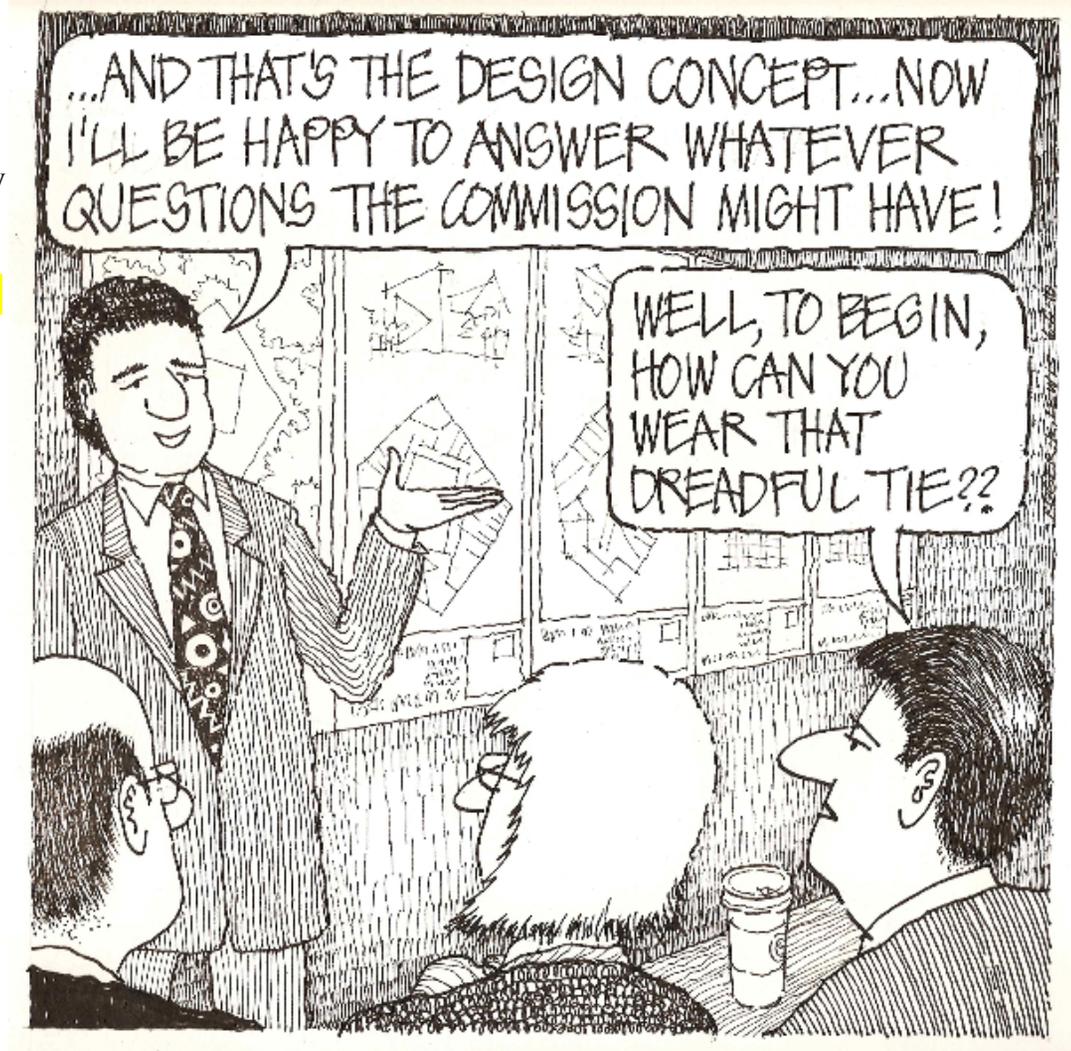
Despite sometimes questionable judgment and mixed results, the CFA's approach to achieving better architecture through constructive criticism is worth emulating.

Many jurisdictions lack a formal process for reviewing aesthetic design. Unfortunately, most projects in the United States never undergo rigorous aesthetic analysis. If they did, the quality of much of the nation's architecture would improve, because a rigorous, well-managed review process motivates project sponsors to select better architects and encourages architects to produce better designs.

This is the magic of the SRSOD.

It is founded on the common interest in designing great buildings in a great public realm to make the experience of place delightful.

There is more than one solution to every problem.



In Washington, the mere existence of the CFA has been a motivator, even if in retrospect some of the work it has blessed is less than stellar. Perhaps this is the commission's greatest legacy -- not guaranteeing design excellence, but **elevating design aspirations.**

*Good design is the key to achieving
the mission of the SRSOD:
enable the most people to function
without having to get into a car.*

The task of the presidentially appointed CFA is to focus on form, on the look of buildings and landscapes. The panel is concerned with massing and geometry, with overall visual composition and with artistic and technological expression. Commissioners worry about scale and proportion, materials and details, textures and colors. Equally important, they judge the symbolic and cultural attributes of each **design relative to the project's fundamental purpose and meaning, and to its site and historical context.**

Please review the Peanuts cartoon and quotes on the “Front Cover tab” of the Woodmont Triangle web-page.

But to celebrate the CFA's centennial, the National Building Museum recently sponsored a symposium, "Power, Architecture and Politics: The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the Design of Washington," which examined the organization's history.

Established as an independent, nonpartisan commission, the CFA's effectiveness occasionally has been compromised because of interference by Congress and the president, hence the use of "power" and "politics" in the symposium title. Autocratic commission chairmen and unqualified commission members sometimes have been problematic. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan reportedly wanted to disband the CFA.

The concept of a federal design review entity grew out of the **1901-02 McMillan Commission** plan for transforming the Mall. **With some of the nation's most famous designers -- Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Daniel Burnham and Charles F. McKim --** serving as members, the McMillan Commission resurrected the idea of a formal, axial space first envisioned by **Pierre L'Enfant** in his plan for the country's new capital.

*The proposed SRSOD for Maryland
is the tool needed to raise the quality of design,
making the pedestrian's experience of place more attractive.*

*This is why the price for additional FAR is
50% of its value — to encourage and reward
conscientious creativity and public-private cooperation.*

*Government is the “master developer”
— the “public realm” is their job!*

In the 19th century, the Mall became a picturesque, tree-covered park reflecting the romantic, Victorian-era ideas of landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing. It even had a railroad station.

Implementing the McMillan plan, which addressed the Capitol building and White House grounds as well as the Mall proper and Washington's growing federal park system, necessitated some kind of institutionalized design oversight. Consequently, in 1910 Congress created the CFA to provide expert advice concerning "matters of design and aesthetics as they affect the federal interest," and to "preserve the dignity of the nation's capital."

Since then, the CFA has grappled with hundreds of challenging projects. One of the most controversial was the Jefferson Memorial, enmeshing the panel in the "battle of the styles." In the 1920s and 1930s, American architects became increasingly interested in modernist design as an alternative to what they thought was unoriginal, formulaic Greek and Roman neoclassicism, still the preferred architectural language for federal architecture in Washington.

The battle was especially intense over architect John Russell Pope's 1938 "Beaux Arts" design for the Jefferson Memorial, modeled on the Pantheon in Rome. Pope's memorial architecture and Tidal Basin setting were hotly debated, in part because cherry trees were to be sacrificed. But the CFA especially disliked the Pantheon-inspired design advocated by the Jefferson Memorial Commission, which ultimately prevailed. The last Beaux Arts style memorial to be erected on the Mall, the Jefferson Memorial was built without CFA approval.

Among other controversial projects in which the panel played a part are Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Island; the Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II memorial design competitions; the Kennedy Center and Watergate complex; the American Institute of Architects headquarters building on New York Avenue; and the FBI headquarters building on Pennsylvania Avenue, where all buildings between the Capitol and White House require CFA scrutiny. Soon the commission will consider the Eisenhower Memorial now being designed.

I, for one, am particularly happy that the CFA lost that one. The Jefferson Memorial is one of my favorite experiences in Washington. But it is everything, not just one thing. And that is the key. The real world is "non-linear" — i.e. context, in every dimension, is materially relevant.

The District is -- pardon the pun -- on the wrong track. Taking a cue from New York's High Line, the District instead should more deliberately pursue the trolley tunnel project as a public-private collaboration, notwithstanding the city's fiscal circumstances.

The SRSOD is public-private cooperation!

To more fully appreciate the CFA legacy, visit its centennial exhibition "A Century of Design: The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, 1910-2010," on view at the National Building Museum through July 18.

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