TRANSPORTATION SQUARE OFFICE BUILDING

Architect: Robert Venturi in association with Caudill Rowlett Scott, with the assistance of Denise Scott Brown, Gerod Clark, and James Greifendorf

Location: Washington, DC

Client: Washington Redevelopment Land Agency

Area: 430,000 sf

Construction Cost:

Completion: 1968

Text excerpted from the original 1972 edition of Learning from Las Vegas by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour

This office building will not be built, either in the form in which it won first prize in a Washington Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) competition or in the form in which it was redesigned to pass the Washington Fine Arts Commission. It will not be built at all because the Fine Arts Commission design lost over 20 percent of its permitted area, and, in the year of negotiations with the Commission, construction costs rose 15 percent. Hence its economic feasibility was brought into question by one client group.

The design team was an association among Caudill Rowlett Scott, the developer Walker and Dunlop, Inc., of Washington, and ourselves. The competition requirements, the zoning restrictions, and the feasibility studies made by our associates produced the following program: Full development of the site for economic feasibility; therefore one-third coverage 90 feet high, one-third coverage 30 feet high, and one-third open land, resulting in a nine-story 430,000 square foot, speculative office building including a three-floor office and commercial building, a plaza in the front, and subgrade parking for just over 1,000 cars.

The site was a complicated one: a residual trapezoid in L’Enfant’s plan consisting of 3.7 acres at the edge of the Southwest Redevelopment area, bounded on the front by the diagonal of Maryland Avenue that mirrors Pennsylvania Avenue across the Ma II and focuses on the dome of the Capitol, seven blocks to the east. It fronts on 7th and 8th streets to the east and west and on the embankment of the mainline of the B&O tracks to the south. C Street, bisecting the block east and west, was to be removed, but its numerous below-grade services had to remain. Looming behind the railroad embankment are the Nassis and HUD buildings. The surrounding blocks contain freestanding, medium-size office slabs that are scattered in the manner of urban renewal townscapes, parallel to each other and facing north and south.

Our office building is a slab because this is a good shape for a speculative office building requiring flexible interior partitions. It sits near the back of the site facing north and south to avoid the subgrade services of the ghost of C Street and to reinforce the unity of the neighborhood with a slab analogous in form and orientation to the architecture around it. The shape of the low building follows the radial diagonal of Maryland Avenue. Its facade lines the street and directs the space along the street - except for the interruption of the entrance plaza - in the traditional manner of dense urban architecture and like that found along Pennsylvania Avenue.

The upper part of our complex therefore is Ville Radieuse - if not Los Angeles sprawl - frankly corresponding to its Southwest Urban Renewal context of parallel slabs in vast space, independent of the street pattern and, especially, of the radial axial avenues of Washington. The lower part, on the other hand, is Baron Haussmann. This is the part pedestrians see at close range; it is “interesting” in order to counteract the vacuous automobile space of the existing landscape circa 1984. In a fragmentary way it revives the directional space of the axial street and focuses on the white dome at its head. In the plaza are places to walk and sit and meet. This brings customers to the stores along the routes to the office building entrance.

The form of this complex -- to a great extent a result of economic, legal, and urban design requirements mentioned earlier -- acquired characteristics antithetical to tenets of Modern architecture, but all right with us.
after we thought about them. For example, the slab takes its shape from the constraints of the site; that is, the office building had to cover one-third of the site, be about 90 feet wide, be parallel to and behind the former C Street, and yet fit within the diagonal boundary of the railroad. Therefore the southwest corner of the slab is cut off. There is a long tradition of expedient exception and distortion of conventional systems to accommodate the exigencies of an urban site, from the street plan of almost any European city to the Pension Building of Alvar Aalto, whose zig-zagged bays we copied. These things, done from strength rather than from weakness, gave tension and vitality to historical architecture. (We dwell on this because of the particular offense that slab gave Gordon Bunshaft of the Washington Fine Arts Commission.)

The relation between our low and high buildings was neither simple nor complex enough for the Commission. The low and the high are not discrete through separation or articulation in the Miesian manner of Lever House or, on the other hand, integral in the complex manner of late Modern Articulated. An orthodox Modern architect would want to insert a big shadow joint between the low and high blocks or, at the other extreme, step the section, because a dogleg in section and in side elevation spells formal ineptitude by Modern standards despite programmatic justification and structural feasibility. The view of the roof from the slab is bad, and we worried about that, but separating the low and the high or rearranging them on the site would not solve that problem.

The structural bay system is the same in size and proportion in the low part and the high part. Since the Swiss Pavilion, a dictum of Modern architecture has been that low wings must be different in structure and form from the high buildings of which they are part. But in this project varying forms above grade are manifestations in some way of the parking garage below grade that encompasses the whole site; the structural grid meshes the consistent pattern of cars and aisles below with offices, shops, and plaza above. This makes for an architectural complex that looks like one block with sections removed rather than a combination of blocks sitting in space.

The almost consistent module all over the site is reflected in the facades where the same pattern holds in the nine-story slab and the three-story wings. The resulting languid effect contrasts with the often pseudo-dynamic structural tension of today’s post-Corbusier building complexes. Again, this does not sound exceptional, but it irritated the Commission the facades “looked like wallpaper.”

Also the proportions of the facades were 1930s, Modern, horizontal, and flush, rather than the Commission’s preferred Washington style for the 1960s, which is 1950s, Mies, vertical, and plastic (the plasticity not Mies, but Corbu via Pei). Our model was Edward L. Barnes’ facade for 20 State Street in Boston, which demonstrates that the conventional strip window of traditional Modern architecture is still good for the flexible interiors of an office building. We made the heights of windows and spandrels the same to increase the abstract quality of the facade’s pattern of horizontal stripes and decrease thereby its comparability with the facade of the federal building across the street. In the 90-foot permitted height, our building contained nine tight floors to maximize rentable area. An abstract pattern would hold its own better than little windows and spandrels against the generously scaled six stories that the federal government can afford to provide in the same height.

The building is clad in white marble to match the building across the street. The module of its very deep joints corresponds to the module of the aluminum mullions of the sash emphasizing the abstract overall pattern. We used verde antique marble to decorate more explicitly the front faces of the zigzag walls of the entrance plaza. These contracting panels follow the module of the structural bays: The last zag on each side is a purely decorative pylon framing the entrance of the office building. The model for our entrance plaza was the receding and contracting drops of a Baroque stage. The model for the axial focus on a vast facade with receding wings was the symmetrical, slightly pompous, yet witty, front of an Elizabethan manor. It was perhaps this approach that dealt the final blow to our design. You do not approach a classic Greek temple or classic Modern slab (which this was supposed to be) axially at its center - especially not by way of a contracting, symmetrical forecourt, or, as Bunshaft laconically described it, “All this little scratchy stuff around.”

The awarding jury had called our scheme “very droll and human,” but the Washington Fine Arts Commission rejected it as “ugly and ordinary.” The architects and developers were not present at the first
Commission session where the Commission rejected the design largely because its members disagreed with the program of the competition, or rather with the forms to which the program led. Some comments of the Commission, mainly from Commissioner Bunshaft were:

Let me say very simply what’s all this complication of low buildings and high? Why can’t the buildings be put right in the middle?

We think there ought to be just one massive building, right in the middle here, not some building that has corners knocked off....

Let them build up one massive building with retail all around it.

...a nice big open space with a diamond [?] going through it, it would be a piece of architecture. We are talking about architecture and planning.

By building the lower section here in the sense that it knocks this space in something of this sort of shape, by getting rid of all these, putting it all in once basic block, you can see really on the model how simple it would be, where this would be a very nice space with two sides integrated.

I think what we talked about, one building, flatter or whatever it is, getting this in one space, instead of all this little scratchy stuff around.

This is not a design in our opinion.

That the Commission had approved the program which had been previously submitted to it and that another governmental agency, in the form of the jury appointed by the RLA, had already approved the design, was grandly dismissed by Bunshaft as a mere legal problem. “This building will be around a long time.”

The second meeting was termed by the Commission an “executive session.” The public and press were barred, and transcripts were not made available to the architects. Hence, the following excerpts are based on our memory:

Gordon Bunshaft: You talk very well, but nothing you can say can make your building anything but ugly and ordinary.... We need no lessons in history from you, Mr. Venturi, and your comparison of your building with Alvar Aalto’s is an insult to Alvar Aalto.... Philosophy? There’s no philosophy in this building.... We have made up our minds about your building; it is a courtesy to you that we hear you at all.

Hideo Sasaki: You talk of accommodation in design, Mr. Venturi, of how accommodating to the difficult conditions of the site has improved your building. Now you should accommodate to us because the Commission is your client.

John Walton (Chairman): Will that woman be quiet. I know how to run my own meetings.

Bunshaft further suggested putting the commercial area underground following the precedent of the economically-ailing commercial area in L’Enfant Plaza.

Because our client needed the project to proceed quickly and because of the agonizing precedent of the Mitchell-Giurgola firm’s attempts to modify their prizewinning but rejected design for the AIA headquarters, we decided to redesign our project completely, to follow letter, if not the spirit, of the “law” laid down for us by the Commission. We shortened and flattened the slab to complete its offending corner at the expense of its proportions and internal plan. We shoved the commercial under the plaza and made a huge piazza of pure space. But the piazza was really a big, wide ramp, and it still axially penetrated the slab at the side. And the commercial signs still existed, hidden in a moat.

“We felt the overall scheme was greatly improved,” said a letter from the Chairman:

We now look forward to seeing an imaginative development of the architectural expression of the building. Unfortunately, the sketches that we saw showed a very bland and unrelieved treatment of the facade. In fact, there was little difference between the paving pattern and the building itself. Surely the architect can do better than this.
Bunshaft said:
... We disapprove the exterior one hundred percent. We don't like it at all. It is very coarse, has no character of any sort ... a sort of nonentity of architecture. I think the indication of signs and things is a deliberate effort to be anti-design, to sort of let everybody have a ball. The grayness of the building, coarseness of joining and detailing - I think you might say we think it is ugly and I think that's about all we have to say.

At the fourth meeting we tried to show that sophisticated architects had carefully designed the proportions and details of the facade to look ordinary because the extraordinary building in this neighborhood is at the end of Maryland Avenue with a big dome on top. Aline Saarinen noted that our elevations looked like wallpaper.

Bunshaft continued:
We all listened to [Venturi’s] spiel at the previous meeting.... I think the position in a nutshell is for an architect to make a very good building for that site not, in his career, to do a building that is different than the one he did before, or that is different from what is au courant.... Remember, this is Washington.

At the fifth meeting we presented the design that passed. It followed the spirit of the law.

The Kafkaesque aura, the personal insults, the questionable professional ethics, and the superficial process of review perpetrated by this particular board are revealed in our account of our experience.