Building a Federal Ideal: Juxtaposition of Individual and the State

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Abstract

This thesis is about the design of a hypothetical national institution called the American Institute. The Institute consists of a presidential library and archive, a somewhat scholarly center for national debate, and a museum for the public presentation of critical national issues. Included in the program are facilities for large public symposia. A site for the Institute was located in the Fort Washington National Park on the Potomac River south of Washington, D.C.

Beginning with a program invented to reflect a clear historical circumstance, this thesis attempts to draw multiple design rationale from a mixture of projected physical needs and social and political ideals. These rationale then lead directly to a design philosophy that guides the subsequent building design. Without the use of any conscious formal historical reference, the design asserts itself as uniquely representative of a national spirit, evoking the mood of the United States during the tenure of an imaginary presidency, and satisfies physical needs through a clear organization.

The thesis is presented in three parts. First the hypothetical historical condition is presented and the building needs that result from the condition. Secondly, the philosophy derived from both physical need and political ideals is described. Finally, the American Institute is presented, described both in physical terms and in terms of the possible social and political understandings implied in the final design.

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This is a mark in my architectural education very close to its beginning. There is still quite a distance to go.

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But most of all, thanks to Mom and Dad in North Carolina. I think I see the next mark and I'm not going to tack.
This thesis is dedicated to Emily Vanderburg, who reached her important first mark about a week ago, January 30, 1990.
When he left the office of the President, the country was changed.
We were different - fundamentally different.

People asked more difficult questions.

Now there was a willingness to accept uncertainty, a national inquisitiveness so great that politicians became transparent.

The public demanded authenticity, and the courage of convictions.
At the President's death action was taken to build a memorial to one identified so directly with such a profound growth of the national spirit.

A place for national debate was envisioned; a place to both enrich the debate in the Congress and draw the general public more effectively into that debate. The result was a place called the American Institute.
Three primary parts make up the American Institute:

**Presidential Library and Archive**

The Presidential Library and Archive is the anchor of the American Institute. It houses the papers and records from an important president's tenure in office, thus it is an historical container. But it also holds an active collection of materials related to the activities of the Institute.

**Center for National Debate**

The Center for National Debate is a quasi-governmental entity. Twenty delegates, selected by a method similar to political convention delegates, convene for one year at the Center with a single issue to debate, discuss, and understand.

**Museum of Current Issues**

The objective of the twenty delegates is not to resolve a particular issue, but rather to illuminate the problem and the multiplicity of tenable positions. Respect should coexist with disagreement.

The Museum of Current Issues is the public outreach arm of the American Institute. It is intended to draw citizens of all levels of society to the Institute and present to them issues from a complete range of perspectives.

Visitors find themselves in proximity to the Center for National Debate which serves as a model of citizen participation in government.
How was the American Institute to be shaped? How would it look and feel?

The image of Federal Washington, D.C. could not be ignored. All visitors would surely bring with them strong images of a national architecture. There would be exceptions.

Clearly, satisfying or violating formal expectations would be part of the design approach.
The Institute has a unique identity and function, and was inspired by a set of ideals addressing relationships between people, ideas, and organizations. From the “facts” of the Institute a set of principles was put forth:

- Differentiate functional parts to suggest the complexity of society and government.
- Give shape to each part that will correspond with the specific use of the part, analogous to the participation of an individual in society.
- Present a comprehensible hierarchy of parts that implies an order to society and government.
- Provide a sequence of spaces that allows the Institute to be understood by each user, and that can provoke thought or contemplation.
- Make the design efficient, so that the users find it effective, economical, and pleasurable.

Several means of accomplishing the design were emphasized:

- Position - connectedness, proximity.
- Shape - size, geometry.
- Material - permanence, weight, texture, color.
- View - sequence, openness, direction.
The spaces were differentiated:

**Presidential Library and Archive**
- Presidential Archive for storage of the President's papers and to serve as a library specific to the Center.
- Library Reading Room for the delegates and the public to provide for interaction in a purposeful environment.

**Center for National Debate**
- Delegate's Congress for daily discussion of the issue.
- Delegate's Offices for private study and informal conversations, meetings.
- Auditorium for public symposia.

**Museum for Current Issues**
- Large Screen for electronic-media driven dynamic presentation of the issue.
- Small Theaters for in-depth focus on various aspects of the issue.
- Cafe and Bookstore for facilitating public discussion and further study.
A site was chosen south of Washington, D.C. on the Potomac River. The land is part of the Fort Washington National Park. The city of Washington is visible to the north, and Mount Vernon, George Washington's estate, is directly across the river. It is an Arcadian landscape, with strong physical connection to American symbols and easily accessible to people visiting Washington.
Site

The American Institute is within the Fort Washington National Park. The Fort and the Institute are the only significant structures within the park. The Institute is separated from the Fort by a distance of over one quarter mile, thick woods, and a deep ravine. The Fort faces south down the Potomac River, at one time in defence of the United States Capitol. The Institute looks north, up the Potomac River, past Alexandria to Washington, D.C. The Washington monument and the capitol dome are visible on clear days.
Map of Fort Washington National Park
Organization

The Museum and Center sit astride the landscape enclosing a ravine. They are 220 feet apart and look across the ravine at each other - equal, yet clearly different, almost opposites.

Visitors to the Center and the Museum assume different roles. One stays a season, the other a day.
Library\Archive and Center

1. Entrance Plaza
2. Entrance
3. Library and Archive Lobby
4. Symposia Auditorium
5. Central Hall
6. Delegate's Congress
7. Restaurant (below)
8. Delegate's Offices (second and third levels)

Museum

1. Entry Porch
2. Entrance
3. Theater (below) and Exhibit Space (above)
4. Viewing Platform
5. Exhibit Space
6. Current Issues Screen
7. Bookstore
8. Restaurant/Cafe
9. Terrace
E-W Section

1. Auditorium
2. Delegate's Offices
3. Delegate's Congress
4. Museum Entrance
5. Small Theater
6. Viewing Platform
7. Current Issues Screen
Arrival

Visitors to the Institute arrive at a plaza in front of the Archive and Center. A path and bridge lead diagonally across the wooded ravine, the inner landscape, to the Museum.

All Institute visitors are first engaged by the loggia to the Center for National Debate to enter. It is a gesture towards Museum visitors, a call for participation.
Center for National Debate and Presidential Archive and Library

The Center and the Archive are composed of diverse and specific elements. The Delegate's Congress and the Archive appear to support the Delegate's Offices and make a space for the Auditorium. There is an apparent interlocking of parts.

The composition remains permeable in spite of the solidity of many of its parts. There is obvious opportunity for human activity.
Central Hall

Public spaces are provided inside the Center to allow the activities of the Center to be observed. Everyone is potentially a delegate, just as everyone is potentially a citizen.

A central space organizes the three main objects on a plane. The Delegate's Offices are a fourth object overhead edging the side to the inner landscape.
Perspective of Central hall from Archive Lobby
The Presidential Library/Archive

The Archive is the most prominent building in the complex and is the first building visible upon entering the park.

On top of the Archive is a wing-like roof structure. Beneath the wing is a reading room. It is by archival standards a spacious room. It is open to the public and is entered from a lobby seven floors below.

The lobby on the first floor corresponds in position and orientation to the reading room above and signals its presence.

Delegates enter the building through a mezzanine level on the side of the Archive near the delegates offices.

The middle five floors of the building are for archival storage and are provided with minimal natural light. This storage function is clearly discernable from the outside.
Axonometric of Library/Archive
The reading room is the highest place in the institute, occupying the eighth and ninth floors of the Archive and Library. It is also a public place.

Through position, and through the heroic gesture of the roof, the discipline of study is celebrated.

The main reading room is 76 feet by 28 feet, and is 26 feet high at its highest point. Staff areas and special reading rooms are located on the opposite side of the elevator and restroom core.
The Delegate’s Congress

The delegate’s congress is the heart of the American Institute. A meeting room for twenty people. Spectators may occupy the outer ring.

The cylinder clings to the edge of the Center for National Debate, figuratively holding the entire complex on the hill.

It is the only object to assert its independence in the landscape, beginning to break away yet anchoring the assemblage.
The Delegate's Offices

Above the Delegate's Congress are offices for the delegates and staff. They are elevated one floor from the public realm. Offices figuratively float within an envelope of space, leaving ample room for group association among the delegates.

Each office opens to a common balcony on the inner landscape, offering views to the outer landscape and Potomac River. By virtue of the river it is a connection to a larger world.

Together, the delegates create a wall of active citizenry; atop their place of meeting they find individual recognition.
Museum of Current Issues

The Museum answers the Center and Archive across the ravine. Its purpose is more singular, less subject to its visitors than the Center or Archive. It is more like a memorial than the other side of the ravine.

The face of the Museum is solid, heavy, uninhabitable. An entry porch is attached to the face, tenuously holding the visitor on the edge of the inner landscape. The visitor does not stay long outside, but for a moment is a counterpart to the delegate across the space.
Museum Sequence

Upon entering, the visitor is within the wall, then steps immediately onto a circular volume. The ceiling is low.

At that point the large electronic screen which presents the current issues is visible ahead within a larger space.

Another circular volume follows to the right and leads to a bridge across which is a viewing platform directly in front of the screen.

The viewing platform and the screen completely fill the large volume which contains them. The screen is constantly changing, sometimes one picture, sometimes split into many smaller ones.
Interior Perspective of Museum of Current Issues
Down escalators on the main floor are physical exhibits related to the issues screen and presidential artifacts.

Turning back to the wall at the ground level reveals the two circular volumes, which are small theaters for issue focus.

Windows cover the ends of the screen hall allowing views of the Potomac or of a planted terrace.

A restaurant/cafe opens onto the terrace and is accessible by going back into the wall. In the cafe one can see the screen obliquely and look directly out into the landscape.

Above the cafe is a bookstore which visitors pass through or near as they exit.
Departure

Leaving the Museum visitors face the Center for National Debate directly. Its transparency contrasts to the solidity of the place they are leaving. The Center is active, the Museum is passive.

The Delegate's Congress sits like a battery in the field; the reading room nearly lifts into the sky.
“In the United States, the majority undertakes to supply a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions of their own. Everybody there adopts great numbers of theories, on philosophy, morals, and politics, without inquiry, upon public trust...”

(from Democracy in America. Alexis de Toqueville, 1835)
The President is a fantasy in people's minds. You have to make him up.

That gives me a very hollow feeling.

It's empty at the top, George.

Mark Alan Stamaty