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Design Review Dialogue

The central issue for the conference was design guidelines. How much individual expression is hampered by constraints? What rights do communities have to determine the character of their architecture? What kinds of constraints seem to spur creativity and which are repressive?

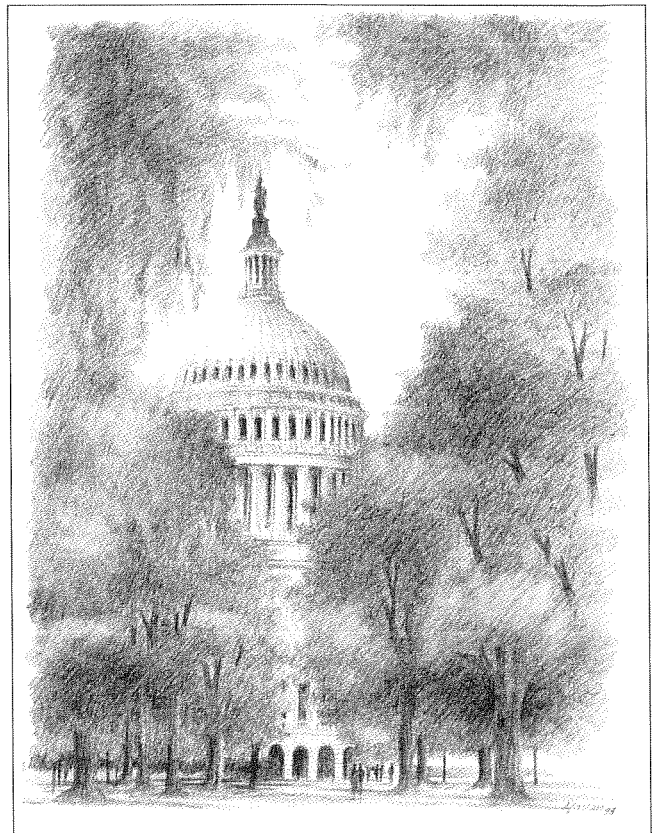
In a session chaired by Jonathan Barnett, FAIA, there seemed to be consensus that some level of consistency was important in Washington D.C. The most important single guideline is the height restriction, which establishes a constant plane and makes it possible to create room-like urban spaces. It also encourages underground parking and service areas in a scale that is similar to some of the designs we visited in Paris. In the case of the World Bank by, Kohn Pedersen Fox, it spurred the architects to invent a new floor system to reduce the floor-to-floor height as a means of building the required floor area on a small site.

In the final meeting, Al Cox, Alexandria's city architect, told us that all over the country, community groups are being formed by citizens to protect their communities from the work of architects. How can we address this? Clearly there should be some criteria and conventions established that can ensure that designs in existing towns and cities are in harmony with the inherited context. In many cases, the role of determining such guidelines has been taken away from architects. We need to restore our traditional role of doing so.

Raymond L. Gindroz, FAIA. Gindroz, principal of Urban Design Associates in Pittsburgh, Pa., chaired the Committee on Design in 1998.

Although Washington is the seat of our nation's government, the review process should be neither a political process nor a platform for stylistic dogma. It can be a forum in which the broader goals and urban agenda, zoning and planning issues can be brought to light. The criteria for approval needs to be clearly understood and adhered to for fairness and openness.

Wendy Evans Joseph, AIA. Joseph, an architect based in New York City, will chair the Committee on Design in 2001.



U.S. Capitol
Hany Hassan, AIA

The final conversation among committee participants addressed the complex issue of the design review process. Jonathan Barnett, FAIA, George Hartman, FAIA, Philip Esocoff, FAIA, and Jerri Smith, AIA, took part. Barnett began by remarking that D.C. is a special city because it has an urban design; it's not just surveyed and planted. Hartman continued, "... the real triumphs of the review boards are the drawers of unbuilt project plans. With accompanying slides that contrasted buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue under parallel design procedures, Hartman remarked, architects who are not sympathetic to design review tend to leave their worst work in Washington.

Esocoff admitted that he was at one time hostile toward review boards, but now he appreciates their contribution to the city. Reviews challenge architects to confront the question of individual rights vs. community responsibility and beg the question of buildings: Do they uphold public interest or merely show off? One final comment was that design review should slow down the construction process, and a review panel must respect the built environment enough not to yield to extraneous pressures.

Karen Devine. Devine is a staff writer with the American Institute of Architects