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POTOMAC VALLEY ARCHITECT BEAUTIFICATION REPORT 1963 - 1966

POTOMAC VALLEY ARCHITECT

May/June 1966 • Volume 9, No. 6

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EDITOR
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CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Neil R. Greene, A.I.A.

MANAGING EDITOR
Joseph C. Dennison, RA 6-1005

ADVERTISING MANAGER
J. Leo Sugrue, WH 6-5814

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The articles in this magazine represent the personal opinions of the authors and/or the editor and should not be construed as representing the viewpoint of the Potomac Valley Chapter, A.I.A.

ON THE COVER

1963 photograph of Silver Spring taken at the time when the Potomac Valley Chapter was making a study for the redevelopment of Maryland's second largest city. A recent survey showed the scene changed very little in the interim.

The Potomac Valley Chapter extends to our Executive Secretary, Amalie Dobres, our sincerest sympathy at the recent loss of her husband.

NATIONAL AIA COMMITTEE MEMBER

In publishing the list of Chapter members serving on National AIA committees (see PVA, Jan/Feb 1966), the following was inadvertently omitted:

ROBERT M. DILLON, AIA, member of the Committee on Research for Architecture. Mr. Dillon has served on the committee for over four years.

AIA MIDDLE ATLANTIC REGIONAL CONVENTION

"Design for a Mobile Society" is the title and subject of this convention to be held in Williamsburg, Virginia February 8-10, 1967.

The objective of the conference is to clarify the place of transportation in relation to socio-economic needs using the Middle Atlantic States as an example, to make recommendations on the planning process as related to transportation and to demonstrate the role of the architect and the collaborating professions in this process.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ANTHONY JOHNS, JR., AIA, announces the opening of his office for the practice of architecture at his home, 7903 Echols Avenue, Lanham, Md. 20801. Phone: 773-6030.

ROBERT MELBY, SR., AIA, announces the removal of his offices to 230 N. Washington, Rockville, Md. Phone: 762-4664.

NEW MEMBER

MRS. M. ELIZABETH STITES, new Associate Member, and a resident of Montgomery County, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland, teaching Architectural History and Architectural Rendering. Mrs. Stites has been with the University since 1949.

THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHAPTER

CONSTRUCTION SPECIFICATIONS INSTITUTE

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President Robert W. Nordstrom, presiding

and to Discover

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Our New President

Joseph C. Dennison

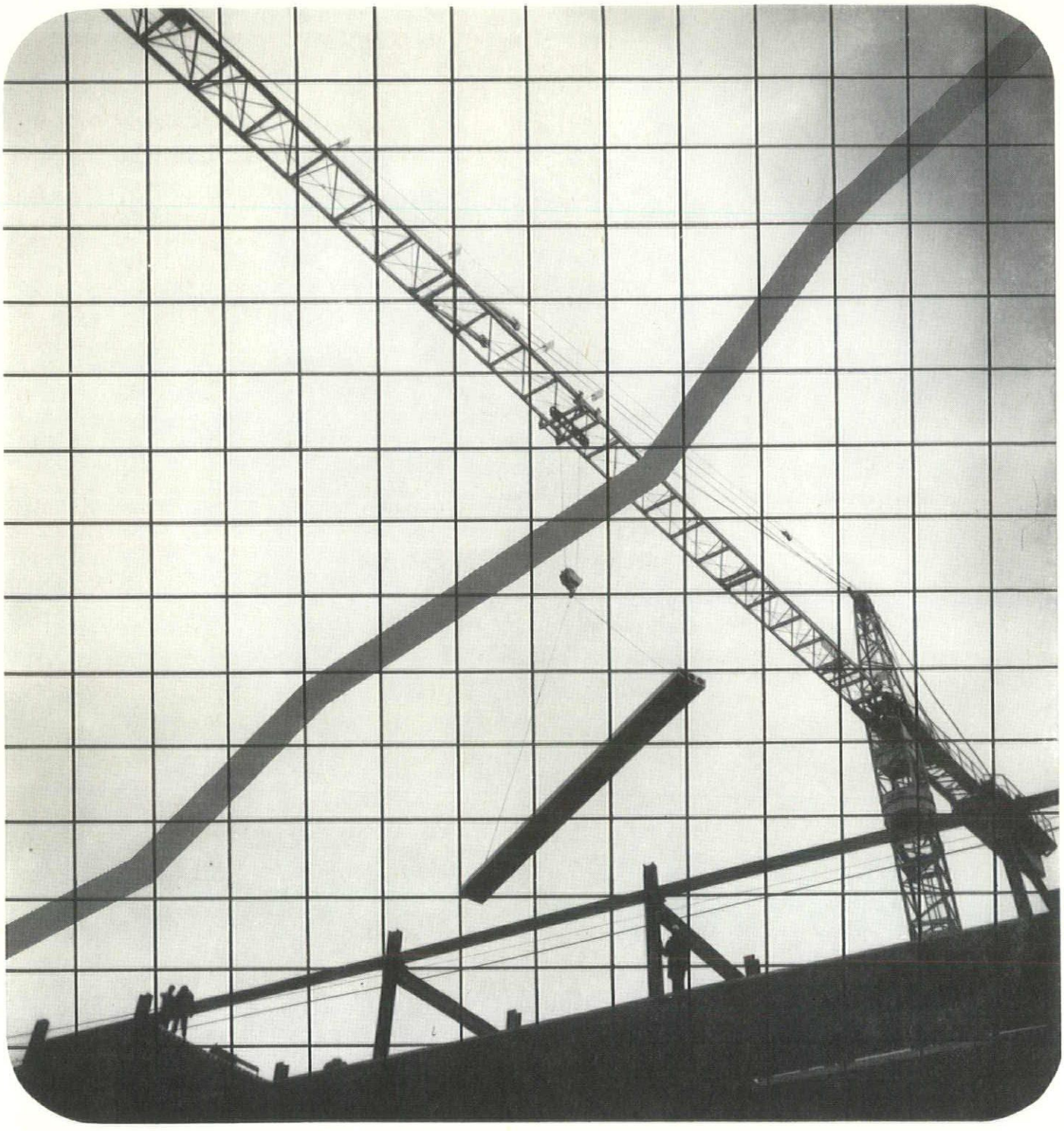
TORTOISE AND HARE

When asked to devote the late Spring issue to beautification, we enthusiastically agreed and planned to dedicate it to our First Lady, whose positive leadership in this regard has netted much visual improvement across the country. After investigating the results to date of our War on Ugliness, we found the dedication presumptive and a promissory note more in order!

With almost daily newspaper reports of beautification activity in Washington, D. C., it is discouraging to look about suburban Maryland for signs of our own program at work, for we do have a program despite evidence to the contrary. But, being naturally optimistic, we recall the story of The Tortoise and the Hare and although it is painfully obvious that we are the Tortoise of the Beautification Race, it is encouraging to remember that he did win in the end.

Beautification, however, should not be looked upon as a competitive race with neighboring cities, but a sincere and personal race to eradicate the squalid, ugly and congested situation which exists within our cities.

. . . Hilleary



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RONALD S. SENSEMAN, F.A.I.A.

The Potomac Valley Chapter of Maryland, A.I.A., proudly announces the elevation of Ronald S. Senseman to fellowship in the Institute by recent decision of the Jury of Fellows.

We gratefully acknowledge and thank Ron for his indispensable generalship in his many and varied responsibilities with the Chapter, dating back to the Chapter's organization, and for his leadership in national A.I.A. affairs and civic activities which moved the Jury to bestow this highest award of the profession on him, and its reflected distinction to our Chapter. His gentlemanly manner and tact in dealing with all situations have brought him the respect and friendship of architects everywhere. The Institute and all who have been privileged to work with him have benefited by the example of his unselfish devotion to the principles of his profession and to his responsibility as a member of society.

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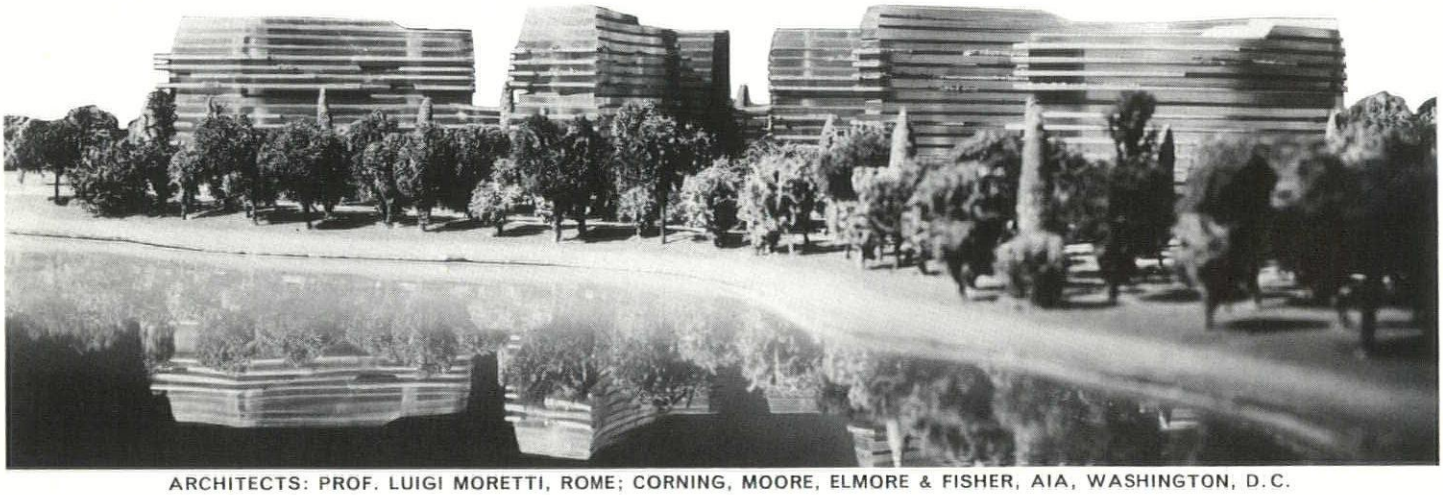


ARCHITECTS: PROF. LUIGI MORETTI, ROME; CORNING, MOORE, ELMORE & FISHER, AIA, WASHINGTON, D.C.

POINT OF VIEW – NEIL R. GREENE

T.V. Tower may become landmark citizens fear. Approval of a 1219 foot high television tower in Forest Glen by the Board of Appeals would result in a 50% improvement for TV viewing in the entire Washington area. Higher than the Eiffel Tower in Paris, but not quite as aesthetic (the Eiffel Tower was not considered aesthetic when it was built), it could replace all the smaller TV antennas in the Washington area.

Although the construction of the tower has city wide benefits, the effect upon the local community could be quite substantial. Most would argue that a location within the range recommended by TV broadcasting and limitations of FAA is an obvious necessity to better TV viewing for two million inhabitants of the Washington area. Few proponents of the tower, however, can allay the fears of the local residents who know of 126 cases of aircraft hitting transmitting towers, or the tremendous destruction of falling ice from a 120 story tower or the periodic firing up of huge diesel engines for emergency operation. If the citizens were convinced that no other large tract of acreage were available, there would be better acceptance of the proposal, but quite obviously another site is available several blocks away at higher cost.

It would appear that a tower of this magnitude and cost would warrant a larger site and one that would pose less threat to a community. Regardless of location, careful attention should be given to the tower particularly at normal viewing level and its distance from neighboring structures should be equal to half of the tower height which would necessitate a rather park like setting.

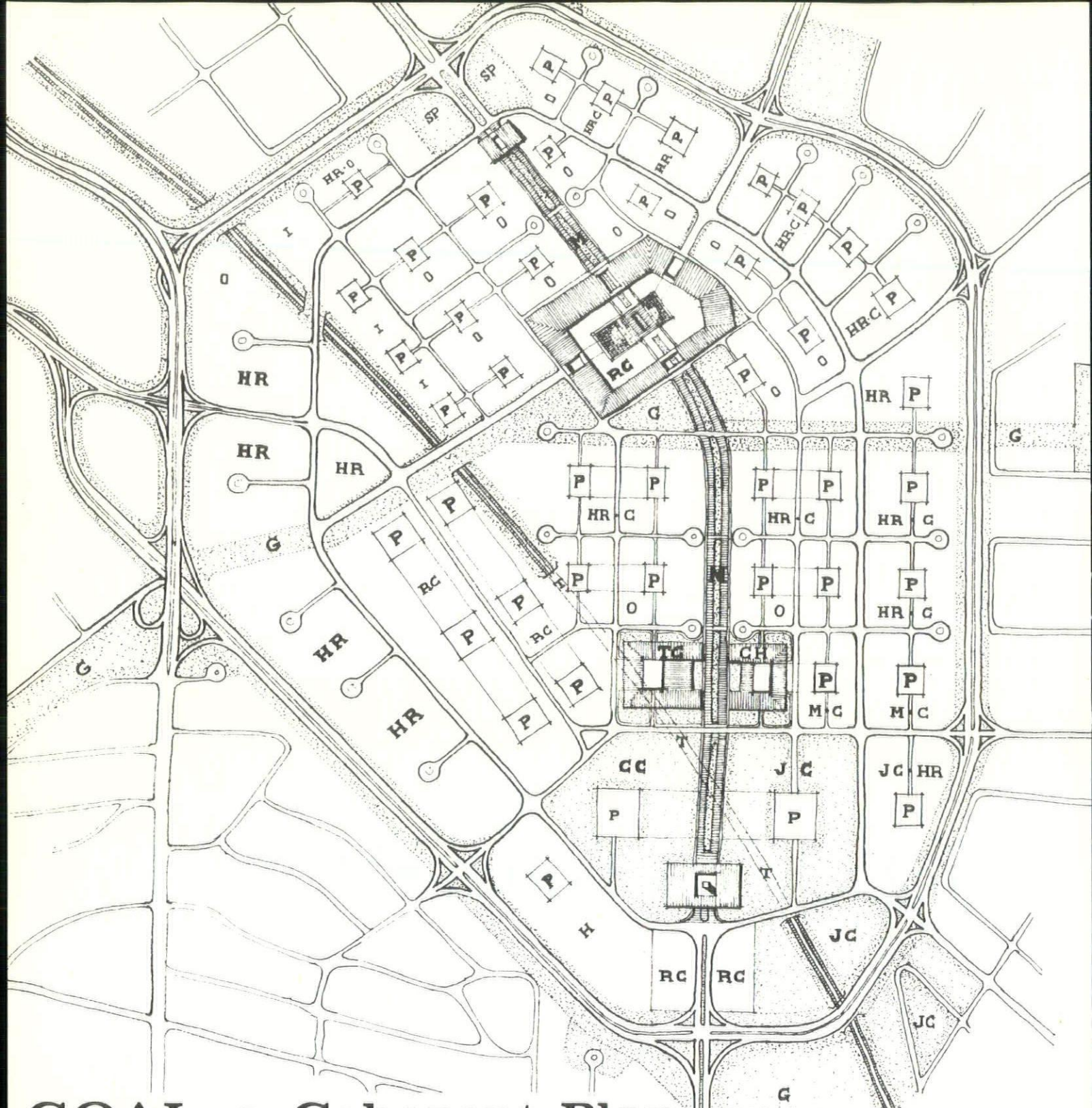
Montgomery Auto Park attacked at County Council Meeting by citizens and defended by former Planning Commissioner. The proposal for White Oak in Montgomery County includes a central pavilion, housing banks, loan companys and other businesses associated with automobiles. The central pavilion would be surrounded by ten automobile dealerships and a one mile test track around the park. This plan, if developed according to the handsome model presented, would be a significant addition to the planning vocabulary. By combining all the necessary facilities into an auto shopping center, the sales, display, repair and testing of autos would be done efficiently, effectively and safely by isolating the center in a landscaped park. The familiar alternative is the roadside sprawl with a jungle of dealers signs, tour d'force showrooms and haphazard traffic control of individual dealerships. The logic of the center in a fair-like atmosphere, with a calm approach to auto competition would be a welcome attraction to our present showroom mediocrity along our highways.

Beautification Surprise was the fortunate development that came about because of citizen reaction to the controversial Texaco sign in Southwest. The sign, now reduced in size, places the gas station with its precast concrete structure, fine proportions, general simplicity and limited advertising in the "well worth seeing" column and probably the most outstanding service station in the Washington area. Shell Oil Company is working on a pilot service station proposal in Montgomery County which could establish a much needed precedent. Also in Southwest is the most effective school landscaping plan at Jefferson Junior High School which Mrs. Johnson considers her favorite school project. The entire school is literally surrounded by a flowering garden maintained by honor students. The generosity of S. Klein has made beautification possible here but PTA's will soon do it throughout the S.W.

The North Central Freeway, last year's controversial 10-lane freeway project gets new recommendation for big reduction. A restudy ordered by the Maryland State Roads Commission and D. C. Highways, following stormy hearings last year, addressed itself to claims of (1) overstated estimates of future travel; (2) desire to meet the corridor needs wholly by rapid transit; (3) freeway construction would seriously aggravate the downtown parking problem and severe social costs would be brought about by its construction. In a joint consultants report, eight lanes would suffice from the proposed Inner Loop in downtown Washington northward to Missouri Avenue and six lanes from Missouri Avenue to the freeway terminus in Silver Spring. The new findings will result in extensive restudy of the freeway traffic and the proposed alignment.

Apartments over Freeways, a new solution for Washington Freeway and Relocation Problems. Developed jointly by the D. C. Highway Department and U. S. Bureau of Public Roads, an imaginative plan has been presented to the Planning Commission to stem a growing deadlock on the freeway issue. This approach, which has interested NCPC, has been in operation several years in New York City and would allow Washington to purchase blockwide rights-of-way for interstate freeways and lease or sell space alongside or over roads. The proposal in the hands of an imaginative architect and engineering team could be a great contribution to the urban environment by reducing the amount of freeway taking, limiting isolation and division of communities, and providing high density relocation housing convenient to bus and auto freeways with landscaped parks and plazas above the busy freeways.

Citizens Demand Planning Consultant for Bethesda-Chevy Chase in an alliance of 37 citizens associations and B-CC Chamber of Commerce. Dissatisfied with the earlier proposed Master Plan, the new group called Action for Bethesda-Chevy Chase (ABCC) has its purpose to support effective long-range master planning north of D. C. to Rockville, the Potomac River and Rock Creek Park. President Andrew V. Donnally reminds the Council (what the Potomac Valley Chapter, AIA has been campaigning for for years) "Our Master Plan must be developed with the aid of an outstanding City Planning Consultant. Our community deserves the finest planning talent available." "The entire community must have a Master Plan designed to protect our fine neighborhoods and to eliminate the costly battles on spot zoning which continue to plague us."



GOAL: a Coherent Plan
1963

LAND USE

- H.R. – High Rise Apartments
- H.R.C. – High Rise with commercial below
- HL. – Hotel
- R.C. – Retail Commercial Shopping Centers
- O. – Office Buildings
- IN. – Industrial
- S.P. – Special Purpose
- P. – Parking Garages
- G. – Green Area, Parks, Bicycle Paths

ROADS

- I – 40 MPH perimeter limited access thru road (staggered lights, merging traffic)
- II – Secondary route, access road for inter-city circulation
- III – Local access road for parking service and pickup
- IV – Service alleys between parking buildings

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

- M – Minibus on shopping mall.
- T – Commuter and downtown rail line
- B – Shuttle bus on secondary road
- H – Helicopter service to airports

FACILITIES

- T.C. – Transportation Center
- C.H. – Convention Hall
- C.C. – Cultural Center
- J.C. – Junior College (combined with above)
- M.C. – City Municipal Center

SILVER SPRING REPORT

In 1963 the Silver Spring Planning Group, under the chairmanship of Jack Cohen, AIA, undertook a comprehensive study of the Silver Spring area in order to develop a coherent plan for revitalization and to instigate a positive beautification program for they recognized that Silver Spring was a grossly ugly place in which to work and shop. The results of this enthusiastic study by its membership were published hopefully in PVA in December of that year. And since we are once again devoting an issue to beautification efforts, we set about an investigation to see what, if anything, this study had accomplished for the betterment of Silver Spring or Montgomery County generally. The resultant ledger speaks for itself.

NEGATIVE:

We advocated sign control	**— See cover for lack of results.**
We advocated planting and trees	**— Effort bogged down at State Roads Commission.**
We advocated pedestrian walkways	**— No improvement to date.**
We advocated more attractive street furnishings	**— Still a future dream.**
We advocated placement of some wiring underground	**— We are still strung up.**
We advocated in-town parkland	**— Still a dream.**
We advocated a high density residential zone for Commercial Districts	**— Accomplished through a loophole in C-2 zoning, but misused and abused with unlimited density and haphazard location with little relationship to an overall plan of development.**
We advocated a better circulatory road pattern	**— Congestion and traffic jams are still a fact of life in the city.**

POSITIVE:

The improvement felt in the immediate area of the two bi-level parking garages is real and commendable. Underground utilities are less of a dream and in the talking stages for future incorporation.

The founding of a Beautification Committee in the county is a first step in the right direction (see report this issue).

The business community has been responsive to the cry for improvement; backed financially a study plan by the Graduate School of Planning at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and shows promise of future positive steps in the fight against ugliness.

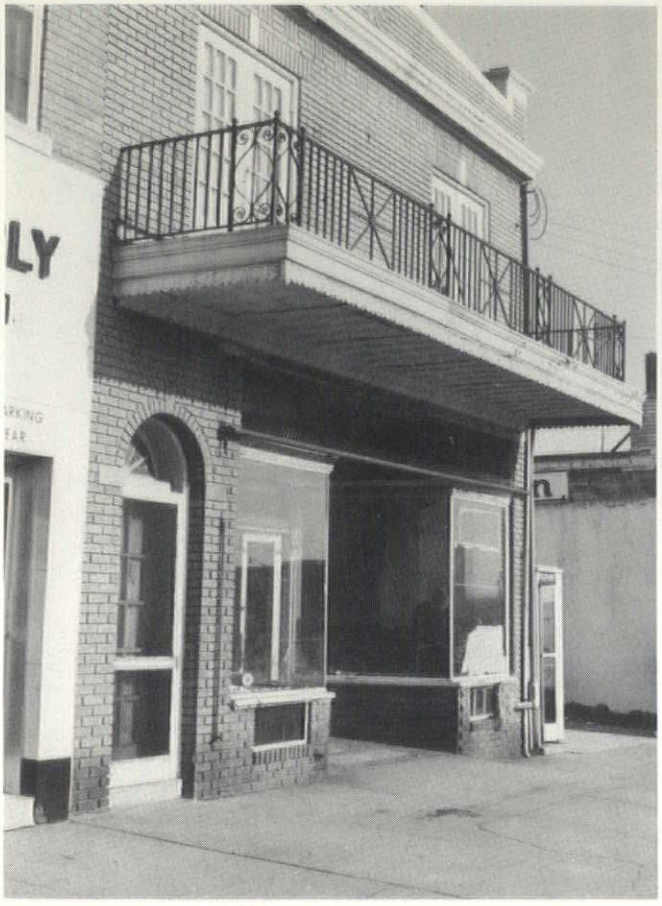
School budgets now provide a small but significant allowance for landscaping (how about an equal amount for art? Ed.).

Outside consultants have been called in to plan Silver Spring, and although the AIA has not been consulted nor posted of any result, we commend this positive if minimum step in the right direction.

We again applaud the performance of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce in the planning and execution of their beautified median planting and street furnishing along the Wisconsin Avenue business strip. Regrettably, work is not far enough along at this point to permit photography.

Rockville is ably taking care of its own renewal, judging by their published brochure and information available to us.

Small signs of encouragement.
Vinson Park
Rockville, Md.



Little Signs of Private Initiative
Flower Shop – Silver Spring

Report
on
The Committee for a More Beautiful Montgomery County

The formation of this organization in 1965 was greeted with enthusiasm by architects, businessmen, civic and garden groups, all of whom are represented on this Committee under the Chairmanship of RONALD S. SENSEMAN, FAIA.

A program was formalized by this group which subdivided itself in order to employ the individual talents in specific areas requiring attention, and their ten-point program, outlined initially, attacked all areas of activity responsible for the environmental mess in which we find ourselves.

Since formation, there is evidence of much hard work on the part of this Committee in meetings, correspondence, designs, plans, and addresses – representing many man hours and a fortune in time if this service were to be purchased. However, despite their effort, there is little concrete evidence to date of their existence, a fact that I am sure is quite discouraging to them after so much hard work.

Their plan to clean up the chaos of signs met with building department troubles and their planting plans bogged down at State Roads Commission. The only positive results of their existence to date have been in the form of talks given to civic groups and presentations of the AIA film "NO TIME FOR UGLINESS," and a spring clean-up campaign which did get support from the schools, sending students out to clean up the litter from streets and roads.

However, it is to the credit of this group that it will not be discouraged and their chairman has made his report recently to the County Council, which is solely responsible for the outcome of their endeavor. The Council has been a bit slow to act so far, pleading too many commitments, but we know of no commitment more important to the future welfare of the County than to remedy the squalor and ugliness which everywhere surrounds us.

One very positive result of a year of hard work has been this committee's ability to finally schedule a bus tour for the County Council and government officials to actually join them in viewing the ugliness on which they jointly are at war. It is an important trip – literally A RIDE OF HOPE – that viewing the battle-front will trigger the very positive and active backing which the Committee requires and deserves in order to get on with this long overdue and lagging program.

Left: Chapter Members James F. Hilleary and Eugene A. Delmar preparing to embark

Council Member Kathryn Diggs gets a briefing on the route

A RIDE OF HOPE

Through the efforts of The Committee for a More Beautiful Montgomery County, the Montgomery County Council, County Manager, and officials of the Department of Public Works, License and Inspections, Park and Planning and State Roads, took time out from their very busy schedules to be conducted on a bus tour of the more populated county areas to see for themselves the many facets of the problem confronted by the Beautification Committee.

The route was purposely laid through the most developed areas, for these afford a concentration of all the ills affecting the entire county to a greater or lesser extent.

In the absence of Ron Senseman, F.A.I.A., Chairman of the host committee, land planner, Thomas Oyster and architect, Eugene Delmar acted as spokesmen and guide. The tour proceeded in a clockwise pattern taking in the Wheaton, Silver Spring, Chevy Chase, Bethesda and Rockville areas where the ills have a striking similarity. All have been fast growing, are densely populated and suffer from having sprung too rapidly for a fully planned growth. All are essentially over-grown small towns with still much evidence of their recent pasts and, despite some fine residential areas and obviously expensive commercial complexes, lack the cohesive grace they could have or probably once enjoyed as small towns or villages. Nowhere does there seem to be evidence of graceful transition enabling the complex aspects of modern living to exist in harmony and, in many of these areas, the residential commercial and industrial collide in a head-on collision of nightmarish proportions.

Though there were areas to be complimented and signs of improvement in evidence, the ailments were many and repetitive. Concentrating upon overhead wiring in an otherwise beautifully landscaped and maintained residential area, the guides stressed their archaic and unsightly aspects, and the perpetuation of outmoded wiring in areas where new streets and roads are under construction and where underground wiring could easily be accomplished. In some areas these unsightly power poles are retained solely as a means of hanging overhead lights, a function which could be more beautifully served by well designed light stanchions. Though they concentrated on the unaesthetic qualities of overhead wiring, the fire department was on hand, thanks to fire inspector Gerald W. Sheard, to demonstrate their practical and serious problems encountered with overhead wiring. In Silver Spring they found it impossible to raise a ladder to service a multi-story building due to the hazardous interference of live wires.

The next most serious and repetitive blemish on all these areas is the over abundance of signs and the incredible vulgarity created by their number, placement, size, taste and state of repair. In addition to the serious impairment of vision in some instances, Mr. Delmar pointed out that many were non-conforming by size and placement and therefore illegal. Some areas encountered seemed totally constructed of signs and wires and if buildings existed behind them their presence was not felt.

Vast meaningless open spaces.

Nature was replaced by Gaping Parking Lots

Incredible vulgarity of too many signs.

Nature was entirely replaced by gaping parking lots all along the way and in addition to their ugliness, they present a threat to the pedestrian, invite drag racing, and bewilder the driver by their lack of direction. Certainly these wide open public spaces could be endowed with a saving grace through good planning, good planting, explicit directions and obstacles to discourage or totally stop these hazardous raceways.

The need for more planting, preventive maintenance, trash removal, general clean-up and sounder planning was a recurring theme of Mr. Oyster over the entire route and the group was able to view some obvious improvements in the Bethesda Commercial District where work had begun on a beautification program.

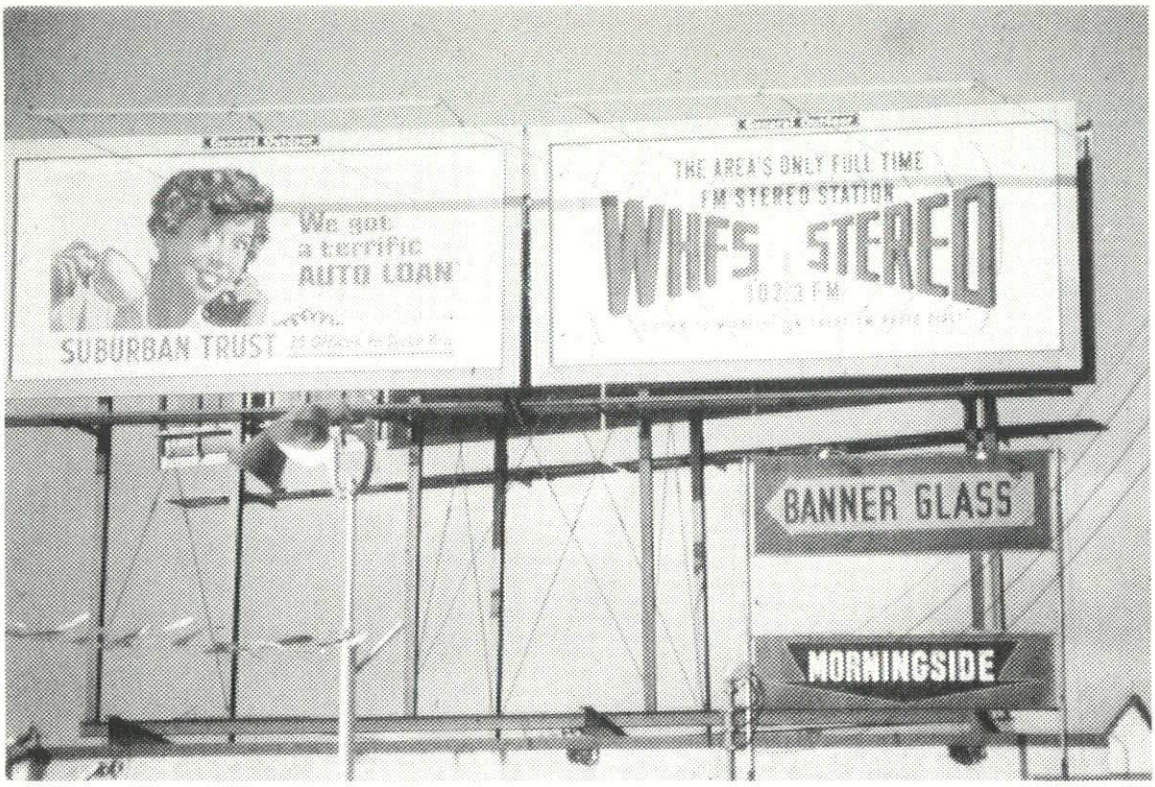
It is much too early to know what positive good was accomplished by the tour, for it is impossible to judge the impression being made on each individual. However, whether the outcome of the trip or previously planned, an announcement immediately followed of the Council's plan for a public hearing on the subject of underground utility lines. This alone is certainly encouraging.

The trip was definitely most beneficial to the Beautification Committee for, although they had long since filed their reports and recommendations with the County Council, preparation for and participation in the Tour, served to strengthen their views and reinforce their resolution to remedy the ills afflicting one of America's wealthiest suburbs.

Mr. Delmar closed the tour with a summation of the problems at hand and the Committee's strong recommendation as to method of cure. The full import of this message (see coverage in this issue) may have been too powerful for rapid digestion for there was no immediate reaction. However, should it have made its mark and come to pass, Montgomery County could number among the most beautiful, and most enlightened counties in the country.

The ride has ended! We are hopeful of a positive reaction.

There is no alternative!



Billboards should be outlawed in urban areas.

THE CURE

After careful study, The Committee realizes that the problems are much deeper rooted than pure cosmetic. Sign control, underground utilities, landscaping and clean up-fix up unquestionably would tidy up the surface somewhat, and would be a step in the right direction to be encouraged; but to stop at this would be unrealistic and fatal, for the surface blemishes are merely an indication of the greater decay within.

Clean up the surface and you may find that what is hidden is worse than that which was used as camouflage. Sign control may help but unless signs are made an integral part of the whole, they will always be alien. An isolated good building may be a total loss in a sea of mediocrity and even a beautiful building fails if it does not consider its environment. How then are we to hold out any hope if each lot owner acts independently with little or no regard for his surroundings and neighbors.

These and many more considerations contiributed to the following resolution profferred by the Beautification Committee at the climax of the hopeful bus tour.

"AESTHETIC CONTROL MUST BE EXERCISED IN ALL ASPECTS OF THE TOTAL COMMUNITY DESIGN. THIS ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY. WE THEREFORE PROPOSE THE FORMATION OF A GROUP OF QUALIFIED PERSONS TO STUDY THE PROBLEMS OF, AND THE CURE FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY. LEAD BY ARCHITECTS OF BROAD VISION, THIS GROUP SHOULD DEVELOP A MASTER DESIGN PLAN OF THE ENTIRE COUNTY, CONCERNING ITSELF WITH EVERY ASPECT FROM TELEPHONE POLES TO CITIES. NOR SHOULD THEIR DUTIES END AT THIS DEVELOPMENT STAGE BUT SHOULD CONTINUE THROUGH EXECUTION AND PERPETUATION TO ASSURE THE CONTINUANCE AND MAINTENANCE OF THIS MAJOR RESPONSIBILITY SO THAT THERE IS NO DANGER OF A RECURRENCE OF THE PROBLEM IN THE FUTURE."

EUGENE A. DELMAR

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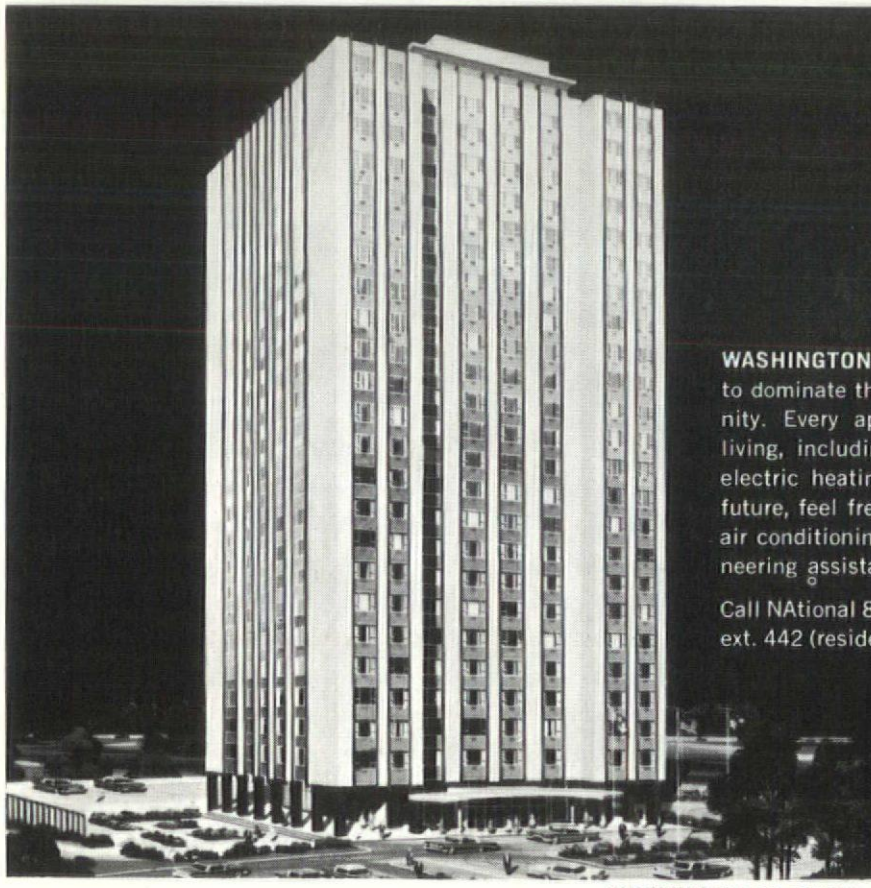

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A silver medal winner in the Fifth International Film and T. V. Festival.

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It is a must film for all who

Don't like being caught in traffic jams —

Feel their lives threatened by the automobile —

Won't walk on city streets at night —

Are displeased by existing urban conditions —

Hate billboards and a jungle of signs —

Are living under an umbrella of wires —

Think that most places are far too difficult to reach to be worth the effort —

Think there is room for improvement in the looks of the city —

Would like to see more park land, more flowers, more recreation facilities —

Would like better living and working facilities —

Think the arts deserve a more prominent place in our lives —

If you number among your complaints any of the above —

Or have a few of your own to contribute to the list —

Then see "No Time For Ugliness". Then go out and do something positive.

* **"No Time For Ugliness"** *was produced by The American Institute of Architects as part of its continued effort to combat the plight of most American cities. The film is available, without charge, through the Potomac Valley Chapter to local clubs, organizations, schools or groups who are interested enough to request a showing.*

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