

Watergate Style

In their latest attack on the Watergate project in Foggy Bottom, the newly appointed members of the Fine Arts Commission are repeating the error of their predecessors.

Once again the commission is lending support to the tired old Washington myth that to be acceptable a building must first of all not be tall. The commission feels that the heights approved for this large apartment-office building-hotel project, located at the foot of Virginia avenue, are out of place so near the Potomac River. It adds, in justification, that these heights also are all "in excess of similar types of construction in other areas of the city."

What a weak reed that is to lean upon! Of course these heights are unusual. That's the whole idea. What distinguishes this development, and what so captivated the National Capital Planning Commission about it from the beginning, is its laudable effort to depart from Washington's drab and stultified pattern of commercial architecture—huge, square boxes of buildings, sitting squarely on their sites and utilizing, in most instances, the maximum ground area allowed.

The fact is that when the Watergate site was acquired in 1960, its developers were perfectly free under existing zoning to crowd that land nearly as tightly and nearly as distastefully as the new State Department building crams its site only a few blocks away. In choosing to try to do something better, by occupying a relatively small portion of the tract with structures, the planners could design their buildings only one way—up.

Keep your "fresh and imaginative" architectural plan, says the Fine Arts Commission to Watergate, but scale down your buildings. What the commission is really saying, of course, is that the developers of this commercial enterprise, in the name of esthetics, should deliberately reduce the return on their investment to a point far below the level to which they are entitled.