

Start Digging!

Ideally, the role of government in urban design is not merely to control private development, but to assist it with imaginative new plans which are pleasing to both the eye and the municipal pocketbook.

Ideally, that is. How sadly the theory collapses in practice! Fortunately, however, the collapse is seldom as total, even in Washington, as in the case of the shabby governmental treatment which has been accorded the Watergate project — the privately-financed \$60-million apartment-office building-hotel development proposed on the old gas company property in Foggy Bottom.

The Fine Arts Commission never has liked the project—and we doubt that it would care any more for any other commercial use of this large, valuable (and privately-owned) Potomac River site. Accordingly the Watergate sponsors during the last few years have been subjected to an unending stream of governmental delay and confusion.

At the moment, of course, they are in a state of euphoria, having finally received a District permit which will allow them to start excavation for the first phase of the project—a 300-unit apartment. In return, the sponsors have agreed to abide by the latest Fine Arts demands—the chief of which, as we understand it, is that the apartment shall be no taller than the Lincoln Memorial.

What a victory for esthetics! Or something. For what this means is that anyone who takes the trouble to measure these two structures in the future will know for a certainty that the apartment does not, indeed, tower over the Lincoln Memorial. But no one else will know, because it is virtually impossible to see these structures together from any vantage point outside a helicopter.

At any rate, peace, for the moment, has settled over this old battleground. Will it endure? Has the Fine Arts Commission really decided to be reasonable? In view of the past, and before anything can happen to that permit, our advice to the Watergate people is simple and direct:

Start digging!