

## Cityscape

# New FBI Building: Perfect Stage Set For Orwell's '1984'

By Wolf Von Eckardt

The new FBI headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue—surpassed in brazen size only by the Pentagon and the Rayburn House Office Building—is contradiction in concrete.

It dominates its part of downtown Washington, but is alien to the spirit of the capital and the architecture of the Avenue. It would make a perfect stage set for a dramatization of George Orwell's "1984."

Its set-back is planted with trees and lanterns to make Pennsylvania Avenue friendly and festive. But on ground-level the building presents nothing but a brutally blank concrete wall.

This blank wall and the gravel moat along 9th Street could hardly be more people-repellent. But the grand entrance on the Avenue sets out to attract people.

From 9:15 to 4:15, excluding Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, the public is free to enter a Pharaonic inner courtyard which is public plaza and prison yard: once, designed both to impress and to control the crowds.

From this courtyard the public may mount huge stairs to a vast expanse of vacant terraces on which there is nothing to see or do except, perhaps,

to watch the inaugural parade every four years.

The yard also serves as a collecting point for the roughly 500,000 tourists a year who are expected to take the popular tour of various FBI exhibits.

Otherwise, the building's designers have managed to spend \$126.1 million on a building of yellowish concrete on Pennsylvania Avenue that offers not a single notable amenity or esthetic delight for either outsider or insider.

The outsider will be struck by the building's overly dramatic and utterly miscarried play of forms. On the Pennsylvania Avenue side we have an 8-story building which seems to be tucked under an 11-story building on the E Street side. Unfortunately it doesn't quite fit.

Then there are these gaps — the aforementioned second-story terrace and some two-story-high windows up there on top floor which serve no discernable purpose, only adding to the confusion.

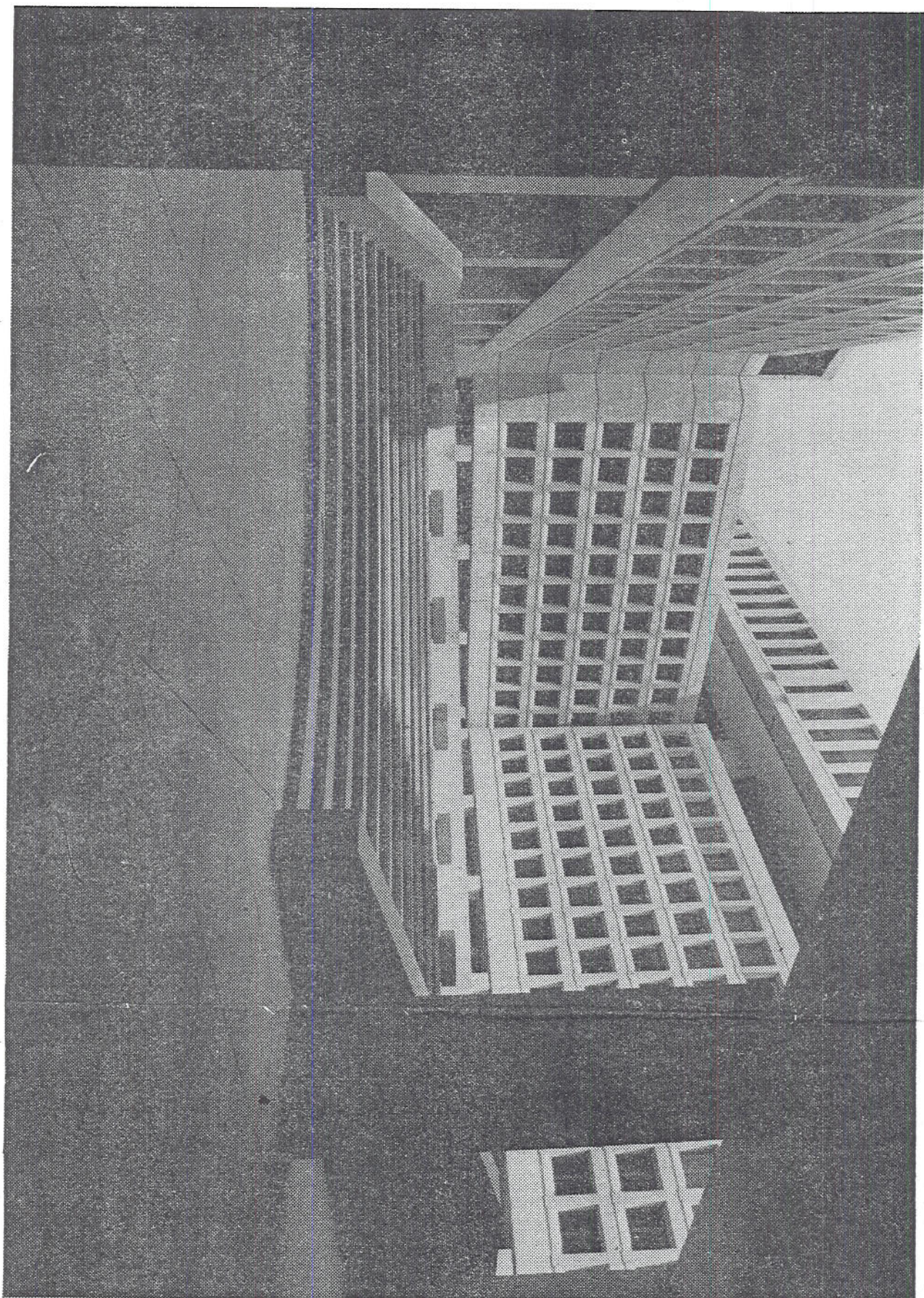
One way to tell good architecture from bad is to observe how a building turns the corner. The FBI Building doesn't turn: it slouches uncertainly into 9th and 10th Streets and, with all its heaping and piling slabs, cubes and columns on top of one another, ought to be arrested for disorderly conduct.

All of this is not a matter of style, of Modern, vs. Traditional, Classic vs. Romantic, Monumental vs. Functional. It is only a matter of a needless and heedless quest for novelty for its own sake gone slightly berserk — and I don't even blame the architects, C. F. Murphy Associates of Chicago. I blame the Fine Arts Commission which, under the influence of Gordon Bunshaft, the architect of the Hirshhorn Museum, tried so hard to make its imprint on Washington and Pennsylvania Avenue that it delivered a painful kick instead.

You just can't escalate a piece of mediocre highway architecture into a domineering \$126 million monument. If you want to know what I mean by "mediocre," take a look at the 10th Street corner entrance. You enter a glass door and five feet later bang your nose against a wall adorned with the FBI seal. You turn either left or right to proceed, which means that the

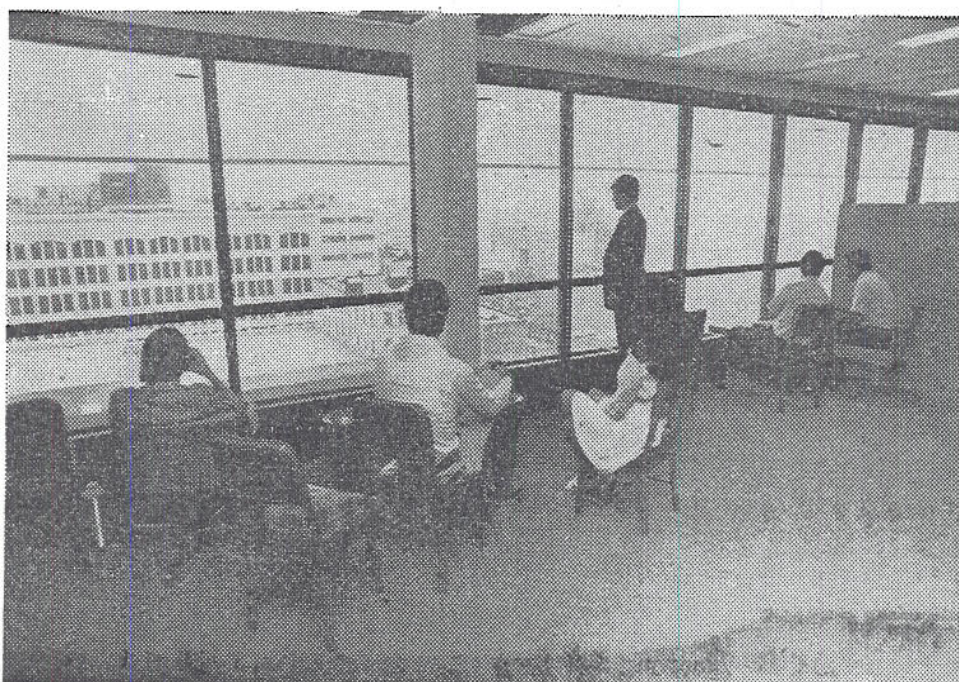
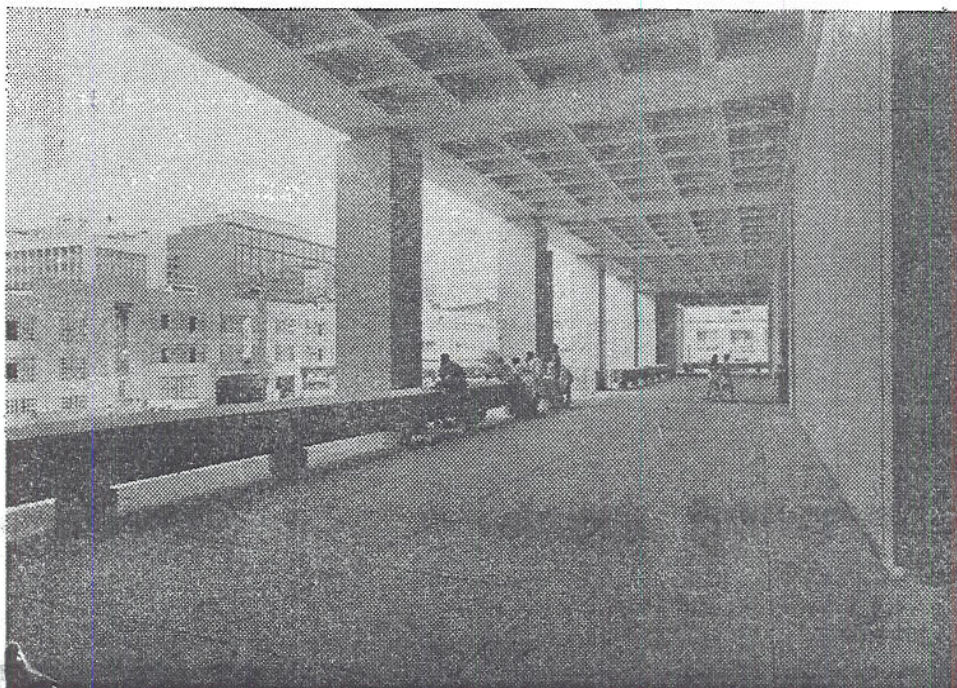
See CITYSCAPE, B3, Col. 1

SATURDAY, JULY 12, 1975



The new FBI Building "dominates its part of downtown Washington, but is alien to the spirit of the capital and the architecture of the avenue." The center of the building, at top, features vacant terraces. At right, is the 10th Street entrance, and an employees' lounge, far right.

Photos by Larry Morris  
—The Washington Post



#### CITYSCAPE, From B1

visitor is confused and the taxpayer has to pay for two guards.

Or, to give you another example of the building's grotesque ineptness, look at the three flagpoles along 9th Street. They stand knee-deep in that moat and so close to the building that there is hardly room for the flags to wave. What are they doing on a side street anyway?

For the insiders, the approximately 7,500 people who work in it, the building is little more than a drab factory with harsh light, endless corridors, hard floors and no visual relief.

The new work spaces are not just austere; they look dingy because they are furnished with old desks and machinery. For their ten-minute breaks, employees may sit in corridor-like lounges, furnished like the waiting rooms of seedy bus terminals, and look out on the 9th Street porno shops through darkly tinted glass windows.

If the file rooms and data processing facilities look depressing, the executive offices look tacky.

What with an unmatched assortment of government-issue "traditional" office furniture, plastic plants, pale gold wall-to-wall carpeting and travel poster photographs of Washington's monuments on the walls, we have ad-

vanced from the bus terminal waiting room to the lobby of a roadside motel.

Surely no one can accuse the FBI of spending taxpayers' money on lavish furnishings. It looks, in fact, as though the austere, so as not to say "cheap," interiors are to recoup the extravagant cost of the building, which was twice as high than estimated in 1967.

At that time, of course, the FBI was riding high, J. Edgar Hoover was a national hero and the FBI building, of all buildings, was to set the tone for a monumental Pennsylvania Avenue that looked a little as though Albert Speer had designed it.

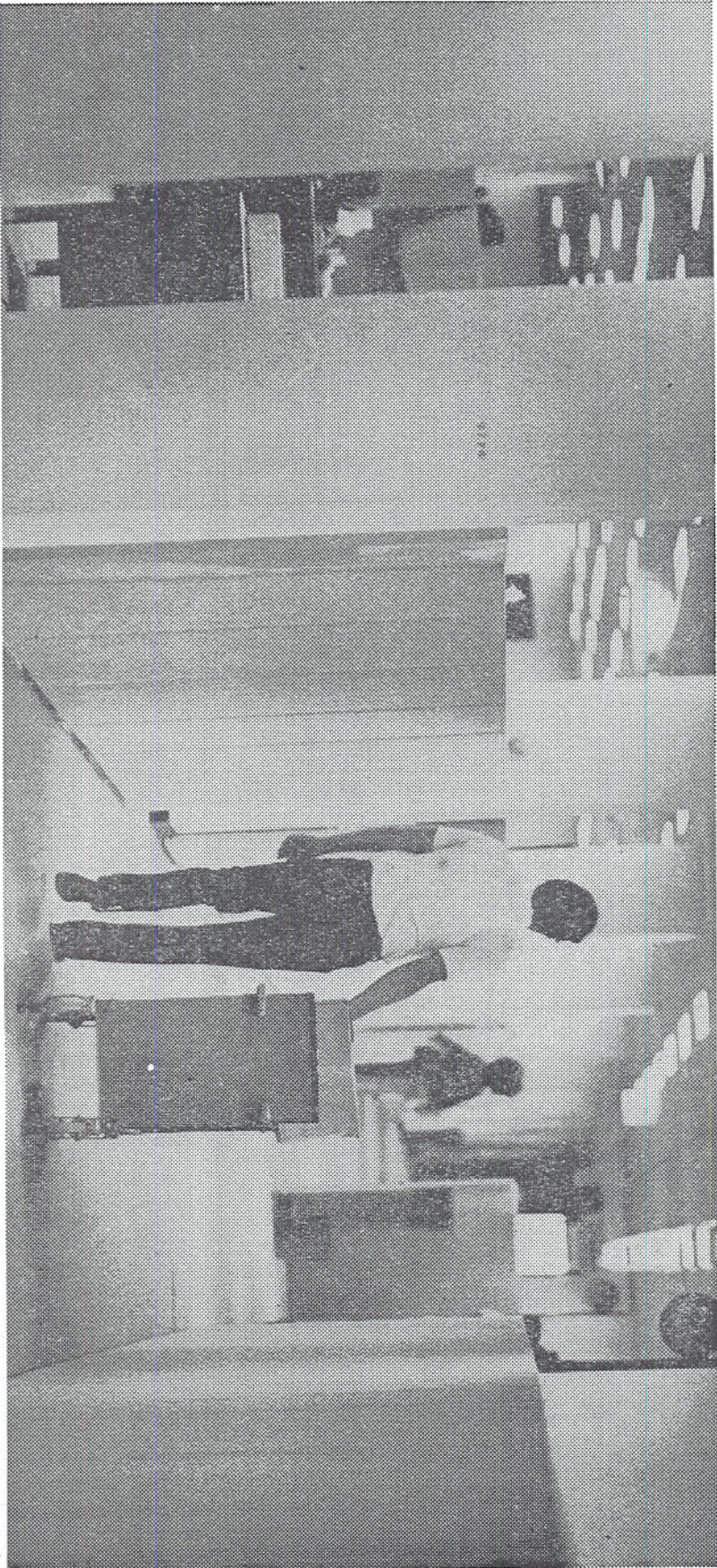
What the government tried to build here was not offices but an image.

It is not the true image of America. The Pennsylvania Avenue plan has now been changed and there is not likely to be another monumental boondoggle like this in Washington.

In time, I am sure, the FBI's vast and growing data processing plant and National Crime Information Center will move out to the suburbs, where they have room to expand and operate efficiently. Other, less grim offices, will take their place. Stores will replace those blank walls along the Avenue.

And down there in the gravel-filled moats, someone will plant ivy. May it grow fast and strong.

For there is nothing like ivy to hide the mistakes of architects and nations.



*A view of the new FBI Building from the inside: a ninth floor hallway.*

By LARRY MORRIS—The Washington Post