

A Huge Building Honors A Foe of Bigness: Reagan

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They have short memories inside the Beltway.

Ronald Reagan, you may recall, was the President who abhorred big Government, cost overruns and busybody Federal regulators. He made that clear as soon as he hit town, declaring in his inaugural address in 1981: "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem."

And he kept right at it. Once he told a crowd in Montana: "The source of our economic problems is finally beginning to dawn on the bafflegabbers and those fancy dudes in Washington: Government is too big and it spends too much."

Well, nobody as much as breathed such ideas today, at least in public, when some of the capital's fanciest dudes turned out to help dedicate the second-biggest United States Government building ever constructed (after the Pentagon). It came in at \$816 million, a mere \$448 million more than Congress projected in 1987. It will house, among others, a large contingent from the Environmental Protection Agency, which President Reagan cordially loathed.

But the Gipper's name is chiseled into the limestone facade anyway. The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center joins a medical institute at George Washington University, the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport across the Potomac River in Virginia, a bridge in Illinois, a freeway in California, a turnpike in Florida and a state office building in Los Angeles on the long list of tributes to the nation's 40th President.

Standing in the building's soaring atrium, President Clinton said that he sensed "the essence" of Mr. Reagan in "this incredible space." Standing in for her husband, now 87 and ill with Alzheimer's disease, Nancy Reagan hailed the sprawling, L-shaped, sort-of-modern structure as "magnificent."

Magnificently big, without question; the concrete used in the building would pave 106 miles of two-lane highway, the floor space exceeds that of the Empire State Building and the exterior contains 42,000 slabs of Indiana limestone. There are no fewer than 13,000 doors and 21,000 light fixtures inside.

Designed by James Ingo Freed, the building completes the Federal Triangle, a complex of Government properties authorized by Congress in 1926 to replace a shabby neighborhood along Pennsylvania Avenue, a few blocks from the White House.

The style of the structure is severe. Unlike the 1908 John Wilson building that nestles within its "L," its columns have no fluting, its capitals have no carving and its facade is bereft of swags, shields and moldings. It looks like a neo-Classical building waiting for the stone carvers to show up.

The idea was to complement but not to mimic the academic style of its neighbors. In that it succeeds, but it has none of the freshness or clarity of Washington's most celebrated modern building, the angular East Building of the National Gallery, farther down the avenue. That was designed by Mr. Freed's partner, I. M. Pei.

Eventually, the structure will house 7,000 Federal workers, a 980-seat food court, restaurants and a privately run trade center that includes office space, a 650-seat auditorium and extensive exhibition spaces.

For his part, Mr. Clinton used the occasion to recall Mr. Reagan as an internationalist and to urge Mr. Reagan's Republican followers in Congress to honor his legacy by providing money for the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations.

"President Reagan once said we had made what he called 'an unbreakable commitment' to the I.M.F., one that was unbreakable because in this age of economic interdependence, an investment in the I.M.F. is simply an investment in American prosperity," Mr. Clinton said today.

Then he quoted Mr. Reagan as saying in 1985: "The U.N. stands as the symbol of the hopes of all mankind for a more peaceful and productive world. We must not disappoint those hopes.' We still must not disappoint those hopes."

There is almost as much disagreement over the building as over international spending. Some find it dignified and impressive; Benjamin Forgey of The Washington Post called it "brilliant." But Deborah Dietsch, former editor of Architecture magazine, said its "watered-down classicism" was "neither fish nor fowl."

Michael Reagan, the President's eldest son, derided it last year as Mount Wastemore.

Representative John J. (Jimmy) Duncan Jr., a Tennessee Republican who has been one the project's most persistent critics, said: "It's one of the biggest boondoggles ever seen in Federal construction.. We will wind up with a beautiful, well-constructed building, but one that will cost twice what it should have."

Washington is like that, as Ronald Reagan himself discovered. Things grow. When he took over from Jimmy Carter, the Federal deficit stood at \$73.8 billion. Eight years later, as George Bush took office, it stood at \$155 billion.