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Massive Reagan Building Is Dedicated

Ceremony: The 40th president is honored with an \$818-million edifice in festivities filled with irony. Critics call monument an unflattering tribute.

May 06, 1998 | JONATHAN PETERSON | TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON — In a ceremony rich in irony, the Ronald Reagan building—a monumental, \$818-million edifice that contains enough concrete to pave more than 100 miles of highway—was dedicated Tuesday amid sighs from conservatives who idolized the 40th president as the enemy of big government.

President Clinton held forth, former First Lady Nancy Reagan joined him, and nine cellists from the National Symphony Orchestra were scheduled to join Mstislav Rostropovich in a musical tribute to the ailing former leader whose name now is memorialized in the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center.

Bathed in the light of a 125-foot-high atrium that encompasses an acre of glass, speakers recalled Reagan's devotion to freedom and global trade, values they said the building symbolizes majestically.

But away from the ceremony, some conservatives could not help but note that the sprawling structure of limestone and glass, which ballooned into a national brouhaha, is an unlikely tribute to a president who championed limits on the federal bureaucracy.

"It's an unfortunate monument, in our view," declared John E. Berthoud, president of the National Taxpayers Union. "It really goes against everything that Ronald Reagan and his revolution stood for."

Nor are critics comforted by some of the building's occupants, including the Environmental Protection Agency—reviled on the right as a symbol of federal regulation—and the Agency for International Development, a metaphor for the foreign aid that is yet another bugaboo in certain conservative circles.

The complex is 3.1 million square feet—less than half that of the Pentagon but more than the Empire State Building—and ultimately will house 7,000 public and private employees. Open on a limited basis since last year, it sports five main entrances, 85 elevators, eight escalators and 10 imposing stairways of granite. It is the second-largest federal office building, after the Pentagon,

"I just think it's ridiculous that this building is being named after Ronald Reagan. I'm outraged," said Stephen Moore, director of fiscal policy at the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank. "Here's a guy who came to Washington with an agenda of dismantling bureaucracies, not housing them. It would be a lot more appropriate to have empty lots in Washington named after Ronald Reagan."

Other conservatives took a more sanguine view.

Grover Norquist, president of the Americans for Tax Reform, said: "It's got to be named after someone. It might as well be named after him."

He added: "The proper way to honor President Reagan's memory is to leave the building named after him and then downsize the government to the point where you could sell off the building because the government didn't need the office space."

The 87-year-old Reagan, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, did not attend Tuesday's festivities. He was represented by his wife, who Clinton escorted onto the podium and who seemed touched by the affectionate tribute to her husband.

"You know, Ronnie would never think about whether a memorial or a monument would be dedicated to him," she said, recalling her husband's surprise during a trip to Ireland that a pub had been named after him. "It just simply never entered his mind."

"This glorious structure serves as a vivid reminder of him and his work."

It appears, however, that this is not a unanimous view within the former president's own family. "I hate it," Michael Reagan, the president's son, told the Dallas Morning News last year. "If my father were to know that a new government building, second only to the Pentagon in size, has his name on it, he would go nuts."

Certainly, the building, which sits on a swamp turned red-light district turned parking lot within walking distance of the White House, has followed the inglorious pattern of other projects that cost a great deal more than cheerfully promised at the outset.

But at Tuesday's ceremony, some insisted the question of whether Reagan's name is the right choice involves more than a matter of dollars. Clinton and others, noting Reagan's die-hard advocacy of free trade, said it was appropriate that a large share of the building's offices aim to promote international commerce.

"As I stand within the Reagan building, I am confident that we will again make the right choices for America, that we will take up where

President Reagan left off, to lead freedom's march boldly into the 21st century," said Clinton, sharing the podium with such GOP luminaries as Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), Bob Dole and Colin L. Powell. "This is a great day for our country."

As Nancy Reagan gazed approvingly, Clinton paid tribute to her husband. "If you look at this atrium, I think we feel the essence of his presence: his unflagging optimism, his proud patriotism, his unabashed faith in the American people . . . President Reagan understood so clearly that America could not stand passively in the face of great change. He understood we had to embrace the obligations of leadership to build a better future for all."

In the late 1980s, boosters projected that the building would cost \$362 million--less than half its eventual price tag--and in the process help renovate a lifeless section of Pennsylvania Avenue and complete a complex known as the Federal Triangle. Dole, the longtime senator from Kansas, pushed legislation to name it after Reagan.

As time passed, architectural fees shot up; delays and changes in the plan reportedly sent the cost of concrete alone up an extra \$44 million. Government officials bickered over the scope of the project; the list of prospective tenants changed. Bush administration officials eventually eliminated a giant screen theater and two performing arts theaters from the plan.

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Naming Another One for Gipper

Here is a sample of sites named after President Reagan:

- * Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley.
- * Ronald Reagan Freeway, which runs about 25 miles from the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles County to Moorpark in Ventura County.
- * Ronald Reagan State Office Building, in downtown Los Angeles.
- * Reagan Center at Eureka College, Eureka, Ill. (named in honor of Reagan and his brother Neil "Moon" Reagan).
- * Ronald Reagan Bridge in Dixon, Ill.
- * Ronald Reagan Fundamental School in Yuma, Ariz.
- * Ronald Reagan Institute of Emergency Medicine at George Washington University Hospital, Washington, where Reagan was taken after he was shot in 1981.
- * Ronald Reagan Federal Courthouse in Santa Ana, to be completed this year.
- * Ronald Reagan Highway, an east-west road that cuts across Cincinnati's northern suburbs.
- * Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.
- * Ronald Reagan Turnpike, a toll road stretching nearly 350 miles from north of Orlando, Fla., to Miami, assuming Gov. Lawton Chiles signs the legislation.
- * Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, in Washington.

Source: Associated Press