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A Cross Section in Space: The Ronald Reagan Building

Context and design guidelines provided a highly defining framework for the Ronald Reagan Building, completed in 199[x] in the city's Depression-era Federal Triangle district.

The concave gesture on the Fourteenth Street facade breaks the rectilinear rhythm of buildings on that street and, in concert with and contrast to the rectilinear facade of the Department of Commerce building across the street, creates an urban room. The cross section created between the two buildings is heightened by the play of light on the south-facing curvature and the dark and shaded north-facing colonnade.

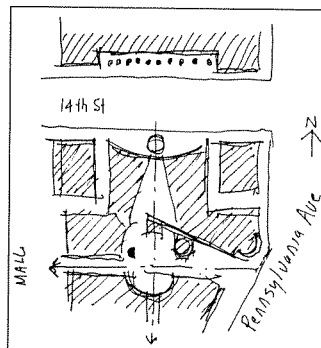
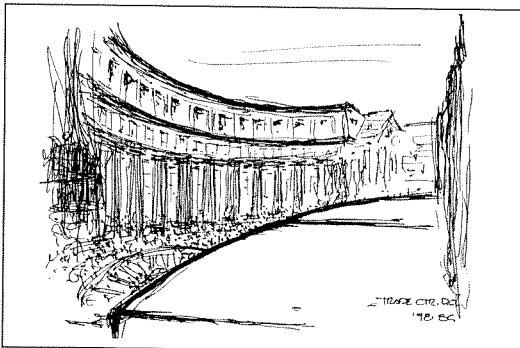
Reminiscent of Borromini's Oratorio dei Filippini, the exterior concavity also gestures to the interior atrium, where the cross section encompasses public spaces at grade and below. The atrium extends axially to a civic plaza and further to the building's monumental south entry. (If only the lower-level cafeteria could have been located on the main level adjacent to the civic plaza.)

In the plaza, the architect masterfully plays the new building off the old building to the south. The introduction of a diagonal, a modernist gesture, and a corner rotunda again provide a counterpoint to the orthogonal building to the south, creating another but more dynamic and active public room, similar to but the inverse of the one on Fourteenth Street. Within this civic space is inserted a classic pavilion, where the public realm is extended to the *piano nobile* and a commanding view is offered.

As one enters the plaza from Pennsylvania Avenue, a bronze marker (by sculptor Martin Puryear) hints at

the yet hidden perpendicular axis of the atrium and continues the cadence of arched entries to the one that breaks through to the Mall. The flat face and curved profile of the sculpture play against the polygonal form of the pavilion, the curved convex back plays against the gently bowed facade of the Woodrow Wilson Center. Solidity contrasts with the voids of the arches. It is a superbly placed and scaled work of public art.

The Modernist diagonal and sculpture are combined with the classical pavilion and rotunda. The subversive detailing, flattened and abstracted classical elements, are played against its older neighbor, all reinforcing the cross section in time and space.



Ronald Reagan Building
Above, left: Steven M. Goldberg, FAIA
Far left: Berent Groth, AIA