

Style

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2002



BY JOHN HOBNER—MOSHE SAFDIE AND ASSOCIATES

The wing-like roofs in architect Moshe Safdie's design for the U.S. Institute of Peace will greet travelers entering the city on the Roosevelt Bridge.

Cityscape

Lift up Your Heads, O Ye Gates

By BENJAMIN FORGEY
Washington Post Staff Writer

Imagine you are driving into Washington at dusk, crossing the Roosevelt Bridge. To your right you glimpse the familiar image of the Lincoln Memorial, beginning to glow under the darkening sky. Directly in front hover the luminous, wing-like roofs of the U.S. Institute of Peace, a new landmark on the Washington horizon.

Or, say you are coming into the city from the opposite direction, following New York

Avenue NE over the big, hump-like bridge above the railroad tracks. At the edge of what used to be a nondescript intersection at the bottom of the hill, where Florida Avenue crosses New York, stands a dramatic, aque-duct-like wall in a sweeping curve. Behind this, in the form of a sleek counter-curve, rises a new federal office building in a grid of stone and glass.

Architects and planners often talk about "gateway" structures such as these -- buildings that memorably signify entry or departure from a city or town -- but

opportunities to actually design and build them rarely come along.

Think, then, how architect Moshe Safdie must be feeling these days after having hit the gateway lottery twice -- and in the same city, at more or less the same time. Safdie, the Israeli-born, Canadian-trained architect who burst on the scene in 1967 with his Habitat housing for Expo '67 -- the Montreal world's fair -- won separate competitions a couple of years ago to design both of these buildings for the nation's capital.

And on Thursday the Commission of Fine Arts enthusiastically endorsed his concept design for the Institute of Peace, a little-known federal entity, and his final plans for the federal building to house the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms.

The bureau building is on track -- construction will begin in the spring, Safdie says, with completion scheduled for 2005. It will take longer for the Peace Institute's luminescent glass wings to rise above a corner of 23rd Street and Constitution Avenue NW. Congress pays the institute's operating expenses, but the organization must seek private funds to cover the building's \$ 55 million cost. Institute officials say the building could be done by 2007.

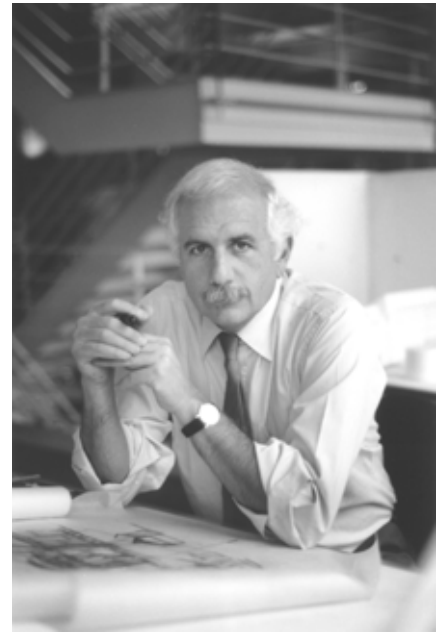
Each building design is exemplary in its way, and the city will be lucky to have them both.

But approval of the institute design must come with a cautionary note. As splendid as it is, the design is somewhat bloated. The building is too massive for its tight corner site, and its exhilarating rooftop peaks maybe a bit too high above the trees. Extreme care must be taken to make sure the new building does not compete with the Lincoln Memorial. The architect and his

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An interior view of Safdie's design for the Institute of Peace, looking toward the Lincoln Memorial with one of the wing-like roofs pointing the way.



BY MICHAL RONNEN SAFDIE

Safdie made the most of the rare chance to design two "gateway" structures in the same city

CITYSCAPE, From C1

client and their federal overseers will have to get out their measuring sticks (or their computer simulators) to ascertain the proper balance between the two. The goal of such exercises is clear: The memorial is, and must remain, the preeminent gateway image in this part of town.

All the same, there's no need to meddle much with Safdie's design. An architect of his stature will be able to adjust it and yet preserve its essential qualities. Some shrinkage alone might do the trick. "Put it on a Xerox machine and reduce it to 90 percent," suggested architect David Childs, a member of the Commission of Fine Arts. Whether a reduction of 10 percent is sufficient remains to be seen, but this is a jewel of a design, and the proportions should be jewel-like.

Known only to a coterie of foreign-policy experts, the Peace Institute dates to a post-Vietnam War proposal to create a Peace Academy as a counterbalance to the academies for military officers. That idea got nowhere, says institute President Richard H. Solomon, but in the mid-1980s liberals and conservatives in Congress came together to support a reduced version -- "an independent, bipartisan institute committed to the prevention, management and peaceful resolution of international conflicts."

Clearly, when the Safdie design is built, the institute will be invisible no longer. Not only is its location close to the Lincoln, Vietnam Veterans and Korean War

memorials -- Solomon quips it will become the "war and peace corner" -- but it also is the endpoint for a line of significant works of architecture on the north side of Constitution Avenue. Aside from being too big, Safdie's design is a sure-handed response to these important contexts. His building does not reflect the symmetries and classical styles of its distinguished neighbors, but it respects them in cornice height, coloration of limestone-like concrete and the overall sobriety of its foursquare facades.

And then come the wonderful roofs. Formed with translucent white glass panels atop swooping lattices of steel, one glides toward the Roosevelt Bridge and the other sweeps out toward the Lincoln Memorial. Corresponding to two cone-shaped interior atria -- a "private" space for researchers and administrators and a public area for educational programs and displays -- these floating structures symbolically suggest humankind's desire for peace and the institute's high aspirations. Architecturally, they are the poetic touches that bring the whole to life. ...