

What's a Tourist Attraction Like The Kennedy Library Doing in a Nice Neighborhood Like This?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

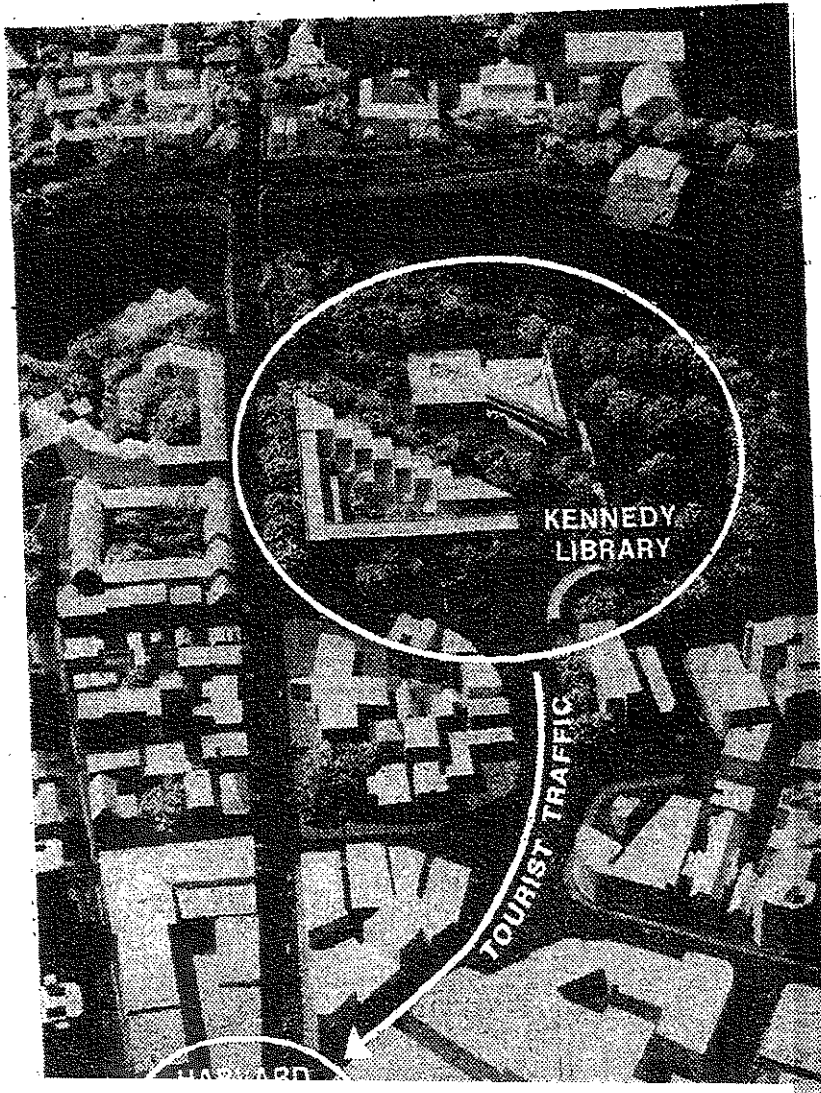
THE "new" Kennedy Presidential Library design that has just been officially unveiled is about as fitting a marker for a traumatic decade as any building complex could be: in the ten years since the plan and the architect, I. M. Pei and Partners, were announced, galloping inflation, an energy crisis and community protest have reduced the project to approximately half its size and half its cost, and completely changed its architectural expression. It is its fate, however, to remain one of the nation's more controversial undertakings, in any guise.

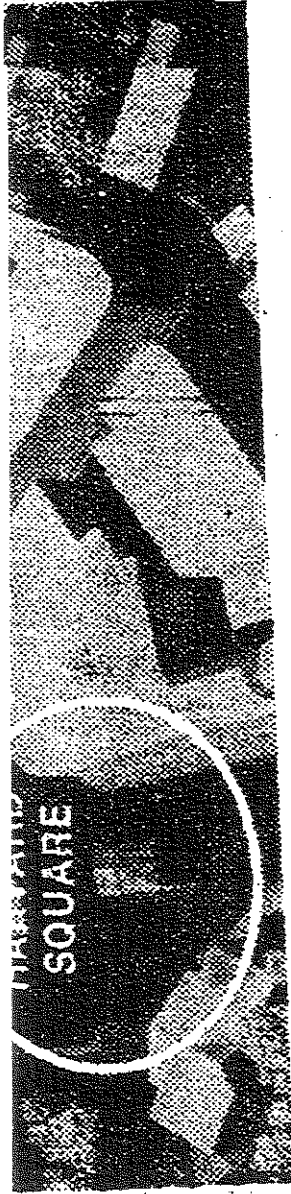
The library and museum building is now about one third smaller in bulk and almost half the height of the previous scheme, with half the exhibition area. It has been transformed from a dramatic, glass pyramid to a much more modest brick structure, obviously torn between monumentality and self-effacement. And a great deal of the focus has been deliberately shifted from the built elements to open park space, making an eight and a half-acre public pedestrian precinct out of the 12.18-acre site adjoining Harvard University and fronting the Charles River.

With the building components now broken apart—another attempt at demonumentalization—the park both unifies and separates the Kennedy archive-museum and the projected Harvard building that will house the John F. Kennedy School of Government and the Kennedy Institute of Politics. (If this sounds confusing it only reflects the complexity of Kennedy-Harvard accommodations, which makes town-gown arrangements look like a breeze.)

What the changes indicate, however, is a revolution in attitudes that goes beyond, and underlies, the radical redesign. The revisions are a response both to the obvious economic restrictions and to the hostile criticism of organized community groups on the grounds of scale, suitability and community disruption. Partly in answer to these well-orchestrated protests, and partly due to arising sensibility in the profession—both phenomena of the past decade—the new scheme is a genuine effort to deal with the project as urban design. This approach emphasizes the environmental impact of architecture.

The potential impact of the Kennedy Library on Cambridge has been correctly perceived as enormous. It will inevitably trigger speculative construction and there is outspoken terror of a tourist invasion. One million people are expected the first year, 700,000 each year thereafter, or about double the number





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of visitors to any other Presidential library. The project has been embattled from the start.

The architect, this time around, has been working not only with traditional considerations of form, style and symbolism, but also with the molding of a kinetic and human experience; he has been almost painfully concerned with how more than half a million visitors will arrive and depart, circulate and receive impressions and messages, and—invariably—impose new images and

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The Kennedy Library Looms Over Cambridge

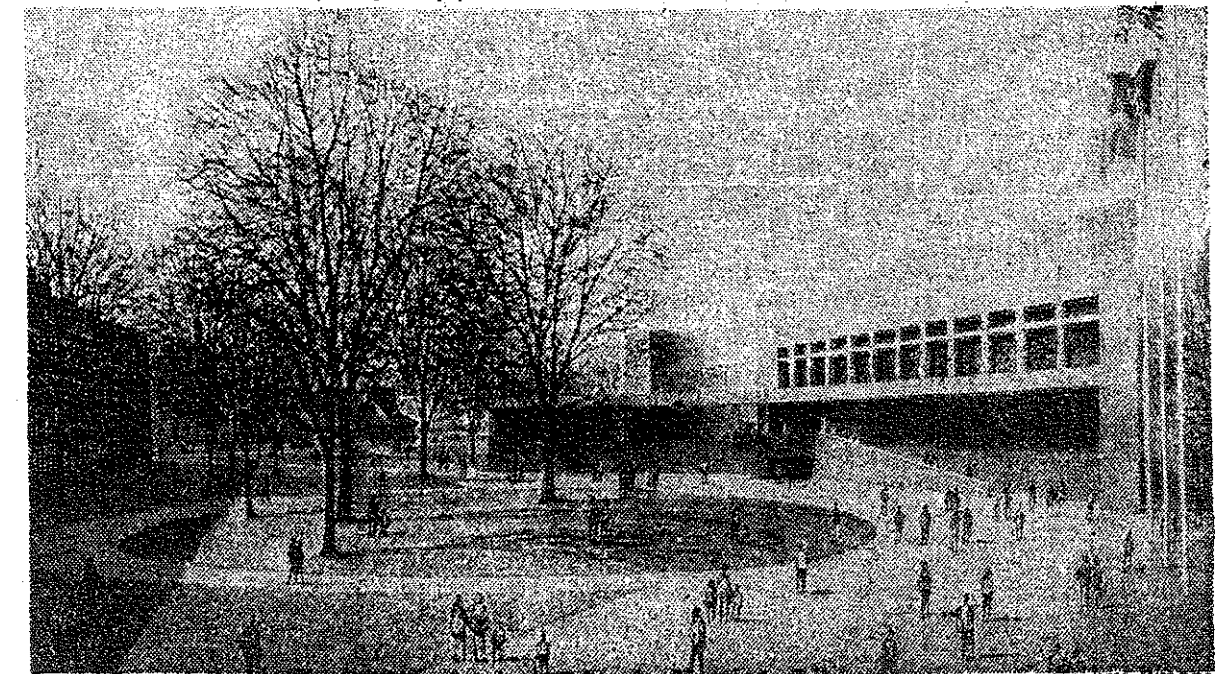
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demands on the neighborhood. All this, too, is highly susceptible to design. And the result can be judged successful only up to a point, beyond which the most severe doubts set in.

Unfortunately, no matter how well the architect may resolve these aspects of his work, they spill out into areas where city government and controls through zoning and design review must take over. His authority and good intentions stop abruptly at the site line. And unless the city of Cambridge, Harvard University and the Kennedy family pick up the responsibility constructively, the library could be a disaster for a community already in flux and indecisive in controls. Cambridge is changing, and the Kennedy Library will only make it change faster, impelled by an influx of Middle America, like the Goths overwhelming the intelligentsia.

It is in these highly sensitive urban terms, then, that the Kennedy Library complex must be evaluated, primarily as an environmental force, rather than as an architectural abstraction. Design specifics, in fact, are still schematic and open to considerable debate—Mr. Pei could goof, but that is 99 per cent unlikely with this talented and tasteful man.

The basic questions that must be asked are therefore conceptual and environmental, rather than architectural. Is the Presidential Library a valid idea as currently set up by Federal law and interpreted by the General Services Administration to include elements of monument and museum? I think not, or at least hold very serious reservations. And if one does accept the concept, what will its realization here do to a densely-used urban area and its academic and social setting? At present, both questions rate extremely uneasy answers.

As proposed now, the Kennedy Library complex will consist of two building com-



The park in the design for the Kennedy Library looks spacious, but "more than half a million tourists will have to be fed and serviced somewhere."

posity, as for Lyndon Johnson. In this case, the goal is a kind of elegant, didactic democracy. This focal building is to be paid for by the Kennedy family, and as with all Presidential libraries, maintained in perpetuity by the Federal government.

In addition, there is the John F. Kennedy School of Government, a Harvard Graduate School renamed and relocated, to be built in two stages. Connected to it will be the Kennedy Institute of Politics, a study center for scholars, to be put up and endowed by the Kennedy family but turned over to Harvard for management.

The proposal has several things to commend it. The park, while still undetailed, is conceived as a pedestrian, circulatory device, connecting visually to the Charles River and physically to the neighboring Eliot and Brattle Squares and to Harvard Square beyond. The architect suggests a continuation of open space promenades from river to town.

The buildings are much less bulky and dominating than previously, and the site coverage is extremely low—about one tenth of the allow-

able alternative—and it is scarcely a desirable one—is conventionally unattractive speculative development fully utilizing the zoning limits.

Traffic studies indicate that most cars will use Memorial Drive rather than town approaches. (What the Drive will turn into on a steamy summer Sunday is anyone's guess.) About 435 parking places are provided on adjacent acreage also owned by the General Services Administration, to be separated from buildings and park by an arcade.

An effort to get related commercial functions such as shops and eating places onto this adjacent site has failed financially. But the Kennedy family has a purchase option on the land and a voice in its ultimate uses. This is critical, because if and when the Library proposal is firmly committed, speculative development pressure will be applied to that land. It is equally critical to supply appropriate visitor support facilities.

The inescapable fact is that more than half a million tourists will have to be fed and serviced somewhere, and this is currently the fatal flaw of the plan. Without any realis-

places, souvenir shops and other exploitative enterprises will spring up like the plague to inundate Harvard Square and its environs.

An environmental impact study is being prepared by the General Services Administration which will consider these and other factors. But this is clearly an impact that nobody wants. It isn't that Harvard Square is so heavenly now, but Cambridge seems to prefer to let it fall apart in its own way, rather than to face the immediate impact of a thundering tourist herd.

Beyond these considerations, the nagging question remains whether there should be such a peculiar hybrid as a Presidential library-museum at all. According to the G.S.A., the way the Presidential Libraries law is written, the Federal government will not support scholarly archives alone; there must be a broader popular or educational base. The result is a cultural curiosity mandated by statute. And so each Presidential project outreaches its predecessors, and no one should think for a moment that the Kennedy project would have been reduced to

stalled with customary skill by the firm of Chermayeff and Geismar, and they will, as usual, consist of 80 per cent trivia and 20 per cent material of genuine worth, intellectually and esthetically rationalized in clever display themes. It is this inevitable repetitive mixture of malarky, propaganda and valid documentation that needs desperately to be re-examined. It is even possible that the law needs to be rewritten.

Do we really require these redundant pseudo-monuments? The archives, the school, the study center, add up to a legitimate research and educational facility based on the resources of the Kennedy Presidential papers, of which, ironically, less than a third will be here. Does this man of history, of grace, wit and tragic legend, need to be turned into a tourist attraction and status sideshow?

If the project is to be made to work without environmental disaster, the first priority in Cambridge is the re-examination of related planning tools and objectives. The Kennedy Library could be the catalyst to make this kind of overdue planning happen. Beyond that advantage,