



The AIA was founded in New York City in 1857. The group moved to Washington DC in 1899, leasing the historic Octagon House as its new headquarters. The AIA purchased the Octagon in 1902.



The Octagon property included the old stable and smokehouse, and plenty of garden area. The AIA wanted to use more of the space. The 1900 Convention told the Octagon House Committee “to consider building a cheap hall in the back yard which could be done without injuring the garden.” Plans for a building behind the Octagon were discussed over and over for decades. But in the late 1930s, the AIA was still crammed into the Octagon.

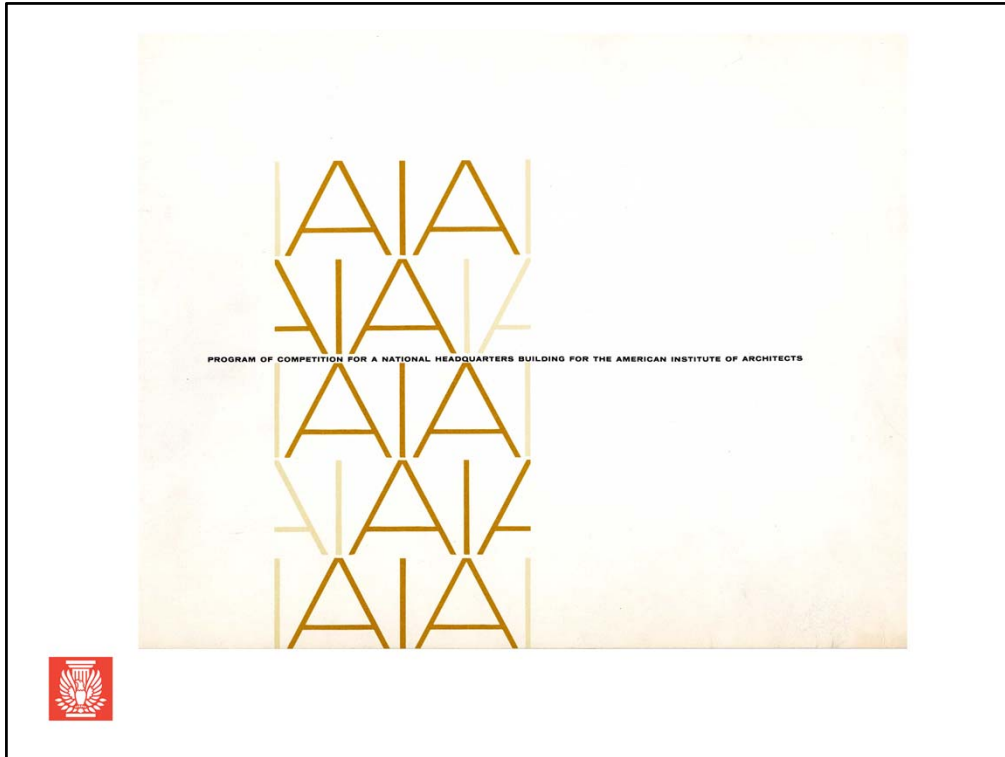


At last, in 1940, a contract was let for a new building designed by Fellows Otto Eggers (1882-1964), Dwight James Baum (1886-1939), and former AIA president D. Everett Waid (1864-1939). The building wrapped the back of the garden, reaching to the stable, and kept the stable's height while incorporating design elements from the upper stories of the Octagon.

Before the AIA could occupy its new Administration Building, it was requisitioned by the federal government and used throughout World War II as government offices with a wooden fence across the property to keep the architects out.



After the war, the AIA finally was able to move into the Administration Building. In 1954, the stable was remodeled by Howe, Foster & Snyder to become the AIA Library. These new buildings, plus the Octagon itself, still didn't provide adequate office space for the postwar AIA.

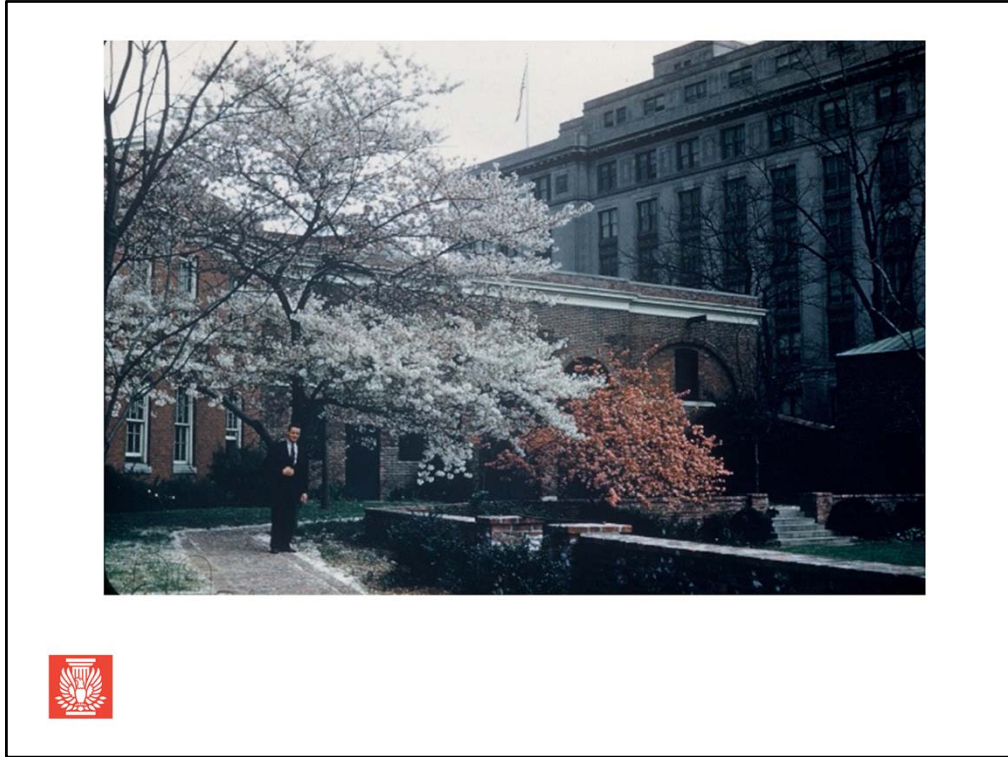


The 1962 Convention authorized a competition for the design of a new headquarters building. The competition was held in 1964.

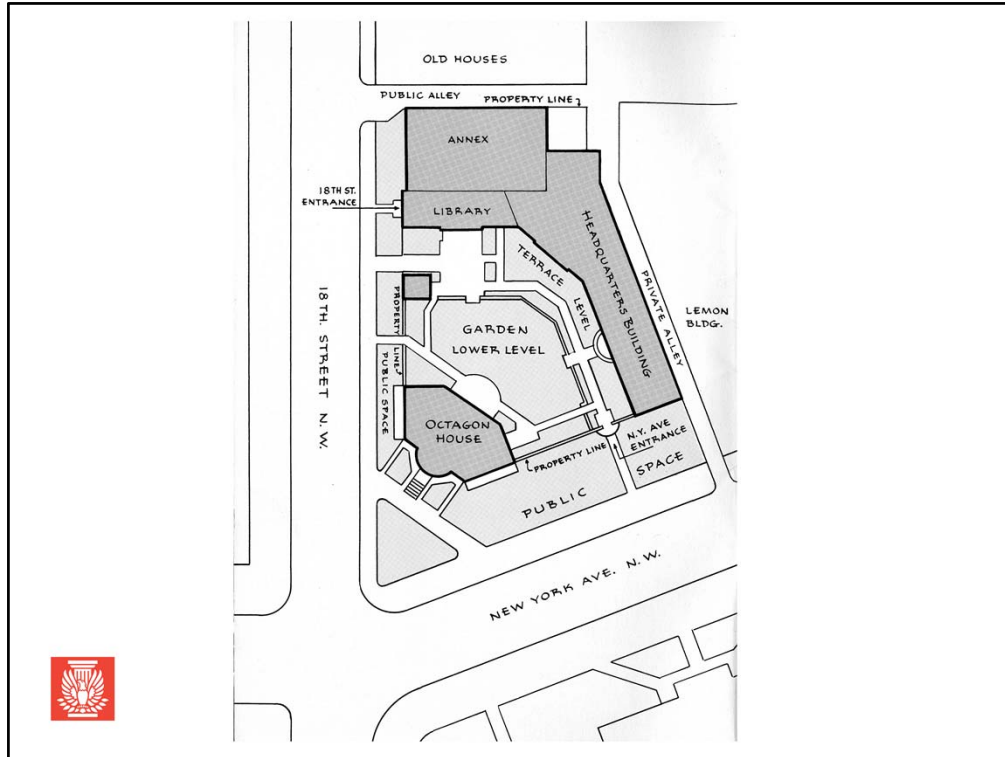
	Function or Description	Occupancy: (No. of people unless otherwise stated)	Approximate Net Area (Sq. Ft.)	Total Gross Area (Sq. Ft.) ¹
PUBLIC AND GENERAL MEMBERSHIP ACTIVITIES	PRN and Receptionist	1	100	
	Exhibit gallery, lounge and pantry		4250	
	Library: Total Area		(1200)	
	Three private offices plus cataloguing and general work space	4	500	
	Audio-visual work space plus projection room with sound	1	350	
	Reading room		350	
	Archives—Special Collection	1	400	
	Storage: Open stacks and files		1000	
	Closed or controlled stacks and files		1800	
	President's Office with dressing room and lavatory	1	250	
	Board Room, ante-room and cloak room	40	1500	
Conference Rooms:		2000		
Two rooms	25 each			
One room	15			
OFFICE OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Total Area		(700)	
Director's Office	1	400		
Reception space, secretary, sten., lavatory and coat room	2	300		
INSTITUTE SERVICES DEPARTMENT	Total Area		(1500)	
Administrator's Office with reception space and secretary	2	400		
Five private offices plus general office and work space	9	1020		
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT	Total Area		(2800)	
Administrator's Office with reception space and secretary	2	400		
Ten private offices plus general office and work space	19	2400		
PUBLIC SERVICES DEPARTMENT	Total Area		(2540)	
Administrator's Office with reception space and secretary	2	400		
JOURNALS—Six private offices plus general office and work space	9	920		
Five private offices plus general office and work space	12	1240		
BUSINESS MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT	Total Area		(2400)	
Controller's Office with reception space and secretary	2	400		
Four private offices plus general office and work space	12	1170		
Files supervisor, clerks and central files	3	680		
Photocopy		150		
TOTAL	PRIME SPACE FOR INSTITUTE OCCUPANCY		22,420	32,028
TOTAL	PRIME RENTAL SPACE		12,580	17,972
TOTAL	PRIME SPACE		35,000	50,000
SECONDARY OR BASEMENT SPACE	Exhibits—Work space		400	
	Mailing Department		1150	
	Storage for custodian, gardener and Institute Departments		3000	
	Offstreet parking . . . 50 car minimum		9000	
	Mechanical and electrical equipment space		1500 (as required by system)	
TOTAL	SECONDARY SPACE		15,000	21,000



The program book for the AIA Headquarters competition laid out the goals and requirements for the new design. They wanted 80,000 square feet including space to rent out, workspace for 82 staff members, a Board Room, two conference rooms, an exhibit gallery, and parking. In terms of design, the program called for "a building of special architectural significance, establishing a symbol of the creative genius of our time yet complementing, protecting, and preserving a cherished symbol of another time, the historic Octagon House."



"The Octagon House with its delightful garden is cherished by architects and the community and has long presented a delightful and refreshing open space within a neighborhood that is fast becoming a monolith of federal and private office buildings of uniform height. The Octagon and the space occupied by the immediate gardens are to be respected in the planning of the new headquarters."



The program book warned against copying features of the Octagon or “any stylistic re-creation of colonial architecture. What is wanted is a more thoughtful, more sensitive and more meaningful solution: an exciting demonstration that fresh and contemporary architecture can live in harmony with fine architecture of another period; each statement giving the other more meaning.” The winning design should achieve “a new and improved relationship between buildings, gardens, and the city around.”



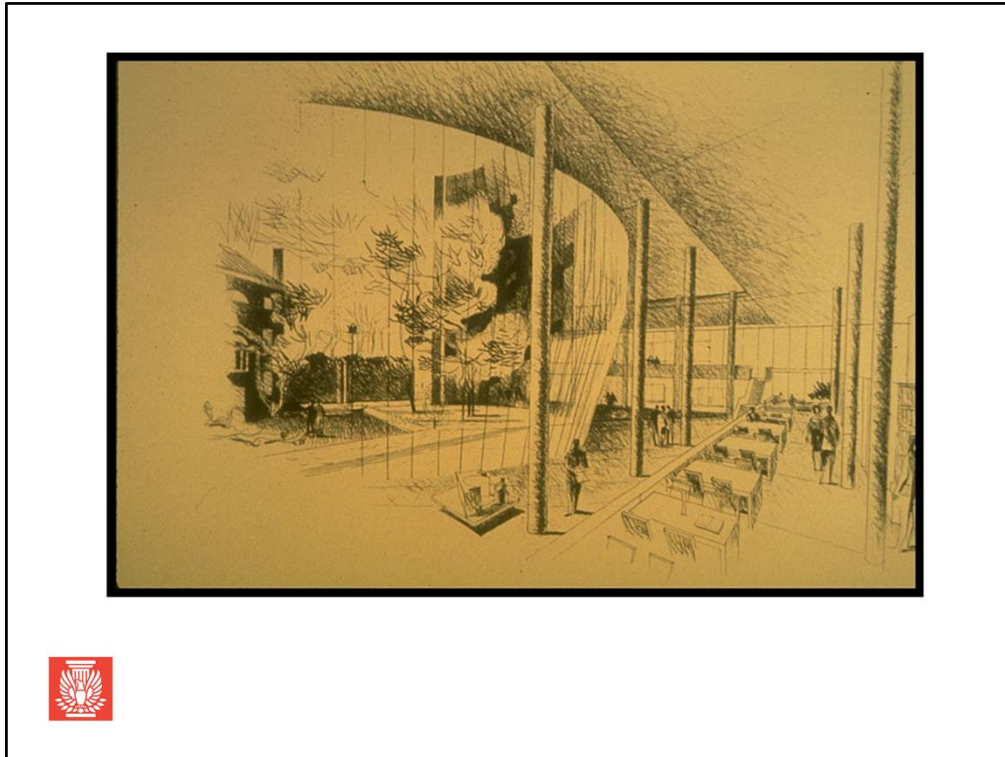
The city around was fast changing. Plans were already underway to replace the houses on the rest of our block of 18th street with the office building that exists today. 1964 was the era of urban renewal, when blocks of historic buildings were torn down wholesale. The AIA's idea to complement the historic structure with a compatible modern building was radical at the time.



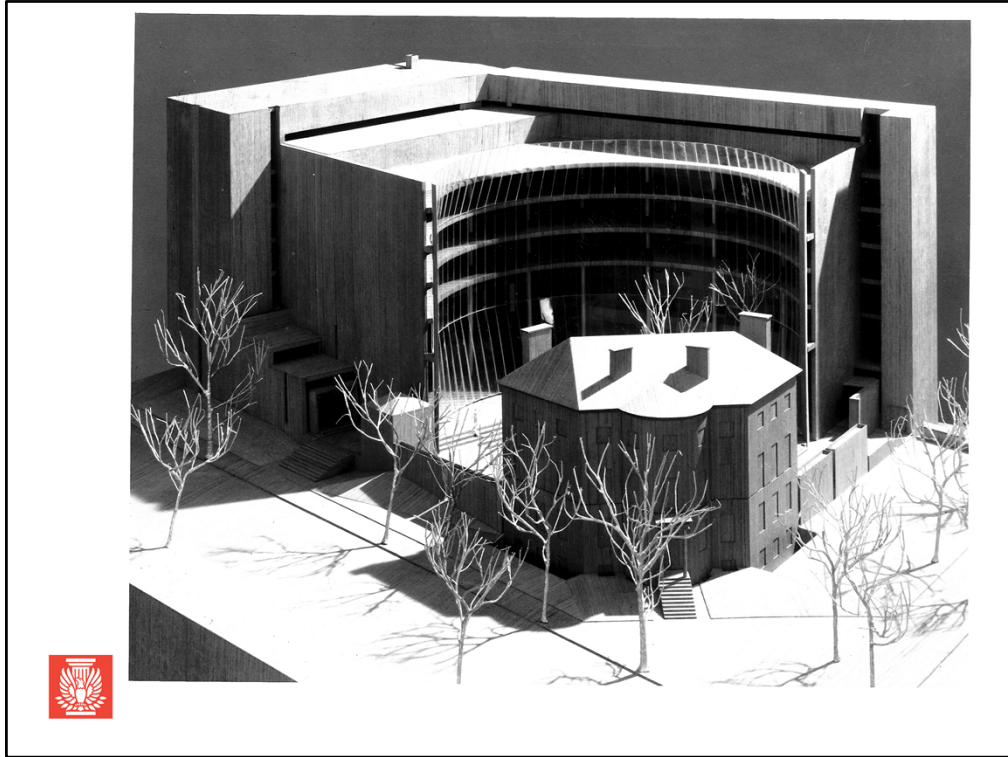
The competition opened in January 1964. It was in two stages: any architect member of the AIA or firms of members were eligible to submit drawings. There were 221 entries.



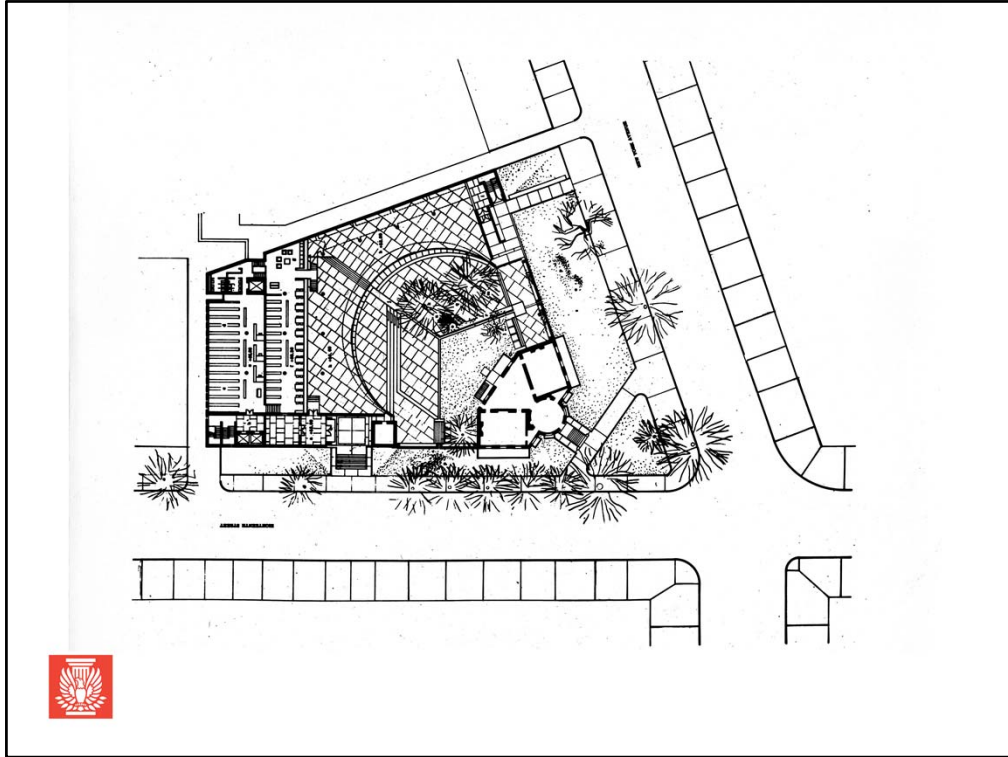
The jury then narrowed it down to seven finalists, who were asked to submit more detailed drawings and models. Finally, the jury selected a winner and three runners-up.



The winning design by Mitchell/Giurgola Associates, Philadelphia, was a five-story red brick building with a semicircular glass wall embracing the Octagon garden.



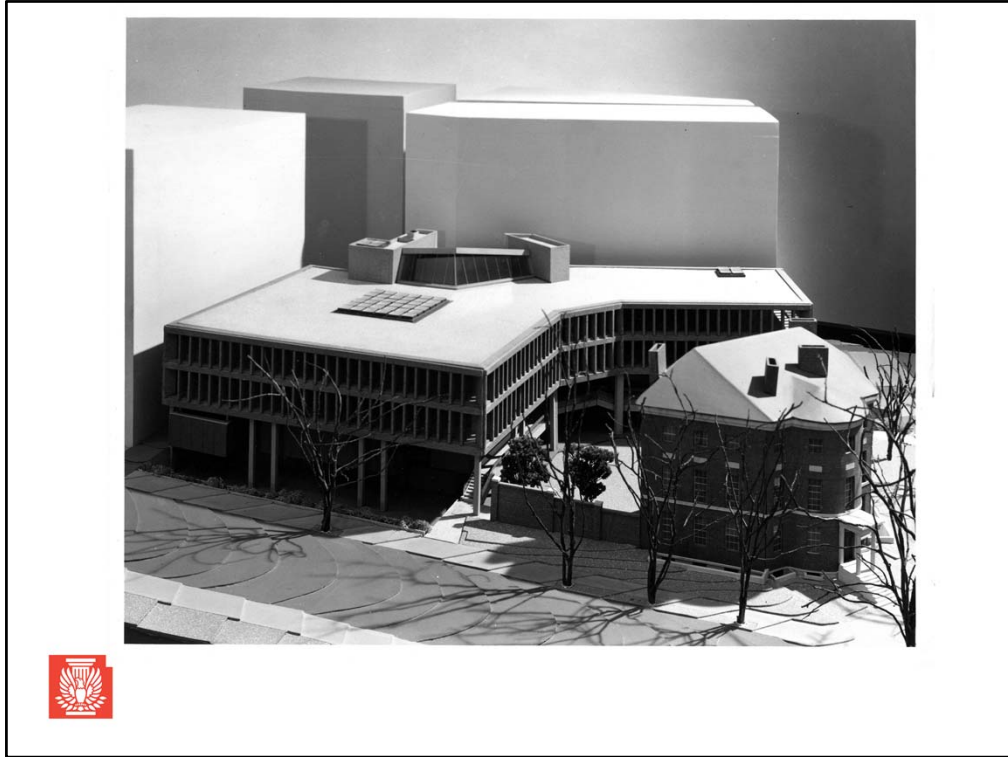
It was the only one of the finalists to retain the smoke house, though it made the existing garden smaller.



The exhibit gallery and the library occupied the first floor. Entrance to the building was on 18th street.



The runner-up design by I. M. Pei & Associates, New York City, would have removed all the existing walls and structures except the Octagon itself and redesigned the garden with sculpture. The building was seven stories, of concrete aggregate in a buff limestone color.



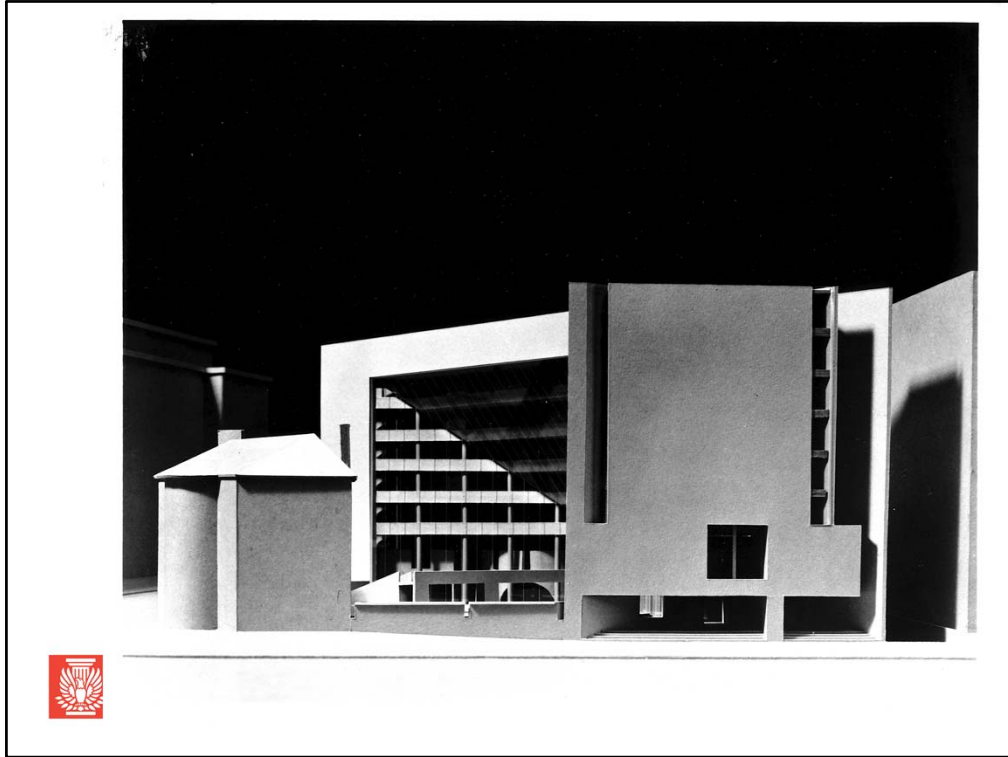
The runner-up design by Labatut – Abernethy, Princeton, was a low, horizontal building done in dark, warm-hued concrete aggregate to blend with the brick of the Octagon.



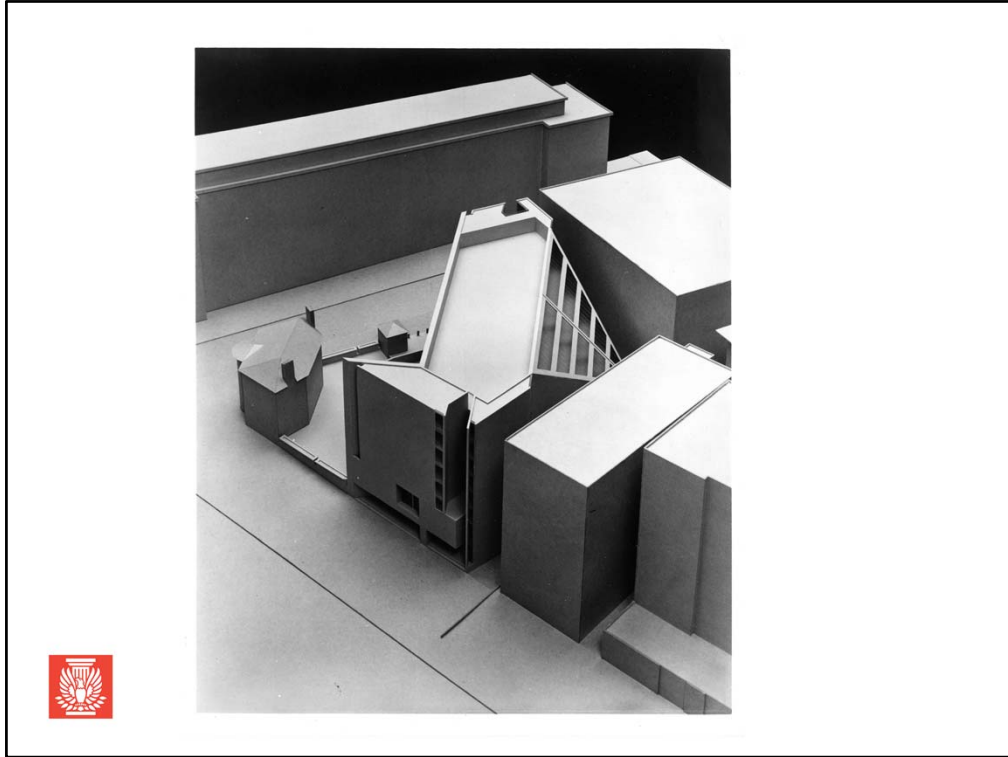
The runner-up design by the Perkins & Will Partnership, Chicago, had a three-level front section with brick piers, backed by a taller office block. Each of these designs took a different approach to the relationship between the Octagon and the new headquarters.



Not everyone liked the winning design, especially its encroachment on the Octagon's garden setting. The Historic Resources Committee of AIA Philadelphia called it "an act of historic desecration." Meanwhile, the AIA Board decided that they really needed 130,000 square feet instead of the 80,000 called for in the program. The AIA acquired the Lemon Building next door on New York Avenue, planning to demolish it.



Mitchell/Giurgola agreed to adapt their competition design, and presented it to the 1967 convention. The new design now had the main entrance underneath the building on New York Avenue, a larger plaza, and slanted glass over the plaza instead of a curved glass wall.



The back corner was stepped to let in natural light. The AIA Board approved the new design, but in June 1967 the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts refused to approve it, saying it was “out of keeping with the feeling of the Octagon House.” The Commission on Fine Arts is the design review board for DC buildings. The AIA helped establish it early in the 20th century, and endorsed the use of design review boards across the country, so the AIA could only accept the decision.



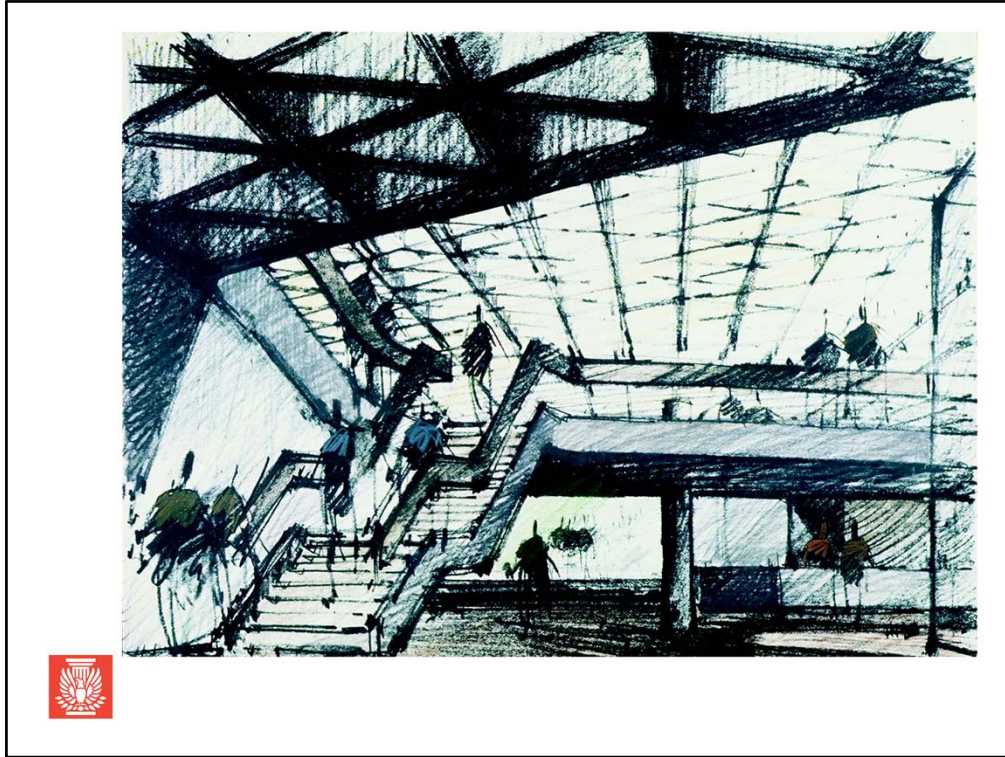
Mitchell/Giurgola submitted a third design in 1968, and it was again rejected by the Fine Arts Commission. The firm had now produced three distinctly different designs and spent four years on the project, and they were not willing to try again. Mitchell/Giurgola withdrew from the process.

A committee to select a new architect was formed, including winners and runners-up from the previous competition: Max Urbahn (chair), Romaldo Girugola, Philip Will, Jr. of Perkins & Will, and I.M. Pei.

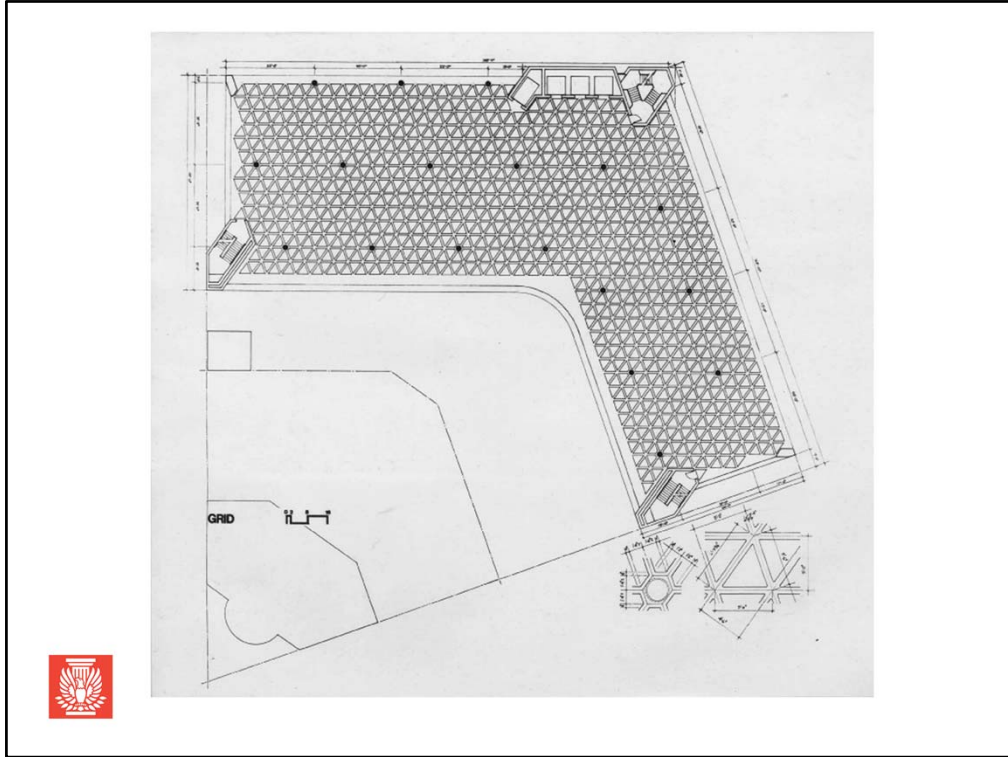
After interviews and naming a short list of seven, in 1969 the committee chose The Architects Collaborative (TAC), a firm founded in Cambridge, MA, by Walter Gropius, to design the new headquarters. TAC had been the second recipient of the AIA's Architectural Firm Award, in 1964.



TAC architects Norman Fletcher and Howard Elkus created a new design that was approved both by the AIA and by the Commission on Fine Arts in 1970. Like Mitchell/Giurgola's designs, the new TAC design attracted plenty of comment both for and against. One critic said, "The AIA promised a memorable feast, and served a frozen dinner." Committee chair Max Urbahn noted "Few buildings in history—perhaps none—have been the focus, either in kind or in degree, of such architectural attention, involvement, anguish, dedication, and criticism."



TAC's design was in the Brutalist style, an architectural movement that emphasized the honesty of unadorned materials, especially unfinished concrete. The structural elements of the building are its columns and the waffle slabs of each floor. The walls in the building aren't load-bearing.



The design of the triangular waffle slabs and the triangular stairwells used the geometries of the site and the lines of the Octagon House to organize the building.



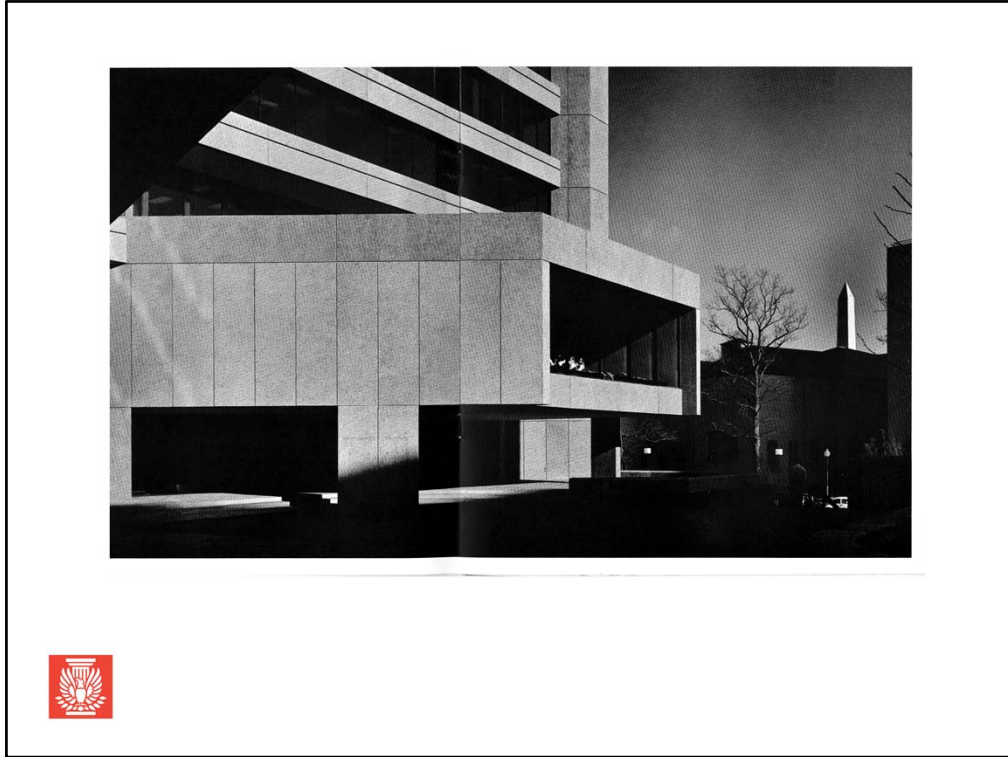
Sadly, the triangular waffle slabs proved too costly, and were replaced with more standard rectangular waffle slabs. They are covered over in most of the building instead of being a major design feature as originally intended. You can still see them in the 3rd and 4th floor conference rooms, and in the Ideas Studio in the Lower Level.



The TAC design allowed plenty of space for the Octagon's garden. The glass wall, uninterrupted by conventional window frames, helps to visually connect the inside with the outside. Most of the first floor was originally exhibit gallery space.

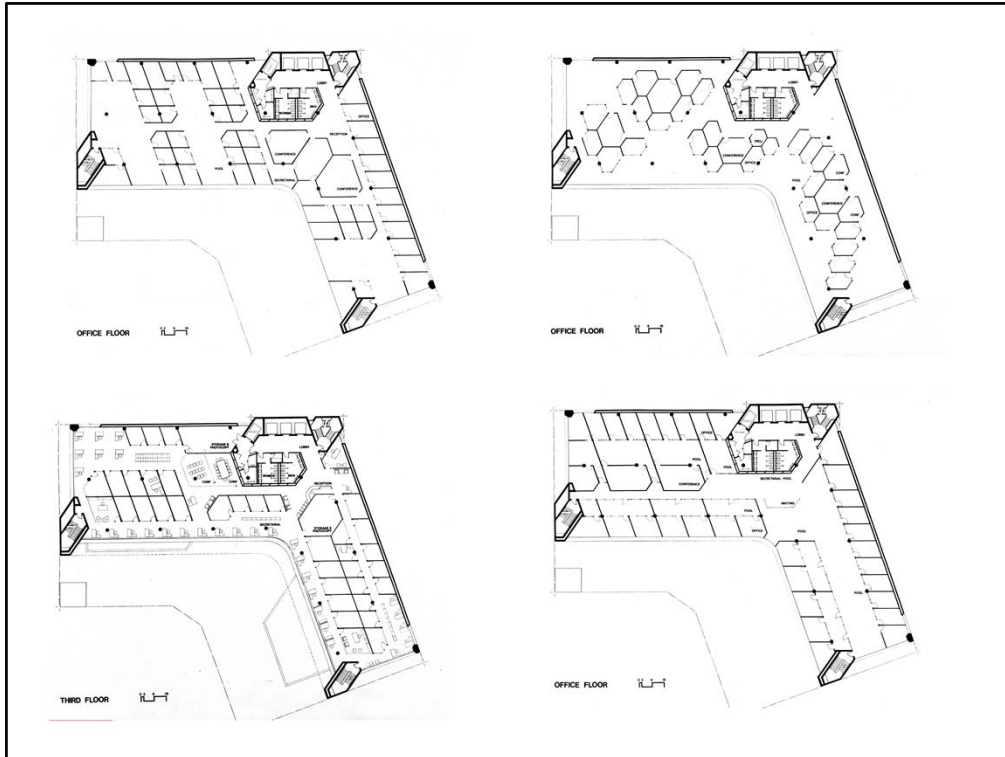


A striking feature of the new TAC building was the AIA's boardroom, which seemed to float in space over a plaza below. The boardroom was all that broke the line of the building as it wrapped around the site. The new building went to the 90-foot maximum height, like other new buildings that filled in the block at about the same time, so when you're looking at the Octagon you see only the AIA building as its backdrop.



At that time, you could still see the Washington Monument in the distance from the AIA plaza.

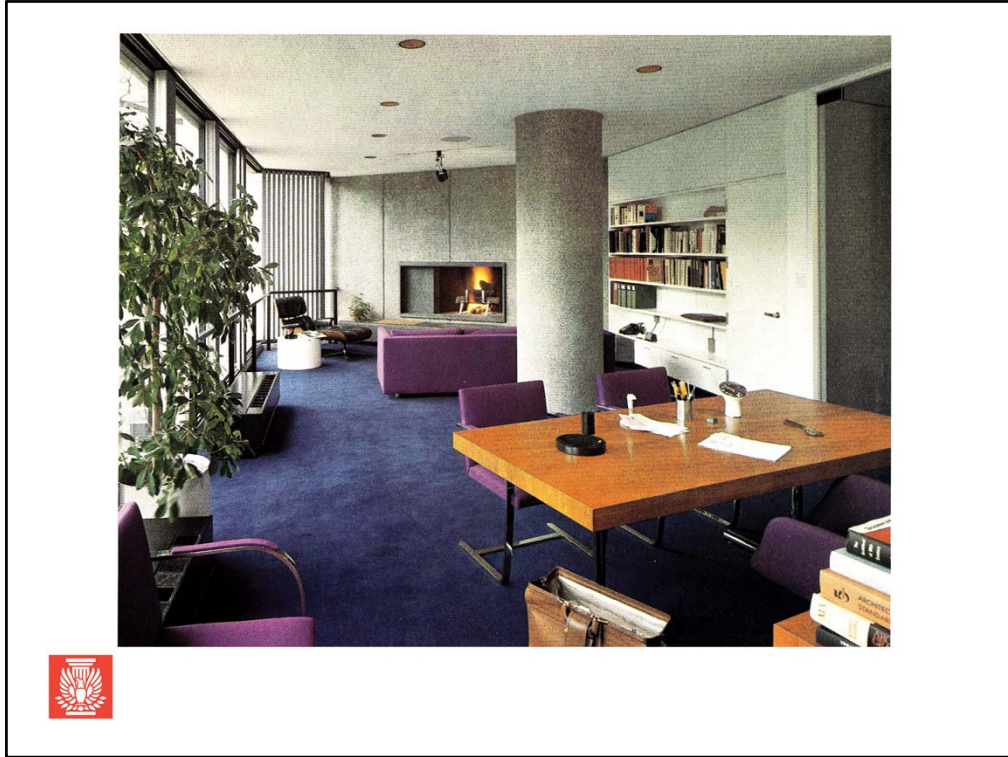
The only major alteration to the building has been the build-out of the AIA Library in 1993, underneath the boardroom. The front entrance was realigned at that time and the former shaded terrace area was glassed in.



Because of the lack of load-bearing walls, the interior floors could be designed as open plan offices and reconfigured over the years as needed. TAC's presentation showed different configurations.



Original furnishings featured white plastic laminate units to create workspaces.



In the CEO's office, modern colors contrasted with the white laminate and rough concrete.



Groundbreaking for the new building happened on April 22, 1971.



The Archives has a set of photographs documenting every stage of construction.

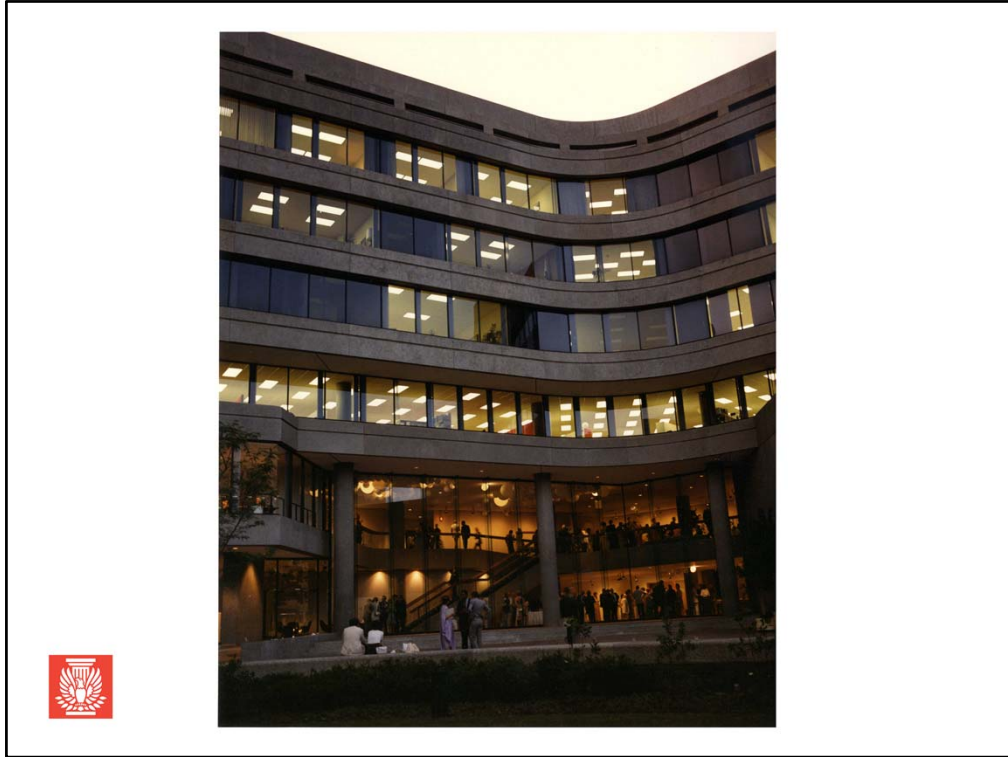


The smokehouse was removed during construction, then carefully replaced in its original location on the site.



Staff moved into the building in March 1973, and a formal dedication party with a buffet and dance was held in June. The official “AIA Dedication Statement” printed in the program doesn’t talk about the building: instead, it talks about the architects’ mission.

“We of the American Architectural Profession rededicate ourselves to the fundamental mission of improving the quality of the nation’s man-made environment. We pursue this mission in design of works of architecture from individual buildings to entire communities, striving to make them serve both their users and the larger environment of which they are parts. We pursue this mission as a professional body, honing and broadening our capabilities, counseling the nation’s leaders and the public alike on the nature of environmental quality and the means of its achievement. And we pursue this mission as citizens, bending our energies and professional knowledge to the reshaping and renewal of our institutions—social, political and economic—so that a nourishing environment is available to more and more of our fellow citizens.”



The celebration continued into the evening. Fifty years later, 1735 New York Avenue is still home to the same aspirations.