

A design architect takes helm at AIA

Tomorrow evening, Ehrman B. Mitchell, Jr. will become president of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in a ceremony with a telling difference from the institute's usual annual ritual. It will be held, not in AIA headquarters, but in a new architectural landmark: the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art. To Mitchell, this structure "has stirred more public . . . awareness and appreciation of architecture than any major work in recent memory," and it is for that reason he insisted it be the site of his inauguration. To Mitchell, the event and place will underline what's to be the preoccupation of his presidency and a possibly important new stance for AIA: a primary emphasis on the design importance and public significance of architecture.

"We'll have the board of AIA together with the visionary (Paul Mellon, National Gallery president), the orchestrator (J. Carter Brown, National Gallery director), and the interpreter (East Wing architect I.M. Pei)" at the ceremony, says Mitchell. "I'm so excited I can't see straight."

Calculated effort. His glee belies a very serious, calculated effort to focus attention on what he calls "architecture of consequence," and to draw its buyers and users, the public, into an appreciation of it. The event will lead off a year of



Two INA Plaza is award-winning.



Ehrman B. Mitchell, Jr.

Architecture is "most important thing we do."

similarly inspired programs around the nation in 1979.

The role is somewhat new to AIA. Preoccupied in recent years with issues such as whether architects should be allowed to act as developers and contractors, pressure from the U.S. Justice Department to permit members to advertise competitively, and restructuring of dues and membership, design leadership has not been one of AIA's notable roles. But now, among architects interviewed, there seems a consensus that Mitchell may contribute greatly to AIA's stature as a design voice. This stems in part from his position as head of an architectural firm known internationally for its design orientation, Mitchell/Giurgola Architects, Philadelphia and New York City.

Design name. "These leading [design] people are rarely active in the AIA," says Anna M. Halpin, director of the New York region. "What this is going to do for the institute, for the image of the institute, could be substantial."

Ironically, in a year that follows outgoing president Elmer E. Botsai's concern over building failures and architects' incompetence, Mitchell hopes to run what he calls a "celebration of architecture" to turn the public on to it and, within the profession, make architects more aware that "we are accountable . . . to the land, to people, to cities. The most important thing we do is architecture."

"He has got a sense of the value of

architecture and engineering in society," says professional competitor Robert Geddes of Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham-Architects, Philadelphia. "I think he's one of the people who understands what design is all about, but also knows the role of architecture as a service profession."

Bullish on architecture. Mitchell's plan is ambitious. A series of grass-roots meetings, at which chapter and national leaders discuss national programs, includes:

- An event at New Orleans' popular Jackson Square, with local architects explaining how restoration revitalized the area.
- An instructive tour in Washington, D.C., of the Capitol to explain to AIA members design issues in the controversy over whether to extend the West Front.

Also planned are three regional design conferences to include current design theory, design for energy conservation and retrofitting existing buildings.

Another thrust is education about architecture in schools at all levels, including adult courses. To amplify a program of the National Endowment for the Arts called Architects in Schools, AIA is developing guidelines teachers can use to filter architectural considerations into a variety of curricula. One technique in use, for instance, has school children draw a map of the trip from home to



Pavilion in Philadelphia houses Liberty Bell.