Soaring to 89 feet tall, the seven story office building, known as the Executive Plaza, firmly establishes its predominance amongst the buildings within Fredericksburg’s historic district. Although constructed to attract more business to the downtown area, today many find the building detracts from the historic feel of the city; the colloquial term for the building is the “Big Ugly.” However, the signature horizontal bands of windows and brick towers which anchor the sides of the building, contribute to the overall modernist appearance and help distinguish it as one of the city’s most recognizable buildings.

Built during a period of urban renewal projects across America, this contemporary building mimics the commercial developments of the time but also attempts to mesh with the 18th century colonial buildings of the surrounding historic district. The Fredericksburg architect who designed the office complex, H. C. Johnson Jr., said, “this building would be constructed using traditional brick and slate with limestone trim to blend with the adjoining historic buildings.”

In 1973, Ronald Shibley, executive director of the Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Incorporated, stated that HFFI “favors the construction of new buildings in contemporary architectural style in the downtown area.” However, he goes on to say that “we recommend that any such building be compatible with existing architecture. A 90-foot building can’t be compatible with the historic buildings downtown.”

Despite the building’s departure from earlier architectural styles, there was a conscious effort to incorporate a colonial look. One account even lists the building as a “vernacular sky-scraper.”
Opposite is a conceptual drawing for the planned Executive Plaza office building.¹ For the most part, it accurately depicts the current look of the building; however, note the presence of the recessed paneling on the image on the previous page which is not present in the drawing.

The sketch on the left page is a 1974 plat drawing of the building.

In addition to the abstraction of the colonial style apparent in this building’s overall design, the incorporation of modern materials and elements continue to blend the contemporary style with the semblance of traditional expression. The steel frame substructure, which supports the building, remains concealed behind the exterior walls. The facades, composed of brick, concrete and glass, overlie the steel beams and obstruct it from view. Despite its sturdy outward appearance, the exterior walls are non-structural. This design, utilized in a myriad of modernist buildings, allows for the application of curtain walls. At the Executive Plaza, this is apparent by the uninterrupted horizontal bands of windows on each floor. Modernist architect, Eero Saarinen employed curtain walls in many of his buildings, including the John Deere and Company Headquarters, constructed in 1964.⁴

The recessed entryway on the first floor, with limestone-like columns, define the lobby and distinguish it from the upper levels. Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, two preeminent modernist architects, incorporated a recessed entryway on the first floor of the Seagram’s Building in New York.⁵ Built in 1958, this stainless steel and glass building represents an aggrandized example of the architectural feature present at the Executive Plaza but the pronounced columns and floor-to-ceiling lobby windows appear within the design principles of both buildings. The Executive Plaza structure exhibits strong symmetry, with the all elevations mirroring each other. This includes the ten-foot wide, windowless brick pillars on the north and south end of the building which house the stairs, elevators, and bathrooms. This arrangement opens up the interior of the building and maximizes the lighted work space. This pragmatic organization of space stresses function, a modernist philosophy. The emphasis on functionality is part of the canon which defines the modernist movement and has influenced its perception as a progressive movement.

Despite its unornamented exterior, regular lines, and simple massing, the Executive Plaza stands apart and contributes to the changing patina of Fredericksburg’s downtown buildings.
Sources

   <http://nymag.com/listings/attraction/seagram_building/>