

Government House future uncertain

By John Dorsey
Sun Art Critic

What's actually going to happen to the governor's mansion in Annapolis is one issue that seems to have gotten lost in the legislature recently.

Behind the bill to change the membership of what is now called the Government House Trust, what's at stake is the seven period rooms that have brought the house justified acclaim both within and outside the state. Now, it would seem, those rooms are to be changed in a major way. The process has already begun, and before it has ended the result may be to sacrifice the house's identity as a repository of Maryland art and decorative arts.

What identity will take its place, if any, is unclear, and nobody seems willing to say the obvious — that the present concept ought not to be changed until it is made clear what the plans are for the house and unless those plans are better than what's there now.

The Maryland Historical Society, which was chiefly responsible for creating the present rooms, has made no move to oppose the current bill, and is not likely to. At a hearing on the house earlier this month, delegates asked a lot of questions about the change of name from Government House to the Governor's Mansion. The fate of the period rooms is surely more important than the name.

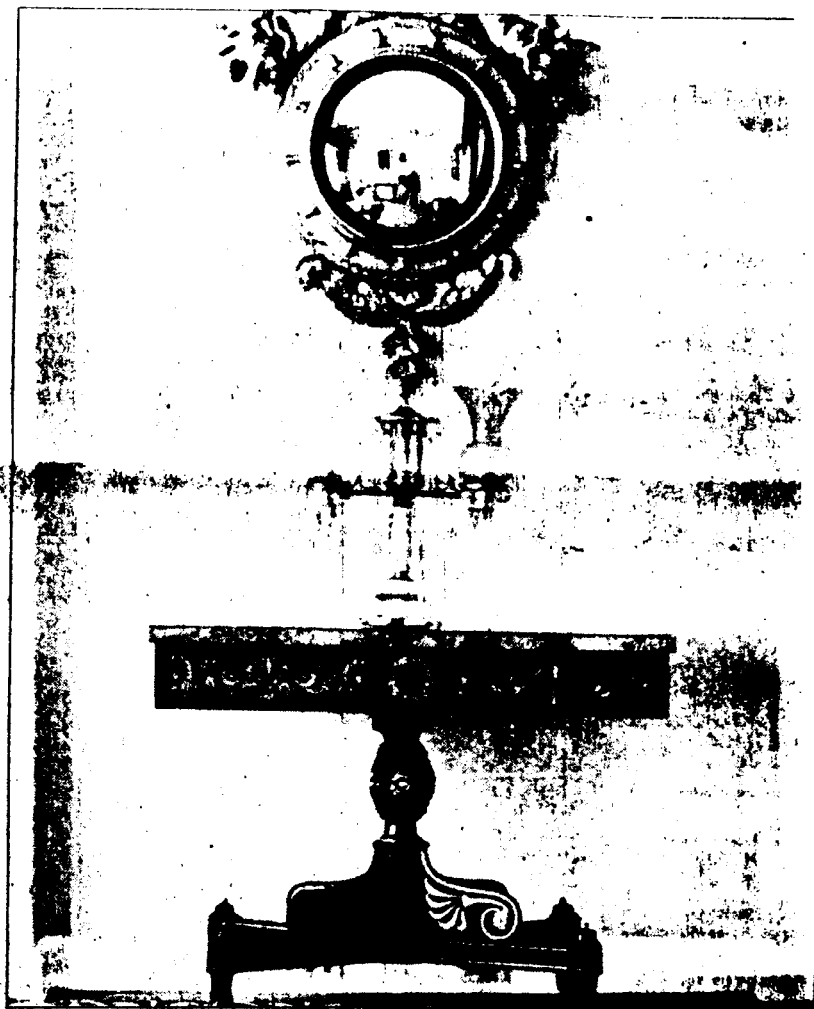
What's there now — or has been until quite recently — is a tribute to the state and incidentally to the people who brought the rooms into being. During the administration of former governor Harry Hughes, his wife Patricia and the Maryland Historical Society created the state rooms to reflect the history of the state's decorative arts from the 18th to the 20th century. They included an 18th century drawing room, a federal reception room, an empire parlor, a Victorian parlor and a contemporary conservatory.

These were carefully planned, lovingly realized rooms that occupied innumerable hours of work by leading experts in the field, including especially MHS museum director Stiles T. Colwill and furniture curator Gregory Weidman. But the point is not the work that went into them — the point is that for the first time in its history Government House (or the governor's mansion, as it has now been restyled) became a nationally recognized showplace. The recognition included a major article in *Architectural Digest*, a leading magazine of interior design.

The idea was never that this would be a temporary transformation for the duration of the Hughes administration, but that the rooms would be permanently preserved. To that end, legislation was passed creating the Government House Trust and making its membership identical to that of the MHS' gallery committee, thus ensuring (so it was thought) that the historical society would continue to control what happened to those rooms.

What the society — in what hindsight can recognize as its naivete — didn't foresee was that legislation can be superseded by subsequent legislation. The subsequent legislation, known as House Bill 1182, is now under consideration by the legislature.

The bill itself doesn't deal directly with what's going to happen to the house. Its specific purpose is to



Empire furnishings are featured in the parlor at Government House.

change the name and, more important, the membership of the trust which has administrative control over the house. Under the bill's provisions, the voting membership of the trust will no longer be that of the MHS gallery committee. It will be composed of the governor, legislative leaders and state agency heads. MHS presence will be reduced to advisory, non-voting status.

In testimony on the bill, Earl F. Seboda, secretary of the Department of General Services, said that the proposed membership of the trust would be appropriate as "similar to the structure that takes care of the State House." There are other rationalizations for the bill as well. J. Jefferson Miller, director of the MHS, noted that under the current legislation "there is no provision for maintenance" of the rooms. And Delegate Anne S. Perkins (D-44th, Baltimore), who introduced the bill on behalf of General Services, said that she thought its purpose was for "inventory — so that things don't disappear, that sort of stuff."

Provision for maintenance and inventory, however, could be made without changing the rooms. But the rooms are being changed, though what's happening to them, and what the outcome will be is hard to know. Questions about plans for the house are referred to Gov. William Donald Schaefer's official hostess, Hilda Mae Snoops, who then declines to be interviewed. The latest request to talk to Mrs. Snoops brought a reply from the governor's press office that Mrs. Snoops might be willing to talk about the house "in

a year — but not now."

Knowledgeable observers suggest that the plan is to get rid of the "museum atmosphere" and reorient the rooms toward more extensive — indeed, everyday — use, by partly populating them with reproductions. The process has already begun: Recently the Maryland Historical Society was notified that 25 objects lent to the house are to be returned.

Why has the MHS not opposed this bill, despite the private consternation of people who worked on the house? Mr. Miller says the MHS wants to be a resource rather than dictate what happens in the house. There is also the factor of state aid to the society, however, which this year amounts to \$118,000, or roughly 8 percent of the society's budget. Though no one will say so publicly, sources close to the MHS have cited privately the fear that that money will be withdrawn if the society doesn't go along.

Thus the state rooms as presently constituted would seem to have no one to speak up for them. They are, nevertheless, a credit to the state. That's why, as the proposed bill passes through the legislative process, members of the General Assembly should be aware that the important question is — what's going to happen to the house?