

The AT&T Building: 550 Madison Avenue

Connor Lucas  
Introduction to Architectural Theory  
May 9, 2018

In a city packed with buildings of similar stature, silhouette, and size, it isn't the simplest of feats to find a building among the New York skyline that truly stands out. At 37-stories high,<sup>1</sup> Philip Johnson's AT&T Building at 550 Madison Avenue is one of the most recognizable forms in the city, and perhaps in historical American architecture in general. However, just because the building is iconic doesn't mean that it is, or has historically been, well received.

AT&T, the then-largest corporation in the world, turned to the famed architect in 1978 when they desired monumental headquarters that could physicalize the company's success.<sup>2</sup> As ignited by topical structures like the Seagram Building (also a Johnson building), the capacity of skyscrapers to act as corporate landmarks was taking the industry by storm: architecture critic Rowan Moore writes, "Johnson's task was to repeat what he had done with the Seagram building, a quarter of a mile away on Park Avenue, in 1958. There, as accomplice to Mies van der Rohe, he had helped make another corporate headquarters into the world-famous statement of an architectural style."<sup>3</sup> Starkly contrasting the glass boxes that were rapidly populating the area was Johnson's design, marked by its stone-façade and the iconic large, open pediment that powerfully caps the structure. Inspired by Chippendale furniture, made by famous 18th century English designer Thomas Chippendale, the ornamental pediment was, and continues to be, as divisive as it is defining. After the building was completed in 1984, it received widespread media coverage and attention from the general public, who could likely place the larger-than-life form

---

<sup>1</sup> Jenna McKnight, "Postmodern buildings: AT&T Building, New York by Johnson/Burgee," *Dezeen*, 28 August, 2015, <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/28/postmodernism-architecture-att-building-sony-tower-philip-johnson-john-burgee-new-york/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Moore, "AT&T building: the threat to New York's 'tablet of stone'," *The Guardian*, 31 December, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/dec/31/at-t-building-new-york-skyscraper-under-threat-philip-johnson-review>

as a detail found atop their own living room furniture. But the reviews of the design; a design that “singlehandedly [sic] turned the architectural world on its head”<sup>4</sup>, did not stop with the community- even critics, despite their extensive knowledge of architectural theory and history, were divided. *The New York Times* critic Ada Louise Huxtable called the design a “bow to the Baroque in a world of flat-topped, no-nonsense skyscrapers,”<sup>5</sup> while, contrastingly, *Village Voice* critic and architect Michael Sorkin wrote, “The so-called ‘postmodern’ styling in which AT&T has been tarted up is simply a graceless attempt to disguise what is really just the same old building by cloaking it in this week’s drag.”<sup>6</sup> This sort of opinionated, collective disunion propelled forward conversation about the building, augmenting its place in the study of architectural theory and history for years to come. **Due to its daring design the building has maintained longstanding divisiveness that remains constant even under analysis through many different architectural theories, including postmodernism, feminism, and the theory of preservation.**

The AT&T Building is widely recognized as being one of the first pieces of architecture to bring postmodernism to the world stage, so naturally the project calls for analysis under the postmodern lense of theory. In fact, the tower’s sheer postmodernity is likely what contributed most to the public aversion, as Johnson’s design bravely challenged the modernist tenets of functionalism and efficiency that were easily accepted at the time. This aesthetic rebellion begins at ground level just beyond the arched, seven-story entrance (postmodernly drawing inspiration from the Italian arcades of the Romanesque and the Florentine Renaissance), where a soaring

---

<sup>4</sup> David Langdon, “AD Classics: AT&T Building / Philip Johnson and John Burgee,” *ArchDaily*, 20 March, 2015, <https://www.archdaily.com/611169/ad-classics-at-and-t-building-philip-johnson-and-john-burgee>

<sup>5</sup> Bart Barnes, “With Glass and Steel, Prolific Architect Cut A Towering Figure,” *The Washington Post*, 27 January, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A38506-2005Jan26.html>

<sup>6</sup> Moore.

lobby clad in pink granite coincides with postmodern ideals of reintroducing color into design after it was banned by modernist minimalism. The most exemplary element of postmodernism, however, is found 647 feet up, at the open pediment that tops the building. Oversized, ornamental, and ‘outlandish’<sup>7</sup>, the design follows one of postmodernism’s cornerstones of drawing inspiration from the design elements of the past. Johnson’s architectural muse was, unexpectedly, the popular Chippendale furniture originating in England during the 18th century. In a shape that likely mirrored the agape mouths of those who first saw the tower, the pediment consists of a rather traditional (although untraditional for a late-twentieth century Manhattan skyscraper) gable roof line, however, at the intersection of these symmetrical planes exists a large, round aperture. As one of the building’s most distinguishable features, the opening is purely ornamental, rebelling against the modernist’s need for function while altering a ‘real life’, everyday object that society would recognize as something existing in their own homes. Postmodernism runs through this building’s veins; a building that, subsequently, contributed to the substantiation of postmodernism as a legitimate architectural style: according to Paul Gapp, the architectural critic of the Chicago Tribune, “[the building] overnight transfused postmodernism from the lunatic vein into the corporate mainstream.”<sup>8</sup>

While the postmodern lense of theory might lend itself most prominently to this structure, the success of the AT&T Building is its ability to be analyzed through varying theories, a second of which is the feminist theory aligned to the socialist viewpoint. This theory, as presented by architectural historian and critic Jane Rendell, is positioned “closely with the agenda of radical

---

<sup>7</sup> Justin Davidson, “Casting a Skeptical Eye on the AT&T Building Remake,” *New York Magazine*, 13 November, 2017.

<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/11/casting-a-skeptical-eye-on-snhettas-at-and-t-building-remake.html>

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Barnes.

feminism where femaleness and femininity are seen to encompass a set of qualities, which are quite different from maleness and masculinity.”<sup>9</sup> The architecture of Johnson’s building aligns faremoreso with the qualities of masculinity, as was common for the monumental towers requested by corporations like AT&T. Towering over the city, Johnson’s design could be likened to that of a *johnson*, with its long and lean form only contributing to the phallic topography of Manhattan. Theorists argue that the patriarchal American society favors males, “as reflected in the often phallic building forms that they produce, the quintessential example being the skyscraper. Conversely they suggest that cultures, which revere the feminine principle and treat women at least as equals produce built forms related to the morphology of the female body.”<sup>10</sup> Due to its height and the fact that this structure was erected prior to stricter zoning laws that architects now face, there is a purposeful omission of physical setbacks; the lack of which enhance the monolithicity of the stone block of a building.

The lack of setbacks points to the appeasement of a great ‘need’ for monumentality; a power complex that makes this building worth exploring through this feminist lense beyond surface level. When the corporation decided to invest in headquarters, the (male) AT&T chairman told the architect: "Now, look, I don't want just another building. We'd like to make the next step in tall buildings since the Seagram building – just go to it."<sup>11</sup> It is easily discernible that the priorities of the client are limited to being the best and biggest; qualities that were similarly the focus of Johnson, a man famous for stating, “monumentality is as inbred as the desire for food or sex.”<sup>12</sup> This monumentality is realized through elements such as the hundred-foot tall

---

<sup>9</sup> Jane Rendell, “4. Tendencies and Trajectories: Feminist Approaches in Architecture,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2012): 87

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> McKnight.

<sup>12</sup> Langdon.

entrance and the vertical banding spanning the height of the building, proving that “Johnson and Burgee employ deliberate architectural strategies to magnify the visual massiveness of the building,”<sup>13</sup> which hints that the relationship between architect and tower may not be all that different than that of man and phallus. Tying into the analysis of postmodernity, Johnson’s need to break away from the modernism that preceded this building and to cause an eruption of attention (directed just as much towards him as towards the building) is just the kind of patriarchal narcissism that feminist theorists would have criticized.

In the same way that postmodernists worked to usher out the preceding movement of modernism (largely aided by this very building), there are strong efforts by the architects of today to update this building for modern living, largely stripping the design of its iconic postmodernity. The desire for change unintentionally interrogates the building’s monumentality, leaving one questioning why a monument designed to show power for the test of time would require updating just a few decades later. It is through the theory of preservation that the newest modification, a proposal by New York firm Snøhetta, can be analyzed.<sup>14</sup> The vision maintains the iconic classical pediment, however the public, retail, and working spaces have been appointed for renovation; the most controversial and substantial of which involves the transformation of the building’s “fortress-like base”<sup>15</sup> via a large glass curtain wall. The intention for opening up the structure, according to the firm, is to create “an inviting street front, extending the lively activity of Madison Avenue further south to 55th Street- stitching the life of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Langdon.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Howarth, “Snøhetta reimagines Philip Johnson’s postmodern New York skyscraper,” *Dezeen*, 30 October 2017, <https://www.dezeen.com/2017/10/30/snøhetta-reimagines-postmodern-icon-550-madison-att-sony-building-skyscraper-new-york/>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

building back into the street.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the design’s subtle links to postmodernism (such as the curved undulations of the glass wall that are “intended to evoke the fluting of ancient columns”<sup>17</sup>), the proposed changes have ironically been likened to the modernist ideals from which Johnson was trying to escape during its initial design: “--instead of finishing the profile with a glass curtain wall as modernism would expect, the steel body is clad with slabs of pink granite, an older and less industrial material that projects an aura of solidity and permanence.”<sup>18</sup> But this permanence is being questioned as the proposal for irreparable facade alterations has left many presenting the need for preservation.

Preservation theorists value the practice of tradition because these “architectural monuments [are viewed] as authentic documents of irretrievable pasts.”<sup>19</sup> While the AT&T Building, constructed during the 1980s, doesn’t rely on its physicality as historical documentation as is required of ancient structures, the modifications are seen as part of a larger threat to the history of postmodernism. As postmodernist icons like the *Strada Novissima* in Venice or Charles Moore’s eponymous *Moore House* are being destroyed<sup>20</sup> with threats posed to structures like *No 1 Poultry* by James Stirling,<sup>21</sup> postmodernism continues to divide with Snøhetta’s proposal for the AT&T Building, which is widely debated by architectural critics and

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson.

<sup>18</sup> Langdon.

<sup>19</sup> Mrinalini Rajagopalan, “17. Preservation and Modernity: Competing Perspectives, Contested Histories and the Question of Authenticity,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2012): 309

<sup>20</sup> Charles Holland, “Charles Holland presents 11 lost icons of Postmodern architecture,” *Dezeen*, 5 August 2015, <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/05/charles-holland-lost-relics-postmodernism-architecture-design/>

<sup>21</sup> Anna Winston, “Threat to Pomo buildings could wipe out “whole chapter of architectural history”,” *Dezeen*, 20 May, 2016 <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/05/20/threat-to-postmodern-buildings-uk-wipe-out-chapter-architectural-history-twentieth-century-society-conference/>

citizens alike; creating a strong division of opinion that is not unlike the reaction to Johnson's original design.

Philip Johnson's AT&T Building might have earned its place in the architectural history and theory books for bringing postmodernism into the public lense via a dramatic scale at which it had yet to be seen, however the design warrants study under multiple lenses in order to fully understand its lasting effects. The theories of feminism, preservation, and, of course, postmodernism, can be applied to this building as it is analyzed from its late-twentieth century conception to the divisive renovations that are being proposed today. Throughout the years, controversy has gone hand-in-and with this structure; the drama of which perfectly aligns with Johnson's initial vision for the monument.



## Bibliography

- Barnes, Bart. "With Glass and Steel, Prolific Architect Cut A Towering Figure." *The Washington Post*. 27 January, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A38506-2005Jan26.html>
- Davidson, Justin. "Casting a Skeptical Eye on the AT&T Building Remake." *New York Magazine*. 13 November, 2017. <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/11/casting-a-skeptical-eye-on-snhettas-at-and-t-building-remake.html>
- Holland, Charles. "Charles Holland presents 11 lost icons of Postmodern architecture." *Dezeen*. 5 August 2015. <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/05/charles-holland-lost-relics-postmodernism-architecture-design/>
- Howarth, Dan. "Some cartoonish postmodern buildings are worth saving, says Norman Foster." *Dezeen*. 13 November 2017. <https://www.dezeen.com/2017/11/13/some-cartoonish-postmodern-buildings-att-tower-worth-saving-norman-foster/>
- Jencks, Charles. "Post-Modern Architecture" in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 4th ed. New York: Rizzoli, 1984.
- Langdon, David. "AD Classics: AT&T Building / Philip Johnson and John Burgee." *ArchDaily*. 20 March, 2015. <https://www.archdaily.com/611169/ad-classics-at-and-t-building-philip-johnson-and-john-burgee>
- McKnight, Jenna. "Postmodern buildings: AT&T Building, New York by Johnson/Burgee." *Dezeen*. 28 August, 2015. <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/08/28/postmodernism-architecture-att-building-sony-tower-philip-johnson-john-burgee-new-york/>
- Moore, Rowan. "AT&T building: the threat to New York's 'tablet of stone'." *The Guardian*. 31 December, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/dec/31/at-t-building-new-york-skyscraper-under-threat-philip-johnson-review>
- Rajagopalan, Mrinalini. "17. Preservation and Modernity: Competing Perspectives, Contested Histories and the Question of Authenticity" in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2012: 308-324.
- Rendell, Jane. "4. Tendencies and Trajectories: Feminist Approaches in Architecture" in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd., 2012: 85-106.

Winston, Anna. "Threat to Pomo buildings could wipe out "whole chapter of architectural history"." *Dezeen*. 20 May, 2016 <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/05/20/threat-to-Postmodern-buildings-uk-wipe-out-chapter-architectural-history-twentieth-century>