SOME NEW SKYSCRAPERS AND HOW THEY GREW

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 6, 1960; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. X12

SOME NEW SKYSCRAPERS AND HOW THEY GREW

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE art of building today must deal with some hard and not too pleasant facts. There is a great deal more involved than the creation of beauty—although pitifully few structures are worthy of the word.

Our new skyscrapers must be evaluated in terms of the important, nonartistic factors that have brought them into being. The question that faces the conscientious critic is whether these complex circumstances can also produce a work of art.

Size vs. Esthetics

It is not enough to say, for example, that the new buildings are too big, without accepting the fact that their size is irrebuttable evidence of the reality of the population explosion and the fantastic scope of modern corporate enterprise. Nor can we condemn them as impersonal or inhuman when their purpose is to deal efficiently with the concentrated, factory-like operation of today's mechanized business structure. When we mourn the loss of scale and individuality (and this observer is one of the chief mourners), we are apt to evade the real issue, which is that uniformity is being imposed not by architect, or his buildings, but by the appalling fact that we are moving inexorably toward a society of centralized, homogenized masses. Inevitably, this set of conditions is producing a homogenized architecture. Against this depressing background, the best of the new large office buildings are gratifyingly good. They are solving their problems with increasing skill, and, in some cases, with marked esthetic sensitivity.

The Time-Life Building, by Harrison & Abramovitz, has met its particular challenge—the necessity of a visual relationship to the thirty-year-old structures of Rockefeller Center, of which it is a part—with commendable success. Structural columns placed outside the glass and metal skin are sheathed in limestone to harmonize with the all-limestone walls of the earlier design in an effective combination of "tradition" and a newer technology. This capable, conscientious solution offers variety and an up-to-date validity to the city's most important group of buildings.

Civic Beauty

Chase Manhattan's new landmark in the downtown financial district, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, is still unfinished, but its bold glass and aluminum-clad tower already serves as a dramatic contrast and foil for the uncertain romanticisms of the Wall Street skyscrapers of the Nineteen Twenties. An impressive building with superbly integrated open plazas, it carries the double promise of corporate efficiency and a more enduring value: significant civic beauty.

The Union Carbide Building, also by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, is equally impressive, but considerably less ingratiating. A strikingly masculine structure, consistently simple, severe and restrained, its facade is a flat, almost scaleless pattern that lacks that definitive, perfected relationship of proportions and parts that makes a great work of architecture. It neither achieves the subtle refinement of its neighbor, the Seagram Building, nor seeks the calculated play of contrasts—light and dark, massive and delicate, hard and soft—that are more traditional architectural virtues.

The building's best features are the surprising pink terrazzo plaza that lifts and warms its matte black steel forms, the huge, austerely handsome lobby, which is one of the city's finest public rooms, and its excellent interiors.

With three other contributions to the "new" Park Avenue by the same architects—Lever House, Chase Manhattan's soigné uptown offices, and the small, jewel-like Pepsi-Cola headquarters—the skillful, sensitive, sleek-surfaced, straight-edged, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill style is holding the line against an increasing number of outsize, uncorseted, undistinguished, imitative interlopers muscling in like parvenus among the avenue's architectural aristocrats.

Elegance Achieved

These Skidmore, Owings & Merrill buildings are noteworthy for three reasons. First, they maintain a remarkably constant and recognizably high standard of design. Second, they are architect-created, inside and out. Skeleton and skin, walls and ceilings, standardized; modular partitions, hardware, light switches, file cabinets, type faces, furniture and color schemes, even the selection of the paintings on the walls and the trees in the plazas outside, are the work of the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill-controlled team. Third, all of their efficiently coordinated efforts are bent to the solution of the big building's complex, non-esthetic requirements in the best possible esthetic terms, and they pursue this objective smoothly, relentlessly, uncompromisingly, and by and large, successfully.

Artists' Contributions

The result of this extraordinary care is a clean, cool, irreproachable, consistently uniform elegance. (Only rarely—as in the presence of a mounted, cigar-smoking bonefish on a Pepsi-Cola executive bathroom wall—do the clients' and the architects' tastes seem less than perfectly attuned.) If, in the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill world, the pleasant offices are invariably alike, except for a choice of colors and details, and if the personnel is offered a preedited selection of furnishings and art objects by the architects according to a rigidly established company hierarchy (the teak table and the Rothko are available at the top, farther down the line it is the metal desk and the good print), it is still pertinent to remember that this standardization sets a mark far above the customary norm. It may be homogenized architecture, but it is all real cream.

Unfortunately, the cream has curdled slightly at Time-Life. In the lobby, button-down steel panels enclosing the elevator block (will this rival the button-down collar for architectural correctness?) do violence to an abstract mural by Fritz Glarner. The ill-chosen scale and undulating pattern of the striped terrazzo floor commits further assault and battery on the mural.

The Collaborators

Upstairs, there is a peculiarly extravagant form of chaos. The architects' job stopped with the provision of shell and services, and an assortment of interior designers took over from there. A special auditorium and entertainment area by the Italian designer, Gio Ponti, has been created and installed totally on the bias, including formidable amounts of violently marbleized blue and yellow linoleum and numberless double-jointed chairs in a modernized version of that classic vulgarity—the bourgeois Milanese taste.

A Flexible Structure

Time-Life's twenty-odd working floors were planned and equipped by a specialist firm, Designs for Business, at a cost of approximately $13,000,000, using modular partition systems for an awe-inspiring number of rearrangeable cubicles for an equally awe-inspiring number of editors, writers and researchers. The result might be called flexible architectural anarchy, particularly where office and building modules don't quite meet. In executive areas, the deepest carpet, the costliest woods, and the tallest floor-to-ceiling doors (it is surprising how a Miesian refinement can become a gesture of ostentation) proclaim the presence of the powers. Sleek, sharp, and obviously expensive, these offices achieve the impossible: overstyled understatement.

But these are details. Whatever their deficiencies, the new buildings are the important monuments of our time. Created by need, their forms have the validity of necessity, an enviable condition among the arts today.

(This is the second of two articles on the new skyscrapers.)

PERCEPTIVE—"Frau Hedwig Berend," oil, 1916, by Lovis Corinth, among his portraits at Frumkin Gallery.