

# Architecture: 'Bigger --And Maybe Better'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

If there is one word to characterize architecture as it stands at the threshold of the 1980's, it is "big." There will be bigger buildings everywhere, and contrary to all predictions about the decline of urban centers, construction in big cities is on the rise. There will also be some big awards and prizes in the architecture field.

The trend that became apparent earlier this year — the growth of investment confidence to the point where the sky is almost literally the limit again — is beginning to be visible in cities across the country. Real estate men are apparently as forgetful of recent recessions and over-building as young lovers are of the last heartbreak as they plunge into a new romance.

The lure, of course, is not love, but money, and the volatile construction market is currently just right. Chicago has close to \$1-billion worth of big building in the works, Los Angeles counts more than \$700 million under way, and the central business districts of cities like Denver, Dallas, Houston, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Portland, Washington and Oakland are in an investment upswing.

Every new corporate or speculative building being announced this fall is "in the \$100-million class." In cities like New York, zoning restrictions are being stretched and manipulated to their absolute limits to accommodate these behemoths. As the new landmarks rise from 40th to 59th Streets this year, not only will the skyline be radically altered, but the affect on the scale, circulation, character and amenity of the city will become apparent. A debate about whether undesirable or even dangerous levels of development are being reached in Manhattan's prime core is currently escalating with the size of the buildings. In any event, the dramatic new construction promises to be one of the best shows in town.

It may also be the fulfillment of what the Dutch architect and author Rem Koolhaas has prophetically character-

ized as Manhattan's "culture of congestion," a process of creative chaos and calculated instability in which builders camouflage their wildest fantasies with profit-and-loss accounting. His "ghost-written biography" of the city, called "Delirious New York," which is equally full of splendid, off-beat insights and self-indulgent opacities, is this year's most imaginative and provocative book about Manhattan. (The drawing of the Chrysler Building and Empire State Building in bed together should become a classic.)

On the positive side, the trend to bigger could also be a trend to better. Many of these huge buildings are reaching for architectural quality as well as the sky. In a city where the pursuit of the bottom line has been more noticeable than the pursuit of art, this is probably less a trend than a revolution. Edward L. Barnes and Associates are the architects of the towering IBM Building and the much smaller Asia House; Ulrich Franzen and Associates has designed the Phillip Morris headquarters; Phillip Johnson and John Burgee is responsible for the controversial AT&T Building; Davis, Brody and Associates has the commission for the American Stock Exchange Building, and I.M. Pei and Associates is completing a Park Avenue office tower and starting work on the city's Convention Center.

Stylistically, these are establishment buildings: most of the new skyscrapers are variations on the glass box, moving in the direction of the more complex and sophisticated manipulation of shapes, surfaces and reflections that was the central theme of last spring's big Museum of Modern Art exhibition called "Transformations in Modern Architecture." That show, which madened knowledgeable observers with its undifferentiated, deadpan mix of curiosity and creativity and almost perverse cultivation of stylistic excess, was last season's whipping boy for the architectural intelligentsia. It has

*Continued on Page 26*

# The Outlook in Architecture

*Continued from Page 25*

proved to be more prescient than propagandistic.

For the fall season the museum will offer much more mixed architectural fare. Its major presentation, "The Art of the Twenties," which promises to be a dazzling display of treasures and hindsight, will contain a good deal of the architecture, furniture and decorative art that set so much of the style and tone of the decade. Other exhibitions will range from environmental design to the architectural avant-garde.

Yes, there is an architectural avant-garde, for better or worse, although the matter continues to be debated and many of its members deny that it exists, or at least object to the use of what they consider a passé term. Its members include some mature talent; the avant-garde tends to build small and light.

What the avant-garde does most is talk, and there will be a good deal of that going on this season. In early October, the avant avant-garde, which makes it terribly clear that it is "sponsoring itself," will convene in New York for an international symposium called "The New York Meeting: Architecture 1979." Stating that it is "unwilling to meet under the auspices of any already existing institutions," the group has accepted the non-sectarian hospitality of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. "It is not our intention to reify a single polemical position, to ward off criticism by dogma or to promulgate a new style," the prospectus explains, in what is becoming standard spoken and written avant-garde architecture.

The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, another avant-garde stronghold, will look forward and backward, in a dizzying straddling of poles of thought and practice, with exhibitions of the work of Aldo Rossi, the futurist Italian architect and master of surreal Marxist vision, and of Wallace K. Harrison, the New York architect

father figure of Rockefeller and Lincoln Centers and the United Nations complex. Someone will have to explain his Albany Mall.

The event causing the most stir in professional circles right now is the awarding of three prime American commissions to the English architect James Stirling. Considered by many of his peers to be one of the few authentic creative geniuses of our time, Stirling has influenced so many practitioners in so many places that his style, or styles, are better known through the cribbing of others than through his own executed works. From the dramatic high-tech of his university buildings at Cambridge and Leicester in England to the severe, super-modern "neo-classicism" of his German museums, he has always managed to be several steps ahead of everyone else and out-of-step with most potential clients. What he will produce for Harvard's prestigious Fogg Museum, Columbia University's Chemistry Building and Rice University's School of Architecture will be some of the more important surprises of the year.

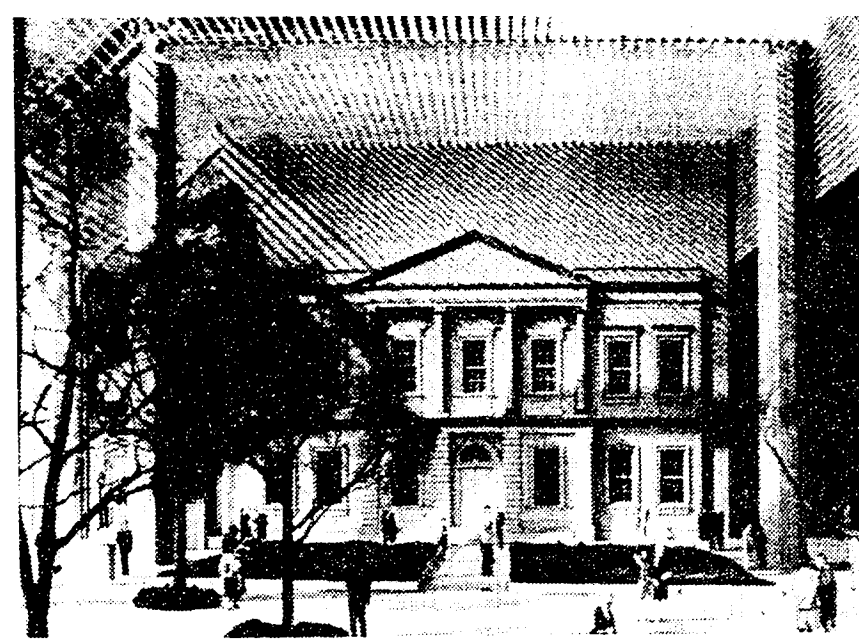
The real trend-setting buildings will be outside of New York, as usual. The opening gun of the serious architectural season will be the dedication on Oct. 10 of the new Atheneum in New Harmony, Ind., designed by Richard Meier and Associates, a building that will serve as the focal institution of the carefully restored 19th-century utopian community. Light years from its simple, founding structures, this is one of Meier's most meticulous compositions of immaculate, thin white walls, intricately connected and interpenetrated by a poetic geometry of screens, stairs and shallow voids. The building is also light years beyond most Americans' experience or understanding of contemporary architecture. Elsewhere, and more expectedly, this fall and winter will bring three more Johnson-Burgee skyscraper specials in the \$100-million class for San Francisco, Denver and Houston.

The most interesting and controversial architectural development in New

York this season is the construction about to be undertaken by the Museum of Modern Art. After much shifting of gears as the real estate market waxed and waned, a new builder for the project, DeMatteis, has been found, and ground is to be broken on West 53d Street for a totally new building type — the museum-condominium. The luxury apartment tower that will be built adjoining the museum, made possible by a multitude of special legal and financial considerations, will also double the museum's gallery space and add substantially to the income needed to support both the expansion and ongoing programs.

Like all real estate ventures, this is a calculated gamble, and the museum's future rides on it. But the impact of the construction on the intimate scale and delightful diversity of West 53d Street can only be marginally ameliorated by even the most skillful design. This design is to be revealed "in depth" later this fall at the museum, according to a spokesman, in a full-scale gallery exhibition.

If one museum-condominium is a curiosity, do two museum-condominiums make a trend? It has all been very hush-hush, but the Whitney Museum, encouraged by the Modern venture and enabled by its legislation, has quietly acquired the rest of its block front to West 74th Street and has been consult-



A rendering of the courtyard for the Metropolitan Museum's new American Wing—"conventional"

ing architects and investment experts about a similar museum-expansion-cum-luxury-apartment-tower. Proposals circulating now, by a team of British firms, Derek Walker Associates and Foster Associates for an Italian-American group, show a startling, vertical Beaubourg on Madison Avenue.

In a more conventional vein, but on a very large scale, the Metropolitan Mu-

seum will be opening its new American Wing in May. The wing will be a continuation of Roche, Dinkaloo and Associates' monumental masonry-and-greenhouse style begun with the Lehman and Sackler wings.

And finally, those Big Prizes. There is now a \$100,000 International Architecture Prize, raised this fall from \$75,000 and renamed the Pritzker Architecture Prize for its donor, and another

\$100,000 prize funded by the Aga Khan for the most suitable marriage of contemporary Western design with Islamic tradition.

Those are big bucks. A \$100,000 award automatically suggests a major contribution of very special worth. I frankly do not believe that any architect has yet come up with a resolution of the built environment comparable to the unraveling of the secrets of DNA, with its ultimate affect on the knowledge and resources of the civilized world. Nor do I see a single body of work of such towering achievement that it demands the equivalent of a Nobel Prize for service to art or humanity. Such an award hypes art and trivializes science. As for the Aga Khan's understandable concerns, a breakthrough of phenomenal proportions would seem to be in order. More architects have already muffed Near East-Western esthetic relations than can be counted in the lobby of the Abu Dhabi Hilton.

Philip Johnson, who received the first \$75,000 prize last spring, recycled part of it to help start a new magazine, "International Architect," edited by Haig Beck in London, which will appear in October as one of the events of the new season. Surely there must be constructive and creative ways to disperse such large amounts of money so that they do not turn into predictable celebrity awards. What seems to be missing is big ideas. Meanwhile, big talk and big buildings will dominate the fall agenda. ■