

SOMETHING AWRY

Three New Buildings Pose Big Problems

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THREE buildings in the news last week were of more than casual interest, and response to one of them showed a lively concern for the city's architectural standards.

Plans were announced for two fairly routine blockbusters of a size noticeable even in New York: the 42-story tower incorporating a new post office at Third Avenue between 54th and 55th Streets, and a 40-story office building for the east blockfront of the Avenue of the Americas, between 53d and 54th Streets. The third building was of a quite different type—the new home for the Whitney Museum, a small, seven-story structure to be built at the southeast corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street.

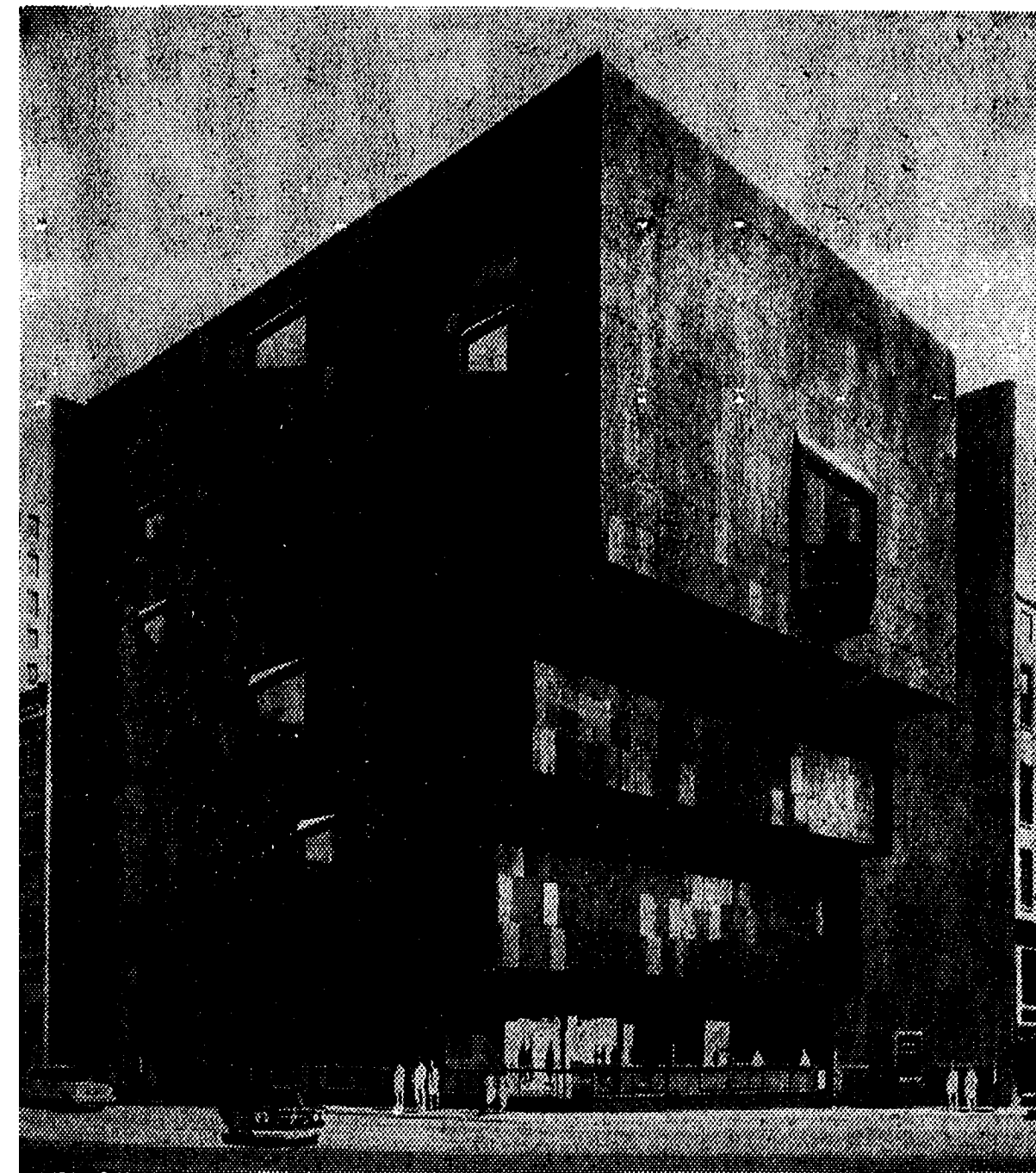
This odd but significant trio, representing a Federally sponsored design, a typical large-scale commercial product, and a noncommercial, esthetically orientated effort for a cultural institution, invoked a curiously inverse reaction. Criticism of the Whitney Museum poured in. Outrage was the opening conversational gambit of the week. But while abuse was heaped on its small gray granite head, no one mentioned the other two buildings, or objected to them in any way.

What About the Big Ones?

Surely this reveals something considerably awry in the city's architectural attitudes. Why is no one concerned with the standard of design set by the Federal government for a structure approximately 25 times the size of the modest Whitney? What, if anything, will make New Yorkers care whether the gargantuan commercial skyscrapers that they take so for granted are good or bad?

Call it unawareness, or apathy, the result is the same: an anything-goes level of lowest common denominator mediocrity, in the city's biggest buildings, justified with a shrug in the name of practical economics.

This is not design; it is a profit formula dictated by investors, detailed by captive architects. No one comes to these men, for a distinguished building, but for the cheapest way to put structural steel and



NEW WHITNEY: "Impressive in a stygian way, or it may be a miniature Alcatraz."

curtain wall components around maximum rentable space for maximum return on exorbitant land costs. And when their dull, tasteless and inescapable mammoth products add up to the shoddy-new face of New York, setting its tone, quality and appearance, it is time to ask if civic and architectural responsibilities have not been violated, and whether the downgrading of the city is a justifiable objective of free enterprise.

Certainly no one loves the results except real estate men. The public dislikes them; the critics deplore them. The image of the city is harmed by them. But if no values are acknowledged except the greatest private economic good—by the investor, the architect, or the public—there is no alternative to the lowest esthetic result.

What have we, for example, in the new post office building? Because the Federal Government starts with the premise that it is cheaper to have its construction undertaken by a private firm, which will then own and operate the building so that the Government can merely lease its quarters, the design has been developed to be attractive to a potential speculative builder. Design

quality will not be a factor in the bids. Under these limiting conditions, what price much-touted Federal standards of architectural excellence in Government-sponsored projects? Too high a price, obviously. This proposal by the architect Max Urbahn is just another package for profit; a smaller version of Pan Am.

More of the Same

The West Side skyscraper is even more symptomatic. It is a Seventh Avenue "adaptation," as they say in the fashion business, of a Park Avenue original, by Emery Roth and Sons and Horace Ginsbern and Associates. But even its saving clean-lined verticality and setbacks from the street, and those of the post office building as well, are due to the new zoning regulations rather than to architectural inspiration. Without the new law it would have been wedding cake, as usual.

It is a stunning fact, if one cares to stop to consider it, that Emery Roth, the most efficient of the investors' architects, is as responsible for the face of modern New York as Sixtus V was for baroque Rome. This is a Roth city. The Roth firm has lined Manhattan streets and avenues with the Roth style of financial expe-

diency. Richard Roth, an honest and engaging man, says frankly that this is what he understands, and discussions of esthetics leave him grimly disconsolate. He asks, sincerely, how can you turn curtain wall parts into good architecture? He makes a good weathertight cost formula, and that is enough for him and his clients. But is it enough for New York?

As for the Whitney—it may be too somber and severe for many tastes, but it is still a careful, conscientious search for a creative solution by a first-class designer; Marcel Breuer. The almost windowless dark gray granite, the bulky overhangs and the sunken sculpture court that suggests swirling little dust storms among the statues below grade, all promise to be pretty gloomy. (Certainly the Whitney seems to carry some kind of a jinx for the heavy-handed and uninviting from site to site.)

The new building may turn out to be impressive in a stygian way, or it may be a kind of miniature Alcatraz on Madison Avenue. But it will not be cheap, thin, tinny, thoughtless, dull, facile, shoddy or routine, and that is more than can be said of most of the city's current construction.