

THE NEW YORK HILTON'S TWO FACES

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A COLD war is being fought at the newly-opened New York Hilton at Rockefeller Center, with skirmishes in every corridor and on every floor. Battle lines are drawn between architecture and decoration, between modern automated efficiency and nostalgia for elaborately ersatz things past. American hotel design is suffering from a bad case of esthetic schizophrenia.

At a distance, there is no evidence of conflict. The new Hilton on the Avenue of the Americas from 53d to 54th Streets, a 46-story structure designed by William B. Tabler, is an uncompromisingly contemporary container for 2,153 guest rooms and 59 suites that fill a tall slab tower. The tower rests on a squat base, which accommodates the public areas and convention facilities. Designed to be strictly functional, the architecture makes its functions admirably clear.

The flat tower is faced in blue-tinted glass framed by gray-anodized aluminum, the flatness relieved by the repeated short, sharp bays of

A Battle of Styles Splits Personality Of a New Hotel

angled windows. These bays permit the placing of heating and air conditioning ducts outside of the structure, add pleasantly to the size of the rooms, and offer interest to what might otherwise be a starkly mechanical facade. The base, or podium, and the tower's end walls are faced in contrasting precast stone, with vertical ribs on the north and south sides of the base to temper the light and unify a variety of functions.

Aimed at the convention trade, the Hilton is laid out with a competence that would make a computer blush. (Computers are its heart: automated hospitality keeps its guest bills relentlessly up to the second.) If the building has a look that suggests that one might put change in at the top and get something out of the bottom, this is only because today's slickly designed commercial structures more and more frequently resemble a product, a machine, or a package.

In a sense, of course, it is a package, since the functions are neatly wrapped in curtain wall components figured according to cost-accounting procedures to produce an international hotel formula. This differs from the native, or Miami modern formula, which is easily recognized because it is always built on the bias.

Outside and Inside

From the outside, this is clearly the world of tomorrow, as promised by Messrs. Conrad Hilton, Laurance Rockefeller and Percy Uris, principals of Rock-Hil-Uris, Inc., the owning company. Within its businesslike limits, the directness of the concept, the expertness of the plan, and the quality of execution are commendable.

Inside, the world of tomorrow gives way to never-never land, and it would be better if it never had. For the fact is that the New York Hilton has barely let the architect through the door. Beyond that point the designers of the interiors have figuratively and esthetically thumbed their noses at him, and vertigo sets in.

Only the registration facilities and the 54th Street lobby show any relationship to the architecture, or any acknowledgment of the modern world. This is not just an opportunity missed; it is a design disaster. The \$75,000,000 question (the walls would give Salome a lifetime supply of veils. This is how an expert group of investors, which obviously took care to select one of the most well as a collection of specially experienced hotel architects in commission and assembled the profession and put to painting and sculpture. (A group of prints chosen for the same standard for the of the decor and the department building's interiors. The Hilton store manner in which they are hung.) The entering visitor is

briefly promised sophisticated, exhilarating experience of contemporary New York.

But conflict waits around the corner. A turn to the left and the promise is broken. Here lurk stone walls made of plastered aluminum, paneled doors made of painted plywood, parodies of antiquity without authenticity; all of the farcical paraphernalia that deride and denigrate the structure they camouflage. This, too, is formula, repeated in hotels and restaurants from coast to coast with a suffocating sameness.

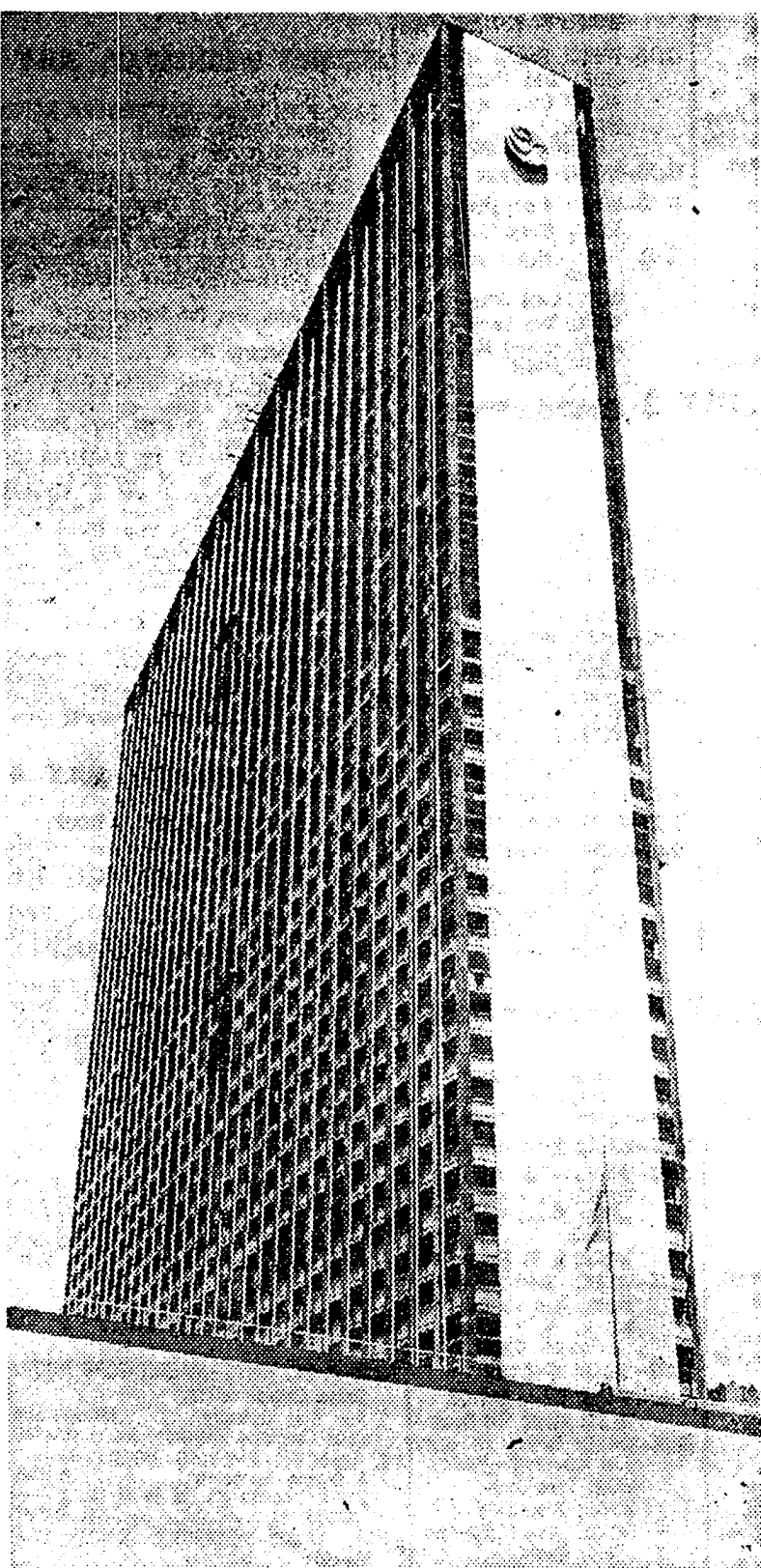
Overdoing It

The Rue des Gourmets, as this corridor is called, is the entrance to the restaurants, and it will please a large number of people who equate pretentious confusion with charm. It will give others esthetic indigestion. But it is sufficient preparation for all except the Kismet Lounge, for which no less than a few years in an MGM harem or a fortification of preliminary cocktails will do. Downstairs, there is the busy banality of the Taverne Coffee Shop, decorated with Dutch tiles and cloth tulips in flower boxes.

Banquet customers have a choice of a surprising period piece of 1930's *salon moderne* decoration in the Grand Ballroom, which sets hotel design back thirty years, a stage-set in the French manner in the Trianon Ballroom, or the unclassifiable Mercury Ballroom.

A certain amount of make-believe is acceptable in restaurants and ballrooms, although there is no law that says that the designer must turn his back on the present. But there is even less excuse for the damage done to the guest rooms, which increases in violence as they rise in importance and price. The architect has produced a better room, with 9-foot ceilings and bay-window walls, than most new New York hotels or apartments can boast. On the lower floors, they are defaced by motel modern colors that assault the senses. (For headaches, there are handy automatic ice cubes in the bathrooms.) In the top echelon suites, the rejection of the architecture is total.

Every decorating trick is used to disguise and destroy the building's most important feature: its contemporaneity and the possibility of a legitimate dramatic beauty within the framework of our own time. suggesting the magnificence of mid-20th century New York. This is not just an opportunity missed; it is a design disaster. The \$75,000,000 question (the cost of hotel and furnishings) is how an expert group of investors, which obviously took care to select one of the most well as a collection of specially experienced hotel architects in commission and assembled the profession and put to painting and sculpture. (A group of prints chosen for the same standard for the of the decor and the department building's interiors. The Hilton store manner in which they are hung.) The entering visitor is



GLASS TOWER—The new Hilton at Rockefeller Center

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