## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# A Stylish New Building At Columbia

The difference between good and bad architecture, or just plain pedestrian architecture, is a quality that might be vastly oversimplified as thoughtfulness—the degree of sensitive concern with which the elements of a program are combined to satisfy both function and art.

It is the skill and awareness with which the architect has thought out his answers, conditioned, inevitably, by codes, costs and other restrictions, that determines the character and excellence of the results. Period and style provide the vocabulary that he employs, determined by a specific cultural and structural context. Theory, no matter how impressive the process of rationalization—and right now theory is swarming around architecture like a cloud of gnats—does not affect the success or the art of the solution, beyond illuminating or obscuring it.

If you have been patient with this prologue, it should be helpful to an understanding of the work of the firm of Mitchell-Giurgola, and of a building that these architects have just completed at Columbia University—the Sherman Fairchild Center for the Life Sciences—one of the best buildings to go up on the campus in a long time.

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The Fairchild Center sits between two of Columbia's worst buildings, the Mudd Engineering Building and the Uris Building Building, a pair of 1960's exercises in definitive ordinariness, and is adjacent to two older, McKim, Mead and White neo-Georgian structures. It actually occupies a kind of non-site, literally on top of the four-story Mudd Lounge. Rising seven stories above this existing base to both plug a hole and close a vista, it creates relationships more illustrative of ad hoc than of formal planning.

The new building pulls things together surprisingly well, although its facade is somewhat disturbing. Made of quarry tile on modular concrete panels, it is elegantly proportioned but quite a lot too red (as yet) for the weathered brick around it, and the attempt to blend it in color and scale with its motley neighbors while maintaining the integrity of a "skin" structure, has been of distinctly limited success. This effort has also led to some visual ambiguities; neither the rationale nor the articulation of the facade are immediately clear. It is not even easy to find the entrance, which is up and off a ramp with a distressingly busy pipe railing.

But if these impossible "relationships" have defied resolution, this is no less a superior and very handsome building, in terms of strength and refinement and appropriateness of design. A little study reveals a notable logic that expresses both the strict needs of the plan and the architects' desire to make an attractive place to work.

While Mitchell-Giurgola buildings have reflected changing taste across the years, moving from the exposed concrete patterns of the 60's to the Stirling-sleek, glass-and-brick of the 70's and a controlled mannerism of shapes and screens on the increase now, they consistently demonstrate the thoughtful making of architecture.

There has been a constant level of quality, without posturing or trademarks, but always with quietly assured style. This is not sock-it-to-you architecture; the result is suave and gentle rather than brittle and trendy. There is a basic debt to Louis Kahn, and there is the presence, although sometimes hard to pin down specifically, of Alvar Aalto, in artful logic, sophisticated naturalism and personal felicities of material and scale—features that are some of the least spectacular, most important and increasingly admired aspects of the modern movement. Above all, there is a sense of the carefully considered solution of complexities of planning through a rational refinement of structure and design that unfolds with increasing esthetic rewards, far beyond first impressions.

In the Fairchild Building, the phenomenon is particularly clear. The program was the provision of flexible laboratory

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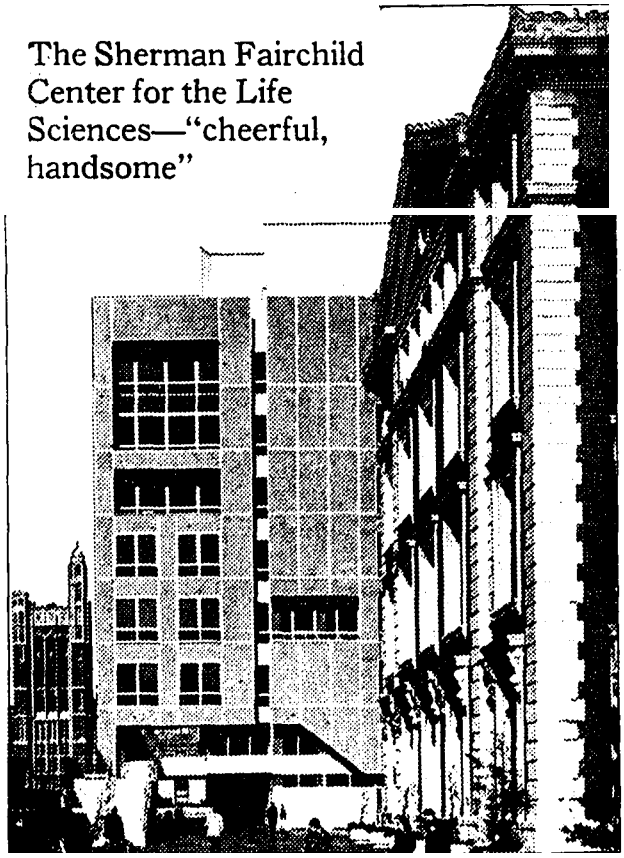
The Sherman Fairchild Center for the Life Sciences—"cheerful, handsome"



Gay Sussman

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space to house the Department of Biological Sciences, and the architects worked closely with the faculty and the building committee. Under Romaldo Giurgola's careful design direction, with Dart Sageser in charge of the project, the firm carried out all fittings, furnishings and colors.

The building, which cost $12 million, with at least half of that spent for elaborate mechanical systems, is not large; its seven stories form a narrow, rectangular tower resting on the existing steel of Mudd Lounge. The tower is cantilevered on a truss slightly beyond the Mudd framing module for a more efficient laboratory layout. Laboratories are on the long east and west sides of the tower, served by two corridors. Between the corridors, in the center, are washing rooms, centrifuges and other shared equipment. Midway along the corridors is a connecting space that serves as a small lounge, or, in one case, a library.

Fronting the labs, along the south side of the building, is a general use space, where people circulate. There is a glass-enclosed stair with a view of copper cresting and cornices on older buildings that leads to a glass-walled lounge on each floor connecting with a six-story wing containing a stack of seminar rooms, offices and lounges. These attractive, out-of-the-ordinary spaces have windows on two sides, at different angles.

This six-story wing is cantilevered beyond the body of the building, across the main walk, to form its only vista, from the south. It becomes apparent on approaching that the concrete-edged tile panels project beyond the wall, screening Mudd Lounge below; walking under it makes the wall's "hung" structure clear.

There is a lot of quiet projecting and angled cutting of corners that gives this deceptively simple building a subtle complexity. Windows are set back behind the facade panels for the width of the laboratory ducts that run from top to bottom. These recessed windows are used as the basis for an intricate relationship of planes that stresses transparency and luminosity. This is achieved through the use of skylight panels between the outer wall and the windows at each floor, with still another dimension added by a row of lights inside the window soffit visible from the exterior. Throughout the building, there is a sense of light and the outdoors that research structures usually lack.

The basic interior colors are a "pewter" gray-blue and a soft peach—surprising to those brought up on the dogma of Bauhaus blue and red. Other colors range from a grayed mauve to an apricot-tan, and the full range appears on every floor as a striped wall in the lounge-passage area. There is a gray-blue, Pirelli-type rubber floor of small embossed disks at the entrance, bright mirror-finished aluminum slats used for hung ceilings wherever they are not left open in labs and corridors, and a recurring motif of steel-tube hand railings. Surfaces are hard and elegant, and corners are smoothly rounded. The staff calls it the "Queen Mary" look.

The building is cheerful, handsome and stylish without brashness, full of the implicit conviction that a good work space is also to be enjoyed as a pleasurable environment. This is the standard now being embraced by the present university administration, under President William J. McGill, Architecture and Planning Dean James Polshek, and campus architect Dean Telfer. After a long, post-McKim, Mead and White decline, and a recent era of bombast and banality in which the signal achievement has been the combination of both in the same building; the architectural direction at Columbia is conspicuously on the rise. ■