Big but Not So Bold

Trade Center Towers Are Tallest, But Architecture Is Smaller Scale

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The towers are pure technology, the lobbies are pure schmaltz and the impact on New York of two 110-story buildings and auxiliary structures with a projected population of 130,000 workers and visitors using a city-size amount of services is pure speculation. These are the three areas in which an undertaking of the size and scale of the World Trade Center must be evaluated: engineering, design and planning.

An Appraisal

As engineering, the buildings' roots are in Chicago in the eighteen-eighties, where technology and esthetics combined for that uniquely American contribution to art and urban life, the skyscraper. By the nineteen-thirties it had shaped the Manhattan skyline and the 20th century.

However, even as the World Trade Center is dedicated, the palm is going back to Chicago, where the Sears Tower will be still higher and even more advanced in its tall building technology.

Megalomania and Economics

In the sixties, new developments in framing techniques that increased strength and rigidity and decreased bulk and cost made megalomania compatible with economics. Don't knock the 20th century, when art finally equalled man's aspirations.

Big buildings are beautiful by accident — through sheer size and drama — and by design.

As design, the World Trade Center is a conundrum. It is a contradiction in terms: the daintiest big buildings in the world. In spite of their size, the towers emphasize an almost miniature module — 3 feet 4 inches — and the close grid of their decorative facades has a delicacy that its architect, Minoru Yamasaki, chose deliberately. The associated New York architects are Emery Roth and Sons.

The module is so small, and the 22-inch wide windows so narrow, that one of the miraculous benefits of the tall building, the panoramic view out, is destroyed. No amount of head-dodging from column to column can put that fragmented view together. It is pure visual frustration.

Mr. Yamasaki is a modest size, and he talks insistently of "human scale." He believes that this miniaturization "humanizes" the huge buildings and relates them to the man in the street. Because the delicate aluminum grid covers the closely spaced columns of a load-bearing exterior wall, he claims structural justification.

But the most beautiful skyscrapers are not only big, they are bold; that is the essence and logic of their structural and visual reality. They are bone-beautiful, and the best wear skins that express that fact with the strength and subtlety of great art.

These are big buildings but they are not great architecture. The grill-like metal facade stripes are curiously without scale. They taper into the more widely-spaced columns of "Gothic trees" at the lower stories, a detail that does not express structure so much as *tart it up. The Port Authority* has built the ultimate Disneyland fairytale blockbuster. It is *General Motors Gothic.*

Still, there are things to be grateful for. Whether one likes the style or not, the Port Authority simply did not raise hack speculative standards to the ultimate power. It tried for something special. And those lobbies are gloriously high and spacious, if dubiously grand.

The third factor, planning, is bringing the big building increasingly under attack in cities today. It is being looked on more as monster than as marvel. The tall building is recognized not as an isolated object, but as an element of the environment.

How They Work

Because the open spaces and circulation areas around the World Trade Center are still clutter and rubble, these buildings cannot be considered yet as a total complex or measured in the all-important terms of how they work in their surroundings.

Belatedly, questions are being raised about energy use and pollution, and all those city troubles that a city-size structure complicates. The World Trade Center will take 80,000 kilowatts of electricity a year, for example, or 20 per cent of Con Edison's growth.

The skyscraper has become a sophisticated problem in environment. And that is how the World Trade Center will ultimately have to be judged, rather than for its esthetic effect on the skyline, or its status value. Survival, not vanity, is the issue now.