ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

An Ingenious Advance in Housing Design

The East Campus Complex at Columbia University Richard Payne

Consider a building that has to be vandal-proof, constructed of maintenance-free materials, with every surface resistant to neglect and abuse, where violation of design and function must be an anticipated fact, along with defacement and petty thievery — a place where surveillance is a necessity and the population is transient. A description of a maximum security prison? Not at all. This is a dormitory at Columbia University.

When such a building manages to transcend these grim requirements to become a serious work of architecture, it can be assumed that the architects are both caring and talented, and even more important, strong. Fortunately, and even miraculously, this has been the case with the $28.7-million complex on Columbia's East Campus at the edge of Morningside Park that combines the Heyman Center for the Humanities and a dormitory for 750 students. Although it sounds as if even Michelangelo might have trouble getting out of this kind of architectural straightjacket, the firm of Gwathmey-Siegel & Associates has produced a first-rate work that makes impressive contributions to the design of housing and the treatment of urban space. If there are parts of the buildings that are too bleakly institutional, it is easy to see how an austerely simple esthetic can be brought down to this level very quickly when the practical requirements for building survival require a quasi-penal solution. The effect is helped along considerably by missing light covers in the halls and littered lobbies.

That these structures display a high level of ingenuity and imagination and a consistently superior level of design is, therefore, no small achievement, even for architects with the good track record of Charles Gwathmey and Robert Siegel, who are responsible for some of today's most refined and precise neo-modernist buildings. (If there is post-modernism, then neo-modernism must follow, for the work of those who are maintaining, or reviving, the modernist vocabulary rather than rushing to the history books.) The firm's best-known work is a series of widely acclaimed, suavely spectacular, costly custom houses of the kind that both the architectural and home magazines love.

The Columbia project is the largest to come from the Gwathmey-Siegel office to date. The transition to the new scale and complexity is handled well, although the solution conspicuously lacks the luxurious finishes and details that have characterized the houses. The 360,000 square feet of the East Campus complex includes two dormitories, one a 23-story tower and the other a four-story block, that face each other on the east and west sides of a court meant to suggest a "cloister," or a quad. The north side of the court is formed by the three-story Heyman Humanities Center, which contains office, study, conference and exhibition space for staff and fellows; the south side is enclosed by a large faculty-student lounge.

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There are accommodations for 350 students in walkup "town houses" and split-level duplexes in the low building and in the lower part of the tower. The walkups in the tower are capped by 14 floors containing 400 duplexes and

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flats reached by skip-stop elevators. The typical dormitory unit has four single rooms with a living-dining room and kitchen above them. Cantilevered from the narrow south side of the slab-like tower are double-height lounges with spectacular city and river views in three directions.

This self-contained residential, academic and community complex supplies some of the best architecture on the Columbia campus, which started in a blaze of McKim, Mead & White glory at the end of the last century and then went steadily downhill. Pretentiousness has been mixed with shoddyness until the nadir was reached in the Uris Business Building of the 1960's. Recently, the University rediscovered architecture, and the 70's produced Mitchell-Giurgola's Life Sciences Building and Alexander Kouzmanoff's discreet underground extension of Avery Library. The Gwathmey-Siegel addition augurs well for the 80's, which will also bring a mystery building by the closely watched British architect James Stirling.

'The new dormitories supply some of the best architecture on the Columbia campus.'

The new construction even manages to repair some of the environmental (but not the visual) damage done by the banal pomposity of the adjacent Schools of Law and International Affairs. Their raised platform base — a planning idea destined for sterility and abandonment — has been connected to a new access plaza that also ties in other previously isolated buildings. The overbearing Law and International Affairs buildings alone could have alienated a few generations of students who have busied themselves attacking the structures that shelter and serve them. But since the bad seems to get it with the good, no architectural judgments are apparently involved.

For the new dormitories, the architects worked with the students to be sure that they got what they wanted. They did, but not in quite the way that was anticipated. Most of the furnishings have been removed from the lounges to student rooms. Chairs, tables and bulletin boards have been liberated.

Unable to use the marble, stone, brick or wood that have traditionally graced campus architecture because they are too easily defaced, the architects have drawn on far less vulnerable materials. Whether by coincidence or irony, the selection of this particular firm was fortuitous, because the High Tech vocabulary of hard-surfaced, unembellished finishes has always been central to their work. What they have done is to make a silk purse out of ceramic tile. Two colors of this tile are used, red and tan, to face the reinforced concrete construction with the addition of clear glass and glass block, aluminum windows and trim.

The result is a "modern" style drawn from history and memory and post-graduate pilgrimages to the European works of Le Corbusier and the early 20th-century masters. It is full of flat surfaces, smooth curves and sophisticated nostalgia. These neo-modernist buildings often bear a remarkable resemblance to some of the pictorial images of the classic black-and-white photographs of the revolutionary structures of the 1920's and 30's. Today, art imitates art.

There is at least one striking image in this vein in the Columbia buildings. The court is flanked on either side of its 60-foot, city-street width by sentinel rows of curved stair towers, faced in glass block, that provide the entrances to the walkup units. The "look" of these repeated cylinders is of a formal, rather handsomely eerie city landscape, rigidly neo-rational in style, with shades of Le Corbusier's Salvation Army period in Paris, Russian Constructivism, Italian rationalism and a suggestion of the symmetries of Aldo Rossi. But these towers create more than a lasting visual impression. They are also a circulation device that permits entry to the dormitories on several levels while allowing natural light to penetrate to recreation spaces below the plaza.

Color is used to recall the material and scale of earlier Columbia buildings. The Morningside Drive facade of the tower is divided horizontally, with red tile on the lower section, to the height of its brick neighbors, and tan tile above. This attempt to relate to other construction and to deemphasize the tower's size is repeated on its west, or court side, and the theme is carried out by the low, red building opposite. The only surface pattern is provided by the fenestration, which clearly reflects the interior layout — wide bands of glass for the living quarters, small, paired windows for the bedrooms. In a departure from established university practice, there will be stores on the street-side ground floor.

All this is thoughtful and competent design. But perhaps the complex's most skilled and unusual feature is the corner entrance — an essentially awkward and unceremonious approach that was dictated by the tightness of the site and the surrounding construction. This entrance is reached by either crossing the Law School platform or coming through a 116th-Street passageway which has been turned into a pleasant, cloistered enclosure. At this point, the south end of the low dormitory block has been raised to a greater height than the rest of the building, to significantly alter the scale. This end is opened for a full three stories, with a massive corner column played off against a recessed, undulating wall. The device is strong enough to be read as a formal entrance and it also succeeds in visually reducing the tower behind it to a backdrop. That is architecture legerdemain of a very high order.

The refinement of the design of these buildings is marred by average construction and small touches like plaques in the wrong places. But the effectiveness of a unified concept of housing and urbanism within a stringently elegant esthetic still comes through. The Heyman Center for the Humanities and these badly needed dormitories are a superior addition to the Columbia campus. One can only look at the fresh-faced, clean-cut young graduate students who occupy the new buildings and try to guess who threw the paint in the courtyard, and why they tried to pry the floor-stop number plates off the elevators. One wonders what kind of humanists they will be. ■