

King of Checkerboards: Towering New Blockbuster Is Impossible To Miss ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLEThe New York Times (by Arthur Brower)
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King of Checkerboards

Towering New Blockbuster Is Impossible To Miss in Matter-of-Fact Sort of Way

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A funny thing happened on the way to a Civic Center. While New York backed and filled and studied and re-studied plans for the environs of City Hall, the Federal Government want ahead and built a 41-story office building and connected courthouse in City Hall's backyard that dominates and destroys the entire Civic

Center area. The new blockbuster can scarcely be called a surprise. It has been rising in solemn, outsize nonsplendor for about three years and is quite impossible to miss from anywhere around. Just look for the biggest checkerboard in the world. The office tower is attached to the smaller building with structural paranoia; hung by trusses, supported by columns and cantilevered at the edges behind a standard glass skin. Is it a suspended structure or isn't it? Only its architects know for sure.

Together, they are about as funny as a bad Joe Miller joke. Architecturally, the Federal Government has laid a colossal egg.

What has been going on in planning and design terms for at least the last four years, however, is not so much funny as it is pure farce. As a case study of how New York got one of the most monumentally mediocre Federal buildings in history, it is edifying. It could be called a classic performance in bureaucratic inflexibility.

In the fall of 1963, New

York City released the results of a Civic Center study that attempted to pull together the chaos around Foley Square, including bridge approaches, highway spaghetti, fragmented open space and new building needs. The design of the Federal building and courthouse, by Kahn & Jacobs, Alfred Easton Poor, and Eggers & Higgins, was complete, but construction had not yet begun.

In the interests of sense and symmetry, the city asked Washington (the General Services Administration, which builds Federal structures throughout the country) to move the building toward Broadway to conform with New York's plan. The answer, apparently based on the fact that while the wheels of government grind slowly, they cannot reverse or change direction, was no. End of Act One.

Act Two: During excavation for are office tower, foundations of several older office buildings on the Broadway side gave way. The Federal Government was forced to demolish them. This extended the site to exactly the location that had been requested by the city. Asked again by the city for relocation and redesign, Washington again said no.

Act Three: The buildings went up as planned, with an immense, blank, featureless concrete wall facing Broadway. This civic embellishment will remain, as well as the



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vacant Broadway frontage, until more space is needed, and then the Federal building will double its size.

Considering its size now, and what can only be called its belligerent banality, this might be called Washington's gift to New York of double disaster.

Just across Broadway are two matching Victorian buildings fronted in cast iron on the corner of Thomas

Street, framing the vista of the huge, blank wall and mammoth checkerboard beyond.

Called the Thomas twins by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, their "Renaissance palace" facades of cast columns and repeated arches, rich in plasticity, style and scale, point a mute, visual moral. They are the 19th century city; the Federal building is the 20th century city. It is automation vs. architecture.