Eero Saarinen's Somber Skyscraper

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE first observation that one must make about the new CBS headquarters that rises somberly from its sunken plaza at Sixth Avenue and 52d Street is that it is a building. It is not, like so much of today's large-scale construction, a handy commercial package, a shiny wraparound envelope, a packing case, a box of cards, a trick with mirrors.

It does not look like a cigar lighter, a vending machine, a nutmeg grater. It is a building, in the true, classic sense: a complete design in which technology, function and esthetics are conceived and executed integrally for its purpose. As its architect, Eero Saarinen, wanted, this is a building to be looked at above the bottom 50 feet; to be comprehended as a whole.

CBS is Saarinen's only skyscraper and only work in New York. It is the first of the city's landmark skyscrapers to be executed in reinforced concrete, and one of the first to use an exterior bearing wall rather than the usual skeleton frame-curtain wall formula. It served as a demonstration model for the new zoning when it was being formulated in 1960-61, with the Saarinen office helping to develop realistic land coverage ratios to permit the plaza-surrounded sheer tower. As such, CBS set the shape and standard for New York building today.

It does all of this with distinction for a figure estimated at not too far above the speculative norm of about $24 a square foot, and well below the luxury building price of $40 upward. Like ABC next door, CBS could simply have taken space offered to it in a conventional investor's building which would then have been named for it, but the company was seeking something special. It got good value and good looks.

And yet the reaction to the building is extremely mixed. The dark dignity that appeals to architectural sophisticates puts off the public, which tends to reject it as funereal.

Solidity

There is certainly nothing seductive about CBS. But its sober solidity is in a noble architectural tradition. The Strozzi Palace, as a historic example, is an awesome masterpiece of forbidding, stony strength. It is doubtful, of course, whether the Medici were as friendly as Chase Manhattan, and today people want friendly banks, and friendly buildings. Quality and presence are more usual requisites for great architecture; there are few friendly buildings on the list.

The first fault, therefore, is in the public eye. Thoroughly corrupted by what might be called the American Product Esthetic — applied equally to buildings and possessions—it takes bright and shiny as synonymous with new and good. Surrounded by tinsel and tinfoil, it finds CBS's somber restraint gloomy, and gloom is not part of the American way of life.

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The spurious glitter of much of the new Sixth Avenue surrounding CBS eclipses Saarinen's sober subtleties.

The second fault is in the building. The failure to carry through its distinctive style and concept consistently into all of its major interior spaces accounts for a curious deadness. Deadness and darkness are easily equated. This abrogation of style that ruptures esthetic continuity is particularly damaging in the ground floor area occupied by a bank, which forms the entire Sixth Avenue street facade and one third of the ground floor. It continues in office interiors. The result is a first-rate work of architecture that just misses coming alive as a unified work of art.

But it is still an extraordinarily impressive structure. The strong, straight shaft is sheathed in dull Canadian black granite and gray glass and set back 25 feet from the building line to take up 50.8 per cent of the block-long, 200-foot deep site. It rises severely from its depressed plaza for 38 stories and 491 feet. On winter days, the wind seems to whip around it with extra force and chill. No frills; no nonsense; no tricks, no pretty come-on with art and flowers.

Approached from outside, the granite-faced, triangular poured concrete columns appear first as overlapping, faceted fins of solid stone. As one's perspective changes, they open to reveal glass, then close slowly, massively again.

Their module is five feet; five feet of wall or column and five of glass, for a particularly felicitous scale. The relationship inside offers superbly calculated framing of the inexhaustible miracle of New York views.

These columns are neither as simple nor as solid as they seem. Rising uninterrupted from ground to top, they have a dual purpose: as a bearing wall and as conduits for services. From the second floor level they are hollow for ducts, and sheared flat on the interior. At the ground floor, they are solid and fully diamond-shaped inside and out, and almost as impressive as the columns of the Parthenon.

What is involved here are the complexity of structure and service of the modern high-rise building and its relationship to visual esthetics, a problem that separates the men from the boys and good buildings from bad. CBS solves it with maximum logic and minimum ambiguity.

The difference between C.B.S. and its neighbors, however, is the basic difference between building and architecture. It is in the fact that most of New York's mammoth commercial structures are no more than weatherproof containers of rentable square footage, or candy-wrapped bulk space.

In contrast, CBS is all one architectonic piece. The outside perimeter of columns and an interior service core support it. Between, there is a 35-foot ring, or "square doughnut," in Saarinen's words, of flexible, totally open office space, uninterrupted by columns or corridors. It all fits together in an economical scheme that unifies structure, planning and esthetics. It makes the "whole thing" that Saarinen envisioned.

But in New York buildings are rarely whole things and C.B.S., unfortunately, is no exception. This can be blamed partly on the untimeliness of Saarinen's death just before construction which led to a double switch of firms for interiors, and partly to the accepted practice of separating container from contained in the design of the city's business quarters.

Credits list Carson, Lundin and Shaw as "interior architect" (sic) and Florence Knoll Bassett as interior designer. The inside of C.B.S. is a solid gold corporate cliché; a lavish cocoon, complete to standardized concealed wastebaskets and accredited and almost as equally standardized abstract art. Interchangeable from Sixth to Third Avenues. The building has been turned into the anonymous, vacuum - packed commercial shell that it was never meant to be. And C.B.S. does not become, as Saarinen had hoped, a whole and "soaring thing." It is a great building, grounded.