## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# A Spectacular Museum Goes Up In Washington

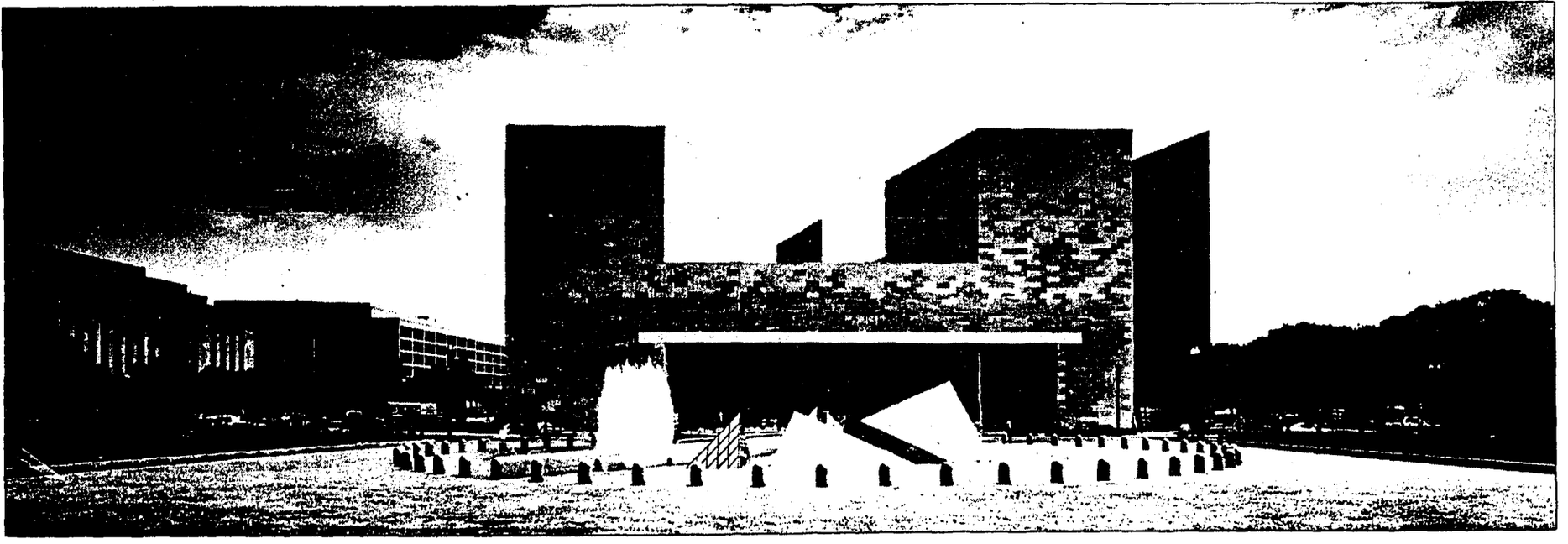
WASHINGTON,

Right now, it is pure Piranesi. The interior of the very large, very expensive, and potentially very beautiful new East Building of the National Gallery in Washington, scheduled to open in the summer of 1978 and still literally under wraps to outsiders and most of the profession, is a place of unfinished, soaring spaces, dense scaffolding and balconies and bridges leading to mysterious destinations in murky half-light. Even the escalators seem surreal.

But as the mysteries are clarified by members of the architects' office—I. M. Pei and partners—and as the vast, tiered, shadowed spaces are visualized flooded with changing, natural light, the promise becomes clear: a spectacular building of unmatched quality is being created.

It should be stated immediately that this is not a Centre Beaubourg; any comparison of the two is an exercise in apples and oranges. And it must also be understood that any definitive judgment of the new East Building can be made only when it has been finished and the art and activities are in place. What the National Gallery is building, at a cost of close to $100 million in private funds from Paul Mellon and the Mellon family and Foundation, is not a daring experiment, or a radical exploration of esthetic form and function. This will be a superb national showcase, in the most classical contempo-

*Continued on Page 29*



The National Gallery's $100-million East Building—"If a generous donor insists on quality, that is hardly a cause for criticism."

*Continued from Page 1*

rary sense, of the finest 20th-century art, architecture and museology.

With the collaboration of Mr. Mellon, the National Gallery's director, Carter Brown, and the new building's designer, I. M. Pei, official Washington architecture has finally moved into this century—in its final quarter. It has approached this moment slowly, reluctantly, and with an almost uninterrupted series of pratfalls. "Compromises" with the city's serene, horizontal classicism have led to the most vacuous and artless modernism—structures that are neither modern nor art. In the meantime, a kind of modern architecture had developed that could take its place in the Capital without apologies, and with impressive enrichment. But until now the vision and stomach to patronize it officially were lacking.

The decision to embrace it fully in this new wing of the National Gallery is decisively right. It is right in terms of the city's historic scale and image, and of the structure's location adjacent to the last-gasp superclassicism of John Russell Pope's Beaux Arts National Gallery of 1939, and as the final element at the east end of the grand, formal scheme of the Mall. Its many tacit acknowledgements of existing scale, size, materials, cornice and sight lines, of the established monumentality and vistas of Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall, in no way corrupt a mature and succinct modern style.

The 20th century was a perfectly logical "next step" for the National Gallery. Now that the limitation on purchase of the work of living artists has finally been removed, it is in the process of building a modern collection. This collection will not explore the high-risk present; it will enshrine the "safe" present, acquiring painting and sculpture in its accustomed old master tradition—a Henry Moore at the entrance, a Calder in the central court, Matisse, Jackson Pollock and other representative, established names and styles on its walls. In addition, the National Gallery is increasingly emphasizing mass-attendance, special feature, temporary exhibitions, such as the treasures from China and Tutankhamen's tomb, and developing programs of broad art scholarship.

To accommodate all this, the East Building has been in planning and construction for seven years, and it has been a unique project in many ways. There were rigid limitations of site and very few limitations on cost. The location is an odd trapezoid of land formed by the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue and Madison Drive from Third to Fourth Streets as they converge on the Capitol. The design, based on the angles of the site, requires such special detailing that it would not have been possible on any ordinary budget. Materials and execution are of imperial quality. Like the original National Gallery, the building and its contents will be a Mellon gift to the nation; the Federal Government bears the cost of maintenance.

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The work is well along, slowed down now by a massive space-frame skylight roof that will cover most of the structure and fill it with daylight; this has turned out to be extraordinarily difficult and expensive to build. What can be seen by any visitor today is a virtually complete exterior—a monumental building consisting of two triangular sections that come together in a series of breathtaking, knife-sharp, acute angles of approximately 20 to 70 degrees. The clear, yet intricate, functional and visual articulation of all of these acute-angled elements creates a kind of abstract, architectural sculpture. In so much of Washington one has the feeling that an inert load of marble has simply been dumped and left. Not here. There are those subtle tensions between the parts and the whole that create the conditions of art; the effect is at once stimulating and serene.

The walls are sheathed in the same perfectly matched, pink-tinged Tennessee marble that clothes the original Gallery. This marble, cut in three-inch-thick panels, is hung on the surface of the reinforced concrete structure and joined, not with mortar, but with neoprene stripping that permits expansion and contraction, a technique developed specifically for this building. Those sharply angled corners are not conventionally mitred, which would make the marble look thin, but are formed by specially cut pieces that continue around a gently curved edge—the kind of excruciatingly considered solution that is characteristic of the care lavished on every detail.

The long facade on the north, or Pennsylvania Avenue side—a typical Washington Brobdingnagian expanse of 360 feet—is set back at ground level in a gesture toward human scale that breaks the capital's customary totalitarian-scaled wall. The east and south sides are lightened by six-story glass sections of office and study floors.

In plan, the two triangles nest perfectly within the trapezoidal site. The larger, north triangle, is gallery space. The smaller, south triangle will contain offices, library, and a new Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. The two elements are joined by a central skylit court that covers 16,000 square feet.

Following the strict geometry of the site and plan, the corners of the gallery space are marked off to produce parallelograms; these parallelograms are turned into hexagons (with stairs and services on the cut-off corners) for special, self-contained galleries originally called "houses" but now inelegantly jargonized as "pods." These units show on the outside as tower-like projections.

However, what you see is not all of what you get. Thirty percent of the new construction is invisible, underground. There are large basement and concourse levels that include a pedestrian link between the two buildings, new loading docks, receiving areas, places for exhibition preparation, storage, parking, and a restaurant and sales area. The restaurant is in the concourse link, with a fountain above on the connecting plaza that cascades through to the skylit lower level.

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What cannot be seen yet is the new building's interior, and that is what this design is all about. The real excitement is in what happens to that provocative, geometric plan when it is raised to its full height, divided into open and closed spaces; it is in the simultaneous and multiple experience of those spaces from balconies, stairs and bridges on various levels, in complex visual and sensuous relationships.

The focus and unifying element of all of this calculated spatial diversity is the huge central court, 57 feet high from the ground level to the space-frame skylight, plunging another 14 feet down to the concourse level for an open, vertical view that soars to 71 feet. The building will be flooded with filtered sunlight and cloud shadows from the glass roof, changing with the sky and the hour.

There are two bridges across this court, one at 14 feet and the other at 32 feet above ground-floor level. Each connects the office and study wing with a set of galleries. The immense glass space frame that covers the court is 150 by 225 feet (each metal-framed tetrahedron is 34 by 45 feet).

The spaces and their relationships are dazzling. The scale

*Continued on Page 30*

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW

*Continued from Preceding Page*

is enormous. But nothing is felt as inhuman or crushing; the effect is exhilarating rather than exhausting. There is no awareness of the actual, mammoth dimensions, which are so skillfully handled that the result is a kind of architectural trompe l'oeil. And there are constant references to the scene outside—unexpected views of the Capitol and the Washington Monument through glazed areas—so perfectly positioned that one almost suspects the architect of hamming it up.

To date, most of the publicity has been about the building's extravagant cost, which is running $130 a square foot. If a generous donor insists on exceptional quality, however, that is hardly a cause for criticism, and many reasons for the cost do not meet the casual eye. Part of it is the invisible underground construction, filled with specialized technological equipment. A high water table meant elaborate and expen-