



**'FORGOTTEN' BUILDING:** The unusual library, classroom and administration building on the Bronx campus of Hunter College, designed by Marcel Breuer and Associates.

## Building's Case History

### Award of Capital Contract to Breuer Calls to Mind Hunter College Edifice

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The award of the commission for the new Housing and Home Finance Agency headquarters in Washington puts the spotlight on Marcel Breuer, the forgotten man in New York's current civic architecture controversy.

In a burst of local and national publicity last spring, New York achieved the dubious honor of a kind of reverse first prize in the field of public building with the City Club's "no award" of the year for its total lack of distinction in municipal design.

In the ensuing fuss, which still has the city's architects drawn up in warring factions, Marcel Breuer & Associates' library, classroom and administration building for the Bronx campus of Hunter College, escaped notice. It is considered by most practitioners and critics to be the city's most conspicuous claim to a superior civic-sponsored design. It is also looked upon as something of a "sport," because it is novel, daring and unlike anything the city has built before or since.

This forgotten building received no award from the City Club in its "search for civic excellence" because it was never submitted in its competition. Nor, unfortunately, does it ameliorate the generally poor picture of municipal construction. Like the proverbial exception that proves the rule, it only exposes the inadequacy of the rest with appalling clarity.

#### Exposes Some Problems

As a case history, it also exposes some of the problems that have helped defeat good design in New York's municipal architecture. Mr. Breuer makes the point, however, that in spite of all the obstacles against the production of distinguished edifices that are built into the city's administrative processes, he wanted to prove "that it could be done."

These obstacles are economic, bureaucratic and political. There has been considerable murmuring among architects about these obstructive factors, but little plain talk. The Breuer office had a real problem with the first, one serious, but temporary setback with the second, and no difficulty with the third. It is quite willing to discuss them all.

The job, admittedly, was a bit out of the ordinary. The architect had been told that the Board of Higher Education, under whose jurisdiction the building would fall, was one of the "easier" city agencies to work with. He had the backing of George N. Shuster, then president of Hunter College, who promised his support and assured him of his desire to have an outstanding building.

"I took the job with mixed feelings," Mr. Breuer says. "I was afraid of red tape and destructive forces behind the political scene. But the problem interested me, and I was moved by the attitude of Dr. Shuster and his staff, and I did it more or less as an experiment. I was curious to see how this works with the city administration."

The result, he says, was a "smooth operation," with a single pitfall of the type he had been warned about, and the consistent cooperation of the Board of Higher Education.

After direct contact by Dr. Shuster, he and other architects were interviewed, as required by the city. An agreement was signed with the Board of Higher Education, and the office worked with Hunter College, much as it would with a private client, toward the development of a general design. Then he-

gan the traditional municipal hurdles, which, as predicted, turned out to be fewer and less formidable than usual.

The design was submitted first to the Architectural and Engineering Unit of the Board of Higher Education, for a necessary approval. In spite of its unorthodox nature, the design was approved. Next, it went to the Fine Arts Commission, which must pass on all buildings on city-owned land. The Commission is not notoriously questioning, and there were no problems.

Once checked by the Board of Higher Education and the Fine Arts Commission (either of which would have effectively stopped it), final contract agreements and cost estimates were prepared. These were received and approved by the Board of Higher Education.

The next, and most vital step was submission to the Board of Estimate, which must appropriate funds for any city building project. This almost proved disastrous, in a depressingly familiar way. The routine review by the Board of Estimate's special staff—and it is these reviews in many city agencies that make strong architects weep—recommended to the board that the project not be approved in its submitted form.

The report stated that the building could not be engineered near its estimated cost (it was), that the hollow tile "sunshades" had never been used on a city structure before and were unnecessary and uneconomical, and suggested revisions that would have made the design unrecognizable. The Breuer staff prepared models and samples to argue the case, which was only resolved by petition to a higher authority, with Dr. Shuster's support.

The Board of Estimate approved. The building went out for bids, contracts were awarded, and construction began.

There were difficulties, but they were overcome. The city required four separate contractors where a private job uses one. City agreements do not include supervision by the architect, a standard and necessary practice in private work. The Breuer firm supervised on its own time, at a substantial loss.

#### Fee Was Below Minimum

Most serious of all, the fee paid by the city was approximately 3.7%, well below the minimum standard fee set by the American Institute of Architects in New York. For an equivalent building, the fee would be roughly 7.5% with supervision; without supervision it would still be close to 6%. "I don't think we got our money back," says the architect. "But I would do it again if I could afford it." Few firms can.

The answer, according to Mr. Breuer, is better fees from the city, supervision by the architect included, some revision of procedures, and an architectural profession willing to fight for higher standards in public building. He stresses this most of all. "Architects can do a lot about it. We don't need committees and reports to study the problem. We just need to go ahead and do the job."

"It will be the same thing in Washington. There will be headaches. There are on private jobs, too. But we will do the best we can."

His best is anticipated in the capital. The announcement of the Washington building was greeted by one Federal official with a graceful tribute to the architect, who is considered to be one of the profession's top men. "A sense of victory attends your selection. It vindicates our humble hope that this giant machine of government can respond to cultural values."