

Architecture

How to Build a Civic Center

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

YOU'VE got to be around this town for about 10 years and watch the progress of a major project or two to develop a proper sense of the ludicrous, or the miraculous, or both. That the two are not mutually exclusive gives New York its special flavor. It is also a New York truism that if you wait long enough for something to happen, it will happen, but not remotely in the way you expected. It can be an epic disaster or a cockeyed miracle, as in the case of the new Police Headquarters downtown.

The Police Headquarters comes in the miracle class. Designed by Gruzen and Partners, the new \$58-million building is a solid, sober, brick and concrete structure carried out with skill, sense and taste — rare enough commodities today. It is, as Brooks Brothers says of its sportswear, good-looking, meaning it has quality without flash. And it provides a headquarters of computerized 20th-century efficiency for a police department that has been begging to be let into the 20th-century for some time. Curious place, New York.

The cockeyed miracle part comes in with the realization that this structure has been 15 years in the making, through two mayors, six police commissioners and nine public works commissioners or municipal services administrators (the last have a very high mortality rate in New York). The project has had to be expedited by a special mayoral assistant through interdepartmental jurisdictions. The result still came out, wonder of wonders, an esthetic whole. It managed to escape such maudlin bureaucratic fates as having its handsome glassed-in lobby, with its essential view, chopped up for a computer room. It was very, very close.

But the real cockeyed miracle, and the greatest homage due to the architects, is for the public space that the building creates around it. Here, suddenly, is a civic center, or the spirit of a civic center, where only chaos existed before. You've got to know how much talk there has been about a civic center for New York for the last 10 years to appreciate that statement.

In the city's civic center plan — of which more later — the new Police Headquarters ended up in a hole in the ground at the back side of McKim, Mead and White's Municipal Building, smack against the approach spaghetti to the Brooklyn Bridge. Just to get to it over the tangle would have required an overpass rising 15 feet and then dropping down again. Without the guidance and goading and departmental coordination of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development — one of the Lindsay-sponsored innovative city planning offices — the story would have had a different and too-familiar ending: more piecemeal design and incremental chaos.

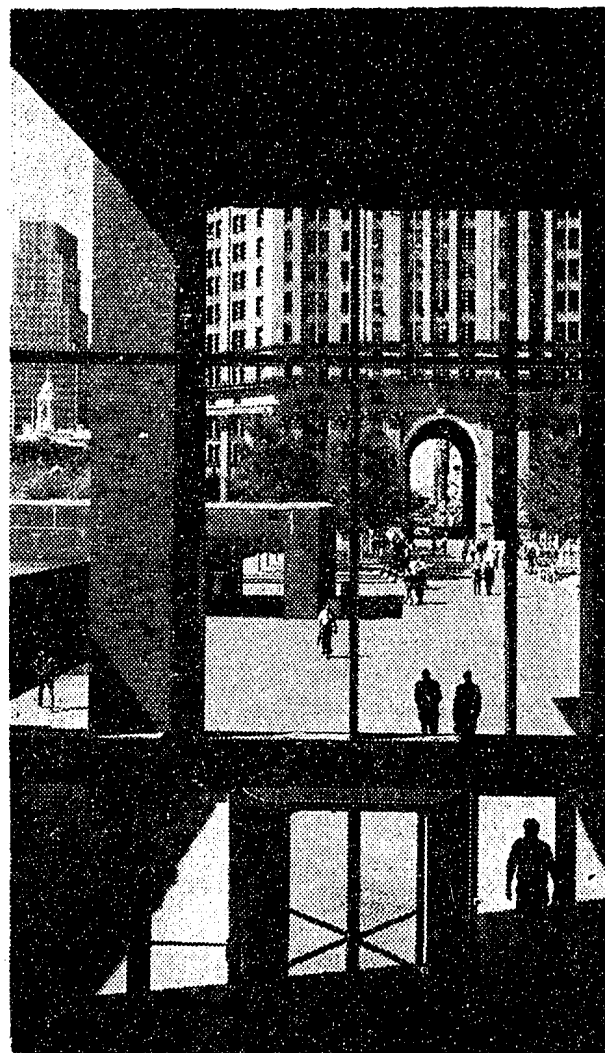
Not only have Gruzen and Partners, with the collaborating landscape architect, M. Paul Friedberg and Associates, redeemed the irredeemable, they have also created the city's finest public plaza and given a kind of coherence by extension to the entire fragmented area of City Hall and Foley Square.

This is much more, and much more important, than architecture alone. An esthetic masterpiece isolated on that grotesque, cut-off site would have been meaningless. But the level of planning that turned the site into connective tissue, increasing the pleasure and efficiency quotient of all the space around it, is significant urban design.

In fact, the city's and the firm's architects thought first about the environmental aspects of the building, before any architectural design was done. They started with the surroundings and worked from the outside in.

The solution was to depress Park Row, at the western boundary of the site, and to create a 75-foot-wide bridge-overpass across it to the Municipal Building, leading directly to, and through, its wide central arch. In the other direction, to the east, the open site's lower level affords pedestrian access to the Al Smith Houses. To do all this, Brooklyn Bridge approaches were modified and Park Row utilities were moved.

The bridge-overpass is the spacious new three-acre Police Plaza, brick-paved,



View from lobby of New York's new Police Headquarters
A fine public plaza makes more than open space

planted with mature honey locust trees, with a fountain wall and raised green buffer strip against Brooklyn Bridge to the south. Part of Duane Street, closed to traffic and also brick-paved, continues the plaza as a pedestrian way into Foley Square. The plaza is connector and catalyst for everything around it; all the spaces and structures it touches take on totally new meanings and relationships, where before there were no relationships at all.

It also connects with the new Federal courthouse annex to the north, another Gruzen and Partners job. The corner of this structure, now well along, has been chamfered to follow the line of the street, the first three floors have been hollowed out for visual penetration, and the building's detailing is related to the height of the capitals of the church columns next to it. At the particular urging of Richard Weinstein, head of the Office of Lower Manhattan Develop-

ment, the colonnade and frieze lines of the Municipal Building and adjacent court buildings, which make a surprisingly unified, monumental urban order in the area, have been picked up in the proportions of the lower floors. This, too, is significant urban design.

And so, miraculously, it all — sort of — comes together. The irony is that what has been built is a kind of beautiful back door to the city's official civic center plan, a study produced and adopted in 1963 with great fanfare that proposed a \$168-million reordering of the area to the west centered on City Hall Park and Foley Square. It was called the ABC plan for the architects who drew it up, Max Abramovitz, Simon Breines and Robert Cutler.

After eons of putting the wrong buildings in the wrong places at the wrong time, it looked like vision. It at least dealt with a whole, rather than with disjointed parts. Hindsight reveals it as a sim-

plistic bit of Beaux Arts pedantry, with lots of axial symmetry and greenery used like glue, but at the time there was public rejoicing, with this voice in the chorus. Everything is relative.

There ensued a passionate donnybrook with the Federal government, which was engaged in its own architectural misadventures on Foley Square. The city wanted the site of the new Federal Building moved west to Broadway to allow those pointless axial vistas to go on and on. The Feds, in the role of bully boys, refused, and then something even sillier happened — weakened by the excavation for the new building, the small structures on the Broadway side fell down. The Feds still wouldn't budge their blockbuster, which has subsequently become known as the Great Checkerboard and is so horribly visible from anywhere at all that its placement is academic.

The job of designing a mall and new municipal office tower was given to Edward Durell Stone and Eggers and Higgins. The saccharine scheme that resulted died a natural death. All this went on to an obbligation of public protest by Nathan Ginsberg, the civic center gadfly.

But in New York, silliness can lead to success. With the establishment of the Office of Lower Manhattan Development, under Richard Buford at that time, the first commendable scheme was produced, by consultant architects Conklin and Rossant. It sensibly emphasized circulation patterns. An elevated "ring" was to be the magic device to make the Brooklyn Bridge mess disappear and tie everything together.

The new Police Plaza actually builds one eighth of that ring, debouching near the Municipal Building. Today you can stand in the Police Headquarters lobby and look out through the glass wall to the handsome new public space, through the Municipal arch and along Chambers Street toward the Hudson River.

That splendid view, which never existed before, is a 100 per cent architectural achievement. It is also a fine demonstration of how to practice the art of civic center building and environmental design.