

Post Office Behemoth

One hundred million dollars is the magic number for New York construction now. It will buy a Pan Am Building, a Grand Central Tower or a new General Post Office.

The behemoth of a post office building, announced last week, will go up west and south of the present classically colonnaded McKim, Mead & White structure, where chiseled stone proclaims eternal dedication to the fulfillment of the mailman's rounds in spite of snow, rain, heat and nightly gloom.

The zealously of the United States Post Office may be eternal, but architecture is not. All the functions of the old building are clearly going to be transferred elsewhere—most of them to the new General Post Office, the biggest post office in the world.

This one will not be an imperial gift-wrap job. That went out with Penn Station Roman Empire, across Eighth Avenue, a casualty of the new Madison Square Garden. The new post office will be an immense, essentially characterless modern building in which the architects have struggled against insuperable odds to give what is really a truck terminal, factory and office building some kind of monumental style.

Without a handy package of classical columns and with the stringent limitations and restrictions imposed, including use of the burned-out Morgan Annex, they were licked before they started. For the loss of nobility there is the promise of better delivery.

As for the old building, the handwriting is on the real estate wall. Its days are numbered. Although the Government disclaims any plans to be rid of it, the pressures for its disposition will mount. The legal grace period that must be observed before demolition of a designated landmark may be offset for an investor by the rapidly rising value of this huge, preassembled two-block chunk of land opposite the Garden complex and surrounded by new building plans. Once it becomes surplus Federal property, the potential purchase price could make the Government giddy.

Sandwiched between the gargantuan new and old post offices is a small historic neighborhood survival of scattered rows of nineteenth-century houses painstakingly restored by New York's forgotten man—the one who wants to live here. The future of this valiant preservation venture is shadowed, too. Neither snow, rain, nor anyone's gloom is likely to stay Manhattan's commercial real estate developers once the heat is on.