Our New Buildings: Hits and Misses

A survey of the construction that has given New York a new face shows too few departures from the characterless and the imitative.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

NEW YORK will be a great town, as the taxi drivers say, if they ever finish building it. The transformation of a half-dozen avenues in the years since World War II, the switch from a cityscape of stone and brick to one of metal and glass, the construction of several impressive architectural landmarks give only a hint of what is yet to come—a building boom greater than any we have ever experienced.

In 1961, Manhattan added more than seven million square feet to its office space. Redevelopment from the Battery to Brooklyn Bridge will ultimately make that section of the city unrecognizable except for the familiar skyscrapers of the financial district. Park Avenue continues its process of down-with-the-old and up-with-the-new and Sixth Avenue is in the midst of major face-lifting. An immense West Side area, focused on the rising Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, is in process of renewal. On the East Side as far north as Ninety-sixth Street luxury apartment houses are built with increasing tempo.

Other neighborhoods of the city are being carefully scrutinized for purposes of rehabilitation and rebuilding by the City Planning Commission. In many places, only the street names will remain the same.

But what does all this building add up to, architecturally? How many of the most recent structures can be called successes, how many failures?

Consider, first, the definition. The standards of great building do not change. Today's construction is radically different in size, function, appearance and technology from that of any other age, but the means of measuring its greatness remain the same. As long ago as the first century B. C. the Roman architect Vitruvius called these factors utility, strength and grace. The definition still stands.

THE first standard, function, is the primary one; an office building, a museum or a railroad station must be designed for workers, pictures or trains. The second requirement, excellence of construction, is vital even though, as construction costs rise, it becomes more difficult to achieve. The third criterion, beauty, is the most elusive and the hardest to define.

We can say, however, that a beautiful building has the qualities of any successful work of art—good lines and proportions and a proper relationship of the parts to the whole. The success with which the work is coordinated, the skill with which each detail is designed, the care with which these details are proportioned and the taste with which the materials, colors and forms are chosen add up to beauty or boredom—the distinction of a Lever House or Chase Manhattan tower or the monotony of routine commercial work. In addition, because architecture is a three-dimensional art, there must be a sense of scale, or setting, and —most elusive of all—of controlled and created space.

Measured by this definition, we are not doing very well. There are, of course, exceptions to the run-of-the-mill pattern, but in general New York is producing few great—or even good—buildings. In spite of their glossy exteriors, most of the large new office structures set no standards and are, in fact, no more than copies of better buildings (those better buildings which can be added up on the fingers of one hand).

As with all pirated designs, the style, materials and workmanship of the product have suffered; the overriding concern has been to produce the greatest amount of rentable space at the least cost for the largest profit. Wrapped in deceptively "look-alike" packages that bear a distant resemblance to the "original creation," these are the mink-dyed muskrats of the architectural world.

Park Avenue, for example, could have been a street of contemporary commercial palaces to rival the best efforts of the Renaissance—if there had been a "corporate Medici" for every block. Unfortunately, every Lever House, Seagram Tower, Union Carbide or Pepsi-Cola Building attracted a retinue of less distinguished imitations, trading on the address and spoiling the view. (The designer of one admits that he was after "a Lever House look" on a limited budget.)

THE city's luxury housing is no better. If added up and set end-to-end (which is actually the way it is appearing on many avenues), it would probably account for the greatest volume of new building and the most notable lack of architecture. The design of expensive cooperatives and high-rent apartments is all economics and no esthetics: minimum expenditure for maximum return. Many of these buildings are put up by short-term investment groups. ("We are all speculators," says real estate man William Zeckendorf, with charming candor.) The loser is the tenant who buys a lowered standard of living, hardly improved by a display of paintings in the lobby.

SURPRISINGLY, it is in middle-income housing, largely Government-financed under urban renewal programs, that improvements are appearing. Here, new structural systems and some conscious attention to design are beginning to temper long-standing clichés. In general, however, so long as costs continue to rise and make for small rooms, narrow halls, low ceilings and "efficiency" arrangements, "minimum gracious living" seems here to stay.

Measuring the six most important New York structures completed last year, or now nearing completion, against our definition of architectural quality, we find one that may be called a great building, three that reflect varying *(Continued on Page 105)*

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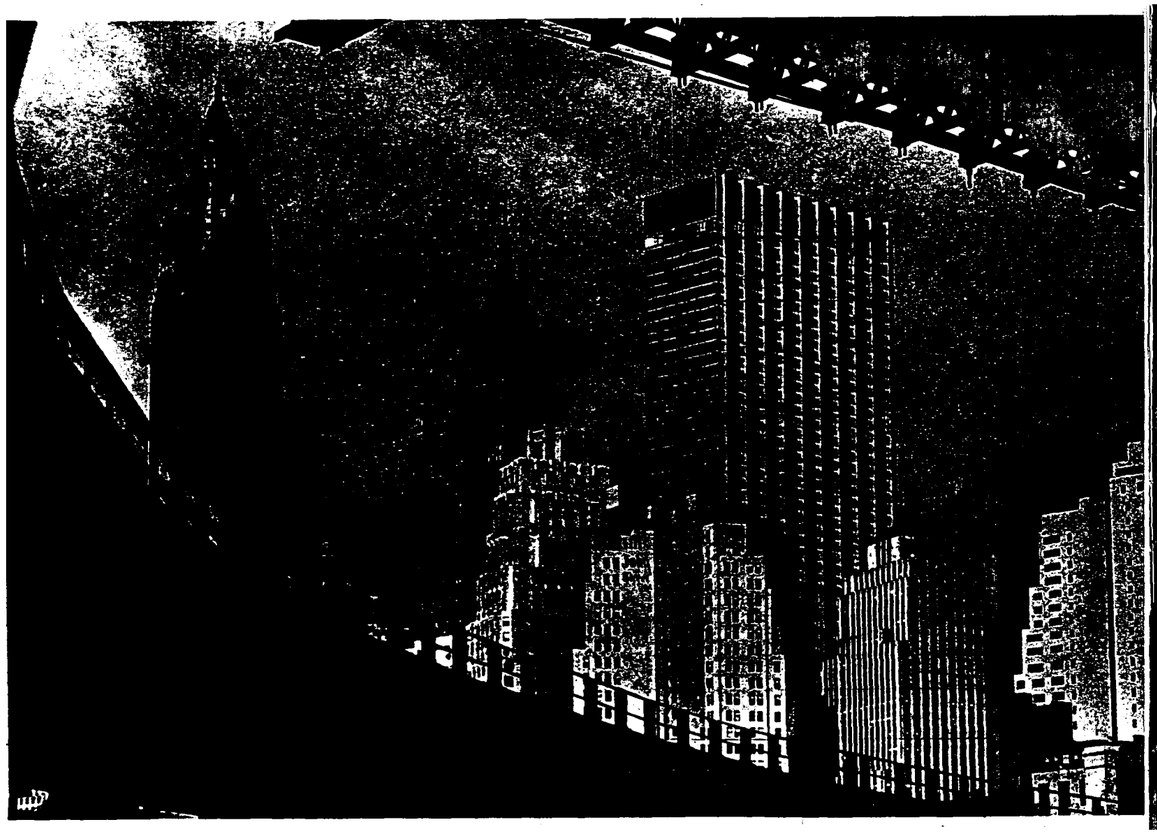
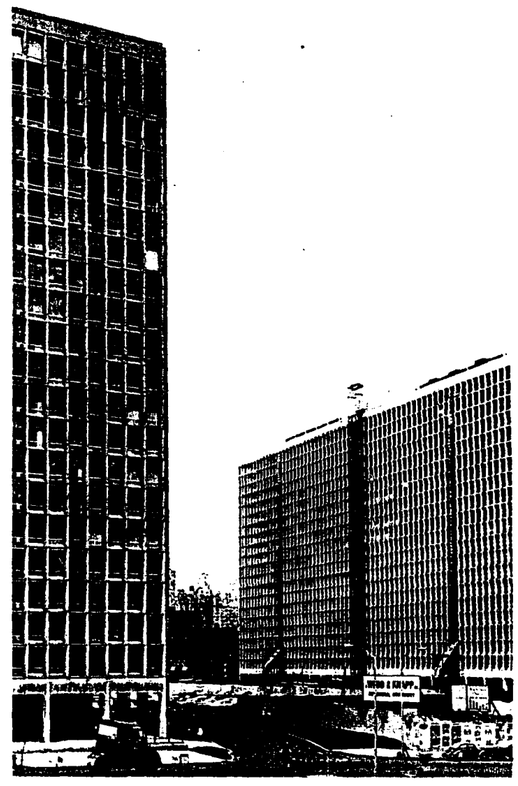
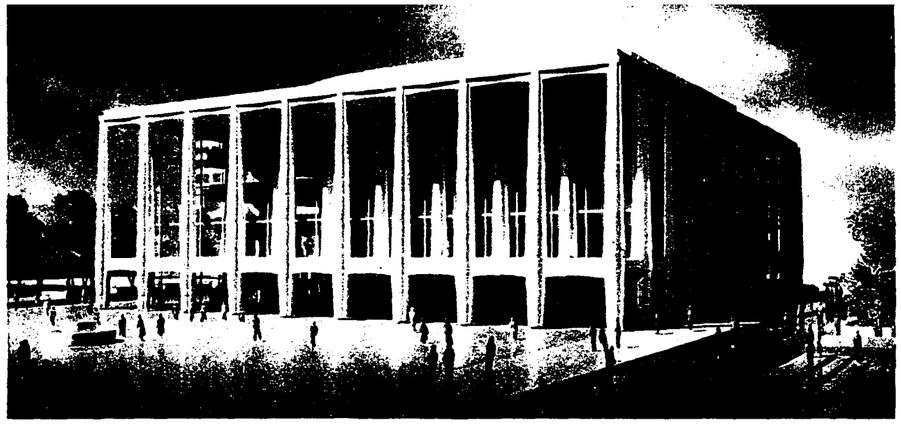


FOUR SUCCESSES

EQUITABLE BUILDING—"A success of a different kind, it stresses a no-frills efficiency and simple dignity."



KIP'S BAY APARTMENTS—"An important breakthrough in residential building underlined by unconventional good looks."



Left—
CHASE MANHATTAN BANK—"A superior building * * * a startling exterior combined with proper relationship to the surroundings."

Above—
PHILHARMONIC HALL—Part of Lincoln Center, it will have "the dignity and scale appropriate to an important public building."

Our New Buildings

(Continued from Page 17)

degrees of success and two that must be called failures.

Only the Chase Manhattan Building in lower Manhattan fully meets the challenge of the triple standard of excellence. The architects, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, have produced more than an impressive headquarters for a large bank; they have created a landmark and transformed a neighborhood. The building's superiority is not confined to its striking exterior. It extends also to its relationship to its surroundings. Approaching the Chase through the turns of the old city's narrow streets is not unlike coming upon a Baroque monument in a Roman square from the small alleys that surround it. Where there was previously congestion and confusion, there is now serenity, openness and order.

THE first reaction is reinforced by the impact of the sixty-story tower, well-scaled to its height and site, appropriately dramatized by the upward thrust of its exposed exterior columns. (These structural columns are more commonly hidden behind thin, glassy facades.) When the large south plaza and lower banking rooms are completed this year, twentieth-century art and technology will have produced a proud monument for New York.

The Equitable Building at Sixth Avenue and Fifty-first Street, also by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, is a success of a different type. Its immense size and streamlined simplicity are a reflection of the complex, impersonal business organization of our time. Equitable does not try for the luxury, prestige image of Chase Manhattan; it stresses a no-frills kind of efficiency in a shell of simple dignity. Its esthetic effects are limited to fine points of structural design and to dramatically coordinated color inside.

AT Lincoln Center, Max Abramovitz' Philharmonic Hall is the first of a significant group of cultural buildings to approach completion. It is of a timeless, classic design; tall, graceful arches rise the full height of the building to emphasize the dignity and scale appropriate to an important public building. The reinforced concrete frame, extremely handsome in its unfinished state, will be covered with travertine marble. However, the bare bones of all conscientiously designed structures are beautiful. It remains to be seen whether the shell will be strengthened or weakened by its finishing details.

In residential building, the first important breakthrough is Webb and Knapp's Kip's Bay apartments, looking over the East River at Thirty-third Street. Designed by I. M. Pei and Associates, these structures use an experimental kind of concrete framing, left exposed to create an exterior of unconventional good looks. This visible construction is the building's most progressive and handsome feature; inside,

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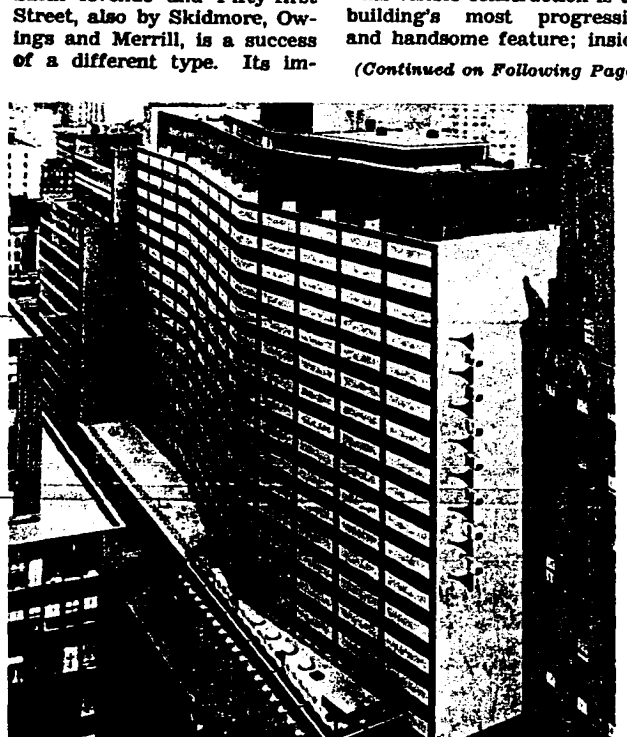

SUMMIT HOTEL—"A glittering display of gaudy confusion conceived by the creators of some of Florida's never-never-land hotels."

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unfortunately, the apartments offer no innovations of similar appeal.

Two buildings in the current group have the dubious distinction of being the largest and most spectacular failures that New York has seen in years —one still to be finished, one already here. The $100,000,000, fifty-four story Pan Am Building, just north of Grand Central, rates a low score because of its bulk and location; it continues to cause consternation among those who believe that such an oversized structure will overtax our already burdened midtown facilities.

STILL incomplete, it cannot be judged on construction or details, but it fails to pass the functional test because it does not consider its surroundings. (There was no pleasanter sight in New York than the open space after demolition of the old Grand Central office building; no more depressing sight than the heavy steel of the Pan Am Building filling it up again.) There are those who believe that its gross size also precludes beauty. As its rising mass blacks out sky, light and view, the attempts of its distinguished architectural consultants, Walter Gropius and Pietro Belluschi, to "smooth up" its overbearing profile seem particularly misguided.

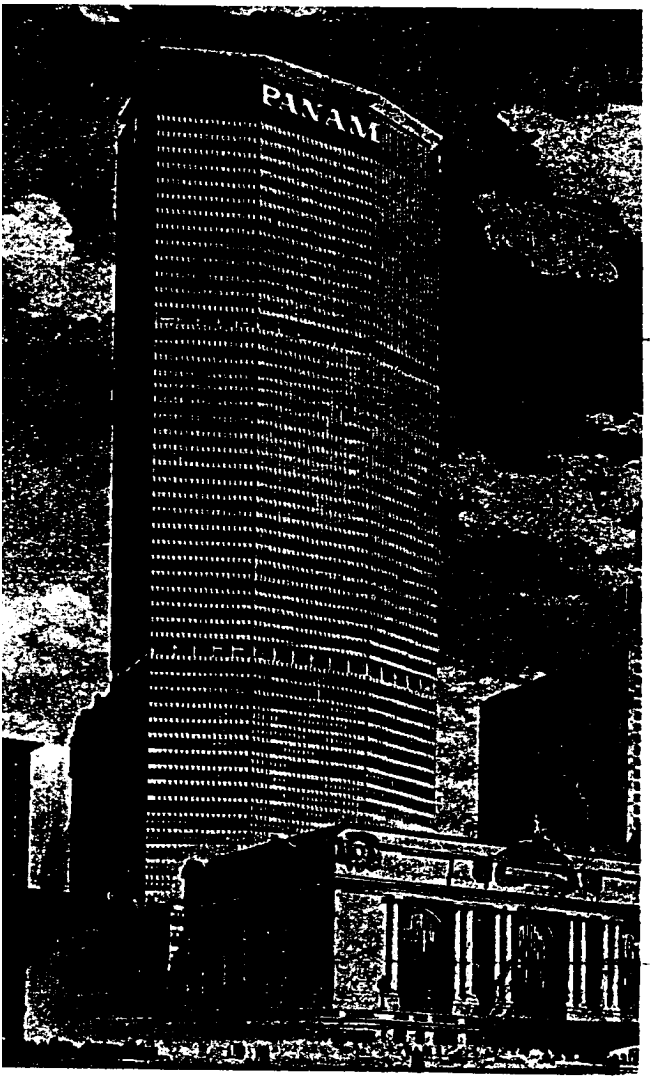
Then there is the recently completed Summit Hotel at Lexington Avenue and Fifty-first Street. The combined effort of hotel builders Preston and Lawrence Tisch and architect Morris Lapidus, creators of some of Florida's flashiest never-never-land hotels, the Summit is a glittering display of gaudy confusion. Mosaics, marbles, woods, enamels, fabrics, synthetics, colors and crafts have been poured forth and combined with profligate abandon and aggressive insensitivity.

Outside, the serpentine walls seem to undulate. Inside, oceans of free-form color swirl on the walls and floors. One may be dazzled, but not blinded. The Summit's showy tricks fail to camouflage its small spaces and hard-headed economies. The plastic lilies are showing in the pool.

IF this was the score in 1961, what can we expect in 1962? The picture is not totally without hope. If there will be few great buildings, and some that the critic would like to wish away, there is increasing evidence of improvement in the design of the general mass of commercial construction — the field that has been guilty of the worst offenses. From all indications on the drawing boards the general direction may be less conspicuously downhill from now on.

There are reasons for this. First, new zoning regulations, passed in 1960 and just going into effect, have given a firm, legal push to better design. Since zoning sets a kind of pre-established mold into which the speculative architect or developer squeezes his buildings, the effect of the new rules is simply to provide a handsomer mold. It is illuminating to see the same architects and promoters—Emery Roth and Sons, for example, whose designs have been outstandingly economical, if not architectural, or Uris Brothers, producer of more stale cake in the old zoning cake mold than any other New York firm—already designing better buildings.

Third, it is no secret that the city itself, which controls many of New York's principal building opportunities through its Housing and Redevelopment Board, has been inviting sponsors to include architects' preliminary proposals in their applications. It has also been made clear that the better the architect and the proposal, the better the sponsor's chance of consideration. As a result, more large-scale construction is now in the hands of imaginative designers—men and firms like Kelly and Gruzen, William Lescaze, I. M. Pei, and Edward Durrell Stone — where only



PAN AM BUILDING—"It rates a low score because of its bulk and location—and many believe that its grossness precludes beauty."

In many cases, of course, there is little creativity beyond the squeezing, and the new designs are often a searing demonstration of how important civic regulations can be for good or evil, for beauty or ugliness, depending on the care, sensitivity and conscientiousness with which they are prepared.

SECOND, some of the city's largest builders and real estate men are moving beyond money-making, to collect art and espouse community causes. They want civic leadership and prestige, and they seek it through better building. For the first time, they are commissioning "quality" architects.

routine "plan factories" previously prevailed.

Unfortunately, not even design standards are the whole answer. In a city of New York's size continuing construction and growing congestion require coordination and control. We need specific, carefully studied density zoning to regulate overcrowding and overbuilding, as well as historic and esthetic zoning to protect the city's character. We must have greater public awareness and understanding of projects and plans and we must have a public that cares. Most important of all, we must remember that the city is the sum of its architecture, and only as good, or as beautiful, as its buildings.