Does Good Architecture Pay?: Does Good Architecture Pay?
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 11, 1965; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 125

Does Good Architecture Pay?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

An Appraisal

"DOES good architecture pay?" is a simple, clear, loaded question. There are as many answers as there are kinds of builders—speculative, public, private and corporate, and the figures given, or more generally, not given, are as loaded as the question. And they are loaded with skill, to prove any point, pro or con. The one reliable consistency, in fact, is the refusal of most clients and architects to give comparative costs on a good building versus a routine building. Construction costs are as carefully guarded or, if released, as calculatedly ambiguous as the secret of the Sphinx.

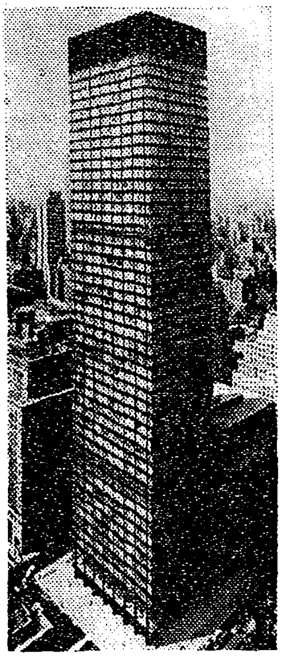
In terms of the New York City tax system, the answer to the question is, no; good architecture does not pay. Whatever the legal rights or wrongs of the recent discriminatory tax for excellence levied on the Seagram Building may be, the result is unarguable. Good architecture is penalized.

●

If the question is put another way, "Does good architecture cost more?" the answers are still evasive but more constructive. It does not always cost more. There are extravagant bad buildings as well as expensive good ones. It is also possible to put up a good building, as well as a bad one, on a tight budget.

A case in point is the Girl Scouts headquarters at 830 Third Avenue, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, one of the country's most notable firms of prestigious office building architects. S.O.M. is also responsible for New York's Lever House, Union Carbide, Pepsi-Cola and Chase Manhattan buildings, the last on a far-from-tight budget of $135 million. The modest but impeccable Girl Scouts building was erected at a total cost of $3,875,000, or approximately $3.50 a square foot, by the thoughtful and tasteful utilization of carefully selected standard components. Even allowing for some loading of figures through tax exemptions, this is remarkably cheap.

But by and large, good building does cost more. It goes beyond standard components to deal in improved solutions, technical advances and quality materials. This makes a higher initial bill in design charges, testing costs and luxury choices, although all may result in substantial savings later. It is largely a matter of values.



Union Carbide Building

As long as a building is treated exclusively as a commodity to be bought and sold for maximum profit in the shortest time, no other values—the contributions of such buildings to the community, for example—enter. A Harvard Business School survey a few years ago found a majority of businessmen to be keenly conscious of social responsibilities and highly critical of business practices that failed to weigh them in the profit picture.

This ethic has been conspicuously lacking in the real estate and building business, whose entrepreneurs seem sincerely innocent of any awareness of responsibility for the effect of their blockbusters on the urban scene, in terms of design, quality and function.

●

The answer to the question "Does good architecture cost more?" could be another question, "Does good anything cost more?" Generally, yes. Cut-rate is frequently second-rate. This holds in any competitive market.

Carl A. Morse, head of the immense Diesel Construction Company, which puts up a formidable number of New York's new buildings, was quoted in a recent Fortune article as saying "the difference in cost between an esthetically pleasing building and an ordinary one is nominal." In a $15 million building, he added, "one to two per cent additional is all that is needed to give a feeling of quality."

This, of course, is a loaded statement, like our loaded question, and like everything else in the field of building economics. The reality of quality is quite different from the feeling of quality, and the substitution of one for the other is a sympton of what's wrong with the values that dominate the investment building business.

Lou Crandall, chairman of the Fuller Construction Company, another of the giants of the building industry, believes that quality pays, but that it is a big world and there is room for everything. Builders are practical men.

Mr. Crandall has lived intimately with the remarkable series of experiments that make up the story of the building art in our time, from the Flatiron Building of 1902

Continued on Page 126, Column 1

Does Good Architecture Pay?

Continued from Page 125

—it was the Fuller Building—through the glass curtain wall that leaked and had to be fixed at the United Nations Secretariat and was perfected at Lever House, to the present movable forms and reinforced concrete construction techniques that permit the erection of a skyscraper floor every four days. He speaks of advances in design and construction, quality by any definition, with the warmth that most men would reserve for discussing the fascinations of a beautiful woman.

Everything that has become standard, efficient and profitable practice in commercial construction came from a quality building, where someone paid for something a little bit different and a little bit better.

●

What is the client getting when he buys better architecture? Basic structural and mechanical services are generally standard. The difference is in the skin of the structure and the quality of the details, as in Seagram's bronze and glass curtain wall and special fixtures and accessories, or the granite sheathing of the new C.B.S. Building by the late Earo Saarinen, reaching completion at 53d Street and the Avenue of the Americas.

It can also be in the interiors, as in the elegantly functional modular partition systems of the Union Carbide Building at 46th and Park. It may be in a radically different concept, in which a structure is "rethought" to achieve increased efficiency reflected in a distinctive appearance. An example is Paul Rudolph's striking Endo Labs in Garden City, L. I.

To whom is this kind of design worth more? Or, to rephrase the question again, "For whom does good architecture pay?"

It pays for the client who is going to own and operate his building. This client is usually a corporation. Most of the ways it pays can be measured in good hard cash. Union Carbide rearranges about 25 per cent of its space each year, at great savings as well as with superior good looks, through its custom partition system. Higher in initial design cost, it achieves substantial long-term savings through flexibility, standardization and lower maintenance.

Lever House was a daring excursion into good design 12 years ago. Its proven, long-range benefits in maintenance, operation and advertising show the investment to have been a shrewd one, although it was originally estimated as high as double the cost for a standard building at that time.

Lever's fixed sash of tinted, heat-absorbing plate glass set in stainless steel frames, radical in 1952, cost about $28,000 more for its 1,404 windows than for ordinary sash. Stainless steel frames were roughly 20 per cent higher than aluminum, and double glazing added $135,000 more. The special window washing machinery cost $50,000.

Savings were $90,000 on the first cost of the air-conditioning, with an operational cut of $3,600 a year. In addition, $1,000 was saved on reduction of hot and cold air leakage. The 30 per cent lower cost to install fixed, rather than movable, sash paid for the window washing set-up, which saved $2,000 a year on conventional washing bills and reduced maintenance costs by cleaning the entire surface of the building.

In operational costs, the more attractive building has given Lever the pick of personnel, with 37 per cent less turnover in 1958, to take a recorded year, than other large companies in the New York area. (The day after the opening, 782 applicants queued up.) The advertising and promotional value of the building has been incalculable for an industry that invests heavily in the creation of a "corporate image." Professional estimates have put the figure at from $7 million to $25 million, equaling the cost of the building itself. The most conservative guess allows a benefit of at least $1 million a year.

●

If the advantages of good architecture are so clear, for whom does it not pay?

It does not pay for the speculative investment builder. And the investment builder is responsible for most of the construction in this country. In 1961, B. H. Friedman, a former executive of Uris Brothers, the firm that has probably put up more of New York's standard commercial construction than any other, wrote in the Architectural Forum: "A building is a machine to make money with." and there is no indication that the situation has changed in any way.

This attitude has been intensified by some interesting features of the tax laws, which favor quick killings and bad buildings. Obviously someone up there in Internal Revenue loves the real estate man.

In a fairy-tale package of benefits, for an investment requiring at most only one third in the investor's own cash, with the rest supplied in mortgages, he has income-tax deductions for the rental of the land (building on leased land is much more profitable than the old sport of speculating in land itself) plus full depreciation of building costs, with accelerated depreciation deductions taken in the early years of the lease.

When he's gotten a good return on his investment, usually in six or seven years at a 14 per cent to 17 per cent profit before tax deductions, he sells the building and "collapses" his corporation, paying a capital-gains tax of only 25 per cent instead of the normal corporate 52 per cent. There are "fringe benefits" like special stock market advantages and increased profits from the artful separation of the building into independent corporate identities.

●

Because the whole cycle can be repeated by a new buyer, basing his depreciation on the difference between the original cost and the price he pays, properties are sold and resold at inflated and reinflated prices. The real estate syndicate, which has further tax advantages, flourishes for the purpose of playing musical buildings in this fashion. And the game is played by putting the least in and taking the most out in every case.

Naturally the investor has no interest in the future of a building and he couldn't care less if it fell apart. He has no reason to be concerned about the eventual benefits of quality or good design. Structure after structure goes up that is patently cheap, ordinary and routine, aimed at "maximized profits." Without restrictions such as zoning laws, they would be even worse. Blame the tax gimmicks, urban economics and the society that permits this to happen, as well as the man who takes advantage of the situation.

But looking at the percentages of those short-term profits, it is perfectly clear that the investor could afford to put up better buildings. The bitter truth is that bad architecture pays too well. Looking at our cities, it is obvious that society is paying the bill.