

Architecture

In This Corner, New York City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A LOCKED battle is being fought high above Rockefeller Center's skating rink and at Gracie Mansion on the future of the Avenue of the Americas from 47th to 50th Streets—one of the richest slices of any center city in the world.

The skirmishes, still behind the scenes, have been going on for the past six months. The dispute is between the large corporate investors who will build the three latest structures scheduled to go up opposite Rockefeller Center and the City of New York. These buildings involve about \$160-million of construction for Standard Oil of New Jersey (49th to 50th Streets), McGraw-Hill (48th to 49th Streets) and an unnamed tenant-builder (47th to 48th Streets) in the textile industry rumored to be Celanese.

The city, anxious to avoid the tragically missed opportunities of earlier Sixth Avenue construction just to the north, wants the three major new structures united in a coordinated, functional design that would include a nucleus of new theaters, shops, restaurants and services, circulation above and below ground and across to Rockefeller Center and Fifth Avenue, and connections to present subways and a proposed 48th Street crosstown line.

The corporate investors are determined to follow the same tried and true, catastrophic course of construction that has made New York a less and less viable place: the familiar, neolithic pattern in which a specific number of square feet of self-contained, totally depersonalized office space replaces a variety of small, necessary local facilities and functions, with the corporate giants hermetically sealed off from their surroundings by a few more pointless, windswept plazas and a dull clutch of ground-floor banks.

Conceived in splendid isolation, these commercial or corporate buildings increasingly compound the growing problems of city services and circulation. Civic gestures are usually restricted to

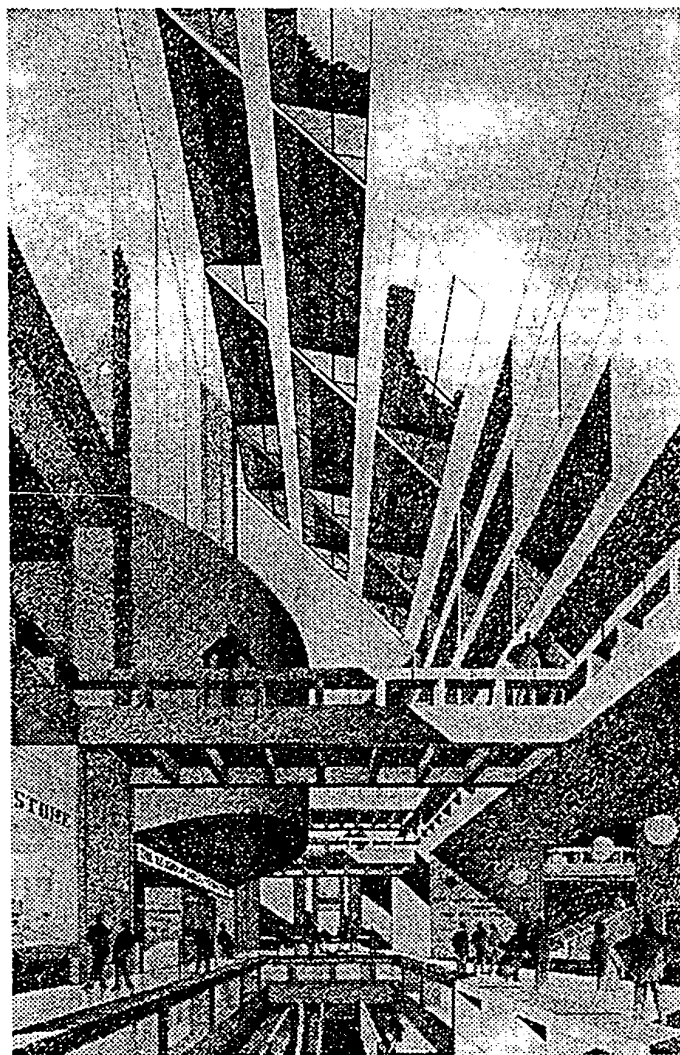
sculpture on the plaza.

The attitude of the city toward the Sixth Avenue builders has been one of persuasive negotiation. It has made its concerns clear for some time. Under the provisions of the new theater district zoning passed recently—the area affected covers 40th to 57th Streets from Sixth to Eighth Avenues—the city is offering the investors bonuses of additional construction space to equalize the additional costs of the desired area amenities. The attitude of the corporations can be summarized as a kind of 20th-century public-be-damned or architectural let-them-eat-cake.

These new corporate structures, close to 50 stories each and containing 1½ to 2 million square feet of space individually, are an extension of Rockefeller Center by proximity and certain very definite ties across Sixth Avenue. Rockefeller Center, 30 years old now, remains an outstanding example of an enlightened planning program that has become the handsome, prestige focus of midtown.

The Center says that these new buildings are not to be considered an arm of the original group. But this implied independence of the neighboring, parent construction is not only inexplicably delinquent non-planning but becomes farcical in view of the administrative and financial arrangements. Each of the corporate tenants has formed a joint corporation (corporation begets corporation) with a Rockefeller Center corporation to construct its building, as was done earlier with Time-Life, and in every case the designers are the original and present Rockefeller Center architects, Harrison and Abramovitz.

What has been lost in the trip across Sixth Avenue is not the connections with Rockefeller Center—these are still firmly economic and there are even some peculiar bows to esthetics—but the sense of responsible, progressive design that makes the Center a world-famous demonstration of the kind of amenity planning that en-



The city's proposed walkway and Galleria for new Sixth Avenue buildings from McGraw-Hill lobby. Questions for the corporate conscience

riches and shapes a city and insures its future while it satisfies business and civic needs. Ironically, in the opposition to the city's proposal, Rockefeller Center has been one of the firmest nay-sayers.

The city's proposal, meant as a guideline, not as a firm design, has been developed by the Urban Design Group of the Department of City Planning. It calls for connecting the buildings to each other and to the Rockefeller Center concourse pattern. Beyond this, it offers something as spectacularly good as the original Rockefeller Center scheme: the creation of a continuous pedestrian promenade behind the towers, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues from 47th to 50th Streets, lined by theaters, shops and restaurants.

As presently planned, the buildings are dinosaurs. Two are to be set back more than the third, for larger plazas and a further breaking up of the already fragmented Sixth Avenue streetline.

In the city's suggestion, all buildings would be moved forward to line up with Time-Life, preserving the street and making room for the promenade. This would be created by shallowly scooping out a number of the rear, lower tower floors, with no structural changes required. The opened space would be turned into an elevated walkway that would continue over the air rights of the side streets. The walkway would be like a shopping mall, glass-enclosed, of the height and effect of Milan's Galleria.

Abutting the walkway

would be theaters in each building, since the westward course of commercial expansion seems to be dooming more theaters than will be built. Building lobbies would be one floor above ground, as at Union Carbide on Park Avenue, and the ground level would be commercial. Concourse and subway levels would be underneath.

Whatever space the builders would lose would be made up to them in bonuses in tower height, bulk, or other additions to the structure under the new "incentive zoning."

This would be the kind of unified design that Rockefeller Center practiced but no longer preaches. Instead of conventional, closed, cold corporate construction there would be a revitalizing urban concept of potentially superb architectural drama and pivotal importance for the present and future of midtown Manhattan.

The kicker, as always, is money. For the city's scheme, about an additional \$5-million would be added to what will probably be at least \$55-million for each building. The income from the bonus space is calculated to compensate for the added capital expenditure. But none of the corporations involved wants to change its standardized investment. To these business organizations the word "public" has nothing to do with the people of a city and means merely the distribution of stock shares. Stockholder responsibility is the routine argument against public service investment.

It might be added that a lot of corporate images, in spite of zealous polishing by advertising agencies, have been slipping in New York lately. With a heightened consciousness on all levels of the interrelated complexities of the city's critical needs, it has become painfully clear that even the most gilt-edged citizens cannot avoid urban involvement and responsibility. Awareness of this fact of contemporary city life seems to filter most slowly at the top of the blue chip power structure. Gentlemen, meet the public; they are also your stockholders.