ARCHITECTURE STUMBLES ON

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Recent Buildings Are Nothing Much to Brag About

THE last four months have been a period marked by an extraordinary concentration of major architectural events. The city's most monumental addition since the Empire State Building — the $100,000,000 Pan Am Building, billed as the largest office structure in the world—made its official debut on March 7, with brass-band ceremonies worthy of a Presidential inauguration.

President Kennedy was missing from a distinguished list of speakers in business and government who paid tribute to the fulfillment of an economic, if not an esthetic dream.

Other Newcomers

Earlier, in December, the Bankers' Trust Building opened discreetly to join Park Avenue's top-brass lineup at 48th Street. Credit for this tasteful solution, from curtain wall to paper cups, goes to an industrial designer, Henry Dreyfuss. More conservative than trend-setting, its bland, competent consistency raises pertinent and challenging questions of architecture as an industrial product, and the role of the non-architect in building design.

Even earlier, the day before the news curtain fell, announcement was made of what may well be the most significant scheme for the city's physical future — the 60-acre plan for New York's Civic Center in the City Hall-Foley Square area. In the ensuing darkness, Federal and City agencies have been engaged in a deadlocked vendetta — to borrow James R. Hoffa's useful word — over changes that New York has requested in the Federal Government's previously designed structures to fit into the city's belated plan. Federal resistance, backed by irrefutable arguments of money and time, are nibbling away at the original concept with predictable bureaucratic compromises. ("We went to Washington to ask for a banquet," says New York Public Works Commissioner Peter Reidy, "and they gave us a bag of peanuts.")

"Sixth" Avenue

At present, the Avenue of the Americas continues its transformation with the most glossily impersonal facade of all of the city's new hotels, the New York Hilton at Rockefeller Center. And what is quite likely the record setting hole-in-the-ground for the most slowly materializing masterwork of the late Eero Saarinen may turn into a spring-blooming CBS Building. On Columbus Circle, Edward Durell Stone's little seraglio for Huntington Hartford's Gallery of Modern Art approaches completion, more suggestive of houris behind its pierced marble screen than of the promised art works that will make it the city's newest museum; a provocatively misplaced pleasure pavilion transplanted from some Shalimar garden to a Manhattan traffic island.

Of these new buildings, Pan Am has far the greatest impact on the city scene. Criticism, which has been plentiful since the building's inception five years ago, is directed largely at its physical and sociological implications: the effect of 17,000 new tenants and 250,000 daily transients on the already overcrowded Grand Central area and its services, and the unresolved conflicts and responsibilities of the city and private enterprise in the control of urban densities and master planning.

But now that the building is virtually finished and functioning, something else becomes distressingly apparent. Bigness is blinding. A $100,000,000 building cannot really be called cheap. But Pan Am is a colossal collection of minimums.

Its exterior and its public spaces, in particular, use minimum good materials of minimum acceptable quality executed with a minimum of imagination (always an expensive commodity), or distinction (which comes high), or finesse (which costs more). Pan Am is gigantically second-rate. This is no Michelangelesque masterwork from the late and latter-day Medici, promoter Erwin Wolfson, but a super economy package with the usual face-saving gimmick: painting and sculpture in the lobby. In its new role as an architectural cover-up, the builders of New York are turning good art into a bad joke. Pan Am's one effective esthetic feature is its brutality. In afternoon sun, from lower Park Avenue, its patterned mass rises with striking power behind the dwarfed familiarity of Grand Central's proper academic facade.

At best, Pan Am is an impressive demonstration of the number of square feet (2.4 million) of completely standard rentable office space that can be packed into one income producing structure; a lesson in how to be mediocre without really trying. For its bulk, its importance, its effect, and its ballyhoo, it had an obligation to be much better. Size is not nobility; a monumental deal does not make a monument.

Coming Up

Two recent announcements concern two more blockbusters. One, a 47-story building to replace the present Grand Central Palace and the connecting Park-Lexington Building from 46th to 47th Streets, will claim the incredible and senseless distinction of adding still another 17,000 people to the Grand Central-Pan Am Neighborhood.

The second, the proposed new Stock Exchange, is an undertaking of singular importance, economically and architecturally. Scheduled for a prime location on the Battery, where it will move from Wall Street, the new Exchange, through site and size, is destined to be a major civic landmark. The schematic sketches released to date make its dimensions, if not its details, unequivocally clear. It is also evident that the architects have a long way to go if this critical structure is not to be just one more example of the big, the expedient, and the deathlessly ordinary. Build we must, but on the present record it is questionable if we are building for a better New York.