## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

**ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**

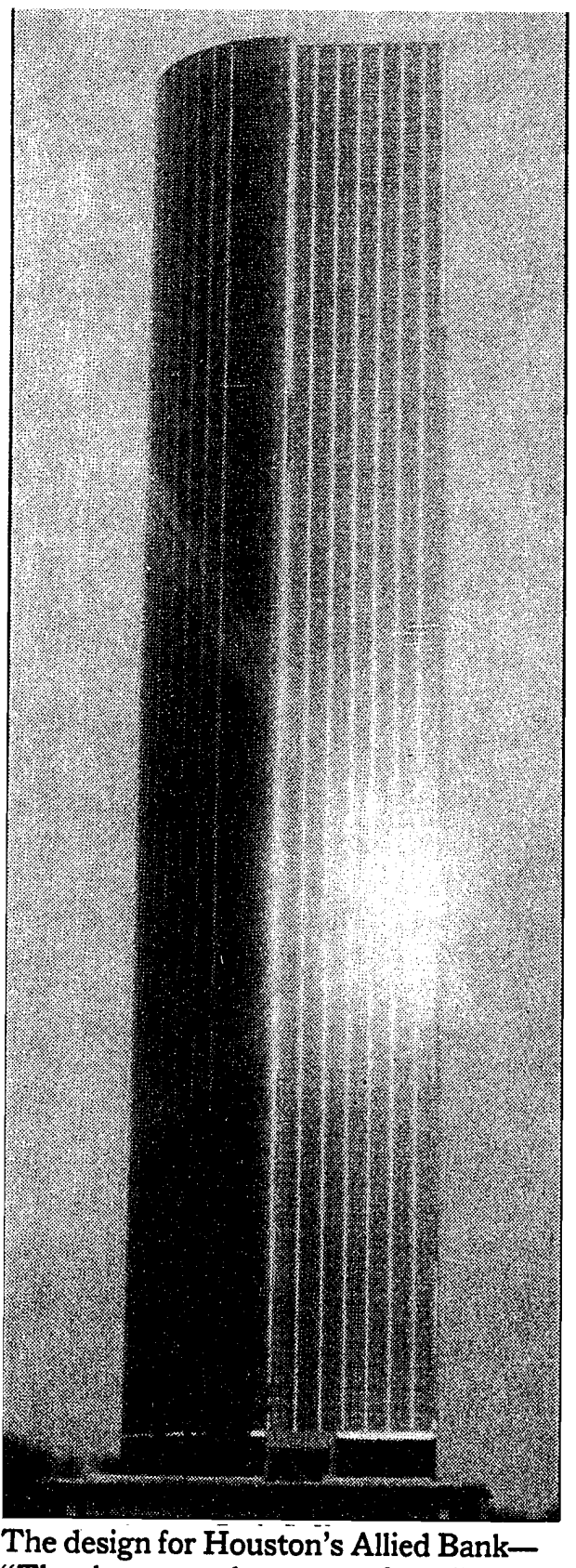
# 'Late Entries' To a 1920's Competition

I do not know quite how or when I acquired the original publication containing all of the designs for the Chicago Tribune Tower competition of 1922, but the book is one of my treasured possessions. It is a substantial volume that tells a great deal about the relationship of art and ambition at a time when the skyscraper was still young and ideas about it were ambiguous and uncertain.

The competition held by the Chicago Tribune for its headquarters building was one of those benchmark events that have subsequently taken their place in architectural history because they embody the full range and spectrum of a particularly significant moment in the development of an art — in this case, the transition from centuries of the familiar Western classical tradition to the unknown abyss of modernism.

The confusion and promise of the moment are summed up in the designs in that book, from examples of Beaux Arts formalism to International Style daring and a great deal in between. I am endlessly intrigued by the mix of certainty and uncertainty, of the adventurous and the retardataire, the sophisticated and the naive, the doctrinaire and the fanciful.

Whatever the idiom, however, most of the architects knew exactly what they were doing; they had set out to fulfill the Chicago Tribune's specific mandate to create "the most beautiful and distinctive office building in the world." They went about the assignment perfectly seriously and



The design for Houston's Allied Bank— "The skyscraper has come of age."

with no visible self-doubt, spurred on, undeniably, by the prospect of a munificent $100,000 in prizes and the understanding that the winning design would be built.

One of the most interesting things about the results is that so many of the designs were so very good. The entries were marked by an extremely high level of competence and skill. Most of the contestants understood the relationships of mass and detail; they handled scale with trained expertise. But even the bummers and curiosities are fascinating and informative. And there is a surprising amount of what is called "commentary" today, a role not unknown to architecture historically that is receiving far more emphasis now than ever before. Most of this comes under the recognizable heading of symbolism, although there were a few essays into irony, such as the tower in the shape of an Indian with uplifted tomahawk submitted by Mossdorf, Hahn and Busch of Leipzig, and Adolf Loos's notorious skyscraper as an overblown classical column.

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The Chicago Tribune Tower competition had absolutely everything, and its continued fascination is that it can be read on a different level of meaning and significance almost any time you approach it. As modernism became the accepted way of building, it was fashionable to deplore the blindness of the judges who passed over Walter Gropius's radical, Bauhaus-type tower from Germany for the "reactionary" American Gothic solution. I find the group of about a dozen Dutch entries, stylistically somewhere between Berlage and De Stijl, particularly interesting. They deserve a dissertation. Interpretation is the most ephemeral and intriguing of intellectual activities; its only truth is to the needs of its own time.

The winner, of course, stands in Chicago today, a skilled Gothic revival skyscraper by John Mead Howells and Raymond A. Hood, who went on to do another remarkable landmark tower, the modernist Daily News Building in New York. The unbuilt, second-prize design is even more outstanding; in fact, it stunned the jury when it finally cleared

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

# Skyscraper Entries

customs just as the decision was about to be made. This was the proposal sent by Eliel Saarinen from Helsinki, where he was already the master of a romantic, quasi-historical modernism that was seen at the time as a brilliant step from the 19th to the 20th century, and later, as a failure to address the new century at all. We now consider it a masterful and highly original design. The third prize went to Holabird and Roche of Chicago for something much drier and more academic than either of the other two. The rest of the entries form an invaluable document of the state of the art of architecture at the end of the first quarter of the 20th century.

Obviously, I am not the only one to be entranced by the Chicago Tribue Tower competition or to find multitudes of meaning in it. Because we are in a comparable transitional period in the state of the art once more, when all the rules are being suspended again, there are very timely parallels. Among those who have found those parallels irresistible are two Chicago architects, Stuart Cohen and Stanley Tigerman, and a Chicago art dealer, Rhona Hoffman. They recently organized an invitational event called "Late Entries to the Chicago Tribune Competition," which elicited 70 American and foreign responses in the form of drawings that will be on exhibition at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art through July 27. (The original competition polled over 200 entries from 23 countries.) The idea of the new competition was to "redo" the Tribune Tower from today's point of view.

I will take Mr. Cohen's word, from his introductory essay to the show, that a certain seriousness was inevitably lost because there was no prize money and everyone knew that nothing would be built. For better or worse, that led to a heavy emphasis on commentary, fantasy and irony, which was, in a sense, both invited and expected, by the choice of participants and the approach to the project. Many of the entries are really observations on the art of the skyscraper or the current state of architecture, highly personal responses to the original competition designs, or expressions of social and cultural attitudes through designs that stray far from conventional definitions of building.

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There is, for example, Helmut Jahn's dramatic tour de force in which the flattened case, or skin, of the actual Gothic building is shown shot up into the air space above it, like a projectile in a burst of light. Robert A. M. Stern's sophisticated vulgarization of the classical column idea can be read as an exposition of post-modernist design or as a play on the famous scheme by Adolf Loos. (There were actually two versions of the building-as-column entered in 1922.) Walter Netsch gives us his ultimate piece of geometry and Thomas Beeby offers a shaft hidden in a Stars and Stripes wrapper topped by a burning funerary urn. Jorge Silvetti's intersecting volumes patterned with an elementary window grid is a surprising recall of the similarly reduced fenestration of an Italian entry of 1922 by Arturo Tricomi. And, as they say, much, much more.

What none of the entries apparently attempts, or is remotely concerned with, is the original challenge seriously accepted by all of the contestants to produce a building of distinction. Mr. Cohen tells us that the new architecture deals more in "communication." It is full of metaphors and messages. It is quite clear that the present competition departs from the traditional making of a building for the making of "images." This concern with images is supposed to be something new, or the revival of something old, because, theoretically, the modernists were forbidden to worship images of any kind. It is also supposed to be the link between the first Tribune designs and the "late entries."

But there are images and images, and these are pretty thin stuff. Literary allusion is no substitute for knowing how to unite volume, space and setting in a significant architectonic whole, for the creation of a work of art. Even the modernists, hiding behind functionalism and restricted to the most abstract formalism, never stopped trying for the big prize. Breathes there the architect who, in his secret heart, doesn't really want a crack at producing a great building rather than a commentary?

These architectural aspirations have not disappeared. Take the brand new office building illustrated on this page. Designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill for the Allied Bank of Texas, it will tower over downtown Houston at 71 stories. It will have an image all right — a semi-curved shaft made of two quarter cylinders sheathed in blue-green reflective glass. The claims being made for it have a very familiar ring. It is being called "the most exciting office building in the world . . . a state-of-the-art design . . . an architectural statement that will stand as Houston's legacy for generations." The Tribune competition, according to its sponsors, "had as its prime motive the enhancement of civic beauty."

A lot has changed, and very little has changed, in the intervening 60 years. The skyscraper has come of age. We have pushed both structural technology and its esthetic interpretation to extraordinary limits. There are those who think we have reached a dead end. Some thoughtful architects have renounced the tall building completely. Others are attempting to restore it to history. But it is still the leading image of the 20th century and an irresistible bid for immortality. Call the Houston Allied Bank Building the late, late entry in the Chicago Tribune Tower competition. ■