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An Appraisal

In the classic verbal shorthand by which New Yorkers communicate, the man-in-the-street response to the projected $100-million tower above Grand Central is "Who needs it?" The Penn Central says it needs it; the English developer, Morris Saady, says he wants it, and the architect, Marcel Breuer, says he'll do it. The railroad wants it to help make ends meet and Mr. Saady frankly wants a profitable New York monument.

The Landmarks Commission wishes it would go away quietly and the City Planning Commission would like to wake up to find that it had dreamed the whole fantastic concept because it can't do a thing about it. The building is completely within the limits of the zoning law and needs no commission-controlled variances or approvals. Therefore New York may very likely get it.

What the city will get, if it goes ahead, is another Pan Am Building only 221 feet from the first one and at least 150 feet higher. It will get some improved underground circulatin and an architectural curiosity that could make a perverse kind of esthetic and urban history. It would be a monument less to Mr. Sandy than to the awesome value of New York air rights.

The value of polluted Manhattan air is another curiosity that will go down in history. If the air over Grand Central Terminal were not worth several hundred million dollars in building rights and income over the next 50 years there would be no Grand Central tower project. That solid gold air is there to stay, and if its superheated values continue to rise as anticipated in the coming half century Manhattan could someday replace Fort Knox.

The terminal, whatever its spacious turn-of-the-century graces, would obviously not be there to stay, measuring its land and air utilization in terms of these values, if there were no city landmarks law to protect it.

The railroad understandably is going to persist in finding a way to tap its air rights treasure, landmark or not. The realities of this situation are not going to change.

Shotgun Wedding

What the situation has produced is a truly remarkable shotgun wedding between sentiment and speculative economics. The result is a colossal modern office building surrealistically astride a mansarded French palace. The trick is pulled off with striking technical èlan and much more suaveness than at the Pan Am, but it has inevitably created a grotesquerie. The result is no less grotesque, however, than those midtown real estate values.

Give a grotesquerie to a good architect and you are going to get a better grotesquerie, like a better mousetrap. Mr. Breuer has done an excellent job with a dubious undertaking, which is like saying it would be great if it weren't awful. Even definitions of awful vary today, and the awful has its advocates; to some this could be a Pop masterpiece. Incongruity is the essence of Pop art and architecture.

Entrusting such a job to a genuinely creative talent assures that ways and means will be found of doing the impossible or undesirable that would not occur to more humdrum minds. It also guarantees a thoughtful refinement of detail beyond the call of commerce.

The building, though still an oddity, is dazzlingly better than tentative proposals circulated earlier to developers by the railroad's real estate department. This improvement is chiefly in the originality of the structural system that permits the insinuation of the tower's core through the station waiting room for maximum preservation of the old structure.

Inside, the south mezzanine of the concourse would be destroyed and the dramatic shafts of natural light that still stream hazily through the unwashed high south windows would be permanently blocked.

The solution is ingenious, technically daring and very expensive. According to Mr. Breuer, going to these costly extremes to save a landmark is a romantic whim that he finds stranger than the architectural results. He would frankly prefer to demolish the terminal.

Assuming that this expensive, unorthodox construction is economically feasible for a speculative building, and Mr. Saady does not seem like a man who would risk losing his custom-made shirts, the project still raises serious questions.

There is the question of whether this spectacular construction trick within a building could be carried out without damage to the building itself. Is Breuer's stylistic trademark of cast stone, which he handles with sensitivity and skill, the most appropriate answer here, if there is any appropriate answer at all?

Would more bravura and less Breuer be better? If you are dealing in esthetic effrontery, why not go all the way with the contrast of a sheer glass, sky-reflecting tower for maximum theatrics? For this is essentially a theatrical architecture of the absurd.

To make his superproject palatable, Mr. Saady has used a top architect and he has taken responsibility for at least the part of public circulation with which his building is involved. Builders who do these things in New York can be counted on slightly more than one thumb. As almost irresistible bait, he has offered to rescue the concourse from its present condition as an esthetic slum.

More important than any of this, however, is the question of whether the city has anything to say about a project that so critically affects planning and construction on one of Manhattan's most congested, focal areas.

Will those improved underground pedestrian patterns to be contributed to the city by the builder merely dump several thousand more people daily on the dead-end of inadequate subway platforms and service? Is the promise of relief from new subway lines in the future enough to justify the solidification of chaos now? At what point, and by what means, can the city control its destiny? In New York, only Solomon could know for sure.