THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR NEW SKYSCRAPERS
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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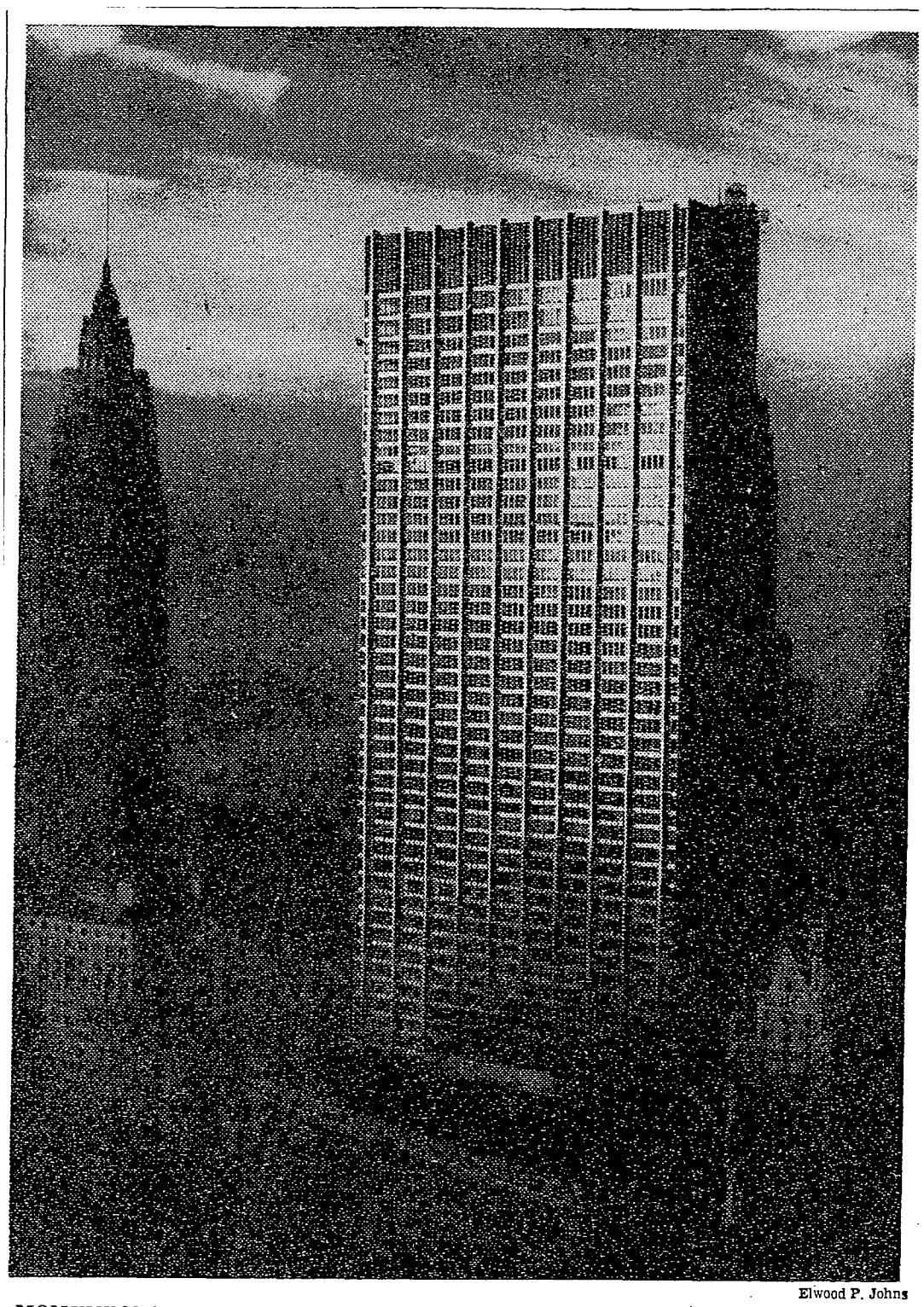

Elwood P. Johns

MOMENTOUS—The Chase Manhattan Bank Building under construction in downtown New York. Visible at the left is the contrasting romantic silhouette of 70 Pine Street.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR NEW SKYSCRAPERS

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WHETHER or not New Yorkers are aware of the fact, they are witnessing something momentous. In the history of the art of architecture, there is no more important age than the present. And there is no more formidable evidence of this fact than some of the new high-rise buildings nearing completion in this city.

The latest giants, like the Union Carbide headquarters now virtually complete on Park Avenue between Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth, the Time-Life Building that extends Rockefeller Center to the west side of Sixth Avenue, and the Chase Manhattan tower currently in construction downtown at Nassau, Liberty, William and Pine Streets are adding significant new dimensions to the city — and to contemporary architectural design.

New York's new buildings are impressive on several counts. They are huge. They represent efficient and adventurous developments in technology. They reflect portentous social and economic change. They are charged with dramatic excitement by the very nature of their siting, structure and size. And when these factors are emphasized by a still too-rare esthetic excellence, the drama is raised to an intense pitch.

Three Giant Structures

The impact of the new construction is inescapable. The Union Carbide Building, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, covers a full square city block, its tall black steel shaft rising fifty-two stories (712 feet) from a glowing pink terrazzo plaza. It contains 1,500,000 gross square feet of space, with each floor an acre in size, and cost more than $70,000,000 without equipment and furnishings.

The Time-Life Building on the Avenue of the Americas between Fiftieth and Fifty-first Streets, by Harrison & Abramovitz, is a forty-seven-story tower with a seven-story "wrap-around" and three basements, totaling about 62,000 square feet on each of the larger, lower floors, at a cost of $52,000,000 for just the shell and services.

Chase Manhattan, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, covers two city blocks and dwarfs everything else with its sixty stories and five underground levels, with a total area of 2,250,000 gross square feet and a total price tag of approximately $135,000,000. (Construction, $98,000,000; land and site work, $19,000,000; bank facilities and furnishings, $17,500,000; art program—repeat, art program—$500,000.) This behemoth has been five years in the making and will take about three more for completion. These are the kind of monumental undertakings that would make a Pharaoh or a Roman Emperor blush, and turn the Medici green with envy.

Overcoming Difficulties

Even the peripheral problems brought on by the magnitude of these projects have been fittingly colossal. The architects and engineers of Union Carbide have kept the New York Central running on schedule as the skyscraper was being raised on foundations passing through the railroad directly underneath, with only six feet between the building's base and the roof of the train shed below. (Record: one train delayed ten minutes in four years.) At Chase Manhattan, chemical stiffeners were injected into the soil to keep the streets from caving in around the mammoth excavation. In a remarkable deal with the City of New York, involving politics, architecture, urban planning and cash, Chase Manhattan and the architects made arrangements to purchase and close off a public through-street which would have bisected the two-block building, in exchange for widening the four surrounding streets and creating ample plazas and circulation—a substantial alteration of the layout and character of the heart of the financial district.

The particular power and magic of these great buildings grow out of their sheer size, and the overwhelming assault that they make on the imagination and the senses. This is immediately apparent to the visitor who emerges on the sixtieth floor of the still unfinished Chase tower to be greeted by the incomparable vista of New York harbor and the view of a luminous, mist-shrouded Manhattan Island, through the thin glass walls raised to unbelievable heights by modern building technology. It is evident on the roof of Time-Life, looking over two rivers from an elevation of 600 feet, surrounded by immense, perpetually circulating air exhaust machinery that services the forty-seven-floor artificial world in which no windows open, where climate and environment are completely man-made.

The skillfully concealed service floors of all of the new buildings are noisy with the shiplike roar of steam turbines and the hiss of gauges regulating the mechanical life systems that the public never sees. But on the street, even a casual eye registers the new construction's full size and force. For architecture has created a unique world of its own in the twentieth century, in these city-size structures, and while it is not always—or even often—the best of all possible worlds, it is an inordinately significant and fascinating one.

Architects vs. Builders

However, it should be made clear that examples like Union Carbide, Chase Manhattan and Time-Life are in a category apart from the bulk of New York's large scale commercial construction. There is a sharp dividing line between architecture and building, and these important new edifices all qualify, in intent, design and result, as architecture. As commercial builders will be quick to point out, they are meant primarily for prestige, not for profit. (Something for which we the people, and the city, can be grateful.) They are not concerned with providing the greatest amount of economically constructed rentable space for the fastest possible return. Designed as headquarters for large corporations, they may or may not include rental floors, which are often earmarked for the company's own future expansion. And they can afford to make some extravagant gestures.

Like Seagram and Lever House before them, each of these buildings gives over a considerable area to a public plaza, with notably good effect. Each sets distinction of design as an essential initial requisite. In the case of Chase Manhattan, the half-million-dollar art program is an intrinsic part of the architectural program. These are ambitious structures of character and quality, surrounded by the most expensive urban luxury that money can buy — space. In a remarkable duality of purpose, reconcilable only in this commercial age, they aspire to the dual role of company trademark and work of art.

To evaluate these buildings properly, however, one cannot consider them on esthetic grounds alone. Because the architect gathers, defines, expresses and serves the economic forces and social patterns of modern life in these gargantuan structures, the real measure of his success must be the manner in which he translates these vast, inartistic requirements into artistic terms. The very fact that these buildings are a tangible, concrete expression of our complex society gives them their singular vitality.

(This is the first of two articles on the new skyscrapers. The second will discuss in more detail the buildings mentioned here.)

PAST AND PRESENT—"Boy With Bagpipe," charcoal and pastel, c. 1897, by Joseph Stella, loaned to the Museum of Modern Art's Stella show by Mr. and Mrs. Walter Fillin. Right, "Figure," steel, 1959, by Richard Hunt, in one-man show at Charles Alan Gallery.