

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

An Imperfect
Renovation

Citibank has an admirable, if somewhat uneven, history as a concerned consumer of architecture in New York. Citibank's own history goes back to 1812, when it was founded as City Bank. After 150 years of growth and merger, it became First National City Bank, and in 1976, in recognition of its expanded international operations and crisp new styles in corporate nomenclature, it was reorganized as Citicorp, with Citibank N. A. as its banking and marketing subsidiary.

While Citibank grew, so did its buildings. After 87 years on the north side of Wall Street, the bank purchased a handsome structure across the street at 55 Wall that had been completed in 1842 by Isaiah Rogers as the Second Merchants Exchange. (The First Merchants Exchange, on the same site, was destroyed by fire in 1835.) The building served as the United States Custom House from 1863 to 1899, when Citibank bought it. Today, it is a registered national and city landmark.

When the Customs Service moved to its new building on Bowling Green in 1907, the bank commissioned McKim, Mead and White to carry out the necessary renovations at 55 Wall Street. The commendable decision was made to preserve, rather than to destroy, the landmark structure, with the architects adding a compatible colonnade above the

original one for four extra stories. The great interior room of the ground floor was remodeled, one might say in the original classical spirit, but in McKim, Mead and White's own classical style.

In 1930, Citibank added a 54-story tower adjacent to the building, at 20 Exchange Place. In 1961, it moved its headquarters uptown to 399 Park Avenue, leaving 55 Wall as a commercial branch, exchanging its distinctive historical image for a Park Avenue address and speculator-level architectural mediocrity.

No one was paying much attention to Citibank's esthetic standards at that time except Walter Hoving of Tiffany's, who protested to Walter Wriston of Citibank that the new Park Avenue building's Christmas lights were unnecessarily garish next to Seagram's understated seasonal sparkle. Mr. Hoving sparred with Mr. Wriston until the lights were removed. This esthetic gaffe was recouped brilliantly by Citicorp when Hugh Stubbins was commissioned to design the soaring, block-square Citicorp Building on Lexington Avenue between 53rd and 54th Streets, which opened to critical plaudits in 1977, as the newest landmark on the city's skyline.

Last year, in another laudable action — prompted by the decision to make 55 Wall Street a public banking facility again — Citibank decided to clean and restore the Wall Street structure, while adding new, computerized banking equipment. (It is interesting that both in 1907 and in 1979 the bank proceeded on the intelligent assumption that modifications for modern technology could be made within the framework of a historical interior. At the beginning of the century it was pneumatic tubes and teletype connections; today it is a computerizer teller system and plastic card banking.)

Continued on Page 37

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Continued from Page 27

If this sounds like a simple decision, it was not; Citibank is a huge, decentralized behemoth, with regional divisions operating independently. If things had gone according to established procedures, 55 Wall Street would have automatically received the B77 treatment — B77 standing for the design established for all Citibank branches in 1977. That design — a blandly nasty orange-and-beige plastic formula — may be a nadir of depressing ordinariness even for a branch bank design, which has descended precipitously from Roman pomp to cafeteria common in this century.

Moreover, if the management of 55 Wall Street chose to invest in special design, the costs were expected to be met through the branch's own operation; there is nothing soft-nosed about Citibank's internal bookkeeping.

The good people down at 55 Wall knew that B77 simply would not do in McKim, Mead and White's illustrious interior. And so, after considering a number of possibilities, they commissioned the Walker/Group Inc. of New York to design and add the new installations while cleaning and restoring the building.

It would be nice to be able to say that the results are as good as the intentions. The fact that Citibank has chosen twice in this century to save a landmark of great historical and architectural importance, rather than to sacrifice it to "progress," is remarkable, and I would stand on my head to call the solution a success. But I find the new design disruptive and lacking any real style, in spite of a high level of commercial competence. If I have been a long time coming to this point, it is because I am unhappy to make it.

What the visitor to 55 Wall Street sees now is the grand interior of 1907 — the great Banking Room's 188-by-124-foot space and Roman arches and colonnades and a 72-foot-high coffered and domed ceiling — with a 20-foot high, shiny brown, free-standing new counter and wall cutting diagonally across the restored room's traditional classical design. The diagonal is repeated in customer facilities on the far side of the room, with round banking "islands" between. The rationale for this plan is the fact that the bank's two entrances, on Wall Street and Exchange Place, create a diagonal, and the angled placement of the new facility gives logical access to the counter, while freeing the central space.

The glossy brown-lacquer finish and faceted details of the new installation are meant to minimize its bulk and reflect the ornate surroundings; the design is actually sup-

posed to strike a balance between making a modern sculptural statement in the space and de-emphasizing the mass through reflective surfaces. Alas, this does not happen; it is one of those unfortunate cases where theory and result do not match. The installation reflects more of the room's bad lighting than anything else, due in part to a miscalculated facet at the top. This is a heavy, intrusive object without redeeming stylistic grace, while its angle provides conflict, rather than counterpoint, for the room's axial symmetry.

When faced with updating facilities this way, there are a number of design options. The addition can be made in a "matching" traditional manner, with a conscious attempt to have everything as "correct" and unobtrusive as possible. (McKim, Mead and White actually took arrogant liberties with the original interior, but left us something of almost equal landmark quality.) Or the designer can go for an all-out contemporary solution based on a mutually enhancing combination of new and old. The idea is that the skillful and sympathetic juxtaposition of the two dramatizes and enriches both and supplies a stylistic continuity that reflects the building's life and uses. The latter approach, which the Walker/Group took, can work spectacularly well. In Italy, for example, architects have consistently added new facilities to old palazzi with a special understanding of the sensitive and subtle relationships that create high drama and high style.

On the plus side for Citibank, the architecture of the interior has been kept intact. The marble and travertine walls and floors have been cleaned and repaired, and most of the remodeling transgressions of the 1950's, including escalators and platforms, have been removed. At that time, the interior was Federalized and Rambusched, with brass lighting fixtures inexplicably replacing the impressive original chandeliers. McKim, Mead and White's banking counter had been taken out quite a lot earlier and a balcony built against one wall. The horrendous blue and yellow down lights that currently illuminate the room were punched into the ceiling coffers in recent years.

An attempt to relight the interior as part of the current program is a limited success, because it has been done so poorly and only in part, without the essential overall lighting plan and installation that should have been a basic part of the job. One is left with the impression that things are patchy, and the suspicion that Citibank and/or Citicorp has been chintzy. Perhaps the view from the top on Lexington Avenue doesn't reach as far as Wall Street. This building was important enough as a landmark and a monument to have commanded more centralized attention and more generous resources. It also needed a much greater degree of creative sensitivity. That is the quality that separates art and competence, and probably architects and bankers, as well.