ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A GRACEFUL BREAK WITH TRADITION ON FIFTH AVENUE
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Atget's "Versailles"—"one of the most beautiful photographs ever made"

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Graceful Break With Tradition on Fifth Avenue

Not too long ago, anyone could put up a blockbuster in New York and no one felt that he had the right and duty to tell the builder that it was terrible. Now neighborhood groups, professional organizations, community boards, city agencies and architectural watchdogs either possess that right or take it upon themselves, and new construction is increasingly the subject of public attention and debate.

At the moment, two important buildings are going through that process of open scrutiny: a new apartment house for a critical Fifth Avenue site across the street from the Metropolitan Museum, and a large, mixed-use tower that the Museum of Modern Art plans to build on its property on 53d Street, west of Fifth Avenue, under a very complex legal and financial arrangement that would channel funds to the institution's financial support.

Both schemes are highly controversial. Both designs, in the light of criticism, are being thoughtfully, even excruciatingly, refined. The Museum of Modern Art project, which is the far more problematic undertaking, will be discussed next week. Today the subject is the Fifth Avenue apartment house.

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The Fifth Avenue house is turning out not only to be a far better building than anyone expected but also promises to be an architecturally interesting building (on the outside, at least)—a statement that can be made about very few speculative New York apartment houses, even of the "luxury" variety.

A result like this demonstrates the good side of the participatory process in New York when there is a cooperative developer, in this case the H. J. Kalikow Company. The bad side is that building has become a much harder and slower business here, with many more municipal steps and official and unofficial obstructions. To complicate matters further in the case of the Fifth Avenue house, a community group went to court and got an injunction against construction. A veritable Laocöon of public and private interests, from developer, judge, lawyers, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Municipal Art Society, and a distinguished volunteer architect, James Polshek, were involved, in relationships that make the SALT talks look easy. That something good came out of it all says a great deal for New York's knack for turning crippling complexity into solutions of unexpected quality.

The project has had a troubled history from the start. It began with the assembly of the land by developers who later went bankrupt and with the demolition of a pair of town houses on the site preparatory to building, accompanied by strong neighborhood protest. The well-organized local group has taken a watchful postition over disposition of the property and any building plans.

When the site was acquired by the H. J. Kalikow Company, the builder was faced with a community already determined, at all costs, to prevent the construction of still another standard high-rise crackerbox. The arguments were the exceptional quality of the neighborhood and its buildings, including the McKim, Mead and White apartment house flanking the site on the south, the proximity of such designated landmarks as the turn-of-the century Duke mansion on the north and the Metropolitan Museum across the street, and the public nature of the park and museum setting.

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It is impossible to give here a full account and credits for all that followed, but what is basic is that James Polshek explored ways to make the project more compatable with its setting. His studies served to raise the standards of design and sensitivity that were essential to the site and to make those standards visible to the developer.

The Kalikows then commissioned the firm of Philip Johnson and John Burgee for exterior design, with the understanding that time restrictions and financing arrangements made it necessary to keep the apartment plans by the original architect, Philip Birnbaum. Working with the builder and the architects was a local resident and architectural historian who knew them both, Elaine Hochman. Intensely committed to the idea of a better building, she has been the catalyst of the new design.

The Johnson-Burgee facade is an intriguing and unexpected solution. A product of the new architectural philosophy of creative eclecticism (a "post-modernist" approach, of which Philip Johnson was an early and controversial proponent), it offers neither an all-glass front nor an equivalently pure skyscraper style, a departure from modernist orthodoxy that is making some people extremely uneasy.

It is certain to make traditionalists equally uneasy, because its eclecticism borrows, mixes and suggests motifs and references to its Beaux Arts neighbors and to the architectural past in an apparently arbitrary and highly unconventional way.

Actually, the building is much more artful than arbitrary. It is not easy to be artful within rigid code restrictions that limit moldings to a 10-inch projection and outlaw the massive cornices that gave the older houses their substantial style. But the result is witty, elegant and worldly, in the way of the Baroque, or of Mannerism, to which the approach, and solution, are close. The design stresses taste and imagination, within the restrictions of today's technology and consumer expectations, while responding to the cultural and esthetic directives of its neighbors.

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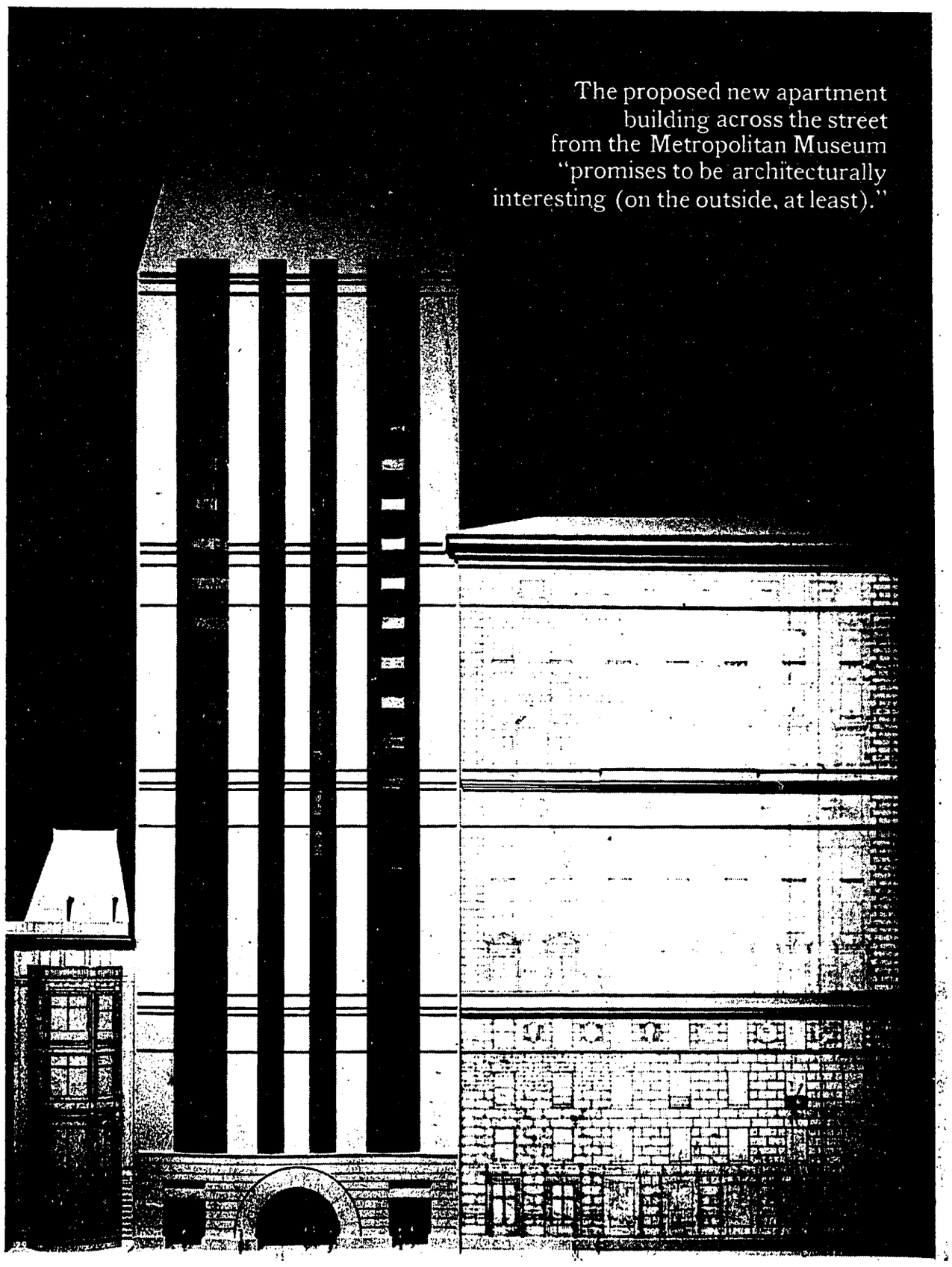
To relate to these neighbors, the materials are limestone, with a sedate pewter gray for glass and spandrels. (The obvious critical response is the more limestone the better.) The 250-foot high, 23-story tower is divided horizontally by shallow moldings copied from the Villard house; these moldings are sliced through in a most untraditional manner by continuous vertical bay windows.

The facade is a deliberately flat composition—clearly treated just as the facing surface that it is—without the solemnities of "proper" copying of the past. It is a high-wire act of "recall." As if all that were not unexpected enough from "modern" architects, the building's base is a 20-foot high limestone front that looks like solid masonry but isn't, with a Sullivanesque arched entrance straight from the Walker warehouse, and the top is a false-front mansard.

The problem that is the villian of this piece must be clearly identified. It is not just the "spec" formulas that the architects have been at such pains to avoid; it is the Fifth Avenue zoning. The city's planners, who have so successfully helped to preserve neighborhoods with special district zoning in recent years, destroyed this one in their zeal to protect it. Trying to outlaw unnecessary street plazas, since the park was just across the way, they decreed an unbroken street line. To achieve this, they gave height bonuses equal to those for the unwanted plazas, which disrupt the avenue's present uni form scale.

The real trouble, then, is the greatly increased height of the new buildings, and that is insoluble. History repeats itself, however; the early apartment houses we are now trying to respect broke the older town house scale. The Johnson-Burgee design is very strongly vertical, despite the respectful finesse of its detailing, and it is unlikely that interrupting the verticals would help very much. The building cannot do the impossible, and it breaks scale with good manners and good design. Most important, it sustains the quality of Fifth Avenue. For the Kalikows and New York, it could be a landmark speculative building. ■



The proposed new apartment building across the street from the Metropolitan Museum "promises to be architecturally interesting (on the outside, at least)."

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