

The New Urban Image? Look Down, Not Up

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE First National City Corporation, familiar to many as the First National City Bank, remembered by some as the First National Bank and the National City Bank B.M. (before merger) and referred to by the irreverent as the First National Piggy Bank, now calls itself, in the cryptic spirit of the times, by the breezy acronym of Citicorp.

Citicorp will break ground shortly for Citicorp Center, which it describes as a 46-story tower resting on a platform 112 feet, or ten stories, high, on the block bounded by Lexington and Third Avenues from 53d to 54th Streets. The architects are Hugh Stubbins and Associates of Cambridge, Mass., and Emery Roth and Sons of New York. The project is currently budgeted at \$128-million, and at 910 feet it will be, according to Citicorp publicity, the fifth tallest building in New York and the third tallest in midtown Manhattan. After the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, that is.

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All of which is going to make Citicorp Center a highly visible skyscraper. In addition to being big and important, it promises to be something of a paradox. At this stage, it seems to be very strong on urban design and very weak on architecture. Which means that what happens at and below ground, in terms of subway circulation, pedestrian movement, the provision of commercial and recreational facilities and the promise of community activity and amenity, is outstanding, and what happens in the air, shouldn't.

As skyscraper design, if one thinks in terms of the art refined by Louis Sullivan, immortalized by the Art Deco romanticism of the New York skyline, and packaged with superb structural rationalism on occasion by such firms, monumental in themselves, as Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the Citicorp tower could be called, quite simply, awful. It reaches weakly after image in its ill-advised, sliced-off-and-angled top, arrived at for obvious identity and public relations purposes, in an unlikely combination of disturbing gimmickry and denatured Bauhaus blandness. It has neither romanticism nor structural rationalism but, instead, appears to have been painstakingly invented with a tortured logic through a series of pragmatic and esthetic compromises.

Alas, this tower just doesn't come off as an architectonic expression of one of the great structural developments of our time. The design is an unconvincing sandwich of a shaft of International Style ribbon windows—structure such as chevron bracing is all invisibly inside—between a kind of New England shed rooftop and off-center, 24-foot-square columns below. It could be a Popsicle, except that it isn't at all Pop. Maybe it is Salt Box Skyscraper.

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What happens at the ground level, however, is extremely interesting, and so is the story of how it came about. Here the architects are making a positive contribution to the spaces of the city, sorting out human functions and activities with a suggestion of skill and pleasure.

A prime mover and very unusual conditioning factor in this aspect of the design has been St. Peter's Lutheran Church. The church had a 1902 building that stood on a piece of the land required for site assembly by Citicorp, and when St. Peter's sold the land and building to Citicorp it attached a lot of significant strings to the deal.

Under the leadership of Ralph E. Peterson, St. Peter's is known as an extremely active community church, serving midtown, virtually on a 24-hour basis, with programs that range from religion and education to music and drama. Its theatrical productions and jazz concerts have become familiar neighborhood features.

"We have had a dream of creating a new people-space in mid-Manhattan," Dr. Peterson says. But he had more than a dream. He also had the property Citicorp needed, plus what he calls "moral clout." The contractual agreement between St. Peter's and Citicorp stipulated that, as part of the development of the block, Citicorp will build and sell back to St. Peter's a new church on the site, completely freestanding, with provisions for expanding community programs. Also in the agreement: the requirement to restore shops and other commercial facilities to the block, and to include a small park. "If religion can't affect environment we're really finished," Dr. Peterson says.

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Citicorp, on its part, was ready and willing to make an urban contribution. "We made a commitment to ourselves and to the church," says Robert H. Dexter, Citicorp vice president, "that we would not put up just another office building. The church was very anxious to keep the life of the city." To which Dr. Peterson adds, "Citicorp wanted to make an urban statement."

Since St. Peter's real estate clout was equal to its moral clout, a little arm twisting might have been involved. But nothing could attest to Citibank's good intentions more strongly than the fact that it is willing to spend 10 to 15 per cent more on the public-spirited scheme than an ordinary office building would cost. There was, of course, enlightened self-interest involved, as well as spaco bonuses to be obtained by the provision of special pedestrian conveniences, but Citicorp went all out in urban design features.

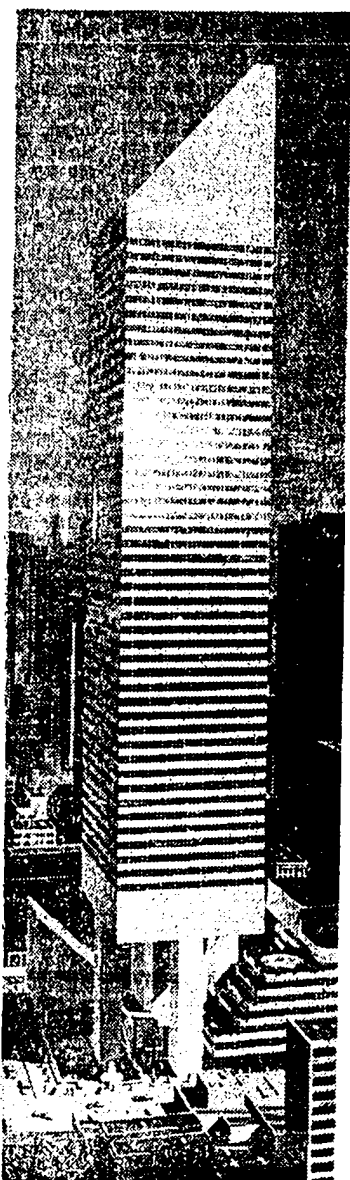
Another player in this design drama

is New York's Office of Midtown Planning and Development. As the administrator of those incentive zoning bonuses intended to improve the pedestrian's lot, the city's planners worked directly with Citicorp, the architects and St. Peter's as the scheme was developed.

The result is a block-long open plaza freed by the oversize supporting columns that raise the office tower in the air, with a lot of interesting things going on at ground level. This space will be the site of the new church and an eight-story, terraced, wrap-around office building nestled at the tower's base supplementing its commercial space, that will also contain a three-story, skylit shopping galleria. There will be a covered, block-through pedestrian passage between 53d and 54th Streets.

A sunken park-plaza at the corner of 53d and Lexington will actually be the top of a double decker space tying into a shopping concourse and the subway below, with improved circulation and a more attractive and humanized subway setting. The park will be about the size of Paley Park, farther east on 53d Street. Lexington Avenue will be widened.

The Citicorp solution almost exactly parallels the Regional Plan Association's suggestion for the identical site at Lexington and 53d, where a corner park



Drawing of Citicorp Center, to rise in midtown Manhattan. Big, important and a paradox

and plaza were proposed to connect directly to the subway in a multilevel arrangement of underground concourses and above-ground pedestrian amenities. Chalk up one more seminal New York planning vision come to pass.

The only serious question concerns the sunken park. New Yorkers have a way of avoiding, rather than using, areas below ground level. The highly successful original Rockefeller Center skating rink and cafes have an action focus, but most of the sunken plazas that have been built recently are a disaster.

Because the Citicorp park-plaza also serves the subway, it may escape that fate through enforced activity. Church programs will help attract the public. There is, however, a psychological and functional uncertainty with public areas more than minimally above or below grade. Still, this promises an innovative spatial contribution.

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It's too bad about the tower. A presentation book from Citicorp shows that the architect provided seven variations of the design, with strong recommendations for a tower with an offset service core, making two sliced-off tops at opposing angles. One does not feel that a masterpiece has been sacrificed.

It was not esthetics, however, but conventional real estate rental wisdom that moved the scheme to a single, central-core tower and removed the apartments above the offices that originally "justified" the terraced, slant top. At present, just cutting off that strip-arbitrary pitch to level it with the row windows would be a distinct esthetic gain. On the plus side, the tower is billed as "energy saving."

The skyscraper as symbol is irresistible. But Citicorp's most effective public image will be on the ground. Perhaps this is a better kind of identity for the seventies, and an indication of a genuine urbanity.