

# Met as Architecture

## New House, Although Technically Fine, Muddles a Dramatic Design Concept

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The architect of the new Metropolitan Opera House, Wallace K. Harrison, has been designing it for approximately 40 years. It began with the original scheme for Rockefeller Center in the late nineteen-twenties that was to focus on a new opera house in its earliest version, and has continued in one or another frustrated form for four decades. The trail of yellow sketches, studies and blueprints and crumb-

### An Appraisal

ling models has led finally to the opening of the \$45.7-million building that is New York's glittering claim to cultural fame.

Forty years is a long time to have a dream. The dream, of both the architect and the client, was for the finest modern opera house in the world. The result, technically, is apparently just that. Architecturally, however, in the sense of the exhilarating and beautiful synthesis of structure and style that produces the great buildings of our age, it is not a modern opera house at all.

Nor is it the realization of the dream. The architect's concept for the new house was for structurally independent stage and seating enclosed within an arched shell, the two separated by an insulating cushion of space. Services were to be in a tower at the rear. The possibilities existed for logic, clarity, exciting contemporaneity and strong visual drama. Reams of drawings testify to the effort put into seating design and imaginative interior treatment.

### Cutoff of Soaring Space

But the estimates came in too high. (This is the dirgelike refrain to which design quality and architectural excellence are being buried all over the United States.) Structurally, the cantilevered seating remains, although there is no visible indication, and the auditorium no longer stands free.

The offices, workshops and services of the tower have been placed between the auditorium and the outer shell, muddling the design concept, filling the open area and creating two huge walls high on either side, facing the glass facade, where there was to have been clear, soaring space. These walls were awkwardly placed, and blank.

The solution of the Opera Committee—a reflex that seems to be automatic with any cultural group today—was to commission the Chagall murals.

Inside the house, the Metropolitan Opera made it clear that it knew what it wanted.

What it wanted were the gilded trappings of tradition and all the comforts of home. "We couldn't have a modern house," Mr. Harrison says with a gentle sadness. "I finally got hammered down by the opera people. I personally would have liked to have found some way around it, but my client wouldn't have liked that at all."

The client liked, and got,

crystal glitter, gold leaf, which goes only to the Grand Tier and is replaced by a Dutch metal substitute from there up, a concrete grand staircase and uncounted kilometers of red carpet.

It got a house whose general shape, dimensions, forms and curves were resolved by acoustic requirements that leaned heavily on successful formulas of the past. It got a good plan that works well in terms of circulation, bars, restaurants and general social movement, and then proceeded to have it embellished in a style that is most notable as a curiously unresolved collision of past and can be said is that it is consistent of which the best that sistently cautious in décor, art and atmosphere. It is a sterile throwback rather than creative 20th-century design.

There are swags and tassels at the top of the boxes ("the opera people wanted those," says Mr. Harrison) and textured fans at the bottom ("that was for the acoustics people," he explains), a gilded cheese-straw pattern around the proscenium and a ceiling of flying saucers. There is also a strong temptation to close the eyes.

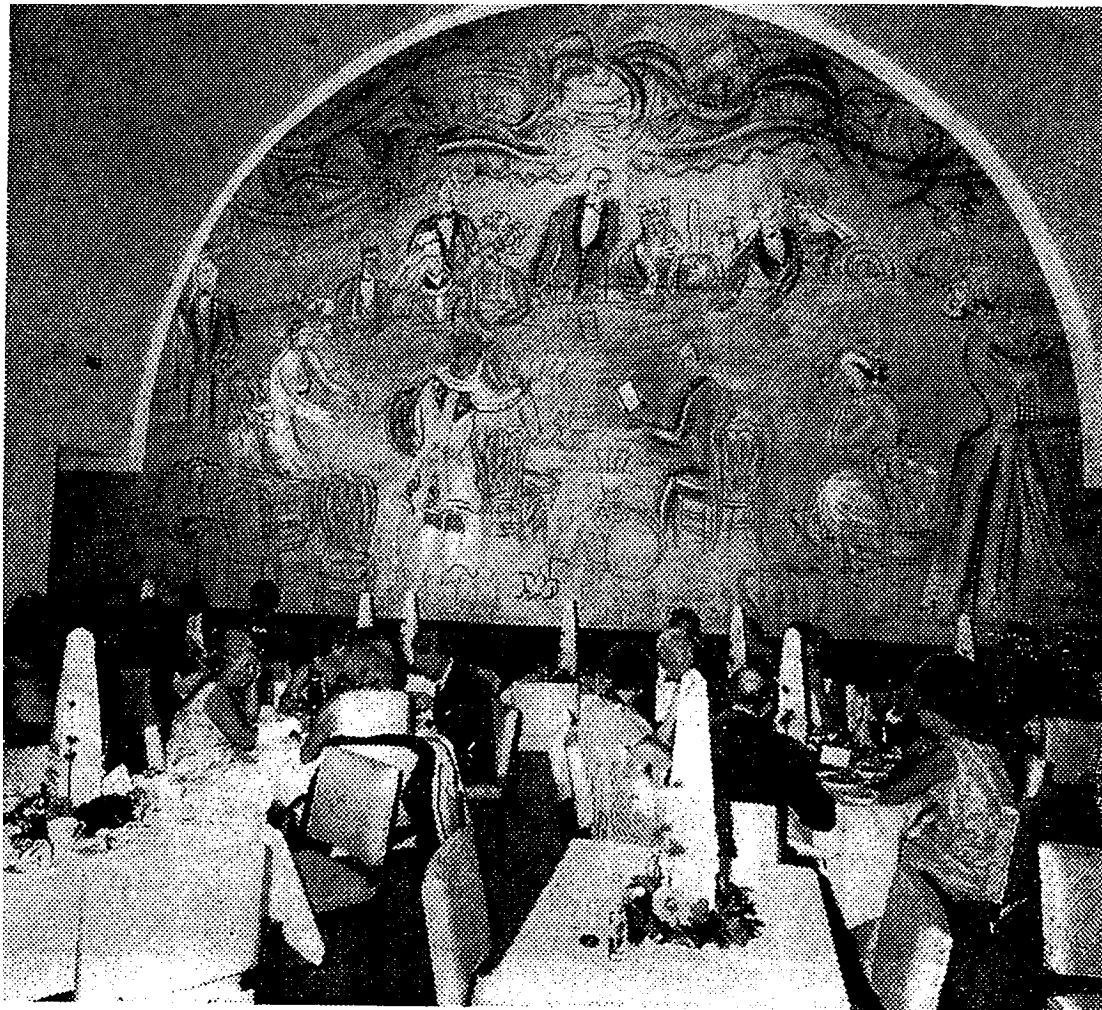
The design coup de grace is in the clubs executed by opera-selected decorators. These clubs range from overstuffed Georgian to Prohibition-nightclub Empire. By contrast, in some of the backstage areas where tradition was a less-oppressive factor, the architect's office provided handsome furniture, color and finishes.

Behind the dubious décor are a million mechanical marvels. Like the rich man who has been a hungry child and keeps three refrigerators full of food, the Metropolitan can now gorge itself on turntables, elevators, raked, raised and lowered stages, moving footlights and scenery and a computer-style lighting system, all to make up for its deprivations in the old house. It is now possible, as has been demonstrated in the opening opera, to overproduce, overmechanize and overdesign.

### The Suggestion of a Gala

The exterior of the building conforms to the ground rules set down for Lincoln Center. Like its neighbors, the opera house is classically arched and travertine-faced. At night, the movement on the grand stair and promenades, seen through the lighted glass facade, defines the building's scale impressively and suggests a sparkling, gala party.

Since the new opera promises to be an excellent performing house, with satisfactory acoustics, it may not matter that the architecture sets no high-water mark for the city; hat it is average, rather than adventurous or avant-garde. Performance, after all, was the primary objective. It is secondary, but no less disappointing, to have a monument *manqué*.



MURAL TO DINE BY: Painting by Raoul Dufy adorns wall of the restaurant

The New York Times