

# Architectural Dynamite

## City Club Criticism of Municipal Design Underscores Need for Drastic Reform

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The announcement by the City Club of New York that no municipal structure built here since 1958 was deserving of the newly established Bard Awards may mark New York's official awakening to the state of its municipal design.

Although the quality of the municipal building program has been a concern of professional architects for many years, this is the first important burst of fire from a group of civic-minded non professionals. It may well be the initial wave of increased general interest in municipal architecture. The chief significance of this no-award fiasco," as the club's report terms it, is that it brings the questions and criticisms into the open. The club's report was sadly subtitled "a fruitless search for excellence."

The fact that a civic organization devoted traditionally to the pursuit of good government should now involve itself equally with good architecture bodes well for the esthetics of the city.

### City Hall a Gem

The report's most shocking single statement, that "New York has not built a municipally sponsored building of generally recognized excellence since City Hall was designed in 1803," is backed by most architectural observers. Considered a gem of early Federal architecture, City Hall was followed by a series of increasingly overblown, academic structures, regarded kindly by few critics and defended only by the most tradition-bound practitioner.

The greatest claim to fame of the scandalously shoddy Court House of the 1860's, directly behind City Hall, is that

it served to line the pockets of the notorious Tweed Ring. And the conservative, generally uninspired courts and offices built in the late 19th and early 20th century, culminating in the Skyscraper Municipal Building of 1914, added little luster to the city's architectural record.

Professional journals have pointed out repeatedly that the trend is more and more toward monotonous, conservative look-alikes on schools, housing and official buildings. Recent attempts by Public Works Commission Peter J. Reidy, before he resigned, to broaden the range of architectural firms receiving city commissions barely ruffled the stagnant pool. Mediocrity has become a habit, aided and abetted by municipal bureaucracy.

### Reform Sought

It is this mold that the City Club hopes to break, using its strongly worded statement as a well-placed stick of dynamite. By questioning current practices of commissioning, payment and design review, it attempts to open city architectural procedures to reform.

In its words, "We have drifted along for too many years without recognizing and squarely facing the problem of a city full of mediocre public housing, public schools, firehouses, police stations, court and administration buildings, piers, libraries and public hospitals."

In the words of one of the jurors, 80 per cent of the entries were "hack work." The ultimate aim of the report is to get more good architects to design distinguished city buildings and to raise the city's general level of architecture.