ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

An Acrobatic Act Of Architecture

Perhaps the most disconcerting sight as you come into New York by air or car right now is the unfinished top of the Citicorp Building—a huge, 46-story structure that has been taking shape as mid-Manhattan's third tallest building quietly, if not exactly invisibly, on Lexington Avenue between 53d and 54th Streets. The tower tops out at a 45-degree angle, and this massive slope is currently an ugly open metal frame against the sky.

On the ground, it is a different matter. What is emerging from the hoarding, dust and rubble on an avenue grown increasingly shabby and honkytonk (you are invited to "check out" massage parlors or hairdressers, depending on your gender) is a singularly suave blockbuster that comes down to the street with innovative drama.

In fact, it never really comes down to the street at all. The building starts nine stories above ground, raised on four colossal square columns and a central core in one of the most impressive—if somewhat disquieting—architectural acrobatic acts in the world. Those columns are not even placed at the corners, which stand free, but are centered on the four sides. The engineering that supports the huge tower on those columns and core is extraordinary, including heavy chevron bracing, immense trusses and steel members of awe-inspiring size, weight and complexity. I don't think I have ever seen so much steel in one building since a famous committee-designed international headquarters went up in New York, for which the architect-in-charge had so many second thoughts that a tangle of metal was used that Atlas would have envied.

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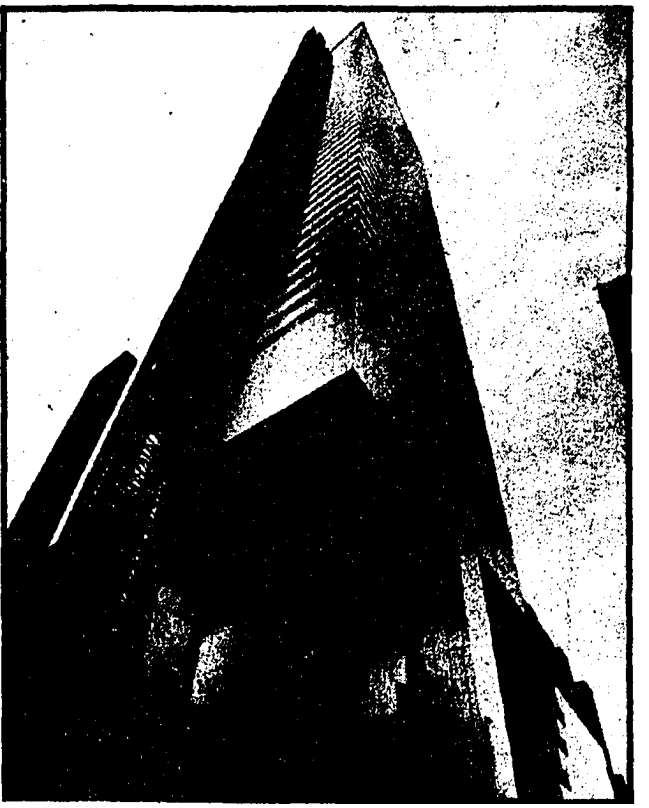

The New York Times/Jack Manning

The unfinished Citicorp Building

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

An Acrobatic Act

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I am not ever going to ask what Citicorp's steel cost. But all that brute strength is now encased in the thinnest, flattest, sleekest panels of softly glistening, silvery aluminum, alternating with horizontal bands of glass. It is steel muscle in a silken glove.

New Yorkers don't carry on much about their skyscrapers anymore, and this one barely gets a second glance from those who pass by. What do you do for an encore after the 110-story flattop towers of the World Trade Center? The big building derby is always an exercise in anticlimax. Citicorp's publicity seems to have revolved largely around its attempt to get rid of the topless bars that have oozed across midtown to the East Side and settled around its edges—an understandable effort to keep its image and its neighborhood squeaky-clean, like its building. That supersmooth sheathing admits of no hanky-panky, esthetic or otherwise. This combination of art and acrobatics is the work of the architects, Hugh Stubbins and Associates of Cambridge, Mass., with Emery Roth and Associates of New York, and the engineers, LeMessurier Associates.

Although the building is not officially finished, Citicorp has already moved in, and one assumes that the truly awful array of plastic plants in the lobby—which is otherwise elegantly detailed—is only temporary. What is still incomplete is that remarkable street-level treatment under the building, which will provide welcome, landscaped open space in Lexington's lively, shoddy clutter; handsome trees (real) and dark red paving tile that continues into the lobby as its floor already surround the building.

But open space is only part of the story; the news here is what will go on in the plaza that has been so spectacuiarly freed. There is a new St. Peter's Church nestled under the tower to replace the old one demolished on the site (almost complete on the north corner), a stepped, six-story structure to the east that seems to slide under the building, new subway entrances and concourses, and the promise of pedestrian pleasures on several levels. Plans range from clothing and furniture stores to a food fair.

This unique experiment in urban design could be a big plus for an overcrowded area if it turns out right. The scale of that space and its sense of amenity are promising. These features, too, will be squeaky clean, of course, and one hopes that the shops and restaurants will not be the usual homogenized boutiques and ersatz ethnic chic. If so, there is plenty of fine, grubby local color just across the street.

Any judgment of Citicorp's final contribution to architect ure and urbanism will have to wait until these features are in place. This is a report only on what can be seen conspicuously —now. What cannot be seen, anymore, is the Chrysler Building's glittering spire from upper Lexington Avenue; the one landmark that has given that street an anchor, a scale and a specific visual identity (Bloomingdale's excepted) has simply disappeared. It is amazing how serious, to the cityscape, such a quiet loss can be.

From any distance, Citicorp's bulk is overwhelming. When one stands close to it, the impact is surprisingly lessened by the refined and reticent scale of its details. But we are beginning to see the awesome and sometimes disturbing results of the bonus zoning that allows larger buildings in return for special pedestrian features. This kind of bulk is encouraged not only by the zoning laws, but also by the corporate desire for large working floors. Under the old zoning, which required setbacks as the building rose, there was a less "pure" architectural product, but a fortunate amelioration of scale. The much greater mass permitted now rises straight up, unrelieved from bottom to top.

Like other new structures that take full advantage of the new zoning, Citicorp is a bruising lump in the skyline. Even with its finesse, it brutalizes the eye. The tradeoff, supposedly, is inhumanity in the air for more humanity in the street. But the new scale that has been established—and will inevitably take over when construction resumes—is becoming a frighteningly measurable reality in terms of the mass and concentration with which New York customarily builds.

At the superscale of this building, the sharply slanting top is an eyesore—there is no other word for it. Advertised as an experiment in solar energy, it proved to be impractical, and will be covered in aluminum panels. This slope was not conceived originally for solar energy, however; that came later. Early studies show a better, double-slant top based on an offset service core. The most charitable observation is that Citicorp and the architects wished to add something other than another big flattop to the skyline; a less generous interpretation is that they were bent on corporate and creative ego gratification. It was probably a bit of both.

But what often happens in such cases is that esthetic contortions supplant rational considerations when real estate departments get into the act. And so when the offset service core was rejected as not providing large enough floors, the single-slant top was substituted, with the idea of terraced apartments above the offices. That, too, got a real-estate turndown. The idea was abandoned but the slant top was not. Then came the solar-energy brainstorm, which didn't work out. That left —guess what—the slant top, now short on both logic and esthetics. (What will hapen when the sun bounces off that slope is anyone's guess.) Unlike the angles of Roche, Dinkaloo's U.N. Plaza Building, this arbitrary form is not part of a subtle and total geometry. It is part of the curious process of client-designer relations that often leads to an architecture of errors. The result will always assault the skyline.

Beyond that bastardization of the design process, Citicorp has exhibited clear desire for design quality. There is much that is very handsome and impressive about this building. The skin is sensitive in scale and detail; the materials of the ground floor—a rough pink-gray granite, brick-toned floor tile—slatted-wood elevator cabs and interesting graphics are all custom solutions that demonstrate a concern for excellence and care. This is no bottom-line New York job; there are many indications of corporate pride. The Citicorp building is certainly the spookiest and most spectacular structural trick in town. But more important than its undeniable drama is its promise for the street environment.

Another cityscape note: John Dietrich, director of the New York Health and Racquet Club at 20 East 50th Street, writes that the building's Gothic facade will not be replaced with mirror glass as reported here; the model in the window was for another site. It will be preserved and refurbished, for tennis-playing and other New Yorkers. ■