

The Newest Skyscraper in Manhattan

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The General Motors Building has opened to huge crowds and what might be called mixed reviews. To the public at large, it's a smash. Some professional responses are less enthusiastic.

The gap between the two is the difference between I-know-what-I-like and serious judgment of the build-

An	ing's form and functions, and its impact on the New York scene.
Appraisal	Any structure that rises 50 conspicu-

ous stories on one of the city's prime sites with a make-or-break urban relationship to the elegant and focal small plaza that sets the tone of Fifth Avenue must be looked at as more than just a building. General Motors, its associated developers, the Savoy Fifth Avenue Corporation, and the architects, Edward Durell Stone and Emery Roth & Sons, consider it more than just a building. It must, therefore, be judged as architecture and urban design.

Behind the marble cladding and bay windows, architecture, like the proverbial thin man in the fat man's body, is signaling wildly to get out.

Under their seven-eighths-inch marble veneer, those 50-story diamond-shaped piers are actually hollow, bearing concrete columns carrying service ducts, a functional design solution that frees the building's periphery of columns behind the windows and integrates services with structure. The rest of the structure is steel. The silhouette, head on, is a slim, soaring shaft.

Beneath the curious mixture of small-town department store and styling section décor is the kind of breath-taking skyscraper shell, balanced in space that modern technology makes possible. You could wrap it in brown paper, instead of Georgia marble, and it would still be impressive. General Motors, however, prefers marble.

Schmaltz Imposed

Without the screens, gimmick lights and revolving and stationary automobiles, the high-ceilinged, glass-walled lobby would have striking architectural scale. Liberated of looped gold "drapes" that cover the 30-foot windows and obscure the unparalleled view for a kind of G.M.-Hilton look, and without the carved-border gold area rugs that even amateur decorators gave up years ago, the main floor would be a handsome architectural space.

In other words, relieved of all the schmaltz that both client

G.M. Building Draws Crowds, but Gets Mixed Reviews

and architect seem to feel is necessary to disguise and diminish one of the great art forms of our age (they fight the natural elegance of the contemporary skyscraper with overlays of low-level corn and pseudo-grandeur all the way), a building of clear, contemporary beauty might have emerged.

Indications of those elements of structure, space and light that are basically and essentially architecture are still there. Inside Edward Durell Stone, there is an architect signaling to get out.

Inside the building, there is wall-to-wall marble. The Parthenon has come to General Motors. Pentelic marble by the ton from the same Greek quarries that supplied the Acropolis lathers the lobby walls; the rejects are upstairs. It is good to keep thinking of the Parthenon or one begins to think of luxury lavatories. Here and there, on the high walls and around elevators, the marble is chamfered and incised.

Parting of Company

In the General Motors offices above the ground floor, architecture and interiors part company completely. (GM has the first 26 floors and the rest is rental space at the city's highest rates.) The architects did not design these work areas; they are the product of the GM staff, headed by Ervine Klein, and the interiors firm of J. Gordon Carr & Associates.

The ground floor showrooms and the executive offices have been done by LeRoy Kiefer of the Detroit styling staff.

The building's 20-foot interior column module is ignored by the module set for the office space. The columns, therefore, appear strangely and frequently in the corners of reception areas and just beyond corridor walls.

One of the basic battles of skyscraper design has been to develop systems that integrate the column into modular office schemes, and when one sees these offices one understands why. It is a matter of esthetics and logic. But G.M. gains some square footage this way, even if it looks as if it had to make the best of a building over which it had no structural or design control.

The 25th, or executive, floor simply abdicates the 20th century. The top executive offices

are furnished in conventional reproductions of "traditional" pieces. No antiques have been purchased and there has been no art program.

At present, smoothly illustrative oils of geese flying and barns in snow with a few mistily impressionistic landscapes are being fetched in by staff on a trial and error basis. One recalls the Chase Manhattan Bank's art program for its headquarters building, which set up a museum-caliber advisory board to select a fine collection.

Pretentiously Ordinary

Which brings us to the question of style, that stamp of individual or corporate taste that makes waves in its surroundings, for better or worse. In its early days, automotive taste was touchingly buckeye. Measured by the General Motors Building, it is now pretentiously ordinary. One wonders if this taste should have been turned into a monument.

The style might be called Throwback Classicism or Furniture Store Posh. Mr. Stone has been called a classicist manqué. In spite of much propaganda to that effect, he is really a modernist manqué and a good one, who simply fruits it up.

General Motors states proudly that the building cost (unspecified) was 20 to 25 per cent less than that of comparable luxury structures in New York.

Asked whether that meant that G.M. was poorer than Union Carbide or other corporate builders, the response was stunned silence. Asked why it was good to build a monument cheap, the reply was that the pressing of economies was "sound business practice." It does not look as if any money was saved on marble.

The still incomplete sunken Fifth Avenue shopping plaza is a promising urban device. But here its lower level only partly ameliorates the disruption of a previously perfectly scaled open space of singular sophisticated graciousness. This, and the influx of crowds—both factors considered when the Hartford cafe was vetoed for the south end of Central Park—have effected the dissolution of one of the last of the city's quality environments.

The crowds slam the showroom car doors from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. The lady of the Fountain of Abundance and her dwarfed parklet look shabby genteel. General Motors has brought a new style and a new kind of abundance to Fifth Avenue. It has the best address in town. It has not given the city its best building.