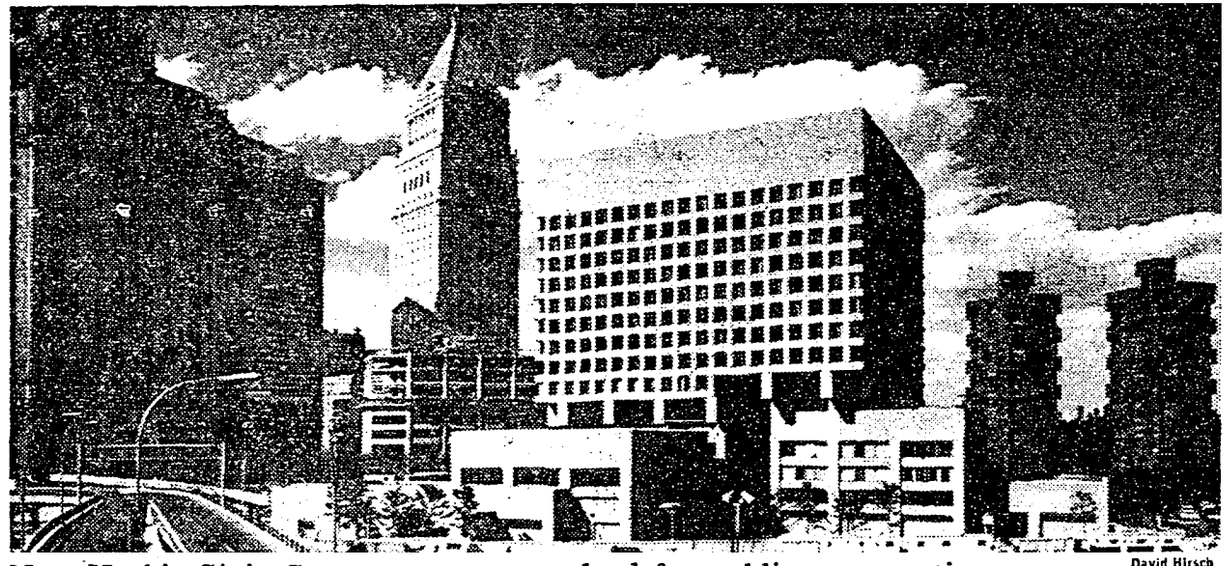
ARCHITECTURE VIEW: ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE A HAPPY TURN FOR URBAN DESIGN

New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 14, 1975; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 125

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Happy Turn For Urban Design



David Hirsch

New York's Civic Center—a new standard for public construction

Every year I come back from vacation to the inevitable mountain of mail and the letter on top of the pile that says, "This is to inform you of a perfectly dreadful situation that is about to become desperate. . . ." There are variations on this theme for the next six inches down to the top of the desk. It is the jolt back to reality.

This year, with default in the air, garbage in the streets, and New Yorkers not knowing where their next 50-cent carfare is coming from, the situation is desperate indeed. The question seems to be whether there is going to be a New York at all, and refinements on that particular theme in terms of the environmental quality of the holocaust appear foolishly beside the point. First things first, like existence. Others can wait, like a city worth living in. That is a frivolity under the circumstances, something in the luxury category.

And yet the city, close to bankruptcy, never seemed richer. Layers of ground-in soil and vintage litter dim its luster, but New York is like impoverished aristocracy—shabbily elegant to the end. Not at City Hall, where the tragedy is being enacted like comedy by bit players, but in the still beautiful side streets of the East Sixties with their intimate, throwaway palaces, in the maze of Lower Manhattan with its drop-dead skyscapers, in the superb shops and boutiques which prosper in direct relationship to their stratospheric prices, in the creative electricity that poverty does not seem to touch. If this is catastrophe, it comes with class.

It is an irony that apocalypse coincides with a triumph for environmental values, which now seem emblazoned on everyone's consciousness—at a time when no one can afford to do anything much about them. Outside of New York, where the money crunch is bad but has not yet reached the bottom line, a great deal of attention is being paid to those preoccupations of place, from far-ranging, critical court decisions on whether a city can control its growth and the quality of its destiny (Petaluma, Calif.) to a record amount of creative preservation of a once undervalued and marvelously motley heritage.

Let me say that the satisfactions of this job are few, but they are monumental. Not the least is the near-total reversal of attitudes toward the past. The woolly, sentimental cause of those legendary little old ladies in tennis shoes is now embraced by astute developers everywhere in an avalanche of imaginative recycling of old structures of diversity and dignity. This is being done with taste, wit, educated judgment and a firm grasp of such esoterica as historical and cultural relevance and urban variety and enrichment. It isn't a movement; it's a mild stampede. (I've just thrown my tennis shoes away.)

The further irony, of course, is that it is just at this time of vastly increased interest that New York's museums have finessed their role of providing interpretive enlightenment of important directions in the arts by copping out on architecture exhibitions. The Whitney has cancelled its architecture shows, the Metropolitan has none scheduled, and important displays on the work of such major figures as Richardson and Palladio are forced to bypass New York for other places. Never one to underestimate a trend, however, the Modern is making a blockbuster reappraisal of the Beaux Arts its major fall show.

So let the streets be your museum when necessary (they are in architecture, anyway), although I will be the first to admit that you won't find a masterpiece on every corner. The inescapable fact, however, is that the level of architectural design has risen significantly across the country, along with the frequency of professional response to the human and urban condition.

To take the most unpromising indicator, one need only look at that traditional slough of mediocrity, public and institutional construction. There is, of course, no moratorium yet on instantly disintegrating courthouses and county seats. But Boston's handsome Government Center, for example, or the recent buildings of New York's Civic Center, such as those of the Police Plaza complex with its far-above-average structures and open space treatment, are clear demonstrations that the standard of municipal construction has been raised light years beyond that of a generation ago, when the norm was unadulterated hack.

To stay in the streets for a moment, one finds that the infrastructure of the city is also responding to design. This summer New Yorkers have quietly celebrated a small explosion of plazas and greenery and places to sit (we need much, much more). Carefully reworked zoning regulations have transformed sterile spaces into increasingly pleasant and knowledgeable demonstrations of urban design expertise.

In a complex and still-evolving national about-face, bulldozer speculation has been slowed less by recession than by the concept of neighborhood conservation, an idea and reality evolving through the innovative use of a variety of legal, governmental and architectural tools.

There are brilliant exercises in design and urbanism in such places as Atlanta and Minneapolis. For every inevitable atrocity in America's largely rebuilt cities, there is at least one distinguished performance or redemptive architectural act that was inconceivable a decade ago. And in the best commercial work, professionali has quietly married art.

Any country that can build like this—even though building volume is way down—and that has developed th sensitivities to past and present and a complex, sympathetic awareness of identity and place can't be all bad. But the paradoxes are baffling and tragic. We can do some things almost too well, and other, essential things, not at all.

We can create masterworks of technology, but we cannot house our poor or keep open our schools and libraries, or make simple commitments to basic human needs just as we have begun to understand what those needs are. We are developing a kind of social and cultural consciousness unparalleled in history, based on this growing knowledge of the nature, effects and components of the built world. At the same time, we have a government renouncing that vision and retrenching on those values at the moment of their spectacular flowering.

This is an extremely troubling and uncertain time, but I would not swap it for any other. It is a source of extraordinary gratification that, in a decade of work, I have seen the environmental and architectural climate change completely, and the level of public concern and comprehension rise meteorically. My obsessions are now shared; my co-conspirators are everywhere. Give or take a few billion in municipal bonds for essential services and survival, the battle for the future is well-joined. We cannot give up now.