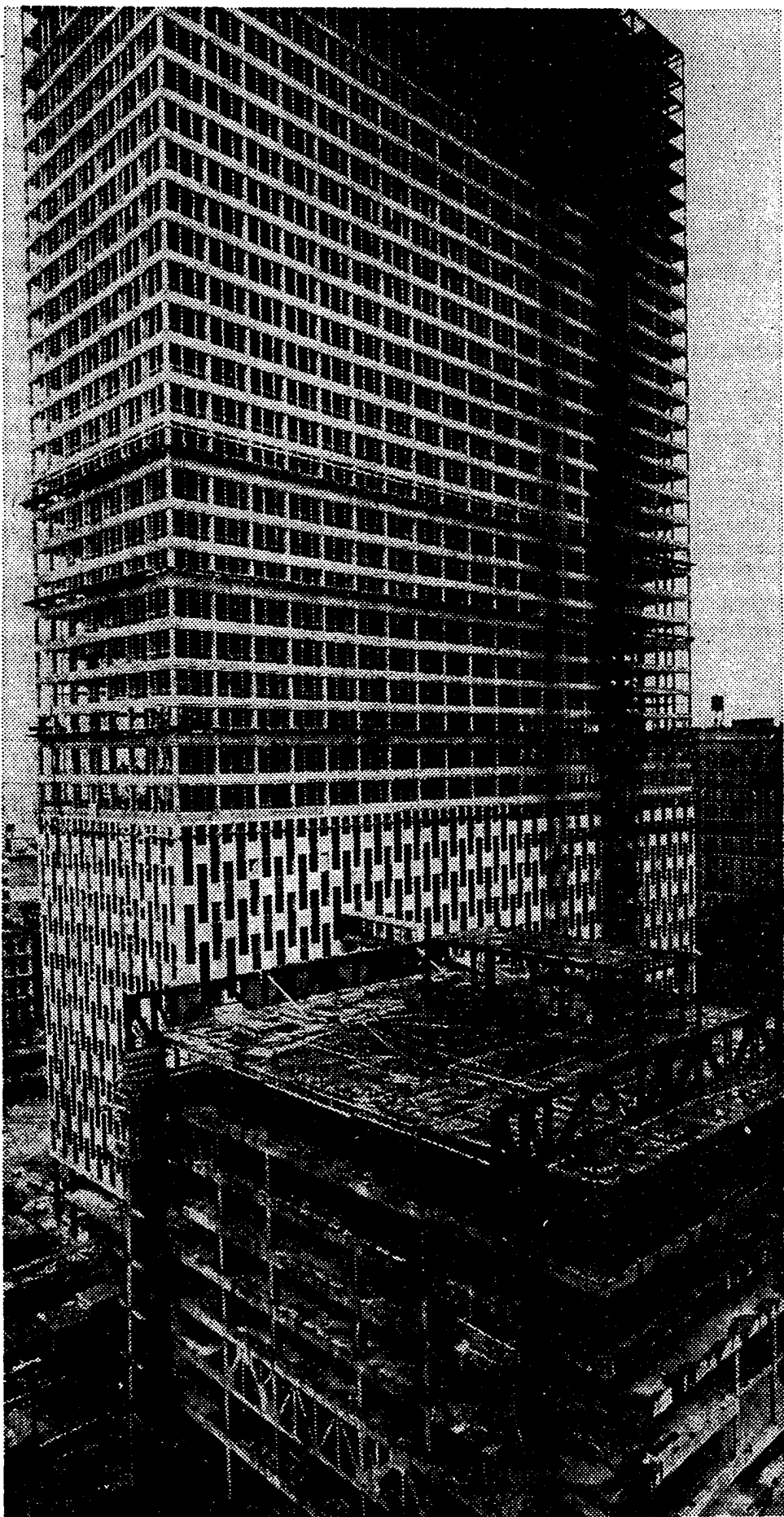


Architecture: Fun and Games

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Richard Saunders from Scope

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THERE are people known as life's losers, and there are cities that could be called urban losers. New York is one of them. What makes the subject fascinating is that the city's architectural misadventures are so often ludicrous. It is hard to know whether to laugh or cry.

Take the General Motors Building. Anyone who likes big holes (often preferable to big buildings) can see a fine one from 58th to 59th Streets, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, facing the Plaza, right now. It will be filled by the General Motors headquarters, which will be a very big building, except for a plaza on the Fifth Avenue side, facing the existing Plaza. A plaza on a plaza, so to speak. This makes no sense, of either the common or the urbanistic variety. When it is built, of course, it may come off as a funny sight gag, or a kind of sick planning joke. New York is rich in architectural humor.

Ship-Shaped

Another example: a new "landmark" just announced for Columbus Circle — a 25-story circular apartment tower perched atop a ten-story base shaped like the prow of a ship. It will sit on one of those characteristically triangular sites that pop up at crossroads in the city's grid street system, producing landmarks varying in quality from the excellent Flatiron Building to the humdrum Times Tower.

The reasoning here seems to be that if a ship-shaped glass structure is a success in Hartford (the Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Building by Wallace Harrison) and circular apartment towers made history in Chicago (Marina City by Bertrand Goldberg), New York can go two cities one better by building both, one on top of the other. Ludicrous again, but there is a subtler humor here. This oddity will face Huntington Hartford's little seraglio of modern art across the way. Has Vincent Scully ever im-

agined an "urban dialogue" like this?

But the biggest bad planning joke of all is laying an extremely large egg in the classic Joe Miller sense; it evokes no laughter. Rising in solemn outsize non-splendor downtown in Foley Square (a funny thing happened on the way to a Civic Center) is the new Federal office building and courthouse by Kahn and Jacobs, Alfred Easton Poor, and Eggers and Higgins. It is almost complete, after a four-act comedy that included the city's request for relocation and redesign closer to Broadway to conform to a Civic Center master plan; the General Service Administration's refusal; the collapse of buildings on the Broadway side resulting in the purely accidental extension of the site to the location requested; and finally, provision for the eventual doubling of the building's size to fill the space, G.S.A.'s gift to New York of double banality.

You can't miss it; just look for the biggest checkerboard in the world attached to a

lower building suffering from structural paranoia. Hung by trusses, supported by columns and cantilevered at the edges, this one is a pretty mixed-up kid. Washington strains hard for a laugh.

Silly Season

Uris Brothers is making funny faces again, this time with a new curtain-wall performance in brick and concrete panels at 245 Park Avenue. And although it's a little early for the silly season, the Committee to Beautify New York has sympathetically come out for tax "forgiveness" to encourage private builders to embellish their structures with art, assuming that they are forgiven first for their buildings.

There is byplay behind the scenes, too, for anyone who looks for it. The world-famous city planner Constantinos Doxiadis, who has led elite planning seminar tours to the Greek islands that have resulted in two manifestos extolling the Doxiadis brand of planning to save the world,

ran out of salvation for Brooklyn. His firm, hired as a consultant by New York's Housing and Redevelopment Board, proposed closing off Williamsburg from the sea with a Chinese wall of construction. The plan was scrapped and redrawn in more human terms by staff technicians who had never signed a Doxiadis Delos Manifesto.

In addition, someone with an odd sense of humor has been putting banks in the ground floor space of all new buildings in the city, guaranteeing standardized monotony for every major street and raising the city's boredom quotient substantially. Window shopping for money, anyone?

And finally, a practical joke, inherited from the last city administration. For the lovely spring season, the Parks Department has provided wholesale numbers of brand new benches lining the walks of Central Park in massive Maginot-line concrete. The punch line? No seat slats.

New York: fun city.

New Federal Office Building and Courthouse at Foley Square.

Laying an extremely large egg in the classic Joe Miller sense

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