ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Johnson's Latest— Clever Tricks Or True Art?

Few New York buildings have created the furor that has greeted the announcement of the new A.T.&T. headquarters to be constructed on Madison Avenue between 55th and 56th Streets. But the controversy about the 645-foot-high skyscraper that will join Citicorp and the soon to be built neighboring I.B.M. building as the spectacular new landmarks of the midtown skyline is not the usual outcry of the lay public protesting the mysteries of modernism, a style it has never learned to love. The consternation about the Johnson/ Burgee design, with Harry Simmons as associate architect, ranges from public puzzlement to serious professional concern. Many observers are simply protesting what seems to be a monumental architectural leg-pull (that huge broken pediment at the top and the quips about the first Chippendale skyscraper) while architects and planners are in an uproar over the nature of the design and its potential urban impact.

Clearly, it is not a joke, whatever jokes are being made. A building of this importance, size and cost—A.T.&T. says it will cost "more than" $110 million—is serious art and business. Nothing will be spared in the quality of its execution. A new A.T.&T. headquarters is a significant addition to New York in both corporate and architectural terms, and it is a building that the city very much needs and wants. Above all, the architect is genuinely committed to the design that has been variously described as a curiosity, an aberration, an outrage, an act of esthetic courage or a failure of inspiration, and finally, a "post-Modern" architectural breakthrough.

It is impossible to write about this building without mixed feelings. One cannot fault the impulse behind the design—to create a memorable structure that could perform the notable feat of being on the cutting edge of new architectural theories and still possess the dignity and solidity desired by a corporate client of massive means and size and monolithically conservative character.

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Is a high-wire act, and as usual Philip Johnson is a star performer. His instinct, a familiar one, is *épater le bourgeoisie*; he balances calculated shock value with superlative quality. He designs with brilliance, if you equate that condition with extreme intellectual vivacity and curiosity, sophisticated historical recall and impeccable esthetic response. These are remarkable qualities, by any measure. But I am not sure that this arsenal of sensitivities quite adds up to the production of architecture. At least, not here. It has done so in the recent past, in two other corporate towers of different approach and style, Pennzoil in Houston and I.D.S. in Minneapolis. But this building is a monumental demonstration of quixotic esthetic intelligence rather than of art.

In the design for A.T.&T., Mr. Johnson is the first to use a major structure to demonstrate a currently fashionable attitude toward architecture. We are in a new, permissive era, in which all the strictures of modernism are being questioned and the lessons or forms of the past are no longer taboo. This exploration of forbidden sources is a course that was pursued as early as the 1950's by Mr. Johnson, who has always been an admirer of his historical peers. But there is a new twist today in the deliberate distortion of historical scale and intent, which bears a curious parallel to the offbeat vision of Pop Art. A kind of artful scavenging approaches the capricious in the pursuit of sensory effect.

What Mr. Johnson has produced, from that Pop pediment on down, is a pastiche of historical references and evocative spatial experiences drawn from his admiration of bits and pieces of earlier monuments, blown up gigantically in unconventional and unsettling relationships. This goes under the rubric of the new eclecticism—a kind of intellectual-esthetic derring-do or game-playing with history, in which the more arcane the borrowings of design elements, and the more perverse their combination, the more provocative and progressive the result is considered to be. The outcry may well be because both the knowing and the naive suspect an architectural rabbit punch.

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This kind of exotic exercise might work in the hands of the exceptionally gifted, but then, almost anything can. However, it requires a great deal more creative synthesis than is apparent here for the necessary transformation to a new level of expression that makes the result art instead of dilettantism. (That word is used in its original sense of a knowledgable lover of the arts, without the later connotations of superficiality.)

Mr. Johnson has gone back to the classical principles of skyscraper design in its early years, dividing the tower into base, shaft and capital, as opposed to the uniformly treated container of today. The bottom of the building is to be a 131-foot high masonry base of rose-gray granite, opened only by ground-floor arcades. On the Madison Avenue front, this arcade will be heroic: a 110-foot-high central arch and six 50-foot openings; on the side streets the openings will be reduced to 20 feet, with oculus apertures above. The "Palladian" return of a smaller unit on the front serves to anchor the corners. Renaissance and classical models suggest themselves from Bramante to Boullee.

The entire ground floor is to be open, except for a central glass-enclosed section that will provide access to the building's corporate entrance, placed the equivalent of five stories above. The 60-foot-high ground-floor space is a hypostyle hall of five-foot-square columns. Behind this open, colonnaded area is a glass-roofed passage from 55th to 56th Streets, at the

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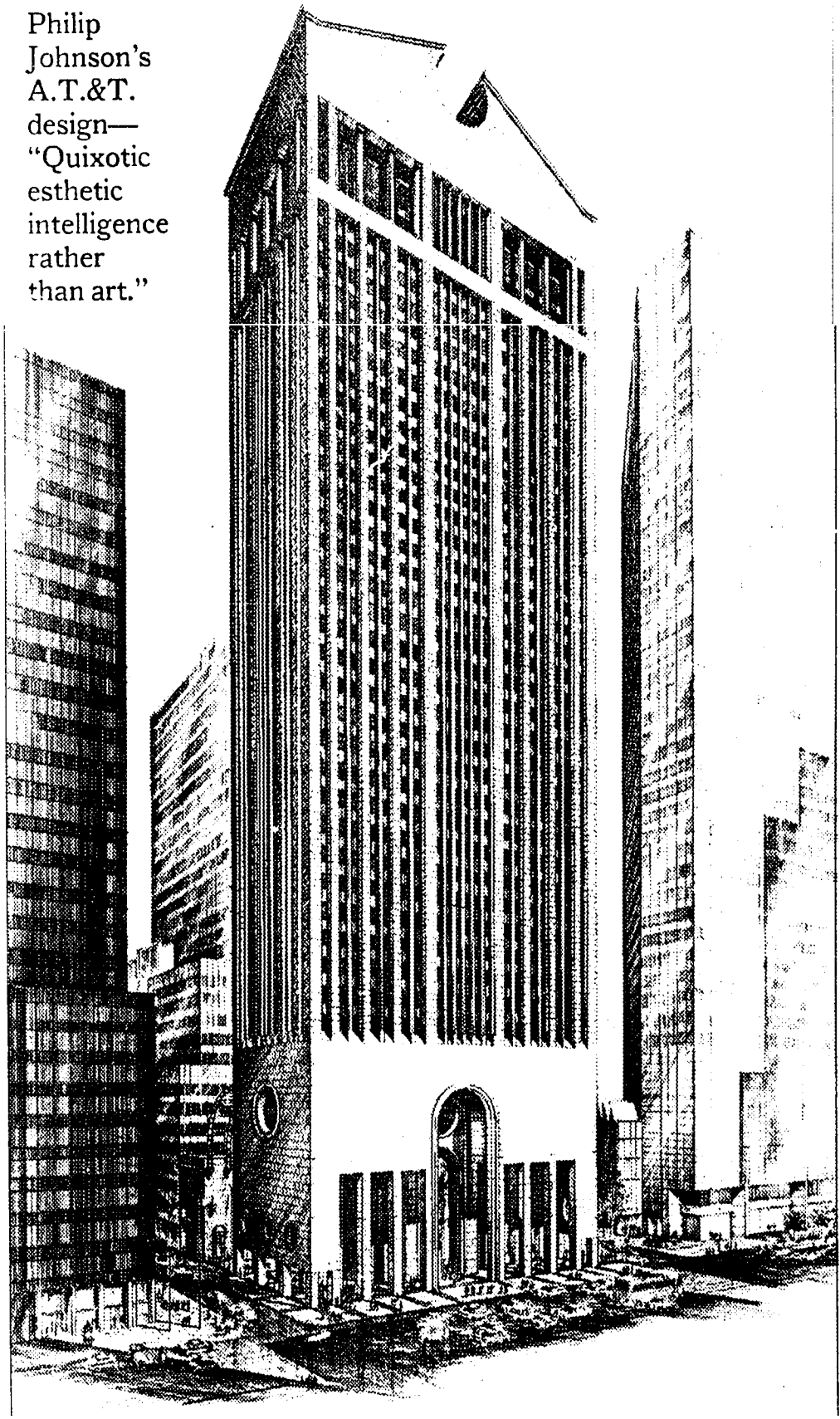

Philip Johnson's A.T.&T. design— "Quixotic esthetic intelligence rather than art."

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back of the building, which will be flanked by a limited amount of retail space and an entrance to an A.T.&T. multimedia exhibit on the floor above.

As designed, this "public" ground floor is austerely formal; it offers some awe-inspiring architectural vistas and diagonal shortcuts to side streets. The A.T.&T. building does not relate to nor recall the style or substance of its luxury shopping-street surroundings. It is clearly an architectural and corporate statement in search of a Park Avenue site. But it is just as clearly the statement that everyone connected with the building wants to make, anywhere at all.

Once constructed, the building will be far more impressive than it is on paper because of its immense size. What seems trivial in concept will become monumental in actuality. An arcade is no longer banal when it is 50 feet high, an arched entrance is imperially grand when it soars more than 100 feet from the street. A facade that seems weak and irresolute, in spite of meticulous adjustments, at the scale of a drawing or model, will reveal handsome surface details that are not apparent now. The pedestrian will experience only the gradeur of that massive masonry base and arcade, and the large rhythms of the colonnaded ground floor. The pediment will be an identifying symbol for the company and the architect. But the building's impact will not come from the creative power or stylistic integration of its design.

Again, there is nothing really wrong with any of these design premises. But the Chrysler Building realizes the oddball top much better, with a suave, romantic form that successfully combines architecture, sculpture and elegant ornament, rather than with quick-and-easy eclecticism or an architectural one-liner. And the classical base-shaft-capital organization of the skyscraper was defined far more creatively and convincingly by Louis Sullivan and some of his fellow members of the Chicago School.

Still other devices are demonstrably the singular esthetic choice of the architect. Since the building consists of completely conventional floors with core and perimeter columns, the structural load could be supported in other ways than on that forest of temple-like columns that appear suddenly on the ground. The desire for a massive colonnaded space has clearly been its own generator.

The remaining and overriding question is how these design choices relate to the city's zoning regulations and intent. At present, they do not, to any convincing degree.

By all zoning logic, since A.T.&T. is on a smaller plot than I.B.M. on the next block, regulations affecting the amounts of ground coverage and floor space in relation to the size of the site should result in a smaller structure for A.T.&T. But the architectural alchemy that sends A.T.&T. shooting up to meet I.B.M. and makes it taller than the city's planners ever intended includes starting the building's floors five stories above ground, using higher-than-average ceilings and several service floors, and adding that broken pediment top, which conceals mechanical equipment. There are only 37 floors in the building's 645 feet, which would normally accommodate a 60-story tower. A.T.&T. has thus achieved its height without unduly increasing its permitted square footage.

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Not that these features are necessarily undesirable; high ceilings are very nice and so are generous public spaces. But the building still has not earned its zoning "brownie points," to quote Mr. Johnson, for the bulk it proposes, by the inclusion of enough pedestrian amenities (seats, trees, shops and services in arcaded through-block passages) to provide the "bonuses" that permit the increased size. A.T.&T will either have to redesign to include more public features, or it will have to cut down on its square footage.

In any case, the building will need special legislation from the Planning Commission or permission from the Board of Standards and Appeals to waive existing height and setback regulations, in order to place the structure at the street line as proposed, instead of moving it back on its lot. In exchange for that waiver, the city can ask for design revisions. But no special legislation should be part of the negotiations that would increase the structure's legal size ratio to its lot.

The architects are already sketching movable tables and chairs where there were fewer, fixed benches, and there is discussion about lighting and shopping kiosks. Accommodations can obviously be made. None of this will transform the building into something else, but the process of adjustment may make it a great deal more agreeable from the point of view of the pedestrian and the street.

We will defend to the death Mr. Johnson's right to design whatever kind of building he chooses for the demonstration of his talent, erudition and skill, as long as it makes appropriate connections and concessions to the city's legal requirements and urban objectives. If it turns out to be an Egyptian temple cum Baroque skyscraper, or the Rolls Royce of Post-Modernism, so be it. Those unpredictable odds make horse racing and architecture the sports of kings. ■