Not For the Medici
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

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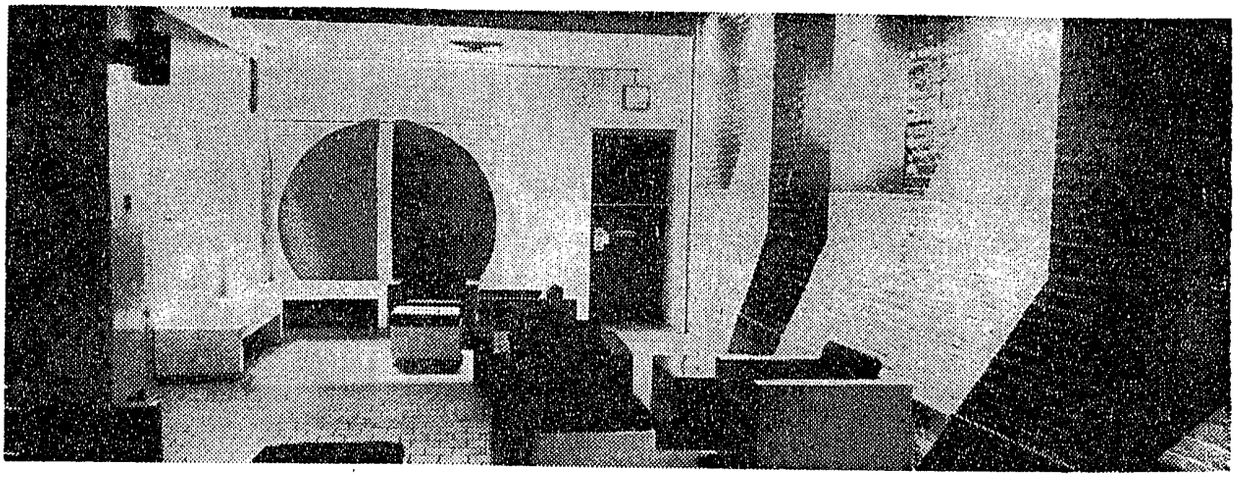

Van Brody

Interior of the remodeled building for the Clinton Youth and Family Center
"The right kind of vision and money where other foundations fear to tread"

CONTRARY to popular belief, there is a lot that faith, hope and charity can do in New York. It took faith, hope and $1-million in the case of the Clinton Youth and Family Center at 314 West 54th Street, operated by the YMCA of Greater New York and the Rotary Club of New York in a section once known evocatively as Hell's Kitchen and now known sociologically as a multi-problem area. The language is less colorful but the meaning is the same. Too many of its people are poor and in trouble.

The $1-million was for complete rehabilitation and remodeling of the former Seventh District Police Court that has been serving as the Clinton Youth Center for the past six years, a job underwritten by the Astor, Mellon and Hayden Foundations with some matching private gifts.

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Over $850,000 of the $1-million came from the Astor Foundation through Mrs. Vincent Astor, a lady who is setting some kind of track record for funding urban design and building projects of notable neighborhood and sociological value—with visible results in Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, the lower East Side, and here. She rushes in with exactly the right kind of vision and money where more lumbering foundations fear to tread.

The remodeling was undertaken in 1969 by architects James Stewart Polshek and Walfredo Toscanini, who now have separate offices, with Mr. Toscanini carrying on the Clinton Center work.

It is an excellent and exciting project, as creative remodeling with a purpose can, and should, be. This is no monument. The visitor who goes looking for the "architecture" in the sense of an impressive esthetic statement, with everything in its assigned place and proper, predetermined relationships, may wonder what it's all about. Not that architecture or design are lacking. Both are there in a superior sense of well-programed spaces and a conscious style, but the building's uses and character are dynamic rather than static. Change and no little irreverence in its use do not destroy its design.

This is a special kind of 20th-century architecture that must flout conventional architectural wisdom to work at all, because it serves social purposes that can be neither predicted nor controlled in today's cities. The Medici did not need it. We do.

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Outside, the visitor finds a cleaned-up, 1907 Beaux Arts-type facade virtually unchanged except for new doors in its triple-arched entrances, with the addition of intake pipes for the air conditioning on the front steps and stencilled supergraphics marking the main door.

Inside, the skillful remodeling of generous spaces uses minimal and supposedly indestructible materials and sophisticated color and graphics. ("Middle-class" manufacturers' ideas of what is indestructible need radical revision through energetic testing by frustrated, underprivileged youngsters.) The visitor will note well-dappled walls and areas already in the process of being "redesigned" by young users, even to the carrying off of the furniture in the entrance "community lounge" to more intimate "clubrooms" upstairs.

An occasional lapse into formality has been the architects' only serious error. They have succumbed, for example, in that handsome ground-floor entrance space created by removing walls and preserving ceiling arches, to the lure of geometric "architectural" furniture arrangements. The concept is now being changed by a kind of "process" or "participatory" design. As the chairs go upstairs, it is obviously turning into something else, as yet undetermined. Spaces for one purpose are often in transition to another.

In club and classrooms, white tackboard supplied for notices and posters by orderly-minded architects remain virgin, while replaceable, shellacked brown masonite wall panels are decorated with posters. There's really nothing wrong with the children's instinctive esthethic reasoning, which is anything but uptight. They figure that the well-lighted white boards don't need anything to brighten them, and the dark walls do.

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The effect of all this is fine; the architecture is working. The only real design mistake would be rigidity. The point is that the basic idea and framework are strong enough to support this kind of change when it is necessary or desirable. An inviolate work of art would not. Style—and that is not to be minimized where so little exists in life or surroundings—survives.

The success of the job rests on two factors: the excellent handling of space and the dramatic use of supergraphics. To cite one use of space: a high-ceilinged, former police courtroom has been made into eight clubrooms by adding a mezzanine and stair. But it has not just been cut up into boxes. A large room across the front of the building can be seen from the mezzanine or stairs through a glass wall across its top, which somehow gives a measure of social as well as visual and esthetic unity.

The six-story building has offices, meeting rooms, game rooms, training rooms, shops and showers. A "family park," or open play area at the rear, with tile berms and seats, occupies the space where a post-Civil War cellblock was torn down that had connected with the old court building and the neighboring 18th Precinct police station. (That was a $90,000 demolition item, with solid stone floors.)

Supergraphics, the use of color and numbers and letters on a giant scale that has been one of the significant design innovations of the past decade, serves the center particularly well. It is not just colorful and attractive; it helps organize areas and substitutes for more expensive materials and treatments. It also covers up a multitude of existing imperfections and minimizes the damage of hard use.

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It appears in halls, on walls and doors and in the elevator. Supergraphic "tree shadows" are painted on the buildings enclosing the "family park." Effects range from Van Doesburg abstraction to a series of giant, jumping curves following a ball on the side walls of the excellent gym. (The gym still has its Renaissance courtroom ceiling and a great classical portico holding a basketball backboard.) The graphic designer was David Bliss, and the work was executed by Environmental Design Associates, James O'Haverty, president, a group previously associated with City Walls.

The Clinton Youth and Family Center operated out of storefronts until the old police court became available in 1963. It is a bright spot in a trouble-plagued neighborhood of more than 40,000 people. The original settlers were Irish, but the mix is now Irish, Greek, Black and Puerto Rican and the statistics are grim.

Ten thousand residents are members of families with incomes of less than $3,000 a year. There are the old and poor existing shakily in the only neighborhood they have ever called home. The chief youth problems are dropouts and drugs, which know no color line. Harvey Newman, the center's director, lists the neighborhood problems as the "by-products of the crowded city — poverty, crime, narcotics, alcoholism, bitterness and hate."

The center serves about 350 children between the ages of 6 and 19, and reaches another 600 through the schools. The staff works with the schools, churches, hospitals, community narcotics service and social service agencies to provide skill, social and therapeutic groups and recreational activities. A $3 membership charge apparently makes it all seem better to the children than something free. They want, and get, their money's worth.

The YMCA and the Rotary also get their money's worth in constructive social programs. Mrs. Astor and the other foundations that have made the building renovation possible have gotten equally good returns. It is a fine job, and it belongs to the community now.