

## Architecture

# What A Little Taste Can Do

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

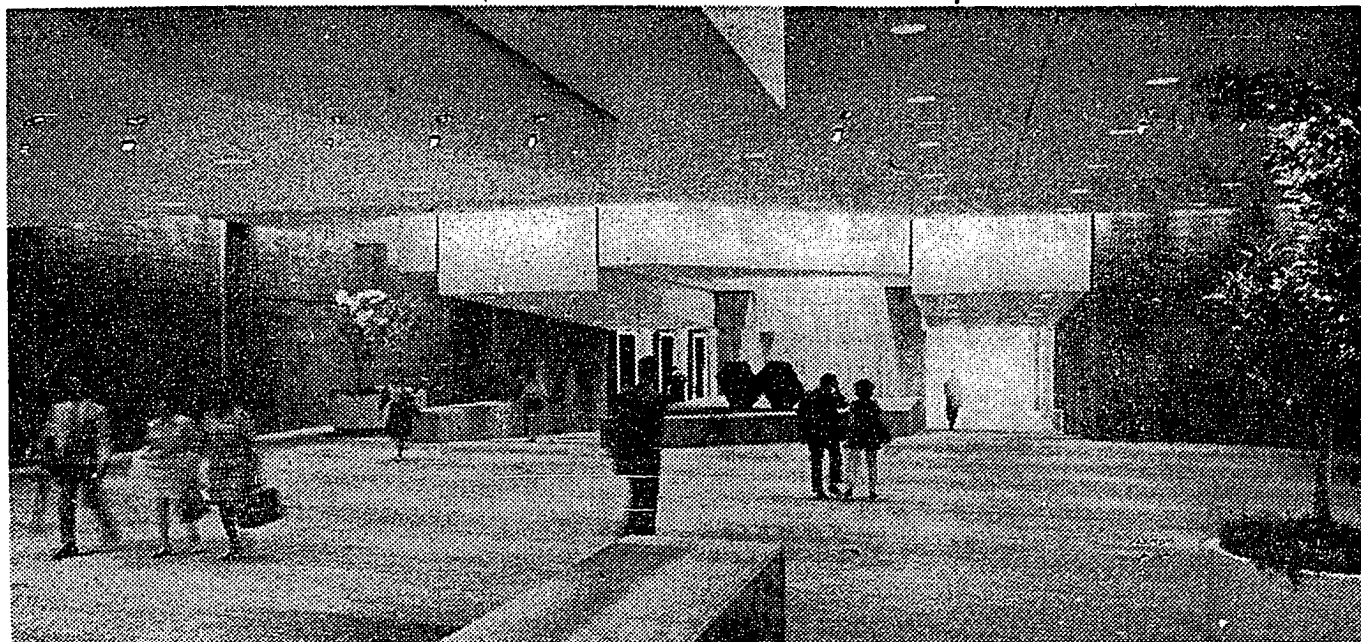
THE environmental impact of even a small work of quality can be startling in a city that swallows the supercolossal without a scar. Casual strollers along 42d or 43d Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues have been noticing a new bit of environment this summer. They have become aware of it without the publicity ballyhoo that accompanies bigger, noisier building projects and they have been reporting it to this writer in surprising numbers. Quality, that rarest of New York products, can pop up unexpectedly and unannounced.

As one approaches the huge hole in the ground that was Stern Brothers, where another predictable commercial colossus is about to rise, there is suddenly a small building that seems to have no ground floor, no stores, and no apparent entrance at all. There is, instead, a covered, but open-ended mall that takes up all of the ground floor space and runs right through the building and the block, from 42d to 43d Streets. It is a public pedestrian mall, open to all from 8 A.M. to 7 P.M.; after that, a discreet bronze grille closes it for the night.

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This mall offers the kind of sophisticated urban and architectural design that most New York builders, lovers of pretentious schmaltz, shun like the plague. It also offers 16,000 square feet of public pedestrian space in a midblock passage 200 feet long. Not really big by New York standards — but big enough to make a small environmental miracle.

This unexpected urban pleasure and convenience is the main feature of the new Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Above and below the mall



Dick Swift

Block-through pedestrian mall of the City University Graduate Center, New York  
A \$9-million baby from a five and ten cent store

are a library and auditorium, classrooms, seminar rooms, offices, a computer and statistical center, laboratories and lounges. All of these up-to-date facilities are in a 58-year-old office building, remodeled with ingenuity and finesse.

But you don't have to be a graduate student to love the mall. Light-washed textures of cast-in-place and precast concrete and a gently ramped bluestone floor invite the pedestrian to enjoy its rugged elegance and sudden respite from surrounding honkytonk. Directional walls and a suggestively staggered stucco ceiling lead past a Euclidian piece of sculpture and trees in tubs to the familiarly sordid street beyond. For the student or visitor, bronze-framed, bronze-tinted glass doors open to the building's entrance and elevators at the north side of the mall.

For what it is worth, there is very little littering on the mall, and no vandalism. Materials were chosen to be tough and trouble-free as well as attractive, and maintenance is no problem.

The CUNY building at 33 West 42d Street began life as the 17-story structure erected in 1912 for the Aeolian Piano Company as Aeolian Hall. Only the exterior walls and windows and basic structure remain. But it has been spared the banal indignity of total refacing (new! new! shouts the commercial remodeler as he strips away craft and style) in an exemplary blend of economic considerations and

good architectural judgment. Above a projecting, boldly modern marquee and a clean-surfaced second and third floor, 1912 swagged lyres and torches still embellish the four central piers. Of such small and sensitive decisions is good design made.

There are other decisions. The original, ornate bronze elevator doors have been kept and deepened in tone to match the sleek new bronze (not anodized aluminum) ground floor fittings. Materials and details are simple and thoughtfully worked out, with even contractors' "or equal" substitutes carefully specified. A top floor "buffeteria" uses slate, brick and oak with oak-topped tables and classic tubular Breuer chairs for an appropriate contemporary warmth that New York's commercial restaurants, currently infected with a kind of tasteless, overdesign hysteria, could well emulate. Oh, to eat without gimmicks!

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This is the building's third incarnation. In its Aeolian period, it was a popular concert hall of the 1920's. (How about Paul Whiteman playing the first performance of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue for nostalgia?) In its second, or Woolworth period, the concert hall was replaced by a large five and ten on the street and basement floors with offices above. (Fluorescent light and peanut candy smell.)

In its current, CUNY period, it is headquarters for the City University's nine-

year-old graduate program, and a lesson to architects, urbanists and educators. We wonder if the mammoth City University Construction Fund, now involved in the planning and commissioning of mammoth campuses, has noticed what a little sense and taste can do.

The sense and taste belong in large part to a woman of drive, charm, faith and ability who directed the job with artful tenacity. Assistant Dean J. Marilyn Mikulsky has supervised design and construction since 1964, when CUNY took administrative space on the second floor. As the school grew from six doctoral programs in 1966 to 19 in 1970, it expanded from two-and-a-half floors to fill the whole building, which was bought for \$6.25-million in 1966 by the State Dormitory Authority. The state leases the property to CUNY for 30 years and then it reverts to the city.

Dean Mikulsky has spent these six years working closely with the architect, Carl J. Petrilli; the design architect, Samuel J. DeSanto; the project architect, David Taylor, and the contractor, John Gallin and Son, to whom all pay homage for the resolution of a logistical nightmare. The building had to be gutted, new systems installed and design coordinated as the old tenants moved. Dean Mikulsky has been graphics designer, art buyer and interior designer, as well.

Renovation costs and equipment purchase were funded by the City Univer-

sity Construction Fund through the Dormitory Authority and a grant from the Federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The remodeling cost \$9-million; total costs, with land and building, are \$17-million. The result proves, in terms of function and esthetics, that you don't have to take down a good old building and replace it with a new one. The point is also made financially, at a remodeling cost of less than \$30 a square foot.

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The idea of the midblock passage is one that has been promoted doggedly for years by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the firm of Pomerance and Breines. At least two more are currently in work. Although it was a wrench for the administration to give up Woolworth's, CUNY has provided a brilliant demonstration of how to build this kind of public space.

On sum, CUNY gains more than it loses. It has a choice in-town campus, which can also be used for exhibitions, concerts and special events—the mall was the site of commencement and the inauguration of the school's new president, Mina Rees. It has a superb midtown location, facing Bryant Park, a fact beautifully evident from the dramatically framed green vista as one walks south to 42d Street. It has prestige facilities to make a corporation envious and style to make its snobbier peers blush. The Graduate Center is a quiet coup.