

SOME NEW FACES ON FIFTH AVENUE

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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A FUNNY thing has been happening on Fifth Avenue on the way to 57th Street, and by funny we mean strange or curious, architecturally speaking. Within two short blocks—55th and 56th Streets—no less than five major establishments, in buildings of as many different styles, have gone in for serious and elaborate face-lifting. The results show at least five different approaches to architectural remodeling, from playing it safe to jazzing it up. But not one can be called an advance in the art of design.

Moving from south to north, there are the newly faced Mario Buccellati jewelry store in the St. Regis at 55th Street, the three-year old Revlon beauty salon on the other side of the Avenue in the Gotham, the restored Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church across 55th, the adjoining Rizzoli building which opened last week, and at the corner, the building occupied by the jeweler Harry Winston, the earliest of the group. Across 56th is the Hallmark card shop and gallery, completed last June.

With the exception of the church, which will be discussed at another time except to mention its mutilating new front entrance, all of these remodeling jobs have shared a single objective. What they have wished to express in the nuances or excesses of their design is elegance.

Elegance is a chameleon quality depending on surroundings and needs, usually the product of a sophisticated and knowing taste. Elegance on Fifth Avenue is a commercial commodity and it is a little bit special. Basically, it is *ambiance*, or the creation of a suggestive atmosphere of luxury, richness, beauty, money and above all, "class." These two blocks encompass a range of definitions from consummate sensibility to the splendors of the past to the aggressive gaucheries of Miami-cosmetique-modern.

Nothing New

The results leave one strangely uneasy. Even the most successful efforts rely on a thoroughly conscious exploitation of what has been proven familiar, safe and fashionable—a demonstration of the chic, expensive "sell" without a single new idea. And where they are unsuccessful, there ought to be a law, literally, to protect the esthetic character of one of the city's few fine streets.

Beginning at 55th Street, two massively handsome examples of the Beaux Arts hotel style—the 1901-4 St. Regis and the 1902-5 Gotham

—face each other across the Avenue. Neither rates as great architecture, but both are irreplaceable assets to the city scene in terms of enriching sculptural plasticity and just plain old-fashioned quality of materials and of the building art.

In the St. Regis, the Buccellati shop forms two bays on the Avenue and three on 55th Street. The remodeling, by Gabriel Sedlis of New York, makes no attempt to preserve the original ground floor facade, which is fairly chaotic beyond it. What it does preserve however, are the original intentions of proportion and scale. When the stone darkens, this storefront's well-studied understatement will never frighten off customers for Buccellati's finely wrought Florentine craftsmanship and it will blend comfortably with the old structure. It does not cheapen or betray it. And it is oh-so-carefully classy.

Lost Chance

The reservation? Only that the Italians, particularly, know how to reach the pinnacle of design finesse. They make the most *soigné* use of the most beautiful contemporary devices within the framework of genuine baroque buildings. They have demonstrated to the world what stated to the world what 20th-century elegance really is. But it has not been done here.

Across at the Gotham the problem was identical—new shopfronts in a superior old building of established character and design. Stores in the three end bays stay within the architectural order of a three-story base topped by a generously scaled cornice with full height stone-block columns.

At the fourth bay, the Revlon shop, by Barbara Dorn Associates, violates the unified facade with a traumatic visual blast. A flat expanse of shiny black granite runs up the three full stories, demolishing all existing relationships and style, appliquéd with a kind of lit-plastic bed canopy embellished with a pair of overblown lantern sconces out of a Mae West movie. Of course, this is elegance, too, to some people, but it is the kind of elegance best illustrated by the design transition from Fontainebleau, France, to Fountainblue, Florida.

On the next street, the new American headquarters for the Rizzoli publishing and cinema empire — *Oggi* and *L'Europeo* and Fellini and Antonioni films—offers another interpretation and a curious anachronism. Housed in an approximately 85-year-old Louis XVI-type building

of New York's classic revival period, it caters to the taste of an elderly owner and the upper level world of Italian art-society of notable *hubris* with an exquisite reproduction that serves its purposes admirably.

It is, as the Italians would say, "molto snob." Soft green 18th-century French *boiserie* transported from some defunct chateau, plum carpeting, superb chandeliers and prime antique furnishings in the upper floors are reflected in the design of wood and marble detailing and lighting fixtures liberated from the Cathedral of Zagreb in the ground-floor bookshop. The well-preserved and pretty exterior is nicely lit at night. The architects were Alberto Menin and Filippo Perego of Italy, and Ferdinand Gottlieb of New York.

This is a beautiful if spurious restoration, retaining the kind of small, graceful building that New York lost in the refacing of the Black Starr building at 47th Street, now being given an equally

spurious Yamasaki expression. But one cannot help reflecting that if Rizzoli ran its avant-garde business this way, it wouldn't be in business at all. The score here is mixed: gratitude for a period gem, real or not-so-real, in a city destroying its past; regret for Rizzoli's lost opportunity to use the arts of design as well as it uses the other contemporary arts in which it deals.

Architectural Act

At the next corner, Harry Winston occupies an anachronism of even greater curiosity — a chaste travertine building in a cleaned-up Louis XVI style which has been Louis XVI for just four years. Think back, New Yorkers, for this is simply the refaced Corning building, stripped of its "modernistic" glass brick. Architecture as Play Acting might be the theme all along the Avenue, and as in the theatre there is a tendency to accept the imitation as the real thing. It wouldn't work with Mr. Win-

ston's jewels, and it doesn't really work with architecture, either.

Which brings us to the Hallmark shop across 56th Street, also faced with ivory travertine, the material that is currently the whipped cream topping of "quality" architecture. But the Hallmark store, by Edward Durell Stone, is in a different idiom.

This is one of those jobs that one wishes the able Mr. Stone had never done at all. The ground floor of a conventionally ordinary ribbon-windowed office building has been transformed into an arched shop with cookie-cut arches, hanging planters, a bridged-over exhibition pit, curving horseshoe stair, gold-leafed domes and crimson carpet. The foliage is real and the music is canned. It takes all of the traditional trappings of elegance and turns them into, not elegance, but a caricature of it. This is pretentious, and pretention is vulgarity in any language.

And that is the moral of our story.



Hans Hartung.
The natives spoke only American.

Waintrob-Budd