Design: Grand hotel

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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How do you design a good hotel? You don't let a hotel corporation design it. There are a lot of other people you don't let design it, either—like specialists in hotel design, famous-name interior decorators, corporate wives and graduates of those hotel schools devoted to the propagation of plastic chic and computerized banality.

It is hard to know why any enterprise as large and important as the hotel business habitually plumbs the depths of design mediocrity. The effort has to be deliberate or the result would not be so predictably universal. It is, in fact, very deliberate; it is all done by formula, from bad colors to stale air, ersatz "theme" restaurants and standardized furnishings. These clichés are enshrined and taught as "the hospitality industry"—a concept that adds irony to insult.

That is why the new United Nations Plaza Hotel which opened recently in New York is both a surprise and a delight. It bears no resemblance to the hospitality-industry formula. What it does suggest, in a scaled-down and completely contemporary way, is something of the luxe and elegance of those Plazas and Excelsiors and Grand Hotels that were the traveler's palace away from home before the hotel robots got into the act. It offers a lost standard of style and sophistication, in keeping with the great cities of the world, expressed in appropriate 20th-century terms. That cosmopolitan standard has been abandoned by the Sheratons and Hiltons and Marriotts and Hyatts and Holiday Inns and their ilk, as they bowdlerize the old and build the new irr the ordinary, institutionalized hotel - chain esthetic.

On the rare occasions when someone else designs a hotel, the results can be instructive. The United Nations Plaza Hotel has not been designed by Hyatt International, the chain that runs it, but by the architects of the building that houses the hotel, Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates. The new tower, called 1 United Nations Plaza and located at the corner of First Avenue and 44th Street, just opposite the world organization's headquarters, has been financed and constructed by the United Nations Development Corporation, a state-chartered agency empowered to build for the United Nations' needs. It is one of New York's new mixed-use buildings, accommodating the hotel's 288 rooms on the top 13 of its 39 floors, with public spaces on the first two floors, and United Nations-related offices in the rest of the structure. When the hotel was contracted to Hyatt, the United Nations Development Corporation continued to hold the design reins.

The building's refined, crystalline shaft, which rises sheer from the street (it is a respectful 2 feet 3 inches less than the Secretariat across the way), is the most distinguished recent addition to the city's skyline. Its striking, eccentric geometry—the walls are notched unevenly on the north and south sides—suggests the different functions within the shining, greenish mirror-glass skin, but it does not spell these functions out. The flat metal grid of the glass skin is deliberately concealing and underscaled, making the height seem greater than it is, and the visual effect more spectacular. A glass canopy circles the entire building just above the first story and establishes a human, pedestrian scale at ground level with sleight-of-hand skill.

These are all dazzling design devices that turn the tower into dramatic architectural sculpture. Sleek, taut, esthetically daring and exquisitely detailed, the building makes its neighbors look like clods.

The hotel interiors are rich, suave and beautiful. They break every rule of the hotel-chain formula. They are uncompromisingly "good" modern — and that violates the first and most rigid taboo of all. (Hotel interiors must be Miami modern, airport modern or quasi-French tacky with token antiques.) They emphasize a luxurious and tasteful simplicity rather than the pretentiously phony, and are light-years from the usual standardized department-store-basement décor. They have real style—the style and conviction of their own times. That style is glamorous, discreetly lush and genuinely elegant—effects hoteliers seek by every mock, devious, corner-cutting device in the trade. In fact, they are everything hotel experts tell you, over and over, cannot be done.

Architect-designed hotel interiors are in themselves a prime taboo. Most hotels are turned over to staff or consultant spoilers, who fill them with stock gimmicks and products. (This is no coincidence; some of the leading chains maintain showrooms of everything from prefabricated front desks and "hand-hewn" styrofoam beams to wallpaper and wastebaskets that are merchandized to other hotels and motels; they immortalize and institutionalize their taste.)

There are some notable exceptions: Architect-developer John Portman's atrium hotels, with their balconies of rooms around soaring central spaces, are outstanding when he has been permitted to detail and furnish them. Otherwise, they are plunged into a welter of schmaltz, and Hyatt's imitations of the genre are pathetic. Hilton International, which generally has higher standards than the domestic chain, has occasionally used such architects as the American firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and Israel's Yacov Rechter. The hotels that result are superior to the routine model to the extent that the architect has been able to maintain design control.

Clearly, Hyatt did not suddenly get religion at the United Nations Plaza. When the United Nations Development Corporation found itself unwilling to go along with the chain's design presentations, it decided on its own architectural follow-through. The collaboration that followed taught much to both sides. The architects tried to satisfy Hyatt's practical concerns while maintaining their own design standards.

The result is clearly a hotel-design breakthrough. The visitor enters a serene, intimate lobby, with islands of pale golden-beige furniture against a marble floor and velvety, emerald-green fabric-covered walls. This softness turns into dark glitter in the reception area just beyond, with checked marble floors and reflecting walls of reverse mirror glass (the other side of the glass used for the building's exterior) and a pattern of small, glittering lights.

This space leads to the dining room and bar, among the handsomest in the city (some day, perhaps, the food will match). Dark-red and mirror walls, floors of red carpet set into more checked marble and a ceiling that is a miracle of brilliant trompe l'oeil create the softly sparkling, romantic setting that is the ideal dining-out ambiance.

That ceiling, which appears complex, is simple design ingenuity. A kind of greenhouse roof is set into it, and above the glass are pentagonal mirrors and myriad small lights that make a fantasy of reflection and illumination. Against this visual intricacy, everything else is held in restraint. Dining chairs are plain, pale bentwood; bar armchairs are embracing red velvet. There is not one false touch—no overreaching, no straining for effect.

Such trompe l'oeil mirror and light treatment reappears subtly throughout the hotel. A corridor to a pool and health club is all exterior glass wall on one side and mirror on the other—one seems to walk through the sky and the incredible city views. Elevators and their lobbies are sparked in this fashion, and discreet mirror strips break up the upholstered emerald-green corridors. In the suites, reflection is used architecturally, to enlarge space and emphasize the spectacular vistas.

The standard guest rooms are inviting and urbane. There are quiet, well-selected furnishings, both stock and specially designed, as in wall-length dressing commodes and lamps. Soft, unpatterned fabrics, in subtle, muted, nonstandard colors — taupe, grayed blue, rose beige—have luxurious appeal. The suites have panache: There are duplexes with spiral stairs to bedrooms above, white flokati rugs, bars and pianos.

The architects have even come to grips with that universal hotel horror, the pictures on the walls. They have framed superb embroideries, from bold to delicate, chosen from every period and culture; many are of museum caliber. These add images and textures of rich beauty to the rooms and corridors.

It all adds up to quality, which is the key to something else that is called, for want of a better word, class. For those who thought the Fontainebleau was the answer to the Ritz, well-managed older Ritzes are still going strong and the Fontainebleau is going broke. There is a lesson there, somewhere.

Perhaps it can be learned in time for Hyatt's planned remodeling of New York's Commodore Hotel, or for the conversion of the Shelton being considered by Holiday Inn, or for the new Palace Hotel that is to be connected to the landmark Villard Houses. New York was ready for the United Nations Plaza. But is the hotel business ready for this kind of hotel? Or is it back to international plastic banality again? ■

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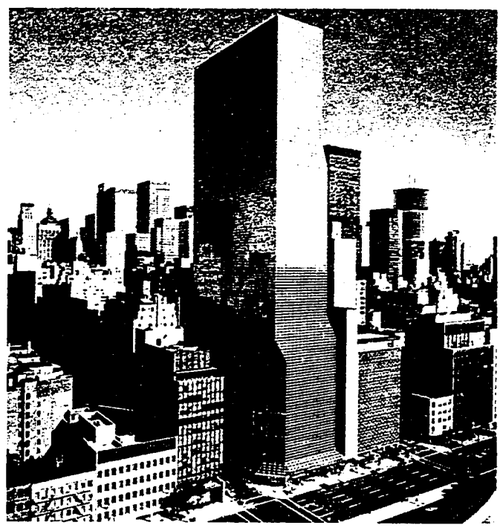

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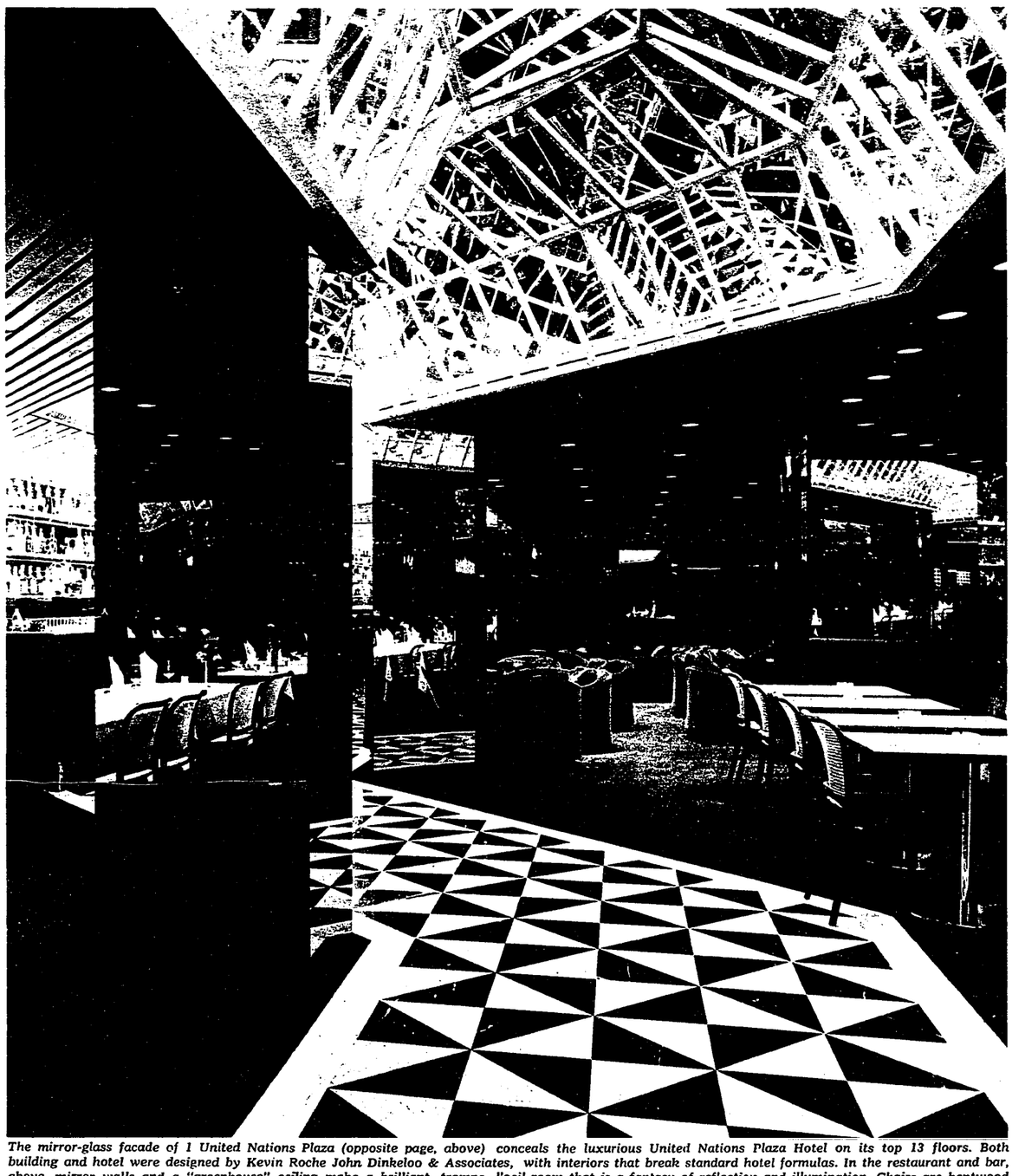

The mirror-glass facade of 1 United Nations Plaza (opposite page, above) conceals the luxurious United Nations Plaza Hotel on its top 13 floors. Both building and hotel were designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates, with interiors that break standard hotel formulas. In the restaurant and bar, above, mirror walls and a "greenhouse" ceiling make a brilliant, trompe l'oeil room that is a fantasy of reflection and illumination. Chairs are bentwood or red velvet; a black and white marble floor alternates with red carpet. Rich visual intricacy is arrived at through simple, ingenious design.

The serene lobby has pale golden-beige furniture ,and velvety, emerald-green walls. Lighting is a soft glow or delicate glitter throughout the hotel.

The guest rooms are inviting and urbane. Colors are rose beige, taupe and grayed blue; the wall dressing-table unit is architect-designed.