ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Dubious Survival Plan For the Modern

What may be New York's most important new building project—the Museum of Modern Art plan for a luxury apartment tower and expanded museum space for its property on West 53d Street—is now bucking its way through the city's involved review processes. The hearings and approvals required for major new construction often include half a dozen city agencies and the community planning boards, which must now pass on all local land-use proposals under the new City Charter, with active participation by citizen groups, neighborhood associations and interested professionals. Any project as large and sensitive as the Museum of Modern Art proposal is in for scrutiny, trouble and delay.

The museum's plan has been moving through this obstacle course for the last few months, with controversy heating up along the way. The next hearing is scheduled for Thursday, before Community Planning Board No. 5. What is involved, technically, are zoning matters, although there are also continuing considerations of location, quality, style and environmental effect.

But the Museum of Modern Art project goes beyond architecture and planning to matters of public policy and the arts. The museum is avowedly pinning its hopes for the future on the new construction, which would be made possible by an intricate and unusual building and tax arrangement set up by a special New York State law. The objective is to secure the shaky financial destiny of one of the city's pivotal cultural institutions.

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The questions raised by the Museum of Modern Art scheme, however, in spite of impressive power-structure backing and support, are not easily resolved. Some of the snowballing concern is reflex anti-establishment reaction, but a considerable amount consists of thoughtful, legitimate doubts about what the museum is doing and the architectural and urban impact of the new building.

For the museum, the opportunity to build a mixed-use structure that would combine six floors of museum expansion (doubling its present space) and a 42-story luxury rental and condominium tower means being able to utilize its valuable real estate—something a tax-exempt institution cannot ordinarily do. This would be made possible by a newly created legal entity called the Trust for Cultural Resources. The arrangement permits the museum—through the Trust—to designate a developer (Arlen Properties has already been chosen) and control the design, and to receive the tax value of the developed land that would otherwise go to the city, as well as sharing profits with the developer.

The museum says that the project is essential to its sur-

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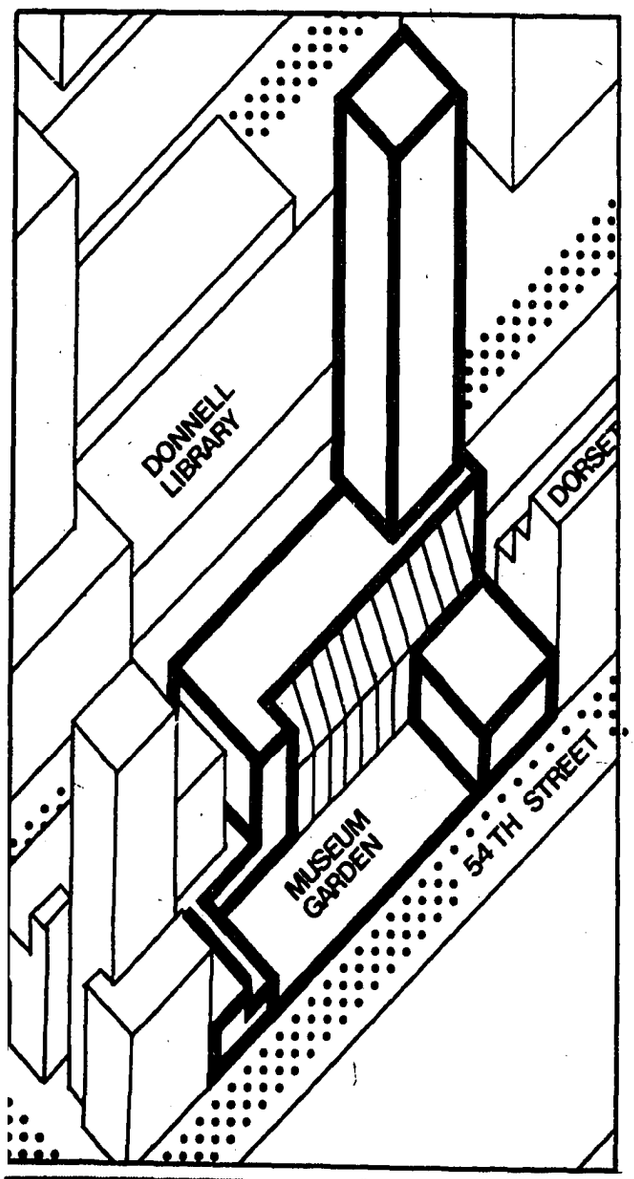
Survival Plan For the Modern



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vival. The arguments are convincing in the light of inflation and shrinking endowments. Survival, in any event, is the only reason for going ahead with an essentially dubious undertaking. Survival is the sole justification for a project that, in almost every other way, will do more harm than good.

The tradeoff is between the museum's real space needs and a means of meeting deficits and carrying the heavier expenses incurred by expansion, and a number of less desirable environmental and design factors. The 48-story tower proposed for the site is a mid-block behemoth that will destory exactly the kind of small-scale amenity and variety between the avenues that has made this particular street, with its modern-vernacular-Beaux Arts mix, a model of civilized pleasure. That scale and mix is exactly what the city's planners have fought to preserve with restrictive, low mid-block zoning, although some of these same planners, now involved with the museum's proposal, are willing to call this situation an exception.

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The tower is bad news, urbanistically, even though it is for a good cause. And there is no denying the fact, even with all kinds of diagrams and measurements, that the famous museum garden is being encroached upon—primarily for a restaurant to cover its upper level—a feature with income possibilities. And it is also clear that the design of the new building, which involves the restyled, incorporated facade of the original building, smudges to the point of obliteration the already compromised 1939 Museum of Modern Art by Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone—one of the city's major architectural and cultural landmarks. To justify this kind of destruction, survival has got to be the name of the game.

There is no room to go into the arguments here about such things as whether the new apartment tower will drain taxes from the city (the museum points out that it is to be on tax-exempt land that would have yielded no return anyway), or whether building luxury housing there will keep it from being built where it could yield taxes, or whether its success would be an incentive to build more luxury housing, which would benefit the city. That gives a rough idea of the many-sided arguments involved.

Nor do I, for one, feel qualified to judge the legitimacy or the future impact of the legislation that was specially tailored for the museum's plan and that seems to have a potential for other financially strained institutions. But there are also some obvious, worrisome aspects about that legislation—at least they are obvious if you have the complete legislation. There is the general bill and there is the special bill; the special bill contains powers of condemnation that have never been publicized and were virtually unknown until they came out at a public hearing.

True, they would facilitate getting the tower built. But condemnation powers should be given to no institution of this type, no matter how noble the purpose. The right to condemn other people's property is a police power that must be carefully limited, in a democratic society, to essential public purposes. The line must be drawn, as difficult as it is to do so, between the essential and the desirable. It has not been done here. The museum's argument of public purpose is not strong enough. It begins to look like convenience, or abuse.

What I am particularly concerned with here is the design that has evolved from the process. It is being carried out by a consortium of experts, including Cesar Pelli, the architect for the Trust for Cultural Resources and the museum, Jaquelin Robertson, the architect for the developer, Arlen Properties, and Richard Weinstein, architect and planner, playing a stellar role for the museum.

Whatever else can be said about it, the highly dubious is being executed with exceptional design skill. Some of the solutions—such as the revised rear facade of the existing museum building, with glass walls and stepped terraces, and the very suave and elegant skin of the tower, are so good that all one wants, like Tinker Bell, is to believe. If not in fairies, then at least that this is the answer to the museum's problems.

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Philip Johnson, who designed the garden that is one of the city's great amenities, has approved the sacrifice of the entrance terrace and steps for an enlarged lobby and escalators, and of the upper garden level for the multi-storied restaurant addition. The loss of the terrace, while regrettable, can be justified in terms of circulation and space for the larger building, but covering the raised part of the present garden, no matter how underutilized it may seem, is an unacceptable sacrifice of open space.

It is the landmark importance of the building, however, that is most threatened, because the new design eliminates—except for intellectually rationalized references that will be meaningless to the unitiated—the famous 1939 facade. Like all museum staffs, which must include the most discontented people in the world with the facilities architects have given them, many of the museum's curators have hated the building for years. And like numerous occupants of landmark structures, they are impatient of other people's admiration for their handicaps.

But the Goodwin and Stone building is a rare, superb and almost unique example of the International Style. The museum built it in its enthusiasm for that style, with which the museum was identified and which it helped put on the map. There is a confluence of singular cultural, artistic and historical factors here that is compelling. It is unthinkable that those who owe so much to this image would simply wipe it out.

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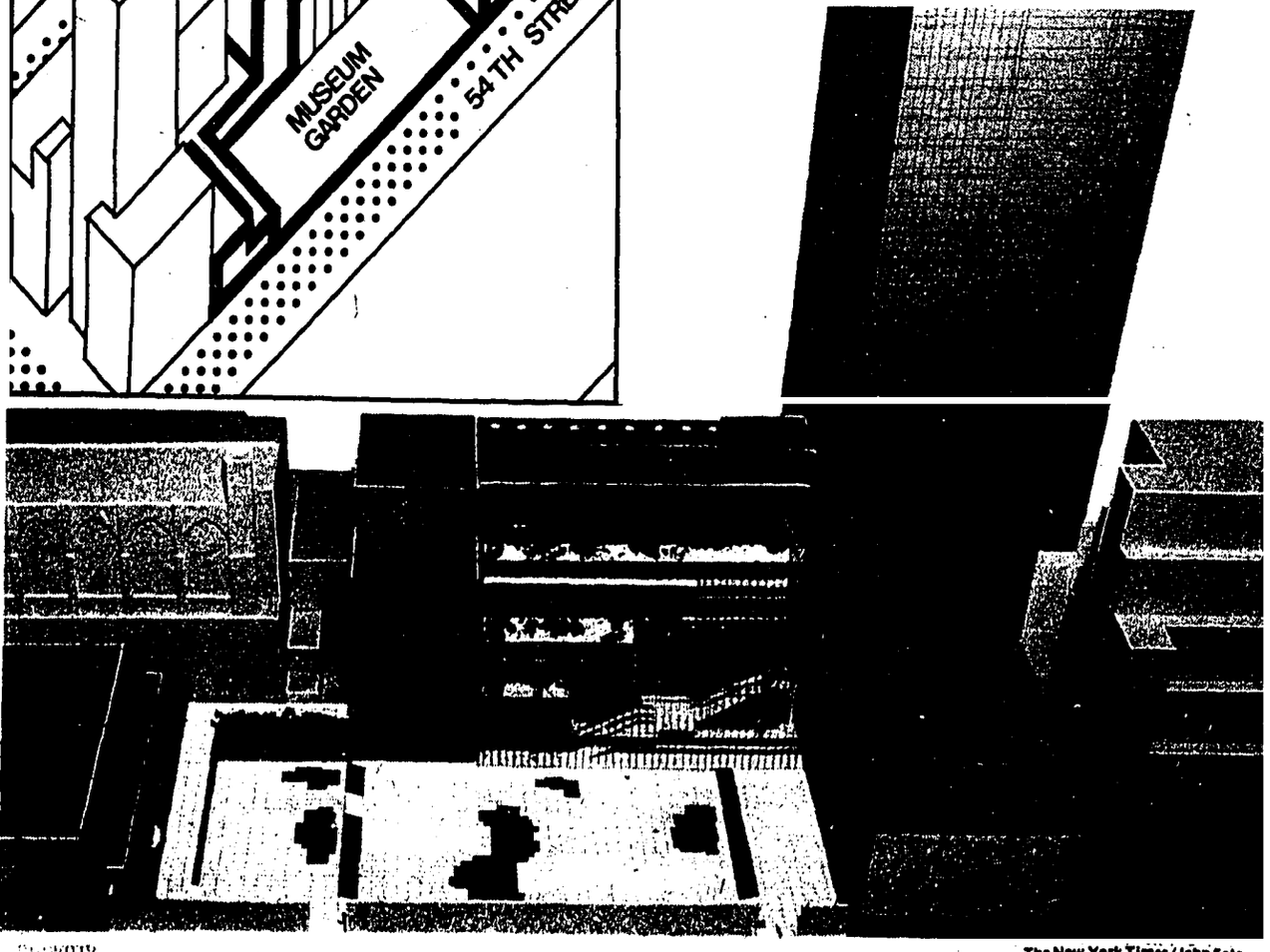
But keeping this landmark—admittedly impure but still with visual integrity—makes a neat architectural solution to the proposed expansion impossible. And making a neat architectural solution also creates a long, sleek, neutral base totally destructive of the scale and character of the street and its pleasing variety of shops, galleries, small museums and restaurants. Ad hocism, or hodge-podge, is not popular with architects; there are no rules of art and order to deal with sentiment and the inconvenient reality of the environment.

The facade treatment is still undecided, but something "recalling" the original building, such as horizontal bands carried the full length of new and old construction with a continuous canopy suggesting the famous "cheese hole" canopy of the top, terrace floor, is in the works. This new front would be that of the complete, enlarged building—an overscaled, impersonal expanse that will be coolly and elegantly institutional. Predictably, it will be detailed with great finesse.

But this elegant corporate-cultural style with its mannered recall of displaced motifs is a sophisticated and meaningless design ploy. In fact, code words being used by the architects are particularly indsidious: they speak of "clues" to the original design and ways of suggesting its "character." That is delusory nonsense. Arcane second-hand references are no substitute for a recognizable building. Artful "recall" brings nothing back to life.

In order to condone this overbearing project, so destructive of urban, esthetic and cultural values, it is essential to accept the assumption that this plan is the museum's only financial hope. One must also believe, with its trustees, that the original Museum of Modern Art as well as the high moment in art and cultural history that it represents are expendable. This massive new cultural-commercial hybrid cannot recreate those important concepts and ideals that the museum still lives on today. That currency is running out. The Modern's problem is ideological as much as financial. Is this salvation or the end of an innovative institutional force that did much to change the image and vision of its age? ■



The New York Times/John Soto

The proposed 42-story luxury apartment tower that would rise above the museum —"bad news, urbanistically, even though it is for a good cause"