Towering Question: The Skyscraper

Is it possible to build ever upward without building ourselves out of a habitable city?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

EVER since the structural fiasco of the Tower of Babel, man has dreamed of the skyscraper. His persistent, starry-eyed pursuit of the super-building has been probably the most enduring architectural romance of history; technological developments have made its realization possible. Today, the skyscraper is the most dramatic monument of the modern world.

In New York, the skyscraper is a symbol of progress, prestige and the power of the dream. With the city's total building activity approaching an incredible $7,700,000,000 a year, the skyscraper continues to rise at a record rate. Manhattan's commercial avenues are a combination of massive, close-packed glass facades and noisy new construction; every important business block seems to offer at least one pretentious new aspirant in the race toward the clouds.

On this very tight little island, however, people are now beginning to wonder if the symbol is turning into a scourge. Critics of the skyscraper believe that this remarkable structure, at a distance so impressive and so beautiful in the subtle transformations worked by changing light and weather, is slowly strangling the city. It would be the ultimate irony if the city were irrevocably damaged by its current big-building boom.

New York's development as a center of trade and commerce, its enormous population growth, rising land costs and decreasing land availability, combined with the desire of business leaders for headquarters of conspicuous grandeur, inevitably dictated the tall building. As early as 1811, anticipating the city's robust growth, a gridiron of streets was laid across the island and the pattern set for the rigid continuity of its straight-line, cheek-by-jowl street architecture. By the Eighteen Seventies, New York builders were reaching for the sky, going as far as they dared with conventional masonry walls. Vying ferociously for "highest" honors, the city's landmarks were called "hideous and magnificent," an indication of "savage and unregulated energy."

WHAT ambition and economics made desirable, technology made possible. With the final development of the steel skeleton and the passenger elevator in Chicago in the Eighties, building height was limited only by the reasonable economic ratio of rentable floor area to the space necessary for elevators and utilities. Twentieth-century advances in air conditioning and lighting subsequently made the "bulk" building possible, with vast, windowless interiors artificially ventilated and illuminated to provide usable working space. The result, today, is the world's greatest concentration of the largest possible buildings on the smallest possible sites—the unique phenomenon of New York.

These big buildings bring an inordinate number of people together (the world's largest office building, Grand Central City, scheduled for 1960-61 construction, will house 25,000 people and have 250,000 visitors a day), and they create an environment of a special psychological nature (the effects of impersonal, beehive living and working are yet to be studied by the omnipresent researchers). The skyscraper goes far beyond architecture. It is a socio-economic colossus that reaches into every aspect of city life.

WHAT then is the case against the skyscraper? The first indictment is that it threatens to destroy the city that has created it. The unprecedented and unplanned massing of people in restricted areas has already wreaked havoc with public transportation and traffic. This slowdown could eventually immobilize parts of the city.

The second indictment is that—with a few exceptions—the skyscraper is unpardonably ugly. It is making the city less and less a place of beauty, for the massed towers are handsome only from afar. Close up, the current crop of skyscrapers rises, row on row, shapeless and characterless, monotonous monuments to mediocrity. New York has few structures that deserve even the name of architecture.

The third count against the big building is less tangible, but it is perhaps the most telling. The skyscraper must answer for much of the psychological damage that the city inflicts on its inhabitants. It has destroyed light, space and air, and turned sunshine into a special privilege. The depressing shadow of massed tall buildings with their bitter downdrafts on December afternoons generates a coldness of the spirit that is the New Yorker's characteristic winter malaise. (The flossy Fontainebleaus of Florida have bloomed as therapy.) Critic Lewis Mumford long ago labeled New York's "luxury" apartments, with their cramped quarters and sunless rooms, "super-slums," an appellation that they have earned with renewed vigor since the war.

PSYCHOLOGICAL discontent rises proportionately with the building's size. In office skyscrapers, the 5 o'clock crowd waits sullenly for elevators, to be packed in like produce and spilled out onto a street jammed with fellow escapees to the suburbs. In spite of the over-praised lighting systems that supposedly provide "daylight glow" in windowless interiors, complaints continue to be heard from personnel who still long for a glimpse of sky—oblivious to statis- *(Continued on Page 69)*

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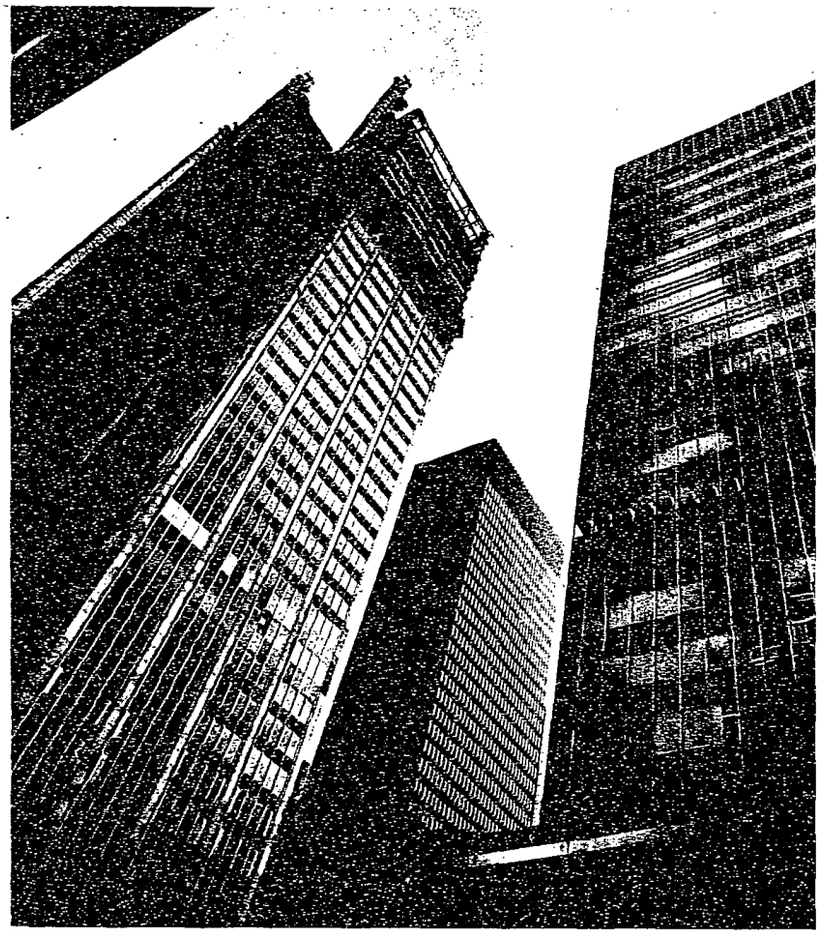

RACE TOWARD THE CLOUDS—With the city's building activity approaching $7,700,000,000 a year, skyscrapers continue to rise at a record rate. Manhattan's avenues are a combination of massive glass facades and noisy new construction. Above, left to right, The First National City

The Skyscraper

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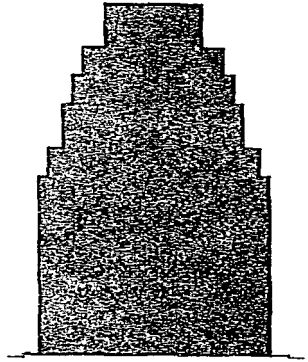
tical and physiological "proof" that they no longer need it. Man can no longer relate to these giants with dignity, as he has been able to with the smaller-scaled architecture of the past. Perhaps the most appalling characteristic of the skyscraper is its inhumanity.

IN ANSWER to the charges of overcrowding and dehumanization, investors, builders and architects reply that the skyscraper is an economic inevitability, and that their job is only to build buildings, not to run the city or its people. They are not guilty, they say, if these structures place overwhelming pressures upon urban patterns of transportation. The commercial builder concentrates on filling the available space for the greatest possible financial return. His architects have become technical specialists in real estate by the square foot, forgetting what they ever knew about design and urban planning. All are quick to stress the economic facts of New York life: on expensive Manhattan land anything but a big building is a losing proposition.

It is a fact that the big building is a necessary and desirable instrument of big business. The more concentrated the quarters of a corporation, the more efficient its operation will be.

Moreover, the massing of these buildings makes it possible for related industries and services to group together, for easy and profitable communication, to provide the kind of valuable personal and corporate interchange that is called "confrontation" in the jargon of the business world. Some of the companies that moved



WEDDING CAKE—The profile of a typical New York bulk building.

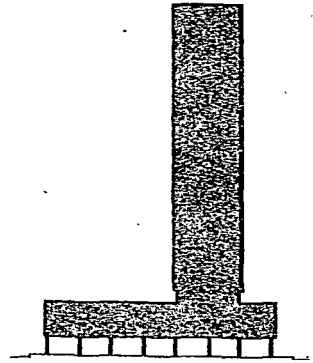
out of New York after the war, following the popular theory of decentralization, which promises ideal corporate existence in idyllic country surroundings, have since moved back, in spite of big-city pressures and problems.

As for the charge of ugliness, the developers and their architects reply that the city's present zoning requirements make it difficult to build a profitable building that is also good-looking. These regulations state that any building that fills its lot may rise straight only to a certain height, then it must be set back before it can rise again —to guarantee light and air to its neighbors. In effect, the law specifies a shape—an empty "wedding cake" mold—into which the builder may push his structure until the mold is filled. By filling the mold completely, he makes the greatest profit.

Unfortunately, the "wedding cake" mold is extremely homely, but the law that dictates it is the real architect of the city's buildings. A straight tower or a soaring shaft, like the Seagram Building, slices off the profitable sides of the cake, leaving only the center piece. Needless to say, this kind of esthetic altruism does not appeal to the speculative builder.

THESE conditions are clearly demonstrated in Lever House and its neighbor, 400 Park Avenue. Lever gave up many square feet of floor space that would have fitted into the legal cake mold in favor of a smaller building with a simple, handsome shape: a slim vertical tower set on a low, horizontal base, open at the ground floor for a landscaped plaza.

The building at 400 Park bears a superficial resemblance to Lever House in the green glass panels of its walls, but the similarity ends right there. A standard product of



SLICED CAKE—A tower above an open plaza cuts off rentable space.

the present law, it hiccups its way upward, tight against adjacent buildings, squat and square below, zigzagging uneasily above. Its undistinguished commercial profile is a striking contrast to Lever's slender architectural distinction.

At present, better design can be achieved only through this kind of financial sacrifice. Lever House, the Seagram Building, the Pepsi-Cola Building and the new Union Carbide headquarters — all prestige structures on Park Avenue — are exceptional examples in which rentable space has been given up voluntarily by building less than the law allows. More distinguished architectural forms, sun-filled plazas and spacious settings are some of the desirable effects achieved by this deliberate flouting of urban economics. However, the ordinary builder or investor has no desire to sacrifice rentable space.

IN THE face of these problems, is there any solution, any hope for New York? It is self-evident that no city can build so much, so fast, with such splendid selfish individualism, without distressing results. It is also obvious that something must be done if New Yorkers are to exist in any comfort or serenity with the new massive construction.

The ideal solution—the totally planned city—is an obvious impossibility for a metropolis that is already vastly overbuilt. Visions of sensibly located industrial, commercial and residential areas with adequately calculated services, balanced neighborhoods and city-wide projects of coordinated architectural excellence must remain the dream of the planner who starts from scratch, presumably in a wilderness.

Fortunately, there are some

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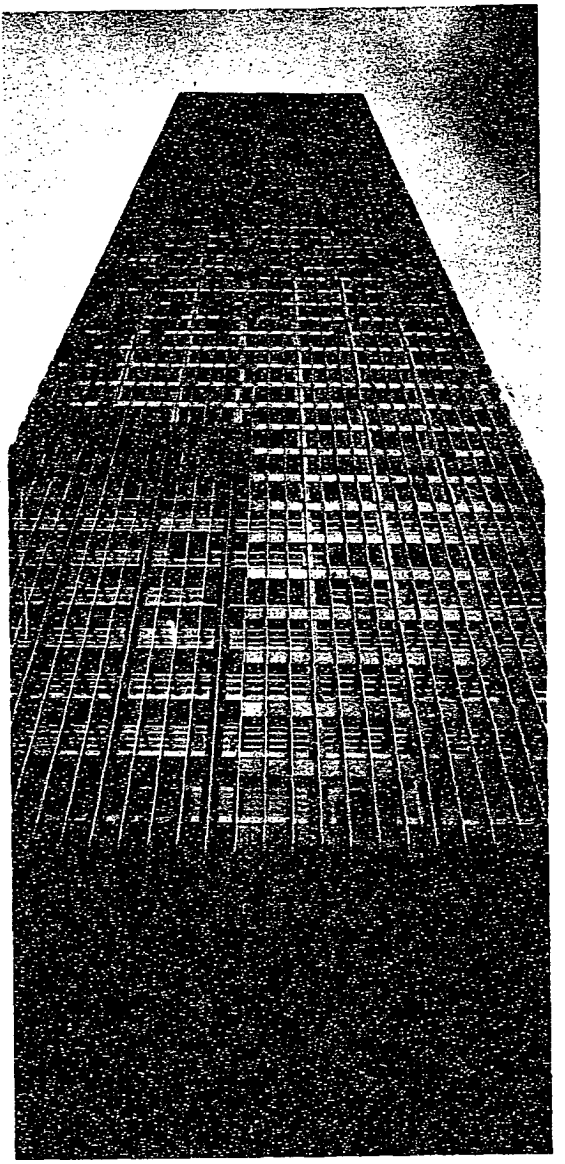
answers within the realm of possibility. New York's present building regulations, embodied in the patched and repatched zoning law of 1916, have been restudied over the past twelve years, and a revised code is now awaiting approval by the city's Board of Estimate. The new law would provide a powerful weapon against further disorder and congestion. By putting a limit on the bulk of all new buildings, and by requiring more open land in new developments, it would help to check future overcrowding. The existing zoning law would permit a theoretical population of 55 million in New York; the new law plans for a maximum of 11 million.

MOST professional city planners, however, do not think that building laws alone can do the job. They point to the necessity of an over-all, long-term civic scheme to coordinate the growth of buildings with transportation and services; the startling fact is that New York has no such plan. They are dismayed that no architect sits on the City Planning Commission. They attack the illogic and impracticality of locating a building of skyscraper magnitude according to economic expediency and personal whim, without considering it as an integrated part of the growth and functions of the community.

Victor Gruen, one of the city's most active architect-planners, involved in urban renewal projects across the country, says: "The developers and architects of the big buildings are only victims of circumstance. The real fault lies in the fact that this largest city in the nation still has no master plan, that we permit hit-or-miss construction, that we are not concerned with the separation of various types of traffic, that legislation offers no encouragement to good developers, but, on the contrary, encourages fullest speculative exploitation of the land.

"The villain, therefore, is not the big building itself, but the official attitude toward environmental planning."

PHILIP JOHNSON, co-architect with Mies van der Rohe of the Seagram Building, agrees.



SHAFT—The Union Carbide Corporation Building on Park Ave.

"The fault is less in the buildings than in their distribution. There is no reason, for example, why the garment district should be next to the theatre district. It should be in New Jersey. What would it cost—$3,000,000?—to move it?" he asks, sweeping it expansively across the river.

"We need large-scale planning and the exercise of the power of eminent domain, to condemn and move what should be moved, to distribute the city's functions properly. But that would be called creeping socialism, and we can't do it."

The problem of making big buildings handsome is perhaps more easily solved. We must have a higher standard of performance among architects, and we must have a greater public awareness of standards of design. We need more qualified public criticism of major structures, and we might even profit from interested architectural vigilantes, like the small, dedicated group of London students who call themselves "Anti-Ugly Action," providing lively demonstrations against buildings of questionable merit.

Their admirable purpose is to awaken the public—"dozing away quietly while the architects and developers heap rubbish on its head"—to a genuine and informed interest in the quality of urban construction.

Architects themselves cannot practice on a higher level until their clients are converted. Fortunately, big business is discovering the fact that good architecture can create a favorable "corporate image" for the public. Park Avenue from Forty-seventh to Fifty-ninth Street is lined with impressive "corporate symbols"; the Time-Life Building is a notable addition to the Rockefeller Center complex, and Chase Manhattan is erecting a dignified tower in the Wall Street area.

THE proposed new building code could make it considerably easier for a good architect to sell a profit-conscious client better design. The rea-

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son is that provisions of the code would offer a "bonus" of extra tower space for a builder who left open ground space —that is, the limit on the bulk of the building would be waived to a degree. Good architecture would no longer be a losing proposition.

There is no real reason why, in theory, a skyscraper cannot be a good-looking building. The neatness and simplicity of modern structural design, with its emphasis on new materials and visible techniques, has an inherent "skin and bones" beauty with a great potential for art.

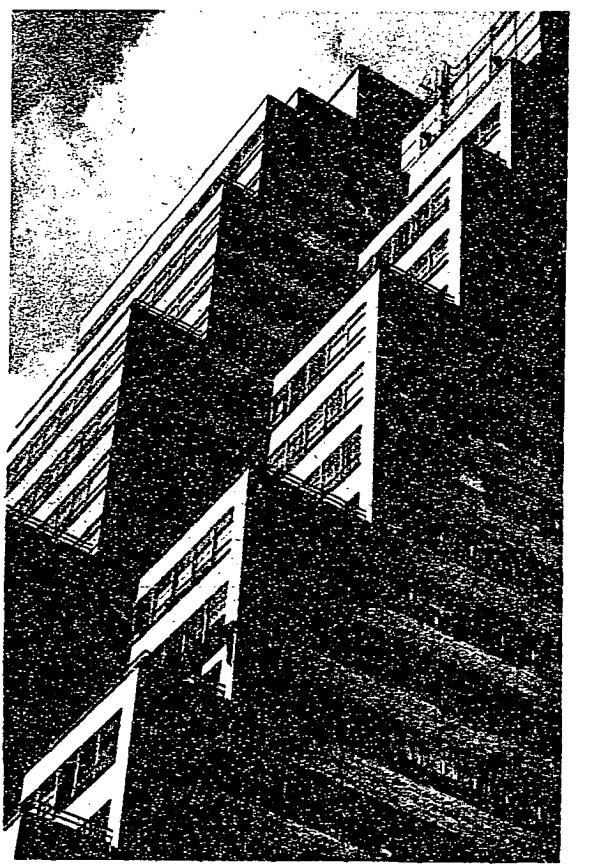
THERE is cleanness, lightness, serenity and sense in the best of the new buildings. There is elegance, and even opulence, in the use of rare marbles, rich bronzes and exotic woods in combination with steel and concrete, with fine silks, soft carpets and warm colors in luxurious interiors. Even the glass walls, still so coldly offensive to many, provide a desirable lightness and brilliance in their transparency, color and capacity for reflection. The same amount of solid masonry would bear down on the spectator with inescapable mass and weight; the new buildings can lighten the city's canyon-streets physically and psychologically.

However, there are some who think that the best solution to the skyscraper problem is just to stop building them. One man who worries about their effect on people and cities, Thomas H. Creighton, editor of the professional journal Progressive Architecture, makes the wistful suggestion that when the site of the proposed Grand Central City project is cleared it would make the finest open green plaza in the world.

"Why," he asks, "should this great, potentially beautiful hole in the middle of Manhattan be plugged with the world's largest cork?"

"There is no reason, really," adds Philip Johnson, "why we should have tall buildings at all. We don't need them; we *will* them. We build them only because we want them. With proper planning and distribution of the city's functions smaller buildings could do the job. Tokyo has little over seven stories; Paris has one skyscraper. The high building is just American arrogance."

WHETHER it is arrogance or necessity, however, it poses a peculiarly American problem. In a city of beauty, like Rome, we take the quality of its buildings for granted. In New York, we accept commercial mediocrity. We shall see little improvement in the huge structures that have become the city's trademark until we face the fact that they must contribute order, dignity and architectural excellence to the city scene. Only then will the skyscraper be, as Louis Sullivan first called it, "a proud and soaring thing."



SETBACKS—Standard Brands Building, Madison at Fifty-eighth.