

A Code for 20th Century

Revised Building Rules Could Bring Beauty to New York—or New Abuses

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The new building code proposed for the city would bring the architecture of the 20th century to New York. It could be the source of vastly improved architectural standards, or a new round of abuses by speculative builders.

At present, it promises the kind of superior modern design

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and construction that have been outlawed by an obsolete code that has not been revised for 30 years. Dur-

ing those years, an international structural and stylistic revolution has taken place. Few of its innovations can be built here. Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum required six design revisions and the granting of exceptions to the New York code by the Board of Standards and Appeals before it could be built at all. Materials and design did not conform to regulations.

Eero Saarinen's T.W.A. terminal at Kennedy International Airport, a soaring, bird-like concrete enclosure, was built only because the Port Authority, a bistate agency, has its own code and is not bound by the city's requirements. Thin shell concrete construction of this type is not permitted under the present city specifications.

Bus Terminal Design

The same is true for the dramatically engineered reinforced concrete trusses of the Port Authority bus terminal at the Manhattan end of the George Washington Bridge. The terminal is the work of the noted Italian designer, Pier Luigi Nervi. The World Trade Center, another Port Authority building now in working drawings, will use new structural techniques in steel and concrete that the present code would not allow.

A temporarily eased code for World's Fair buildings permitted a cable-hung structure and a prestressed concrete tower for the striking New York State pavilion. These are accepted new techniques that could not be used in the city today.

A list of the architects and engineers who could not build their concepts in New York would be a roster of all the great, innovating designers of our time. Their work is exiled from the city under the current regulations. So is great architecture, with few exceptions.

The revised code would change all that. The esthetic possibilities and the implications for the urban scene are staggering. Both public and private building would be affected.

As one example, a structure such as Shea Stadium could have taken advantage of daring

and dramatic uses of reinforced concrete to produce a spectacularly handsome sports arena and a genuine landmark. Like almost everything else built in New York under the present code, it turned out to be predictably humdrum.

The new materials and methods of construction that would be permitted under the revised code are responsible for the appearance and style of today's best buildings all over the world. They summarize the skill and spirit of our time.

However, these techniques do more than promote new styles. They are usually more efficient and frequently more economical than older methods, and they offer a flexibility and range of practical design solutions unknown in New York.

Bonuses in Savings

In addition to greater structural and engineering latitude, updating requirements for heating, plumbing and wiring and coordinating all city functions in the Department of Buildings that are now scattered among 16 offices, will help the architect to control and execute improved designs. Faster, cheaper, better and more beautiful buildings could be the new code bonuses.

But what could be, and what will be, are often two different things in New York. Building codes are not all that shape the city's architecture. Zoning codes and economics are equally important.

The new zoning code that went into effect four years ago is a case in point. Formulated to offer the greatest range of esthetically desirable solutions, it has, like the old zoning, been reduced to a maximum profit mold. Investors have figured out the zoning envelope, or building shape, that contains the greatest rental square footage, and are rubber-stamping it all over Manhattan.

In the same way, many observers fear that innovations of the new building code will be adopted by speculative builders for financial benefits rather than for design opportunities. Like zoning, its possibilities will be calculated in economic rather than in urban terms. What is cheaper or more expeditious may not always be the most attractive or suitable solution.

Provisions for excellence do not guarantee its attainment. Good building cannot be legislated. The city's architectural standards will still rely on men of talent and conscience, who will at least be able to commission a better building without knowing that creativity is doomed to a bureaucratic death.