

Architecture by Entrapment

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE new General Post Office announced for New York last week will be just about as big as the Pan Am Building laid on end—if anyone would want to do it. Most New Yorkers have a hard enough time accepting it standing up.

The \$100-million post office building will incorporate the burned-out Morgan Annex and cover two full blocks bounded by 28th and 30th Streets and Ninth and Tenth Avenues. It will contain 2.5 million square feet of space, a truck terminal and \$17-million worth of mail-handling machinery and will be, naturally, the biggest post office in the world.

On its completion in 1974, all mail-handling activities will be transferred from the neighboring General Post Office built by McKim, Mead and White from 1911 to 1913, in the years when classicism sprang triumphant from the brows of the Pennsylvania and Grand Central railroads.

The old post office's 20 pink granite Corinthian columns topping 31 broad steps were meant to match Penn Station, a recent casualty of progress. The two-block architecture inscribed with Herodotus's tribute to Persian couriers undaunted by snow, rain, heat or gloom of night provides uplift for Madison Square Garden fans now.

With the announcement of the new post office, the old one started on its inevitable route to obsolescence as Federal surplus property. It has been announced that the General Services Administration will eventually take over the unused space for other purposes or disposal.

The old structure is not a great McKim, Mead and White building, but even bad McKim, Mead and White is better than almost anything that replaces it today. If it is ambiguous, and even a little silly, about the uses of classical culture for standardized spaces, it at least tries to suggest that someone was thinking about building for mechanized modern needs in a cultural context. Its sham is transparent, but it clings to 25 centuries of civilized thought and art.

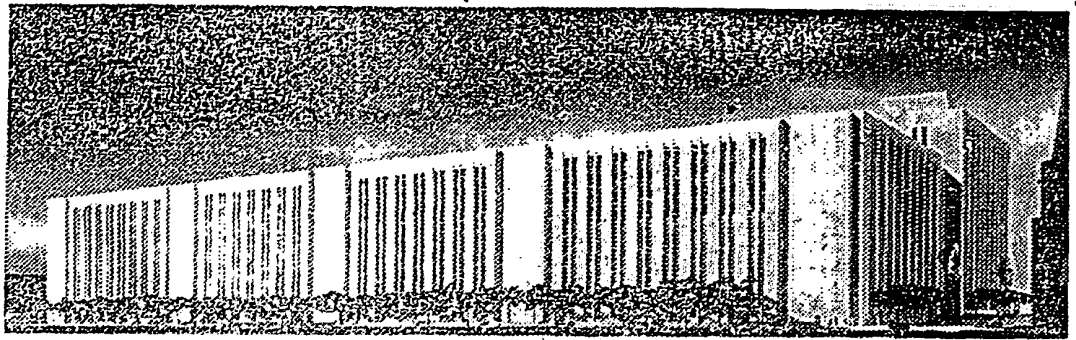
The building that will replace it has been designed by the firm of Edward Durell Stone and Associates, which bows, and sometimes trips, toward classicism in its own way. Also on the job are Frederic R. Harris, Inc., engineers, and Ames Associates, architects-engineers. According to Postmaster General W. Marvin Watson, the new General Post Office will "enrich the architectural splendor of this great city."

That is extremely doubtful. The building is far more notable for size than splendor, and it is questionable whether it can be called architecture at all. If it is, it is the architecture of entrapment. As a case history of this increasingly common genre, it is worth exploration.

Modern mailhandling is a highly technical process and the Post Office spent about three years analyzing and programming the building's functions. By the time the architects began, the site and the program were fixed. Another requirement was keeping and using the burned-out structural shell of the Morgan Annex, which occupies half the land.

Given the site, the program, the old building and the restrictions of New York zoning and building codes, design choices shrank noticeably. Dreams of a facade massed in terms of interior functions, and even of landscaping, died quickly as it became necessary to push out to the farthest limit and ultimate possible building line to get the required space and size.

More than half the height



Model of the new \$100-million General Post Office for New York.
Just about as big as the Pan Am Building laid on end

of the building, including two floors below ground, is a mail truck terminal, with two ramps. The idea of expressing the ramps for exterior interest and drama also died quickly. By the time the entire zoning envelope was filled to the last corner there was nothing to be expressed except one small segment of the ramp, which might have offered, at most, a chisel curve.

The floors of the new building had to be tied to the floors of the old building to accommodate a horizontal operation. A "tower" of offices in the annex had to be retained. Given permission, finally, to unite the new and old structures "architecturally," the designers were limited in exterior height and treatment by floor levels and fenestration patterns of the existing annex. Option after option was eliminated. The trap closed in.

The architect's answer is a packaging job. This is not surprising, since the Stone office has an established predilection for neo-classical candy boxes for a variety of functions. The solution decided on here was to wrap everything neatly in endless matching facades, like a kind of striped wallpaper, hoping to give the building "dignity."

Interestingly, or rather, uninterestingly, nothing that goes on inside is in any way discernible outside. In fact, the building's vertical stripes conceal predominantly horizontal functions. It gift-wraps every activity from trucking to clerical in a bland, homogeneous container. The top to bottom window strips change from glass to metal louvers halfway down the 28th Street side, to disguise the truck terminal floors. It is an exercise in camouflage.

There is an effort to pretty up the package. For scale and detail, the buff brick is stepped back at the top and bottom of the window strips and paneled between the windows and on vertical windowless sections that cover stair towers. A fringe of trees is indicated to soften the bottom, which consists of four blockfronts of running, boring identical facade.

The result is a depressing monolith. Its scale is crushing and it suggests nothing so much as a throwback to Washington's weak semi-classicism of the 1930's. It does not even have the simple, direct banality of the commercial construction that provides a machine for making money in, without pretensions. This is a machine to sort mail in, tricked up with skin-deep pseudo-monumentality, a factory in false face, a building in drag.

Ironically, the Post Office decided to move all its mail-handling functions to the new building after the design was finished, so the prepackaged contents of the package will be changed after all. The resolution of truck traffic is a promising feature, with all mail loading to be off-street on 29th Street, which runs through the center of the building like a tunnel. Mail

processing should be vastly improved.

But one is left with some uneasy thoughts about "dignity." A working structure can have dignity; even beauty. Dignity is not the denial of everything a building is or does.

The noted Dutch architects van den Broek and Bakema have built a large department store in Rotterdam with a superb architectural sense of activity, purpose and scale, by showing, or suggesting, a great deal of what goes on inside through its visible forms and features. It is an exciting building that adds life and interest to the city.

The new General Post Office is an embalmed building. Much construction in big cities is trapped into similar solutions by rigid codes

and economics. But is this the only answer?

Whether it is the answer or not New York is getting this particular kind of non-architecture in large doses. Come to think of it, some of the largest are post offices. There is the nearly complete Franklin D. Roosevelt station at 54th Street and Third Avenue, a commercial gift-wrap job of 475,000 square feet with an office tower topping it by Max Urbahn Associates. The "architecture" has been "applied" in panels. There will be another 450,000 square feet in the new Murray Hill station on Lexington Avenue between 31st and 32d Streets. The odds for more architecture by entrapment are even. If we can't have art, there is at least a chance that we can have the mail on time.