

# MARVEL OR MONSTER?

## Grand Central City Is Mass Architecture

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**T**OGETHERNESS, we are told by the family magazines, is the trend of the times. Grand Central City—the world's largest office building, planned for one of New York's busiest commercial sites—will put togetherness on a monumental architectural scale.

This \$100,000,000, 830-foot high fifty-four story building, covering a three-and-a-half-acre plot from Forty-third to Forty-fifth street, spanning Park and Vanderbilt Avenues, will contain 2,400,000 square feet of space and house 25,000 people and 400 cars, with an expected total of 250,000 visitors every day. It is scheduled for erection in 1960-61 on the site of the old six-story Grand Central Building (not to be confused with the familiar campanile-topped New York Central).

The question raised by the record-breaking commercial colossus, and the prospect of its massed architecture and humanity is, "How much togetherness is enough?"

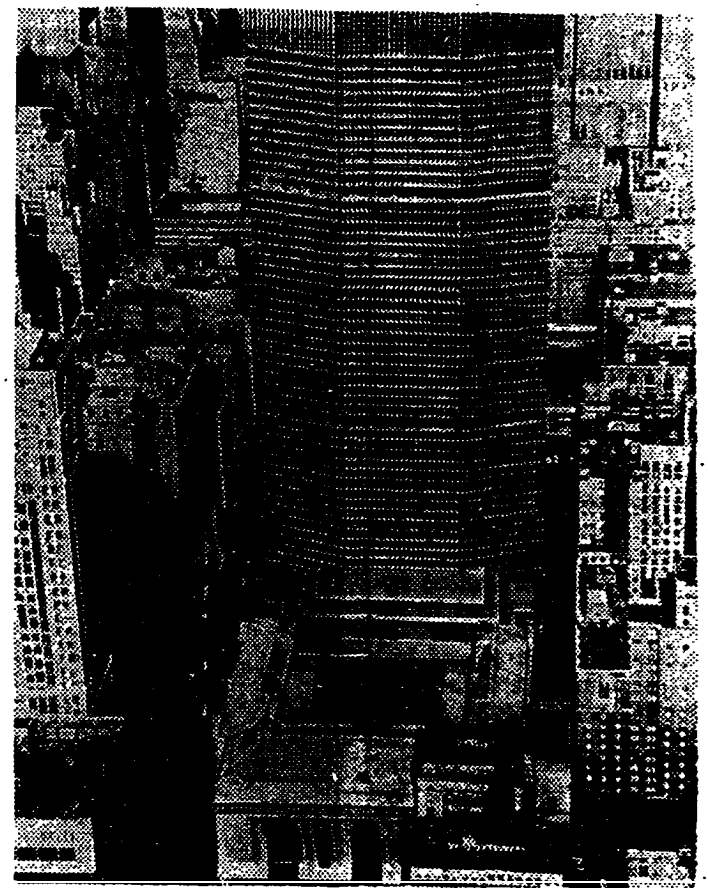
### Major Landmark

By virtue of its size and location, Grand Central City will inevitably be New York's most important structure. In a commendable effort to create a worthy civic monument, builder Erwin S. Wolfson has retained a distinguished pair of architects, Pietro Belluschi, Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Walter Gropius, a revered founding father of the modern movement, to work with his own architect, Richard Roth, designer of many of New York's biggest commercial buildings. There is no doubt that Messrs. Wolfson, Roth, Gropius and Belluschi have designed a major landmark. Whether it is monster or marvel, however, is being hotly debated in architecture and building circles.

### Prickly Problems

The debate became public at a special forum focused on the building, "What Is Good Design and Planning in New York?" held at the New School on Jan. 15. The fact that this outsize structure poses an important and prickly problem for the city was reflected in the arrangement of the discussion. Designers and sponsor, Belluschi, Gropius, Roth and Wolfson, were ranged as a "presentation panel" against a "questioning panel" of critics—architect Victor Gruen, one of America's prime movers in urban redevelopment, Thomas H. Creighton, editor of Progressive Architecture; Peter Blake, associate editor of Architectural Forum, and Paul Zucker, city planning expert.

The presentation panel was modest, to the point of apology. Mr. Wolfson said, "We hope for



**PROPOSED BEHEMOTH**—Scale model of Grand Central City superimposed upon a photograph of area as it exists.

a building that will be a fine artistic achievement, and a fine commercial achievement. My aim has been to seek a balance between esthetics and economics." Mr. Roth added, stressing the common architectural bond between long and short hair collaborators, "Gropius, Pietro and I are really in-laws." Mr. Belluschi admitted, bravely, "Some criticism of this scheme has been heard."

Criticism, in fact, has been loud and clear in the architectural press from the time that the preliminary design was announced. It has been voiced on three counts. First, it is suggested that a construction of this magnitude will bring more people, cars and traffic into an area that is already crowded almost to immobility, creating insoluble problems of physical congestion; second, that the concentration of people in this single building will strain to the breaking point surrounding facilities and an already archaic system of public transportation, and third, that the overwhelming bulk of such a building precludes architectural distinction.

In reply, the sponsors point out that the building contains many of its own services, such as restaurants and shops, so that its inhabitants will not be thrown completely on neighborhood resources. As for the effect on public transportation, Mr. Belluschi remarked:

"When baby grows out of his shoes, you don't cut off his toes—you buy new shoes," adding, with resigned pessimism, "Probably the city will die eventually, anyway." Esthetic criticism is answered by the existence of the two respected architectural consultants.

### Modified Design

But just how effective have they been? The first published scheme from the Roth office, which aroused the initial uproar, was a massive rectangular tower encompassing 3,000,000 square feet of net rentable space—close to the maximum

permitted for the site by current regulations.

The first suggestion was to cut the building's bulk to 1,800,000 square feet. A later compromise settled on the present 2,400,000, which Mr. Wolfson believes necessary for a reasonable return. The axis of the massive tower was turned East-West instead of North-South, to leave more space between it and the New York Central Building, and its surface was faceted for a less heavy look.

### Multiple Restrictions

Restricted by pre-selection of site, by existing columns and foundations and the problem of the railroad underneath, by the need for a maximum number of "premium" floors of large area for the more desirable corporate tenants by New York's crippling zoning laws determining the disposition of a building's mass, by the profitable economic ratio between land and construction costs and rentable square footage, the architects had pathetically little creative scope. They were, as Mr. Gruen put it, "victims of circumstance." Within these limitations, they could only propose certain esthetic refinements of the building's inescapable mass. Their efforts were a continuous compromise, and compromise is rarely art.

Beyond its architectural merits, the basic question remains of whether this kind of building should be constructed at all. Many planners agree that this addition to an overbuilt New York is one more rapid step toward the certain strangulation of the city, and its eventual reduction to total paralysis. However, as long as private enterprise controls city land, use and economics and legislation offer no incentives to improved urban design, such buildings are inevitable, and neither developer nor designer is to blame. The blockbuster building is here to stay, a singular symptom of one of the most disturbing characteristics of our age: a loss of human scale that seems irrevocably tied to a loss of human values.

### A Lack of Plan

Who, then, is the villain of the piece? Mr. Gruen, for many thoughtful observers, provides the summary:

"It is our official attitude toward environmental planning that is to blame. The largest city in the world has no master plan, permits hit-or-miss building and encourages full speculative exploitation of its land. Ultimately, by our lack of concern, we are all responsible."

The one bright spot in the picture is the serious consideration that this major commercial edifice attempts to give to architectural esthetics. Whether the result is monumentality or megalomania, however, is still open to debate.