Concertgoers Give Building Life: Architect Uses Men and Materials to Create Motion
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GALA OPENING NIGHT: Philharmonic Hall shortly before the initial concert

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The brilliant audience at the opening of Philharmonic Hall last night witnessed the initiation of a New York architectural landmark.

The overriding criterion of the building's success will be its performance as a concert hall —acoustically and in audience accommodation. Unless these factors work well, the hall doesn't work at all.

But Philharmonic Hall is a large and significant structure and the first step of an even larger and more significant development for the city—the 14-acre program of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. This makes it a work of particular impact.

Even without its setting, the new hall, designed by Max Abramovitz, is impressive and handsome. Getting to it is still a hazardous obstacle race through the gritty chaos of construction. Public areas are reasonably complete except for the large hanging constellation in the Grand Foyer by the sculptor Richard Lippold. The crucial auditorium was "tuned" by acoustical engineers at practice sessions.

Unpredictable Factors

Unfortunately, there is no way of "tuning" a building like this for the rest of its performance: the way it handles the people who fill it, the visual and spatial satisfactions that it must present to its occupants, the functions and pleasures of entrance, promenade and motion, as well as the provision of a certain number of seats; in other words, the manner in which it comes to life.

For such a building is complete and, unlike other buildings of a less special social and performance character, can be evaluated only when it is alive and in action. The architect's gamble in this respect is immense, since no advance yardsticks of judgment are available, as they are to the acoustical engineers. Only when the building is put to its purpose does the architect sense whether he has won or lost.

The effectiveness of the building as a civic monument, however, is immediately apparent.

It is beautiful, and its structure has a great deal to do with its beauty. The taper of the columns conforms to the lines of stress of their reinforced concrete, heaviest at the first-floor crossing, slimmest at the bottom and the top. Also following the structural load, this crossing is treated as a gently curving arch. The columns, forming an arcade, are faced in creamy travertine, and with the glass-walled interior space soar grandly to a 50-foot-high roof. The scale, the proportions and the modeling of this exterior have unusual finesse and elegance, as well as a delicate strength.

Just in back of the arcade a second set of columns encloses the glass cage that contains the Grand Foyer and three levels of promenades that are wrapped around the outside of the auditorium. The orchestra is entered through the foyer and the upper seating levels are entered through the promenades. All these public spaces are visible from the street.

If the building is serenely handsome by day, it takes on a remarkable beauty at night. Mr. Abramovitz has won his gamble. From the outside, the drama of light, movement and color, seen through the glass walls, enclosed by the great tapered frame, makes the structure a spectacular success in action.

It is the difference between a still and a motion picture: when the audience emerges from the auditorium onto the tiered promenades, movement flows through the huge open foyer, on every level, filling the structure with a warm, steady stream of animation and color. This is the building's life blood. It is an effect at once simple, subtle and complex; its practical and esthetic manipulation is a notable architectural achievement.

Only in the Guggenheim Museum can one see a similar union of people and architecture. There the swirling life-movement along spiral concrete ramps makes a memorable organic interior of fascination so lively that the exhibitions, unfortunately, pale. At Philharmonic Hall, the architecture serves, rather than usurps, the function of the building.

The transition from these muted cream and beige areas to the deep blue and gold auditorium is a dramatic change of mood and key.

Three gracefully sweeping golden tiers above the orchestra assure full visibility throughout the house. Suspended from the ceiling is the modern engineer's answer to the varied requirements of today's concert halls: a partly movable screen of individual hexagonal panels called "clouds," gold covered, with jewel-like center lights.

From below, the installation is visually successful; from the upper levels it is an obtrusive mass of mechanical gear, something neither architects nor engineers seem able to overcome. Except for this jarring note, there is the traditional theatrical air of rich and elegant architecture that somehow gives the vast hall a surprising intimacy. This air is difficult to create within the severe simplicities of modern design, and here Mr. Abramovitz just manages to achieve it.

The stage is set; the architect has broken ground and established standards for Lincoln Center in more ways than one. The performance begins. Only now can we know whether the building is really great.