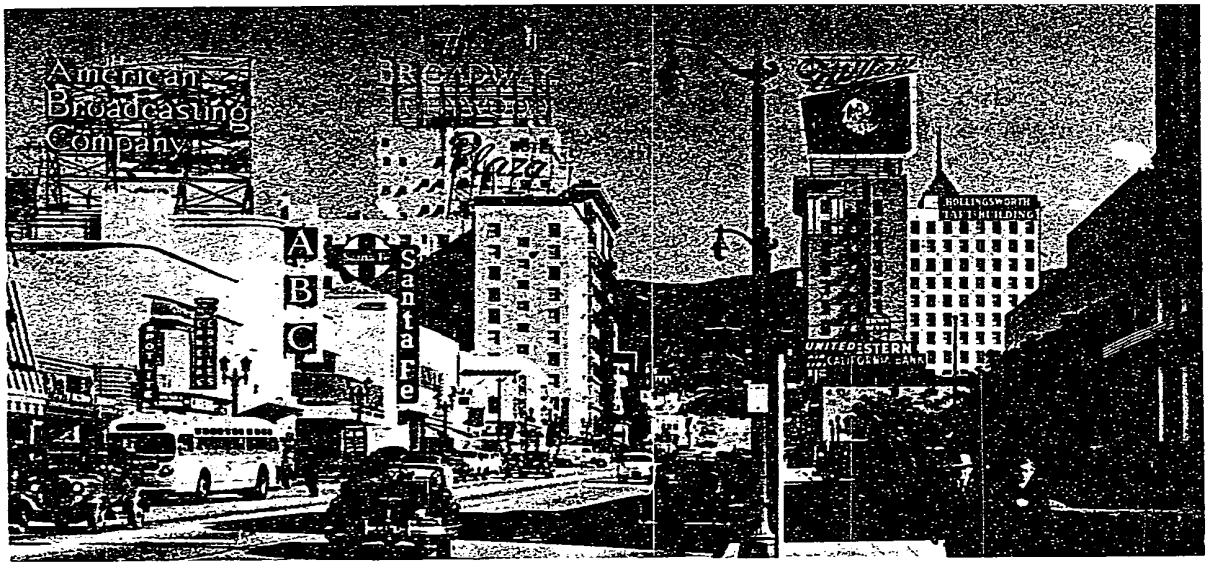
'DISTURBING' ARCHITECTURE



CHAOS—The sad, cheap confusion of so many of our urban areas is ultimately distressing to the viewer. This is a scene in Hollywood.

'CALMING' ARCHITECTURE

OLD-WORLD CHARM—The ordered

MONOTONY—Many builders fail in their use of new techniques and produce a depressing sameness, as in this Madison Avenue building.

NEW-WORLD CHARM—Architectural

The Art We Cannot Afford to Ignore (But Do)

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN a country of bustling cultural consciousness, where exhibitions of painting and sculpture bring out rib-crushing crowds and museums compete with major league baseball, architecture is the forgotten art. This does not mean that the architect isn't busy, or that building isn't booming. In the years since World War II, New York has added more than 100 new structures totaling 35,272,000 square feet of space (previous record: 30,400,000 square feet in the years of 1925-33). On a national scale, construction has risen to a yearly average of approximately $47 billion, and present predictions, based on growing population and continuing prosperity, estimate a further rise of more than $20 billion in another decade.

What we fail to remember, however, is that this huge body of contemporary construction is more than just building—it is also architecture. And architecture, because it serves primary practical needs, is a most important art. Considering its importance, and the sheer size of its present production, it is surprising how little attention we pay to i And yet the more we build, the more we crowd our cities with new construction and alter our environment, the more important architecture becomes to all of us.

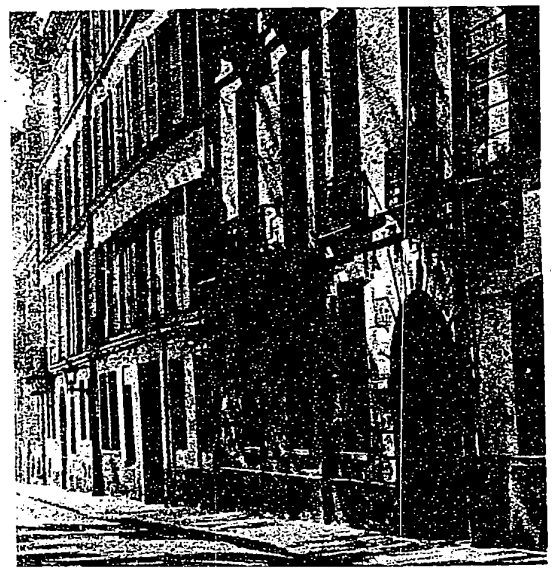
For architecture is not only essential—it is inescapable. This is a man-made world, and the pattern of our existence follows an inexorable architectural routine. We spend most of our lives in buildings—houses, offices, schools, churches, hotels, motels, theatres, restaurants, shops and stores—and our mental and physical well-being is influenced in large part by how efficiently these buildings perform. When we are not engaged in the pursuit of profit or pleasure inside these structures, we are traveling from one to the other on skyscraper-jammed city avenues or builder-created suburban streets. Our longer voyages are hemmed in at both ends by the architecture of transportation—railroad terminals, airport buildings, dock shelters and bus stations. Each of these buildings affects us in terms of its function (how well it works), its esthetics (how well it looks), and its relationship to other structures and to the community as a whole.

With curious illogic, our indifference to architecture increases in direct proportion to the volume of our building, the chaos of our surroundings, and the paralysis of our cities. Precisely because there is so much of it, however, and because its effects are so evident in every aspect of our lives, architecture is the one art that we cannot afford to ignore.

NOR is it really possible to do so. We can't tune it out, like a TV show, or decline to go to it, like a play or a concert, or refuse to read it, like a work of literature, or decide not to see it, like an exhibition of painting or sculpture. There is nothing optional about our presence at the performance of this particular art; the architect has the perfect captive audience.

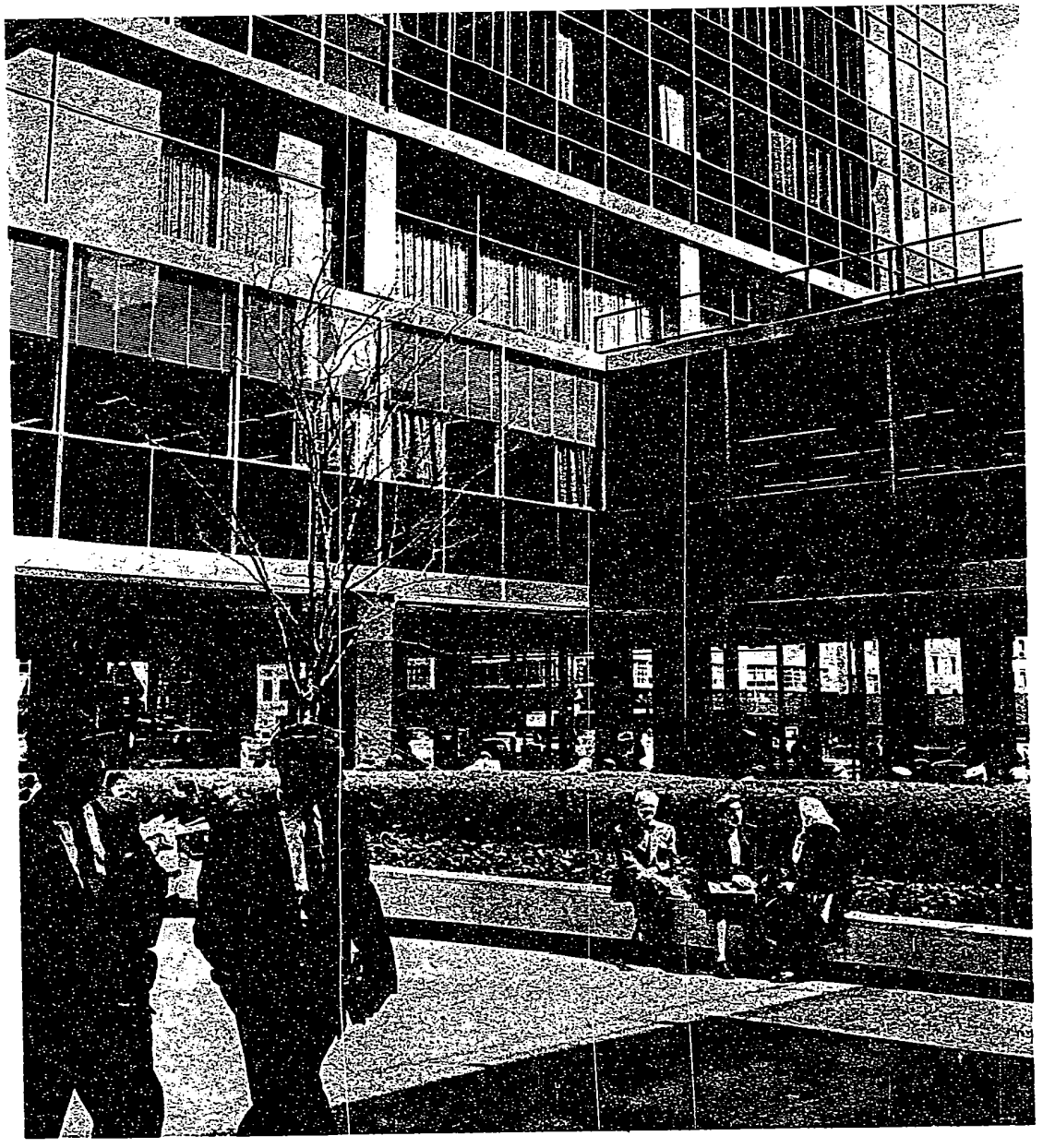
Even when we are not consciously aware of it, we are receiving impressions from our architectural environment, with unavoidable emotional re-

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE, who writes often on architecture, has just been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for study of structural and design advances in the United States.



serenity of the Quai d'Orleans in Paris delights the eye.

elegance distinguishes this handsome street in Salem, Mass.



NEW LOOK—Lever House is a superior example of modern materials and methods used to create a pleasing atmosphere.

Since architecture has an enormous effect on the mind and spirit of man, it is surprising, says an observer, how little attention we pay to it.

sults. Advertising's latest and most controversial gimmick—the use of subliminal perception, where the visible message is flashed so briefly and repeatedly that the viewer, unaware of seeing it at all, absorbs it on the lower level of consciousness and reacts by rushing forth to buy popcorn or beer—is nothing new to architecture. For centuries, man has been receiving subliminal impressions from his surroundings. Every time he walks down the street he is wide open, on this marginal level of perception, to the messages of his environment. Even with his mind on other matters he is recording, without actually realizing it at the moment, the chaos and disorder of the architectural scene, or its attractions and amenities.

This impact may set up in him a pervading sense of discomfort or tranquility, thereby becoming an influential element in his state of contentment or frustration. And since substandard, rather than superior architecture, is today the norm, this under-the-skin perception is not the least of the contributing factors to our notorious twentieth-century tensions.

THE unique ability of architecture to soothe, stimulate or distress the inner man is being increasingly recognized, particularly when profit is involved. Business has been quick to realize that no one works well in a hair shirt, and that the subtle irritations of an inharmonious or indifferent environment have a measurably adverse effect on production and morale.

The pleasant frame of mind that comes from pleasant surroundings has been proved to have a very real value in dollars and cents. Today's large corporations provide architectural amenities specifically designed to induce a state of employe-euphoria.

Lever House is a good example of how one of these giant companies has transplanted architecture into advantageous human terms. In this narrow, glass-enclosed tower no worker is more than twenty-five feet away from the natural light of a window wall. The interiors, although they fall short of the architecture in elegance and taste, create a "glamour" that has the net effect of making every secretary feel like a movie star.

The Manufacturers Trust Company branch at Fifth Avenue and Forty-third Street is another example of successful architectural psychology. A glittering jewel box in which the banking services are deliberately and dramatically displayed through the all-glass facades, it offers a strong emotional lure to the potential customer outside and equally great satisfactions to the client and worker inside.

Although most of the sleek business buildings erected in New York since the war will never rank as great—or even good—architecture, they all have undeniable psychological impact. If they do not suggest beauty, they do add an aura of shining prosperity to the city's staid streets, and none of us is indifferent to the signs and suggestions of affluence. Even the speculative builder, traditionally scornful of art for art's sake, has learned the dollar value of art for business' sake.

THE result has been a considerable increase in more impressive, if not better buildings. If it has led to some flashily superficial architecture (an appropriate motto above the doorway of a new gold-anodyzed aluminum edifice currently *(Continued on Page 86)*

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in construction in midtown Manhattan might be a timely reminder that all that glitters is not gold), it has also created an occasional landmark of significant architectural character, like the classically austere Seagram tower.

For good building means not only the inclusion of desirable physical facilities, but also positive emotional values. Through three-dimensionally perceived arrangements of space, color, texture and form, it has the power to delight and stimulate the senses, and this satisfaction of eye and mind is one of the basic rights —and necessities—of man.

A properly designed house is a source of shelter, pleasure and pride. A handsome business structure—like the new Connecticut General Life Insurance Company headquarters, near Hartford, or the General Motors Research Center, in Detroit—offers obvious advantages in efficient operation, employe satisfaction and company prestige. A well-planned transportation building—such as the St. Louis air terminal—permits a convenient and confident entrance.

THE art of architecture can produce a setting of ordered and attractive serenity (witness the harmonious examples of the past—the homogeneous simplicity of early New England towns, the eighteenth-century elegance of Bath, the impressive unity of nineteenth-century Paris) to create a background that is an aid, rather than a deterrent, to pleasurable living.

If psychology has made us increasingly aware of the subtly influential aspects of environment, we have less understanding of the extraordinary extent to which architecture shapes it. Unfortunately, it is all too often shaped by haphazard, speculative development rather than by the architect, and the result is the sad, cheap confusion of unplanned, inferior building that characterizes most of our cities and towns. It follows quite logically that we are disturbed in such surroundings: not only by the physical discomforts imposed on us, but by the sheer unpleasantness that greets the eye.

Obviously, if the fulfillment of all of our physical and emotional needs is so closely allied to how we build, the responsibility of the architect is very great. He must consider a vast variety of factors, and meet an overwhelming number of specifications and requirements. He is the man of a hundred hats and with each hat he assumes a different personality and designs a different kind of building, for a different set of purposes.

AS a practical man, the architect's primary objective is to provide shelter and the physical facilities necessary for a productive and comfortable existence, within realistic economic limitations. As an artist, he serves a need that is almost as basic as the demand for shelter—the desire for beauty. Sociologically, the architect's work gives form to the living and working patterns of society, in the design and construction of communities. Spiritually, he creates a setting for faith, and in doing so, has given us one of the most remarkable of all architectural achievements — the vaulted drama of the Gothic cathedral.

As if all this were not burden enough, the architect must also set the standards of design. The quality of building and environment are dependent to an awe-inspiring degree on his training, talent and taste. However, pressured as he is by economics, building codes and clients (everything from New York's crippling zoning laws to the business man who wants a Georgian fireplace in his air-conditioned, stainless steel office) he loses many battles; he is too often reduced to the helpless production of mediocrity or worse.

In addition to this commitment to the highest possible level of design, he has a grave responsibility to his own times. Contemporary problems can be served best by contemporary techniques: today's methods of construction and philosophy of design offer the most suitable solutions to twentieth-century needs. They also pose the greatest challenge to the architect's creative abilities, since the past holds no pertinent answers.

Because of the rapid rate of technological advance, the architect must work with an entirely new range of materials and techniques, for unprecedented visual and spatial effects. In spite of the obvious difficulties, he has an unparalleled opportunity to play a part in the development of an impressive new kind of architecture — an experience far more stimulating to both professional and public than that offered by any period of rehashed, revival styles. The art and science of building have never held more promise for the present or the future. It is a promise that cannot be kept, however, until we become more intelligently aware of the important role that architecture plays in our society and acquire a better and more sympathetic knowledge of its aims and standards.

At present, we have little awareness, and less knowledge. The press, which regularly reviews art, literature, theatre, movies, music and dance, ignores architecture, except for building news on the real estate page. Architectural criticism as a standard feature is virtually unknown, in spite of the direct and inescapable impact of architectural production. Superblocks are built, the physiognomy and services of the city are changed, without discussion except in a few of the more sophisticated or specialized journals. Unless a story reaches the proportions of a scandal, architecture is the stepchild of the popular press.

THE fault, however, goes deeper than superficial disinterest: the lack of attention of both press and public stems from a basic defect in our school curricula—the neglect of visual education. (One more serious charge to be added to the unprecedented critical beating being administered to education today!) The ability to see is as important as the ability to read and write, and it, too, must be taught. The training of the eye to perceive and appreciate all the aspects of the world around us, from the accidental designs of nature to the man-made patterns of architecture, is a fundamental factor of learning.

No tacked-on "art appreciation" course, belatedly offered at the college level, can suddenly and miraculously illuminate the world of architecture for us, without this essential visual training. To see clearly is to become aware; awareness awakens interest; interest creates concern. Concern will inevitably lead to increasing critical evaluation of our environment and to the demand for higher architectural standards. Only then will the $70 billion worth of building predicted for 1968 hold any hope of a brave, new world.