Fisher Hall Is Alive With Grace
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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This time they did it right. The new Avery Fisher Hall—new from top to botton, new in structure, shape and style, literally suspended from new roof trusses within the shell of the existing building—is as good to look at as it is to listen to. Acoustics have been its continuing problem since it was built in 1962, and acoustical evaluations will determine its success. But architecture and acoustics are virtually inseparable in this case, and the new hall is a lovely place to be.

Although every form, material, surface inflection and structural technique has been approved by the acoustician, Dr. Cyril M. Harris, the architects, Philip Johnson and John Burgee, have produced a very personal product. This is a sophisticated solution of great elegance and absolutely no gimmickry. It is a completely contemporary design that still lives graciously with precedent; in a sense, it has come home to history.

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Stylistically, this is not a hall that could have been built 14 years ago. No modern architect at that time could accommodate himself to the past esthetically or borrow its technical lesson without being a traitor to the modernist cause. Today architects are increasingly, almost insatiably eclectic, seeking to enlarge their design sensations and experiences.

Mr. Johnson is quick to tick off sources: Austrian baroque for the antique greenish-white walls and ceiling and rich gold leaf trim, the 19th century for the rectangular concert hall shape, classical theater for the procenium-arch and the flat, stacked boxes against three walls.

If there were no other reason to respect these sources, prudence would have dictated the example of successful prototype. No one was about to take a $6.4 million gamble. Three times and you're out. In the matter of concert hall design, old is beautiful, in sight and sound.

And so the architects changed the shape from a modified, curved fan to a straight-walled rectangle (there are 2,747 seats now, where there were 2,790 before, in straight, rather than curved, rows), added the proscenium-arch stage, eliminated the curves of walls and boxes, and altered the contour of the floor. They built everything of solid wood and heavy plaster and battened it all down firmly. This is a "tight" house; there are no "holes." If a slot is left for a retractable fixture it is lined in thick plaster. When the hall is closed for performances it is sealed with lead doors. The new structural legerdemain is by the engineering firm of Amman and Whitney.

All of the gestures to the past have been practical and gracious, but at the same time there is no compromise with the present. This is an unequivocally 20th-century design. Lights glitter, but there are no gift shop chandeliers. Straight lines of clear bulbs make madiant reflections in smooth gold leaf surfaces.

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Walls and ceiling are faceted in a continuous pattern of angled stepped planes of random width and sequence, meant to break and diffuse sound in the same manner as the irregular surfaces and ornament of period styles. Only the gold box fronts are curved. The stage is lined with European oak, "buttoned down" with bright brass-capped screws, for a jeweler's touch.

The gold color is repeated in velour seats, and the balconies have parquet floors. There is no nonsense about vapid "recalls" of the past through tacky design details, and there is no failure of imagination or taste.

A good theater is an event. That is something that Charles Garnier understood and demonstrated with opulent excess a century ago at the Paris Opéra; it is carried out here with sophisticated restraint.

If the new Avery Fisher Hall is a functional design, it is also a beautiful design; it projects glamorous theatricality. This is a setting for people as well as a place for music. Mr. Johnson and Mr. Burgee understand the social-dramatic role of architecture, and New York has finally gained an appropriately cosmopolitan, and major modern hall.