

Architecture: Maritime Union Builds Dream House

Former Wright Student Designs a Battleship for Hiring Halls

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE National Maritime Union has built itself a battleship on Seventh Avenue. The union's new national headquarters and New York offices are housed in a Frank Lloyd Wright-type of building in a city that boasts of only one Frank Lloyd Wright original, the Guggenheim Museum.

At the heart of the new structure are two huge, glass block-walled, intersecting circular hiring halls on the ground floor, from which 1,000 seamen are dispatched every week. These halls are entered from 12th and 13th Streets, but for the landlubber visitor, the way into the solid, off-white fortress, with its sawtooth overhangs making a double row of split portholes above, is through glass doors on the imposing Seventh Avenue front.

He takes a small elevator lined with sea-blue-green mosaics to the sixth floor executive penthouse. The elevator opens onto a 70-foot long, round tunnel, its curved walls continued by the optical device of floor mirrors flanking a sea-green carpet. At the end of the tunnel are a porthole and locked glass doors.

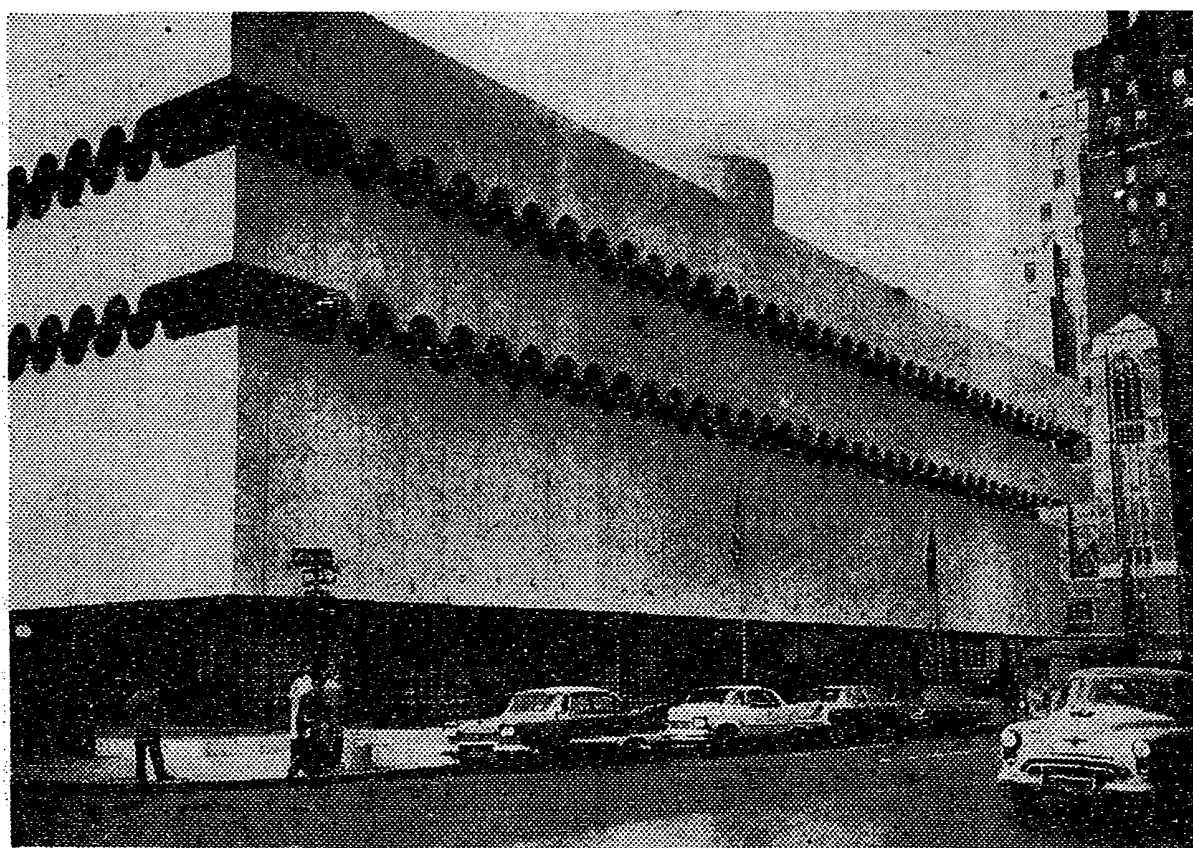
The visitor is checked by a receptionist behind the porthole; the locked doors are buzzed open. The sea-green carpet continues into a large open area with a skylit garden and brook on its long end wall. Custom walnut cabinets divide the space for officers and secretaries. At one end, sea-green gives way to grass-green in President Joseph Curran's circular office. At the other, a private apartment offers sleep-in arrangements for use during strikes, with Georg Jensen accessories.

"When we came off the ships in '36 and '37, ragged hungry and rebellious, none of us dreamed of anything like this," Mr. Curran says. It is now 28 years since the union was founded and the building has been named after him by popular vote.

Mr. Curran's dream house, fully automated and I.B.M. and closed-circuit television-equipped, is already a New York landmark before its formal dedication, which will take place May 4. The staff moved in this month.

It has been designed by a 40 year-old architect and former Frank Lloyd Wright student, Albert C. Ledner of New Orleans. But there is a significant difference between the work of the master and his able disciple.

The Guggenheim Museum is a building of painstakingly poured concrete; a strong,



New quarters of National Maritime Union on 7th Avenue between 12th and 13th Streets



The hiring hall, where seamen wait to sign aboard merchant ships sailing from New York

structural snail. The N.M.U. Building creates its effect of solid concrete by using hung-on attachments — precast panels that face the construction much like a curtain wall. The scalloped edges of these panels make the portholes.

This is not a wall that is integral with structure, as Mr. Ledner originally intended, or as Wright would have done it. The contractor's estimates, which came in \$2 million over the budget for the unconventional design and construction, changed all that. More usual steel and concrete framing techniques were substituted. The outside treatment was applied.

As a result, the scalloped edges became a kind of embroidery, a decorative rather than a structural esthetic.

This may not bother Wright fans, since it is still a Wright-looking building, but it will bother aficionados of other schools of architectural thought very much.

Now that the worst has been said, let it be added that within the Wrightian esthetic, if one accepts it as an overlay, this is a very striking building, with many handsome details. Its architect is talented and conscientious. Its standards of design are high and painstaking.

Even the structural compromise is turned to advantage by the use of all-glass walls on the fourth and fifth office floors behind the portholes, which temper glare and give a two-layered wall of intriguing effects. (For some

reason, most of the occupants on the upper floor suffer from a drawn-curtain syndrome.)

There is no reason why the N.M.U. could not have followed the line of least resistance and added another cheap, dull, routine box with a shiny facade and a big sign to the New York scene. (The six-story building cost \$6.4 million, including land.)

Or it could have treated itself to some Miami flash or the vulgar and ponderous marble banality that is the general level of most union national headquarters in Washington. It decided, instead, to go for architecture. Whatever reservations may be held, New York needs more of those decisions.