

Architecture

Sometimes We Do It Right

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

NEW YORK usually seems to be an all-is-for-the-worst-in-the-worst-of-all-possible-worlds city. But when it is good, New York is very, very good, which is why New Yorkers put up with so much that is bad.

When it is good, this is a city of fantastic strength, sophistication and beauty. It is like no other city in time or place. Visitors and even natives rarely use the words urban character or environmental style, but that is what they are reacting to with awe in the presence of massed, concentrated, steel, stone, power and life. It is a quality of urban greatness that may not solve racial or social tensions or the human or economic crises to which a city is prone, but it survives them.

Right now, in this sense, one small piece of downtown Manhattan is very, very good. For a demonstration of New York at its physical best, go to Broadway between Cedar and Liberty Streets and face east. You will be standing in front of a new building at 140 Broadway, one of the handsomest in the city, and you will not be able to miss the 28-foot high vermilion steel cube that balances on one point in front of it, at the north end of a travertine plaza. The cube is by the sculptor Isamu Noguchi and it was unveiled by the builders of 140 Broadway, Harry B. Helmsley and partners, and the chief tenant, the Marine Midland Bank, with some fanfare this week.

Look to your left (Liberty Street) and you will see the small turn-of-the-century French pastry in creamy, classically-detailed stone that houses the neighboring Chamber of Commerce. To your right (Cedar Street) is a stone-faced building of the first great skyscraper period (pre-World War I through the 1930's).

Move on, toward the East River, following the travertine plaza that flows elegantly on either side of the slender new shaft, noting how well the block size of the marble under-foot scales

the space. Surprisingly, the site and the 52-story tower are trapezoidal in shape.

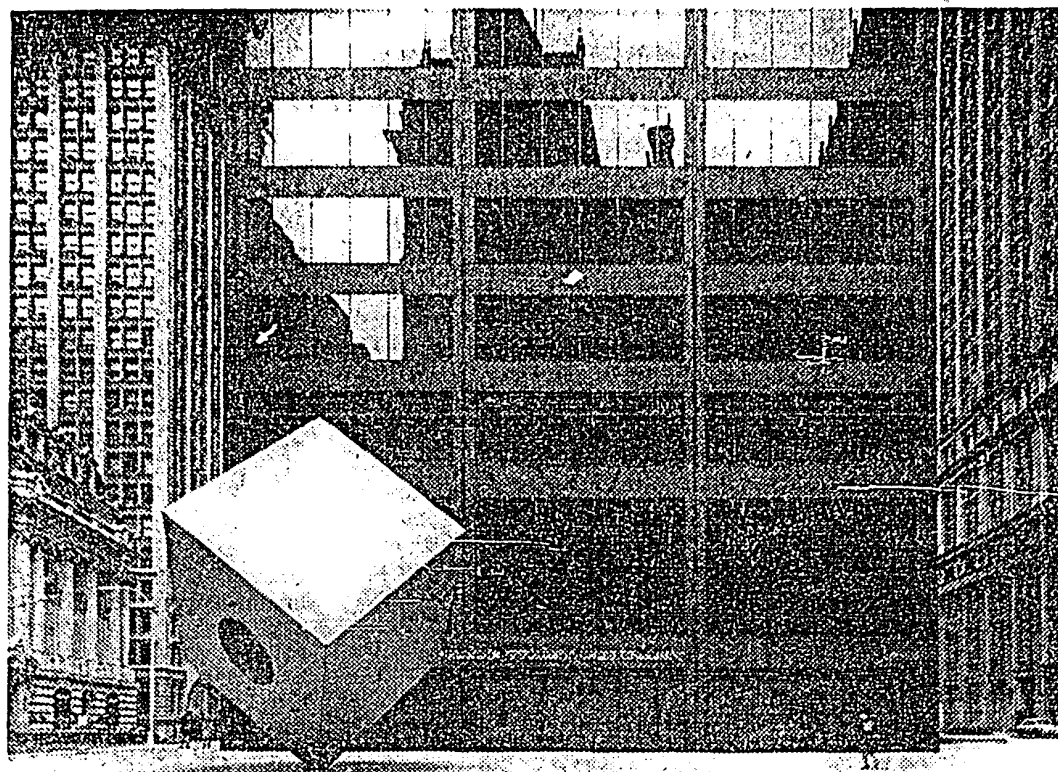
At Broad Street, the 140 Broadway plaza stops and Chase Manhattan Plaza begins. There is an unfortunate wall between them, due to abrupt changes in ground level and the fact that the architects of both buildings, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, had no idea when they did Chase in the early 1960's that they would be doing the adjoining building less than a decade later.

But the open space continues, even with this barrier. Closing it and facing Chase's gleaming 60-story tower across Liberty Street is the stony vastness of the 1924 Federal Reserve Building by York and Sawyer, its superscaled, cut limestone, Strozzi-type Florentine facade making a powerful play against Chase's bright aluminum and glass. A more conventional masonry-faced structure walls the plaza to the south.

There will be still more open space west of 140 Broadway, following the same axis. Just opposite the new building is the U. S. Steel site, where the Singer Building is now in demolition. (With difficulty, like the Astor Hotel.) That landmark loss to New York's skyline will be replaced by a skyscraper by the same architects who have done Chase Manhattan and 140 Broadway, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

The architects and owners have just received approval from the City Planning Commission to adjust the zoning of the two-block site to extend the present pedestrian channel farther toward the Hudson River. The Liberty-Cedar block west of Broadway will be another open plaza, paralleling the existing ones. The new skyscraper will be constructed on the block to the north.

Still farther west, slightly off this axis, will be the giant Trade Center twin towers and plaza. For much of this, underground connections are being planned, a lesson that Rockefeller Center taught and then forgot



140 Broadway with Noguchi sculpture: The urban drama at its best
Ezra Stoller

as it pushed across Sixth Avenue.

The result, a striking slice through one of the densest, most dramatic cityscapes in the world, is a stunning success in terms of urban design. For once, the losses, such as the Singer Building, are at least being balanced by rational gains. For once, there has been intelligent, sensitive capitalization on one of this century's most fantastic urban phenomena. Instead of thoughtless destruction through new construction, there is a calculated relationship between past and present, and between buildings and spaces.

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This small segment of New York compares in effect and elegance with any celebrated Renaissance plaza or Baroque vista. The scale of the buildings, the use of open space, the views revealed or suggested, the contrasts of architectural style and material, of sculptured stone against satin-smooth metal and glass, the visible change and continuity of New York's remarkable skyscraper history, the brilliant accent of the poised Noguchi cube—color, size, style, mass, space, light, dark, solids, voids, highs and lows—all are just right. These few blocks provide (why equivocate?) one of the most magnificent examples of 20th-century urbanism anywhere in the world.

Not the least contribution is the new building, for which Gordon Bunshaft was partner-in-charge at S.O.M. One Forty Broadway is a "skin" building; the kind of flat, sheer, curtain wall that it has become chic to reject. Younger architects, off on a wild, Arthurian search for the *nouveau* picturesque, and an uninformed public that never understood or accepted what was happening, have turned their backs on one of the miracles of modern building: the skyscraper wall reduced to gossamer minimums of shining, thin material hung on a frame of extraordinary strength through superb contemporary technology.

The significance and beauty of this achievement are not dimmed by the instances of its commercial prostitution as the unjustly denigrated "glass box." It is still one of the great developments and most remarkable expressions in all of architectural history from Stonehenge to the present. It has produced some masterpieces and made a lot of commercial building palatable. One Forty Broadway is a commercial building, not a monument. Here the skin is handled with suave expertise.

It is New York's ultimate skin building. The wall is held unrelentingly flat; there are no tricks with projecting or extended mullions; thin and flush, they are used only

to divide the window glass. The metal spandrel facing, in one smooth piece, echoes the placing of structural steel and seeks no "artful" plasticity. The taut, shiny-dark sleekness of matte black aluminum and gleaming bronze glass is an architectural statement of positive excellence as well as a foil for the ornate masonry around it. The quiet assurance of this building makes even Chase look a little gaudy.

What next? Probably destruction. One ill-conceived neighboring plaza will kill this carefully calculated channel of related space and buildings. Seagram was sabotaged by the recent construction to its south; it can happen here. It only takes one opening in the wrong place, one "bonus" space placed according to current zoning (read "business") practice, to ruin it all.

Space is meaningless without scale, containment, boundaries and direction. The fabled massing of the Wall Street skyscrapers has been given masterful urban definition by the architects' ordering of these few blocks of new construction. It has been done by concerned, coordinated effort. This is planning. It is the opposite of non-planning, or the normal pattern of New York development. See and savor it now, before it is carelessly disposed of.