ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE 'PATHETIC FALLACY,' OR WISHFUL THINKING AT WORK

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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The 'Pathetic Fallacy,' Or Wishful Thinking at Work

The subject today is Pyrrhic victories, or, to mix mythology and metaphor, the Architectural Pathetic Fallacy.

The Architectural Pathetic Fallacy is more literal than literary; it is a sad kind of self-delusion in design, full of good intentions and bad results. This particular fallacy operates on the principle that if you are going to put an out-of-scale, out-of-context, discordant structure into a setting where it will be damaging or destructive, you can make it less so by "recalling," or "extracting" the essence or details of the surrounding older architecture. Borrowing from the existing for the new is supposed to make the two incompatible structures compatible.

In actual practice, this is almost always hogwash, with results ranging from well-intentioned bungling to pious hypocrisy. The Architectural Pathetic Fallacy is most frequently invoked to get a bad building put in the wrong place. But it has some obvious virtues. There is the sensible feature of compromise, which appeals to reason and intellect, and is particularly attractive in situations which are fraught with controversy. Because such a "solution" partakes of new and old, champions of both are mollified. One can point to the compromise and say that two buildings "go together" because they share a common cornice line, or related material and color. One is supposed to admire the way the addition "picks up" themes or motifs from its neighbors, no matter how it violates them in its totality.

This kind of design gets high marks from those protecting the integrity of a landmark or the scale and character of a neighborhood. But answers meant to satisfy all camps seldom do, and compromise in architecture can be compared to the work of the committee assigned to design a horse that comes up with a camel.

As design philosophy, then, the Architectural Pathetic Fallacy turns out to be classic false reasoning. As design practice, it is usually a pitiful cop-out that falls between two stools with more of a thud than a crash. I suppose I should make the necessary disclaimer here by saying that it sometimes works; top talent can generate excellence from almost any set of givens. But more often it doesn't, and the reasons are manifold: blockbusting scale and bulk cannot be corrected or much ameliorated by decorative trim; the use of a traditional vocabulary does little more than reveal its current impoverishment; and an illusory approach based on wishful thinking cuts off more creative solutions.

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Which brings us to the case histories of two large, new buildings on Fifth Avenue that were faced with a monumental problem of compatibility in a design and urban context shaped by earlier zoning and a classical, Beaux Arts taste. These are both apartment houses, one at 800 Fifth, at the corner of 61st Street, where the Dodge Mansion stood, and the other at 1001 Fifth, between 81st and 82d Streets on the site of two demolished town houses across from the Metropolitan Museum. Eight Hundred Fifth is newly occupied, and 1001 Fifth is close to completion.

Because both buildings planned to breach the avenue's scale and style, they were highly controversial from the start. Both were designed originally as perfectly routine Philip Birnbaum luxury specials, efficiently laid out to the builders' customary bottom line of marble-trimmed plaster board inside and brick and glass outside. In each case a "prestige" firm was called on to transform the speculative duckling into a suitable swan — Ulrich Franzen & Associates for 800 Fifth, and Philip Johnson and John Burgee for 1001 Fifth. Each resorted, ultimately, to the Architectural Pathetic Fallacy.

Here a little historical digression is necessary. The relationship of past and present has been an architectural dilemma for most of this century. Architects, generally, ignored it, intent on the modernist revolution and doing their own thing. In principle, the modernists rejected all revivals, or copies, of older styles. Compatibility, when considered, was to be achieved only through the most pure modernist design, the relationships restricted to adjustments in scale or selection of material.

Sometimes this was done very well — the Italians, in particular, treated the new structure as a complementary contrast to the old, rather than as a copy of it, in terms of sophisticated oppositions, such as glass against marble, carried out with great dramatic and esthetic skill. But more often the results have been jarring juxtapositions.

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Today, with all the modernist rules being broken in a counter-revolution reputed to be "beyond modernism," the past has become respectable and usable again. A kind of historical eclecticism, or pastiche modernism, is presently in vogue.

Ulrich Franzen didn't go the easy way with 800 Fifth. His first revised design was full of references to the surroundings so abstract that only the architect could know for sure. The building came out as something far jazzier than Philip Birnbaum's simple pragmatism — an approach, incidentally, that is far from being without its own virtues.

The next version was pure Architectural Pathetic Fallacy. It could be said that the completed building was negotiated to death by the city and the community. The result is a pitiful compendium of watered-down mannerisms that are supposed to maintain the integrity of the avenue and relate to adjacent buildings, but speak more clearly of the inflation of costs and impoverishment of crafts in our own time. (See the Hotel Pierre's urn-topped, carved balustrades, and the "balustrade" of holes in the stone with metal rods that are supposed to recall it, or the all-cut-stone facade versus weak trim at the corners.) If there is any achievement here, it is making the bland grotesque.

The "honest" gesture of leaving the false front clearly visible for what it is simply misfires; it is appalling from the side approaches and would have been considerably better if it had been honestly faked. If the neighboring Knickerbocker Club, whose cornice height set the measure of the new building's base, should not survive, anyone would be left wondering what this ambiguous mediocrity was all about. Thus are fallacies compounded.

Mr. Johnson, on the other hand, jumped into historical recall with both feet. Taking his cue from the McKim, Mead & White apartment house on the south, he trimmed his tower with a series of "classical" moldings (which do not relate to the house on the north) in delighted defiance of "modernism," and topped it with a slanted roof that is mansard in front and bare behind.

But the dark gray bay windows and their connecting metal spandrels form strong vertical elements that totally negate these horizontal strips. And the "honest," or tongue-

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in-cheek, gesture of stopping the moldings short of the sides of the building may be amusing for those in the know, but their use just seems unresolved. It does not help that the moldings look like sliced-off Tootsie Rolls.

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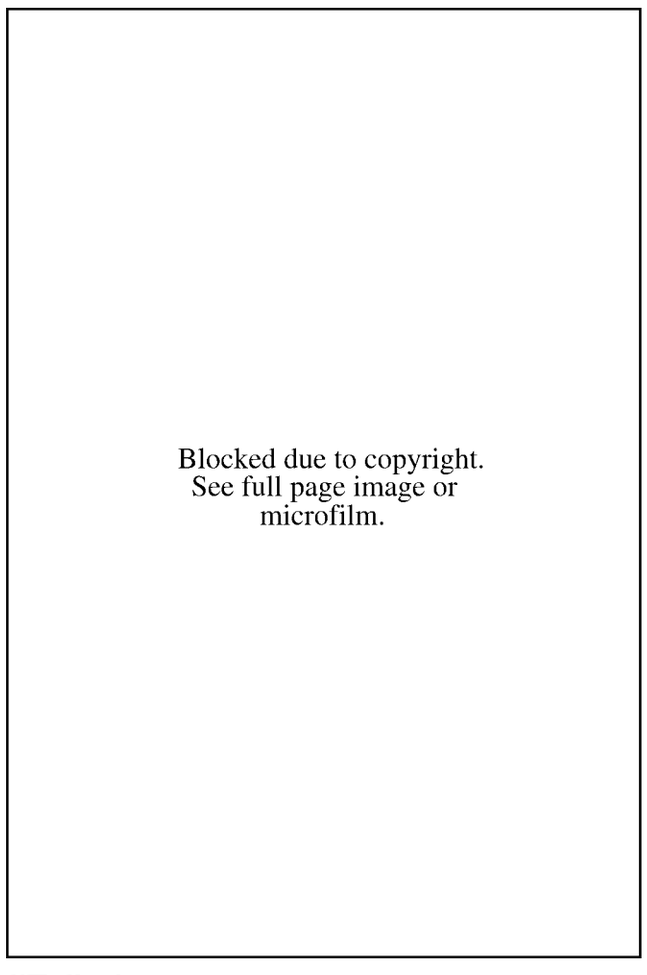
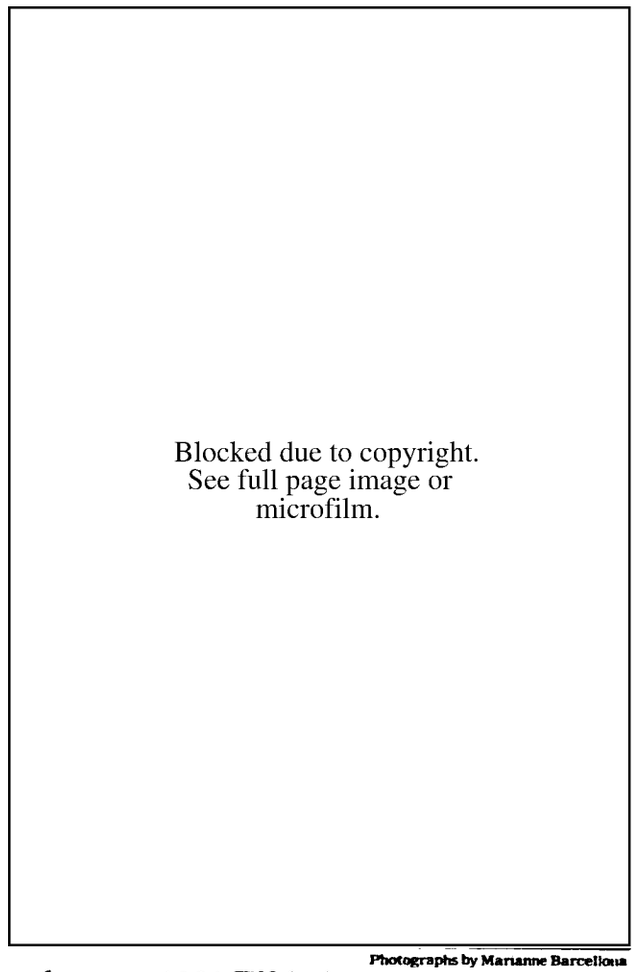
The entrance, however, has the elegant Johnson touch. Designed originally as a Sullivanesque arch — a feature that was abandoned — it has turned out to be the least "reminiscent" feature and the best part of the building. Simple rectangles of intersecting stone and void suggest solidity and openness at once, a currently popular kind of ambiguity that is richly resolved in a much more "modern" treatment than anything else in the building, whatever the source. Actually, it looks as if Mr. Johnson were really designing.

Farther up Fifth Avenue at 86th Street, there is a glass-fronted apartment house built considerably more than a decade ago. No masterpiece, it would probably make Mies blanch, but it has worn extremely well. A facade of double planes of transparent windows and balconies, neatly detailed, continues to please. Moreover, it is nicely compatible with the landmark Carrère & Hastings house at the corner.

It "recalls" nothing. There are no sight gags from Bannister Fletcher; no instant entrapment in the decline and fall of traditional forms. The building speaks quietly of contemporaneity, continuity, and the cultural context of which architecture is a prime indicator. The modernists may have been on the right track after all, even with their hands tied behind their backs. ■





Photographs by Marianne Barcellona

"Fallacies compounded" in two new apartment houses: 1001 Fifth Avenue, at left, opposite the Metropolitan Museum, and 800 Fifth, where the Dodge mansion stood