

A New Era Heralded

Architectural Virtue of Trade Center Expected to Enhance City's Skyline

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

It was big business inside and little business outside at the New York Hilton yesterday as the small-store owners to be displaced by the World Trade Center picketed the formal unveiling of the monumental eight-foot model of the even more monumental 16-acre project for downtown Manhattan.

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Analysis

What they were picketing may turn out to be New York's dominating landmark. The Trade Center's two

110-story towers are taller than the Empire State Building. Seen from any angle, they would overshadow all of Manhattan's celebrated skyscrapers and become the new focus of the city's famous skyline.

The controversial elements of the scheme are human, not architectural. From the design aspect this is not only the biggest but the best new building project that New York has seen in a long time. It represents a level of taste and thought that has been distressingly rare in the city's mass of non-descript postwar commercial construction.

Planning issues are also involved. Mayor Wagner's formal statement, after suitable words of praise, reserved judgment on planning factors still to be resolved: relocation of businesses, tax exemption and traffic patterns.

Transition in Design

But if the human and planning issues can be handled as well as the architectural issues—and many similar architectural problems were mishandled in the gigantic Pan Am Building—the World Trade Center could be one of the city's finest building complexes.

It is a breakthrough in terms of New York's architectural trademark—skyscraper design. It could even signal the second great period of the skyscraper, because the two factors that have limited the height of the tall building until now—construction cost and elevator space—have been solved.

Unlike conventional skyscrapers, supported by internal steel skeletons, the Trade Center's towers are held up by their outer, load-bearing walls, with the help of the inner core for elevators and services. Wall and floor units are efficiently and economically designed for prefabrication and rapid installation.

Esthetics and engineering are mutually dependent, as they must be in the highly technological art of building today, if the Trade Center's appearance is not to be a contradiction, or a sham. (It is often just that.) Here the delicate verticality of the handsome twin towers is no curtain wall paste-over; these slender ribs are visible metal-sheathed supporting steel columns that form a wall-supporting truss.

The towers soar above a plaza, enclosed by a series of low buildings. These smaller buildings face the street and frame the towers. Their decorative exterior structure, surrounding the plaza space, suggests a public area of considerable beauty. This could be a modern Piazza San Marco—with skyscrapers.

The obvious alternative, a group of several large buildings, "would have looked like a housing project," according to Minoru Yamasaki, one of the architecture and engineering team that includes the New York firm of Emery Roth & Sons and the Port Authority's architectural, engineering and planning staffs.

Mr. Yamasaki ranks among the country's leading creative designers, and the Roth firm is known for its expertness in erecting many of New York's largest office buildings, including the controversial Pan Am.

The Trade Center will be the city's first Yamasaki design.

The most successful features of the scheme and its most commendable accomplishments are its handling of cityscape and scale. It is in these areas that Pan Am failed.

The tall towers, right for New York, are not the customary space-eating blockbusters to which there is no human ap-

proach. The architects have skillfully restored the human scale by their use of the low, galleried buildings through which the pedestrian enters the plaza from the street.

This humanization of the inhumanity of today's huge building projects is one of the most critical problems that contemporary architecture must face and solve.

The full acreage is planned as a unit, which means street closings and traffic rerouting, for the best relationships of its buildings to the surrounding space and structures. Now that New York State plans to put all of its offices in a Trade Center building, these relationships become particularly important in terms of the nearby City Hall and the proposed Civic Center.

The buildings that the World Trade Center would replace are a motley, undistinguished assortment of the 19th century. There is no threat here, as in some of the city's other redevelopment areas, to New York's disappearing architectural heritage. The threat is to people and to a lively commercial community.