Design: Unbuilt buildings Design
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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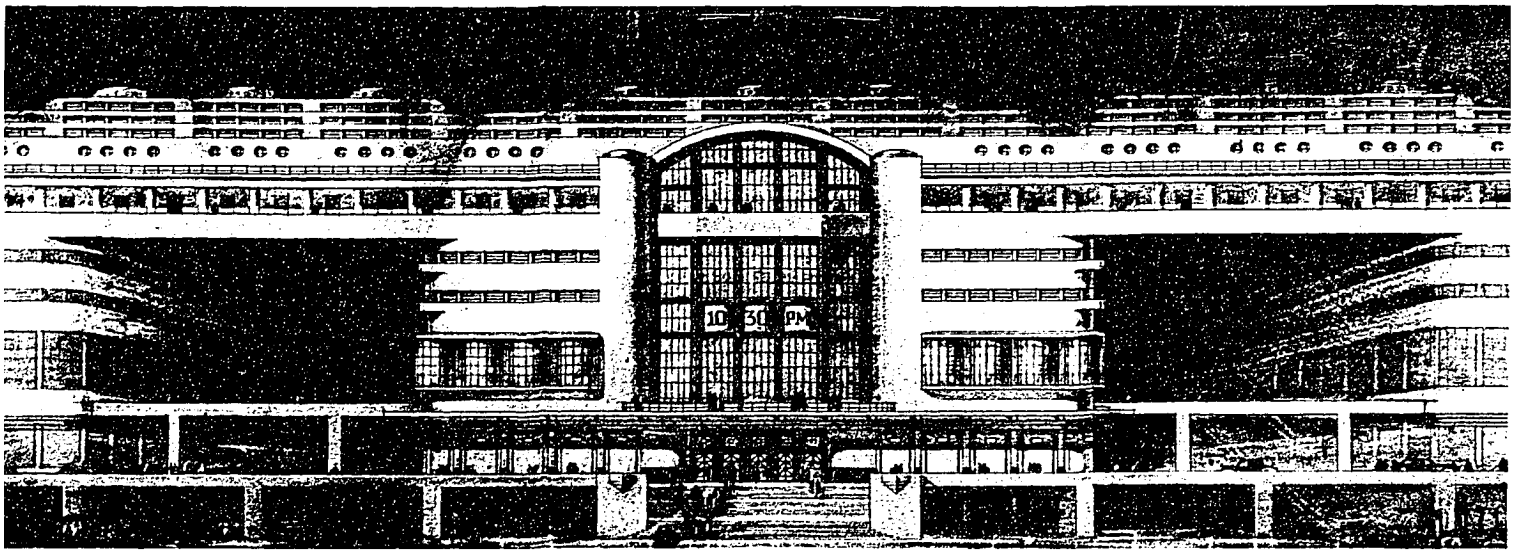
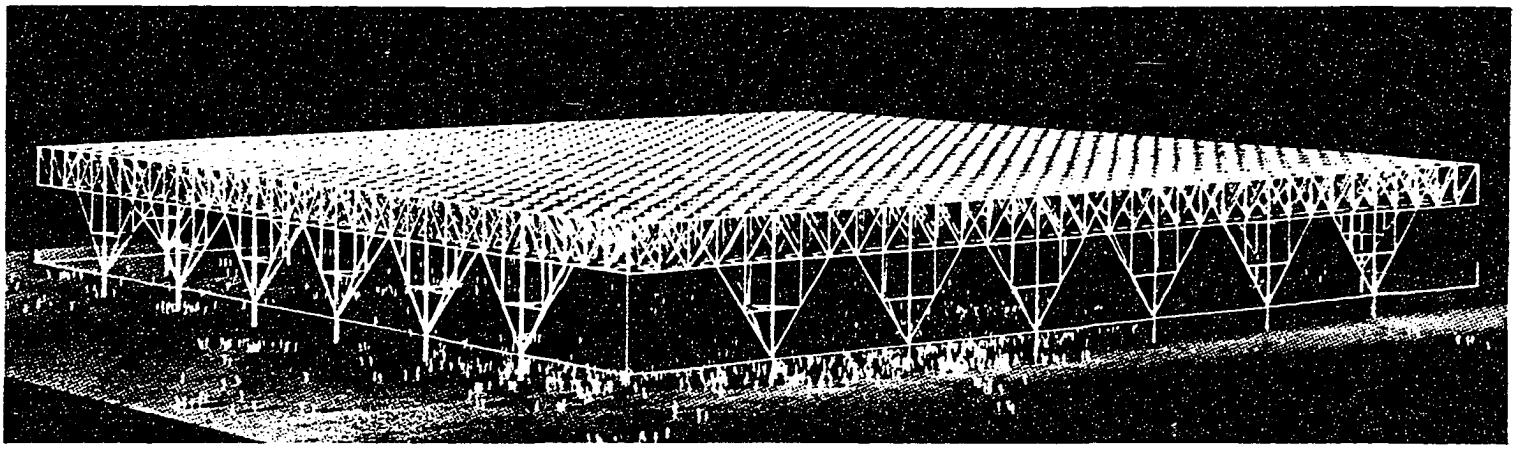
Design

Unbuilt buildings

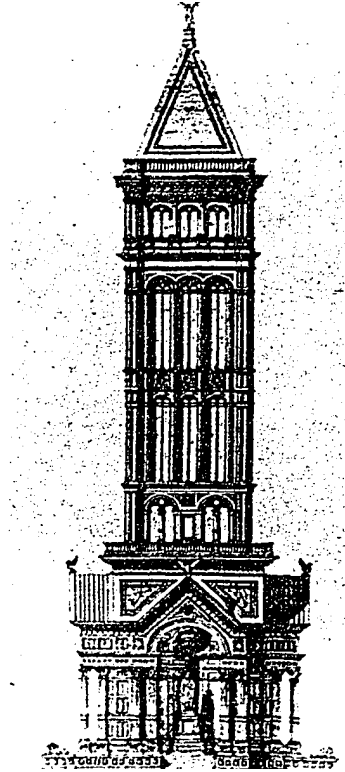
'They exist only in models, drawings, archives and designers' fantasies. But they tell us a great deal about our tastes, standards and values.'



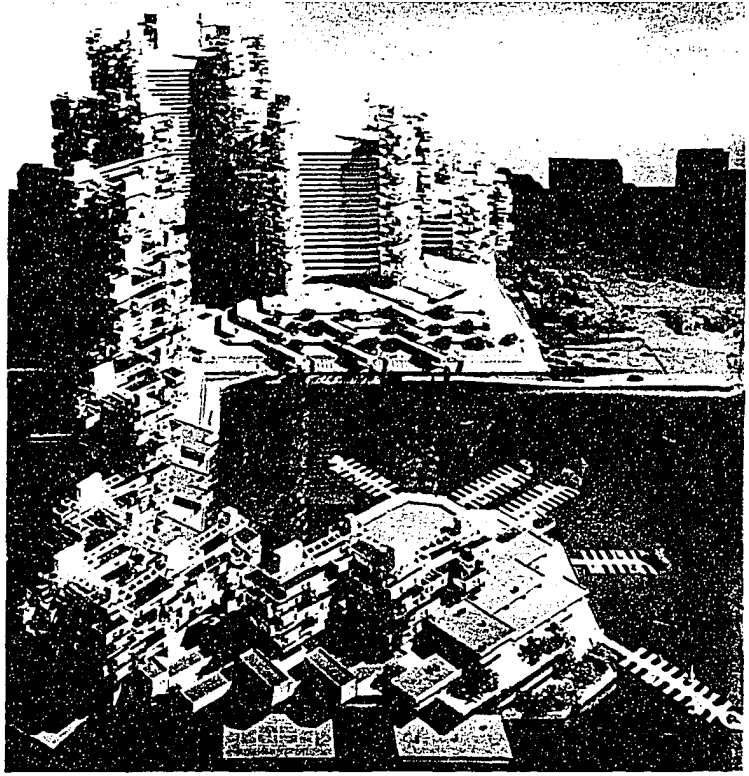
An airport terminal. Competition drawing for the Beaux Arts Institute of Design. 1927-28. Thomas H. Dreihs.



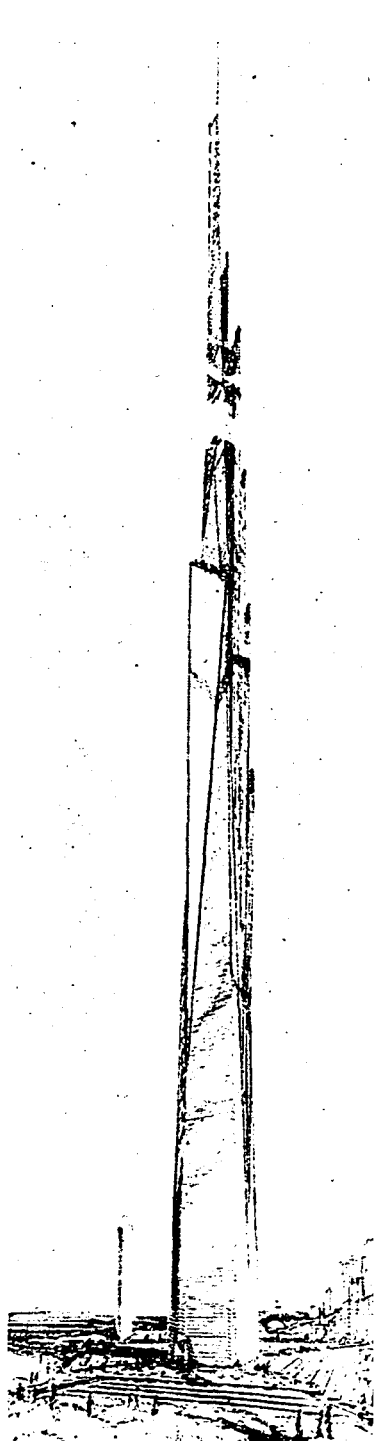
Convention hall. Chicago. 1953-54. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.



Design for completion of the Washington Monument. 1878. William Wetmore Story.



Graphic arts center. New York City. 1967. Paul Rudolph.



Mile High Skyscraper, "The Illinois." Chicago. 1956. Frank Lloyd Wright.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

There are two worlds—the built and the unbuilt world, the one we live in and the one we dream about. The real world is a product of cost and compromise; it is shaped by all of the complex, pragmatic and frustrating factors that turn grand visions into pedestrian streetscapes, that substitute the businessman's bottom line for the architect's aspirations. In real life, masterworks are few and far between. There is little evidence of those soaring flights of imagination, the superb stylistic overstatements, the technological extravaganzas that every architect keeps in the recesses of his heart and mind.

But the unbuilt world is as real, in its way, as the streets and buildings of our cities. It tells us a great deal about our tastes, standards and values, with a clarity rarely achieved in actual construction.

"Unbuilt America" (McGraw-Hill), published last month, is a book about this other world, a provocative never-never land that exists only in models, drawings, files and archives and the designer's fantasies. Subtitled "Forgotten Architecture in the United States from Thomas Jefferson to the Space Age," it is a documentation of the artful and the artless, the failed and the foolish, as well as the genuine visions and the serious seminal schemes of quiet, profound influence. Compiled and edited by Alison Sky and Michelle Stone of the New York-based group called SITE (Sculpture in the Environment), the examples are put together with a knowing eye for the prophetic and the absurd.

Here are the competition entries that were never carried out, the ideal solutions invented and unrealized, the visionary projects never meant to come to pass, the Olympian works of architecture and engineering of a scale and style to confound the senses.

In a masterful introduction by the architectural historian George R. Collins, the French author and critic Michel Ragon is quoted as saying that there are two histories of architecture —one of completed buildings, the other of research and projects, with the built world a pale echo of the visionary mind.

How much this forgotten architecture has to say about that mind! From Robert Owen's controlled, orderly plan for an ideal community at New Harmony, Ind. (circa 1825), to the Pop Art-Buck Rogers paraphernalia for a "habitat" in outer space (1976) or Daniel Burnham's crushingly classical, superdomed Chicago Civic Center and city plan (1909), these projects make our ideals and yearnings clear.

Man has never wanted to be bounded by space, sky or petty practicality. Frank Lloyd Wright's Mile High Skyscraper (1956) is as much a romantic symbol, soaring needle-sharp into the upper air, as it is wishful technology. The overreachingly tall building has been a constant in history, from the eternally powerful imagery of the unfinished Tower of Babel to the thunderous letdown of the completed World Trade Center.

The American dream has taken the shape of houses designed like Greek temples or flying saucers. The ideal American city has been slung, levitated and tied together with skywalks; there have been proposals for communities that would grow biologically in water or take shape as spiritual concretions in the *(Continued on Page 49)*

Ada Louise Huxtable is a member of the Editorial Board and is architecture critic of The Times.

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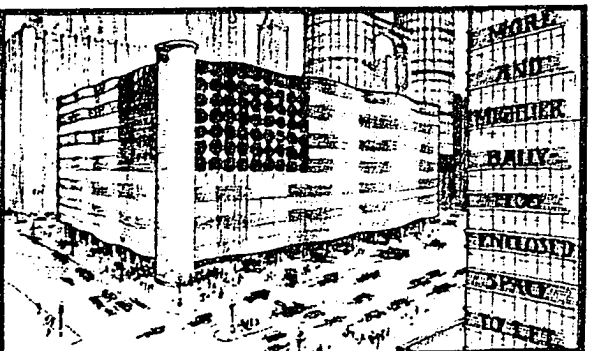

A government office building for a metropolis. Circa 1932. William Adams Delano.

desert or technological units in New Jersey. Futuramas and megastructures are common visionary coin.

The desire to be impossibly grand is apparently immortal. In the 1920's and 30's, students from M.I.T. drew up Beaux Arts projects for an airport terminal and a moving-picture theater, where classicism marries Art Deco with whiffs of Frank Lloyd Wright in imperial elegance.

Or to be grandly tasteful, as in the competition entries of the 1870's meant to complete the Washington Monument, which stood unfinished in the capital for over 40 years. Cultured taste clothed the naked obelisk in ornate Gothic bell towers or Renaissance campaniles — incomparable 19th-century sight gags.

For pure delight, there are those wonderful conceits such as an American Acropolis for Washington, D.C. (1891), a bastion of Roman and Babylonian splendor dedicated to past civilizations, with a Via Sacra and a memorial temple for the President of the United States. Or a New England Center for Comparative Utopias (1976). Or a Government Office Building for a Metropolis (circa 1932) —in the form of a waving American flag—by the otherwise architecturally staid William Adams Delano. There are proposals for an all-American architecture that make Disneyland look sincere.

And then there are the buildings that luckily never materialized, such as Philip Johnson's intimidating spiral monument for hapless Ellis Island (1966) or Eric Gugler's perennially pretentious proposal for a Hall of Our History, a monumental banality that surfaced regularly until 1953.

And there are also the buildings that we would like to see constructed—for example, Edward L. Barnes's delicate crystal palace of hexagonal modules for the Bronx Botanical Garden (1974), an institution so eviscerated by New York's current fiscal crisis that the project has entered the realm of total fantasy. Or Mies van der Rohe's Convention Center proposal of 1953-54, one of the most breathtakingly beautiful exercises in engineering esthetics of this century.

All of the projects are arranged in the book in alphabetical order, in a gesture that can seem rational, ironic or desperate. How, after all, does one file dreams—under "D"? Or "M" for megalomania?

What holds everything together, ultimately, is the fact that none of the schemes were ever built, although many were actually meant to be. Some plans lost their patrons; some were not realizable because of scale, complexity or cost; some were too radical—esthetically, technologically, socially or politically.

But unbuilt architecture, as Professor Collins points out, like paper money, circulates widely. Its aspirations touch a common human chord. This is, as Michel Ragon has said, "the history of lost chances," a thought filled with endless possibilities of the ludicrous and the sublime. ■