ARCHITECTURE VIEW: HOW GREAT BUILDINGS SHAPE A CITY'S SOUL

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

How Great Buildings Shape a City's Soul

Sometimes the best exhibitions are in the most unlikely places. On second thought, sometimes the most unlikely places are the best places for exhibitions. I don't know when I've seen a better architecture show in a more appropriate setting than the one called "Three Buildings," currently in the City University Graduate Center Mall at 33 West 42d Street. This is a model of what such an exhibition should be: an easily encompassable, marvelously evocative group of well-selected and well-lit photographs that make points about buildings of significance as the shapers of a city and the sources of its style. The text is so good that one wishes it were easier to read standing up, and the pictures are so good that the research involved deserves some form of permanence. The solution would have been a catalogue to take home.

But the show's unique virtue is that its subject matter is only steps, or blocks, away. One leaves the mall—a covered passageway forming the ground floor of the Graduate Center's handsomely recycled building that is a fine urban achievement in its own right—to encounter the buildings themselves. This give the display an extraordinary extra dimension. The "Three Buildings" of the title are the Fifth Avenue Library, just across 42d Street, and Grand Central Terminal and the Times Tower, due east and west. The first two are designated landmarks; the third is not. The Library is safe, the Terminal is threatened, and the Times Tower has been changed almost beyond recognition.

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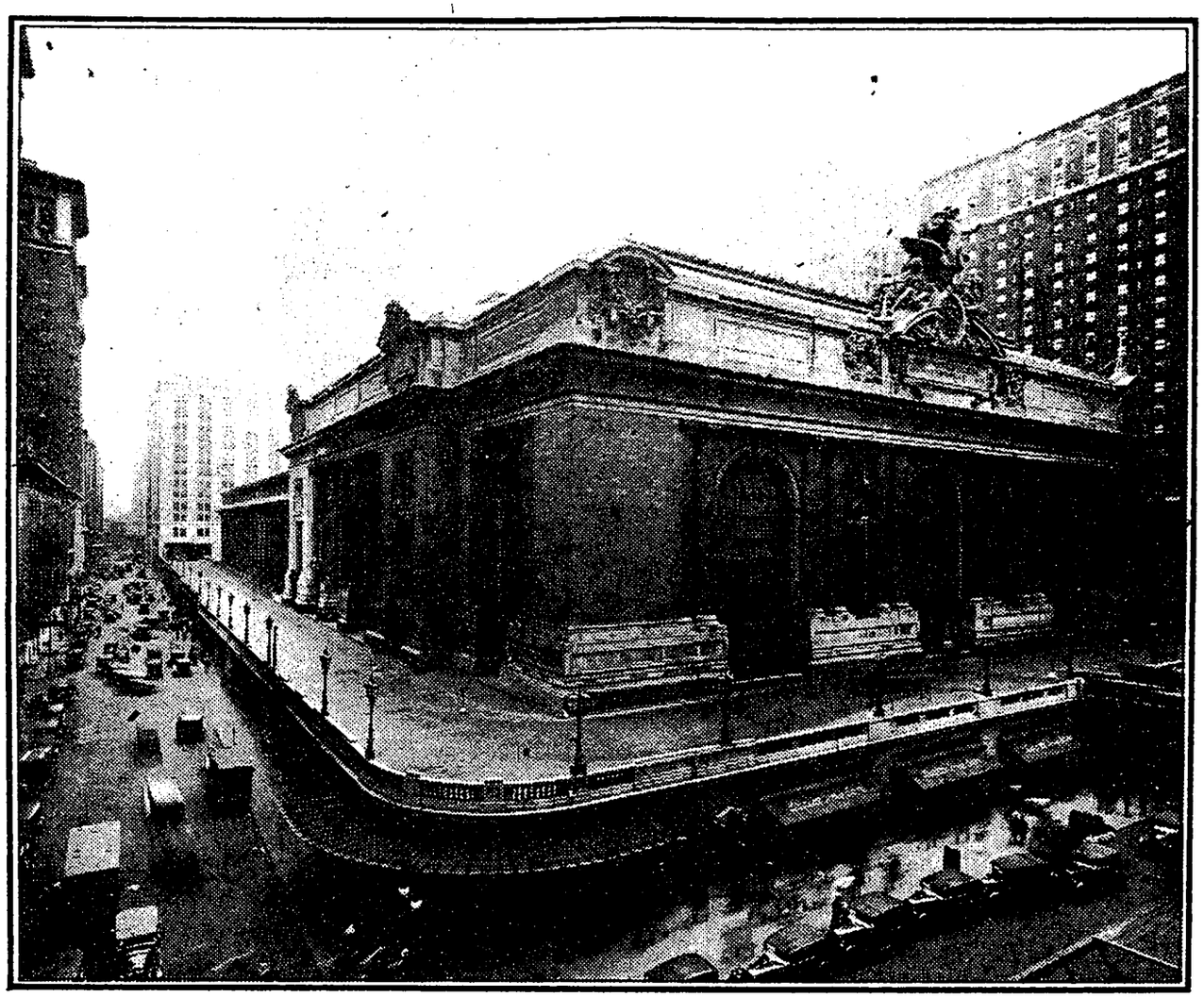
This is not a capricious selection. The exhibition, which is the result of a collaboration between the City University and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, takes three of the most important structures on one of the city's most important cross-axes, and traces their impact on the matrix of the changing city around them.

All three buildings straddle the 19th and 20th centuries. They are all examples of progressive planning and formal, academic style. And all profoundly affected the character and development of their surroundings. Together, as the text by Roy Strickland and James Sanders points out, they are responsible to a large degree for the form and content of midtown Manhattan. And they have continued to serve practical and symbolic purposes well into our own time. They are, in fact, much more than buildings; these three are New York icons, touchstones of its identity, generators of function and legend, a part of the city's soul.



Ed Nowak

Grand Central in the 1930's—a "most stunning" urban design achievement

The Library, started in the 1890's and completed in 1911, soon turned a quiet residential area into a cosmopolitan avenue of commerce and culture. Because the new building incorporated the earlier Astor and Lenox Libraries for a larger, central facility—it was a time of consolidation, growth and the grand civic gesture—the Library's new president, John Shaw Billings, devised an innovative and functional plan.

This grand plan received a grand French classical form when a competition for the building's design was won by two young Beaux Arts-trained architects, John M. Carrère and Thomas Hastings. The murmurous sea of the huge reading room is still sanctuary for scholars and life's gentler failures; its collections are available in great rooms of marble, carved wood and bronze.

Today, the building's mellowed classicism, seen from the east, is one of the city's finer vistas. The superbly planned complex of the Library and Bryant Park, and the set back, green front—now designated as exterior, interior and landscape landmarks in full and wise application of the law—creates an urban space beyond price. (Try to imagine New York without it.)

There are those, however, who can imagine such things very well. For example, the bankrupt owners of the Grand Central Terminal, the Penn Central Railroad. They have succeeded in having the Terminal's landmarks designation overturned, and the city's appeal is now in the courts.

When the Terminal was built, between 1898 and 1913, it too was the result of consolidated growth and a grand civic gesture. The brilliantly functional, intricately related, multi-level plan, with the Terminal built over the tracks, was connected by pedestrian routes and "circumferential drives" to the circulation of the area and the large-scale development around the station. It is one of the most stunning achievements in the history of urban design.

Ramps, passageways, subways, shops, services and and offices all converge on one of the greatest interior spaces of this or any other city, the Grand Concourse—125 feet high to its star-studded, once blue, vaulted ceiling. The planning concept, based on electrification of trains, came from a railroad engineer, William J. Wilgus; the design was the result of a competition won by Reed and Stem of Minneapolis; the stylistic grandeur was the contribution of Whitney Warren of the Beaux Arts firm of Warren and Wetmore.

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The elegant facade is now black with soot and the huge arched windows are blind with grime. Ugly leaks in the concourse quietly threaten the structure. But the worst threat is from the Penn Central and the developer. After the show's photographs of the Terminal's early splendor, a picture of the proposed commercial tower for the Terminal's air rights, designed by Marcel Breuer in the 1960's, is like a slap in the eye. The design shows a waffle-faced slab, obliterating the Terminal's facade, supported by giant canted legs from the elevated roadway. The new tower would form one side of a huge sandwich board (the Pan Am Building would be the other side) and together they would squeeze the old building in a brutally arrogant embrace. The grand civic gesture has been replaced by the grim economic gesture.

In fact, this picture and the view of the Times Tower after it was sold to Allied Chemical in the 1960's, and its facade stripped and refaced, are the shockers of the show. The Times Tower was another turn-of-the-century hybrid—19th-century picturesque in its Gothic detailing by the architectural firm of Eidlitz and MacKenzie, and 20th-century modern in its remarkable, early steel skeleton and underground links to mass transportation. (Both the area and the brand new subway station were named Times Square shortly after the building's completion in 1904. (Can you think of it as Longacre?) Through its special site and eccentric shape and style, the building became part of the city's cultural folklore.

The distinctive character of the old building was replaced by the lowest common denominator of non-design; if the remodeling had set out to be artless, banal and ordinary, it could not have done a better job. There is a proposal now (the building has been sold again) to re-reface it with mirror glass, and anything would be an improvement. It cries to be turned into a badly needed center of tourist information and services, as part of a coordinated city plan to revitalize Times Square.

Curiously, even in its mutilated state, the structure's symbolism survives. The illuminated news banner courses around its sides in a gesture to tradition: the ball still drops at midnight on New Year's Eve. In the end, buildings are the survivors, and the barometers, of our world.

"Three Buildings" at the City University Graduate Center Mall, 33 West 42d Street, through Nov. 5. Open 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. weekdays; 11 A.M. to 3 P.M. Saturday; closed Sunday.

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