ARCHITECTURE VIEW: 'A LANDMARK BEFORE ITS DOORS OPEN'
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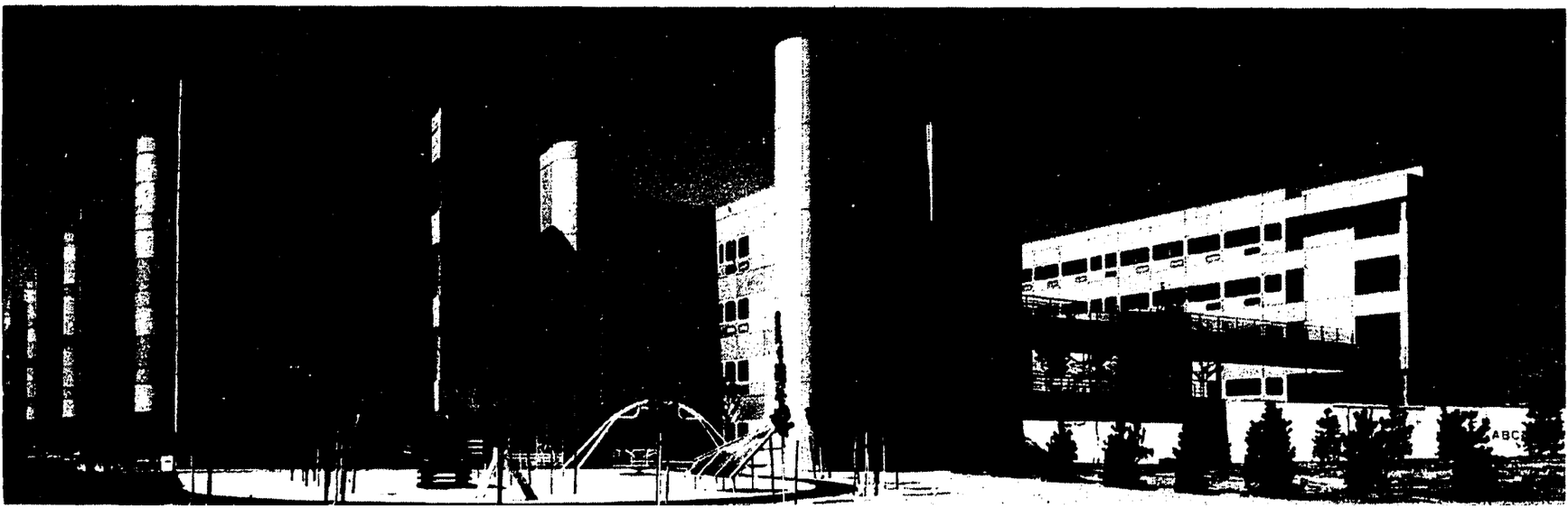

Richard Meier's new Bronx Developmental Center "turns on professionals and turns off laymen." · Ezra Stoller

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

'A Landmark Before Its Doors Open'

There are some buildings that the world watches and some buildings that the profession watches, and one of the most watched by architects right now is the Bronx Developmental Center by Richard Meier and Associates—the recently constructed addition to the Bronx State Hospital complex adjacent to the Hutchinson River Parkway. It is also a building very much in the news because of the Willowbrook scandals and lawsuits; commissioned seven years ago for the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene by the State's Facilities Development Corporation, the new facility will receive a part of the Willowbrook population.

While it waits for the transfer of those pathetic shards of humanity and the severely retarded and handicapped of the Bronx who are eligible for this state institution, the structure has become the cynosure of the architectural world. It has received busloads of visiting Japanese, a day-trip of 200 local practitioners, many of whom stayed for a symposium on the building, and distinguished visitors and critics from around the world. It is already an object of controversy: the building's sleek silvery skin and carefully machined look turn on most professionals and turn off most laymen. It is a landmark before its doors open.

As the first large-scale public work of one of the most talented younger American architects, the Bronx Developmental Center deserves the attention it is getting. Until now, Richard Meier has been known for a series of pristine white houses of complex and sophisticated artistry. This structure goes far beyond those elegant exercises in abstract synthesis and historical recall. It has become a catalyst for some of today's most progressive trends in architectural practice. But most of all, the new building stands on its own, and on its merits, as a distinguished work of art.

That the building was able to achieve such quality and status while dealing with a program in a total state of flux—the treatment of the retarded or mentally ill is one of the most embattled subjects of the decade—is remarkable in itself. After planning and during construction, a series of radical changes in attitude toward the care and treatment of the severely mentally and physically disabled took place, and the debate still rages about whether they should be institutionalized or their treatment "normalized" within the community.

According to Dr. David Kliegler, Deputy Director of the Bronx Developmental Center, nothing has been resolved; no one really knows what is best. But practices are being drastically revised. That the building's design has survived this kind of programmatic and ideological chaos, and that it has done so with clarity and distinction, says much for the flexibility and durability of art.

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The facility was never meant to accommodate Willowbrook patients. It was originally intended as a center for training the mentally retarded for whom there was some hope of adapting to normal living; there is even a small training "house" for their return to society which will be used as offices instead. Now that the idea of the "holding" institution, or self-sufficient "community," has been cast into doubt, the planned residential population has been reduced from 750 to 384, and the almost monastic atmosphere becomes an anachronism.

The new conventional wisdom is to bus the patient out into the community as much as possible for education and services, and to mix residents, staff and outpatients within the center. Almost every space in this building is therefore being converted to some other use, except the residential units. It is all still in the throes of modifications dictated by new patients, new practices, and even new state codes. Clearly, the ultimate test of success or failure for this kind of structure will be in the adaptability of the physical plant, and the degree to which the staff exploits its potential.

The architect has brought a rigorous intellect and a sensitive esthetic to these nearly insoluble problems. The site is a triangular 12 acres of limbo bounded by railroad tracks, parkways and scattered, scaleless construction. The plan consists of two parallel and connected four-story units about 565 feet long—a service and a residential section—joined across a landscaped court. By turning inward to this court, the complex creates its own environment.

The main entrance is through the section for services, in which the treatment, therapy and public spaces for both residents and outpatients are concentrated. The residential wing consists of slightly offset "houses" broken down into "family" units of 24, further divided into groups of eight. All of the buildings are encased in a taut, thin skin of flat, soft-finished, silver-toned aluminum.

Immediately upon entry, the glass-walled reception area gives a view of the entire complex that makes its organization clear. The progress from public to private spaces is skilfully controlled, from reception, classrooms, clinics and cafeteria, across the court with its outdoor classroom extensions, sculptured steps, walls, slides and amphitheater, by way of a glass-roofed corridor or open walk, to the residential quarters.

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All of these uses are "coded" visually by the window types, the nature of the exterior skin panels, and the articulation of the parts. In this way, the whole building can be "read." The aluminum panels shift from horizontal to vertical, for example, from the classrooms with their elongated windows to a closed, vertical stairwell. The windows themselves are round-cornered, like bus windows (curious intimations of a mobile technology) and are held rigidly flat with the wall surface in residential or classroom areas. In the more public dining, social or therapy areas (pool, gymnasium etc.) they become larger, slightly inset, mullioned glass expanses. There is a rhythmic fugue of fenestration, allied to a subtly expressive skin.

Criticism of the design centers on expressions of concern about an "unhomelike" atmosphere, but the architect's emphasis is more on the human scale of the rooms and their arrangement than on a familiar ambience. No one really knows about the effect of design quality, but the intent is to create a "comfortable" physical and psychic environment.

In this building, Meier has gone beyond the lyrical abstraction of his white houses. There is a fusion of form and purpose in which style and function become a single thing. The elements of structure and skin, circulation and use, are put together like a fine, expensive watch. (The building has been called a Patek Philippe on the outside and a Timex on the inside by one architect-observer; the interiors use limited stock parts livened by a diffusion of fragmented colors that cannot disguise their just adequate construction.)

The whole project is marked by an extremely disciplined interlocking of logic and art. Meier's move from white to silver is also a move to maturity. In spite of its fashionably "minimalist" components, this building has a richness of composition and a finesse and originality of form that mark an important new phase of architectural design.