



The proposed replacement for the Bonwit Teller building on Fifth Avenue

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A New York Blockbuster of Superior Design

The changes on Fifth Avenue have a lot more to do with high land values than with high style. The whole Bonwit Teller saga — the closing of the store and the sale of the building, the much-mourned passing of one of the Avenue's landmarks — reads infinitely more like a real estate deal than a merchandising drama.

The Bonwit Teller building, which made such a fine limestone-and-deco pair with Tiffany's on the block from 56th to 57th Street, might still be alive and well except for the city's zoning. This fact of real estate life, combined with the financial weakness of Bonwit's parent company, Genesco (the Bonwit chain has since been sold to Allied Stores), doomed the building.

The 58-story structure that will replace it simply shows what the zoning on Fifth Avenue permits and encourages. In the arcane measurements of the law, this is a 21.6 F.A.R. building (floor area ratio, or the size of the building permitted for the size of the site), which is as about as big as you can get anywhere in New York, and bigger than anything seen yet on Fifth Avenue except Olympic Tower, which was built under the same zoning. Any developer who can get half a block on Fifth Avenue next to a site with some available air rights can do the same thing.

To give credit where credit is due, what the developer of this building, Donald Trump, and his architect, Der Scutt of Poore, Swanke, Hayden & Connell, have done, with the city's planners looking over their shoulders, is to design a very good 21.6 F.A.R. building. There is a great deal of legitimate concern about its excessive size, which joins the excessive size of the I.B.M. and A.T. & T. buildings just behind it on Madison Avenue, for a truly frightening concentration of the new building scale. Questions have been raised about what it will do to Fifth Avenue as a proportion-breaking and esthetic-shattering interloper.

Alas, the objectors are whistling in the wind, or up the wrong skyscraper. If this building is in the wrong place, it is the city's zoning that has put it there, and not much can be done about it. Right or wrong, and unlike some others going ahead in midtown, this one happens to be of potentially superior quality. Look not for villains in this case; look to the city's laws.

A few stories may be lopped off during the traditional bargaining process with the City Planning Commission when the variances are sought that are needed to erect a better-than-routine structure. (Interestingly enough, Trump is not threatening to build the truly awful "as-of-right" design that he could put up with no variances at all and at considerably less cost if the city does not agree to his design modifications.) The proposal has already been reduced from 63 to 58 stories, which has not made it any smaller, but has simply redistributed the bulk, and actually improved the design.

Although a further slice off the top may look good politically, and even urbanistically, this would be no real victory

for anyone, since it will make so little difference for this big a building. The point that is being missed in the outcry over the size of this particular structure is that whatever compromises are made here, the law will still permit 21.6 F.A.R. structures on Fifth Avenue. Moreover, the promise of such building bonanzas will continue to drive land values up. Developers simply calculate prices in terms of the maximum square footage that can be achieved by the addition of bonuses given for special features through amendments to the already over-generous 1961 zoning in an attempt to ameliorate its bulk and density.

These are the forces behind the debacle of the Bonwit Teller site. The high value of the land due to overzoning must have been irresistible to a corporation in financial trouble, and the site must have been irresistible to a devel-

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oper looking for a prestige place to build. Closing the store and selling the building could seem like salvation to any Fifth Avenue department store in less than the full flush of financial health. One can hear the sighs of relief and regret all the way to the bank as the wrecking ball swings. And the replacement will be another 50 to 60 story behemoth.

Anyone who can work out the formulas (and they are enormously complex) can find out how it is done. It is all perfectly legal if you have the expertise. A builder may get extra square footage by providing a public pedestrian passage called a through-block arcade. He can get still more by increasing the minimum amount of ground-floor retail space that the Fifth Avenue zoning requires. He may up the ante still further by putting both residential and commercial uses in the building. But Trump's real coup has been an agreement to purchase Tiffany's unused air rights, which can be transferred to his site, creating a jackpot known as a merged zoning lot. There is a limit to these increases, however; no matter how many are piled up, the top is that 21.6 F.A.R. figure. But no one can accuse New York builders of underreaching.

The number of stories, from 50 to 60, will be determined by how the bulk of the building is arranged. If the design departs from the letter of the law in the way it rises from the street — and most of the better designs do — a variance must be sought from the city for the change. The Trump building needs three variances. One is a conventional height and setback waiver. Another would be permission to turn the through-block arcade on an east-west axis, to join I.B.-

M.'s north-south pedestrian space, instead of repeating it pointlessly. The third involves the rearrangement of tower bulk due to the use of Tiffany's air rights.

The Trump building has clearly used every trick in the book to maximize its size. But a great deal of care has also been lavished on its design. One of its problems is its closeness — again, permitted and encouraged by the zoning — to those two other blockbusters, A.T. & T. and I.B.M. Still, the structure relates as sensitively to its surroundings as possible for its size. The bulk has been broken with a series of faceted, diagonal surfaces that step the building back from the street on the Fifth Avenue and 56th Street corner, with a similar set of diagonal facets used at the rear to establish a rapport with the I.B.M. building. It is undeniably a dramatically handsome structure. A retail atrium on the ground floor (let the Planning Commission beware of the gap between what builders promise and deliver) would connect with I.B.M.'s public facilities. At the pedestrian level, this could be a spectacular block.

Faced in reflecting glass, the building would have 28 shimmering sides. The situation is not unlike that of the John Hancock Building in Boston, which, by its very size and concept, brutally ruptured the traditional scale of Copley Square. But when the episodes of falling windows were over, and the building appeared in its complete, taut, pale-mirrored skin, a kind of miracle had taken place: It had achieved an airy dematerialization that combined surprising delicacy with a commanding presence.

There is talk now of buttering some limestone on the base of the Trump building as a gesture to Fifth Avenue, but that would be a dreadful mistake. This would do nothing to turn a large building into a small one, or marry it convincingly to its neighbors. It would be an act of pure architectural hypocrisy (most such compromises are) that could only ruin a design that depends on glass for its prismatic distinction.

The decision that will make or break this building — and Fifth Avenue — is the selection of the glass. The first model showed an oppressive near-black. Now there is talk of a special shade of bronze. The lesson to be learned, again, is from John Hancock, which has turned out to be Boston's most beautiful new building. Hancock's glass is ethereal in shade and tone, transient in its atmospheric effects. It projects no color that is not dependent on the light and its surroundings; it projects a genuine elegance.

As this is written, the bargaining process for the Trump building is reaching its climax at City Hall. What details will be traded off depends on who holds what cards. But until the zoning law is changed or modified, builders will continue to play for these choice sites and huge structures at the highest stakes. And we will continue to get what they give us, give or take a few stories at the top. ■