

A Tower Too Many

Grand Central Terminal, recently declared a landmark, is one of the few remaining examples in New York of the noble use of stone and space for a substantial magnificence that our own day can neither match nor replace. It is more than a landmark; it is a declaration of the diminishing values of urban quality and architectural excellence.

The New York Central now proposes to erect a tower over the Terminal waiting room, just in front of the main concourse. While the New York Central cannot, under the landmarks law, treat the Terminal as disposable, it is obviously looking for another revenue-producing Pan Am building or a reasonable facsimile. Park Avenue, and New York, are still traumatized by that one. What the Central is suggesting is a kind of architectural shotgun marriage in which the Terminal's Beaux Arts bottom would be the base for a forty-odd story commercial building on top.

Grand Central Terminal is a free-standing piece of superb classic eclectic sculpture; the facade would become a false face over which any superstructure would be ludicrous. It would not be a "backdrop," as suggested, but a kind of supercolossal, unfunny hat. Certainly the spirit, if not the letter, of the landmarks law would be violated.

As architecture, Michelangelo couldn't pull it off. As planning, it raises the issue of Pan Am congestion compounded, in a focal midtown area where the daily routine is an increasing struggle against impractical, inhuman densities and deteriorating services. As economics, the proposal is a continuation of the Central's desperate efforts to squeeze revenue out of the Terminal, which includes a honkytonk of shopfronts along 42d Street and a series of commercial enterprises and advertisements in the main concourse that have turned that once glorious room into an esthetic slum.

Given this triumph of tastelessness, emphasized by that other Central-sponsored landmark, the Pan Am Building, the results of the new project would be, in urban and esthetic terms, a disaster for New York.