ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Houston's Towering Achievement

HOUSTON

New York architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee are completing one of the best big buildings in the country—not in New York, but in Houston. That is not surprising. As reported here last week, Houston is the place where money, power and patronage are coming together in a city of singular excitement and significance for the 1970's.

The $45 million Pennzoil Place, in Houston's downtown, the work of Johnson/Burgee with the Houston firm of S. I. Morris Associates, is that rarity among large commercial structures—a notable work of architecture. It is, by any measure, a dramatic and beautiful and important building. It is also a highly profitable investment. It successfully marries the art of architecture and the business of investment construction—a union essential to the American economy and the urban environment.

Pennzoil is the product of Houston developer Gerald Hines, who is also responsible for another of the city's standard-setting buildings that happens to be its tallest, One Shell Plaza. Shell is a handsome tower with a strong structural rationale; Pennzoil goes farther as a work of art. It engenders a special kind of visual and conceptual excitement.

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The $45 million Pennzoil building—"brilliant, shifting geometry"

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The building is hard to describe, and no picture can fully represent it. That is because it is a complex and unconventional three-dimensional form—actually two forms—that meets the eye differently from every viewing point, changing as that perspective changes, in a brilliant, shifting geometry.

The richness of its esthetic impact suggests sculpture. The architects speak of it as sculpture, but that is a dangerous reference because of its implications of arbitrary and superficial novelty, something that has already infected too many architects lusting after style and symbolism, and produced too many dreadful results. Like all of the best architecture, however, this is a formal statement at the same time that it is a working building and part of the environment—a synthesis passionately to be desired and rarely achieved.

The building consists of two 36-story towers that are trapezoidal in shape, in the form of a square plus a right triangle, set down on a square city block as mirror images of each other. In plan, each tower has a sharp, 45-degree angle at one corner. The towers are separated by a 10-foot space, or "slot," a division visible from some viewpoints and not from others. The tops of the buildings slope, sliced off at a 45-degree angle. The two towers are joined at the base by a glass court 117 feet high at its apex, with a roof that also slopes at 45 degrees, to make a covered pedestrian space eight stories high.

It sounds complex, and it is, visually, because all of those angles add up to a very sophisticated series of stunning geometric images. "All is a play of simple, angular volumes," Mr. Johnson says. That narrow open slot, or sliver of air and space between the towers, determines the relationships and effects of the two volumes as one moves around them. And those effects are best seen—characteristically for Houston—from the freeway, where the elements come together and apart, compose and recompose, with the kinetic advantage of the moving car.

The taut skin of the building is a grayed-bronze, modified mirror glass, in a bronze-colored aluminum grid of flat spandrel strips and delicately raised and slotted mullions. The ground-level galleria enclosure is clear glass in an aluminum space frame. The building is a sharp, dark presence on the skyline; it gives weight and focus to the glaring, almost levitating whiteness of the neighboring cultural center. The dark color seems to make that 10-foot separating slot a mysterious opening, and the pleasure of suddenly catching and losing the creamy *tempieto* of the 1927 Niels Esperson Building in this narrow slit is a bit of architectural lagniappe.

But there is no mystery to the building's economics. Mr. Hines has calculated the actual costs and cost advantages with a finesse that equals the architecture. One tower is called the Pennzoil Building, and the other is the Zapata Building, after the two principal tenants. The taste of an interesting corporate client, Hugh Liedtke, chairman and chief executive officer of Pennzoil, for something different and distinguished figures as prominently in the results as the willingness of an astute investment builder to capitalize on the financial assets of an exceptional design. In fact, this building proves once and for all that architectural excellence pays.

"The point of difference," as Mr. Hines puts it, is a building of such recognizable quality that it achieves both immediate status value and long-term investment value. By his own figures, these values translate directly into money. The tallest building in a city may have a temporary advantage. But a notable building has a permanent advantage.

Nor does achieving this end mean artistic or financial license for the architect, or extraordinary costs for the builder. Item by item, the elements of the design—steel weight, curtain wall, mechanical systems—were worked down to the developer's acceptable figure by the architects, with the developer's staff. Final costs were a reasonable $28 a square foot for the building and $7.50 for the curtain wall. This includes special interior details and the striking 45-degree corner that is cantilevered, rather than having an exterior column, for maximum elegance and drama. Because the developer wanted distinctive features as much as the architects, the cost compromises arrived at were mutually agreeable.

Again, by Mr. Hines's figuring, the construction cost of this kind of architecture is 10 percent above that of a basic, bottom-quality box. But that 10 percent difference is immediately reduced to 5 percent by the advantage of lower interest rates and fewer delays. A better building, provided ownership and management are equally good, gets faster and more favorable financing. When money is tight, it goes first to the better product. And quality construction with long-term value offers the kind of security that insurance companies and pension funds like for their investment dollars.

The other 5 percent is made up in the higher rentals that the prestige building commands. Pennzoil Place rent rose from $7.50 to $9.50 and $10 a square foot during the leasing period alone, and the lower floors, ordinarily the lowest-priced, commanded a premium because of the galleria base.

Beyond that, the financial advantages accrue. Space rents faster and the quality of the income stream is not only greater, but it will increase—or at least stay level with inflation—while it drops in other buildings. And the building tends to stay full, even in bad times. A prime structure in a prime location with prime tenants has greater liquidity; it also has the "hidden" asset on the corporate books of potentially profitable sale or lease if the corporate position changes. Pennzoil is already subleasing its expansion space at a profit. Liquidity and lower capitalization are important future protective advantages. In fact, it is this kind of stockholder protection, in addition to the immediate, favorable financial features, that is the conclusive answer to those who protest higher initial costs.

These are all powerfully persuasive arguments for superior architecture—beyond the usual ones of quality of life and environment. If Houston has found the formula for turning prosperity and growth into beauty and elegance, it is indeed the city of the future.