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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Radical Change on the City's Skyline

Eli Attia and Associates' design for 101 Park Avenue—"One of the biggest of the new crop, and an exercise in the kind of creative quality that until very recently has been conspicuously absent from the New York scene."

There was a fleeting architectural event in Saks Fifth Avenue's windows last week. From July 5 to 12, the chic mannequins shared space with sleek models and renderings of five very large new buildings either in construction or about to be built in midtown. The most interesting structure in the group was being publicly unveiled for the first time — a 46-story office building that will replace 101 and 103 Park Avenue, from 40th to 41st Streets, for one of the most substantial new additions to the city. That's right. The two older brick office buildings there now will be torn down for the replacement; such is the economics of the real estate market today. (By a quirk of architectural fate, 101 Park, long the home of architects' offices and building product displays, is a particularly undistinguished structure.)

The new 101 Park has been designed by Eli Attia and Associates for the builder Peter Kalikow, and it is one of the biggest of the new crop. It is also an exercise in the kind of creative quality that until very recently has been conspicuously absent from the New York scene. Those projects in Saks's windows, plus the new corporate headquarters for IBM, AT&T and Philip Morris, and the replacement planned for the Bonwit Teller site, are more than a post-recession resumption of building-as-usual; they represent a radical change in the city's style.

The most obvious difference is their immense size — much larger than almost anything built before. Except for the earlier stretch of skyscrapers across the Avenue of the Americas that extends Rockefeller Center to the west, we are getting the first full impact and understanding of the kind of construction permitted by the revised zoning ordinance of 1961, with its subsequent amendments. This is the overwhelming height and bulk that New York will have from now on. In a real estate lobster quadrille of land prices set by the amount of building the law allows, and vice versa, these projects also demonstrate what investors consider necessary for today's inflated construction and financing costs.

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This new size is frightening, and it raises all sorts of questions about density, concentration and sheer, inhuman scale. The problems range from what and when is too much, and what should be done about it, to the role of planning in controlling and directing development. These are not questions to be answered with any ease, dealing as they do in politics and economics as well as in urban design.

Oddly enough, it is just when the basic rules of building in New York have begun to be deeply troubling that a noticeable improvement in the quality of the city's construction is taking place. Because in normal times just about anything can be sold at the right address in Manhattan, builders have stuck close to the bottom line. Nothing better was needed to merchandise their space, and beauty was only in the eye of the accountant.

As a result, New York has had just about the lowest standards of any major city. And New York's best-known builders have made fortunes without contributing anything architecturally. Since this city has a concentration of the best architectural talent in the country, there have been frequent and repeated laments that these firms' commissions were almost always somewhere else, and it was the rarest of speculative builders who strayed from tried and true formulas of mediocrity for the unaccustomed pursuit of excellence. Corporate headquarters were the occasional exception to the rule.

Corporate headquarters still lead the way. IBM with Edward L. Barnes and Associates, AT&T with Philip Johnson and John Burgee, and Philip Morris with Ulrich Franzen and Associates are corporations that have gone for top reputations. They have gotten, at the best, excellent work, and at the worst, questionable or controversial results, but they are all gambling on varying kinds of landmarks.

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Now, finally, the speculative builders are beginning to do the same. George Klein has used I. M. Pei as the architect for 499 Park Avenue; Donald Trump has given Der Scutt a chance to come up with a thoughtful and imaginative solution for the Bonwit Teller site. And Peter Kalikow has hired Eli Attia for 101 Park Avenue.

Mr. Attia is an extremely able Israeli architect who worked in Philip Johnson's office during the period when it produced such designs as the stunning, trapezoidal Pennzoil Building in Houston. Mr. Johnson has lately gone on to fancy-dress historicism but Mr. Attia is still pursuing the same impressive, abstract geometry.

He was in the office when Peter Kalikow came to Johnson-Burgee with his first prestige site, 1001 Fifth Avenue. When Mr. Kalikow acquired his second presige site, 101 Park, he solicited proposals from a number of architects, including Eli Attia. Mr. Attia won the commission and left Johnson-Burgee to open his own office. He has also received a plum assignment from still another speculative builder interested in quality, Sheldon Solow, for a group of town houses in the East 60's.

Builders like Mr. Kalikow have learned that good architecture pays. If 1001 Fifth Avenue turned out to be more curious than beautiful, a famous name and even a little architectural controversy added up to a whoppingly profitable venture. For the 101 Park property, therefore, he sought a superior solution rather than a standard money-maker.

Some investment builders, like Gerald Hines in Houston, have literally run quality design through the computer and found that it means greater marketability and profits. These men now invest more to make more, instead of automatically going with the cheapest package. And they like the way the prestige of the better buildings adds to the lustre of their own images.

But the fact that stands out most about this new generation of builders is exactly that — they are a new generation. Most of them are in their 30's or 40's, either new to the business or the next-in-line in families of builders who have made their fortunes with a lot of very ordinary, bread-and-butter construction.

Unfortunately, the current New York projects by the city's older, familiar builders are as big as any of the others, but not nearly as distinguished. These men know every investment angle in and out of the books, but there is also

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Jack Horner

Skyline

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every indication that they are either incapable of discerning good from bad, or are totally unconcerned about the difference.

In the mysterious numerology of zoning, 101 Park is an 18 F.A.R. building. This refers to the floor-area ratio, or the relationship of the bulk of the building to the size of the site. Starting with the basic 15 F.A.R. permitted in this district, the size has been increased to a perfectly legal 18 F.A.R. with the use of bonuses given for open ground-floor space. Because the Park Avenue site is so large, the permitted bulk translates into more than 52,000 square feet of space.

The building has an unusual, almost pinwheel shape, set on the diagonal, utilizing the slope of the site. It holds the Park Avenue street line, but shifts the pedestrian and formal focus to the 40th Street corner, where the Grand Central overpass ends. Its sharply angled forms will be clad in either clear or reflecting glass in a tint of gray or blue. A variance will be required in the form of a height and set-back waiver, a practice that has become routine for any design that does not dispose its bulk in conformance with the letter of the law.

The solution is extremely skillful on two counts: the way the volume is used to produce the "economically efficient" structure the builder wanted, at the same time that the architect has raised that requirement to notable levels of art and urbanism. Mr. Attia, who has no patience with the allusive and decorative pretentions of "postmodernism," has produced architecture at its most elegant, controlled, abstract and precise. Like the rest of the "new wave," it breaks scale, with many of the problems that result, but it also raises the standard of New York building. ■