ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Philip Johnson And the Temper of These Times

The name of the game in architecture right now is "Can You Top This?" And the master of the game, hands and pediments down, is Philip Johnson, whose firm, Johnson/Burgee, has produced the vastly overpublicized, unceasingly controversial, Chippendale-topped AT&T Building for New York, a design that raises passions equally in learned symposia and on the cocktail circuit. The appearance of that gargantuan broken pediment with its buckeye bow to the Baroque in a world of flat-topped, no-nonsense skyscrapers succeeded in doing what mere masterpieces have failed to pull off: It put architecture on the front pages of newspapers and on the cover of Time — a neat trick for a building that is still a hole in the ground.

Only Mr. Johnson would dare to top his own top. He is a man whose search for the heights is insatiable and for whom there is no anticlimax; there are pinnacles to be endlessly reached, or shaped. If you think AT&T is a hard top to follow, then you haven't seen his latest — the just-released, hot-off-the-blowpipe design for the new Pittsburgh Plate Glass headquarters in Pittsburgh, a 40-story, full-block tower with five surrounding smaller buildings, next to Market Square, a complex that will form a new square of its own and connect to the famous Golden Triangle. The cost is said to be upward of $100 million, but only PPG will know for sure.

Now — are you ready for Camelot in Pittsburgh? Because these buildings are neither Baroque nor Beaux Arts, two newly popular modes in the current antimodern trend; they are Gothic. And instead of a masonry skin, they are sheathed in reflective glass. The faceted mirror-glass walls take their esthetic cue from medieval stone piers and clustered columns, rising as intricate reflective and refractive surfaces to a Gothic crown on the top.

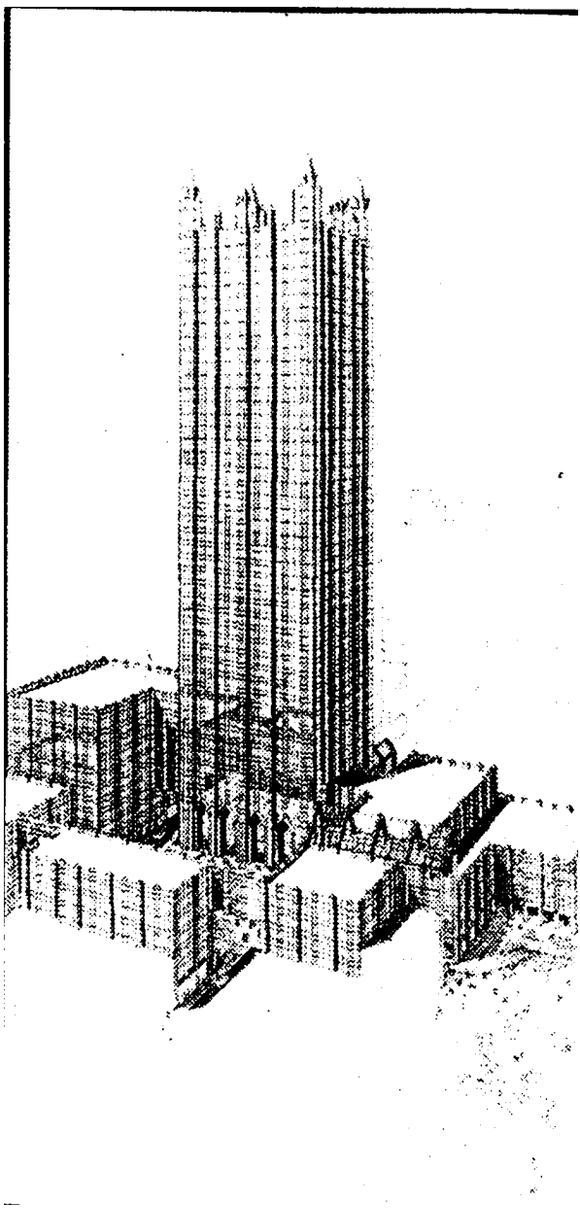
The rippling glass suggests that there is a relationship between skin and structure, but the columns are actually set back from the "Gothic" curtain wall, and what looks like structural elements are bay windows for executive offices. With pointed corner towers and an assortment of lesser turrets and pinnacles rising above the roofline, the effect is of some giant, glittering toy castle in the sky.

• • •

All those who love the AT&T Building will adore PPG, while those who hate the former will despise the latter with tripled ire. That is because the new building raises the same problems with the kind of architecture that is being created by these raids on the past for traditional elements devoted to the exclusive creation of smashing visual effects. The doubts are about the total jettisoning of all of the time-honored relationships that bind together structure, form, style and use in an architectonic whole for an eclecticism that does no more than exploit history as a grab-bag of ideas for surface spectacle. The question is whether this makes as good architecture as publicity.

This building traffics about equally in shock value and studious skills. A great deal of very careful consideration has gone into the determination of the configuration of these walls, and while the jumping off point may have been "Gothic," the actual result tends to be more like a kind of planar geometry in which the properties of mirror glass are explored with elaborate sensibility. Certainly this kind of exploration is a logical next step in the increasingly popular use of this material. The subtle, sophisticated abstraction of these walls may be why the more literally translated top of the building ruptures its credibility; it is like suddenly being handed a joker. Millinery is not architecture.

'Philip Johnson is a man whose search for the heights is insatiable: There are pinnacles to be endlessly reached.'



The Johnson/Burgee design for Pittsburgh Plate Glass—"Like it or not, spectacular addition to the skyline"

The whole thing is supposed to remind one of the Houses of Parliament or English cathedral towers. But it is just as easy to see a resemblance to Minoru Yamasaki's World Trade Center in New York, which is a similar grouping of towers, related low buildings and public space with quasi-Gothic references, although it has never been embraced as an architectural frontier. PPG has a sharp, crystalline elegance; where false glass piers divide to form the pointed arches of the entrance, the pretense has some panache, as opposed to the noodle-like quality where the World Trade Center's traceries split and hit the ground.

Perhaps Yamasaki's sin was wrong timing (too Gothic too soon) or not enough real style, or the total absence of wit — the only real sin left in a world where moral judgements have disappeared in life and art. Or it might have been simple excess of towers, two of the tallest buildings in the world (at the time) is a wretched kind of redundancy. Maybe what makes PPG different is an excess of style. The conscious manipulation of traditional forms and cultural symbols is the basis for an attractive esthetic vision that

Continued on Page 28

Philip Johnson And These Times

Continued from Page 27

also offers a little erudite Disney kitsch, an unbeatable combination for today's avant-garde. It is all dazzling enough so that nobody asks any hard questions.

There is a tradition for this kind of eclecticism, of course, from Durand and the Beaux Arts to the accepted practice carried from the 19th into the 20th century, which dressed up buildings of disparate functions in a choice of classical, Gothic, or other "appropriate" garb. The buildings that resulted could be anything from excellent to hack. But there were important differences with today's eclecticism that invalidate comparisons.

•

The older process was based on traditional structure and scale. There had been no technological breakthroughs great enough yet to transform everything that a builing was equipped to do; no urban revolution had taken place to destroy existing environmental continuity. The radical 20th-century changes in materials, building size and context had not yet intervened, changes that were to set unparalleled creative challenges and demand very large talents to solve them. There is no doubt that the precedent-shattering monuments produced by those talents stand, and will continue to stand, as the great architecture of our age.

•

So now that the period of "heroic modernism" is past, it is fun-and-games time, and games like the PPG building are very controversial indeed. Is Mr. Johnson really serious about his selecta-style approach to architecture? You'd better believe that he is. It is obvious that he tires of styles a little more quickly and easily than others; his inquiring mind prizes visual stimulation and intellectual titillation above all else — something that excites before it bores.

Come to think of it, this may be an art that is acutely right for our times. It is totally in tune with the "new morality." There is no wrong way to build, just as there is no wrong way to have sex or run your life. Without sin or scandal, even achieving transient shock is something of an accomplishment. Sensations pall quickly and new ones are sought. Architects, like anyone, can do things now that were considered unspeakable a few years ago. All that counts is the style with which the particular undertaking is carried out.

But it would be witless to dismiss what is going on in this "new architecture" as having no interest or merit. Architecture is freer than it ever has been before; it has developed unique resources of technical magnificence, and the potential for stylistic development is enormous. The seeds of genuine esthetic evolution are being sown.

Then why am I troubled by the PPG Building, with all of its suave glitter and monumental pizzazz, its fashionable historical recall and delighted breaking of rules? Like it or not, it is going to be the kind of inescapable addition to the American skyline that both the architect and client obviously want.

I think that what is deeply disturbing is a philosiphy of building so superficial that the only thing that matters is how one expands the visual boundaries of design. With every other kind of response downgraded, this approach can produce a lot of very bad building, very fast.

Comparison with any truly great building — and particularly one with the disciplined restraint and powerful esthetic impact of a consistent ideal maintained through the artist's whole body of work — brings one up short. It makes PPG look "pretty" and foolish, even at its suave superscale. Architecture that counts requires more than a good eye and clever taste. Even the architect who indulges in tour de force or private gesture must do so in the service of a larger framework of form, use and technique that derives its meaning from a serious consideration of human and cultural factors and functional needs.

An "appearance" architecture, which denies the values that make building a complex social esthetic, is an architecture that lacks depth, vigor and sublimity. It is fashion, not art. ■