

# Architecture: Felt Forum

## New House Is Sensible and Quietly Attractive

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WITH 3,642 permanent seats and space for 5,200, the Forum at the new Madison Square Garden Center can scarcely be called a minitheater. Compared with the 20,000 capacity of the main Garden arena itself, however, which will open in February, it probably qualifies as intime. Yesterday, it gave a small sampling and preview of what the 8.5-acre, \$125-million Madison Square Garden Sports and Entertainment Center will be like.

The Felt Forum, named for Irving Mitchell Felt, chairman and president of the privately promoted and financed Garden enterprise (it has a friend at Chase Manhattan), is a semicircular amphitheater 180 feet in diameter and one-third of an acre in size. It sits within the huge drum on the Pennsylvania Station site that accommodates the 410-foot span of the oval Garden arena, a pie-shaped 500-seat cinema, 48 bowling lanes (the only part now open in addition to the Forum) and assorted exhibition spaces.

The Forum has vinyl upholstered seats—they will also be used in the Garden—in shades of rust red and orange. Walls of epoxy-painted cement block are the warm, deeper hue. Garden corridors will be in the same plain material.

Wedge-shaped white baffles hang from a mechanical ceiling, with horizontal strip lighting troughs over the performance area. Except for wood grain panels and yellow tile in the lobby and entrances, there are no frills. Everything is mustard-proof and vandal-proof.

Architecturally, the Forum is a simple, straightforward solution of a flexible performance arena for multiple purposes, based on direct, rational, inexpensive answers to function and use. (A few details, such as corner equipment balconies, remain to be ironed out.) It will accommodate everything from yesterday's Welsh and Scots Guards to small sporting events, trade shows and, potentially, rather large little theater. It will take the hot dog crowd or a charity benefit with equal aplomb.

The effect of the theater, even without luxury materials, is pleasantly and unpretentiously handsome. These are not the negative virtues that they sound. Simple, direct solutions with rational and appropriate details are increasingly hard to find in a

## The Building

THE FELT FORUM, architecture by Charles Luckman Associates; structural engineers, Severud, Peronne, Sturm, Conlin, Bandel; mechanical and electrical engineers, Syska Hennessey; acoustical engineers, Bolt, Beranek & Newman; sound system engineers, Hulst & Hulst; seating consultant, Ben Schlanger; construction, Turner Construction Company. At the Madison Square Garden Sports and Entertainment Center, Eighth Avenue, between 31st and 33d Streets.

world that likes its theaters pseudo-baroque, its restaurants pseudo-pub and its hotels pseudo-schloss.

The answer is partially that the Garden complex is a \$125-million economy job. It is also in the fact that the supervising and designing architects of Charles Luckman Associates have carried out a huge and immensely involved technical project with sensible, tasteful logic.

The new Garden complex, like the Forum, will be neither avant-garde nor high architectural art. The large cable-hung roof of the drum-shaped center is dramatic, economical engineering; it is not the exquisite esthetic structural expression of a concrete-ribbed arena by Pier Luigi Nervi or the heroic sculpture of the Tokyo Olympics structures of Kenzo Tange. A great stadium is always a great space, but nobility went out with the Roman grandeur of the old Pennsylvania Station.

The Garden's 5,000-seat and 20,000-seat arenas are being produced commercially to serve popular pleasures for a great many people, on a vast scale, with efficiency and comfort. Six years of intensive planning promise both. This kind of center deals, legitimately, in mass art.

The question is whether high art really belongs with mass art, or whether this package deal of building and entertainment is not a singularly appropriate contemporary expression of a sizable and valid cultural phenomenon of our time. (The 48 continuous automated bowling lanes are a kind of mass-cult in motion that the technologically minded artist has not begun to catch up with.)

This esthetic expression is consistent throughout, and there are no breaches of standard within the architects' control. To one observer, the expert, median level of execution that does not aspire above its purposes and resources is almost a relief from the spurious pretensions and hokey details of a Lincoln Center.

Twenty-thousand hockey fans will undoubtedly love the new Garden, and 20,000 hockey fans need not be wrong. See you at the circus next year.