

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Skyscrapers, A 'New' Esthetic And Recycling

**I**n architecture, there is no Off Broadway. An important building costs millions, and like an expensive show, the investment rides on established reputations. The big building jobs go to the big names and the big firms. There is just too much money involved.

But there is more to architecture than establishment practice, and there are other places to look for its vital signs. Architecture is really a schizophrenic art, existing on two levels. The major structures—those that command the widest attention and praise—are almost always skillful, polished works of a kind acceptable to enlightened and affluent clients. At another level are the younger or more heretical talents, more closely tied to the art and intellectual worlds. They build little or build small, but make waves. Since there is no equivalent of experimental or repertory workshops for architecture, they tend to write and talk a lot.

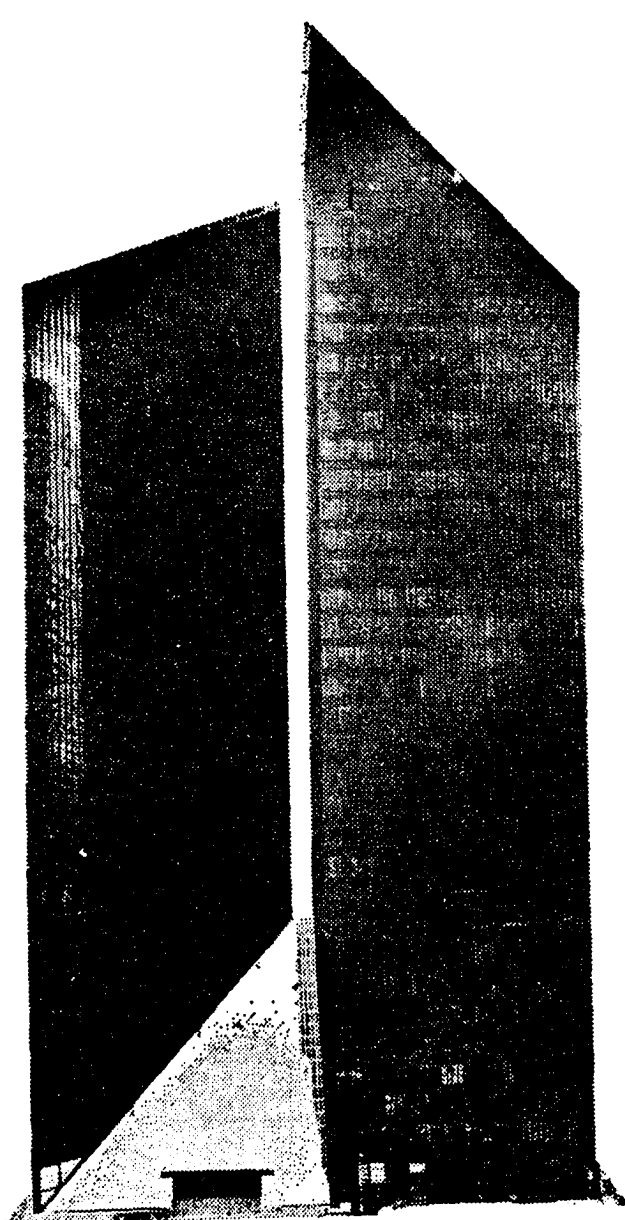
Both levels are manifestly influential. The first, or established brand of building, creates a vast spinoff of both competent and deplorable commercial work; nothing except haute couture gets knocked off faster than a successful architectural style. This is the construction that determines much of the built world as we see and know it.

The second level, unfamiliar to the general public, usually represents architecture's immediate future, pushing the present. This is where the theory and philosophy of the art of architecture are developed and new styles are born. Although this is a kind of ferment that cannot be seen on city streets, it has a profound effect on establishment work.

To reduce these incestuously vitalizing currents to a list of architectural events of the year is a risky enterprise. But if one wishes to indulge in such an exercise, the Pennzoil Building in Houston, by Philip Johnson and John Burgee, could be No. 1, as a pretty good "building of the year," although it is actually no more a "pure" 1976 product than any other major construction. With its completion it has achieved the kind of visibility and publicity that makes it an architectural event. The building becomes a "statement" that the public recognizes—a critical bridge between the art of architecture and its popular use and understanding.

Mr. Johnson, who has just turned 70, is incontestably super-establishment. But his sharp intellect has always been directed to what is new, challenging, stimulating and provocative—the thoughts and events that represent the frontier of his art.

With the Pennzoil Building the establishment and experimental architectural levels meet. Its twin towers are an experience in a kind of giant, minimal abstraction, tremendously effective in their scale and artfulness, offering a complex and shifting geometry subject to kinetic and



Pennzoil—"the building of the year"

esthetic transformations through stunning changes of movement and light. This is significant skyline sculpture as well as a successful commercial container. It is at this point of synthesis of form and purpose that building becomes art.

The second building, or event, on the list is New York's best new skyscraper in years, by the establishment firm of Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates. This is the building at One United Nations Plaza put up by the United Nations Development Corporation.

The tower's suave mirror skin breaks many of the rules on which modern architecture is based. It is a brilliant and somewhat perverse design, with a deliberate trompe l'oeil scale for its exterior elements combined with an arbitrary form that turns the structure into more of an esthetic "object" than an indicator of its functions. The result is giving orthodox modernists fits, while setting new development patterns.

1976 is also the year they got all the windows back in the John Hancock Building in Boston, by I. M. Pei and Partners, which gives us event No. 3. For several previous years the windows blew out and lawsuits piled up in an architectural debacle paralleling the collapse of Beauvais Cathedral or the slow slide of Pisa's tower. The results are surprising.

The boarded-up eyesore on Copley Square, which can surely be nominated as one of the all-time wrong buildings in the wrong place, has turned out to be Boston's most beautiful new construction—a slender, sleek, mirror-glass tower with more refinement and elegance than anything else in town. Call it the architectural irony of the year.

Two other Pei works in construction now are events of a different nature. The impressive Dallas Government Center and the new East Wing of Washington's National

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dance program, these are changing the homing patterns of American dance. No longer—or less frequently—do we find ourselves at the 92nd Street “Y,” the Hunter College Playhouse, or even the Manhattan School of Music, although a company from Utah did hurriedly have to change its venue to the latter, when another of dance’s newer homes, the Marymount College Theater, tried to censor a dance where partial nudity occurred. Fancy that! Wasn’t that 1976 we just passed through?

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# Skyscrapers

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Gallery promise to set exceptional standards for public buildings.

Next on the list is a kind of group event, the peripherally visible, quietly influential, smaller constructions of the practitioners of “new” esthetic. Their work is found in rather recondite pastures and hilltops from Connecticut to California and in all of the architectural journals. To name names without differentiating in detail is to invite contumely, but at the opposite poles of this practice are the pristine abstractions of Richard Meier and the elite eclecticism of Venturi and Rauch. This work is cerebral, special, significant and often quite beautiful. Its practitioners wage endless paper polemical battles about post-modernism and post-functionalism (yes, they are different). Don’t look now; the future

is gaining on you.

That brings us to the second half of our enumeration of the 10 most influential happenings of the year, and we move from people and buildings to trends. No. 6 on the list is the museum explosion. The museum is clearly the monument of the year, or of the decade, leaving no city untouched. Its architects are from both the establishment and experimental sectors, with varied and notable results.

No. 7 would be complete without examples of old building recycling, a boom that has peaked this year. Placing seventh and eighth are the sensitive restoration of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and the successful reuse of Boston’s Quincy Market.

The ninth item is another trend—the mirror-glass building, indisputably the building of the year, ranging from elegant to awful and spreading like a funny-house plague in cities and in limbo. It reflects streets, freeways, buildings or no buildings, heat and glare, and is the latest architectural copout.

No. 10 is the building activity of the year—the architectural stampede to the Near East. Whatever the economic indicators are indicating generally, for architects they are still pointing down, and the action is in Abu Dhabi and points east. We are importing OPEC oil and exporting all past American architectural and environmental mistakes. At least (we hope) no one is using mirror glass in the desert.