ARCHITECTURAL VIEW: A BUILDING THAT LOOKS LIKE A LOSER ARCHITECTURAL ...

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pg. 71

ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Building That Looks Like A Loser

Nothing is ever simple in New York. A case in point is the extremely large, conspicuous and highly controversial luxury apartment house planned for 800 Fifth Avenue on the Dodge mansion site at 61st Street—one of the city's most distinguished locations—which can only be called a very mixed blessing. Because of the high price of the land the developer is asking for a bigger structure than the zoning allows; to keep him from building what he really wants to build, which is dreadful, the city is considering compromises in size and design; and if this negotiated proposal is rejected by the City Planning Commission, the Board of Standards and Appeals can let him build the horror he originally wanted.

Confusing? This statement doesn't even begin to indicate the complexities of purchase options, hardship claims, economics and urban design involved. Or the games being played by buyers and sellers and the city. Only a masochist would play them if the stakes for everyone were not so high.

If all this were not enough, the project has every architectural strike against it. It will be surrounded by, and measured against, some of New York's most handsome and substantial structures of a style and quality outlawed by the realities of today's construction economics. The building's neighbors are the Metropolitan and Knickerbocker Clubs, the Pierre, the Plaza and the elegant space of Grand Army Plaza at 59th Street, a group that stands at the cosmopolitan heart of the city and makes its one serious claim to formal urban grandeur. It will sit at the point between the grand hotels and the start of residential Fifth Avenue's classical limestone facades. Built by today's speculator standards, it has almost got to be a loser.

Still, some points have been won. Because the zoning variance is being sought, the city's planners were able to ask the developers, Bernard Spitzer and Marvin Winter, for a number of extremely important improvements. They have reduced the bulk of the building from the original request, although it is raised from the legal limit for the district. In the developers' proposal, the bulk was all to be in a huge Fifth Avenue tower of monster banality, with the midblock behind it on 61st Street broken up by a drive-in plaza. This destructive open space would not only be in the wrong place, it would be a conduit to a residential and commercial garage.

In addition, this disruptive plaza was to substitute for a cash contribution to the maintenance of Central Park—a feature of the new Park Improvement District, a special zoning area of which this building is the first example. (Under the zoning a space bonus is given either for a plaza or arcade, or for a cash sum for the park, calculated according to the additional square footage; the builder has the option.)

Other city-requested changes include the transfer of most of the zoning bulk permitted in midblock to the Fifth Avenue tower, leaving a low structure set slightly back on 61st Street. This creates a continuous "street wall" of the right height and keeps the intimate, midblock scale that the city is trying to protect. As another concession, the developers agreed to add a highly regarded New York architect, Ulrich Franzen, to their design team to make the changes in both site plan and building design.

The results of this shotgun marriage are distinctly mixed. As urban design—in terms of the disposition of the building's height and bulk and its street effect—the changes are commendable. They represent a standard of land use and amenity preservation far above that of the developers' first proposal, as well as a vast improvement upon anything that could be built by formula under the existing zoning regulations. (What could be built with ingenuity is something else again; but developers just don't see that as a way to maximize profits.)

As architecture, however, this building is extremely disturbing. It has an aggressively busy facade, resting on weak (and undesirable) arches at street level, topped and boxed in by rows of indented ribbon banding, and with a section of zippy bay windows above. The composition has neither coherence nor esthetic conviction. The planned use of buff brick would be a gesture to the Avenue's earlier limestone facades, which are now totally beyond price.

This design cannot be passed off as Miami jazz, because the architect is a man known for taste and thoughtful work. There is certainly no lack of talent, expertise, or concern for the Avenue's character to explain this aberration. Mr. Franzen's reasons turn out to be serious and complex. He is obviously troubled about the inhumanity of an immense, sheer, scaleless wall.

But what is evidently also involved is a change of philosophy from the rigors of the International Style to a dizzying neo-eclecticism. If he is seduced by design recall, he is not alone; many other architects are going through similar esthetic sea changes. He makes it clear that he has been examining forms and details that practitioners of his generation were taught to ignore: the ordered complexity of Beaux Arts and classical models that were used both wisely and foolishly for New York's early skyscrapers when style was something dictated by academic fiat and craftsmanship was affordable and alive.

However, the relationships and transitions of the multiple parts of those modes were thoroughly understood; most were textbook cases. Mr. Franzen's co-opting of this approach results in one kind of building that appears to be sitting uneasily on top of another kind of building, with unresolved transitions and unnerving details. Having left the safe ground of the severely simple modernism on which he operates so well, he seems to be thrown right back to those agonized debates so popular in the 1890's on how to design the tall building. The answers are obviously still elusive. And although the result undeniably breaks the standard speculator apartment house mold, it also assaults Fifth Avenue. That is unpardonable, and that is not what anyone had in mind.

Perhaps the trouble lies in the fact that there

Continued on Page 29

A Building That Looks Like A Loser

Continued from Page 23

are so few guidelines today for what he is trying to do, as there were for the prescribed 19th-century styles. Or the fault may be that this design does not really grow out of a plan, or concept, as in classical Beaux Arts practice, but is a kind of decorative bravura imposed on a stack of inexorable, unviolable, formula floor plans. The developer is still building exactly what he wants to build, only a little less of it, gift-wrapped, and there are some added amenities of balconies, bays and views. That wrapping would have to be of the most subdued and special materials and detailing if it were not to be a guaranteed disaster.

One longs for the austere beauty of Mr. Franzen's more familiar work, the logic, subtlety and sophistication of those precise details and elegant, knife-sharp forms and relationships that are his hallmark and a true contemporary, cosmopolitan style. Anything less than that kind of sensitivity and restraint will disfigure this critically important site.

What the avenue does not need is esthetic disruption, or 50 spaces of commercial parking, to which the city's planners acquiesced unwisely after refusing a request for 200, or any more of these blockbusters beyond this transitional commercial-residential corner. The city has worked hard to achieve some very desirable compromises. But the question of who wins or loses in this complex trade-off is one for Solomon to decide.