Architecture: Ford Flies High Ford Flies High
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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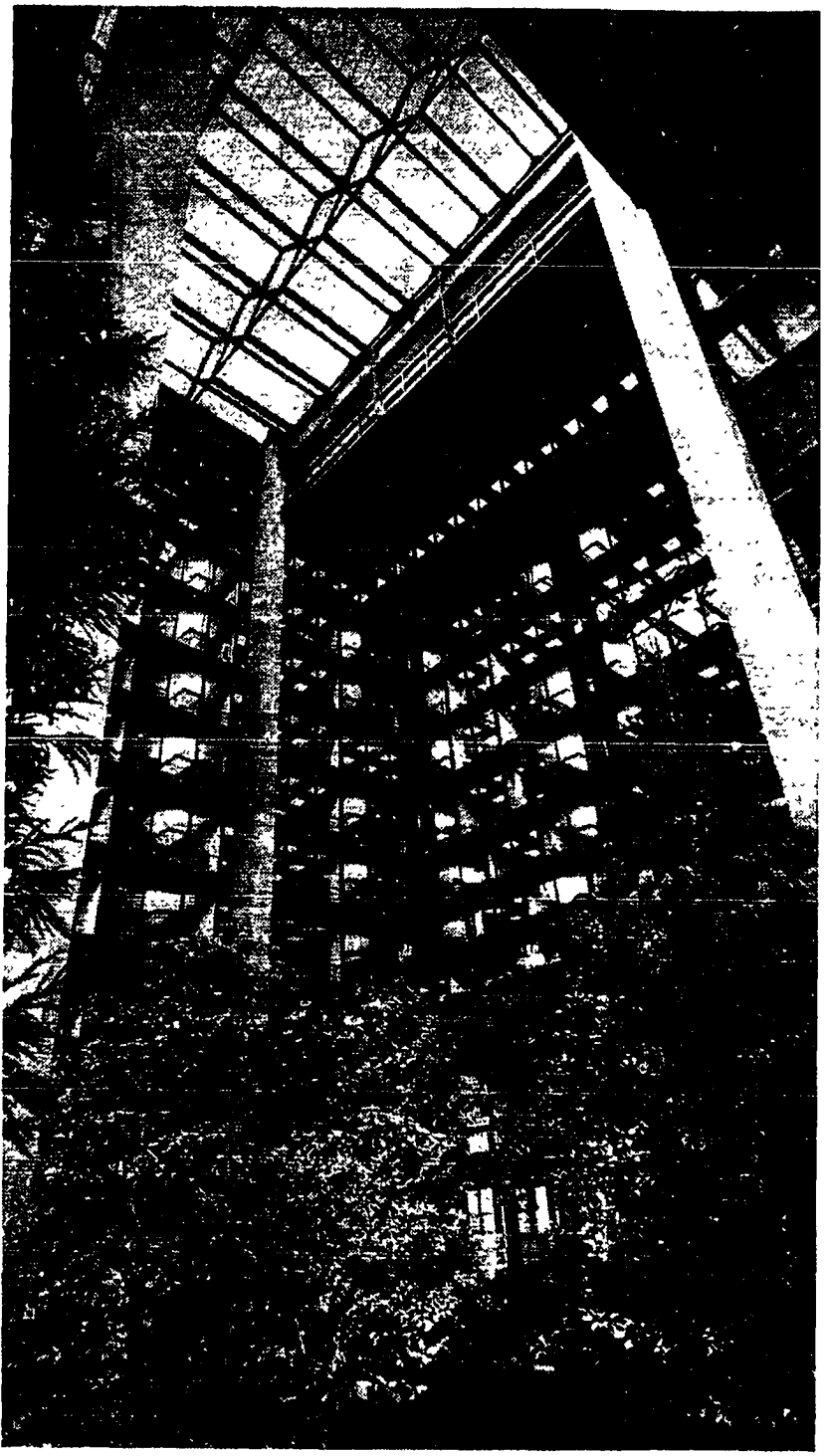

Architecture

Ford Flies High

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE first members of the Ford Foundation moved into their new headquarters this week—12 stories of subtle splendor half a block west of the United Nations. The building on the 200 by 200 foot site reaching from 42d to 43d Streets, designed by Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates, is destined for instant fame as New York's latest landmark and one of the most important and beautiful new structures anywhere. It will be dedicated on Dec. 7.

By now most New Yorkers know that the glass box anchored by granite piers and partially embraced by granite side walls contains a giant indoor garden—a 12-story, 160-foot high, skylit, air-conditioned, third of an acre terraced park

The 17 full-grown trees include acacia, magnolia and eucalyptus, there are 999 shrubs, for anyone who wants to count, 148 vines, 21,954 ground-cover plants and 18 aquatic plants in a still water pool. The seasons will bring bloomings of rhododendron, gardenia, camellia, azalea and bougainvillea, special plantings of tulips in spring, begonias in summer, chrysanthemums in fall and poinsettias in winter. The landscaping, by Dan Kiley, is carried up the projecting top surfaces of the first five floors

This huge greenhouse is illuminated by 76 spotlights from the 11th floor and 43 ground lights, as well as by the changing moods and colors of natural sky and weather through the glass roof and walls. It is a horticultural spectacular and probably one of the most romantic environments ever devised by corporate man.

It is also an architectural spectacular. The garden is wrapped on two sides and part of a third by a glass-walled office block that

Continued on Page 25

The New York Times (Sam Falk)
Interior garden and offices, new Ford Foundation Building
A corporate Crystal Palace

The New York Times (Sam Falk)

New York's newest landmark, the Ford Foundation Building, Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo Associates
Sensitive consideration of its place in the existing city

Ford Flies High

Continued from Page 23

opens visually and physically to the planted court with sliding glass panels This luminous, transparent interior structure soars to the top in a complex counterpoint of the modular geometry of visible, stacked work floors bathed with golden light played against the huge open court with its illuminated greenery This is an even more rich, complex and subtle esthetic when viewed from the outside through the ten-story-high glass walls, or from inside, through the court, to the street

The building reveals itself totally from the street; the Ford Foundation has built itself a splendid, shimmering Crystal Palace.

More important, it has built a significant addition to the New York scene It is one of the small handful of buildings released from the exigencies of commercial construction to rank as architecture at all The excellence of this building is not just in its original, highly romantic beauty, or the effective way it opens up a closed corporate group into a communicating organization focused on that great garden court. It is more than superb and special standards of design in which every uncompromising detail is a lavish custom solution Its great lesson is in its extraordinarily sensitive consideration of its place in the existing city.

The conventional way to build a "status" structure in New York today is to erect a tower set well back on a landscaped plaza This solution, aided by the new zoning law, repeatedly and senselessly breaks the continuity of the street line. New York's only coherent urban design feature in a city of constantly competitive structural chaos

Here the architect chose to preserve the street rather than to disrupt it and to relate sympathetically to a curious set of neighbors rather than to ignore them a commercial building, some small town houses, a park at the edge of Tudor City and some radical changes in ground level across the site In a virtual reversal of current practice, he put the building around the plaza, instead of the plaza around the building The glassed-in closed court is open to the passing public from 42d to 43d Streets. The design offers sentitive transitions to every part of the environment It is that rarity, a building aware of its world, as well as a work of art

The building is too well-mannered to make its neighbors look cheap or shabby The granite is a blending taupe-gray warmed with rose laid up without mortared joints, the glass walls are steel-framed The granite sheathes the vertical structure, consisting of piers and walls, which is of reinforced concrete The piers contain stairs and mechanical shafts

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The horizontal structure is steel, faced with a second steel that weathers a rusty bronze, because exposed structural steel is against the city's fire laws The top two floors, which ring the building completely above the 10-story-high glass window wall, are suspended over that non-load bearing wall from large spandrel girders These are the two special executive floors in an all-executive building At skylight height, a promenade surrounds the court

All materials are natural. The plastic esthetic, the "hot modern" spectrum of colors, have not been permitted here, in this most modern of buildings Golden-beige Puerto Rican wool rugs are set into oak parquet floors so that deep pile is level with wood, a discreet study in expensive non-ostentation There are natural linen covered modular walls, English wool upholstery, real leather and Honduras mahogany furniture of contemporary style and a satiny, traditional 19th-century finish. All furnishings are by Warren Platner, of the architectural firm, for a totally unified, interior-exterior design Grants will be made and programs pursued in a virtual hothouse of standardized, suave elegance

The price for understated magnificence for 287,400 square feet, of which 83.3% is "net" working space, is approximately $16-million Of this cost, the landscaping, surprisingly, is under one per cent It is, in every sense, a luxury building

It is quite obvious that in the structure and buildings of corporate democracy the United States has found a natural replacement for nobility and its monuments (One of the great debates during the design process, whether the offices should be uniformly furnished as the architect wished was resolved on the basis of democracy. The best is good enough for all)

The large American foundation, with royal resources, has consequently become a kind of corporate Medici Considerably less colorful and more cautious than the Medici, however, its superorganization men are frequently more committed to bland altruism than to courageous creative acts. Occasionally they come across with a smashing gesture In proper Florentine fashion, Ford has given New York a superlative work of architecture.

There will be two arguments about this building One will be based on standards of speculative commercial construction, under which the building will be explained away as unrealistically extravagant due to design emphasis on "waste space" There is a gold mine of "lost" square footage in that open court, as builders have demonstrated by tearing down the great open court buildings of the 19th century to jam standard rental floors onto the same sites

To judge the building on these grounds is not only tiresome nonsense but unfair to both the Ford Foundation, which could build non-commercially to the city's benefit, and to the commercial builder, who cannot The two kinds of building bear no comparison at all

Space, and the handling of that space is the essence of all great architecture. Every monument from the Baths of Caracalla through St. Peter's is filled with "waste space" Every square inch of the Ford building's "waste" space works in terms of design, function and corporate or urban purpose. It is a humanistic, rather than an economic environment.

In the 20th-century city, space and humanism are luxuries that we can no longer afford Therefore architecture is something that we can no longer afford

It is equally ridiculous to argue as to whether the Ford Foundation has built a monument to itself or whether the money might not be better spent on the problems of the world Certainly the building could come under the heading of one of the foundation's more valid contributions to the arts It is a significant contribution to the quality of the city

It is also certain that Ford will never give most New Yorkers anything except this civic gesture of beauty and excellence, and that is a grant of some importance in a world where spirit and soul are deadened by the speculative cheapness of the environment The loss is measurable not in square footage, that favorite yardstick, but in the quality of life That so few seem capable of making the distinction between art and profit is one of the serious failures of our cities and a great cultural tragedy of our time