

## Architecture

# Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Bldgs?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ANY discussion of the World Trade Center at this point may be in the nature of locking the barn after the horse is gone, but, to mix a couple of barnyard metaphors, there is no reason why New Yorkers should be getting a pig in a poke. They have had very little objective information or evaluation of this huge and highly controversial project unless they have read a report on the subject by the City Planning Commission, including between the lines, or have had access to a commission-ordered study of lower Manhattan which will not be released until next month.

What has come out of public hearings and protest is: 1. Establishment-baiting, in this case the Port Authority; 2. Yamasaki-baiting, particularly popular among architects; 3. emotional arguments, usually aimed at the project's size; 4. fears of the real estate interests; 5. concern for the destruction of a small but irreplaceable business community.

### The Real Issues

On balance, the World Trade Center is not the city-destroyer that it has been popularly represented to be, its pluses outweigh its minuses in the complex evaluation that must be made, and its potential is greater than its threat. The issues are far from black and white. The proper basic question may well be whether any agency should have the right to indulge in city-building on this scale and with this freedom, without obligations to the city and beyond city review. Since the Port Authority has that legal right, the pertinent issues are those of the plan. Certainly its impact will be so great that it is a matter of legitimate public concern.

The focus of the argument is a \$525 million, 16-acre complex bounded on the north and south by Vesey and Liberty Streets and on the east and west by Church and West Streets. It will be the largest commercial superblock in Manhattan, closing all internal streets of 15 small blocks, with a perimeter cov-

erage on each side equal to the distance between Fifth and Park Avenues. The twin 110-story towers, each 200 feet square or about the size of a city blockfront, are flanked by four seven-story structures around a five-acre plaza. The architects are Minoru Yamasaki and Associates and Emery Roth and Sons.

The greatest storm has centered on the size of the towers, which, as everyone knows by now, will break the skyline and be the tallest buildings in the world. The argument goes that the flat-topped behemoths will destroy the beauty of the romantically spired lower Manhattan skyline. The hue and cry equals that raised at the time those spires were built. They were attacked then as barbaric, oversized wreckers of scale and sunlight, and with the building of the (now modest) twin towers of the Equitable Building in 1914, the outcry became so great that the city's first restrictive zoning law was passed. Wall Street was a symbol of architectural transgression. The responsible intellectual community refused to forgive the design sins of those early skyscraper builders with their decorative curtain-wall classicism, fancy-dress Gothic, "senseless" spires and Halicarnassus water towers for another 40 years. This is the skyline that the same intellectual community now wants to protect.

With today's engineering advances, it was only a matter of time when the skyline would be broken again. The inevitable may or may not be desirable, but it must be dealt with as a fact of life. Barring war or depression, the impact will be ameliorated by buildings of intermediate scale as history, technology, megalomania, the skyscraper and the skyline pursue their natural course.

We do not believe in embalming or Williamsburging the New York skyline. This valid and dramatic testament of the city's brutally competitive grandeur and vitality has produced an incomparable 20th-century esthetic. What we do believe in is the absolute necessity of relating

these corporate and speculative status symbols to the needs, functions and uses of the city at ground level. The rationale of planning goes far deeper than a picture of the skyline, which is not static, and which changes its composition and alignment from every viewpoint.

### Planning Pluses

The World Trade Center is no Pan Am Building, muscling into an overcrowded neighborhood of maximum big-building concentration. It is closer to Rockefeller Center as a city-shaping group of structures (another example of buildings rejected by the architectural community for many years and now hailed as successful urban design). The area is of minimum interest to preservationists. Separate studies by the Regional Plan Association, the City Planning Commission and the consultants preparing the new lower Manhattan plan. Whittlesey and Conklin, Wallace-McHarg Associates and Alan M. Voorhees and Associates, Inc., confirm the planning logic of the location.

Rapid transit (three subway lines and Path) and street capacity are judged to be more than adequate for the 50,000 employees and 100,000 visitors expected daily. The Regional Plan Association, which is conscientiously concerned with long-range planning goals and particularly with better public transportation, feels that the downtown location encourages more transit than car use, and that it has the right kind and number of jobs in the right places.

The city's consultants for the lower Manhattan plan are not exactly bankers' boys in their view of what is best for downtown New York, which includes people-oriented waterfront reclamation, parks and pedestrian streets. They nevertheless have concluded that the economic realities of lower Manhattan are a critical issue, and that without the revitalizing emphasis of the Chase Manhattan Building, the World Trade Center and some coherent solution of the muddled Civic Center plan,

the continued vitality of the area is in doubt.

Regional Plan and Planning Commission studies indicate that the eight million square feet of rentable space in the Trade Center will be properly absorbed. It will be spread over six years of staged construction in a city that builds an average of five million square feet of new office space annually. The commission would prefer to see more than a year between the completion of the two towers to ease the effect of the release of the major spaces.

The serious issue that remains, then, is the disruption of the present business community. One of the worst unsolved problems in the renewal of cities is the loss of those healthy small enterprises of a kind and character that large-scale projects increasingly and tragically destroy. The situation is particularly bad in New York, and the Port Authority has done even worse with it than the average municipality. Untouched by local laws, endowed with the right of eminent domain and a sovereign state position from which it negotiates at an absurdly one-sided advantage with the city, the Port Authority offers only a bonus as inducement to the tenant to move, which is less liberal than the liquidation or small business displacement grants under Title I urban renewal.

### Failures

If skill, imagination and even enlightened philanthropy were required to keep this business community as an economically and humanly viable part of downtown, they should all have been employed. At this point, the default is clear and inexcusable. The public finds it less easy to excuse and the mammoth project less easy to accept because the Port Authority has not, in the opinion of many, used the power and prosperity gained from the ceding of municipal rights for the greatest municipal good. It has acted more as a private investor than as a public agency.

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# Big Bad Bldgs?

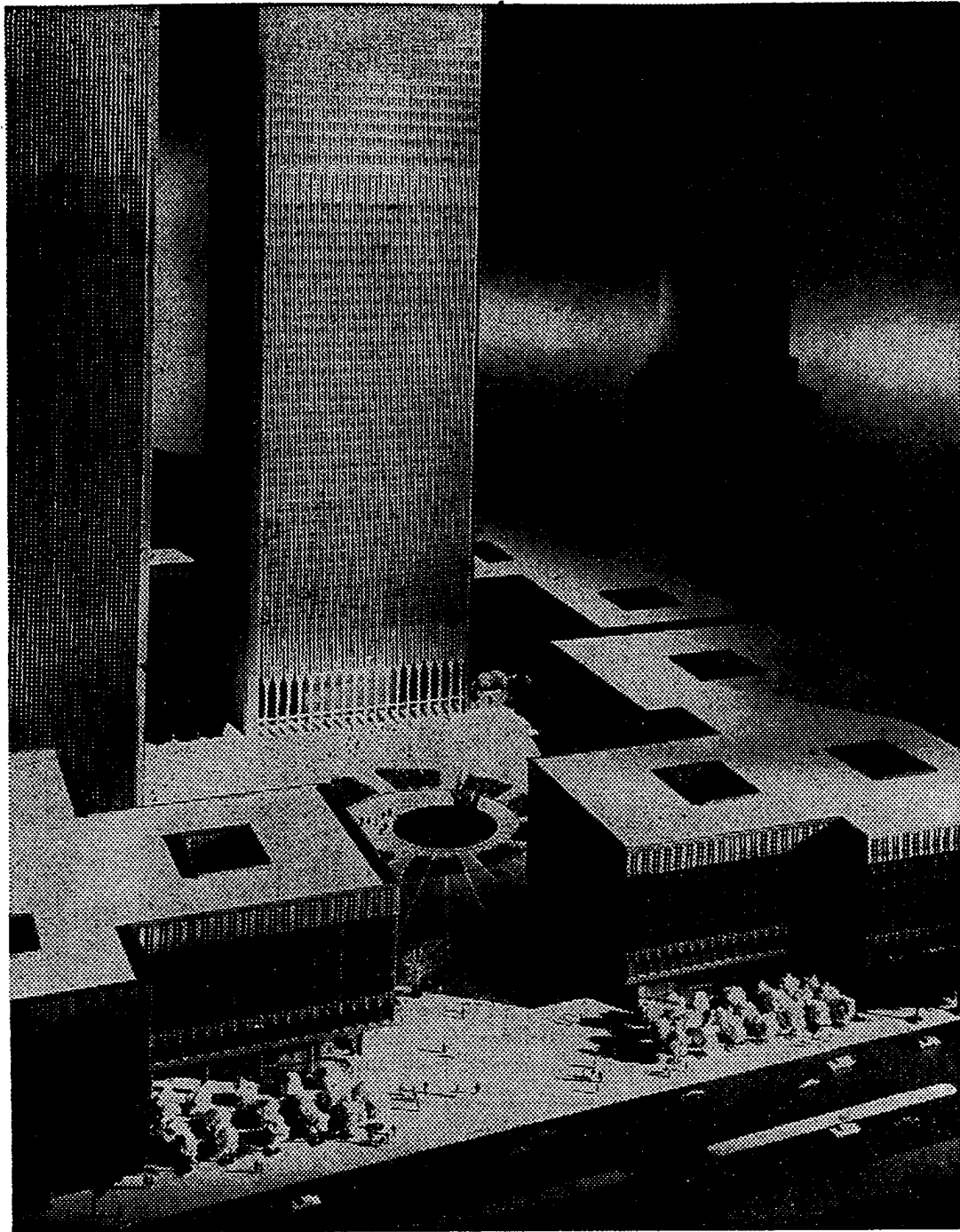
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The Regional Plan Association points out that foreign trade is projected as a growth industry in New York, and that the scale of the Center is consistent with its prospects. However, without modern port facilities for New York, which are now going to New Jersey in the Port Authority's balancing act of largesse dispensation, the coordination of modern office facilities in Manhattan makes limited sense. The World Trade Center will actually function as an arm of the financial community, permitting its expansion and tie-in with trade. Its use for government offices outside of Customs (1,900,000 square feet of the 10,165,000 total have been taken by New York State) is questionable in the extreme. It could be one more blow to the reeling Civic Center.

## Design

If we come to esthetics last, there is good reason for putting this at the bottom of the list. Buildings of this substantial an effect on the life patterns of the city are a great deal more than art objects. Unless they represent design irresponsibility, which means raising the cheap and ordinary solutions of the speculative builder to monument status, their relationship to those life patterns must be the primary consideration.

No one would suggest, however, that esthetics are not important in big buildings. Nor is Detroit architect Minoru Yamasaki's work to everyone's esthetic taste. He has developed a curiously unsettling style which involves decorative tracteries of exotic extraction applied over structure or worked into it. His choice of delicate detail on massive construction as a means of reconciling modern structural scale to the human scale of the viewer is often more disturbing than reassuring. It makes many competent architects go to pieces. Here we have the world's daintiest architecture for the world's biggest buildings. But no review board could refuse to pass his buildings, even if it pined for a Corbustian or Miesian masterwork.



**The New York Port Authority's World Trade Center project for lower Manhattan**  
*"A new skyscraper age or the biggest tombstones in the world"*

The design has been revised significantly in the two years since it was announced. The towers' aluminum facing on incredible 3'4" modules will still shimmer at a distance like windowless metal grilles. The four low buildings, originally to be finished in the same aluminum, are now in a brownish concrete, tied to the towers by the use of aluminum spandrels. At model scale, the relationship is undefined and disquieting.

These buildings, which were joined to provide an enclosing arcade for the plaza, have been separated to give access to views of the river and to the waterfront in future development when the West Side highway will hopefully be depressed. They give the appearance of having been merely broken apart. As a result, the immense formal plaza now has subsidiary open spaces. It is to be hoped that

they will enrich rather than disrupt this awesome area. The danger is that they could leak limp and uncoordinated out of the five-acre vastness, as in the smaller Holford plan for the rebuilt St. Paul's precinct in London, rather than give the intimate relief intended.

The plaza has now been reduced to an ornamental role, or a kind of paved promenade for fine weather, with most circulatory and access functions relegated to the concourse level below ground. All elevators start on this lower level, which also connects to rapid transit. There is a serious need now to improve pedestrian use and circulation at street level. With Church Street doubled in width, the Center becomes traffic-isolated. A tunnel to be built deep under the street will lead again to the underground concourse. A bridge over the street would bring

pedestrians more easily to the plaza and make it a more physical, functioning part of the neighborhood.

The final, inescapable fact remains that architecture is now breaking scale, and style, everywhere. (In his secret heart there is hardly an architect who doesn't want to do so.) The objective historian realizes that the 20th century is in transition to a remarkable new technology and a formidable new environment, before we have learned how to handle the old one. Who's afraid of the big, bad buildings? Everyone, because there are so many things about gigantism that we just don't know. The gamble of triumph or tragedy at this scale—and ultimately it is a gamble—demands an extraordinary payoff. The Trade Center towers could be the start of a new skyscraper age or the biggest tombstones in the world.