ARCHITECTURE VIEW: ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE HENXY STREET'S NEW BUILDING AN URBAN TRIUMPH
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Henry Street's New Building– An Urban Triumph

The arts for Living Center—the new building of the Henry Street Settlement on Grand Street on the lower East Side—sums up in its name everything that urban architecture should be. It is a building meant to serve and expand the life of a community, and no better definition of architecture exists than that.

The fact that it is a good building, not only in the fulfillment of this basic objective but also in terms of the more esthetic qualitative criteria in which architecture deals, makes it doubly satisfying. The successful integration of the two requirements—one very much tied to the life of society and the other a timeless requirement of the art of architecture—is a complex and rewarding achievement.

Henry Street is a name both familiar and revered in the annals of social reform. The Settlement has served its neighborhood since 1893, and its activities, from assisting the adjustment of immigrant families to the dramatic successes of the Playhouse, are legendary. As a pioneer in the use of the arts for socially-oriented services, Henry Street has become a part of New York and national history.

Like almost everything else, this institution has been in troubled transition in recent years. The once predominantly Jewish area has become largely black and Puerto Rican with a mix of Jewish, Italian and Chinese; the neighborhood has exchanged stability for a state of flux symptomatic of the times; the urge for upward mobility within accepted middle class standards has been replaced by rebellion against those standards. Only poverty and underprivilege remain the same.

There has been a matching upheaval at Henry Street as to how its programs, within the framework of its aims and values, could best serve this new kind of disadvantaged, multi-cultural community. The objective remains the same as it has for the last 80-odd years—a kind of triumph of its own when it is fashionable to turn all values upside down—to improve the quality of life in an area of urban poverty. The resolution of the dilemma has led to significant changes in approach and style. Under the leadership of the Settlement's executive director, Bertram M. Beck, all this is reflected in the form and use of this exemplary building.

The Arts for Living Center has been designed by Lo-Yi Chan of the architectural firm of Prentice, Chan, Ohlhausen to house an extensive performing and visual arts program of highly professional standards that serves all elements of the community from children to the elderly. There are facilities for painting, sculpture, silkscreen printing, pottery and crafts, dance, drama and music from chamber to rock, with such refinements as individual piano rooms for practice.

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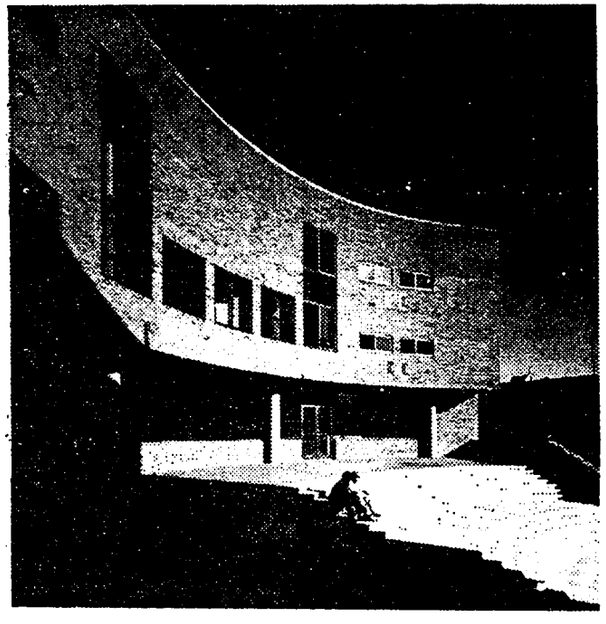
Nurturing talent is as much a part of the agenda as the primary purpose of helping people. A new emphasis is placed on the cultural heritage of minorities, and on film and television. The most recent Playhouse success was Ed Bullins's "The Taking of Miss Janie."

But you don't have to know anything of this to see and respond to the building's obvious role in the community, for this is a design that states its purpose immediately, in visual, three-dimensional, urban terms. The structure opens to the street in a very special way to ask people in, to say that it is part of the neighborhood, to invite everyone to use it.

Instead of hugging the building line, it takes the shape of an open arc, with shallow, curving steps creating an informal entrance space that is used actively for sitting and socializing. Doors and studios, wrapped around the plaza, are visible and welcoming. This public area carved out of the building site and flowing in from the street, yet part of the building itself, demonstrates architecture as a social and urban art in the very best sense.

The aim is equally clear in the plan. The Center is actually a basic shell for people and their products. The shell holds many multi-purpose rooms adaptable to changing needs. Arranged in five levels around the entrance arc, all of these performance, meeting and instructional areas are related constantly to it, either through large areas of glass on the ground floor, or smaller, sometimes eccentrically positioned windows above.

This gives immediate orientation and visibility. To state a basic fact simply, nothing in a building like this can be closed or hidden. Part of its function is to turn energies commonly directed to vandalism to other interests and pursuits. Trashing and attack are today's societal norms, with complex motivational roots. A too-high concealing wall outdoors, next to the adjoining Bialystoker Synagogue, for example, meant merely as a back to benches, has become a place to hide and jump emerging elderly worshipers. The wall will be lowered. Design becomes a kind of behavioral or architectural fencing to the end of making the building something more than an adversary environment.



The Arts for Living Center

Even with a budget of close to $2.5-million, there are no frills. The creative work—exuberant banners, stained glass, surprisingly skilled prints—is the building's only adornment. Construction is the most reasonable kind of cast-in-place concrete; facing is brick to blend with the connecting Playhouse.

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The costs include renovation of the Playhouse, built in the 1920's in a tentative Federal style, which is now a designated landmark. Its stylistic gaucheries, colored by its creative and community roles, are endearing and non-expendable after 50 years, and it is a further credit to the architects that the new and old buildings sit together with comfort and style. Both use red brick, but it is more a delicate adjustment of planes and proportions that does the job. The Bialystoker Synagogue flanking the center on the other side is another designated landmark, with a required 30-foot separation well handled as a supplementary outdoor space.

After visiting the new Center, it is a good idea to go back to the original Henry Street buildings, a few blocks away, for a fine demonstration of cultural continuity. These are also landmarks—small, brick row houses of the early 19th century with delicate columns and carved entrances and a Georgian street scale that are a precious link to New York's past.

Their museum-quality interiors, used actively and sympathetically for administration and living, are beautifully proportioned, flooded with daylight from large double-hung windows, rich in moldings and mantels, linked in the manner of old houses by steps at changing levels. Informal staff lunch is in one of the handsomest dining rooms in the city. These buildings are full of architectural grace. The past and the future are in good hands.