

Open-Space Designs Breathing New Life Into Smothered Blocks

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The New York of popular mythology is the ever-changing city—the one they never finish. Traditionally, those changes have been measured by looking at the skyline. Today they are measured best on the ground, at street level, where new urban patterns are emerging that are in the process of making the city a vastly different place.

New York is becoming a city of elegant open spaces where previously congestion was always the rule; of intricate, planned circulation above and below ground, of large plazas and small parks in midtown and downtown, of midblock passages, malls, gallerias and arcades. It is even a place where, for the first time, you can sit down, when you are looking up.

This new New York is being built right now. Some of it is already completed and visible. And it is most striking where the buildings meet the sidewalk—in the life of the street.

Trend Reverses

This change is particularly dramatic because it reverses what has seemed an irreversible trend, for in recent years, the New York street has been dying. Among some of the striking changes that are revitalizing the city's streets are these:

¶From 41st to 42d Street, there is in construction now a through-block passage behind the New York Telephone Company's latest windowless giant, to provide stores and 'street' life of the type destroyed by the building. London paving, an attractive prefabricated stone made in sections that can be replaced as required, will be used.

¶From 42d to 43d Street, between Fifth Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas, there has already been built—under private auspices—the prizewinning through-block mall of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

¶On the east side of the Avenue of the Americas, from 45th to 46th Streets, a new Tishman building will have a large midblock plaza, as part of the construction currently in process. There will be a grove of trees and an outdoor cafe. Retail shops are mandated, through city agreements, with entrances from the plaza.

¶At the northwest corner of Avenue of the Americas and 46th Street, the J. P. Stevens Building already incorporates the special construction of The American Place Theater as part of the city's new incentive zoning, which rewards builders for special amenities and building types. A through-block passage will be completed to 47th Street.

An Unhappy Past

In the past, block after block had been killed by successful development. Each glossy new office building, each healthy investment in the city's economy, had destroyed part of a street or an avenue.

This kind of street death is not the street crime stressed by the city's chronic critics. It is the attrition of the city's amenity, activity, interest, pleasure and style, as defined by the urban expert.

The formula was unvaried. First, the bulldozer cleared out the small shops and services and their heterogeneous quality and functions. Then the new building replaced the old variety and vitality and the style that keyed individual neighborhoods with a cool, standardized, expensive architectural impersonality.

The tower rose on an empty plaza. It was handsome, but sterile. The lobby was marbled, but vacuous. The developer's gesture to amenity stopped at a fountain or a piece of abstract sculpture.

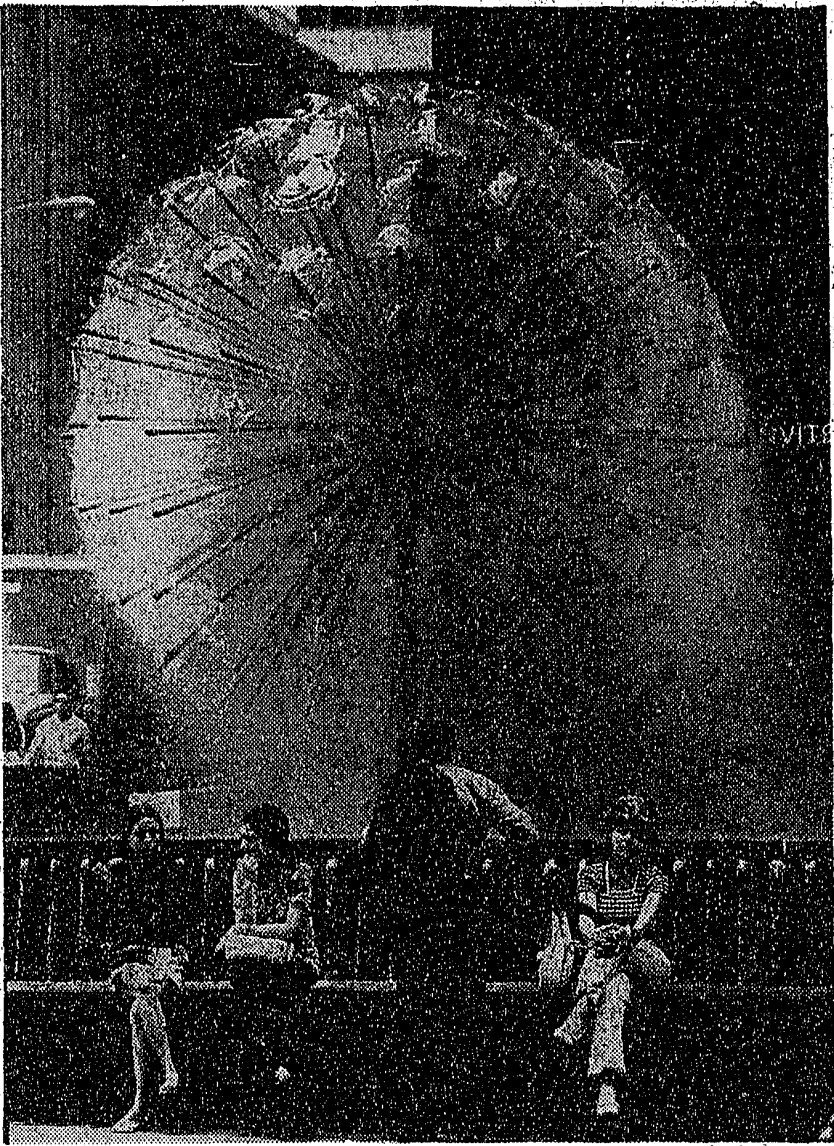
Inevitable Bank

The inevitable bank, which had probably provided the financing, took the choice corner or all of the ground floor. The newer structures had wrap-around banks, from street to street. There might be a corporate showroom. Plate-glass windows stare blindly, showing only the pedestrian outside hurrying past the profitable wasteland. Dull by day, these blocks are dead by night.

The process is almost codified by the block-size building, at 919 Third Avenue where, by a curious anachronism, one of New York's most enduring pubs, P. J. Clarke's, has been preserved with the new construction.

The small, old, Third Avenue building stands in quarantine on the 55th Street corner now, as if it had some dread disease that the new building might catch. It is set into an alien travertine plaza, carefully isolated from its grandly bleak neighbor.

At ground level, the new structure consists of a full avenue blockfront with parts of 55th and 56th Streets totally given over to the blank windows of a bank,



on the most desolate stretch of paving around. There is no more austere awful scene, straight out of De-Christico, with all A-O-K architectural details, in New York.

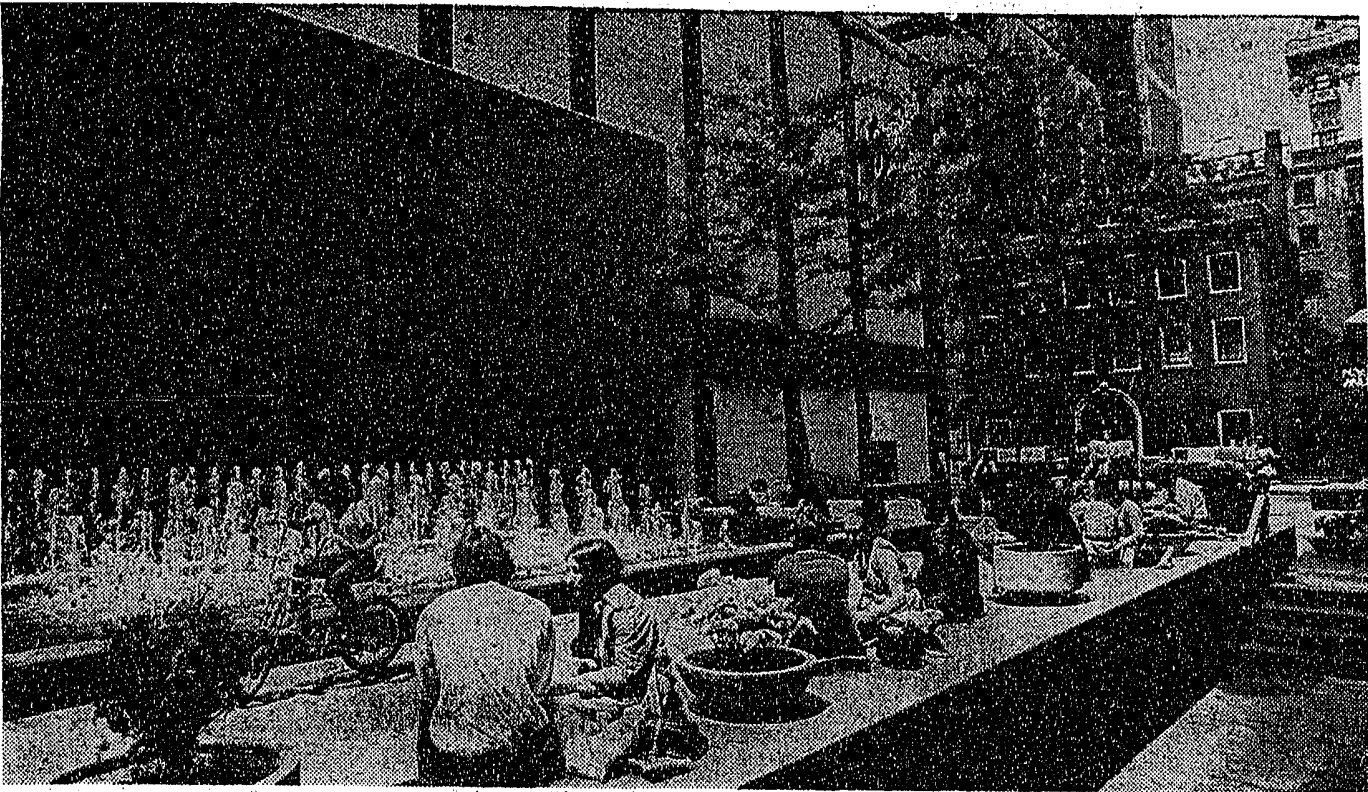
The details are less refined, but the effect is the same on the Madison Avenue side of the General Motors Building, from 58th to 59th Streets. Two banks flank a recessed building entrance for a lifeless block of less than riveting urban interest.

Formula Modified

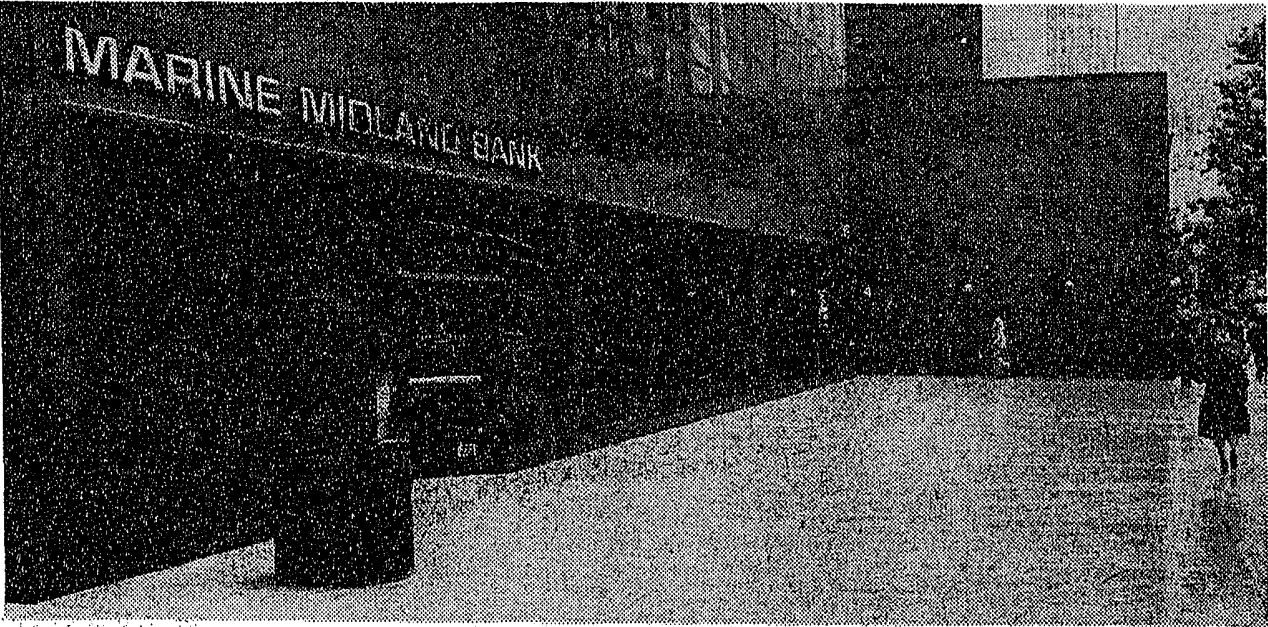
This deadly formula has not been eliminated, but it is now being successfully modified. The change is being accomplished by an unprecedented—for New York—combination of civic vision and muscle—by law, negotiation, design review and deliberate intent.

The new kind of city that is emerging on a grand scale can be seen most dramatically in the current construction on the Avenue of the Americas from 42d to 55th Street. It can be experienced best on a fine summer day when people use the

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Fisher Park, which connects 54th and 55th Streets, provides fountains, walls that are low enough for people to sit on.



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street, and New York regains an electric enchantment that is partly seasonal and partly immortal, and the city's own.

The new construction superficially resembles the towers and plazas of the rebuilt parts of the Avenue of the Americas completed in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. The difference is in the attention to the life of the street. The lesson of the earlier failures has been learned.

The spaces are now people-oriented, or people-serving, rather than people-rejecting.

Jaquelin T. Robertson, director of the city's Office of Midtown Planning and Development, which has planning jurisdiction over mid-Manhattan, calls the process "notational architecture."

'Schematic Design'

"You make notations in the margins of the developer's plans," he explains, half jestingly. More seriously, he refers to it as "schematic design."

"You specify bulk, placement circulation at street level and below and above it, places for the public, the provision of shops and restaurants, relationships between buildings, how to get from one place to another," he says.

It is done through amendments to the zoning law, which give space bonuses to builders for providing specified features, by the creation of special zoning districts, such as the Theater District and Fifth Avenue Retail District, with amenities built into the legislation. It is accomplished by direct city negotiation with the builder for zoning variances and street closings and through design review by the city's relatively new Planning Offices.

These include the Office of

Midtown Planning and Development headed by Mr. Robertson and the Office of Lower Manhattan Development under Richard Weinstein.

An example of the innovative designs is at 47th Street and the Avenue of the Americas, where a three-building group is approaching completion on the three blocks to the north. The Celanese Building, the McGraw-Hill Building and the Standard Oil of New Jersey Building form a coordinated unit all the way to 50th Street. McGraw-Hill and Jersey Standard are built as part of Rockefeller Center across the avenue, with concourse connections below ground.

Originally, these connections were not planned. The three buildings would have been discontinuous, each constructed in a vacuum.

As they are being finished now, they have attractive, integrated features. Besides a 65-foot-deep plaza on the avenue, the Celanese Building will have a shop-and-service-lined "galleria," 35 feet high and 35 feet wide, cutting through the block behind the building, from 47th to 48th Street. This will eventually be continuous with passages behind the other two buildings.

The through-block passage in back of the McGraw-Hill Building will be a parklike mall, 40 by 200 feet. Behind the Jersey Standard building, the passage will be a Paley Park-type minipark.

Four-Block Passage

Eventually, this will add up to an uninterrupted mid-block passage of shops and malls from 46th to 50th Street.

From 48th to 49th Street, there already exists a plaza 112 feet deep fronting the McGraw-Hill Building, with trees at street level and a

sunken court for a two-level McGraw-Hill bookstore and other shops.

And from 49th to 50th, Jersey Standard has completed a 112-foot plaza with raised trees and benches focusing on a huge pool and fountain cascading to a lower level. Lunch, chess, sunbathing, strolling and water-watching are already daily activities.

On the next block, the older Time-Life Building plaza takes on new spatial meaning.

Together, these large avenue plazas create one of the most strikingly elegant of the city's new urban vistas, as well as provide a notable aid to pleasant and efficient pedestrian movement. It is an example of the relationships possible between very high density and controlled use and circulation.

More than 40 per cent of the area occupied by the huge Celanese, McGraw-Hill and Jersey Standard Buildings is open space. Pedestrian movement is further assisted by concourse levels below ground, new subway connections from the lobbies and attractively designed into the outdoor landscaping. This is Rockefeller Center up-to-date.

Uptown Changes

Moving uptown, there are more of the new urban features:

From 51st to 52d Street, on the Avenue of the Americas, just beyond the Equitable Building garage, a midblock passage of stores, unfortunately singularly unattractive, but useful, has been built through agreement with the city.

Between 54th and 55th Streets, on the avenue, behind Burlington House, a park-passage goes through the block, next to the new Ziegfeld Theater, the result of another incentive zoning bonus.

Between Fifth and Madison Avenues, another covered arcade through a new Uris building from 52d to 53d Streets, will have a bookstore and a map store. It terminates across from Paley Park.

At Third Avenue and 40th Street, another new Tishman building in construction has a passage and an elevated plaza. There will be a cafe and shops.

Regulations

The recently created Fifth Avenue Special District contains strong strictures for shop placement and circulation.

In Lower Manhattan, the Greenwich Street Special Zoning District mandates a shopping arcade as part of any new construction along Greenwich Street, as well as pedestrian connections with Battery Park City. Striking pedestrian features are already beginning to appear in the Wall Street area.

London Cited

The city's perseverance in obtaining these urban design features — from how the building sits on the site and relates to the street and its neighbors, to the restitution of sandwich and dress shops in those midblock arcades, and the small and large joys of small parks and large plazas handled as useful amenities rather than as status symbols—has been essential to the new urban concept.

"You draw broad outlines, the way John Nash did for London in the 19th century," Mr. Robertson said. "Nash built more of London than anyone else, and he built it better, and he designed it for speculators. You need replicable architecture organized

as Nash organized London. That's why London is such a handsome city today."

"It may be making a plastic purse out of a sow's ear," he said, "but you don't need zooty architecture. These are building blocks that any fellow can put together."

By this method, the city is guiding development into patterns that no speculator, and few corporate investors, would have devised unassisted. And the builders are putting the blocks together.

There are blind spots, such as the side streets when you round the corners from the new plazas on the Avenue of the Americas where bankers relentlessly face bankers and insurance men stare at brokers, until you reach the more human functions of the passages at the buildings' rear.

But there are new theaters, shops and restaurants, and places meant for people, and connections between them. There is new life, and even beauty, on the streets of New York.