

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: TODAY THE CARDS ARE ALL IN THE BUILDERS' HANDS

Huxtable, Ada Louise

*New York Times* (1923-Current file); Mar 26, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times pg. D29

## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Today the Cards Are All In the Builders' Hands

**A**fter a long, cold winter, there are signs of spring in New York. Trees and real estate are about to burst into bloom. Following a depressed period that was as much the result of overbuilding as of the recession, the city is experiencing a significant resurgence of commercial construction.

But this will be construction with a notable difference. Due to changes in New York's zoning, the new midtown offices will be much larger buildings than those of the speculative boom of the early 1960's. A few recent bellwethers, such as the Olympic Tower on Fifth Avenue, have signaled things to come.

Right now, there are almost half a dozen spectacular midtown skyscrapers on the drawing boards, in the form of corporate headquarters or speculative construction. The new A.T.&T. and I.B.M. buildings, designed, respectively, by Philip Johnson and John Burgee, and Edward Larabee Barnes, will stand next to each other on adjoining 56th and 57th Street block fronts on Madison Avenue. Philip Morris has commissioned a new headquarters from Ulrich Franzen for the East Side Airlines Terminal site on 42nd Street. Both Fisher and Tishman have huge new speculative buildings in the works, the former well-advanced for a large mid-block site from 52d to 53d Street between Park and Madison avenues, the latter for the 53d to 54th Street Madison Avenue block front, reaching back to Paley Park. Other projects using smaller sites are also moving ahead.

The effect of these massive buildings on the skyline and the streetscape will be striking. Some have almost gone through Charter-mandated process of Community Board and City Planning Commission review. But their impact on the city, in terms of size and density, is conjectural. And the problems they pose for the city's planners are enormous. The precedents they will inevitably set for future development require the most serious consideration while there is still time and flexibility.

The problem, at this uneasy moment in the city's fortunes, is that New York is so anxious to have large-scale building resume that it is going to be very difficult for the City Planning Commission to set and maintain standards for these huge, innovative projects. The kind of jockeying with city regulations in which the developer demonstrates his skill in taking the most and giving the least is a familiar New York process. And right now, the cards are all in the builders' hands.

In this climate, is it possible to control the stretching and bypassing of rules that is the astute developer's game in the environmental horse-trading called zoning? Who can tell a giant corporation to build differently, when it might threaten not to build at all? Can the city refuse a little special zoning legislation to make high-bulk, mid-block construction possible where empty lots lie fallow? How to enforce the requirements that will make such construction palatable at all? Can you refuse waivers of height and setback requirements, or increases in plot coverage, when the city's economy and image are dependent on going ahead?

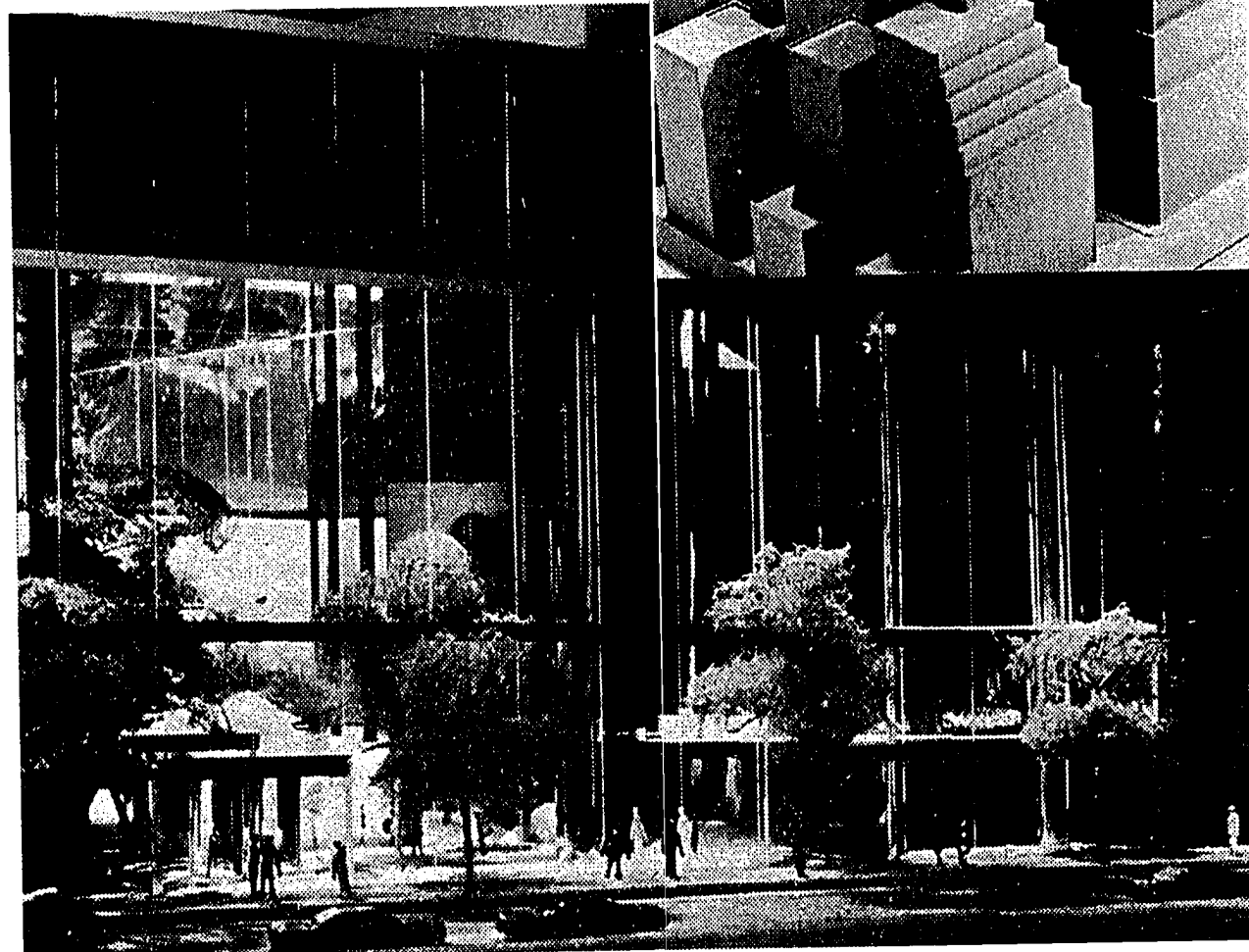
The planners who devise and administer New York's zoning—a small group of practitioners of a remarkable degree of creative courage and environmental sensitivity—have an awesome responsibility and an unenviable job. What they do, how they negotiate, will be critical, because these buildings are not only tremendously important to New York in terms of the city's investment and economic health, they are even more important in the rules they will set for construction to follow.

The new Fisher Brothers building and the A.T.&T. building are striking examples in point. The Fisher building, designed for the center of the 52d-53d Street block between Madison and Park, defines a number of the pertinent issues. Among these considerations are the nature of mid-block construction; the use of zoning to create a whole range of public features on the ground for the benefit of pedestrians and the neighborhood, with the builder permitted to construct a much bulkier tower for providing them; the esthetic relationships of such a huge structure to its neighbors, here the landmark Racquet and Tennis Club by McKim, Mead and White that fronts it on Park Avenue; and the impact of tower size on the immediate surroundings, in this case ranging from the view from the Seagram building to the scale of the side streets.

Fisher wants to make the building competitive with prime-avenue-front property, which is harder and harder to

acquire. The city wants to ensure the vitality of the street fronts the new blockbuster takes over. This means the inclusion of traditional urban and pedestrian pleasures such as trees, shops and places to sit or eat. The negotiated result is still another piece of zoning legislation—a "public galleria" amendment, specifying a block-through public space on the building's ground level of at least 20,000 square feet, separate from the building lobby, with everything from height, access, landscaping, lighting and the number of seats and stores spelled out in legal detail. Maintenance by management is part of the package. All these features are "bonusable"

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Designs for the Fisher building (in black at top), and its proposed "galleria"

items, which gives the developer his bigger building.

In this case, the builder is gambling on his collaborative effort with the city (these working relationships are, in themselves, a giant step forward) to get the passage of the carefully tailored amendment. He has carried out the design requirements with his architects, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, in a creative and positive way. Unlike the architectural firm's earlier, desolate passage through Olympic Tower—in which Olympic Tower got everything in excessive height and bulk and the city got an empty gesture—this design promises a lively and useful place similar to the Citicorp Market.

The trade-off for these desirable public features is a larger-than-normal, 44-story tower of almost 900,000 square feet, sheathed in near-black glass. The architects have faceted this tower to refine its mass, with the thinner edges facing Park Avenue and the side streets. But it will still be very big and very dark—as Seagram, throwing stones from its own glass house, has already noted.

The same architectural firm's black glass facade for Olympic Tower is a lifeless bore; these flat, sheer, vitreous surfaces must be as elegantly detailed as the John Hancock Tower in Boston to work esthetically. More refinement is promised here, and clear glass is projected for the height of the galleria. In addition, the proportions of the galleria section are keyed to the Renaissance measure of the Racquet and Tennis Club. The whole thing is being designed to a much higher standard than the city's usual speculative construction.

Then why is one uneasy about this building? Because the elegant and intimate mid-blocks that mark this part of town—and which this kind of construction replaces—provide much of the style and character of the city. They relieve the scale and density of the big buildings on the avenues, and their small-scale architecture, which includes everything from remodeled brownstones to Beaux Arts palaces, adds up to streets of irreplaceable quality and charm. With their rich and varied design details and sophisticated shops and services, the mid-blocks are New York.

Such blocks are seen by the real estate fraternity merely as potential assemblages. Will this kind of mid-block zoning signal the end of these streets? Can a conscientious attempt to replace their features compensate adequately for their loss? The city's planners say there is no real danger, because the "galleria" is restricted to limited areas, and such assemblages would be possible in very few places. They point out that every case must be evaluated individually for a special permit, dependent in part on whether similar facilities already exist nearby.

Fisher is clearly prepared to invest in a high level of quality and amenity under the city's guidance. Its land is already vacant, and there is no reasonable argument why the project should not go ahead. But what of the future? Who will pass on these permits and how their requirements are met? What ingenuity may be applied to make such profitable assemblages possible, with the resultant loss of street style and scale? How will this kind of bulk and density affect services and circulation? How many big black towers are enough?

I.B.M. and A.T.&T. present another set of similar problems. I.B.M. will be a very big building because it is providing some public space amenities, but its size is within its rights under the zoning law. Height and setback waivers have been given to permit the placement of the tower at the building line with the open space behind it.

The neighboring A.T.&T. site is smaller, and by law, the building would be smaller, too. Whether or not A.T.&T. and the architect are consciously playing "Can You Top This?," what is being requested from the city now is larger than legal plot coverage in addition to height and setback waivers to make bigger floors and a tower as tall as I.B.M.'s. This kind of squeeze-play was carried off earlier for Olympic Tower. The A.T.&T. building also has a foolish top, but that is beside the immediate point.

Because a number of ingenious uses of the zoning law make this and similar plays possible, there are serious matters of interpretation to be considered by the Planning Commission, not only for this building but for others as well. Does one tell Philip Johnson to go back to the drawing board? Can a better, and more legal building result? Who is ultimately going to come out ahead in all this zoning hand-wrestling? We wish the Commission the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job. The future is in its hands.

The New York Times/Fred R. Conrad