

## Architecture

# It's So Peaceful In the Country

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

GREENWICH, Conn.

ONE of New York's worst-kept secrets and best-manipulated statistics is the exodus of major corporations. City Hall shivers for its tax base with every new company count.

Where do the corporations go? To the country, even as you and I, when and if we can. What do they get? That can best be illustrated by one of the newest and most architecturally distinguished corporate additions to the country scene, the American Can Company.

American Can has moved its headquarters to 175 acres of spectacularly beautiful wooded and rocky land in Greenwich, Conn., not far from another corporate exurbanite, IBM. While the building was in construction last summer, the company transferred 2,200 employees from the office building at 100 Park Avenue in Manhattan. (Shiver.) This represents its central, administrative operation. American Can is a giant with 54,500 employees in areas from the United States and Canada to American Samoa, with subsidiaries, affiliates and licensees in 23 countries. That's not corporate peanuts.

The new plant has a setting of idyllic splendor. It was designed by Gordon Bunshaft of the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the country's notable purveyors of good architecture to corporate clients whether their taste runs to sylvan campuses or city skyscrapers. It offers comfort, efficiency and structural grand luxe, tastefully controlled. And it is a triumph of environmental consideration.

The impact of such a plant on its surroundings is considerable. Communities that previously welcomed tax benefits on this corporate scale have been taking a hard look recently at some of the problems raised. Studies have been made of how much new revenue is offset by new demands for increased facilities and services and an enlarged administrative burden. There

is a rising concern with ecology and conservation.

In Greenwich, apparently, if local officials and corporate executives shadow-boxed at all, it ended in a marriage dance. For benefits received—zoning was changed from residential to commercial—American Can worked to make its host community happy.

All of American Can's traffic is taken off local roads as quickly as possible by a sweeping four-lane highway that enters and serves its own property. The corporation has built its own sewage disposal plant. Water comes from its own wells. Neighborhood views are unspoiled. Since Greenwich land is expensive and zoning is restrictive, it is unlikely that new housing on a mass scale can adjoin the new plant to bring expansionary problems. You may read whatever sociological message you want into this and it will not be irrelevant. But these are the current facts.

The building is a beauty. A lot of people would call that irrelevant, but they shouldn't. American Can has not participated in the Rape of the Environment.

It costs a lot of money to be environmentally considerate, and the real American Can construction figure isn't even available. First, there is the least possible coverage and destruction of the site. What the architect has done is to bridge a ravine and a stream with his building, in effect, creating a dam. Most of the structure has been dropped into this ravine and the building itself is the dam. With one level partly below ground, five beneath that, and three above ground, nine

floors look like a three-story building. Nothing has been leveled, almost every tree has been spared, and a lake has been created at the end of the ravine.

Second, with between one and two thousand people commuting by car daily, there are no visible automobiles. Repeat, no asphalt parking seas. Five of those underground levels are a 1600-car parking garage. No one need put foot on the site. One enters and leaves on wheels.

One large and one small building are constructed in this fashion, connected below ground. The large structure, 525 by 255 feet, with three administrative floors above its parking podium, is the general headquarters operation. The smaller structure, 165 feet square, is a one-story executive building, also on a parking podium inserted into the slope of the land.

Both buildings are stunning structural bravado. And now, if I may borrow a shopworn phrase, let me make one thing perfectly clear. Structural bravado does not mean whizzbang visual effects such as fins, curves and other eye-stopping gimmicks. That kind of flash is a cheap substitute for the real thing and you can see its corporate fall guys in nearby Stamford.

What it means is the use of unprecedented modern structural techniques for a rational combination of functional purpose and dramatic architectonic effect. But effect does not come first. And it is not faked. It derives from appropriateness. The use of structure at American Can is to bridge that ravine and provide large, clear-span floors with a practical working module.

This is done with poured-in-place concrete walls, columns and girders, and precast double-tee beams on office floors of the main building to make 30 by 60-foot bays. Two vertical spines contain elevators and services, and between them at ground level is an open, landscaped central court 95 by 195 feet, making the building into Mr. Bunshaft's favorite shape—the squared, or rectangular, doughnut. The span and strength of the construction are impressively, handsomely evident.

The concrete finish is a grayish granite aggregate exposed by sandblasting; the precast tees are white. Recessed windows are of gray glass, with muted incandescent lighting at the perimeter to keep the building from being a beacon at night. On a recent winter day, the gently mounded white curves of snow swept against the strong gray concrete planes next to jagged outcroppings of gray and black rock and the black tracery of bare trees. There was the combined power and delicacy of a Japanese wash drawing.

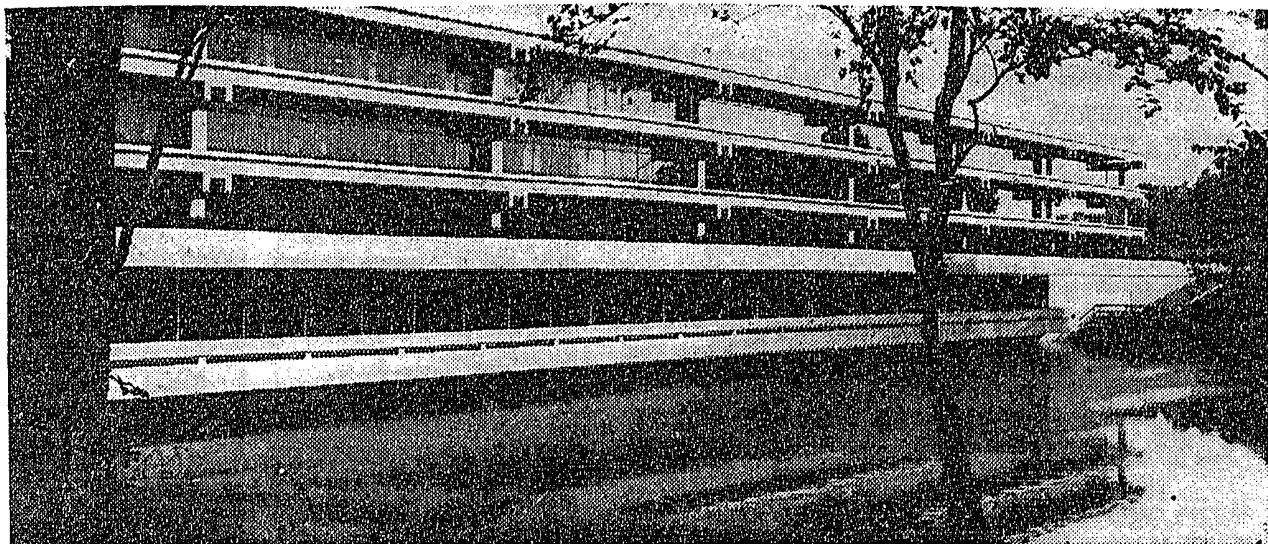
The supremely elegant executive tempietto is framed by huge, 165-foot long, post-tensioned beams that provide 60-foot spans. After erection, when the steel inside the beams was tightened (in a very elementary sense, that is what post-tensioned means) to make the beams enormously strong, the exposed ends of the steel were covered with a jeweler's touch—polished stainless steel caps. This may be understated overreaching, but it is pretty breathtaking stuff, structurally and visually.

On to the main office build-

ing interiors, alas. Structurally they are excellent, with exposed beams permitting an integrated lighting and air-conditioning system that allows higher than normal ceilings in most of the work areas. These work areas are serenely and efficiently organized around the central court. Higher echelon offices ring the edge of the building, with views of the site. If the gentlemen in these outer offices are kind enough to leave their doors open, everyone else can see part of the carefully conserved view. But the court is pretty, too.

There is high intensity red carpet throughout. If you like insistent red carpet, fine. If it gives you a headache, stay away. It must be said here that S.O.M. furnishings sink deeper and deeper into a familiar, formalistic rut. At American Can, it is no less deadly because it is red, white and blue. I suppose you could stand up and salute.

Back in New York, there is slush and crime in the streets. Disturbing questions enter one's head. What part of a work force does a commuter's country-club plant set in Greenwich's restrictive zoning serve? What does it do for larger considerations of regional planning? After how much captive pastoral beauty does one crave the lively, bad vibes in town? Defectors are few, according to American Can's low turnover figure. After all, you can get out of your car or leave the cafeteria with its lovely lake views and humdrum food for a scenic walk to the carefully preserved swamp or the sewage plant. And you can breathe the air, which is fully conditioned and artificially controlled in a sealed building all year round.



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Esra Stoller