BALANCING UP

A Highbrow Ideal, Lincoln Center Is A Likely Middlebrow Monument

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LINCOLN Center: dream or disaster? This is the big, barbed question that has been circulating around town since the opening of Philharmonic Hall on Sept. 24. One building does not make a cultural center, but what is good, bad and indifferent about the design and concept of the Philharmonic can be taken as a reasonably accurate indication of Lincoln Center's architectural assets and liabilities.

The strong points of the Philharmonic were obvious on opening night, and they remain unchanged. The building has monumentality, and it is no less effective for being somewhat studied and contrived, for New York is rich in awkward architectural accidents and poor in calculated dignity. (Most of the center's buildings will have self-conscious monumental manners.) It has elegant scale, color and surface—there is no more beautiful material than travertine and no more traditionally acceptable civic ornament than the formal colonnade. But the Philharmonic's most admirable feature is the manner in which its architect, Max Abramovitz, has integrated the building's social uses with its design, so that the activity of its audiences, seen through the glass walls, brings the structure dramatically to life.

Some of the defects of the building have become apparent during its first month of operation. Repeated visits develop an impression of confused and ineffectual interior spaces. The concertgoer enters crabwise from the plaza and virtually stumbles over a restaurant more suggestive of eat-and-run than haute cuisine, sidestepping it to escalators that ascend, department-store style, to the grand foyer above, so that the main public space is reached without appropriate psychological or visual impact.

The foyer itself suffers from this inauspicious entry and from the fact that it is narrow for its height and never capable of being grasped in its entirety from any of the balcony promenades that face out onto it. Even the commendable use of audience color and movement as the building's most decorative effect suffers in proportion to the audience's drabness. Neutrality becomes negativeness. The design's most successful aspect remains its after-dark vitality, seen from the street.

Forthcoming

Those virtues that the Philharmonic possesses, however, will be multiplied when Philip Johnson's State Theater and Wallace Harrison's Opera House are completed to form the cultural Big Three. They will share arcaded serenity, travertine surfaces, parks, plazas and a fountain with two other buildings, the Theater-Library and the Juilliard School, and the sum will be greater than its parts. This is fortunate, for no single structure at the center contains the promise of architectural greatness.

The most obvious explanation for this depressing observation is the fact that Lincoln Center is a committee design, for conservative clients. Like all committee architecture, it is creation by compromise and fatigue decision. The result is inevitable and predictable: the buildings are neither as good, nor as bad, as they might have been. All excesses of error are avoided, and all excesses of excellence. Glass was changed to travertine; modules were established for all; a "theme" of unifying colonnades was arrived at cooperatively. No structure is the free, dedicated, uncompromised effort of a single artist, with all of the strength, conviction and originality that this implies. Each, however, reflects the level of taste and achievement of the man responsible for it. And because no one was able to start with a strong concept of his own, the results are usually identifiable by the architect's personal weaknesses. (Abramovitz's Philharmonic might be called daringly derivative; Johnson's State Theater tastefully chichi; Harrison's Opera blandly conventional.)

To dilute the scheme still further, the site plan was crippled by an immovable, inviolate park. And to completely destroy any possibility of a genuinely integrated effort, a double client had to be satisfied: Lincoln Center, which pays the architectural bills, and the individual organizations to be housed, each of which demanded its own monument.

Dream vs. Reality

But beyond these considerations, one crucial factor is that the dream of Lincoln Center is highbrow and avant-garde, while the reality is middlebrow and pop art. Therefore no frontiers are breached, culturally or architecturally.

It could not be otherwise,, for in spite of the architect's cherished illusion of a kind of superman. world-shaping status, he inevitably builds in the image of his time. And this is a time of mass culture. Mass culture is a 20th-century phenomenon praised on the one hand for its wide dissemination of the arts, and damned on the other for the mediocrity and conventionality of its standards.

There is no great hope that Lincoln Center will see the birth of new movements or be the source of the kind of creativity that takes place in back rooms or makeshift theaters—the brilliant, minority spark that nourishes the growth and development of the arts in offbeat atmospheres. It will be a popular showcase of a broad-based, orthodox culture. What is decreed by taste, is enforced by economics. We say this without cynicism or censure.

Yardsticks

The first difficulty in evaluating Lincoln Center, therefore, is due largely to the mistake of confusing the dream with the reality. It has disappointments and deficiencies, but it is not a disaster. The second problem is in applying too limited a critical yardstick. The popularly employed criterion—the "great art" approach—scores a building only on its achievement as an isolated masterpiece of progressive, personal creativity. Another, less common standard—the historian's view—puts it in long-term perspective for its quality as an expression of its era. And the historian's view usually prevails. (It is helpful to remember that Rockefeller Center, which was harshly condemned in the "great art" category for "backward-looking" planning and design, is now accepted as a modern classic and exemplary civic amenity. Penn Station is being fought for today by some of the same architects who scored it for years as "reactionary eclecticism.")

As middlebrow architecture for middlebrow art, Philharmonic Hall and Lincoln Center break no new ground. But because these buildings are an accurate, inevitable, and occasionally superior mirror of the culture they seek to serve, they have importance and validity. We will hazard an unfashionable prediction that they will represent 20th-century America with fidelity, if not with brilliance, and will stand eventually as one of the most significant monuments of our age.