

HAS PRESERVATION ONLY TWO DIMENSIONS?

Two very important decisions are to be made by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission within the next few weeks which are likely to influence in a very strong way the future of mid-Manhattan for years to come. As we like to think that Manhattan, or better-- that New York City--is the beacon of American cultural development, we believe that these two problems and their solution will affect the reality of architecture for several years, much more than the theories, books and articles discussed in academic circles.

The first of these decisions concerns the tower foreseen as a backdrop of and overhanging the dome of St. Bartholomew's: its facade a faceted mirror reflecting the sky and the light of a small open space on Park Avenue, of which the tower will usurp the largest share. The architectural forms are here designed to act as a curtain behind which are hidden the \$9 million a year hoped by the owners as a subsidy to their activities. Architecturally, this large, 59-story bulk does not pretend to be an expression of design to accompany, or to imitate, or even to interpret the Byzantine revivalist forms expressed by Bertrand Goodhue. In a certain sense, what the office of the late Edward Stone has tried to do is hide the existence of this huge bulky volume behind the hope that light, clouds, and shadows reflected into the mirrored surface would make the real volume disappear. Even by maintaining against the large panes of glass the old entrance of the demolished Parish House, they admitted to themselves and to the viewers that, ideally, the brick and mosaic masses of St. Bartholomew's were intended by its designer to be seen as against open space, with free air around them--like the dome of San Vitale in Ravenna or St. Mark's in Venice. Around the circular forms should fly the pigeons, sweeping in large formations at the sound of bells.

It is perfectly true that no bells ring in Park Avenue, and that most of the birds are deterred by the carbon monoxide fumes of the Cadillacs, Mercedes, and Lincolns that surround the nearby Waldorf-Astoria. Assuming that, in lieu of the parish house to be demolished, there would be about fifty employees and visitors on each of the 59 floors, would the addition of 3-4,000 people, their taxis, their cars, their brown bags and luncheon garbage, really improve upon the mystical qualities of the Episcopal auditorium?

It is quite evident to me that if the Landmarks Preservation Commission should consider "appropriate" as an addition to the St. Bartholomew's complex the least conspicuous building that could be inserted there, they would have to approve something very much like the present mirror glass submission with the hope that the lines of the metal grid holding the glass panes would also be as thin and inconspicuous as possible. After all, the John Hancock Tower, which is very visible behind Henry Hobson Richardson's Trinity Church in Boston, has collected awards of various kinds and survived its falling glass panes with admiring glances from this and other continents. There are, however, about 100 feet of open street between the two property lines in Boston. In the St. Bartholomew's project the glass tower is about 20 feet away from the dome.

The second decision of the Landmarks Preservation Commission related to an existing historical landmark building is to be made on the appropriateness of a 24-story tower for luxury residential units over the building of the New York Historical Society at the southwest corner of 77th Street and Central Park West. The architects of this design, Hardy Holzman & Pfeiffer, have decided here to interpret the aesthetic goals of another firm of dead architects, York and Sawyer. Well-known in the generation before ours, York & Sawyer opened their own practise after having absorbed in the office of McKim Meade & White the best of the neo-renaissance and neo-roman concepts and details which flooded the U.S. after the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1892. They

acquired at the beginning of this century a prestigious clientele of banks, hospitals and universities who were treated with an array of corinthian columns deserving of Emperor Augustus' admiration, rusticated facades from 15th century Florence, and, above all, high ceilings and large windows expressive of the lavish living of their clients.

For the Historical Society, they designed a building with a colonnade with large windows above a large stone base to give the impression of a single-story pavillion, inspired perhaps by the Petit Trianon at Versailles. Two pavillions with a gabled copper roof were later added to the building sometime after its original completion. These new forms completed and closed-in all three dimensions the original design, including the top copper pitched surface of the roof.

Above this building, the architects of the developer--who expects to collect what will permit him to pay the Historical Society about \$6 million--have imagined a tower that steps back several times, with gabled end-pavillions and with some large glazed openings, multi-story high, hiding several ten-foot high ceiling spaces of the rentable apartments. Facades with limestone, granite, copper-roofing, mouldings, etc. enclose the volumes of the tower with a design intended to complement the original portion by the repetition of some of the proportions and of some of the enclosing forms. It is hoped by the designers that the existence of 5 or 6 floors in each of the stepped-back envelopes that are the equal of the two-story volume at the base will pass unobserved.

If the Landmarks Preservation Commission considers as "appropriate" a design which recalls the original one by repeating some of the shapes and details independently of the overall volume, this building should obtain the expected label with a prize for its effort. But what about the addition of this enormous bulk on the roof of the original pavillion? Is design

merely the treatment of molding and window frames? Is it just the accompanying of materials or the selection of counterpoints?

After 19 years of New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission functioning, the problem of what is "appropriate" to a landmark building design as an addition or alteration has never been defined--and probably with very good reason. What could be considered appropriate in one case may be damaging in another, and like all aesthetic judgments, it depends on the personality, the education and past experience of the judges themselves.

Yet as we know, there are some buildings which one would not dare to add to. For instance, it has been proposed and, fortunately, defeated to extend the west front of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. into the Mall. Nobody has yet suggested erecting over the capitol dome a new office skyscraper. It remains very simple for a panel of judges to declare that the addition of a molding, or the extension of a doorway, or even the color of a new material are or are not accompanying or changing the basic design of a facade. Yet when it comes to questions that multiply the financial value of a property or sizeably reduce it, all judges become timid. The larger the amounts of money involved, the more timid they become.

It should be obvious that aesthetic decisions and judgments have nothing to do with accounting procedures, and that they should be made on the basis only of visual appearance. To assume that an existing building, which has been judged valuable to the environment and thus deserving designation as a design to be maintained untouched, can multiply its volume many-fold, is to deny its character and aesthetic power. Perhaps a new architect can produce on that location a new monument or even a better building than the previous one, but this simply means that the original designation was in error, and that that particular building was not worthy of preservation in comparison to the possible new masterpiece that can enhance the location in its stead.

It may be said that any landmark building may need, at times, in order to remain viable and usable, changes and perhaps even additions. But unless these additions and these changes can be limited to only a small percentage of the original three-dimensional design--to call them "appropriate" becomes a deception and a denial of the original concept. If the citizens have been convinced that a special agency has to be paid with their tax money in order to maintain their environment and to guarantee their enjoyment of some special sections of town, or views, or spaces, they are entitled for years to come to see the character of these respected. Nobody can claim that a bulky 25-story addition over a 2-story building is suitable to the original design, or that it respects the intent of the original designer. The same can be said for a 59-story building, even if clothed in reflecting surfaces.

The concept of definition of percentages of a building for different evaluations by a city agency has been for a long time a Building Department device to distinguish an application for a new building from an application for an alteration. This, of course, reflects monies and fees to be paid to the agency. Perhaps the same principle could be applied by the Landmarks Preservation Commission when deciding whether or not--and how much--an existing landmark building can be added to.

A third example which, in contrast, has been successfully executed deserves to be examined within the context of this analysis, even if it is not owned by a religious or non-profit organization. Perhaps it can give us an indication of some other methods and conditions which could justify some landmark additions in the future.

The slick glass and aluminum building at the southwest corner of Park Avenue and 60th Street, which was designed in strictest Miesian terms by Skidmore Owings & Merrill for the Pepsi-Cola building, and which was purchased

and used as its headquarters for a few years by the Olivetti Company, could be declared a landmark as soon as the legal 30 years will have expired from the date of its completion. The financial needs of the owner invited consideration by a developer leading to the construction of a mixed-use and residential tower on the property immediately adjacent to the west.

This development could expand its floor space by cantilevering over the roof and using the air rights of the existing property.

J.S. Polshek's office designed a remarkably successful addition to the original design which complies with the desires of the investors, blends with the original structure, and provides a careful new mix of materials which seem to really belong to the block. This design was successful because of a basic difference between this building and the two previously examined projects.

The pre-Bauhaus structures were both conceived and completed as 3-dimensional shapes, any surface of which, including the roof, was the result of a design study with symmetries or asymmetries with geometric forms--curved or peaked: complete forms covered or surfaced with materials and colors carefully related to each other.

The Miesian structure, instead, was the result of the technological approach to aesthetics, conceived, analyzed and accepted as the result of the mechanization obtained after the Industrial Revolution. As such, this design presented us with a flat roof over a regular grid of facades. The sophistication of the windows' proportion, as well as the elegant details, are great qualities of a structure which, with its flat roof and repetitive facades, could easily have been designed similarly but with more floors and could have been higher without losing the character that constitutes its elegance and its attraction. The air above it had nothing to do with the grid design; this can well be interpreted as a fabric or rectangular piece of texture,

inviting analysis only to its relationship to the lower level where it meets the ground on a well-proportioned recessed platform.

This building was not a volume sculpturally conceived. It was only a corner meeting of two facades, enclosing with an elegant rhythm surfaces that could have been easily extended horizontally as well as vertically. In a way, the surfaces were a perfect expression of the monotony and repetitiousness of the bureaucratic life of the corporate employees who used the spaces inside.

If we consider, as I do, that the architecture of our time should be the environmental expression of our way of living, and that our respect for the buildings of the past is due to our recognition that our predecessors' way of living has an influence on us--and we should respect it for that reason, the answer to why we can accept as successful the expansion and addition to the Pepsi-Cola Building, while rejecting those to St. Bartholomew's or to the Historical Society, becomes obvious. The first of these buildings was originally conceived for a life that continues and for a purpose that we know well and that remains the same. The other two, instead, are buildings conceived for a purpose that has nothing to do with the one for which they wish the addition. That original purpose is expressed by their forms. They are expressing it as a sculpture in space, as a structure which is complete and finished in all of its dimensions and enclosed forms, not merely with the assemblage of their minor details. This is why a visible large addition will crush and deface them just as much as would an amputation or the removal of some of their parts.

Giorgio Cavaglieri, FAIA
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