

Preserving the Legacy Of Modernist Design

A reckoning is nearing for those glass boxes.

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

HOLLY GOLIGHTLY looked wistfully on the face of Manhattan as she prepared to depart for Rio. "Years from now, years and years, I'll be back," she declared. "Me and my nine Brazilian brats. I'll bring them back, all right. Because they must see this."

"This" in the 1961 movie "Breakfast at Tiffany's" was not Central Park or the Brooklyn Bridge or Rockefeller Center. It was the steel-and-glass corporate enigma of postwar Park Avenue.

These International Style skyscrapers — Lever House, the Seagram Building, the Union Carbide Building — epitomized New York at the peak of its economic might and workweek prowess. In their cool sophistication, they were an ideal complement to Audrey Hepburn, who played Holly, and a fitting backdrop for her vaudeviatory stroll.

Not everyone felt kindly toward this crop of architecture, to be sure. The building boom of the 50's and 60's had replaced so much of the city's historic fabric that it spurred a popular preservation movement, culminating in the landmark law of 1965. But even those who said "glass box" with a sneer would have thought the Park Avenue tower would always be part of the skyline.

How surprising, then, that their day of reckoning may already be at hand, along with beach banks and airline terminals and cultural institutions of the same vintage. And how paradoxical that many are now old enough — 30 years or more — to qualify for landmark status.

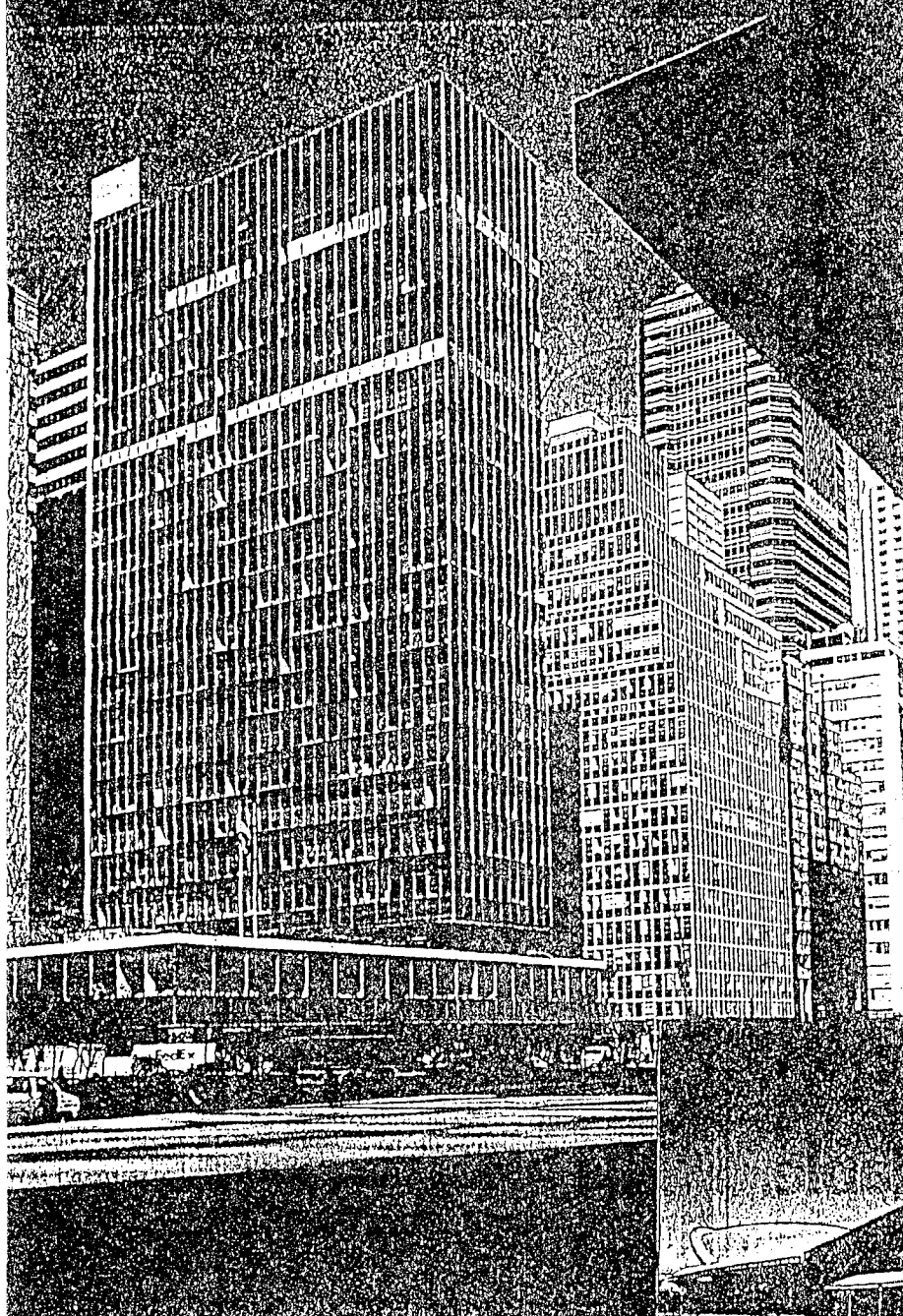
That raises critical issues with which owners, architects and urban historians are only beginning to wrestle. Which postwar buildings merit preservation? Can they be economically and usefully maintained in anything resembling their original forms? Or are they destined for rehabilitations that leave them substantially altered or totally unrecognizable?

The list of buildings in question starts with an official landmark: Lever House, 390 Park Avenue, between 53d and 54th Streets. This tower, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, may need an entirely new exterior after 44 years.

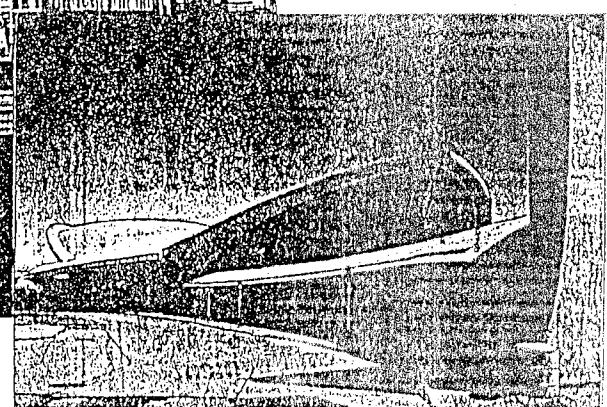
At 141 Street, significant interior alterations are being made to the former Fifth Avenue branch of the Manufacturers Trust Company, also designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Dubbed the "Glass House" when it opened in 1954, it is under consideration for landmark status.

And a tremendous amount of reconstruction is required at New York's 34-year-old Trans World Airline Terminal A at John F. Kennedy International Airport, another

Continued on Page 6



The Lever House (above) at 390 Park Avenue may need an entirely new exterior after 44 years. The T.W.A. Terminal (right) at Kennedy International airport cannot now efficiently serve jumbo jets. Both are landmarks.



Photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

landmark, which cannot efficiently serve jumbo jetliners.

At worst, such buildings are hopelessly out of date. At best, they are challenging and expensive to maintain. (The owners of the Seagram Building pay roughly double the operating costs to conserve its deceptively simple luster.) Constructed with systems that are growing obsolete, to serve a corporate culture that no longer exists, they tend to be extravagant in their consumption of energy and their use of space, something few owners can tolerate.

WHILE some were recognized as classics on the day they opened, most have long since slipped out of fashion. Because they are so spare and clean in design, their esthetic qualities can be radically transformed by the simplest change in materials — tinted glass, for instance, instead of clear.

Few are candidates for demolition, possibly excepting smaller structures like Two Columbus Circle, the former Gallery of Modern Art, which was commissioned by Huntington Hartford and designed by Edward Durrell Stone.

Instead, owners are more likely to recreate the buildings. For instance, the former ITT Corporation World Headquarters at 320 Park Avenue, between 50th and 51st Streets, has been transformed over the last two years from a plain-vanilla corporate glass box designed by Emery Roth & Sons into a pyramid-peaked post-modern zigurat by Swanke Hayden Connell Architects. It is now the headquarters of the Mutual of America Life Insurance Company.

No one much mourned the disappearance of the Emery Roth design as a single work. But Robert A. M. Stern, the architect and architectural historian, is quite troubled by the compromise to Park Avenue as an urban ensemble.

"Individually, they're not great buildings," he said, "but collectively, they're incomparable. We all lambasted the loss of the Beaux-Arts Park Avenue. But there is no collection of metal-and-glass corporate modernism like it anywhere else in the world. And now we're going to tear it all apart again."

Eight years ago, at a preservation symposium in the New York Public Library, Mr. Stern argued that landmark status ought to be given to buildings like "Black Rock," the CBS Building at 51 West 52d Street; the stainless-steel-clad former Socony-Mobil Building, 150 East 42d Street and the Ford Foundation, 321 East 42d Street.

Almost as devil's advocate, he went so far as to say that the Pan Am Building, 200 Park Avenue, might merit landmark consideration as "a telling lesson of how not to build a city."

"The monuments of postwar modernism have now been subjected to the passage of time and have achieved a place within the very continuum of history they so determinedly sought to destroy," Mr. Stern said in 1988.

Since then, he has become a de facto leader in the modernist preservation movement. He has written its manifesto and 1,374-page guide book, "New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial" (Monacelli Press, 1995), with Thomas Mellins and David Fishman.

work draws so heavily on more classical styles. "We've got to struggle to get above taste," he said. "It's just about when a building is 30-years old that a new generation comes along to discover it. Landmarking is not to select what's pretty, it's to select what's significant."

Jennifer Raab, the chairwoman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, said she discerned "a growing interest in postwar, modern architecture." She noted that the commission last year designated the former Pepsi-Cola Building, 500 Park Avenue, at 59th Street. It was designed by Gordon Bunshaft and Natalie de Blois of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and completed in 1960.

THE Municipal Art Society has formed a "postwar-architecture working group," said Ned Kaufman, the associate director of issues, and will hold meetings this spring with a new group known by the unwieldy acronym of Docomomo — Documentation and Conservation of the Monuments of the Modern Movement.

Mr. Kaufman allowed that this was something of a sea change for the society's members, who long battled the very forces behind the buildings they are interested in saving.

"Preservation being what it is," he said, "we now have to look at some of the work of that period as a legacy."

That is only where the challenges begin. "We're going to have to deal with functional obsolescence," said Theodore H. M. Prudon, an associate professor of historic preservation at Columbia University, partner in Swanke Hayden Connell and member

have an enormous effect on the look of its facade.

"The problem with the preservation of modern architecture is that there's no difference between the inside and the outside," Mr. Prudon said.

David M. Childs, a partner in Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, noted that structural problems could arise in early curtain walls, built of many separate elements rather than in modular units.

"Stainless steel is great but the glue that held things together is wearing out," he said. "There are tremendous heat and freezing cycles on the sides of the buildings. The trouble is, once water gets in, it expands and corrodes."

Although he was not referring specifically to Lever House, that landmark is known to have problems. Designed by Bunshaft and completed in 1952, the 21-story building is essentially two perpendicular slabs, clad in stainless steel and blue-green glass panels, with horizontal window ribbons.

Last year, Unilever, the household-products company that still occupies the building, proposed a new curtain wall, saying the original had been "untested and experimental." The company said 40 to 50 percent of the glass had already been replaced and that there was extensive corrosion in the underlying structural steel due to leaks from bad joints and deteriorating drains.

The plan called for building the new wall around the existing skin and then demolishing the old curtain wall from within. That proposal raised more than a few eyebrows and Unilever withdrew its application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Today, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill is

BUT two notable neighbors of Lever House give a glimpse at how complicated it can be to maintain a building whose allure rests on its simplicity.

"Vigilance, diligence and consistency are the keys," said Philip R. DiGennaro, managing director of the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association, owners of the Seagram Building, 375 Park Avenue, between 52d and 53d Streets, which was completed in 1958 to designs by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson.

To insure a uniform exterior appearance, tenants are given no choice in ceiling treatments at the building's perimeter. The first 15 feet from the window must consist of a row of solid panels, beyond which comes a row of luminous panels, all on a uniform grid. (The Allegheny Corporation, which moved in earlier this year, had to give up the idea of hanging brass chandeliers.) The only window coverings allowed are Venetian blinds, whose blades are fixed at a 45-degree angle. The mechanisms permit three positions: completely closed, half-drawn or fully open.

The bronze-sheathed exterior is oiled by hand once a year, with a lemon-based oil, by workers on window-washing scaffolds. The process takes two and a half months, said Mike Angeladis, the property manager.

The terrazzo floors in the elevator lobbies are polished every month by cloth and every few years by stone. The travertine walls in public areas are cleaned five times a year and get a poultice treatment annually. Marble benches on the plaza are washed weekly and honed, polished and covered in sealant as needed. Faucets, spigots and door handles are custom made.

All told, such extraordinary measures roughly double the operating cost, to about \$15 a square foot, Mr. DiGennaro said. But the rents are also higher than in other Park Avenue buildings, around \$50 a square foot, said Douglas P. Lawrence, senior real estate manager for the association, and the building is 84 percent occupied.

Five blocks south, at 370 Park Avenue, is the world headquarters of the Chase Manhattan Corporation. This 52-story tower, with its black and silver curtain wall, was completed in 1960 as headquarters of the Union Carbide Corporation, to designs by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

The building underwent a \$75 million renovation in 1983 to become headquarters of the Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company. After a 1991 merger, it served as headquarters of Chemical Bank, which it re-

mained until Monday, when the Chase-Chemical merger took effect.

When it was built, the corporate world operated on a 9-to-5 schedule. Buildingwide systems would be turned on and shut off accordingly. "Today, we're into 24-hour buildings," said William F. Treanor, a bank vice president. "You have to go out for new ways of bringing in heating and cooling so the staff can function at 10 o'clock at night."

Union Carbide set aside only 5,000 of the building's 1.5 million square feet for a data-processing center. At the time of remodeling, the assumption was that one employee in four would have an automated work station. Today, there is a computer at almost every desk. "The electrical consumption is a continuing challenge," Mr. Treanor said.

All told, however, Mr. Treanor said much of the original infrastructure "has carried that building through today," a tribute in part to the fact that an owner-occupant lavished more money on its headquarters than a developer would have sunk into a speculative tower.

"Many aspects of the International Style are still looked for by tenants: large amounts of glass, flexible systems," Mr. Childs said. "They might want more span to the core and more room for mechanical systems, but the buildings are reasonably up to date."

THE former Union Carbide tower is one of three modernist milestones in the real estate portfolio of the new Chase bank. The others are One Chase Manhattan Plaza in lower Manhattan and the "Glass House," which is best known for the audacious touch of displaying a Mosler safe door, designed by Henry Dreyfuss, in plain view behind plate glass on Fifth Avenue. Above

bank vice president. On Fifth Avenue, an A.T.M. center has been built, with a partition separating it from the safe. A ceiling has been extended from the slab of the second floor to the exterior wall, closing up the space beneath. And the openness of the main floor has been diminished somewhat by new office partitions.

Since the building is under consideration for landmark status, Ms. Voda said the bank consulted closely with the staff of the landmarks commission. And Ms. Raab concurred, saying the bank had been "extremely cooperative in working with us to maintain the architectural integrity of the building."

Alterations are on the horizon at the arching, gull-winged T.W.A. terminal at Kennedy International Airport. "The first phase is mostly cosmetic and comfort level," said Marvin B. Mitzner of Davidoff & Malito, a lawyer for the airline. But major reconstruction will follow.

Because jumbo jets are too big to fit at adjoining gates, planes have to park on the field, forcing passengers to use buses, Mr. Mitzner said. "There's no question that it's an obsolete terminal," he said. "The objective is to find a happy medium between destroying architectural features and allowing the terminal to become useless."

IT is unclear what use can be made of Two Columbus Circle, a white marble box with perforated edges, a loggia at top and an arcade at the bottom. Last October, Forrester R. Taylor, the chief of staff for Deputy Mayor John S. Dyson, said the city was preparing a request for proposals to develop the site, which it owns.

Preservationists like Mr. Stern worry that the 10-story building will be torn down. But Mr. Taylor will not discuss the redevelopment project now. He will not even say whether the request for proposals had been completed.

There is one minor modernist monument that is virtually assured of demolition. Unknown to and unseen by most New Yorkers — even though thousands pass underneath it every day — is a two-story penthouse suite that I. M. Pei and William Lescaze designed for the real estate giant William Zeckendorf in 1952.

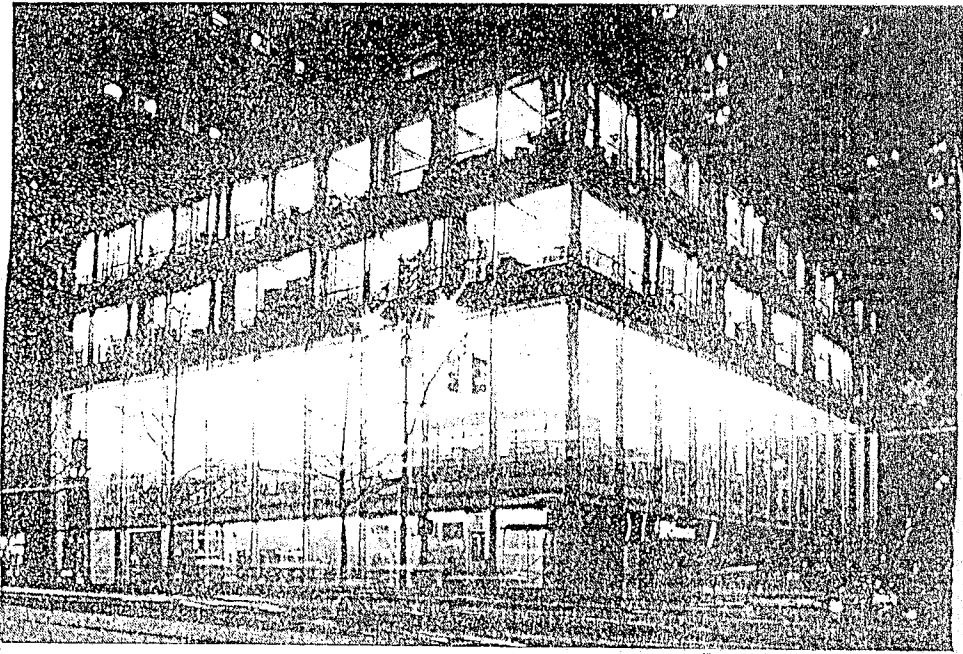
Largely concealed by parapets, the penthouse crowns the long-vacant Knapp Building, 363 Madison Avenue, between 46th and 47th Streets. This block-square property, a prime candidate for redevelopment, has been at the center of a fierce struggle for control among Bear, Stearns & Company, the al-Babtain family of Saudi Arabia and the British developer Howard Ronson.

The authors of "New York 1960" described the Zeckendorf penthouse as "the era's most extraordinary offices." The chief feature is a circular dining room with floor-to-ceiling windows and a cylindrical elevator shaft. Here, with a wide-screen perspective on mid-Manhattan, the legendary developer held court, offering guests three-course lunches and fine wines.

Zeckendorf's own office was on the floor below this turret, in a teak-lined drum 25 feet in diameter. One of his grandsons, William Lie Zeckendorf, recalls that the inner sanctum seemed to him as a child as if it must have been 60 feet wide.

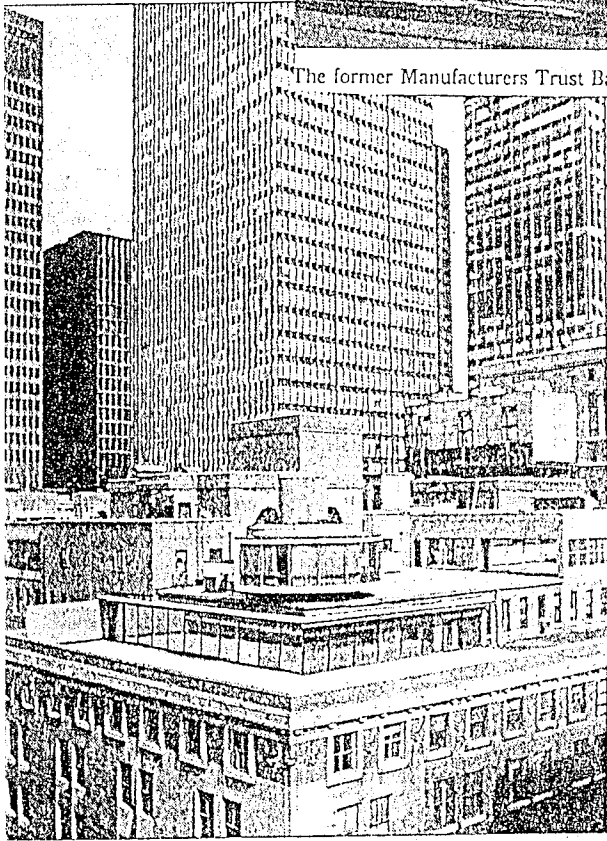
"It's amazing how many people I run into almost daily who have never forgotten that office," the younger Mr. Zeckendorf said last week. "But I'm told by people who've been up there that it's been so altered over

Preserving the Legacy of Modernist Building

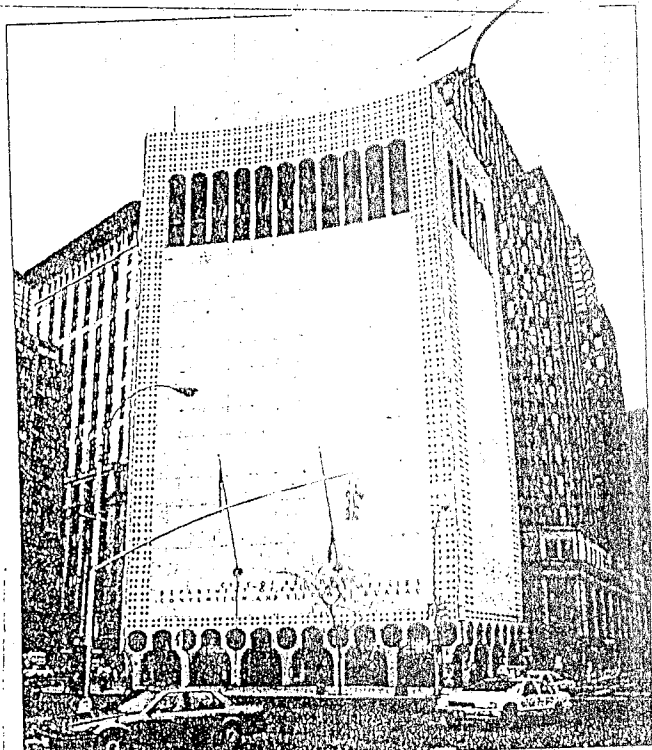


The former Manufacturers Trust Bank branch at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street.

Photographs by Fred M. Conrad/The New York Times



The foreground is the two-story penthouse office atop 383 Madison Avenue that I. M. Pei designed for the real estate developer William Zeckendorf. Behind it is 270 Park Avenue, the former Union Carbide Building.



Two Columbus Circle, built as a museum, is now used for city offices.