

Daily Closeup

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BEAUTY & THE CITY



OPPENHEIMER

At one point in his life, architect Herbert Oppenheimer flirted with the idea of being a painter or a sculptor. He had attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina to study under Josef Albers and later enrolled at the Sculpture Center here.

His artistic involvements had followed a year of work with the CIO in 1946 organizing student members. But it wasn't until the Sculpture Center that he thought about returning to school to be an architect.

"I recognized then," Oppenheimer said the other day, "that my inclinations were more social. Only poets are more solitary than sculptors."

He attended Columbia University, worked for Phillip Johnson and then started his own firm with John Brady and Charles Vogelstein, working on such diverse projects as housing rehabilitation in Harlem, the 1964 World's Fair Japanese Pavillion, a Bronx medical building and the restoration of the Wyckoff house, the Dutch farmhouse in Brooklyn that is the city's oldest landmark.

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Architecture, Oppenheimer says, has been the perfect "synthesis of his social concerns and artistic feelings." Recently he became the new president of the American Institute of Architects-New York Chapter. For years he had been active in the 1700-member professional group and, like the organization, he has

gotten increasingly involved in city controversies.

Whether it's the West Side Highway, a zoning fight across from Lincoln Center or the preservation of the Tweed Courthouse or the Grace Church houses, Herbert Oppenheimer and the AIA are usually found among active participants.

Yes, Oppenheimer agrees, the "profession is more involved than ever and it's long past time we got involved."

Oppenheimer is a tall and affable man, the kind who can always be counted on to control his temper and produce a smile in the midst of heated controversy. "If we want a beautiful city," Oppenheimer said in a quiet, determined voice, "we have to assert ourselves. We can't just let real estate people and builders be the motivating force when their interest is how the figures add up on the bottom line."

"It used to be," he added, "that a politician, a banker and a builder would sit down to figure out how to develop a piece of land and then go the the architect to make the package presentable. We have to ask what effect that building will have on transit, stores, light, etc. Our concern is the whole quality of life in New York City. That's our bottom line."

As president, Oppenheimer will preside over the chapter's 12-member executive committee, speak before public hearings, meet privately with officials and encourage the "ferment of activity" that runs through the chapter's 40 committees.

Occasionally the chapter takes a stand in direct opposition to the work of one of its members, as in the case of the proposed demolition of Grand Central to make way for a new office tower designed by Marcel Breuer.

"We have to do what we feel is good for the city as a whole," said Oppenheimer, "even if it gets in the way of one of our members. Culturally it is important to preserve our landmarks. We can't let ourselves be part of creating a new world without a history."

Oppenheimer was born in Yonkers, March 17, 1924, the fourth and youngest son of Harry and Amy Vorhaus Oppenheimer. His father had a successful New York textile business and his mother was a social worker and author of children's books.

"My parents were always involved in community problems," Oppenheimer said. "My mother's two idols were George Bernard Shaw and Gandhi and my father was active in Jewish and cultural groups. We fed half the WPA Westchester orchestra."

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Oppenheimer first attended public school and then went to Fieldston in Riverdale. It was there that his art interests developed.

During World War II he was an infantryman in Germany, where a leg wound disabled him. Then at a political rally for Henry Wallace in Washington in 1947, Oppenheimer met Judy Jordan, who had come all the way from Denver, Colo.

When she returned home, Oppenheimer recalls with a grin, "I followed rapidly" and after a "short courtship of three months," they were married. They have three daughters—one at the Ethical Culture Midtown School, one at Fieldston and one job-hunting in New York—and Judy Oppenheimer is an English teacher at the Friends School.