

# ARCHITECTURE: HOW TO KILL A CITY

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

**T**HE final defeat for Pennsylvania Station was handed down by the City Planning Commission in January, and the crash of 90-foot columns will be heard this summer. What was not heard was the bitter and eloquent opposition at the hearings to the demolition of this New York landmark, and the Planning Commission's explanation of its action.

The explanation needs airing. What few realized, and this made all of the impassioned pleas for the cultural and architectural values of the city fruitless, was that however much the commission might be moved in the area of its civic conscience by such arguments, it was totally without power to act on them. As it pointed out in its report, it is permitted only to pass on the proposed use of land, not on its existing use, and therefore cannot rule on the value of a building that is already on the site, but only on the nature of its replacement.

## Joker

The matter would not have come before the commission at all except that a zoning variance was necessary to permit an occupancy in excess of 2,500 persons for the new Madison Square Garden, which will replace Penn Station. The decision rested entirely on whether congestion would be increased by issuing the variance. The joker here, and it is a terrifying one, is that the City Plan-

## Ours Is an Impoverished Society That Cannot Pay for the Amenities

ning Commission was unable to judge a case like Penn Station's on the proper and genuine considerations involved.

## Impotent Authority

What this amounts to is *carte blanche* for demolition of landmarks. The commission's hands are tied in any interpretation of the public good that rests on evaluation of old vs. new, or good vs. bad. If a giant pizza stand were proposed in an area zoned for such usage, and if studies showed acceptable traffic patterns and building densities, the pizza stand would be "in the public interest," even if the Parthenon itself stood on the chosen site. Not that Penn Station is the Parthenon, but it might just as well be because we can never again afford a nine-acre structure of superbly detailed solid travertine, any more than we could build one of solid gold. It is a monument to the lost art of magnificent construction, other values aside.

The tragedy is that our own times not only could not produce such a building, but cannot even maintain it, so that its fate is as inevitable as the Planning Board's decision. An interesting suggestion, like Robert Zion's in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, that the station's great frame with a nostalgic, backward-looking stone vaults could have sheltered a remarkably handsome

and appropriate railroad museum, and that its adjoining glass and iron shell could have been converted into a public botanical garden, becomes a fairy tale in terms of economic realities. It's time we stopped talking about our affluent society. We are an impoverished society. It is a poor society indeed that can't pay for these amenities; that has no money for anything except expressways to rush people out of our dull and deteriorating cities.

An even stranger kind of poverty, that of imagination and ideals, is demonstrated by the proposed remodeling of another landmark, the Times Tower, into a modern showcase for the Allied Chemical Corporation. In this case, the old building will not actually be torn down; it will be defaced. But it will be defaced in a morbidly significant way.

## Radical-Picturesque

When it was designed in 1903 the Times Tower was a blend of progress and romanticism; it stood at the crossroads of the 20th century. Called "a valuable artistic skyscraper" by Montgomery Schuyler at the time, it was an anachronistic solution that combined the radical, still new, forward-looking steel structure with a nostalgic, backward-looking, Victorian-picturesque facade of Gothic and

Renaissance details in white (sic) brick and terra-cotta.

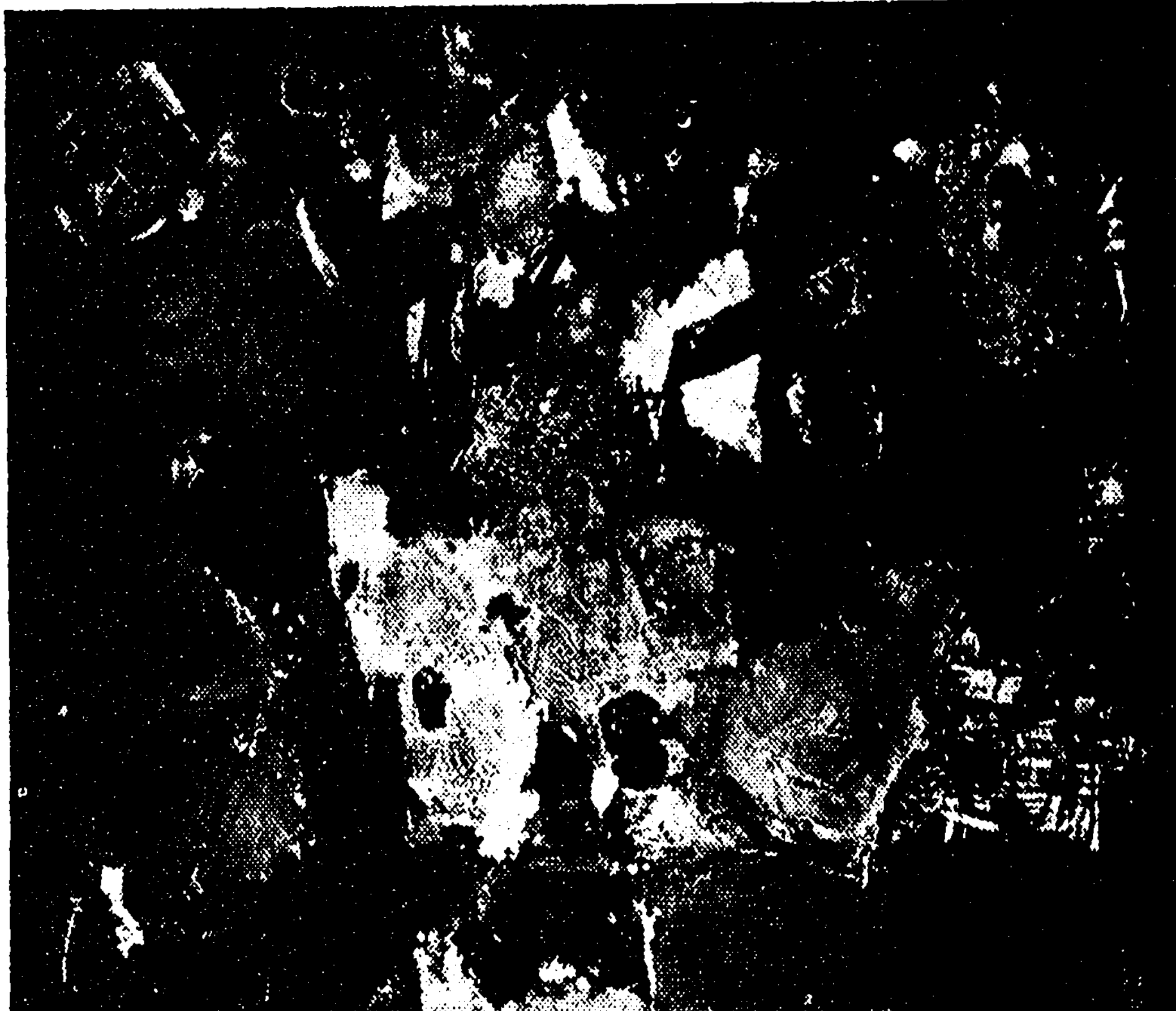
In what was considered an inspired solution for the city's most important new building on the oddly shaped lot formed by the crossing of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, the architects rather fetchingly inflated Giotto's bell tower in Florence and joined it with the lower office floors in a carefully calculated, but embarrassingly inept, articulation. The result was the building's well-known, and awkward, silhouette. The Times Tower was never a masterpiece; it was ambitious, pedestrian and dull. But it was legitimately conceived for its day, and such buildings, as they embody and preserve historic attitudes and styles, actually improve with age.

## For the Worse

The new design is also ambitious, pedestrian and dull, but without the virtue of singularity that marks its predecessor. All exterior detail will be cleaned off, and the building "refaced" with a routine, completely faceless contemporary curtain wall. The awkward silhouette, however, will be kept, although it becomes totally meaningless once its *raison d'être* is stripped away. Thus the publicity value of the landmark is retained, while the landmark itself is destroyed.

Surely there could be no more curious confusion of values than this, no clearer evidence of the current emphasis on expedient commercial advantage over all other considerations, no sadder revelation of the architectural standards that prevail today. Anything new is categorically preferred to anything old, no matter how shoddy or undistinguished the new may be. And if the old is wanted, occasionally, "reproductions" are preferred to originals, because they are newer and cleaner. It rarely occurs to anyone, as in the case of the 1905 Columbus Tower in San Francisco, or the Fidelity Building of the same period, adjoining Charles Center in Baltimore, that an old building can be profitably cleaned, restored, and even modernized where necessary, for civic enrichment, rather than civic loss.

The ultimate curiosity is the willingness, even enthusiasm, of the architectural firms employed by businessmen to wreak the damage; interestingly enough, for the Times Tower, the firm of Voorhees Walker Smith Smith & Haines is successor to the partnership of Eidlitz & MacKenzie, the original designers. Architects' inhumanity to architects surpasses understanding, particularly when the earlier ones are dead. It's a good way to kill off a city, as well.



**STARS IN THE WIND-UP**—With the art season entering its final month, the galleries are putting up their last big shows. Among last week's, Jean Arp is represented at the Sidney Janis Gallery with 37 marbles, bronzes and reliefs in various media going back to 1923, and Jannis Spyropoulos, at World House, is showing oils painted during the last two years. Spyropoulos, Greece's leading painter, maintains his international position as one of the most expert abstract artists alive. Arp is still a grand old man of sculptural poetry. Left, a minor poem of 1928, "Danseuse," a relief in cord on canvas. Right, Spyropoulos's "A Myth," 1962. Both of these exhibitions will close on May 25.