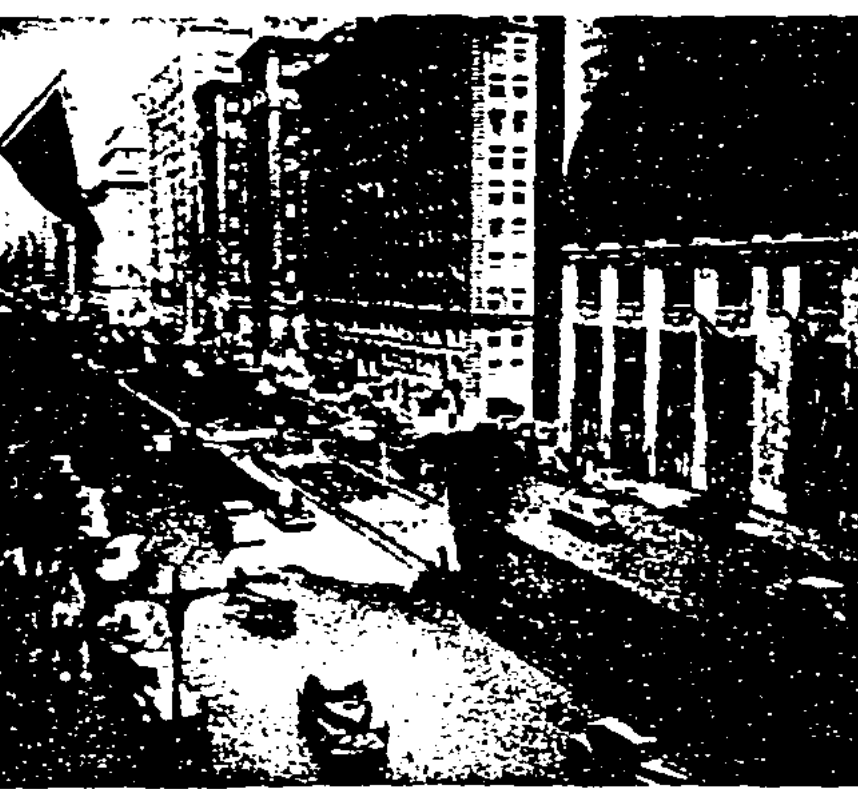


# Park Avenue School Of Architecture

Business and its new sleek and shiny temples have transformed a famous residential street.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



**OLD FACE**—This is the look Park Avenue offered to the world in the Nineteen Forties.

**N**EW YORK is a series of experiments, and everything which has lived its life and played its part is held to be dead, and is buried, and over it grows a new world.

New York has seen several "new worlds" since this observation appeared in Harper's Weekly in 1869, but it would be hard to find a more fitting description of the city's latest and most controversial series of experiments: the new architecture of Park Avenue. Today the old Park Avenue is being buried with remarkable and ruthless efficiency. Pedestrians pick their way through dust and debris, past temporary fences put together out of discarded (and still oddly personal) apartment house doors, while musty rubble thunders down chutes from ghosts of buildings stripped to shabby, naked steel. For we no longer just bury the past; we destroy it to make room for the future. Monuments and memories are demolished with the same cheerful, irreverent violence. As the old buildings disappear radical new ones rise immediately in their place, and the pattern of progress becomes clear: business palaces replace private palaces; soap aristocracy supplants social aristocracy; sleek towers of steel-framed blue, green, or gray-tinted glass give the avenue a glamorous and glittering new look.

**O**F the more than a hundred office buildings constructed or remodeled in Manhattan since the war, Park Avenue's share of fifteen commercial structures, thirteen of them impressively concentrated in a twelve-block area between Forty-seventh and Fifty-ninth Streets, includes the most important examples of the new style. Unconventional and unfamiliar, their precise patterns gleaming sharply against the city sky, these buildings are New York's contribution to a dramatic revolution in architectural design.

The revolution is a post-war miracle, brought about by unprecedented prosperity, which in turn spurred a great building boom. Inevitably, as an expected dispersal of business offices to the suburbs failed to materialize, land in the Forties and Fifties on Park Avenue—a small, vital area of midtown Manhattan—became too valuable to be devoted to the vestiges of gracious residential living. Speculative builders

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE writes often on architectural subjects and is now engaged in preparing a guide to modern architecture in New York, co-sponsored by the Municipal Art Society and the Museum of Modern Art.

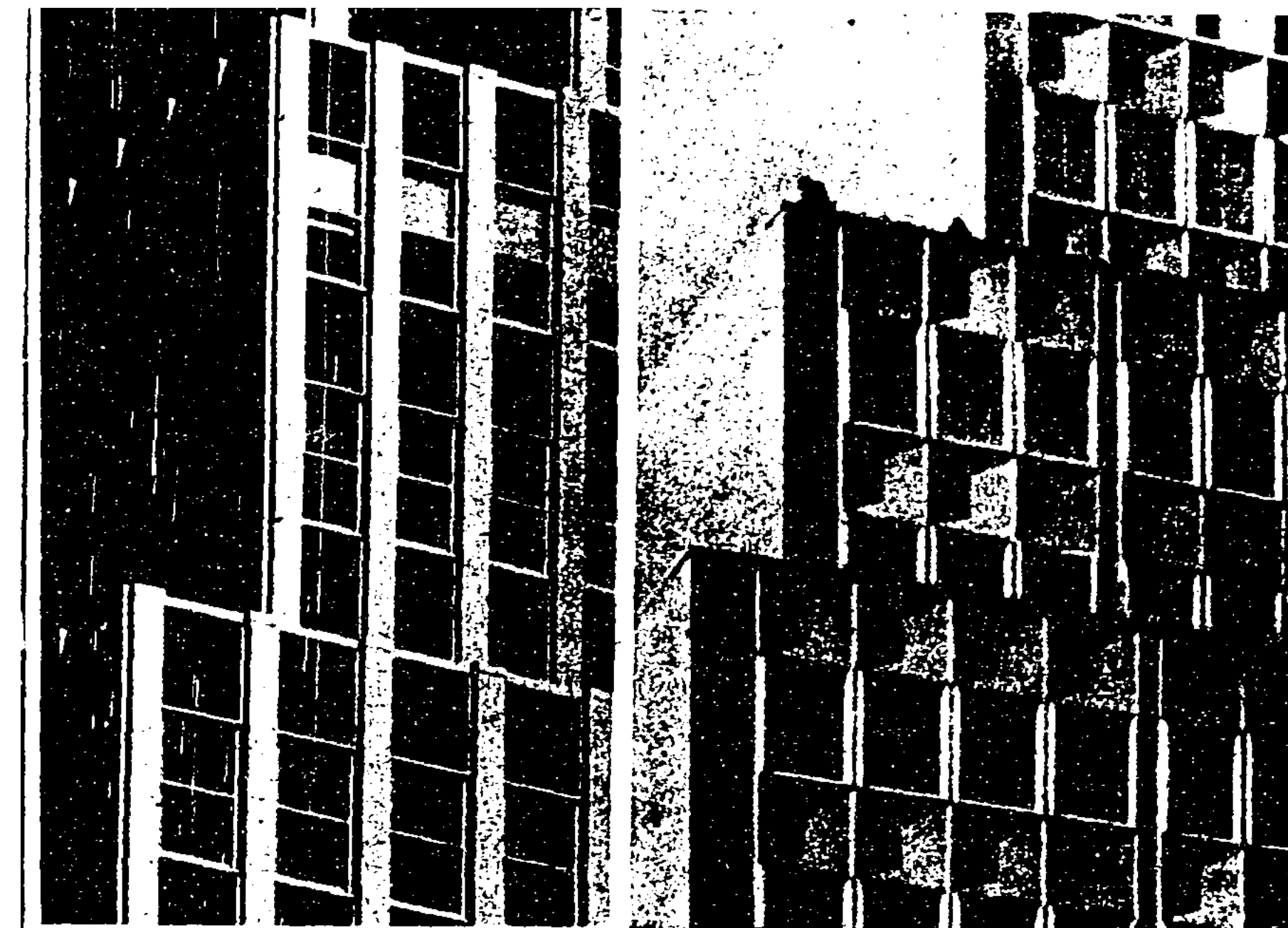
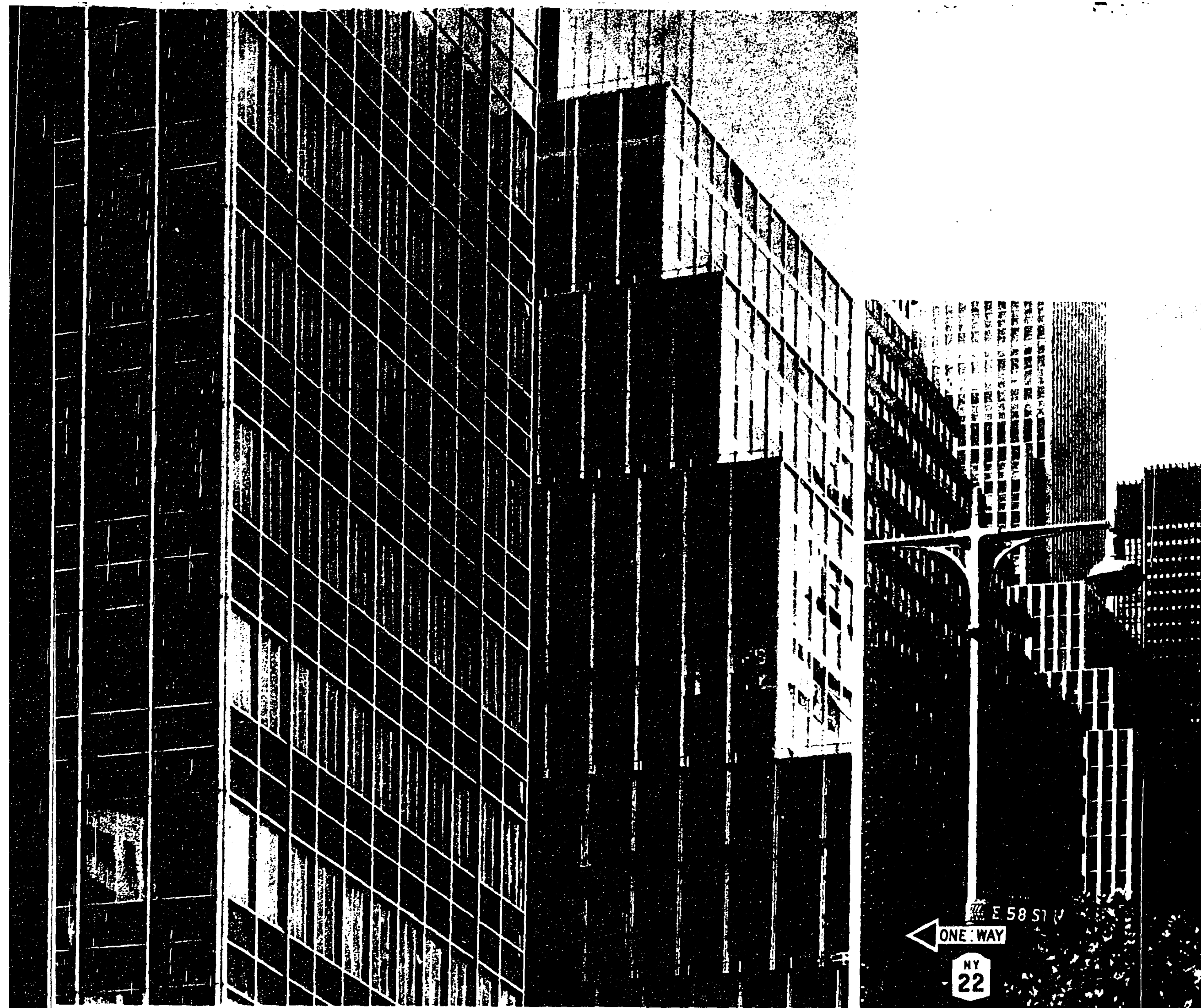
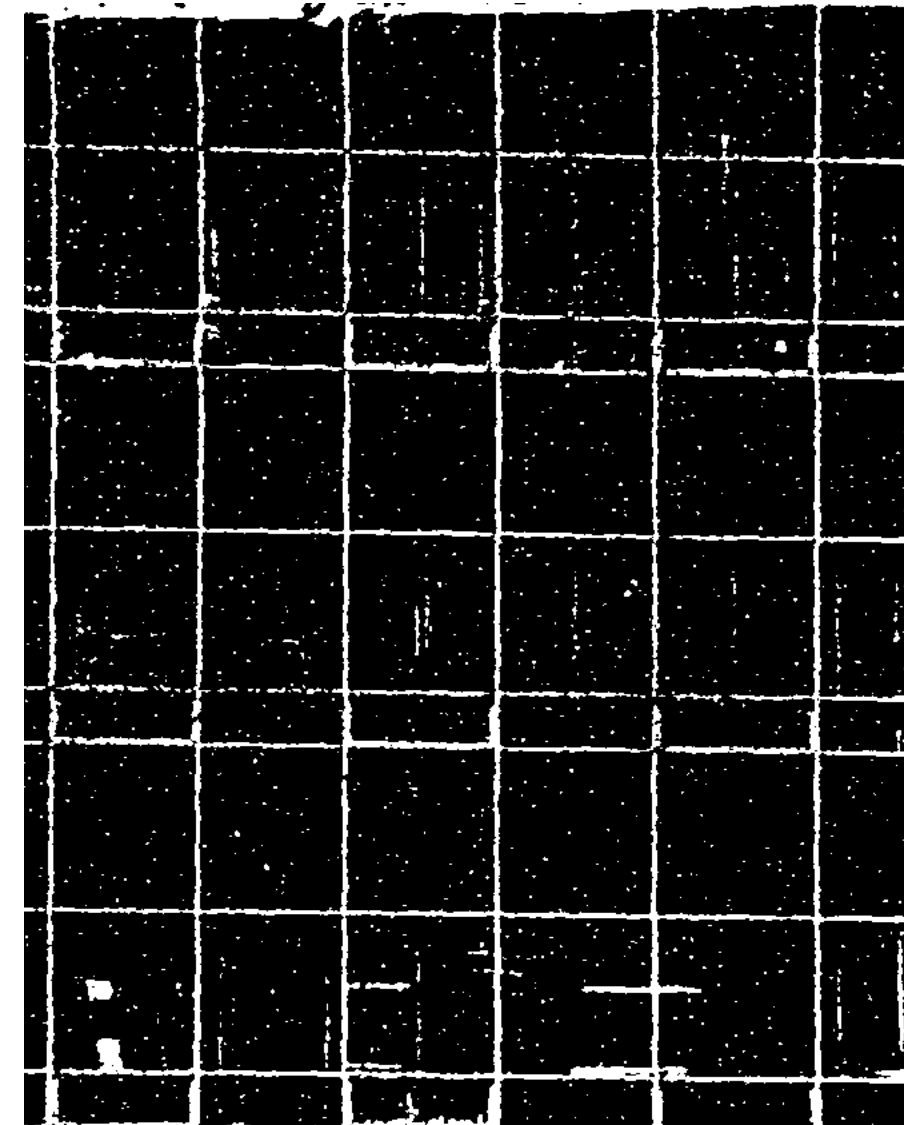
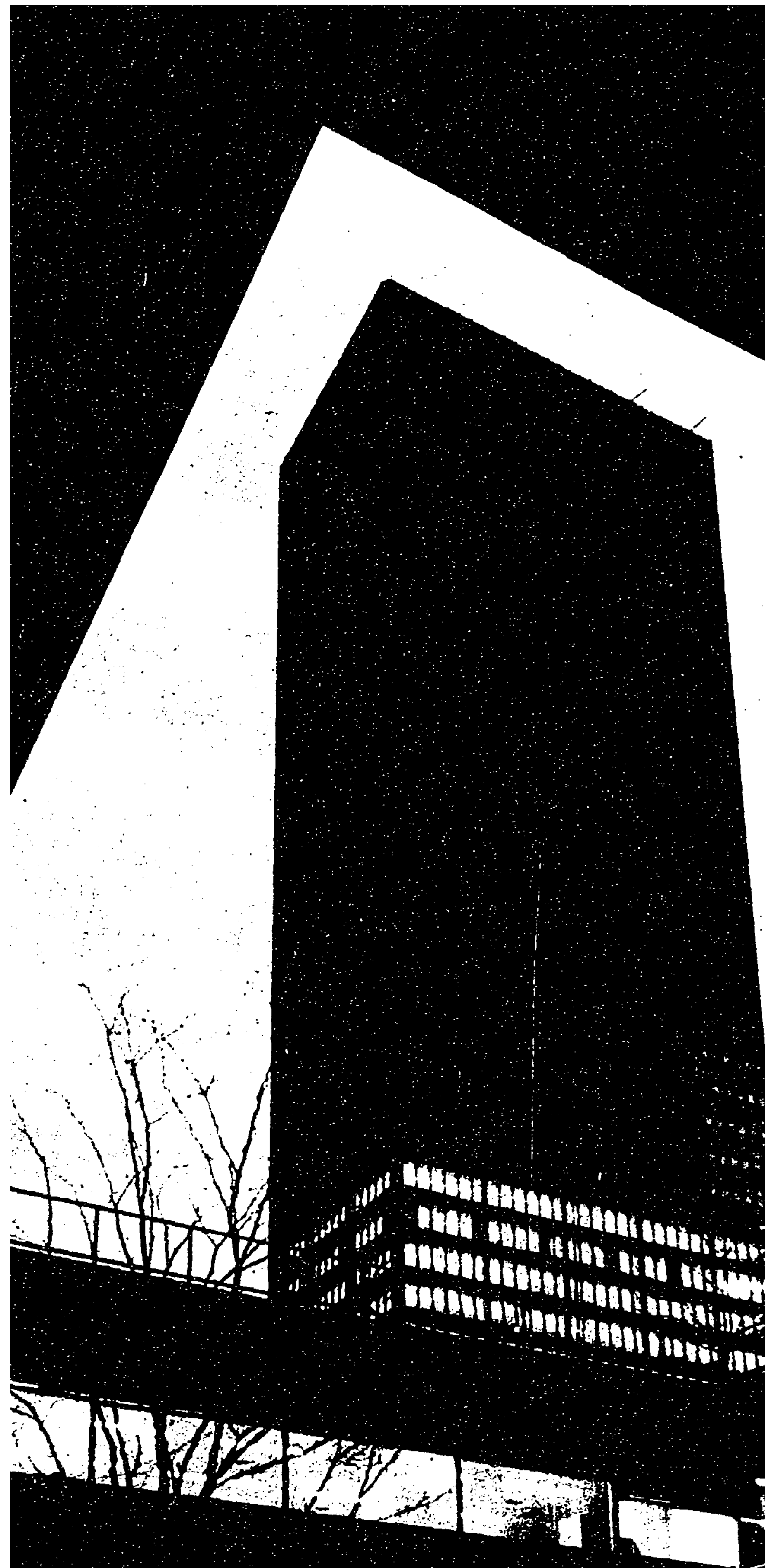
and giant corporations shopping for new sites took over. The chief sponsors of the new office buildings were (and are) conservative commercial corporations whose names read like a preferred listing of "Who's Who in American Industry." The staples of our civilization—soap, whisky and chemicals—have identified themselves with advanced architectural design and their monuments march up the avenue in a proud parade.

**T**HUS, in spite of its change from a residential to a commercial neighborhood, Park Avenue still has its upper-class aura, its special air of privilege and prestige. The passing of the stately old apartments and hotels—most of which were thoroughly undistinguished buildings—has not eliminated this special brand of elegance from New York. It has merely changed its locale. In a surprise shift, elegance has moved from domestic to professional life, from the apartment house to the office building. As luxury apartments become smaller, shoddier and more shamefully stereotyped, commercial quarters grow more impressively handsome. Their spacious, costly and orderly perfection owes much of its genteel drama to the architect, but it also borrows something from the theatre and from the stenographer's Hollywood dream.

At Forty-seventh Street the Union Carbide Corporation is constructing an impressive home office of black metal and stainless steel. Colgate-Palmolive presents a shining beige glass-and-aluminum front at Forty-ninth, and the House of Seagram, an austere distinguished bronze-and-glass edifice, is near completion at Fifty-second Street. Opposite, at Fifty-third, is Lever Brothers' trend-setting blue-green glass tower. Just above the Seagram Building, at Fifty-fourth Street, demolition is proceeding on the site of Astor Plaza, and Pepsi-Cola plans a dramatic headquarters at Fifty-ninth.

**T**HE designers of these buildings include some of the country's leading architects. Mies van der Rohe, who has been advocating the stripped-down, precisely proportioned simplicity of the glass tower for nearly forty years, is responsible for the Seagram building, with associate Philip Johnson. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, who have executed many of America's most important structures, are the architects of Lever House and of the projected Union Carbide and Pepsi-Cola buildings.

The shiny new look of these buildings comes (Continued on Page 54)



**NEW FACE**—The transformation of Park Avenue is a change from blocks of masonry to towers of glass and metal. An outstanding example of the new architecture is the nearly completed Seagram Building (shown on facing page). Lever House (in foreground in the picture above, left), put up in 1952, established the vogue for glass-walled buildings and was soon flanked by imitations. Park Avenue's resultant new look (above, right) was made possible by so-called "curtain wall" construction. Close-ups of this style of building are shown elsewhere on these pages.

Photographs by JOHN ROSS

# Park Avenue Architecture

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about through use of a streamlined method of building known as curtain wall construction. The principle is old (it was first used in the nineteenth century) but technological improvements have been so great since then that today's wide use of the curtain wall may be thought of as a post-World War II phenomenon. The technique involves no more than the application of a thin skin of lightweight panels (in the old days they were made of masonry, now they are usually glass, metal or porcelain) to a building's structural frame.

**T**HESSE factory-made panels—they fit together like pieces of a very large, elementary jigsaw puzzle—make wall construction fast, easy and economical. They also offer a built-in style with certain obvious advantages. A curtain-wall building gains a discreetly expensive appearance, an understated simplicity that speaks softly, but convincingly, of industrial progress. In this sense, the new style has become a suave symbol of American business success. Its advantages are especially apparent in those instances—few as they are—where a corporation has been shrewd enough (or rich enough) to erect a "non-competitive" building on ample open space, thus sacrificing maximum rentable office area for publicity and prestige. In some other instances—as we shall see—the results have been less than inspiring.

If business has been enthusiastic in its endorsement of this new style, the general public has not. Reactions to Park Avenue's glamorous, glittering facades range from pleasure to pain, from polite or bitter confusion to uncompromising (and usually uncomprehending) outrage. As in all matters of art, the public may not know much about architecture, but it definitely knows what it likes. What it does not like

are those "stark glass boxes." They are shocking and strange. There is considerable gloomy talk of "monotony" and "uniformity" and tears shed for the passing of "ornament" and "character."

On a professional level, the controversy is equally great. Architects are more concerned with the technical problems involved, but they, too, are disturbed by the prospect of monotony (with more sympathetic concern and less this-is-the-end-of-the-world belligerence than the public); many fear relentless repetition through the unimaginative use of standardized parts, or the reduction of the abstract patterns of the curtain wall to a few inadequate commercial formulas. They are worried about a vast panorama of bungled mediocrity if the curtain wall is treated with less than the proper professional respect. The critic of architecture shares the professional's alarm, but is also increasingly aware of the delicate question of the role and responsibility of the architect in the determination of the new style.

**I**S the new architecture really shocking, as so much of the public seems to feel, or does it make good sense? Actually, no one questions the validity of curtain wall construction. On the practical side, there is the promise of efficiency and economy; on the esthetic side, the possibility of dramatic new design based on its sensitive and imaginative use. Once the structural logic and economic desirability of the curtain wall are understood, it is a short step to a sympathetic appreciation of a method of construction that is a suitable and proper part of our way of life. Only through this kind of rational comprehension can we be prepared to judge whether a building is good or bad.

As for the fear of monotony and uniformity raised by the increasing use of the curtain wall, one may ask: Is the

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**CHANGE**—Two men play shuffleboard on the terrace of Lever House. Behind stands one old building hedged in by numerous new ones.

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present visual chaos of our cities really better? If we open our eyes—for most of us never look above attractive storefronts or impressive entrances—can we actually prefer the incompatible and elaborately ugly edifices with which we have lined our streets in the past fifty years? Great buildings are few and far between. Architecture is a background for life and, except for the isolated monument, should offer serenity, harmony and repose. This was the aim of the planned Renaissance city, with its "monotonous" uniform cornice lines and deliberately "repetitious" windows, and of the eighteenth-century city, which we still admire so unreservedly, and which again depended on the "uniformity" of symmetrical facades.

**C**URTAIN wall construction, properly designed and executed, could deliver us from the present anarchy and return us to this perennial ideal. Nor is it any more reasonable to suggest that mass production of building parts (the logical aim of the curtain wall) must result in inescapable monotony. This kind of architecture is potentially less limited in the richness of its effects than was the familiar and beloved classical style, where the architect was required to design within the restrictions of a carefully defined vocabulary.

Character is not lacking today, only ornament in the traditional sense. The ornament that was desirable for masonry facades—which, as a material, offered little decorative effect in itself—becomes an out-of-scale anachronism when applied to the curtain wall. That contemporary design is intrinsic, rather than applied, makes it no less rewarding to the eye.

Only the architect can save us from the fate-worse-than-monotony, and he's going to have a fairly rough time. In the final analysis, the success or failure of the new buildings depends to a surprising degree on the taste and talent of the designer. There has been no bigger or more responsible job in the history of his profession, and history will provide him with no answers, for the task involves unprecedented problems in both structure and design. He is sitting on an architectural hot seat, and it is no wonder that he occasionally seems to want to run and hide.

**I**T is easier, for example, to blame the zoning laws for poor design than to admit the possibility of artistic error, for these rigid regulations that govern the size and shape of New York's buildings by requiring setbacks above certain heights, for light and air, undeniably determine the unfortunate layer-cake form of most of our commercial construction. Another popular refuge is the constant neces-

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**STREET OF LIGHTS**—Random patterns of shining windows illumine the new Park Avenue after dark. The view is from Fifty-fifth Street, south to Grand Central Terminal.

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sity to cut costs, although it is no secret that a successful building can be designed on a limited budget (the new headquarters for the Girl Scouts of America at Third Avenue and Fifty-first Street is a case in point).

All of this makes it possible to skirt around the basic issue: the free, creative choice which every architect must exercise within the specific limitations that vary with the job. Many architects treat this part of their work as if it were something slightly shady, putting their solutions safely beyond criticism by ascribing them to purely practical factors. They speak of curtain wall construction, not as an instrument of creative design, but as a kind of automatic technological cure-all.

**B**Y playing down design responsibility, they promote ignorance of design standards. Lack of standards leads to lack of judgment. Lack of judgment results in lack of differentiation between good and bad architecture or good and bad architects. The inevitable end of the process is the elimination of public standards, the lowering of professional standards, and the commissioning of a good deal of pretentious, inferior building.

Actually, it is the architect's personal, calculated choices that carry the largest share of responsibility for the building's ultimate effect. The great diversity possible in the arrangement of the elements of the curtain wall creates a unique and rather frightening challenge, and a design problem that is still far from solved. It is on the basis of these relationships and their proper integration with structure and function that these buildings—and their architects—should be judged.

However, granted that the architect is seriously aware of these problems, a few small nagging questions remain: Is he, for example, conscientiously concerned with the development of genuine curtain wall systems that will be practical in terms of mass production, or is he only indulging in a superficial game of pretty, abstract pattern making, based on the latest curtain wall whim?

Unfortunately, too few architects are meeting their responsibilities, and too few of the present buildings are realizing the promise of the new construction. The undisputed pace setters of the new style are the Seagram building, on Fifty-second to Fifty-third Streets, and Lever House, diagonally opposite, from

Fifty-third to Fifty-fourth. For most of the remaining examples, including some with very impressive brand names, the curtain wall has become no more than a pleasantly anonymous backdrop or, at worst, has been reduced to a slick, insensitive parody of a well-established cliché.

The conclusion is inescapable. For those interested in the quality of the city's architecture—and architecture is the city—the fact remains that a building is usually only as good as its designer, and the fate of the new building rests firmly with the artist-architect. He in turn, is dependent upon an enlightened or open-minded client. Because we live in a society where practical men of affairs distrust art and consider scientific efficiency the ultimate good, it has been a simple, profitable and esthetically disastrous process to discount the artist-architect and to reduce the art of architecture to a commercial operation.

The result has been a growing series of sizable, superficially impressive, second-rate copies of less-than-first-rate buildings. Most of these cannot be called architecture at all—if we understand it as one of the major arts—since their appearance is largely the result of accident, expediency, economics and the inevitable march of industrial advance. They are economically “styled” rather than architecturally designed. The justness and sensitivity of their structural and decorative proportions—criteria of the great architecture of any age—are often ill-considered, if they have been seriously considered to begin with.

**A**ND yet, in spite of the disproportionate number of poor buildings, the new architecture has considerable to recommend it. The impressive, generally elegant simplicity that is its chief characteristic is bringing order out of existing civic chaos, a contribution at least as valuable for the urban landscape as the creation of an occasional isolated masterpiece. Its design acknowledges, in varying degrees, legitimate and necessary sources in contemporary technology. Unprecedented dramatic effects of reflected sun and shadow on flat, vitreous facades add a brilliant, if unpremeditated, beauty to the city scene.

Significant in spite of their faults, handsome in spite of their esthetic inadequacies, New York's new buildings signal one of the most important structural and stylistic changes in the history of architectural design.