

“THE WRONG BUILDING, IN THE WRONG PLACE, AT THE WRONG TIME”:  
MARCEL BREUER AND THE GRAND CENTRAL TOWER CONTROVERSY,  
1967–1969

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## ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s, New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission rejected a controversial proposal submitted by Marcel Breuer and Associates to float a fifty-five-story office tower in the air rights above Grand Central Terminal. As a flashpoint in the development of US preservation policy, the dispute over Breuer's addition has figured prominently in historical accounts of the postwar city. This study, however, challenges the common historiographical reception of the project—that it was irredeemably wrongheaded—and suggests as a counter-position that its wrongness might be its principle virtue. Breuer's tower—much larger than the existing building and executed in an incompatible architectural vocabulary—violated prevailing conventions of taste and propriety. But, in doing so, it staged a confrontation between private and public concerns with a new kind of visibility. As much as Breuer and his modern movement idiom have been cast as villains in the controversy, contemporary critics saw his Grand Central Tower less often as an act of vandalism and more often as the product of a growth machinery whose operations had been pushed to the point of irrationality. Like a work of Surrealist collage, the addition threw critical light on architecture's complicity in an anti-democratic politics of development dominated by the interests of corporate capital.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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## INTRODUCTION

***The Wrong Building***

The first image included in Paul Byard's 1998 study, *The Architecture of Additions: Design and Regulation*, is a black-and-white, ground-level perspective of New York City's Grand Central Terminal as viewed from a small distance southwest of its principal facade on Forty-Second Street (fig. 1). Directly overhead, filling the bulk of the frame—many times taller than the terminal's street-front colonnade and triumphal arches—floats a trim rectangular tower punctured evenly by a grid of narrow vertical windows. A shadowed recess marries it to the head house below, and both are rendered by the same even hand with the same clean lines, as if the two buildings were contemporaries. The disjunction, however, between the corporate-modernist slab and the deeply sculptured Beaux Arts terminal is severe. With mismatched architectural vocabularies executed on radically different scales, neither seems able to reconcile itself to its neighbor. And it was precisely this unsettled (and unsettling) quality that caught Byard's eye. For him—a lawyer, architect, and historic preservation educator—the disunity of the composition raised definitively the central theoretical question of addition: “How does one building affect the meaning of another when their expressions are combined and interact?”<sup>1</sup> The incongruity of the tower and the terminal—one stacked above the other—signaled a failure to adequately balance or harmonize their expressions; superimposition, he believed, gave the former “a polemical edge” over the latter.<sup>2</sup> Byard thus saw the image as an instructive failure—an object lesson in how *not* to negotiate the dilemmas and difficulties of joining new architecture with old.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Spencer Byard, *The Architecture of Additions: Design and Regulation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

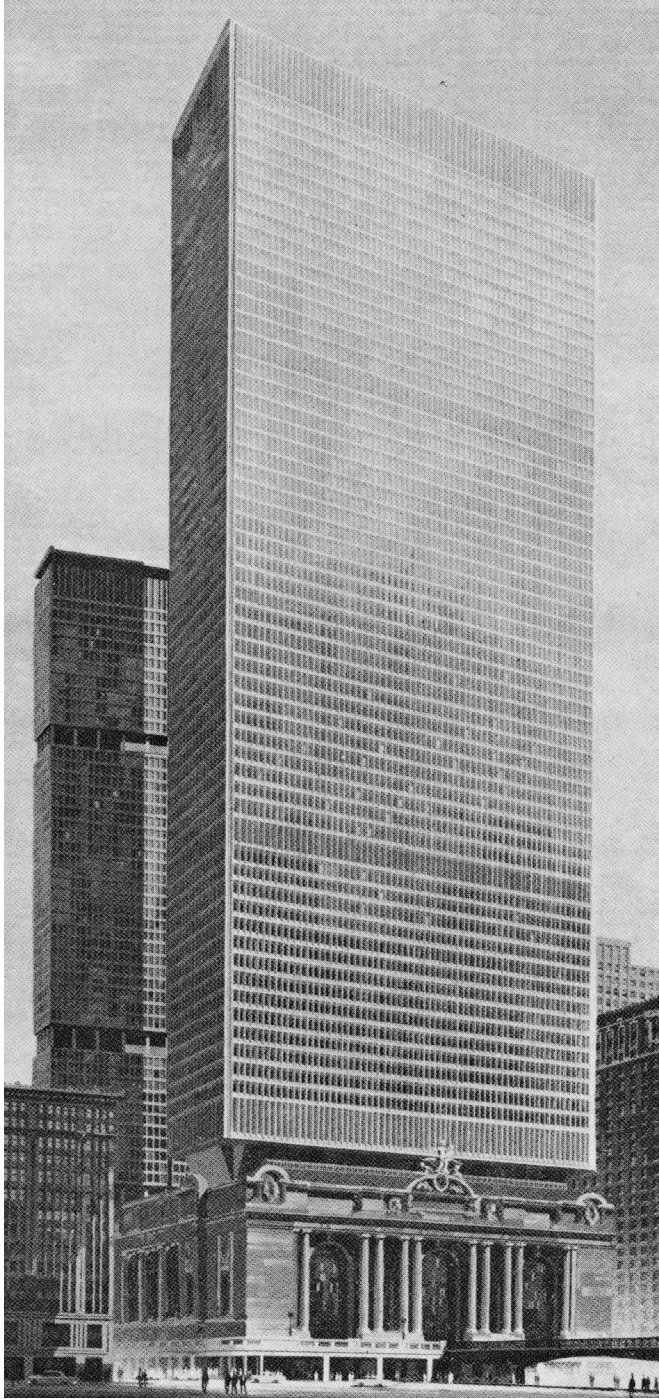


Figure 1. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower, perspective rendering, 1968. (Middleton, *Grand Central*, 134)

The rendering itself was produced in May 1968 by watercolorist Pierre Lutz,<sup>3</sup> employed by Marcel Breuer and Associates to illustrate its proposal for the insertion of fifty-five cast-stone and exposed-aggregate office floors—christened Grand Central Tower<sup>4</sup>—into the undeveloped air rights at the southernmost end of the terminal complex. And it was the same image that hung behind Breuer at a press conference one month later when the architect defended the plan before an already skeptical public. “From the urban point of view,” he argued, “one can say that if there is any place on Park Avenue for a large office building, that place is above Grand Central Station. The direct interior connections to the subways and commuter trains justifies the location: concentration there where subsurface transportation is most readily available.”<sup>5</sup> But Breuer must have sounded then to be arguing against a truth already made plain by Lutz’s rendering—a counterargument drafted so clearly as to appear undeniable: the architecture of the tower would be an affront to that of the terminal; the two were incompatible. The void above Grand Central may have been the most “logical place” for more mid-Manhattan offices,<sup>6</sup> but what Breuer’s audience remembered most was an emphatically *illogical* collage of unrelated forms and functions, bound together more by coincidence and opportunity than by design. As the chairman of the City Planning Commission observed soon after Breuer had made his case, “it’s the wrong

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<sup>3</sup> There was some concern among the architects that Lutz had rendered the buildings too cleanly, that the effect would be more convincing were the terminal “darker and dirtier” and the tower more “ethereal.” [Herbert Beckhard?] to Marcel Breuer, 10 May 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Marcel Breuer Papers, 1920-1986, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter cited as Breuer Papers AAA).

<sup>4</sup> “Grand Central Tower” was the name preferred by the project’s developer and used most often in press accounts. Breuer and his staff preferred “175 Park Avenue,” and that was the name used in their internal communications. To avoid confusion, I will use “Grand Central Tower” exclusively here, as it is more descriptive and stands up better to repetition. Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 28 May 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>5</sup> “Notes on the New 175 Park Avenue Building over Grand Central Station,” 27 May 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>6</sup> Marius Scopton, press release draft, 31 May 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

building, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.”<sup>7</sup> And this was the sentiment confirmed by Byard thirty years later, explaining on the recto of his opening spread—the tower reproduced alone on the verso as if its architecture could speak its lessons for itself—that his book began as “an effort to understand what’s *wrong* with the picture of Grand Central Terminal shown on the facing page.”<sup>8</sup>

I share Byard’s curiosity about the project. I agree that something looks improper on the face of it. But I begin my own study of Grand Central Tower less with questions about where and how Breuer and his team may have erred than with questions about the self-evidence of their transgressions. If unexamined, what is hidden behind a certainty that their proposal was irredeemably wrongheaded? I want to challenge the conclusions drawn by Byard and others—that it was “an evil” to be prevented or a “terrible mistake” to be forgiven<sup>9</sup>—with a contrary proposition: Grand Central Tower’s wrongness might be its principal virtue. I take my cue for this claim from comments like Ada Louise Huxtable’s in the *New York Times*: “it would be great if it weren’t awful.”<sup>10</sup> Or like Robert Gatje’s, a partner at Marcel Breuer and Associates, in his recollections on the firm: “The project was totally defensible, if one were inclined to defend it.”<sup>11</sup> Both saw something Janus-faced in the addition—a quality whose principal contradictions I hope to unfold here. But more specifically, I take my cue from a charge often repeated by Breuer’s

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<sup>7</sup> Donald K. Elliott quoted in Glenn Fowler, “Grand Central Tower Will Top Pan Am Building,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Byard, *The Architecture of Additions*, 9 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> “In the act [the city’s rejection of Grand Central Tower], an evil was prevented that seemed as serious as the demolition of Pennsylvania Station a few years before.” Byard, *The Architecture of Additions*, 9; “He [Breuer] was a good guy who made a terrible mistake.” George S. Lewis quoted in Isabelle Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect: The Career and the Buildings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Ada Louise Huxtable, “Grotesquerie Astride a Palace,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Gatje, *Marcel Breuer: A Memoir* (New York: Monacelli, 2000), 231.

opponents: that his proposal was an act of surrealism.<sup>12</sup> Critics threw the word at Grand Central Tower like a slur, but insofar the poets and painters of the surrealist avant-garde understood their own solicitation of the irrational as a maneuver against an oppressive status quo, I find the application of the term here particularly apt. The very strangeness of Breuer's proposal (the disquiet provoked by the addition floating above the terminal) marks it as a similarly disruptive experiment in discontinuity. Grand Central Tower, in other words, shares with more overtly surrealist works the potency of unpredictable juxtaposition, perhaps best evoked by Lautréamont's famous lines on "the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table."

Moreover, the term "surrealist" is conceptually useful for my study if it can emphasize the subversive dimension of the proposal's odd appearance. Michael Löwy has argued, "Surrealism is a protest against narrow-minded rationality, the commercialization of life, petty thinking, and the boring realism of our money-dominated, industrial society."<sup>13</sup> I want to read some of the same spirit of protest into Grand Central Tower—even (or especially) if it was a protest that Breuer registered only half-consciously, unexpectedly, and against his own commitments. I am not interested in joining the ranks of critics and historians who have raised objections to the addition, but neither am I entirely convinced that it ought to be defended against these objections. Rather, I want to understand Breuer's proposal—together with the controversies that it ignited—for the way that its "surreality" may have expressed something other than modernist values or modernist villainy.

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<sup>12</sup> Huxtable's first impression, for example, recorded on the day after Breuer's press conference, was that the architect had set a "colossal office building surrealistically astride a mansarded French palace." Huxtable, "Grotesquerie Astride a Palace."

<sup>13</sup> Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 1.

### *A Creative Dead End*

Scholarship in preservation has had comparatively less difficulty than architectural criticism in positioning Breuer's proposal and its consequences historically.<sup>14</sup> Grand Central's exterior was designated an official landmark in August 1967, which—according to a 1965 ordinance—granted the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) veto power over alterations. The terminal's then-owner, the New York Central Railroad, initiated the air rights project just a few weeks later, and after a lengthy review process and a series of appeals, revisions, and compromises, the LPC indeed rejected Breuer's design, citing an “inappropriate impact on the landmark qualities” of the facade.<sup>15</sup> The Central had by then merged with the Pennsylvania Railroad, forming the Penn Central Transportation Company, which answered this rejection with a lawsuit filed against the city in October 1969, arguing that landmark designation amounted to an unconstitutional taking without compensation. The case was litigated for many years in a number of venues until, in 1978, the US Supreme Court heard the Penn Central's arguments and voted with a six-justice majority to uphold the LPC's action. As Michael Tomlan has noted, “the *Penn Central* decision is the bellwether case of the judicial reception to preservation.”<sup>16</sup> And given this importance, it is no surprise to find the dispute over Breuer's building figuring prominently in historical accounts of the preservation movement's growing authority in the

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, David Bonderman, “The Grand Central Terminal Litigation and the Development of Preservation Law,” in *Grand Central Terminal: City Within the City*, ed. Deborah Nevins (New York: Municipal Art Society of New York, 1982), 129–34; John J. Costonis, *Icons and Aliens: Law, Aesthetics, and Environmental Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 103–110; Charles M. Haar and Jerold S. Kayden, *Landmark Justice: The Influence of William J. Brennan on America's Communities* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1989), 154–168; Michael A. Tomlan, *Historic Preservation: Caring for Our Expanding Legacy* (New York: Springer, 2014), 127–130.

<sup>15</sup> Haar and Kayden, *Landmark Justice*, 155.

<sup>16</sup> Tomlan, *Historic Preservation*, 130.



postwar city.<sup>17</sup> Some have pointed out, for example, how the case “served to validate the thirteen-year-old Landmarks Preservation Commission as well as to catalyze the commission to significantly broaden the concept of what constituted a landmark.”<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, Grand Central Tower seems still to occupy a historiographical blind spot for architecture. Early scholarship on Breuer’s work—scholarship published during the first decades after his death, for example—focused almost exclusively on his furniture designs (particularly on the experiments with tubular steel and cantilevers carried out during his tenure as master of the carpentry workshop at the Dessau Bauhaus [1925–1928]);<sup>19</sup> or on his domestic architecture (particularly on the homes designed first in collaboration with his Bauhaus mentor, Walter Gropius, after moving to the United States in 1937, and then in practice for himself after that partnership dissolved in 1941).<sup>20</sup> Generally speaking, this literature has had very little to say about Breuer’s late-career work—a prodigious body of large scale commissions, mostly in reinforced concrete (and surfaced often in prefabricated panels), executed for institutional, corporate, and governmental clients. In the 1960s these projects were already beginning to represent, for some critics, “a kind of stale modernism.”<sup>21</sup> And by the 1970s Breuer’s preferred

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, John Belle and Maxinne R. Leighton, *Grand Central: Gateway to a Million Lives* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 3–27; Meredith L. Clausen, *The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 329–346; Gregory Gilmartin, *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society* (Clarkson Potter, 1995), 401–410; William D. Middleton, *Grand Central: The World’s Greatest Railway Terminal* (San Marino: Golden West, 1999), 131–135; Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: Monacelli, 1997), 1138–1143.

<sup>18</sup> Stern, Mellins, and Fishman, *New York 1960*, 1143.

<sup>19</sup> See Magdalena Droste, *Marcel Breuer Design* (Cologne: Taschen, 1992); Christopher Wilk, *Marcel Breuer, Furniture and Interiors* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> See Joachim Driller, *Breuer Houses* (London: Phaidon, 2000); David Masello, *Architecture Without Rules: The Houses of Marcel Breuer and Herbert Beckhard* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect*, 154.

idiom was put firmly out of fashion by the emergence of a “postmodernist opulence of materials and the new taste for architectural glamor and shine.”<sup>22</sup> Put simply, Breuer’s late-career architecture was out of step with the major movements of the discipline, and for many years this placed his most ambitious work well out of view for historians. It was not until Gatje’s memoir in 2000 and Isabelle Hyman’s comprehensive survey of his buildings in 2002 that Breuer’s large-scale projects started to receive sustained scholarly attention. But even in the context of this overdue reappraisal, the significance of his work for corporate clients has often been minimized. Hyman, for example, described a few unbuilt “expressionistic” designs from the late 1960s as “creative releases from and in contrast to his unremarkable office towers of the period.”<sup>23</sup> Breuer’s corporate work was, for her, a “creative dead end.”<sup>24</sup> And Grand Central Tower itself appears in scholarship like Hyman’s most often as an apotheosis of that “dead end,” or as a turning point marking the decline of Breuer’s public image. Tellingly, in a 450-page catalog accompanying a 2003 Vitra Design Museum monograph exhibition, endeavoring to see the architect’s oeuvre “in its entirety,”<sup>25</sup> the terminal project was ignored but for I. M. Pei’s recollection that Breuer’s “reputation suffered a great setback from his proposed design for a tower over Grand Central Station in New York.”<sup>26</sup> The difficulty, however, of finding a comfortable place for the addition in his career and in the postwar city is, I believe, exactly what ought to earn the project a closer look.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander von Vegesack and Mathias Remmele, eds., *Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2003), 16.

<sup>26</sup> I. M. Pei quoted in *ibid.*, 172.

*A Building with a Monkey on Its Back*

Shortly after the LPC issued its initial rejection of Breuer's scheme, word reached the architect's office, through Jacques Robertson at the Planning Commission, that "the thinking now at City Hall and the recommendations to the Mayor were to forget the Landmarks idea ... 'Let's forget about having a building with a monkey on its back and let's build a real superb building in the Grand Central location.'"<sup>27</sup> The LPC's denial was based on the effect of Breuer's addition on "the external appearance of that landmark,"<sup>28</sup> but the concerns expressed by the city in private were more for the disunity of the collage than for the integrity of the terminal. Encouraged by Robertson's suggestion, and apparently with the city's blessing, the architects developed a second proposal "based on the assumption that the present Grand Central Building will be demolished between 42nd Street and the South Gallery of the Concourse."<sup>29</sup> With the Beaux Arts facade now absent from the design, the renderings for this new tower (again prepared by Lutz), which Breuer took to the next LPC hearing, offered a uniformity of expression that was much easier to square with the mainstream of corporate-modernist architecture in the 1960s (fig. 2). Members of the Planning Commission pledged to support it,<sup>30</sup> the developer, Morris Saady, was "far more encouraged than ever before,"<sup>31</sup> and Breuer himself was convinced that the

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<sup>27</sup> Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 1 October 1968 (4 p.m.), box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Franklin Whitehouse, "City Unit Blocks Building of Tower," *New York Times*, September 27, 1968.

<sup>29</sup> Marcel Breuer to Morris Saady, 9 October 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA. In fact, two versions of the revised design were developed, both assumed the demolition of the terminal but their bases were treated differently—one with vertical and the other with inclined piers at Forty-Second Street. Additionally, the possibility of developing railroad properties other than Grand Central was pursued. The design team executed feasibility studies for nearby sites including the Commodore, Biltmore, and Roosevelt hotels.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert Beckhard to Marcel Breuer, 3 December 1968, box 5, reel 5716, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>31</sup> Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 1 October 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.



Figure 2. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower (scheme II), perspective rendering, 1968. (Breuer Papers SUL)

redesign would swing opinion in his favor.<sup>32</sup> Even Harmon Goldstone, chair of the LPC, recorded in his journal a preference for the second scheme over the first, despite the far greater damage it would do to the landmark's protected features<sup>33</sup>—before voting against them both.

For the same reason, however, that the city and the development team saw more promise in the revised Grand Central Tower, I see more in the original. Replacing the terminal, rather than building above it, avoids precisely the expression of disharmony that I want to probe. In other words, with an unbroken or singular identity, the second scheme is easier to critique (for demolishing a landmark) and easier to sell (for the coherence of its architecture), and so I focus this study narrowly on the first, where these ambitions cannot be so quickly settled. I begin in September 1967, when the New York Central first began soliciting proposals for an air rights addition to the terminal's head house. I end roughly two years later, in August 1969, when Saady and Breuer were denied a "certificate of appropriateness" by the LPC, exhausting their final appeal before the city and paving the way for litigation. Chapter one reads Grand Central Tower's design and development in relation to Breuer's late-career architecture and attitudes. There are precedents within his prior work for the addition's surreality,<sup>34</sup> but the attempt here is not to find for it at last a proper place in Breuer's oeuvre. Rather, this chapter tries to draw out the project's *impropriety* insofar as it might thereby inflect or challenge then-contemporary ideas about urban architecture and city-making. Chapter two pivots from Breuer to the tower's critics. Although accounts of the post-war city have frequently noted the volume of objections raised

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<sup>32</sup> Marcel Breuer, telegram, 9 December 1968, box 5, reel 5716, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>33</sup> Harmon Goldstone, journal entry, 18 December 1968, box 1, Harmon H. Goldstone Papers (MS 256), The New-York Historical Society.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Ford, for example, has read Breuer's Wolfson house (1949–1950) as a "Surrealist collage" for the way that the design juxtaposes the client's existing "metallic streamlined" Airstream trailer with a "rustic, often low-tech wood frame." Edward R. Ford, "Alvar Aalto and Marcel Breuer: Light, Industrialization, and the Vernacular, 1928–1963," in *The Details of Modern Architecture*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 157.

against the proposal, this chapter argues that the nature of the controversy has been largely misapprehended. Critics saw the project less often as vandalism and more often as an expression of an objectionably laissez-faire attitude to the real estate market—or of a progrowth politics whose logic had been pushed to the point of irrationality. Grand Central Tower was, for its contemporaries, not a violation of the rules of urban architecture, but an illumination of their absurdity. The addition was sited at the nexus of contradictory impulses and agendas; it exploited and illuminated these forces pulling in two (or more) directions at once. The rest of this introduction, therefore, asks how this conflict was already prepared for or predicted by Grand Central Terminal’s own history of development.

### ***From the Air Would Be Taken Wealth***

The New York Central’s chief engineer, William J. Wilgus, was first to identify, in 1902, the air rights over railroad property as a resource that could be leveraged for financial benefit. The Central was operating an out-of-date, steam-powered depot at Forty-Second Street with an open train yard filling the blocks at grade north to Forty-Ninth Street. Wilgus proposed sinking two stories of electrified yards underground and constructing a new multi-level terminal complex on the site of the old building. He promised, moreover, that these improvements would be self-financing; revenue-producing structures could be built above the new trackbeds and rental income would more than justify the massive capital outlay (fig. 3).<sup>35</sup> “The keynote in this plan,” he wrote, “was the utilization of air rights that hitherto were unenjoyable with steam locomotives requiring open air or great vaulting spaces, for the dissipation of their product of combustion. Thus from the air would be taken wealth with which to finance obligatory vast changes

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<sup>35</sup> Wilgus estimated a total cost of \$35 million, fully half of the Central’s yearly revenue. Kurt C. Schlichting, *Grand Central’s Engineer: William J. Wilgus and the Planning of Modern Manhattan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 47–50.

otherwise nonproductive.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, when the new terminal opened in 1913, an ambitious development program was already underway that would, over the next two decades, entirely bury Grand Central’s train yards and track approach under offices, apartments, and hotels along a reconstructed Park Avenue (fig. 4).<sup>37</sup> And after the Second World War, with newly relaxed zoning restrictions, a new phase of development would draw even larger fortunes “from the air” over the railroad’s property. During the 1950s and 1960s, almost all of those early stone and brick air rights buildings would be replaced with much taller and more profitable curtain-walled slabs.<sup>38</sup>

Redevelopment proposals for the terminal itself began in the mid-1950s. Grand Central had contributed to an “enormous inflation of realty values in the surrounding land” but had remained “a low sculptural mass in the roofless bowl created by all its towering offspring.” As James Marston Fitch put it in 1974, “it was perhaps inevitable that, sooner or later, it would occur to the New York Central management that ... it might begin to skim off some of the increment itself.”<sup>39</sup> The *Times* put the same sentiment more succinctly in 1954: “nothing is so costly as to hold land and not fully use the air above.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, the railroad had then two proposals under consideration to more “fully use the air above” Grand Central, both requiring the

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<sup>36</sup> William Wilgus quoted in *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–71; see also Carl W. Condit, *The Port of New York: A History of the Rail and Terminal System from the Grand Central Electrification to the Present*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1981), 190–199.

<sup>38</sup> Kurt C. Schlichting, *Grand Central Terminal: Railroads, Engineering, and Architecture in New York City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 178–183.

<sup>39</sup> James Marston Fitch, “Grand Central Terminal and Rockefeller Center: A Historic-Critical Estimate of Their Significance” (New York State Parks & Recreation, Division for Historic Preservation, 1974), 7.

<sup>40</sup> “A New Grand Central?,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1954.



Figure 3. Grand Central Terminal, track approach during construction showing outline of future Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, 1911. (Condit, *Port of New York*, 2:88)

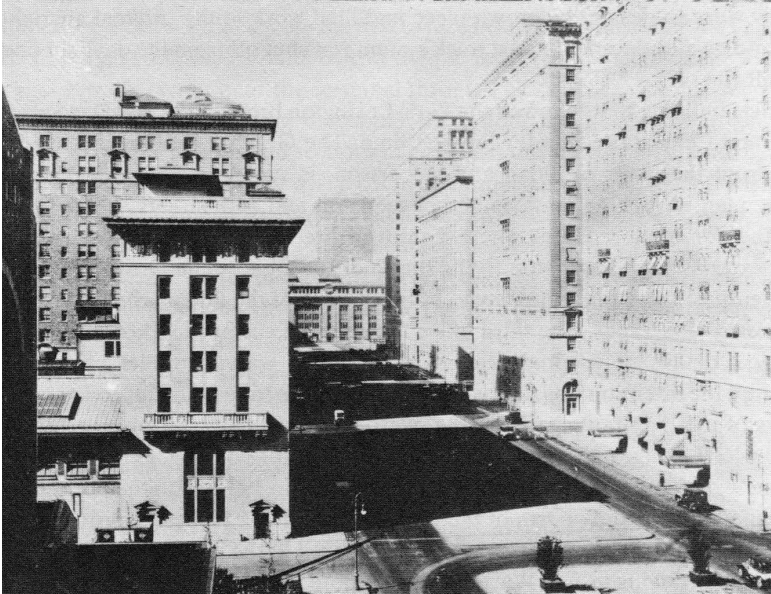
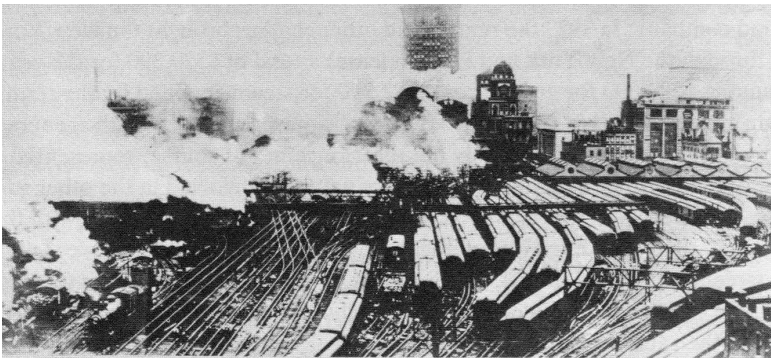


Figure 4. Grand Central Terminal. *Above*: Open yards as they existed in 1906. *Below*: The same view in 1926. (Condit, *Port of New York*, 2:196)



demolition of all above-grade terminal facilities.<sup>41</sup> One, designed by I. M. Pei, was a slender circular tower with dramatic flares at top and bottom (fig. 5)—the developer, Webb & Knapp, promised five million square feet in “the largest privately owned office building in the world.”<sup>42</sup> The other, designed by Fellheimer & Wagner, was a blocky H-shaped tower set on a base of interconnected low-rises (fig. 6). Neither, however, could overcome popular resistance to the idea that the 1913 building needed to be sacrificed in order to satisfy demand for new office space in the vicinity. A group of 220 architects, for example, signed an open letter to *Architectural Forum* presenting, as Carl Condit would describe them, “excellent arguments as to why the plan was destructive barbarism.”<sup>43</sup> And ensuing plans were thereby led to attempt a compromise: increase rentable square footage by filling in Grand Central’s underutilized zoning envelope but maintain the head house intact in order to avoid the high political cost of demolition. The railroad could not ignore the idle economic potential of its air rights, but neither could it ignore public and professional desire to limit its appetite for redevelopment.

Accordingly, Richard Roth of Emery Roth & Sons proposed—in 1955 and again in 1958—an aluminum and glass tower to replace an existing six-story office annex over the passenger platforms just north of the terminal’s main concourse (fig. 7). The structure to be demolished was already nearly obscured from street-level views, and the new tower not only left the more visible portions of the complex untouched but was to be oriented north to south in order

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<sup>41</sup> See Condit, *Port of New York*, 2:240–242; Stern, Mellins, and Fishman, *New York 1960*, 1138–1139.

<sup>42</sup> Damon Stetson, “World’s Loftiest Tower May Rise On Site of Grand Central Terminal,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1954.

<sup>43</sup> Condit, *Port of New York*, 2:241; “Can the Grand Central Concourse Be Saved?,” *Architectural Forum* 101 (November 1954): 134–39.

to minimize its disruption of the Park Avenue vista.<sup>44</sup> The design, however, was radically reworked by Gropius and Pietro Belluschi in 1959 (fig. 8). Precast concrete panels replaced Roth's reflective curtain wall, and the tower, now a flattened octagon in plan, was rotated ninety degrees on its plinth, effecting a more thoroughgoing interruption of north–south views.<sup>45</sup> Named the Pan Am Building after its largest tenant in 1960, the Gropius-Belluschi tower opened in 1963 amid such strong opposition that, as Meredith Clausen has argued, it became a flashpoint for the public's "profound disillusionment with modernism's ideals." "The building," she wrote, "was despised from the moment the plans for the mute, massive, overscaled octagonal slab were announced. Despite the public outcry, despite the outrage from those in the profession, the huge office tower was built, a flagrant example of private interests riding roughshod over public concerns."<sup>46</sup>

The relationship of Breuer's Grand Central Tower to this history is ambiguous: it neither broke from nor conformed to the major themes of the terminal's development. Wilgus's original plans had called for twelve stories of office space in the terminal's main building,<sup>47</sup> an intention reflected in all of the surviving entries to the design competition that followed,<sup>48</sup> and indeed the original team of architects—two firms in partnership, Reed & Stem with Warren & Wetmore—

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<sup>44</sup> "New Plan Studied on Grand Central," *New York Times*, February 8, 1955; Glenn Fowler, "Grand Central 'City' Is Planned," *New York Times*, May 8, 1958; Stern, Mellins, and Fishman, *New York 1960*, 359.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas W. Ennis, "Octagonal Office Skyscraper To Rise Behind Grand Central," *New York Times*, February 18, 1959; Stern, Mellins, and Fishman, *New York 1960*, 359–360.

<sup>46</sup> Clausen, *Pan Am Building*, xv.

<sup>47</sup> Schlichting, *Grand Central's Engineer*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Four firms were invited to submit competition entries: McKim, Mead and White, D. H. Burnham and Company, Samuel Huckel Jr., and Reed & Stem. The Burnham entry did not survive. Deborah Nevins, "Grand Central: Architecture as a Celebration of Daily Life," in *Grand Central Terminal: City Within the City*, ed. Deborah Nevins (New York: Municipal Art Society of New York, 1982), 12–13.



Figure 5. I. M. Pei, The Hyperboloid, model, 1954–1956. (Avery/GSAPP Architectural Plans and Sections)

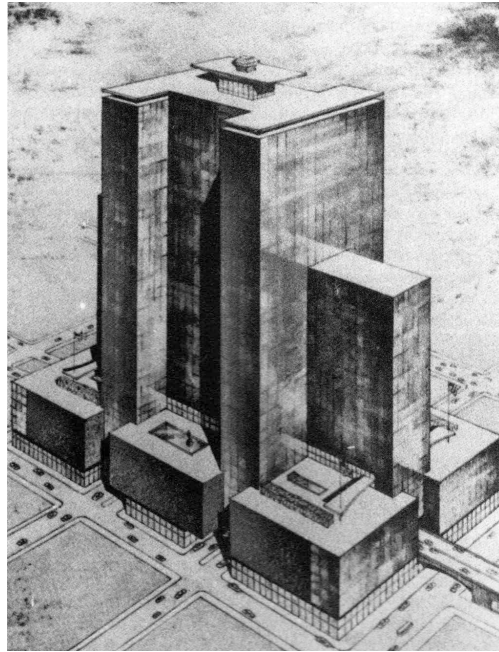


Figure 6. Fellheimer & Wagner, office tower proposal, perspective rendering, 1954. (Stern, Mellins, and Fishman, *New York 1960*, 1140)

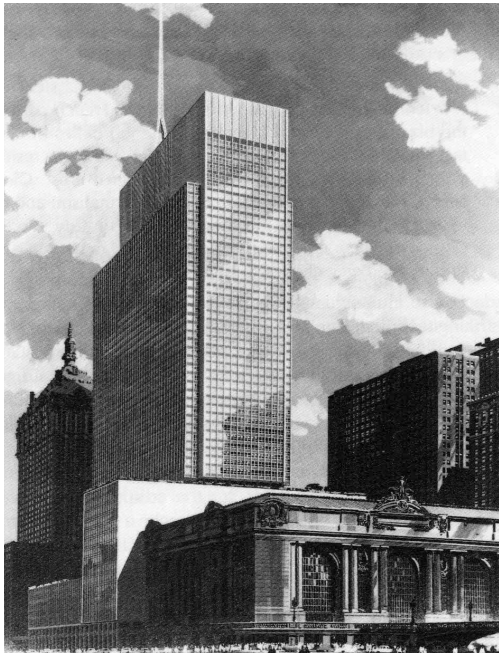


Figure 7. Emery Roth & Sons, Grand Central City, perspective rendering, 1958. (Stern, Mellins, and Fishman, *New York 1960*, 1141)



Figure 8. Walter Gropius, Pietro Belluschi, and Emery Roth & Sons, Pan Am Building, perspective rendering, 1958–1963. (Avery/GSAPP Architectural Plans and Sections)

designed and built Grand Central with the structural capacity to carry a tower overhead.<sup>49</sup> Air rights development, in other words, had always been regarded as a likelihood. Even before the terminal's construction was completed, there were speculative drawings published in the mass-market press depicting "the great office-building which is ultimately to be erected over the concourse" (fig. 9).<sup>50</sup> On one hand, Breuer figured his own tower to be legitimated by these erstwhile plans, often citing them as evidence for the correctness of his scheme.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, however, Breuer wanted to distance himself from (or even reverse) the drive to exploit the Central's midtown real estate holdings to the maximum of their profitability—a drive that had compelled so much of the terminal's postwar history and that had seemed to culminate in the Pan Am Building five years previously. He often stressed, for example, that he planned "to restore the main concourse to its 'original splendor,'" which would have involved removing decades of accumulated advertising: for example, the Merrill Lynch information booth from its center, the Westclox clock from over its south entryway, and—most prominently—the eighteen- by sixty-foot illuminated Kodak Colorama transparency from its east end windows (fig. 10).<sup>52</sup> He stressed also that the "honky-tonk" of private enterprises facing the Forty-Second Street sidewalk—coffee shops, drugstores, discount clothiers, shoe doctors, and so on—were to be removed and

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<sup>49</sup> Early in his investigations, Breuer learned that the terminal's interior columns were built to carry this extra weight. [Herbert Beckhard], "Grand Central Building" notes, 30 January 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>50</sup> Hugh Thompson, "The Greatest Railroad Terminal in the World," *Munsey's Magazine*, April 1911.

<sup>51</sup> For example, "The original designers back in 1903 were foresighted in this regard since their plans called for a multi-story building over the station." Scopton, press release draft. There was even some discussion of issuing renderings of this earlier air rights plan alongside renderings of Breuer's own addition in its press kit. Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 13 June 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>52</sup> "Press Conference Outline," 18 June 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>53</sup> Christopher Gray, "The End of the Line for Grand Central's Big Picture," *New York Times*, June 18, 1989.

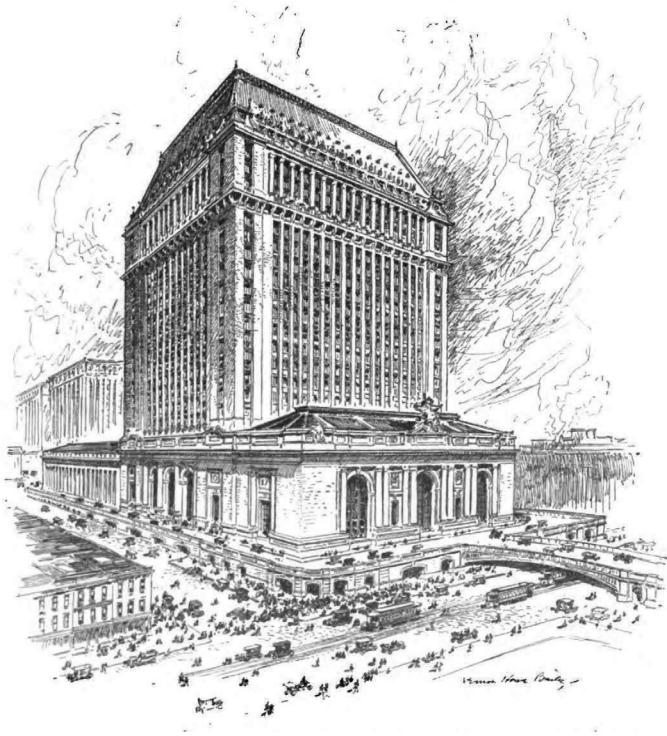


Figure 9. Grand Central Terminal, unbuilt office tower, 1911. (Thompson, “The Greatest Railroad Terminal in the World”)



Figure 10. Grand Central Terminal, concourse with advertisements for Kodak, Westclox, and Merrill Lynch, 1968. (AP Photo)

their parcels resubmitted to the city as an unrestricted public arcade (fig. 11).<sup>54</sup> In short, if Grand Central Tower was governed by the same economic imperative (maximize revenue) by which the terminal had always developed, it also expressed the conflicts associated with that imperative with a hitherto absent clarity. If, for example, the Pan Am Building failed to find a convincing or satisfactory balance between countervailing demands (between economics and popular opinion, private interests and public concerns), I see Grand Central less as repetition of that failure than as an exposure of the difficulty of the compromise. It highlighted the absence of either a conceptual or a practical register at which the demands could be made reconcilable.

When examined retrospectively through the lens of Breuer's proposal, I wonder if we can begin to imagine a different kind of history for the terminal. Ernst Bloch understood collage as a kind of critical dissent; in the hands of the surrealists, in particular, collage "mounted [the world's] fragments into grotesque caricatures" in order to transcribe the "the confusion of experienced reality with collapsed spheres and caesuras."<sup>55</sup> Did Grand Central Tower, if it was also a "grotesquerie,"<sup>56</sup> similarly caricaturize 1968 New York's own "caesuras"—that is, the rifts or antagonisms opened by a growth coalition operating for private rather than public benefit? Can the addition, read as collage, help expose the degree to which the terminal had been, throughout its development, a stage for these conflicts? Or to put the question otherwise, what can Grand Central Tower's fragmented appearance tell us about city life in the postwar period of capitalist modernity? What can it tell us, more specifically, that might be suppressed in an expression free of such explicit rivalries? This is a thread that I will pick up again in this study's

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<sup>54</sup> "Notes on the New 175 Park Avenue Building over Grand Central Station."

<sup>55</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 205.

<sup>56</sup> "[Breuer] has inevitably created a grotesquerie. The result is no less grotesque, however, than those midtown real estate values." Huxtable, "Grotesquerie Astride a Palace."



Figure 11. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower, sketch rendering of street front upgrades, 1968. (Breuer Papers SUL)

conclusion, which looks at the trajectory of development traced by Grand Central Terminal after the Supreme Court blocked Breuer's tower—and any other air rights schemes that may have followed—finally and definitively.



## CHAPTER 1

## THE TOWER AND ITS ARCHITECTS

*Impossible Task*

On September 21, 1967, the *New York Times* reported on an invitation, circulated among architects and developers, to submit proposals for a “skyscraper, possibly 45 stories tall, surmounting the waiting room of Grand Central.” And even though Samuel Hellenbrand, the New York Central’s vice president in charge of real estate, promised readers that “new construction would have to respect the landmark facade,” the paper predicted—following so soon after the Pan Am debacle—that the railroad’s plan was “certain to provoke extensive debate.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, the *Times* itself began chronicling objections almost immediately thereafter, publishing, for example, the following letter to the editor in its September 30 issue:

While reading of the latest desecration planned for Grand Central Terminal, I thought of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s impassioned plea when the *Constitution* was rotting at its dock, neglected and forgotten. “Better to set her threadbare sails and send her out to sea as an offering to the god of storms,” he said, “than die a victim of the harpies of the shore.”

Grand Central isn’t exactly rotting at its wharf. But the indignities it has been subjected to parallel the neglect and abuse that Old Ironsides suffered for many years. Now, with this latest proposal, it might be preferable if they were to set the old building’s “threadbare sails,” tear the whole thing down as an offering to the god of commerce and jam another tower in the hole. Better that than continue to make a mockery of its architecture....

Rather than have those noble arches and columns crunched beneath the visual weight of a 45-story tower or the soaring statuary negated by a pile of stone, I would prefer that the building be really destroyed. Then at least I could envision what had been there each time I passed instead of having its outraged walls and windows cry, “Shame!”<sup>2</sup>

In chapter two, I will discuss in greater detail protests like this one—written by Alvin Tresselt (a children’s book author and resident of West Redding, Connecticut)—but the letter’s polemic is relevant here for two reasons. First, it carried forward an antipathy to development

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn Fowler, “Grand Central May Get a Tower,” *New York Times*, September 21, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Tresselt, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, September 30, 1967.

that had been primed by earlier projects, but it also already added to older concerns a new point of inflection. In other words, Tresselt counted the new tower proposal among the “indignities” withstood during the New York Central’s increasingly “desperate efforts to squeeze revenue out of the terminal”—as it was put by an editorial running in the same edition.<sup>3</sup> But the plan implied for him an effrontery operating at an even higher and more dangerous register than the Pan Am Building, the Kodak billboard, the storefronts below the Forty-Second Street colonnade, and so on. It threatened a “desecration” so extraordinary that an outright demolition of the head house would have been, for him, a lesser violation. The editorial did not explicitly repeat Tresselt’s sardonic call to “tear the whole thing down,” but it did agree that to treat the old Beaux Arts building as the base of a new commercial skyscraper “would be ludicrous,” “a kind of architectural shotgun marriage.”<sup>4</sup> The proposal, in other words, seemed to be pushing the limits of rationality. If it reignited familiar concerns about the commercial exploitation of the city and its landmarks, it also seemed to demonstrate how, taken any further, this trend could threaten the very coherence of the urban environment.

Second, Tresselt’s letter and the objections it represented predate Marcel Breuer’s involvement by a significant margin.<sup>5</sup> Even before news of the railroad’s intentions began to circulate publicly, the executive committee of the city’s AIA chapter had agreed to stand in unanimous opposition. Philip Johnson called the idea “wrong in every possible way,” an “outrage.” And Richard Roth, the architect of record for the Pan Am Building, claimed that he “wouldn’t touch this one,” despite having been approached to assist on the bids being prepared

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<sup>3</sup> “A Tower Too Many,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Breuer’s firm was first contacted about the project in November 1967 by the property’s managing real estate agent. “While You Were Out” note, 9 November 1967, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

by “half a dozen” different builders.<sup>6</sup> No preliminary sketches or studies had been made available, and yet the proposal was already being pilloried and satirized in the press. *Progressive Architecture*, for example, published a collage prepared by its art director, Richard Lewis, in which the condemned Singer Building was pasted above Grand Central’s facade, a tongue-in-cheek solution satisfying the railroad’s need for rental income while saving the Singer—a 1908, single-spired landmark (though not an officially designated one), slated for demolition that year (fig. 12).<sup>7</sup> I am stressing this detail of the chronology in order to suggest that Grand Central Tower’s development was conditioned from its very outset by public and professional hostility. Breuer and Herbert Beckhard, his partner in charge of the project,<sup>8</sup> would labor always against what must have sounded to them like a near-consensus—voiced in the press and among their peers—that the railroad’s brief posed a design problem for which there could be no decorous solution. And indeed, Breuer accepted the commission not because he believed it possible to suitably harmonize a massive modern office tower with the 1913 facade, but because he believed that the Pan Am Building—which he called “a terrible potpourri of a building”<sup>9</sup>—already appeared to surmount Grand Central and so had already irreversibly marred the Park Avenue

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Glenn Fowler, “Grand Central Proposal Scored,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1967. Bidding developers included two of the city’s largest: Tishman Realty & Construction and Uris Buildings Corporation.

<sup>7</sup> “A Grand and Central Proposal,” *Progressive Architecture* 48 (November 1967): 56. On the Singer Building see Jan C. Rowan, “As Ye Sew, So Shall They Reap,” *Progressive Architecture* 48 (September 1967): 170–71.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Beckhard reflected in 1993 that for large institutional commissions his partnership with Breuer was “a close-to-equal situation,” and although Breuer was always “the number one man” the balance of power in the 1960s was “55/45 or some such ratio.” Herbert Beckhard in Masello, *Architecture Without Rules*, 147. When I refer to Breuer’s design or decisions in regard to Grand Central Tower, unless I am quoting him directly, it should be assumed that I am using his name to stand in for this collaboration.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Leticia Kent, “An Architect of the ‘Inevitable,’” *Village Voice*, July 25, 1968.

vista.<sup>10</sup> Breuer believed, in other words, that his own tower would be an improvement over Walter Gropius and Pietro Belluschi's, but he always recognized that *any* air rights addition—whatever its individual architectural merits—would inevitably look unseemly when juxtaposed against the head house. “As architecture,” the *Times* insisted, “Michelangelo couldn't pull it off.”<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, we can see the design pulled in a pair of contradictory directions. In one, its development team was driven to seek some favor with an audience that was vocally predisposed to antagonism. Indeed, the knowledge that any architecture, were it to move forward, would have to win municipal approval—if not broad public support—probably explains the notes of desperation that ring in Morris Saady's remarks to the press upon the announcement of Breuer as the project's architect: “Don't judge me yet. Wait and see what we propose. I want to put up the finest building in New York.”<sup>12</sup> Or the same desperation that rings in the New York Central's earlier response to the Tresselt letter and the *Times* editorial: “we cannot understand the narrow-minded attitude that convicts us before any plans are presented to the Landmarks Preservation Commission.”<sup>13</sup> Both seemed to be promising implicitly that careful planning and sensitive design could overcome objections to the tower's presence above Grand Central.

And in fact, much of the design work followed in pursuit of that promise. For example, substantial efforts were focused on reducing congestion and rationalizing the flow of pedestrian traffic through the area (fig. 13). Saady had insisted from the beginning that the proposal's circulation strategy needed to be “better than perfect.”<sup>14</sup> And the architects collaborated with the

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<sup>10</sup> If the Pan Am “weren't already there, he wouldn't have accepted the commission.” Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “A Tower Too Many.”

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Ada Louise Huxtable, “Slab City Marches On,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick W. Rovet, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, October 16, 1967.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 4 March 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.



Transit Authority, engineers at Grand Central, and independent consultants to develop a plan that could not only accommodate—in an already overcrowded transportation complex—a new tower’s population loads, but also improve the movement of passengers through existing terminal facilities. In short, in terms of navigation, they hoped to leave Grand Central better than they found it: new entrances, new escalators, widened and simplified passageways, direct connections to subways, off-street taxi loading, sheltered waiting areas, and so on.<sup>15</sup> Breuer understood that his addition would be exposed to criticism on the question of density—that there were serious concerns about the terminal district’s ability to support more office workers—and his team believed that the tower could be made more palatable were it to be packaged with upgrades in circulatory capacity and transportation amenities.

In the opposite direction, however, the team was simultaneously driven—if perhaps less explicitly so—toward the very danger that observers found most worrisome: the unlikelihood that any designer could decorously marry the terminal’s Beaux Art features with a modern commercial structure. If the apparently insuperable aesthetic difficulty of air rights addition led architects like Johnson and Roth to turn away from the project, it was precisely this challenge that drew Breuer’s interest. He would later confess, after being aggressively goaded by an interviewer for the *Village Voice*, that “it was the ‘surrealist possibilities’ of the architectural solution” that had convinced him to take on the commission.<sup>16</sup> “I knew there would be objections,” he said, “Because I wanted to weigh the pros and cons, I didn’t accept the job right away. After a week, I came to the conclusion—somewhat to my surprise—that the project offers an opportunity, though an *unconventional* one, for a great urban building.”<sup>17</sup> Given the

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<sup>15</sup> “Notes on the New 175 Park Avenue Building over Grand Central Station.”

<sup>16</sup> Kent, “An Architect of the ‘Inevitable.’”

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *ibid* (emphasis added).

protections afforded to the terminal by its landmark status, any air rights development large enough to supply Saady with an acceptable return on his investment would also, by necessity, violate certain aesthetic mores; it would require an addition incompatible in scale and awkward in position. The mathematics, so to speak, were straightforward. And it was probably a calculation as simple as this that compelled, for example, a former student to advise Breuer against such an “impossible task.”<sup>18</sup> Or, for that matter, that led to objections within his own firm. At least one of his partners, Hamilton Smith, counseled Breuer to turn down the \$2.5 million job offer. And, when he did not, at least one staff member assigned to the project threatened to resign from the office.<sup>19</sup>

But it was not as if Breuer performed the calculation differently or disagreed about the problem’s intractability. Rather, he intuited that the impossibility of finding a compromise between the conventions of taste and the demands of economics might work to the project’s advantage. For him, the necessity of impropriety opened up the possibility of an atypical architectural expression, particularly when the economics of office construction had been leaving his peers, over the previous two decades, with so little room to experiment. Roth’s firm, for example, had put up, since 1947, seventy office towers in Manhattan (twelve on Park Avenue), each so similar to the others that they had earned the epithet “Rothscrapers”—standardized glass and steel slabs produced with the predictable regularity of a factory.<sup>20</sup> Roth had written in his own defense, “we are sometimes criticized unfairly, because of the basis on which we are judged; ours is not a field of architecture in which we create or try to create masterpieces. The entire endeavor in our office is to create the best that can be produced within the restrictions that

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Gatje, *Marcel Breuer*, 231.

<sup>20</sup> “The Skyline Factory,” *Newsweek*, September 18, 1967; see also Dennis Duggan, “The ‘Belly’ School of Architecture,” *New York Herald Tribune*, December 15, 1963.

are placed upon us; and these restrictions are seldom those of our client, but rather of lending institutions; economics; and municipal authorities' laws."<sup>21</sup> At Grand Central Tower, however, Breuer would be given the opportunity simultaneously to satisfy the economics of office construction while delivering a design that the Park Avenue parade of Rothscrapers could not predict. This was what Breuer meant by the "surrealist possibilities" of the addition—it was capable of challenging business-as-usual expectations without seeming to violate any "restrictions placed upon" midtown architecture.

### ***A Properly Scaled Urban Building***

Saady already had office buildings in London, Birmingham, and Geneva (but none yet in the United States) on his résumé when he agreed to the terms of a seventy-five-year lease for the southern portion of Grand Central's air rights—including the existing waiting room, its wings, and the offices tucked into the roof above; but excluding the main concourse to the north, its ceiling vault painted with zodiac figures, and all of the building's exteriors.<sup>22</sup> He expected to squeeze into this valuable (because increasingly rare) wedge of midtown sky—into what Ada Louise Huxtable would later call the terminal's "solid gold air"<sup>23</sup>—1.8 million square feet of offices. Estimates put development cost at \$100 million (some put them as high as \$120 million), but financing would have posed no difficulty as the tower was expected to have full tenancy prior even to its completion. In fact, the Bank of England authorized Saady to sink into the project as many dollars as would be needed; it believed that a booming real estate market would

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Roth, "High-Rise down to Earth," *Progressive Architecture* 38 (June 1957): 196.

<sup>22</sup> Glenn Fowler, "Breuer to Design Terminal Tower," *New York Times*, February 24, 1968. Saady was to pay, at a minimum, \$3 million per year for fifty years and had an option to renew the lease for an additional twenty five years.

<sup>23</sup> Huxtable, "Grotesquerie Astride a Palace."



all but guarantee a profitable venture.<sup>24</sup> Given this, some speculated that hiring Breuer was a maneuver planned deliberately by Saady—himself a Londoner (though well acquainted with New York as a director of the Plaza)—to dispel in advance “any image he may have gotten as a newcomer bent on desecrating a cherished landmark to cash in on New York’s shortage of prime office space.”<sup>25</sup> Whether calculated or not, the architect’s appointment was timely.

One week before Saady made their agreement public, the AIA had announced that Breuer was to be awarded that year’s Gold Medal at its convention in June, the “highest honor accorded by the national professional society of architects.”<sup>26</sup> And so just as Breuer and his partners were starting to brace themselves against what *Architectural Forum* called “the predictable brickbats,”<sup>27</sup> they were also being inundated with adulatory letters and telegrams like the following “heartly congratulations” from Gropius: “I got the good news that you will receive the AIA Gold Medal this year, a most satisfactory event indeed. I criticized me as tactless for saying the other day that this country did not recognize you sufficiently, but I have truly have felt that strongly. Now I see it was entirely unnecessary, and I apologize.”<sup>28</sup> Whether or not it was “tactless” for his friend to say, Breuer, in fact, shared the opinion that these professional accolades were overdue. The following year, for example, he would cause some embarrassment among the Royal Society of Arts when he declined the distinction of Honorary Royal Designer for Industry. “This should have happened 30 to 40 years ago,” he told Ashley Havinden.<sup>29</sup> And it was true, at least, that Breuer no longer had much interest in practicing the type of design

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<sup>24</sup> Fowler, “Breuer to Design Terminal Tower.”

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*; see also George Nelson, “Don’t Fire Until You See the Tops of Their Roofs!,” *McCall’s*, November 1968.

<sup>26</sup> “Marcel Breuer to Receive Gold Medal,” press release, 11 February 1968, box 1, reel 5708, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>27</sup> “Big Plans: Grand Central City,” *Architectural Forum* 128 (April 1968): 35–36.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Gropius to Marcel Breuer, 20 February 1968, box 5, reel 5716, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>29</sup> Marcel Breuer to Ashley Havinden, 1 August 1969, box 6, reel 5716, Breuer Papers AAA.

work—furniture and interiors—that the Society hoped to honor.<sup>30</sup> Many New Yorkers certainly would have recognized Breuer’s bent tubular steel chairs—two well-known Bauhaus designs, renamed “Wassily” and “Cesca,” had been licensed and re-editioned in 1962, selling quickly and in quantity<sup>31</sup>—but likely many more would have recognized his name from the flattering press coverage of his recently-completed Whitney Museum of American Art (1963–66): “one of the best buildings to be built in New York in a long time,” wrote one reviewer.<sup>32</sup> Of course the Whitney had its own detractors, but as Huxtable argued, “the taste for its disconcertingly top-heavy, inverted pyramidal mass grows on one slowly,”<sup>33</sup> and by the time that Saady was looking to hire an architect for the Grand Central addition, the museum had won Breuer enough goodwill among the public to gamble some on another controversial project.

Although the air rights tower would have been his first skyscraper, by the beginning of the 1960s, an increasing number of similarly scaled commissions had turned Breuer’s attention away from the single-family houses that had been his most reliable source of income through the early postwar years.<sup>34</sup> It is telling, for example, that in June 1967—a few months prior to his initial investigations at Grand Central—time constraints forced him to pass on a bed-and-bath addition to his own first house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, built during his partnership with

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<sup>30</sup> “I want to keep my activities connected with furniture design to a very minimum.” Marcel Breuer to Rudolf Graber, 3 July 1969, box 6, reel 5716, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>31</sup> See Donatella Cacciola, “Established Modernism—The Furniture of Marcel Breuer in Production by Gavina and Knoll International,” in *Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture*, ed. Alexander von Vegesack and Mathias Remmele (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2003), 150–65.

<sup>32</sup> Charles W. Millard, “The Great Grey Whitney,” *The Hudson Review* 19, no. 4 (1966): 616–19; see also Wolf von Eckardt, “The New Whitney Museum Challenges Wisecrackers,” *The Washington Post*, September 25, 1966.

<sup>33</sup> Ada Louise Huxtable, “Harsh and Handsome: The New Whitney Is Superbly Suited For an Art That Thrives on Isolation,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> Breuer built only seven houses in the ten years prior to his retirement, and these were mostly for friends or “devoted clients.” Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect*, 161.

Gropius in 1939. “I am so over-burdened with work, all large projects,” Breuer explained to the builder, “I simply couldn’t do it.”<sup>35</sup> And indeed, his practice on Madison Avenue—employing close to forty draftsmen—would never be busier than it was that year. Designs were newly underway for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Headquarters in Washington, DC (1968–76) on a prominent site near the Capitol, a technically challenging job requiring that office floors be suspended from a system of roofline trusses; and for a monumentally scaled, folded concrete addition to the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River (1968–75), which was to house a new complement of turbine generators. A number of projects were ongoing, including buildings under construction for corporate and institutional clients in Florida, New England, and the Midwest. Among these, to name a few, were offices and laboratories for IBM in Boca Raton (1967–70), with Y-shaped wings lifted above a flood-prone site on sculptural concrete tree columns; an educational wing for the Cleveland Museum of Art (1967–70), surfaced in alternating bands of light and dark granite (a modern translation of the patterned marble at the Cathedral of Orvieto); and an office block for the Armstrong Rubber Company in West Haven, Connecticut (1965–69), cantilevered on trusses over a two-story base, strongly foreshadowing the structural diagram Breuer would soon propose for Grand Central Tower (fig. 14). Still more were at or nearing completion, including the St. Francis de Sales Church in Muskegon, Michigan (1961–67); Mary College at the Priory of the Annunciation in Bismarck, North Dakota (1965–68); St. John’s Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota (1953–68); and the Department of Housing and Urban Development Headquarters in DC (1963–68).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Marcel Breuer to Phillips Ketchum Jr., 26 June 1967, box 5, reel 5716, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>36</sup> Gatje, *Marcel Breuer*, 209–249; Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect*, 149–168; Tician Papachristou, *Marcel Breuer: New Buildings and Projects* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1970). A second office in Paris was equally busy during this period handling Breuer’s European commissions.



Figure 14. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Armstrong Rubber Company, West Haven, Connecticut, 1965–69. (Papachristou, *New Buildings and Projects*, 160)

Put briefly, complex and demanding jobs were moving rapidly through the practice, and in this work Breuer's staff was proving itself comfortable with and eager to shoulder the sorts of problems—technical, structural, programmatic, aesthetic, and so on—that would have accompanied air rights construction over Grand Central Terminal. Of course, in the coming decades, particularly after Breuer's death in 1981, critics would often look back on these commissions unfavorably—most often in comparison with his domestic architecture. Paul Goldberger, for example, wrote in an obituary for the architect, “his buildings were best when they were small and could naturally be more objectlike.”<sup>37</sup> This was a sentiment that would be repeated frequently—a conviction that Breuer's design talents did not scale well or that his work lost legibility at higher registers of complexity. Indeed, Vincent Scully had already delivered a version of this critique in 1964, “his small-scale graphic sensibility made it impossible for him to build a monumental building—a properly scaled urban building.” Scully argued, in other words, that the “insectile tension” holding together the disparate elements of Breuer's houses was absent from his larger undertakings.<sup>38</sup> And for Goldberger, Breuer had “seemed to replace the grace of his earlier work with something more arbitrary.”<sup>39</sup> I will return later to this supposed regression toward incoherence or toward the arbitrary—I agree that in his larger commissions there was less effort to join “disparate parts” within a larger “wholeness,”<sup>40</sup> but I do not agree that this is a fatal flaw in the work. I will argue, rather, that it is precisely through its arbitrariness that Grand Central Tower exposed what a more “graceful” solution—were one possible—would have disguised. But for now, I want to suggest that the proposal shopped by the New York Central in

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Goldberger, “Rich Legacy of Innovative Furniture,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1981.

<sup>38</sup> Vincent Scully, “Doldrums in the Suburbs,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24, no. 1 (1965): 40.

<sup>39</sup> Goldberger, “Rich Legacy of Innovative Furniture.”

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

1967—with the restrictions imposed by the terminal’s landmark status, the circulatory density in and around the complex, the high political and economic stakes—already precluded the possibility of an “objectlike” or “properly scaled” architectural solution.

### *A Satisfying Architectural Play*

It was not at “grace” that the architects aimed. Rather, the development team’s *principal* targets—at least in determining Grand Central Tower’s overall dimensions and bulk, and in orienting its mass above the terminal’s waiting room—were a maximum of rentable square footage and a minimum of exposure to public authority. From the earliest discussions between the architects, the developer, the railroad, and the property managers in late January 1967 to the drafting of preliminary plans the following May, most of the architectural work was devoted to finding a practicable equilibrium between these competing requirements. For example, Wylie Tuttle, the project’s real estate consultant, advised Breuer: “The higher the building, the better ... going higher than 45 stories will be the point where I think the building will provoke strong criticism ... [and] since all solutions envisage surpassing the height of the Pan Am building, my opinion is that we should ‘go-all-out’ and try for the highest building possible.”<sup>41</sup> He suggested that the architects should aim to produce a floor area ratio (FAR) “of 18 times the site,”<sup>42</sup> and that the “economics of the operation” meant that they would “need 60 floors to make it work”—even if this would require “prod[ing] lawyers to get exceptions.”<sup>43</sup> It was decided, however, to

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<sup>41</sup> Wylie F. L. Tuttle, memorandum, 6 March 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>42</sup> Beckhard, memorandum, 4 March 1968. “Floor area ratio” refers to the ratio of a building’s gross floor area to the area of the plot on which it is built. Grand Central’s lot is 146,577.33 sq. ft. Thus a FAR of fifteen would set the gross allowable area of all buildings on that lot at 2,198,660 sq. ft. Adding an arcade bonus of 49,350 sq. ft. feet sets the gross allowable area at 2,248,010 sq. ft. “Floor Area Ratio (F.A.R.) Calculations,” 3 June 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>43</sup> Don[ald] Cromley, memorandum [on meeting at Marcel Breuer and Associates], 10 April 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

scale back from these ambitions in order not to need precisely such “exceptions” from the city. And while the plans drafted on May 13, depicted in figure 15, hit nearly all of Tuttle’s benchmarks “from the renting and operating standpoint” (for ideal module width, bay size, distance from the structural core to the window line, and so on),<sup>44</sup> elevations show a building whose massing was carefully calculated to avoid triggering municipal review (fig. 16). At fifty-five stories, its chargeable zoning bulk matched the FAR limit to the foot—fifteen times the roughly 150,000 square feet of the terminal’s plot—placing it beyond the authority of the Board of Standards and Appeals.<sup>45</sup> And at the tower’s widest it grazed but did not cross the Vanderbilt Avenue setback threshold, placing it beyond the authority of the City Planning Commission.<sup>46</sup> At the southwest and southeast corners, where the 1913 building recedes from the elevated Park Avenue, the addition was to slightly overhang an easement held by the city, requiring approval from the Board of Estimates, but the team was convinced that this would be “one of the relatively easy matters which might arise on the project.”<sup>47</sup>

Compared, however, with the architects’ care and exactitude in working out Grand Central Tower’s density, dimensions, and orientation, particularly regarding the legal and economic consequences of these details, the building’s facade treatment seems almost to have been an afterthought. The elevations included with the May 13 drawings (a presentation set that would have accompanied Breuer in meetings with his client and with city authorities) are schematic in the extreme. The south elevation, for example, depicts the tower only with a flat

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<sup>44</sup> Tuttle, memorandum. Tuttle requested 4’ 8” modules, 4–6 modules per bay, and 30–40’ from the core to the windows. As designed, the project called for 4’ 7” and 4’ 8” modules, 4–7 modules per bay, and 32’ 1” from the core to the windows of its broadest (north and south) elevations.

<sup>45</sup> “Floor Area Ratio (F.A.R.) Calculations.”

<sup>46</sup> Donald Cromley, memorandum [on meeting at Don Morrison’s office], 10 April 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>47</sup> Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 23 April 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

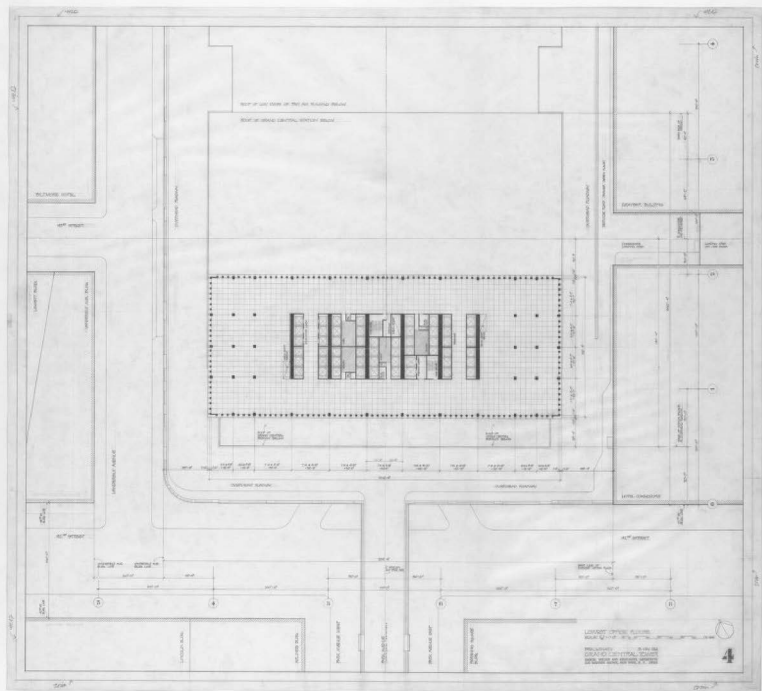


Figure 15. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower, lowest office floors plan, 1968. (Breuer Papers SUL)

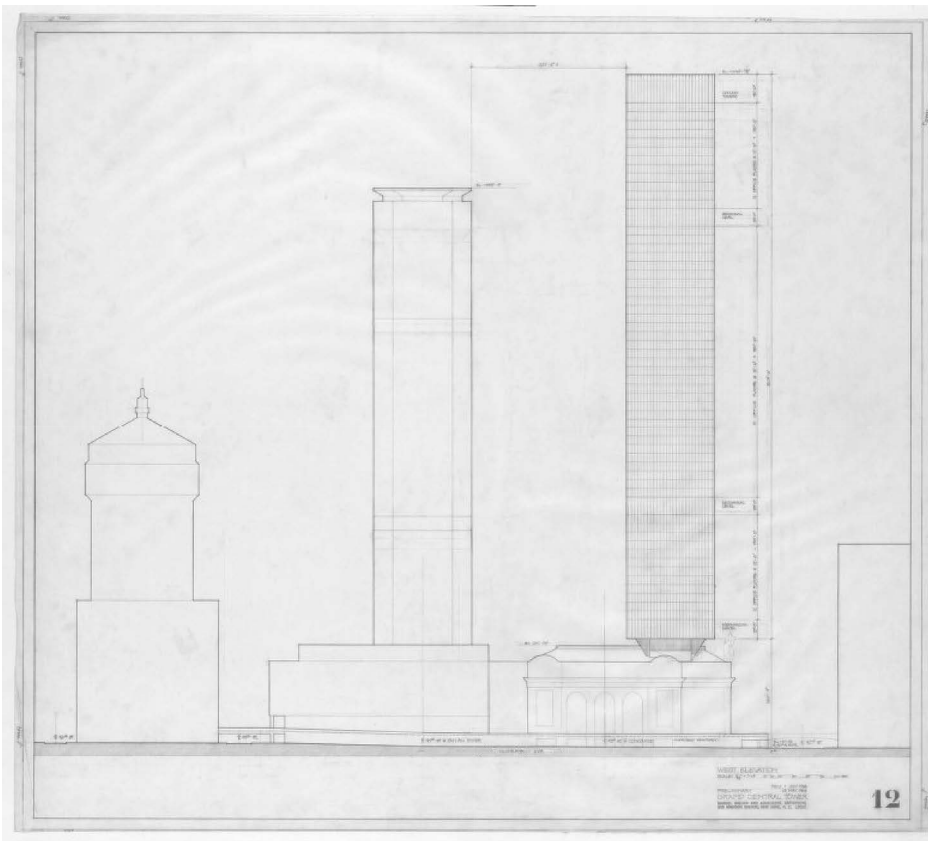


Figure 16. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower, west elevation with the Pan Am Building (center), 1968. (Breuer Papers SUL)



grid of evenly-spaced and evenly-weighted lines (fig. 17), revealing nothing of the facade's construction or detailing—revealing nothing to confirm Breuer's promise that the tower would be “considerably more dimensional in effect than is seen in other New York buildings.”<sup>48</sup> Only on the set's last page—illustrating the intersection of the two architectures, where the addition's structural brackets disappear at sharp angles behind the roof of the existing building—do the drawings hint, with narrow rectangles nested in a regulating grid, at a modular surface of molded panels (fig. 18). And even here the drawings do not communicate any of the animation that Breuer hoped would be given to his tower—its windows recessed two and a half feet, “protected from the direct sunlight and, at the same time, [presenting] a strongly modulated surface of light and shadow.”<sup>49</sup> Elevations for Breuer's second terminal proposal (the one premised on the demolition of the head house) do show a little more shading and thus a little more “dimensional effects” than the earlier version. But for a clearer sense of what Breuer had in mind for Grand Central Tower's outward expression, we can look at the drawings that were under simultaneous development for the Cleveland Trust Headquarters (1967–71), an office tower addition to a neoclassical bank rotunda designed by George B. Post in 1905.<sup>50</sup> Panel studies dramatize the chiaroscuro that Breuer expected also at the terminal project with a similar matrix of cast-stone window units (fig. 19). And renderings emphasize how the depth of the bank tower walls echoes the depth of the pediments and colonnades of the Post building (fig. 20)—echoes better, at least, than would a shallow glass curtain wall of the Rothscrapers variety (the “other New York buildings” to which Breuer had referred). My point, however, is not that the Grand Central

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<sup>48</sup> “175 Park Avenue,” notes, 7 June 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Breuer himself referred to renderings of the Cleveland Trust building in meetings with Planning Commission members in order to help illustrate details of the Grand Central Tower design in lieu of finalized drawings. Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 1 April 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

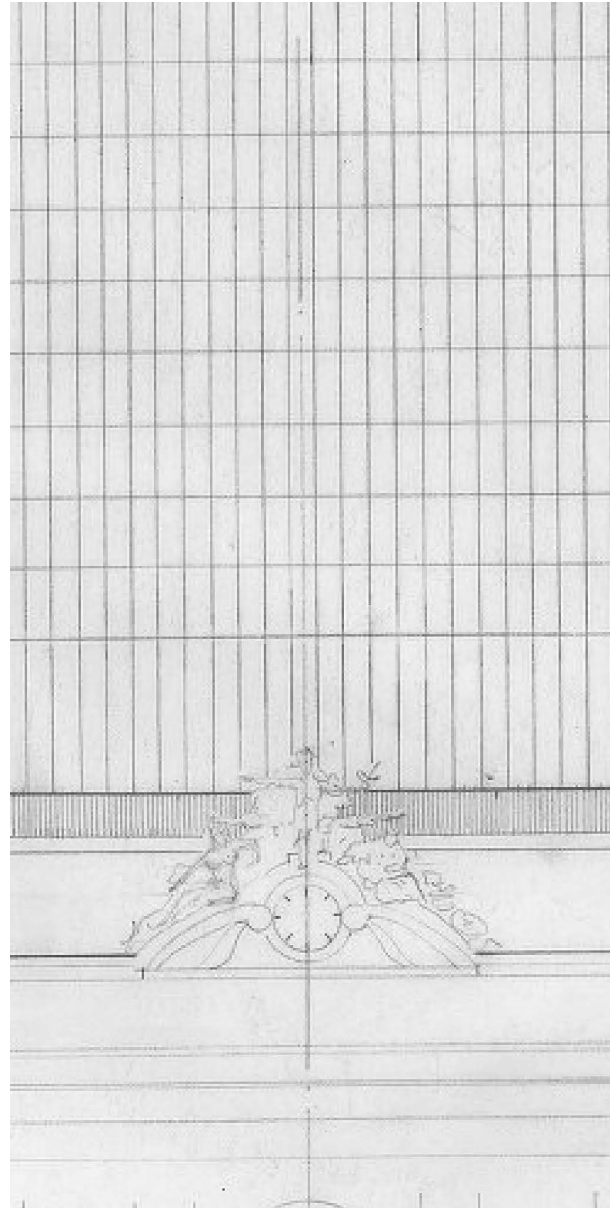
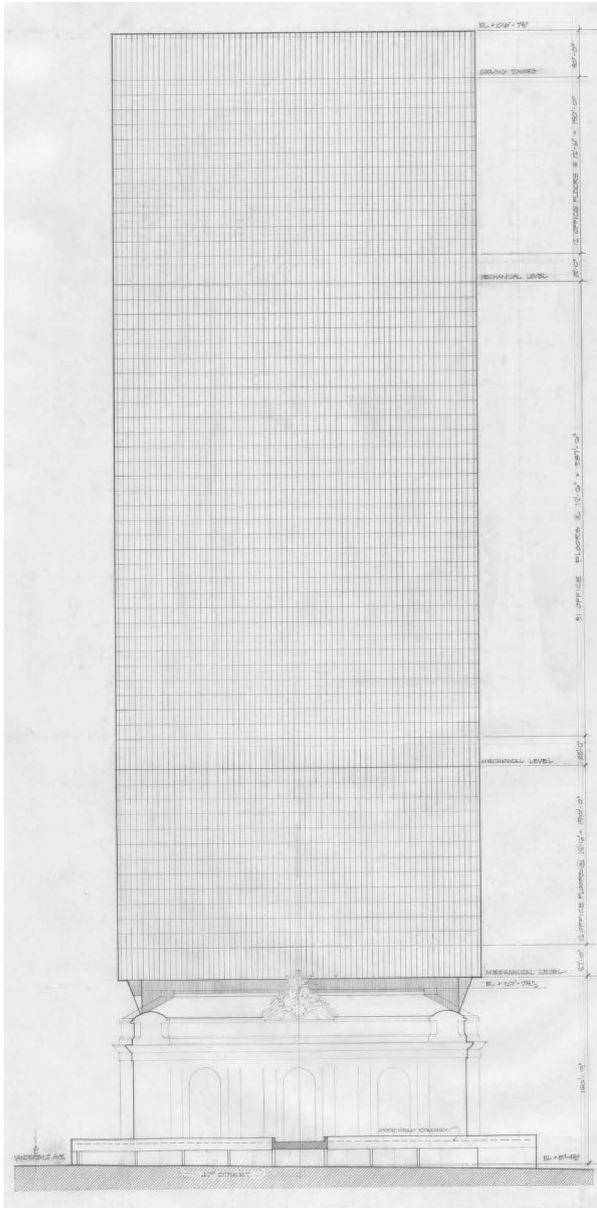


Figure 17. *Left*: Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower, south elevation, 1968. *Right*: Detail of facade treatment. (Breuer Papers SUL)

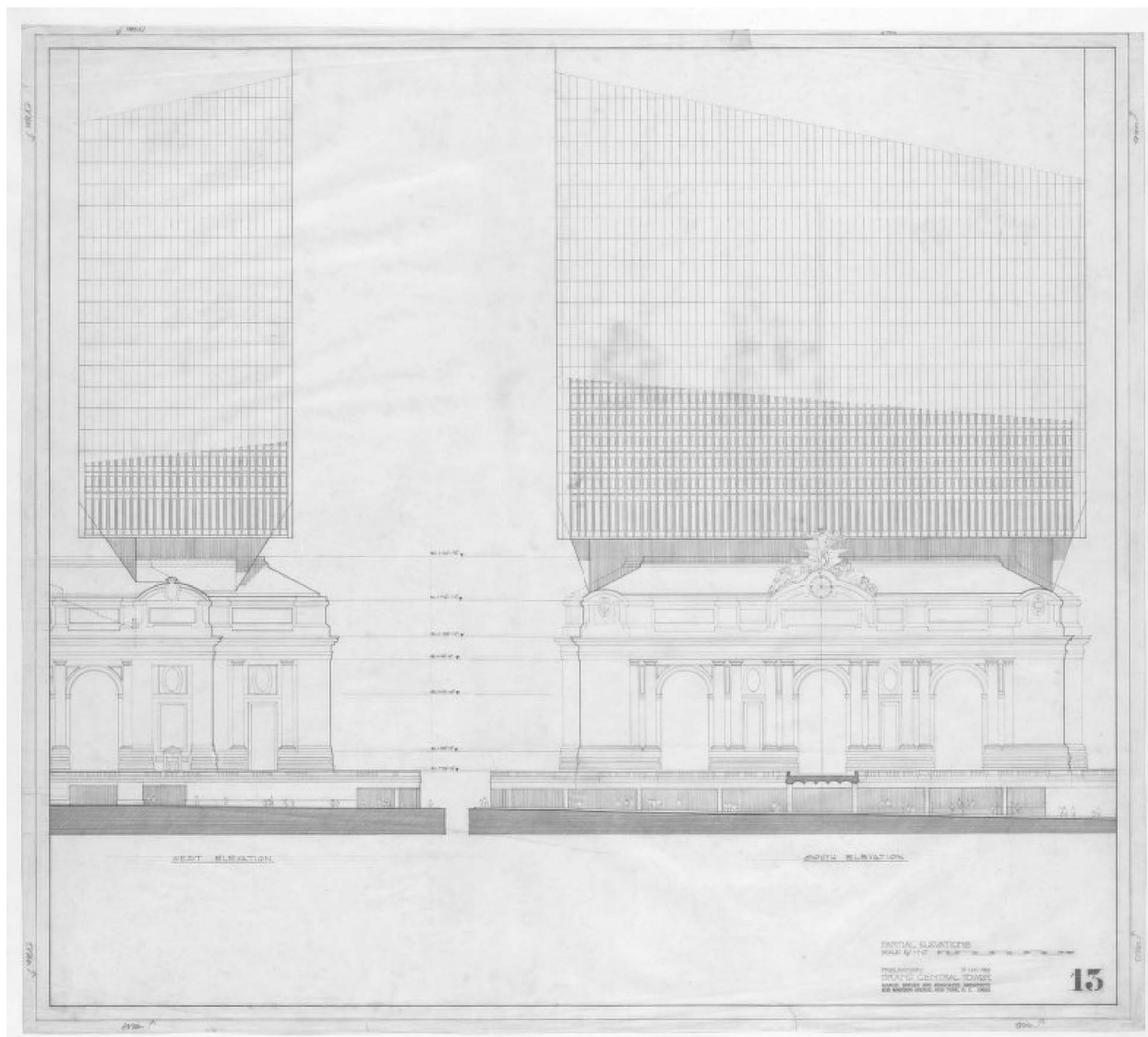
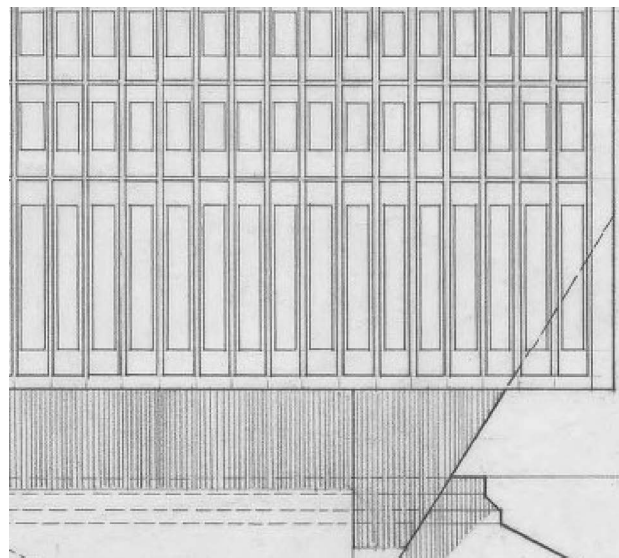


Figure 18. *Above*: Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower, partial elevations, 1968. *Right*: Detail of facade treatment. (Breuer Papers SUL)



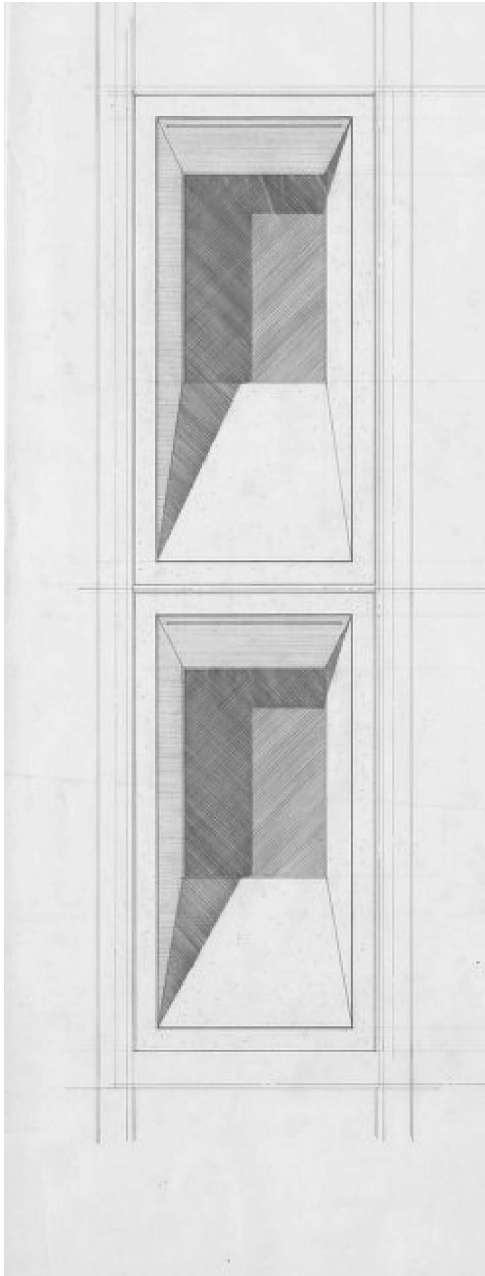


Figure 19. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Cleveland Trust Company Headquarters, Cleveland, Ohio, precast concrete panel study, 1967–1971. (Breuer Papers SUL)



Figure 20. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Cleveland Trust Company Headquarters, Cleveland, Ohio, perspective rendering, 1967–1971. (Breuer Papers SUL)

Tower drawings ought to have better illustrated the shadowed and molded stone of the addition in order to better suggest a harmonization with the shadowed and sculpted stone of the head house. To the contrary, I take the lack elaboration as evidence that harmonization was not a priority for the architects.

In other words, I think that the very sketchiness of the facade drawings—their ambiguity in communicating the nature of the aesthetic relationship between tower and terminal—indexes the unlikelihood that a traditionally appropriate design solution was possible. With the Cleveland project, sited more conventionally—behind rather than above the rotunda—the architects could more reasonably hope to mitigate some of the shock of adjacency. Its renderings accentuate not only the “dimensional effects” shared between Post’s and Breuer’s otherwise incompatible architectural vocabularies but accentuate also the inclusion of black granite bands spaced at regular intervals, subdividing the tower’s gridded elevations into blocks closer in scale to that of the smaller building. While Breuer maintained that, “architecturally speaking,” floating a new building above the head house would be “not much different than their being side by side,”<sup>51</sup> the absence of comparable attempts at reconciliation in the terminal addition drawings implies otherwise. No banding was to subdivide Grand Central Tower’s facade grid. Even its mechanical floors were downplayed—with external treatments nearly matching its office floors—stressing the addition’s own slab-like uniformity and thereby stressing also the disproportion between it and its neighbor below. In fact, Breuer cited this uniformity as a point of contrast with (and as an improvement over) the Pan Am Building to the north.<sup>52</sup> Press materials for the proposal included back to back images of the view up Park Avenue toward Grand Central’s south facade. One was a photograph of the Gropius-Belluschi tower positioned behind the 1913 head house (fig. 21). Its

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<sup>51</sup> “Notes on the New 175 Park Avenue Building over Grand Central Station.”

<sup>52</sup> “175 Park Avenue,” notes.

octagonal plan splits the broad facade into three separate surfaces. And mechanical floors, where the curtain wall is pulled behind exterior columns, are gashes that attack the hulking consistency of its mass. Even though contemporary critics often saw the Pan Am as a “fat, wide slab . . . balloon[ing] like a cloud” over the terminal,<sup>53</sup> its architects had looked for ways to “offset the bulk of the massive structure gracefully”—as the *Times* reported.<sup>54</sup> The other image was a rendering meant to illustrate how Grand Central Tower could improve the vista by obscuring this “fat, wide slab” from southern sightlines (fig. 22). But Breuer would have made none of Gropius and Belluschi’s concessions to compatibility. His tower would not have attempted to hide or reconcile the size disparity between itself and the terminal. Breuer understood that the call to build above rather than next to Grand Central had already foreclosed the possibility of compromise.

I am arguing that while the development team pulled back from some of the project’s potential for controversy, it also leaned into an alarming aesthetic disjunctiveness: on one hand, offering compensatory amenities, improving pedestrian circulation, paying fastidious attention to zoning requirements, and so on; but on the other hand submitting to the public an image that stubbornly refused to cohere, that consummated premonitions of an “architectural shotgun marriage” with transgressive pleasure. Breuer was careful to keep his firm’s drawings confidential, mindful perhaps that they would do nothing to quiet popular anxiety about the endeavor.<sup>55</sup> But he also took pride in the proposal’s alarming appearance. He saw its strangeness

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<sup>53</sup> Vincent Scully, “The Death of the Street,” *Perspecta* 8 (1963): 95.

<sup>54</sup> Ennis, “Octagonal Office Skyscraper To Rise Behind Grand Central.”

<sup>55</sup> In fact, Breuer instructed Beckhard to make only “absolutely necessary dwgs for application of permit”—Breuer’s handwritten response when Beckhard inquired about how the “final drawings” would differ from the May 13 presentation set. Herbert Beckhard, memorandum, 29 April 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.





Figure 21. Walter Gropius, Pietro Belluschi, and Emery Roth & Sons, Pan Am Building, 1963.  
(Stern, Mellins, and Fishman, *New York 1960*, 367)



Figure 22. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Grand Central Tower, perspective rendering, 1968.  
(Breuer Papers AAA)

as a virtue: “To place the well defined 1968 architecture of the new building above the 1912 architecture of the Station is, perhaps, unusual but ... there is a satisfying architectural play in the juxtaposition of the two independent and still physically connected expressions.”<sup>56</sup> But more precisely, for Breuer, the play was “satisfying” *because* it was “unusual”—because it was so difficult to reconcile to the mainstream of architectural culture in 1968 New York.

### ***Midcentury Copycat***

Ironically, even Breuer’s own convictions about city-making were unable to account for Grand Central Tower. His urban ideal was in strict accord with the kind of planning orthodoxy—indebted to principles defined by Le Corbusier and the Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne (CIAM) in the 1920s and 1930s—that activists like Jane Jacobs had been petitioning against since the early 1960s.<sup>57</sup> His preference, to which he was to hold fast even at the end of his career, was for a rational arrangement of superblocks (what he called “big units”), continuous islands of roughly 500 acres served by large transportation arteries but free of through-traffic penetration. Each would comprise a configuration of tall buildings whose functions would be carefully calibrated to the daily needs of local residents: “shopping areas, schools, small manufacturing and office areas, administrative and cultural areas, facilities for various health and social services,” and so on. “Each big unit,” he wrote, “should be designed like a huge hotel or a

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<sup>56</sup> “Notes on the New 175 Park Avenue Building over Grand Central Station.”

<sup>57</sup> See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961). Breuer outlined his thoughts on the role of architecture in urban planning in a short 1955 essay, and they remained largely unchanged when he elaborated these ideas for a 1973 interviewer. Marcel Breuer, *Sun and Shadow: The Philosophy of an Architect*, ed. Peter Blake (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1955), 54–57; Marcel Breuer, interview, *Schokbeton* [promotional literature for Schokbeton Products Corp.], October 1973, box 16, folder 4A, Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries (hereafter cited as Breuer Papers, SUL).



huge ocean liner: self sufficient in every major way.”<sup>58</sup> And with the segregation of long-distance (automobile) and local (pedestrian) traffic, much of the superblock interior would be given over to uninterrupted parkland. In other words, like many of his predecessors, Breuer advocated for a “towers in a park” model of urbanism that, in the 1960s, was being discredited by new planning philosophies. Here, however, I want to raise just three objections to Breuer’s *explicit* approach to city-making—relevant insofar as they can nuance our reading of what was *implicit* in his Grand Central Tower.

First, to rationalize the city in the manner that he described required a *tabula rasa* on which to build new settlements. Superblocks, Breuer insisted, “must be built in one stroke, and they must be replaced in one stroke.”<sup>59</sup> No accommodations were to be made for the contingencies of an existing fabric. This was, of course, the same reasoning used in the postwar period to justify the demolition of wide swaths of the historic city in advance of federally-funded urban renewal efforts. Second, reliance on the technocratic authority of experts implied a top-down perspective on design that short-circuited public involvement. The planning of “big units” was to depend, he imagined, “more and more on a systematic and rational approach”—that is, not on any democratic deliberations undertaken by residents themselves but on, for example, “cooperation between the architect’s office and the construction industry.”<sup>60</sup> “Local politics,” he argued, “can have no part in this matter of urban survival—our cities outlast the politics of the day. They must be built according to technical knowledge.”<sup>61</sup> And third, a function of the previous objections, a city conceived according to this uniform set of principles—planned, designed, and constructed in a single take by a single author (or team of authors)—was in danger

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<sup>58</sup> Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 56.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Breuer, *Schokbeton* interview, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 57.

of succumbing to aesthetic monotony, what Jacobs called the planned community's tendency for "dullness and regimentation, sealed against any buoyancy or vitality."<sup>62</sup> While Breuer's work was not the specific target of her words, it is not hard to imagine how Jacobs would have received, for example, the identical rows of interconnected apartment blocks in his 1943 redevelopment proposal for Stuyvesant Town (fig. 23).

Versions of each of these objections, however, *have* been made against the Grand Central Tower project. In other words, for many critics and historians, Breuer's proposal for the terminal seemed to be the product of injurious, dictatorial, and tedious ideas about urban architecture—ideas whose CIAM provenance supplied it with dubious and waning authority. Some, for example, have argued that the tower proposal exhibited a destructive disregard for its site and its context—"Breuer's design didn't even attempt what would now be called a 'dialogue' with the much-loved building at 42nd Street and Park Avenue."<sup>63</sup> Some have argued that it arrogantly ignored the public's will—"The only reason for condoning a piece of commerce such as this is ... that the profession is embarrassingly out of touch with the mood of the cities."<sup>64</sup> And some have argued that the design conformed drearily to the standards of boxy corporate-modernism—"The architecture is in a style which might be called Midcentury Copycat, so nearly indistinguishable are its designs."<sup>65</sup> These criticisms are fair, as far as they go, but I want to pursue here a different reading of the proposal, one that sees how it might actually undercut—on each of these points—the tendencies of mainstream postwar urban architecture and Breuer's own firmly held convictions on design and the city.

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<sup>62</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Michele Herman, "Yet Another Breuer Controversy," *Metropolis*, May 1988.

<sup>64</sup> Walter McQuade, "A Dissenting Opinion of Grand Central," *Architectural Forum* 129 (July 1968): 112.

<sup>65</sup> Russell Lynes, "After Hours: Stacked-Up," *Harper's Magazine*, October 1, 1968.

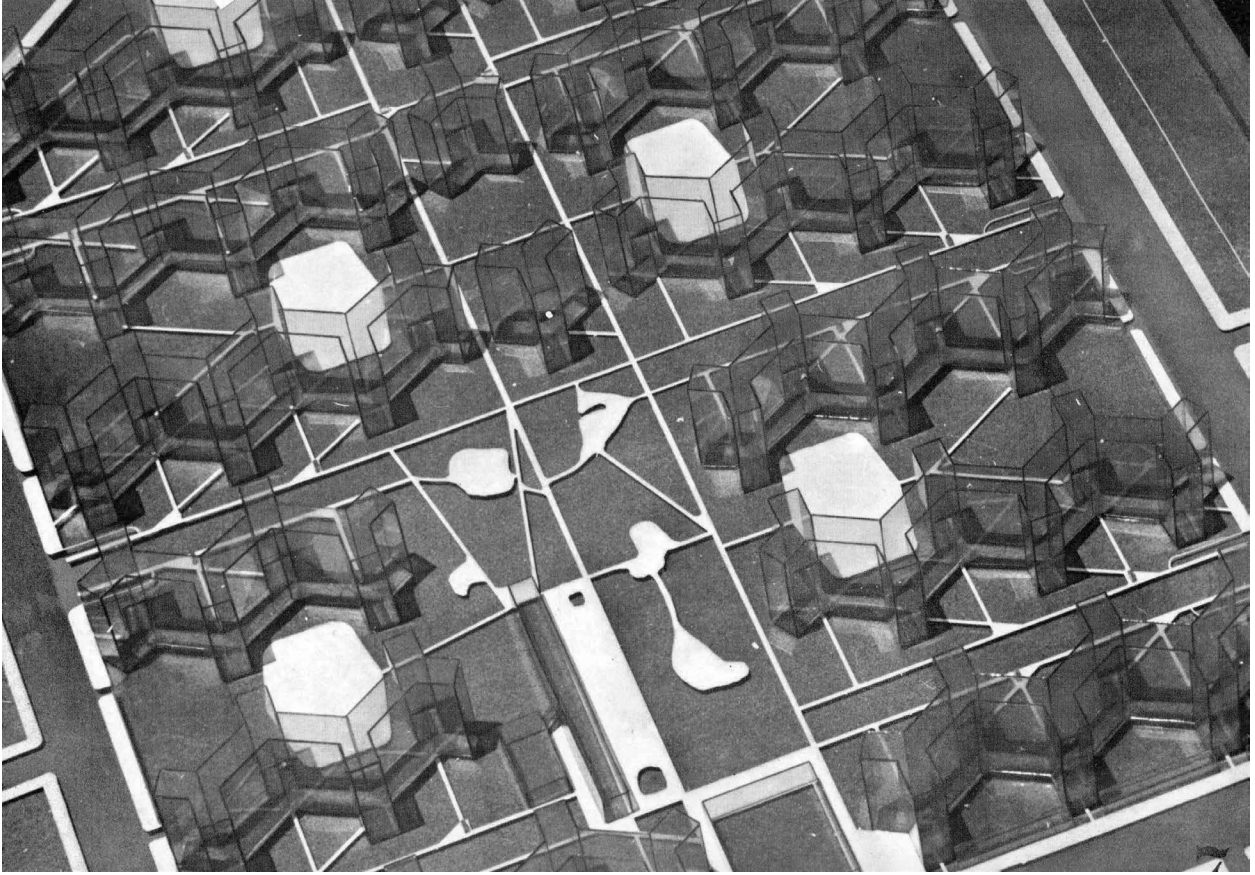


Figure 23. Marcel Breuer, Project for  
Sunnyside Town, New York, model, 1943.  
(Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 52)

After all, the tower may have been, in some sense, indifferent to its site, but it was not meant to spring from a tabula rasa. Breuer had long been arguing, “just as we can not build a house one room at a time, so the city-unit can no longer be built in a piecemeal fashion.”<sup>66</sup> But with Grand Central Tower, he seemed to model the possibility of doing precisely that—of building a “piecemeal” city, an accumulation of surprising and opportunistic interventions. To borrow a distinction made by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Breuer’s arguments may sound strategic, but the tower looks almost tactical.<sup>67</sup> Perched rudely above the terminal, it seems to look for an interstice where neither the planning authorities nor the conventions of taste and propriety could reach it. (Of course, Breuer underestimated the extent of that reach—the interstice was, after all, under their authority.) Similarly, even while Breuer was arguing that “politics are wise to promote Architecture without dictating its ‘how,’”<sup>68</sup> these supposedly irrelevant “local politics” were proving to be a principal determinant for the “how” of Grand Central Tower’s design. In a 1967 television interview with Senator Eugene McCarthy, Breuer repeated his conviction that architecture ought to develop exclusively from the expertise of professionals, that it ought to “achieve its quality independently and serve its own conscience, that is: the best possible technical, esthetic and useful solution for its task.”<sup>69</sup> But as much as Grand Central Tower’s qualities may have developed from an independent disciplinary “conscience” or technocratic expertise wielded by Marcel Breuer and Associates, they developed

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<sup>66</sup> Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> “A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it ... I call a ‘tactic,’ on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ ... A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety.” Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix.

<sup>68</sup> Marcel Breuer, “Politics and Architecture,” typescript of speech, December 1967, box 7, reel 5718, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

also from the civic externalities with which the firm was compelled to negotiate: the popular will to preserve Grand Central as it ran up against the economic imperative of developing the property to the maximum of its legal profitability. The major drama of the proposal—the “ludicrous” incongruity between tower and terminal—expresses nothing so much as this political confrontation.

And thus, finally, Grand Central Tower could be said to match the dry regularity of neighboring Park Avenue skyscrapers only, so to speak, from the waist up. The Regional Plan Association was issuing warnings, repeated by many others in the late 1960s, that midtown was “gradually losing its distinctiveness and giving way to ‘slab city’—interminable rows of identical [skyscrapers] lined up along identical blocks, all thirty to fifty stories high.”<sup>70</sup> And certainly the scaleless, uninflected elevations of the addition could be counted among this collection of “anonymous, cool surfaces ... more expressive of the new machines than of the humans who control them.”<sup>71</sup> The proposal was, indeed, implicated in this seemingly “inexorable march” of nearly-featureless, nearly-identical rectangular prisms (fig. 24),<sup>72</sup> but its collision of incompatible idioms—Bauhaus and Beaux Arts—must set Grand Central Tower radically apart from the “slab city” trend. Insofar as Breuer actually courted such incompatibility, he came close (perhaps his proposal’s greatest surprise) to heeding Robert Venturi’s 1966 call for “both-and” rather than “either-or” designs. Against “the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture”—with which the formal and programmatic homogeneity of “slab city” was being written—Venturi encouraged “elements which are hybrid rather than ‘pure,’ compromising rather than ‘clean,’ distorted rather than ‘straightforward,’ ambiguous rather than ‘articulated,’

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<sup>70</sup> Regional Plan Association, *Urban Design: Manhattan* (New York: Viking, 1969), 9, <http://www.rpa.org/regional-plans#second-plan>.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Huxtable, “Slab City Marches On.”

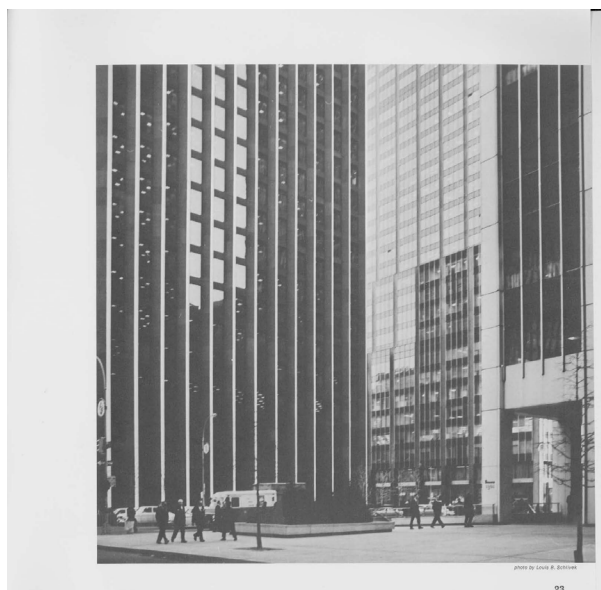
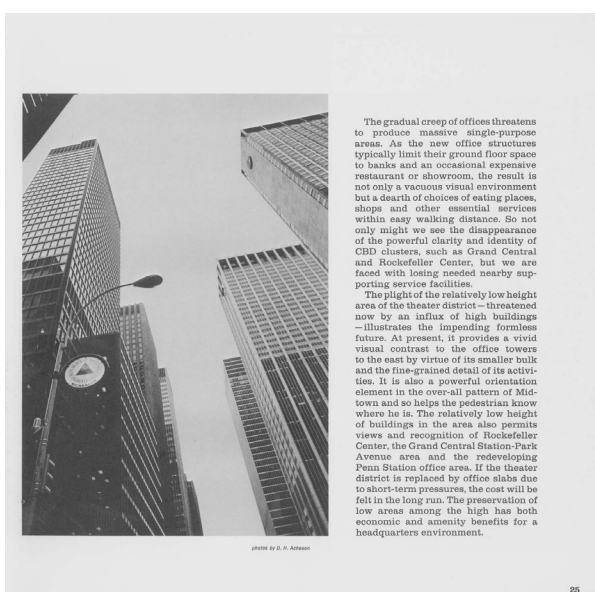


Figure 24. Pages from the Regional Plan Association's *Urban Design* guidelines, 1969. (Regional Plan Association, *Urban Design: Manhattan*, 23–25)



perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as ‘interesting,’ conventional rather than ‘designed,’ accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear.”<sup>73</sup> If we can imagine Grand Central Tower as another dull, economical installment of “slab city,” perhaps we can just as easily imagine—through its own hybridity, ambiguity, vestigiality, inconsistency, equivocation and so on—how it threatened to undermine precisely that uniform “architectural sterility” toward which Manhattan had been advancing.<sup>74</sup>

### ***More Bravura and Less Breuer***

In other words, if Breuer himself often spoke in the “puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture” was Grand Central Tower something like a slip of the tongue? Was it—in psychoanalytic terminology—a parapraxis, a return of what had been repressed in a functionalist, technocratic call to order? This was the paradox of the proposal: unabashedly pursuing a stereotypically modernist itinerary of efficiency and rationality—particularly as adapted to the requirements of postwar corporate capitalism—but manifesting this governing logic in a way that becomes self-subversive.

Immediately after its public presentation in June 1968, Huxtable posed in the *Times* a set of revealing questions: “Is Breuer’s stylistic trademark of cast stone, which he handles with sensitivity and skill, the most appropriate answer here, if there is any appropriate answer at all? Would more bravura and less Breuer be better? If you are dealing with esthetic effrontery, why not go all the way with the contrast of a sheer glass, sky-reflecting tower for maximum

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 16.

<sup>74</sup> Regional Plan Association, *Urban Design: Manhattan*, 22.

theatrics?”<sup>75</sup> To venture an answer: had Breuer surfaced his tower in glass and steel, its dissimilarity to the terminal may indeed have been pushed further—made even more dramatic—but the architecture would also have been less arbitrary. Even in asking for a contrast that “goes all the way,” Huxtable still asked, in effect, for some kind reconciliation—for the “grace” of some ordering logic. She asked for a dialectical reciprocity between opposites: the architecture of the terminal and the architecture of the tower each implicitly denied or excluded by the other, the two thereby held together in a stable unity. And while it is true that a “sky-reflecting tower” would have been, stylistically speaking, “less Breuer” than the proposed cast stone slab, the architect had long held to the conviction that “the real impact of any work is the extent to which it unifies contrasting notions—the opposite points of view.”<sup>76</sup> Grand Central Tower did not “unify contrasting notions”; the tower and the terminal were not dialectically related. Huxtable saw, in other words, how Breuer had held firm to a familiar palette of forms and materials, she saw also the arbitrariness that resulted, but she missed how radically this undermined his own architectural philosophy, how radically “less Breuer” it already was.

Indeed, for Breuer, the mark of good architecture was a unification of heterogeneous elements without a compromise of their heterogeneity. Breuer had insisted repeatedly on this as a first principle of design throughout his career. He wrote, in the 1930s, “contrasts have become a necessity of life. They are guarantees of the reality of the basis we have chosen to adopt. The power to preserve these extremes without modification (that is to say, the extent of their contrast) is the real gauge of our strength”<sup>77</sup>; in the 1940s, “the most contrasting elements of our nature should be brought to happiness at the same time, in the same work, and in the most definite

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<sup>75</sup> Huxtable, “Grotesquerie Astride a Palace.”

<sup>76</sup> Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 32.

<sup>77</sup> Marcel Breuer, “Where Do We Stand?,” typescript of lecture, 1934, box 7, reel 5718, Breuer Papers AAA.



way”<sup>78</sup>; in the 1950s, “in simple architectural terms, our buildings and interiors will be composed elements set next to each other and will aim to a harmony given by contrasting forms”<sup>79</sup>; and in 1968, for his AIA Gold Medal acceptance speech, “only [a] combination of polar qualities can assure an architecture which is alive and of our time.”<sup>80</sup> This was, of course, exactly the achievement that Goldberger admired in Breuer’s furniture: “their wholeness,” “their sense of disparate parts being joined together.”<sup>81</sup> Or that Scully admired in his small houses: their “tension,” “utterly light, held together by wires.”<sup>82</sup> Take, for example, the famous Wassily club armchair (1923) depicted in figure 25, which we can grasp as a taut unity despite the distinct formal and material contrasts of bent tubular steel framing and planes of woven horsehair fabric (leather in later editions). Or take the home he built for himself in New Canaan, Connecticut (1947–48). We can see there the same impulse toward compositional equilibrium, wiring together (literally, with off-the-shelf turnbuckles and marine cables) a set of categorically idiosyncratic architectural elements: a concrete base and fieldstone retaining walls above which cantilevers a platform-framed box in an adapted American vernacular (fig. 26).

Even while this centripetal cohesiveness, characteristic of Breuer’s work through the 1950s, became less often a practical possibility as he began taking on larger and more complex commissions, finding harmony in contrasts remained for him a normative virtue. Just as, for example, his New Canaan home hoisted itself above the landscape, so did his research center designed a decade later for IBM in La Gaude, France (1960–61)—raised over a Var Valley

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<sup>78</sup> Marcel Breuer, “What Is Happening to Modern Architecture?,” typescript of lecture, 1948, box 7, reel 5718, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>79</sup> Marcel Breuer, “Notes on Architecture,” typescript of lecture, 1959, box 7, reel 5718, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>80</sup> Marcel Breuer, “About the Eye,” typescript of lecture, 1968, box 7, reel 5718, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>81</sup> Goldberger, “Rich Legacy of Innovative Furniture.”

<sup>82</sup> Scully, “Doldrums in the Suburbs,” 40.

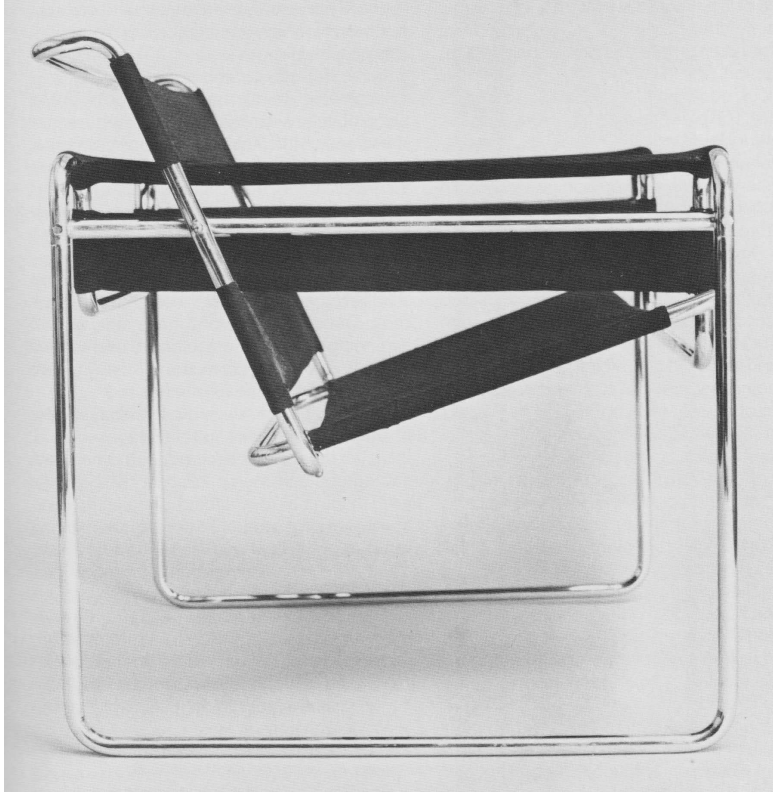


Figure 25. Marcel Breuer, club armchair, c. 1927. (Wilk, *Marcel Breuer: Furniture and Interiors*, 39)



Figure 26. Marcel Breuer and Associates, Breuer House I, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1947. (Breuer Papers SUL)

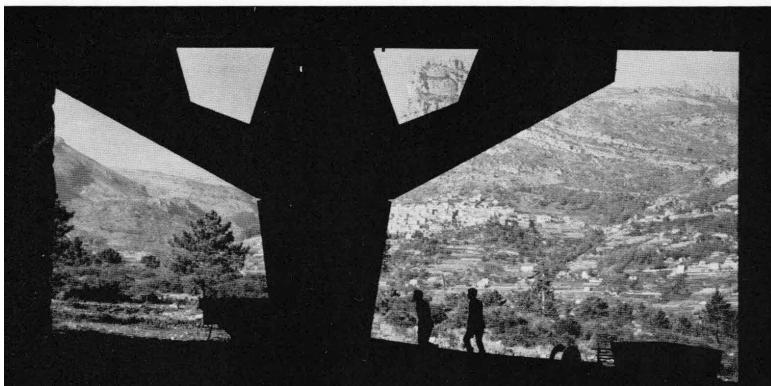
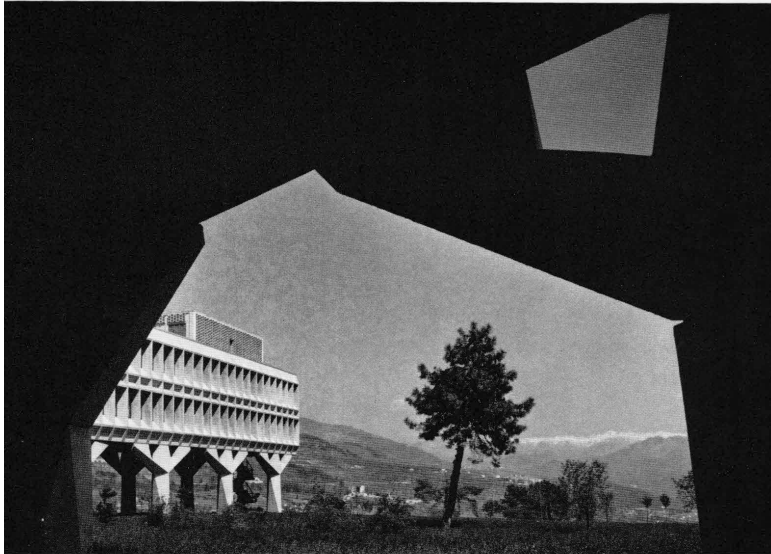


Figure 27. Marcel Breuer and Associates, IBM Research Center, La Gaude, France, 1960–61. (Papachristou, *New Buildings and Projects*, 32)

panorama on concrete tree columns, the terrain passing underneath largely undisturbed (fig. 27). “Nature and architecture,” Breuer had written, “are not enemies—but they are distinctly different.”<sup>83</sup> Lifting his buildings above their sites was a signature means of maintaining a nature/architecture complementarity—a clearly differentiated binary, neither term entirely legible without its counterpart. In his words: “This is what the Spaniards express so well with their motto from the bull fights: *Sol y sombra*, sun and shadow. Half the seats in the bull ring face the sun, the other half is in the shadow. They made a proverb out of it—‘sun *and* shadow’—and they did not make it sun *or* shadow. For them, their whole life—its contrasts, its tensions, its excitement, its beauty—all this is contained in the proverb *sol y sombra*.”<sup>84</sup>

The conjunction *and* does a good amount of conceptual work here for Breuer, standing in for the production of a rich and balanced architectural whole. But at Grand Central Tower, it was as if his *and* had lost its regulatory function. It still joined the tower to the terminal, but it could not bring their expressions into stability; it could not subordinate their opposition to a higher unity. At Grand Central they were held together with an *and* that also held them apart—that joined them differentially, or that forced their unrelated architectures into disjointed relation. Gilles Deleuze mined precisely this paradoxically disjunctive logic of conjunction in his discussion of Jean-Luc Godard’s cinematic practice. Godard’s *and*, Deleuze argued, “is diversity, multiplicity, the destruction of identities.” His films were not edited by a dialectician. Their pairings of images (“The convict *and* his wife. The mother *and* child.”) did not produce wholes; they produced differentiation.<sup>85</sup> In the language of preservation, a similar kind of disjunctive conjunction is typically called a “hyphen,” a set-back that physically links while

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<sup>83</sup> Breuer, *Sun and Shadow*, 38.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 45.

aesthetically differentiating a historic property from later additions.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the deep recess below Grand Central Tower's cantilever *almost* performed this function. Its trusses would not only have carried the addition above the existing building, but would have isolated each from the other—in the same way that lifting the La Gaude IBM building above its site isolated its architecture from its context. Hyphens, however, are also meant to ensure (or support) legible chronologies—marking originals as original and additions as not. And the disproportion of Breuer's terminal addition relative to the size of the head house, not to mention the distance of his idiom from the existing Beaux Arts vocabulary, overwhelmed the hyphen's ability to put the two architectures in order.

In 1934, Breuer spoke to the Swiss Werkbund of the “tenacity” with which “formal order [needed to be] imposed upon the world of realities.” Formal order would follow, he told his audience, in proportion to the “degree of intensity or application with which the most various or directly interconnected problems are disposed of.” Breuer believed, in other words, that architecture's mandate was to analyze “objectively” and offer a “complete solution” to every difficulty that it encountered, be it “psycho-physical,” “techno-economic,” or otherwise.<sup>87</sup> Order was, in a sense, proof of architecture's success at meeting uniformly a plurality of diverse obligations. Breuer found, however, no perspective from which the demands put before him at Grand Central could be seen to cohere, and thus the imposition there of “formal order” seemed implausible from the very beginning. It was, moreover, precisely in the absence of easy order that his architecture would substantiate the contradictoriness of claims then being made on Grand

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<sup>86</sup> See Anne E. Grimmer and Kay D. Weeks, “Preservation Briefs 14: New Exterior Additions to Historic Buildings” (National Parks Service, US Department of the Interior, August 2010), <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/preservedocs/preservation-briefs/14Preserve-Brief-Additions.pdf>.

<sup>87</sup> Breuer, “Where Do We Stand?”

Central's air rights (whether by the city, by preservationists, by the press, by the public, by the architectural profession, or by the railroad itself). His second proposal provides a useful point of contrast—its coherence would depend upon hiding the project's difficulty, ignoring the requirement that the head house be preserved. The wrongness of the tower addition (as Paul Byard saw it) could only be avoided, in this sense, by prematurely resolving the essential conflict in one direction or the other. But when Breuer held true to the impossibility of the compromise—when he leaned into it architecturally—he staged a confrontation between private interests and public concerns with a new kind of visibility. And this is the question I turn to next. What, exactly, did the public *see* in the Grand Central Tower proposal? How did its opponents read its disjunctiveness?

## CHAPTER 2

## CRITICS AND CONTROVERSY

*Eye Impact*

Marcel Breuer trusted what he called “the rapid aesthetic of the eye”—that is, the eye’s ability to make split second appraisals of architecture, an ability that seems to precede cognition but that is trained “by custom, by precedence, by preconceived opinion, by varied experiences of varying individuals.” “The eye,” he wrote, “is a powerful informer; it forms an aesthetic judgment at a glance and, while buildings should be useful, well constructed, and in harmony with our human-social world, the first impact—the eye impact—is a preconditioning of our sympathies.”<sup>1</sup> This chapter, however, queries not Breuer’s own eyesight but the perceptual abilities that were brought to bear in censuring his Grand Central Tower. Here I treat the textual and visual content of diverse materials produced in response to the proposal as evidence of a particular acuity of vision. I argue, more precisely, that these materials suggest sensitivity to a heterochrony that Ernst Bloch would have called (depending on the translation) “non-contemporaneity.”<sup>2</sup> And with this term, I mean to invoke, after Bloch, an understanding of the present as a radically discontinuous whole—as a layering of eccentric temporalities, some synchronized to the clock of development and others not. “Various years,” he wrote in 1932, “beat in the one which is just being counted and prevails.”<sup>3</sup> “Contemporaneity,” in this conceptual system, describes a certain resonance with dominant modes of production and exchange. And in the architectural culture of 1968 New York, nothing beat more resonantly with a postwar corporate economy than Park Avenue’s growing collection of standardized office slabs—“machine[s] to make money with,”

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<sup>1</sup> Breuer, “About the Eye,” 2–3.

<sup>2</sup> Bloch’s German term, *ungleichzeitigen*, has also been translated as “non-simultaneity,” “non-synchronism,” and “non-sametimeliness.”

<sup>3</sup> Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 97.

one builder called them.<sup>4</sup> “Non-contemporaneity,” in contrast, describes all that is asynchronous to this machinery—outmoded remnants of earlier times, alien in and hostile to their own present: “nor do they flourish in obscurity as in the past, but contradict the Now; very strangely, crookedly, from behind.”<sup>5</sup>

I argue, in other words, that in Breuer’s collage of a corporate-modernist office tower and an aging Beaux-Arts terminal facade, critics often saw a *political* confrontation between what was up-to-date and what was not: above, the most-recent architectural products of capitalism, and below, the obsolete remainder. We can recall that for Bloch’s friend and rival Walter Benjamin outmodedness possessed a certain revolutionary energy, an insight he credited to French surrealists. That is, for Benjamin, critically inhabiting obsolescence could illuminate capitalism’s endless forfeiting of its own cultural products in favor of ever newer ones—“the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them.”<sup>6</sup> The keenest of Grand Central Tower’s opponents saw in it a confirmation of the forfeitures demanded by their own economy, and they leveraged a perceptiveness to the critical energies of non-contemporaneity with no less satirical bite than that of the surrealists.

My reading, however, diverges sharply from most other historical accounts of the controversy. The tendency has been to claim, for Breuer’s critics, a vision in which his proposal was held as vandalism. One historian has argued recently that, for example, in Sybil Moholy-Nagy’s eyes, Grand Central Tower “laid bare the profound disregard for site ... typical of the

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<sup>4</sup> “The Skyline Factory.”

<sup>5</sup> Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 181.



new functionalism of mid-20th-century architecture.”<sup>7</sup> Most accounts, in other words, have emphasized the degree to which critics blamed Breuer himself or his modernist idiom for Grand Central Tower’s apparent wrongness. Perhaps, it has been implied, Breuer ought not to have accepted the commission; perhaps “the classic Modern Movement urban formulae” were no longer “right for Manhattan.”<sup>8</sup> But, in fact, the terms of the debate—as established by critics themselves, particularly by critics publishing in the popular press (the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, the *Washington Post*, *McCall’s*, and the *New Yorker*, for example)—were less often aesthetic or stylistic than political and economic. I agree with John Costonis, in other words, that this apparent aesthetic dispute was, at its center, a contest for political power.<sup>9</sup> Precisely to the extent that Breuer courted a startlingly disjunctive outward expression (avoiding compromise and inviting impropriety), his proposal made visible a competition between antagonistic political agendas. And as much as objections to Grand Central Tower may appear to have been focused on the inappropriateness of its architectural expression—on its violation of particular aesthetic conventions—these objections stood in, most often, for the assertion of some popular or democratic authority over questions of land use and the quality of city life.

I disagree, however, that these objections amounted to a defense of the status quo against an extraterritorial danger. Costonis has argued that disputes like the Grand Central Tower controversy are underwritten by “individual and social needs for stability and reassurance in the face of environmental changes that we perceive as threats to these values.” In his view, the landmarked head house was an “icon” “invested with values that confirm our sense of order and

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<sup>7</sup> Despina Stratigakos, “Future Archive: ‘Hitler’s Revenge,’” *Places Journal*, March 2015, <https://placesjournal.org/article/future-archive-hitlers-revenge/>.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Powell, *Grand Central Terminal: Warren and Wetmore* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 23; see also Clausen, *Pan Am Building*, 345; Condit, *Port of New York*, 2:250; Hyman, *Marcel Breuer, Architect*, 152; Middleton, *Grand Central*, 132–133.

<sup>9</sup> Costonis, *Icons and Aliens*, xvii.

identity,” and Breuer’s addition was an “alien” threatening “our investment in the [icon’s] value.”<sup>10</sup> Quite to the contrary, most critics saw Breuer’s tower as the very apogee of well-established development procedures. It was the slab that had been made normative or iconic (contemporaneous, in Bloch’s sense) in Manhattan’s speculator-driven postwar economy and the terminal that had been made alien (non-contemporaneous). As George Nelson put it in *McCall’s*, the project was “completely within the rules of the game and completely—even dramatically—consistent with the city’s image of itself.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, opponents tended to treat the addition as a *fait accompli*; if its architecture was perverse, its economics seemed to guarantee it a prominent position in the city skyline. The *New Yorker’s* reflections, published in June 1968, were typical: “neither the zoning regulations nor the City Planning Commission nor the Landmarks Preservation Commission nor any uprising of maddened standees on the 5:07 to Larchmont had the power or energy to put a stop to the project. The thing is to be done, and our only wonder is our own lack of wonderment, our acceptance of the fact that any well-financed irrationality, any guarantee of total urban inconvenience, is almost surely irreversible.”<sup>12</sup> Appeals like Nelson’s and the *New Yorker’s* aimed at an interrogation rather than a maintenance of familiar values—at an uncovering of architecture’s complicity in what Harvey Molotch would call the city’s “operation as a growth machine” by and for the benefit of a local “land-based elite.”<sup>13</sup>

Here we have yet another face to the Grand Central Tower paradox. Breuer’s uncompromising pursuit of modernist conventions—standardization, efficiency, rationality—had culminated in a deeply unconventional (that is, disharmonious) architectural expression. Just as,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xv–xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Nelson, “Don’t Fire Until You See the Tops of Their Roofs!”

<sup>12</sup> “The Talk of the Town: Notes and Comments,” *New Yorker*, June 29, 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Harvey Molotch, “The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 2 (September 1976): 309–310.

inversely, the apparent aesthetic conservatism of the tower's opponents—their rejection of its unconventional appearance, their efforts to preserve the terminal complex unchanged—was founded in a kind of political radicalism, a desire to interrupt a political machinery that was operating without popular consent. On one hand, as I argued in the previous chapter, Breuer knew that the air rights addition was incompatible with 1968 New York's prevailing conventions of taste and propriety—this is why the proposal looked “outrageous.” On the other hand, his critics knew that the addition was perfectly compatible with the city's prevailing ethos of development (what the *New Yorker* called “the abhorrence of real-estate men for any midtown vacuum”<sup>14</sup>)—this is why it looked like “almost surely irreversible.”

### ***The Washington Monument on a Hot Dog Stand***

Of course, opposition to Grand Central Tower was not universal, though it is striking the extent to which supporters and detractor both agreed on this irony—it may have been shocking aesthetically, but it was utterly predictable economically. For example, two of the three largest architectural trade journals published endorsements of Breuer's addition, but both tempered their support for the architect with contemptuous accounts of the economics that had made his project appear inevitable. *Architectural Record's* editor, Walter F. Wagner, wrote in its August 1968 issue: “Nobody can be surprised about the new building—with land values (and therefore air rights) at New York City prices, anyone who could not foresee this building is probably also unsure as to where the sun comes up.”<sup>15</sup> *Architectural Forum*, then under the editorship of Breuer's friend and biographer Peter Blake, made a similar point: “the single most important fact about the forthcoming Breuer tower is that its site—146,000 sq. ft. of air rights—is currently

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<sup>14</sup> “The Talk of the Town.”

<sup>15</sup> Walter F. Wagner Jr., “The Wrong Criticism, in the Wrong Place, at the Wrong Time,” *Architectural Record* 144 (August 1968): 9.

valued at an outrageous \$60 million or so, and this without any sort of building on it! What this means, is that the Penn Central Railroad (which like most other railroads, claims to be in dire financial straits) is going to put up a building on those 146,000 sq. ft. no matter what—and a great big building at that, if only to amortize the outrageously inflated price of the land alone.”<sup>16</sup>

But professional commitments to practicing architects, to builders, to the construction industry, to manufacturers (many of whom were advertisers) meant that journals like *Record* and *Forum* were already invested in the success of the project, and thus they tended to direct attention away from the disharmonious aesthetic that had made it so contentious. Since a tower would be built “no matter what,” these editorials reasoned, it was better that it be done by Breuer and Morris Saady than by a less reputable designer/developer team. “I suggest,” Wagner wrote, “that others join me in being thankful that Saady had the good sense to ask Breuer to do the job, and even more thankful that Breuer had the courage to take it.”<sup>17</sup> But critics publishing outside of the trade press, absent comparable professional commitments or investments, had no incentive to look away. For example, when Moholy-Nagy condemned the proposal in a strident *Art in America* polemic as “an apotheosis of the Functionalist Era ... that was already bankrupt when the dying German Republic unloaded it on America,” her attention was captured by a publicity photo of Breuer standing before Pierre Lutz’s Grand Central Tower rendering, grasping at the very point where the tower was to join the terminal facade (fig. 28). “We fervently hope his providential hand, so intent ... on keeping the two *incompatible monuments* together, ... will prevail,” she wrote.<sup>18</sup> Russell Lynes in *Harper’s Magazine* and Nelson in *McCall’s* were similarly gripped by the confrontation of these two architectures. Lynes called it a “fight between

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<sup>16</sup> “Big Plans: Grand Central City,” 35.

<sup>17</sup> Wagner Jr., “The Wrong Criticism, in the Wrong Place, at the Wrong Time,” 9.

<sup>18</sup> Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, “Hitler’s Revenge,” *Art in America*, September 1968, (emphasis added).

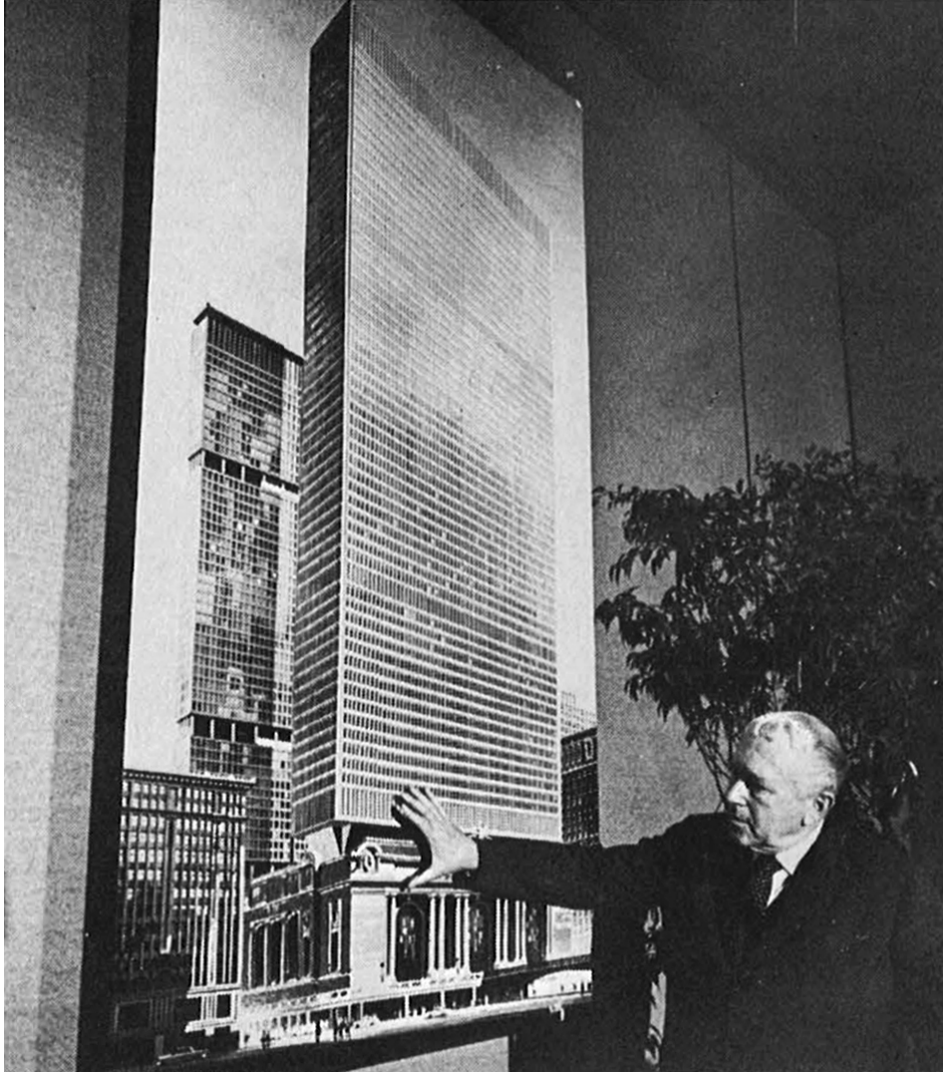


Figure 28. Marcel Breuer with rendering of Grand Central Tower, 1968. (Moholy-Nagy, "Hitler's Revenge")

the art of the static and the art of the mobile”—Breuer’s tower an architecture of “stay[ing] put” both physically and socially (literally a “status symbol”), the terminal an architecture of movement and opportunity, of “picking up and moving on.”<sup>19</sup> For Nelson, “the grotesque combination of structures” occasioned an examination of New Yorkers’ own share of responsibility for the project: “We are all out of our minds, and Mr. Saady, like so many before him, is going to make a lot of money out of this happy circumstance.”<sup>20</sup> And in fact, Breuer’s public relations representative regarded these three as having authored “the strongest attacks against the building ... since the initial release” and worried that they “could be rallying points for arousing public opinion.”<sup>21</sup>

In other words, it was not as if Grand Central Tower’s supporters saw an agreeable unity where its opponents saw disjunction. Rather, what separated those who spoke on behalf of the project from those who spoke against it tended to be differences in emphasis rather than interpretation. For example, supporters often celebrated Saady and Breuer for their willingness to leave the landmark’s protected features intact. *Forum* had little faith in the Landmarks Preservation Commission’s power to prevent demolition, alleging (incorrectly) that “‘protected’ is hardly the word since the law, generally speaking, allows only for a delaying action.” An editorial from July 1968 argued that even if legislation appeared to bar such an action, Saady and Breuer “*could* have, with a little more difficulty, torn down the station and started from scratch.”<sup>22</sup> But Douglas Haskell—Blake’s predecessor as *Forum*’s editor-in-chief, a preservation campaigner for whom Grand Central had long been a cause célèbre, and a principle antagonist of

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<sup>19</sup> Lynes, “After Hours: Stacked-Up.”

<sup>20</sup> Nelson, “Don’t Fire Until You See the Tops of Their Roofs!”

<sup>21</sup> Marius Scpton to [Morris] Saady, 27 November 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>22</sup> “Grand Central City,” *Architectural Forum* 129 (July 1968): 72 (emphasis in original).

both the Pan Am Building and Grand Central Tower<sup>23</sup>—responded by asking, “Isn’t it a little absurd to do a highly expensive major structural handstand operation just to save ... a nice facade which is not the top concern of everybody?”<sup>24</sup> It may have been commendable that Saady and Breuer meant to follow the letter (if not the spirit) of the landmarks law, but their detractors emphasized that the preservation of “a nice facade” was largely beside the point. In fact, Grand Central Tower’s most exacting opponents were often openly *indifferent* to the fate of the head house.<sup>25</sup> And Alan Dunn keyed into exactly this indifference with a cartoon drawn for that month’s *New Yorker* (fig. 29). A pair of architects with rolled up sleeves and pencils behind their ears display a wall-sized rendering of Grand Central Terminal sitting atop a modernist slab. A man in a suit leans against a desk, surveying the work, and a caption below reads: “We think Marcel Breuer really has it licked now.”<sup>26</sup> Lampooning Breuer’s project by swapping the position of the tower and the terminal, Dunn affirmed that, for many of the proposals opponents, it hardly mattered which was on top. That is, if the LPC was worried principally that “the tower would overwhelm the Terminal by its sheer mass,”<sup>27</sup> for many observers it hardly mattered which one was overwhelmed and which one was overwhelming. Even more than damage to or defacement of the terminal facade, it was incongruity that caught the eye of critics.

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas Haskell, “The Lost New York of the Pan American Airways Building,” *Architectural Forum* 119 (November 1963): 106–11; see also Clausen, *Pan Am Building*, 238–247.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Haskell, letter to the editor, *Architectural Forum* 129 (July 1968): 10.

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps most explicitly, the Urban Design Council, a nine-member panel set up by Mayor John Lindsay to act as an advisory body regarding the quality of new public and private architecture, argued that if the tower’s construction were to be “inevitable,” then Grand Central itself “should be sacrificed so that there would be free rein to design a building combining unity with beauty and function.” Quoted in Charles G. Bennett, “City Urged to Bar Terminal Tower,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1968.

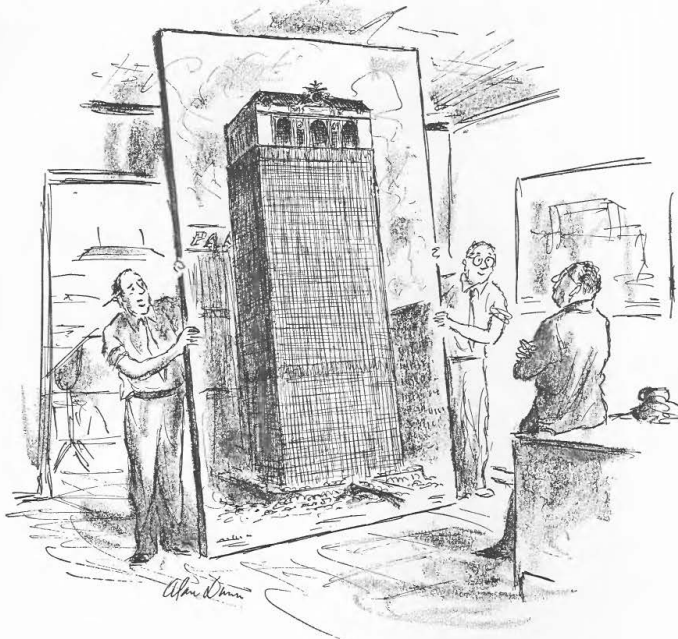
<sup>26</sup> Alan Dunn, “We Think Marcel Breuer Really Has It Licked Now,” *New Yorker*, July 6, 1968.

<sup>27</sup> New York Landmarks Preservation Commission quoted in Haar and Kayden, *Landmark Justice*, 160.

contractors (the young man in the polo shirt worked for one of them). "In a way, orchestra leaders have orchestras," Wolff said, "but in a way what we really have is a name, some first men, a union membership list, and this."

Wolff explained that the musicians on The Floor became accustomed to distinguishing between the two voices coming over the loudspeaker—one paged people to the front of the room, and the other paged them to the telephone—and also became accustomed to returning to a particular section of The Floor each time they came. Many of the people in the section we were standing in, he said, were interested in full-time jobs with big-name bands. The center of the hall is popular with those interested in Latin music and Negro jazz. Wolff spends most of his time at the far end, with those who play what musicians call club dates. Although the term "club date" may have started with orchestras playing at country clubs, it now means any one-time appearance—a subscription dance, an office party, a wedding, a bar mitzvah, a coming-out party. Many of the musicians who play club dates have other careers; on the way over to the far end of The Floor, Wolff pointed out a man whom he described as a fine furrer and a fine bass player. "A lot of the people who play steadily for the big-name bands are first-rate musicians, but most of them need written arrangements," he said. "A lot of them couldn't just sit down and play a chorus of 'Dinah' if their lives depended on it. With these guys—the club-date guys—all you have to do is name a tune. You don't even have to tell them what key. They all play it—in the same time, in the same key. Most of them can play any style of music. They can play *kasatskes* for a bar mitzvah or they can play society music all night, and the same musicians might do both for two different orchestras playing two different club dates on the same day."

Wolff introduced us to one of his own first men, who turned out to be a girl—a pretty singer named Nancy



"We think Marcel Breuer really has it licked now."

Manning. Miss Manning can appear in three types of outfit—a "sparkly, sequiny thing," a simple cocktail dress for society dates, and a rock-and-roll get-up—but even with that versatility she has no guarantee that she will work at every club date the Wolff orchestra plays. "There are some dates, like Gentile weddings, where you just can't use a girl singer," Wolff explained. "So we try to find Nancy work with someone else on those nights."

Miss Manning said that girl singers are not the most requested performers for Jewish weddings, either, and are not in great demand for coming-out parties.

"Any place where another pretty girl is supposed to be the center of attention," Wolff explained.

"What type of musician has the easiest time finding work?" we asked, thinking of rock-and-roll drummers.

"Probably a strong singing accordionist," Wolff said. "In some of those catering halls, either the piano is useless or it's not there, and you can sub-

stitute an accordion. Come on, I want you to meet someone."

We followed Wolff over to a short, cheerful-looking man. Wolff introduced him as Herman Fink, a drummer, and told us that without people like Fink—people who had been on The Floor for years and had all kinds of information and gossip for everybody—the hiring system couldn't work.

"I've been around a long time, all right," Fink said. "I played Abe Lincoln's bar mitzvah."

"Herman's got a set of drums that's three hundred years old, and he bought them new," Wolff said.

"That's my line," Fink said, but he laughed anyway.

As we walked off, Wolff said another asset of Fink's many years on the club-date scene is that he has become acquainted with most of the kitchen help in the hotels and catering halls in the area. "He's the greatest scrounger in New York," Wolff added. "If there's a hard roll in the kitchen, Herman can find it."

Figure 29. Page from *New Yorker* with Alan Dunn cartoon, 1968. (Dunn, "We Think Marcel Breuer Really Has It Licked Now")



Perhaps the best evidence in support of this claim can be found in the sheer number, variety, and ingenuity of the metaphors called upon to describe the disjunctiveness of Breuer's work. A *Times* editorial argued that "the new tower soaring from the classical Beaux Art terminal like a skyscraper on a base of French pastry has the bizarre quality of a nightmare."<sup>28</sup> For *Cue Magazine*, "the two buildings one on the other will create a circus-like monstrosity."<sup>29</sup> For Wolf Von Eckardt, art and architecture critic at the *Washington Post*, Breuer rammed "a concrete 'spine' into the old building much as you would poke a stick into a wedding cake without touching the icing."<sup>30</sup> For the *New Yorker*, the tower was an "elongated meat cleaver descending on a prune soufflé."<sup>31</sup> For *Progressive Architecture* it was "an elephant ... perched on a Volkswagen."<sup>32</sup> And for Nelson, it was "not unlike setting the Washington Monument on a hot dog stand."<sup>33</sup> I want to emphasize, however, the extent to which these reviewers read the proposal as the outcome of an anti-democratic politics of development—that is, a politics wherein developers pursued their own interests narrowly and unilaterally. An incongruous absurdity as severe as Grand Central Tower's seemed only possible in (seemed to be a symptom of) the absence of meaningful public involvement in questions with public consequences. Moholy-Nagy, for example, read the visual weight of Breuer's "functionalist" slab as an analogue for the team's—Saady's, Breuer's, the Penn Central's—excessive self-interestedness. Grand Central was to be crushed, she argued, "under the monstrous load of profit dictatorship." For her, it made "no difference whatever" whether the tower floated "on a bond issue or on the

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<sup>28</sup> "Jumbo Atop Grand Central."

<sup>29</sup> "Total Disbelief," *Cue Magazine* clipping, 6 July 1968, box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf von Eckardt, "Architects Are Madly Shooting for the Stars," *Washington Post*, June 30, 1968.

<sup>31</sup> "The Talk of the Town."

<sup>32</sup> "Put It over Here, Mac," *Progressive Architecture* 49 (August 1968): 48.

<sup>33</sup> Nelson, "Don't Fire Until You See the Tops of Their Roofs!"

most original structural system sunk into the ground.”<sup>34</sup> Ada Louise Huxtable, similarly, saw Grand Central Tower as a grotesque capstone to the “speculative lottery” that had allowed corporate landowners to add in Manhattan, without public oversight and “at considerable profit,” seventy million square feet of rentable office space since the end of World War II with another forty million coming by 1971. She wrote, “The game, as it has been played, is simple. The private developer proposes and disposes.”<sup>35</sup> And if Breuer’s tower indexed for these critics the extent of the power held by private real estate interests, mocking the addition’s incongruity—“a meat cleaver on a prune soufflé,” “an elephant on a Volkswagen”—was a way to expose that power to some measure of public scrutiny. We can recall the sardonic challenge to the city’s development authorities implied in Claes Oldenburg’s watercolor, *Proposed Colossal Monument for Park Avenue* (1965), which depicts the street’s vista were the Pan Am Building to be replaced by a skyscraping Good Humor ice cream bar (fig. 30). Nelson imagined, in a collage accompanying his *McCall’s* article, that were Saady’s London to be governed by the same anti-democratic political regimes as New York’s, its skyline too might be “forced to accept” the presence of monstrous oddities—perhaps a fifty-five-story, \$100 million, Oldenburgian Coca-Cola bottle (fig. 31). “New York will permit anything that fosters its exchange function,” he wrote, “and ignore or forbid whatever interferes with it.”<sup>36</sup>

### ***Built on Its Rooftops***

My argument, however, is that Breuer’s critics often saw architectural incompatibility also as a kind of temporal heterogeneity. It was not just that Grand Central Tower’s incongruity represented the abuses of objectionable procedures of development, and it was also not just that

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<sup>34</sup> Moholy-Nagy, “Hitler’s Revenge.”

<sup>35</sup> Huxtable, “Slab City Marches On”; see also Regional Plan Association, *Urban Design: Manhattan*, 13–17.

<sup>36</sup> Nelson, “Don’t Fire Until You See the Tops of Their Roofs!”



Figure 30. Claes Oldenburg, *Proposed Colossal Monument for Park Avenue, New York, Good Humor Bar*, 1965. (Oldenburg, *Proposals for Monuments and Buildings*, 65)



Figure 31. *McCall's* collage of the London skyline, 1968. (Nelson, "Don't Fire Until You See the Tops of their Roofs!")

incongruity accentuated the relative oldness of the terminal against the brand-newness—the contemporaneity—of the tower. As I argued in the previous chapter, Breuer joined the two architectures disjunctively—that is, he held them together but he also held them radically apart. Their temporalities too were joined disjunctively, brought together in a way that emphasized for reviewers the estrangement of the terminal’s past from the vantage point of the tower’s present. Jane Jacobs had argued that a “successful city district” needed a “mixture of buildings of many ages,” old alongside new. “Time makes certain structures obsolete for some enterprises, and they become available to others,” and it was through this plurality that, she believed, a genial equilibrium of complementary functions could be maintained.<sup>37</sup> Grand Central Tower, however, diagrammed a different kind of adjacency; critics saw modeled there a much more alarming *disequilibrium* of old and new.

Nelson observed: “This is something truly new in our experience, and what more dramatic demonstration of that fact than the piling of a new building on top of an old one?” “Can we be sure,” he asked, “that the Metropolitan Museum will not be tempted to rent its air rights? ... Since the Met covers much more ground than Grand Central, one could easily envisage at least three 100-million-dollar, 55-story structures, containing luxury apartments, immense residential hotels, and all other conveniences.”<sup>38</sup> Haskell too wondered, for example, if we might see next “a pyramid swaying above” the Beaux-Arts library in Bryant Park.<sup>39</sup> *Progressive Architecture* speculated that it might not be “too fanciful to envision an office tower with a rooftop restaurant springing above the nation’s Capitol.”<sup>40</sup> And Tony Geiss predicted “we could end up with one of the most unusual cities in the world: Underneath, a quaint, low metropolis of

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<sup>37</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 189–190.

<sup>38</sup> Nelson, “Don’t Fire Until You See the Tops of Their Roofs!”

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Haskell, letter to the editor, *Architectural Forum* 130 (May 1969): 16.

<sup>40</sup> “Put It over Here, Mac,” 46.

old brownstones, pushcarts, Greek Revival houses, delicatessens, fire hydrants and old law tenements, awash in traffic jams ... and built on its rooftops, a soaring, mile-high city of glass and concrete.”<sup>41</sup> Each of these prognostications confronted the temporal logic of a then-*current* urban reality; these visions of corporate-capitalist development surmounting symbols of culture and democratic urbanity allegorized 1968 New York, to borrow Reinhart Koselleck’s words, as “a superseded former future.”<sup>42</sup> With the help of Grand Central Tower, critics began to see the foreclosure of the potential held in the architecture of their past. They saw, in other words, that their city was not the city imagined by preceding generations. They saw the distance of that “former future” from their own present condition; they saw its non-contemporaneity.

A pair of images published alongside Blake’s defense of the proposal—appearing not in *Forum* but in *New York* magazine’s August 1968 issue—can help illustrate this point. Blake worried that some of his colleagues had been “pointing fingers past the *real* culprits, and past the real issues,” namely “a society that permits and encourages wild and unrestricted speculation with the price of land.”<sup>43</sup> But the full sense of his indictment may be better communicated by the anachronistic view up Park Avenue that illustrated the text. Working with one of Grand Central Tower’s press kit renderings, Blake (or perhaps the magazine’s art director) clipped Breuer’s addition out of the frame and replaced it with the twenty-three-story office building that the original team of architects had imagined as the terminal’s future in 1910 (fig. 32). In other words, a *contemporaneous* architectural product was excised from the scene and replaced with one that was emphatically *non*-contemporaneous to New York’s postwar growth machine—I say

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<sup>41</sup> Tony Geiss, “Landmarks,” clipping, n.d., box 23, reel 5731, Breuer Papers AAA.

<sup>42</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Blake, “In Defense of an ‘Outrage,’” *New York*, August 12, 1968 (emphasis in original); see also Peter Blake, “Air Rights and Air Wrongs,” *New York*, April 15, 1968.

“emphatically” because the 1910 design hails not only from an earlier time, but from an incomplete or interrupted earlier time, from what Bloch called the “non-past, because never wholly become.”<sup>44</sup> Published on the following page was the unaltered original version of Breuer’s rendering (fig. 33). And readers were thus invited to make comparisons across a temporal rupture: on one side, the 1968 New York in which “wild and unrestricted” real estate speculation meant that buildings like the Pan Am and Grand Central Tower—whatever their merits or deficiencies—were inevitabilities; on the other, the Koselleckian “past possibilities and prospects, past conceptions of the future: futures past” that the former had supplanted.<sup>45</sup>

Though Haskell and Blake disagreed about Grand Central Tower itself, they shared this sense that a teleology had been severed. In fact, Haskell opposed Breuer’s addition precisely because it represented, for him, a continuing failure on the part of the railroad to make good on a promise implicit in the original terminal complex. Grand Central, Haskell believed, had given “the world the great prototype pattern of the Futurist City.” He had written in *Forum* at the end of his editorship: “The brilliant breakthrough of the Grand Central Terminal project came out of the fact that there, during the first decade of our century, New York brought together her two major achievements—concentrated building and swift urban transportation—into a single, interrelated, planned operation. The event was majestically fantastic. It stood at a pinnacle of creative effort. Here was compounded the great movement of urban ‘futurism’—and all that Sant’Elia did in his famous futurist railroad schemes for Milan a decade later was to draw up another Grand Central with the covers off.” Grand Central’s owners, in other words, had promised New York a future of speed and movement on par with the one Sant’Elia would

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<sup>44</sup> Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> David Carr, review of *Futures Past*, by Reinhart Koselleck, *History & Theory* 26, no. 2 (May 1987): 198.

## In Defense of an 'Outrage'

By Peter Blake

Some four months ago, writing on this page about the impending office tower on top of Grand Central Terminal, I said, in part, that "given the world of real estate as it is, New York is fortunate in getting Marcel Breuer to design this building." I also suggested that when Breuer's design was released, "all right-thinking boys and girls hereabouts" would be appalled.

That, it now turns out, was quite an understatement: those right-thinking boys and girls have been having kittens! I don't exactly blame them—the idea of perching an 800-foot-tall, 310-foot wide, and 125-foot-deep concrete-and-glass box, however delicately, on top of Warren & Wetmore's Beaux Arts palace is, of course, rather unusual. (The fact that this exercise in Super-Pop seems hilarious to me is only a measure of my own perversity.)

What I do blame all those outraged critics for is pointing fingers past the *real* culprits, and past the real issues.

Any time you have a problem and want to solve it, the first thing to do, obviously, is to identify it; and after you have identified it, you may be able to do something about coping with it in the future.

What happened at Grand Central, however, was this:

Some critics said that the proposed tower violated a certified historical landmark. (It does not.)

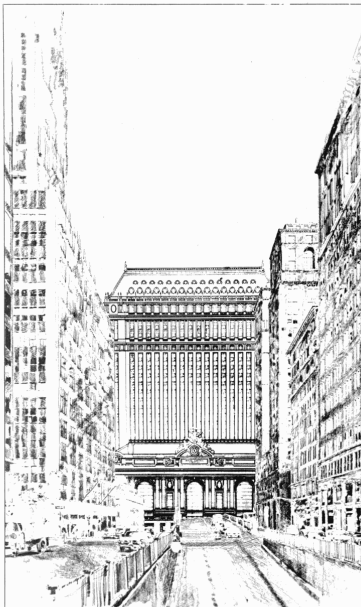
Some critics said that the proposed tower would violate established New York City planning policies and principles. (It won't.)

Some critics said that the proposed tower would, demonstrably, add to congestion in the area. (Possibly, but not demonstrably, and maybe not at all.)

Some critics said that the proposed tower was a monument to the Penn Central Railroad's avarice. (Nonsense.)

And some critics said that the proposed tower was bound to be an ever-present eyesore. (You'll hardly notice it.)

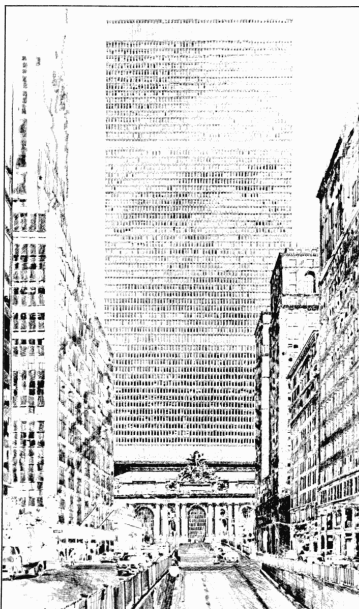
Let me explain my disclaimers: First, the Rape of the Landmark: few New Yorkers realize that (a) the only thing that's been designated an official "landmark" at Grand Central is its exterior; that (b) the Breuer scheme scrupulously respects that (rather indifferent) exterior; that (c) the only thing really worth designating as an official "landmark" at Grand Central—and all historians agree



This is the building originally planned in 1903 to go atop Grand Central.

Figure 32. Page from *New York* magazine with collage of Grand Central and unbuilt 1910 design, 1968. (Blake, "In Defense of an 'Outrage'")

"The building planned for atop Grand Central is at least better than one planned in 1903."



This is a rendering of how Breuer's building will look from the south.

on this—is the great, interior Concourse—but it hasn't been so designated, and could, without trouble, have been filled up with offices by the would-be developers; that (d) the developers and Breuer, instead, propose largely to preserve and, in some ways, to improve that interior space which they could have demolished; that (e) even the exterior of the Grand Central Terminal could have been demolished by the developers, since the Landmarks Preservation Law is so feeble, in its enforcement mechanisms, that it offers little more than a delaying action; and that, finally, this rather grotesque pop job may be the biggest effort in the area of landmarks preservation ever undertaken in this city and, possibly, in this country. The Breuer design goes far beyond the requirements of the feeble law in this respect. In short, the "villain" in this case is the Landmarks Preservation Law.

Second, the Rape of New York City Planning Policies and Principles: few New Yorkers realize that the City of New York has no master plan at all—this is probably the only major city in the world without one. So how could its planning policies be violated? There is talk of such a master plan, soon, but there has been that sort of idle talk for quite a few decades. As for the bulk of the proposed building, there was a detailed zoning study made for the City Planning Commission, some 20 years ago, by the firm of Harrison, Ballard and Allen, which advocated smaller slabs for Midtown Manhattan; because the then City Planning Commission didn't fight for the H-B-A proposals, they died; then, about five years ago, a watered-down version of the same proposals was adopted—watered down because the then City Planning Commission lacked the guts to fight for something better.

To sum up: there is no City Plan to which Breuer or anyone else could have conformed; and so the "villain" in this case is a City Planning Commission too spineless in the past to have fought for tough zoning laws and too unconcerned to have developed a master plan for the city as a whole.

Third, the congestion of the area: few New Yorkers realize that almost no reliable traffic studies exist for this part (or any other parts) of the city. When the very admirable, new Urban Design Group

Figure 33. Page from *New York* magazine with Grand Central Tower rendering, 1968. (Blake, "In Defense of an 'Outrage'")

imagine in his *Città Nuova* drawings (1914). And in return the railroad was granted “a rich continuous realty holding ... which it still owns of itself or through subsidiaries, to its very large profit.”<sup>46</sup> The complex, after all, had been built on land acquired with large public subsidies—with franchises, easements, condemnations, and so on. And, as Haskell saw it, the Saady-Breuer proposal was “a case in point” of the railroad defaulting on these obligations. “All over the U.S.,” he wrote, “there is now going forward a large-scale diversion of this property from railroad use to real-estate profit-making by lease or sale. It evades the railroads’ manifest public service responsibility and enriches the railroad companies on land while the railroads’ service is widely regarded as going all but completely to pot.”<sup>47</sup>

Like Blake’s collage, Haskell imagined the possibility of recovering a “former future” incompatible with prevailing economies of development. But an even more explicit illustration of this desire was featured on the cover of a 1987 issue of the same magazine: a cartoon wrecking ball knocks into the Pan Am Building, throwing debris where Breuer’s tower was to rise (fig. 34). Inside, accompanying a feature on “the buildings New Yorkers love to hate,” a doctored photograph resurrects the vista, blocked since 1965 by this “Bauhaus-inspired monolith” (fig. 35).<sup>48</sup> Vincent Scully had described, in “The Death of the Street,” how the Pan Am delivered Park Avenue “its fatal blow” (fig. 36). “It visually denies the continuity of the Avenue beyond Grand Central, deprecates the length of the Avenue’s axis of movement, and smothers its scale,” he wrote.<sup>49</sup> But the *New York* photograph, reopening a formerly solid wall of tower slabs to a light blue sky, restoring the street’s axis of movement and continuity, visualizes

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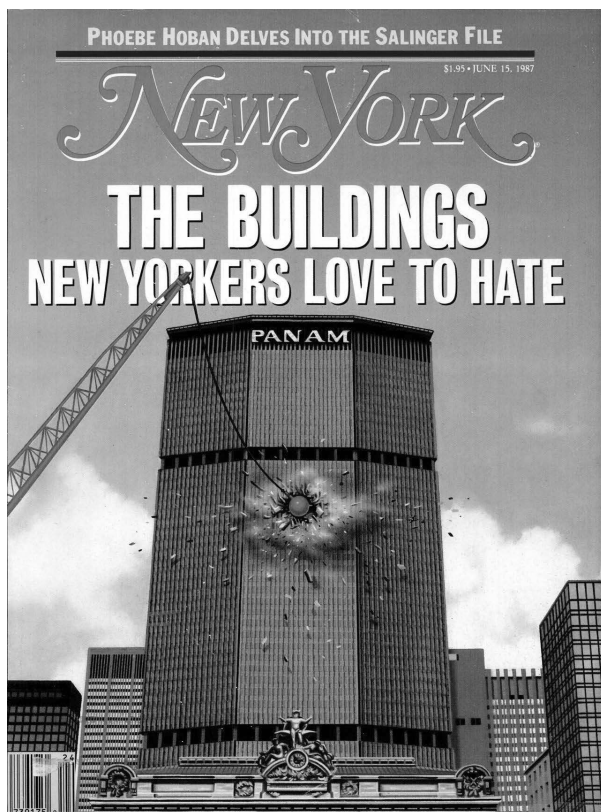
<sup>46</sup> Haskell, “The Lost New York,” 107–108.

<sup>47</sup> Haskell, letter, May 1969, 16–18.

<sup>48</sup> Richard David Story, “The Buildings New Yorkers Love to Hate,” *New York*, June 15, 1987.

<sup>49</sup> Scully, “The Death of the Street,” 95.





**J**UST IMAGINE WHAT THE CITY WOULD BE LIKE IF THE buildings New Yorkers love to hate could be demolished. Big, overbearing, ugly buildings. Banal buildings that screw up memorable views. All-right buildings in the wrong places. Monstrosities that should never have been built *anywhere*, much less here.

But how to choose from the cornucopia of taste and trash that is the cityscape of the mid-1980s? *New York* asked more than 100 prominent New Yorkers—people who have a special interest in the city and treasure its glories—to name the ten buildings they'd most like to see knocked down. They could name any kind of structure: residential or commercial buildings, museums or government buildings, old ones, new ones, even monuments like the Unisphere in Flushing Meadows Park, left over from the 1964 World's Fair.

The results were at once surprising, predictable, and provocative—and showed how caring New Yorkers feel about the skyline they have to live with. The ten buildings receiving the most nominations for the wrecker's ball were all put up in the last 25 years. Two of America's most celebrated architects, Philip Johnson and Edward Durell Stone, designed two each, and three were built by the firm Emery Roth & Sons. Only one person mentioned Trump Tower, which caused some grumbling when it went up on Fifth Avenue and 56th Street in 1983 but now seems to be an accepted part of the landscape. Instead, the Pan Am Building, 24 years old this year, and the Marriott Marquis hotel, open only 21 months, were the clear choices for extinction.

Abe Beame and William F. Buckley Jr. said they couldn't think of any buildings they wanted to demolish, and Donald Trump passed. "I have friends who were responsible for many of New York's ten worst buildings," he said. "I don't want to embarrass them!"

"Alas," lamented Brooke Astor, "so many of the buildings that I dislike intensely have been designed by people I know, and in order to keep my friends, I should keep my mouth shut."

Others, like Norman Mailer, didn't even know where to begin. "I can't list 10 buildings; the number would come to 10,000," said Mailer. "Ninety to 95 percent of the high-rise architecture put up since World War II sits on the New York skyline like an incubus."

Evelyn Lauder would take down half of Manhattan. The dehumanizing heights and the shadows cast by New York's enormous structures, she said, make her feel "like a tiny little insect scurrying through traffic to get to my destination."

Even the run-up managed to spark some passion. The new, colorful Tinkertoy of a building, the Memphis Downtown Condominiums, in the West Village, drew the wrath of admiral Jerry Della Femina. "They wouldn't even have built that in Miami," he grouched. Manhattan district attorney Robert Mor-

genhau would rip off the top twelve floors of 108 East 96th Street—built, said Morgenthau, "against the zoning laws." If former parks commissioner Gordon Davis had his way, the equestrian statue of Teddy Roosevelt being led by an African and an Indian would be blasted from its site in front of the Museum of Natural History. "Unless," said Davis, "Roosevelt got off and walked with them." Herb Schmetz, the P.R. wizard of Mobil Oil, thinks the entire Sixth Avenue valley of post-World War II skyscrapers from 42nd to 90th Street should come crashing down, along with all of 8th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Jerry Kosinski came up with five fictional buildings ("the Truistown Townhouses, Impasse Row, East Village," was one) ready for the wrecking ball.

Ed Koch said that he took "no pleasure in seeing a particular building demolished." But he added, "We should remove all of our in rem buildings [those abandoned by their owners and taken over by the city] that are not structurally sound, and preserve those that we ultimately will rehabilitate and fill with tenants."

Gloria Steinem, who didn't name names, also struck an altruistic note: "Tear down all welfare, SRO, and homeless buildings, and build low-cost, economically and racially mixed housing."

Only a few people—Condé Nast editorial director Alexander Liberman was one—said they would leave New York just as it is. "If every building were a masterpiece, the whole would be an unbearable bore," observed Liberman, who said he would destroy only the slums and burned-out and abandoned buildings. And then only if "good replacements are built quickly."

Caborn Elliott, the former editor of *Newsweek* and deputy mayor under Beame, nominated the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan's Sackler Wing, which houses the Temple of Dendur. James Brady, the columnist, excoriated the Pan Am Building's new lobby for looking like the third act of *Aida*, and Marietta Tree said the U.S. Mission to the U.N., with its honeycomb facade and primitive security devices, had the look of a building under siege. Gay Talese stuck close to home: "A neighbor's swimming pool—twice in the last year—flooded my basement office, leaving my floor strewn with his wife's bathing caps, his kid's plastic boats, and what looks like the tail of a real baby alligator that, apparently, is related to the old alligator discovered in 1941 in the bowels of the IRT."

But the grandest vision of all belongs to editor Michael Korda. "I'm not sure it wouldn't be a good idea to go back to the beginning instead!" said Korda. "After all, why demolish a mere half a dozen or a dozen buildings, and what would that accomplish? Why not just take it down to the bare rock and start again?"

In the meantime, here are ten to begin with.



BLUE SKIES: Park Avenue without Pan Am.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY FREDERICK CHARLES

JUNE 15, 1987/NEW YORK 31



Figure 34. *Above left*: Cover of *New York* magazine illustrating demolition of the Pan Am Building, 1987.

Figure 35. *Above right*: Page of *New York* magazine illustrating Park Avenue vista without the Pan Am Building, 1987.

(Story, "The Buildings New Yorkers Love to Hate")

Figure 36. *Left*: Park Avenue vista blocked by the Pan Am Building, 1963. (Scully, "The Death of the Street," 96)

a present in which that “death” had not come to pass. It engages in an almost revanchist fantasy to reclaim the past’s lost (because unfulfilled) potential.

### *Totem-Pole Urban Architecture*

This is what I mean when I say that Breuer’s opponents often saw diagrammed in his project a contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous: not a mere adjacency or coequality of old and new, but a sedimentation of pasts interrupted in ever newer presents. “Is New York,” Nelson asked, “going to turn into something like the seven layers of ancient Troy?”<sup>50</sup> The question implies a perspective similar to the one that Benjamin famously attributed to the “angel of history”—“turned toward the past,” a storm called progress “piling wreckage upon wreckage” at his feet.<sup>51</sup> In Breuer’s (and his critic’s) New York, the storm of progress manifested itself, in James Marston Fitch’s words, as a “period of accelerating obsolescence, when the effective economic (*not* physical) lifespan of buildings is being sharply reduced.”<sup>52</sup> And Alan Dunn illustrated this acceleration incisively with a cartoon drawn for *Record*’s October 1968 issue (fig. 37). A pair of men sit on stones in front of the Sphinx of Giza and ask, in the caption, “OK—we sent them the Temple of Dendur, now what’s to prevent them from sending us Grand Central Station?”<sup>53</sup> At the risk of over-explaining the joke: it took two millennia and the construction of the Aswan Dam for the Temple of Dendur to reach the end of its architectural life—relocated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art the previous year—but it looked to Dunn as if Grand Central was due to reach its own end after only fifty years of useful operation.

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<sup>50</sup> Nelson, “Don’t Fire Until You See the Tops of Their Roofs!”

<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 257.

<sup>52</sup> Fitch, “Grand Central Terminal and Rockefeller Center,” 16 (emphasis in original).

<sup>53</sup> Alan Dunn, “O.K.—We Sent Them the Temple of Dendur,” *Architectural Record* 144 (October 1968): 10.

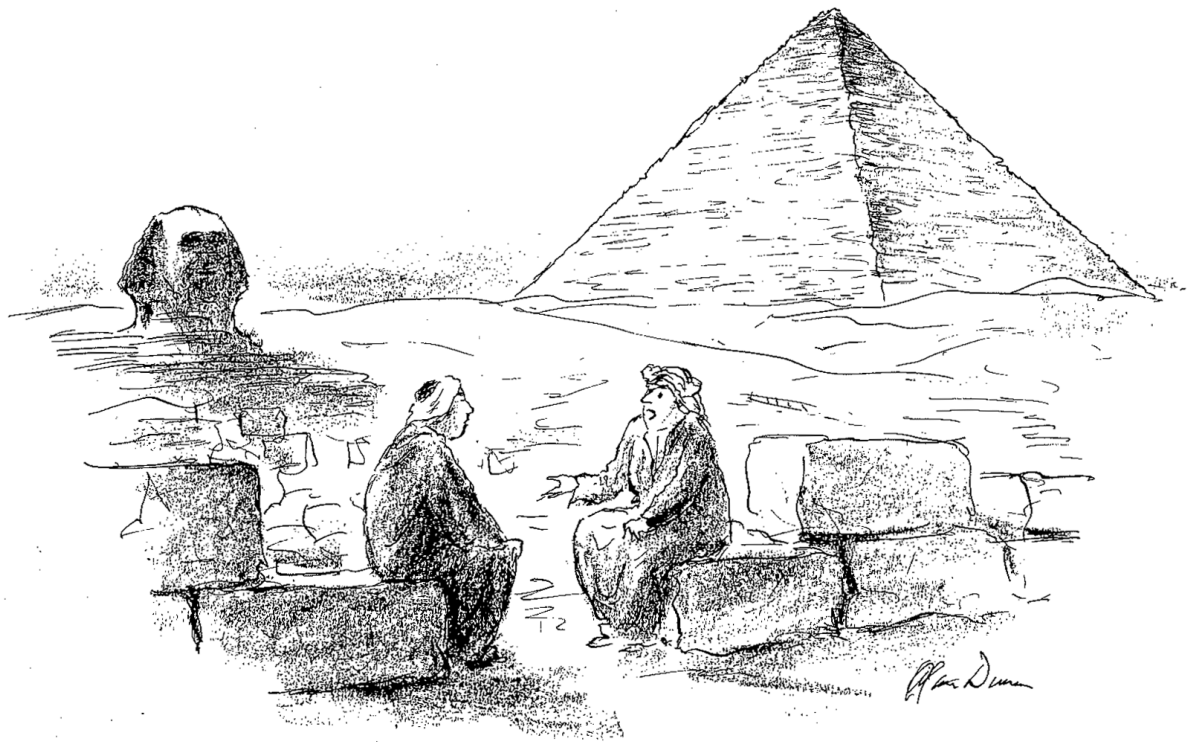


Figure 37. Alan Dunn, *Architectural Record* cartoon, 1968. (Dunn, "O.K.—We Sent Them the Temple of Dendur," 10)

Moholy-Nagy, similarly, imagined that the old head house could survive this storm only as “testimony” to a lapsed era of “architectural urbanity.” It had been snared, she believed, in a quickening replacement cycle that was not likely to stop with Breuer’s addition. Were Grand Central Tower to be built, it too would be destined for premature obsolescence. And Moholy-Nagy thus predicted a future in which Breuer’s architecture would appear just as passé as the terminal’s. Both, she speculated, might soon be put out of date under even newer phases of development—perhaps under, for example, “a High Technology Center of Computerized Existence” or “divine slabs salvaged from the set of ‘2001.’”<sup>54</sup> In this sense, the collage that illustrated Moholy-Nagy’s text looks less, as the caption described it, like “the forerunner of a new serial style, totem-pole urban architecture,”<sup>55</sup> and more like a core sample taken through the city’s temporal strata (fig. 38). Breuer’s tower surmounts the terminal, but is itself surmounted, first, by an even newer structure that revives the abandoned 1910 design, and above that, by a sparkling glass cube inspired by the minimalist sculpture of Larry Bell. Just as Benjamin’s angel, propelled into the future, watches “while the pile of debris before him grows skyward,”<sup>56</sup> Moholy-Nagy and the *Art in America* editors visualized an accumulation of architectural remains abandoned in the wake of progress. The collage’s striation of old things, modern things, retro things, and futuristic things was a layering of outmodedness. Each stratum stood for a vision of the city whose fulfillment had been preempted by the one above, and in total the image parodied

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<sup>54</sup> Moholy-Nagy, “Hitler’s Revenge.”

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 258.

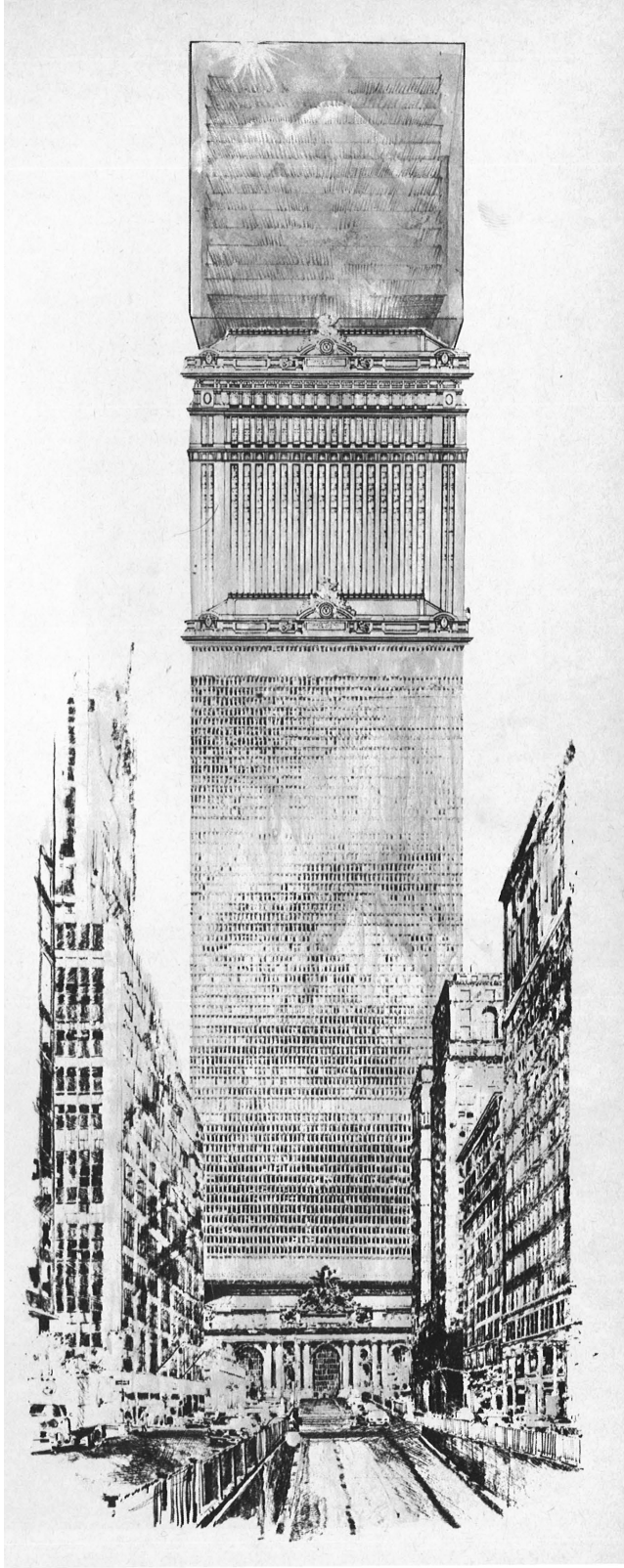


Figure 38. *Art in America* collage featuring Grand Central Tower rendering, 1968. (Moholy-Nagy, "Hitler's Revenge")

capitalist modernity's tendency to leave the past's business unfinished, in the words of media scholar Joel Burges, "frequently to repeat—and therefore often to break—its promises."<sup>57</sup>

To reiterate, as much as Breuer (specifically) and modern movement architecture (more generally) were indeed often cast by critics as villains in the Grand Central Tower controversy, the major conflict transcended their vandalism of the terminal. Blake made this point perhaps most explicitly. "The villain," he wrote, "was our sacrosanct Free Enterprise System, with its equally sacrosanct faith in private ownership of land."<sup>58</sup> Although many disagreed with his conclusions—that, though "a bit grotesque," Breuer's design had "a lot of merit"<sup>59</sup>—very few (if any) critics disagreed with his premise. Moreover, to mock what even Blake saw as "grotesque" about Grand Central Tower was a way to mock the authority of that apparently "sacrosanct" system—to satirize and falsify its "totalist assumptions ... and its claims to be timeless," borrowing Hal Foster's words.<sup>60</sup> A final set of examples—published in the *Village Voice* during the weeks leading up to the LPC's final veto—might push this critique furthest. On five consecutive Thursdays, starting in late-August 1968, the paper, drawing tongue-in-cheek inspiration from Breuer's surrealist gesture, offered a series of collages that columnist Howard Smith explained, sardonically, as illustrations of how "we can live with our landmarks and our speculators at the same time."<sup>61</sup> Smith pasted monuments from New York's newly obsolescent past against the postwar growth machine's own monuments—tributes to its contemporaneity. Can we imagine, he asked, "the high, prestige rents" to be commanded were the Washington

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<sup>57</sup> Joel Burges, "The Television and the Teapot: Obsolescence, *All That Heaven Allows*, and a Sense of Historical Time in Contemporary Life," in *Trash Culture: Objects and Obsolescence in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Gillian Pye (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 215.

<sup>58</sup> Blake, "In Defense of an 'Outrage.'"

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Hal Foster, "The ABCs of Contemporary Design," *October* 100 (2002): 196.

<sup>61</sup> Howard Smith, "Scenes," *Village Voice*, August 22, 1968.

Square arch inserted into the middle of a curtain-walled high-rise (fig. 39),<sup>62</sup> or the “historically quaint” City Hall set astride a pair of “sleek skyscrapers” (fig. 40)?<sup>63</sup> Would a precariously stacked assemblage of luxury apartments, brownstones, and tenement blocks help “keep our speculators in the money while we hang on to the city’s architectural charm” (fig. 41)?<sup>64</sup> If we can read some normative intent into Smith’s caustic sarcasm and the collages’ jarring contrasts, they imply that these two aims (maximizing rent and preserving landmarks) ought to be incompatible; they imply that the effort to resolve the city’s temporal heterogeneity under a unifying logic of capital accumulation ought to result in a deep absurdity.

### ***The Outmoded Now Outmoded Too***

Amid efforts of the past few years to understand the preservation activism of the 1960s in some kind of continuity with work being done today,<sup>65</sup> I want to stress, instead, the *discontinuity* that might be made visible were we to share with Smith and his colleagues their sensitivity to the heterochronic. I want to stress their truculence toward the city’s reigning political and economic coalitions—a truculence toned-down or overlooked in most other histories—as a point of contrast with the progrowth enthusiasm underwriting much of what is marketed as historic preservation in the United States today. As Alexander Reichl has noted, the rhetoric of preservation has become, for many cities, the glue that holds together their most profitable development schemes. In his words, it is often the “means by which widespread support for

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Howard Smith, “Scenes,” *Village Voice*, September 5, 1968.

<sup>64</sup> Howard Smith, “Scenes,” *Village Voice*, September 12, 1968.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Donald Albrecht and Andrew Dolkart, *Saving Place: 50 Years of New York City Landmarks* (New York: Monacelli, 2015).

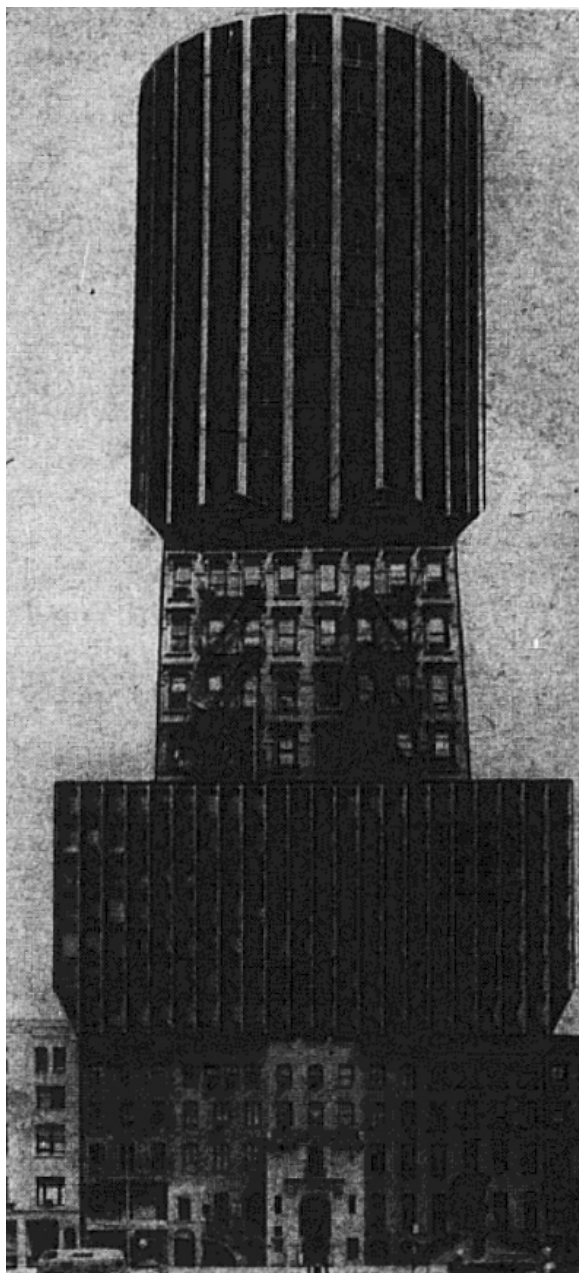
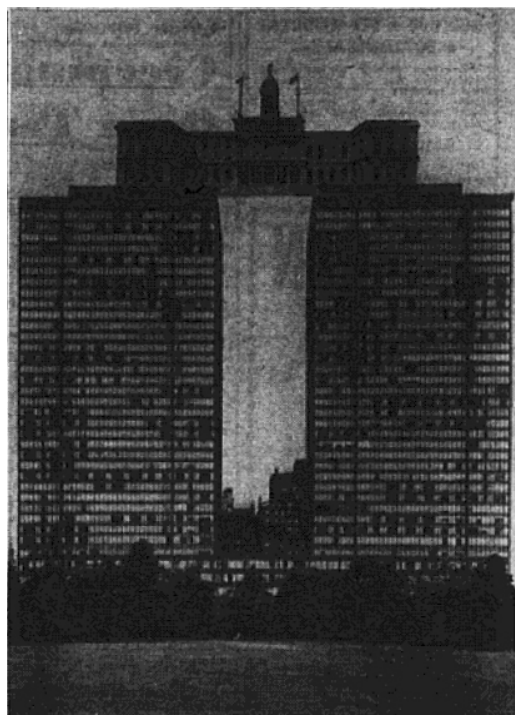
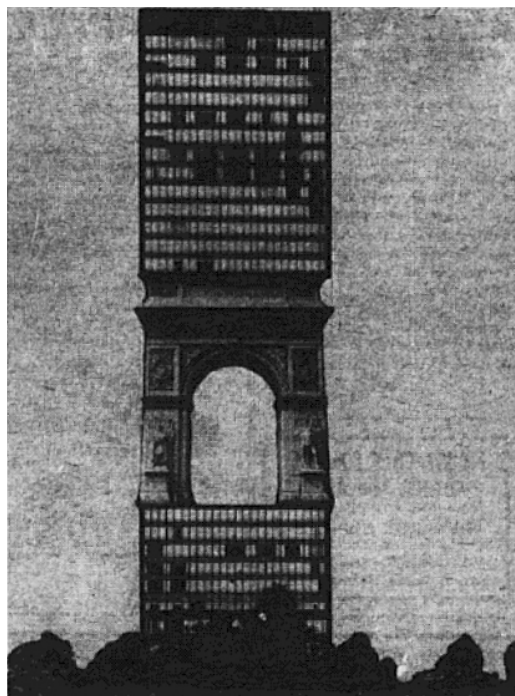


Figure 39. *Above left: Village Voice* collage of speculator high rise and Washington Square arch, 1968. (Smith, "Scenes," August 22, 1968)

Figure 40. *Above right: Village Voice* collage of speculator high rises and New York's City Hall, 1968. (Smith, "Scenes," September 5, 1968)

Figure 41. *Left: Village Voice* collage of housing types, 1968. (Smith, "Scenes," September 12, 1968)



redevelopment efforts can be politically constructed.”<sup>66</sup> This is an irony that the opposition to Grand Central Tower can help reveal—that is, if we are willing to see the project as these critics did.

In other words, to see continuity between the reaction against Grand Central Tower and today’s wide instrumentalization of a preservationist agenda by development concerns requires that we suppress what was most subversive in the “Save Grand Central” campaign. It requires that we simply call Saady and Breuer vandals—that we ignore the confrontation with an anti-democratic political machinery and the seizure of obsolescence as a means of laying bare that machinery’s own absurdity. Thus the concluding question that I want to ask in this chapter is: what could be the *critical* purchase of obsolescence today? If non-contemporaneity was important for Bloch insofar as it could oppose or contradict what he termed his “capitalist Now,”<sup>67</sup> what is its role in the “neoliberal Now” of our own cities, particularly if obsolescence is stripped here of critical energies and made a secondary market for real estate speculation? Foster asked a broader version of this question in 2002: the outmoded once seemed to him (as for Bloch and Benjamin) capable of reminding capitalist culture “of its own wish symbols, and its own forfeited dreams of liberty, equality, and fraternity.” He wondered, “Can this mnemonic dimension of the outmoded still be mined today, or is the outmoded now outmoded too—another device of fashion?”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Alexander J. Reichl, “Historic Preservation and Progrowth Politics in U.S. Cities,” *Urban Affairs Review* 32, no. 4 (March 1, 1997): 514–515. For example, The Howard Hughes Corporation markets the redeveloped Seaport District as “New York City’s oldest new neighborhood.” Howard Hughes Corporation, “The Howard Hughes Corporation Signs Chef and Restaurateur Jean-Georges Vongerichten to Open Culinary Experiences at the Revitalized Seaport District,” September 9, 2015, <http://www.southstreetseaport.com/docs/seaport-jean-georges-announcement.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 109.

<sup>68</sup> Foster, “The ABCs of Contemporary Design,” 196.

I am not offering an answer, but rather suggesting, whatever our response, it will depend on how we perceive the time of the city and how we leverage that perceptiveness politically. Breuer's critics, to be sure, were sensitive to the universalizing, hegemonic force of corporate capital, but they were equally sensitive to the counter-hegemonic force of what had fallen out of sync with "the great clock of development"—as it would be put by Frederic Jameson in his own reading of Bloch.<sup>69</sup> What happens if we turn to look at our own cities through their eyes? What happens, particularly, if we look at that quintessentially neoliberal urban environment, shot through, since 2008, with abandonments and foreclosures? Can we see in these, our own obsolescent remainders, the same coincidence of eccentric, heterogenous times that critics saw so clearly diagrammed in Grand Central Tower? Can we see in our own forfeited "wish symbols" the same critical energies that they saw in theirs?

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<sup>69</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 309.

## CONCLUSION

*Gateway to a Caviarateria*

In May 1982, The Municipal Art Society mounted an exhibition, *Grand Central Terminal: City Within the City*, at the New-York Historical Society to celebrate the Supreme Court's confirmation of the terminal's landmark status. The exhibit was underwritten by Philip Morris Incorporated; the tobacco interest was building its headquarters opposite to Grand Central's head house, replacing the art deco Airlines Terminal Building (1941) at Forty-Second Street and Park Avenue with a twenty-six-story concrete tower designed by Ulrich Franzen.<sup>1</sup> George Weissman, Philip Morris's Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, wrote a statement on sponsorship that was included in an accompanying catalog of images and essays:

The Grand Central Terminal Exhibition appeals to Philip Morris for geographic and aesthetic reasons. The New York Central's graceful monument to railroading evokes a feeling of permanence. Its presence has become, quite literally, the foundation of a renaissance in the midtown area it dominates. Our new Corporate World Headquarters building stands directly across from Grand Central on 42nd Street, its architecture reflecting and complementing the exquisite Beaux-Arts charm of one of New York's most important landmarks. . . . We can think of no finer way to celebrate our new home address than to support this salute to the imposing presence and vital influence of Grand Central.<sup>2</sup>

Weisman characterized his company's decision to build "in the heart of New York" as evidence of Philip Morris's commitment to "the vitality of the central cities,"<sup>3</sup> but he left unmentioned the degree to which that decision was made easier by the Court's ruling. With construction above Grand Central prohibited, nearly two million square feet of development rights had been left vacant and unimprovable—rights that, under the city's zoning resolution, the landmark's owner

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<sup>1</sup> "Philip Morris Says Airlines Terminal Building On E. 42d Will Be Replaced by Office Tower," *New York Times*, August 2, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> George Weissman, sponsorship statement, in *Grand Central Terminal: City Within the City*, ed. Deborah Nevins (New York: Municipal Art Society of New York, 1982), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

could sell or transfer to adjacent non-landmarked properties where height and setback restrictions would be waived.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, in 1979, Philip Morris bought 74,655 square feet of the terminal's unused air rights, facilitating the construction of a tower with a floor area ratio well above well above what density regulations would have otherwise permitted. Five more transfers followed thereafter. Most recently, in 2004, 43,244 square feet were moved to Madison Avenue between Forty-Third and Forty-Fourth Streets when a developer resurfaced a 1920s masonry structure in glass and steel in order to maximize the building's rentable floor space.<sup>5</sup> The largest transfer, however, occurred in 1998, when 285,866 square feet were bought by investment brokerage Bear Stearns for the construction of its own headquarters at 383 Madison Avenue, a full-block, forty-five-story, curtain-walled octagon designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.<sup>6</sup>

I have argued that the opponents of Marcel Breuer's Grand Central Tower addition were less interested in preserving the terminal's head house than in halting the advancement of a growth machinery that had been operating for private rather than public benefit. It is thus ironic (and a little tragic) to see their success at the former result in a failure at the latter. It is ironic, in other words, to see preservationist interests end in such close alignment with the "mighty commercial interests" that the "Save Grand Central" campaigners had set out to oppose.<sup>7</sup> In the end, blocking Breuer's tower hastened not only the maximal exploitation of midtown real estate

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<sup>4</sup> Department of City Planning, "Grand Central Subdistrict" (New York, November 1991), 1–9.

<sup>5</sup> Department of City Planning, "A Survey of Transferable Development Rights Mechanisms in New York City" (New York, February 26, 2015), 21–22, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/tdr/tdr-1.shtml>; John Holusha, "A New Face on Madison Avenue," *New York Times*, October 26, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Department of City Planning, "Transferable Development Rights Mechanisms," 22; Edwin McDowell, "Around Grand Central, New Office Towers and a 54-Floor Residence," *New York Times*, February 13, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> "The voice of preservationist was a lonely voice, powerless against mighty commercial interests." Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, "Foreword," in *Grand Central Terminal: City Within the City*, ed. Deborah Nevins (New York: Municipal Art Society of New York, 1982), 9.

for the benefit of corporate bottom lines, but also the obsolescence of structures like the Airlines Terminal Building and the twelve-story, terra-cotta Knapp Building (1922), which the Bear Sterns headquarters replaced in 1999. Weissman congratulated Philip Morris for understanding that “our business activities must make social sense,” just as he congratulated the Municipal Arts Society for understanding that “our social activities must make business sense.”<sup>8</sup> But I want to stress, instead, the degree to which this alignment of interests represents a neoliberal hollowing out of the politics of preservation—retaining its concern for the “permanence” of landmarks like Grand Central, but jettisoning its critique of the market’s unchecked authority.

Wendy Brown has argued recently (updating Michel Foucault’s 1978–79 lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*) that neoliberalism is best understood not as a simple renewal of classical economic liberalism, but as a fundamental reformulation of political sovereignty—“one that not only constrained, but produced a new form of the state and its legitimacy.” With the emergence of neoliberalism as a governing rationality, “the market became the new site of truth or veridiction”; the market “came to construct, measure, and legitimate the state.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, insofar as the market is itself now politically sovereign, the state’s social policies are considered valid and worthwhile only to the extent that they serve capital enhancement and accumulation. As Brown put it, “economic growth *is* the state’s social policy.”<sup>10</sup> And if its endeavors fail to promote the project of growth, they may “legitimately” be cast aside. Brown described, moreover, the saturation of this neoliberal rationality into ever larger spheres of human activity. The value of higher education, for example, has been increasingly judged by market metrics like return on investment and the capacity of students for economic advantage, “removing quaint

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<sup>8</sup> Weissman, sponsorship statement.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 57–58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 64 (emphasis in original).

concerns with developing the person or citizen.”<sup>11</sup> I would like to argue that Grand Central’s trajectory of development following the Supreme Court decision illustrates the extension of a similar neoliberal reason into the arena of preservation. Growth has been made both its end and its means of legitimation.

In 1990, the Metro-North Commuter Railroad—by then the sole operator of Grand Central’s daily traffic of five hundred inbound and outbound trains—announced a plan “to restore its majestic interior and transform the vaulted terminal into a major center for retail, civic, and cultural activities,” as the *New York Times* reported.<sup>12</sup> If the 1970s “Save Grand Central” campaign had been conceived as a means of limiting the influence of “mighty commercial interests,” this 1990s effort was, instead, explicitly designed to “exploit the building’s commercial potential.”<sup>13</sup> The terminal’s restoration was financed by a near doubling of its retail space; as a *Times* headline announced upon the project’s completion in 1998, Grand Central had been “reborn as a mall.” David Dunlap described the extent of this transformation: the development team “is doing more than rehabilitating a great railway station. It is creating a Beaux-Arts vessel for an enormous new commercial enterprise.” “No longer the ‘Gateway to a Continent,’” he wrote, “Grand Central will be more like the Gateway to a Caviarateria—or a hundred other establishments, among them Banana Republic, Citarella, City Bakery, Kenneth Cole, the Discovery Channel Store, Junior’s, Mike’s Takeaway, J. Peterman, Posman Books, Republic, Rite Aid, Starbucks, Two Boots Pizza and Zocalo.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin Sims, “Metro-North Plans \$400 Million Grand Central Renewal,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> David W. Dunlap, “Grand Central, Reborn as a Mall,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1998.

Additionally, within the next two years, this commercial “rebirth” sparked, in the area, at least a dozen new speculative building schemes, refurbishments, and modernizations: a fifty-four-story residential tower by RFR Davis, a one-million-square-foot office tower for the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, a thirty-story tower by Essex Capital Partners, a pair of hotel conversions, renovations at the Kent and Chrysler Buildings, to name just a handful of projects. The leasing agent for many of these properties credited the restoration of Grand Central with demonstrating to developers “the area’s potential” in terms of profitability. And, indeed, the Bear Sterns CEO, James Cayne, told the *Times* that the terminal’s commercial makeover was “a major factor” in its decision to headquarter nearby.<sup>15</sup> The problem that I am trying to highlight, however, is not that the preservation of Grand Central catalyzed (or accelerated) redevelopment in its neighborhood, but that the extent of redevelopment was preservation’s “veridiction” (to use Foucault’s word)—that Grand Central’s commercial profitability, its ability to function as what Harvey Molotch would call a “growth-inducing resource,”<sup>16</sup> its contribution to the neoliberal project of capital enhancement were regarded as the most significant measurements of preservation’s success, as proof of preservation’s legitimacy as an undertaking. When Herbert Muschamp, architecture critic at the *Times*, called the restoration “the greatest feat of historical preservation in the city’s history,”<sup>17</sup> he did not distinguish between the quality of the restorative work and the revenue it was poised to generate. For him, to have accomplished one was already to have accomplished the other.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> McDowell, “Around Grand Central.”

<sup>16</sup> Molotch, “The City as a Growth Machine.”

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Muschamp, “Restoration Liberates Grand Vistas, and Ideas,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> An earlier preservation effort can provide a useful point of contrast. A proposal was made, in 1960, to suspend a three-story bowling alley—including forty-four lanes, a press box, dining rooms, lounges, snack bars, and pro shops—from the ceiling of Grand Central’s waiting room.

*Idiosyncratic. Self Indulgent. Frivolous.*

The alliance between preservation and corporate capital troubles me insofar as it strips the former of its critical traction—of its value as a means of challenging the latter’s expanding authority in the neoliberal city. Thus, while I agree with Muschamp that Beyer Blinder Belle (the New York firm behind the terminal’s restoration) can be commended for the sensitivity and clarity of its interventions,<sup>19</sup> I still prefer the surreality of Breuer’s 1968 vision for Grand Central’s future. Put most simply, Breuer’s Grand Central Tower drew attention to the havoc and irrationality that had been passing for progress. It threw critical light on architecture’s complicity in an anti-democratic politics of development—on architecture’s complicity in a reshaping of the city for the benefit and in the image of a corporate elite. It served as a site for the mobilization of resistance to city’s governing growth coalitions. It did all of this precisely because it was (returning to the Planning Commission’s estimation) “the wrong building, in the wrong place, at the wrong time.” Its wrongness on each of these counts—the incompatibility of its architecture, the surreality of its position, the discontinuity of its temporality—let it articulate a rupture between public and private interests that a conventionally “correct” architectural solution would have hidden. There is nothing “wrong,” for example, with Beyer Blinder Belle’s restoration of

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But, as James Marston Fitch recalled, “A scheme at once to venal and frivolous could not survive the storm of protest it provoked,” and “This grotesque proposal undoubtedly expedited the subsequent designation of Grand Central Terminal as a Landmark.” Fitch, “Grand Central Terminal and Rockefeller Center,” 7. Preservation was regarded as successful in this case because it blocked commercial exploitation of the terminal’s interior. Preservation was regarded as successful in the case of the 1990s restoration because it abetted commercial exploitation of the terminal’s interior.

<sup>19</sup> In the main concourse, for example, the architects cleaned and restored the zodiac mural on vaulted ceiling, added a new staircase to the eastern balcony, drawing inspiration from the original architects’ plans for the room, and uncovered ramps leading to the lower level, enhancing, as Muschamp put it, “the terminal’s identity as a place of vertical as well as horizontal circulation.” Muschamp, “Restoration Liberates Grand Vistas, and Ideas.” See also Belle and Leighton, *Grand Central*.



Grand Central, and so, unlike Breuer's tower, it dissimulates architecture's and preservation's participation in the continuing havoc and irrationality of capitalist modernity.

It is tempting to read this fertile wrongness of Breuer's proposal as postmodernist *avant la lettre*. I began to suggest such an interpretation in chapter one where I argued that Grand Central Tower's ironies and inconsistencies fulfilled, to a degree, Robert Venturi's call for a complex and contradictory architecture against the puritanical strictures of orthodox modernism. When Philip Johnson was featured on the cover of a 1979 issue of *Time* magazine, he carried a model of his AT&T Building and stood before a background of stereotypically uninflected modernist slabs (fig. 42). The image was meant to illustrate a radical break from postwar corporate architecture accomplished by Johnson's reintroduction of historicist reference to the skyscraper type. But the AT&T Building's concatenation of past and present idioms had already been tested by Breuer at Grand Central (and Johnson's tower bears a strikingly close resemblance to the *New Yorker's* parody of the terminal addition—a classical facade atop a modernist shaft [fig. 28]). And, moreover, much of the response to the AT&T design echoed the outrage—including Johnson's own—that had already been voiced against Grand Central Tower: “It's mongrel architecture” (Jan C.K. Anderson); “It's totally inappropriate and can't possibly succeed” (John Portman); “Idiosyncratic. Self Indulgent. Frivolous.” (James Marston Fitch); “The whole thing is turned in one stroke from a serious building of quality to a bad joke” (Judith Wolin); “It is appalling that anyone would talk Ma Bell into doing this, and to doing it to New York” (Raymond J. Wisniewski).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> These responses were collected in a July 1978 edition of the Municipal Arts Society's newsletter. “Ma Bell Builds Her Dream House,” *The Livable City*, July 1978, Greenacre Reference Library, Municipal Art Society of New York.



Figure 42. *Time* magazine cover featuring Philip Johnson, 1979. (<http://time.com/vault/>)

In other words, formally speaking, Grand Central Tower does seem to have anticipated the way that an eclectic borrowing of past styles would come, in the following decades, to scandalize modernist conventions and challenge modernist aesthetic dominance in the postwar city. But Breuer's addition also raised theoretical questions about the relationship of new buildings to existing urban fabrics that would be asked again in tandem with the architectural discipline's rediscovery of history in the 1970s and 1980s. What might be the precise nature of Grand Central Tower's relevance to this extensive body of literature is, of course, beyond the scope of my study. But I want to add a few concluding thoughts prompted, in particular, by an essay authored by Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, "Urban Transformations & The Architecture of Additions," published in a 1978 issue of *Architectural Design*—part of the first wave of writings on architectural postmodernism to appear in the United Kingdom. De Arce listed three basic ways that cities grow, "extension" (read: suburban sprawl), "substitution" (read: tabula rasa modernism), and "additive transformation—in which an original nucleus is transformed by a sedimentary and incremental process of addition of new parts." "This third form of growth," he argued, "has been almost completely ignored in recent periods of urban development, and the notion of a balanced form of development has been disregarded in favor of indiscriminate and wild urban extension, often combined with unrestricted destruction and renewal."<sup>21</sup> He believed that architects ought to draw inspiration, when working in historic urban environments, from the accretive processes by which cities themselves had developed—built up gradually through layers of alteration, appropriation, and addition.

In other words, de Arce understood and explained the city as if it were a palimpsest. This was a vision that he shared with Rodolfo Machado, who had written an essay for *Progressive*

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<sup>21</sup> Rodrigo Pérez de Arce, "Urban Transformations & The Architecture of Additions," *Architectural Design* 48, no. 4 (1978): 237.

*Architecture* called “Old Buildings as Palimpsest” while teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1976. For both, the existing urban fabric was a manuscript, written and rewritten, erasures incomplete, its old words still legible beneath the new.<sup>22</sup> And their vision was meant to challenge a common understanding of the city’s historical remains as “anomalous elements which, depending on the value [placed] on them, should be either preserved or destroyed.”<sup>23</sup> Instead, for them, the city was a historical matrix into which new buildings were to be attentively inserted: “The past provides the already-written, the marked ‘canvas’ on which each successive remodeling will find its own place.”<sup>24</sup> I have already noted that the tabula rasa approach to urban redevelopment preferred by Breuer’s modernist contemporaries (and by Breuer himself) could not fully account for Grand Central Tower. But I want to suggest here that his addition also might exceed the palimpsest metaphor preferred by his postmodernist successors. Or rather, I want to suggest that Grand Central Tower can tell us something about the nature of urban growth that the palimpsest model does not emphasize.

For theorists like de Arce and Machado, the layered complexity of enduring city forms testified to processes of development as unpredictable and incontestable as forces of nature. Constant and “continuous adjustment, rearrangement and transformation” were courses of progress advancing inevitably through the generations. Worked over through trial and error by countless hands, the historical city laid bare the latent collaborative genius of its citizens; it was an unavoidably democratic expression of consensus. The accretion of urban architecture, if given enough time, was “almost necessarily a product of great quality.”<sup>25</sup> Grand Central Tower,

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<sup>22</sup> Rodolfo Machado, “Old Buildings as Palimpsest,” *Progressive Architecture* 57 (November 1976): 46–49.

<sup>23</sup> de Arce, “Urban Transformations,” 266.

<sup>24</sup> Machado, “Old Buildings as Palimpsest,” 49.

<sup>25</sup> de Arce, “Urban Transformations,” 237.

however, expressed a different set of processes; its leitmotif was not consensus but fracture. Breuer's proposal followed the same sedimentary logic that de Arce would advocate ten years later, but his addition parodied in advance the notion that such logic would lead urban architecture naturally, irresistibly toward continuity with its history—toward a stable if mutable sense of “place” or identity. Grand Central Tower exposed the antagonism of postwar urban politics, it exposed the contentiousness of an urban citizenry, and it exposed the necessity of asserting democratic values in the face of abrogation.

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