ART/ARCHITECTURE

ART/ARCHITECTURE; A Pair of Crystal Gems Right for Their Setting

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HERE come two more: a pair of New York buildings to which the term architecture can be applied without fear of bearing false witness. By chance, the new arrivals will be one short block from each other, in the southwest corner of SoHo just above Canal Street. Both are residential buildings. Both respond creatively to their surroundings, vividly demonstrating that context is a matter of time as well as space. And both offer further evidence of a trend: the emergence of the crystal as an emblem of new architecture in New York.

Philip Johnson and Winka Dubbeldam, the architects of these new gems, are generations apart in age but bring to their projects a similar preoccupation with faceted geometric shapes. This motif has recurred frequently in recent New York projects. Christian de Portzamparc initiated it with the LMVH Tower, a building described by him as a crystal flower. James Stewart Polshek followed

with the transparent quartz cube he designed for the Rose Center for Earth and Space. David Childs's design for Columbus Center, featuring two parallelogram-shape glass towers rising from a multifaceted base, will elevate the theme to epic heights. A design by Roger Duffy for 350 Madison Avenue, a parabuilding or addition that transforms an older structure, was a sparkling example of the genre. But Johnson and Dubbeldam's twin formations bump the crystal toward the status of a millennial proposition.

Philip Johnson's is the more outrageous. The boy is 94 and still can't help it. Here, Johnson has turned contextualism on its head. Using forms and materials familiar from the immediate surroundings, he has fashioned a surprise, a symbolic gateway to the downtown state of mind.

The project is on the southeast corner of Spring and Washington Streets, one block north of Canal. An auto mechanic's shop, housed in a utilitarian two-story shed, occupies the site. The Ear Inn, a venerable bohemian pub, is next door, in a landmark building that was once the residence of James Brown, an early 19th-century black entrepreneur. The district abounds in brick warehouses, factories and industrial lofts.

Johnson has responded to this urban patchwork with a design that is a collage in itself: a medium-rise Cubist composition of angular brick planes punched through with rows of rectangular windows. A 22-story tower, containing 50 apartments, rises from a four-story base, set flush with the street line on Washington and Spring. The lobby, a restaurant and possibly a satellite art museum will occupy the ground floor, along with the driveway to a parking garage on two levels above. A health club and terrace are planned for the fourth floor and the setback that wraps around it.

Now for the fun part: a habitable sculpture that one might call abstract if it did not refer explicitly to the surrounding streetscape. The design was in fact inspired by a piece of semifigurative sculpture, one of John Chamberlain's

crushed-automobile constructions. As rendered by Johnson, the sculpture subjects the neighborhood to a metaphoric chop-shop treatment. The facades are made of multiple facets, each different in shape, clad with bricks in an assortment of matched contextual colors.

The facets, most of trapezoidal contour, are cantilevered from a square-shaped service core that pops up on the roof. The effect is of a sliced-up rectangular solid, perhaps a Cubist rendition of a streetscape, in which the trapezoids provide an illusion of depth. Even the Czech Cubists were not so Cubistic.

Double-hung windows with lintels and a ziggurat of cascading cornices are the mirth-making part of the collage. These details are a cackling downtown descendant of the carved masonry facade of 1001 Fifth Avenue, an Upper East Side apartment building designed by Johnson and John Burgee in the 1970's. That earlier project, one of my favorite Johnson designs, was also a contextual essay. To appease the Fifth Avenue neighbors, Johnson was hired to supply a classical limestone mask for a modernoid building already designed. He responded with a piece of paper-thin limestone pastry, crowned with a cut-out false-mansard roof, the latter propped up by plainly conspicuous struts. In Tribeca, he deploys the cornices and rows of uniform, period-style windows as a sign of normalcy that is subverted by the fragmented facades. You almost want to see lines of laundry looped along the upper stories. (Commes des Garcons, of course.)

Bad idea: the genteel arched lobby entrance. The entry wants to be a Cubist miniature of the building above. In glass.

AS a resident of TriBeCa, I can testify that a Cubist skyscraper is better suited to the downtown context than the retro loft-style real estate that has gone up there in recent years. The TriBeCa Grand Hotel, to cite one recent example, is a blow to the neighborhood's nonconformist reputation. Johnson's developer, Nino

Vendome, plans to market the apartments through an art dealer, as if they were sculptural pieces. Call it ''Nude Descending a Skyline.'' Or ''The New York Manager,'' after Picasso's design for a character in the ballet ''Parade.''

Given Johnson's pivotal role in the history of taste, however, German Expressionist architecture is the Spring Street project's most deeply seated root. A movement that specialized in utopian fantasies, Expressionism flourished in the years just before the advent of the Bauhaus. The crystal was one of the movement's most potent symbols. It was instrumental in promoting the use of glass, an idea later incorporated in what Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock termed the International Style. The idea reached its supreme expression in 1958 with the Seagram Building, designed by Mies van der Rohe with Johnson's help.

When I was a student, in the late 60's, Expressionism had been written out of the official history of modern architecture, along with Constructivism, Cubism, Futurism and other alternative modernisms. George Collins, at Columbia University, was the only prominent historian who grasped the importance of these half-forgotten movements. His work on the subject was inspirational. When I saw that architecture could embrace the extravagant dreams he had unearthed, it became a vastly richer subject of study. To see Philip Johnson activating those dreams with this confident and fresh design is a minor historical miracle.

Winka Dubbeldam is Johnson's junior by about 50 years. She was not yet born when the Seagram Building was completed. And Dubbeldam, a native of the Netherlands who came to New York, has more in common with Mies than with Johnson. While her work is very much of the moment, it embodies a far more sober approach than he has ever cared to pursue. She is completely unconcerned with the notion of style. Her crystalline forms, composed of folded planes, arise from philosophical speculation about the relationship between geometric abstractions and the societies that project them.

Dubbeldam's new design, her second New York project, is a parabuilding, an addition that wraps around the top and one side of an existing loft structure on Greenwich Street between Spring and Canal. The six-story brick-faced structure will be gutted. A gallery operated by Dubbeldam's client will occupy the ground floor. The upper stories will contain two loft units per floor.

The 11-story building, clad entirely in glass and steel mullions, is the shape of an inverted L. A vertical piece rises to the left of the existing building, projects five more stories above it, then hangs a right. The overhang will house the owner's triplex.

The crystalline composition of the glass skin is Dubbeldam's main device. Only the bottom three stories of the skin are set in plumb. Above that, the facade angles forward and backward from the vertical in a series of creases. Diagonal crimps animate the skin between the third and sixth stories. These manipulations accommodate setbacks required by zoning. And they create large solariums within the apartments. Small open balconies provide a transitional zone between the host structure and para-site.

PORTZAMPARC, too, used a folded glass wall to overcome the box-on-a-base zoning regulations that have given New York the appearance of a storage depot. But Dubbeldam's folds are philosophically as well as visually grounded. Like Peter Eisenman, she challenges the grid as a structure of Western thought. Who wants to think like a box? Why not try turning the lens this way and that? And twinkle when you shake it?

In her project, the grid of steel mullions performs the same function as Johnson's period windows. It is a sign of normality that the glass folds then undermine. Like Johnson, in other words, Dubbeldam crystallizes urban complexity within the discrete architectural object. Their two projects, between them, fold backward and forward in time.

To my eye, the designs fulfill Robert Venturi's idea of complexity and contradiction far more persuasively than the nostalgic postmodern architecture that claimed Venturi for its intellectual pedigree. This is the kind of work Battery Park City might have chosen to support, for example. In that architectural Lost World of prewar simulations lit by those crackpot bishop's crook lampposts, not one building stands out from the fearful ''Everybody Says Don't'' pack. Dare we hope that things will turn out differently at Queens West, a similar public-private development project on the East River.

I like these new crystals. They seem ideally suited to a built-up cityscape that is often compared to a natural formation. I particularly like them in the form of parabuildings which fasten upon older structures, as if precipitated there by a dense atmosphere of change. And I suspect that the desire for change will produce even more of these gems. So will new developments in glass technology. These were the same factors that drove the Expressionist passion for glass at the beginning of the last century. It makes good historical sense for architects to revisit that source today.

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