

A procession of mid-century Modern office buildings lines New York's Park Avenue north of Grand Central Terminal. Among them are some of the high points of American Modernism, Lever House and the Seagram Building. Yet the design characteristics of Modernism didn't fit readily into this dense urban setting.

Virtually all the icons of the Modern movement up to the early 1950s were freestanding structures. And the Modernist planning ideal of the time envi-

MODERNISM COMES TO PARK AVENUE and adapts

sioned a future of freestanding buildings liberated from the confines of the existing urban fabric—the towers-in-the-park concept advocated by Le Corbusier—which was then being realized in swaths of urban renewal. But this part of Park Avenue was not going to be swept clean for visionary planning. New buildings would have to be dovetailed into the existing fabric.

Prior to 1953, the only U.S. examples of urban office buildings in the International Style were the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society, 1932, by George Howe and William Lescaze, and the Equitable Building in Portland, OR, 1948, by Pietro Belluschi. PSFS has a street-line-hugging two-story base that abuts adjacent structures. But the 30-story stack of office floors above draws back from the property lines as an almost freestanding slab, tethered only at the back end to a lot-line-hugging vertical circulation shaft. Portland Equitable, commanding an entire block front, looks from the street like an unencumbered 13-story volume, but its rear wings drop down to the heights of the side-street structures they adjoin.

On the stretch of Park Avenue north of Grand Central, the arrival of office buildings after World War II was due to a fortuitous convergence of zoning revisions and economic forces. By the 1920s, the avenue from 47th to 96th Street was lined almost continuously with rental apartment buildings. In 1929 the blocks from 50th to 59th Street were rezoned to permit commercial buildings. But the Great Depression, followed by a war-time construction hiatus, halted any new construction there until the late 1940s. By then, the country was enjoying an economic expansion, and the extension of war-time rent controls were limiting revenues from the avenue-front apartment buildings. All the conditions were in place for the office building boom on this prestigious and conveniently located stretch.

The Modernism of the first postwar office structures along the avenue was essentially skin-deep, visible only in their curtain walls. Following the still-applicable 1916



SEAGRAM BUILDING

photos: © Ezra Stoller/Esto

zoning regulations, they rise flush from the sidewalk to a prescribed height, then step back for a few additional floors. As with most pre-war commercial office buildings, their street floors housed retail space. The earliest of the area's office properties—the 1947 Universal Pictures Building by Kahn & Jacobs—occupies an entire block front from 56th to 57th Street, the asymmetrical setbacks of its upper floors dutifully recording the zoning requirement for three different street frontages. A somewhat different configuration of setbacks and ribbon windows appeared in Emery Roth and Sons' 505 Park Avenue building of 1949 at the corner of 59th Street.

FULL-FLEDGED MODERNISM ARRIVES

Lever House, completed in 1952 and designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (Gordon Bunshaft, design partner), defied these uninspiring precedents. It differed not only in its design audacity, but in its program. This project was initiated not by a developer as a speculative venture, but as the iconic headquarters of a major corporation.

Unlike almost all prior urban office buildings, the Lever Brothers headquarters banished street-level retail. The decision to devote this entire block front to Lever's untainted presence asserted that it was an exceptional corporation, whose president, Charles Luckman, had been educated in architecture. It's also relevant that Lever's previous headquarters in Cambridge, MA, had been a freestanding Classical Revival structure with no retail intrusions (which subsequently became MIT's School of Management.)

Lever is about as close to a freestanding composition as possible in this location. Making minimal contact with the structures along its rear lot line, it is composed primarily of two visually self-contained, glass-clad volumes: a one-story-high horizontal slab hovering above an open street-level space, and a 21-story slab oriented so that only its narrow rear wall touches its neighbors (through a buffer volume for vertical transportation, in this case essentially invisible). Because Lever's office slab occupies only 25 percent of its site area, it was allowed to rise without setbacks from its avenue property line, and



LEVER HOUSE



UNION CARBIDE



Lever House's glazed volumes extend to the avenue property line, the lower one to the side-street limits. Structural columns are set back and shadowed. © Ezra Stoller/Esto.

the lower volume also adheres to the street line. The design strategy here is similar to that of PSFS, but there the high-rise slab rises from a solidly-walled two-story base that continues the prevailing street-floor retail frontage, while Lever's street level offers an open colonnade and a pocket garden—open spaces barely interrupted except by a glass-enclosed lobby.

The design of Lever House makes only partial efforts to conceal adjoining structures to its rear. At street level, narrow marble-encased volumes extend out to the side streets, forming a mute backdrop for its public open spaces. The interior space extending to 53rd Street behind this marble wall originally accommodated Lever's test kitchens and has recently be repurposed for upscale restaurants with fair-weather extensions into the open space—retail operations not contemplated in the original scheme.

In the broad areas where Lever House didn't hide the buildings behind it, it simply left the party wall of the adjoining side-street building bluntly exposed. A replacement office building now exploits

the view over this low portion of Lever and presents a distracting composition, unfortunately mimicking Lever's blue-glazed curtain wall. This apparent failure to deal effectively with adjoining structures would not be repeated at the Seagram Building.

MORE SUBTLE ADAPTATION TO CONTEXT

When the design of the Seagram Building commenced in 1954, the corporate headquarters of Lever was already a prominent presence diagonally across the avenue. Seagram company, a Canadian producer of alcoholic beverages, had had no previous headquarters building in the U.S., having operated there out of stylish offices in the Chrysler Building. The story of CEO Samuel Bronfman's turning first to Charles Luckman, who had by then left Lever Brothers to launch his architectural practice, is fully documented in the 2013 book *Building Seagram*, by his daughter and collaborator on the project, Phyllis Lambert.

After Luckman proposed a strangely clumsy corporate monument, Lambert led an architect search that yielded a formidable team: the revered Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the neophyte architect Philip Johnson, and the established firm of Kahn & Jacobs. That firm's knowledge of rentable office space was essential since neither Johnson nor Mies had yet designed an office building and most of the office floors were to be leased to tenants. The building was replacing an apartment building that occupied an avenue block front, and adjoining properties to the rear were acquired to make possible a larger building under the zoning ordinance.

Given the similarities in the circumstances of Lever and Seagram—and the nominal adherence of both to the International Style—their differences are striking. The Lever design presents a composition of volumes that look weightless, their supporting columns recessed and visually muted; Seagram's primary image is of one sturdy tower, clearly acknowledging gravity. Lever's surface is dominated by the blue tone of its glazing and glass spandrel panels; Seagram's skin is of earth-colored bronze and amber glazing. Lever's volumes and open spaces are boldly asymmetrical in their composition; Seagram's resolutely symmetrical form rises from an equally symmetrical plaza.



Rising sheer from a 90-foot-deep plaza, the Seagram tower is flanked by low side-street wings. © Ezra Stoller/Esto.

The symmetry of Seagram clearly acknowledges the Classical Revival façade of the Racquet Club (McKim Mead & White, 1918) facing it across Park Avenue. The Seagram designers seem to have foreseen that—while apartment buildings along this stretch of avenue were doomed—the club would remain a prominent landmark, as it has. (Its survival strategy included selling its air rights for a tower that now looms behind it.)

Not only does Seagram mirror the club's symmetry, but the granite of its plaza approximates the color and texture of the club's masonry facade, making the club effectively an opposite wall for the plaza. In responding to design cues from the Racquet Club, Mies and his team showed a respect for existing context that was very rare among Modernists of this period, long before "contextual" became a architectural byword.

The 39-story sheer tower that forms the major part of Seagram—and establishes its image—follows the zoning provision that allows unlimited height for a portion of the building with floor area no greater than 25 percent of the site area. In this case, all that appears is the tower portion of the zoning-determined "wedding cake" configuration, shorn of its more expansive lower floors at the sacrifice of 500,000 square feet of allowable office space.

That sheer tower, however, is by no means the whole of the building. And it's in the less iconic parts that the building's accommodations to its site become apparent. Unseen from the avenue, there is a full-height extension of three structural bays appended to the tower's rear side to augment its office floors. Then a succession of lower volumes steps down along the side streets to the level of buildings that were there in the 1950s (since replaced by larger bulks).

Rarely noted features of these rear wings are glass-canopied entrances from both side streets. While entering the building across the avenue-front plaza may be exhilarating in fair weather, these

ONE OF THE BOLDEST, PRECEDENT-SETTING MOVES, OF COURSE, WAS PLACING THE BUILDING 90 FEET BACK FROM THE AVENUE...

provide weather-protected access both for executives being dropped off here and other workers walking from the Lexington Avenue subway. One effect of these rear wings was, at least initially, to hide adjacent buildings beyond (in contrast to the highly visible neighbor behind Lever House).

While Seagram appears from the avenue to be purely an office building, its rear wings in fact provided for street-level retail to penetrate the site along its side-street margins. The drop in sidewalk levels toward the building's rear allowed for a low street-level story topped by interior volumes match-

ing the height of the lofty lobby. These tall spaces became the legendary Four Seasons restaurant, entered through a low-ceilinged lobby at the 52nd Street level, with the Brasserie occupying the street-level space on 53rd Street.

One of the boldest, precedent-setting moves at Seagram, of course, was placing the building 90 feet back from the avenue and establishing an elegantly minimal plaza. At Mies's insistence, the plaza has no permanent sculpture or other focal point. The shallow pools to either side have only modest fountains—and only placid expanses of water when they are not operating.

Since the grade levels at the edges of the site vary, the plaza is elevated three shallow steps above the Park Avenue sidewalk to minimize this variation visually. Along the side streets, the grades drop sharply toward the rear of the site, and broad slabs of green marble along the plaza edges provide the required safety barriers. Since these slabs are set only inches from the pool edges, they clearly



At Seagram, canopied entrances from both side streets offer convenient alternatives to the axial approach across the plaza. © Ezra Stoller/Esto.



At Union Carbide, an open through-block passage between the Park Avenue tower and the lower Madison Avenue wing extends the axis of Vanderbilt Avenue. © Ezra Stoller/Esto.

weren't intended for seating, but generations of workers have deftly managed to sit along them at lunch hour.

While Seagram's plaza was achieved with a substantial sacrifice of rental office space allowable under the then-prevailing zoning, its much-admired example raised a demand for zoning revisions to facilitate inclusion of plazas at other office projects. The result was a provision of the city's 1961 zoning ordinance that allows ten additional square feet of interior space for each square foot of street-level open space. With that provision, plazas soon appeared at office building sites throughout the city.

BUILDING ON PRECEDENT, BUT BIGGER

While other office buildings along Park Avenue in the late 1950s continued to apply Modernist curtain walls to the familiar wedding-cake volumes, the Union Carbide Building by SOM, completed in 1960, strove for a more genuinely Modern configuration. Occupying a full city-block site—Park to Madison Avenue, 47th to 48th Street—the building provided 1.5 million square feet of office space, all intended for Union Carbide's use. Its sheer 52-story tower was permitted as occupying only 25 percent of the total site.

An eight-story extension reached west to Madison Avenue, separated from the tower at street level by a 60-foot-wide pedestrian passage, extending the axis of Vanderbilt Avenue a block further north. Its nod to the precedent of an avenue-front plaza was a setback of 50 feet from the curb, essentially a generous widening of the sidewalk (which is now spoiled by security barriers separating the public sidewalk from the building's "plaza.") In the building's boldly patterned cladding, stainless steel-framed spandrels were colored black by a process Union Carbide had developed.

SAARINEN POSTSCRIPT

In her book *Building Seagram*, Lambert reveals a connection between the Seagram Building and Eero Saarinen's CBS tower on Sixth Avenue, which was completed in 1965, after his early death. Lambert reports that Saarinen, seeking the Seagram commission, described to her the kind of structure he would build, a "sculptural" tower rising from a sunken plaza, essentially what he later designed for the CBS headquarters.

The CBS tower is notable for its total isolation from context, surrounded by its moat-like sunken plaza and avoiding any above-ground contact with neighboring structures. Nor does it acknowledge various surrounding conditions, with all four sides totally equal. And the sunken lobby floor looks as much as possible the same as the upper floors, with entry doors fitted into the same modules as office windows above. From the outset the building contained ground-floor retail—a bank and a restaurant—their signage almost non-existent and their windows the same width as those above. With an exterior palisade of angular piers clad in dark granite, the building has long been popularly known as "Black Rock."



CBS BUILDING

Photo: c. 1969. Found at wirednewyork.com

While the Park Avenue office buildings with architectural ambitions were carefully dovetailed into the existing fabric, CBS shows that the ideal of the autonomous sculptural tower had not been entirely suppressed, but would repeatedly turn up again, even in the heart of the city.

—JOHN MORRIS DIXON