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A Handsome Hunk Of a Glass Tower

ALTHOUGH Donald Trump prefers to publicize the aggressive side of his nature — it's the manly thing to do — he is also the only beauty freak at large in New York City real estate development. Aggression and desire, violence and sex: put them together and they add up to Trump World Tower, undeniably the most primal building New York has seen in quite a while.

I wasn't brought up to count floors in skyscrapers, so I don't know whether the 72-story Trump World Tower across from the United Nations, on First Avenue between 47th and 48th Streets, is the world's tallest residential building, as Mr. Trump has claimed. And it is aggressive even to advertise the idea that something is an extremity of its type: tallest, biggest, speediest, richest or whatever. How you feel about Trump World Tower is likely to reflect how you respond to the presence of competition in your space.

Designed by the New York architect Costas Kondylis to Trump's specifications, the tower has found a surprising number of admirers among New York's younger architects. Terence Riley, chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, says it's his favorite new building. Riley has a picture-postcard view of the tower from his new office at the Modern's temporary location in Long Island City. "It's a Trump building, so you're not supposed to like it," Riley says. "But it works urbanistically, and the glass curtain wall is the best New York has seen in a long time."

Trump's new 72-story residential skyscraper reverts to Mies's clean, simple lines and wins some unlikely friends.

From downtown, the tower also makes a good impression. Its visual appeal derives, first of all, from the contrast between its amplitude of scale and its simplicity of shape. Then, like the Empire State Building, there is an unbalanced ratio of width to depth. Depending on your perspective, the tower shifts from sliveresque to monolithic. After all the frou-frou launched into the skyline for the past generation — the fussy attempts at three-dimensional collage; the ersatz Art Deco confections weighed down by stepped silhouettes and ornate crowns — it is pleasing to see a flat roof raised to the top of the skyline by four flush glass walls.

All of us go tut-tut over the building's lobby, not because it's glitzy, but because no effort has been made to coordinate the glitz with the Miesian vocabulary of the somber exterior. The lobby cries out for Barcelona chairs, preferably upholstered in gold lamé. And glass-topped Barcelona tables could be encrusted with cubic zirconiums to outrageous effect.

The tower's appeal is as much polemical as it is aesthetic. It punches through the morbid notion that the Midtown skyline should be forever dominated by two Art Deco skyscrapers, the Empire State and Chrysler buildings, as if these cherished

icons couldn't stand the competition. Philadelphia got over the taboo against building higher than the statue of William Penn that crowns its City Hall. Eventually, New York will conquer a phobia about tall buildings that had set in well before 9/11.

Le Corbusier's observation that New York's skyscrapers aren't tall enough makes even more sense today than when he made it in the 1930's. The observation had as much to do with the aggressive temperament of New Yorkers as with the physical appearance of their city, and I sense no general abatement of the city's Darwinian drives. For better and worse, we're more in touch with our instincts than we used to be.

Architecture, we forget at our peril, is inherently violent. It invariably subtracts from the range of available possibilities, especially the perennially attractive option of building nothing at all. In this sense, construction sites are crime scenes. Memories, landscapes, slices of sky, beloved vistas and old neighborhoods are violated even when buildings of distinction take their place. Perhaps the most architecture can do is convert aggression into desire, its primitive twin. Beauty is an effect of this emotional transmutation.

On a human level, I prefer most developers to most architects, because (to borrow Truman Capote's terms) developers tend to be Unspoiled Monsters, whereas architects are often very Spoiled Monsters indeed. Possessed by the desire to control, they are also convinced that their aggression is redeemed by a high artistic calling, proof of which is usually lacking. Monsters don't come more Unspoiled than Donald Trump, and the World Tower is the fullest expression of his purity to date.

It's not surprising that unofficial approval of Trump's building should come by way of the Museum of Modern Art. The tower embodies the Miesian aesthetic through which the Modern's design department's taste was initially formulated. Though Philip Johnson, the department's founding curator, later turned away from that aesthetic, the Modern itself has seldom strayed far from its roots, and indeed has survived the "post-modern" assault on the historical chapter it represents.

It has become commonplace to suggest that only Mies van der Rohe could pull off a Miesian building, as if only dumb glass boxes lay within the range of everyone else. But now it's becoming more evident that a dumb glass box is preferable to a dumb masonry box, or a dumb collage box, and that, in any case, technology has greatly expanded the expressive potential of glass.

I regret that Trump World Tower did not take greater advantage of this. I would have liked to see a more conspicuous articulation of the floor plates than dark glass allows. A vertical is nothing more than stacked horizontals: chunks of land abstracted and repeated skyward. Super-transparent "white" glass and other technical innovations enable architects to convey this idea clearly.

I hope Trump sticks with this material. The World Tower is not innovative architecture. But neither is it reactionary, unlike Trump Place, the developer's other recent venture into the skyline, under way on the Upper West Side between 59th and 72d Streets. Clearly, Trump does better when he ignores his critics than when he pays attention to them.



The Trump World Tower, 845 United Nations Plaza, at 47th Street, defies today's fashion of frou-frou architecture.

Philip Greenberg for The New York Times