

THE REAL DEAL

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ARCHITECTURE REVIEW | JAMES GARDNER



Razing a spiritless box

Demolition of old 425 Park means one less ugly glass building in Midtown

The significance of what will soon occur at 425 Park Avenue is twofold: what is going up, and what is coming down. So far, attention has focused exclusively upon the former, a 41-story, 650,000-square-foot office tower designed by Norman Foster and his London firm, Foster & Partners. Foster's design was selected with considerable fanfare in October. The building's developers, Lehman Brothers Holdings and L&L Holding Co., invited 11 internationally acclaimed firms to submit designs. Four were chosen as finalists: Foster, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Richard Rogers.

Usually, when a competition of this sort is held, the land over which the building is set to rise is vacant, or perhaps a sequence of crumbling buildings and row houses. It might surprise some people, then, that the future 425 Park Avenue will rise up over a plot of land currently occupied by a fully functioning building that also goes by the name of 425 Park Avenue. Construction on the new building will not begin for another two years, so the weary and dispirited example of the International Style that currently occupies the site will stand until the last of the tenants have been eased out.

The razing of the building will represent something of a milestone in the history of New York City. A great many beautiful buildings from the early 20th century were destroyed to build the mostly soulless glass boxes that align Park Avenue from 57th street south to the Helmsley Building. For a half-century or more, those exemplars of the International Style have remained. But now, finally, one of them is coming down, and that can only be a good thing.

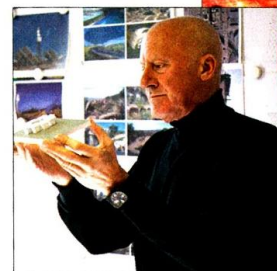
The incumbent 425 Park Avenue exemplifies all that was wrong with the International Style, after such earlier and nearby masterpieces as the Seagram Building and Lever House. The 425 Park Avenue tower was completed in 1957 to designs by the once-famous firm of Kahn & Jacobs, whose founder, Ely Jacques Kahn, was responsible for more than 30 New York projects in his long career. Among Kahn's more memorable designs are the Squibb Building at 745 Fifth Avenue and the Municipal Asphalt Plant at 655 East 90th Street. But if Kahn can lay claim to any posthumous fame these days (beyond the circle of architectural historians), it is as the inspiration for Guy Francon, the architect who sells out in Ayn Rand's novel "The Fountainhead."

As Rand herself realized, however, that characterization was unfair to Kahn, because he was capable of distinguished

designs and because, as 425 Park Avenue attests, he ended his career as a modernist. (Francon, by contrast, was a die-hard reactionary.) But Kahn's modernist structures, especially 425 Park Avenue, were a key step in the International Style's descent from a revolutionary reimagining of space and form to the pallid and gutless conformity that blights much of Midtown.

Kahn's 425 Park Avenue rises up in setbacks in a way that recalls the Squibb Building, but with rather less of a dash. Its curtain wall is qualified by white ribs in its vertical ascent and by darkened spandrels along its horizontal access. It is possible that, back in 1957, there was a measure of freshness to this treatment, but that has long since vanished.

Age, which enhances most architecture, only vi-



tiates the relics of the International Style.

By the same token, the new tower that is set to rise represents the first wave in a new kind of skyscraper that, from an aesthetic perspective more than a functional

A rendering of what's destined for 425 Park Avenue, a 41-story office tower designed by Norman Foster (bottom inset). Top inset, the International Style building that now stands on the site.



tect, as well as the starchitect's idiosyncratic use of forms, to office towers.

This development has been underway for the past decade in other parts of the world. One need look no further than Foster's own "Gherkin Building" in London, so called because its parabolic walls approximate the look of a pickle. And a foreshadowing of it can be found in the diagonal ribs of his Hearst Tower at 57th Street and Eighth Avenue.

The good news is that 425 Park Avenue represents a bolder artistic vision than the Hearst Tower. It is divided into three segments that progressively recede from the street. There is nothing especially daring about that in New York, except that the architect has contrived to mark the spaces between those segments with gardens in such a way that each of the upper segments no longer seems to sit on the one beneath it — the traditional practice in New York — but rather, thanks to something like trusses, to float above it.

The top of the building is marked by three tall, thin fins (or flanges) that serve absolutely no function, but look quite stylish, especially on the eastern façade. The bulk of the building is more standard fare, consisting of a curtain wall whose glassy surface is articulated with horizontal bands throughout, over which vertical bands have been superimposed on the western façade. The result is a sense of balance, safety and tidiness, which has the slightly disappointing effect of assimilating the building to most of the other office towers built in Midtown since the 1970s.

The three other finalists were far more daring in their designs. I would not have wished to see Hadid's design, a standard, four-square tower that seemed to liquefy at its base, built in any city I intended to inhabit. Similarly, for all the boldness of its twisting structure, Rem Koolhaas's attempt lacked the grace and style to serve as a suitable replacement to what is standing on the site today.

The best, I am convinced, was that of Richard Rogers, who conceived a three-part, segmented sequence of rectilinear forms that in some respects resembled those of Foster's project. But its brightly colored exoskeleton, which recalled projects of Rogers' early years, such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris, looked very promising indeed.

It is pure and perhaps unwarranted speculation on my part, but I suspect that the fix was in for Foster all along. In true New York fashion, the developers wanted something unconventional, but ultimately, in a conventional way. **TRB**

one, may transform the way we build office towers in New York. It too will be clad in the curtain wall so dear to the Modernists. But it will have a bit more style and individualism.

In this regard, the new building promises to perform a role for apartment buildings in Midtown similar to the one that has already been performed by several notable residential high-rises, such as Rafael Viñoly's 432 Park Avenue. That is to say that, in its tentative way, Foster's design brings the pizzazz of the starchi-