

A Concern for Detail

CPYRGHT Max Abramovitz



The New York Times
"Building should be one of the visual joys of society."

THE man in the gray flannel suit isn't, always an advertising man; add a button-down collar shirt with a black knife, and he's usually an architect.

Behind this conservative, ordinary exterior he is apt to be engaged in some of the most dramatic and unordinary work of our time — the creation of those large, costly and occasionally beautiful structures that make up the city scene.

Man in the News

In the case of Max Abramovitz, architect of Philharmonic Hall, the tonality is more taupe than gray, and very much in harmony with the new concert hall.

From the glowing, creamy beige of the building's travertine facade to the warm interior, brought to a climax by the blue and gold auditorium, the city's new landmark reflects the architect's passionate, personal preoccupation with every detail of the design.

He sums it up in less esthetic language: "I think I know every nut and bolt of the damn thing."

His associates say, "He really lived this one." A hard worker, aggressive, energetic, sure of what he wants, Mr. Abramovitz devotes a seven-day week to the job.

He sets a pace and a tension that he controls skillfully, carrying his staff along at the same high voltage rate. Called fast and fair, he is admired by his colleagues and the trades, a tribute considered the architect's highest compliment. "He gets along with people." "He's a quick thinker." "He knows what he wants but he doesn't make speeches." "He's no actor."

Pleasure for People

Yet he is not afraid to call architecture art, and believes that New York deserves architecture on the highest level.

"Building has become a business," he says. "It should be one of the visual joys of society. The man in the street should get a kick out of it. What I had in mind"—a sweeping gesture indicates the walls of his office, lined with photographs of models and drawings of the Philharmonic Hall—"is that New York should have something like Rome, or Venice, where buildings and plazas are a source of pleasure for people."

Mr. Abramovitz's concern for New York is due to bear fruit shortly in a city-sponsored study for a new Civic Center plan, which he heads.

But like many dedicated New Yorkers, he is not a native. Born in Chicago in 1908, he earned his degree at the University of Illinois in 1929, and came to New York in 1930.

He earned his master's degree at Columbia and a two-year fellowship at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in

Paris, he joined the office of Wallace K. Harrison, a prime mover in the city's closely interwoven architectural-business-social circles from the time of the building of Rockefeller Center in the early Nineteen-Thirties.

The firm of Harrison & Abramovitz, formed in 1941, has continued to garner civic-architectural plums like the United Nations Headquarters and choice parts of Lincoln Center. (Mr. Harrison is designing the new Opera House.

During the war years, Mr. Abramovitz built air fields in China for Gen. Claire L. Chennault's Flying Tigers, rose from first lieutenant to lieutenant colonel and received the Legion of Merit. Recalled to Korea in 1950, he built more airfields and came out a colonel in 1952. Rejoining the firm, he turned to the construction of office buildings, universities and embassies.

In New York, he has designed the Columbia Law School Library, the C. I. T. Financial Building at Madison Avenue and 60th Street, and participated in work on the Corning Glass Building at Fifth Avenue and 56th Street and the new Time-Life Building of the Rockefeller Center group. He is also supervising architect to Brandeis University, and is responsible for a spectacular, saucer-shaped assembly hall nearing completion at the University of Illinois.

As a designer, Mr. Abramovitz moves experimentally from one kind of solution to another; he is not known for a specific "style" or an identifying "hallmark" ("Glass walls are fine when they suit the job . . . Grilles are a poor substitute for designing the wall right the first time.")

His work has not, until now, set trends or been looked to by the profession for news; on this score he is mildly defensive and a bit wary of criticism. ("I don't fit into the patterns set by the professional periodicals.")

Leads a Quiet Life

Beyond his full-time affair with architecture, his life is limited to intimate social occasions with close friends and family: his wife, the former Anne Marie Causey, a daughter Katherine, 21; a son, Michael, 23, and one grandchild. He and his wife live quietly in a 16-foot-wide town house on East 85th Street, in which a modern Abramovitz interior has been combined with circa 1870 Victorian details. Except for the painting and sculpture that he collects, which fill the house, he has no hobbies.

"I sit, relax, read a little, and start over again," he says. "I'm just a working fool."

There is a story told in the office, of an associate who asked if he planned to keep a scrapbook of the many Philharmonic stories, appearing in the Times.

"Hell, no," he replied. "I don't have to. I've got the building."

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