

How a Building Gets Built

by Phyllis Bronfman Lambert, '48

In this account of the search for an architect and the beginnings of a building, I have resorted to a number of letters that I wrote at the time. After four years of Devotion to a skyscraper it is impossible to recapture the freshness and excitement of first discovery, but the letters do convey something of my reactions to the infinite complexity of the problems as I first encountered them. First I would like to give the background pertinent to the Seagram building and to my role in its creation.

I have always been interested in painting and sculpture but my concern with architecture and plunging into situations without formal training began at Vassar. The opportunity to plunge and tackle what would normally be considered professional problems was, I think, Vassar's greatest contribution to me. There was, for instance, the Arts Conference which we undertook and organized in 1947. It was Eve Borsook '49 who talked us into an exhibition on the relation of painting and sculpture to the buildings we live in and the objects we use. This was my first contact with modern architecture and E.B. has remained an inspiration. As a matter of fact, a significant number of Vassar names appear in this story. (It was only after graduation, when the Seagram company acquired the Park Avenue site that I studied the history of architecture with Dr. Richard Krautheimer, formerly of Vassar, who was by then at the Institute of Fine Arts of Kew York University.)

Post War Building

The new buildings that mushroomed with the post war boom in New York were a dismal lot. Demand for office space was tremendous and office buildings moved up town to Park Avenue. No thought was given to the meaning of a city nor to the men who lived in it. With the need for more space, the old zoning law which regulated the height and placement of buildings on Park Avenue was broken. Instead of rising 20 stories clean from the street, the new structures were allowed to zigzag back, with a tower 25% the size of the property sticking up out of a wedding cake base. Buildings were no longer really built; rather full-scale models of set-back zoning laws appeared, covered by cheap metal and glass curtain walls.

But a building cannot be ignored as a painting can be passed by, or a book left unread. It imposes itself on us, for we must approach it, find our way into it and through it, be enveloped by it. It is a visual and kinetic experience. As we approach a building, we are aware of its size and mass. Our eye is delighted or repelled by the proportions of the whole, its parts, its details. We are conscious of the materials we pass and step on, the space the building creates inside and out. These spatial intangibles, as well as the materials and detailing, have a direct influence on human beings, for we have a reaction to them, conscious or not.

The responsibility for superior planning and painstaking detail required to make a building pleasing to the eye and spirit, and eminently habitable, would appear to fall solely on the architect. *But the moment business organizations and institutions decide to build, they claim responsibility and take a moral position; and upon the choice of architect depends the quality of the statement.*

Usually these institutions, occupied with their own business, are content to have a real estate developer take over these infinitely complicated building problems and affix their name to the resulting skyscraper. If they do not buy a ready-made package, how are they to choose the architect? In the middle fifties the few masters of modern architecture were generally unknown. Modern architecture was viewed with suspicion if considered at all. With one or two exceptions the new ziggurats were being designed by huge architectural firms who, thanks to their stereotyped thinking, were the undisputed leaders in the number of square feet built.

In 1954 Joseph E. Seagram and Sons at last decided to build on Park Avenue. I was living in Europe when Seagram's intent to build reached me in Paris in July through a rendering of a very mediocre building. I flew to New York and started to learn all I could about the good buildings built since the war, and I consulted with architectural critics. I felt that my task was to explain to my father, the president of the company, what the business's responsibility could mean in terms of architecture and to convince him of the validity of the new architectural thinking that started to mature in the twenties.

My Architectural Research

My father could not leave the choice of an architect to me without making sure that my attack made sense and that the architects of whom I spoke had the experience to build a skyscraper. He consulted a friend, Lou Crandall, the head of a large construction firm. By the middle of August, my real work began. I wrote to Eve Borsook:

"Now I really have a job. I shall be travelling all over ... Crandall wants ME to do the research, the talking to the architects, etc. He told my father that I could do a job that no one else could have done, going to these people and talking to them. Certainly no one employed by Seagram could (by virtue of being employed), and a daughter who is interested in seeing that her father puts up a fine building seems to have everyone's sympathy. And now I must say my prayers every day to be able to do the job as it should be done. What a unique chance I have!"

Through Marie Alexander (V.C. '44) at the Museum of Modern Art, I met Philip Johnson who was then the Chairman of the Department of Architecture. Through him and Mr. Crandall I was to meet and talk to the leading architects, the heads of the architectural schools, the architectural historians and critics (among them, Aline Bernstein Saarinen '35), the editors and writers of art and architectural magazines and the members of museum staffs.

It was most important to see the recent buildings. In New York were the United Nations Building and Lever House. Outside of New York there were a fair number of buildings. Eero Saarinen's auditorium and chapel at MIT were in construction, Gropius' Harvard Graduate Center was recently finished, and The Architects Collaborative had built houses and schools nearby. In Connecticut, there were houses and a small office building for Schlumberger by Philip Johnson and also houses by Breuer. Philadelphia was still proud of the PSFS by Howe and Lescaze built in the early thirties, an object lesson in the quality of interior detailing. In Philadelphia there was also the psychiatric wing of the Jewish Hospital by Lou Kahn and there was his Museum at Yale University. One could see Harrison's ALCOA building in Pittsburgh and his auditorium for Oberlin University. In Detroit, were Eero Saarinen's General Motors complex, Yamasaki's addition to a Bank building, and in the surrounding country a school by Yamasaki and a library by Breuer. I. M. Pei's Mile High Center was in construction in Denver. Chicago, the wealthiest American city architecturally, now had Mies van der Rohe's Twin Towers at 860 Lake Shore Drive and his growing campus at IIT. In Racine, Wisconsin, there was Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Tower.

In the draughting rooms of these architects were buildings that had been built within the last four years and through the architectural magazines one was acquainted with some of the works of the younger men in the U.S., as well as Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles and various buildings underway in other parts of the world.

Choosing the Architect

While looking at the buildings and talking to those concerned with architecture, the question to be asked was obviously not who should be the architect, but who was now going to make the greatest contribution to architecture? Were the masters of the 20'S still leading the way or were the younger men, the second generation?

In the two and a half months of searching, it became clearer and clearer that it was Mies van der Rohe who had so understood his epoch that he had made poetry of technology. In his 1950 address to the Illinois Institute of Technology Mies had said: "Wherever technology reaches its real fulfillment, it transcends into architecture." Through superb detailing and clarifying and articulating the structural system, Mies has given it artistic expression and created a language and vocabulary of architecture.

The October 30th letter makes obvious my choice of architect:

"It has been said that Frank Lloyd Wright was the greatest architect of the 19th century ... To me the Johnson Wax is a complete statement of 'Manifest Destiny,' the embodiment of all the philosophy of that period in America. It has a force and vitality that is almost cyclonic. It's crazy as hell and as wonderful as it is crazy. The greatest errors of taste-not errors, just plain bad taste-turn out to be magnificent ... His is not the statement that is needed now. America has grown up a bit and Frank Lloyd Wright has expressed what it was when its energies were unharnessed...."

"Le Corbusier has not built a building in this country. (The UN was unfortunately only an emasculation of his plan.) Would he be a great and good influence here? I am afraid not...One is fascinated by his spaces, his sculptural forms, but are not people likely to be blinded by these and skip over the surface only? Mies forces

you in. You have to go deeper. You might think this austere strength, this ugly beauty, is terribly severe. It is, and yet all the more beauty in it.

"The younger men, the second generation, are talking in terms of Mies or denying him. They talk of new forms-articulating the skin or facades to get a play of light and shadow. But Mies has said, 'Form is not the aim of our work, but only the result.' In his Farnsworth house in 1951 and the Twin Towers at 860 Lake Shore Drive in Chicago in 1952, he has articulated the skin, at the same time creating a play of depth and shadow by the use of the basic structural steel member, the I beam. This ingenious and deceptively simple solution is comparable to the use of the Greek orders and the Flying Buttress. It is not a capricious solution; it is the essence of the problem of modern architecture that Mies had stated in 1922: 'We should develop the new forms from the very nature of the new problems.'"

At the beginning of November, my father asked Mies van der Rohe to be the architect of the Seagram building. Mies asked Philip Johnson to join him. On consultation with Mr. Crandall, our working force was set up. The associate architects who would produce the working drawings, the engineers and the rental agents were chosen.

It was an unusual team that produced an unusual building. My father placed his trust and confidence in his architect and in Mr. Crandall who was not only in charge of construction, but who was to help determine and watch costs. Mr. Crandall and I became, virtually, the clients. On leaving Paris, I had not intended to do more than help choose the architect and then return, but it became increasingly clear to me that the person who had chosen the architect must stay with the job to fight for the concept.

The owner stated his requirements to the architect: The building was to have roughly half a million square feet of useable office space. Clients almost invariably present their architects with endless ideas they have dreamt of and reams of efficiency charts and studies prepared by a hierarchy of committees. Instead, my father simply told Mies that his building was to be the crowning glory of everyone's work-his own, Crandall's and Mies's. And so began four fascinating years of work.

Planning the Building

Letter to E.B.-December I, 1954.

"I have been named Director of Planning so that everyone will have to go through one central person.

"Three weeks ago, the contracts were signed and Mies came up-he and Philip found offices. Then the architects offices (where I will work) had to be installed, and then they got to work. Mies wanted the facts and the problems began.

"The first facts were the zoning laws-and the first problem, the air rights. According to the zoning laws, a tower can cover only 25% of the plot. Seagram intended to demolish only 375 Park Avenue, now the Montana apartment house, but with the area of 375 alone, we would have an unworkable tower, only 8,000 square feet gross. It is much too small for everything. However, Seagram also owns some land behind 375 116 East 53rd Street and two smaller buildings on 52nd Street. We could enlarge our tower if we could borrow the air rights to these buildings, but we find we can't unless they are included as a part of the new building, *i.e.* converted to offices, for they are apartment houses. So in a meeting in Crandall's office, we looked again at 116 and the small houses facing it on 52nd- (someone long ago had said oh let's not pull them down and the question stayed there) and we discovered that it was ridiculous to leave them as they do not make financial sense anyway. So the night after the meeting, I called my father and told him we had just pulled a couple of buildings down for *him-et voila!* But still more problems-now we have to get the people out of these buildings so that we can begin demolition ...

"I can't wait to see what Mies comes up with for this building-he has a cardboard model made of Park Avenue between 46th and 57th streets with all the buildings on the Avenue and some going in the blocks and then he has a number of towers for different solutions that he places in the empty place of the old 375 and this model is up on a high table so that when sitting in a chair his eye is just level with the table top which equals the street-and for hours on end he peers down his Park Avenue trying out the different towers -you could make a lovely drawing of this! ...

"NOW TO THE BUILDING-what can we do without a wedding cake (buildings that set back from the street in layers until they get to the tower) ? There are three solutions. First, a square tower-which is out. Second, a 7:3 rectangular building set at a right angle to Park Avenue, the solution of Lever House. The third solution, set a 5:3 rectangular building back 90 feet from Park Avenue, creating a PIAZZA. The apartment houses mentioned above are to be rebuilt and form the background for the tower. They will be connected somehow and so your first six floors will have huge floor space and there will be a terrace garden and interesting shapes

on top of the six-story building."

Later, we bought a 100 x 100 foot plot on 52nd Street rounding out the site to 200 x 300 feet. This allowed for a still larger tower. Mies enlarged the tower by adding a one-by-three bay spine to its east face, and this spine formed the connection to the six-story east wing.

"Guess what solution will be picked? Mies hasn't said which yet, but he is only thinking in terms of the last one. There will also have to be STEPS leading to the Piazza as there is a big drop (8 feet) from Park to Lexington and you can't have a building with columns of different heights marching down the hill, and so it has been placed on a podium.

"This solution for the building has promise for terrific things-set back you hardly see it from the street coming up or down the Avenue but now what an impression-when you arrive there-almost Baroque, you don't know what is there and then you come upon IT -with a magnificent plaza and the building not zooming up in front of your nose so that you can't see it, only be oppressed by it and have to cross the street to really look at it, but a magnificent entrance to a *magnificent* building all in front of you-How excited I get just thinking of it-Oh how right the decision of Mies is-I become more convinced every day .. ,

"Mies just came back here on Monday and all these actual building things have happened since then-the real work has started-how exciting I can't tell you-How exciting to see how and why decisions are made. Oh! I can hardly contain myself. Last week when Mies was not here X. was doing some preliminary work for him, getting the facts-and the biggest fact in getting this skyscraper equals the elevators. They determine your bay system (in a columnar building a bay is the area between columns), the height of your building and heaven only knows what else. On the first try X. called me up-disaster-no building just elevators. Now all is getting in order-the Otis people are constantly consulted and asked to do their most brilliant best-but no matter what you do the elevators take up 3 bays!"

My Job

As the basic requirements for the building were being determined in consultation with the rental agents and the mechanical and structural engineers, more and more information was gathered. One had constantly to work with the manufacturers, to reexamine production techniques and products. This was true of the bronze, the glass, the air conditioning units and enclosures, the lighting system and fixtures, the elevator cabs, the plumbing fixtures, the Venetian blinds-the list could go on and on. We are still working on many of these problems in the design of the restaurant in the east wing.

The letters I have quoted indicate some of the complications of planning and the multitude of facts that must be gathered and collated. But information required for a building, like information required for a thesis or a balance sheet, can amount to jabberwock talk. A good building depends on the clarification and ordering of information by the artistic volition, and on the freedom of the framework in which the architect can work. My job was to make sure of this freedom and to avoid the rankling lack of understanding and short-sighted compromise that have atrophied or killed too many buildings.

This "keeping of the concept" involved a thousand decisions every day. I followed every step of the development of the building in the architect's office and we consulted with Crandall to make sure that the costs were in line before presenting them to the building committee. For example, we wanted nine-foot ceilings instead of the present standard eight-foot or less and fought bitterly for ten feet until we graciously accepted nine. Then I would explain why it was important that the stair wells be of good brick rather than the initially cheaper but in the long run just as expensive cinder block construction. I would insist that a graphic designer develop a lettering standard for use throughout the building. The mural decorations are an integral part of the space and I bought and commissioned prints, posters, tapestries, paintings, and sculpture for the offices of the Seagram company, the public areas and the restaurant. These procedures involved every part of the building, from desk handles and bathroom tiles to the bronze extrusions, the glass, the plaza.

The finished building reveals the clarity of approach which gives it meaning both as an individual creation and as part of the city. It indicates too, I think, what a city could become if only vision were implemented by the devotion of all concerned.