The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream
MEREDITH L. CLAUSEN

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Meredith Clasusen's *The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream* is a useful addition to a growing list of biographies that use a monographic focus to reveal the social, political, and economic issues that converge in the planning, design, construction, and reception of large-scale building projects. But unlike most building biographies, which examine beloved icons like the Empire State Building or mourned monuments like Pennsylvania Station or the World Trade Center, Meredith Clausen's subject is a building that, since its completion in 1963, has been reviled and ignored in equal measure—not only by New Yorkers but also by architects, historians, and critics.

Though designed by prominent architects Walter Gropius and Pietro Belluschi in association with Richard Roth, and built in a prominent location, midtown Manhattan immediately north of Grand Central Terminal, the Pan Am was regarded as an urbanistic and aesthetic failure. Clausen does not attempt to revise this view. She appears in complete agreement with the assertion that the building destroyed the vista of Park Avenue and she makes no claims for the building's architectural merits. If anything, she seems intent on emphasizing the design's mediocrity if not its outright badness, at least as perceived by its critics. Rather, Clausen's goal is to argue for the Pan Am's significance as an architectural event that marked, as her title portentously puts it, ''the shattering of the modernist dream.''

Unfortunately, she never adequately explains which modernist dream the building supposedly shattered. Was it Le Corbusier's dream of the rational city or Gropius's dream of an architectural utopia? Such idealism had barely survived the transatlantic crossing, and by the late 1950s, when the Pan Am was under development, modernism had been effectively co-opted by corporate America. Clausen is undoubtedly aware of this since her book highlights the work of Richard Roth, whose firm, Emery Roth & Sons, was largely responsible for the mainstreaming of modernism in postwar New York. As Clausen makes clear, Roth's was an economic rather than aesthetic or ideological embrace of modernism, which explains his firm's astonishing success with real estate developers. By shedding light on Roth's value-engineering approach to design, Clausen makes a real contribution to our understanding of the forces that shape the skyline, but given the title of the book, one wishes that Clausen had also situated this approach within the discourse of mid-century modernism.

The strongest part of the book is Clausen's meticulous retelling of the Pan Am's critical reception before, during, and after its construction. Because of the building's relationship with Grand Central Terminal—it rose on land owned by the New York Central Railroad and was linked to several projects that called for the demolition of the old Beaux-Arts concourse—the Pan Am generated a significant amount of publicity. Clausen carefully documents the building's local, national, and international press coverage, paying particular attention to how it was understood by real estate and business interests, by government officials and civic groups, and by the architecture and urban planning community. Clausen's account of the growing importance of architecture critics in the postwar period is especially compelling, with figures such as Ada Louise Huxtable of *The New York Times* and Douglas Haskell of *Architectural Forum* playing key roles in the narrative as the Pan Am's most persistent detractors.

Less successful is Clausen's cursory analysis of the Pan Am's architecture, which is all the more surprising given how carefully she details the building as a real estate transaction, involving a deft handling of zoning, financing, and leasing, and as an engineering challenge, requiring construction over railroad tracks without disrupting service. One wishes that Clausen had shown more clearly how the contributions of Gropius and Belluschi—the octagonal lozenge shape, the Mo-Sai panels of the curtain wall, e.g.—reflected the shifting terrain of modernism in the late 1950s as it moved away from the narrowly defined International style.

The book is generously illustrated with over one hundred black and white images, including a number

of fascinating construction photographs and renderings of other towers proposed for the site. Also included are aerial views of midtown and views of Park Avenue looking south toward the Pan Am that the author uses to illustrate the urban impact of the building's height and bulk. Although a number of these are period photographs that were deployed polemically when they were originally published (in, e.g., Vincent Scully's *American Architecture and Urbanism* and in Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard*), they have the effect of reinforcing the reader's sense that the author has uncritically accepted negative assessments of the Pan Am almost as articles of faith. Had the author included a few more architectural drawings beyond a section sketch by Belluschi and a perspective by Gropius, a more nuanced picture of the building might have emerged.

As it is, Clausen has provided a lively, if occasionally repetitive, account of a building that embodied the frenzy of New York's postwar building boom and the short-lived romance of the jet age. If she does not quite convince us that the Pan Am Building really did shatter the modernist dream, she at least reminds us of the critical role that architecture—good and bad—plays in the life of our cities.

Gabrielle Esperdy