

Its Lush Interior Is Stylish, Too

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

The design of the club and restaurant atop the World Trade Center would probably send Mies van der Rohe whirling in his grave. Gone is the austerity, the tightness, the discipline of purist modern architecture, but instead of seeking refuge in any historical style, the architect for the project, Warren Platner, has taken elements of modern design and loosened them, manipulated them, contorted them into a style that can only be called sensuous modernism.

It is not, in principle, a bad idea. Miesian purism by now is commonly acknowledged to be a style of the past, and anyway it was never very able in its cold rigidity to provide dining spaces that satisfied the imagination as well as the rational eye. Dining in a restaurant is a fantasy experience, and there is nothing wrong with a restaurant's design playing up to this.

And play up this restaurant does. The main dining room of Windows on the World, as the 107th floor is called, is done in soft pastels, with tufted vinyl banquettes, lots of brass, and fabric-covered walls. The room is so lush that even the simple wood-and-cane Prague chairs used at the freestanding tables, a classic modern design, take on a certain voluptuousness.

The dining room is elaborately terraced, which has the advantage of assuring window views for every table as well as of dividing the room into intimate groupings of just a few tables each. The room seats 350 people, yet it never feels oppressively large.

The over-all plan is as intelligently conceived as that of any skyscraper-top restaurant in New York; the service facilities are all in the center and the dining areas, both public and private, stretch out along the periphery. Mr. Platner moves people well through space; there is an attractive vestibule, a small room beyond it to permit an introductory glimpse of the view, a long gallery connecting the entry to the bar and dining room, and a promenade along the window wall to the eating area.

There are also constant and skillfully wrought changes in level. One walks up a few steps sometimes to go right down again, but each time it heightens a sense of entrance, or the drama of a new aspect of the utterly extraordinary view, of the sense of movement from one kind of a room to another in the huge complex.

Frozen in Space

The view, incidentally, is like nothing else in New York: It is more like seeing the city from an airplane frozen in space than from the top of a building. Looking north, the skyscrapers of midtown are a totality, a city in themselves glistening in the distance, while looking east, lower Manhattan and the East River bridges are seen at an angle approaching the vertical and take on an entirely different kind of drama.

With such a view, and with such a general design concept, Windows on the World comes close indeed to succeeding. But the design does have its drawbacks, and unfortunately they are as conspicuous as its virtues.

Mr. Platner has a sense of detail that is puzzlingly inconsistent. The tufted vinyl banquettes recall (as so much of the design does) the World Trade Center's undeniable ancestor, the Four Seasons, Philip Johnson's design of 1958 that Joseph Baum, the World Trade Center restaurant's creator, also oversaw. But where the Four Seasons never strayed from its basic vocabulary, here there are magenta velour coverings on the stair rails, corny gold-leaf decorations on some of the glass doors, and little strands of yarn as decoration, on the fabric-covered walls. And the entrance corridor is a gallery of mirrors that is at best silly, at worst vulgar.

Even with these lapses, the design clearly triumphs over Minoru Yamasaki's ghastly design of the trade center buildings themselves; Mr. Platner and Mr. Baum managed, in fact, to do the architect one better by convincing the Port Authority to widen the oppressively narrow windows of the other floors on the restaurant level, and they have rounded the mullions between each window to create a pleasant wall texture and avoid the caged feeling the other floors of the center create.

The total cost of the project, including fixtures was \$7.5 million, and some of the decisions about allocating resources are curious indeed. There is cheap acoustical tile on ceilings throughout, damaging to the design, yet money was available to create a men's room that is a veritable temple of pink Norwegian marble. It is doubtless the most elaborate such facility constructed in New York in years.

Mr. Platner's problem, in the end, is that he just doesn't seem to have been sure where to stop, and thus everything got fussed up a lot more than it had to—more than it had to even to create the sensual mood Mr. Platner was obviously, and correctly, after.

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