AT&T Headquarters
New York, N.Y.

Not enough said

The street-level loggia is the most successful element of this much-publicized Post-Modern skyscraper.





The AT&T building, which can barely be seen frontally in its entirety (top), lifts its famous head proudly on the New York skyline. The attenuated entrance arch (above) and the Golden Boy statue within the lobby (opposite page) are viewed most satisfyingly from across the street.

"This building has been written about too much," Johnson has scrawled across the AT&T photograph in the current exhibition of his work at New York's Urban Center. But he is wrong. The serious commentary has yet to begin.

As the AT&T building reaches completion on New York's Madison Avenue, it is far less extraordinary, overall, than the early hoopla would have suggested. Yet it delivers—and this is the best news—more pleasure to passers-by than anyone would have predicted. Who could have known—distracted by those flinty drawings of a pedimented granite tombstone—that the deep-cut, curved, and faceted stone piers and archways of the loggia would be so palpably fine, deep, and grand; that the loftiness of the space would be so awe-inspiring; that the play of high square openings and low arches, and the bending effect of the centrally placed oculi, glimpsed through off-center archways, would be so exquisite. The loggia—AT&T's gift to the public—is a truly fine urban accomplishment.

On the whole, however, despite its several virtues, the AT&T is merely a "good" building—and more was expected. It is not quite the scintillating Post-Modern morsel that would delight fans and infuriate Modernists, nor yet the glowing traditional cabinet filled with discreetly gleaming jewels. It is a little bit of both, and therein lies the problem. For the humor, and indeed bravado, that would place an overscaled, underdetailed pediment on the top of a 647-foot 20th-Century skyscraper is hamstrung by the use of ponderous materials, especially when these materials are discreetly hushed—as in the case of the granite finish—to suit a conservative client. Furthermore, the cavalier manner that combines disparate elements—the motifs in the public lobby, for example—requires a surer sense of artistry than the architects bring into play here. Finally, the street-level public space is cleverly organized in terms of functions, but its various parts lack clear identity.

The achievements

If, for the moment, we examine the building for its achievements rather than its shortcomings, there is much to praise. There is the excellence of the loggia, as mentioned. There is the much-maligned top that, after all, provides a distinctive and far from outlandish marker on the skyline, engaging the sky and clouds most pleasantly. And the parti is ingenious: the tower, 90′ x 200′, is kept to the front of the small site, maintaining Madison Avenue's street line; a three-story row of shops is placed along the Galleria at the back of the site, retaining the dignity of the corporate front entrance; and the reception "skylobby" for the corporation is raised 77 feet above the ground, ensuring increased security for AT&T and leaving the ground free for a public lobby surrounded by a lofty covered public plaza, thereby meriting an increase in the zoning envelope.

The progression of spaces into the building is carefully balanced, from the controlled openness of the loggia, to the high, compressed space of the public lobby, to the low, directional elevator corridor, and finally, to the bright white marble skylobby above. While the subtle granite of the public lobby is finely detailed, the brilliantly nervous black-veined Breccia Strazzema marble of the skylobby is left simple.

The success of the carved granite at entrance level is no accident. The architects engaged the elderly Harold Swenson, a former assistant of Bertram Goodhue, to help them achieve a satisfying sequence of shapes and moldings. In some cases, styrofoam models were prepared, and reworked, and redone.

The typical office floors are generously sized and trimly finished. Floor-to-ceiling heights are ten feet, and the ceilings are neat: Air conditioning is distributed through slots between large, perforated, vinyl-faced metal acoustical panels that can be hinged down for repairs; and with task lighting at each work station, ceiling lighting is kept to a minimum, with fluorescent lighting along the perimeter and core, and some track lighting to illuminate artwork. It is interesting to note that the staff is not accustomed to the task lighting: When a worker stands up with written material in hand, the ambient lighting is felt to be insufficient.

Up against the ideal

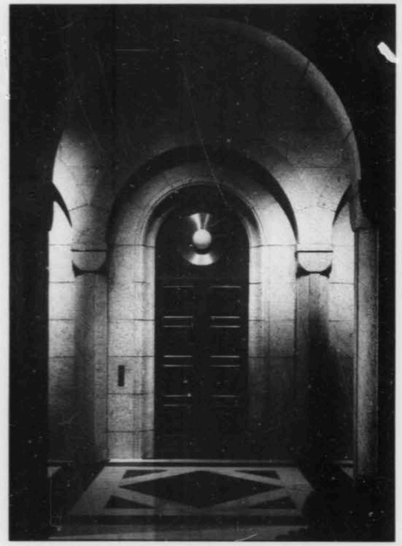
We must, inevitably, return to the ideal image and examine where and why the building falls short.

On the exterior, it is commendable that the granite is used traditionally, so that it *looks* like structural stone, with joints (some real and some suggested within the panels) and without a polished, glassy finish. At ground level,

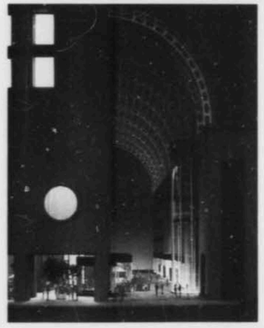


the effect is luxurious. Unfortunately, the nuance is lost above: The effect of the color and finish is dulled, a dullness exacerbated by an unexhilarating fenestration pattern and depth. Johnson agrees that the rhythm of windows is disappointing: Because of the costliness of thick slabs of granite, the windows could not be as deep as the architects wished (they have solved this problem in another way at RepublicBank); the minor mullion sections could not be round, as designed originally, and the actual rectangular configuration gives them too much prominence; and the mandated five-foot office module restricted their freedom in designing the window pattern. In short, the famous form does not glow.

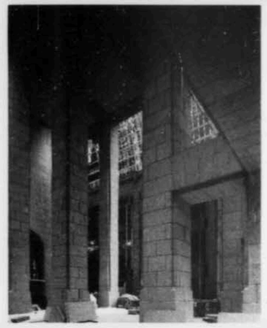
Inside the subdued case, some of the jewels are aggressively white or defiantly large. In the public lobby, an oriental spell is cast by the dusky rose Byzantine-capitaled arcade, the attenuated, tentlike gilt crossvault, and the mysteriously glowing cyclorama orb—a spell that is shattered by the bold, albeit beautiful, black-and-white polished marble floor pattern derived from Lutyens. Upstairs, the voluptuous white Calacata Versillia marble staircase connecting skylobby and dining floor is, well, magnificent, but rather overblown, given its



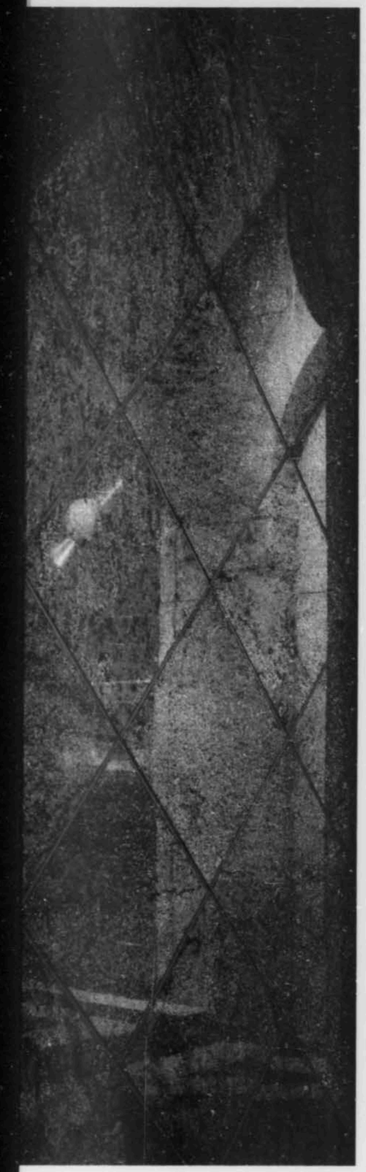


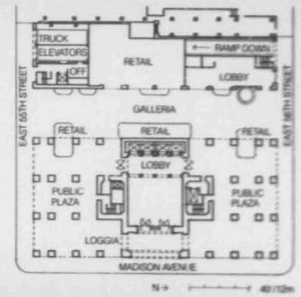


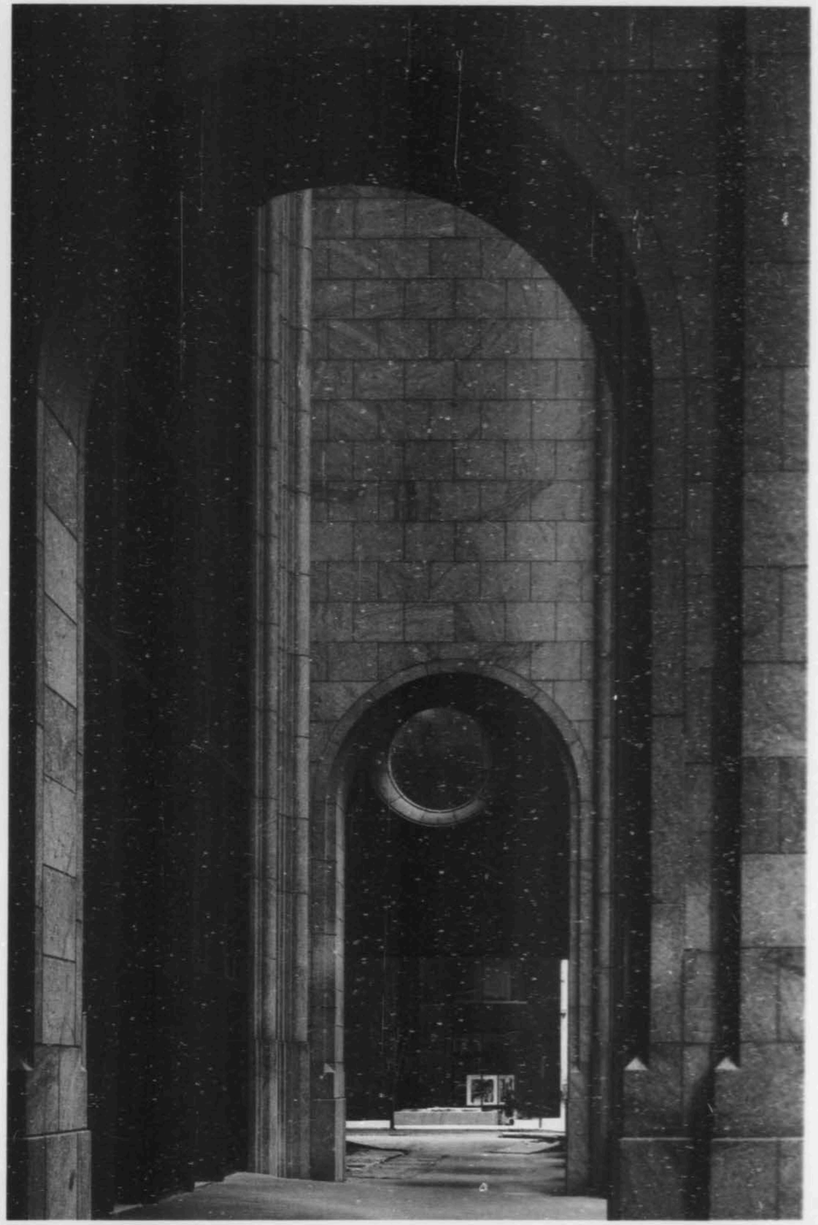




The Byzantine forms and rosy granite in the lobby (above) create a glowing, exotic effect, disrupted by the bold black and white Lutyens-esque floor pattern and large indicator globes above the elevator doors (above left). An encyclopedia of plaza types is found, now, along Madison Avenue: There is the shop-lined Galleria (middle left and model far left) at the rear of the AT&T site, which culminates in the IBM building's Bamboo Court to the north; the loggia along the front of the tower (right); and the public plazas on the sides, under the tower (left).







The loggia (right), with its great, deeply cut granite piers, arches, and oculi, is the building's most remarkable feature. The oculi are fashioned in false perspective to create the effect of greater depth. Located centrally within their bays, they are seen through off-center arches, so that the linear space of the loggia seems to curve.

AT&T Headquarters

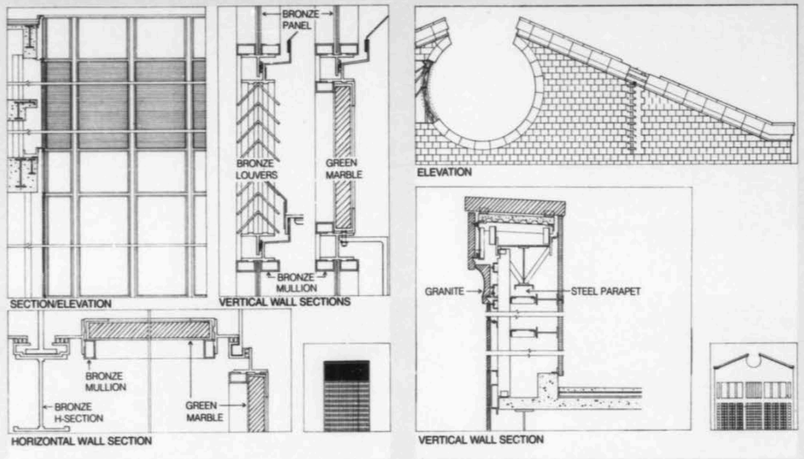
Dennis Wedlick, who now works for Burgee Architects, received his B.Arch from Syracuse University last year. For a class presentation, he compared the Seagram Building (1956) and the AT&T. We reproduce a portion of it here, dealing with the two curtain walls.

The Seagram Building and the AT&T headquarters, built 25 years apart, reveal very different design intentions in the expression of the curtain wall. Both are office towers, similar in plan, steel construction, number of floors, and overall shape; and both were given lavish budgets. The ground level of each tower is recessed, with the base colonnades revealing the slenderness of the steel skeletons. Upon this skeleton, the curtain walls—unlimited by budget and load-bearing considerations—took very different forms. The Seagram building uses an elaborate and carefully balanced system of structural components. The AT&T has a seemingly continuous skin of pink granite, the play of light upon forms and textures giving it its richness.

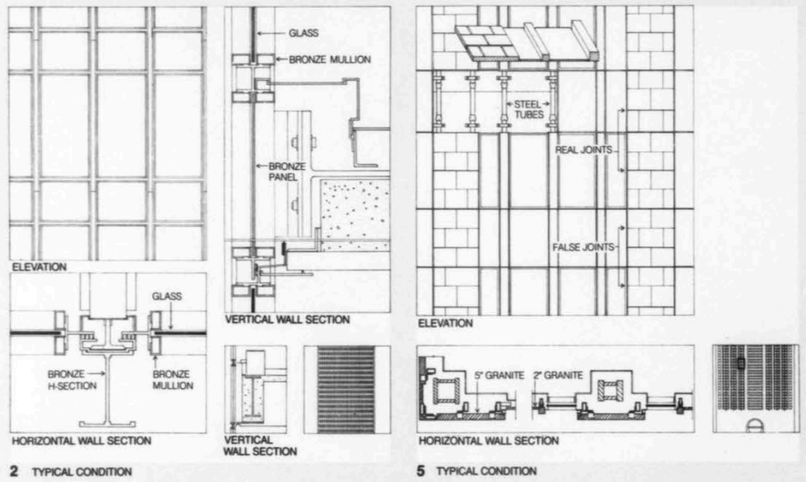
The Seagram Building: At the typical office floor (fig. 2), the pattern of standard bronze mullions is established, infilled with floor-to-ceiling glass alternating with bronze panels. At the base (fig. 3), the system continues, but is slenderer, allowing a sense of continuity from plaza to lobby. At the crown (fig. 1), the mullion system is slightly adjusted and infilled with bronze louvers surrounding the mechanical floors. At the spine—shear walls of concrete—green marble panels become the infill.

The AT&T Headquarters: At the typical office floors (fig. 5), granite panels vary in thickness (2 inches and 5 inches, with 6-inch-square and 10-inch-square mullions), width, and height. Consistent joint pattern is achieved by using both real and false joints. Mullions and panels are anchored to steel tubes supported by angles at the floor slab. At the base (fig. 6), granite skin continues while backup surfaces vary (masonry, steel, and concrete), and various combinations of dowels, plates, and angles are used. To achieve "punched" windows, granite thickness and shape are varied. At the crown (fig. 4), the mass appears still greater, but is still composed of granite pieces, suspended on projecting steel parapet.

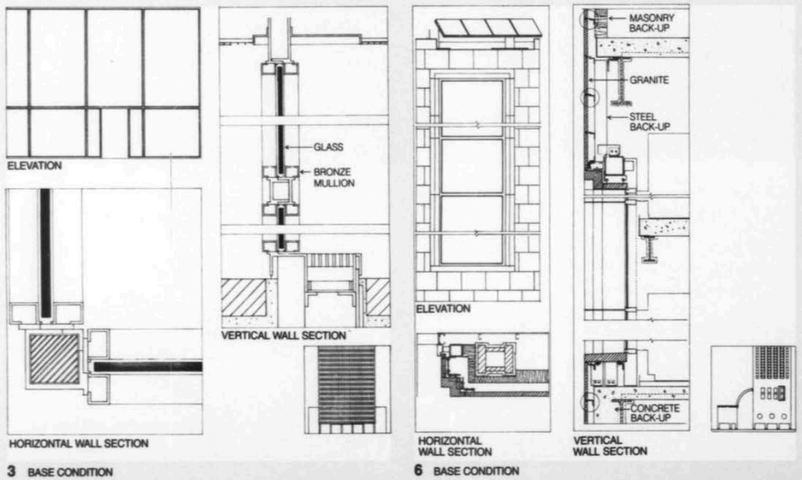
SEAGRAM BUILDING | **AT&T HEADQUARTERS**



1 CROWN CONDITION | 4 CROWN CONDITION



2 TYPICAL CONDITION | 5 TYPICAL CONDITION



3 BASE CONDITION | 6 BASE CONDITION

Project: *AT&T Corporate Headquarters, New York.*
Architects: *Johnson/Burgee Architects (Alan Ritchie, associate, Rolf Hedlund, field representative). Simmons Architects, associates (Harry Simmons, Russell Patterson).*
Client: *195 Broadway Corp.*
Site: *550 Madison Avenue, in Midtown Manhattan.*

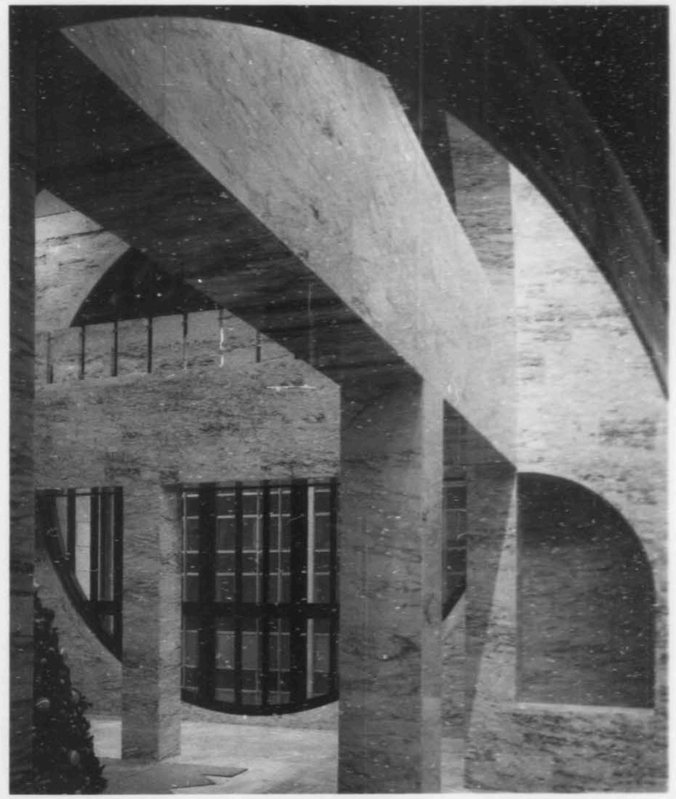
Program: *corporate headquarters, with public lobby, covered plazas, Galleria, and shops at the base.*
Structural system: *steel frame made up of a series of tubes, with steel-plate shear walls from foundation to skylobby.*
Mechanical system: *New York steam as energy source.*

Major materials: *Stony Creek granite exterior cladding and lobby walls. Lobby floor, skylobby floor, walls: marble. Lounge and dining rooms: teak doors, paneling. Offices: dry wall, carpeting, vinyl-clad perforated metal ceiling panels (see Building materials, p. 168).*

Consultants: *Robertson & Fowler Associates, structural engineers; Leroy Callender, associate engineers; Mueser, Rutledge, Johnston & De-Simone, foundations; Cosentini Associates, mechanical engineers; ISD Inc., interior design.*
Construction manager: *Frank Briscoe Co., Inc. Crow/Briscoe, joint venture. HRH Construction Co.*
Photography: *Wolfgang Hoyt, © ESTO.*

space, its off-center location, and the restrained, authentically raised teak paneling of the adjacent lounge and dining rooms.

Even as the exterior spaces provide great pleasure to users, the relationship among the parts—the shift from street to loggia, to covered plazas, to Galleria—is problematic. The given, the street, is just wide enough to view Golden Boy in its vitrine (and the statue and pedestal are scaled for viewing from this standpoint, not from the lobby itself); but the street is not wide enough to provide the most desirable frontal approach to the giant arcade. Next, the various open spaces on the site seem almost continuous, but they are not, and their individual identities are obscured. First, there is the delightful linear promenade, or loggia, whose front is open to the street, in keeping with its portico typology, but whose back is unexpectedly open to the two covered plazas flanking the central lobby. From loggia to plazas, the clarity of the parts begins to break down; but within the tower envelope reorientation is possible. Then, the character of the open space shifts again, to become a covered linear street called the Galleria, not under the tower, but under a high, curved, transparent shed roof springing from the row of low shops along the back of the site up to the towering building beside it. Is it a street? Is it a plaza? Its identity is uncomfortably weak.



In summary

The AT&T building raises its head distinctly on New York's skyline. Its covered promenade is grand, giving pleasure to passers-by, and it is presumably a most comfortable building in which to work. But as a landmark of the Post-Modern movement, which it already has become, it is both too flamboyant and not flamboyant enough, trying to show off, and holding back simultaneously. It dares to "do" Post-Modernism in a big way, drawing upon a variety of images, but it combines them either too aggressively (Byzantine/Lutyens), too meekly (overrestrained granite), or too obscurely (loggia/plaza/Galleria). Intoning "McKim, Mead & White" and "Raymond Hood" as sources is not sufficient; one must do something brilliant with them. In the AT&T building, the organization is effective and intelligent, but only the loggia gleams brilliantly. But then, Johnson and Burgee have many more buildings to do.

[Susan Doubilet]



In the skylobby (above), the Breccia Strazzema marble is simply detailed to allow the nervous Koren-like veining to have its full effect. The employee dining room (left) is furnished with teak-paneled booths upholstered in simulated leather, and will be decorated with banners.