

# Philip Johnson's AT&T: The Post Post-Deco skyscraper

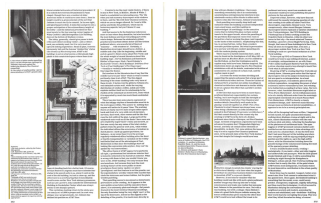
25 AUGUST 1984 BY REYNER BANHAM ESSAYS



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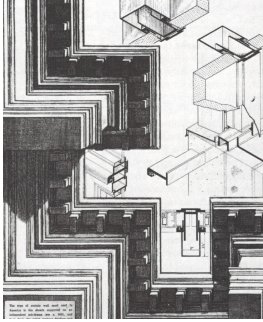
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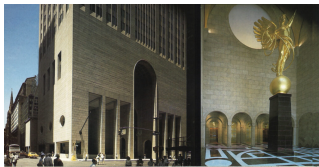
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Banham adopts a new critical position to assess this canonical work of Post Modernism

*Originally published in August 1984, this piece was republished online in March 2017*

Even since the design was first published in 1980, Philip Johnson's AT&T building in Manhattan has been regarded as one of the canonical buildings of Post Modernism. William Curtis attacks the building as being not historical enough. But here Reyner Banham

argues that the tower is a piece of 'truly critical regionalism' - recognising the Manhattan vernacular yet refusing to be bullied by it.

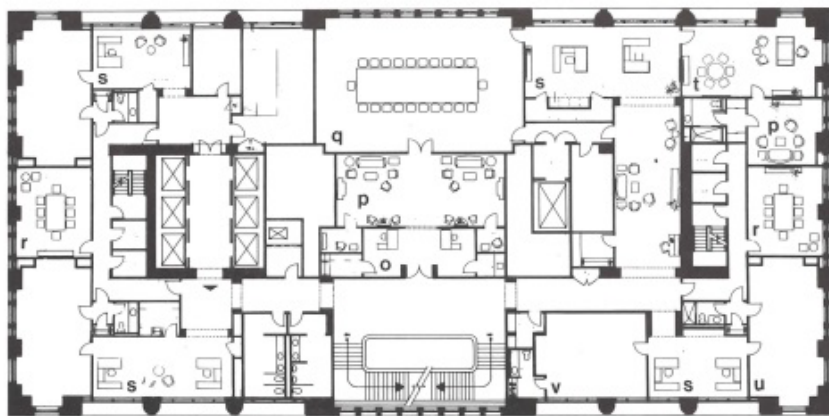
In doing so, Banham himself adopts a new critical position - the latest in a series which have influenced architecture for 30 years.



‘Whereas the AT&T Building’s witticisms are expressly superficial, it is a work that-in Manhattan-one must take very seriously indeed’  
The trouble with nine days’ wonders in architecture is that buildings take more than nine days to erect. Before AT&T’s distinctive silhouette was any more than a steel outline against the sky, the media abandoned it and ran across the continent to drool over Michael

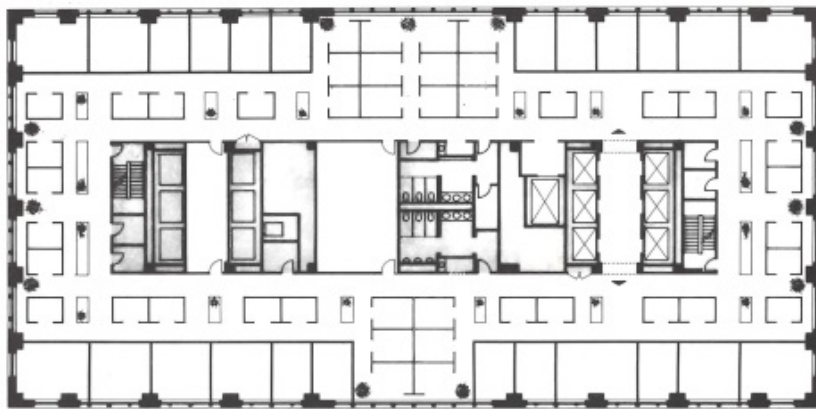
Graves' Post-Deco cube in Portland, Oregon (AR November 1982). But time and the media have their revenges, and AT&T was barely clad in its handsome granite skin before *Women's Wear Daily* announced that Michael Graves was Out and printed a red X over his picture.

These matters are not trivial; the fact that a garment trade paper had even heard of architecture, let alone Graves, is a fair measure of the public awareness of building that Philip Johnson has created in New York-not altogether unaided but very much in his own image. He is part of the life and culture of his city as few other architects have ever been; arbiter of taste, regulator of gossip, confidant of power, a citizen presence.



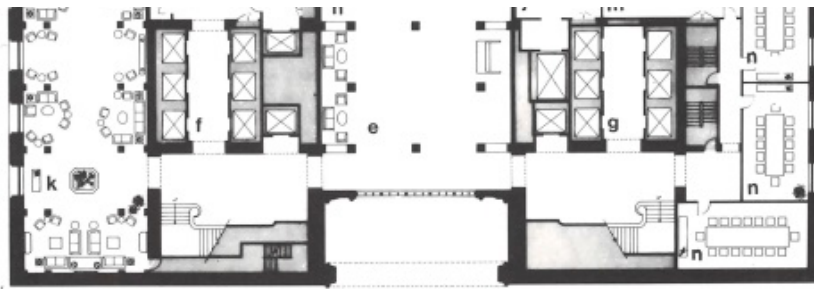
34th (executive) floor plan

- key
- a, lobby
  - b, retail
  - c, garage ramp
  - d, truck elevators
  - e, sky lobby
  - f, high-rise elevators
  - g, low-rise elevators
  - h, shuttle elevators lobby
  - i, security and personnel
  - j, parcel room
  - k, lounge
  - m, pantry
  - n, conference/dining
  - o, reception
  - p, ante room
  - q, board room
  - r, conference
  - s, secretarial
  - t, chairman
  - u, vice-chairman
  - v, vice-president

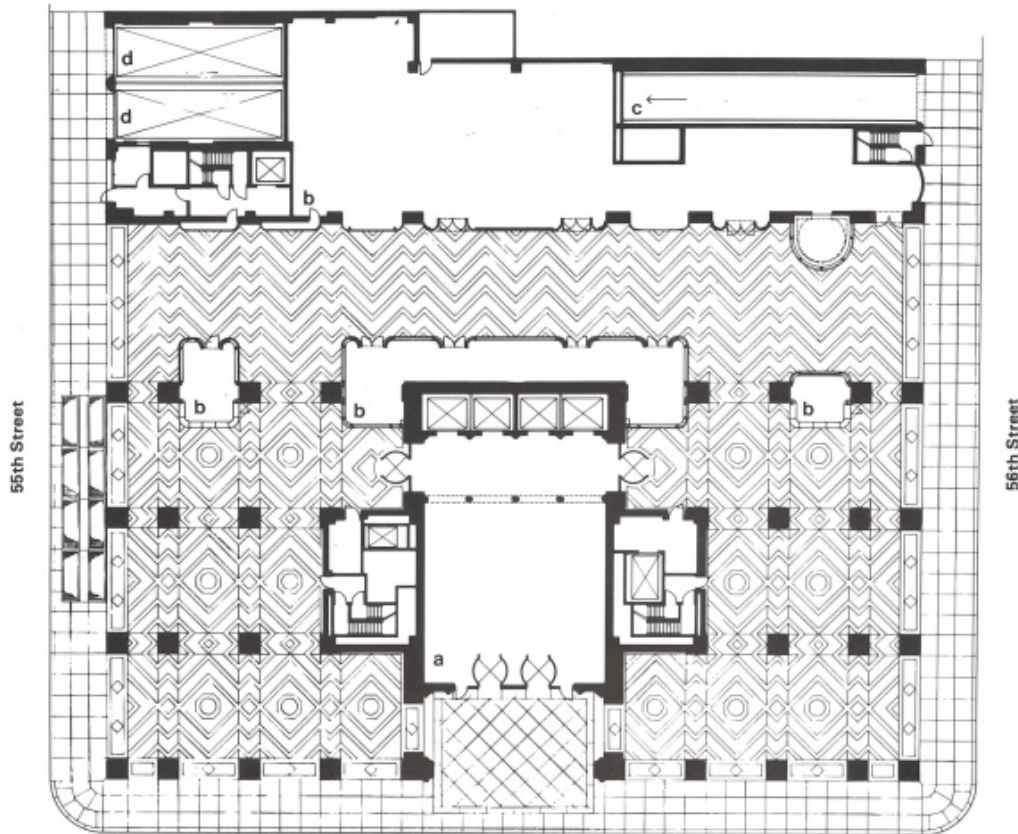


typical low-rise floor plan





first floor plan ('sky lobby')



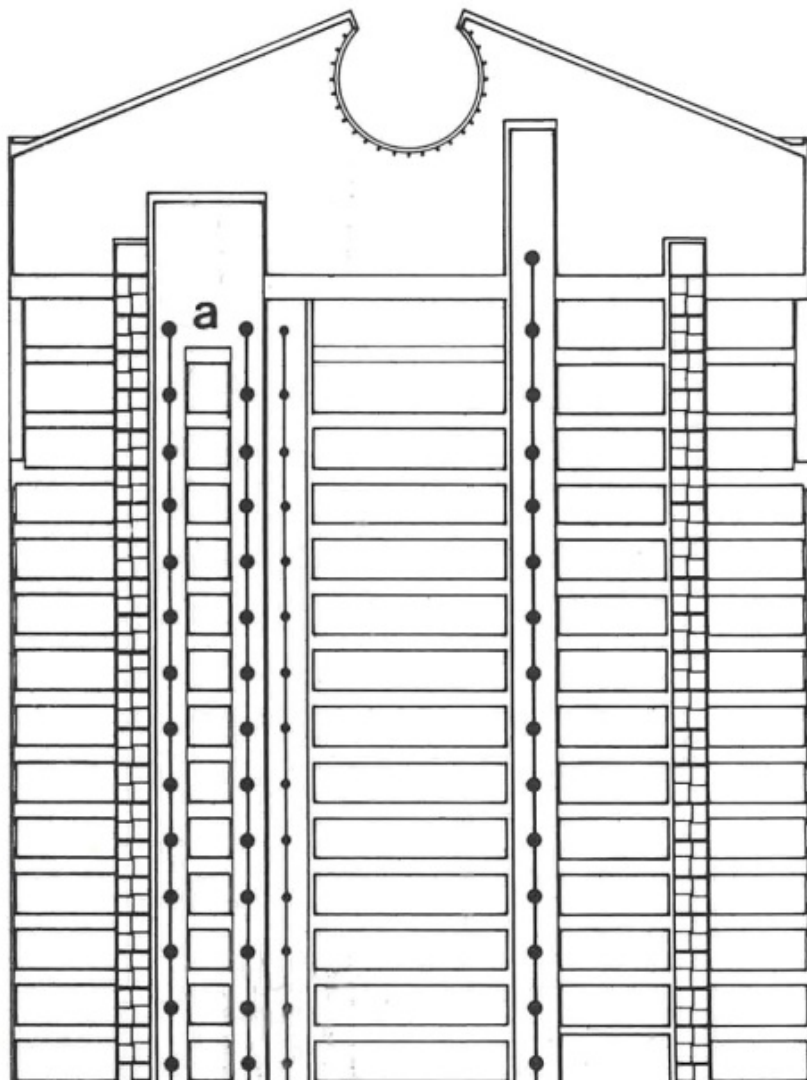
ground floor plan

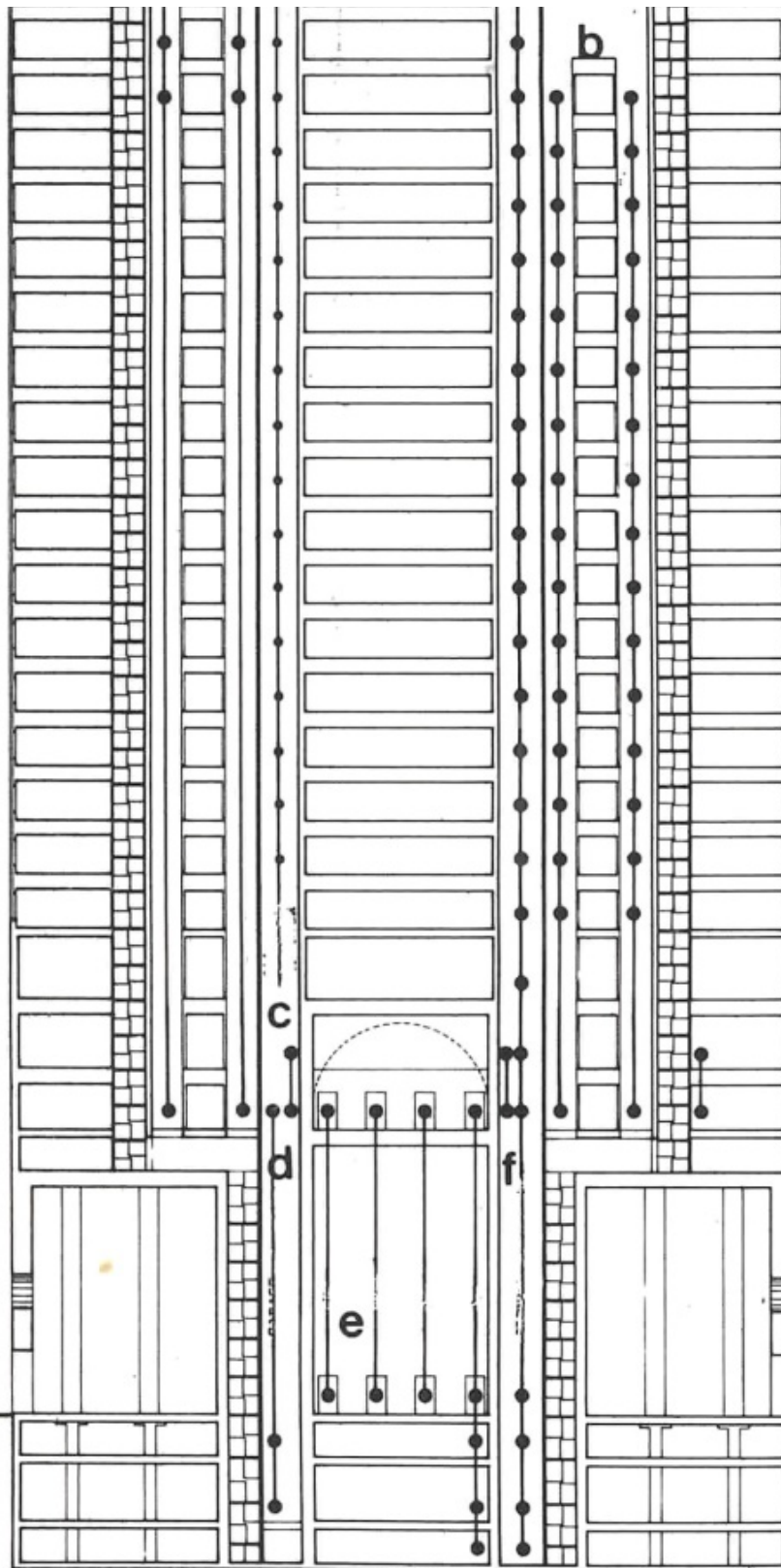
## Floor plans

Because of him, AT&T's cresting produced public and journalistic debate on the use of historical precedent in a way that the whole oeuvre of Charles Jencks, David Watkin and Roger Scruton have so far failed to do. All New York knows the building has a 'Chippendale Top', and has accepted it as a classic New York skyscraper already. For the building is, above all, a commentary or product of the specifically Manhattan history of architecture, a monument (or tombstone) to the whole period since Johnson, with Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Alfred H. Barr, devised the exhibition with which the Museum of Modern Art opened in 1932 and gave the world the

phrase, 'The International Style'.

If AT&T is the most publicised defection from that style so far, it is appropriately so. Johnson has, so to speak, killed off his own most famous offspring and in the process has, with perfect irony, produced a text-book example of that 'Critical Regionalism' by which Kenneth Frampton has proposed (in *The Anti-Aesthetic*) that a living architecture should defend itself against the dead hand of the International Style. AT&T is so intensely regional as to be almost parochial, an insider's Manhattan one-line jest - or would be if Manhattan were not a world city and Johnson a world figure.





**section showing vertical circulation**

**key**

a, high-rise elevators

b, low-rise elevators

c, mail conveyor

d, garage elevator

e, shuttle elevators

f, service elevator

Section showing vertical circulation

If it fell to Skidmore Owings & Merrill and Wallace K. Harrison to build the first actual examples of the International Style in its classic Manhattan glass-box form (Lever House and United Nations), the climate of opinion in which it was possible to do so had been overwhelmingly the work of the architecture programme at MoMA, founded by Johnson, originally funded by his family, continued by Arthur Drexler, his chosen successor, and diffused by influential journalists like Peter Blake, Ada Louise Huxtable of the New York Times and Paul Goldberger, her successor, whose careers all developed under the programme's shadow.

Whether or not Philip Johnson actually invented the term 'Post-Modernism' (his denials are unusually modest), his obliquely erudite relationship to the practice of the International Style marks him as one of Post-Modernism's true progenitors. Anyone who goes back through the files of the AR in the '50s, when Johnson was to some extent the eminence grise behind (sometimes in front of) the magazine's executive editor Ian McCallum, will realise that Johnson, even then, did not practice 'Modernism as vulgarly understood' and that his famous glass house in New Canaan, a paradigmatic example of Modernism in many books, is revealed in AR September 1952 as a concentrated exercise in historicism.

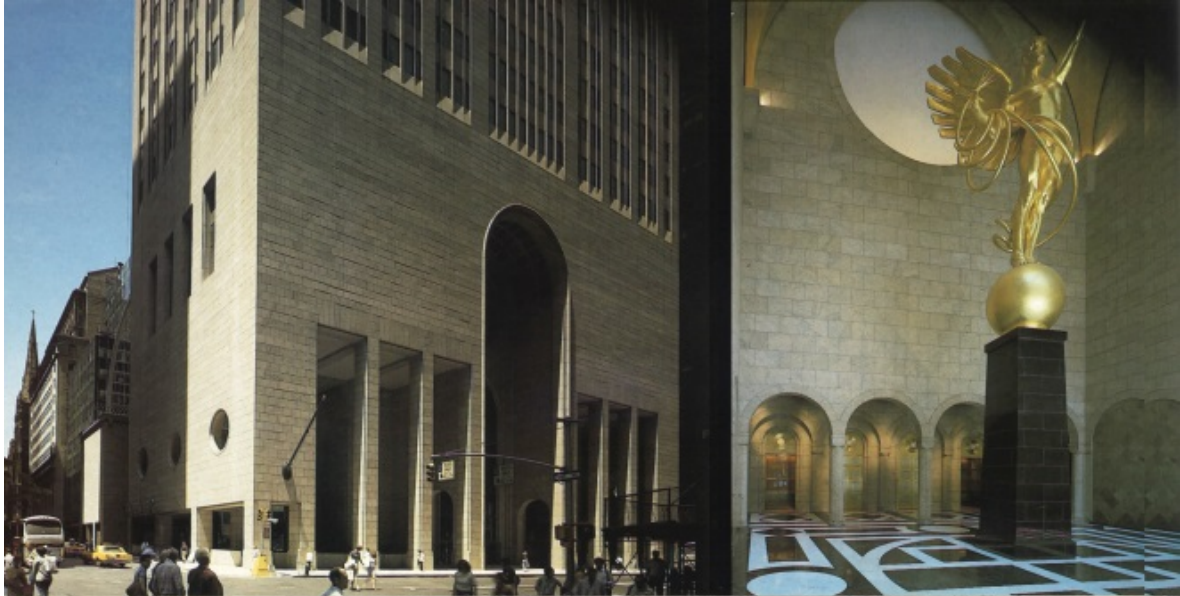


'sky lobby' on first floor

That all this erudition was not taken seriously at the time (or since) is largely due to his carefully cultivated media image of superficial wit and flip irony - 'It used to be Bob Hope,' said Alison Smithson toward the end of the '50s, 'but now it's Jack Lemmon ... and did you notice how he keeps his gestures within the frame of a standard tv screen?' Few seemed to realise even after his urbane demolition of the formidably intelligent Susan Sontag in the BBC's Monitor programme that behind that assumed facade there lurked a genuine wit and profound ironist, sustained by the kind of guarded seriousness and vulnerability that sustains all great performers in that field.

This may help to explain the confusing fact that whereas the AT&T Building's witticisms and ironies are expressly superficial, it is a work that - in Manhattan - one must take very seriously indeed. After all, even its literal superficialities, the surfaces of its envelope, are made neither of plastic, wall-board, stucco, anodised aluminium, enamelled refrigerator-doors, nor any other standard Post Modern stuff. Instead, they are made of two to four inches of good Connecticut granite so

well installed and detailed that Tom Wolfe's canard about Modern architecture having destroyed building craftsmanship can now go back in the trash-can where he presumably found it.



That good granite is the most strikingly unexpected difference between the myth-maker's pre-completion AT&T of press release, magazine cover and academic polemic, and the real-life AT&T that New Yorkers will now have to-live with. What no model or drawing could properly show, for instance, was how resoundingly the building comes down to ground on its solidly granitic legs, while actually enclosing much less ground-level space than is customary. The walled box of the lobby occupies barely a quarter of the tower's total footprint and, combined with the (not too convincingly) glazed half-galleria at the back, returns a remarkably large covered and paved area to the public realm.

But, although the public munificence of these loggias would have been a major topic even five or six years since, it is the granite that tends to monopolise conversation among those who have actually seen the finished work, and has convinced most of them that this really is a good building. The detailing of the stone (by old-timer Howard Swenson in the last months of his life) is simplified, adequate and correct. Adequate and correct in its mechanical and technical aspects, visually it is 'stern', if you approve, 'barren', if you don't.

Sparse it certainly is, and the only relief from this thinlipped reticence comes from the fat roll-mouldings that arch over the entrance and the circular window above-and the astonishing apron of opus reticulatum (more or less) that fills in the space between those mouldings.



stairs between executive 33rd and 34th floor

The height of that arch (and the corresponding arch of the entrance colonnade) should disconcert literal-minded advocates of historical precedent. If it is indeed derived from Brunelleschi's Pazzi chapel (though there are a number of older American banks it could have come from), then its height would be a gross solecism of the sort that Johnson is much too fly to commit. In its own right, and ignoring precedent, it looks fine and gives one a proper anticipation of the extraordinary height of the lobby-and the historical precedent for that must surely be the four soaring corner loggias of Wiley Corbett's 1932 Metropolitan Life Building, down at the bottom of Madison Avenue.

The lobby, generally, should give pause to both critic and rubber-necking visitor-and a rubberneck you certainly need, for it is very much an upward-looking experience. Small in plan, it seems immensely tall and the famous 'Golden Boy' statue (the Genius of Electricity from AT&T's old building) is set on what seems a ridiculously high plinth in this constricted space where there is no hope of standing back for a better look. Of course, Evelyn Beatrice Longman must have intended her statue to be seen *di sotto in su*, since it went on the roof of the old building, but not in close-up, and the effect now is so overbearing that it immediately recalls some earlier New York statuary presences, such as Lee Lawrie's Atlas outside the International Building in Rockefeller Center which one always seems to see sharply upward.





‘While the witticisms and ironies are superficial, it is a work that-in Manhattan-one must take very seriously indeed.’

This vertebrae-busting return to the status quo (or nearly so) of 1930 is proper and (in a not very oblique way) programmatic, for Johnson has defined his position on AT&T thus: ‘ ... it seems to me the most viable history, if there is any in New York, is McKim, Meade & White. I tried to re-establish two interesting eras. The ’20s when you

had masonry skyscrapers with windows in them, and the '90s with their Classical cornices, which we are no longer allowed. So I went a little astray and broke the pediment, which has its humorous aspects, but you'll know it's our building.'

And that seems to fix the historical references more or less where they should be, but also brackets the most dubious and least rewarding part of the whole design. Between the elaborately gilded, granited and marbled lobbies below and the broken pediment above, are an awful lot of floors of 'masonry ... with windows in'. Certainly, a Manhattan skyscraper should have a bottom, a middle and a top (like the beginning, middle and end of a good Henry story about New York) and the whole weight of recent literature about this building-type-Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Bletter's *Skyscraper Style*, Carol Krinsky's *Rockefeller Center*, Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* or Paul Goldberger's *The Skyscraper* -visually or verbally underscores the tradition of this tripartite theme.



## Offices

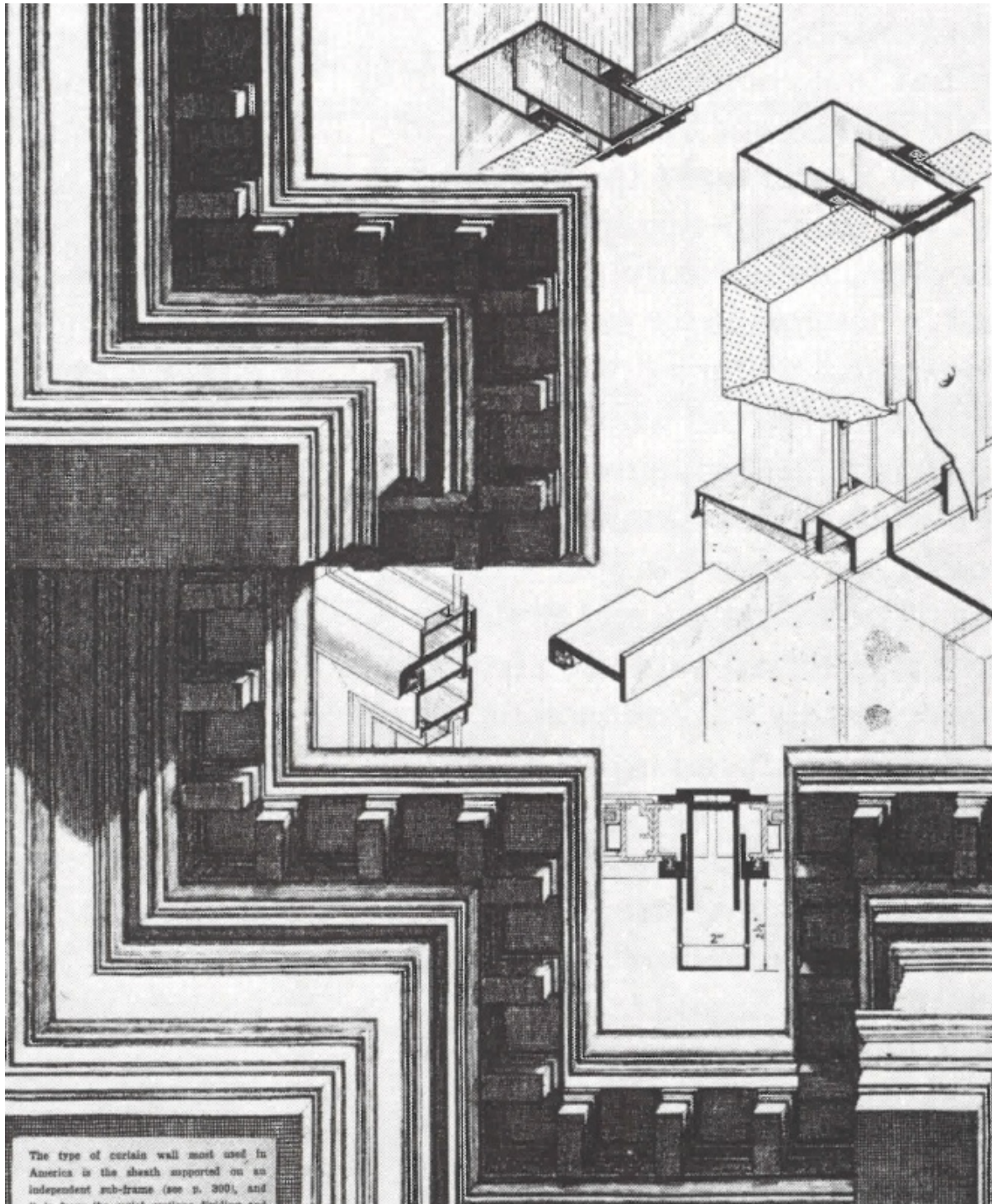
But nowhere in the literature does it say that the middle has to be just ‘filler’ which is what it comes perilously close to at AT&T. The thin-lipped detailing of the stone cladding looks very bare at these levels ; it lacks even the glittery richness of a well-detailed curtain wall, while the varying distribution of window-widths, solids and voids explains neither itself nor its relationship to the rhythm of the colonnade at street level, from which it is separated by much too much blank undetailed granite.<sup>4</sup>

There has also been some alarm expressed at what that skippy rhythm of fenestration must do to the work space within. The answer is : nothing that anyone will notice in 10 years’ time. The working floors are fairly narrow slabs of open office-space back and front of a very solid core of elevators, services, duct-work, store-rooms and the like that runs the full width of the plan. Large parts of the windowed outer

wall on all the floors I have seen are pre-empted by supervisors' rooms and so forth, so that one rarely has any sense of the total window pattern from the general work area, while within the individual offices the occurrence of windows in dumb places-hard up against partitions, for instance-is no worse than it is in the average regularly-windowed office/building after the third or fourth reorganisation (a variation on the widely held belief that one of the advantages of PostModernism is that since the buildings start off looking like conversion jobs anyhow, they can't be spoiled by real conversions).

The office floors of AT&T appear to be perfectly all right, a professional but humdrum interior that is honestly reflected in the humdrum exterior. What is wrong with them is that you wouldn't know you were in the AT&T building! Not only because they are humdrum, but because they lack the most striking feature of the more public or more prestigious floors below (public) or above (prestigious) and that feature is not the granite, nor the superpolished, weirdly veined white marble that clads the staircases and minor lobbies, but the plain wooden panelling .

That panelling seems to me almost as historically provocative as the cresting. As it appears in the semi-public areas below and the executive floors above, it is extremely plain and simple-flat panels framed in the most minimal Classical mouldings, the only flourishes being the very slight 'ears' at the top of the doorcases. Almost as thin-lipped as the detailing of the granite, it is much more directly in line with pre-Modern traditions; I have seen something remarkably like it in comfortably unostentatious entrepreneurial interiors in late nineteenth-century office blocks in older northeastern cities like Cleveland, Johnson's hometown.



Such panelling was usually shop-built and installed within the building as almost independent room-sized boxes, and this tradition is acknowledged (**if** unwittingly) in the executive rooms that lie behind the glass curtain-walled inserts in the upper facade , where the panelling of the partitions that separate room from room is turned for a foot or so along the glass (and repeated on the backs of the mullions), emphasising that this, too, is an inserted box, rather than a modern movable partition system. But what is provocative is to see

how well this pre-modern panelling sits with the modern glazing system.

There may be a buried connection here, and it may be found on the frontispiece of AR May 1957 -a special issue on Machine Made America edited by Ian McCallum, so that the frontispiece and its caption may both have been Johnson-inspired. The illustration shows an engraving of a Neo-Classical entablature with all its details, confronted with an axonometric of a section of curtain-wall, and the caption reads in part:

' ... it is from the metal sections dividing and supporting the panels and panes that a large part of the architectural effect derives. These few inches of metal perform a function not unlike mouldings in classical architecture and demand a similar ability to see at a glance the effect that a profile's section will have.'<sup>5</sup>

At the time that may have been no more than a proffered historical respectability for curtainwalling, but it now begins to look like foresight of how comfortably (and why) Neo-Classical and modern details (beautifully well made in the glazing) would sit together at AT&T. For a Neoclassicist is what Johnson has always been, even when being a Modernist (as John Jacobus has argued in the February Progressive Architecture) .<sup>6</sup> But that cannot directly be the reason why the cresting of AT&T is in the form of a broken pediment since that is a Baroque, not Neo-Classical, usage. All kinds of ingenious arguments have been advanced to explain that 'Chippendale High-boy' format, and they all contain some elements of plausibility, no doubt. Yet, none address the issue of why it is not a regular Neo-Classical pediment since, in the present state of the New York skyline,<sup>7</sup> even that simple flat triangle would have been distinctive enough to satisfy his clients' craving for architectural identity-at a time when the largest divestiture in American business history was about to demolish AT&T's corporate identity.



arcade which connects tower to adjacent building

However, **if** one tries to visualise what the building would look like with such a plain pediment, another image may float up into one's visual consciousness and make one realise that someone beat Johnson to the punchline for once. Not with a real building, but with a collage; Hans Hollein's vision of a giant Rolls-Royce radiator among the

towers of Manhattan gives exactly the effect that AT&T would have had without the break in its pediment and every smart-ass academic and columnist would have been publishing the paired pictures for fun and profit!

Deprived of that, however, why have they not addressed the equally intriguing question of why that cresting is so unlike all other Post-Deco skyscrapers, especially Johnson's own. Very conspicuously, other recent Burgee/ Johnson skyscrapers tend to replicate or satirise established New York prototypes: the PPG Building in Pittsburgh has a Gothic cresting as does the Republic Bank in Houston, while his other new tower in that city-the much-admired Transco Building-goes for a Deco/Hugh Ferriss top. Note, though, that none of these buildings is in New York. They all seem to recognise that, even now, a skyscraper outside New York is a New York building in exile or a provincial imitation of a New York building-.

To have put up PPG or Transco in New York would have been to say nothing of interest, a piece of nostalgia, antiquarianism or, as with Cesar Felli's sadly inadequate Battery Park City Towers, a straw-chewing country-boy attempt to teach New York what it already knows.

By giving AT&T a cresting that New York did not already know, Johnson gave notice that the tops of skyscrapers will not be subject to historical rules but are open to re-interpretation. As a local Manhattan gesture, it is indeed a piece of truly critical regionalism, recognising the power of what is almost a native vernacular by now, but refusing to be bullied into accepting it at face value. Nor is it, however, what Jencksian discourse might label as 'Free-Form Historicism', for its wilfulnesses seem to be of a totally different order from the seemingly unprincipled eclecticism of so much Fancy-Style Post-Modernism. AT&T is clearly a closely considered design, and-however much this may enrage many architects of stricter sensibilities-it appears to me to be a severely principled one.



lobby-‘small in plan, it seems immensely tall’.

After all the foregoing had been written, I happened to find myself, for quite unconnected reasons, walking down Madison Avenue at night and in the rain, classic Manhattan weather with the road

surfaces slick and shiny, reflecting the headlamps of the phalanxes of northbound taxis. The open loggias of AT&T promised welcome shelter and I scuttled across the avenue to take advantage of it. And came to a stunned halt-it was the first time that I had seen this part of the building anywhere near complete, with the zig-zag striped paving in position and the lights on, up in the high soffits above, with the illumination trickling down the granite facings of the columns and making the most of the sparsely proper detailing. ·

**It** was a transformation-scene, evoking nostalgically, if you insist- other and older loggias and undercrofts and passagen. With the little glazed kiosks finished and lit up, it will be something like walking by night through the Konigsbau in Stuttgart, echoes and all. New York has nothing else to show that is really like this. At the point where AT&T seems most antiquarian, it actually makes its most innovative contribution to the urban quality of Manhattan.

Some time may be needed, **I** suspect, before even smart-alec New York comes to understand what it has gained here. Once again, the finished building is something that the model, even, could barely predict. Unexpected, enigmatic, slightly disturbing, and thus much like its designer, it will sit around in Manhattan defying the conventions of its neighbours ancient and modern, annoying the mature and established, and-doubtless-fulfilling their worst fears by corrupting the young. That was what they killed Socrates for doing, of course!