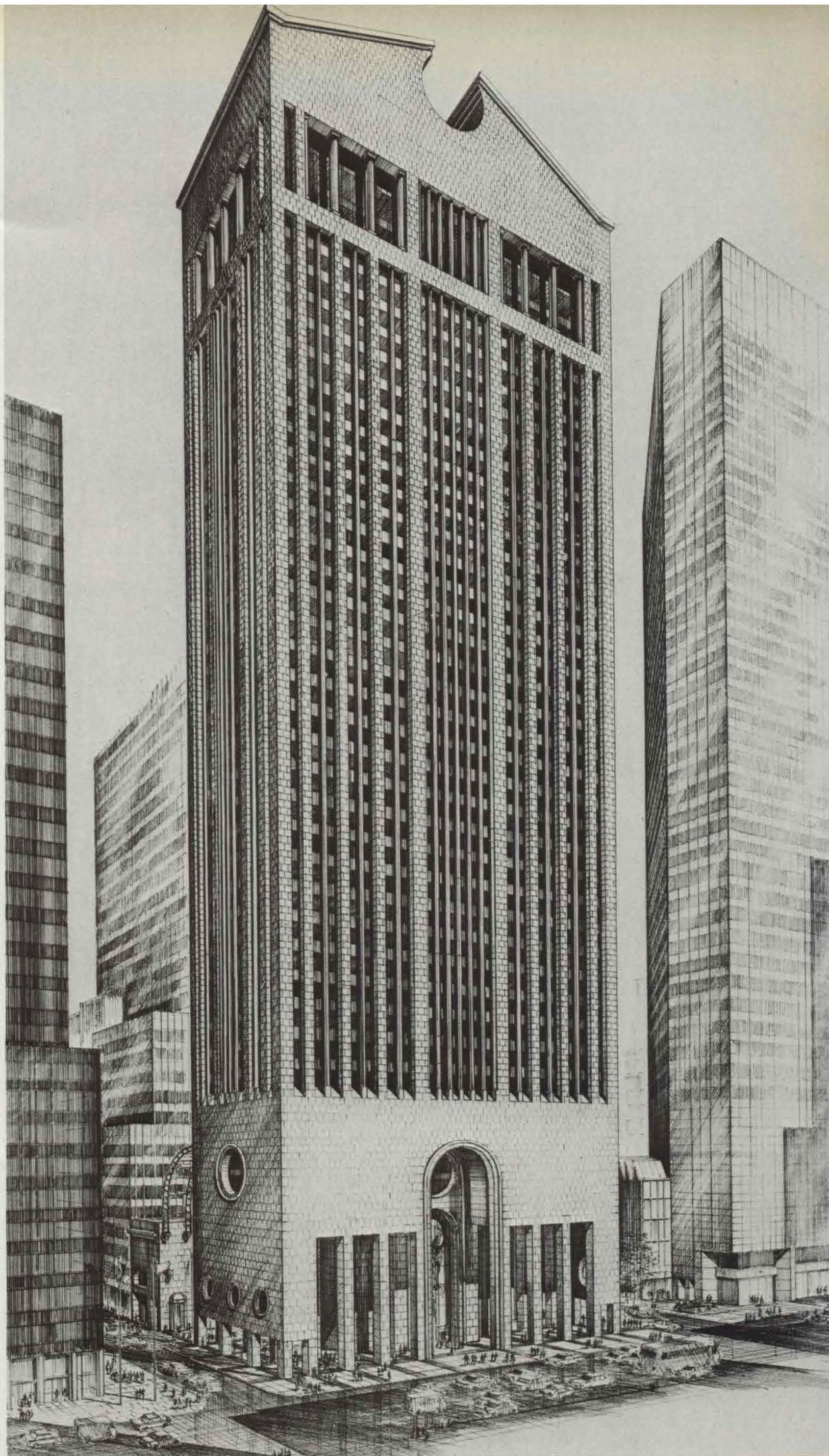


TWELVE
TWISTS

ON
MODERN
ARCHITECTURE

JOHNSON



left and p.34:

Drawings of AT and T Corporate Headquarters, New York
(Architects, Johnson/Burgee)

*extracts from a lecture given by Philip Johnson at the
Architectural Association, 30 April 1979;
edited by Chris Fawcett*

*Robin Middleton modestly introduced him as 'the mind of
American architecture', before Johnson took the platform.*

I was attacked during my last visit here eighteen years ago that I repeat it with trepidation. But that was a generation ago – undoubtedly you have all softened, as I have done. I was under attack mainly for symmetry at that time and perhaps it isn't quite so bad to today's generation.

Coming to England again things have changed. I notice that the AA has become Americanised to the extent that you have to do everything yourself. But it's still so much better than where I come from that I intend to make it my vacation home. I've spent the afternoon with Ernest George, a name I didn't know in 1961. We still have a lot to learn in city planning and streetscape, the type done so well by George: in one project of his he gets the scale of large shop windows well-fitted to the ins and outs of a street's requirement. The works are in all manner of styles: Gothic, Dutch or maybe Belgian Baroque, playful gables, enormous volutes; but the man I've really come to discuss is Norman Foster. I told Gavin Stamp that I was more catholic than he and he said that wouldn't be hard. Foster's Sainsbury Centre is something to be celebrated; we don't have anything as 'high-tech' in the US; you can read all about it in Jencks, though that's probably a mistake. The architect can use words like Humpty Dumpty to mean whatever he likes, whereas the critic like Jencks has to be clear as to exactly what it is he intends. He has called me 'modern-eclectic', which gives me the chance to run the whole gaunt of Modernism and eclecticism.

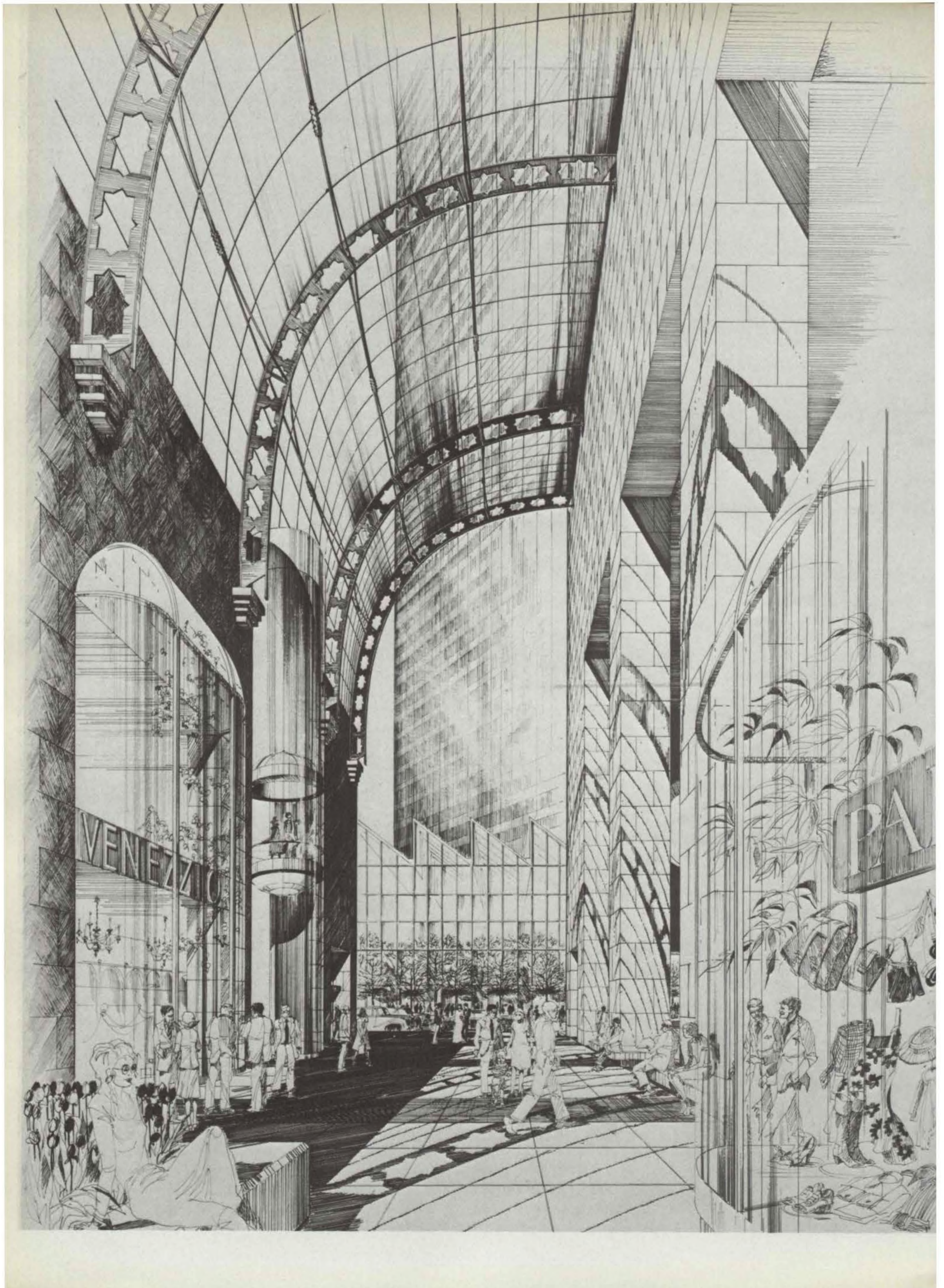
I may be the mind of American Architecture, but we have no minds; at least we build buildings. We really do have the opportunity to build in the US, although I can't offer you a job in my office; if you want to start building perhaps that's a good place to start.

My lecture title is 'Twelve Twists on Modern Architecture'. In the work ongoing in my office, twelve different directions are being explored. The work of Ernest George is very appropriate here: for example he employs four

different styles in one block, cohering nobly, so that a good many twists can be embodied in one and the same building; a triumph of complexity, a *tour de force* in street architecture; conventional shopping on the ground floor with everything going mad above. Even Oxford Street has such examples, one building art nouveau, the next a turn of the century block, then a few modern things, culminating in something called Centrepoint; such a building can't be left empty in New York.

Last year I gave the annual American Institute of Architect's address on what was happening to architecture today, but my position has changed since. Then I was euphoric (Jencks had inspired us all) and I wanted to take stock of the changes taking place, the first being that we now have to look to history. Things have developed since the heroic phase of Modernism when problems were thought to have been solved for an eternity. Glass was the only material that could be used, cornices taboo, horizontal roofs essential, the material skin had to be taut and windows flush: asymmetry ruled. It was a glorious age: arguments passed over one, Functionalism was the only principle. Lubetkin's caryatids at Highpoint were taken as symbols that Modernism had not quite yet reached England. The International Style was a victory too easily won. Just look at the tower blocks proliferating in a place like London, I wish they could be pulled down; they just don't seem right here, where they appear singly here and there, poor substitutes for church spires; whereas in New York they comprise a living and complete culture, enjoying a vitality of its own beyond mere architecture. Size had its own aesthetic: canyons of artificial delight. But in London the tower mars the city fabric, too loose to really engage in an urban way. For example, the AT and T tower project of mine, which has sparked off so much controversy (featured in the *New York Times* and the *London Times*) cannot be seen in its entirety at all: its form will always be hidden by the adjacent blocks, and can only really be understood viewed from across the 59th Bridge. As you walk along Madison Avenue you will come across a great opening, a great arcade, a hyperstyle; there are lots of columns: I put more in than was needed to make it interesting. The ceiling is 60ft above your head and light filters down. But you can't see the top. Just about no one has ever seen the entirety of the Empire State Building, which is hard to distinguish from the buildings either side of it.

Now to return to the theme of the talk, the switching of favour from Modernism to the study of history, whether it means Boullée, Richard Meier or the Pazzi Chapel, we don't mind looking at old buildings anymore. Structure is no longer the determinant. Mies believed a building was almost finished once he'd got the column's spacings fixed; now I tell the engineer that he may feel free to put his columns wherever he likes in one of my designs. This is obviously not the case with Richard Rogers or Ove Arup: the Beaubourg was a conscious structural exercise, as is Foster's work. There was a lot of buildings going up in the twenties in the US which didn't take structure seriously: Raymond Hood's work, for example. It was us European-inspired purists who sparked it off; it was us who believed in the rhythm of the module. The word 'module' had not been used in the nineteenth century, fortunately for Sullivan, who placed his windows



according to the way his pencil worked; but then structure became the Shiboleth, until now we are in a period of contextualism or *genius loci*.

Another difference between the architect and the critic is that the latter has to understand what he means whereas the former doesn't. We architects managed to get along for fifty to sixty years without words like 'semiology'; I'm not sure how we did, but the journalist must get along with them. I will leave the words of the moment to the current generation for them to use as they see fit. Symbolism is another thing we've learned about. Houses, banks, churches, all looked exactly the same in the Miesian days; the owner was 'never right', the neighbours were 'never right'; we told the client that if they didn't agree then we refused the job. But now (for example in the work I've done in Texas, which has no design laws or restrictions) we find a style for each job. One is two skyscrapers roft apart; the planning committee responded to the planning proposal, 'that looks alright to me'. Architectural students should head on down to this sunshine state. Nowadays style has moved so far that we want a church to look like a church; I've just built a Spanish-looking cultural centre in Miami, and people immediately understand and say, 'yes, that's a library'; you can't imagine a greater compliment today. Jencks has interestingly discussed the boiler-house and the church on Mies's IIT Campus Chicago: the boiler-house, because of its chimney, looks like a church, while the church proper looks like a boiler-house. Good building is very far from being good architecture.

Genius loci, symbolism and history: these are the new rising stars, but I can't unlearn fifty years of Modernism overnight; of course I am a Modern, not a post-Modern, architect. I still work for functional distribution: for example, an office building has to be rentable, and it has to have the right core to perimeter ratio. I'm afraid I can't live up to grand sweeps we find in Lutyen's work. We in the US think Lutyens is the greatest English architect, better than Soane, and the best twentieth-century architect globally.

But to come to my subject matter, it is the 'Twelve Twists of Modernism'. I am doing an Expressionist church in California that derived from Mies' Friedrichstrasse project: (1920s, sharp-point, all glass, no interior); seating 4000 people, it is 400ft long, 100ft high; space frame of bronzed steel, like the Sainsbury Centre; no columns, no other architectural expression; non-symmetrical, sharp angles; I didn't think of Mies' project until afterwards; one should always design first and then see where you got it from later; but it is wonderful to find historical analogues to encourage one.

Another building I'm doing is a 'Corbu', as I've been told by Bob Stern: it's a cone, looking like a mosque, that is in fact a studio for myself; and the form was determined by the light, which is a shadowless, diffused light, sub-aquatic in feeling. The lighting in the AA shows that you are as uneducated as us about it all.

Another project we're looking on is the ATT building: grandfather clocks, Ledoux, the Pazzi Chapel; these are some of the associations, though the main shaft is actually taken from the work of Raymond Hood in Chicago. Some of the other buildings in Houston are in an Art-Deco style, with ribbon window effects I got from a 1931

building in New York: a marvellous series of lines without corners. Then I have a modern building out in San Francisco: hung granite in a steel frame is the basic theme, asymmetrically organised like Malevich; that's the closest thing to Modern that I have. I recently designed a house for myself in Swiss Chalet style, but it will never get built. Recent houses cost £150 000 in the States nowadays.

Next, I'm doing the tallest tower in Texas based on a structure in Iran: there are zigzags in it and a cone on top, slightly exaggerated in scale, but that's all right. Then there's my Gothic Tower in mirrored glass, with corner turrets. I don't like mirror glass buildings normally, so I tried to modulate it in Gothic and interesting way, with finials and all; then at the top there are four corner towers, a bit like the Victorian tower at the Houses of Parliament. This is the most popular building I've ever done; people in general are bored with upended cigar boxes. Then there's my neo neo-Spanish thing in Florida: it seems appropriate to the Mediterranean atmosphere, and the architectural profession was furious, although it's still Functionalist inside; the bookshelves do what is expected of them and the lighting is efficiently handled. Then there's a chapel I'm doing in Houston, based on an Iranian spiralling form. The latest one is in Cleveland, which is 'neo-Romanesquoid', to use Russell Hitchcock's delightful term. The design was based on 1840-1850s Munich precedent, to fit into a 1930s neo-Romanesque in the neighbouring site: it has delightful towers and is pentagonal.

After you get over seventy you can begin to play; I don't know what this means in architectural history. Who is to say what style is right? Who is to judge? Correctness is no guide. Venturi made a good speech last year on 'Let us not be correct'. Also, archaeology doesn't help; we must fit ancient precedent to today's circumstances and sensibilities. These are the kinds of lessons from the variety and complexity of a city like London, where styles happily cohabit. My particular love is the work of the 1820s; it is this period that really informs my work, like it used to be industrial vernacular for Stirling. Each must use his own prototypes for his own purposes. Stirling is very big in the US at the moment because we don't have to sit in the Cambridge library with water leaking onto our books; but that's an engineering problem; he should have had better advisers. I've done glass buildings that don't leak (well at least not on my books). My own museum has a glass roof, and when it rains it always leaks in a different place.

I must end by warning 'be careful': you have to learn; you have to have developed your sensibility to such a degree that quality is a natural consequence. And it is the visual side that counts most, whether it be of brick, glass or steel; values have to grow out of an understanding of the way the elements of architecture are welded together, not out of a subjective search of your soul. You can express yourself all you want to, once you know on what it is being based. Michael Graves has tried to build but without that initial understanding he, like most of the rest of us, must fail. Taut despite having worked on his Utopian projects; after the war immediately set about building, and he knew his bricks and his windows. The proportion of window frames and the distance between them is about all you can express sometimes.