

# PROGRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE APRIL 1963

# NEWS REPORT

*Architecture's Monthly News Digest of Buildings and Projects, Personalities, New Products*

"Before" photos: Frederic Lewis



David Hirsch

*"Before" (top) and "after" (bottom) photos show effect Pan Am Building has on Grand Central area.*

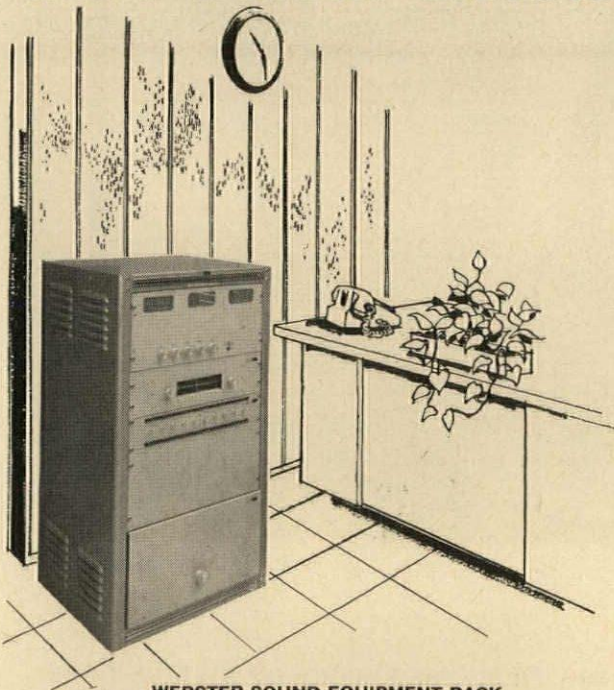
- 61 MONOLITH OPENS ON PARK AVENUE
- 63 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF 1913 ARMORY SHOW
- 64 CAMDEN-COLUMBIA THREE-SCHOOL STUDY
- 66 HOLLYWOOD HOTEL BY YAMASAKI

- 66 PROGRESS REPORT ON SYDNEY OPERA
- 70 WINNERS OF FIRST AISI COMPETITION
- 86 WASHINGTON/FINANCIAL NEWS
- 93 AIA CONVENTION EXHIBIT NEWS



ARCHITECTS: John Steinmann, AIA, Monticello, Wis.  
 CONSULTING ENGINEERS: Olsen and Evans, Inc., Madison, Wis.  
 ELECTRICAL CONTRACTOR: Berman Electric Co., Madison, Wis.  
 SOUND ENGINEER: Grant Electronics, Inc., Madison, Wis.

*New First National Bank of Stoughton . . . sound planned*  
 with a **Webster Electric music and program system**



**WEBSTER SOUND EQUIPMENT RACK** provides compact headquarters for sound components. Can be readily expanded for additional sound services. Also available in flush-mounting design.

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A dramatic departure from conventional bank design, First National's bank-in-the-round at Stoughton, Wisconsin was designed to "allow the most facility in the smallest possible area . . ." It's an exciting combination of white, gray and gold Wisconsin limestone . . . a great, self-supporting glass dome in the center . . . controlled-variation indoor and outdoor lighting.


And it's *sound planned* with a Webster Electric music and program system!

All customer and service areas are provided with background music. Program selection is by area — blankets offices, lobby, public meeting rooms.

Sound components include an amplifier, speaker switch panel, AM-FM radio tuner, record player — all contained in a single cabinet. Each Webster unit assures crisp, clear voice reproduction and high fidelity music.

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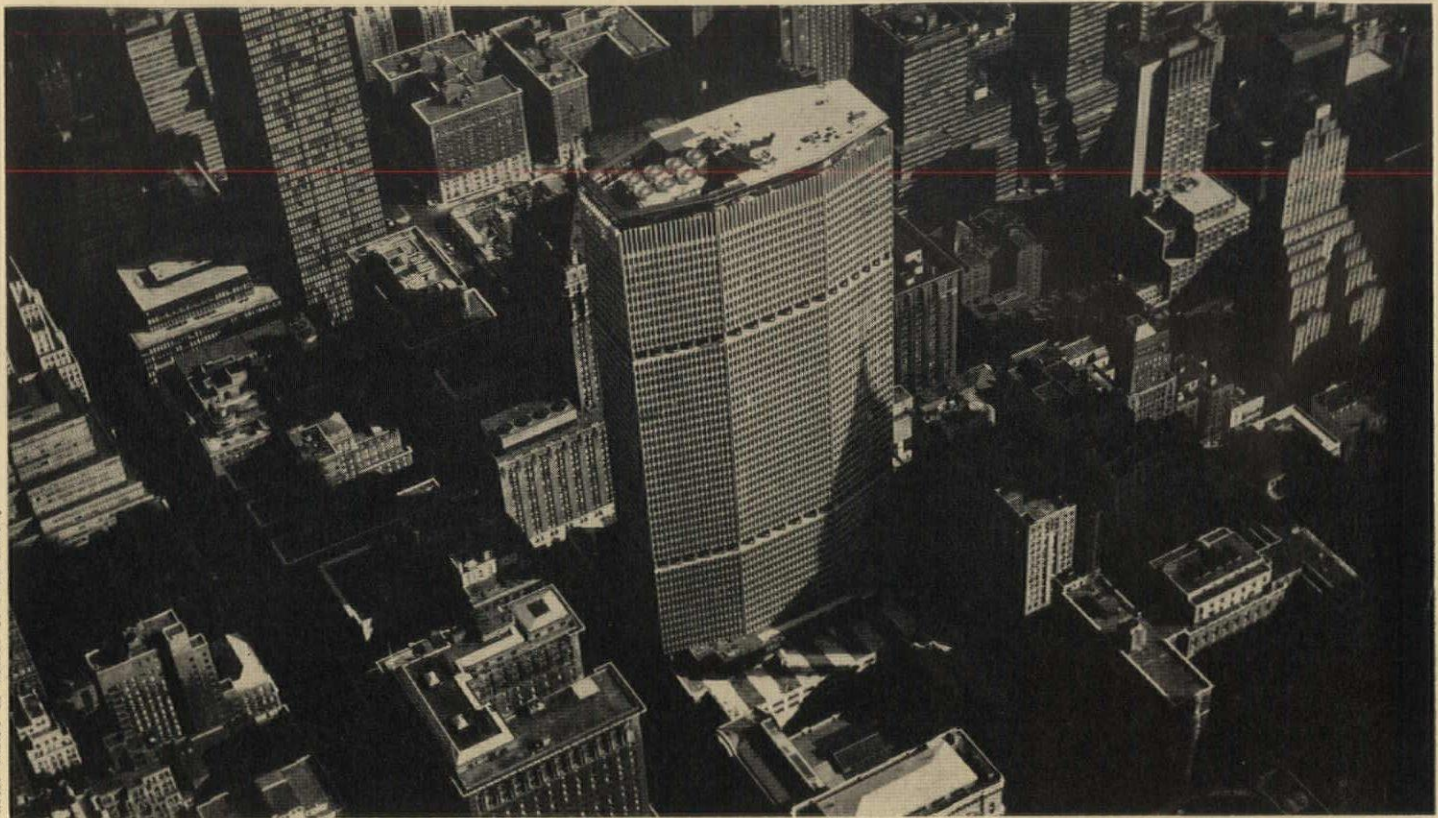
**COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION**

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*In Canada: Webster Electric (Canada), Ltd., Kitchener, Ontario*

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Photos except as noted: J. Alex Langley



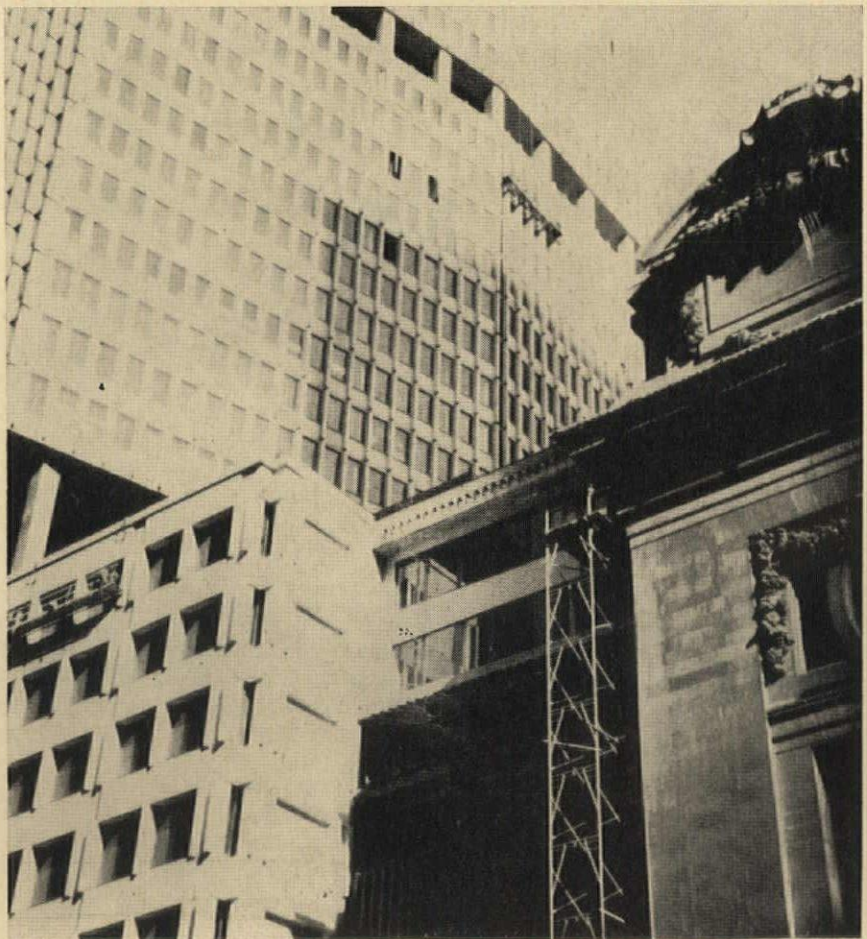
## The Pan Am Building: A Behemoth Is Born

The rightness or wrongness of the siting and position of the new Pan Am Building—and the subsequent traffic pattern—can, in this writer's opinion, be summed up very briefly. It's wrong.

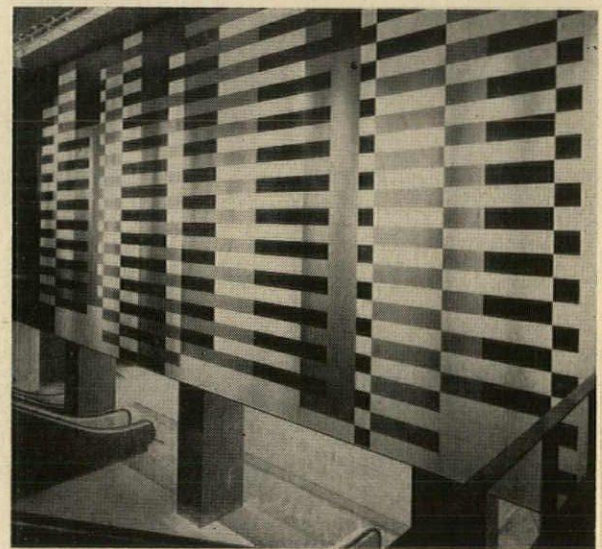
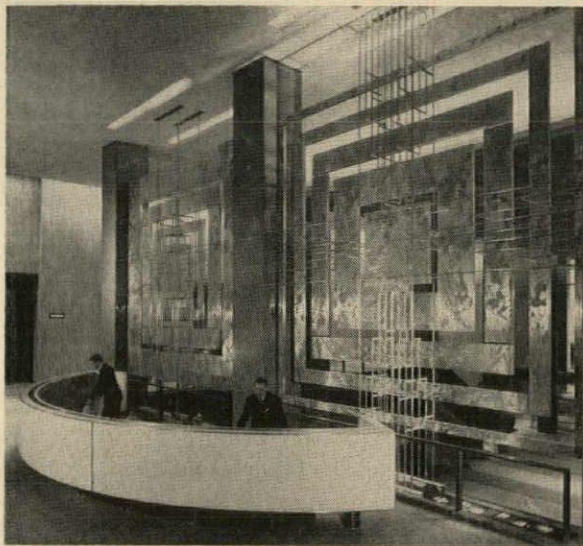
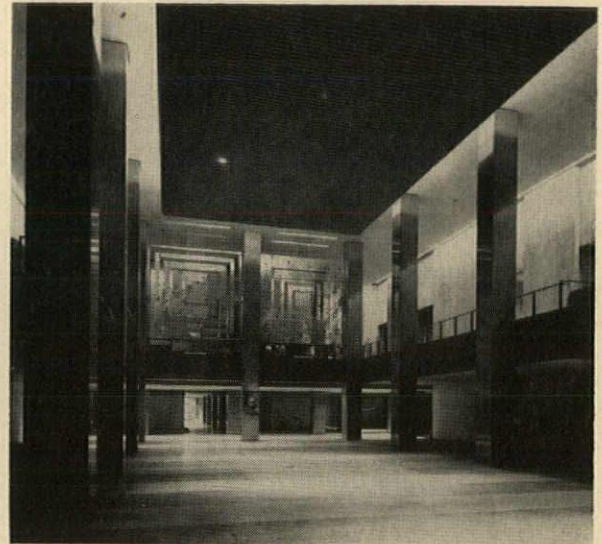
The concept of vertical "stacks" of office workers in center cities has much, if not everything, to recommend it—if sufficient space between high-rise structures is provided. In the case of the Pan Am Building, however, "the world's largest commercial office building" has been jammed into a spot where day-to-day rush hour traffic already resembles one of the more delirious student demonstrations on Tokyo's Ginza. Now, according to the public relations counsel for the building, the permanent working population will be 17,000, and "some 250,000 persons will use its facilities or pass through the building daily." In addition, there is a 400-car parking garage. Enough said on that score.

The building itself is another matter. With a powerhouse of consulting design talent—Dr. Walter Gropius and Dean Pietro Belluschi—and, in control, the most knowledgeable firm in New York when it comes to commercial buildings—Emery Roth & Sons—Pan Am is an architectural design failure. Had lesser lights been involved, this could be overlooked and it would be a curiosity merely for breaking the

Photo: James T. Burns, Jr.



*Elements jar one another where base, tower, garage, station meet.*



rules of decent city planning. But the obvious effort on the part of the late Erwin S. Wolfson, his professional team, and noted artists to make this a gem of the first water makes the failure all the more significant.

Seen from either north or south on Park Avenue (p. 59), Pan Am breaks the continuity of the thoroughfare, where previously the Grand Central Station and the tower of the New York General Building served to point it up. The new building forms a vast anonymous backdrop for these older structures, but at the same time dwarfs them with its immensity, making them appear insignificant. Since the building sits on such a crowded site, one must get some distance away in order to see it as a whole. Then it becomes apparent that the precast, three-dimensional elements introduced onto the façade to give interesting effects of light and shadow blend into each other to give the impression of just another curtain wall. The same effect is experienced with the cream-

colored Mosai aggregate used for added texture on the walls.

Approaching the building through the narrow streets, one loses sight of the structure as a visual composition and is overwhelmed by its square, ten-story base. From the ramp which brings Park Avenue around the site, the juxtaposition of elements is occasionally inexcusably jarring: base, tower, parking garage entrance, and Grand Central Station meet in a most unfriendly manner (p. 61, *bottom*). On clear, sunny days—always at a premium in New York—the building's octagonal shape reads. But when seen from even a short distance away on a hazy or smoggy day, it becomes one-dimensional.

Moving past the colonnaded entry (*top, left*) and into the lobby of Pan Am (*top, right*), one sees that the taste for monolithism did not desert the designers here. The spaces are much too big and heavy-handed. Surfacing materials are too numerous and varied, and lighting elements for gen-

eral illumination *and* lighting of art works are too prevalent. (On opening day, someone remarked, "This looks like a gigantic architects' samples bureau!") Great care reportedly went into the selection of artists and art works for the public areas, but, unfortunately, this observer found them disappointing. The aluminum and stainless-steel screen by Gyorgy Kepes (*bottom, left*) behind the elevator control desk has a meretricious "1930'ish" look, and the flashy tile mural by Joseph Albers (*bottom, right*) over the exit to the station is too loud, adding yet another jarring note to the composition. (A major sculpture by Richard Lippold has not been installed yet.)

On the positive side, interesting areas may result if tower tenants follow the lines of the building in designing and dividing their interiors. The most *impressive* experience the building offers is to look at its neighbors from the upper floors!

—James T. Burns, Jr.