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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



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A HUNDRED MILLION DOLLAR BUILDING cannot really be called cheap,” architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote not long after being appointed the first full-time critic at a daily newspaper, *The New York Times*, in 1963. “But Pan Am is a colossal collection of minimums.” (Pan Am is the giant skyscraper that looms over Grand Central Station, designed by the developer architect Emory Roth & Son working with the famous Bauhaus émigré Walter Gropius and Pietro Belluschi. It’s now called MetLife.) “Its exterior and its public spaces, in particular, use minimum good materials of minimum acceptable quality executed with a minimum of imagination,” Huxtable added. “Pan Am is gigantically second rate.”

Ada Louise Huxtable knew how to land a punch. Much of what made her such a distinctive critical voice can be found in this short passage. She gets to the point: don’t be fooled by its developer’s spin. Look at the thing itself.

Huxtable quickly found her footing as a critic and retained that distinctive voice through 40 years of reviewing. Only a few years later, she dissected Edward Durrell Stone’s pretentious 50-story marble palace for General Motors (GM) like a zealous coroner in search of criminal evidence: “looped gold ‘drapes,’” “carved-border gold area rugs that even amateur decorators gave up years ago,” “overlays of low-level corn and pseudograndeur . . . .”

Readers hungered for her extraordinary confidence, which she earned with her deep knowledge and analytical eye. Yet she never assumed her authority would carry the day and she never coasted on the prestige of the *Times* (nor later *The Wall Street Journal* and *New York Review of Books*). She helped us see what was right with buildings that were bold, innovative, and experimental, and what was wrong with projects that were very much of current taste yet traded on impressiveness or trivial effects rather than insight.

As her takes on the Pan Am and GM buildings show, Huxtable was not afraid to take on mediocrity, which is one of the hardest things to write about. Cost-driven developers long ago learned that bland and dumb fly beneath the radar precisely because these qualities give the critic little on which to latch. That’s why enormous American cities, such as Atlanta and Phoenix, have almost no architecture of distinction. No one was reminding the populace that they deserved much better.

In her 2008 collection, *On Architecture* (Walker & Co.), she assembles some of her toughest calls, including “the most disliked building in New York”—the Whitney Museum of American art, Marcel Breuer’s 1966 granite box that aggressively projects outward in clifflike segments as it rises above Madison Avenue. In her genteel way,

Huxtable asked her genteel readership to come to terms with architecture that did not aspire to beauty. She called it “suave-brutal, a curiously anachronistic aesthetic that stimulates, provokes, and unsettles . . . .” New Yorkers came to an acceptance of the design’s boldness and its underlying intelligence to the degree that well-heeled, well-lawyered neighbors defeated some half dozen attempts by three architects to add to the building. (The Whitney surrendered and moved to a much larger structure in Manhattan’s Meatpacking District, ceding the Breuer building temporarily to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

She called Boston’s City Hall, by the firm then known as Kallman McKinnell & Knowles, “one of the handsomest buildings around,” an assessment still shared by few, including the mayor then and the mayor now, both of whom have claimed to want the building torn down. She was sure of the City Hall’s enduring value even when the specifics of its extraordinary nature eluded her, and she had to resort to vague assessments like “tough and complex.” In today’s more expressionistic age, its Piranesian procession of spaces brought alive with shafts of changing sunlight are easier to appreciate, and someday an architect as insightful as the original one will reveal its greatness in service to the evolving needs of city bureaucrats.

She was sensitive to the rapid vicissitudes of taste yet didn’t shy from discussing her own strongly held views on style. Taste sounds quaint, like the idea of beauty, both of which are anathema to most of the intelligentsia. Yet taste and style are the conduits by which newspaper readers, even the *Times*’ readers, come to understand design intentions. As early as 1971, she saw a renewed appreciation for Paul Rudolph’s Art & Architecture building at Yale, which was breathlessly anticipated but then fell precipitously from grace after its completion in 1963, thanks to functional shortcomings and the conclusion by the 1960s counterculture that it was the product, as Huxtable put it, of “a false value system by an architect on an antipeople ego trip.” Only in 2008 was the building’s intricate spatial grandeur and extraordinary use of light restored to its full glory.

I think a lot about that distinct voice, which is one of the small miracles that made Huxtable’s writing so appealing. It was civic—keeping the big issues and big ideas in front of the public against a backdrop of bottom-line development and petty politics. She also humanized architects’ visual and rhetorical abstractions, walking you through a building or neighborhood so that you could see it in your mind. Your head craned upward with hers. She never adopted the voice of the imperial observer from on high, as the once lionized now somewhat

obscure Louis Mumford did. She always started with the thingness of architecture and urbanism, what you could see and touch and smell, poking fun at the big civic abstractions beloved of planners, the meanness of developer product, the empty grandiosities of architects.

She didn't stick to aesthetic ruminations on buildings the city's elite cared about (although she did plenty of that), but took as her portfolio the evolving form of the entire city. Architecture grounded her forays into the thickets of planning and the shenanigans of developers. She didn't hesitate to use her bully pulpit, but she wielded a velvet sword. She was not a crusader like her contemporary, Jane Jacobs, was. Jacobs learned how to stop a freeway and repel the planners' or the developers' heedless bulldozers. Huxtable helped to establish a civilized baseline of architectural acceptability, no small feat in a city where every grace note was a candidate for cost cutting.

She could be too comfortable, as she was with Philip Johnson's dreadful Sony headquarters, to give one example. But that is a failing of anyone who tries to actually understand artistic intention; sometimes we're taken in by the ideas and hope their meager expression may one day blossom. Far more common among critics, including today's self-appointed ones, is to bloviate aimlessly against the new because it fails to conform to the terms of what's currently acceptable—a far simpler, lazier task.

Huxtable was a woman prominent in a man's world and suffered her share of male condescension in print, and no doubt in person, yet I can't recall her ever drawing attention to the fact. She started writing about architecture when the field was dominated by a comfortable male elite, power brokered by the architect Philip Johnson, who, as she wrote in an appreciation after he died, "created the position and the role of *l'architecte du roi* for himself, holding court [all male, so I doubt she was ever invited], dispensing favors, creating reputations, masterminding moves in careers and construction . . . ." *Village Voice* critic Michael Sorkin correctly called Johnson a fraud and worse. Huxtable, ever graceful, never did, instead admiring "his driving belief in architecture as the defining art of the present," while observing that his legacy "will not rest on his buildings." She avoided the king-making role, so no architect, no matter their stature, could be sure of avoiding her sting. Instead, she championed fellow critics (including the author) as she grew older and wrote less frequently, sending out encouraging emails when she liked their work. She cared most about keeping architecture central in the public conversation about culture and cities.

A passage in what turned out to be her last column caught me up short. She devoted considerable space to how obdurate the New York

Public Library had been in responding to her request to see plans for the conversion of the Main Library's research stacks (via a suspiciously complex real estate deal) to a mid-Manhattan branch library. "I believe I have waited long enough," she concluded, before excoriating the design by the London-based architect Foster + Partners. She was not one to let impatience show, nor to risk seeming petulant. I wondered then, knowing she had been ill, if she had determined that she could not make her exit without making her mark one more time. This turned out to be the case, since she led the column, which appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on 3 December 2012 with this: "There is no more important landmark building in New York than the New York Public Library, known to New Yorkers simply as the 42nd Street Library, one of the world's greatest research institutions." She died 7 January 2013. The plan imploded not long after.

Ada Louise Huxtable inaugurated architectural criticism for a wide audience and lived to see its spiraling decline. Her audience is quickly being atomized by the economics of the Internet. That's one reason I study the distinctive nature of her voice. In these days when criticism is the province of anonymous reviewers on ever-evolving electronic platforms, no one is assumed to be authoritative in the way Huxtable and her peers were. But an informed, distinctive voice can still cut through.

She was a critic but also an explainer, one who devoted her career to decoding an art that shapes our lives but is so often strange, mystifying, even frightening. It's risky to predict what the future will make of any writer tethered to deadlines, who must fight against the exigencies of the messy present to hold onto a deep or long-term perspective. I believe her work will endure.

Elected 1989

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