

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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CONTROVERSIAL MUNICIPAL ASPHALT PLANT CHOSEN BY MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART AS OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE OF RECENT
AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

The new Municipal Asphalt Plant which the city is about to open at 91st Street and East River Drive and which Park Commissioner Robert Moses has recently damned with the designation "Cathedral of Asphalt" and held up as an example of "horrible modernistic stuff" has just been selected by the Museum of Modern Art as one of the buildings in the entire country which best represent progress in design and construction during the past twelve years. Photographs of it will be shown in the architecture section of the fifteenth anniversary exhibition Art in Progress opening at the Museum May 24.

An analysis of the Asphalt Plant's good architectural qualities will appear in a book Built in U.S.A., 1932-1944, which the Museum will publish in connection with the exhibition. The Museum comment is in part as follows:

"Sharply diversified industrial operations invite sharply differentiated architectural forms. Here there are three distinct and well related elements: conveyor belt, storage building and mixing plant. The main conveyor belt starts at the East River barge moorings, runs under the Drive, then above ground through a diagonal tube (later to be cased in chromium) to the rectangular concrete storage building, where the sand and stone is dropped into a network of bins. From there, underground conveyors run to the third and most prominent unit, the mixing plant.

"The bold semi-ellipse of the mixing plant is no affectation. These clean curves represent the most efficient structural form which could house the machinery. The building is of reinforced concrete, its thin vault strengthened by four 90-foot-high ribs. Since the ribs are reinforced with light, self-supporting steel trusses rather than with the usual rods, no elaborate scaffolding was required while the concrete was poured and dried. Here is industrial architecture which is a distinct asset to its residential neighborhood and an exciting experience for motorists on the adjacent super-highway."

The Municipal Asphalt Plant was designed by the Department of Borough Works of the Office of the President of the Borough of Manhattan, with exterior design by Ely Jacques Kahn and Robert Allan Jacobs.

In addition to the Asphalt Plant, the Museum has selected three other structures in New York to be shown among the forty-seven outstanding examples of good design. The other three are the house for Edward A. Norman on East 70th Street, Rockefeller Center, and the Museum of Modern Art.

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The Norman House was built in 1941; William Lescaze, architect. Comment on it in the Museum's publication Built in U.S.A., 1932-1944 is in part as follows:

"A town house which makes the best of one of New York's typical and absurd twenty-foot lots. The plan of the ground floor is pleasantly introvert. The dining room opens upon a garden court, planted with ginkgo, flowering hawthorn, dogwood and crab-apple, and skirted by a glazed passage which leads to a well secluded study.

"Living rooms are on the floor above, running from one end of the house to the other with a fine, easy flow of space, every detail carefully subordinated to the rhythm of the whole. Facing the garden and the south is an entire wall of glass, shown above, slanted to trap the sun, and to create an illusion of a more generous interior. The roof of the ground-floor passage and study becomes a landscaped terrace. The street facade is suitably urbane, pleasantly proportioned and well-scaled in relation to its neighbors."

Rockefeller Center was built between 1931 and 1940; Reinhard and Hofmeister, Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray, Hood & Fouilhoux, architects. Comment on it in the Museum's publication Built in U.S.A., 1932-1944 is in part as follows:

"The only group of skyscrapers to be planned as a unit, Rockefeller Center shows the advantages of central control of land use, even when it is the control by a private corporation of the relatively small area of twelve acres.

"The taller buildings are well separated. Their thin cross-sections and the staggered layout of the group insure each office a maximum of light and air. The interplay of their attenuated slab-like forms as one sees them from changing angles is one of the exciting urban experiences of our time.

"With the exception of the new Eastern Airlines Building the individual buildings have little architectural distinction. But the bold conception and convincing urbanity of the whole have captured the public's imagination and Rockefeller Center has become not only a business center, but a civic monument.

"If the profiles of the earlier skyscrapers were less blurred with 'set-backs' and superfluous ornament and the ground less cluttered with minor, often symmetrically disposed structures, the result would rival the Pyramids in geometric splendor."

The Museum of Modern Art was built in 1939; Philip L. Goodwin and Edward D. Stone, architects. Comment on it in the Museum's publication Built in U.S.A., 1932-1944 is in part as follows:

"Only a few years ago an art museum was still considered as the repository for static collections. Almost any pompous building served the purpose. Today's problem is to provide for constantly changing exhibitions of diverse material and for an expanding program of public services.

"Here steel and concrete columns take all the load, and partitions can be shifted at will on every floor. As an invitation to the passerby, the ground floor is separated from the street only by clear glass. The north side of the second floor gallery is walled with glass brick, interspersed with clear glass for a view out over the sculpture garden."