

Tinsel in the Sky

The esthetic controversy of the Christmas season seems to be the red, white and green lighting of the Empire State Building. Because every New Yorker believes that he or she personally owns or is responsible for that enduring symbol of the city, feelings are running high. An informal and perfectly useless poll finds opinion divided between people who love the lighting and people who hate it, with a surprising absence of "don't knows."

The split has polarized the purists and the populists—those who see a vulgarized architectural monument and those who find the illumination a suitable part of the city's spectacular seasonal light show. One person's corn is another person's enchantment. Subtle it is not, but neither was the red, white and blue lighting that transformed the tower for the entire Bicentennial year, a time when more exacting critical judgment was suspended in the spirit of national celebration. When the top glowed blue for the Yankees' World Series triumph, the gesture seemed appropriate. It was almost inevitable that yellow and orange would follow for Thanksgiving, before the Christmas red and green.

To students of the architectural scene, the debate has its ironic side. Not long ago, the purists—critics, historians and that determined little band called tastemakers—would not look at the Empire State Building at all, or only with a scathing, sidelong glance. To the cognoscenti, it was an architectural aberration, a betrayal of the austere



principles of the modern movement; its stepped symmetry and shaped top with dirigible mooring mast (what a dated, romantic conceit that was!) represented a kind of decadent residue of despised traditionalism. Tourists gawked and sophisticates looked away. It was fine for Fay Wray and King Kong but not for the Museum of Modern Art.

There has been an approved pecking order for New York skyscrapers. One admired the International Style geometry of Raymond Hood's 1930 McGraw-Hill Building, and the severe, dramatic verticality of Hood & Howells's Daily News Building of the same year. These were admitted into the modern art textbooks. But Shreve, Lamb & Harmon's "reactionary" Empire State Building (1929-31) and William Van Alen's "corrupt" Chrysler Building (1929) were not. Even Rockefeller Center, now considered a mas-

terwork of urban design, was patronized for its reliance on the planning principles of the once disowned Beaux Arts. The critics wrote a tidy, elite art history that put, and kept, everything in its place.

But not for long. Thirty years later, in the 1960's, a younger generation kicked over the faith of its fathers, in architecture as in everything else. These new observers looked at the city with a more catholic eye. They ceased to celebrate a selective esthetic and delighted in New York's historical and idiosyncratic variety. The Chrysler Building, with its efflorescence of nostalgic Art Deco ornament, became a cult object; its silver spire is the city's newly acknowledged crown. But now the champions of the once-disdained Empire State Building object to the most transient violation of its architectural integrity.

Actually, they may already be behind the times. In Houston, that bellwether city of the future, an observing architect, **Peter Papademetriou**, has published what may be a prophetic book. It is devoted to buildings bathed in their entirety in glowing red and green light—an established Christmas practice in the sunbelt metropolis—for a psychedelic evocation of the season. If the avant-garde now admits the Empire State Building to the architectural pantheon, can its Pop seasonal and special-event lighting effects be far behind? We await the creative challenge of Mother's Day. Nothing is more mutable than taste and art.

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