



Totalitarian Capital with Acanthus

ONE OF THE MOST beautiful sights in the world to a city boy — even a boy from a city thousands of miles away — is lower Manhattan at dusk or early evening, viewed from the breezy front deck of an incoming Staten Island Ferry. Or the famed midtown skyline, seen backlit through morning mist from New Jersey. It whispers of spun candy and delicious

faerie secrets, and beckons the young and the dreaming with widened arms.

Beware. Dusk and morning mist are as the honeyed words of the ruthless — gilded and sticky indeed, and with more than a little sting. A long day's walk among the Manhattan towers, with the eyes even a story above ground level, is a semester's course in the political theory

by Gene Marine

of onrushing totalitarianism. Watch the streets — the diversity of people, the raucous multicolored taxicabs, the dizzying interweave of activity — and there are superficial variety, individualism, pluralistic pursuits: the stuff of vigorous democracy.

But look up, at the hard-eyed, standardized, unpromising, demanding structures, and see the cynical sneer of the dictator.

Like others among the pretentiously half-educated, the writer has tended to accept, unexamined, the dictum of Henry Adams and the A.I.A. that architecture is a reflection of society. Piety and love of the Virgin begat the Gothic arch, and materialism the supermarket. Midcentury's drift toward a totalitarian America is thus easily seen in its buildings: the monolithic, graceless, super-efficient Federal Building in San Francisco's Civic Center, the massive and parvenu United States Building at the New York World's Fair, the countless upthrust featureless steel-and-glass boxes which are the large-economy-sized ticky-tacky of every major city.

Stand as I did at East 39th Street and Park Avenue in Manhattan, looking north, and you must agree as I did with a friend who said of the Pan Am Building: "Look at it. It's not a building. It's a computer."

It is precisely that — a computer which eats cars. With Park Avenue beneath it in continual supine submission, it is not merely oversized or ugly. It is frightening, dominant, cruel, commanding — so completely totalitarian as to have achieved impassive remoteness.

Surely this *is* totalitarianism reflected in architecture: the total devotion to efficiency, the complete disregard for human scale or meaning, the brushing aside of esthetics as irrelevant to function, the shrugging off of relationship to environment, the substitution of involution for ecological sense — surely this is the supersized demonstration that Adams was right, that our Virgin is the dynamo?

Or do we perhaps have it backwards?

A short walk from the glowering bulk of the United States Building at the New York Fair Grounds, it was possible to view a small and delightful structure, designed with not only consideration but love for the people it represented and the people who would visit it: the Spanish Pavilion. Obviously a humanistic tradition lay behind the South Korean exhibit; plainly a gentle and courteous people were represented by the Indonesian Building.

A GIGANTIC PAPER FIRM this year ruthlessly closed a New Jersey factory and put workers with a quarter century's experience on the streets with a few weeks' pittance; the same firm achieved a dubious notoriety in being revealed as a long-time exploiter, even oppressor, of Negroes in Bogalusa,

Louisiana. Yet its headquarters in San Francisco, with its inviting plaza, is to the student of the humanistic in office-building architecture as the Shwedagon Pagoda to the Burmese Buddhist — a building justly renowned for its attention to human scale, esthetics, environment and ecology.

An insurance company's home office makes downtown Hartford exciting; a wax company makes an architectural epicenter of Racine, Wisconsin. Where is the totalitarian reflection?

We are misled, I think — those of us over 35, at any rate. We see totalitarianism as a thing of governments, associating it with Hitlerian ruthlessness and efficiency. As it grows in America, we look to Washington for its cause, and to the bleak functionalism of federal architecture for its reflection. As the Eisenhower Administration brought talk of "partnership," the Kennedy Administration of news management and the Johnson Administration of a kind of browbeaten consensus, we have gazed about in fright at our steel boxes and cried, "See what we become."

But — as with Germany, as with Spain, as with China or Ghana or Paraguay — America's totalitarianism is its own, takes its own forms, casts its own reflections. Far more important (look back at Germany if you must), totalitarianism is a thing not of government but of culture. In America, it cannot emanate from Washington; it can, must and does emanate from New York.

Here in New York, the culture of America is completely controlled. No Washington government can impose totalitarianism past New York's willingness to tolerate it (remember Murrow and McCarthy?). No Washington government can long resist the totalitarianism that New York chooses, consciously or by default, to thrust upon it.

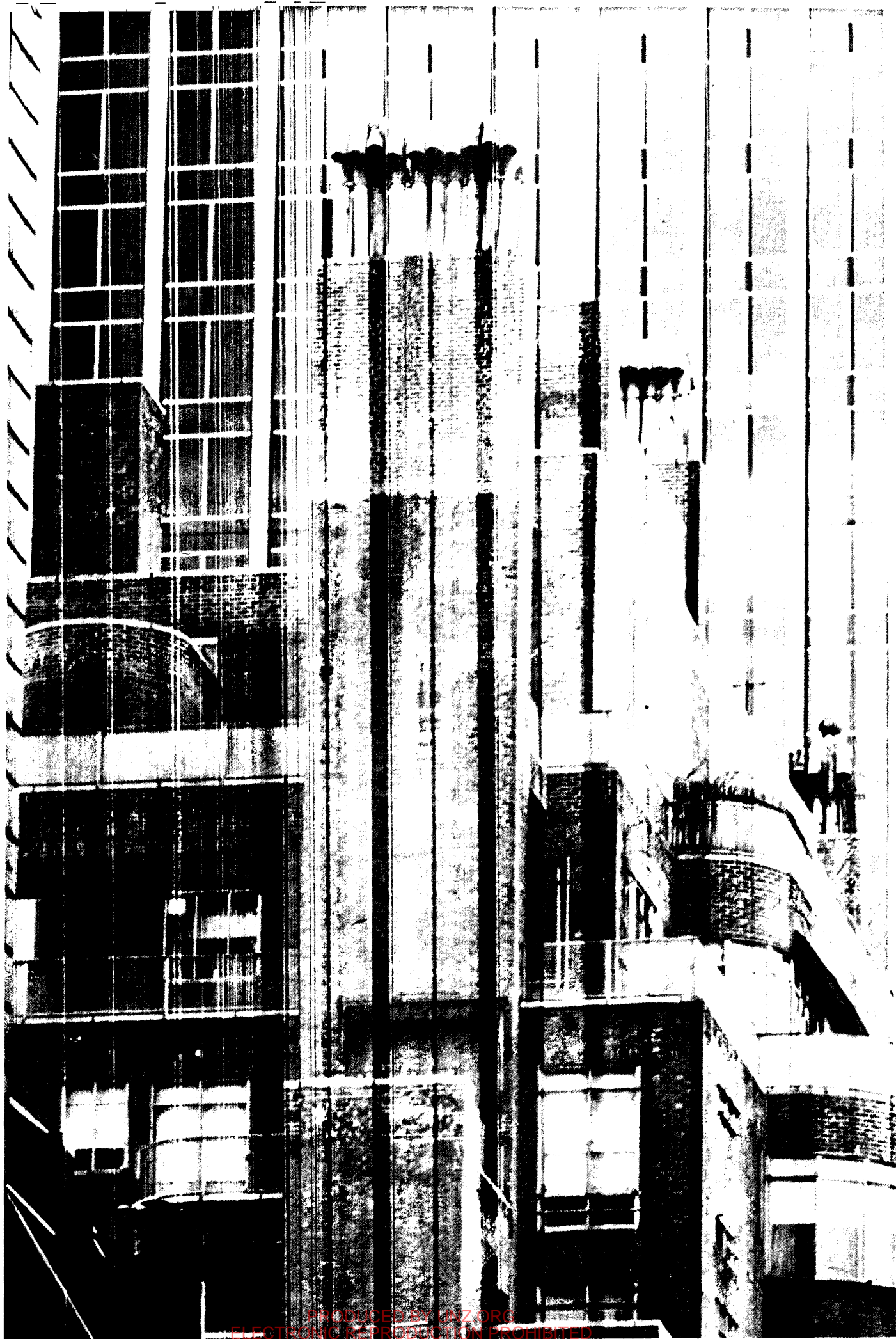
The architecture of the rest of the nation is incidental — reflective, perhaps, but essentially irrelevant. The architecture of New York, on the other hand, is crucial to the onset of totalitarianism in America — not because it reflects it, but because it is among its major causes.

The Pan Am buildings and the carbon-copy aluminum-and-glass phalli on Park Avenue play their part, of course. Though there is often oppressive heat or bitter cold, there is rarely sunlight in the canyons of midtown Manhattan, and, indeed, there is scarcely a view of the sky. The junior editor walking to his office — towered over, hemmed in, reduced to ant-sized dimensions by the dimensions around him — is hardly likely to arrive at his desk every day with a concern for the importance of the individual uppermost in his approach to his work.

But there is no need to refer to the elephantiasis of midtown to find the shapes of incipient totalitarianism lurking in the shapes of New York's structures. Nor is there need to stare back at the cold-eyed and dirty urchin buildings that jam the streets of Harlem or Bedford-Stuyvesant —



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after all, our cultural leaders neither live nor visit there. The apartment houses on Riverside Drive or in the East Eighties will do.

On the crosstown streets, four cars abreast — two of them parked, two moving — will barely fit, will not fit at all if they are all late, large models. Yet no building sets back an inch; almost none is lower than five stories and most are seven or more; every one is flat across the front and tightly joined to its neighbor. And every one is a dirty brown, a deep, filthy brick-red, or a grimy gray-black.

Day in and day out, New York's reporters and writers and editors, her broadcasting executives, her molders of opinion — virtually all of them reared in the easy sight of sky and stars in Kansas or Montana or Oklahoma — spend their outside hours in an environment whose only concession to individuality is a choice of bars, their inside hours in efficiently packaged and almost interchangeable apartments and offices. How can they shape a culture to care for diversity or freedom?

The native New Yorker resents such an implication, and to some extent rightly, for he is to some extent immune. A native in his fifties recalls stables and draft horses in the East Twenties; today the East Twenties are distinguishable from the West Eighties only by such memories in native minds, and by the survival — surely temporary — of Gramercy Park. Like the Siberian snow leopard in the San Francisco Zoo, the native New Yorker has become acclimatized by stages; but few of his number are high in the circles of TV networks or national newsmagazines.

IT IS INCIDENTALLY notable that the cultural champions of the individual — however weak their voices and disparate their approaches to the anti-totalitarian struggle — tend to concentrate in the Greenwich Village area: *The Nation*, Grove Press, *Monocle*, *Monthly Review*, *The Village Voice*. Greenwich Village retains over much of its area a building height limit, and the odd directions of its ancient streets result in a number of tiny squares and plazas too small to support still another Manhattan structure. It is not the congregation of homosexuals or fascinating little shops or interracial couples that brings the freedom-seeking non-conformist to gravitate to the Village; it is the survival of human scale — the daily sight of the sky, the nightly view of the moon.

The shapers of our culture, the proprietors of our information, the interpreters for us of the worlds in which we live, are intelligent men (and they are almost all men, which may be part of the trouble). They can see and abhor drabness as well as you and I, and they do. They are at least vaguely aware that they are towered over during virtually every moment of their lives; they cannot escape the knowledge that they are forever hemmed in.

This as much as anything else, one suspects, creates the Martini-and-ulcer syndrome so widely associated with "Madison Avenue," and may even create a defensive mechanism, the slashing back of a frightened jackal against a gigantic opponent, which is in itself a factor in the construction of totalitarianism.

But they will not have it straight, perhaps because of the morality of that childhood in Kansas, the freedom-dream memory of those civics books in the Oklahoma high school. American totalitarianism cannot be the fatalistic *sol y sombre* of the Spanish, the god-leadership of the prewar Japanese, the faceless goosestepping of Nazi Germany. American totalitarianism must be upholstered in decorator colors: the American cultural cacique's rebellion against the grimy facade of the apartment house across the street from his.

Visit the office of a vice-president of a television network, high above Rockefeller Center. The hall outside his office is svelte, slick, smooth, unexceptionably beautiful in its exact choice of the right muted colors and the precise placement of an abstract expressionist painting of just the right size. So predictably that you almost no longer notice it, the secretary who greets you is svelte, slick, smooth, unexceptionably beautiful in her exact choice of the right muted colors and the precise placement of an abstract metal brooch of just the right size.

Can it be a surprise that the vice-president's taste in offices and women also displays itself in his taste for societies?

The rest really doesn't matter. The White House can be occupied by a Hubert Humphrey or a Gerald Ford — or even a Wayne Morse. The Supreme Court can follow Hugo Black or Byron White. Kenneth Tynan can preach sexual revolution, and Helen Gurley Brown can make a million dollars from people who lack the courage to fight one. New York will continue implacably to press the young idealists from Montana and Kansas into the glowering, unyielding mold of its buildings, and across the country we will hang this year's approved abstract expressionist and continue to be left carefully free to tell each other that it's a free country.

What to do? One falls back helplessly on the lyric suggestion of the late Lorenz Hart — but the chances are the Indians wouldn't want it back.

By and large, they were free men.

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Understanding Marshall McLuhan

DURING THE PAST FEW MONTHS Marshall McLuhan of the University of Toronto has become that phenomenon of our times, the intellectual celebrity. That is to say that suddenly Everybody — the press, the vanguard of business, the new youth — discovered him in the curious way that these things happen: at a certain moment all elements grab hands, and there you are.

This after years of relative anonymity. He has taught; he has published to wide and, for the most part, complimentary reviews; he has been recognized, if grudgingly, by his ivy-walled colleagues. (At a high-level academic conference on mass communications in Washington references to McLuhan's theories were accorded that profound non-response usually reserved for unfortunate noises in chapel. This was only a year ago; things have changed.)

What has happened? Obviously the clamor has followed on the publication of his newest and most readable book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions Of Man*. But at best this is a partial answer, for the book came out in 1964, and until recently, it had been largely unavailable despite the undoubted capacity of its publisher, McGraw-Hill, to swamp the market if it so chose. Perhaps one reason it didn't so choose was that the demand pattern must have been puzzlingly random/intense in the early days — say to the end of last year — as isolated huddles of McLuhanites back-ordered their holy writ in quantity.

This suggests that at least some of McLuhan's currency at the moment must be either in second-hand catch phrases or simply in that he is a "celebrity": one who is well-known because he is well-known. The former is understandable; how many ever read Great Books? The latter is deplorable, not only because such fame passes as quickly as it came, but because it tends, through over-exposure, to amberize a man; to encase him, like a fly in amber, so that he is seen but not heard. This is very easily done, and very hard on men who still have much to say. Let us start with what McLuhan has said already:

Understanding Understanding Media

MARSHALL McLUHAN's *Understanding Media* has possibly the least catchy title for an important book since *Principia Mathematica*; however, it is somewhat easier to read once you have got the hang of it.

The hard part is getting into it. One school of thought says that you should start at page 77, or wherever, and then sit through it again the way you do when you come in on the middle of a movie. Another holds that you should skim through it once, saving your thunderstruck (or indignant) marginal notations for the second time around. The trouble with this is that skimming McLuhan is like trying to fill a tea cup from a firehose; there is likely to be no second time.

It is quite possible, I think, to start cheerfully at the beginning, provided one has some notion going in of what McLuhan is up to. To begin with, what Professor McLuhan means by a "medium" is any extension of man — whether it be a book, an automobile, an electric light bulb, television, or clothes. His theory is that the media a man uses to extend his senses and his faculties will determine what he is, rather than the other way around. To give a simple example: a car is certainly an extension of a man's legs. Moreover, when he drives a car he has in a sense amputated his legs. He is an amputee just as surely as though he had lost his legs first and then looked for a way to get around.

Similarly, by wearing clothes a man eliminates a good many of the functions that his body would have to perform were he naked. Let us consider this proposition in its most extreme form: a native living at the Equator and an Eskimo. The tropical native, because he is naked, has no means of retaining body heat; therefore he must eat constantly or die. He can starve to death in a day or two. The

by Howard Gossage