

WORKPLACE DESIGN

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LONDON DESIGN FESTIVAL: OUR REVIEW
MEET MAKE: FIVE ARCHITECTS UNCOVERED
THE NEW NEW YORK TIMES BUILDING
WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

Words by
Michael Willoughby

Times a-changin'

The New York Times Building is now complete, and Gensler's crisp, minimalist interior is a resounding success. It's just a shame about the outside...

■ There are two new-build, midtown skyscrapers that every New Yorker has had to have an opinion on recently: Lord Foster's Hearst Tower on West 57th Street near Columbus circle, which opened to employees just over a year ago; and Renzo Piano's just-opened New York Times Building – designed with New York-based FXFOWLE and interiors by Gensler – a bit further down 8th Avenue at 40th Street. Almost unquestionably, Foster's extraordinary, diagrid tower, indented at the corners, has been the more warmly received. New Yorkers welcome boldness and clarity in their building shapes.

But what's wrong with the 320m-tall New York Times Building? It is an elegant, even beautiful structure, reminiscent in its exoskeletal aspects of Piano's very early work, the Pompidou Centre, completed with Lord Rogers and his then wife Susan in 1977. Indeed it even features similar intermittently descending, red staircases, but where the Pompidou is a fascinating object close up, the Times Building is meant to be viewed from afar and looks diffuse, fuzzy, almost messy from a distance, like it's still to be licked into shape. It makes one yearn for the broad-shouldered, crisp-edged towers of

deco design. Interestingly, Piano's sketch of the building shows a five-line design reminiscent of the Empire State Building. (Easier said than done: nearby One Worldwide Plaza, completed in 1989 by David Childs, then at SOM, is a hulking, brick-built tyrant of the skyline in the manner of a latter-day, would-be depression era creation.)

The Times Building's lack of definition and twinkle is due firstly to its being white, and secondly to its panels of ceramic rods, which reflect the sky, halve internal glare and allow for floor-to-ceiling windows, but also make the building look – as one critic said – as if it is made of corrugated iron.

In fact, now it's been built – the second or third tallest tower in New York – it seems the most important thing about the building was the competition held to commission it. It opened up the doors for big name architects to build in New York for the first time in 30 years. Since it was announced, not only has the Hearst Tower been built, but also Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava

THE NEW YORK TIMES BUILDING

ARCHITECT:
RENZO PIANO/
FXFOWLE/GENSLER

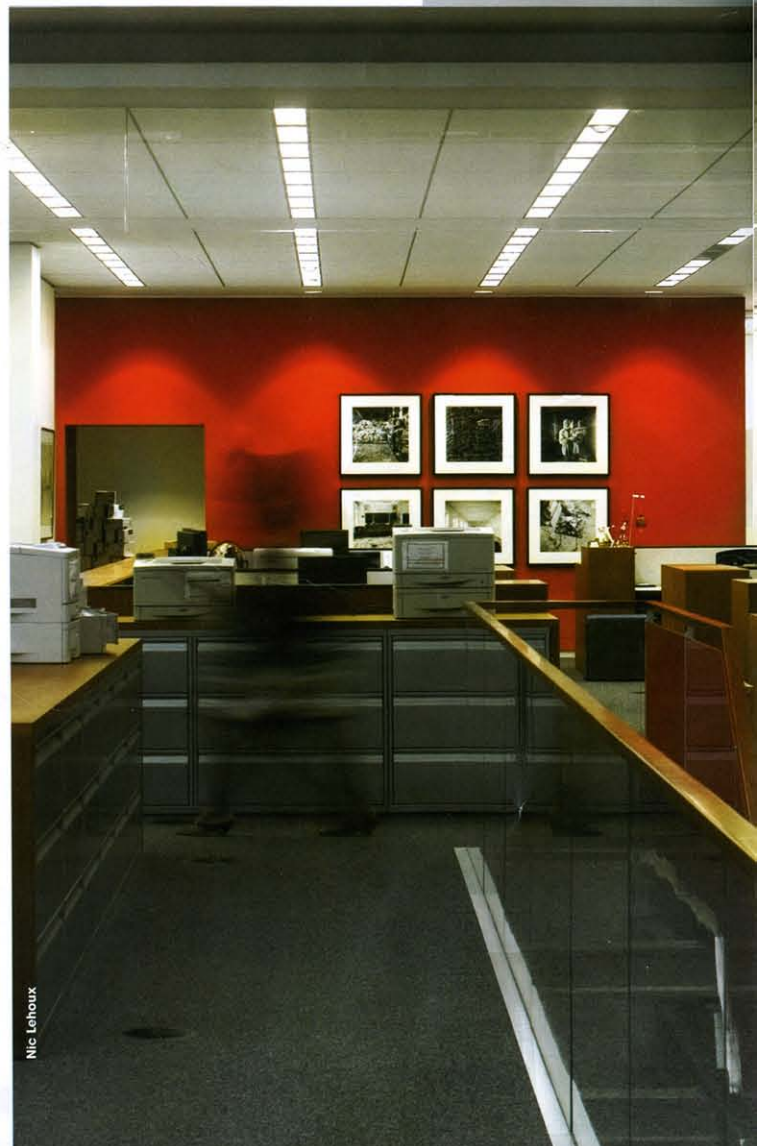
CLIENT:
NEW YORK TIMES/
FOREST CITY
RATNER COMPANIES

COST:
\$1-1.1 BILLION

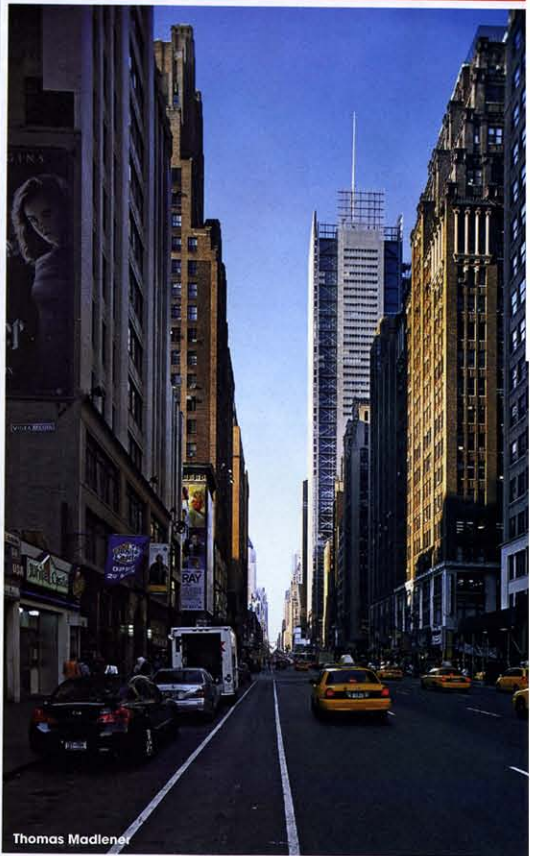
START DATE:
2003

COMPLETION:
MID 2007

FLOOR SPACE:
0.48 MILLION SQ M



Nic Lehoux



Thomas Madlener



Above: View of the building from lower midtown

Left: Prominent staircases connect all floors, discouraging elevator usage. Photographs from the Times collection adorn the walls



and Daniel Libeskind have all been commissioned. The City's notoriously conservative developers, neighbourhood groups and conservationists – which Mark Wigley, Dean of Columbia University Grad School of Architecture has called “ambitiously committed to mediocrity” – seem to have been won over.

While the building has not been such an unqualified critical success, it took a public-spirited, outward-looking company to hire Piano to that end. The New York Times – still considered the paper of record in America – is comprised of people who have lofty ideals on a national scale and, equally, are aware of their impact on the neighbourhood. After all, it already donated its name to Times Square when it moved to a gothic building there in 1904.

So, despite its cloudiness, the architects aimed at street-level transparency with the building. The foyer level offers clear views in and out through low-iron glass with high transparency. Pedestrians can see through the central corridor to the soon-to-be-completed internal beech and moss garden.

There's transparency inside, too. Views from the elevators keep a clear sweep to the edges of the building with the inclusion of transparent or low conference spaces.

Pairs of red staircases at the corners of the building connect internal floors, offering incredible views of 8th Avenue through a screen-less right angle. The newsroom is lit from a large skylight on the roof and the garden court on the side. As a workplace reporter, I think the inside is as clear a success as the long view is a tentative, gauzy near-failure.

Yet verdicts about the interior have also been lukewarm. Gensler principal on the project Ed Wood tells me: “There's a lot of detail that you wouldn't notice until you've been in there for a year or six months. People don't understand the minimalism. It's fresh, modern and beautiful. They say, ‘Where's the hipness?’ They wanted curved workstations and weird things everywhere.”

However, he says he felt the duration of the project – nearly six years – and the fact that Piano and Gensler worked closely together from almost the very first gave the team an unparalleled chance to engineer things and try them out.

In fact, when the first Times occupants took their desks in September, many of them were already aware of what they were moving into. A mock-up of a corridor had been built at one of the company's printing works in College Point and most people had visited it. Three different types of furniture and lighting were tested in the space and Lawrence Berkley labs tested the lighting. “It's executed down to the last dot,” Wood says. “It was almost like an academic research project.” ▶

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Above: Pantan chairs mark informal meeting points

Right: The massive 80m-wide newsroom, housed in a separate mini tower

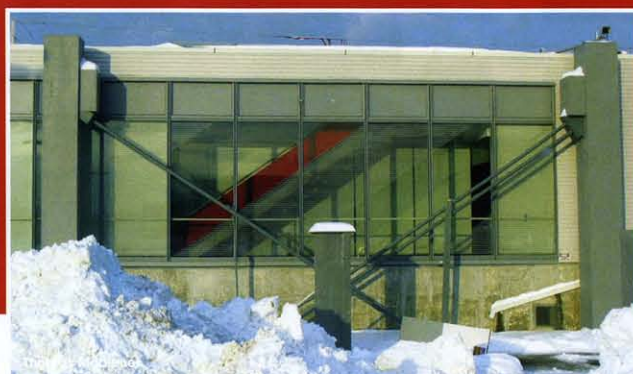


Right: Meeting room
with river view

Below: The mock up
of a corridor at the
newspaper's printing
plant, previous to
the completion of
the building



Nic Lehoux



The building looks diffuse, fuzzy, almost messy from a distance, like it's still to be licked into shape

The lighting is entirely unique. Apart from the ceramic rods, internal shades move to block glare according to the position of the sun and also react dynamically. At the same time, the ceiling lights raise or lower their wattage to fade almost unnoticeably.

Air is distributed under-floor and can be controlled by individual occupants. It's then extracted through slots in the light fittings. The building also has its own 1.4 megawatt natural gas generator. Real Estate vice president Hussain Ali-Khan believes that the firm has made an energy saving of 30 to 40 per cent by inclusion of these measures.

One Times journalist I spoke to expressed some light-hearted disappointment that the news people were not housed in the tower, but in an adjoining mini-tower. In fact the newsroom has been designed with a massive floor plate nearly 80m wide.

"The news guys like to work more horizontally than vertically," Ali-Khan says. "There's more of an ability to see across the space."

"You can literally yell from one end to another," says Wood.

This was another great change from the old building where news teams had been balkanised and split up.

The cafe is another great, expansive space that Ali-Khan describes as like being in a tree house. The super-long space, with three walls of light, must be an inspiring place to start the day. As in the rest of the building, the details – the clevis joints with the two rods and the Unifor tables – are

absolutely consistent. Most details were bespoke for the building, including the hexagonal screw heads.

"The consistency of details on Renzo's team is quite religious," Ali-Khan adds. "The finish is more typical of a museum than a workplace." Times photos, works of art and the publisher's framed collection of maps and prints abound, creating some colour and focus. Each landing features a different sofa for differentiation.

But the Times Building, while bespoke, is not lavish. Perhaps Gensler and Piano's combined success was to achieve an almost romantic precision and lightness on a budget. Gensler made heavy use of repetition and consistency, first by bringing the yellow Merino plaster into the conference centre and cafe and the wood floor from the elevators into the elevator lobby.

"It's built on a five-foot planning module," says Wood. "You can move a wall five feet in any direction and not have to worry about moving the ceiling or the sprinklers."

Piano's desire for clear views from the elevators to the curtain walls – which would have needed five more floors, Wood tells me – was solved by keeping Gensler-designed desks low, and low or transparent conference rooms nearby.

At least inside, the Times environment is a blend of great architecture and workplace design, invigorating yet tranquil; externally, the Italian's modesty has got his building overlooked. ☒