

# New Bar Center Offers Lesson in Civilized Architecture

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE  
Special to The New York Times

ALBANY, Sept. 24—If you turn your back on the \$1 billion worth of high camp rising ominously on the Albany Mall, you will face one of the neatest architectural achievements in the country. Just beyond the State Capitol, fronting Academy Park on Elk Street, is

the new headquarters of the New York State Bar Association, dedicated today. This \$1,626,616

center for the 22,000 members of the State Bar is an object lesson in how to build intelligently, sensitively and well. It is nice to know that someone is doing something right.

The Bar Center is not very big in today's terms, but it offers a large lesson in civilized urban architecture.

In a happy alliance, the lawyers and the architects, James Stewart Polshek and Associates, have preserved a row of handsome 19th-century town houses on Elk Street and incorporated them, not as a false front, but as a working part of a completely and strikingly contemporary complex built behind them. The words that come to mind are skill, imagination and taste, qualities not encountered too often on the urban scene.

## World of Henry James

On Elk Street, you are still in the Albany of Henry James—sedate, small-scaled, with high-stooped houses, ornate window lintels and evocations of a more leisurely world.

You enter the Bar Center through No. 1, its substantial period door flanked by colored glass sidelights. Nos. 1, 2 and 3 have been retained to the depths of their front parlors, for meeting, conference and dining rooms.

No. 4, on the corner, collapsed during construction and had to be demolished—something like shooting a horse with a broken leg. It leaves a grassy side plot leading to the pleasant open court that joins the new and old sections of the building.

The three historic houses are connected at their rear by a glass-walled corridor that opens to the outdoor court. Entrance to the new section is either through the court or through a corridor from the 19th-century front hall.

## Three Parallel Sections

The new part of the center is divided into three parallel, skylit sections filling the rest of the sloping site to the next street. They increase in height toward the back.

The first is for reception, the second is a Great Hall and the third contains office space. Topping the office space is the Grievance Hearing Room, where questionable legal practices are investigated. They don't shoot bad lawyers; they, disbar them.

The relationships of the various parts of the structure in terms of useful and beautiful spaces provide changing pleasures for the eye. The calculated vistas and contrasts, the logical movement from public to "quiet" areas, the measured views and effects demonstrate a good deal of what more-than-merely-competent architecture is about.

The Great Hall is the focus of the building. Serving as library, lounge and formal social reception area, it is a spacious 40 by 66 feet and soars the structure's full 41-foot 6-inch height.

Its natural stucco-finished walls are washed with light from a skylight, narrow vertical glass on one outside wall and a window wall on the court. Opposite the window wall is a library wall of law books, with the exposed balconies of the tiers of office floors rising visibly above. A bit of *trompe l'oeil* with glass and mirrors helps.

## Demolition Was Planned

Emphasizing the space are flaglike banners by Norman Laliberté, one 6 feet wide and 28 feet long hung most of the height of the hall. This non-stop representation of world legal systems in every sweet and hot color of the spectrum is a glowing blend of deeply serious symbolism and gentle wit. Law and order becomes law and joy.

If the lawyers are heroes today, just a little over three years ago they were looked on as villains. In their first plan, Nos. 1 to 4 Elk Street were to be demolished for the new headquarters.

Instant outcry from preservationists followed the announcement. The legal profession is trained to reason,

if not to urban esthetics. Reasonably, the Bar Association reconsidered the project.

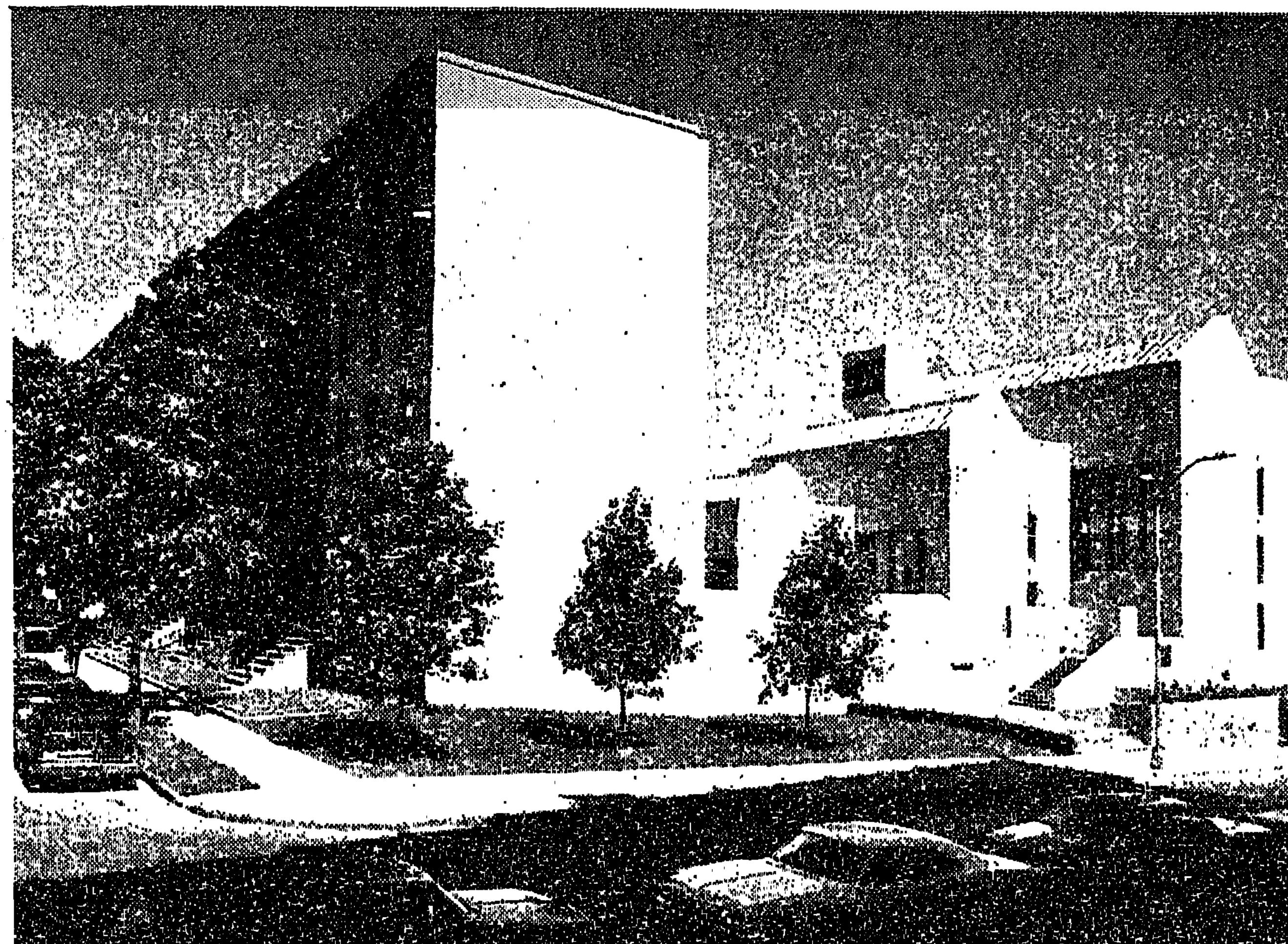
The architect agreed to seek a real use for the old buildings that could combine with new construction without sacrificing the Bar Association's modern needs. The solution is a national model.

It would have been cheaper not to care. Demolishing the house that crumbled and rehabilitating the historic buildings added about \$80,000 to the basic budget. The 19th-century parlors still cry for the period furnishings that the increased expenses could not include.

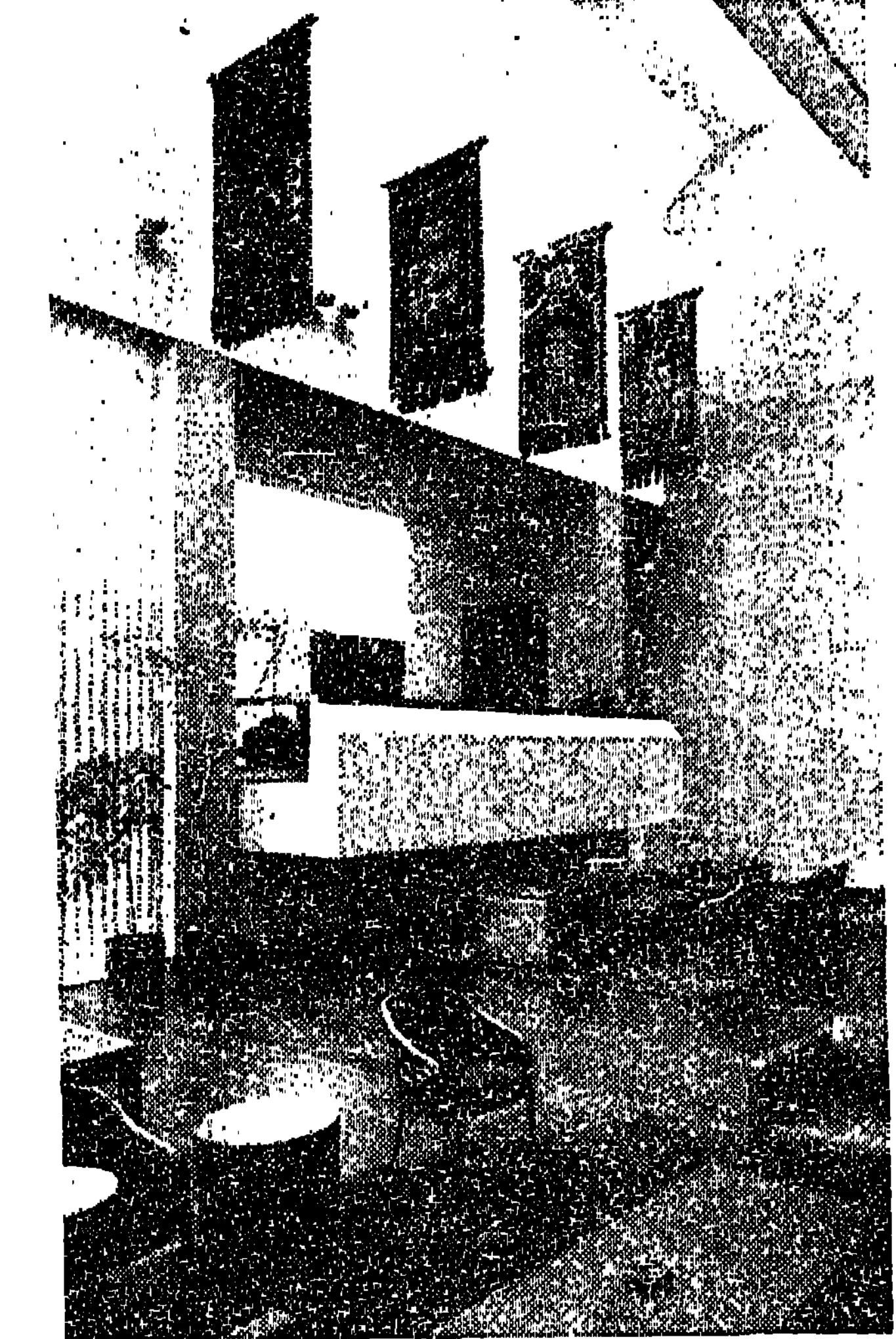
Another \$204,553 went for foundation changes due to poor soil, the work made more difficult by the fragile old structures. Other concessions to quality raised the price nearly \$70,000 more.

Combining new and old was a delicate and costly task. But you get what you pay for. The result, says Mr. Polshek, "brings the profession into the 20th century gracefully."

The building clearly says that continuity, tradition and art are part of life and law, tangibly expressed in the turn of the corner from Elk Street to Eagle Street, from the 19th to the 20th century. This is excellent image-making as well as excellent architecture. Smart, these lawyers.



The new headquarters complex of the New York State Bar Association in Albany. At left is a row of 19th-century town houses that were restored and incorporated



George Cserna  
The interior of the Great Hall, one of the new sections in the complex. It serves as a library, lounge and reception area. Banners were designed by Norman Laliberte.