

# 21-Year Watch

**AXA Equitable Tower,  
787 Seventh Avenue, by  
Edward Larrabee Barnes,  
1986**

**By Fred Bernstein**

Edward Larrabee Barnes, who died in 2004, received a posthumous Gold Medal from the AIA last February. The award was suggested to the AIA by Barnes's contemporaries and protégées, including Henry Cobb, FAIA, Bruce Fowle, FAIA, Charles Gwathmey, FAIA, Toshiko Mori, FAIA, and Terence Riley, AIA, along with Agnes Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, and other luminaries. But even among this group there was little talk of the office towers that Barnes created in the last decades of his career. Gund wrote of her fondness for Barnes's museums, and Cobb wrote of his "exceptional skill and inventiveness in dealing with problems of aggregation and assemblage," as in linking a series of shingled buildings at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine. It was an irony of Barnes's career that some of his best buildings, such as Haystack, are in remote locations, while some of his least successful are on full view in Manhattan.

In the latter category is the Equitable Tower (now the AXA

Equitable Tower), an insurance company headquarters on Seventh Avenue between 51st and 52nd Streets. The 54-floor building is more than 700 feet high, which makes it tall even for midtown Manhattan. It occupies a half-block site bordered to the west by Seventh Avenue, and to the east by a passageway separating it from an earlier skyscraper designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (now the UBS Building). The passageway is decorated with a huge mural by Sol LeWitt called *Bands of Lines in Four Colors and Four Directions*.

Perhaps by coincidence, Barnes replicated the stripes of LeWitt's mural on the building's façades, where he alternated bands of off-white limestone and dark glass. The effect is of too much pattern, giving the building a frenzied, motley appearance. Up close, the effect is no more satisfying. Unlike the stone columns of Eero Saarinen's nearby Black Rock, which suggest strength and verticality, Barnes used stone as a kind of appliquéd surface that suggests weakness, superficiality, and horizontality – none of them great qualities for a skyscraper. Paul Goldberger, writing in *The New York Times* in 1986,

called it "54 stories of ambivalence."

There is suggestion of the building's higher ambitions in the lobby, a massive rectangular space some 80 feet high. Facing the street (and visible through a 70-foot-high arched window on Seventh Avenue) is a five-story-high mural by Roy Lichtenstein depicting some of the important themes of 20th-century painting. The piece seems to cry "modern," which makes it seem out of place amid the brightly colored marble walls that frame it. Also out of place is another terrific modernist piece: Scott Burton's *Atrium Furnishment*, a 40-foot curved

seat of green marble with integral onyx lanterns. Barnes stranded Burton's and Lichtenstein's modernist creations in a cloying, post-modernist room.

Unlike many of Barnes's earlier buildings, which have required renovation (leading to intriguing plans by some of the most creative architects working today, including Michael Maltzan, FAIA, and Architecture Research Office), the Equitable appears almost exactly as

Barnes designed it. Even the galleries in the corners of the Seventh Avenue atrium – designed to be branches of the Whitney Museum – are still being used to show art, under the auspices of AXA Equitable. That the building is virtually unchanged in 20 years is both good (for purposes of assessing Barnes's output) and not good (for the city).

It's true that Barnes's foray into post-modernism didn't last long. And it's true that the Equitable Tower does nothing to diminish Barnes's earlier accomplishments, including some of the most original museums and academic buildings of the mid-20th century. At the same time, the tower remains an uncomfortable addition to the skyline.

Fred Bernstein, an *Oculus* contributing editor, studied architecture at Princeton and law at NYU, and writes about both subjects. His work appears regularly in *The New York Times*, *Metropolitan Home*, and *Architectural Record*, and on his own website, [www.twinpiers.com](http://www.twinpiers.com).



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**Left: The 80-foot-high lobby sports a five-story-high mural by Roy Lichtenstein and a 40-foot curved seat of green marble by Scott Burton Right: A Sol LeWitt mural is seemingly reflected in the tower's stripes in the through-block passageway**