# Progressive Architecture

July 1980

Olean Central Fire Station,
Olean, NY

# A fitting image?

**A fire station in Upstate New York designed by Werner Seligmann raises questions about users' perceptions and preferences.**

When the New York town of Olean decided to replace a small, secondary fire station with a new one that would become its main facility, it called upon architect Werner Seligmann. His work was already known to the town through some earlier and admired New York State UDC (Urban Development Corporation) housing. What the town got in its new (and to some, misguided) venture, however, was a building that is reviled by its users in almost exact reverse proportion to its (to some, undeniable) formal distinction and elegance. The building raises important questions about its fit, as far as the users are concerned, its function, and equally important in this case, its symbolic message. Before going into such matters, however, a straightforward and, it is hoped, unbiased description of the building is in order.

### The site

The 8200-sq-ft structure occupies a site at one end of the town's main street in an area where most of the older buildings have been removed and replaced with suburban-type shopping malls. The site was not chosen by the architect, and it is, according to him, really too small for the activities the building was expected to house, if all of them were to be accommodated on one level. As a consequence, spaces other than the garage, which is designed to hold five fire-fighting vehicles and two ambulances, are stacked in a two-story structure attached to the main "shed." This smaller residential/office structure is trapezoidal, as it fills in the north side of a site that is splayed 15 degrees. This section is clearly articulated as a part of the building serving a function different from that of the shed.

### The structure

An exposed structural steel frame with open-web joists supports a metal deck roof over the shed. Three equal bays across the front of the building extend five bays in depth. The exposed roof framing of the shed is expressed on the outside of the building through stepping back the large rolling doors, which are separated from the roof framing by glazing. In the residential/office section of light metal framing, conventional dropped ceilings are used, along with standard gypsum-board partitions. The building is clad in dark gray and white panels of a synthetic material resembling stone, along with metal sash compatible with the mod ules of the panels. All exterior parts of th building not panel-clad or glazed, such a the exposed structure, rolling doors, and ex haust stacks, are painted bright colors.

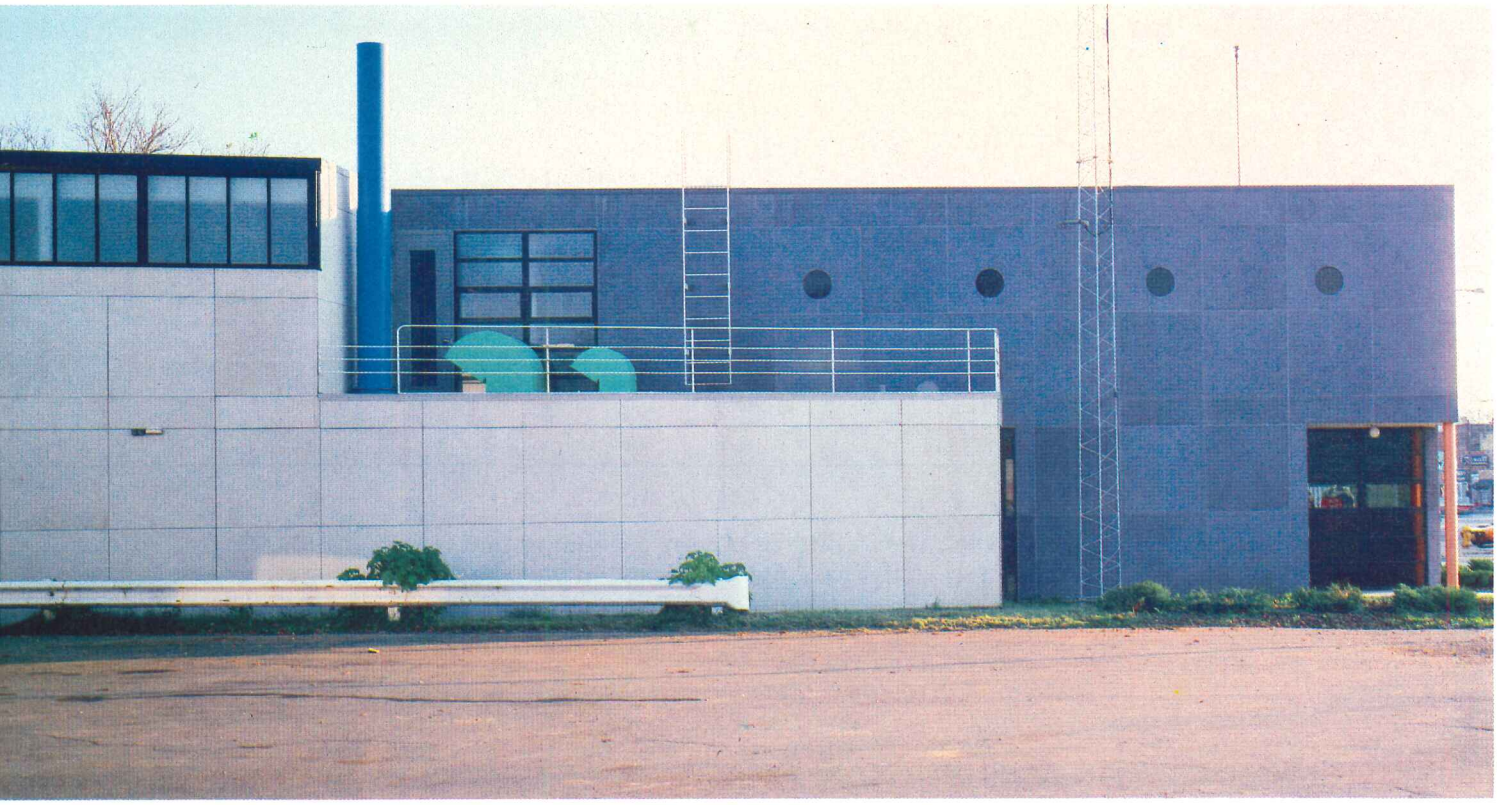
The building is designed to be dry-assem bled as much as possible. As such, it repre sents a continuation of a theme Seligman has been working on for the past severa years in other buildings, such as his adminis tration building at Willard State Hospital i Willard, NY (P/A, May 1976, p. 78).

### The context

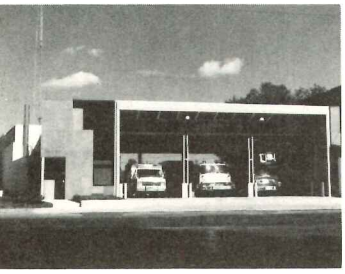
The building completely fills its site fron side to side (north to south), but leaves ope driveway space for the fire engines at th front and back (east and west) ends beyon the enclosure of the drive-through shed. T the north, the residential/office part of th building is scaled down in relation to th shed and is articulated as a small, whit structure set before a dark gray ground. Th intention of this, according to the architect is to put the fire station into a favorable rela tionship with a white and gray gas statio that sits on the adjoining corner lot at a odd angle to the fire station. At the south the large apparatus room is set back fron the main street at the same distance as th larger "Italianate" Knights of Columbu building, to which it is joined and wit which it forms a large-scale urban ensembl facing the street.

### The users

The firemen (or at least the captain and th men P/A spoke to) are quite outspoken i their attitude toward the building. The don't like it, and it is a source of embarrass ment to them. Their complaints, amon others, are: 1) they were not consulted dur ing the design; 2) some of the exterior pain faded and had to be repainted; 3) the exte rior panels are streaking; 4) the two-storie portion should have been done somehow a



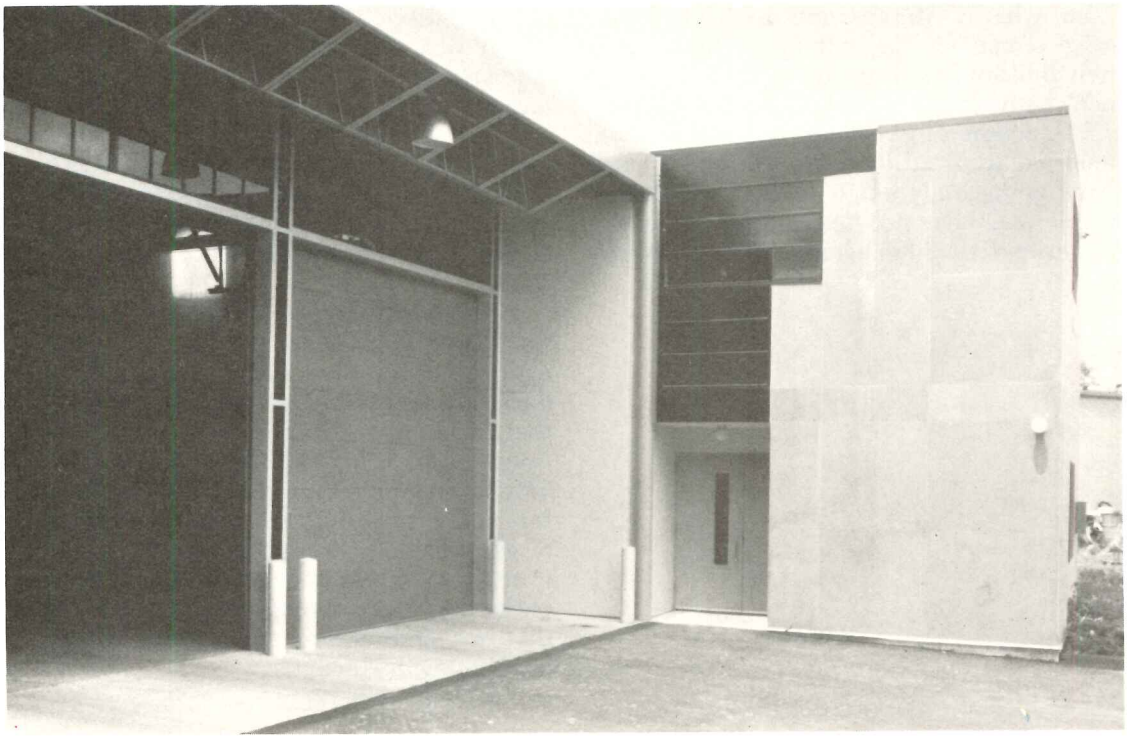
Jon Reis



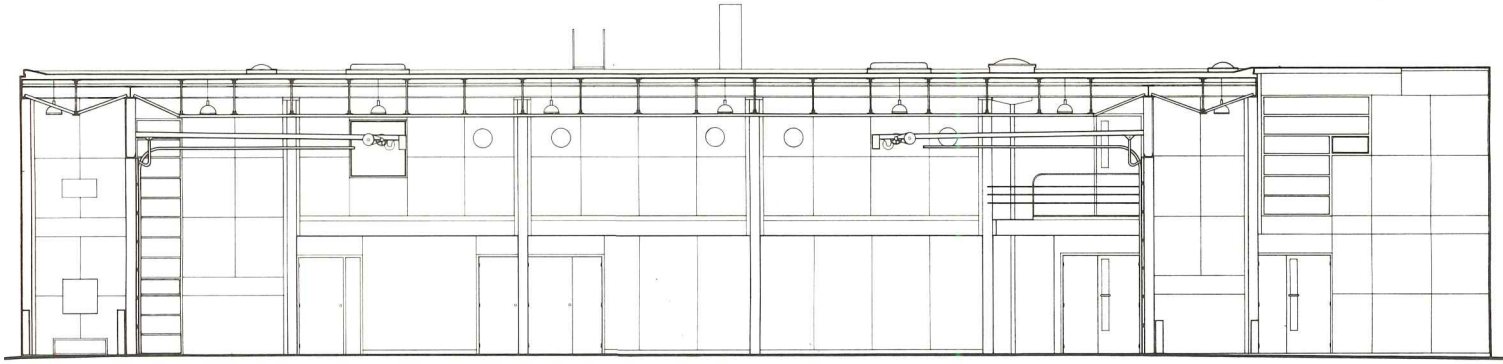
John Reis

Werner Seligmann

*The new fire station in Olean, NY, is decreased in scale on the north side (top) and increased on the west side to relate to the buildings around it. The rear (right) shows the same precise clarity of detailing as the other facades.*



David Morton




one story because it is awkward to use; 5) the building doesn't look like a fire station; and 6) they don't know why they "need all this architecture."

### The architect

The architect's response to these complaints goes as follows: 1) he consulted with the fire chief who saw and had drawings throughout the design phase; 2) the faded interior paint used on the exterior (because of its particular color) should have been sealed; 3) the exterior panels should have been sealed; 4) the residential/office function would not have fit on the lot in other than a two-storied structure; and 6) —these are real problems.

### The real problem

One suspects that the real problem of this building, insofar as the firemen's attitude toward it is concerned, has to do more with its image than with such physical problems as leaking, fading, or staining. While these problems are very real and to some degree exist because cost overruns precluded their correction, they should not be dismissed out of hand. They are, however, not unique for structures where the architect is trying to work out new or unusual techniques.

But what do the firemen think when they go to a convention and are chided about their building by other firemen? The Olean men themselves have called the building the U.S.S. Seligmann because, to them, it looks more like a ship than a fire station. What is really going on, though, is that a group of people who have not been initiated into the mysteries of the high art of architecture have been asked to occupy a building that is exactly that: high art. These firemen have pin-ups on their walls, Barcaloungers in their TV room, and crocheted stuffed frogs on their desks. While it could be argued whether there is anything right or wrong with pin-ups, Barcaloungers, or crocheted stuffed frogs, the point is that the same people who have them don't buy high architecture. At least not usually.

The problem with the Olean fire station is not whether it is a brilliant solution to its programmatic problem in terms of its aesthetics, contextual relationships, and functional resolutions, which this observer thinks it is, but whether a brilliant solution was necessary or even wanted.

If one looks at this building and sees the bold rhythm of the bays of the apparatus room so vigorously terminated by the entry portico, and the composition they form together, then counter-terminated by the white splayed office/residential section of the building, one can read in this single, "simple" façade all of the order, complexity, accidents, and resolutions that occur normally in the richness of the urban texture. Here they have been abstracted, condensed, and distilled into a single unit of extreme sophistication.

But was this wanted? Was it necessary? The answer to the first is, probably no. The answer to the second is harder. On one hand it is very tempting to disavow any elitist tendencies and acknowledge that stuffed frogs are just as good as anything by any "serious" artist. But are they, and should the reader be insulted with an answer to such a question?

What is going on with the fire station is that the right image has not been paired with the right users. This building, though, does not represent the first time in history that has happened. The physical and functional problems of the fire station are probably not insurmountable and with a little effort could be easily overcome. The problem of the image, however, cannot be so easily overcome. While one may have every sympathy for the firemen, one can also hope that in time they may begin to see what they have. [David Morton]

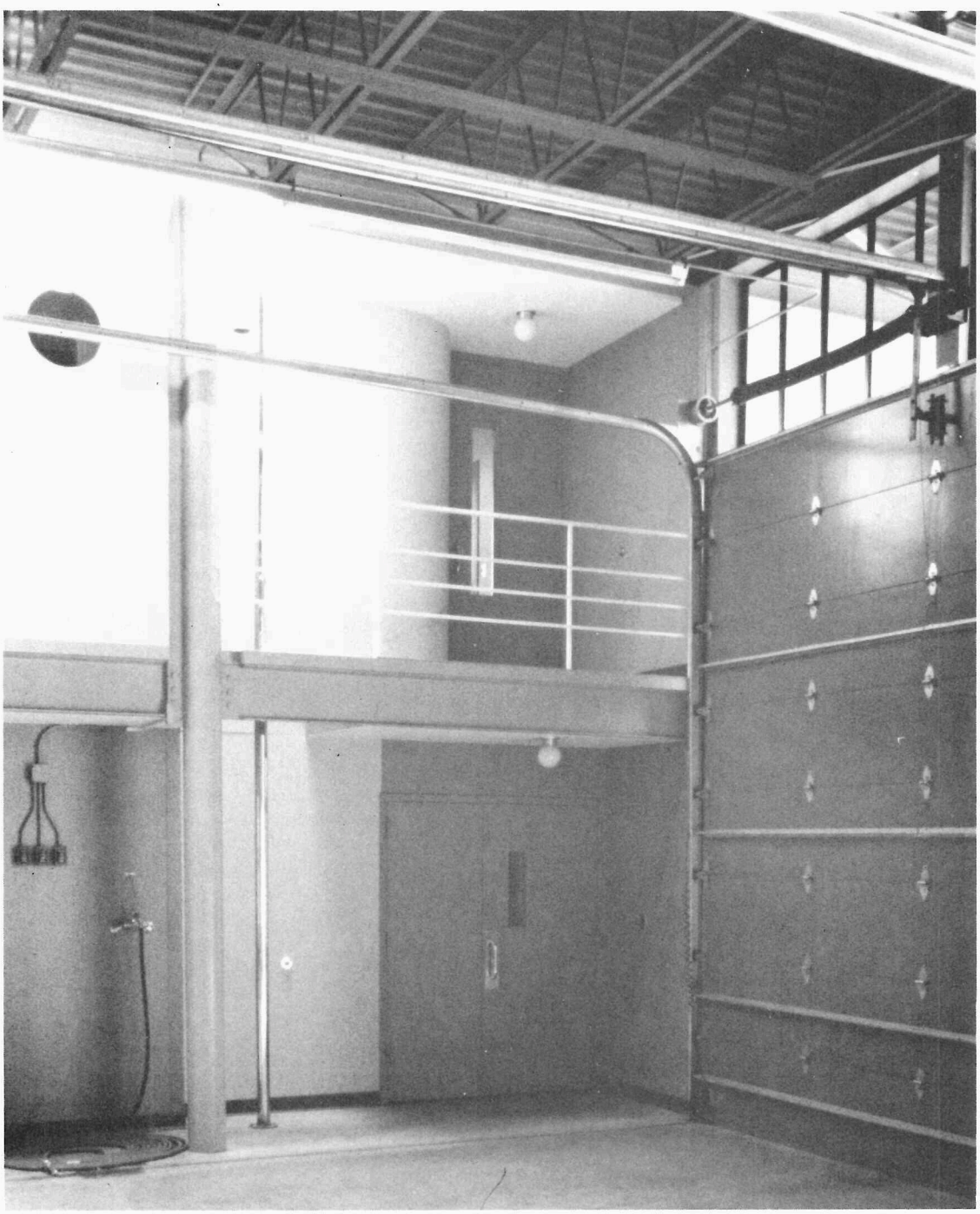
### Data

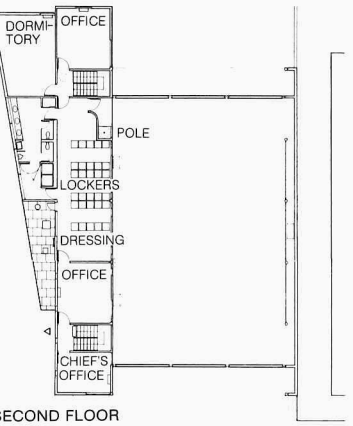
Project: *Olean Central Fire Station, Olean, NY.*
Architects: *Werner Seligmann & Associates; Bruce Coleman, job captain; Val Warke, assistant.*
Site: *flat, urban lot where former fire station stood; one side splayed 15 degrees.*
Program: *a new fire station to replace inadequate facility on site; new station to become central one for town; garage to hold five fire-fighting vehicles and two ambulances.*
Structural system: *concrete foundation and foundation walls; steel frame and open-web joists; light metal framing.*
Major materials: *exposed steel frame and deck, 5/8-in. inorganic mineral fiber-cement exterior panels, gypsum board, steel window frames and panels.*
Mechanical system: *hot-water, oil-fired boiler, unit heaters, pipe-fin radiation; incremental air-conditioning units.*
Consultants: *Synder-Burns Associates, structural; Galson & Galson, mechanical.*
General contractor: *Smith Bros.*
Costs: *$496,000; $60.00/sq ft, including site work, landscaping.*

David Morton

Werner Seligmann

*Inside, the same sharpness of detailing as on the outside is seen, but here through the exposed structural steel, open web joists, and metal roof deck.*



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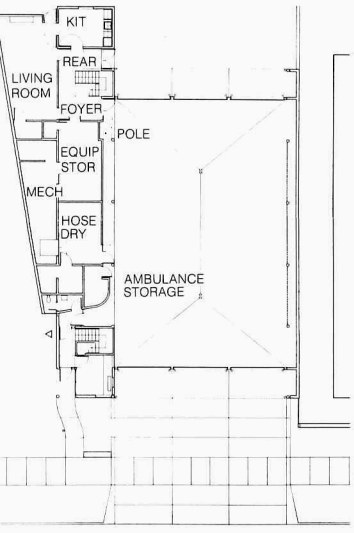


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