

All the Rockefeller Centers

Americans are the Materialists of the abstract.

— Gertrude Stein

PARADOX

At the heart of Rockefeller Center — the first installment of that final, definitive Manhattan — is a double paradox that only Manhattanism could transcend:

“The Center must combine the maximum of congestion with the maximum of light and space,” and

“All planning ... should be based upon ‘a commercial center as beautiful as possible consistent with a maximum income that should be developed.’”¹⁶

The program of Rockefeller Center is to reconcile these incompatibles. An unprecedented coalition of talents works on this enterprise, unusual in both numbers and composition. As Raymond Hood describes it: “It would be impossible to estimate the number of official minds that have engaged in untangling the complexities of the problem; and certainly the number of unofficial minds that have pondered over it is even a more meaningless guess. Architects, builders, engineers, real estate experts, financiers, lawyers — all have contributed something from their experience and even from their imagination.”¹⁷

Rockefeller Center is a masterpiece without a genius.

Since no single creative mind is responsible for its definitive form, the conception, birth and reality of Rockefeller Center have been interpreted — in the traditional measuring system of architectural judgment — as an elaborate *compromise*, an example of “architecture by committee.”

But Manhattan’s architecture cannot be measured with conventional instruments; they give absurd readings: to see Rockefeller Center as a compromise is to be blind.

The essence and strength of Manhattan is that *all* its architecture is “by committee” and that the committee is Manhattan’s inhabitants themselves.

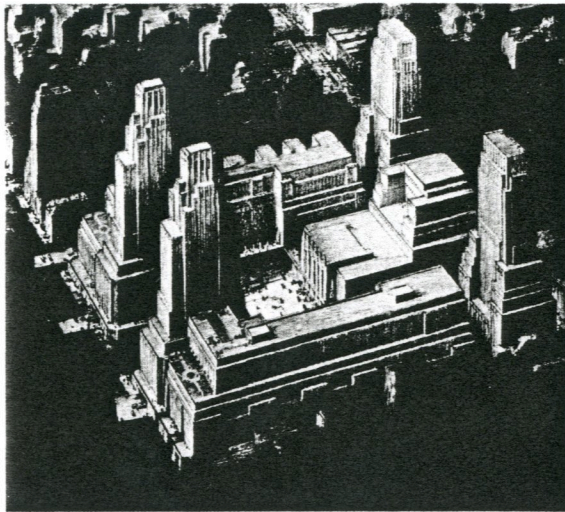
SEED

The seed of Rockefeller Center is a search, begun in 1926, for new accommodation for the Metropolitan Opera.

In an architectural odyssey, the theoretical container of the new Opera wanders across the Grid in a quest for an appropriate location.



Scenes from the campaign of specification: “Corbett’s Move,” or “Design by Committee.” Associated Architects and developers playing with miniature Centers. “Standing: J. O. Brown, Webster Todd, Henry Hofmeister, Hugh S. Robertson. Seated: Harvey Wiley Corbett, Raymond Hood, John R. Todd, Andrew Reinhard, Dr. J. M. Todd.”



Benjamin Wistar Morris, proposal for Metropolitan Square, 1928, on site of present Rockefeller Center. From Fifth Avenue a central axis leads to plaza in front of the Metropolitan Opera. 49th and 50th streets continue through the two frontal Towers. The dilemma of cultural facility vs. fund-raising commercial structures is resolved by shaping the offices into the protective walls of a "forbidden city" and using the four Skyscrapers as monumental totems that define a bastion of high culture. Apart from the central plaza, many other features that recur in later schemes by other architects are already present here: an intimation of roof gardens, and bridges across 49th and 50th streets that connect a network of elevated arcades and walkways on the second-floor level, in the manner of Corbett's so-called anti-congestion proposals.



John D. Rockefeller, Jr., measuring plans of the future RCA Building with his four-foot rule. Office interior, originally bought in Spain, was reconstructed first in Rockefeller's private offices, then dismantled again to be resurrected on the 56th floor of the RCA Building.

Its architect-to-be, Benjamin Wistar Morris, is subjected to a fundamental Manhattan paradox: it has become literally impossible to be conventional in the Manhattan of the late twenties, even if determined to be so: Morris' Opera can only exist on its own, as a dignified object, in the most undesirable areas of the Grid. At better locations, the ground becomes so expensive that additional commercial functions are needed to make the enterprise financially feasible.

The better the site, the more the theoretical Opera is in danger of being overwhelmed — physically and symbolically — by these commercial superimpositions, to a point where the original concept collapses under their weight.

The Opera's trajectory is from a site on 57th Street between Eighth and Ninth avenues, where it can exist on its own in a slum, to a location on Columbus Circle where it is already incorporated into a Skyscraper. Finally, sometime in 1928, Morris discovers a three-block site, owned by Columbia University, between Fifth and Sixth avenues and between 48th and 52nd streets.

There he designs a final scheme, stubborn in his Beaux-Arts determination to make the Opera a freestanding symbolic object at the end of a symmetrical vista. The center of his site is now a plaza where he locates the cube of the Opera. A ceremonial approach flanked by two Skyscrapers leads to it from Fifth Avenue. Opera and plaza are surrounded by a ten-story wall of deep loft space; on Sixth Avenue two more Skyscrapers — a hotel and an apartment building — flank the Opera.

RIVET

When this scheme is officially unveiled at the Metropolitan Club, whose members have sponsored its design, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., begins to take an interest.

The Opera does not have the means to construct its own new headquarters, let alone finance the surrounding mountain range of what is to be the largest building operation ever conceived in Manhattan.

Rockefeller offers to take responsibility for the further planning and actual execution of the entire operation.

Feeling unequipped, as a nonexpert, to lead such a colossal real-estate operation, Rockefeller delegates the logistical responsibilities to a friend, John R. Todd, a businessman, contractor and real-estate developer.

On December 6, 1928, the Metropolitan Square Corporation is founded as the vehicle for the enterprise.

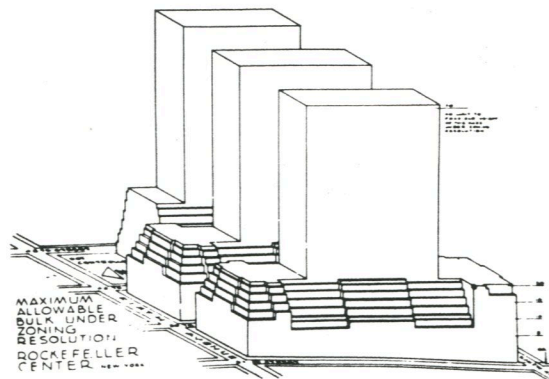


Diagram of maximum allowable bulk on three-block Radio City site according to 1916 Zoning Law. Morris' project sacrifices the volume of the middle block in favor of the Beaux-Arts dignity of his Opera.

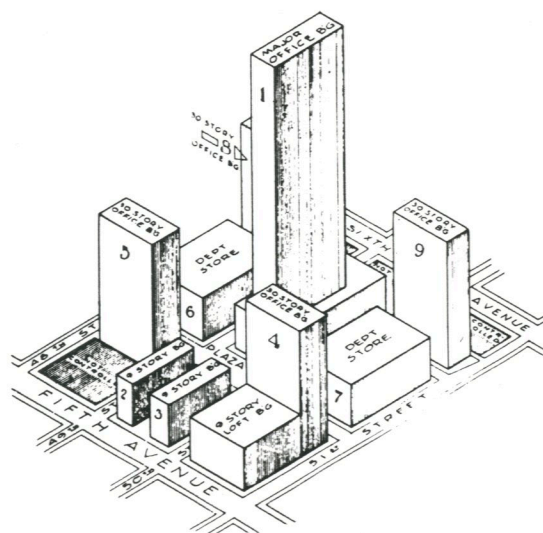


Diagram by architect Reinhard & Hofmeister for developer Todd, correcting Morris' mistake by adding major central tower to exploit fully commercial potential of allowable bulk. Closeness of this diagram to Center as built is remarkable, but that does not make Reinhard & Hofmeister the "designer" of Rockefeller Center. These unspecified outlines correspond rather to Ferriss' "shape that the law puts in the architect's hands." In the *specification* of this envelope — its "conquest" by architectural and programmatic detail — lies the genius of Rockefeller Center.

Rockefeller himself remains responsible for preserving the idealistic dimensions of the project.

He is obsessed with the process of building. "I suspect he always had a suppressed desire to drive a rivet,"¹⁸ is how Nelson Rockefeller diagnoses his father's condition.

Through the late twenties, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., has been chairman of the building committee of Riverside Church — emphatic graft of the spiritual onto the Grid to counter the commercial frenzy everywhere else — and involved himself in all its architectural details.

Simultaneously with Rockefeller Center, he is preparing the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg; one enterprise is the fabrication of a past, the other — in a collapsing economy — the restoration of a future.

During the design of the Center, Rockefeller spends years "living knee deep in blueprints"¹⁹ in his Gothic office (later transplanted in its entirety to the higher regions of the RCA). He always carries a four-foot rule with him, to check the smallest details of the emerging project, occasionally insisting on the addition of spiritual details such as the Gothic decoration at the top of the RCA slab (a suggestion accepted by the architects because they know that altitude alone will make it invisible).

CRATER

Todd has his own architects, Reinhard and Hofmeister, both young and inexperienced.

With them, he scrutinizes Morris' proposal in light of the paradox of maximum congestion combined with maximum beauty. The weakness of Morris' scheme is its avoidance of the maximum zoning envelope — which by now is both financial necessity and irresistible architectural model. Compared to the Ferriss-Hood *Mountain* — the configuration of the definitive Manhattan — Morris' project, with the plaza's emptiness as its center, is like the crater of an extinguished volcano.

In a gesture of commercial and metaphoric repair, Todd and his architects replace the crater with the peak of an office building.

This correction defines and fixes the primordial Rockefeller Center; all later versions are variations of the same architectural motif: a super-tower at the center, four smaller towers on the corners of the site. The shrunken remnants of Morris' plaza survive only insofar as they facilitate further planning.

After the formulation of the fundamental diagram, Todd invites Hood, Corbett and Harrison — more experienced than his own architects — to become consultants.

CRASH

In 1929 the Great Crash shatters the assumptions on which the Center is based: from a financially reasonable enterprise it becomes commercially irrational. But this sudden suspension of financial gravity forces the committee to be, if anything, less commercial and more idealistic.

The original impetus — construction of a new Metropolitan Opera — becomes more and more implausible, while the demand for the type of office space the scheme provides also evaporates. Yet Rockefeller has signed a lease that stipulates payment of \$3.3 million a year to Columbia University.

What is left after the collapse of all predictions — and of the structures that make prediction of any kind possible — is only the Center's zoning envelope, a colossal volume that now somehow has to be made desirable for new forms of human occupancy through the originality of the architects and builders.

There is a metaphor — Ferriss' Mountain.

There is a series of strategies — the Great Lobotomy, the Vertical Schism, real-estate calculations that have been geared, since the twenties, to prove the impossible — and there is a construction industry specialized in building it.

Finally, there is the doctrine of Manhattanism — the creation of congestion on all possible levels.

FACTS

Todd is committed to a tradition of relentless pragmatism and financial cold-bloodedness. But because of the financial uncertainties of the enterprise, what should have been the ultimate pragmatic operation unfolds in a complete shortage of facts. In the uncertain climate after the Crash, there simply *are* no demands, no empirical necessities to be met — in short, no *facts* that could compromise the purity of the conception. The financial crisis guarantees the Center's theoretical integrity.

The committee — stacked with alleged philistines — has no choice but the Ideal.

Intended as empirical, their specifications merely bring into focus the outlines of the archetype.

TEST

For Hood, Rockefeller Center is a test of the doctrine, the strategies to establish it and the individuals committed to it.

"I have, and I suppose every architect has, done things of which I was not entirely certain. On a single building operation, something may be risked for the sake of experimentation, but on a two hundred fifty million development, and one which may set a precedent for many in the future, mistakes can be so costly that they become catastrophes. It is needless to say that every man associated with Rockefeller Center knows that he is risking his professional reputation, his professional future on the success of Rockefeller City."²⁰ What all the men on the committee have in common is their involvement in the previous unconscious stages of Manhattan; in different degrees, they are responsible for developing Manhattan's already existing architecture. Now they have to carve the final Manhattan archetype from the invisible rock of its zoning envelope in a campaign of specification: each invisible fragment will have to be made concrete in terms of activity, form, materials, servicing, structure, decoration, symbolism, finance.

The Mountain must become architecture.

COMPETITION

At the beginning each of the Associated Architects is asked to develop a private scheme in competition with the others. This ploy creates an overabundance of architectural images and energy for partial inclusion in the diagram while it drains ego from the individual members.

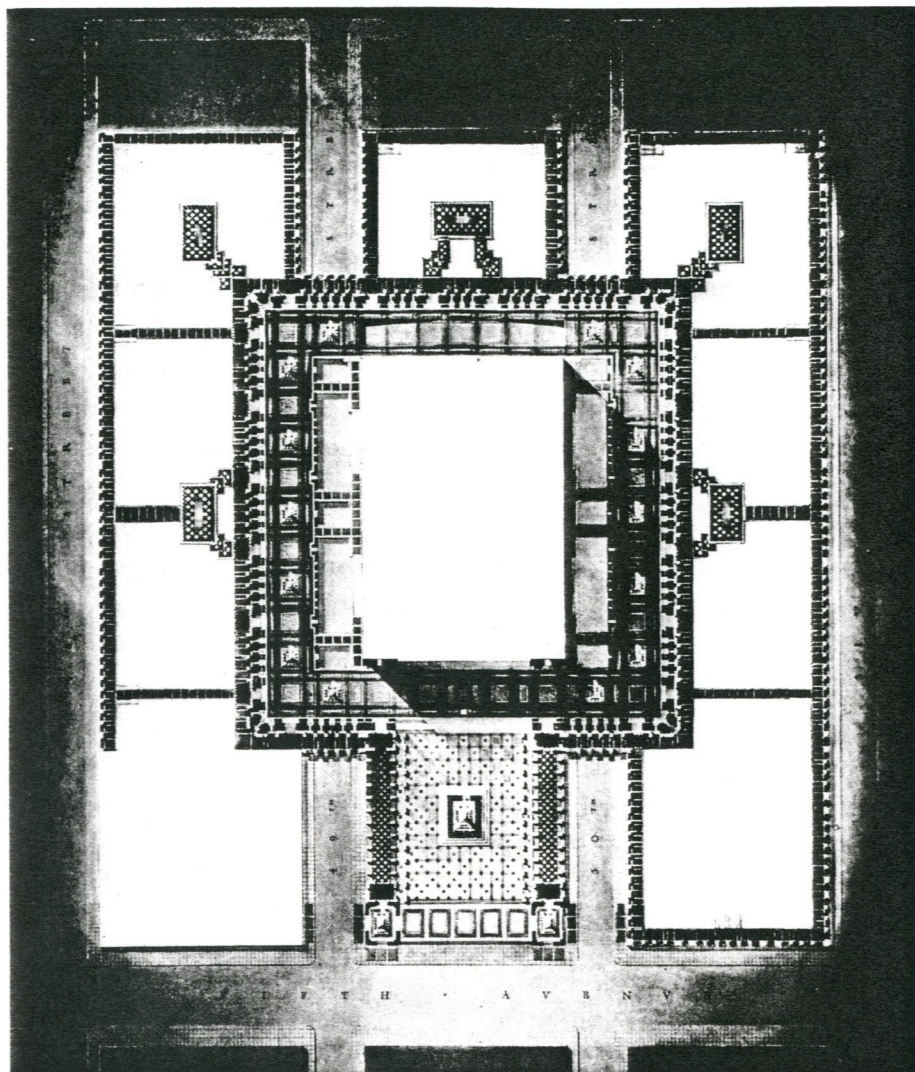
The two most famous of the Associated Architects, Corbett and Hood, the only theoreticians, propose retroactive versions of earlier, aborted projects.

Corbett sees a chance finally to impose his 1923 traffic/island metaphor to cure congestion by turning Manhattan into a "very modernized Venice." Ferriss' renderings bring only the Venetian elements of Corbett's scheme into sharp focus: a Bridge of Sighs spans 49th Street; San Marco-like colonnades and a stream of shiny black limousines monopolize the attention. The other outlines of the scheme disappear in a mist of charcoal particles.

Corbett's Rockefeller Center, located on a synthetic midtown Adriatic, redeems a subconscious promise made as long ago as Dreamland's Canals of Venice.

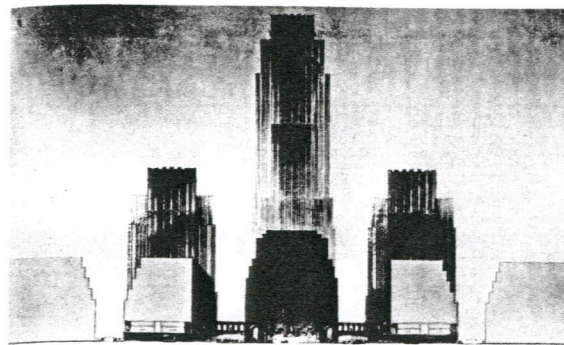
INTERSECTION

Hood's proposal too is testimony to the persistence of his obsession; since the three blocks of the site frustrate his intention finally to implant one of his mega-Mountains on a major intersection, he creates within the

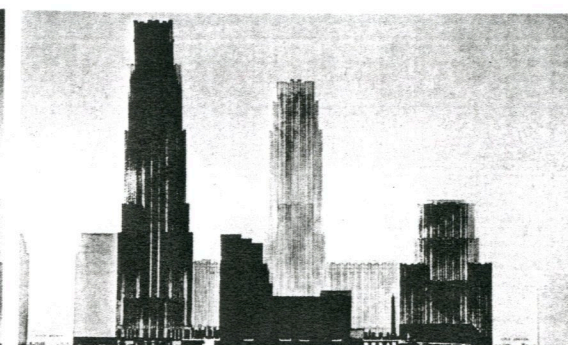


"Proposal for the Development of Metropolitan Square," plan at elevated arcade level, Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray, 1929, or "The Persistence of Memory (1)." Corbett's private project for Rockefeller Center is the apotheosis of his *planning through metaphor*, a last attempt to create "a very modernized Venice" in his lifetime, presented as a logical series of anti-congestion measures. The three blocks of Radio City are treated as "islands"; the center of the middle island is occupied by the Metropolitan Opera, surrounded by seven Skyscrapers. As to be expected, the essence of his scheme is the separation of vehicular traffic — assigned to the ground — and pedestrians, for whom he creates a continuous elevated network on the second floor; its arcades line the full perimeter of the outer blocks and form, at the core of the scheme, a *Square* around

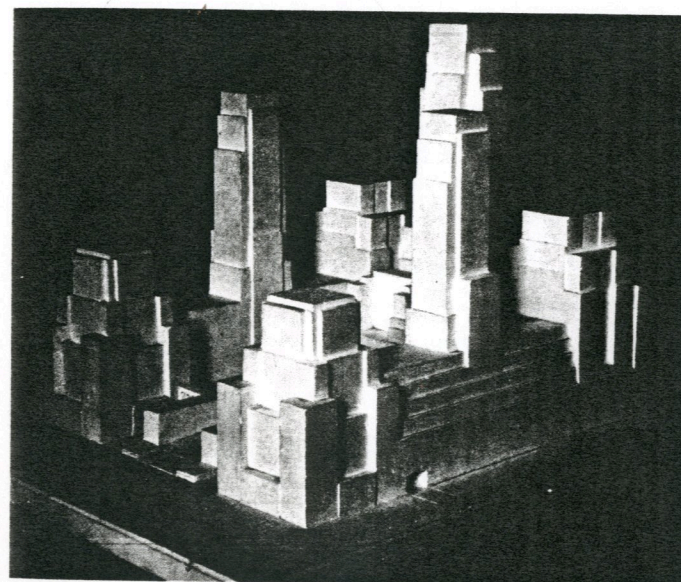
the Opera, a metropolitan ambulatory whose circuit is completed by half-arcaded bridges — the width of the plaza itself — across 49th and 50th streets. From the Square, subsidiary bridges lead to side entrances in the Opera. The arcade network also gives access to the recessed lobbies of the seven Skyscrapers — three on the outer blocks and one, the tallest, west of the Opera on Sixth Avenue. The central Square is connected to the city's conventional pedestrian plane — i.e., the ground — by an inclined platform that slopes down toward Fifth Avenue between two colossal pergolas. The whole arrangement resembles the "circumferential plaza" around Grand Central Station, with the station replaced by the Opera, the cars by people and the ramp from Park Avenue by the sloping plaza.



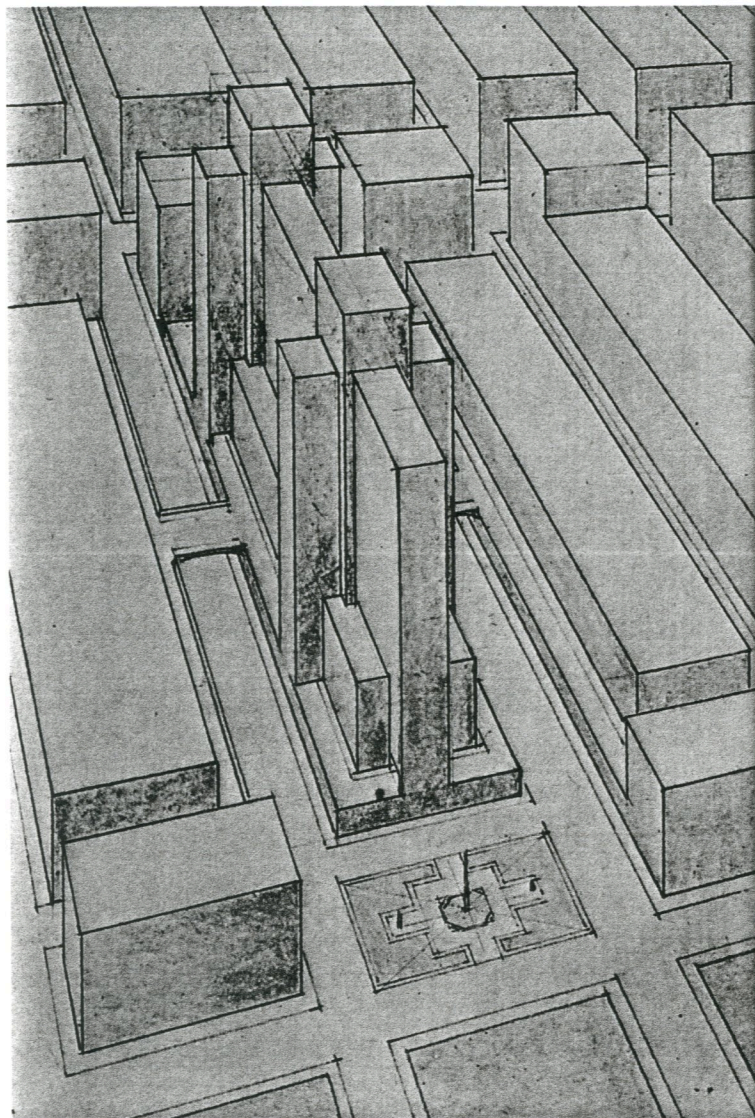
"Development of Metropolitan Square," section/elevation from Fifth Avenue, showing, in center, sloping plaza between pergolas ascending toward Metropolitan Square in front of Opera, and section through the two outer blocks. Here a problematic aspect of Corbett's scheme is revealed: not only are the arcades on the main pedestrian level on the second floor lined with shops — a valuable commercial proposition — but the ground floor, which ought, to be consistent, to have been completely surrendered to cars, shows a second arcade with shopping on both sides, while all other features of the scheme conspire to *remove* pedestrians from grade level.



"Development of Metropolitan Square," west-east section through 49th Street, central Square and sloping plaza on Fifth Avenue. From left to right: silhouette of tallest Skyscraper, outline of Opera, cut through Metropolitan Square and sloping plaza.

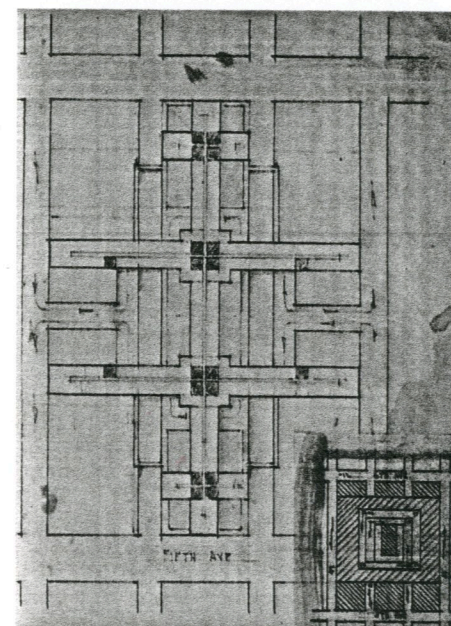
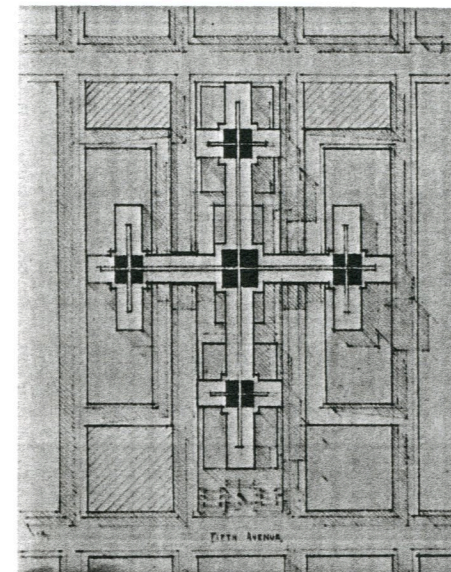
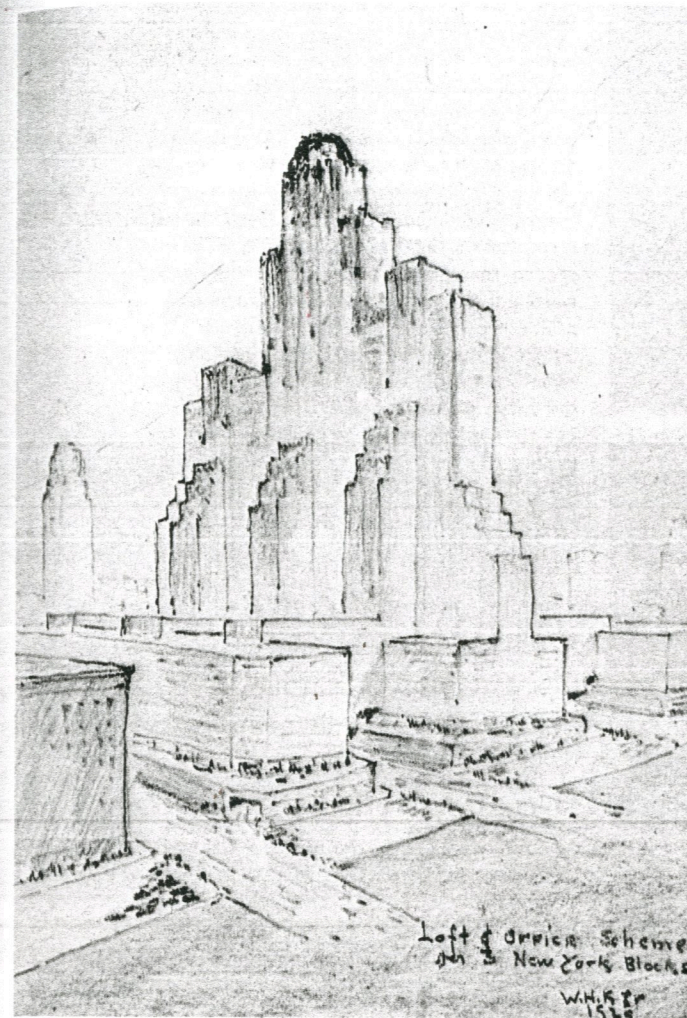


"Development of Metropolitan Square," model from northeast showing north elevation of block with three Towers and car access to covered area under pedestrian square on site of present Rockefeller Plaza.

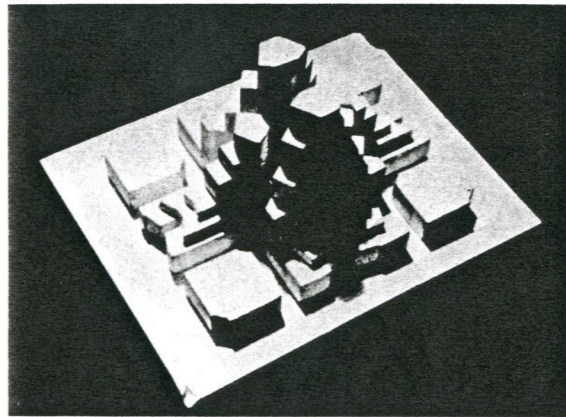


Between December 19 and 23, 1929, Walter Kilham, Jr. — working for Hood — drew up at least eight Rockefeller Centers. Each alternative was developed as a diagrammatic plan and in three-dimensional outline. Scheme O dates from December 19. Like Corbett's "private" project it proposes a continuous elevated level for pedestrians that counteracts the discontinuity of the three separate blocks. In the O scheme the center block is occupied by an extremely tall longitudinal slab that terminates in Skyscrapers at both ends. Thus, the O project marks the first appearance in Manhattan's architecture of a "slab" — itself a regression to the *extrusion* buildings of the early part of the century — the form that would soon spell the end of the

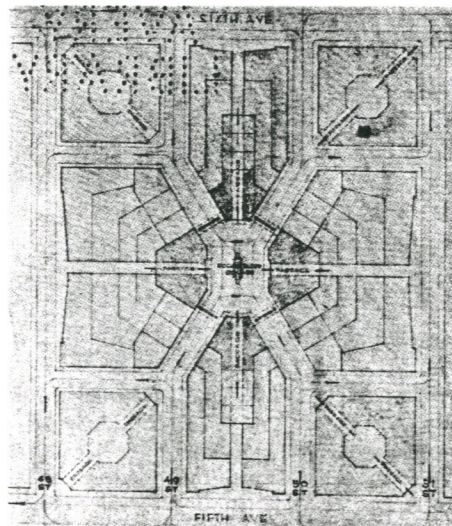
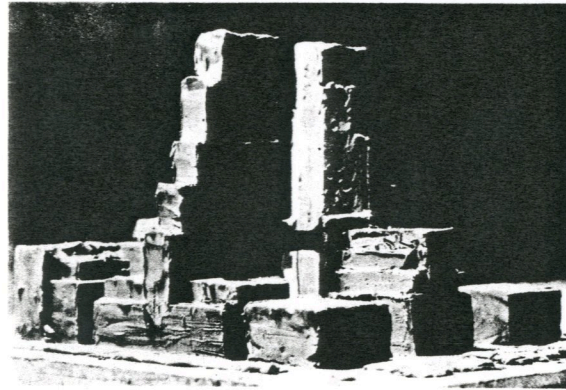
Manhattanist Skyscraper. It was dictated — Hood would claim — by logic alone: access to air and light. The two outer blocks are designated as "Department Stores." Facing the central Skyscraper Slab are two metropolitan balconies along the inside of the outer blocks, connected by two bridges to similar terraces around the perimeter of the center block; both balconies and terraces are lined with shops. The two elevator cores at either end of the Skyscraper Slab are connected by an interior arcade. Further schemes were variations on the O scheme, with alternative arrangements of high-rise elements on the center block and relocations of the bridges to create different pedestrian networks.



In further proposals, like "Loft & Office scheme on 3 New York Blocks" and the plans for V and X schemes, the proto-project of Rockefeller Center consists — not unlike the "City under a Single Roof" — of a center slab intersected by one, two and even three north-south wings that span 49th and 50th streets, with elevator banks at those points where the transverse slabs rest on the lower outer blocks. These plans make the project a "Grid within the Grid," with premonitions of Mondrian's *Victory Boogie-Woogie*.



Hood's personal project for Rockefeller Center — "The Persistence of Memory (2)": "Superblock scheme for Rockefeller Center," also called "The Fling," described by Hood as "an attempt to build a pyramid unit," model. "The Fling" is a barely disguised version of one of the business centers of his "Manhattan 1950." Since the site lacks the major intersection for which those "peaks" were intended, Hood connects the outer corners of the site to create an artificial intersection, then fits the business center in by twisting it 45 degrees. Four Skyscrapers face each other across a miniature Rockefeller Square in the center; they are connected by bridges at intervals along their length. From the quadruple central peak "The Fling" slopes down toward the perimeter to connect with the existing city.



Grid an artificial intersection, two diagonals that connect its four corners, the traffic "shortcut" first applied in his City of Towers. On this artificial crossing, he places a four-part peak that slopes down in terraces toward the perimeter of the site. The peaks of the four buildings concentrate services and elevator shafts. At regular intervals along these towers, bridges connect the four shafts, so that congestion is assured. Hood's scheme is a proposal for a perpetual rush hour in three dimensions.

BRAIN

Before the Center itself, the most impressive creation of Todd and his architects, now assembled as the Associated Architects — Reinhard & Hofmeister; Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray; Hood, Godley & Fouilhoux — is the theater they design to accommodate the campaign of specification.

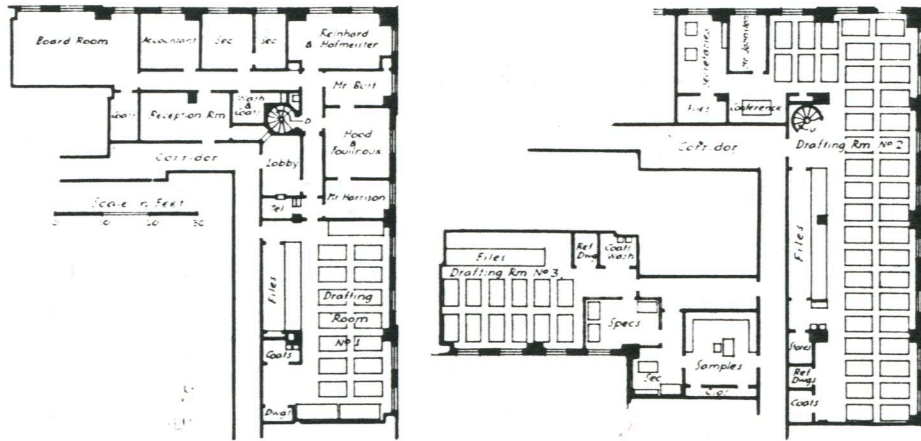
Its purpose is not the fastest possible determination of all the details of the Center but, on the contrary, the *postponement of its final definition* to the last possible moment so that the concept of the Center remains an open matrix that can absorb any idea that can increase its ultimate quality.

The Associated Architects are organized on two floors in Todd's own Graybar Building. The office is an almost literal diagram of the consecutive stages of the creative process.

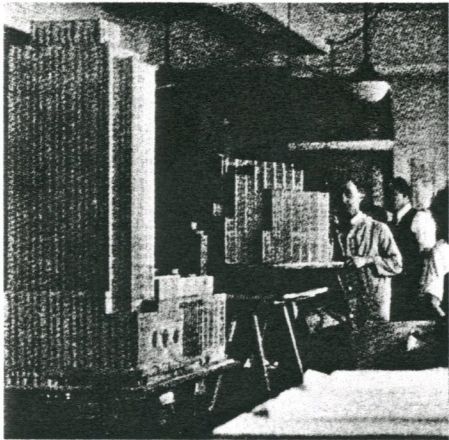
On the top floor, all the Associated Architects have their individual cubicles; they meet together once a day in a conference room for collective brainstorming, so that their separate ideas can be inserted in the collective matrix. Renee Chamberlain, an architectural sculptor, and the "delineators" of Drafting Room #1 give the still-fluid concepts of the designers a provisional embodiment, so that they can make quick decisions.

On the floor below, connected only by a small spiral staircase, the professional specifiers are arranged in a grid of tables in Drafting Room #2. Here the zoning envelope is dismantled into separate fragments numbered one to thirteen, each with its own team of supervisors and technicians. They translate the ideas from above into precise working drawings that will be submitted to those who turn the blueprint into three-dimensional reality.

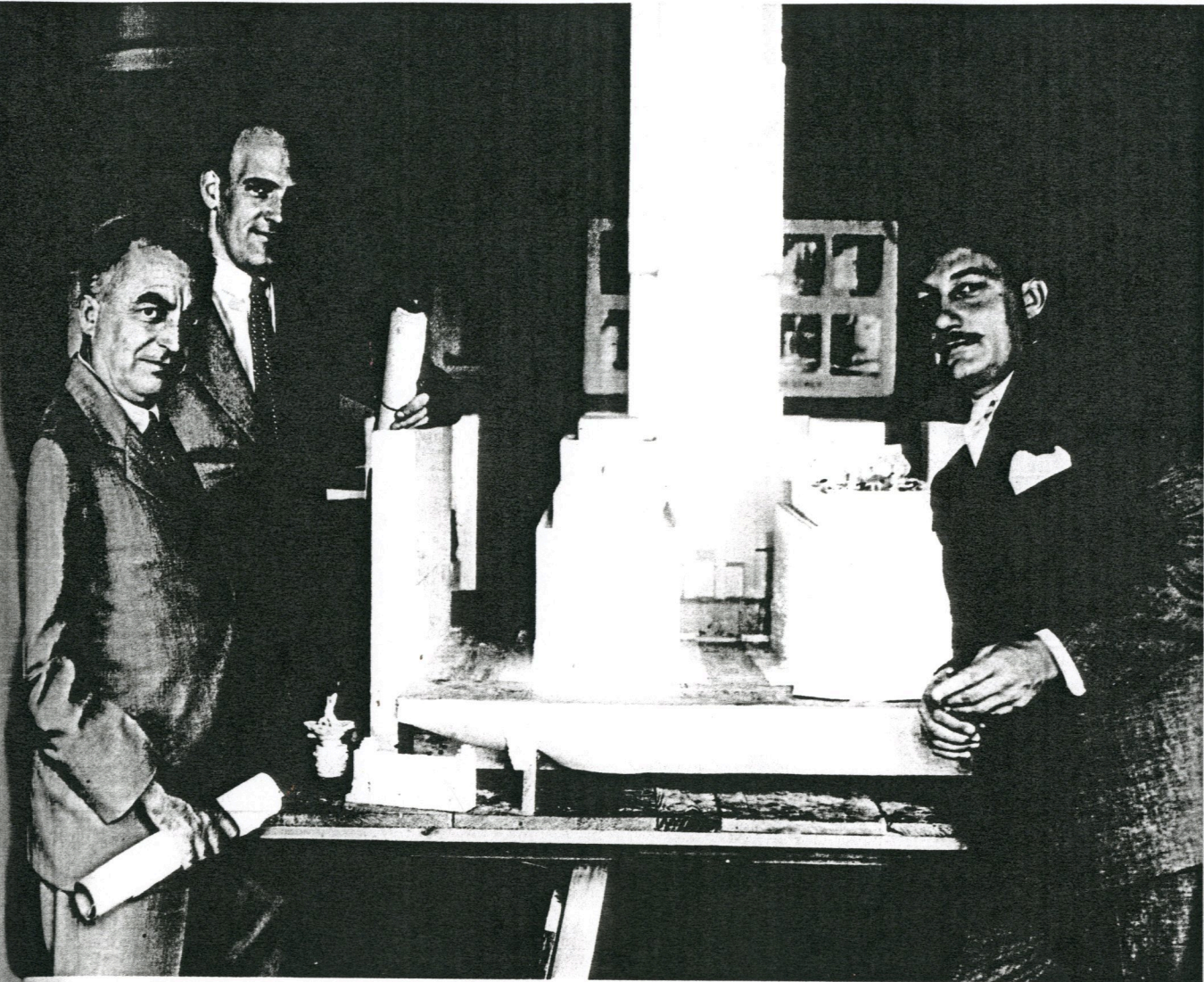
"In addition to a main telephone switchboard, with direct lines to consulting engineers and the blueprinting companies, is a dictograph system of interoffice communication. All departments are connected by dictograph substations, connected in turn with a master dictograph,



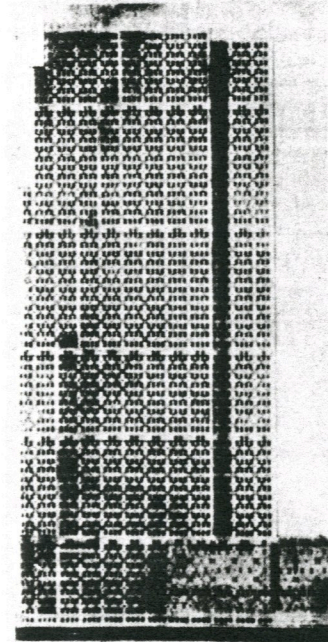
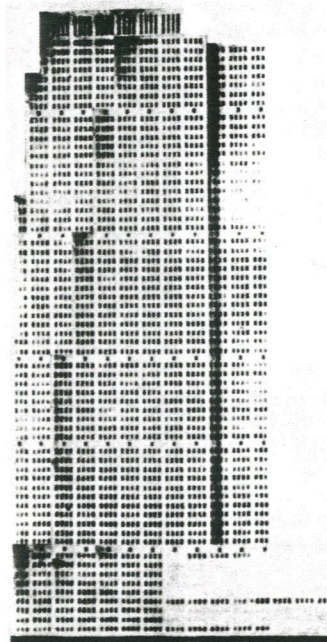
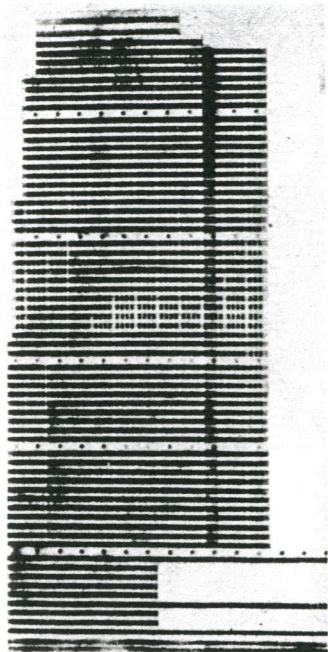
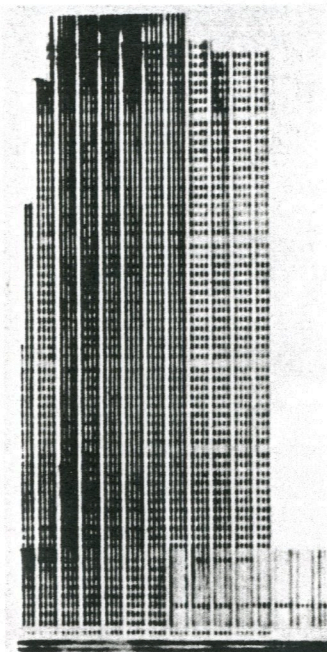
Theater of the campaign of specification: the office as a three-dimensional flow diagram of the creative process. "Executive offices are located on the 26th floor of the Graybar Building and are connected with 3 drafting rooms, 2 of which are on the 25th floor. Drafting Room #1 is used for designing and modeling; the other two for general production work..."



Center's bulk was dismantled in fragments that were studied and developed by separate teams of architect, sculptor/modelmaker, delineators, draftsmen, specification writers.



Raymond Hood, Wallace K. Harrison and Andrew Reinhard: "the architects of Rockefeller Center as they inspect a plaster model of La Maison Française and the British Empire Building..." Ashtray-like objects on pedestal are models for fountain in sunken plaza.



Further evidence of “density of rejected possibilities”: facade alternatives for RCA Building; cladding in painted corrugated iron was also considered.

from which a conference report can be carried on with all the substations at the same time.

“Each substation is connected with an executive office. In addition to this system is a corps of runners who transmit interoffice memoranda, mail and conference notes,”²¹ writes Wallace Harrison, the futurist “manager” of this quasi-rational circuitry of creation.

MARRIAGE

The rejection of the personal projects in favor of the diagram established in the committee’s brainstorming causes no resentment. When Hood describes the committee’s mechanics — the collapse of philistinism into creativity — he seems, for once, free from disingenuousness. “Far from being a handicap, this discipline, I am convinced, of being obliged to make a project stand on its own financial feet and to submit its details and materials to a constant critical analysis leads to honesty and integrity of design. Under this stimulation, the cobwebs of whimsy, taste, fashion and vanity are brushed aside, and the architect finds himself face to face with the essentials and elements that make real architecture and real beauty.”²²

If not responsible for the Center’s initial diagram, it is obvious that Hood dominates *the campaign to specify the envelope*. Specialist in pragmatic sophistry at the service of pure creation, Hood is the most effective member of the committee. He speaks all the different “languages” represented by its members.

When Todd, for instance, balks at the cost of cladding the entire RCA slab in limestone, Hood retaliates by suggesting they cover it with corrugated iron, “painted, of course.”²³

Todd wants limestone after all.

(Perhaps Hood really does prefer painted iron?)

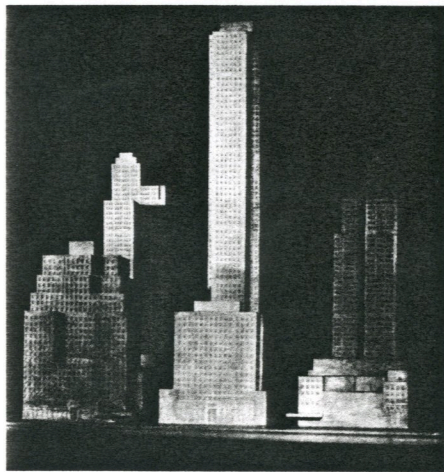
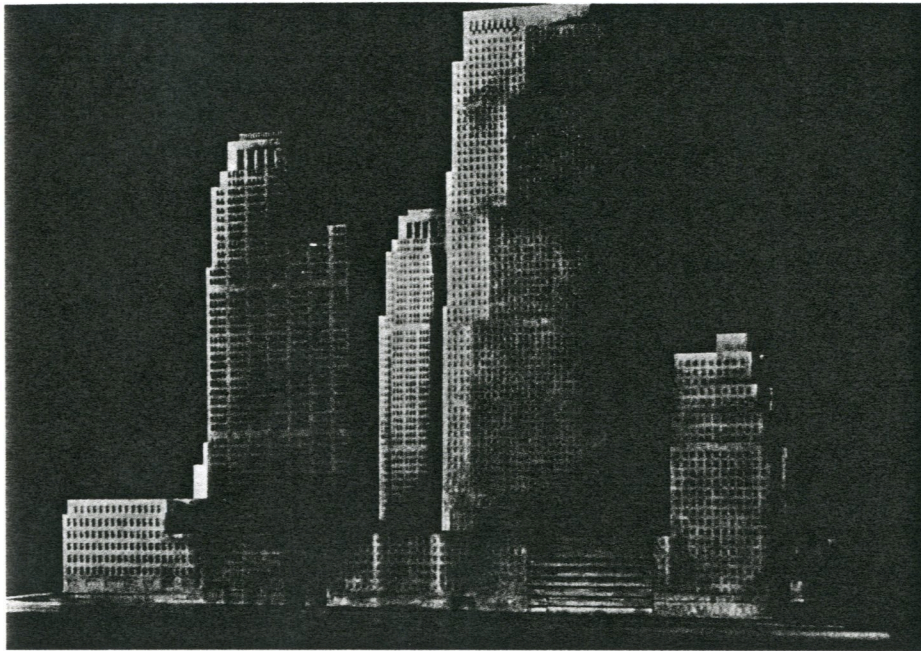
If the committee is a forced marriage between capital and art, it is a marriage eagerly consummated.

SIEGE

Outside Rockefeller Center’s “brain” reigns the Great Depression: the cost of both labor and materials keeps dropping during the design period.

The two floors are under constant siege from outsiders who want to contribute ideas, services and products to the realization of the Mountain.

With the economy desperate and the Center one of the few works in progress, the pressure from these outsiders is often irresistible. It is one more reason for the committee to avoid premature definition; the longer



"I would not attempt to guess how many ... solutions were made: I doubt ... if there were any possible schemes that were not studied before the present plan was adopted. And, even *after* arriving at a definite scheme, changes were continually being made to coincide with rental developments..." (Raymond Hood.) Once the individual schemes were out of the way, their metaphors — Venice, the pyramid — digested, the Associated Architects worked on the elaboration of the Reinhard & Hofmeister envelope: tallest Skyscraper at the center, four secondary Skyscrapers on the far corners of the outer blocks. In front of the central Tower, a midblock plaza — as in Morris' scheme — sunken to facilitate communication between underground and grade levels. Lower structure on Fifth Avenue was first an oval bank, soon replaced by two identical seven-story structures — the French and the British buildings — which channel pedestrians toward the sunken plaza. Symmetry of the initial concept was abandoned, with northeast Tower now facing Fifth Avenue. Originally it had a solid department store fronting it on Fifth Avenue; this block soon "split," to form, as an echo of the French and British buildings, an entrance court to the International Building, whose slab repeated the stepping motif of the RCA ("necessitated" by the dropping-out of elevator banks). Southeast tower became the Time-Life Building. As the thirties proceeded and the Center was realized in installments, overall design became less recognizable — to suit demands of specific tenants, and in response to creeping Modernism.

they postpone nonessential decisions, the more the answers appear to them in the form of luxuries that were impossible before. They appoint a *Director of Research* to exploit this unexpected potential. Thus the Center continuously raises its sights. While the usual process of architectural creation is like a narrowing horizon, the horizon of Rockefeller Center becomes ever wider. In the end, each fragment of the structure has been exposed to unprecedented scrutiny and is chosen from a terrifying number of alternatives. This density of rejected possibilities still emanates from the Center as built: there is at least one idea for each of its 250 million dollars.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Rockefeller Center is the most mature demonstration of Manhattanism's unspoken theory of the simultaneous existence of different programs on a single site, connected only by the common data of elevators, service cores, columns and external envelope. Rockefeller Center should be read as five ideologically separate projects that coexist at the same location. Ascent through its five layers exposes an archaeology of architectural philosophies.

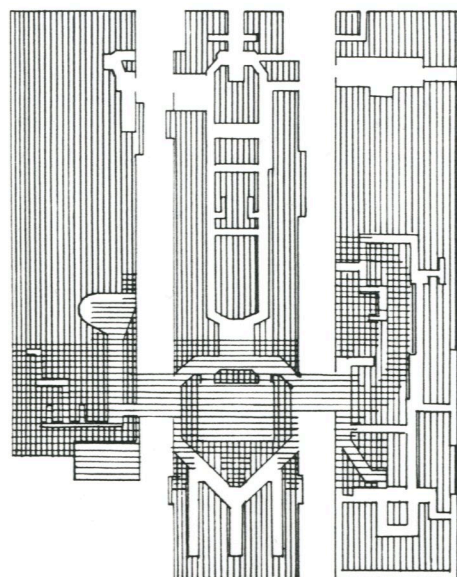
PROJECT #1

The most prominent New York architects, like Hood, have been marked by the teachings of the École des Beaux-Arts, with its reliance on axes, vistas and the articulation of civic monuments against a background of neutral urban fabric. But each and every one of these doctrines is invalidated and denied *a priori* by New York's Grid.

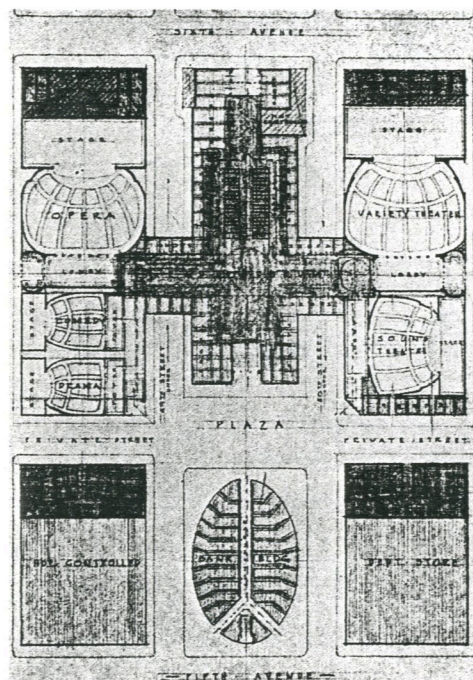
The Grid assures every structure it accommodates exactly the same treatment — the same amount of "dignity." The sanctity of private ownership and its inbuilt resistance to overall formal control preclude the creation of premeditated perspectives, and in the city of the Automonument, the isolation of symbolic objects from the main fabric is meaningless; the fabric itself is already an accumulation of monuments.

In New York, the Beaux-Arts sensibility can only go where there is no Grid, that is: underground.

Rockefeller Center's -1 level, the basement, is a traditional Beaux-Arts composition finally established on Manhattan: buried vistas that culminate not in the monumental entrance of a new Opera but in the subway. In the Center's basement, Beaux-Arts planning establishes surreptitious connections between blocks that are scrupulously avoided above ground: a grand design that never makes it to the surface.



Project #1: Underground Beaux-Arts, plan of concourse (basement) level. Counteracting surface independence of the three Rockefeller Center blocks, a system of underground arcades radiates from Rockefeller Plaza — turned into a skating rink in 1937 after a listless existence as shop window/entrance to the subterranean domain — to form a grandiose, if pathetically two-dimensional, Beaux-Arts composition.



Project #2: Metropolitan resort, three-block theatrical carpet of five to eight theaters — where, theoretically, a single cast could perform up to eight simultaneous spectacles — connected by "Radio Forum," a hybrid bridge at grade level blocking 49th and 50th streets, which dive underneath it. Concentration of elevator banks shows tallest Skyscraper on Sixth Avenue, two smaller ones east of "private street." The five theaters were eventually reduced to single Radio City Music Hall.

At the east end of the composition, the sunken plaza negotiates the transition between the surface of the Grid and the Beaux-Arts intricacies underneath it.

PROJECT #2

The 0 level of the present Rockefeller Center, dominated by the RCA lobby and Radio City Music Hall, is a drastically reduced version of much more daring alternatives that were projected and even almost built. When plans for the new Metropolitan Opera are discarded, the Associated Architects continue to consider theaters. They design versions of a fantastic ground floor *entirely* occupied by more and more theaters: a three-block ocean of red velvet chairs, acres of stage and backstage, square miles of projection screens — a field for performance where seven or eight spectacles can unfold at the same time, however contradictory their messages may be.

An enormous suspended lobby — three blocks wide — bridging 49th and 50th streets will connect all these theaters, reinforcing the simultaneity of clashing performances. This metropolitan lounge will turn the separate audiences into a single fantasy-consuming body, a temporarily hypnotized community.

The antecedents of this theatrical carpet are Steeplechase, Luna Park and Dreamland. It is exactly within the megalomaniac ambition of the definitive Manhattan to want to provide this kind of escape — a metropolitan resort — within its territory.

In the process of realization, the size of the carpet is reduced; Radio City Music Hall is its last bastion, a measure of its ambition.

PROJECT #3

The third project of Rockefeller Center is the ten-story extrusion of the site in the early Skyscraper tradition of sheer multiplication of surface. It is a volume unpenetrated by daylight, artificially lit and ventilated and filled with public and semipublic spaces.

This entire artificial domain is planned for nonexistent clients in anticipation of straightforward applications of the Great Lobotomy; it finds its perfect occupant when the Radio Corporation of America and its subsidiary NBC sign up as tenants of the Center. RCA takes the slab, NBC the block.

"The National Broadcasting Company will occupy ... twenty-six broadcasting studios in this building ... supplemented by six audition rooms. One studio, the largest in the world, will be more than three stories

high.... All the studios will be electrically shielded and provided with suitable lighting facilities for Television. Many of them will have observation galleries for visitors.

"Four studios grouped around a central control room will be used for complicated dramatic productions. The actors will be in one studio, the orchestra in a second, crowd scenes will be staged in a third and the fourth will be used for sound effects. This plan for grouping several studios around a central control room is admirably adaptable, also, to the presentation of television programs."²⁴

In anticipation of the imminent application of TV technology, NBC conceives of the entire block (insofar as it is not punctured by RCA's columns) as a single electronic arena that can transmit itself via airwaves into the home of every citizen of the world — the nerve center of an electronic community that would congregate at Rockefeller Center without actually being there. *Rockefeller Center is the first architecture that can be broadcast.*

This part of the Center is an anti-Dream Factory; radio and TV, the new instruments of pervasive culture, will simply broadcast *life*, "realism," as it is organized at the NBC studios.

By absorbing radio and TV, Rockefeller Center adds to its levels of congestion electronics — the very medium that denies the need for congestion as condition for desirable human interaction.

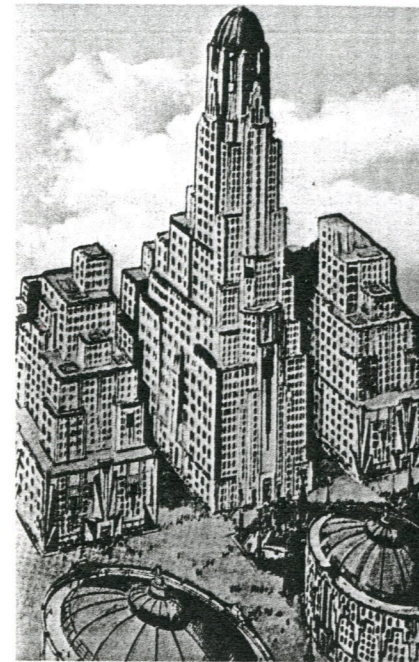
PROJECT #4

The fourth project is the resuscitation of the original, virgin state of the site now occupied by the Center, on the roofs of the lower blocks. In 1801 Dr. Davis Hosack, a botanist, established the Elgin Botanic Garden, a scientific horticultural enclave with an experimental greenhouse. He filled the garden "with plants from all parts of the world, including 2,000 duplicate plants from the laboratory of Linnaeus, renowned Swedish botanist...."

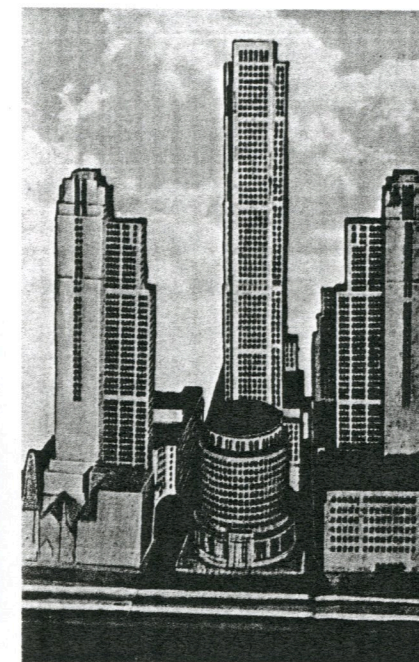
Only 130 years later Hood convinces Todd — with one of his most seductive pragmatic fairy tales, about the higher rent that can be charged for the privileged windows that would look down on one of the Wonders of the World — finally to install the hanging gardens of a contemporary Babylon.

Only the negligible surfaces of the Center's high-rise elements — the RCA slab, RKO tower, International Building, etc. — subtract "from the landscaped roofs which will tower above the area formerly devoted to the Elgin Botanic Garden."²⁵

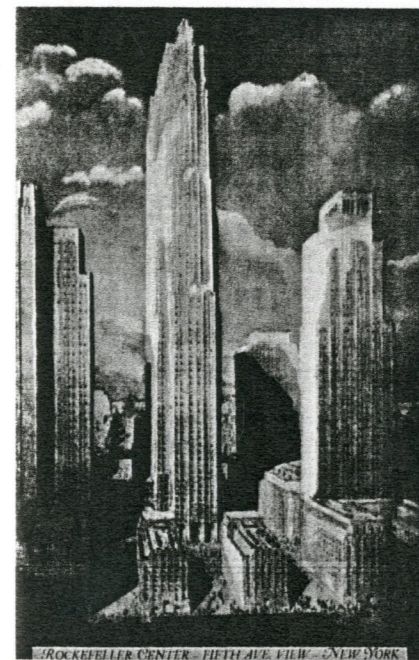
From the early thirties, a series of postcards recorded each step in Radio City's design — almost before it occurred. These images reflect an unbearable suspense on the part of the metropolitan public about its final appearance — a collective impatience for these speculative shapes to become tangible. In Manhattan, postcards acted as a populist semaphore about architecture, a medium that nourished Ferriss' "populace warmly appreciating and applauding" the architects of the "New Athens."



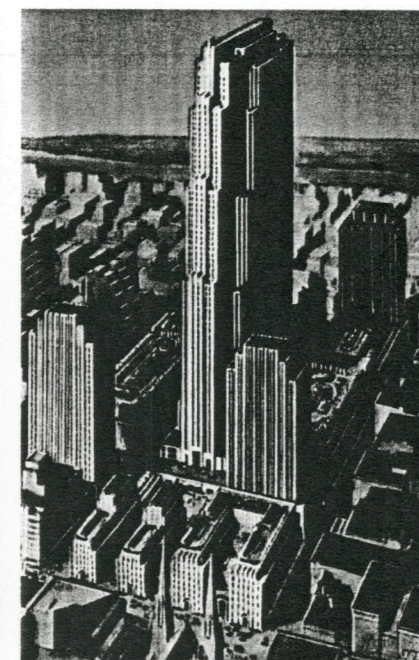
"Phantom" scheme, imagined entirely by postcard publisher.



First "official Radio City" presented to the public.



Official perspective from Fifth Avenue with "hanging gardens" joined by Venetian bridges.



Bird's-eye view of definitive scheme, based on John Wenrich rendering.



Collage of spectral Radio City in midtown.

Under any other doctrine of urbanism, Rockefeller Center's past would be suppressed and forgotten; under Manhattanism the past can coexist with the architectural permutations it has given rise to. The park extends over the three blocks. A greenhouse for scientific experimentation is a reminder of Hosack. The roofs are to be connected by Venetian bridges that create a continuous park with a marionette theater, a permanent sculpture exhibition, an open-air flower exhibit, music stands, restaurants, elaborate formal gardens, tea garden, etc.

The garden is only a more advanced variation of the synthetic Arcadian Carpet of Central Park, nature "reinforced" to deal with the demands of the Culture of Congestion.

PROJECT #5

Project #5, the final project, is "a Garden City aloft."²⁶

But the garden is a double image: two projects at the same time. It can be read as the *roof* of the lower blocks but also as the *ground floor* of the towers.

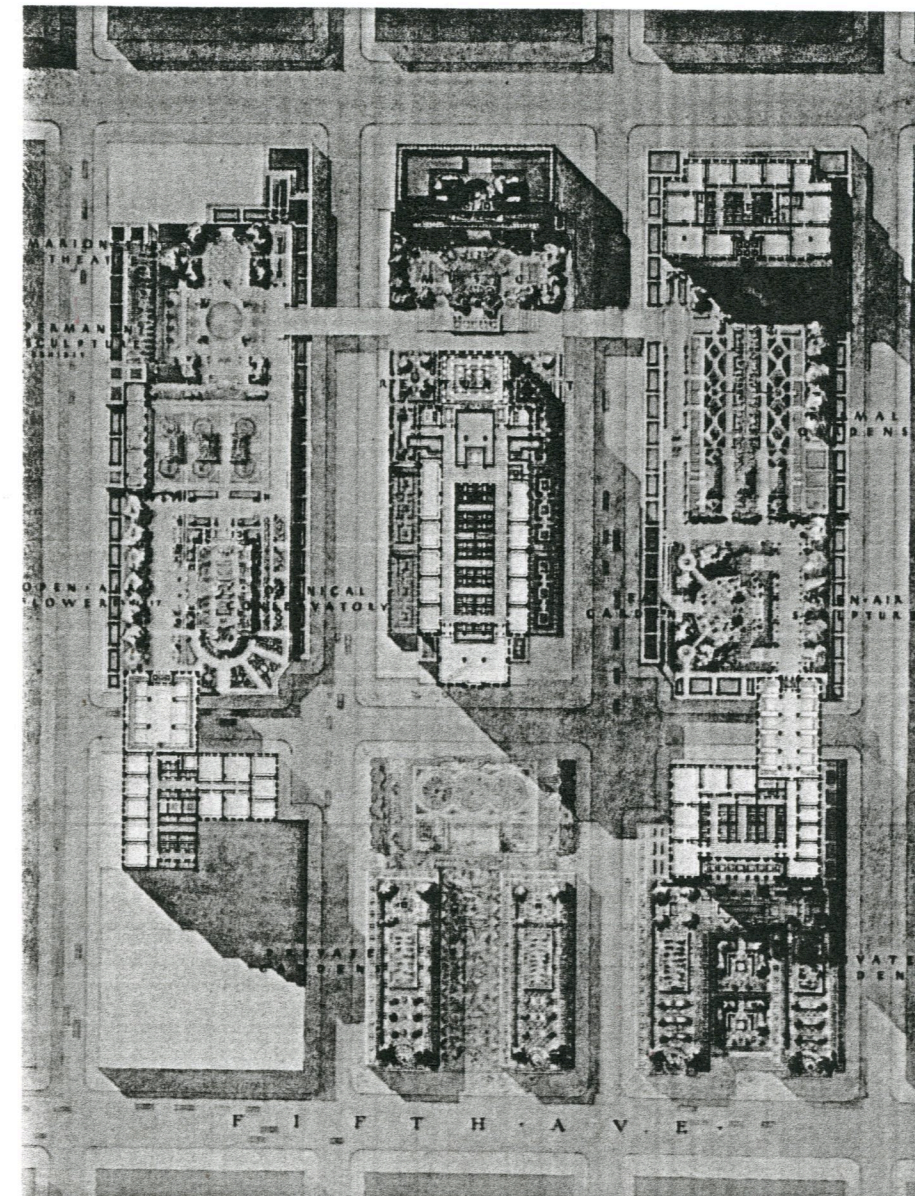
During the design and building of Rockefeller Center, the impact of European Modernism on American architectural practice can no longer be ignored. But Hood and the Associated Architects are representatives of Manhattanism first, and Modernism second.

Hood's projects before Rockefeller Center may be seen as a more or less erratic "conversion" from eclecticism toward Modernism; but his production can also be read as a consistent enterprise to salvage Manhattanism, to develop, clarify and refine it. In the face of the Modernist *Blitzkrieg* of the thirties, Hood always defends the hedonistic Urbanism of Congestion against the puritanical Urbanism of Good Intentions.

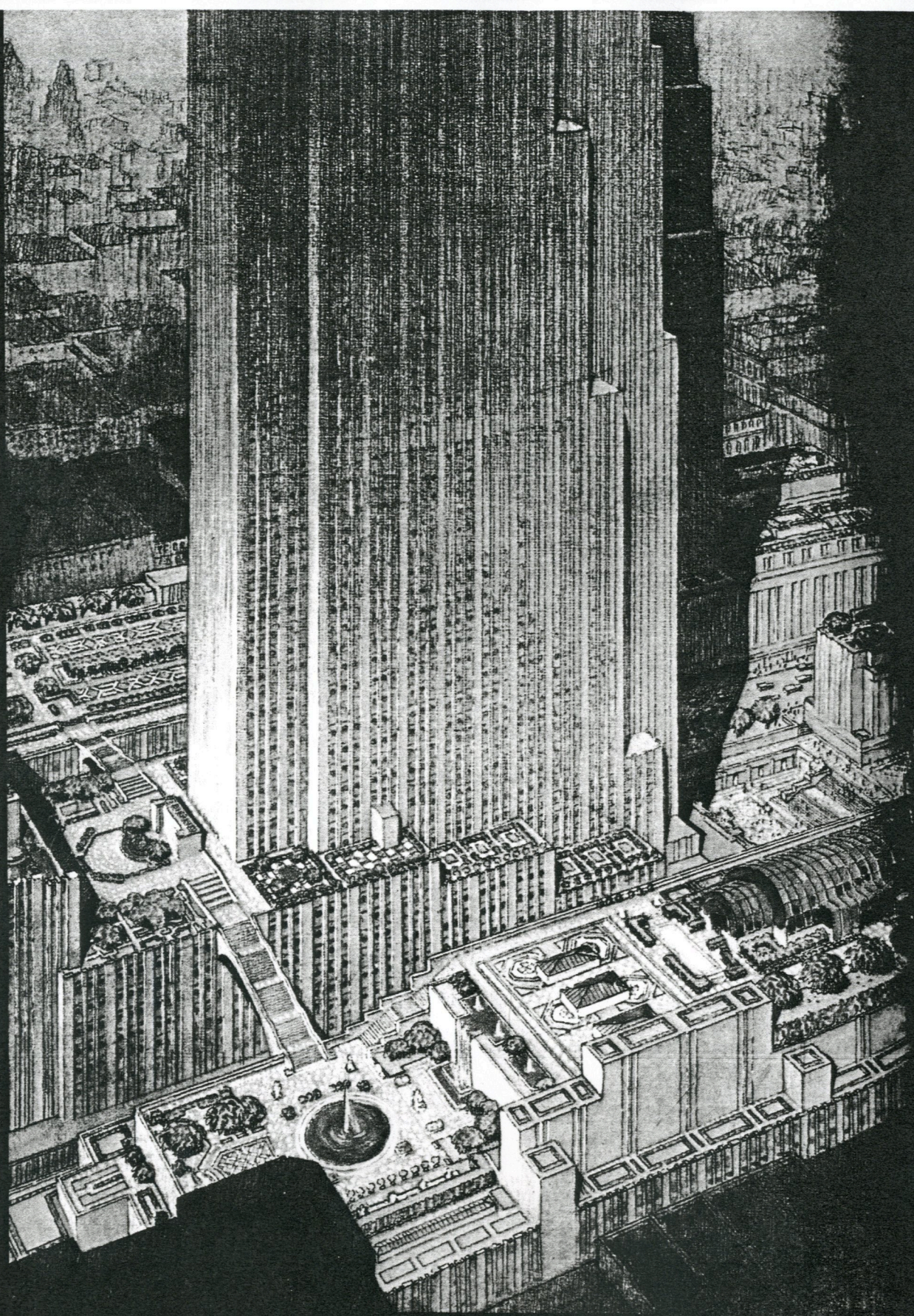
In this light, the roof gardens of the Center are an attempt of the Manhattan sensibility to ingest the Modernist Radiant City of "happy" light, air and grass, by reducing it to one layer among many. In this way, the Center will be both metropolitan and antiurban.

Implanted in the synthetic vegetal past of their airborne site, standing on the fabricated meadows of a New Babylon, amid the pink flamingos of the Japanese Garden and imported ruins donated by Mussolini, stand five towers, co-opted totems of the European avant-garde coexisting for the first and the last time with all the other "layers" their Modernism intends to destroy.

The roof of Rockefeller Center is both a flashback and a flash-forward: ghost of the Elgin Garden and Ville Radieuse, masterstroke of architectural cannibalism.



Project #4: "hanging gardens on the roof... landscaped roofs will tower above the area formerly devoted to the Elgin Botanical Gardens," plan (John Wenrich, rendering). Bridges connect the parks on each of the three blocks; public and entertainment facilities are scattered through the parks. Pale areas are high-rise towers; orange squares within them, elevators. The two Skyscrapers nearest Fifth Avenue were supposed to bridge the private street, forming porches to Rockefeller Plaza. Babylonian "hanging gardens" connected by Manhattan's last "Venetian" bridges: a triumph of mixed metaphor.



The Center is the apotheosis of the Vertical Schism: Rockefeller Center = Beaux-Arts + Dreamland + the electronic future + the Reconstructed Past + the European Future, "the maximum of congestion" combined with "the maximum of light and space," "as beautiful as possible consistent with the maximum income that should be developed."

FULFILLMENT

Rockefeller Center is the fulfillment of the promise of Manhattan. All paradoxes have been resolved.

From now on the Metropolis is perfect.

"Beauty, utility, dignity and service are to be combined in the completed project. Rockefeller Center is not Greek, but it suggests the balance of Greek architecture. It is not Babylonian, but it retains the flavor of Babylon's magnificence. It is not Roman, yet it has Rome's enduring qualities of mass and strength. Nor is it the Taj Mahal, which it resembles in mass-composition, though in it has been caught the spirit of the Taj — aloof, generous in space, quieting in its serenity.

"The Taj Mahal lies in solitary grandeur on the shimmering bank of the Jumna River. Rockefeller Center will stand in the mid-stream rush of New York. The Taj is like an oasis in the jungle, its whiteness tense against the gloomy greenness of the forest. Rockefeller Center will be a beautiful entity in the swirling life of a great metropolis — its cool heights standing out against the agitated man-made skyline. And yet the two, far apart in site and surroundings, are akin in spirit.

"The Taj, in tribute to pure beauty, was designed as a temple, a shrine. Rockefeller Center, conceived in the same spirit of aesthetic devotion, is designed to satisfy, in pattern and in service, the many-sided spirit of our civilization. By solving its own varied problems, by bringing beauty and business into closer companionship, it promises a significant contribution to the city planning of an unfolding future."²⁷

"General airview seen from above 47th Street looking NE over roof gardens and RCA Building complete with bridges over City Streets" (John Wenrich, rendering). The "restored" virgin territory of the Center as synthetic Arcadia on the roof. Foreground right: the "Botanical Conservatory," retroactive homage to Hosack; waterfall leads to sculpture garden.

Radio City Music Hall: The Fun Never Sets

In Radio City Music Hall the fun never sets.

— Advertisement

DREAM

"I didn't conceive of the idea, I dreamed it. I believe in creative dreams. The picture of Radio City Music Hall was complete and practically perfect in my mind before architects and artists put pen on the drawing paper..."²⁸

In the congestion of hyperbole that is Manhattan, it is relatively reasonable for Roxy, the animator of Radio City Music Hall, to claim a crypto-religious revelation as inspiration for his amazing theater.

EXPERT

Roxy — real name Samuel Lionel Rothafel of Stillwater, Minnesota — is the most brilliant showbiz expert in the hysterical New York of the twenties. After abandoning the ideal of the new Metropolitan Opera as cultural epicenter of his complex, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., buys Roxy away from Paramount and gives him carte blanche to create instead a "Showplace of the Nation" at the Center.

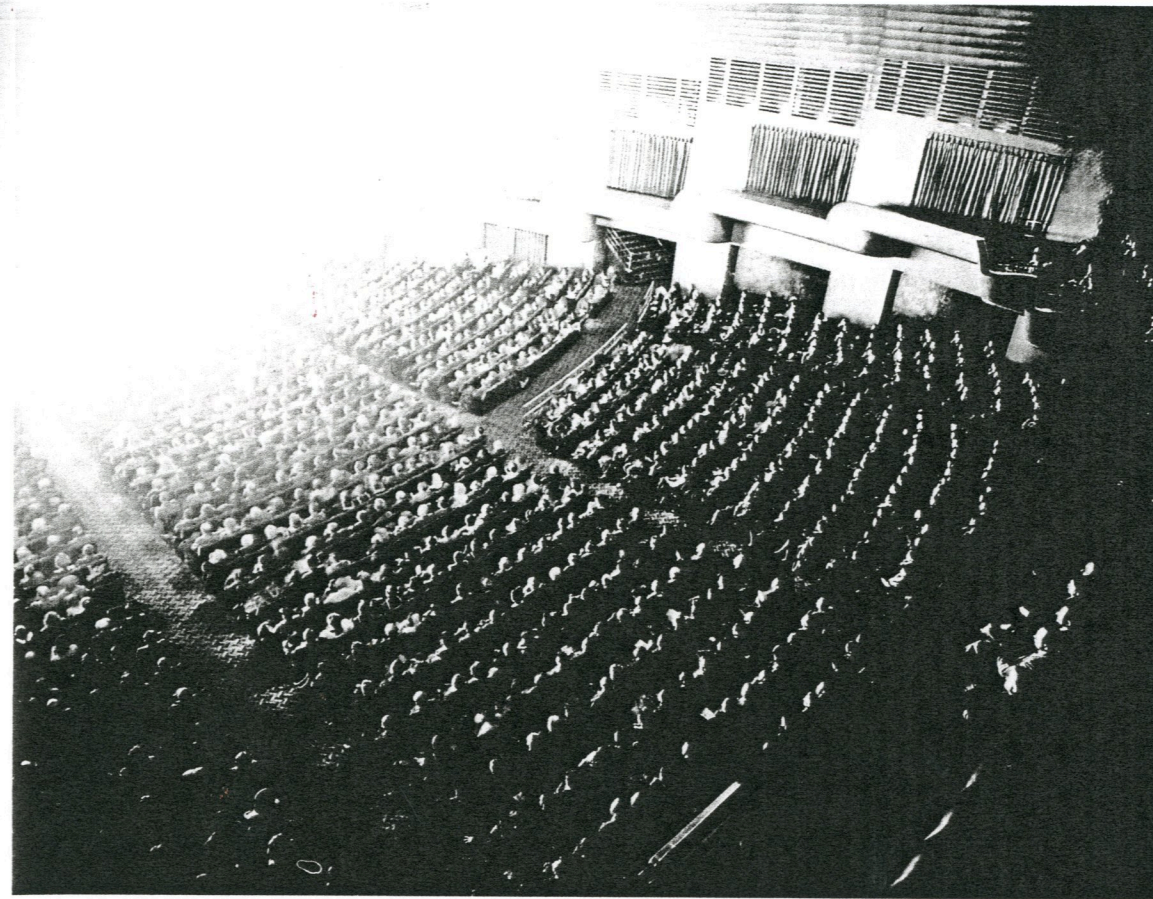
NEW YORK—MOSCOW

In this venture — "the greatest theatrical adventure the World has ever known" — Roxy cannot expect much enthusiasm from the Center's Associated Architects, who want to be sober and modern; they even convince Roxy to join them on a study tour of Europe, where they want him to see with his own eyes the advances modern architecture has made in theater construction.

Summer 1931: the consummate showman Roxy, two businessmen-architects, Harrison and Reinhard, and a delegation of technical experts make the transatlantic journey.

The mission opposes Roxy, expert in the production of illusions in sufficient quantity and density to satisfy the metropolitan masses, to the European architects, puritanical enemies of the tradition of showbiz that Roxy embodies.

Roxy is bored in France, Belgium, Germany and Holland; his architects even force him to take the train to Moscow so that he can inspect and



Revelers at the Metropolitan Resort facing synthetic sunset: "A visit to Radio City Music Hall is as good as a month in the Country."

experience firsthand the Constructivist clubs and theaters built there since the mid-twenties.

ANNUNCIATION

Somewhere in mid-ocean during his return to New York, a revelation strikes a melancholy Roxy. Staring at a sunset, he receives the "Annunciation" of his theater: it is to be an incarnation of this sunset. (*Fortune* magazine dates the moment of this architectural visitation much later, i.e., a week before the theater's opening. In that case Roxy's is merely a retroactive revelation — late, but no less valid.)²⁹ Back in New York, Roxy's pregnancy only needs to be substantiated by his architects and decorators.

From the beginning, Roxy insists on the literalness of his metaphor. Within the rectangular section and plan of the Hall's external envelope, the sunset theme is established through a series of consecutive plaster semi-circles that diminish toward the stage to create a vaguely uterine hemisphere whose only exit is the stage itself.

This exit is "masked by the beautiful contour curtain"³⁰ made of a specially developed synthetic fabric whose reflectivity makes it an acceptable substitute for the sun. The "rays" from the curtain continue along the plaster arches, reaching around the entire auditorium. The arches are covered in gold to better reflect the purple of the setting sun and the glow of the red velvet which Roxy insists on for the chairs.

The consequence of Roxy's dream is that, while the effect of a sunset is successfully achieved when the lights of his auditorium are dimmed, the return of electricity in the intermissions and at the end of each performance corresponds to a sunrise.

In other words, the 24-hour cycle of day and night is repeated several times during a single performance at Radio City Music Hall. Day and night are drastically reduced, time accelerated, experience intensified, life — potentially — doubled, tripled....

CHILL

Roxy's understanding of Fantastic Technology inspires a further intensification of his metaphor: questioning the conventional use of the air-conditioning system — ventilation and cooling — he realizes that this would only add chill to the sunset.

With the same maniacal logic that characterized his earlier visions, Roxy then considers adding hallucinogenic gases to the atmosphere of his theater, so that synthetic ecstasy can reinforce the fabricated sunset.

A small dose of laughing gas would put the 6,200 visitors in a euphoric mood, hyper-receptive to the activity on the stage.

His lawyers dissuade him, but for a short period Roxy actually injects ozone — the therapeutic O₃ molecule with its "pungent refreshing odor" and "exhilarating influence" — into the air-conditioning system of his theater.

Combining super-time with super-health, Roxy defines the definitive formula of the metropolitan resort with his slogan, "*A visit to Radio City Music Hall is as good as a month in the Country.*"³¹

MUTATIONS

The perfection and metaphorical stringency of Roxy's artificial paradise — the "ultimate countryside" — sets off a chain reaction of further, unforeseen cultural mutations.

"In grandeur of conception, in glory of planning, in perfection of fulfillment nothing like Radio City has ever been dreamed,"³² claims its creator, with justice; but the container is so perfect that it ridicules its imperfect contents.

On the night of the official opening of Radio City, the exhausted remnants of a stale and spent vaudeville tradition — a tradition that peaked 20 years earlier in Coney Island — fall flat into Roxy's sparkling new apparatus.

The old histrionics do not survive the test. People sitting 200 feet from the footlights cannot follow the grimaces on the comedians' faces as they embark on their tired routines; the size of the theater alone precludes reliance on conventional use of the human voice or even the human body; the gigantic stage — wide as a city block — denies the meaning of *mise en scène*, where suggested vastness can always rely on actual intimacy. On this stage, "atmosphere" is atomized.

Under these crisis conditions, "feelings" are mercilessly exposed as both unreal *and* human, or worse, human, *therefore* unreal.

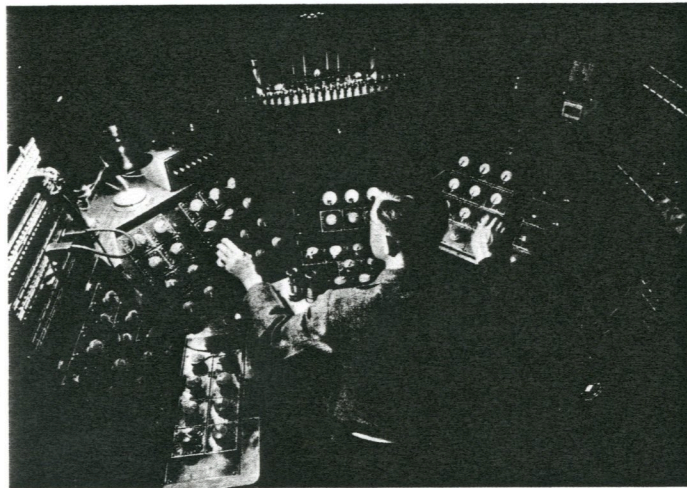
"Much of it," writes a critic on the first night, "seemed sadly second rate stuff, out of place amid such triumphs of architecture and mechanics."³³

Light years separate the architecture of Roxy's theater from the activity on its stage.

Unintentionally, Radio City represents a more radical break with the past than any consciously revolutionary theater has managed so far.

PARTICLES

In the early thirties only Hollywood is producing the kind of scenarios that equal Roxy's fantastic landscape in anti-authenticity.



Control booth of the Metropolitan Resort:
 "The great stage, which he watches constantly
 (sometimes with a pair of binoculars), is a
 full city block away..."

Hollywood has developed a new dramatic formula — *isolated human particles floating weightlessly through a magnetic field of fabricated pleasure, occasionally colliding* — that can match the artificiality of Radio City Music Hall and fill it with abstracted, formalized emotions of sufficient density. The production of the Dream Factory is nowhere more at home than in Roxy's brainchild.

BACKSTAGE

After the first-night fiasco, humanity — in the form of superannuated vaudeville — is abandoned, and the Music Hall becomes a movie theater. A movie theater needs only a projection booth, an auditorium and a screen; but behind Radio City's screen still exists another realm, "a perfectly organized entity of 700 souls": backstage.

Its elaborate facilities include dormitories, a small hospital, rehearsal rooms, a gymnasium, an art department, costume workshops. There is Radio City Symphony and a permanent troupe of 64 female dancers — the Roxyettes, all between 5'4" and 5'7" — a scriptless chorus line without any action to sustain.

Furthermore, there is a menagerie — horses, cows, goats and other animals. They live in ultramodern stables, artificially lit and ventilated; an animal elevator — dimensioned to carry even elephants — not only deposits them on the stage but also on a special grazing ground on Radio City's roof.

Finally, there is Roxy's own apartment fitted in between the roof trusses of his theater. "It is round, all white plaster and the walls describe a parabola to meet in a domed top. The whole thing is really breathless — vague, spaceless, timeless. Makes you feel like an unhatched chicken looking up at the top of his eggshell. To make the whole thing even more fantastic, there are telephone dials in the walls. When you turn a dial, a red light starts to flash on and off — something to do with radio."³⁴

But most painfully inactive is the colossal theatrical machine, "the most complete mechanical installation in the world, including a revolving stage; three manipulable sections of stage flooring; a power-driven orchestral dais; a tank; an electrically draped curtain; seventy-five rows of fly lines for its scenery, ten of which are electrically operated; a cyclorama 117 feet by 75; six horns for motion pictures and two motion picture projection sheets; a fountain in the middle of the revolving stage which can be used for water effects while the turntable is in motion; a public-address system for amplifying speech and producing thunder and wind effects (played from records with fifty-four ribbon

type); semi-invisible microphones on the stage, in the footlights, in the orchestra pit and in the sub-basement and an amplifier and six loudspeakers concealed above the proscenium; a monitor system in connection with the public address system which reproduces words spoken on the stage in the projection booths and the director's office and even in the foyer and lobbies if desired, and which also carries the directions of the stage manager to the dressing rooms and electrical stations; an elaborate lighting system with six motor-operated light bridges over the stage, each 104 feet long, from which lens units and floods can be used for special lighting; eight portable sixteen-floor lighting towers; four spotting galleries, two on each side of the stage, and a spotting booth in the auditorium ceiling; a cyclorama strip in the floor and a floor battery of self-leveling, disappearing footlights; six projection machines, four effect machines and the usual, or rather more than usual, complication of controls."³⁵

The waste of this mechanical potential behind the movie screen is unacceptable.

The frenetic sunsets and daybreaks, and the permanent availability of the Roxyettes and the cosmopolitan livestock, combined with the inactivity of "the most complete mechanical installation in the world," create multiple pressures for a new stage show that can exploit in the shortest possible time the maximum capacities of this top-heavy infrastructure.

Under these critical conditions Roxy, general director of production Leon Leonidoff and the director of the Roxyettes (their name soon streamlined to Rockettes) invent a stunning ritual: a new routine that is, in a sense, a record of the crisis; a systematization of the concept of "lack of inspiration"; variations on the theme of "no content," founded on a process, a display of inhuman coordination that relies on frenzied synchronization, an exhilarating surrender of individuality to the automatism of a synthetic year-round rite of spring.

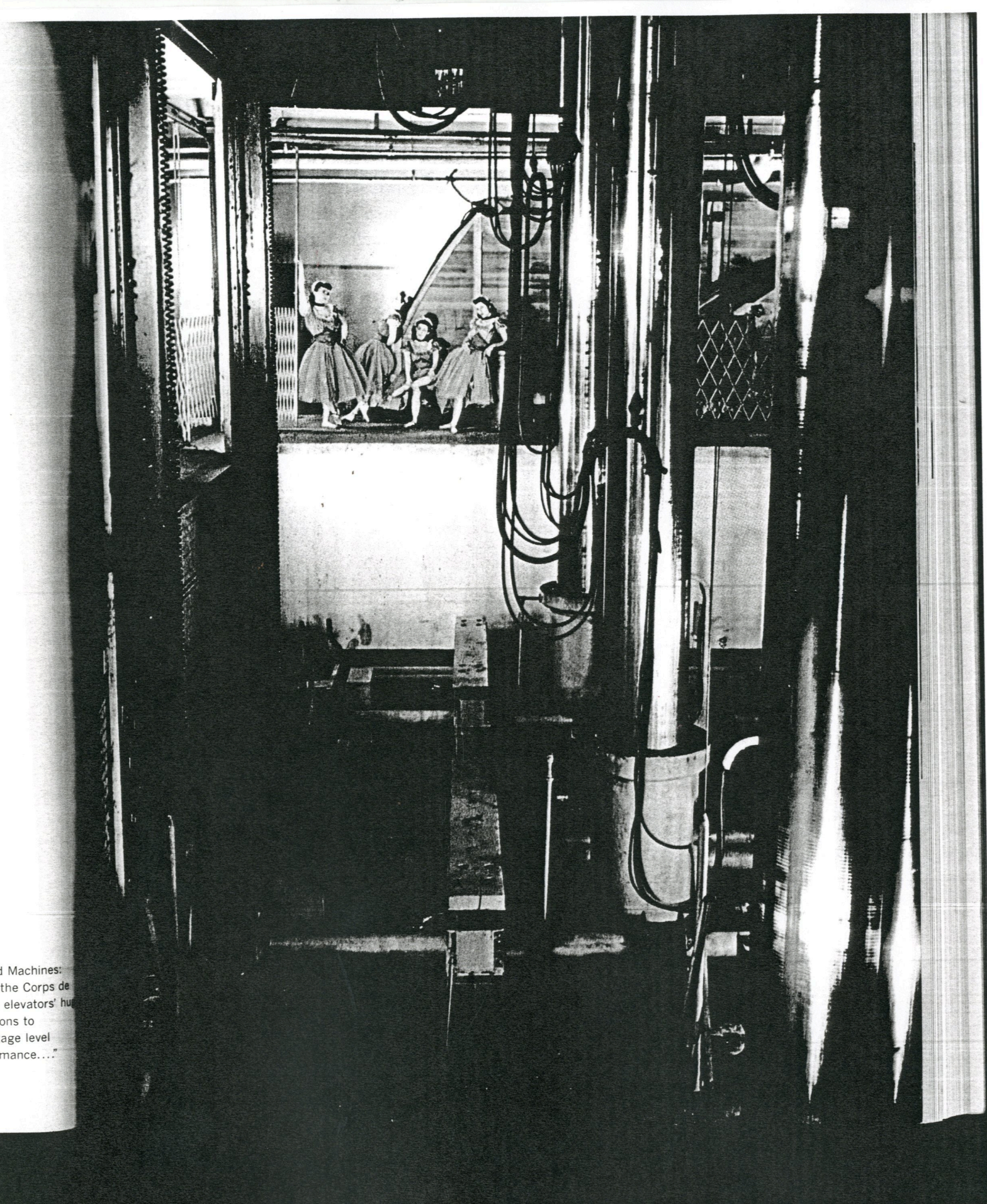
The essence of this performance is a mass high-kick: a simultaneous display of sexual regions, inviting inspection but on a scale that transcends personal provocation.

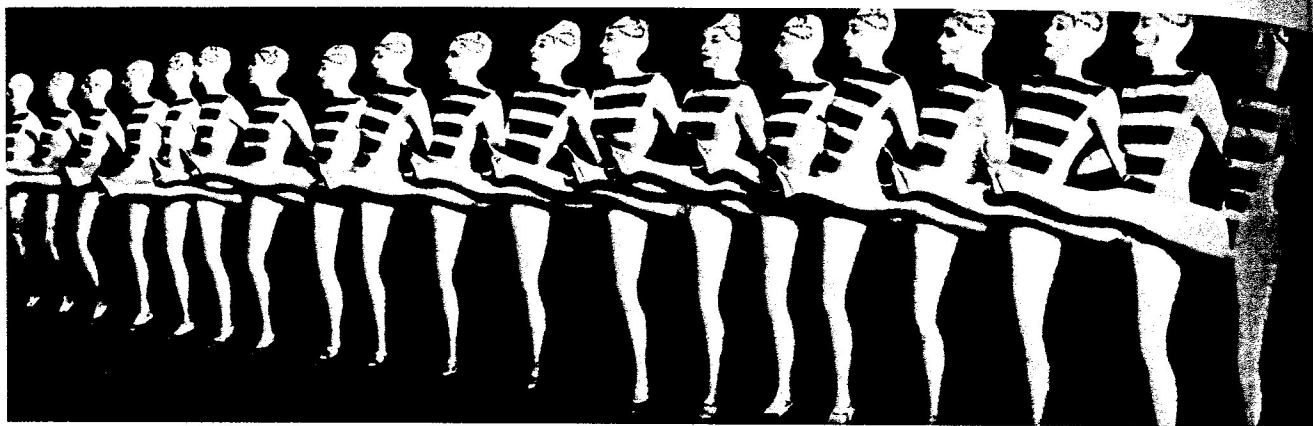
The Rockettes are a new race, exhibiting their superior charms to the old one.

PYRAMID

For the sake of the Music Hall audience, this pure abstraction is occasionally intersected with a recognizable reality. Producer Leonidoff

Rockettes and Machines:
"Members of the Corps de
Ballet wait by elevators' hu-
gleaming pistons to
be lifted to stage level
during performance...."





Essence of the Rockettes' performance:
plotless theatrical energy.

invades traditional stories with his man-made race, rejuvenating tired mythologies.

Especially his Easter show becomes a classic of such cross-fertilization. A pyramid of eggs occupies center stage. Cracks develop, marked by neon scars.

After some struggling the Rockettes emerge intact from the shattered shells in a direct reference to the Resurrection.

The stage magically cleared of debris, the reborn Rockettes assume their traditional formation, lift their legs as high as they will go....

CHORUS

Only the Rockettes' abstract movement can generate completely plotless theatrical energy commensurate with the theater Roxy has created.

It is as if the chorus of a Greek tragedy decided to desert the play it was supposed to support and pursued its own emancipation. The Rockettes, daughters of the multiple sunset, are a democratic chorus line that has finally left its background role and gone to flex its muscles at center stage.

The Rockettes = the chorus line as main protagonist, the *lead*, a single personage made up of 64 individuals, filling the gigantic stage, dressed in Suprematist costumes: flesh-colored bodystockings marked with a series of black rectangles that shrink toward the waist to end in a small black triangle — living abstract art that denies the human body.

With the development of its own race, its own mythology, its own time, its own rituals, the container of Radio City Music Hall has finally generated a worthy content.

Its architecture has provoked, and is now supporting, a new culture which, preserved in its own artificial time, will remain forever fresh.

ARK

From the moment of his sunset Revelation, Roxy has become a Noah: the chosen recipient of a quasi-divine "message" who — oblivious to its apparent implausibility — imposes its reality on the world.

Radio City Music Hall is his Ark; it now contains ultrasophisticated accommodation for selected wild animals and the apparatus to dispatch them throughout the structure.

In the Rockettes, it has its own race, luxuriating in its mirror-clad dorm whose regular rows of unglamorous hospital beds suggest a maternity ward, but without babies. Beyond sex, strictly through the effects of architecture, the virgins reproduce themselves.



Rockettes in crisis: their permanent — useless — availability led to routine based on concept of lack of inspiration.



Rockettes' medical center: fresh awakening of a new race.



"Dormitory for dancers is located backstage. Girls can rest between shows, stay overnight...."

In Roxy, finally, the Music Hall has its own helmsman, a planner with a vision who has built a self-contained cosmos on the allotment of his block. But unlike Noah, Roxy does not depend on a cataclysmic event in the real world to vindicate his Revelation; in the universe of the human imagination he is right as long as the "fun never sets."

In the completeness of its facilities and mechanical equipment, in the selection of its human and animal menagerie — in its *cosmogony*, in other words — each of Manhattan's 2,028 blocks potentially harbors such an Ark — or Ship of Fools, perhaps — recruiting its own crew with competing claims and promises of redemption through further hedonism. Existing in such abundance, their cumulative impact is one of *optimism*; together, these arks *ridicule* the possibility of apocalypse.