

Architecture in New York 1920 - 1940: the project and site of the Rockefeller Center

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***People are always asking
who designed Rockefeller Center.
Each of us answers "I did".***

(Speech delivered by Wallace K. Harrison at Building Congress Luncheon,
Nov. 10, 1937. W. K. Harrison Archive, Avery Library, Columbia University. N.Y.C.)



The "Mussolini Model", 3 march 1931.
Walter H. Kilham Archive. Avery Library, Columbia University.

The Rockefeller Center is a vast fragment of an urban development which was started some years before the stock market crashed and which was completed in the years following the New Deal. The Wall Street crisis - above all in the United States - marked a fracture between two periods: the Twenties and the Thirties. The collapse of the New York Stock Exchange affected significantly the whole US economy and accordingly the definition of the Metropolitan Opera House's plan itself. The conceivers of the Rockefeller Center had to change their strategies; the project, originally intended as an Opera House with *plaza*, was modified in view of the new commercial needs.



The Rockefeller Center buildings on Fifth Avenue, (may 1997).

In the prosperous 1920s massive building increase brought a dramatic change in towns: the economic development entailed a switch from an individual to a social capitalism where "gigantism" and anonymity prevail and corporations started emerging. Increasing specialization of the services sector concentrated in mid-Manhattan and developed a hierarchical society based on wealth and consumption; private economy took over public politics.

In the Rockefeller Center all those elements converge: the Center - although it arose from a family's desire - reached the symbolic value of a national revenge against depression, of a political poster declaring the overcoming of the economic crisis.



The RCA Building under construction. Walter H. Kilham Archive.
Box n°1, folder "Kilham – Miscellaneous photographs,
Rockefeller Center"; Avery Library, Columbia University



A Rockefeller Center roof garden. Walter H. Kilham Archive.
Avery Library, Columbia University

The Rockefeller Center - as *City within the City* - is a political as well as disciplinary symbol that aims at building the city piece by piece in order to re-qualify suburban areas. Building the Center represents the apotheosis of chain-assembly, of *bourgeoisie*, of symbol and underlines the peculiarity of a closed planning aimed at acquiring the status of a model for further building.

One of Center's interesting features is the large and heterogeneous number of people working for its construction under the supervision of Todd & Brown firm that had to manage the relationship between architects, engineers and general contractors.

By May 1930 the participation of three independent architectural firms was formalized in the Associated Architects: L. Andrew Reinhard & Henry Hofmeister; Harvey Wiley Corbett, Wallace K. Harrison & Mac Murray; Raymond Hood, Godley (until 1931) & J. A. Fouilhoux. *"How definitely the day of the architectural one-man show has passed is borne out with unmistakable emphasis in the planning of Rockefeller City. (...) Rapid growth in the size and complexity of architectural problems, however, has forced all of us to realize that in the face of them our own capacities are relatively limited and that we must consult freely with experts in allied arts and sciences. (...) 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"* (Raymond Hood, *The design of Rockefeller City*, in "The Architectural Forum", vol. LVI, January 1932).

It is therefore important to emphasize the strict co-operation between the several offices in the form of weekly meetings between drafting room department heads, Architect's Committee and the builders of the individual units.

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