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A Foundation of Amnesia

Author(s): Rem Koolhaas

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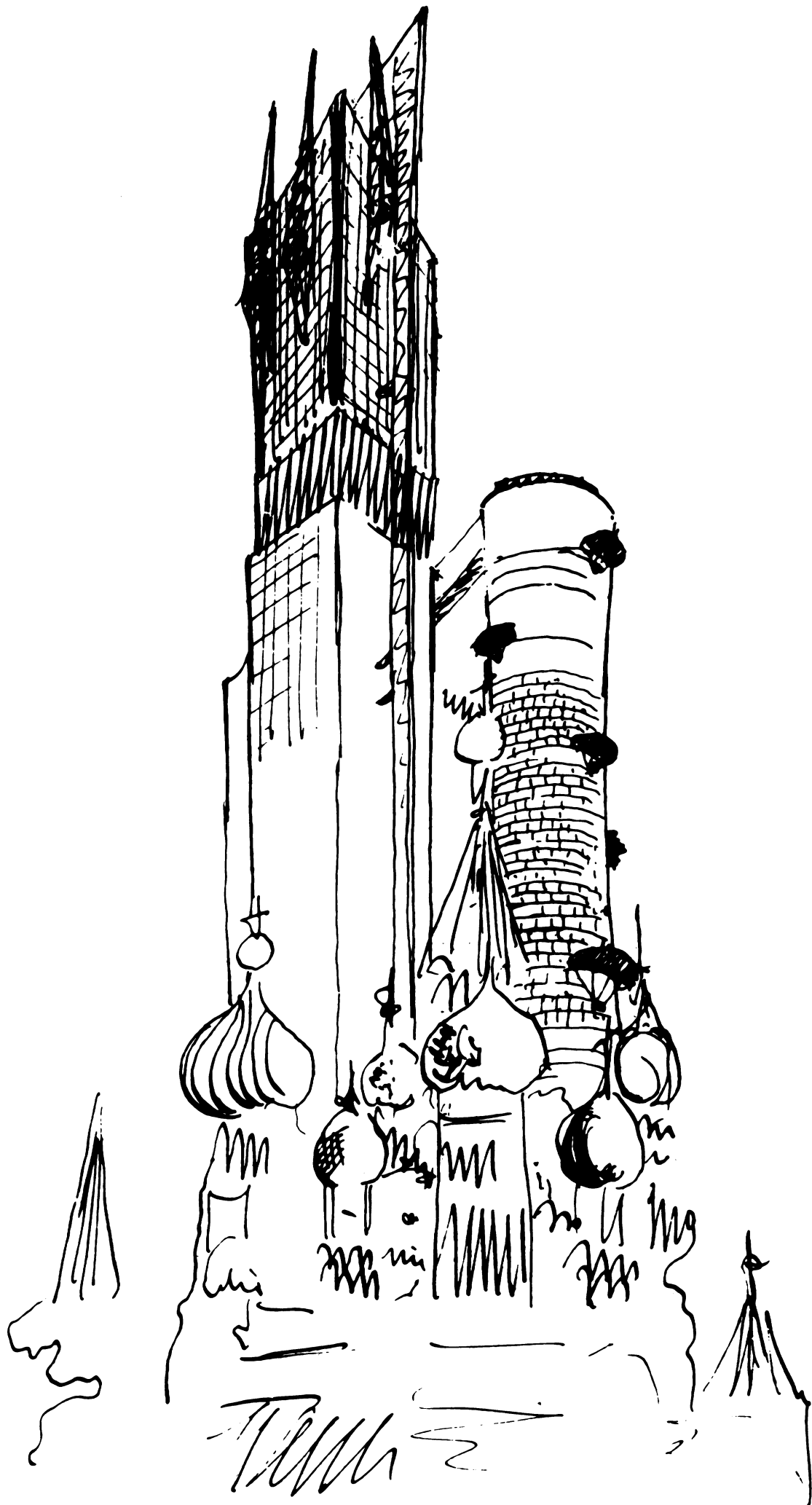
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A Foundation of Amnesia

Rem Koolhaas

Throughout the 20th century, in Europe and America, architects, urban planners and the public have been seeking an inventive, vital reality for urban life. On both sides of the Atlantic expectations for architecture were established and the potentials defined early in the century, particularly during modernism's most creative decade, from 1920 to 1930. Now as we see the first harvest of postmodernism in the decade from 1975 to 1985, we find that our buildings, modern and postmodern, embody, instead of vibrant mass, a void, a malaise of unrealized potential. Something seems to have been lost, although we are in the midst of an incredible upsurge in enthusiasm for architecture. More and more architects are becoming stars or folk heroes, more and more is written about architecture not only in serious papers but all over the popular press. Architecture is becoming an urgent subject and one can sense both in Europe and the United States the expectation that architecture is going to deliver something significant. Yet I think that expectation has gone hand-in-hand with a very curious forgetfulness about architecture's recent past and a distortion of that past.

Advocates of postmodernism embrace historicist architecture maintaining that modern buildings have two essential flaws: they do not complement the architectural environment of most European and American cities, nor do they meet the needs of the people who will use them. I want to show here that this postmodern hypothesis is based on a solid foundation of amnesia. Modern architecture does not emerge from emptiness. Good modern architects carefully consider a city's existing needs and historical context.

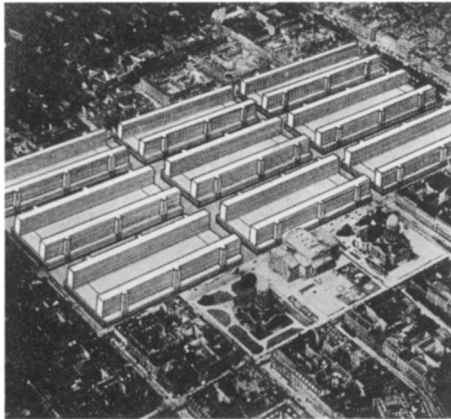
A project by Ludwig Hilberseimer, 1920–24, is an often used example that gives modern architecture a bad reputation. No tree-lined parkways, aging stone facades, or awning-draped storefronts here. Is Hilberseimer's city homogeneous, inhuman and boring, a city unrelated to the past, to existing cities, to its inhabitants? Hilberseimer's vision was, in fact, a project for nine city blocks in central Berlin, and it was supposed to relate strongly to its surroundings as is evident in a series of contextual sketches by the architect.

Consider another notorious project, again for Berlin: Mies van der Rohe's 1921 design for a twenty-two story office building competition. Often this unrealized project is seen out of context, creating the impression that Mies designed a triangular tower for the middle of nowhere. But the following statement by the architect indicates that Mies meant to complement the baroque context with a modern reinterpretation of the historical situation.

Ivan Leonidov
Sketch of a proposal for the Ministry of
Heavy Industry (Dom Narkomtiazhprom)
on Red Square, Moscow, with St. Basil's
Cathedral in the foreground, 1933.

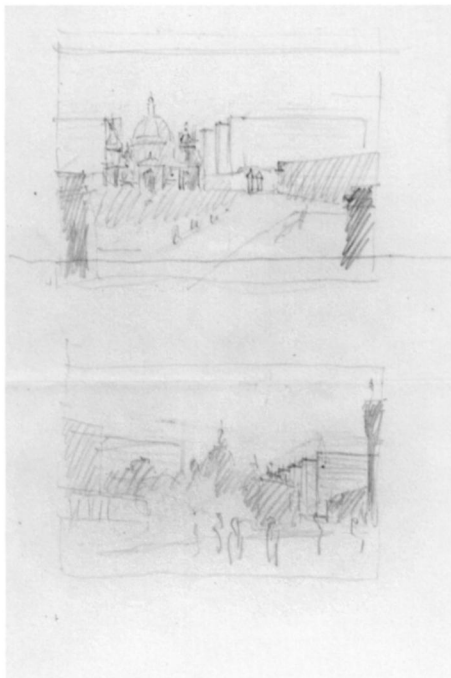
In my project for a skyscraper at the Friedrichstrasse Station in Berlin I used a prismatic form which seemed to me to fit best the triangular site of the building. I placed the glass walls at slight angles to each other to avoid the monotony of over-large glass surfaces.

Berlin's South Friedrichstadt district is a baroque plan with a grid that terminates with geometrical shapes on each entry point: an octagon, a square, and a series of lines converging on a circle. So at one end of this historical development, Mies proposed the triangular glass tower for a site on the Spree River (see red triangle, p 7). Even in his drawing, where he includes the surrounding architecture, Mies shows concern for context, and he carefully places his building to derive the maximum benefit from its contrast with the immediate environment. The building is clearly not a non sequitur, brutally inserted into the city.



Two projects designed between 1928 and 1935—New York City's Rockefeller Center and the Ministry of Heavy Industry (Dom Narkomtiazhprom) in Moscow, which unfortunately was never realized, exemplify the best of that period. They demonstrate that the early modern architects had more awareness of and concern for the architectural environment and the occupants of their buildings than do the postmodern architects of the 1980s.

In the Moscow of 1933, although the cold breath of Stalinism threatened modern experimentation, Ivan Leonidov, a constructivist architect, submitted the winning design for the most significant ministry of the Soviet state, the Ministry of Heavy Industry. Refinements in modern architecture's ability to relate to the real world in the early post-Revolutionary years led to Leonidov's unique design, which I consider one of the 20th-century's architectural triumphs, and which in our prevailing amnesia remains virtually unknown.



Leonidov's project demonstrates how modern architecture can accommodate the most difficult situations, for it is impossible to find a site in the whole world that is more loaded with significance and ominous meanings than the heart of Moscow—Red Square. This project shows the ability of modern architecture to relate to every aspect of a project, not only on an architectural level but also in terms of the ideology and mythology that exists in a place.

The Square is bound on one side by the Kremlin, a walled triangle with a number of loose objects inside. Most important are the buildings that were the palace of the czars but are now the seat of government. Surrounding Red Square are, in addition to the Kremlin wall, St. Basil's Cathedral, GUM, the enormous arcaded department store, and the State Historical Museum.

The most dominant element on the square is Lenin's mausoleum. Designed by A. V. Shchusev in 1926, it replaced a 1924 improvised wooden structure. The architect Konstantin Melnikov designed the sarcophagus, basing his display of Lenin's body on the story of Sleeping Beauty. By that analogy, the never-ending stream of visiting Russian workers may one day bring the leader back to life.

Keeping this charged context in mind, Leonidov doubled the size of Red Square, removed an enormous part of medieval Moscow to create an equivalent of New York's Central Park, and positioned his building to form a new wall on Red Square.

Ludwig Hilberseimer
Bird's-eye view and contextual sketches
for a proposed housing project for nine city
blocks in central Berlin, 1920–24.

The focal points of the building are three towers. The first consists of straight elements; the second, straight and curved elements; and the third, curved elements. The three towers seem to represent past, present and future. The straight tower, the most historical tower, is the one closest to the Kremlin. Were you to stand with your back toward the Kremlin, facing this complex, a unique composition would unfold. The historical tower blocks your view of the completely modern, curved tower, while the half-modern, half-traditional tower is in full view. But if you move onto Red Square, the curved tower comes into full view. In other words, the future is hidden by the past, but you catch glimpses of both in the present, and leaving the past reveals the future.

The materials in each of the towers also reinforce their themes. The square tower is mostly stone, a traditional material. The straight and curved tower is half stone and half glass, and the curved tower is covered with solid black glass block, creating a shimmering black tower with golden balconies along its edges.

Critics charge that modern architecture is as faceless as the anonymous bureaucrats who often work in such architecture. Although the Ministry of Heavy Industry was designed to accommodate bureaucrats, it is not faceless. The building establishes a relationship with its context, not by making historical citations, nor by simply resembling the structure of the Kremlin. It creates an analogy through inferences from the structures and the themes of the immediate context.

The building also has important programmatic enrichments. Between the three towers are two lower elements. One with an enormous lobby, and the other with staircases or continuous rows of seats that face Red Square and form an arena. Near the top of the tower, large platforms serve as stages for political demonstrations.

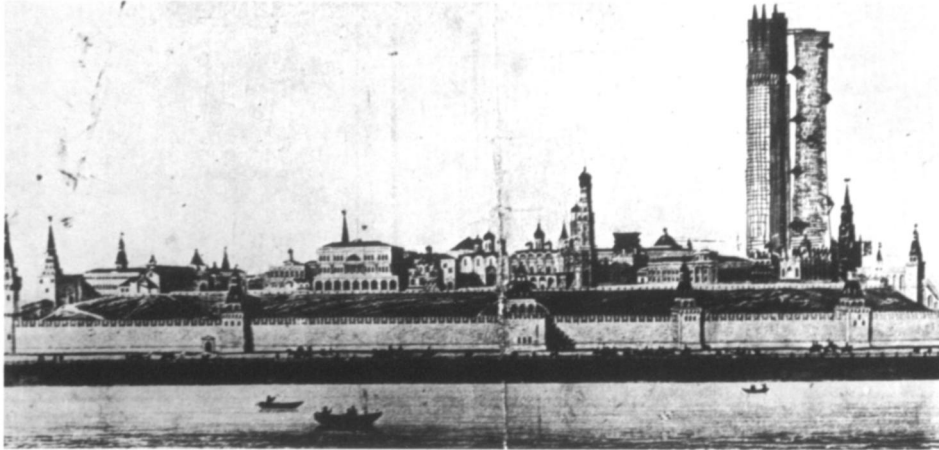
To help anchor his colossal design in the scale of the immediate context and the city, Leonidov used not only the ministry's lower buildings, but also the buildings nearby. If you draw a line between St. Basil's Cathedral and the Bolshoi Theater you will see that the entrance to the Ministry of Heavy Industry lies at the center of the line and that it maintains the scale of the other buildings. When you look inside the Kremlin wall, you see another building that consists of three towers, a strange building, the belfry of Ivan III, which was undoubtedly the source of Leonidov's inspiration.

Leonidov's design is a colossal extrapolation of all the city's historical elements. If you study Leonidov's drawings, you will see in sketch after sketch that establishing a relationship with context and history is the main focus of his design. Leonidov envisioned that out of the bizarre and baroque architecture of Moscow could grow an equally bizarre and baroque modern architecture, and that without quoting, without resembling, this new architecture could establish a rich and harmonious relationship with the past. In various sketches the architect inserts his building into the site as if a mysterious fertilizer has been applied on the ground of Red Square making the existing elements merge with the new to grow into an amazing architectural mutation.

In the 1920s the forms of modern architecture emerged. Ten years later the forms changed to accommodate the present and developed a relationship with the past. Instead of being shockingly new or



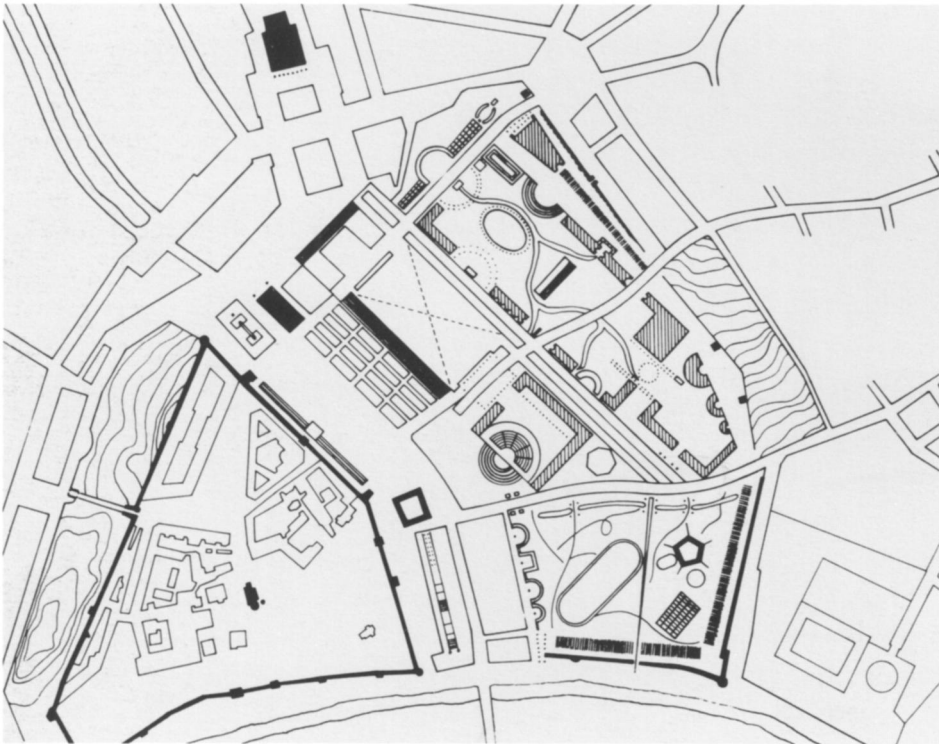
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe
 Perspective drawing for the
 Friedrichstrasse Office Building, 1921
 charcoal and pencil on brown paper
 68¾ x 48 inches
 Collection Mies van der Rohe Archive, The
 Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Gift of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe



A view of the Kremlin with the Ministry of Heavy Industry towers inserted in collage form into the existing cityscape. This map of Red Square locates the Ministry opposite Lenin's tomb (dotted X) on the site of the existing GUM department store. The model (right) of the Ministry project, made in 1977, demonstrates Leonidov's conception for the three towers, indicating the variety of materials and form envisioned by the architect.

(opposite)
Ivan Leonidov
Dom Narkomtiazhprom Project, Moscow, 1933

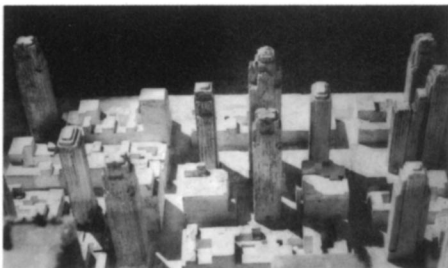
(1977 replica of the architectural model submitted to the ministry competition)
28³/₄ x 58¹/₁₆ x 24
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of D.S. and R.H. Gottesman Foundation



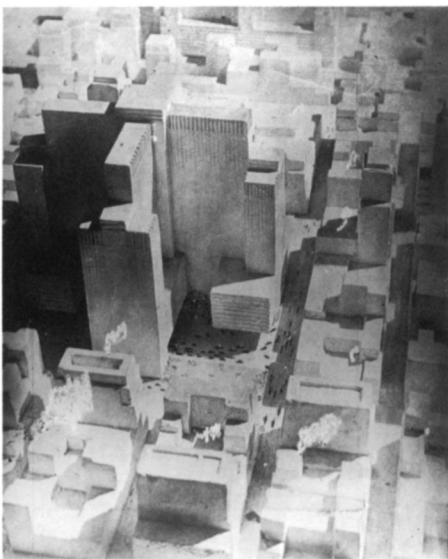


revolutionary, in the 1930s modern architects created intricate and constructive contextual relationships. In the Soviet Union, we saw a scheme that would have allowed the city to survive and improve with the invasion of modern architecture. In the United States we will see the city improve in fact. American architects of the 30s ask, how can modern architecture contribute to life in the city? There is a stroke of genius in their application of modern forms, especially vivid in New York's Rockefeller Center.

Rockefeller Center is the product of careful theoretical preparation primarily by two New York architects, Harvey Wiley Corbett and Raymond Hood. The significance of their contribution to the city is enormous and it explodes the myth that American architecture, apart from the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and a few other geniuses, simply happened. The thought of these two architects and the team that worked with them fills me with reverence and melancholy. I know that few living architects can hope to be assembled with a similar group, preoccupied with the same amount of dignity with a project such as Rockefeller Center. The group's character suggests the need to criticize the architects of the 1980s. In comparison to these men we are frivolous; we lack both theoretical interest and ability. We are improvisers who struggle desperately with every new commission. In the 30s, an architect's career embodied a series of related ideas; in the 80s we only emboss our trademarks in the manner of Gucci or Vuitton.



Harvey Wiley Corbett had one obsession: fill New York City with people and traffic until it overflows. Instead of resolving congestion, he hoped to exacerbate congestion for architectural purposes. In Corbett's vision each block becomes an island in a sea of traffic. You climb to the higher regions of the islands to find calm and quiet away from the frenzy of the streets below. The city is an archipelago of blocks, each with an identity and autonomy, but each connected to the next by second-story pedestrian bridges (or skyways), the unifying elements of the community.



Raymond Hood, the other genius of Rockefeller Center, had several visions. First he saw a city of isolated towers surrounded by open spaces, a landscape of needles. With this in mind he designed the McGraw-Hill building and the Daily News building. His next idea came closer to the concept of Rockefeller Center—superbuildings where you live, work and play, that would eliminate congestion. Finally, he decided to keep most of the old city, but build clusters of modern buildings at every tenth street on an avenue, and to house the people who work at these outposts in apartments built into the bridges that span the city's two rivers.

Although Corbett and Hood were hard-nosed pragmatists and businessmen, their reservoir of ideas and theories makes them significantly more creative than most developers. Rockefeller Center is the result of those ideas.

Corbett prepared a model for Rockefeller Center that fit his vision of a city of islands like those of Venice. On the model, serene pedestrian precincts float above the street level, skyways connect the buildings, and an opera house is surrounded by business and housing structures. Hood, on the other hand, interpreted Rockefeller Center as one of his first outposts of modernity in a cluster of four towers that form a diagonal

intersection on the grid of Rockefeller Center's three-block site.

Neither of these concepts was realized. The final design resulted from a collaborative effort. Instead of reviewing the design in detail, I will show how Rockefeller Center fits into the context of New York City.

Rockefeller Center is interesting because it is several architectural projects in one. In its basement is a three-block shopping area. On the tenth floor level its roofs are gardens and parks, which are connected by bridges that span the space above the streets. The roof-top park seems outrageous at first, but one side of the project occupies land that was originally a park (even at this stage, modern architects established emphatic and direct relationships with precedent). So in Rockefeller Center you find all of the Venice metaphors of Hood and Corbett crystalized in a monumental project: an island paradise, a self-sustaining outpost of modernity.

The model of the ground floor for the Center is fascinating, although it was never fully realized. In addition to Radio City Music Hall, the model calls for an uninterrupted floor containing from five to eight theaters, which are to be run simultaneously. The stages are connected by short corridors, so a performer leaving one stage can enter another stage seconds later. Therefore, with ingenuity a writer can write three plays for one cast. That alone is a beautiful metaphor about city life.

Of course, only two theaters, Radio City Music Hall and Center Theater (demolished in 1954), were realized. In the United States, people usually consider the Music Hall as a beautiful example of Art Deco, rich and nostalgic. But the architects had more outrageous ambitions. As the result of a trip to Moscow, they probably borrowed a somewhat sinister idea from a Soviet project.

The Soviet government held a competition to design a system of "green" satellite towns around Moscow where exhausted workers could go to relax. Konstantin Melnikov submitted revolutionary proposals. He suggested that an artificial environment of re-created natural phenomena and chemical substances would speed the process of recuperation. For example, special dormitories would induce specific types of sleep. In the dormitories, control towers would alter the incline of the floor and administer gases for dreams and psychedelic experiences. The concept was never realized—in the Soviet Union. But in the United States, for a brief time, the designers of Radio City Music Hall administered laughing gas, ozone, and other gases to transport the audience—and the resident Rockettes—to another world. So New Yorkers heard the slogan ". . . two hours in the washed, ionized, ozoned, ultra-solarized air [of Radio City Music Hall] are worth a month in the country."

Rockefeller Center is a primary example among those works of 20th-century architecture that have a solid theoretical base. Such works offer visions, corrections, alterations, or at least interventions, into the way people live. The architects of such projects are concerned not with how their designs look, but how they happen. Instead of imitating established styles, through the use of innovative materials, programmatic enrichments and planned contextual relationships, these architects make significant contributions to urban life.

Three early schemes for Manhattan's Rockefeller Center are illustrated (from top):

In a 1930 rendering by Hugh Ferriss, Harvey Wiley Corbett's "islands in a sea of traffic" are connected with second-story skyways; the "city of towers" concept of Raymond Hood, with landscaping and low buildings between the towers, relates directly to Le Corbusier's tower city depicted in *Vers une Architecture*, 1924; Raymond Hood's "city under a single roof" followed the city of towers conception, theorizing that urban concentration is desirable and predicting the urban megastructures of the 1960s and 1970s.

(overleaf)

1981 aerial view of the "city-within-a-city," which occupies twenty-two acres of midtown Manhattan. Innumerable schemes for this vast complex were made and modified as successive tenant changes impinged upon the architect's plans, yet it remains one of the most successful urban complexes of this century, its sequence of exciting outdoor public spaces interacting with the variety of mid-size and tall buildings that constitute Rockefeller Center today.

