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ABSTRACT

Rockefeller Center has long been described as a city in miniature. The project's aspirations to completeness have been discussed in a variety of terms, but most critics and historians focus on the contrast between the project's cohesive visual language and the more varied urban landscape surrounding it. This preoccupation has led to blind spots in received understanding of this well-known project. This article focuses on little-known infrastructural and housing projects—some built, others not—that carry the Center's history from the heart of Manhattan to the margins of the metropolis. To ensure financial viability, these projects mostly sought to pull wealthy, white commuters into the Center's orbit, but they also reveal competing visions of urban and regional change among the Center's architects and managers. Rockefeller Center provides a unique vantage point from which to consider the ways architecture exceeds the formal and visual preoccupations of most architects and architectural historians.

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Introduction

Rockefeller Center has long been described as a *city within a city*. One of the earliest critiques of the massive, as-yet-unrealised project, in the May 1931 issue of *Architectural Forum*, noted that it would "form a complete and self-sufficient unit of city life."[1] The Center's scale and complexity make such descriptions seem obvious. Rockefeller Center was built during the depths of the Great Depression. When completed in the early 1940s, it contained fourteen buildings across three blocks in Midtown Manhattan—between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, east to west, and 48th and 51st Streets, south to north (fig. 1). Shops lined Fifth Avenue, the side streets, the promenade leading to a central sunken plaza, and the concourse connecting the entire development below grade. The Center's Sixth Avenue side, known as "Radio City," contained several theatres and thirty-five broadcast studios. Above this were hundreds of hectares of speculative office space. The largest tower, a sixty-six-storey serrated slab originally known as the RCA Building, alone held over 250,000 square metres.[2] The Center's publicity

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Figure 1. Rockefeller Center, New York, 1939. Photograph by Irving Underhill. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, https://www.loc.gov/item/2015647625/.

department described the project's aspirations for completeness in terms more ambitious than the *Forum* article. Of the development's six then-novel air-conditioning systems, the most substantial, inside the cavernous Radio City Music Hall, "controls the largest single chunk of well-behaved weather in the world."[3]

Early descriptions of the project used a variety of means to portray Rockefeller Center as a kind of city in miniature, complete unto itself. The Center's visual

language reinforced this perception. To smooth over what otherwise would have been a disjointed collection of functions—drawn together more by Depression-era exigencies than farsighted development strategy—and forms—determined as much by the zoning code as the architects' creative vision—the Center's architects overlaid all fourteen of the complex's buildings with almost-identical, alternating bands of limestone piers and double-hung windows with aluminium spandrels. This made the Center stand apart from its more varied surroundings. In *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), Sigfried Giedion lauded the Center as a model for large-scale, civic-minded post-World War Two urban development, because it "tyrannizes over" the existing city as a visually cohesive "architectonic organism."[4] Other architectural historians have followed suit, even as they have struck a more polemical tone. For Manfredo Tafuri, the development embodied the contradictions of architecture under capitalism, signifying a "closed and circumscribed intervention" that failed to attain "comprehensive control of the urban organism."[5] Reinhold Martin has argued that, contrary to Giedion and Tafuri, the Center did succeed "in projecting organic unity onto the disaggregated field of commerce […] not in some residually futile effort to unify the civic realm but as a marketing tool."[6] Even though these scholars' concerns extend beyond the merely formal to consider issues like political economy, their focus on Rockefeller Center's "organic unity," however critical, obscures the project's more substantive but nebulous relationship to its context.

In what follows, I aim to expand on these more canonical studies of Rockefeller Center by considering how the Center's architects and managers situated their work within a larger urban and regional frame. Take, for example, Raymond Hood, the project's lead designer until his death in 1934. Hood positioned the Center as the first step in remaking the metropolis. In a November 1931 lecture, Hood suggested that the hundreds of row homes and apartment buildings demolished to make way for Rockefeller Center previewed the reinvention of Midtown as "a business section as intensive as the downtown financial district." Of the "few" residences remaining below Central Park, "within a few years they will have doubtless retired gracefully to the outlying sections." Hood did not accompany this premonition with a comprehensive plan. Instead, he simply knew that large-scale, privately funded developments like Rockefeller Center would produce a "better organized" city.[7]

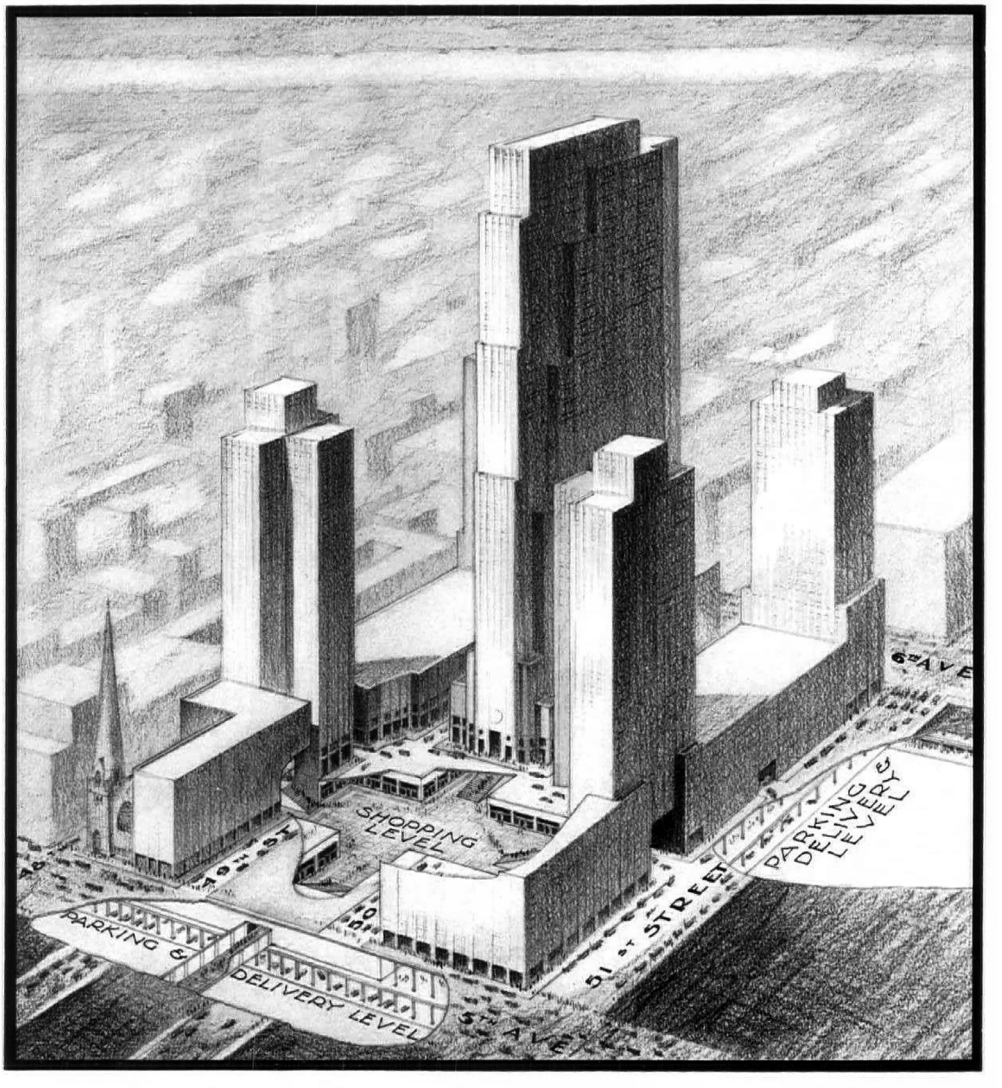
To better understand the expanded field in which Rockefeller Center's architects and managers operated, I have found it useful to draw from urban and planning history. Over the past couple of decades, scholars in these fields have developed methods and narrative frameworks that treat the histories of cities, suburbs, and their hinterlands as shaped by interconnections and reciprocities within a shared regional, or metropolitan, context, rather than as distinct realms disconnected from one another.[8] With notable exceptions, these urban and planning historians have focused more on questions of policy, economics, and environment, rather than the cultural and material dimensions of buildings and landscapes.[9] Nonetheless, translating approaches taken in urban and planning histories provides instructive lessons for treating individual buildings and landscapes as both instruments and avatars of wide-ranging transformations. This entails a twofold shift in perspective. First, while I do discuss Hood and his collaborators, I am equally interested in the work of the Transportation Committee, helmed by Nelson A. Rockefeller, whose father, John D.

Rockefeller, Jr, bankrolled the project. The project's managers—a team of real estate and financial advisors assembled by the Rockefellers, of which the Transportation Committee formed a subset—quickly realised that their development was mostly inaccessible to commuters, despite its prominent location, because of its distance from existing transit stations. This group spent the mid-1930s pursuing infrastructural projects that would, at minimum, connect the development to the city's existing transportation networks and, at most, transform large swathes of the surrounding region to generate a steady stream of wealthy, white commuters. Second, because the Center contained no residences, I consider apartment buildings in the Center's orbit. One, designed for mostly female clerical workers, and another, for more affluent male executives, introduce conflicting ideas about the scale, scope, and intent of the Center's urban and regional ambitions. Rather than a unified "architectural organism," I show Rockefeller Center as the product of conflicting ideas about architecture, infrastructure, and urban life that were loosely held together by a striving for financial solvency.

This shift in perspective does more than shed new light on an otherwise well-known work of architecture. It offers opportunities to think critically about how architecture, in general, is narrated and what types of evidence support those narratives. In this case, this involves expanding the scale and scope of analysis to include (mostly unrealised) infrastructural projects. But it also means considering how these projects were conceived as ways to literally move people and to produce a more intangible "mobilization of affect," as anthropologist Brian Larkin has put it.[10] In a different sense, Rockefeller Center embodies Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva's idea of architecture as "a contested gathering of many conflicting demands," not least of which are ways a building "resists attempts at transformation, allows certain visitors' actions and impedes others, bugs observers, challenges city authorities, and mobilizes different communities of actors."[11] As Raymond Hood, Nelson Rockefeller, and others were quick to realise, Rockefeller Center's many conflicting demands reverberated from the heart of Midtown to the margins of the metropolis.

The Concourse

The best place to begin is below ground. The architects' earliest schemes included a subterranean shopping concourse, parking and delivery zones, a bus terminal, and connections to existing and envisioned subway lines (fig. 2).[12] The rationale for locating these facilities below ground was simple. Given its scale, the Center would generate such a volume of foot, car, truck, and commuter traffic that displacing at least some of it from street level was necessary. Since these concourses and tunnels would pass below public rights-of-way, they required permission from the city to build them. A March 1932 draft of the franchise petition submitted to the Board of Estimate reveals overarching ideological motivations embedded within more pragmatic justifications.[13] The petition spelled out the public benefits such a franchise would bring. It would relieve the traffic congestion the Center would otherwise cause. It would boost property values, "not only of the Development but of all the surrounding area," which would lead to increased tax revenue for the city.[14] It would "enhance the beauty of the City and […] attract widespread public interest."[15] It would, finally, establish a



TRAFFIC AND SHOPPING LEVELS
OF THE
NEW RADIO CITY DEVELOPMENT

Figure 2. A cutaway axonometric drawing of Rockefeller Center, ca. May 1931. From "The Question of Radio City," *Architectural Forum* 54, no. 5 (May 1931).

precedent for resolving traffic problems "by private initiative and at private expense" in accordance with what were understood to be the Regional Plan Association's (RPA) recommendations for underground facilities.[16] Such claims translated into practical terms the fantastical visions of Harvey Wiley Corbett, one of the Center's architects who spent the 1920s proposing multilevel streets to "solve" the city's traffic problems.[17] But they conveniently ignored the precedent set by Grand Central Terminal's network of underground facilities and the "vast concentration of new urban

development" the Terminal had generated by 1930, as architect and preservationist James Marston Fitch put it.[18] They also overlooked the fact that the RPA's 1929 *Regional Plan*, discussed below, made no mention of underground parking, though its discussion of parking and loading facilities warned against "the replacement of low buildings by higher ones."[19]

The petition's language, in particular its treatment of relationships between public and private, points to the hubris at the heart of the Center's plans. The city was asked to choose between two constituencies: the "old-fashioned brownstone private dwellings" that were not "in keeping with the potential usefulness of the property," versus the "unified group of modern commercial buildings" that would "obviously result in a great enhancement in value of the area."[20] Since the Center's management considered the choice self-evident, they warned that, if the city did not "co-operate" with their plans, "the entire burden" of relieving Midtown traffic "will have to be assumed by the City."[21] Rockefeller Center was not alone in treating the consequences of private development as problems for public authority to resolve. The overburdening of Manhattan's transportation networks, power grid and other infrastructures by ever-larger skyscrapers factored into the city's 1916 zoning resolution and continued to concern critics like Lewis Mumford during the building boom of the 1920s.[22] But the Center's scale and the exigencies of the Great Depression gave the "cooperation" it proposed a decidedly threatening air.

The petition estimated that the complex's "daily transient population" would number at least 160,000.[23] It argued that the Center would be doing the city a service by diverting so much pedestrian traffic from already congested sidewalks into below-grade passageways. But there was a catch: "The surface and subsurface passageways located inside of the buildings will, of course, be subject to such reasonable restrictions and such use of the property as are ordinarily imposed and retained by the owner in the case of private commercial buildings."[24] This assumption was reiterated as the petition speculated, in conclusion, "that these subsurface connections will be the forerunner of a vast subsurface network of pedestrian passageways under this entire part of the city."[25] In other words, alongside the more obvious transformations above grade, the Center's management proposed to colonise the land below Midtown with a private alternative to public space.

The Subway

By the middle of 1933, New York was experiencing the worst of the Great Depression. The city's commercial real-estate market was plagued with vacancies, bankruptcies, falling rents, and mounting debts, while breadlines and makeshift encampments exposed the extent of the decade's human suffering. The Center's construction site, echoing through an otherwise jobless city, seemed insulated from this misery. The publicity office released statements twice daily about newly secured leases to the press. In truth, the leasing office was struggling to "keep ahead of the Publicity Department."[26] By the end of the year, the Center's first four completed buildings were only fifty-nine percent full.[27]

Things seemed to improve in 1934. The occupancy rate rose to seventy-nine percent, although this was mostly thanks to the relocation of the Rockefeller family

office and several of their philanthropies to the Center. The plaza at the heart of the development had been envisioned to connect the lower-level concourse to Fifth Avenue's shopping district. Instead, as the architects, managers, and shopkeepers discovered, pedestrians would simply peer into the plaza and return to Fifth Avenue. Shops in the concourse struggled to attract customers, and many failed.[28] In January 1935, to better understand this situation, management conducted a survey of pedestrian traffic through the complex, measuring fluctuations based on time of day, weather conditions, point of entry, and direction of movement (fig. 3).[29] The real problem was not that people found the site difficult to navigate. Rather, its location was, according to *Architectural Forum*, "considered inaccessible" for commercial development.[30]

The Center's own assessments confirmed this. Internal studies showed that tenants had to walk an average of 552 metres from the nearest rail and subway stations, almost double the distance developers considered acceptable.[31] Ridership on the elevated Sixth Avenue line (the El), abutting the development's west side, was declining. But management planned for it to be removed anyway, so they explored other remedies for their "disadvantageous" situation. These varied in scale, complexity, and feasibility, but they shared a common purpose. It was not enough to make the Center more accessible. "The question of transportation," as Nelson Rockefeller put it at a November 1934 Transportation Committee meeting, was "of vital importance" to maintain "a continuous flow of the right kind of people to the Center."[32]

Oddly, this did not involve automobile traffic, despite the 1.3 million cars clogging the streets of Greater New York by 1926, Corbett's visions for handling them, or the Rockefellers' pioneering role in the burgeoning oil industry.[33] The private street cut through the site was more about increasing retail frontage than moving vehicles. Instead, management focused their attention on rail proposals. This was not a high-minded attempt to combat automobile-induced sprawl, but rather a profound lack of foresight from the scion of the Standard Oil fortune to anticipate how automobiles would remake cities and regions after the 1930s.[34] The Transportation Committee's first idea was a new subway line through Midtown, which was designed by railroad engineer L. Alfred Jenny. His March 1933 report envisioned a loop between Grand Central Terminal and the 50th Street station of the new Eighth Avenue subway, with stops at the Center and two other stations (fig. 4). For Jenny, the subway would ensure the Center's economic success by supplying "first class transportation facilities."[35] It would not matter how "ideal and beautiful" the development was, "if it is inconvenient for [businessmen] and their clients to reach."[36] Just as importantly, "much of the territory that would be served by such a line is today relatively undeveloped," meaning "it is a fertile territory for future development."[37] Echoing the Center's own neighbourhood-colonising logic, Jenny left unsaid that the tens of thousands of existing residents and small business owners were not the proposed subway's envisioned passengers.

Suburban commuters were. While the Sixth Avenue El shuttled a dwindling number of passengers between Midtown and the Financial District, the westside subway lines were engineered to funnel commuters from upper Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn to jobs below 59th Street. In a December 1935 radio address announcing the El's demolition, Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia proclaimed that its

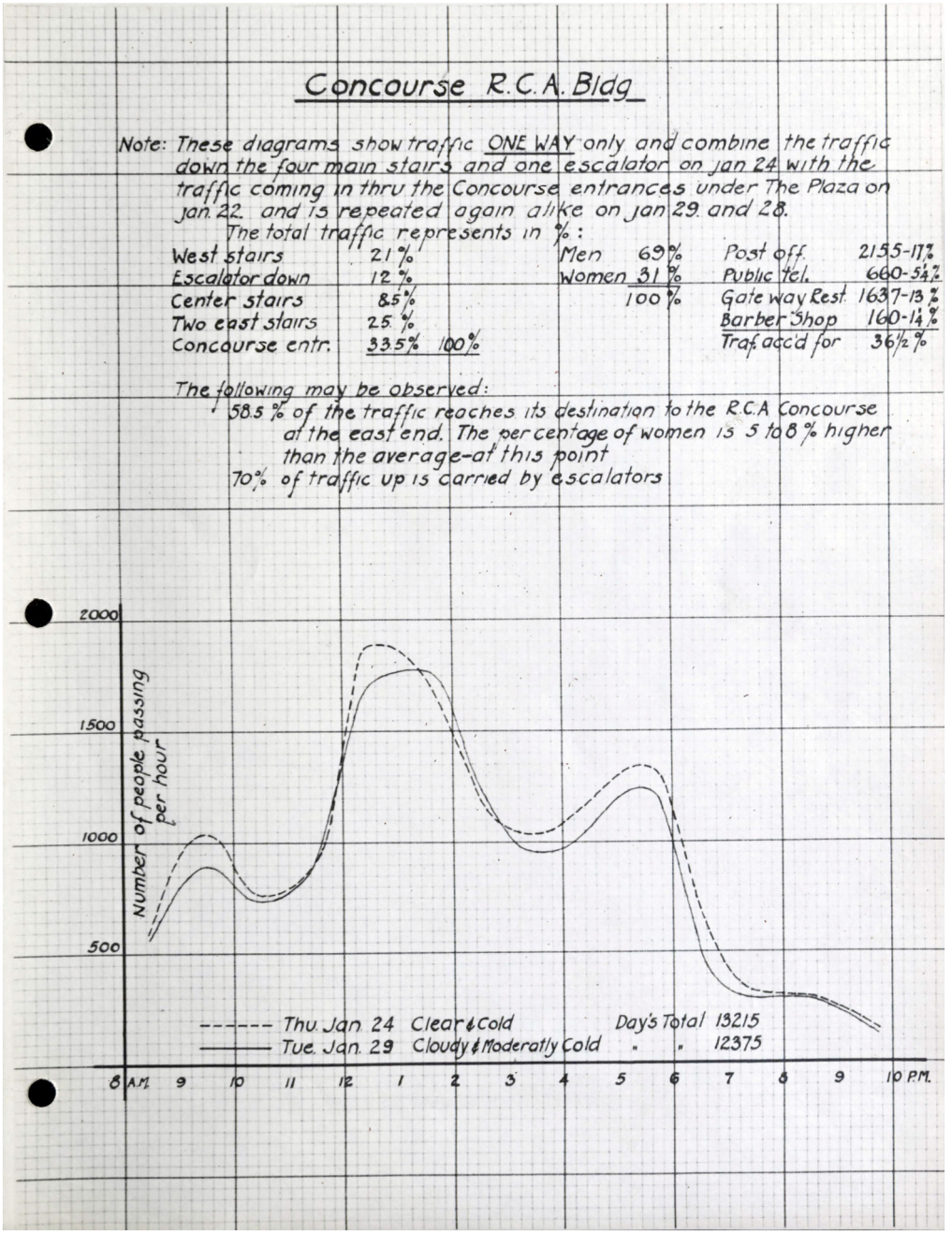


Figure 3. A graph from a January 1935 study of foot traffic in Rockefeller Center. Rockefeller Archive Center.

"discontinuance as an artery of transportation will not be felt, and its ultimate removal as an unnecessary and obsolete obstruction to traffic and business will be a blessing."[38] The new Sixth Avenue subway would complement existing lines "to enable the people to travel conveniently to and from their homes and places of

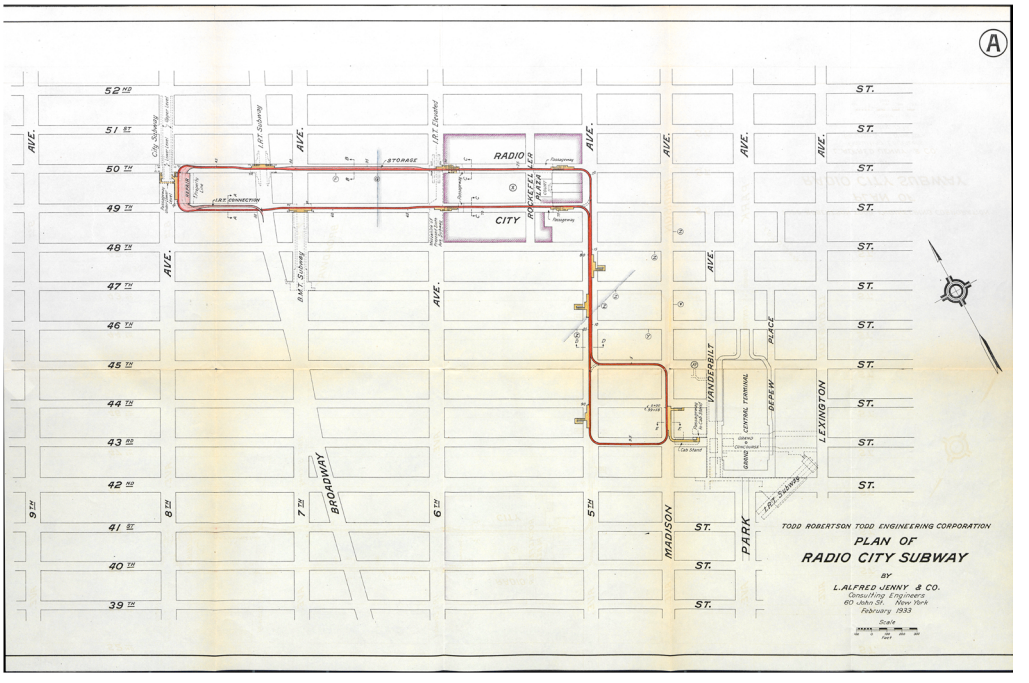


Figure 4. A plan of the Radio City Subway, L. Alfred Jenny & Co., engineers, unrealised proposal, February 1933. Rockefeller Archive Center.

business or employment."[39] Yet, as Jenny made clear, the "Radio City Subway" would do more than connect the Center to the city's commuter network. Even the design of the cars—with their silent, rubber-lined wheels and "numerous other modern developments"—proclaimed the subway and, by extension, the Center, an agent of socioeconomic change.[40]

The Rail Terminal

Management simultaneously explored locating a rail terminal across Sixth Avenue from Rockefeller Center, expanding the subway's localised ambitions to a regional scale. A July 1934 Transportation Committee report argued that the Center's "ultimate desirability" depended on its "relative accessibility to the whole Metropolitan area."[41] This was in keeping with well-established patterns of using marginal landscapes and communities to fuel urban growth, but in this case a large swathe of the metropolitan area would be remade, in what Fredric Jameson has called "a breathtaking and Promethean proposition," solely to serve Rockefeller Center.[42] The rail terminal would become the new endpoint for trains from New Jersey, replacing the ferries that brought commuters across the Hudson River into Manhattan. It would accommodate 56,000,000 passengers a year—an incredible estimate that far exceeded the passenger volumes of Grand Central and Pennsylvania Station. It would also "be an important factor in developing Northern New Jersey."[43]

That geographic specificity is noteworthy, because it brings Rockefeller's "right kind of people" into focus and draws the Center's ambitions into dialogue with the

1929 *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*. Alfred Jenny again consulted on the terminal. He argued that continued reliance on "the antiquated ferry" had "retarded the proper development of New Jersey, particularly the northwestern portion of the State."[44] He proposed the terminal be linked to a web of new rapid transit lines traversing the New Jersey Meadowlands serving would-be commuters in Hudson, Bergen, and Passaic Counties (fig. 5). These three counties in the northeastern corner of the state were not as underdeveloped as Jenny made them seem. The population of the three counties accounted for one third of the state's, and was dispersed among working-class townships, semi-rural villages and wealthy enclaves. It was also ninety-eight percent white.[45] Bergen County was and remains one of the state's wealthiest areas.[46] In a 1935 presentation, Jenny tried to convince Bergen County residents they were, in fact, marginalised and that his proposal would save them. He encouraged them to imagine "great electrically motored trains" and "glistening viaducts […] rising from the Jersey meadows," whisking "millions of rushing

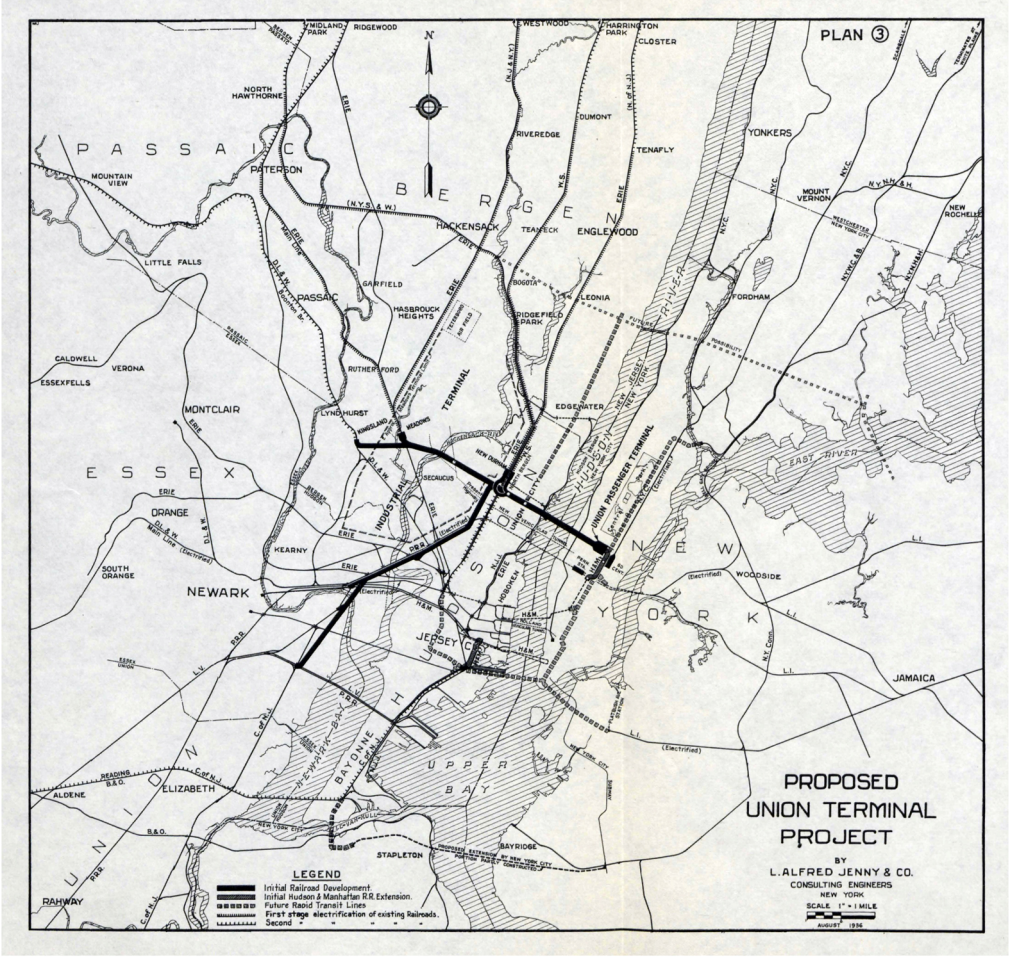


Figure 5. A map of the Union Terminal Project showing existing and proposed rapid transit lines extending from Midtown Manhattan across northern New Jersey, L. Alfred Jenny & Co., engineers, August 1936. Rockefeller Archive Center.

people" to Manhattan from their "quiet homes throughout north Jersey, more quickly than ever before."[47] By sponsoring this transformation, Jenny promised Rockefeller Center's management they could turn wealthy, white New Jerseyans into the commuters they desired.

In addition to revealing race and class biases informing the Center's development, these transit proposals also drew the project into debates about regional reform. Specifically, the rail terminal challenged the recommendations of the RPA's 1929 *Regional Plan*. The *Plan* as such is beyond the scope of this article, but, in short, the RPA argued that parts of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut within the socioeconomic orbit of Manhattan were becoming dangerously overbuilt. Other areas, like the Meadowlands, remained "unfortunately" underdeveloped. To this end, the plan advocated a balance of density and dispersion. What this meant was that lower Manhattan would remain the locus of commercial, financial, and cultural activities, as well as wealthy residences.[48] This would be achieved by removing lower-class residences and industrial activities to suburban parts of the region. Thus, upper Manhattan, the City's outer boroughs, and much of northern New Jersey would become a new "industrial zone," with a carefully planned mix of medium-density residences and small-scale manufacturing. The further "outlying region," home to private estates, farms, and large parks, would create a pastoral buffer against sprawl. This "diffused re-centralization" would be facilitated by concentric rail networks allowing movement through and between these zones while also ensuring they remained distinct.[49]

In general, the aims of Rockefeller Center and the RPA were aligned. They both sought to reinforce Manhattan as the region's commercial and cultural hub while displacing (lower-class) residences, industry, and other "inappropriate uses" to outlying areas.[50] But their visions for the Meadowlands reveal critical differences. This was a 10,500-hectare wetland occupying parts of Bergen and Hudson Counties (fig. 6). Manhattan, by comparison, is about 5,900 hectares. Insofar as the *Regional Plan* was concerned, the Meadowlands landscape was "unattractive," "unproductive" and "unsanitary."[51] Luckily, a "haphazard" and fragmented "subdivision of ownership and authority has helped prevent any large scale development in the past," which meant it was still possible "to prepare a comprehensive plan."[52] That plan was to dredge, canalise, and backfill the Meadowlands. The reclaimed land could become a "self-contained development," with light manufacturing, commercial facilities, workers' housing, and recreational areas.[53] The proposal relied on mass transit, but, unlike Rockefeller Center, the RPA located its proposed rail terminal in upper Manhattan. This would foster "a multiplicity of subcenters" and more connections between outlying areas, "thereby fostering decentralization."[54] To be sure, Rockefeller Center and the RPA were not the only entities interested in "improving" the Meadowlands, a landscape that endured immense socioeconomic and ecological changes in the twentieth century.[55] But, the differences between these two visions are instructive. For the RPA, the Meadowlands and a rail terminal were distinct pieces of a robust approach to regional reform; for Rockefeller Center, they were simply a conduit for funnelling suburbanites to a single development.

Neither the subway loop nor the rail terminal was realised. The Center's management pursued them for years but ultimately balked at their price tags—US$5.1

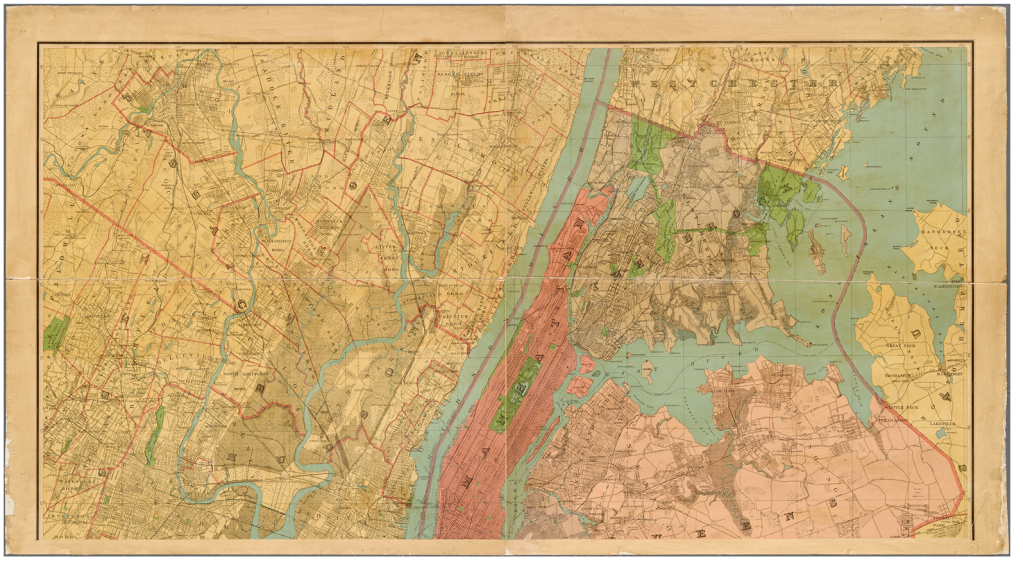


Figure 6. Two quadrants of a map of the Metropolitan District Including the whole of the 1899. Joseph R. Bien, cartographer. The Meadowlands are the large, hatched area due west of Manhattan. Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library.

million for the subway and up to US$20 million for the terminal.[56] They also belatedly realised that while these transit projects would be "beneficial to Rockefeller Center," they would also generate a vast quantity of additional development, "result[ing] in serious competition."[57] After 1936, management devoted their primary attention to construction of the city's Sixth Avenue subway, which began operation in December 1940 (fig. 7). Though less ambitious than the earlier proposals, the new subway station created a seamless interface between the Center's lower-level concourse and the city's transportation network. Though the new subway line benefited Midtown generally, rather than Rockefeller Center specifically, and served a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse cross section of the city's population, it made the Center considerably more accessible to outlying white middle-class enclaves like the Norwood neighbourhood in the Bronx and Forest Hills in Queens.[58]

The Apartment Buildings

This focus on transportation was necessary because Rockefeller Center contained no residences. Despite management's attention to outlying areas and Hood's prediction that Midtown's "few" remaining residences would succumb to the ongoing commercialisation of Midtown, the blocks around Rockefeller Center retained a diverse assortment of mansions, apartment buildings, and boarding houses, as well as commercial lofts, theatres, and high-end shops.[59] Dozens of luxury high-rises were built, mostly on the east side of Midtown, in the 1910s and 1920s before the Depression ground construction to a halt.[60] Apartment buildings by Raymond Hood and Wallace K. Harrison, two of Rockefeller Center's principal architects, contributed in small

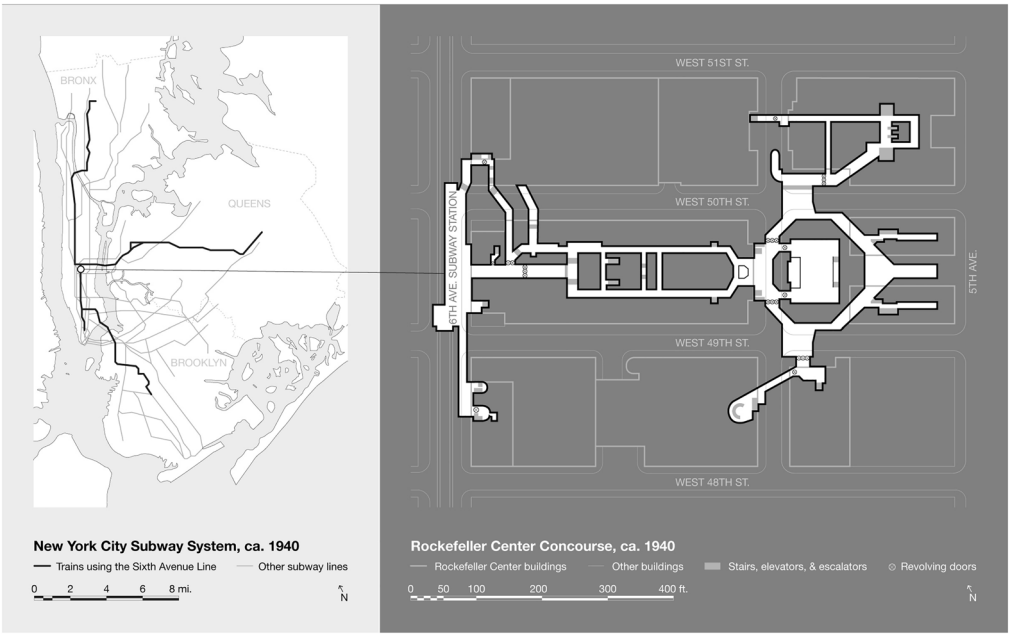


Figure 7. A plan of the Rockefeller Center concourse and New York City subway system, 1940. Drawn by the author based on plans of the concourse in James Marston Fitch, *Grand Central Terminal and Rockefeller Center* (1974), and the Rockefeller Archive Center, and of the subway system in Board of Transportation of the City of New York, "A Program for Expansion of Rapid Transit Railroad Facilities" (1939), and George J. Nostrand, "Rapid Transit Map of Greater New York" (1939).

ways to these larger transformations. They also complement and complicate the discussion thus far of the Center's relationship to its context.

Hood's Beaux Arts Apartments (1930), designed with Kenneth M. Murchison, were composed of two nearly identical structures on either side of 44th Street between First and Second Avenues (figs 8 and 9). They were financed and developed by the Beaux Arts Institute of Design and replaced several "old rookeries" as part of an effort to "improve" the largely poor, mostly Irish, industrial Turtle Bay neighbourhood.[61] On the exterior, the buildings communicated their efficient, middle-class modernity through large casement windows set in alternating horizontal bands of cream- and red-coloured brick. The interiors were filled primarily with one-room apartments, each outfitted with electric refrigerators, kitchenettes, and fold-down beds. More than half the tenants were women, eighty percent of whom identified as businesswomen, professionals, or artists.[62] According to the (male) architects, the apartments' high-tech but cost-effective amenities were tailored to these tenants, because "the 'career woman' demands practically all the freedom from housekeeping obligations that men require, but wishes to retain the facilities for small-scale housekeeping, not only as a measure of economy, but as a form of relaxation."[63] There were enough "career women" living there that, by 1933, an independent company established a private bus service to shuttle them to jobs at Rockefeller Center.[64] In 1930, management opposed plans for a public bus route through the Center, but in 1934 highlighted the Beaux Arts bus service to encourage additional private lines.[65]



Figure 8. Beaux Arts Apartments, Raymond M. Hood and Kenneth M. Murchison, New York, NY, 1929–30. View from a balcony with industrial buildings and the East River beyond. Photograph by Samuel H. Gottscho. Museum of the City of New York.

The Beaux Arts' bus line was a more practical way to improve access to the Center than remaking an adjacent state. The apartments also fit within the framework of the RPA's 1929 *Regional Plan*, even if they were built too late to be treated in the plan itself. The RPA used the east side of Midtown to illustrate transformations it had in mind for most of Manhattan. The area's working-class homes, slaughterhouses, power plants, and dockyards were "a confused mixture of uses which is caused by want of planning."[66] Rezoning the blocks between Second Avenue and the East River for "high class residence" would preserve the exclusivity of the Park Avenue corridor, complement nearby business and retail districts, and generally follow "along the lines of progress in the direction of effecting a proper balance between business and residential use."[67] Though developed independently of Rockefeller Center and the *Regional Plan*, the Beaux Arts Apartments provided the "right kind of people" associated with the "appropriate" types of activities sought by both.

Wallace Harrison's Rockefeller Apartments (1935–36) fit the same mould. Designed with engineer J. André Fouilhoux (Hood's former collaborator) and financed by the Rockefellers on Rockefeller-owned property three blocks north of Rockefeller Center, the development consisted of two nearly identical eleven-story buildings—one facing 54th Street, the other 55th—mirrored about a shared courtyard (figs 10 and 11). The sand-coloured brick exteriors and semicircular bay windows nodded to the neighbouring turn-of-the-century brownstones and to the streamlined aesthetic of the recently codified "International Style." Lewis Mumford compared the Rockefeller

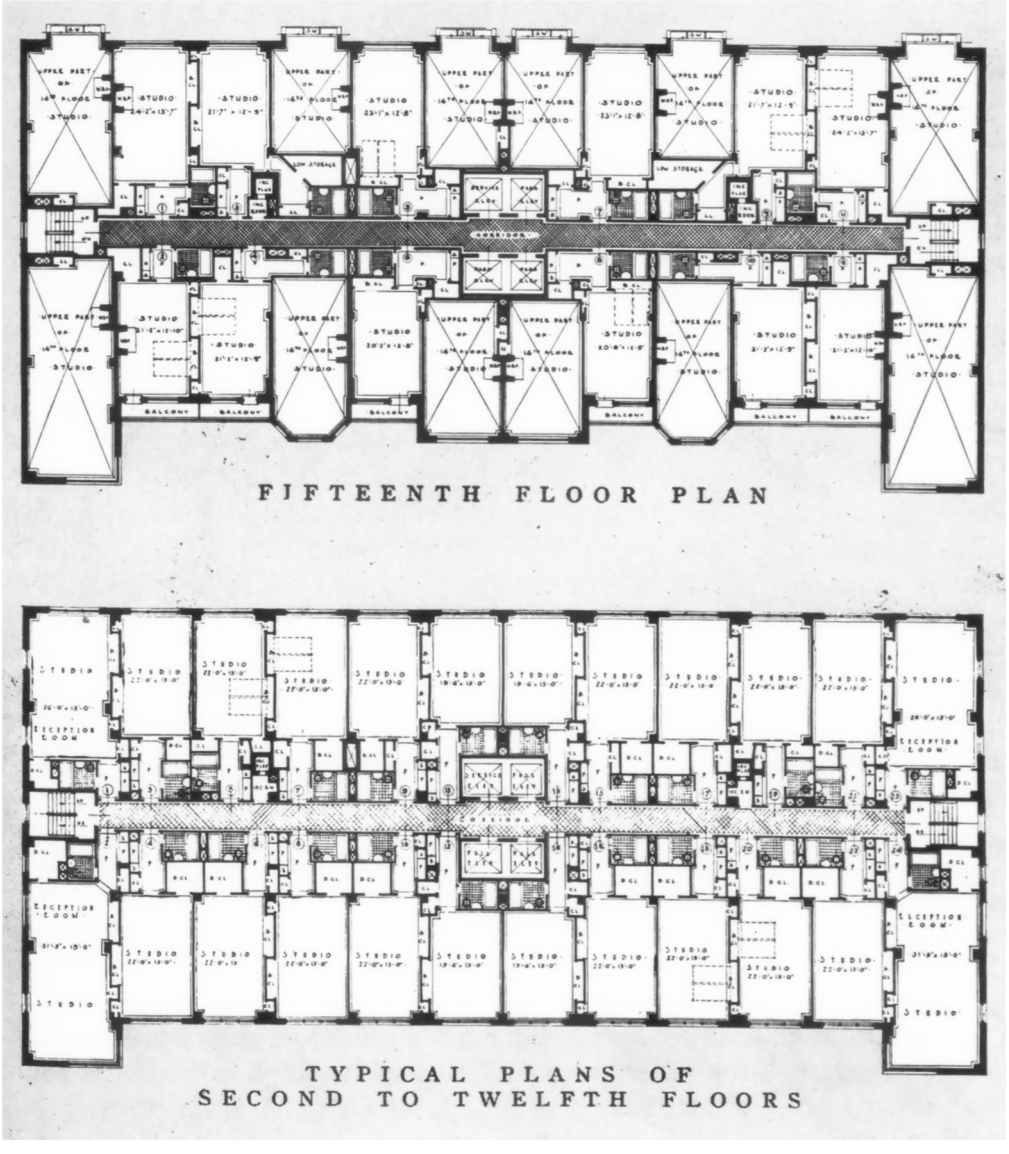


Figure 9. Beaux Arts Apartments. Typical plans. From Kenneth M. Murchison, "Beaux Arts Studio Apartments, New York: Designed, Financed and Built by Architects," *American Architect* 137, no. 2581 (March 1930).

Apartments to the Beaux Arts Apartments, which had been "the first capitulation to modern design in apartment houses."[68] For Mumford, Harrison's handling of the exterior was more adept than Hood & Murchison's "superficial stylistic stereotype." The apparent functionality of unadorned brick and large swathes of glass made the Rockefeller Apartments "the most successful example of modern architecture in the city—at least in apartment houses."[69]

The apartments' modernism was also class-bound. An unattributed January 1937 *Architectural Forum* article explained that everything about the "small, luxurious

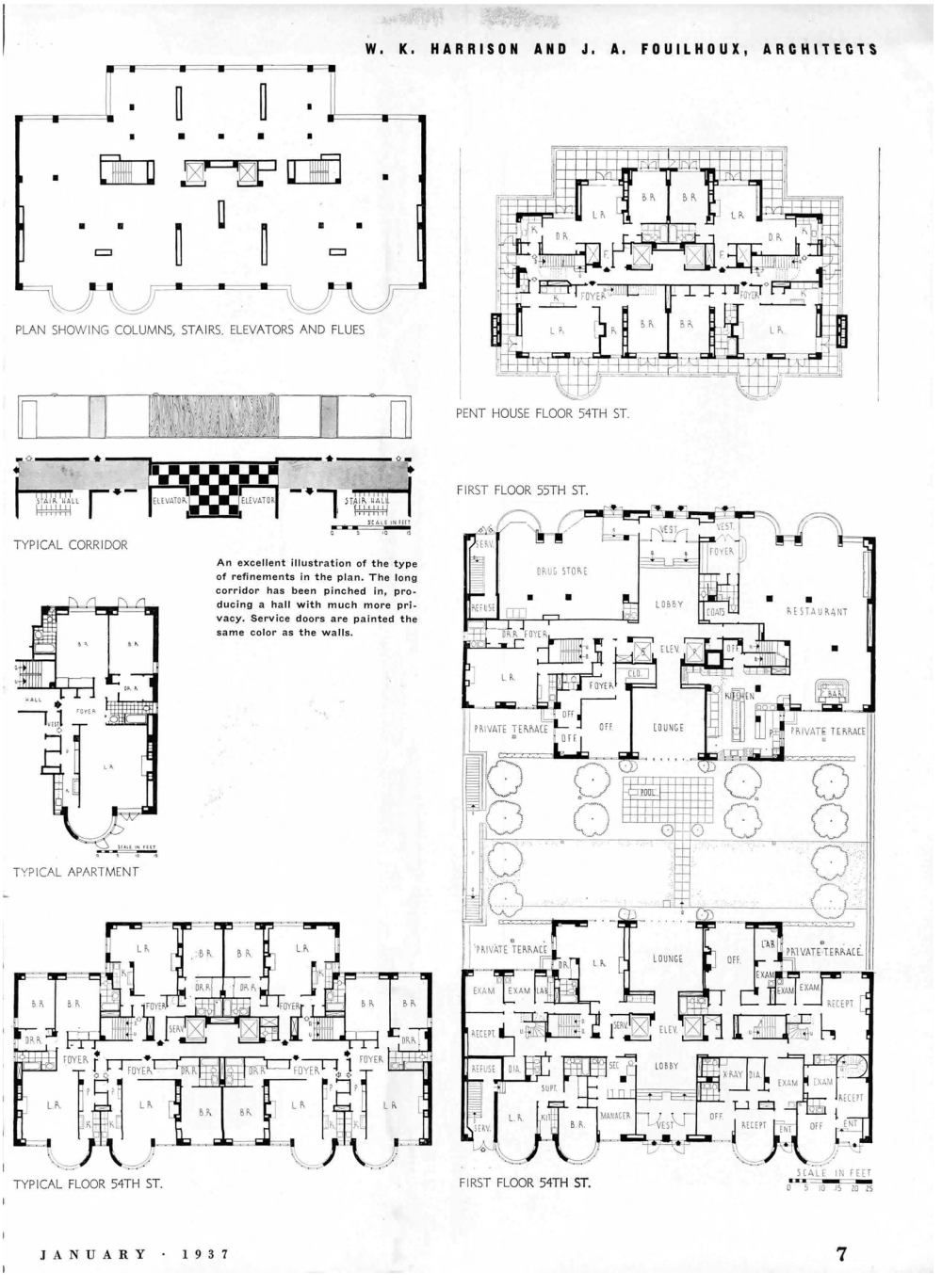


Figure 10. Rockefeller Apartments, Wallace K. Harrison & J. André Fouilhoux, New York, NY, 1935–36. Floor plans. From "Rockefeller Apartments," *Architectural Forum* 66, no. 1 (January 1937).

apartments" was designed to appeal directly to "business executives and wealthy commuters."[70] This was achieved through a variety of means. The buildings' massing fell short of zoning allowances to create the shared courtyard, meaning there were fewer



Figure 11. Rockefeller Apartments, Harrison & Fouilhoux. Photograph by Gottscho-Schleisner, Inc. Museum of the City of New York.

units but a maximum of "good light and ventilation."[71] The detailing of the bay windows directed views outward rather than across into neighbouring units. The irregular structural grid created airy, unobstructed apartment interiors while a meandering interior corridor fostered a greater sense of privacy. Marble, wood, and plaster

interior finishes communicated luxury and refinement. Service doors were painted the same colour as the walls to minimise their intrusion into the "very expensive" apartments.[72]

Harrison explained in a March 1936 essay for *Rockefeller Center Weekly* that the Rockefeller Apartments were "a natural, almost inevitable, result of the development in mid-Manhattan which Rockefeller Center initiated. For there has grown up here, now, a commercial city of 100,000 population, resident and transient, complete with business offices, shops, restaurants, amusement and cultural activities. But it is a city with no residential section."[73] If that confirmed Hood's earlier prediction, Harrison reached a fundamentally different conclusion. A Depression-era hiatus in new construction, combined with increased traffic congestion, meant that "business men are finding it more and more convenient to live within walking distance of their offices."[74] Retreating from management's earlier regional ambitions, Harrison positioned the Rockefeller Apartments as exemplary of Midtown's reinvention as an exclusive, businessman's enclave.

In a June 1936 address to a real estate group, Nelson Rockefeller affirmed Harrison's sentiment, arguing that suburbanisation was a reaction to the city's high taxes, "obsolete buildings," and overcrowded conditions. The future of Manhattan was at risk, unless property owners, developers, financiers, and other real-estate interests could "create a wider market for this great city of ours by rebuilding a large portion of our buildings. […] The feasibility of this building program has been proved by the unique success of Rockefeller Center and more recently by the success of the apartment houses which my father is erecting on Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Streets."[75] That the apartments were not yet complete was irrelevant. They were ninety per cent rented, which was enough to recommend them as a model for the wholesale reconstruction of Midtown.

The Rockefeller Apartments were not the Rockefellers' only foray into housing. They supported various housing initiatives, including the Thomas Garden Apartments, for middle-income whites in the Bronx, and the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Apartments, a middle-class Black cooperative in Harlem, both designed by architect Andrew Thomas and completed in 1928.[76] Notably, the Rockefeller Apartments, for wealthy (white) professionals, were the only Rockefeller-sponsored housing project that anyone linked to Rockefeller Center.

Conclusion

In his study of the 1929 *Regional Plan*, historian Robert Fishman notes that the RPA's ambitions exerted a significant but selective influence on the metropolitan region after the 1930s. One of the most notable divergences was that the *Plan* viewed automobile highways, in Fishman's words, as "subordinate to a centralized rail system that would continue to define the region. […] The authors of the plan saw only dimly the impetus that the automobile would give toward decentralization."[77] The same could be said of Rockefeller Center. Its unrealised transit plans focused exclusively on rail. While Harrison argued that Midtown should be made walkable—and exclusively upper-class—the rest of the Center's leadership advocated for construction of the Sixth Avenue subway, to accommodate those tenants and employees whose preferences, or circumstances, required commuting.

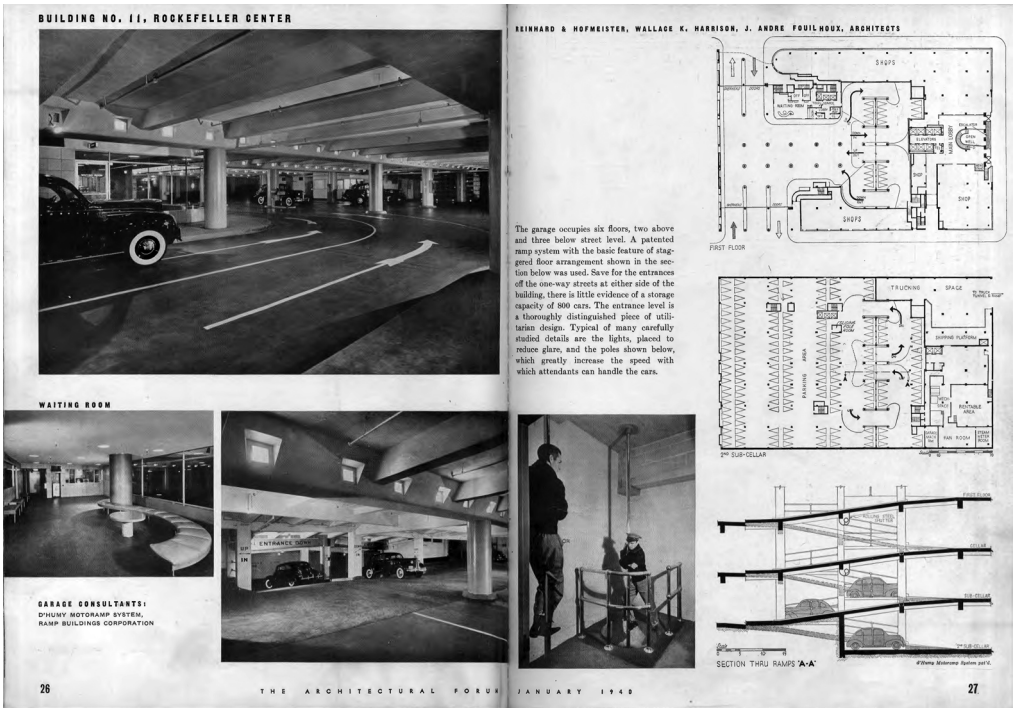


Figure 12. A spread from "Building No. 11, Rockefeller Center, New York," *Architectural Forum* 72, no. 1 (January 1940).

Only belatedly did Rockefeller Center's management turn its attention to motorists. The base of the sixteen-story Eastern Airlines Building, completed in 1939, was organised around a six-level parking garage (fig. 12). Three levels were below grade, with the rest encased in a multistorey retail podium. As *Architectural Forum* noted in January 1940, "Save for the entrances off the one-way streets at either side of the building, there is little evidence of a storage capacity of 800 cars. The entrance level is a thoroughly distinguished piece of utilitarian design."[78] Neither the streamlined enclosure nor the patented ramp system that enabled cars to manoeuvre the garage's compact footprint were what Nelson Rockefeller found compelling about the Center's new parking garage. Instead, responding to changing commuting habits was one more way to ensure the development catered solely to "the right kind of people." In a 1938 letter written to curry favour for the Center's application to install fuelling and oil-change stations in the garage, Rockefeller explained, "If we were allowed to sell gas and oil in this garage, not to the general public, but only to the patrons of the garage, this additional income would make the proposition a sound one from an investment standpoint."[79] The garage, as one of the last major additions to the complex before its expansion across Sixth Avenue in the 1960s, was a fitting conclusion to the Center's mostly unrealised infrastructural ambitions. It was a pale imitation of the earlier, "Promethean" subway and rapid transit proposals and a belated attempt to incorporate the source of the Rockefellers' wealth into the development. As such, it further reinforces the need to look beyond the Center's familiar architectural forms. To focus on Rockefeller Center's "organic unity" is to miss the far-reaching if

competing concerns that shaped the project. It was, more accurately, a nebulous and at best partially realised collection of differing ideas about architecture, infrastructure, and urban life unified by race- and class-based biases. From that perspective, it offers valuable insights into ways that architectural histories might better narrate the many conflicting demands that shape what might otherwise appear as coherent, unified formal objects.

Notes on Contributor

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Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1. "The Question of Radio City," *Architectural Forum* 54, no. 5 (May 1931): 601.
2. Sixth Avenue is now Avenue of the Americas; the RCA Building is now officially the Comcast Building, but is better known by its address, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, or "30 Rock." Throughout, for the sake of clarity, I have retained the names of streets and buildings at the time of the project's completion.
3. "Weather Trainers," *Rockefeller Center Weekly*, pre-publication number (August 30, 1934): 14.
4. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 756, 758.
5. Manfredo Tafuri, "The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City," in *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, ed. Giorgio Ciucci, Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri-Elia, and Manfredo Tafuri, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983 [1973]), 461, 483.

6. Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 88.
7. Raymond M. Hood quoted in "Supremacy of City Laid to Skyscraper," *New York Times*, November 10, 1931, 24.
8. For a then-current overview of this literature and an example of its methods, see Andrew Needham and Allen Dieterich-Ward, "Beyond the Metropolis: Metropolitan Growth and Regional Transformation in Postwar America," *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 7 (November 2009): 943–69.
9. In addition to additional studies cited below that emphasise cultural, material, and visual histories, see Francesca Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Michael Rawson, *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
10. Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013), 333.
11. Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva, "Give Me a Gun and I Will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture," in *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*, ed. Reto Geiser (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008), 86.
12. See L. Andrew Reinhard, "What Is the Rockefeller Radio City?" *Architectural Record* 69, no. 4 (April 1931): 278; Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Rockefeller Center* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 55, 204–68.
13. See Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Re: Certain Areas Below the Street Surfaces of West 49th and West 50th Streets, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, in the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York," draft franchise petition, March 24, 1932, folder 710, box 94, series C, Business Interests (FA312), Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). An amended version of the petition was eventually submitted to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment in September 1933.
14. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas Below the Street Surfaces," 6.
15. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas Below the Street Surfaces," 7.
16. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas Below the Street Surfaces," 6, 17.
17. Corbett first published these ideas in "Triple-Decked Streets for Traffic Relief," *New York Times*, February 3, 1924, XX5.
18. James Marston Fitch, *Grand Central Terminal and Rockefeller Center: A Historical-Critical Estimate of Their Significance* (Albany: New York State Parks & Recreation, 1974), 6–7.
19. See Harold M. Lewis and Ernest P. Goodrich, *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 3, *Highway Traffic* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1927), 96–98; Thomas Adams, et al., *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 6, *Buildings: Their Uses and the Spaces about Them* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1931), 79–80.
20. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas below the Street Surfaces," 9.
21. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas below the Street Surfaces," 7, 8.
22. See, for example, Keith D. Revell, *Building Gotham: Civic Culture and Public Policy in New York City, 1898–1938* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 185–226; Lewis Mumford, "Is the Skyscraper Tolerable?" *Architecture* 55, no. 2 (February 1927): 67–69.
23. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas below the Street Surfaces," 11.
24. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas below the Street Surfaces," 16.
25. Metropolitan Square Corporation, "Certain Areas below the Street Surfaces," 20.
26. Lawrence A. Kirkland, untitled leasing report to Todd, Robertson & Todd, March 17, 1933, folder 683, box 91, series C, OMR, RAC.
27. Daniel Okrent, *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center* (New York: Viking, 2003), 263.
28. Charles O. Heydt to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., November 13, 1935, folder 512, box 68, series C, OMR, RAC; Krinsky, *Rockefeller Center*, 91–93; Okrent, *Great Fortune*, 356–57.

29. See Lockwood Greene Engineers, Inc., "Suggestions Regarding Transportation Studies Affecting Rockefeller Center," September 20, 1934, folder 714, box 95, series C, OMR, RAC; and the material in folder 584, box 78, series C, OMR, RAC.
30. "A Phenomenon of Exploitation," *Architectural Forum* 61, no. 4 (October 1934): 296.
31. See L. Alfred Jenny and Company, untitled report to Todd, Robertson & Todd, March 14, 1933, folder 714, box 95, series C, OMR, RAC, 2–4; Lockwood Greene, "Suggestions Regarding Transportation Studies Affecting Rockefeller Center," 4–5.
32. Nelson A. Rockefeller, remarks recorded in the minutes of the Committee on Subway Construction, November 1934, quoted in Robert Fitch, *The Assassination of New York* (London: Verso, 1993), 198.
33. See "Table II: Number of Motor Vehicles in New York and Its Environs, 1916–1926," in Lewis and Goodrich, *Regional Survey*, vol. 3, 42.
34. For two later but instructive counter-examples, see Elihu Rubin, *Insuring the City: The Prudential Center and the Postwar Urban Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Zachary M. Schrag, *The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
35. Jenny and Co., untitled report to Todd, Robertson & Todd, 10.
36. Jenny and Co., untitled report to Todd, Robertson & Todd, 10.
37. Jenny and Co., untitled report to Todd, Robertson & Todd, 10.
38. Fiorello H. LaGuardia, "The Demolition of the Sixth Avenue Elevated: Broadcast from Station WJZ, Friday, December 20, 1935—6:15 P. M.," transcript of radio address, folder 714, box 95, series C, OMR, RAC, 2. See also Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 44–111.
39. LaGuardia, "The Demolition of the Sixth Avenue Elevated," 44–111.
40. Jenny and Co., untitled report to Todd, Robertson & Todd, 3, 8–9.
41. Nelson A. Rockefeller, et al., "Progress Report on Terminal and Transportation Study for Rockefeller Center," July 17, 1934, folder 714, box 95, series C, OMR, RAC, 9.
42. Fredric Jameson, "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 174. On relationships between urbanisation and the periphery, see, for example, William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991).
43. Rockefeller, et al., "Progress Report," 7.
44. L. Alfred Jenny quoted in Randall Norris, "Looking Forward: An Audience Hears of 1800's Transit Slowing 1935 Jersey," *Bergen Evening Record*, April 9, 1935.
45. See Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930—Population, vol. III, part 2, 845–80.
46. The 1930 census did not report median income, but Bergen County's median home value was 25% higher than the median value in New Jersey (US$9,270 versus US$7,426) and almost twice the value nationwide (US$4,778). The median home value in Hudson County was US$8,997 and in Passaic, US$7,351. See *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930—Population*, vol. VI, 864–65.
47. L. Alfred Jenny quoted in Norris, "Looking Forward."
48. See Robert Fishman, "The Regional Plan and the Transformation of the Industrial Metropolis," in *The Landscape of Modernity: New York City, 1900–1940*, ed. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 106–23.
49. Thomas Adams, et al., *Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 1, *The Graphic Regional Plan* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1929), 149.
50. Thomas Adams, foreword to Robert Murray Haig and Roswell C. McCrea, *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 1, *Major Economic Factors in Metropolitan Growth and Arrangement* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1927), 4.
51. Harold M. Lewis, *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 4, *Transit and Transportation* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1928), 151.
52. Lewis, *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 4, 150.
53. Lewis, *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 4, 153.

54. Lewis, *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 4, 63, 58.
55. See Theodore Steinberg, *Gotham Unbound: An Ecological History of Greater New York, from Henry Hudson to Hurricane Sandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 259–80.
56. Jenny and Co., untitled report to Todd, Robertson & Todd, 12; Rockefeller, et al., "Progress Report," 10.
57. Rockefeller, et al., "Progress Report," 7.
58. The uptown terminus for the D Train on the Sixth Avenue Line is the 205th Street station in Norwood, also called Bainbridge, in the Bronx. Forest Hills sits near the Queens terminus of the F Train. See Clifton Hood, *722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 181–213.
59. See Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21–68.
60. See Elizabeth Hawes, *New York, New York: How the Apartment House Transformed the Life of the City (1869–1930)* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), 188–242.
61. Kenneth M. Murchison, "Beaux Arts Studio Apartments, New York: Designed, Financed and Built By Architects," *American Architect* 137, no. 2581 (March 1930): 26.
62. "Beaux Arts Tenants," *New York Times*, July 27, 1930, 139.
63. "Beaux Arts Tenants," 139.
64. See "Beaux Arts Tenants," 139; Lockwood Greene, "Suggestions Regarding Transportation Studies Affecting Rockefeller Center," 2.
65. See Lockwood Greene, "Suggestions Regarding Transportation Studies Affecting Rockefeller Center," 2. On opposition to public bus routes, see Charles O. Heydt to W. J. Scanlan, November 6, 1930; Charles O. Heydt to Hugh S. Robertson, October 23, 1930; and Robertson to Heydt, October 28, 1930, folder 511, box 68, series C, OMR, RAC.
66. Adams et al., *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 6, 158.
67. Adams et al., *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, vol. 6, 157–58.
68. Lewis Mumford, "The Skyline: Modernity and Commerce," *New Yorker*, October 3, 1936, 47.
69. Mumford, "The Skyline," 48.
70. "Rockefeller Apartments," *Architectural Forum* 66, no. 1 (January 1937): 5.
71. "Rockefeller Apartments," 5.
72. "Rockefeller Apartments," 5, 7.
73. Wallace K. Harrison, "Suggested article to appear in Rock[efeller] Center Weekly, 3–12–36," attachment to a letter from Harrison to K. Andrews, Publicity Department, Rockefeller Center, Inc., March 13, 1936, folder 1, box 2, subseries 1 (Professional Papers), series II (Collection II: 1989.003), Wallace K. Harrison Architectural Drawings and Papers (1913–1986), Department of Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
74. Harrison, "Suggested article to appear in Rock[efeller] Center Weekly."
75. Nelson A. Rockefeller quoted in "Nelson Rockefeller Warns Real Estate to Check Business Decentralization," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 21, 1936, 1.
76. See Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 157–59; Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 155–60.
77. Fishman, "The Regional Plan," 119.
78. "Building No. 11, Rockefeller Center, New York," *Architectural Forum* 72, no. 1 (January 1940): 27.
79. Nelson A. Rockefeller to Robert K. Straus, December 22, 1939, folder 595, box 79, series C, OMR, RAC.