

# PROFILES

## ARCHITECT

—YOU'RE LUCKY IF YOU CAN COME CLOSE

IN July, 1926, the League of Nations, having decided to build itself a palace in Geneva, invited all the architects in the countries constituting its far-flung membership to submit designs for such a structure, in a competition to be judged by an international committee of experts in the field. By January, 1927, when the competition closed, three hundred and seventy-seven architects had submitted some ten thousand designs. The judges then held a series of meetings in an attempt to come to a unanimous agreement on the best plan. During their first sixty-four sessions, they were unable to reach a decision, although a plan submitted by Charles Le Corbusier, the French functionalist, regularly received more votes than any other. At the sixty-fifth session, Le Corbusier's plan was disqualified, on the technicality, perhaps politically inspired, that it had been drawn in printer's ink, and not in China ink, as the terms of the competition had stipulated. Then the judges went on to proclaim nine architects (including, paradoxically, Le Corbusier) co-winners of the contest, confused things a little more by announcing that none of their plans would be used, and wound up by handing what had become a very hot potato indeed to a committee of five supposedly experienced diplomats, who hardly lived up to their advance billing by first selecting a team of experts to advise them, then rejecting their advice, and, in the end, hand-picking four architects, not including Le Corbusier, to collaborate on an entirely new design for the palace. The building, an anti-septically conservative one that nobody was happy about, was finally opened in September, 1934—seven years after the wrangle began. Since the League's dispiriting failure to get its own house in order, to say nothing of the world's, is still vivid in the minds of statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic, a good many of them feel that the most spectacular feature of the permanent headquarters of the United Nations, on the East River, is that the members of its international board of design—seventeen architects, from fifteen countries, among them two Russians, a Brazilian Communist, and the controversial Le Corbusier—unanimously arrived at a plan in four months and in a rare state of harmony. The major credit for this

achievement is generally accorded to the leadership of the American architect Wallace Kirkman Harrison as chairman of the board of design and director of planning for the United Nations headquarters. Under Harrison's direction, the three buildings that constitute the headquarters were up and ready for occupancy just four years and one month after ground was broken for the first of them. Their total cost exceeded by only two and a half million dollars the original appropriation of sixty-five million—a considerable feat in view of the fact that the price of building materials rose about twenty per cent during the period of construction.

A hearty, intense, strong-featured New Englander of fifty-nine, who stands a bulky six feet two, shambles like a small-town mailman, and, whether he is talking English, French, or Spanish, still speaks in the undefiled accents of his native Massachusetts, Harrison, up until he achieved his recent celebrity as the U.N.'s architect-in-chief, was largely unknown outside architectural circles, although over the past quarter of a century he has been a partner in firms that have built some seven hundred million dollars' worth of assorted structures. Among these are all but one of the fifteen components of Rockefeller Center; the Trylon and Perisphere at the New York World's Fair, in Flushing Meadow; the Hunter College building on Park Avenue; the African Habitat, at the New York Zoological Park; additions to the Bush Building, in London; submarine and air bases for the United States Navy, at Coco Solo, in the Canal Zone; the remodelled Lenthéric store, on Fifth Avenue; a batch of garages for New York City's Department of Sanitation; the Hotel Avila, in Caracas; the Eastchester housing development, in the Bronx; Oberlin College's auditorium; the Republic National Bank Building, in Dallas; the United States embassies in Havana and Rio de Janeiro; and two office buildings that went up not long ago in Pittsburgh—one, thirty-nine stories high, for the Mellon Bank and the United States Steel Corporation, and the other, thirty stories high, for the Aluminum Company of America.

Much in the pattern of those recurrent Marquand characters who, though saturated with integrity, are neverthe-



Wallace Harrison

less constantly fretful about not having enough of it, Harrison is careful whenever he is singled out for admiration as the fellow who built the U.N. to call attention to at least a dozen of the specialists who were associated with him on the project, but at the same time he insists on accepting full responsibility whenever the buildings are criticized. And there has been plenty of criticism, for no other contemporary architectural enterprise has provoked such extreme differences of opinion as the United Nations headquarters group—the Secretariat Building, the Conference Building, and the General Assembly Building. Those in favor have called the most prominent building in the group—the slab-shaped Secretariat—"a masterly example of the power of architecture to express monumentality" and "a triumph of unadorned proportion," and one of them has referred to the group as a whole as nothing less than "a segment of man's dreams made visible." Those opposed have been equally eloquent. They have denounced the Secretariat as, among other things, "a sandwich on end," "a sinister emblem of world power," and "a bop-sized TV screen that no one can dig," and the entire setup as "a colossal botch," "a spiritual cipher," and "a collection of clichés from the dead past and the dead present." Harrison has managed to parry most of these thrusts gracefully, but in the case of a prolonged attack by Lewis Mumford, a critic for whom he has great respect, he has periodically shown signs of feeling the sting. Even so, he has managed to keep his equanimity. Shortly after Mumford publicly declared that if the United Nations succeeded in be-



*"Alfred! What happened to the Crusade?"*

coming an effective organization for world government, it would be in spite of, and not because of, the architecture of its permanent headquarters, the editor of the *Sunday Times* book-review section sent Harrison a pre-publication copy of a book edited by Mumford, "Roots of Contemporary American Architecture," along with a letter asking him if he would care to review it. Harrison's secretary of many years' standing, Mrs. Bernadette O'Toole, put these on his desk, adding a note of her own at the foot of the letter: "Everything comes to him who waits." Harrison's first impulse was to send the book back for somebody else to review, because he was afraid that he could not be objective about it, but he

changed his mind when he read it that night, and the next morning, pacing his office like an angry moose, he dictated a long, slashing diatribe. Mrs. O'Toole read it back to him. "O.K.," Harrison said crisply. "That's perfect. Now tear it up." He then sat down and dictated a rather generous review.

**I**N a profession studded with gaudily iridescent temperaments, Harrison's basic restraint and stability give him a curious individuality. They also help to explain his success. "In this world, you can find all the brilliant minds you want, but the Wally Harrisons—brilliant people who are also completely reliable—are a rare commodity," Beardsley Ruml, a friend of Harrison's who is a

connoisseur of commerce rather than of architecture, said recently. "Wally can get along with people, a wide variety of people. For another thing, he understands money and has a sense of responsibility about it. On top of this, he's a clearheaded administrator, so capable that he was able to run the Office of Inter-American Affairs toward the end of the war. You can work with Wally Harrison." In the judgment of Nelson Rockefeller, Harrison's only true eccentricity is his independence. Harrison and Rockefeller, who have been close friends for over twenty years, first met in the embryonic days of Rockefeller Center, with which they were concerned as a young architect and a young son, respectively. "The first time I became aware of Wally," Rockefeller has recalled, "was the day I went along with Father when he met with the seven architects who were designing the Center to talk over how the exterior of the R.C.A. Building should be handled. Well, Father was accustomed to buildings that had fluted columns or Gothic arches marching up their sides, and he was outlining his ideas on that subject. The architects all listened until Father had finished, and then Wally exploded. 'God-dam it, Mr. Rockefeller, you can't do that!' he said. 'You'll ruin the building if you cover up its lines with that classical gingerbread.' Mind you, Wally was the youngest of the architects present, and it would

have been easy for him to have played it safe."

Harrison's reputation as a man of incorruptible principle towers so high that it tends to obscure his considerable creative powers. As an architect, he belongs to no school or movement. "Perhaps you might call him a perpetual progressive," says Max Abramovitz, his partner in the firm of Harrison & Abramovitz. "The question Wally is always asking himself and everybody else is 'Where do we go from here?' He's always searching for a better design to express the function of a building. He's always on the lookout for new materials that will make new designs practicable." By way of corroborating this statement,

## Cream in the Coffee

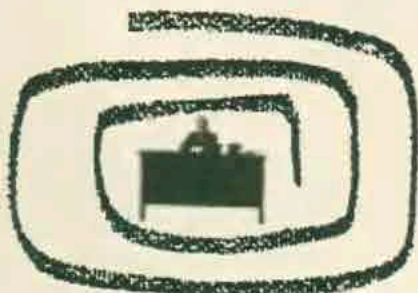
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(Advertisement)

Abramovitz cites the fact that the Secretariat was the first building in the world to have windows made of heat-resistant glass; it started the present vogue for exteriors that give the effect of being a single huge window. Harrison is inclined to minimize the independent streak that others see in him. "There's no building that isn't designed by the client," he says. "The amount of beauty an architect can achieve is always limited by the amount of imagination and feeling for beauty the client has in his system. Most clients haven't got much, or else what they have is buried deep beneath their conservative commercial instincts. Here's the way it figures most of the time: In the designing stage, when you're trying to interest the client in a new idea, he thinks you're a crackpot. Say it's a new kind of door. The client won't touch it unless you can take him over to some building that's already up and show him a door exactly like it. Then, when the client finally gets into his own building and you've given him the door he asked for and nothing new he can boast about, you're just a no-good, lousy carpenter." In the case of the Aluminum Company of America, however, Harrison & Abramovitz had a client who was far from reluctant about going along with them on at least one phase of experimental design—an exploration of the various possible uses of aluminum in construction—and in consequence, the Alcoa Building, in Pittsburgh, is undoubtedly one of the most revolutionary office buildings of the past two decades; not only its ceilings, stairs, window frames, air-conditioning equipment, lighting fixtures, piping, and hardware are made of aluminum, but even its exterior walls. According to the Alcoa people, it weighs less than any other building of its size in the world and may well be the most weatherproof.

Along with his standing as an expert on tall, trim, down-to-their-fighting-weight office buildings, Harrison is also preëminent in a field that at first might seem to be an altogether antithetical aspect of architecture. Over the past quarter of a century, the firms he has been associated with have led the way in paying more than the customary lip service to the view that architecture should embrace painting and sculpture as kindred arts. Calder, Archipenko, Gabo, Léger, Noguchi, Lachaise, Manship, Ozenfant, Rivera, and Callery are a few of the well-known painters and sculptors Harrison has commissioned to ornament his buildings. His enthusiasm for modern art would ap-



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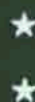
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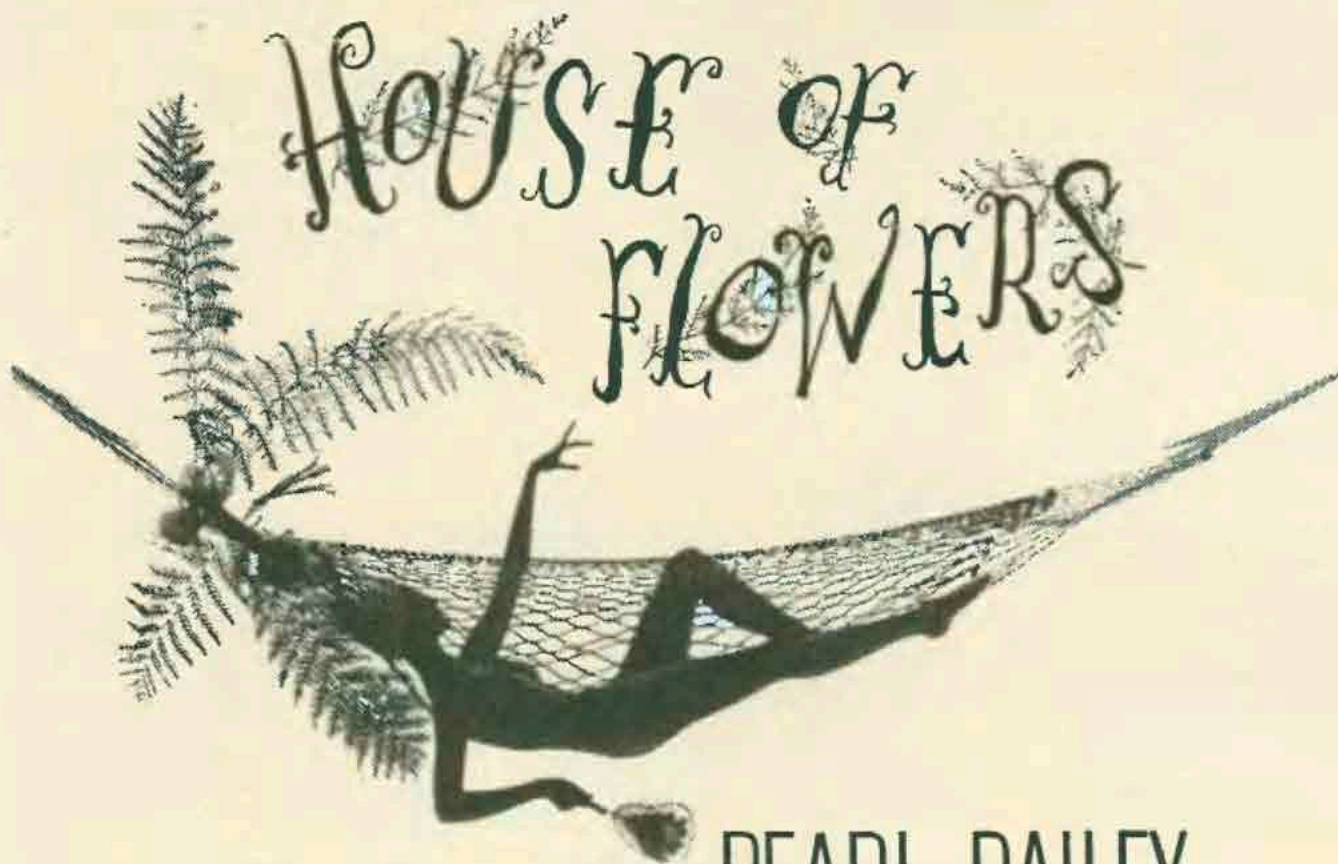
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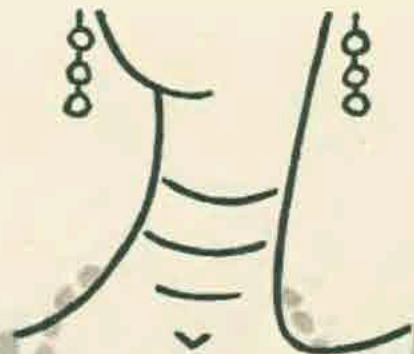
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pear to be simply a triumph of exposure to it for thirty-five years ago, when, as a young Yankee, he found himself in the wilderness of Paris, he couldn't see the stuff at all. Now, having overcome his prejudice to the point where he paints a pretty enigmatic abstract himself from time to time, and finds a Calder mobile called "Snowfall" a restful note in his bedroom, he is out to convert others, and often sends mobiles and extremely modern paintings to Midwestern businessmen he has had dealings with, asking them to live with the pieces for a while and see if they don't find them as comfortable as an old pair of flannels. A few years ago, in a rather similar missionary mood, Harrison tucked a fine Picasso under his arm and paid a call on Trygve Lie, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, to discuss the interior decoration of the organization's new headquarters. After a brief preamble in which he explained how, to his mind, Picasso's work embodied the aesthetic qualities the new buildings should express, Harrison uncovered the painting with a flourish and stepped back to admire it. "Just imagine," he said reverently. "Picasso painted that in one day and thought nothing of it!" "Neither do I," Lie responded shortly. There are no Picassos at the U.N.

Harrison surrounds himself with contemporary art at home. He and his wife, the former Ellen Hunt Milton, have a six-room, fifth-floor apartment on Fifth Avenue, in the Sixties, which is so filled with modern paintings they have bought, with copies of Légers painted by Mrs. Harrison, and with Picassos that the Harrisons' friends have lent them that it might almost be taken for an uptown branch of the Museum of Modern Art. Much as Harrison admires this setting, however, he finds that he can both enjoy himself and work better at a year-round country house he owns at Huntington, Long Island, where most of the time he dresses in a T-shirt and a soiled pair of trousers held up by a rope belt. This house is forever reminding visitors that it is the shoemaker's son who wears sneakers, for it is a seemingly aimless hodgepodge of three buildings, and, looking at it, one finds it hard to believe that its owner has designed a dozen or more beautiful private houses for other people. The first of the three constituent buildings of the Huntington house to go up was a rectangular one made of aluminum sheeting. Designed by Kocher & Fry, it was the principal attraction at an architectural exhibition that was held



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in Grand Central Palace in 1934; when the exhibition was over, no one could think what to do with the house, so Harrison bought it, for fifteen hundred dollars, and had it lugged to a sixteen-acre piece of property he owned in Huntington, where it was reassembled. Dadaistic, if anything, in design, "the tin house," as the Harrisons have always called it, offers such conveniences as an exposed drainpipe that runs down from an upstairs bathroom into the center of the living room, where it becomes one of the legs of a built-in dining table and then disappears into the floor. This house proved to be icy in winter and torrid in summer, and after struggling along with it for a couple of years Harrison built on a four-room cottagelike wing, made of Transite and wood, which, while not very handsome, is at least habitable. In 1939, he added "the new living room"—a vast, modern, circular thing, thirty feet in diameter and fifteen feet high, with white cement-block walls, on which Mrs. Harrison has painted a mural copied from a design by Léger. While this triple-scoop concoction occasionally shakes the faith of prospective clients the first time they see it, it is home to Harrison, and sooner or later they learn to put up with it.

Compared to Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and several of his other prominent fellow-architects, who have a penchant for Olympian comment on all topics and a weakness for turning any tête-à-tête into a filibuster, Harrison is a quiet man. In his own way, though, he can be fairly eloquent. Preoccupied with the realization that most people never achieve all they aspire to, he has a way of thinking and talking about the average man in sympathetic diminutives—sometimes as "the little fellow next door," sometimes as "the hard-pressed little bastard," but usually as just "the little guy." (These expressions, as Harrison uses them, convey a feeling quite the opposite of that other sympathetic diminutive, "the little man," as it was used so patronizingly a few years back.) When the little guy gets on Harrison's mind, it is hard to get him off. One morning not long ago, he was kicking around the philosophy of his profession with a young architectural graduate of the Yale School of Fine Arts, who had come to see him at his office, in the International Building, in Rockefeller Center, when he received an urgent call from Abramovitz. Excusing himself, Harrison joined his partner in a conference room, where the two worked out some revisions in the windbracing for

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**"Tallulah's dynamite"**  
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a new building their firm is designing—the Socony-Vacuum Building, which is to cover the entire block bounded by Third and Lexington Avenues and Forty-first and Forty-second Streets. Harrison returned to his visitor some twenty minutes later. "And that's the crux of it," he said immediately, speaking as offhandedly as if he had never left the office. "Should the temple be on the hill, or should you walk down to it? All through history, man has put most of his public buildings up on the hill, to give them an air of size and scope. It can be dangerous. Most of the time, the building takes on an impersonal feeling. The little guy goes up the hill to it less and less frequently, and after a while he has no connection with it at all. The building becomes an inanimate symbol of authority. All right, we know that's lousy, so we'll build the temple in the market place. But is it going to have the dignity down there that the little guy wants it to have? After all, he wants something he can look up to and put his faith in. It's quite a problem. Where the hell *do* we build it?"

Confronted by some of the less metaphysical aspects of his profession, Harrison often grows equally concerned. "Each time you set out on a new building, you try to make it as nearly perfect as possible," he said one day last spring to a group of friends with whom he was having an after-work drink in a bar near his office. "You know it won't *be* perfect. You're lucky if you can come close. I think maybe we did come close with Rockefeller Center. Some of its buildings are twenty years old now, but they have every major facility the newest buildings have except air-conditioning, which is something no one knew much about when we designed them. In any event, you make your mistakes and you try to profit from them the next time. I remember when my wife and I were in Italy a few summers ago, looking at everything by Michelangelo that we could find, and we came on his 'Pietà.' It's a really bad piece of sculpture, no two ways about it. Stack it up alongside the 'David' or some of his things in the Sistine Chapel, and it has no meaning, no guts at all. You feel a little better when you discover that even the greatest artist in history could botch a job now and then." Harrison took his ball-point drawing pen from his pocket and reached for a paper napkin. "I think it helps to work in America," he went on, doodling odd geometric shapes on the napkin. "There's something about this country that makes you realize you can't build a perfect building; you'd get

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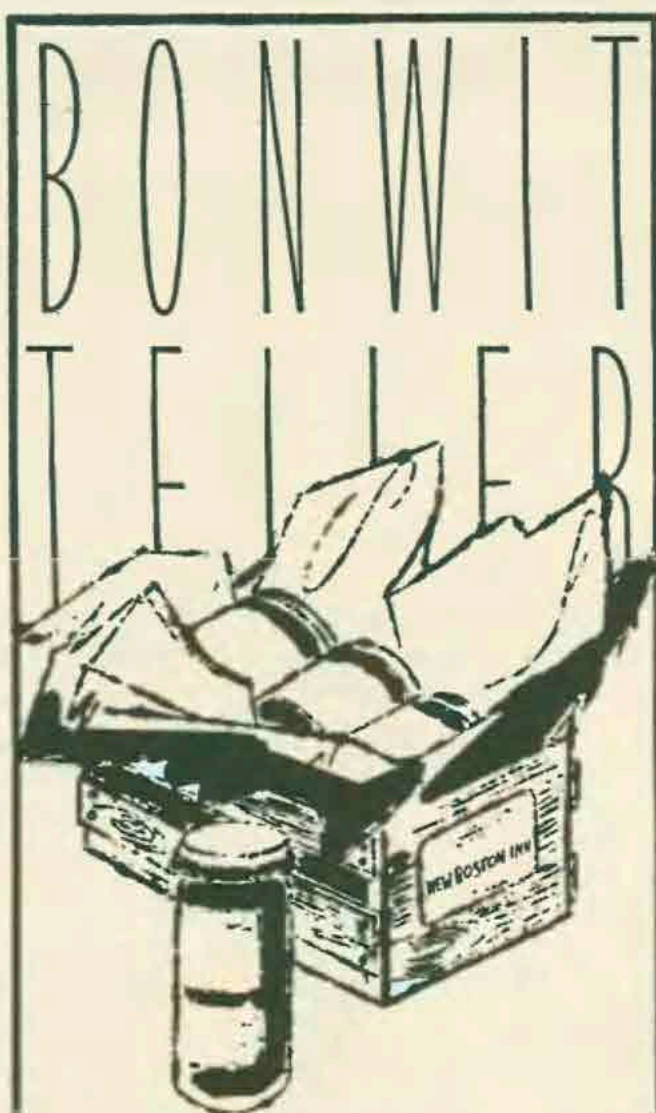
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**H**ARRISON was born in Worcester in 1895, the only child of James and Rachel Kirkman Harrison. The Harrison and Kirkman families both originated in Yorkshire. The Kirkmans had been engravers as far back as anyone knew; they took the English industrial revolution in their stride by engraving the rollers that stamped prints on the cotton fabrics manufactured in the mills of Yorkshire and Lancashire. The Harrisons had followed various trades. James Harrison started as a molder in a Worcester iron foundry and rose to be superintendent of Rice & Barton & Falls, a combination foundry and machine shop. Young Harrison grew up at a time when the pleasures of the classic Twain-Riley American boyhood had not yet quite vanished from the fringes of Eastern cities. "Where we lived in Worcester, you couldn't tell the streets from the fields," Harrison has recalled. "It was a fine life. We fooled around with all the sports in their seasons. We made skis out of old hockey sticks. In the summers, we swam, and fished for pickerel and perch in Coe's Pond." When Harrison was fourteen,

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his mother died unexpectedly. "I just can't describe what a blow that was to my father and me," Harrison says. "I know I lived with my father for a while after that, but whether it was three months or a year, I really have no idea. I guess you would say I was in a state of prolonged shock. All I knew was that I had to do something and do it quick. I was a freshman in high school at the time, and I decided the best thing to do would be to leave school and get a job. A friend of my family's knew a contractor named O. W. Norcross, who had an opening for an office boy, at five dollars a week. That's how I got into architecture—I needed work. After a while, my father left Worcester and started moving from job to job, so I went to room with the head office boy—a chap named Harry Winchester. Harry and I would get up at six-thirty, rush to eat breakfast, rush to see who could get to the office first—push, hustle, and compete all day. Then we'd rush home and stick our feet up on the stove and see who could get the most out of books, with Harry always a step ahead of me." After Harrison had been with Norcross for two years, his salary was raised to nine dollars a week, and around that time he also got his first architectural training, when he was assigned to draw some diagrams that would indicate to a stonemason the size and shape of the stones he should supply for an architrave—the molded frame around a door or window. Four years after starting work, Harrison left Norcross to join the Worcester architectural firm of Frost & Chamberlain as a junior draftsman. While there, he enrolled for a series of night courses in structural engineering at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, egged on by a restlessness that found its objective when an imposing modern office building designed by a New York firm went up on the edge of Worcester Common. "It was that building that made it plain to me where I wanted to be—with the people who did that sort of work," Harrison says. "When I switched from Norcross to Frost & Chamberlain, I thought I'd find out the reasons things were done the way they were. At Norcross, no one could tell me why an architrave had to be one-sixth the width of the opening. That was the way architraves were done, they looked best that way—that was all they could tell me. And when I asked at Frost & Chamberlain how the proportions of an architrave had been determined, they'd tell me that those were the proportions prescribed by McIntire or by some book on architectural

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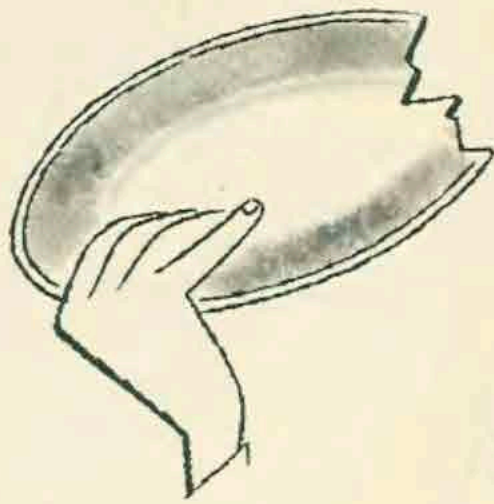
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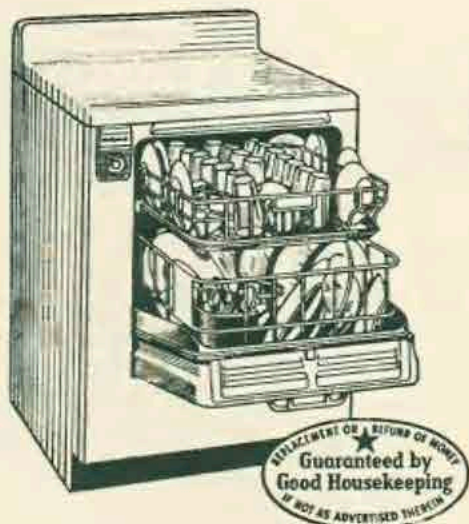
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standards. That didn't satisfy me, either. Surely, I figured, there were better reasons for doing or not doing a thing a certain way."

In the summer of 1916, when Harrison was twenty and had saved up thirty-five dollars, he came to New York and moved into a rooming house on West Twenty-third Street. Unencumbered by letters of introduction, he walked into the offices of McKim, Mead & White, the most famous architectural firm in the country at the time, and succeeded in getting an interview with its chief designer, William Mitchell Kendall. "Kendall told me there were no openings for draftsmen," Harrison says. "So I asked him if he'd let me work for nothing. That's youth for you—I had only about twenty dollars left in my pocket. Anyhow, Kendall told me to come back in a day or two, and when I did, he put me to work helping a man get up a book of drawings of hospitals. A couple of weeks later, they hired me at twenty a week."

Since American schools of architecture at that time were rather rickety institutions, Harrison, on the advice of some of his associates at McKim, Mead & White, began attending an atelier for architects directed by Harvey Wiley Corbett. There were three ateliers in New York in those days; one of the others was directed by Frederic C. Hirons and the third was conducted as an adjunct of the Columbia University School of Architecture. These ateliers had been established about twenty years earlier by a number of American architects who had imported the idea from Paris after studying there at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, which since the seventeenth century had been acknowledged to be the world center of architectural thought. The first Parisian ateliers were set up by groups of wealthy students who disliked the idea of attending lectures with the rank and file at inconvenient hours, and, instead, hired a loft and paid some winner of the Beaux-Arts' Grand Prix to serve as their *maître*. Over the years, atelier life became severely disciplined and developed an atmosphere about as gay as that at an Officer Candidate School, and the same came to be true of the ateliers in New York. The membership consisted of the *nouveaux* and the *anciens*, the latter being upperclassmen who had been in the atelier two years or more and were supposed to be already partially endowed with the wisdom of the *maître*. Assisting the *maître* was the *massier*—an upperclassman elected by his fellow-*anciens*—

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who had dictatorial powers over the *nouveaux*, and submitted them to the sort of hazing that is common to student life everywhere. Meanwhile, everyone would collaborate feverishly on some architectural *projet*—the plans and specifications for a Loire château, perhaps, or for a railroad station. Whatever the limitations of this inbred system may have been, atelier life encouraged a hardy *esprit de corps*, it gave the members lasting lessons in architectural design, and, transplanted to this country, it provided students with a much better working background than they could hope to pick up at any of the domestic schools.

Upon enrolling as a *nouveau* in Corbett's atelier, Harrison found himself the slave of a gruelling schedule. He would finish work at McKim's at five, grab a bite to eat at a quick-lunch counter, and show up by five-thirty at the atelier, which was on West Thirty-sixth Street, on the fourth floor of the building occupied by Keen's Chop House. There he would spend three or four hours at his drawing board, along with the other students, who were either graduates of architectural schools or, like him, draftsmen intent on developing their skill. Corbett, a lean, talkative Californian, preached the doctrine that architecture must have thrill and appeal, but as he made his way from drawing board to drawing board, criticizing the work of the students, he emphasized that it must also provide space and convenience. "He was the first person to give me the answers I'd been looking for," Harrison says. "He taught us the why of things, and if there wasn't any good reason for things being as tradition ruled they should be, he said so. You couldn't get that kind of answer at McKim's. McKim, Mead & White were the best—and the end—of the Renaissance. The firm stopped there. In McKim buildings like the Morgan Library and the University Club, you get the Italians' richness of surface and their modifications of the Greek proportions. That was what McKim's style was, really—a catalogue of the strong points of the great Renaissance Italians. Say you were designing a private building and were going to provide it with an elaborate hedge of trees, shrubbery, and flowers. At McKim's, you would always be referred to the hedges Lippi did for the Villa Medici. It was taken for granted that Lippi's dimensions were the best dimensions for hedges. Corbett's approach was different. I used to walk home from the atelier with him, and he'd spout away on the good and bad aspects of the buildings we passed. He'd

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point to the columns McKim's did for Penn Station, for instance, and explain that the firm had narrowed the spaces between them at each end of the building to give it the illusion of sturdiness. But Corbett thought it was carrying the Renaissance much too far to make taxicabs swerve between pillars to get in and out of the station. Other evenings, we'd walk over to Grand Central, and Corbett would point out why he thought its plan was superior to Penn Station's. Whitney Warren, the architect of Grand Central, provided more entrances, of course, and placed them in such a way that traffic moves in and out of the station more easily."

Harrison had been following this tight routine for about three months when, at the suggestion of his minister in Worcester, an old friend with whom he had kept up a correspondence, he moved from his Twenty-third Street rooming house to the parish house of the Calvary Episcopal Church, then at 194 East Twenty-second Street. He found the change much to his liking. "The young curates were a great bunch, full of pep and interested in everything," he says. "There was lively talk at every meal. Living there made me realize that there were other kinds of riches besides those of my monastical architectural world."

THE United States was drawing near to war. As a young man of military age, Harrison signed up for a weekly class in navigation at Columbia and became a member of the Naval Coastal Defense Reserve. His turn came in July, 1917, when he was called to active duty as a quartermaster second class. Soon afterward, he was commissioned an ensign and assigned to Submarine Chaser-80 as second-in-command to Lieutenant Walter Blumenthal, a member of the New York banking family, who was then two years out of Yale. A wooden ship, a hundred and ten feet long, with a fifteen-foot beam, and capable of ten knots (assuming there was a stiff following wind), the SC-80 astounded its two young officers by crossing the Atlantic without serious mishap and was then assigned to the Otranto Barrage. This was the name given to an operation in which thirty-six American, French, and English vessels, most of them no speedier than the SC-80, patrolled the Strait of Otranto, a forty-five-mile strip between Cape Linguetta, in Albania, and the tip of the heel of Italy, in an effort to prevent Austrian submarines based at Fiume, four hundred miles north, from

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breaking out of the Adriatic into the Mediterranean. The flotilla put on a surprisingly good show, sinking two subs for sure and scoring thirteen probables, and in the end further distinguished itself by intercepting on its radio the Austrian plea for an armistice. The SC-80 was thereupon ordered to proceed to Cattaro, on the Dalmatian coast, where its two officers were empowered to act as the American representatives at the armistice talks until more experienced men could be summoned to take over. Blumenthal and Harrison lived high off the *kebab* during the two months they spent in Cattaro, and Harrison found the assignment so pleasant that although he doesn't ordinarily care for souvenirs, he still keeps a square of blue, white, and red striped oilcloth that was part of one of the earliest flags of the nation of Yugoslavia, which was born at the armistice conference.

In February, thanks to the limitations of the SC-80, Harrison got his first glimpse of Paris. United States Naval Headquarters for the Mediterranean, at Malta, feared that the wintry Atlantic would be too much for the pint-sized subchaser, and ordered the ship to wait until spring before attempting the home crossing. While hibernating, the SC-80 put into Marseille for a week, which enabled Harrison to go up to Paris on a four-day leave. He spent most of his time there studying the workings of the Beaux-Arts, and returned to his ship determined to become a student at the school as soon as possible. "I could see that it was absolutely necessary for me to go there for an education," Harrison says. "For the first time in my life, I wasn't broke. I'd saved up over a thousand dollars in the Navy. The only catch would be getting into the Beaux-Arts. The admission exam has always been pretty brutal. In my day, it lasted twelve hours, and you had to make a grade of seventy to pass. Most of the candidates spent six months in a preparatory atelier before they took the exam. Apparently, the object of the school was to see not how many students it could get but how few."

With the coming of spring, the SC-80 crawled back across the Atlantic, and on July 19, 1919, Harrison was discharged. For the next couple of months, he bolstered his Navy savings by working at McKim's, and attended some mathematics classes at Columbia in preparation for the Beaux-Arts examination. In October, he went to Paris, took the examination, passed it comfortably, found himself a cheap room on the Rue Jacob and a cheap restau-

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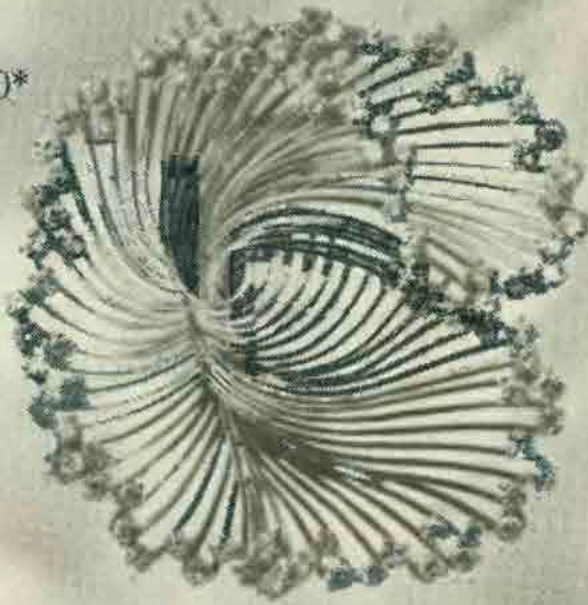
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rant specializing in bean soup, and settled down to a year of study in an atelier presided over by Gustave Umbdenstock. "Boy, we were serious about our opinions in those days!" Harrison says. "I remember getting all steamed up at a café one night and breaking my glass of wine as I slammed it down on the table to drive home some point I was making about closet space. I was sort of a traditionalist in those days. Even such a moderate innovation as using large glass windows on the ground floor of a building made no sense to me, because it gave me the feeling the building didn't have sufficient support. I gradually learned to appreciate what the revolutionaries like Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, and Le Corbusier were getting at, and, of course, they were right about many important matters, including some of their criticisms of the Beaux-Arts. You can overrefine and oversystematize the life out of anything, and Beaux-Arts thinking had a tendency to do just that. Still, it seems to me the modernists went too far in their wholesale censuring of the approach the Beaux-Arts stood for. Now, you take old Umbdenstock. He was a hell of a guy, one of those old-timers with the authentic rational spirit that's peculiar to a certain type of Frenchman—a type, incidentally, that's getting rarer and rarer. He must have been over sixty then, a gruff old fellow with a shaggy Clemenceau mustache. At the atelier, he always wore an old, dented derby. He'd walk around the studio—there were about thirty of us—and rip us apart, one by one. He'd just scare you to death. Then he'd talk about balance and imbalance, and the qualities of *poché* in a plan. That was Umbdenstock's big word: *poché*, *poché*, *poché*—the reason and order that lie behind even the most minute phases of planning. You find *poché* in the Paris Opera House and the Bibliothèque Nationale—the best buildings that Beaux-Arts architects ever produced. There's something to the Beaux-Arts approach, too. You really can't dismiss all traditional building with glib avant-garde phrases."

Back in New York after his year at the Beaux-Arts, Harrison worked for a few months with McKim and then got a job as a draftsman with a firm headed by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. The next year, he won a Rotch Travelling Scholarship, offered to architects who have either studied or practiced in Massachusetts, and with this he spent a few more months at the Beaux-Arts and toured various centers of ancient culture, examining their architectural wonders at first hand and pondering what



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they had to offer a contemporary designer. He made five principal stops, after picking out in advance one building, or ruin of a building, that he especially wanted to study at each of them: in Egypt, the temple of Luxor, the most complete of the remains of the colossal buildings that once stood on the plains of Thebes; in Athens, the Propylaea, the colonnaded gateway to the Acropolis; in Syria, the temple group at Baalbek, which his friends had raved about—and rightly, he decided—as the ultimate in Roman grandeur; in Arles, the Church of St. Trophime, whose twelfth-century Romanesque portico Goodhue adapted for St. Bartholomew's, in New York; and in Chartres, the Gothic cathedral. Harrison camped at each of these sites for six or eight weeks, soaking in the building's atmosphere, clambering over the structure from top to bottom, checking its dimensions with a measuring tape, sketching its ornamental details, and making elaborate drawings of it from every angle. He originally intended to give this same full treatment to St. Sofia, in Constantinople, but when he got there, the mosque left him cold, and he didn't even bother to take his measuring tape out of his pocket.

The trip made an enduring impression on the young pilgrim. Although Harrison has never translated any period structure as literally as Goodhue translated the portico of St. Trophime, he has frequently adapted ancient ideas to modern uses. Twenty-nine years after studying the temple of Luxor, for example, he borrowed from the Egyptians in devising a method of lighting the Corning Glass Works' display center, in Corning, New York. "The Corning people wanted a setup in which they could show off their wares effectively to the visiting public," Harrison says. "In the building we worked out for them, the visitor walks from one display room into another, and from one kind of light into another. The key is the dramatic handling of light, and no one has ever improved on the Egyptians in that department. The architect of a temple like Luxor was out to work on the eye of the beholder, like Cinemascope—trying to stagger you with contrasts, and doing it. At Luxor, you begin by walking down a double row of lions with intermittent patches of light. Then the architect plops you into a courtyard flooded with that blinding Egyptian sunlight. You walk across that courtyard—it's as big as the Piazza of St. Mark's—and enter a hall, a closed arcade of columns, each sixty feet high

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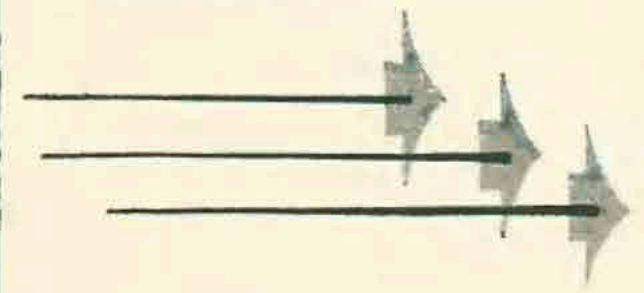
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and ten feet in diameter, with a faint light sifting down among them from the clerestory windows. You walk through this hall for quite a while—just how long a time you probably have no idea—and a feeling of awe and of separation from life rises inside you. You emerge into another courtyard—another rectangle of harsh sunlight—and then move forward into a sombre, shut-in passageway, and this grows narrower and darker until, suddenly, you're there, standing in the holy of holies—a pitch-black room with one minute shaft of light, like a spotlight, streaking through a six-inch hole in the granite ceiling and picking up the climax, which is the figure of the Cat God."

**R**ETURNING to New York in 1922, Harrison rejoined the Goodhue firm. Goodhue was a conscientious idealist who treated his employees like self-respecting guildsmen, allowing them lunch hours of Gothic proportions, so that if they wished, they could take in an art exhibit or some similar cultural liqueur before returning to the office; he even went so far as to have his staff present an annual Twelfth-night play, following the custom in the building trade during the Middle Ages. As an architect, Goodhue did not think primarily in terms of style; his position, when he took one, was roughly midway between that of McKim's, with its devotion to the cinquecento, and that of the young functionalist extremists, who wanted to tear down Paris, Rome, and even Stonehenge, and rebuild them from the ground up with proper fenestration. "Goodhue was an eclectic, and that's supposed to be the most damning word in the lexicon of the modernists," Harrison says. "But whether he was doing a classical public structure, like the National Academy of Sciences Building, in Washington, or putting up a Gothic church, like St. Thomas, on Fifth Avenue, or striking out on his own, as he did in the Los Angeles Public Library and the Nebraska State Capitol, his work showed taste and care and originality. The inscription on his memorial in the Chapel of the Intercession of Trinity Parish, here in New York, reads, 'He touched nothing which he did not beautify.' There can't be any argument with that."

In the interests of efficiency, Goodhue's staff was divided into two groups of specialists—one Gothic, the other classical. Harrison was a classical man, having been hired specifically to superintend the construction of the National Academy of Sciences Building, in which

Goodhue sought to endow an up-to-date plan with an Athenian tranquility. The Academy of Sciences Building, which Harrison worked on for about two years, turned out well—so well, in fact, that it later served as a guide, and sometimes as a blueprint, for architects all over the country who were commissioned to design “modernized-classical” courthouses, libraries, galleries, and other public buildings. From time to time, Harrison was taken off the Academy of Sciences Building in order to help work out the designs for the tower of the Nebraska State Capitol, since it was Goodhue’s policy to call in outside men occasionally to get a fresh point of view on some phase of a project that might be going stale. Goodhue died, quite suddenly, on April 23, 1924. “I think it was on a weekend,” Harrison says. “It seems to me I came in to work on a Monday and learned that I’d been fired. The Gothic group had taken over. Most of us classical fellows were out on our ears. I was, anyhow.”

Harrison and another classical outcast, the late Robert Rogers, decided to go into business for themselves. They rented office space in the National Association Building, at 25 West Forty-third Street, and set about corralling clients. Through a cousin of Rogers’ who was the local sales representative for a company that put out grated cheese, they wangled a commission to remodel the front of the Cheshire Cheese Restaurant, on West Forty-third Street. The front was only eighteen feet high and twelve feet wide, but the partners labored over that façade for twelve months; it gave them something to do when they were not out scouring the town for their second customer, whom they never found. Rogers had some money of his own to tide him over, but Harrison was reduced to taking in architectural washing. His former *maitre*, Corbett, gave him an odd job now and then designing minor parts of buildings, and Raymond Hood, a brilliant alumnus of Goodhue’s who was now doing very well on his own, helped out by thinking of Harrison whenever he needed perspective sketches. After a year of just scraping by, Harrison, following up a tip from Corbett’s partner, Frank J. Helmle, applied for, and got, a job as associate architect for the New York City Board of Education, and he and his partner, their restaurant front finished and their patience exhausted, happily dissolved their firm.

Harrison’s new job paid seventy-five hundred dollars a year, which he thought



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"perfectly enormous"—so enormous, in fact, that he felt free to marry Miss Milton, a young New York social worker whom he had known for two years. The job itself turned out to be nothing much. In the course of one of the Board of Education's periodic efforts to do something about the shortage of schools, some municipal statistician had figured out that a new school would have to be completed every three days for the next year to provide adequate facilities. Responding to this challenge, the Mayor, John Hylan, who was no man to do things by halves, had ordered five hundred draftsmen and designers rounded up and installed in a mammoth room in a loft building at the Brooklyn end of the Williamsburg Bridge, with instructions to turn out plans for new schools at printing-press speed. Harrison was brought in to supervise all five hundred of them. To his dismay, he found that he was expected to make a daily inspection tour of the room, stopping at each drawing board long enough to drop some incisive critical observation. It took Harrison nearly six months to get around the room once. "By the time I got back to the first board, I found that the design had been approved by some official while I was out in center field, and contractors were already bidding on it," he recalls. "Same thing the second time around. Hell, I wasn't doing any good at all." Harrison resigned at the end of a year and took a part-time job teaching design at the Columbia School of Architecture. Then, in January, 1927, Helmle, his good angel, got in touch with him again and invited him to join the firm of Helmle & Corbett, as a junior partner.

At the time Helmle & Corbett became Helmle, Corbett & Harrison, the firm was engaged in a number of projects that were both financially and artistically stimulating, among them the Roerich Museum, on Riverside Drive, and No. 1 Fifth Avenue, and, in Allentown, Pennsylvania, a twenty-three-story skyscraper; it was buildings of this sort that, three years later, prompted the Rockefellers to pick the firm, along with three others, to design Rockefeller Center. Harrison felt that at last he had found his niche. "I finally knew for sure that I wanted to be a *modern* architect," he told a companion one day early last spring as they were crossing the Plaza of Rockefeller Center on their way to Harrison's office. "I don't mean I was a purist. That isn't in me. But while I was hacking away at the Board of Education, it became absolutely clear to me that the only sound ap-

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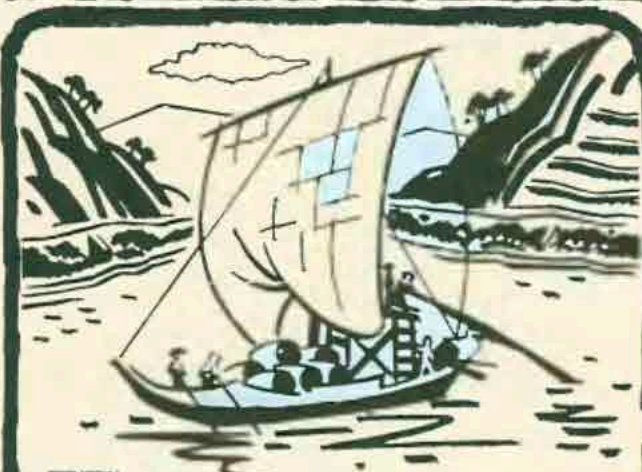


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proach to architecture is to think in terms of the people who will be using the building—that the function of architecture is to take care of human beings in a pleasant way. Say it's a school you're doing. The question you've got to ask yourself is: 'How do I utilize the best principles of design and the advances of our modern technology so that we get something here in which the teachers and the pupils—and the little guys who make up the community—can come together in the most agreeable atmosphere we can create for them?' That was how Corbett and Helmle looked at architecture, too. And the firm was busy! I had to take work home every night. For the first time in I don't know how long, I had my feet under me—lots of work to do, and good, steady pay for doing it." Harrison slowed his ambling gait and looked down at the skaters whirling below on the ice of the sunken plaza. "Do you know what an architect is?" he asked, smiling wryly. "When all is said and done, an architect is a designer with a client." —HERBERT WARREN WIND

(This is the first of three articles on Mr. Harrison.)

## CORRECTION

Former Vice President Henry Wallace is probably still puzzling over last Tuesday's column. Probably readers are puzzled too. The column, which referred to Eisenhower's efforts to study the problem of Oakies, Arkies and migrant workers, contained this sentence: "Wallace was one of the few government officials who ever tried to migrate across the U.S."

Frankly I was thunderstruck when I saw this line in print. So probably was the Wallace family. The ex-vice president, ex-secretary of agriculture did move from Des Moines, Iowa, to Washington to join the Roosevelt cabinet and now lives on a farm north of New York City. But he certainly did not migrate across the United States in the usual sense of the word, and he certainly was no migrant farm hand.

So I looked up the column as I originally wrote it. It read: "Wallace was one of the few government officials who ever tried to do much about the Oakies, Arkies and itinerant farm hands who miped across the U.S." What hap-er-ator skipped one line. My apologies.

However, considering all the copy they have to transmit, it's a wonder teletype operators don't make more mistakes.—Drew Pearson in the Pottsville (Pa.) Republican.

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