PROFILES

ARCHITECT

II—THE SQUARE THAT BECAME A CENTER

NEXT to Frank Lloyd Wright, who, as the father of modern American architecture and perhaps its only true genius, occupies a unique position in his field, the person commonly regarded as the most influential figure in present-day building design in this country is Wallace K. Harrison. A fifty-nine-year-old New York architect who has been associated with about seven hundred million dollars' worth of new buildings during the last quarter of a century and was a member of the seven-man team of architects responsible for Rockefeller Center, Harrison was nevertheless largely unknown outside his profession until he took on the job of architect-in-chief of the headquarters of the United Nations. Except for his predilection for wearing shirts of faintly Left Bank hues and for daubing away at tortuous abstract paintings when his spirits sag, there is little or nothing in Harrison's appearance or manner that fits the classic concept of a high-geared creative temperament. A tall, rugged man with a stalwart conscience, who fell into architecture by accident when, at the age of fourteen, he went to work as an office boy with a construction company in his native Worcester, Massachusetts, Harrison talks with a raspy New England twang, wears what is left of his gray-brown hair at a conventional length, adheres whenever possible to a nine-to-five working schedule, and regards potato farming as the consummate hobby. "Wally's a perfect Yankee—always was and always will be," an architect who has known Harrison for thirty-five years said recently. "That's one of the reasons he gets along so well with foreigners, like the members of the international board of design who worked with him on the U.N.—he's exactly what they expect an American to be like. Wally's as plain as an old shoe. It's no façade. He really is. But he's a fellow who learns from experience and he's had a lot of it, so today he's also a very sophisticated man. He understands businessmen, politicians, and scientists just about as well as he understands architects and other artistic types. They all feel, when they first talk with Wally, that here, at last, is a kindred soul. He's

really a sort of Renaissance man—a latter-day Michelangelo or Leonardo, completely at home in many different worlds, even in this age of specialists."

Over the years, Harrison, who has a way of becoming personally attached to the people he works with, has developed a wide and varied circle of friends that includes painters, bankers, construction foremen, high-ranking statesmen of many countries, Kiwanians, conservative and socialist political philosophers, steel magnates, and Latin-American poets. He is always intensely concerned about their problems, professional or personal, and these are likely to involve him on so many levels at once that his associates sometimes wish they had a score card to identify the players. Last autumn, for example, while he was chatting in his office with a young manufacturer of plastics, his secretary put a phone call through to him. "I had no idea who Wally was talking to," the plastics man said later, "but they were evidently discussing somebody who was in very bad straits—most likely, I figured, one of Wally's floundering artist friends who was only a couple of steps from potter's field. Wally, I could see, was deeply disturbed. He kept pawing his eyebrows and repeating phrases like 'We must do everything we can for him' and 'He was our friend when we needed him.' After he hung up, he didn't say anything for quite some time, and then he told me, 'We were talking about Trygve Lie. We mustn't forget him now that he's left the U.N. and retired to private life. Few people appreciate the terrific job he turned in as Secretary-General.' "

While Harrison's colleagues are generally agreed that he is a sound engineer and an adventurous designer who brings a fine creative continuity to his buildings, they are also generally agreed that, for all his talent, it is his Renaissance-man range of understanding and adaptability that principally accounts for the tremendous influence he has had on modern architecture. "The big thing is the respect Wally Harrison commands in the business world," the eminent architectural historian Talbot Hamlin remarked not long ago. "Over the last twenty years, he's been a partner in firms that have controlled a good deal of the big money. At the outset, his connection with Rockefeller Center gave him a reputation that the business world looked up to. And now, of course, the U.N. job has added enormously to his prestige. It's given him something of the status of an international statesman. All in all, he's achieved an extraordinarily powerful position for an architect, and he's used it admirably. He's been so phenomenally successful in gaining the confidence of businessmen that they've begun to accept innovations in modern architecture more readily than they ever did before. Thanks to him, many business leaders have actually become enthusiasts for the best in progressive design. Harrison has won a new kind of respect for the entire profession. I shudder when I think what could have happened if the same opportunities had fallen into the hands of a man who was less responsible, or less creative, or both." For his part, Harrison is inclined to interpret the aesthetic headway he has made in his dealings with the business community as support of his belief that architecture can rarely, if ever, be approached as pure art. "When Le Corbusier came over to work with us on the plans for the United Nations, he said to me more than once that he had never compromised with his principles," Harrison told a friend a while ago. "That's probably true of Corbu—never compromising. Well, I've compromised more

than once. Reality demands it, if the building's going to get built. The people who talk about conceiving perfection and sticking to it have never had to get down on the ground and get their hands dirty. Out in Texas we've been working on an office building for the Republic National Bank of Dallas. It's thirty-six stories high—far and away the tallest building ever put up in that part of the country. To emphasize that fact, our client wanted to top it off with some distinctive emblem that could be seen for miles away across the plains—a landmark by day and by night. We drew up a number of designs. The client didn't like them. He had his own baby. He wanted a replica of the Statue of Liberty, with the torch lit up. Now, what do you do in a case like that? Tell him he can't have it? If he wants it, he'll have one put up anyway. All you can do is present what you consider superior designs as forcefully as you can, and hope your arguments will sink in." In this instance, Harrison gained a distinct victory. The client scrapped the Statue of Liberty idea in the hope of hitting upon a symbol more truly representative of Texas but finally reversed his field and settled for a simple, spikelike spire that Harrison considers not half bad.

A man who thrives on change of pace, Harrison has designed private houses, naval installations, housing developments (in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx), service men's centers, factories, embassies, a hotel, a hospital, and a building for a zoo. His fellow-architects, however, think of him primarily as a specialist in office buildings, and with reason, for he has had a hand in the design and construction of almost a score of them, nearly all skyscrapers. His firm, Harrison & Abramovitz, is currently at work on two more big office buildings, both of them scheduled to be completed in 1956. One of these is a nineteen-story structure for the United States Rubber Company that is going up on the site of the old Center Theatre, at Sixth Avenue and Forty-ninth Street, and the other, forty-two stories tall, is being built for the Socony-Vacuum Company and will occupy the entire block bounded by Forty-first and Forty-second Streets and Third and Lexington Avenues. Harrison has long pondered the basic arguments for and against skyscrapers, which many internationally minded critics regard as the one truly original contribution America has made to architecture, and he has come to the conclusion that there are more good things than bad to be said for them, provided that there is sufficient space between them—as he feels there is at Rockefeller Center—to admit the proper amount of fresh air and sunlight. Not everybody, of course, has a plot the size of Rockefeller Center's to fool around with, but Harrison believes that ways and means of assuring open space can always be devised if the architect is really sold on its merits. For instance, the base of the forty-two-story Socony-Vacuum Building will be only three stories high; on this will stand two separate, well set-back, eleven-story slabs, connected by a central tower that will rise twenty-eight stories above them. By way of stressing the fresh-air-and-sunlight theme, Harrison is thinking of planting grass, trees, and shrubs on the roof of the three-story part of the building, with, possibly, an abbreviated brook purling among them.

"It's your wife, Ed. Want to listen to her?"

HARRISON's first experience in designing skyscrapers came in 1928, shortly after he had become a junior partner in the architectural firm headed by Frank J. Helmle and Harvey Wiley Corbett. The firm of Helmle & Corbett was one of the country's busiest and

best, and for Harrison, a rather gaunt and run-down thirty-one at the time he was asked to join it, its decision to take him in was pretty much of a lifesaver. Since he had never had any money except what he contrived to earn, his years of architectural apprenticeship had been rather tough going. During that period, in which he put in a little over a year at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, with the help of a scholarship and a thousand dollars he had saved up as a naval ensign in the First World War, he had slowly changed from a devout, if inquiring, traditionalist to a modernist—not an extreme modernist, to be sure, but a thoroughgoing functionalist. This position corresponded quite closely to that held by Corbett, the wheel horse of the firm and a recognized leader in office-building design. From 1914 on, Corbett, an angular, vocal, red-headed engineer from California who had studied at the Beaux-Arts himself, had been championing the so-called "stripped classical" office building, a structure of simple, vertical lines unmarred by banks of Ionic columns or any of the other standard motifs of the well-bred façade. Today, of course, Corbett's views are commonplace, but in the first quarter of this century they were considered radical, for the skyscraper was a long time finding itself.

Since there has never been any real agreement on how high a building must be to be considered a skyscraper, it is impossible to say who designed the first one, but certainly Chicago architects were ahead of all others in recognizing the advantages of height in meeting the problem of housing large businesses under a single roof. In 1885, William Le Baron Jenney put up a ten-story building, supported by a steel framework, for the Home Insurance Company in that city, and six years later the sixteen-story Monadnock Building, also in Chicago, was completed, setting an all-time altitude record for a structure whose entire weight was borne by masonry walls. (To bear that weight, it was necessary to make the Monadnock's walls twelve feet thick at the base.) In 1895, Louis Sullivan, of the Chicago firm of Adler & Sullivan, built, in Buffalo, what many authorities regard as the finest of the early skyscrapers, the thirteen-story Guaranty Building. Gradually, however, New York became the center of skyscraper construction for a number of reasons, including the tendency of big business to concentrate in Manhattan, the consequent rise in the

price of land on which to build here, and the island's hard-rock substratum, which provided a good support for the tremendous weights involved. In 1913, Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building was opened on lower Broadway; seven hundred and ninety-two feet high, with an eighteen-story tower rising above its forty-two-story base, it was the tallest building the world had ever seen. Not long afterward, the municipal authorities became alarmed at the spread of shoulder-to-shoulder skyscraper construction, which had already made a sunless gulch of Wall Street, and passed a zoning law that put an end to sheer vertical walls and required architects to provide more light by tapering their buildings with setbacks every few stories. No ceiling was placed on the towers of buildings, however, and in 1931, Shreve, Lamb & Harmon showed the world what a tower could be when the firm's hundred-and-two-story Empire State Building was completed, setting a record for loftiness—twelve hundred and fifty feet—that stands to this day.

At about the time Harrison joined Helmle & Corbett, the firm was drawing up plans for a twenty-three-story skyscraper that the Pennsylvania Power & Light Co. wanted to build in Allentown. "That building, the first skyscraper I ever worked on, has always seemed to me to be the perfect illustration of why the skyscraper was the logical answer to the changing business scene in this country," Harrison remarked not long ago. "Pennsylvania Power and Light had started out with just a simple office in Allentown. As its business kept growing, it had to keep finding new office space. By the late twenties, it had taken over ten or twelve houses on both sides of one of Allentown's main streets and was using each house for a separate department. In the skyscraper we built, these departments were placed one on top of another, and the increase in efficiency was enormous. You can lose a barrel of time, among other things, in a strung-out horizontal layout. To give you an example, when I was down in Washington during the war, working for Inter-American Affairs, my office was at the southeast corner of the seventh floor of the Commerce Building, and my boss's was at the northwest corner of the second floor. One day, I clocked it to see how long it took me to get down there. The trek took seven minutes. In a modern skyscraper, where the horizontal distances don't really matter much, you don't throw time away like that, as long as there is

an efficient relationship between the height of the building and the elevator system. Fifteen stories is about ideal for each bank of elevators. We've found that if you run a bank any higher than fifteen, there's too much waiting. You could increase the speed of the elevators, all right, but human beings couldn't take it."

IN April, 1929, about two years after Helmle & Corbett had become Helmle, Corbett & Harrison, Helmle retired and William H. MacMurray was taken in as a partner. Late in 1929, the new firm of Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray was chosen, after a competition, to collaborate with two other architectural firms on the project that in time became Rockefeller Center. Of the two other firms, one, also chosen as the result of the competition, was Hood & Fouilhoux, consisting of Raymond Hood, who had designed the Daily News Building, on East Forty-second Street, and André Fouilhoux, a French-born architect and engineer. The third firm was Reinhard & Hofmeister, consisting of Andrew Reinhard and Henry Hofmeister, who did not have to compete, because they were regularly associated with the construction enterprises of John R. Todd, and Todd had been selected to run the Rockefeller Center show. A highly successful operator in the fiercely competitive field of renting office space, Todd was also a promoter and builder and had been primarily responsible for the construction of such blue-chip ventures as the Cunard Building, the Architects Building, the Ritz Towers, the Barclay Hotel, and the Graybar Building. He was a big, ingenious, and irascible man, and, being suspicious of architects, he was seldom happier than when baiting a prominent one. After summoning Hood to his office, in the Graybar Building, and informing him that he had been chosen as one of the architects of the Rockefeller project, Todd turned to a window, waved a hand in the direction of Hood's celebrated Daily News Building, and growled, "We're hiring you not on account of that but in spite of it."

Todd himself had got in on the project during the summer of 1929, when Rockefeller Center—or Metropolitan Square, as it was then called—was little more than an idea in the mind of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Back in 1927, Rockefeller, though not an ardent operagoer himself, had been persuaded by Otto Kahn that New York ought to have a new opera house that would rank with the finest in the world. When word

General Nuisance

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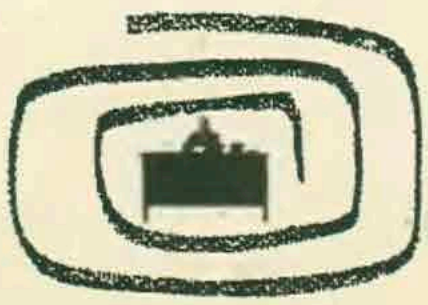

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of this got around, it was greeted with bravoes and promises of support by the trustees and the more illustrious patrons of the Metropolitan Opera Company, and, thus encouraged, Rockefeller, in January, 1929, leased a tract of land he had had his eye on from Columbia University, which had received it by grant of the state legislature early in the nineteenth century. This tract, of some twelve and a half acres, comprised, roughly, the three blocks bounded by Forty-eighth and Fifty-first Streets and Fifth and Sixth Avenues. The lease, calling for an annual rent of about three million dollars, was for twenty-four years, with renewal options until the year 2015. It was originally planned that the opera house, to be designed by Benjamin Wistar Morris, would be situated at the heart of the plot, and buildings on the remainder of the land would be rented out to commercial interests as offices and shops. Rockefeller had barely completed the negotiations with Columbia when word reached him that, for several complex reasons, mostly stemming from clashes of personality, the Metropolitan people's eagerness to have a new opera house had utterly subsided. Jolting as this intelligence must have been even to a Rockefeller, John D., Jr., rolled with the blow. He resolved to go ahead just the same with a midtown cultural and business center, and chose Todd to head a board of five managers who would build and operate the project. Todd's firm, the Todd, Robertson, Todd Engineering Corporation, was to let all the contracts and dig up suitable tenants, including cultural ones. Todd was to be responsible only to Rockefeller.

Early in 1930, after a lengthy search for something that could fittingly take the place of grand opera as the central attraction of the development, Todd and his board decided that the best bet was radio—the big new medium of mass entertainment. With Rockefeller's blessing, Todd took his idea to Owen D. Young, the chairman of the board of the Radio Corporation of America, who passed it along to David Sarnoff, the president of R.C.A., and the upshot was that R.C.A., together with its subsidiary, the National Broadcasting Company, and Radio-Keith-Orpheum, agreed to rent a vast amount of space in the Center and make it their headquarters. Thus the Radio City branch of Rockefeller Center came into being. Actual construction on the first building—the R.K.O.—was started in September, 1931. The riveting could be heard blocks away, for the depression

was closing in and no other construction was in progress in the city. By that time, Todd agents had been sent abroad to try to interest companies in various European countries in banding together on a national basis, with each group taking a building as a focal point for their commercial activities in the United States. The agents were a diligent lot, and it was out of their efforts that the present British Empire Building, the Maison Française, and the Palazzo d'Italia materialized.

For all the lofty intentions of its backer, Rockefeller Center might have become nothing more than a covey of Graybar Buildings roosting on some of the most expensive land in the world if the architects who designed it had not been an unusually independent lot. For years, American architects had been dreaming of the magnificent things they would do if ever they were given the money, the site, and the freedom to build a city from the ground up—a city of towering buildings and broad vistas that would demonstrate the beauty of space as well as of mass. Of course, none of them expected such an opportunity to come their way, and there were cynics who said that even if it did, high aspirations would soon yield to the pressure of the client's insistence upon the tried and true. Now, all of a sudden, seven of these architects found themselves in a position to design, if not a whole city, at least a city within a city along the lines of their most improbable dreams. To be sure, the fortunate seven could not utterly disregard Todd and his preoccupation with conservative, tenant-pleasing, revenue-producing design, but, by and large, Corbett, Fouilhoux, Harrison, Hofmeister, Hood, MacMurray, and Reinhard managed to create a community of buildings that only a few

years before would have been considered hopelessly visionary. They set up their headquarters in the Graybar Building, in two large rooms, one directly above the other, that were connected by a circular iron staircase. Each room was about a hundred and thirty feet long and forty feet wide, so after a conference room and the principals' offices had been partitioned off, there was plenty of space left for the desks and drawing boards of the draftsmen and designers—as many as a hundred at a time—who worked on the plans. The place was also furnished with a large table, on which René Chambellan, the sculptor, made clay models of the various plans under discussion; architects find models useful in determining which of their exploratory ideas will work out best in three dimensions. The architectural combine plodded away in these quarters for some three years, by which time the designs for the first ten of the fourteen buildings that were originally planned for the Center had been completed. Anxious as they were about the individual features of each building, the architects' overriding concern was to settle on a unified plan for the entire Center. Of the hundreds of preliminary plans dreamed up, mulled over, and rejected, the most fanciful was one that proposed covering the three blocks with one mammoth pyramidal complex of structures linked by subterranean streets and aerial ramps for both pedestrians and automobiles. There was a brief period, too, in which some consideration was given to the notion of treating the three blocks as a Chinese walled city, but this was discarded because the architects decided it not only was wrong aesthetically but also might discourage shoppers from entering the compound.

The first plan to be adopted, early in 1930, had as its key structure on Fifth Avenue an elliptically shaped building, fourteen stories high, to be situated between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets, with its longer axis running east and west; behind it was to be an open space, now the Plaza, and, behind that, the lofty R.C.A. Building, with its handsome and original setbacks. Todd and his associates were banking on the curving lines to lure the public off the Avenue and into the stores that were to comprise a fashionable shopping center in and around the lower level of the Plaza. In March, 1931, a diagram of this plan and a photograph of a model of the elliptical building were released to the press. There followed what the *Times* called, in an editorial, "a perfect stream of objection, protest, and, one

may say, wondering malediction," directed principally against the elliptical building—it looked a good deal like a lady's hatbox—which, in the opinion of many highly articulate New Yorkers, violated the plan for the whole Center and completely muffed a heaven-sent opportunity to beautify the city. "I doubt if any other architectural undertaking ever received such a lambasting," Harrison says. "All of us at the Graybar thought we'd be fired, but John D., Jr., stood behind us. He simply said, 'I never read the papers when they criticize men who are working for me.' "

Nevertheless, in the face of such violent opposition, the architects decided to abandon the elliptical building in favor of the two rectangular six-story buildings that are now the British Empire Building and the Maison Française. No one will ever know what effect those curving, hatbox lines would have had on shoppers, but there is no denying that the sixty-foot-wide promenade running between the present two buildings has succeeded in luring as many people onto the grounds of the Center as even Todd could have wished. At first, however, most of them just strolled there, and the question was how to entice them down into the shops in the Lower Plaza. Slowly and painfully, while buildings continued to go up all around them, the architects and Todd's building officials fumbled their way to a solution. First, they installed the statue of Prometheus and its accompanying fountains in the Plaza, and then they persuaded the Café Français and the English Grill, which had been operating on the street level, to try their luck at the Lower Plaza's south and north ends, respectively, each of them being given fifty per cent of the open area facing Prometheus for outdoor tables. At that point, cold weather set in, and the Lower Plaza stood as bare and empty as ever. Finally, since there seemed to be no better suggestions, the now famous skating rink was tried out, as a desperate means of putting the empty space to some use, however slight. To almost everyone's astonishment, the rink caught on immediately, and the shops around it have prospered ever since. "That's the way it goes sometimes," Corbett once said. "The skating rink turned out to be the perfect attraction for Rockefeller Center, and planning had nothing to do with it. On the other hand, planning can, of course, work wonders. By giving up sixty feet of Fifth Avenue frontage—an unheard-of thing at the time—and

using it as a channel between the French and British buildings, we sacrificed an obvious source of revenue. But in doing so we increased the value of the land inside the Center immeasurably. It's funny, but when a job of designing is tackled with honest-to-goodness imagination, and perhaps a touch of daring, you usually discover that it produces the only kind of architecture that really pays off in dollars and cents."

By the autumn of 1933, some two years after the excavating started, the first seven of the buildings were finished: the R.K.O. Building (thirty-one stories) in October, 1932; the Radio City Music Hall (ten stories) and the Center Theatre (nine stories) in December, 1932; the R.C.A. Building (seventy stories), the R.C.A. Building West (sixteen stories), and the British Empire Building (six stories) in May, 1933; and the Maison Française (six stories) in September, 1933. By then, too, ground had been broken for three more buildings—the Palazzo d'Italia (six stories), the International Building (forty-one stories), and the International Building North (six stories). This threesome, fronting Fifth Avenue between Fiftieth and Fifty-first Streets, opened in May, 1935. Meanwhile, Hood, the driving force of the architectural collaboration, had died in August, 1934, and his death precipitated changes in two of the three firms working on the Center. Harrison dropped out of Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray and, after a year or so as an independent, he and Hood's partner formed the firm of Harrison & Fouilhoux. Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray then became Corbett & MacMurray. Reinhard & Hofmeister remained Reinhard & Hofmeister. This setup prevailed until the thirty-six-story Time & Life Building was completed,

in April, 1937, after which Corbett & MacMurray stepped out of the picture, leaving the two remaining firms to finish up the Center with three more buildings: the fifteen-story Associated Press Building, opened in November, 1938; the sixteen-story Eastern Air Lines Building, opened in October, 1939; and the twenty-story United States Rubber Company Building, opened in April, 1940. With these done, the architectural team disbanded. In 1946, when the thirty-three-story Esso Building was announced as an added starter, Harrison was named as consultant to the architects in charge.

IN the course of the decade or so that Harrison spent with Rockefeller Center, his status both as an architect and as a man of the world changed notably. In his middle thirties at the outset, he was the youngest of the seven architects, and during the conferences at which high-level policies were threshed out by his associates, Rockefeller's advisers, Todd's men, and officials of companies who had agreed to take office space in one or another of the buildings, he was seldom asked for his views. "I didn't get anywhere until I took up cigars," Harrison says now. "The big conferences were held in the Graybar Building after a lavish lunch or dinner at the Barclay, and I'd come into the conference room from the dining room bursting with ideas. The minute I saw a chance to speak up, I spoke up. Even when I knew my points were damn good, they never made the slightest impression on anyone. It took me a couple of months to figure it out. It wasn't so much that I was a kid compared to the rest of them. The trouble was that I'd been wasting my ammunition—I'd been doing my talking before the older men had digested their meals and were ready to think. I wasn't a cigar smoker, but from that time on, when they passed the cigars around, I took one, and waited till we had all puffed them down to the butt before I said a word. It really made a difference."

As Rockefeller Center took shape, Harrison came to be more and more respected by his associates as a good all-round man to have on the team. A good many of the people connected with the Center in those days feel that it was he who, after Hood's death, emerged as the strong man, capable of pushing through the necessary agreements between the architects and the management before differences of opinion degenerated into a test of egos, as

conflicts have a way of doing once the initial enthusiasm for any long-term collaborative enterprise has evaporated. While no one architect can be credited with the design of any of the Center buildings, it is clear that, as time went on, Harrison's ideas began to carry increasing weight with his colleagues, and in consequence, experts think, some of the later buildings embody a good many of them—particularly the Eastern Air Lines Building, which was the Center's first slab-style structure. From the very inception of the Center, Harrison had been plumping for the slab, convinced that the simpler the form of any object, the stronger its impact. For that reason, too, he was opposed to the setbacks on the front of the R.C.A. Building; he argued that they would give it a consciously artistic touch that might not wear well. The front was set back anyway, but six years later, in 1938, when plans for the Eastern Air Lines Building came up for consideration, Harrison's colleagues were ready to go along with him on the idea of unbroken slabs. They approached this new project boldly. The eleven-story tower of the building, rising unindented and unadorned above a five-story spread-out base, is almost as sheerly rectangular as a matchbox. Because the Eastern Air Lines Building looks so small next to its Brobdingnagian neighbors, sightseers are inclined to ignore it, but architects regard it with respect as the trail blazer of a wholly new approach to office-building design—one that, a dozen or more years later, was given its most lucid and striking expression to date in the United Nations Secretariat and in Lever House, which was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

In 1932, after Todd had with some difficulty been persuaded that leading painters and sculptors should be brought in to decorate the Center, Harrison, who had advocated this step after stubbing out many a postprandial cigar, was sent to Europe to line up first-rate artists there. Carl Milles and José Maria Sert eventually came to New York and added their contributions to those of Lee Lawrie, Paul Manship, William Zorach, Diego Rivera, and other North American artists, but Harrison was unable to work out any arrangement with Picasso, Despiau, Matisse, or Maillol. "There was always a conflict in schedules," he recalled recently. "We didn't have any trouble with the French artists about subject matter, since we were willing to leave that up to them. I remember telling old Maillol—we wanted him to do a sculpture for the entrance

to the Maison Française—that he would have absolutely free rein. 'I can do only one thing—a woman,' he said. 'How do you want me to do her—lying down or standing up?' "

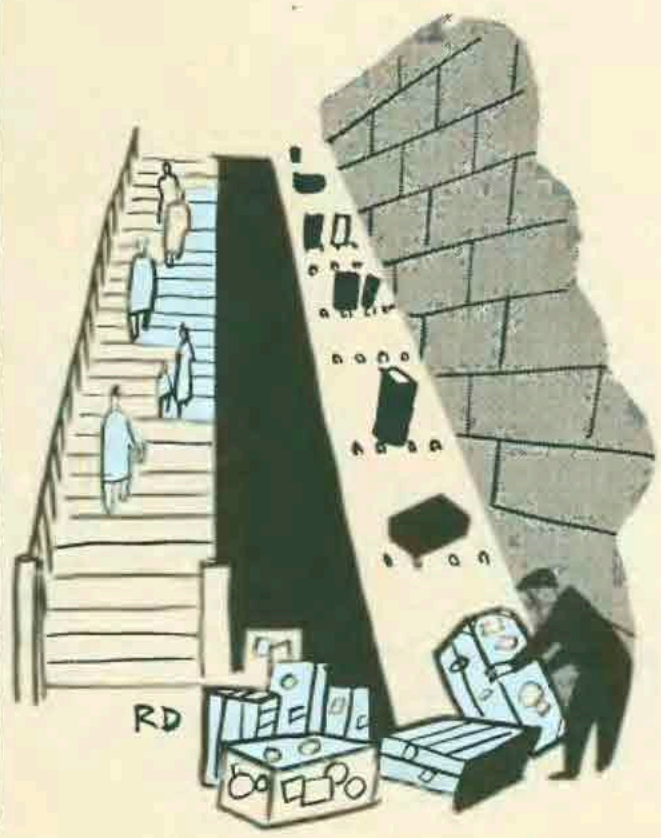
THE offices of Harrison & Abramovitz are on the second floor of the International Building, in Rockefeller Center, and its staff, which fluctuates in size according to the amount of work on the agenda, averages about sixty-five—a figure that includes forty or so draftsmen, who toil in a much partitioned room the size of a couple of basketball courts. The whole place is air-conditioned and soundproofed; the walls are brightly painted in blue, white, gray, and orange; and, all in all, it is the sort of office that one would expect a successful firm of modern architects to occupy. It is, however, a far cry from what Harrison was accustomed to up to last February, when he moved into it. During the year he operated as an independent, before the Harrison & Fouilhoux partnership was formed, his office consisted simply of a single, bare room on the fifty-second floor of the R.C.A. Building, occupied by a skeleton staff of half a dozen draftsmen. One of the designers who whiled away his time in this room was Harrison's present partner—Max Abramovitz. A graduate of the University of Illinois School of Architecture, Abramovitz spent his first two years in New York teaching elementary and advanced design at the Columbia School of Architecture. He became associated with Harrison quite by accident. Around the time Abramovitz came to New York, Harrison and some other established architects, including Ralph Walker, who designed the Irving Trust Company Building, at 1 Wall Street, and the New York Telephone Company Building, on West Street, were conducting seminars at the New School of Social Research, each consisting of a group of three student-architects. At Walker's invitation, Abramovitz signed up for his seminar, but through a clerical error, he found himself in Harrison's. He meant to change over to Walker's, but somehow he never got around to it, and at the end of the course, he accepted his instructor's invitation to join the skimpy Harrison staff. "There we were, hanging around in that room on the fifty-second floor," Abramovitz recalled recently. "Wally was too busy at the Graybar Building to spend much time with us. We drew up the plans for a couple of houses the firm was doing in Bermuda, but that

was the only real job we had. The rest of the time, we made work for ourselves—or, rather, Wally made it for us. Once, we spent eight months redesigning Central Park—not because anyone had commissioned the firm to do so but because Wally thought it would be a stimulating exercise. We started with the premise that Central Park was a traffic bottleneck. Our problem was to figure out a scheme that would unplug it and still keep the greenery." Harrison felt that by paying the occupants of the lonely aerie regular wages for solutions to theoretical problems of this sort he was hardheadedly investing in a future staff. "I wanted designers who would attack a problem by thinking about it in fresh terms," he says. "I wanted a staff that would keep moving away from the stereotype. After Fouilhoux and I formed our partnership, I found he felt as I did, and we carried on that way. I know some critics have said that because we never knew exactly where we were going, our office was weak. Maybe it was, and maybe it still is. That's the way we like it—no assembly-line methods, I mean, no trademarks."

In 1935, Harrison and Fouilhoux moved their headquarters from the R.C.A. Building to a larger, though not much more formal or attractive, office on the eighth floor of the International Building. Here the firm ran a sort of international clubhouse, where visiting European architects and kindred artists could always count on finding a chair and a drawing board waiting for them. Among those who availed themselves of this hospitality were Alvar Aalto, a Finnish architect and designer who has since done several important buildings in this country, including a dormitory for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the French abstractionist Fernand Léger; Oscar Nitzchke, a Swiss architectural designer; and Maurice Rotival, a French expert on city planning, whom Harrison brought over here to help teach a course in that subject that he had been asked to set up at the Yale School of Fine Arts. All this was in line with Harrison's belief that the people in his firm should keep in touch with what was going on in other parts of the world and in the allied arts, and, to make his staff even more aware of new ideas and techniques, he invited two European painters—Amédée Ozenfant and Werner Drewes—to give a series of after-hours office lectures on form, attendance optional.

As Harrison and his partner put Rockefeller Center further and further behind them, they began to branch

out. During the years immediately preceding the Second World War, they designed the Rockefeller Apartments, on West Fifty-fourth Street; the Theme Center for the New York World's Fair; the Avila Hotel, in Caracas, Venezuela; and, with Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, the architects of the Empire State Building, they drew up the plans for the new Hunter College building, on Park Avenue. The earliest of these projects, the Rockefeller Apartments, grew out of the esteem Harrison and Nelson Rockefeller had come to feel for each other during the construction of the Center, and was the first of many enterprises on which they worked together. The two men first met in 1926, around the time Harrison married Ellen Hunt Milton—making them brothers-in-law of a sort, for Mrs. Harrison is the sister of David Milton, who was married at that time to Nelson's sister, Abby Rockefeller—but they saw little of each other until the Center was well under way. Rockefeller, who was a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, discovered at the Center's planning conferences that Harrison shared his enthusiasm for modern art. "I came to admire a lot of other things Wally stood for, too, and the way he stood for them," Rockefeller says. As time went on, Harrison and Rockefeller got in the habit of meeting once a week in midmorning or midafternoon in the Gateway Restaurant, to the rear of Prometheus in the Lower Plaza, and exchanging ideas over coffee and a bacon roll—two strips of bacon grilled on the halves of a soft roll, a Rockefeller favorite. The Rockefeller Apartments was one of many ventures that originated at the sessions in the Gateway. The plot on which the apartment houses stand, on the north side of Fifty-fourth Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, was originally



set aside by the Rockefellers to serve as one corner of a huge subsidiary Center, devoted to the arts, that would extend north from Rockefeller Center, covering the eastern half of the blocks from Fifty-first to Fifty-fifth Streets. The plan for this undertaking fell through when the Kriendler brothers, the proprietors of "21," declined to sell their building on Fifty-second Street. (Before the Rockefellers became reconciled to abandoning the project, they considered going ahead despite "21," running streets around the restaurant, and setting it off as an island—an arrangement that would certainly have given the holdout Kriendlers an ideal location, making their place a sort of Ile de la Cité, with the arts on one side of them and the Chase National on the other.) The Rockefeller Apartments, consisting of two twelve-story buildings separated by a spacious garden, were an audacious departure from the common, or non-garden, approach to apartment-house design, which, seeking only to provide the maximum number of rentable rooms, used every legal inch of the plot for building. "The real-estate groups were really browned off by the Rockefeller Apartments," Herman Axelrod, a New York builder, said recently. "Those two buildings changed the standards. With Rockefeller and Harrison giving up fifteen per cent more space to light and air than they were required to, you can guess what happened. Before the buildings were half finished, all the apartments had been leased and people were scrambling to get on the waiting list—and, mind you, this was at a time when apartments all over the city were begging for tenants."

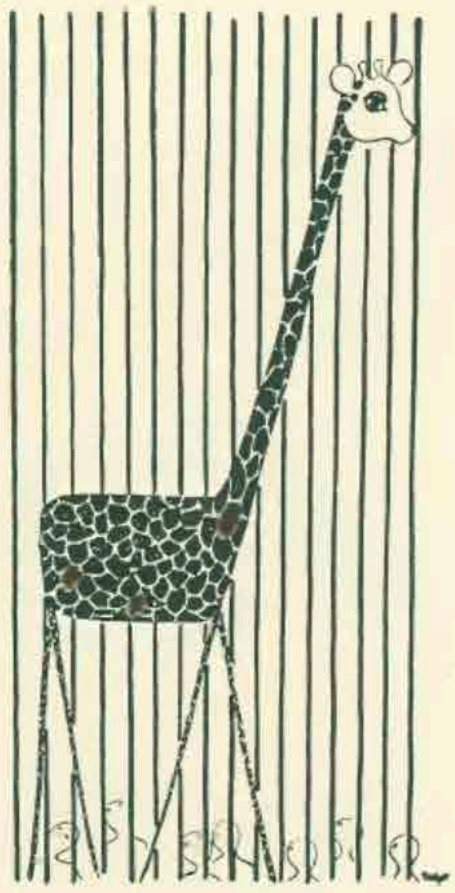
The Hotel Avila, which was not only the second collaboration between Nelson Rockefeller and Harrison but Rockefeller's first important sortie into inter-American affairs, was built on an old hacienda a few miles outside Caracas. Constructed of reinforced concrete as a precaution against earthquakes, the Avila was the forerunner of modern tropical hotels. It consists of a central lobby flanked by two long narrow wings, each of them with an open gallery along one side and private balconies on the other; the rooms stretch the width of the wings, from gallery to balcony, and are equipped at both sides with sliding panels for cross-ventilation.

IN 1936, Harrison's firm was chosen to design the Theme Center for the New York World's Fair on the basis of

a competition open to all architects practicing in the city. This competition, which was judged by the World's Fair board of design, made up of a dozen architects, engineers, and industrial designers, was a rather unusual one, in that the designs submitted did not have to be descriptive of the building the candidate proposed putting up, but might consist of no more than an expanded sketch of something that would give the judges an idea of the terms in which the competing firm was thinking about the Fair. Harrison & Fouilhoux entered the competition with a design for a tent. "We'd been asking ourselves and everybody else in the office, 'What's most expressive of the atmosphere of a fair?'" Harrison says. "We had a designer working with us then named Oltar-Jevsky, who was a very talented guy from Leningrad. We got him to tell us what the famous fair at Novgorod was like. He said they didn't have permanent buildings—just huge canvas tents that were lighted at night with colored lanterns. That, we agreed, was the essence of a fair—blowing tent tops and gay, lively colors. Instead of colored lanterns, our tent had a lot of colored balloons." After having been selected to do the Theme Center on the strength of this design, Harrison and Fouilhoux put aside the tent idea because they felt that it hardly suggested a theme, and began exercising their imaginations in an effort to hit upon some architectural concept that would really stir the public and also symbolize the spirit of the Fair. "One of the special functions of architecture is to provide people with a chance to see something they've never seen before," Harrison has since said. "For its day, the Eiffel Tower, the focal structure of the Paris Exposition of 1889, was perfect. There'd never been anything like it. What's more, the visitors could go right up to the top of the tower. That was something in 1889—man had never built that high above the earth before. By 1939, though, height meant nothing. Well, the theme of the Fair was 'The World of Tomorrow,' and the first idea that struck me as a step in the right direction was to use a sphere, a complete sphere, as a major element of the design. Ever since the dome was used by the Romans for the Pantheon, in the second century, architects had been trying to expose a larger and larger segment of it—undercutting it more and more, until, in Persia and India, they succeeded in exposing ninety per cent of it. Why couldn't we do a total-

ly exposed sphere? It had one merit, at least—to my knowledge, it had never been done before." Harrison and Fouilhoux and their assistants made hundreds of sketches, experimenting with spheres of all sizes and combining them with objects resembling Maypoles, spinning tops, inverted obelisks, clover-leaf intersections, ellipses cutting across other ellipses, and so on. Sometimes, Harrison thought of discarding the complete sphere, or perisphere, but he found himself returning to it again and again, and finally concluded that it would be most effective combined with a three-sided obelisk, or trylon. After he and his staff completed their one thousand-and-thirty-sixth sketch, he settled on a perisphere two hundred feet in diameter, connected by a circular ramp with a seven-hundred-foot trylon, standing alongside.

Then Harrison was faced with the task of selling the idea of a trylon and perisphere at a meeting of the board of design. In addition to a clay model of the proposed structures, Harrison and Walter H. Kilham, Jr., an architect who had worked closely with him on the design and who accompanied him on this crucial mission, took along to the meeting some twenty photographs of famous Italian buildings, all of them asymmetric in composition. "Wally thought they might come in handy," Kilham recalled a while ago. "He figured that the board might not be very receptive to a design that didn't have a tower at each end, or in the middle. He couldn't have been righter. First, the board wanted to know why the trylon hadn't been placed directly in front of the sphere or directly behind it. Wally replied that if you put the trylon in front, it would cut



the sphere in half, and if you put it behind, you'd get something that looked like one of those old German war helmets with a spike on top. Then the board objected that placing the trylon to one side of the sphere threw the design off balance and that this was all wrong; monumental buildings were always symmetrical. Wally reached for our pile of photographs and calmly exhibited them, one after another—the Cathedral of St. Mark's and the Campanile in Venice, the Cathedral and the Campanile in Florence, the Cathedral in Padua, and several others. If that sold anybody, they concealed it beautifully. There was some long-jawed hemming and hawing, and then Wally suddenly grabbed a cigar from his breast pocket, stood up, and threw it angrily on the floor. I've never asked him, but I don't think he ever intended to smoke that cigar when he put it in his pocket. I'm almost certain he brought it along in case the meeting got bogged down to the point where a violent gesture was needed to shake everyone up. That's the only time I've ever seen him go into an act, and it was an awfully effective one. The discussion got right down to business, and pretty soon Walter Dorwin Teague came out for the design. That broke the ice. One by one, the others dropped their reservations, and the design was accepted." To save money, the Fair's board of estimate later reduced the size of the trylon and perisphere by some twenty per cent. Harrison has always believed that the design would have been far more effective in its original dimensions, but, having won his main point, he settled for the diminished trylon and perisphere cheerfully enough.

IN the late nineteen-thirties, Harrison found himself associating more and more frequently with a group of other comparatively young New Yorkers who had risen precociously to the top of their professions, and were now turning their attention increasingly to community and national affairs. Besides Nelson Rockefeller, this coterie included William Benton, Adolf Berle, Beardsley Ruml, Buckminster Fuller, Robert Moses, and John Hay Whitney. With the approach of the Second World War, it began to appear inevitable that those of its members who had not already gravitated into government service would turn up in Washington sooner or later. Harrison turned up there in June, 1941—ten months after Rockefeller, who had prevailed upon the Roosevelt

administration to set up the Office of the Coördinator of Inter-American Affairs and had then been asked to head it. Harrison joined the office as director of the Cultural Relations Division and turned over the job of running the architectural firm to Fouilhoux and their new partner, Abramovitz.

When Harrison was shown the office in the Commerce Building that he was to occupy, along with his assistant, George Dudley, a young member of the firm he took down to Washington with him, his first reaction was "Let's throw these desks out and get some drawing boards in here." By the time the drawing boards came, Harrison had made a successful adjustment to the standard-model desk, but otherwise he accepted little of the apparatus of bureaucracy. Arriving at his office after a breakfast to the accompaniment of a lesson in Spanish from a young Mexican member of his Washington staff, he would swiftly dispose of the mound of paper that had accumulated in his "in" basket overnight by jotting down a few notes to himself on whatever inter- and intra-office memorandums he considered important, pencilling on a corner of certain letters a laconic instruction to his secretary, such as "Say no politely" or "Make appt.," and tossing the residue into a drawer. "If you stick this stuff in a drawer, it almost always takes care of itself," he once explained to a fellow-administrator. "And, that way, you have time to see people and get on with the job." Even though Harrison and Dudley had adapted themselves to desks, they spent a great deal of their time in a chart room, where they built up a collection of maps and diagrams bearing on various aspects of the Central and South American countries, such as railroad lines, areas where yaws were endemic, locations of branches of the Export-Import Bank, and sites of strategic mineral deposits. "The mission of our office was to work out a program that would improve the standard of living in the twenty countries we were working with," Dudley says. "The charts proved invaluable when it came to clarifying our reams of data and pointing up the key areas to concentrate on—areas where, if we improved living conditions by combatting yaws, let's say, we might also improve relations between the Americas. In the chart room, we had it all at our fingertips." Since the products of the Harrison-Dudley chart room could be easily and quickly grasped, a visit to it was looked upon as essential by many foreign dignitaries who came

here to get filled in on what was happening south of the border.

In December, 1944, when Rockefeller was appointed Assistant Secretary of State in charge of relations with other American republics, Harrison moved up to Deputy Coördinator of the Office of Inter-American Affairs, as the agency had been more simply renamed, and later he became Coördinator. He found the work fascinating, and threw himself into it with a conscientiousness that made some of his fellow-bureaucrats smile. Once, on a trip to Caracas, after he had spent a morning being taken on a tour of the city by a ranking government official, he met a labor-union leader at lunch whom he persuaded to take him on a second tour of the city, so that he could get the other side of the picture. "On the whole, I think our Latin-American program was damn successful," Harrison says. "The Act of Chapultepec, which the nations of North, Central, and South America signed in 1946, is one of the best defense pacts in existence today. Nelson took several of us down to Mexico City for the signing, and it gave us all a terrific feeling of accomplishment. Government work can be dull as the devil, and frustrating, but there were stretches during the four and a half years I spent in Washington when I've never been more engrossed in my work, or happier. As a matter of fact, there were days at a time when things were humming along so nicely I never even gave a thought to architecture."—HERBERT WARREN WIND

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

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NEW YORK, Oct. 16 (AP)—Mrs. Magdalena Marsili, of Rockford, Ill., sailed today on the S.S. Constitution, for Rome. She will attend the beautification of a younger sister . . . —*Chicago American.*

It's a long way to go.

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She was graduated from Huntington High School and has been employed as a secretary in New York City. Her husband is a buyer for a Philadelphia Dept. Store and deserved four years in the U. S. Air Force.—*The Long Islander.*

Maybe it's not too late.

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LETTERS WE NEVER FINISHED READING

FAULTLESS LAUNDRY
KANSAS CITY 8, Mo.

DEAR SIR:

You never before have had a letter from a Shirt, have you?

Being . . .