

ROCKEFELLER APARTMENTS, 17 West 54th Street and 24 West 55th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1935-37; architects Harrison & Fouilhoux.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 20

On February 9, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Rockefeller Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The board of directors of the Rockefeller Apartments submitted a statement opposing designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Rockefeller Apartments, built in 1935-37 and designed by the firm of Harrison & Fouilhoux, are a major example of the International Style. Commissioned by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Nelson Rockefeller, they represent Wallace K. Harrison's first independent foray into contemporary architecture as well as his first of many collaborations with Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller. Rockefeller Apartments changed the current standards in apartment house planning, giving 15 percent more space to light and air than required by the building codes. Other apartment house plans sought only to provide the maximum number of livable and rentable rooms using every available inch. These two buildings, designed as a unit, are a major and early example in this country of an architecture that synthesized the new currents in Europe, the functional and biological aesthetic, new building techniques, and the concern for public housing, propounded by Le Corbusier, J.J. Oud, and Otto Haesler, among others. This commission offered Harrison the opportunity to present an architectural expression particular to his own time. In their simplicity, use of industrial materials, smooth wall surfaces, and especially their fenestration these buildings are undeniably characteristic of the International Style. As such, Rockefeller Apartments occupy a place in the continuity of significant urban work in this city, in this country and in this century.

The Client

Rockefeller Apartments were not the family's first housing venture. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had sponsored workers' housing in Bayonne, New Jersey, and the Bronx in the early 'twenties, as well as apartment buildings in Harlem, Tarrytown and Cleveland. Andrew J. Thomas (1875-1965), designer of these housing project, had attracted Rockefeller's attention when he publicized his goal of rebuilding New York City, block by block, to wipe out the congestion of slum buildings. The Thomas Garden Apartments (named for their designer) at 840 Grand Concourse in the Bronx was the first Rockefeller project. Called the first garden apartments, this five- and six-story complex occupies but 46 percent of the five-acre site.¹ Harlem's Dunbar Apartments (1926, named for the black American poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, 1872-1906), between 149th and 150th Streets and Frederick

Douglas and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevards, were built in clusters of five and six stories around a central courtyard. But only one-third of the site is occupied by structure. Commercial space for a bank and several shops is part of the plan. (They won an A.I.A. first prize for "walk-up" housing and are considered a prototype in this country for subsequent housing projects throughout the 1930s.) Their historical importance as the residence of many of Harlem's noted business, cultural, and social leaders is unquestioned. The Dunbar Apartments, with the Thomas Garden Apartments, represent Rockefeller's initial efforts to provide housing with amenities previously unavailable, as well as generous amounts of light and air. As such, they served as a precedent for Rockefeller Apartments a decade later.

Rockefeller Apartments grew from the esteem Nelson Rockefeller (1908-1979) and Wallace Harrison had come to feel for one another during the planning of Rockefeller Center.² They were also an outgrowth of Nelson Rockefeller's assignment to attract tenants to the Center -- he had become associated with his father in the planning and construction of the Center in 1929.³ The family already owned property north of the Center site. Although they later donated the Donnell Library and Museum of Modern Art sites, there was no definite scheme at first for developing this property between West 54th and West 55th Streets. Remodelling the existing houses was considered, but sequential studies indicated that an apartment building in proximity to midtown offices was a better solution. Father and son believed that small accommodations of quality -- studios, one- and two-bedroom apartments to serve as an urban supplement to suburban homes -- nearby Rockefeller Center were a necessary and good investment. The commission for the buildings, granted in 1935, was the first for the new firm of Harrison & Fouilhoux, the partnership Raymond Hood's untimely death and the Rockefeller Center collaboration had brought together, undoubtedly with Nelson Rockefeller's blessing. Both he and Harrison shared a fascination for contemporary European art, and coincidentally had in-laws in common; Mrs. Harrison, the former Ellen H. Milton, was the sister of David Milton, Nelson's older sister Abby's first husband.

The Architects and Their Sources

Wallace Kirkman Harrison (1895-1981) was born and grew up near Worcester, Massachusetts, the son of James and Rachel Kirkman Harrison. James Harrison rose from molder in an iron foundry to be superintendent of Rice and Barton and Falls, a foundry and machine shop. Wallace Harrison's mother died in 1909 when he was fourteen. Working for the O.W. Norcross contracting firm, he learned basic drafting technique,⁴ and in 1915 he joined the Worcester architects, Frost & Chamberlain, as a junior draftsman, while taking night courses at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in structural engineering. In 1916 he came to New York and found work at McKim, Mead & White assisting a draftsman with hospital drawings. He also entered the evening atelier of Harvey Wiley Corbett, which was modelled after those of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.⁵ But a year later he was called to active duty as a Quarter Master 2nd Class in the Naval Coastal Reserve, then commissioned as Ensign. No stranger to hard work, he had early demonstrated a remarkable self-sufficiency.

Serving under Lieutenant Walter Blumenthal of the New York banking family, Harrison spent the next two years on a wooden-hulled sailing ship. He was discharged in 1919 and resumed work at McKim, Mead & White, while attending classes in mathematics at Columbia University in preparation for the Ecole des Beaux-Arts examinations. That October he returned to Paris, and entered Gustave Uddenstock's atelier, attending the Ecole in 1920-21. Uddenstock emphasized the technique of poché (the traditional means of rendering plans, showing the relative thickness of the wall), as a vehicle for displaying reason and order for even the most minute phase of planning. Although Harrison may have had some inkling of the revolutionary architectural movement espoused by Le Corbusier, Mies, and Gropius that would so influence his own work a decade later, he was engrossed in the traditional techniques of the Ecole.⁶ He returned to McKim, Mead & White, only to leave to become a draftsman for Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue (1869-1924), who was at work on Saint Bartholomew's Church, New York. However, he won the Rotch Travelling Fellowship to the American Academy in Rome and went abroad once more in 1922-23.

He returned to a decade which for him was filled with challenging learning experiences. These eventually gave him his first opportunity to substitute some of the revolutionary ideas permeating architectural circles for the heavy Beaux-Arts technique. Goodhue's office was divided between Gothicists and classicists. As a classicist, Harrison worked on the National Science Museum in Washington, and the Nebraska State Capitol in Omaha. When Goodhue died in 1924, the Gothicists in the office prevailed and Harrison was out of a job. He formed a short-lived partnership with one Robert Rogers, designing a Cheshire Cheese Restaurant facade on West 43rd Street.⁷ But in 1925 Frank Helmle, Corbett's partner, steered him to a position as associate architect to the New York City Board of Education. The frustrations he encountered trying to oversee the day to day work of 500 designers and draftsmen was mitigated by his investigation of modern school buildings, especially those built in Europe after World War I; this research he compounded in a book School Buildings of Today and Tomorrow, written with C.E. Dobbin, the department's Superintendent of School Buildings, published in the American Architecture Today series in 1931.

School Buildings of Today and Tomorrow is clear evidence that Harrison was becoming aware of the current revolutionary architectural trends in Europe. Among the requirements he proposed for the modern school building was that it be "a machine for education," filled with light and industrial in character.⁸ Lest this appear to have only the sound of modernity and none of its physical character, Harrison used a photograph of Otto Haesler's (1880-1962) School at Celle (1925) to illustrate "a school of today." And with another photograph of Buckminster Fuller's "4-D" to suggest tomorrow⁹ he went on to propose how schools of the future would look. Natural and artificial lighting, ventilation and circulation were illustrated by buildings with horizontal strip and around-the-corner fenestration, plain surfaces and simple lines.¹⁰ More illustrations followed, apparently culled from German periodicals, among them four schools designed by Fritz Schumacher as well as a very striking project, plans and elevation, for the Friedrich Ebert Schule in Luckenwalde, designed by Haesler. Of particular interest are the seven projecting circular classrooms, the walls of which are uniformly glazed over only about 45 percent of the perimeter of each.¹¹

Before and after his year with the Department of Education Harrison had been doing odd jobs-- drafting and rendering-- both for Corbett and Raymond Hood. In 1927 Helmle invited him to join Corbett and himself as a junior partner. Helmle, Corbett & Harrison are responsible for two major buildings in Manhattan, the Roerich Museum-Master Apartments (1929) and One Fifth Avenue (1928), but it is the Roerich-Master Apartments where Harrison made his presence felt.¹² Although both residential towers are girded with the firm's characteristic vertical massing, the Master's heavy corners are pierced by horizontal corner windows, not unlike quoins, and because quoining suggests reinforcement, these openings are all the more striking-- a mini-revolution in themselves. Helmle retired in 1929 and William MacMurray (1868-1941) was added to the partnership. In the same year Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray was one of the firms to receive the Rockefeller Center commission.¹³

Harrison's personal defection from the thick poché technique, its corresponding heavy structure, and vertical style toward the thin, skeletal frame, enclosing screen walls, and horizontal strip windows was completed when he acquired the "Aluminaire House." The Aluminaire, or K-F House was designed by A. Lawrence Kocher and Albert Frey and constructed in 1931 at the Architectural League's Architectural and Allied Arts Exposition at the Grand Central Palace.¹⁴ The walls were all non-load bearing, carried on a steel and aluminum frame. It was three stories; all the furniture within it was built-in, its materials were standard, and it took seven days to assemble. The exterior was covered with corrugated aluminum over building paper over insulation board. It was an adaption of LeCorbusier's Citrohan house (first proposed in 1921, a variation of which was built in 1927). Frey, a native Swiss, had worked on housing for LeCorbusier in 1928-29.¹⁵ Harrison bought this small building and had it re-erected on his property at Huntington, Long Island, as the first component of three constituent buildings he was constructing there.¹⁶ Although Harrison's "a machine for education" phrase in School Buildings... suggests a familiarity with LeCorbusier, acquiring the "Aluminaire House" added an indirect influence, via Frey, to his gestation of German architecture. Thus it was through assimilation that Harrison equipped himself with the principles of contemporary European Functionalist architecture.

However, he did have an opportunity to see a few of these new buildings first-hand. Later in 1931 a group of the Center designers were sent to look at recent German theaters and the Harrisons were in the party.¹⁷ In Berlin they saw theaters designed by Hans Poelzig and Erich Mendelsohn, the new Alexanderplatz and Jaegerstrasse, and dined with Poelzig, Mendelsohn and Peter Behrens. The trip was described as a chance to study "the practical working out of the German slogan, 'light, sun and air'."¹⁸ Individuals within the group made side trips to view sights of particular interest, Hamburg and Dresden, Munich and Stuttgart. We can assume the Harrisons went to Hamburg.¹⁹ We can only guess that they saw the Weissenhof (1927), Stuttgart, with residential work by Mies, LeCorbusier, Oud, Gropius, Hilberseimer, the Tauts, Poelzig, Behrens, Scharoun, Stam, Frank, Docker and Schenck.²⁰

Work on Rockefeller Center had begun in 1929. The other two firms awarded the Rockefeller Center commission were Hood, Godley & Fouilhoux, and Reinhard & Hofmeister. Major components of the Center were completed in 1932 and 1933, but

with work still to be done, Raymond Hood (1881-1934) died. Hood has been credited with being the driving force behind the collaboration, and his passing caused a reshuffling among the participating partnerships. In 1935 Harrison and Fouilhoux formed a partnership and took on the major design responsibilities.

J. André Fouilhoux (1879-1945) has not attracted the attention given his better known partners, Hood and Harrison. Rather than a designer, he was known as an astute engineer and a painstaking supervisor and his work gained the respect of his collaborators.²¹ He was born in Paris, received degrees at the Sorbonne, and graduated from the Ecole Centrale des Arts et Manufactureurs as a civil engineer. While still at the Ecole Centrale Fouilhoux would have been exposed to the excitement caused by Francois Hennebique's concret armé, or reinforced concrete, which Hennebique employed at the Charles Six Spinning Mill at Tourcoing (1895, the year Auguste Perret left the Ecole des Beaux-Arts) and again in an apartment house, 1 Rue Danton, Paris in 1898.²² Years before the Ecole des Beaux-Arts accepted reinforced concrete as a material worthy of the art of architecture, the engineering profession was investigating its useful properties, its greater spanning capabilities, and its imperviousness to fire. Perret and Tony Garnier are credited with recognizing its aesthetic character. Knowledge of its use must have secured Fouilhoux his first position upon arriving in this country shortly after 1900.²³ He worked first for Albert Kahn in Detroit in the very years Kahn's brother, Julius, a civil engineer himself, patented a steel bar within reinforced concrete and established the Trussed Concrete Company in Youngstown, Ohio.²⁴ Their first reinforced concrete building was the Packard Plant Building No. 10 (1905), in Detroit. It is likely that Fouilhoux was working for the Kahns at this time and on this building.

Fouilhoux moved to Portland, Oregon, in 1908 and had opened an office in the Lumberman's Building there in 1909.²⁵ The following year he formed a partnership with a local architect, Morris H. Whitehouse.²⁶ Their work, illustrated in the Architectural Club Yearbooks, 1910, 1911, and 1913, reflects the needs of a growing community and consisted of schools, residences and clubs.²⁷ Undoubtedly Fouilhoux's eight years in Portland gave him much practical experience but he did not stay. He served as Captain, then Major in World War I in France. He returned to his adopted country where he joined the New York firm of John Meads Howells (1868-1959) and Raymond Hood in 1920 as an associate.

A short survey of the work the Hood firm did in the 1920s is valuable for two reasons. First, we can better understand what Fouilhoux as an engineer was called upon to achieve. Second, after winning the Tribune competition and after the polychromatic treatment of the American Radiator Building, Hood was the man to watch. And Harrison was one of those watching. Fouilhoux participated in the preparation of the international competition drawings, indeed the winning scheme, for the Tribune Tower (1924) in Chicago, and no doubt supervised its construction. The firm's American Radiator Building (1924), though not unlike the Tribune Tower in its vertical massings, attracted attention because its walls are black brick with gold leaf covered ornamental copings. Corbett wrote, criticizing its color, but admitted that originality is always criticized.²⁸ And after this, very few of the buildings Hood designed were without color.

In 1927 the firm became Hood, Godley & Fouilhoux when Howells retired; Frederick Godley (1887-1961) came to run the business, and Fouilhoux was made a partner. Following Howell's retirement, the firm underwent a radical change in design philosophy. The expressive mass of the earlier buildings was shaved to the very piers and spandrels, and these in contrasting polychrome stone or brick revetment. The vertical emphasis of the Daily News Building (1930) and the horizontal banding of the Beaux-Arts Apartments (1930) were achieved in this manner. The shift in design from heavy modelling techniques and massive cladding to thinner surfaces and horizontal lines was complete with the McGraw-Hill Building (1931). Of these three the structural frame is most apparent, the wall surface appears thinnest, the sense of volume contained is most prevalent, and the polychromy most resolved in the McGraw-Hill Building.

Harrison had watched this progression, from the robust to the thinner, more Functionalist, later structures. Then, with Rockefeller Center, he had an opportunity to collaborate with Hood. Following Hood's death he formed the partnership with Hood's right-hand man. Fouilhoux's strength was his ability as an engineer to make his partner's designs buildable. Harrison's was his clear-headed administrative ability. The firm's subsequent designs, the United Nations, Lincoln Center, Empire State Plaza, evolved through a team effort over which he presided.²⁹ Though Harrison had been called imitative, Max Abramowitz, who joined the firm in 1935, described him as looking always for new materials with which to do things.³⁰ Ada Louise Huxtable characterized him as subject to ideologies.³¹ But in the case of Rockefeller Apartments, Harrison himself synthesized current European trends to fulfill the requirements of the commission.

The Design History

The design of Rockefeller Apartments proceeded through several stages. The first was an ordinary thirteen-story apartment block with setbacks at floors ten, twelve, and thirteen.³² By contrast the facades of Hood, Godley & Fouilhoux's Beaux-Arts Apartments seven years earlier are more exciting.³³ Though the Beaux-Arts do not share a block-through site, both they and Rockefeller Apartments were conceived as pairs and parallel. The initial apartment design for Rockefeller Apartments is followed by a plan neatly drawn in pencil on overlay paper.³⁴ On the right the floor plan is brought forward with square porches, one per apartment, cut into the corners. Though more familiar, a quite different pattern occurs on the left. There is no projection, only two rounded bows, again one per apartment, side by side and flanked by internal balconies.³⁵ In the last plan, a blueprint,³⁶ all the internal porches are eliminated and the projection on the right has been replaced by two more rounded bows. The internal arrangement was used from the second to the eighth floors. In its design phases Rockefeller Apartments went from a remarkably conventional thirteen story apartment block to an entirely new plan and aesthetic.

Rockefeller Apartments were not only a product of Harrison's assimilated Functionalist vocabulary, the new school buildings of Haesler and others, Kocher and Frey's 'Aluminaire House,' or any lessons he had taken from Hood, but also may be seen as a textbook example of what has come to be called the International Style. The exhibition in 1932 at the new Museum of Modern Art, 'Modern Architecture,' curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, synthesized for

others what Harrison, consciously or unconsciously, must have known already. Not only was the European Functionalist trend recognized as a definite style, its architectural characteristics were identified. The three basic principles, architecture as volume, regularity in architecture, and the avoidance of applied decoration, and their dependent corollaries became dogma. (These corollaries granted dispensation to genius-- Gropius, Mies, LeCorbusier, and Oud-- when aesthetic outweighed hard core Functionalism.) Nor were these the first declarations to affirm a new architecture. In his amplification of the proceedings of the first International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM, 1929) at Chateau de Sarraz in Switzerland, André Lurçat listed major concerns discussed: housing, new monuments, new techniques, standardization, and new architectural elements.³⁷ Of the new elements, pilotis, terraces, windows, color and electric lighting, he felt constrained to treat windows at some length. He explained that windows presented aesthetic considerations significant to this new architecture: the structural framework permitted horizontal breadth, extending the interior space beyond the limits of the wall; a concentration of windows where needed was now possible; and that the dimensions of the window established human scale. The effect that Hitchcock and Johnson's stringent codification of Lurçat's first CIAM summary had upon Harrison can be judged in terms of the architecture of Rockefeller Apartments. The neutral tone and even bond of the twelve-inch bricks and the carefully scaled fenestration placed on the external edge of the wall preserve the continuity of the enclosed screen wall surface. Nor do the vertical bows interrupt or dominate this continuity. These extended and orient the internal spaces toward more light and air. Their shape and location are in response to this function.

While Harrison may have drawn on other sources, too, there are at least three references to Haesler's work at the Rockefeller Apartments. Among architects and planners attracted to the Neue Sachlichkeit (new objectivity) Haesler, whose schools Harrison had published, was universally admired.* His legacy, the housing communities or Siedlungen, the very essence of the new aesthetic (biologische Aesthetik), stand in another country.³⁸ But three examples of Haesler's work were included in the Museum's exhibition, the catalogue, and book.³⁹ Lewis Mumford praised Haesler's Georgsgarten Siedlung for its unity and consistency in street and house plans and architectural design.⁴⁰

Haesler's Siedlungen all were laid out in regular and parallel rows of dwelling units or Zeilenbau, a pattern favored by German housing reformers. The site between West 54th and 55th Streets, a relatively cramped urban space of 125 by 200 feet, lent itself to the Zeilenbau model.⁴¹ Though he could have used the 'U' or 'H' models, Harrison chose his parallel configuration for it was the most beneficial orientation for light and air and left a garden approximately 60 feet deep.

Hitchcock and Johnson's second principle, regularity, permits vertical elements when function requires it. Vertical facade elements, either containing stairs or windows can be seen at Georgsgarten in Celle (1924-26) and Rothenberg, in Kassel (1930).

*His reputation in this country was eclipsed by the attention given his contemporaries, the individualists within the new architecture cited earlier.

Indeed, the two-story window elements at Georgsgarten are of particular interest.⁴² They are glazed only on the two adjacent sides oriented south and west, creating a sense of privacy and admitting abundant light. In his Friedrich Ebert Schule project, the one Harrison introduced in School Buildings..., Haesler enlarged this concept of partially fenestrated bays into the row of seven, round classrooms, each glazed four-fifths way round. The vertical window elements at Georgsgarten, rounded five years later in the Luckenwalde school project, appear as the four vertical, cylindrical bows Harrison projected from the West 54th Street facade and the two on the West 55th Street facade of the Rockefeller Apartments. Though here only two-thirds of their circumference is glazed, Harrison faced three of these openings away from each other to ensure the privacy Haesler had created at Georgsgarten. It is true that this silo-like form was not developed by Haesler or Harrison. Nor by any means was it theirs exclusively. Lurgat used it repetitively on a row of attached houses in Lainz, Vienna (1932) but these bows weren't glazed and probably enclosed stairs.⁴³ Schumacher, Gropius and others employed them glazed but as attached stairwells. Only Haesler and Harrison appear to use them as window bows.*

As their third principle Hitchcock and Johnson advocated the absence of ornament, but encouraged the development of standardized window detail suitable to mechanical production, creating both an economic and aesthetic solution.⁴⁴ They noted that the excellence of an American factory building is largely that of its metal sashes.⁴⁵ Haesler's windows were generally simple, standardized, steel components. However, from their arrangements in the windows of the Teacher's Residence at Celle, it is apparent that the pattern of steel mullions and muntins is a significant aesthetic feature.⁴⁶ Though the irregular grid arrangement is dictated by function, it suggests both contained volume and human scale. Harrison's window detailing of the Rockefeller Apartments is one of the buildings' most significant features. While the steel transoms, casements, and ventilation hoppers subdivide window space, all with specific functions (guaranteeing them aesthetic consideration), their repetition creates the consistency and consequent unity necessary, and their pattern provides the only indication of the human dimensions this new aesthetic permitted.⁴⁷ These window components are unalterable evidence of the buildings' architectural style.

It has been pointed out that the broken silhouette of these apartment buildings, with their symmetrically setback penthouses, terraces, and tall chimneys, is hardly pure Haesler, who consistently adhered to flat roofs with uninterrupted roof copings for his Siedlungen.⁴⁸ As far as is known Haesler was not called upon to execute a housing project within a tight urban matrix. Furthermore, Harrison's sources were as broad as the international representation within CIAM. He had it all to draw upon. Hood's terminal signage on the McGraw-Hill Building would have inspired him as much as the work of such Frenchmen as Lurgat or Roux-Spitz.⁴⁹

In his autobiography Haesler recalled hating his narrow, dark, urban upbringing and how he came to believe in light-filled dwelling spaces. As a consequence he formulated his biologische Aesthetik. In the "Modern Architecture" exhibition catalogue (1932), Lewis Mumford paraphrased Haesler: shelter for such basics as hygiene and sanitation, rest and sleep, nutrition, recreation, reproduction

*Local lore has these bows sympathetic, modern evocations of those on the adjacent houses. After all No. 13 had been owned by the Rockefeller family since 1906.

(privacy), sunlight and air.⁵⁰ That his Siedlungen placed him in the history of architecture pleased him very much, for they were financed through Socialist government programs. "If you think I had obtained my commissions in the 'twenties and 'thirties because I was a Modern architect, you are mistaken. I obtained my commissions because I was twenty-five percent cheaper than all the others and for that reason only did I build modern."⁵¹ Though this might have been heresy to Lurcat, neither Mumford nor Harrison needed to know it to appreciate Haesler's architectural solutions.

By contrast, and as ironically, Rockefeller Apartments had been commissioned by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Nelson Rockefeller to provide accommodation near Rockefeller Center for the well-to-do executives and professionals employed in midtown Manhattan. In their design Rockefeller Apartments displayed the concern for light and air that could be found neither in the typical Park Avenue apartment block nor in tenements of the Lower East Side.

Description

The two buildings of the Rockefeller Apartments are located at 17 West 54th Street and 24 West 55th Street; each has a major facade which is a variant of the other. Each is an eleven-story block with a dramatic symmetrical cresting silhouette--setback penthouses with French doors opening onto terraces flanked by tall chimneys. But they differ in the number and height of the vertical cylindrical bows and in the orientation of these bows' glazed surfaces. The 54th Street elevation has four of these vertical elements, two of ten stories bracketing two of eleven, each projecting from the main plane of the facade. The fenestration at each floor--six casements and transoms--in each of these juxtaposed cylinders modestly faces in opposite directions, east and west. On the main plane of the facade the fenestration at each floor is three casements with transoms above and ventilation hoppers below, except between each pair of cylinders where the casements are smaller and paired. The 55th Street elevation, a variation of that on 54th Street, has only two vertical bows, each nine stories, which flank the main eleven-story portion of the facade which projects forward. The curved sides of this portion echo the inner cylinders on 54th Street. Here the fenestration--also six casements and transoms at each floor--of the curved surfaces faces in similar directions, east and east, west and west. Window units like those on 54th Street are arranged in groups of three paired on the flat portions of the facade. The difference in compass directions accounts for the difference in facade design. The 54th Street facade faces south and enjoys the full circuit of the sun all year round. The 55th Street facade faces north and at our latitude seldom receives full sunlight except in the early morning and late afternoon.

The structural steel skeleton frame of these buildings is enclosed by a smooth, tawny-colored brick surface made uniform by using regular twelve-inch bricks laid in mortar of approximately the same color and with thin joints. There are no deep reveals creating holes in the wall. All of the steel casement windows are placed on the outer edge of the bond to ensure the continuity of the wall surface. The only adornment is the shadow cast by the unconventional vertical bows, simple and eloquent testimony to their volume. But this is an unconventional building, responding to the biological aesthetic articulated by Haesler as well as conveying the moral integrity of the revolutionary International Style.

On 54th Street the centrally-placed entrance with its paired doors and a light fixture between the doors is both indicated and protected by a cantilevered metal canopy. Behind the flashing on the canopy are flanges with sliding hooks on each of the three sides. Canvas weather curtains once hung from these. The address of the building, executed in sans-serif aluminum characters, projects above the end of the canopy. Freestanding poured concrete planters (not original) flank the doorway. On 54th Street the ground floor bows contain professional offices. On 55th Street the ground floor incorporates storefronts, planned from the beginning to offer tenant services. The main entrance treatment is similar to that on 54th Street, except that light fixtures flank the paired doors, and there are no planters.

Summary

In the realm of apartment house design the Rockefeller Apartments were quite unusual for nothing like them existed at the time of their construction. There were three apartment sizes, all small, two-bedroom, one-bedroom, and studio. Each had good light and ventilation. In fact, the usual undesirable apartment locations were eliminated. The buildings occupied fifteen percent less than the maximum legal percentage of the site, permitting amenities like the landscaped courtyard and broader sidewalks and more light, sun and air. On the ground level and convenient to the tenants was a restaurant with room service, doctors offices, a drugstore, and a beauty salon. The buildings were one hundred percent rented even before they were finished. And there was a waiting list at a time when there were vacant apartments all over the city. Real estate groups were upset for Rockefeller Apartments had changed the standards.⁵²

The International Style was an aesthetic force that grew throughout the 1920s. In this country its slow pace was mirrored in the work of Raymond Hood. Harrison watched, read, learned and waited for his opportunity. When it came he embraced it. Not only did he design two residential buildings that responded to the requirements of his commission, he did so choosing inspiration from the new architectural prophets, Haesler chief among them. Despite, or because of, his eclecticism, he maintained the architectural integrity of Rockefeller Apartments, giving New York a first class example of the International Style.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Obituary, Andrew J. Thomas, New York Times, July 27, 1965. Frank Chouteau Brown, "The Low-Rental Apartment - An Economic Fallacy," Architectural Record, 55, 5, (May 1924), 404-415. Thomas and D.E. Waid were architects of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company apartments in Queens.
2. Herbert Warren Wind, "Architect," The New Yorker, 30 (Nov. 20, 1954), 52; (Nov. 27, 1954), 64. Apropos his choice of an architect Nelson Rockefeller recalled Harrison's pluck in a daunting situation. His father was describing his idea of the exterior appearance of the Center buildings to his team of architects - very academic. Harrison, then a junior partner in one of the participating firms, interrupted, "Goddamn it Mr. Rockefeller, you can't do that. You'll ruin the building if you cover its lines with that classical gingerbread."
3. Carol Herselle Krinsky, Rockefeller Center (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.75-76.
4. Wind, p.65. For more on Orlando Whitney Norcross, see J.F. O'Gorman, "O.W. Norcross, Richardson's 'Master Builder': A Preliminary Report," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 2, (May 1973), 104-113.
5. There were two others: Frederick C. Hiron's and Columbia University's School of Architecture atelier, Wind, p.65.
6. Ada Louise Huxtable, "Re-examining Wallace K. Harrison," New York Times, Jan. 6, 1980, p.D23. Huxtable pointed out that Harrison reinforced his traditional concept of beauty and grandeur just as Eurpoe was agitating against them.
7. Wind is the source of the location. New York Telephone Directories list a Cheshire Cheese restaurant at 201 West 47th Street in 1924. There are none listed after that anywhere for the next five years, and none on West 43rd Street.
8. Wallace K. Harrison and C.E. Dobbin, School Buildings of Today and Tomorrow, ed. R.W. Sexton (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc., 1931), pp.1-2.
9. Ibid., p.1.
10. Ibid., p.18.
11. No acknowledgement of a source for these European schools is made in School Buildings... Those by Schumacher are on pp.35-38 while Haesler's are on pp.46-49. Haesler's school building at Celle, along with other views of his Georgsgarten Siedlung, were often published: Ludwig Hilberseimer, Grossstadt Architektur (Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hoffman, 1927), pl.50; Müller-Wulckow, Wohnbauten und Siedlungen aus Deutsches Gegenwart (Königstein in Taunus: Langewiesche, 1929), pls. 116-117; Bauwelt, 18, (1928), 428, pls. 33-36; and 51, (1929), 1-8; Wasmuth Monatshefte, 13 (1929), 168-170.
12. The architects of One Fifth Avenue are Helmle and Corbett, but Harrison claimed to have worked on the building, too. Wind, Nov. 20, 1954, p.78.

13. Krinsky's monograph on Rockefeller Center is amply rewarding on this subject. It is she who has sorted out who was responsible for what.
14. "Aluminaire House for Contemporary Life," Shelter, 2 (May 1932), 56-58.
15. Richard Pommer, "The Architecture of Urban Housing in the United States During the Early 1930s," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 37 (Dec. 1978), 251.
16. "Icy in Winter, Torrid in Summer," Wind, Nov. 20, 1954, p.54.
17. The others: "Roxy" - Samuel Lionel Rothafel, the impresario who was to run Radio City Music Hall; O.B. Hanson, manager of NBC plant operations; Peter Clark, inventor of theatrical machinery; Gerard Chatfield, technical art director, NBC; Webster Todd, Rockefeller real-estate and construction manager; and L. Andrew Reinhard, an architect often associated with Todd. Krinsky, p.64.
18. Ibid., p.64, n.84.
19. The similarity of Harrison and Fouilhoux's African Plains installation (1939) at the New York Zoological Garden in the Bronx to Carl Hagenbeck's Zoological Park in Stellingen, Hamburg, makes this very clear.
20. Oscar Hanson went to Stuttgart. Krinsky, p.65. Perhaps the Harrisons went with him.
21. Wind, Dec. 4, 1954, p.56. Krinsky, p.47.
22. Leopold Mensch, "The Hennebique System of Armored-Concrete Construction," American Architect and Building News, 88 (Dec. 3, 1902), 67-70. "Beton Arme," Larousse, 2 (1960), 107; Hennebique is cited as is the apartment house at 1 Rue Danton, but is dated 1892.
23. The date is variously given as 1903 or 1904. His obituary in Interiors, 104, (July 1945), 75, much the most the succinct, states the former. Architectural Forum, 83, (August 1945), 86, and Michigan Society of Architects, 19, (July 10, 1945), 13, states the latter.
24. W. Hawkins Ferry, The Legacy of Albert Kahn, (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1970), pp. 10-11.
25. The move: Architectural Forum, 83 (Aug. 1954), 86. The location: Portland Art Association/Portland Architectural Club Yearbook, (1909), np.
26. Portland Architectural Yearbook, (1910). Whitehouse worked from Portland's Worcester Building until he moved to the Lumberman's Building in 1910. The 1909 Yearbook carries a Whitehouse site drawing and plan, "Bungalow at Tacoma, Washington." The 1910 Yearbook has one photo and one sketch of work by Whitehouse & Fouilhoux. A second sketch is work by Lazarus (another local architect), Whitehouse & Fouilhoux.

27. Known works by Whitehouse & Fouilhoux: Jefferson High School; Josiah Failing School; Mrs. E.A. King Residence. These are all photographed. Whitehouse was on many architectural committees as well as assisting at atelier of the of the Society of Beaux Arts. The A.I.A. Guide to Portland Architecture (1968), lists two of his later buildings, Temple Beth Israel (1927), p.67, (illus.) and the Sixth Church of Christ Scientist (1931), p.10. Temple Israel is also cited in Thomas Vaughn and George A. McMath, A Century of Portland Architecture, (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1967).
28. Harvey Wiley Corbett, "The American Radiator Building," Architectural Record, 55 (May 1924), 473-477.
29. "New York World's Fair Theme Building," Architectural Forum, 66 (May 1937), 389-396.
30. Wind, Nov. 20, 1954, p.52.
31. Huxtable, p.23. In her fine review of the Institute of Urban Architecture exhibition of Harrison's oeuvre, she characterizes him as subject to ideologies.
32. Oltar-Jevsky rendering, Architectural Forum, 66 (Jan. 1937), 5.
33. Published in Bauwelt, 46 (1929) 8-9, as designed in 1928; but in North, pp.74-75, 1930 is given.
34. "East Building," sheet 2, 1935, Avery Archive, Columbia University.
35. Porches within the building's external surface, Pommer calls "internal balconies."
36. "East Building," sheet 2, scheme B, 1937.
37. Andre Lurçat, Architecture (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1929): elements, p.110; windows, pp.136-138.
38. Peter Hense, "Otto Haesler - Ein Leben für eine menschliche Architektur," Bauwelt, 71, 26, 7/11/80, pp.1131.
39. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, Modern Architecture: International Exhibition (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), pp.151-155.
40. Ibid., p. 188.
41. Richard Pommer prefers a more limited use of Zeilenbau to mean rows of housing units, but (in plan) perpendicular to the street, their long sides oriented east and west.
42. Hilberseimer, p. 50.
43. Andre Lurçat, Oeuvres Recentes (Paris: Editions Vincent Fréal et Cie, 1961), p.11.

44. Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, The International Style (New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 1966), p.69.
45. Ibid., p.71.
46. Müller-Wulckow, p.55.
47. The sash are standard and come from Fenestra Steel Casements; the transoms and venthoppers from Detroit Steel Products are also standard. The steel and glass doors with chromium trim were manufactured by the General Bronze Corporation, and the hardware, knobs and lever handles were made standard by P. and F. Corbin. "Rockefeller Apartments," Architectural Forum, 66, (Jan 1937) 12. Recall Lurcat's discussion on this subject and its resolution at the first CIAM meeting. Lurcat, Architecture, pp. 135-38.
48. Richard Pommer, in a letter to this writer, 10/8/83, is convinced that sources for Rockefeller Apartments are better found in France: Lurcat, or the Beaux-Arts Modern of Mallet-Stevens or Roux-Spitz. This is a widely held prejudice. I might agree were it not for Harrison's apparent preference otherwise.
49. Jean Virette, Immeubles (Paris: Editions de Bonadona, 1931), pp.15,17, and 27. All by Roux-Spitz and all "Moderne." Both the studio apartment house on the Rue de la Cité Université, p.17, and the apartment house on the Quai d'Orsay, p.27, have a central, symetrically stacked feature above the main cornice. My thanks to Prof. Pommer for suggesting Roux-Spitz.
50. Modern Architecture, p.181. Mumford misinterpreted the cause, below standard housing, with the tendency in this country to see the house as a symbol - "home," patriotic, nuclear and secure.
51. Hense, p.1130.
52. "Rockefeller Apartments," Architectural Forum, 66, (Jan. 1937), 4; Wind, Nov. 27, 1954, p.76.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Rockefeller Apartments have a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Rockefeller Apartments are a major example of the International Style, which synthesized the new currents in Europe, the Functional and biological aesthetic, new building techniques, and the concern for public housing; that they represent Wallace K. Harrison's first independent foray into contemporary architecture, offering him the opportunity to present an architectural expression particular to his own time; that in their simplicity, use of industrial materials, smooth wall surfaces, and especially their fenestration, Rockefeller Apartments are undeniably characteristic of the International Style; that, when completed in 1937, Rockefeller Apartments changed the current standards in New York City apartment house planning, giving 15 percent more space to light and air than required by law and providing such amenities as a landscaped courtyard and ground floor tenant services; that Rockefeller Apartments, an outgrowth of other Rockefeller family housing ventures, were planned to attract tenants to Rockefeller Center; that this commission was the first of Wallace K. Harrison's many collaborations with Nelson A. Rockefeller; and that Rockefeller Apartments occupy a place in the continuity of significant urban work in this city, in this country, and in this century.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Rockefeller Apartments, 17 West 54th Street and 24 West 55th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1270, Lot 20, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site

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Rockefeller Apartments
17 West 54th Street
Manhattan

Architects: Harrison & Foulhoux
Built: 1935-37

Photo Credit: Carl Forster



Rockefeller Apartments
24 West 55th Street facade
Manhattan

Photo Credit: Carl Forster