

Imagining Rockefeller Center

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The original purpose of my research visit was to examine how communications – with particular reference to the emergent communication technologies -- were represented in the design and decorative elements of Rockefeller Center. To this end, during my visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center, I examined relevant material in the Rockefeller Family Archives, (Record Group 2 Office of the Messrs Rockefeller, Business Interests series), giving a good deal of attention to the ideas of the philosopher, Hartley Burr Alexander, who was commissioned to develop a vision for how “Rockefeller City,” as it was originally called, would be decorated.

In the thirty-two page report entitled “Rockefeller City – The Theme” that he submitted in the spring of 1931, Alexander was concerned with the kind of impression that Rockefeller City would make on the public. In particular, he was of the view that by virtue of the regularity of the decoration, the public would gain the impression that the choice of ornamentation had not been in any way “haphazard or meaningless.” Moreover, he stressed that the public

understanding engendered should be one of “a general or favorable interest.” He saw the complex as inviting comparisons with “the great monument of civilizations,” which portended the future of culture “not only in North America but the world.”

In order to realize this vision, Alexander proposed that the unifying theme of the complex should be “Frontiers of Time.” Echoing Frederick Jackson Turner’s sentiments about the closing of the American frontier, Alexander maintained that, with the closing of spatial frontiers on a global basis, the future of humankind had now become time-based. This would involve the reconstruction of institutions in a variety of realms, including the economic, the political, the religious, the scientific and the biological. By virtue of new discoveries along these frontiers, society would remain healthy and civilization would grow strong.

Closely related to the theme of “frontiers of time” was that of “HOMO FABER” or “MAN AS BUILDER,” which would capture the notion that the complex represented not a monument to the past but rather the “living activities” that were inherent in the “building of a civilization.” This would involve the various decorative elements working organically in concert with one another, “with respect to main lines of communication both horizontal and vertical.” Thus, the decorative elements at street level – near points of motion and interchange -- should be “near and rich” while those at altitude should be “abstract and simplified.” The horizontal and vertical elements were to produce together a “constant play of pattern” that could be likened to “an architectural arabesque.”

Alexander went on to describe in more detail how this scheme could be realized by discussing specific locales within the complex. It is instructive that within Alexander’s more concrete descriptions, communication themes abounded. At the entrance to the No. 1 building (which corresponded to what became the RCA building), Alexander foresaw the placement of a

large exterior sculpture, “A Voice Speaking from the Clouds” (the theme of which he elsewhere described as “Voice Speaking through Time and Space.”) It was to be flanked by figures symbolizing “Sound” and “Time” that were to represent “the modern developments of human understanding typified by the radio and television.” At the north entrance to the building, Alexander proposed the decoration of “Intelligence Awakening the Public,” which consisted of a Thinker, “sending waves of sound throughout the Globe and rousing the Public from its lethargies.” Within the entrance hall to No. 1, Alexander proposed the placement of an elaborated “Orbis Pictus Terrarum,” namely a “moving and news character of the habitable globe.” Within this configuration, there was to be a central group, “representing Commerce and Industry under the guidance of Communication.” Its pedestal was to contain “informative bulletins” that “could be displayed there for close-up examination.”

Alexander was also concerned with the communicative aspects of the complex’s roof spaces. Complementing the brilliant and moving imagery of the lower levels, they would “have the quality of a tapestry... of an intriguing pattern when viewed locally.” The skyline, however, would not be mere “spectacle,” but would be grounded in “social uses.” The roof spaces would be provided with “walks, shrubbery, porticoes, kiosks, and ornamental attractions.” With their “brilliant and living color-patterns,” they would serve as a counterpoint to the “metallic hues at the base.”

Shortly after Alexander submitted his report, he was summarily dismissed, with the development of a decorative theme turned over to what Daniel Okrent described (in *Great Fortune*) as “the metaphysicians and phenomenologists in the Rockefeller Center publicity office.” Alexander’s decorative plans were similarly dismissed by Okrent as bizarre and outlandish. However, in examining material related to how the complex was conceptualized in

the early 1930s, I was struck by the extent to which the general design and aesthetic contours of Rockefeller Center were indebted to Alexander's original vision: many of his insights and ideas were retained – albeit often in a reformulated manner.

Indeed, a document prepared by Merle Crowell, the new publicity director for Rockefeller Center, can best be described as an unacknowledged appropriation of Alexander's ideas. The central theme of this report, "New Frontiers," which was also the report's title, appears to have been taken directly from Alexander's report of the previous year. "New Frontiers" was intended to "interpret our American civilization at the moment, its manifestations, its meanings, its promises." Indeed, the way Crowell discussed the "New Frontiers" was virtually identical to Alexander's claims about the same subject. Since there were no longer new territories to explore and settle, civilization would now develop in an inward and upward manner. This would involve cultivating "the comparatively unexplored and undeveloped territory within ourselves." What Crowell had in mind was not only "the spiritual significance of life," but also "a significant adventure in human relations." Echoing Alexander's allusion to various forms of institutions, Crowell went on to note how "new frontiers" would be embodied in medical science, in general science, and in education. Finally, in a discussion of the relationship between the vertical and the horizontal (that was much more mundane than that of Alexander), Crowell proposed that the old order would be represented on the street level while "the story of the new frontiers will be told in the levels above these, on the interior walls and the façades of the various buildings."

Shortly thereafter, in March of 1932, George Vincent submitted what he termed "A Decorative Scheme for Rockefeller Center" to John Rockefeller, Jr. (hereafter Junior). While much more down-to-earth than the report of Alexander, it nevertheless mirrored a number of the

themes that the earlier work had adumbrated. In line with Alexander's emphasis upon Civilization, Vincent proposed as a central theme, "America in the Pageant of Civilization." Among its sub-themes were aspects of culture and communication that had also found a place in Alexander's report, namely, "architecture, music, painting, sculpture, theater, motion pictures..." His plans for the "Central (Radio) Building" were also quite in line with those of Alexander, namely, the use of the two long available spaces for the representation of "the pageant of transport" and "the pageant of civilization."

Along the same lines, M. I. Pupin also presented views that were quite compatible with those of Alexander (as well as with Vincent). Specifically, in a report he submitted to Junior on the decorative panels for the RCA Building, he recommended that they "illustrate the creative power of our civilization on the side of transportation and communication." Some of the panels would be dedicated to illustrating how "the moving power of electricity" was applied to communications, through images of "telegraphy, telephony, radio transmission, and television." The ideas of Vincent and Pupin found favor with Junior, who noted to Colonel Woods (after summarizing some of their ideas) that "we would do well to consider the suggestions above referred to."

Judging by the subsequent deliberations, Junior (influenced by the thinking of Pupin, Vincent, and Crowell), played a significant role in determining how Rockefeller Center was decorated. In particular, Crowell's overarching theme of "New Frontiers" became a key point of reference for some of the major decorative elements of Rockefeller Center including "Wisdom," "Sound," "Light" and "The Story of Mankind" by Lee Lawrie; "Morning, Present, Evening," by Robert Garrison; "Dance, Drama, and Song," by Hildreth M. Meiere; "Man's Triumph in Communication" by José Maria Sert; "Radio" and "Television" by Lee Friedlander;

“Intelligence awakening Mankind” by Barry Faulkner; “Aspects of Mankind” by Gaston Lachaise; and “News” by Isamu Noguchi. But given that the theme of “New Frontiers” (as inflected by the ideas of Pupin and Vincent about Civilization) were derived more or less from Alexander’s original vision of “Frontiers of Time,” Junior and his advisors were, in effect, largely acting upon the insights and views of the California philosopher.

Indeed, it may have been the case that, at least in part, Junior’s intense interest in the interplay between the roof-tops and the skyline was linked to Alexander’s thinking on the subject. Neither Pupin, Vincent nor Crowell gave much attention to this element. Evidence suggests, rather, that Junior’s interest in roof gardens stemmed from architect Raymond Hood’s original plans for Rockefeller Center. Hood, in turn, had been enthusiastic about Alexander’s ideas, and it was through Hood’s intervention that Alexander had been hired. It is likely that Hood had been attracted by Alexander’s views on skylines and rooftops, which were consonant with his own enthusiasm for the subject.

In any event, in line with the emphasis given by Hood and Alexander to the development of the Center’s upper reaches in relation to its vertical contours, Junior became very involved with the development of roof gardens. While he was very enthusiastic about the “tall central building” (which became the RCA building), he was of the view that the open roof space could be rendered more “useful and comfortable” and that the “distant profile” of the building could be softened and improved. With reference to the roof gardens, Junior was of the view that they would help the Center to “attract tenants and sightseers.” Likely reflecting Junior’s interest in the vertical aspects of Rockefeller Center, a “roof and restaurant” committee of Rockefeller Center Inc. was established, chaired by Nelson Rockefeller. In addition to organizing a “lunch club” (that would “occupy the west wing of the 65th floor - RCA Building during the lunch hour”), the

main initiative of the committee was to develop an overall plan for dealing with matters pertaining to the roof-top areas. In effect, the “roof and restaurant committee” as a vehicle for coordinating and developing the higher reaches of Rockefeller Center, was continuous with Hartley Alexander’s avowal that the “roof spaces” of Rockefeller City “should become a vital asset of the center.”

Alexander’s vision about how Rockefeller Center should be decorated – as inflected by the ideas of Vincent, Pupin, and Crowell, as well as Junior -- also provides a window into how the Center eventually came to be organized. For it was – at least in part – because of the clash between Junior and John R. Todd (who bore the main responsibility for overseeing the building and management of the Center), that Rockefeller Center Inc. was created, providing Junior, his family, and associates with more control over how the Center should be administered. Among the most important committees within the new organizational structure was that responsible for overseeing how “roofs and restaurants” would be used and developed.