


# ‘Prevailing’ Upon the World

## John D. Rockefeller, Jr. & the Architecture of International Houses (1921-1936)

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In 1946 when the newly formed United Nations was searching for a suitable site for its headquarters, the American philanthropist and heir to the Standard Oil and Gas fortune, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., bought and gifted eighteen acres of land on Manhattan's east side to the organization. This gift—as well as the Second World War that had preceded it—marked the official resumption of American leadership in world affairs. But for Rockefeller it was also the culmination of a decades-long campaign of architectural patronage and cultural philanthropy, which had aimed at positioning the United States as exactly the type of political messiah it was now becoming. A precursor to the UN project, and to this idea of American leadership, may be found in the earlier and relatively obscure International House movement in the United States and France, which was also championed by Rockefeller.

Official accounts of this movement trace its origins to a chance encounter on the steps of Columbia University in 1909, between Y.M.C.A. official Harry Edmonds and a lonely Chinese student who famously said to him, “I’ve been in New York three weeks, and you are the first person who has spoken to me!”<sup>1</sup> Edmonds, the story continues, put the movement on a more tangible and secure footing in 1921 by successfully petitioning Rockefeller to build—in New York—the first of four residences in the Western hemisphere dedicated to bringing together foreign students, regardless of their nationality or religion. Rockefeller later stated that these residences were designed so “that brotherhood may prevail” in the larger world.<sup>2</sup>

But while Rockefeller and his network of cultural and political advisors did respond to real instances of social dislocation within the foreign student community, the records held at the Rockefeller Archive Center show that they also leveraged the image of the ‘alienated foreigner’ to define the very basis of internationalism. Historians have argued that after the First World War American attempts at cultural internationalism—that is, the promotion of a shared ideological outlook across national borders—often took the form of

educational projects geared towards foreign students, who were seen by the East Coast's liberal elites and religious leaders alike as the new foot-soldiers or ideological emissaries.<sup>3</sup> Archival evidence shows that in Rockefeller's cultural projects the values that were shared were predominantly American and Protestant. Despite this evidence of an asymmetrical internationalism, the sanitized narrative of International Houses as sites of equitable cultural exchange remains entrenched in popular imagination. I attribute this narrative's persistence to a lack of critical engagement with the architecture and urban siting of these projects.

The I-Houses, as these residences are popularly known, are on the whole architecturally historicist and largely unremarkable in their outward appearance. Each project was designed by a different architect. Given architectural history's bias towards modernism as the aesthetic of progress in this period, the architect as author of a building, and stylistic consistency as a necessary ingredient for the creation of an 'oeuvre,' these projects have not been studied from within the discipline. By positioning Rockefeller as the ideological and architectural form-giver of these residences—rather than merely their financial sponsor, which is how he is remembered—I show how to conceptualize the I-Houses into a coherent body of work alongside the other buildings and landscapes of his patronage. Despite their apparent eclecticism, Rockefeller's projects share a common ideological basis and are united by the historic moment in which they were conceived: i.e. in the devastating aftermath of the First World War.<sup>4</sup>

At War's end, the United States withdrew into political isolationism. For Rockefeller and other industrial elites—particularly on the liberal East Coast—American isolationism and the resulting nativism at home presented a problem. New nation-states such as Turkey had emerged from the war, and it was felt imperative that they—together with countries such as China, which had recently cast off its imperial rule—should modernize along lines sympathetic to American democratic and economic values and away from communism or 'excessive'

nationalism. For Rockefeller, a devout Baptist, it was also crucial to keep Christianity relevant in these changing times. He began by throwing his support behind a controversial early twentieth century theological movement called Protestant Modernism, which sought to shift Christianity's emphasis away from biblical miracles, sectarianism, and religious conversions, embracing instead ecumenism, modernity, and capitalism as the foundations of an earthly Kingdom of God. To assist the movement in achieving its goals, Rockefeller used cultural philanthropy to position the United States as a new political messiah—one that would demonstrate how modern science and culture, when guided by Protestant values, could steer the world towards international cooperation, capitalist prosperity, and away from the next war. I call this ideological agenda “Protestant Internationalism.”

Architecture and site were important tools in this program of ‘soft’ imperialism. Underneath their historicist aesthetic, the I-Houses attempted to produce a worldwide modernity that would be sympathetic to American and Protestant leadership in business and politics. This research report will describe how Rockefeller leveraged architecture and urban-spatial practices in order to achieve this goal. It is important to note that Rockefeller often took on projects or movements that already existed in some nascent form. His involvement would then transform and expand significantly the architectural, urban, and programmatic scope of these projects. Therefore, to fully understand his particular architectural and ideological authorship, it is necessary to trace each project's origins and background.

With respect to the I-Houses, their institutional origin may be traced back to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Edmonds, who was an officer of the Y's intercollegiate arm, originally worked with American students new to the city. But after his infamous encounter with the lonely Chinese student, he founded the Intercollegiate Cosmopolitan Club of the City of New York (ICC) in 1910. The Club was organized as a separate administrative branch within the citywide

YMCA, and focused on socializing and welcoming foreign students through a program that emphasized their social, intellectual, physical, and spiritual well-being. Underlying this program, however, was another one that aimed to ‘interpret’ the United States to foreign students. These young men and women were introduced to a carefully curated selection of persons, institutions, and sites that represented the United States as its industrial and religious elites wanted the country to be seen: a land of bounty, industrial prosperity, justice, and inclusion. Activities often took place in a rented space at Columbia University or in the homes of wealthy Americans eager to demonstrate the comforts that capitalism and hard work could provide.<sup>5</sup>

The wartime devastation of European universities increased the number of foreign students entering the U.S. In New York, the number nearly doubled from 697 in 1913 to 1210 in 1919. Most of these were graduate students from elite backgrounds, who had held important government positions in their home countries and could be expected to do the same upon returning. They were thus in an ideal position to promote sympathy abroad towards the American economic and political model. Unfortunately, their increasing numbers coincided with even greater nativism in the U.S., and this threatened to give them a very different view of America than its elites had hoped for.

Religious leaders such as John R. Mott (an evangelist and general secretary of the International Committee of the YMCA), religious organizations such as the YMCA and the Committee on Friendly Relations among Foreign Students (CFRFS), and secular organizations such as the Cosmopolitan Clubs (different from the ICC) and the Institute of International Education (IIE) worked hard to encourage the migration of foreign students to the U.S. and to overcome their social isolation.<sup>6</sup> Over at the ICC Edmonds conducted a survey, which showed that, compounding the usual problems of social isolation and hostility, the housing stock available to foreign students was inadequate and dispersed. It kept them in isolation from each other and from suitable Americans. The ICC thus

decided to erect a purpose-built residence for the students' housing and social needs. In July 1920, the Club's administrators raised enough money to buy six plots of land near Columbia University, which was a hub for foreign students. The land was bounded by Sakura Park to the south, Claremont Avenue to the east, and a row of buildings to the west that separated it from the more scenic Riverside Drive. Architect Louis Jallade—who specialized in designing YMCA buildings—prepared an initial sketch for the project, which featured prominently in newspapers.

The announcement, and the project's obvious potential for large-scale influence through its international membership, caught Rockefeller's attention. The following year, he pledged one million dollars towards the project, using this gift as an opportunity to take control of and transform the architectural and ideological agenda of the proposed I-House. He insisted on creating a financially independent building, on strengthening the project's commitment to countering xenophobia in the larger American population, and on promoting the political and economic values of the country's liberal industrial elite as well as his own personal interest in theological modernism.

To accomplish these objectives, Rockefeller began by increasing the building's accommodations in order to generate more income through rent. He also stipulated that a third of the building's dormitory rooms should be reserved for American students, thus increasing the interactions and—presumably—the understanding and goodwill between foreign students and their American counterparts. He then engineered a separation between the YMCA (which represented a more conservative version of Protestantism) and the I-House, which he hoped would promote a modernist interpretation of Christianity. Most importantly, he used his position as financial sponsor to create an architecturally 'appropriate' building.

Rockefeller was not a remote client to whom the advantages of good architecture or site had to be demonstrated. Rather, he was a hands-on patron who drove many key decisions and brought on his personal architect, William Welles Bosworth, in a supervisory capacity. Although Jallade was adept at providing adequate facilities along the YMCA model, in Rockefeller's opinion he was not as skilled in the architectural arts—specifically, the Beaux-Arts tradition. Bosworth and Rockefeller were both “unabashed Beaux-Arts neo-classicist[s]” who believed that symmetry, monumentality, and the right quantity and style of ornament could create a building that would be appropriate for its function and that would convey a commanding institutional presence.<sup>7</sup> These principles are evident in Bosworth's landscape design for Kykuit (the Rockefeller family estate in Pocantico Hills) and in his design for the new campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge—arguably his most famous work.

Archival records show that in conversation with Rockefeller, Bosworth substantially redrew Jallade's elevations, enlarging the building and eliminating its sloped roof to create a more sophisticated profile. Also upon Rockefeller's instructions, architectural ornament was kept to a minimum. Correspondence between Rockefeller and the I-House's Building Committee shows the former's concern that a heavily ornamented façade would make it difficult for students to return home to ostensibly plainer surroundings. And this idea of the students' successful return to their homelands—where they would presumably rise to influential positions in political and economic spheres—was a key component of the I-House movement: without this, it would be impossible for these young men and women to spread the American model of modernization abroad.

These are substantial marks of authorship on Rockefeller's part, but he did not stop here. In the Beaux-Arts tradition, architectural presence and the importance and loftiness of an institution are conveyed through symmetry in a building's plan and elevations. Rockefeller extended this concept to the building's relationship with the surrounding land. He purchased additional lots west of the

ICC's existing property so that the I-House could extend all the way from Claremont Avenue to Riverside Drive. Not only did this allow the I-House to feature a façade on the more desirable Riverside Drive, but it also allowed the building to be symmetrically aligned with the Park.

It is at this register of site—both macro and micro—that Rockefeller's ideological program is most apparent. A map printed in 1923, in an in-house publication of International House New York, strikingly depicted the Club's international membership with lines from all corners of the world converging upon New York. This map aesthetically visualizes a series of center-periphery relationships that are at the heart of the International House movement and that hold the United States—particularly New York—as internationalism's ideological fulcrum.

If a site can be considered to have ideological character, then, in the 1920s, Manhattan's Morningside Heights (the immediate neighborhood of the I-House) had this in spades. The Rockefeller team saw the site as a new “city upon a hill,” which is a provocative statement of American and Protestant exceptionalism. The neighborhood hosted Columbia University, Barnard, Teachers College, and the Union Theological Seminary—institutions where Progressivism had taken hold, and from which the ICC primarily drew its membership. The I-House embraced these institutions, but positioned itself in opposition to the General Grant National Memorial, which was located just across Riverside Drive. Rockefeller and his advisors saw the construction of the I-House as an architectural ‘reproof’ to what they understood was the tomb's message: that peace can be obtained with a call to arms. By extending the I-House's park frontage to Riverside Drive, Rockefeller brought his monument to internationalism in direct confrontation with this military tomb.

In 1925, one year after the completion of the I-House, Rockefeller announced plans to erect a new structure across from it—one that would tip the site's ideological balance towards religion and particularly towards Protestant



Modernism. The Riverside Church was completed in 1930 and immediately became an iconic landmark in competition with Grant's Tomb. The high-rise church faced International House across Sakura Park. Rockefeller built it as a dedicated ministerial seat for Harry Emerson Fosdick, a controversial theological modernist and brother of Rockefeller's chief philanthropic advisor, Raymond Fosdick. In stark contrast to the I-House, the Church's neo-Gothic façade was quite ornate, perhaps indicating that it was the more powerful of the two institutions, and that religion should be a central tenet of internationalism.

Indeed, the Rockefeller team's private correspondence attributed the International House's success to its emphasis on morality within the framework of a Christian faith, which had been "freed from theological and ecclesiastical entanglements."<sup>8</sup> This modern religion provided a lens through which the United States could be properly revealed to foreign students. But to prospective residents, the I-House promised to deliver an environment where no imposition would be made with regards to faith or nationality. In practice, however, the governing bodies of the I-House consisted entirely of American business and religious leaders, who were designated as experts on various countries, rather than of leaders chosen from these countries. As to the first point—freedom of faith—the impending arrival of Riverside Church made it clear that this was not entirely the case. In 1927, students complained of a type of religious pressure. In response, I-House leaders had to explicitly emphasize their mission's secularity in their by-laws:

students have the fullest freedom and independence and...whatever they arrive at is the result of their own independent thought and action.<sup>9</sup>

Religion and internationalism's close relationship is also apparent in the architectural treatment of Sakura Park, which lies between International House and Riverside Church. This interstitial space was re-designed from a 'wild' and topographically uneven landscape into a perfectly flat park, which is partially

‘contained’ by retaining walls that are reminiscent of the Abbey of Cluny in France. Its new formal paths replaced older picturesque ones and were laid out to align with the axes of the I-House and the Church, thus helping to create an aesthetically harmonious relationship between the two.

In 1926, the Rockefeller team began to think about extending the I-House movement to other cities. It ultimately selected Berkeley, Chicago, and Paris, owing to these cities’ concentration of foreign students as well as to their strategic locations on the Pacific Coast, the American Midwest, and Western Europe. The presence of I-Houses was used to extend Protestant Internationalism’s reach into these geo-political peripheries, and—through their population of foreign students—farther afield into countries like China, Turkey, and Iraq. Each residence was situated in an urban location appropriate for its geo-political mission. For example the Berkeley project, which was tasked with the promotion of friendly relations between Asian students and Americans in a part of the country that was particularly xenophobic towards the former, was situated next to the University of California campus. Writing to the University’s President, Rockefeller described his thinking behind the project and its larger site in strategic terms:

the splendid location of the new International House in Berkeley, directly across the ... Golden Gate, through which pours so much of the world’s commerce and travel, will provide both a community and an opportunity much fuller and richer than now obtains.<sup>10</sup>

In Chicago, the Rockefeller team chose a site near the University of Chicago, where sixty percent of the city’s foreign student population was concentrated. The building is situated on the north side of the Midway Plaisance, a parkway that Edmonds described as the “‘Champs Elysees’ of America.”<sup>11</sup> Midway Plaisance is also the former site of a controversial ethnic village during the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, and was thus a provocative choice. In Paris, La Maison Internationale was inserted into an existing campus of student dormitories that

had been inaugurated in 1925 to provide housing for foreign students (in a bid to attract more of them after the First World War). When Rockefeller joined the project in 1933, the campus already featured nineteen “national” residences, each housing students from a specific country. La Maison Internationale was intended to provide a social gathering space for all students irrespective of their nationality. Its central location on the campus acted as an architectural rebuke to its neighbors’ excessive nationalism.

These three cities—Paris, Berkeley, and Chicago—were presented as gateways to a larger geo-political periphery, but internally they were positioned as subsidiary to New York, which set the global agenda and was held up as the ideal of the I-House movement. This positioning caused ideological conflicts between the center (New York City) and its peripheries. In Berkeley, particularly, the I-House movement was met with suspicion. Progressivism, one scholar has written, had not made much of an impact there at the time. Not only were Berkeley residents and students distrustful of the Asian community, to whom they were asked to extend their hospitality, but they also doubted the motives of New Yorkers. Protests and demonstrations broke out against institutional encroachment. Chicagoans were wary of the project, too, but the atmosphere there was less contentious because Rockefeller’s father—John D. Rockefeller, Sr.—was the university’s founder.

I contend that not only does the built environment record a particular ideology, but it also contains evidence of the periphery’s resistance. There are, as I have tried to show, different types of periphery: those that fall within the American border and those that lie outside. With respect to the former—those that lie within—perhaps the I-Houses’ architectural eclecticism is an example of the Rockefeller team’s response to resistance from the peripheries. The Berkeley project was designed in a Spanish-Colonial Revival style, Chicago in the neo-Gothic style similar to the University of Chicago campus, and the Paris project was ostensibly designed to resemble a French château. They were, in this

manner, aesthetically appropriate to their function and context: they managed to blend in while advocating a radical program of international brotherhood in which the values of the United States' East Coast elites prevailed over other sovereign nation-states as well as other American cities. Unable to prevent the next war, this program did forecast the United States' future domination and control of the international sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Edmonds, *Excerpts from the Memoirs of Harry Edmonds Including The Story of International House* (1979), 8.

<sup>2</sup> “The Work of International House” (John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s speech published as a pamphlet), November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1923, Folder 68A, Box 10, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (hereafter OMR), III 2G, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY (hereafter RAC).

<sup>3</sup> See: Bu, Liping, “Education and International Cultural Understanding: The American Elite Approach, 1920-37,” in *Teaching America to the World and the World to America: Education and Foreign Relations Since 1870*, ed. Garlitz, Richard and Jarvinen, Lisa (United States of America: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Liping Bu, *Making the World Like Us: Education, Cultural Expansion, and the American Century* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003); Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Kramer, Paul A., “Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century,” in *Teaching America to the World and the World to America: Education and Foreign Relations Since 1870*, ed. Richard Garlitz and Jarvinen, Lisa (United States of America: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–50.

<sup>4</sup> During my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center, I studied several projects that were built and financed by Rockefeller. For this research report I have chosen to write only on the International Houses. This paper has been adapted from a chapter of my dissertation.

<sup>5</sup> Industrialists and capitalists such as the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie and the Dodge family were known for frequently hosting the ICC’s student members in their homes. Finally, in 1920, Rockefeller too hosted his first event for foreign

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students. Largely at the urging of Edmonds, he invited a Latin American contingent from the ICC at his home in Manhattan. It is in part due to the success of this event that he became involved in the project to build International House New York.

<sup>6</sup> IIE helped administer fellowships for foreign students and coordinated the exchange of information between the American government, universities, and students for this purpose. Meanwhile, motivated by the mission to spread Christianity abroad through foreign students, the CFRFS focused on creating a welcoming atmosphere for them in the United States. When the U.S. Congress passed a series of restrictive immigration laws that threatened to affect foreign student migration because of the absence of a separate student visa category at this time, the CFRFS managed to get special concessions for students: at ports of entry, students were “paroled” into the custody of CFRFS, which in turn agreed to ensure their departure from the United States at the end of one year of study. The Cosmopolitan Clubs, meanwhile, emerged out of the peace movement and focused on spreading internationalism. Despite the fact that each organization focused on a different issue related to foreign students, they often coordinated their efforts and even shared student members. For example, student members of the Cosmopolitan Clubs were often also registered with YMCAs and YWCAs. The ICC, meanwhile, was administratively located within the New York City YMCA but took its name from the Cosmopolitan Clubs. In the years before International House New York was constructed, the CFRFS would notify the ICC of incoming foreign students: the ICC would then help find temporary lodgings for them. For more on this, see Bu, *Making the World Like Us*; Bu, Liping, “Education and International Cultural Understanding: The American Elite Approach, 1920-37”; Kramer, Paul A., “Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century.”

<sup>7</sup> Quentin Snowden Jacobs, “William Welles Bosworth: Major Works,” (Master's Thesis, Columbia University, 1988), 1. Jacobs uses this description for Bosworth but I believe it applies equally to Rockefeller.

<sup>8</sup> “Report” submitted by Edmonds to Rockefeller, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1921, Folder 68A, Box 10, OMR, III2G, RAC.

<sup>9</sup> “The Religious Policy of International House,” August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1927, Folder 68, Box 10, OMR, RAC.

<sup>10</sup> Rockefeller to University of California President Robert G. Sproul, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1930, Folder 109, Box 17, OMR, RAC.

<sup>11</sup> “International House, Chicago” Edmonds to the Committee on the Extension of International House, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1927, Folder 111, Box 17. OMR, RAC.