


The Architectural Collaboration Between William Welles Bosworth and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 1906-1924, the American Years

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On December 1961, ninety-two-year-old architect William Welles Bosworth (1869-1966) recalled in a short memoir how he first made the acquaintance, in 1906, of the philanthropist and heir to the Standard Oil fortune, John D. Rockefeller Jr. (1874-1960). *“I first met the Rockefellers when I had an apartment which adjoined that of my great friends Adele and Albert Herter in the Gibson Studio Building in New York. Late one afternoon, Mrs. Herter knocked on my door and asked if I would like to come in to tea, and meet some friends of hers who were there. I gladly obliged and spent a delightful hour in a conversation with Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. [...] And so it all began”*.¹ Whether this first meeting was complete coincidence or a premeditated scheme, it marked the beginning of a long and fruitful professional collaboration, as well as the beginning of a sincere friendship between the two men. This report will explore a few of the several architectural projects on which Junior and Bosworth collaborated in the United States, and examine how both men benefitted from working together between 1906 and 1924, before Bosworth leaves for France to oversee restoration projects funded by Junior. It will also explain how their lifelong friendship started and why the two men got along so well.

Trained on both sides of the Atlantic at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris during the last decade of the nineteenth century, Bosworth opened a successful firm in New York in 1902. Soon after, his work began to attract increasingly prominent clients for whom he was mostly designing country houses and gardens in the *Beaux-Arts* style. Among his clients were Valentine Everit Macy and Frank A. Vanderlip, who both owned a property in the Westchester County, near Tarrytown. So when Bosworth first made the acquaintance of John D. Rockefeller Jr. in 1906, he probably already knew that the heir was building a new house, *Kykuit*, on his father’s estate in Pocantico Hills (Tarrytown, New York). According to Bosworth’s account of their first meeting, he had the occasion to mention to Junior that he was an architect. Junior then

said that he was planning to have some landscape work done at Kykuit and asked Bosworth to show him some of his work. Two days later, at Junior's behest, Bosworth went to Kykuit to see the place for himself and sketch out a vision for this new garden.

Seduced by the architect's proposal, Junior hired him and the two men immediately started their collaboration.²

Bosworth was first entrusted with the design of the approach roads, for which he arranged the tracing and plantings in such a way to conceal the breathtaking view on the Hudson River, in order to save it until the visitors' arrival on the west terrace of the house, thus creating a dramatic effect. Bosworth was then commissioned to design the whole gardens and a few outbuildings on the estate, such as the Orangerie, which was modeled after Versailles. The gardens, arranged along a central axis and punctuated with several sculptures and prominent architectural elements, such as the Temple of Venus, are an example of Bosworth's love of the Beaux-Arts tradition. Bosworth also took advantage of the panorama and integrated it as the major element in the design of the gardens. Completed in 1909, the gardens proved to be very satisfactory to Junior even though the total cost amounted to twenty-five times the initial estimates:³ *"all of those who have visited the gardens have shared with us the belief that they were exceptionally beautiful, not only in general plan, but in every smallest detail"*.⁴

In 1911, Junior asked Bosworth to intervene in the remodeling of the house, which was originally designed between 1906 and 1908 by Delano & Aldrich, but did not entirely satisfy John D. Rockefeller, Sr. In collaboration with the decorator Ogden Codman who was responsible for the interior design of the house, Bosworth was especially involved in the remodeling of the east façade. He harmonized it with the surrounding gardens by giving it a Beaux-Arts style, visible for instance with the addition of a richly sculpted pediment, as well as a general symmetry and well-balanced proportions. After seven long years of construction work, the house was finally completed in 1913.⁵

The Kykuit project was entrusted entirely to Junior by his father, and even though Senior still kept an active interest in the construction and was consulted on all the major decisions, it was one of the first major responsibilities that Junior directed on his own. By the end of the construction, he had proven to his father that he was able to successfully conduct large-scale projects. For historian Albert Berger, the construction of Kykuit was significant because it marked a transition between the first two generations of Rockefellers; by the time the house and gardens were finished, Junior was also in almost complete charge of the family's business and philanthropic endeavors. "*In a very real sense, building his father's new house at Pocantico Hills was John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s initiation in business*".⁶

The construction of Kykuit represented a second challenge that Junior triumphed over, a more personal one. Junior was saddened by the press's repeated criticism against his father, such as the work published by Ida Tarbell in *McClure's Magazine*. In August 1905, Tarbell especially attacked Senior's moral fiber, saying that his poor houses were a reflection of his poor character.⁷ Thus, Junior was even more eager to build a suitable house for his father. He took it as a personal challenge to counter Tarbell's criticisms by succeeding in building a house that reflected the Baptist inclination for simplicity and restraint, but that was elegant and imposing enough to reflect his status in society.

Therefore, Junior found in Bosworth an architect whose classical taste he personally liked and found appropriate for what he had in mind: "*I think one can safely say that Mr. Bosworth has a strong leaning towards simplicity and dignity in architecture, rather than complication and ornateness. Although he gives most careful attention to the finish of details, he never uses ornamentation except with some definite purpose in mind, and then sparingly. I quite agree that Mr. Bosworth's good taste is unquestionable, not only as regards matters of architecture, but as regards general questions of art*".⁸

This first successful collaboration between Junior and Bosworth was rapidly followed by other personal architectural projects. Between 1911 and 1913, while he was working on the remodeling of Kykuit, Bosworth was also entrusted with the construction of Junior's townhouse on 10 West 54th street, which followed the same classical principles.⁹ Later on, in 1916, Junior asked him to design a commercial building around the corner from the townhouse on 680 Fifth Avenue. Bosworth was also involved in the design of several bridges on another Rockefeller property located at Seal Harbor, on Mount Desert Island in Maine.

The collaboration between the two men went beyond projects related to personal Rockefeller residences, extending to architectural operations related to Junior's philanthropic interests. In February 1909, Junior asked Bosworth if he would agree to sketch for him the plans and elevation for a new edifice for the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church – of which he was a member – because the current church and Sunday school premises were “*no longer adequate*”.¹⁰ Junior insisted that Bosworth consider the matter an “*absolutely confidential one*” because “*the question of building a new church has not been brought up formally, but within the next year or so, it will very probably be agitated*”.¹¹ Bosworth accepted and when the question was officially raised, Junior was able to present plans he had already approved to the Church Committee as an example of what he thought would be an appropriate building. A competition was nonetheless organized and Bosworth, fairly predictably, won it. In December 1909, the Trustees drafted a contract for his employment and in 1910, they published a booklet presenting the new church that featured Bosworth's plans and drawings. In this booklet, the architect explained that his perfectly symmetrical facade was designed “*in the Italian style of architecture in vogue un Pisa in the Twelfth Century*”,¹² and that the new edifice was expected to be open for worship the following year. The whole project was eventually cancelled and the new church was never built.¹³

But in 1917, a new Building Committee presided by Edward L. Ballard raised again the question of the erection of a new church building. They chose a new site, at 64th street and Park Avenue, and a new architect, Henry C. Pelton. Learning that Bosworth was not involved in the project anymore, Junior wrote to Ballard saying that the Committee was doing to the architect “*both a discourtesy and injustice*”;¹⁴ he also suggested at least including him in the project as a consultant or associate architect. This solution would, of course, be a way for Junior to keep control of the final design of the building. Bosworth was very much upset by this new turn of events. In a letter to Ballard, he explained that this new situation was professionally to his disadvantage because the connections between him and Junior, and between Junior and the Church, as well as his previous connection with the plans for the edifice, were well known in the profession. So if he were not to be identified with the new building, it would “*suggest the possibility of dissatisfaction on the part of the church or Mr. Rockefeller with the work [he] did before.*” He then wrote, in a passage that is especially revealing about the nature of his collaboration with Junior, that “*while [Junior] does not in any way wish to dictate the selection of the Committee, it is agreed between us that he has expressed his confidence in my work, and that in view of his connection with the Church being so well known, he would have to give less thoughts to the ultimate design being creditable to the prominence of the church*”.¹⁵ This sentence proves that the employment of Bosworth was seen by Junior as a guarantee of the appropriateness and good taste of the building to which his name was associated. Bosworth, who was fully aware of it, did not hesitate to use it as an argument. He also added that Junior was the largest contributor, thus implying that it would be good for the Building Committee to follow his recommendations.

Bosworth was eventually appointed consulting architect, but his collaboration with Pelton proved to be difficult. Their working methods and opinions concerning the style of the edifice were quite different. He decided to resign in March 1919.¹⁶ What seemed to have bothered him the most was that Pelton’s work was “*never rising above the ordinary as regards design,*” raising once

again the question of the appropriateness of a building to which the Rockefeller name would be attached. Bosworth thought that their high status in society should be reflected in the buildings in which they were living, and to which they were associated. But Bosworth's reaction was also probably the result of personal resentment towards the way in which this whole project turned out for him, which he blamed on Pelton, and which eventually led him to criticize his designs. However, this resentment was short-lived. In 1926, after Bosworth's departure for France, Junior employed Pelton in partnership with the Boston firm Allen & Collens¹⁷ for the construction of Riverside Church – an architecture that Bosworth praised when he first saw it.

Junior also called for Bosworth's advice in another architectural enterprise: the construction of the New York International House. In 1920, he became interested in the project carried by a branch of the Y.M.C.A. to build a facility to house and socialize international students coming to New York. The architect, Louis Jallade, who already worked on a number of Y.M.C.A. facilities was selected and his plans were covered by the press when Junior decided, in 1921, to pledge one million dollars to the project. But he was not entirely satisfied with the design of the building which he considered, among other things, to be too ornate. He decided to bring Bosworth into the project as a consulting architect, and asked him to considerably redesign Jallade's original plans and to modify them to what he thought would be more appropriate. That is to say, Junior wanted a less ornamented, more monumental and symmetrical building. The building was completed in 1924.¹⁸ This project was important for Junior and Bosworth, because a few years later, they were involved in the construction of another International House, *La Maison Internationale de la Cité Universitaire*, in Paris. The project was developed along very similar lines, with Bosworth being brought into the enterprise as a consultant in 1928, when Junior decided to fund it. He worked alongside Lucien Bechmann, the architect previously chosen by the French authorities, who was eventually evicted from the project--thus giving to Junior the opportunity to better control the final design and the construction of the edifice.

At the end of this report, it clearly appears that the success of Junior and Bosworth's architectural collaboration was due to a shared taste for classical design. Both men agreed that its simplicity, elegance and monumentality were the best way to convey the respect and dignity that they wanted to express through architecture. It is also clear that they mutually benefitted from their collaboration. Junior, by having at his side a loyal architect who advised him, understood his ambitions and was able to translate them into appropriate building designs. He trusted Bosworth's professional abilities and appreciated his character enough to recommend him warmly to other potential clients who enquired about him: *"He is as successful as a landscape architect as he is as a builder of buildings, and withal he is a public spirited and most delightful man"*.¹⁹ Bosworth, by earning Junior's trust in his architectural abilities, was able to durably associate his name to the prestige attached to the Rockefeller name. There is no doubt that potential clients perceived their repeated association as a positive signal. But most importantly, their collaboration was the opportunity for Junior and Bosworth to start a lifelong friendship. In 1915, Junior wrote to Bosworth: *"The cordial and interested spirit in which you take up any matters which we impose on you, your willingness at all times to confer with us and give us the benefit of your judgment, has made our association with you during these past years a delightful one. Long ago, we ceased to regard you as a business acquaintance and placed you among our personal friends"*.²⁰ Bosworth highly prized this friendship and often ended his letters to Junior by writing *"Devotedly yours"*. He had the occasion to prove this unfailing loyalty to Junior on several occasions, but most notably when he agreed to oversee the restoration of Versailles, Fontainebleau and Reims that Junior decided to fund in 1924. The architect closed his office in New York and moved to France where he remained for the rest of his life, and where his collaboration with Junior took a whole new turn.

¹ “Time with Mr. Rockefeller”, William Welles Bosworth, December 1961, Folder 356, Box 48, Series H, Friends and Services, FA317, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (hereafter OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC), p.1.

² Ibid.

³ Albert Berger, *My Father’s New House at Pocantico Hills – Kykuit and the Business Education of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1985, RAC, Box 5, Location 205.132.1., p. 288. The author estimates that the total cost of the gardens amount to \$730,000, but he underlines the fact that even though it greatly exceeded the original budget, this cost was modest by the standards of the day and the examples set by other wealthy contemporaries.

⁴ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Richard C. MacLaurin (President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), February 13, 1913, Folder 354, Box 48, Series H, Friends and Services, FA317, OMR, RAC.

⁵ For more information on the house and gardens at Kykuit see: Robert F. Dalzell and Lee Baldwin Dalzell, *The House the Rockefellers Built: a tale of money, taste, and power in twentieth-century America*, New York, Henry Holt, 2007; Quentin Snowden Jacobs, *William Welles Bosworth: Major Works*, Columbia University, Master’s Thesis, 1988. Especially chapter 2, Major landscape designs: Kykuit and Greystone; Ann Rockefeller Roberts, Mary Louise Pierson, and Cynthia Bronson Altman, *The Rockefeller Family Home, Kykuit*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1998; Albert Berger, *My Father’s New House at Pocantico Hills – Kykuit and the Business Education of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1985, RAC, Box 5, Location 205.132.1.

⁶ Berger, p. 143.

⁷ Ida Tarbell, “John D. Rockefeller: A Character Study – Part II”, *McClure’s Magazine*, no. 4, August 1905, p. 387. “*It is fair to judge something of a man’s character from his homes – particularly when the man is one who is freed from the necessity of considering cost in building. Mr. Rockefeller’s homes [...] certainly show his cult of the unpretentious. [...] They are all unpretending even to the point of being conspicuous. Not only that, they show him to have no pleasure in noble architecture, to appreciate nothing of the beauty of fine lines and decorations. Mr. Rockefeller’s favorite home, the house at Forest Hill, is a monument of cheap ugliness [...]. His city house is without distinction, and there has never been an appropriate mansion at Pocantico Hills.*”

⁸ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Richard C. MacLaurin, February 13, 1913, Folder 354, Box 48, Series H, Friends and Services, FA317, OMR, RAC.

⁹ The townhouse on 10 West 54th street was demolished in 1938 and the land given to the adjoining Museum of Modern Art to make its expansion possible. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, named after Junior’s wife who was at the initiative of the museum’s creation in 1929, occupies today the area left empty by the house.

¹⁰ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to William Welles Bosworth, February 2, 1909, Folder 263, Box 33, Series N, Religious Interests, FA323, OMR, RAC.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “The Fifth Avenue Baptist Church”, 1910, Folder 275, Box 35, Series N, Religious Interests, FA323, OMR, RAC.

¹³ The exact reason for the cancellation of the construction is obscure. A note left in Folder 263, Box 33, Series N, Religious Interests, FA323, OMR, RAC, explains that the 1909-1911 correspondence relating to the new edifice was destroyed upon office authorization in 1933. The most probable reason that would explain the cancellation of the project is either the financial one (not enough money was raised by the Trustees) or the geographic one (the plot of land chosen for the erection of the church was small and it did not satisfy all the Trustees).

¹⁴ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Edward L. Ballard, June 22, 1917, Folder 268, Box 34, Series N, Religious Interests, FA323, OMR, RAC.

¹⁵ William Welles Bosworth to Edward L. Ballard, July 24, 1917, Folder 267, Box 34, Series N, Religious Interests, FA323, OMR, RAC.

¹⁶ William Welles Bosworth to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., March 4, 1919, Folder 268, Box 34, Series N, Religious Interests, FA323, OMR, RAC.

¹⁷ Allen & Collens replaced Bosworth as consulting architects for the construction of the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church after Bosworth’s resignation in March 1919. The construction of the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, completed in 1922, can in that sense be seen as a prototype of Riverside Church.

¹⁸ For more detailed information on this project, see Azra Dawood, “Prevailing upon the World”, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. & the Architecture of International Houses (1921-1936), *Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports*, 2016, available online on the RAC’s website.

¹⁹ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Cabot Ward (Commissioner of Parks, New York City), June 5, 1914, Folder 94, Box 15, Series D, Civic Interests, FA313, OMR, RAC.

²⁰ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to William Welles Bosworth, February 11, 1915, Box 48, Folder 354, Series H, Friends and Services, FA317, OMR, RAC.