

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Rockefeller Center

and or common

2. Location

street & number Bounded by Fifth Avenue, West 48th Street, Avenue of the Americas, and West 51st Street not for publication

city, town New York vicinity of

state New York code county New York code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military <input type="checkbox"/> other:

4. Owner of Property

name RCP Associates, Rockefeller Group Incorporated

street & number 1230 Avenue of the Americas

city, town New York vicinity of state New York 10020

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Surrogates' Court, New York Hall of Records

street & number 31 Chambers Street

city, town New York state New York

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Music Hall only: National Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1978 federal state county local

depository for survey records National Park Service, 1100 L Street, NW

city, town Washington state DC

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Rockefeller Center complex was the final result of an ill-fated plan to build a new Metropolitan Opera House in mid-town Manhattan. When the original plans collapsed, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., transformed the vast scheme into a private commercial enterprise.

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report of 1985 has detailed descriptions of the over-all plan and individual structures and the landscaping and sculptural programs as well. The basic scheme which transformed the Opera House plan to a commercial scheme was submitted on January 8, 1930, by the architects Reinhard and Hofmeister and was called "Scheme G-3." By this time the architects, Hood and Corbett, were also at work as consultants. The developer was John R. Todd who also influenced the design.

By restricting the height of the Fifth Avenue units and transferring air rights to the central tower, the arrangement provided maximum light and air within a basically symmetrical plan. It was dependent in large part upon Beaux Arts principles of design, but modified by specific tenant needs and the requirement for maximum profit.

Critical to the success of the plan are its three major and multiple minor axes. The first lies along Fifth Avenue at the "front" of Rockefeller Center where its international tenants were housed in four virtually identical units. By maintaining the small scale of 19th century New York these six-story facades provide a powerful north-south vista. Their line is continued in the Manufacturers Hanover Trust (originally Sinclair Oil) Building and in 666 Fifth Avenue as well as in other buildings to the north and south. Together with St. Patrick's Cathedral and the neighboring Saks department store, Rockefeller Center's Fifth Avenue frontage provides an urbane, human scaled space.... An asset which becomes increasingly more precious as financial pressures continue to transform Fifth Avenue into a canyon of highrise developments.

The second, and by far the most famous axis is the Promenade Channel Gardens. A steeply banked east-west pedestrian corridor, it extends the ambience of Fifth Avenue into the heart of the complex. Its horizontal vista is strongly defined by the uniform flanks of the British Building and La Maison Francaise the axis terminates in the central space of the skating rink and sunken plaza.... the climax is the powerful vertical focus of the RCA Building....

The private north-south street known as Rockefeller Plaza is the third major axis. It runs parallel to and between Fifth and Sixth Avenues and intersects the three blocks between 48th and 51st Streets. It helps to establish the unique identity of Rockefeller Center by interrupting the city grid while simultaneously aiding it as an additional artery. From the private street extend the sunken plaza and six of the Center's principal structures.... The structure marked the end of plans to extend the street as the spine of a vast

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1930-1933, 1939 **Builder/Architect** Reinhard and Hofmeister, Hood and Corbett, Godley, MacMurray and Fouilhoux

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Rockefeller Center changed the form of mid-town Manhattan. It became one of the most successful Urban Planning projects in the history of American architecture, and integrated the arts of architecture, city planning, landscape architecture, and Sculpture on a scale never achieved before. It competed with other new buildings such as the Chrysler and Empire State for tenants in the height of the Depression. Rockefeller Center was the only large, non-government architectural project executed between the stock market crash in 1929 and World War II. This vast project provided thousands of jobs during the Depression and restored the image of New York as the premier American city. Construction of the original complex began in 1931 and ended with the completion of the fourteenth building in 1939. The original three-block site was subsequently enlarged by the construction of the Esso (now Warner Communications) Building in 1946-47 and by the purchase of the Sinclair Oil (now Manufacturers Hanover) Building in 1950-52. Both buildings harmonize with the original group. More recently, new buildings have gone up on the West Side of Sixth Avenue but they are not part of the historic core.

The site was originally planned to be a cultural center with a new Metropolitan Opera House at its center (1926). This scheme was entrusted to a classical-minded architect, Benjamin Wistar Morris (1870-1944). After studying various possible sites, it was decided to select a site between 48th and 51st Street, and Fifth and Sixth Avenues. These lots were located in an area that was not yet fashionable and not yet convenient as there was little rail or subway traffic.

Between 1804 and 1811 this property had been developed by Dr. David Hosack as the famed Elgin Gardens. An innovative concept in America, its legacy was to survive in Rockefeller Center's rooftop and Channel Gardens. In 1811 rising costs led Dr. Hosack to sell the property to New York State. Three years later the nearly 12 acre plot was conveyed to Columbia College (later University) under an aid-to-education act. Located about three miles north of the college campus at Church Street, the "Upper Estate" was leased for residential development, all of which was completed by 1879. By the mid-1920s, however, many of the 298 rowhouses in this once stylish neighborhood had deteriorated into an unseemly collection of boarding houses, nightclubs and speakeasies on the northern boundary of New York's theater district. The proposal to build a new opera house on the site thus prompted visions of redevelopment as a midtown cultural center.³

Income producing units had to be included in the plans for the Opera House. The price of midtown real estate was so high that Morris realized that only a very large endowment would keep the scheme going. It was supplied by one of the richest men in America, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 12 acres

Quadrangle name Central Park, New York

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

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4	5	1	2	3	1	0
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5	8	6	2	2	0
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4	5	1	2	1	1	0
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Verbal boundary description and justification

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carolyn Pitts, Historian

organization National Park Service, History Division date

street & number 1100 L Street, NW telephone (202)343-8166

city or town Washington state DC 20013-7127

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title date

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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civic and cultural complex. It provides a strong vertical focus at the northern boundary of the Center, much as the RCA Building does at the end of the Channel Gardens.

In general, the complex was oriented toward the east and fashionable Fifth Avenue. Its Sixth Avenue frontage faced toward New York's theater district and was developed as the Center's entertainment complex. The Sixth Avenue front was expected to play a more significant role in the Center when the E1 was demolished in 1939. This was enhanced by the completion of the Sixth Avenue subway line in 1940. The subway established yet another traffic pattern at Rockefeller Center. It was linked to the shopping concourse and the vast subterranean network which connects all buildings in the development. In unprecedented fashion the concourse transformed the lobbies of individual buildings from self-contained cul de sacs into gateways to the Center at large. The underground truck route provides a further circulation artery (one which likewise frees the surrounding streets from freight deliveries). Yet another circulation system was planned at roof level where bridges were to connect the gardens atop various buildings. Although the latter scheme was ultimately abandoned and the grand garden scheme only partially realized, the planted rooftops above the four international buildings and above RCA's eleventh-story roof distinguish Rockefeller Center as the first urban commercial development to be landscaped in modern architecture....

Despite its multiple axes, the Center lacks rigid symmetry and its various components vary in massing according to original tenant requirements. It comprises a visually unified composition. All the buildings are clad with buff colored, shot-sawed Indiana limestone with vertically ridged spandrels (cast slate gray aluminum in the skyscrapers; limestone spandrels in the lowrise units). All have two-over-one steel sash recessed slightly behind flat piers to produce a significantly cohesive fenestration pattern throughout. The unity of material and handling gives the Center a distinct sense of place and the coherent impression of the precinct as virtually one structure. Six of the buildings have foliate spandrel terminations while others have a simple chevron crest, but in each case these are minor decorative elements on buildings which depend for effect on their monumental simplicity.

The earliest (pre-air conditioned) units were designed to take full advantage of natural light and ventilation. Their minimal setbacks are functionalist expressions of elevator elimination. This guiding principle throughout was maximum beauty consistent with profitability. Purely aesthetic extravagance was avoided. There was, however, a great concern for a comprehensive and thematically integrated art program.¹

The individual buildings in the original scheme can be described briefly as follows:

The Radio Group

It was the visionary architect, Raymond Hood, who suggested that the Radio Corporation of America join the Rockefeller complex and in June 1930 a contract was

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signed. David Sarnoff became President of RCA. It was his vision that changed the concept of the Center's development from a cultural Opera House Center to a corporate headquarters for mass entertainment and a new technology. This important image gave the center the name "Radio City" although it correctly should only have applied to the Sixth Avenue buildings dominated by RCA and its subsidiaries: National Broadcasting Company, Radio-Keith-Orpheum, a producer, distributor and exhibitor of motion pictures and RCA Victor, one of the foremost manufacturers of phonographs and records in America. Sarnoff agreed to a rent of \$4.25 million annually. In exchange, the two theatres were called "Radio City Music Hall" and "RKO Roxy" and they had exclusive broadcasting rights in the complex, plus the right to display the RCA logo atop its own building at the heart of the Center.

1. 1270 Avenue of the Americas

Originally RKO. This is the first structure undertaken at Rockefeller Center, followed one month later by RKO's Radio City Music Hall with which it is connected. Although the theater-office building was a familiar type in New York, there was nothing of the scale of the RKO. Building codes at that time prohibited building directly over a theater's auditorium but the Sixth Avenue slab was set on a north-south axis and projected slightly over the Music Hall.

The building itself is a 31-story slab rising above Sixth Avenue. Above the 6th story it is setback on the north and south, and again at the 8th story in the center. The walls rise sheer to the top punctuated by vertical window spandrel bays and limestone piers. There are store fronts on the ground level and the fine stone reliefs above each bay on ground level are the work of Robert Garrison.

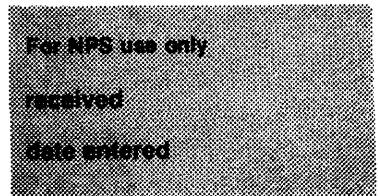
2. Radio City Music Hall

One of four planned theaters for the complex, it is the sole survivor of the two actually constructed. When it was completed in 1932, it was the world's largest indoor theater with 6,200 seats. RKO was formed in 1928 by RCA's David Sarnoff and Joseph P. Kennedy who controlled the Film Booking Office (FBO) production agency. Radio-Keith-Orpheum became a leading producer of motion pictures. Movies and vaudeville merged when Samuel Lionel Rothafel ("Roxy") joined RKO and he made Radio City Music Hall the finest entertainment hall in the country. Programs included not just stage and screen entertainment but legitimate drama, ballet, opera, jazz concerts, and precision dancing by the "Roxyette" chorus girls.

The building was beautifully appointed and embellished by exterior metal plaques by Rene Chambellan and Hildreth Meiere. In spite of its beauty, the Music Hall was not a financial success but by the 1940s it became immensely popular running Hollywood films and featuring dancing by the "Rockettes."

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3. Associated Press Building (50 Rockefeller Plaza)

Construction was not begun until April 1938 although the excavation work had been done earlier. The entire building was ready for occupancy December 17, 1938. Originally meant to be low-rise so that the roof-top gardens would be contiguous throughout the entire complex, financial pressures forced the construction of a 15-story building. The interiors were specially designed to accommodate the masses of electrical equipment needed to operate a wire-service. There was a 5-foot by 12-foot switchboard. Under this building is a truck ramp and delivery route to lower level storage which keeps the surrounding streets free of congested traffic. The major tenants were Associated Press and the National Cash Register Company giving the building a 95% occupancy rate its first year and the first unit in Rockefeller Center to show a profit.

Perhaps the finest sculpture in the center is the stainless steel panel called News by Isamu Noguchi. It hangs above the main entrance, weighs 10 tons and measures 23 x 18 feet. The building remains unchanged today.

4. The International Buildings

One of the buildings on the exclusive Fifth Avenue frontage was to be rented by Chase National Bank but instead of this scheme, the paired, low-rise rectangular buildings were occupied by European interests. The northern-most building at 636 Fifth Avenue is the multi-tenant International Building and at 626 Fifth Avenue is the Palazzo d'Italia. The two other buildings in this scheme are the British Empire Building at 620 Fifth Avenue and La Maison Francaise at 610 Fifth Avenue. As a complex, these buildings respected their neighbors, St. Patrick's Cathedral and Saks Fifth Avenue. They provided an exciting space in crowded mid-town Manhattan.

The International Building 636 Fifth Avenue

This 41-story skyscraper tower with its two six-story wings was the seventh unit to open at Rockefeller Center. Designed for maximum rental space, it was, however, set back as far as possible to allow a fore-court before the tower entrance. The courtyard contains the monumental figure of Atlas by Lee Lawrie.

4a. International Building North 636 Fifth Avenue

The northern most of four six-story wings on taller structures. Originally planned for occupancy by the Germans, Hitler's rise to power forestalled the plans and the complex finally contained a number of foreign clients. The sculptors who embellished the building were Attilio Piccirilli and Lee Lawrie.

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4b. Palazzo d'Italia 626 Fifth Avenue

The Fifth Avenue frontage was being designed in 1934. Apparently the proposal for 626 pleased the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, but a commitment from the Italian government never materialized. The "Societa Anomina Palazzo d'Italia" sustained the commitment. Eventually the U.S. Army and the F.B.I. seized the building when World War II began and the Fascist decorations were removed. In 1965 a bronze panel by Giacomo Manzu replaced the offending symbols.

4c. British Building 620 Fifth Avenue

Begun in 1932, this was the first building in the complex to be constructed on the Fifth Avenue frontage. The high-minded ideas behind the trade pavillions were examples of "symbols of a new day." Britian chose as a theme for the sculptural program, Empire, her natural resources and commerce. The sculptors for the decorative doors and panels were Lee Lawrie, Carl Paul Jennewien, and Rene Chambellan.

4d. La Maison Francaise 610 Fifth Avenue

The identical twin of the British Building, it opened five months after its neighbor. It was dedicated to the industry, art, and trade of France and celebrated a century of friendship between the French and American nations. The entrance was embellished with a 10-ton bronze panel by the sculptor Alfred Janniot.

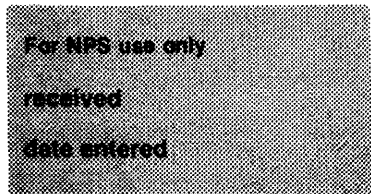
Gardens and Public Spaces

The Gardens and walkways were one of the greatest urban design feats of the 20th century. The complex went up in the height of the great Depression so the sacrifice of rental space to public gardens was unheard of. In addition to 2 acres of open space in a congested building area there are extra-width sidewalks and some seating for pedestrians. All Rockefeller Center buildings are connected underground and there are two miles of corridors lined with shops. There is also an entrance to the subway system. The Channel Gardens between the French and British buildings are always beautifully landscaped. The traffic-free passage from Fifth Avenue is 200 feet in length and slants down toward the open plaza, both of which act as a kind of outdoor lobby for the RCA Building rising from the plaza. In the center of the Plaza is the glittering Prometheus by Paul Manship. There is a popular ice skating rink at the base of the Plaza.

The roof-top gardens are one of the most successful of all of the Centers innovations, reminiscent of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The plan called for a wide variety of gardens spread over all the buildings and connected by roof level bridges -- seven acres in all. There was also to be a restaurant, music conservatory, sculpture exhibit, and marionette theater. Financial problems ensued and some of the gardens survived but the roof bridges never materialized.

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5. RCA Building and RCA Building West 30 Rockefeller Plaza

The RCA Building spans the entire block which runs between Rockefeller Plaza and Sixth Avenue incorporating 3 different buildings into a single structure. On the east side are the corporate offices of RCA housed in a 70-story tower while additional space was provided along Sixth Avenue in the 16-story slab of the RCA Building West. The midblock section, much less desirable for office space, was allotted to NBC's broadcasting studios which needed no windows but only large amounts of layered horizontal space. To ensure soundproofing all of NBC's studios had "floating" walls, floors, and ceilings, suspended and insulated from the building's structural frame. The 70-story tower was served by high speed elevators. The rise is sheer for 33 stories before a break of gentle set-backs unlike the ziggerat like setbacks on other New York skyscrapers of the same era. Thus these slab-like buildings predicted the predominant form of later high-rise structures in dense urban areas. The floor plan in the RCA Building provided more than 2 million square feet of prime office space, which, for years made it the world's largest office building. The rooftop gardens combined with the buildings made these buildings unique in the history of architecture--the world's first landscaped skyscrapers.

Above the main entrance is the male figure of Wisdom by Lee Lawrie. The work was made of 240 glass blocks and was a major technical achievement. There were also four limestone panels carved by Leo Friedlander. Lee Lawrie also carved lintels representing Sound and Light.

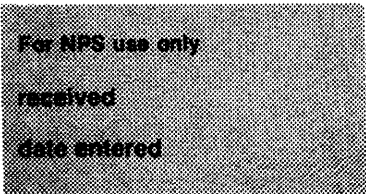
A note should be made of a number of interior embellishments at RCA as well as the exterior ornament. More than 30 artists were commissioned and they produced more than 100 major works of art as well as a large number of smaller pieces done in wood, stone, metal and cast glass. The most notorious incident occurred when the Mexican Marxist painter, Diego Rivera, not only painted Lenin's portrait on the wall but also portraits of "depraved capitalists." The enormous fresco was destroyed as being too radical.

RCA Building West 1250 Avenue of the Americas

This building is a 16-story extension of the RCA Building proper. The two buildings are connected by NBC's studios. All three units were constructed simultaneously. There are no entrances on the north or south flanks; these were low-rise corner properties that Rockefeller did not own. The most visable decoration is the 79-foot x 14-foot mosaic of glass enamel designed by Barry Faulkner and executed by Ravenna Mosaic Company. Above the main entrance are four limestone panels by the sculptor, Gaston Lachaise.

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6. Simon and Schuster Building 1230 Avenue of the Americas
(originally U.S. Rubber Company Building)

Completed November 1, 1939, the Rubber Company Building was the last construction in the original 14-unit Rockefeller Center complex. Six structures were subsequently added to the complex, four on the west side of Sixth Avenue, but they were commissioned by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s, sons. The Simon and Schuster building was located on an irregular plot to the southwest and partially over what was originally the Center Theater, now gone. Sixth Avenue became a more desirable address as a result of zoning revisions in 1936 and the final destruction of the elevated trains.

In 1938, the U.S. Rubber Company signed a long-term lease in Rockefeller Center. The company was enjoying a boom due to a newly-invented stretch-fabric called Lastex and later the invention of foam rubber. The new building rose 20 stories and overhung the theatre. In the 1950s, a 19-story office building replaced the old theater. It was in the usual slab-construction style designed by Harrison and Abramowitz. The structure was maintained by "Uniroyal" until the mid-1960s when it became the corporate headquarters of Simon and Schuster, Publishers.

7. 10 Rockefeller Plaza (originally Eastern Airlines Building)

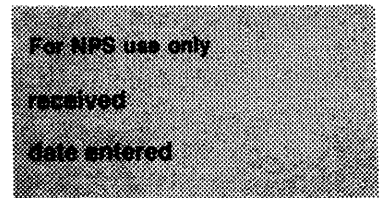
Although this lot was not developed until 1937, the building replaced a vast parking lot on the site. Built to house the Holland House Corporation of the Netherlands, they moved into this new building in November, 1939. Full occupancy was cut short by Hitler's invasion of the Netherlands.

Eastern Airlines was just beginning to emerge at that time as a commercial passenger service (Lawrence Rockefeller served on the Board of Trustees). The new company proudly offered a sleeper flight from New York to Miami which took 14 hours--with 11 stops. The firm flourished under general manager, Eddie Rickenbacker.

The building was designed by Wallace Harrison as a 16-story slab and is essentially a more refined version of the adjacent Time-Life building to the east of it and which preceded it by two years. The limestone clad slab is flanked on the north and south by four-story air conditioned wings, set back above double-story glass front shops and exhibition space. Unlike all the other Rockefeller complex buildings which were skeletal steel frame covered with limestone slabs, 10 Rockefeller Plaza used the glass-surface contrasted against the masonry. A new type of glass was used called Satinol Louvrex. There also was a rounded moderne corner on West 48th Street. At the west-end of the building is a six-story parking garage which provided space for 800 cars, a new idea in that part of New York. Attendants slid down bronze fire poles to the automobiles and there was a lounge for patrons and chauffeurs.

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8. 1 Rockefeller Plaza (originally Time and Life Building)

This was the eleventh building to be constructed in the complex. This site had been used as a parking lot. The plans were filed in May, 1936, and called for a 32-story building - later to rise to 36 stories with a lateral set back high on the east and west sides. The design was done by Reinhard and Harrison after Raymond Hood's death. The 48th Street facade rose sheer from the pavement 490 feet while the 48th Street facade is set back above the 10th story. The structure set a new record for speed in construction, its frame was completed in 43 days and the building finished in 5 months. The building was intended for general occupancy and was named Time - Life when the news magazine leased the seven upper floors in April 1938.

There are sculptural reliefs by Lee Lawrie, Carl Paul Jennewein, and Attilio Piccirilli.

A note on the art in the Complex:

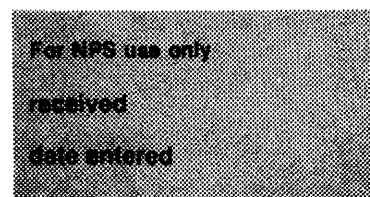
The planning of the buildings in the Complex was implicit from the beginning but it became obvious that the sculpture and decorative arts also needed a program and the assignment went to Professor Hartley Burr Alexander, head of the Philosophy Department at Scripps College.

Alexander was a prolific author in a variety of fields, notably mythology and symbology. He designed the sculptural program for Lee Lawrie at Bertram Goodhue's Los Angeles Public Library (1921-26) and also at the Nebraska State Capitol (1920-32) where Lawrie was joined by Hildreth Meiere. The influence of Nebraska's proto-WPA style is evident at Rockefeller Center and appears in such specific motifs as the bison head with corn cob horns in the sixth story spandrels of the International Building North and more generally in Meiere's plaques for the exterior of Radio City Music hall. Professor Alexander also designed thematic programs for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in New York and worked with Raymond Hood on the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago (beginning in 1929).

By December, 1931 Professor Alexander was engaged to design a "scenario" for Rockefeller Center. He early suggested "Homo Fabor, Man the Builder" as representative of the new social ideal where satisfaction would derive from work and not from some incidental wage. The theme, however, failed to enlist much support. As an alternative the Professor suggested the "New Frontiers" which faced man after the conquest of the physical world. This included the cultivation of his mind and soul, the broadening of human relations and the harnessing of new scientific discoveries. The latter aspect was particularly appropriate for radio and emerging television technology and inspired such works as Leo Friedlander's sculpture for the RCA Building's side street

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entrances, Robert Garrison's panels for 1270 Avenue of the Americas (originally the RKO Building), Barry Faulkner's mosaic and Gaston Lachaise's sculptural panels for the RCA Building West, and Lee Lawrie's "Wisdom."

The Professor's themes imbued the complex with elevated social and spiritual themes, but had the practical effect of restricting creative license, particularly as he specified in minute detail exactly how the finished product should appear. His ideas were criticized as "beatific humbug," Alexander was ultimately relieved of his position, but his influence seems to have survived in the programs finally chosen. Among them were "Intellectual and Spiritual Progress" (including Chambellan's fountainheads in the Channel Gardens and the sculptural works on the former Time-Life Building), "Historical and Mythological Background" (as represented by "Atlas" and his brother "Prometheus" as well as the murals in the RCA Building's lobby) and "The Rise of the Nations." The latter was particularly appropriate to Rockefeller's announced quest for world peace through global commerce and appears in all the international units on Fifth Avenue.

The professor was replaced in March, 1932 by a panel of five experts in the art world. Included were Edward Waldo Forbes who was a Renaissance authority and Director of Harvard's Fogg Museum; Everett V. Meeks, Dean of the Yale University School of Art; Fiske Kimball, Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (whose specialty was Colonial art); Paul J. Sachs, Trustee of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and Herbert E. Linlock, the Egyptian authority who directed the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Significantly, there was no representative from the Museum of Modern Art. The panel was comprised of conservatives who for the most part selected like-minded artists. At least a half dozen had attended the American Academy in Rome, others the Ecole des Beaux Arts while still others followed the academic traditions of such masters as Gutzon Borglum. The great exceptions were Gaston Lachaise (who, however, revealed none of his characteristic sexual dynamism) and Isamu Noguchi. The latter produced one of the finest, if not the best, works in all of Rockefeller Center with his innovative stainless steel panel for the main entrance of the Associated Press Building....

The artworks throughout the complex allow the architecture to dominate, but simultaneously relieve its uniform buff limestone with color and varied texture. Their above lintel placement emphasizes mural mass and in many cases dramatizes the severe simplicity of the entrances which they crown. Interesting as period pieces, the major significance of the art lay in the fact that it was designed as a component of a vast commercial complex in which all of the arts were integrally combined. As such, the art and the Center as a whole, are unprecedented.²

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List of Buildings in Rockefeller Center

1. 1270 Avenue of the Americas Building
(originally RKO Building, then Americas Building, then American Metal Climax Building, AMAX Building)
2. Radio City Music Hall Entertainment Center
1260 Avenue of the Americas
3. Associated Press Building
50 Rockefeller Plaza
4. The International Building
630 Fifth Avenue
 - 4a. International Building North
636 Fifth Avenue
 - 4b. Palazzo d' Italia
626 Fifth Avenue
 - 4c. British Empire Building
620 Fifth Avenue
 - 4d. La Maison Francaise
610 Fifth Avenue
5. RCA Building and RCA Building West
30 Rockefeller Plaza and 1250 Avenue of the Americas
including the sunken plaza and skating rink
6. Simon and Schuster Building
(originally U.S. Rubber Company Building)
1230 Avenue of the Americas
7. Ten Rockefeller Plaza Building
(originally Eastern Airlines Building)
10 Rockefeller Plaza
8. One Rockefeller Plaza Building
(originally Time and Life Building)
1 Rockefeller Plaza

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Rockefeller's involvement in the Opera project began on May 21, 1928 when Benjamin Morris presented the scheme to potential investors during a dinner at the Metropolitan Club. Among the guests was Ivy Lee, Rockefeller's public relations manager. He recommended the proposal to his employer, noting that it would make the Opera Square and the immediate surroundings the most valuable shopping district in the world. Rockefeller was interested. He, his sister and father lived in three large houses on W. 53rd and 54th Streets (just three blocks north of the proposed Opera site) and owned a good deal of real estate in the area. Development of a cultural center would insure the quality of his neighborhood while increasing the value of his speculative properties. But before making any committment, Rockefeller sought development advice from prominent real estate advisors, the Todd, Robertson & Todd Engineering Corp. among them.⁴

Todd's engineering firm was indirectly responsible for interesting Rockefeller in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in 1928. Todd, Robertson & Todd was one of five real estate firms to advise Rockefeller on the development potential of the complex and they proposed a most unusual scheme of a mixed use plan for offices, shops, theatres, and department stores. Beneath the large complex were two new private streets and a lower level for vehicular traffic, parking, and freight deliveries. The architects of this scheme were the little known firm of L. Andrew Reinhard and Henry Hofmeister.

In October, 1928, Rockefeller agreed to lease the land from Columbia College and agreed to pay approximately \$3.5 million annual rent during the years 1928-1952 with options for three 21 year renewals.

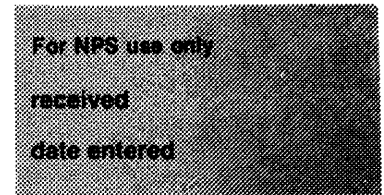
The scheme was originally called the "Metropolitan Square." An architectural symposium was arranged so that independent ideas and advice might help in a project of such magnitude.

Seven architects were invited to prepare designs for the complex which wouldassure an appropriate and artistic environment, ample and convenient approaches, circulation, and a delight and harmony of architectural composition in the development of land surrounding the Opera. The contest was juried by John Russell Pope and Cass Gilbert (two of the most prominent architects of the day) and Milton B. Medary (a specialist in institutional architecture).

Although nothing came of the contest per se, several of the ideas advanced did come to fruition at the Center. Among them were Benjamin Morris' recommendation that the site be extended all the way to Sixth Avenue and that its buildings include planted terraces. Also prophetic were Harvey Corbett's proposals for separated pedestrian and vehicular traffic, a graded open corridor leading into the complex from Fifth Avenue, lower buildings in the east stepping up to focal tall buildings in the west (each to be occupied by related tenants), and the visionary connection of these buildings with the Sixth Avenue subway (not

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completed until 1940, eleven years later). The architectural advisors were most favorably disposed toward the latter scheme by Corbett.

Ultimately all the "Symposium" schemes of 1929 were rejected. On October 1, 1929 (precisely a year after Rockefeller agreed to lease the Columbia property) Todd, Robertson & Todd were appointed managers of the project. Their mandate was to build the thing, put it on a profitable basis, and sell it to the world. By the end of October their staff architects (Reinhard & Hofmeister) were named architects of the development. They were experienced in the internal layouts preferred by Todd and familiar with his theory that business property income production supersedes pure aesthetics. Todd recommended at the same time that Harvey Corbett and Benjamin Morris be engaged as consulting architects (although the latter declined after December, 1929). He also suggested employment of Raymond Hood, the man of ideas whose reputation as a leading skyscraper designer had skyrocketed in recent years.

Todd selected architects who would be primarily interested in good planning, utility, cost, income, low operating expenses and progress.... men who were not committed to the architectural past nor too much interested in wild modernism. The pooling of eight different talents from three different firms allowed for a division of labor and for an undertaking too large for most private offices of the day. Architecture by committee modified the singular dominance of any one personality, but also seems to have generated competition and controversy. The situation was resolved in February, 1930 when the architects united in a collective known as the Associated Architects. Thereafter all drawings bear the three firm names in strict alphabetical order: Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray; Hood, Godley (until 1931) & Fouilhoux; Reinhard & Hofmeister.

Since August, 1929 Rockefeller agents had been buying property along the western boundary of Columbia's property with the aim of extending the site to land covered by the Sixth Avenue El. The holding company was appropriately (and poetically) named "Underel." Both real estate and architectural plans developed rapidly throughout autumn, only to be stalled on December 5, 1929 by the Opera's decision not to relocate. With the stock market crash on October 29th the Opera, never overly well endowed, felt financially bound to stay put. On the very next day (December 6) Todd announced that all future planning for the site would be based upon a commercial center as beautiful as possible consistent with the maximum income that could be developed. All previous plans were reviewed, those with the Opera as a main feature set aside and new schemes undertaken for a commercial project.

Throughout the proceedings Rockefeller had intended to share costs with the Opera and to develop the site with buildings constructed by individual tenants. He never planned to carry the entire lease by himself, nor did he ever consider taking on full responsibility for its architectural development. But finding himself at an annual loss of more than \$3,000,000 for the lease of the 12 acres,

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he boldly proceeded--in the teeth of the Depression---to develop the largest private enterprise ever undertaken in America.

Contracts were made with RCA by the end of December and in June a contract signed for the construction of Radio City. The deal transformed what had been an aristocratic cultural center--a vision of the past--into one of the future where the focus was democratic entertainment, commerce and modern technology. The name of the enterprise was changed from the Metropolitan Square to Rockefeller Center in late December, 1931.⁵

The subsequent planning of the Center was determined by the tenants: RCA, NBC, and RKO in the Radio group. For these tenants, and for the French and British groups which leased the low buildings on the eastern sides, the architects designed widely spaced buildings with an unusual number of offices open to the air and light. By placing the tallest structure, the RCA Building, in the Center block with its narrow east front facing a sunken plaza, the architects assured the occupants unobstructed ventilation and daylight, as well as distant views.

The lower buildings on the north and south blocks and to the east along Fifth Avenue could enjoy the light and air of the plaza. By staggering the heights of the buildings the designers allowed more than the usual amount of sun and breeze to penetrate the Center and benefit neighboring buildings. While there was far less open space than many critics had hoped for, the planning of the Center was markedly different from that of older office towers, which had usually been designed without regard for the relation of one to another.

Because the planners understood the needs of a developing neighborhood, they provided extensive underground truck-loading facilities in order to handle the dramatically increased number of vehicles in the newly improved blocks. They envisioned off-street parking from the start. They created underground pedestrian streets linking all the Center's buildings and extended them to connect to a subway station and even to non-Rockefeller buildings adjacent to the Center; this solves problems of circulation on the crowded street level which most planners neglect. Internal corridors at street level relieve crowding too, and lead to other buildings in the same blocks through doors that face each other.

Rockefeller Center was designed when few office buildings were air conditioned, so the location of windows no more than twenty-eight feet from the inside wall of any office and the provision of combination air filters and noise silencers were thoughtful and progressive. It was a time of innumerable dark and poorly ventilated interior workrooms and apartments for both rich and poor, where air shafts provided the little air and even less daylight that were available to the occupants. If there were views at all, they were of fire escapes and grimy roofs, but at Rockefeller Center Raymond Hood proposed planting the rooftops

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with gardens, to allow the Center's workers and those in nearby offices to look out upon large plots of green instead of acres of water tanks and furnace flues.

With an eye toward the distant future, the designers provided air-cooling devices in several of their buildings and air conditioning for the two theaters and cinema of the original Center. Enough wiring and electrical capacity were installed to handle later, more advanced equipment. High-speed elevators and narrow-tread moving stairs, both new at the time, served the offices....

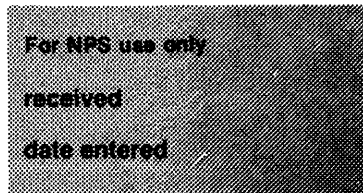
Trees and plants adorn the Fifth Avenue facade and the promenade from Fifth Avenue to the plaza. By making the Center physically attractive, and especially by substituting a skating rink and summer restaurant for unsuccessful shops in the sunken plaza. Rockefeller Center has provided a lively oasis, a place to meet, a public amenity in crowded mid-town. The observation roof of the RCA Building affords extraordinary views of the city, and the Rainbow Room and Grill just below it have been among the city's most admired skyscraper restaurants.

The theaters, too, were up-to-date, with uncluttered auditorium design, exceptionally advanced theatrical machinery, and remarkably restrained modern furniture created in 1932, when theater lounges usually offered French eighteenth-century settees and gilded tables to patrons. And although S. L. ("Roxy") Rothafel, the theatrical entrepreneur responsible for much of the design of the Radio City Music Hall and the now demolished Center Theater, preferred Portuguese rococo furniture for theaters, the designer Donald Deskey persuaded him to have even his own studio decorated in a geometrically based contemporary style. Deskey's furniture there and in the Music Hall's lobbies and lounges was made of aluminum and Bakelite in addition to more traditional materials. His imaginative wall coverings included cork, fabrics specially designed by Ruth Reeves and Marguerita Mergentime. A mural called Men Without Women by Margaret Bourke-White was a photomural (which were then recent developments) for the Center Theater and for the NBC reception area in the RCA Building.

For all its advances in design and materials, there remains a core of tradition to the Center. John D. Rockefeller Jr. and John R. Todd preferred established styles, although they were very much interested in contemporary planning and plumbing. The architects, taken as a group, were among those who tended to favor the simplification of older styles, but they were not serious theoreticians of modernity or in total sympathy with advanced European design. Several of them had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris or in America institutions that promoted similar formal and classicistic ideas. It is no wonder that elements of the past are as prominent as they are at Rockefeller Center; the wonder is that its planners combined their earlier experiences with the most advanced technology and urban planning possible within the bounds of cost accounting and managerial prudence.⁶

Rockefeller Center today is still a premier example of the skyscraper metropolis, a city within a city. It is still admired and copied world-wide and can be called the finest spatial grouping of tall buildings yet designed in America.

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A note about the architects:

Reinhard and Hofmeister:

Andrew Reinhard (1891-1964)

Although he started in Benjamin Morris' firm at age 14, he became a junior designer with Raymond Hood. Reinhard also worked with Todd, Robertson and Todd on the Graybar Building next to Grand Central Station.

Henry Hofmeister (1891-1962)

He was self-trained. He started working for Warren and Wetmore after two years of high school. After 17 years with Warren and Wetmore he joined Todd, Robertson and Todd. Hofmeister was the practical engineer and space designer and supervised the working drawings for the Rockefeller Center project. At the end of his life he served as a planning consultant on the Lincoln Center project.

Corbett, Harrison and Mac Murray

Harvey Wiley Corbett (1873-1954)

Educated at the University of California and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Corbett taught architecture at Columbia University which favored Beaux Arts methodology. Corbett designed both the Bush Terminal Building in New York City and the 10 million dollar Bush House in London dedicated to "the friendship of English speaking people." He was an early and strong advocate of the tall building as a solution to 20th century urban problems. He was on the planning committees for both the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition and the 1939 New York World's Fair.

William H. Mac Murray (1868-1941)

He was the businessman in the firm and had little to do with the design of Rockefeller Center.

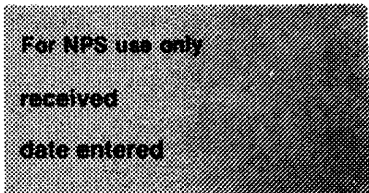
Wallace K. Harrison (1895-1982)

His early career, (he quit school at 14), was as an office boy in the Worcester Massachusetts, contracting firm of O. W. Norcross who were the builders of many of H. H. Richardson's designs. He attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the American Academy in Rome. He worked with McKim, Mead and White and Bertram Goodhue who was doing the Nebraska Capitol at that time (1922).

In 1935, Harrison left Corbett's office and formed a partnership with Fouilhoux who had worked with Raymond Hood until Hood's death in 1934. The firm survived as Harrison and Abramowitz who were responsible for parts of Lincoln Center, Nelson Rockefeller's Empire State Plaza in Albany, and the United Nations buildings in New York City.

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Hood, Godley and Fouilhoux

Raymond Mathewson Hood (1881-1934)

He studied architecture at both Brown University and M.I.T. and later at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. He was a draftsman in the firm of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, Boston; Palmer, Hornbostel and Jones, New York and Henry Hornbostel, Pittsburgh. In 1914, Hood opened his own New York office but his fame was established in 1922 when he won, with John Mead Howells, the Chicago Tribune Competition. He subsequently was given the commissions for the American Radiator Building, Daily News Building, and the McGraw Hill Building, all in New York City. Hood also worked with Corbett on the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition of 1933. Before his premature death in 1934, Hood played a dominant role in the design of Rockefeller Center. He introduced building set-backs and rooftop gardens, the uniformly low-rise elevations along Fifth Avenue and it was Hood who suggested that the Radio industry should be brought into the Center as prime tenants.

Frederick A. Godley (1887-1961)

Trained at Yale and M.I.T., Godley was the architect concerned with the business affairs of the firm. He resigned in 1931 to teach at Yale where he remained until 1947.

Jacques Andre Fouilhoux (1879-1945)

A Paris-born engineer, Fouilhoux emigrated to America in 1904. He worked for Albert Kahn in Detroit and moved to New York after World War I. He formed a partnership with Raymond Hood (1927). After Hood's death, he became partners with Wallace K. Harrison and Max Abramowitz. He also designed the Trylon and Perisphere for the New York World's Fair of 1939.

Footnotes

¹Landmarks Preservation Commission. The City of New York. Rockefeller Center. Designation Report. 1985. page 11.

²Ibid., pp. 21-23.

³Ibid., p. 12.

⁴Ibid., p. 13.

⁵Ibid., pp. 14-16.

⁶Krinsky, Carol. Rockefeller Center. Antiques. March 1975. Vol. CVII, No. 3. Straight Publishers, New York, New York. pp. 481-483.

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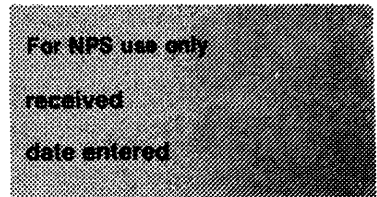
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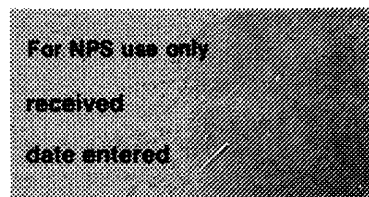
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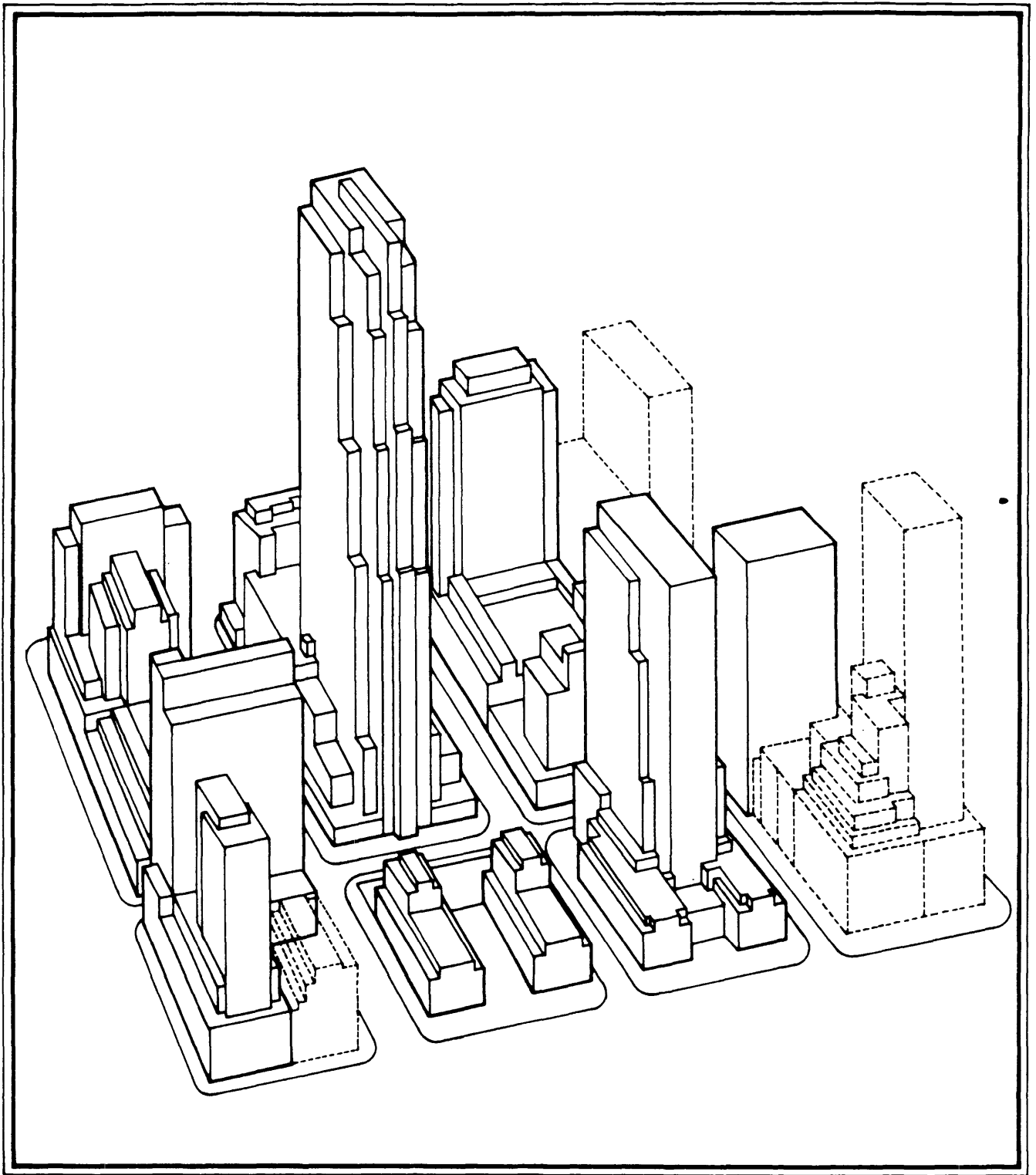
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Verbal Boundary

That portion of midtown Manhattan lying within a six-block area bounded by West 51st Street, Fifth Avenue, West 48th Street, and Avenue of the Americas (formerly known as Sixth Avenue) but excluding the following three areas:

- 1) an approximately rectangular property located at the northeast corner of Avenue of the Americas and West 49th Street with 20 feet 6 inches of frontage along Avenue of the Americas and 63 feet 2 inches of frontage along West 51st Street.
- 2) a rectangular property located at the southeast corner of Avenue of the Americas and West 50th Street with 25 feet 4-1/2 inches of frontage along Avenue of the Americas and 66 feet 5-1/2 inches of frontage along West 50th Street, and
- 3) a parcel abutting Fifth Avenue between West 48th Street and West 49th Street and bounded by such frontage, 225 feet of frontage along West 49th Street, 200 feet of frontage along West 48th Street and a line running in a southerly direction, parallel to Fifth Avenue, from the western-most point of the West 49th Street frontage to the midpoint of the block between West 49th Street and West 48th Street and thence running 25 feet in an easterly direction parallel to West 48th Street and thence running in a southerly direction parallel to Fifth Avenue to connect with the western-most point of the 48th Street frontage.



ROCKEFELLER CENTER
Elevation