

Radio City: Cultural Center?

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ON LAND largely owned by Columbia University and leased by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., is rising what we have been told is to be a cultural center for New York, if not for the whole United States. Out of this stony pit, according to sonorous announcements in the press, is to emerge a "new and shimmering city of soaring walls and challenging towers," "a great cultural and architectural monument" which will contribute in a variety of ways, all of them impressive, to our wellbeing. In its design the group of buildings will "typify American progress in city-planning." The enterprise will bring economic advantages: being "the greatest building project in the history of the world," it will "involve a great building program to be reflected in employment conditions here." And as for its contribution to our intellectual and spiritual life, it will "provide a center for the radiation of the best type of entertainment and of musical culture" and thereby will advance "the entertainment and educational arts," together with what the proponents of the enterprise somewhat curiously call "the new electrical art." For this is Radio City—or, as we are now told we should call it, Rockefeller City.

Now Radio City, even if it is to include one sixty-six story tower and two others of forty-five stories apiece, to say nothing of theaters, minor office buildings, plazas, gardens, and subterranean parking-spaces, is a small item in a huge city like New York; and New York, as Mr. Ford Madox Ford would put it, is not America. Yet what is happening here would seem to be of more than merely local interest and concern. For the influence of Radio City will go out over the ether waves into homes all over the country. The project furnishes, furthermore, a characteristic object-lesson in American daring, extravagance, and economic and emotional inflation. In its brilliance and in its absurdity alike, Radio City promises to stand as a gigantic symbol of some of the engaging ways of the American mind.

II

The history of this enterprise illustrates the fact that even the worthiest civic plans may sometimes suffer a sea change into something rich and strange. It began, oddly enough, with the search of the Metropolitan Opera for a new home. . . . Mr. Otto Kahn, who is as adept at promoting the arts as at floating a bond issue, assembled some property in West Fifty-Seventh Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, which he obligingly offered to the directors of the Metropolitan Opera & Real Estate Company at the price which he had paid for it. . . . He engaged Mr. Benjamin Wistar Morris [with whom at the outset Mr. Joseph Urban was associated] to draw plans for the proposed Opera House. . . . The directors of the Metropolitan Opera & Real Estate Company considered the suggestion, voted no, and began a new search.

But in the spring of 1928 Mr. Tonnele of the real estate firm of William A. White & Sons had an idea. Mr. Tonnele

went to Mr. Cutting of the Opera Company and showed him a map. Columbia University, it seemed, held a large parcel of land west of Fifth Avenue. . . . Why not lease a modest piece of this land between Forty-Eighth and Forty-Ninth Streets and Fifth and Sixth Avenues, connect Forty-Eighth Street with Forty-Ninth by a sixty-foot street cut thru the block, and build the new Opera House facing this new street?

The scheme had some merit. But Mr. Tonnele must gasp with wonder, these days, whenever he thinks of what it grew into. When Mr. Cutting referred him to Mr. Morris, as the architect for the Metropolitan Opera, Mr. Tonnele's plan became transformed into a project far more ambitious. The Columbia holdings reached northward for three blocks. Mr. Morris suggested a mighty undertaking: to develop these three blocks as a unit; to set the Opera House a block to the north of where Mr. Tonnele would have set it—in other words, between Forty-Ninth and Fiftieth Streets—and let it face not upon a mere sixty-foot street but upon a broad open plaza midway between Fifth and Sixth Avenues; to provide a monumental arcaded approach to this plaza from Fifth Avenue, so that the stroller on the Avenue might look thru the arcade across the plaza to the splendid façade of the Opera House; and, finally, to flank the Opera House and the square, on the north and south, with low buildings backed by taller buildings and occasional high towers which would bring in an adequate revenue. [Mr. Morris's suggested scheme was later modified so as to substitute for the arcaded approach from Fifth Avenue two small buildings facing the Avenue with a vista toward the Opera House between them.] This would not only give the Opera House a setting of irreproachable dignity and possibly of great beauty, but would also develop a large tract of urban land as enlightened city-planners like to see it developed—not higgledy-piggledy, but as a symmetrical and harmonious whole, with plenty of light and air and space guaranteed to all by the intelligent placing of the buildings, and with an opportunity for the architects to do what they are seldom permitted to do—to design metropolitan buildings which can be seen without leaning backward.

The idea was shortly thereafter communicated to Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Mr. Rockefeller not only liked it; he became so enthusiastic that he presently decided to lease the whole three blocks from Columbia and finance the whole tremendous enterprise himself [except, of course, that he would turn over to the Metropolitan Opera & Real Estate Company that portion of the tract on which the Opera House was to stand]. It might prove a profitable enterprise, but on the other hand it might not; anyhow, Mr. Rockefeller would take the risk for the sake of the Opera and New York. The daring decision, whether or not it was farsighted, did credit to the public spirit of a citizen who works as conscientiously as any man ever worked to apply his millions where they will do as little harm as possible, and with luck may do some good.

Mr. Rockefeller forthwith formed the Metropolitan Square Corporation to manage the undertaking and engaged a number of architects to submit plans for the treatment of the tract as a whole, in the hope that a canvass of their various ideas might result in a better plan than any individual firm could evolve alone. His Metropolitan Square Corporation leased the land from Columbia. All was apparently serene. . . . Yet weeks lengthened into months and still the representatives of the Opera hesitated to put their names on the dotted line. Their reasons for this hesitation have never been publicly stated in full; the ostensible reason, however, was enough. It was the difficulty about prior leases. . . . A good many of the Columbia tenants exhibited a strange reluctance to vacate without suitable reimbursement, and their ideas of what would be suitable reimbursement became exalted. . . . And then, in the autumn of 1929, the stock market went to smash, and the business world began to regard with a somewhat more skeptical eye, vast, ambitious real-estate projects based on the fancy values of boom times. By December it became clear that the Opera Company would not come in—at least for the present. . . .

Holding undeveloped real estate can be nearly as uncomfortable as holding a red-hot poker. Mr. Rockefeller . . . had to do something, and quickly, even if it were to undertake a purely commercial development of the property. He was under a sort of economic pressure which has often prevented public-spirited citizens from carrying thru fine plans for the public benefit. An opportunity came, and he seized it. The following June it was announced that the Radio Corporation of America and its affiliates would utilize the Rockefeller land for a "radio metropolis" which would include business offices, broadcasting studios, television studios, a huge variety theater, and other minor theaters.

It was essentially a commercial use for the property which had been forced upon Mr. Rockefeller by the relentless force of circumstances. But the press agents—abetted by the press itself—did not allow it to appear as such. The idea having been firmly implanted in the public mind that these three blocks were to be dedicated to the arts, they did their best—as is the way of press agents—to make it appear that they were still to be dedicated to the arts. Mr. Rockefeller was represented as having been persuaded that an opera was an aristocratic enterprise and that the real democratic benevolence was to arrange for the modern popular forms of entertainment "on the highest plane." The words "culture" and "education" were so lavishly sprinkled thru the news accounts of Radio City that one would almost have supposed that the directors of the Radio Corporation were starry-eyed dreamers indifferent to profit. Mr. Owen D. Young was described as having been "preoccupied with the release of radio as an art," and Mr. Merlin Aylesworth, president of the National Broadcasting Company, as having been interested in "the cultural opportunity" which awaited the broadcasters. How successful were the entrepreneurs of publicity in conveying the idea that the central idea in the mind of the custodians of Radio City was to be the dissemination of sweetness and light among the populace may be gauged by the fact that, despite the inclusion in the plans of a large variety theater and the promised connection with the scheme of Mr. S. L. Rothafel, better known as Roxy, the

headline writer for the *New York Times* topped the front-page announcement of the plans with the glowing words, ROCKEFELLER PLANS HUGE CULTURE CENTER.

III

. . . There was some surprise when it was announced that the architects in charge of Radio City were to be the young and little-known firm of Reinhard & Hofmeister, assisted—for sage advice and possibly for window-dressing purposes—by a battery of associated architects which included those two able publicists of modern architecture, Harvey Wiley Corbett and Raymond Hood. The draughtsmen duly labored [in some confusion at first, if early rumors were to be believed] and by April, a year ago, produced for the edification of a small army of reporters a rough plaster model of the proposed development. And immediately from the public at large, as well as from the architectural profession and the critics of architecture, there arose a howl of consternation and dismay.

Almost exactly where the sedate Opera House was to have stood, the plaster model now showed a colossal sixty-six-story skyscraper. Northeast and southeast of it were to stand two other huge forty-five-story buildings. Instead of an oasis of ordered dignity and quiet in the midst of New York's crazy jumble of towers, Radio City, it appeared, was to furnish what Mr. Lewis Mumford called a "masterful clot of congestion." On the Fifth Avenue frontage, where it had been proposed to place two small buildings with a vista between them, the model now showed a single building, oval in shape. The reporter for the *Times*, possibly inspired by a handout from the publicity staff, called the oval building "as delicate and graceful in comparison with the sharp angles and sheer walls of the buildings surrounding it as a jeweled powder box on a dressing table," but most architects were less lyrical: Ralph Adams Cram, for instance, likened it to a "band-box of the early Victorian period." Describing the group of buildings as a whole, the press copy chanted of "soaring walls and shimmering towers." Not so Mr. Cram. Writing in the *American Mercury*, he drew liberally upon a vocabulary of contempt. He described the model as consisting of "sprouting amorphous and cubicular mushrooms," and called Radio City "the apotheosis of megalomania." Was Mr. Cram unrepresentative of his profession, was he merely expressing the distaste for modern design of a confirmed lover of the traditional Gothic? As one read in the very same article his extravagant praise of the Empire State Building, one doubted if this were the case; as one heard the spoken comments of other architects, one doubted it still more; but it was left to Mr. Mumford to complete the work of critical annihilation. In the usually light-hearted columns of the *New Yorker* this able lay critic of architecture and city-planning, a professed admirer of the best modern work, laid down a barrage of invective.

There was something in those three free blocks, said Mr. Mumford, which had stirred the imagination; everybody had hoped that with the aid of Mr. Rockefeller's wealth a design might be produced which would show the way to orderly treatment of urban areas; yet the architects, working "by the canons of Cloudcuckooland," had "piled more buildings on this site than could be accommodated by a dozen streets of the normal width," and then had "eased the congestion by

widening two of the streets—fifteen feet!" One of the greatest opportunities ever offered to the profession had been lost. "If Radio City, as now forecast, is the best that could be done, there is not the faintest reason for anyone to attempt to assemble a big site," concluded Mr. Mumford. "Chaos does not have to be planned."

Since those searing words were written many months have passed, and the numerous architectural cooks have much modified the broth. In the present model of Radio City, the band-box has been replaced by two small buildings with a vista between, as in the plans recommended by Mr. Morris. By way of recompense for the shrunken size of the central plaza, which distressed Mr. Mumford, the architects have decided to put spacious gardens on top of the theater building and the lower office buildings [where they will not monopolize rentable space], so that New Yorkers may enjoy the spectacle—if they can get up high enough to enjoy it—of several acres of greenery and flowers and garden pools some eight or ten stories above the street. The skyscrapers are favorably placed to insure one another light and air. . . .

The plans, then, have been improved. But the real answer to Mr. Mumford and the other architectural critics who cried aloud with rage last year is that they hoped for too much. . . . One may reply that any scale of land values was crazy which made it necessary for the owner of property in the most desirable areas to put up seven-hundred-foot buildings in order to earn the interest on his money and pay his taxes, even tho it was generally agreed that every story added above the thirty-fifth or fortieth was a doubtful investment owing to the amount of elevator space required, and that the lower stories could command only moderate rentals in view of the lack of light and the noise. But the fact that the land values were crazy did not help Mr. Rockefeller. He held the bag. He did not want to lose his fortune. He had paid for his land at 1928 prices. And the logic of those inflated values forced upon him skyscraping wedges and congestion and the commercial utilization of every available inch of property. An embodiment of American progress in city-planning? That would be very nice, if attainable. But the first essential was to save his investment from disaster.

IV

Economics was never more dismal science than today; let us turn to more engaging topics. . . . Just what is the cultural contribution of Radio City likely to be?

"The maestro of the big show," we have been assured, will be Roxy, who is responsible for Roxy's Theater, which he has been quoted as calling "the largest similar theater in the world." Now Mr. Rothafel is an extraordinary man. He was born of foreign parents [his father was a German shoemaker, his mother was Polish] in a Minnesota village. He had only a common school education. As a boy he landed, and lost, one job after another. To use his own words, "Yes, I was shiftless and a dreamer, but in all my shiftlessness I was building up, entirely unknown to myself, a symposium of impressions which has followed me thru the years and left me a keener, deeper, and more appreciative picture of human frailties and kindnesses." Followed by this symposium of impressions young Rothafel went to New York, started work as a cash boy at

two dollars a week, drifted from job to job, served seven years with the Marines and saw the world [" . . . nights and days at sea, glimpses of strange lands, adventure—movement, color, strange sounds, exotic perfumes! I drank it all in with an insatiable thirst"]. He sold travel books in the mining towns of Pennsylvania, married a saloon-keeper's daughter, and finally turned the dancehall back of the saloon into a little moving picture theater. With this venture his fortunes suddenly turned. He made the theater go. ["I can say now, without affectation, that I began then to create something beautiful for people who have an unsatisfied longing for beauty."] From this modest beginning he went ahead by leaps and bounds. He got a job with B. F. Keith, then managed successfully a movie house in Milwaukee, and then went in turn to the Regent Theater in New York, the Strand, the Rialto, the Capitol [where he made a sudden national reputation by presenting "Roxy and His Gang" on the air], Roxy's Theater, and—a position of high authority in Radio City. A remarkable career, in the best rail-splitter-to-President tradition; the sort of career that shows the incredible possibilities of democracy.

This man who has risen so high is a magnificent showman—make no mistake about that. He has, too, a real love of good music, and his big orchestras play it well, albeit in fragments. ["A little snatch of grand opera," to quote Roxy himself; "a quick little silhouette scene; a few bars of a symphony; done in a normal tempo, but in such a small dose that the audience wishes there were more."] Despite the high sugar-content of his prose style, there is no reason to question his sincerity when he talks about satisfying people's unsatisfied longing for beauty. ["More beauty, for more and more people! That's what I want."] Nor would it be quite fair to charge against Roxy the flatulence of some of the things which have been written about him, such as Mary B. Mullett's tribute in the *American Magazine*: "He has two visions always before him. One is of more and more perfect work to be done. The other is of human service." Yet it would seem quite fair to judge him and his possible cultural contribution to Radio City by the theater over which he now presides; and a visit to that theater suggests that the beauty of which he talks so fulsomely is perhaps a little overripe.

One enters Roxy's Theater thru a vast and sumptuous foyer, the embodiment, one supposes, of the romantic dreams of a boy who once worked for B. F. Keith and longed to have some day a super-gorgeous, super-gilded Keith's Theater of his own. The great oval hall contains not only "the largest Oriental rug in the world," but a huge and glittering chandelier, a colossal bust of Victor Herbert, and a bewildering display of marble columns, palms, plush-carpeted stairways, urns, and fancy bronze statuettes of nymphs. As one quails before the opulence of this scene, one has to scuttle out of the way of a company of two dozen smartly uniformed Roxy ushers marching in to relieve the outgoing shift; in strict military order they quick-step in thru the lobby to the doors of the auditorium, wheel, stand at attention, click their heels in precise unison, and separate to their tasks. Still quailing, one glances at one's program to learn more of these superb young cadets, and discovers that "they are young men who have embarked seriously on careers which will, in time, lead many of them to

executive positions." Finally, after this impressive preparation, one enters the vast, darkened auditorium itself. One's eye is immediately drawn to the distant stage. And there, in the glare of a spotlight from on high, is the beautiful spectacle for which marble foyer and splendid chandelier and marching ushers have been but the appetizers. I do not wish to be unfair to Mr. Rothafel: undoubtedly that spectacle often brings "more beauty for more and more people." But the last time I visited Roxy's the spotlight was focused, as I entered, on a cheap hoofer doing a rather dull drunk act.

Among the cultural items at Radio City under Roxy's beneficent administration, we have been told, are to be a school for musicians and vaudeville entertainers, where the latter will possibly learn to do bigger and better drunk acts; a ballet of forty-eight girls and sixteen boys, who will presumably emulate the contributions made to the art of the dance by the thirty-two Roxyettes of present fame, whose simpering pictures [bare-legged and bare-middled, with tinsel-bright skirtlets and scarlet-and-tinsel brassiere-harnesses and plumed helmets] ornament the entrance to Roxy's Theater; and as the last touch of splendor, a daily guard-mount of ushers after the pattern of that at Buckingham Palace [only probably more impressive, if only because the spectators will realize that the performers are on the march to executive positions].

Mr. Rothafel, of course, will be very far from the whole show at Radio City. Under the auspices of the National Broadcasting Company it will be a broadcasting center. With the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Company there, it will be a motion-picture headquarters as well as a vaudeville center. It will be a center for television, too, when, as, and if made available for general public delectation. Incidentally, at this writing there is still talk of the Metropolitan Opera's coming in, and the site between Forty-Eighth and Forty-Ninth Streets which Mr. Tonnele originally suggested with such momentous consequences is being held open for a possible opera house, or for an auditorium suitable both for the opera and for concerts and other uses; if the Metropolitan remains coy, the Philadelphia Opera Company may take its place. [The managers of Radio City appear to have been wooing the Metropolitan with a gentle threat.] But if either of the opera companies moves into Radio City it will not have a central position in the enterprise. The central activity will be broadcasting.

Now it goes without saying that there will emanate from Radio City, as from our present broadcasting stations, much that will appeal to the most fastidious taste: fine concerts, for example, and important addresses. We may also expect, of course, much good entertainment on a less ambitious yet quite satisfactory level. We may expect the transmission of music and of speech to improve with the inevitable gain in technical equipment and technical skill. Yet it is equally obvious that the general level of production, like the present general level of broadcasting, must of necessity approximate the level of Roxydom. Once in a while the music lover may be able to hear a symphony concert or a fine performance of a grand opera; but usually as he twirls

the dials he will be lucky if, after turning on and off two or three jazz orchestras and a crooning tenor and a dulcet tribute to somebody's tires or somebody's coffee, he is able to hear, as Radio City's contribution to musical culture, the "Dance of the Hours" from "La Gioconda," Nevin's "The Rosary," Rubinstein's "Melody in F," or Tosti's "Good-Bye." Likewise the motion-picture addict, if he drops in at his local theater to discover what the influence of Radio City is doing to bring beauty into his life, will be doubly lucky if he is not treated to a picture in which a tawdry sex theme is revamped for the thousandth time to the accompaniment [lest the censors object] of the unctuous preaching of copy-book virtues.

For this enterprise will be conducted for the millions for profit; and earnestly as Roxy and his colleagues may desire to raise the intellectual and artistic level of their performances, we must credit them with sense enough to realize that it will be risky to raise it far. The millions often enjoy fine things, sometimes they enjoy things which the custodians of their entertainment would consider over their heads; but they cannot be counted upon to do so, and much that is fine is inevitably too difficult, or requires too much knowledge or sustained concentration, to appeal to them. Anybody who caters to the great democratic public soon learns that the royal road to profit is thru crude display, rubber-stamp sensationalism, the easy sure-fire effect, the manufacture of lush sentiment—in short, by the vulgar, the syrupy, and the trite.

Cultural center? Let us not deceive ourselves. The same logic which forced Mr. Rockefeller to build a commercial development, which dictated to him the erection of skyscrapers instead of the planning of a charming urban retreat, which compelled him to go on with his project even tho Manhattan was overbuilt, will compel the managers of Radio City to make the best of Roxyism. They will be operating on a huge scale, in an expensive location, and will want to earn their dividends. They may—and undoubtedly will—call their entertainment what they please, but it will have the limitations of mass-entertainment, and there is no use hoping for anything better.

Indeed the argument may be carried a step farther. It is doubtful whether anybody could deliberately organize a "cultural center" anywhere—whether on a hundred-million-dollar site or a ten-dollar site—which would not ultimately caricature the idea behind the phrase. Culture cannot be put into quantity production. The finer creative energies of man and the minds which are attuned to them flower where they will; and their growth, tho it may be encouraged, cannot be forced. You cannot wave a wand and say, "Let us produce culture," and succeed in doing so; there are in this country plenty of monuments of brick and stone called universities and plenty of ambitious projects for the rapid manufacture of education and artistic appreciation which in their sterility testify to this hard truth. Anybody who tells the public that he is going to build a cultural center is uncommonly naïve—or has a smart press agent.