RAYMOND HOOD
and the American Skyscraper
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Curated by
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DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIVERSITY
On December 3, 1922, a headline on the front page of the Chicago Tribune announced the winner of the newspaper’s sensational international competition: “Howells Wins in Contest for Tribune Tower: Novelist’s Son Gains Architect Prize.” The credit due to Raymond Hood, the son of a box maker from Pawtucket, Rhode Island, was relegated to a passing mention. Attention was given instead to the slightly older and much better known John Mead Howells, son of the famous novelist and Atlantic Monthly editor William Dean Howells. Though Howells was then the more notable of the pair, Hood was quick to gain recognition in his own right and soon achieved worldwide fame. Scholars and critics agree that the Tribune Tower competition was the turning point that launched Hood’s career. As a consequence, though, his work before 1922 has not been adequately surveyed or scrutinized. On the surface, a description of Hood’s career before the Tribune Tower competition might seem like an inventory of mediocrity—styling radiator covers, designing a pool house shaped like a boat, writing letters to editors arguing against prohibition—ending only with the “famed turn of fortune.” However, it is in these earlier years of study and work that the characteristics we associate with Raymond Hood’s architecture were formed and solidified: a blend of tradition and innovation, a focus on plan, a facility with style and ornament, an understanding of architectural illumination, and a thoughtful, iterative approach to design. Hood’s well-known buildings are indebted to his early work and cannot be fully appreciated without surveying his experiences in Pawtucket, Paris, Pittsburgh, and Providence.

Hood was born on March 29, 1881, in Pawtucket to John Parmenter Hood and Vella Mathewson. John Hood, a descendant of Pawtucket’s first Baptist Sunday-school teacher, was the owner of J.N. Polsey & Co., a wooden crate- and box-manufacturing enterprise. The family lived in
a two-story timber-frame house at 107 Cottage Street, at the corner of Howard Avenue. In a 1931 profile on Raymond Hood in the *New Yorker*, the reporter Allene Talmey called the house “the ugliest place in town, sitting firmly on its base with a porch like an iron truss running clear around.” The house was designed by John Hood in collaboration with the Pawtucket architect Albert H. Humes. Raymond Hood later recalled that he had been “entranced by the plans” at age ten and knew from that moment that he wanted to become an architect.

In 1893, the Hood family, including twelve-year-old Raymond, traveled to Chicago to see the World’s Columbian Exposition. This “White City,” devised by some of America’s leading architects, encompassed both historically minded and forward-looking tendencies. Architecturally, the buildings made use of classical ornament and popularized the aesthetic principles of the Parisian École des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) for an American audience. The fair was also a playground for new technologies, such as moving sidewalks, the world’s first Ferris wheel, and the debut of inventions by Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison. With fifteen thousand incandescent lamps in the Electrical Building alone, the fair was at the time the most electrified and artificially illuminated place in history. Hood, one of the millions who witnessed this spectacle, would go on to pioneer the idea of an “Architecture of the Night.”

In the fall of 1898, after graduating from the public high school in Pawtucket, Hood enrolled at Brown University in the class of 1902. Within a month he had joined the Theta Delta Chi fraternity at 81 Waterman Street, Providence, where his older brother, J. Lawrence Hood, was also a member. At Brown, Raymond Hood took courses in mathematics, rhetoric, French, and drawing. But above all Hood wanted to become an architect, and his opportunities were limited at Brown. So, as it was noted in his fraternity’s national publication, Hood decided to “go to Boston ’Tech.’ and ‘grind’ out an existence there.”

Hood entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the fall of 1899, after one year at Brown, and graduated four years later, in the spring of 1903. The program in architecture at MIT was the oldest of its kind in the United States. Since its founding in the 1860s, the department had come increasingly under the influence of the French École des Beaux-Arts’ method of instruction. In its American adaptation, Hood and his classmates took regular courses in algebra, analytic and descriptive geometry, French, modeling, and other fields, with a particular emphasis on architectural history and drawing.

Design competitions judged by panels were key features of the teaching method at MIT. Design assignments were given in the form of programs, written by the faculty, which would designate the topic of the assignment, list particular requirements of the design, and indicate the expected format of the final submission. Regardless of the project, the first step was to produce an *esquisse*, a sketch that embodied the essence of the solution to the design problem and would serve as the basis for further development of the design into its final form. The essential elements were a good *parti* or governing organizational idea, and impeccable rendering skills. Hood’s thesis, “A Design for a Parish Church in the Gothic Style” (Fig. 1), embodies both elements. It was a free interpretation of French gothic architecture with an oversized western tower. In Hood’s own words, “the general scheme has been to have the church flower out as it goes up.”

Hood prepared his thesis and took his fourth-year design courses under Professor Constant-Désiré Despradelle. Despradelle had been recruited from France in 1893 to teach design at MIT, in hopes of bringing the school more credibility and to further align its methods with the prestigious École. His most famous project, the “Beacon of Progress,” serves as an example of École teaching and design methods (Fig. 2). Despradelle first conceived of the Beacon after visiting the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, an extraordinary event that he thought “should not pass without leaving some trace.” Over the next several years he developed, elaborated, and refined his idea for a monumental fifteen-hundred-foot-tall obelisk, finally unveiling the project at the Paris Salon of 1900, where it was awarded a *première médaille* (first-prize medal). The steel-frame building would be covered in sculptures and inscriptions and would house a museum, offices, and several auditoria, one of which could seat twenty thousand people. The most dazzling feature of the design
that he worked on the designs for the firm’s Deborah Cook Sayles Public Library in his hometown of Pawtucket, but it was finished in 1902, before Hood’s term at the office began. During Hood’s employment, the firm was designing new buildings for the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, fashioning them in their typical and famed neo-gothic style, which Hood had himself experimented with in his thesis and would later use in the Tribune Tower. In June 1904, Hood left his position as a draftsman there, obtained a passport, spent a few weeks in Pawtucket, and headed off to Europe.¹⁵

Hood’s hope was to study architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts, which at that time was considered the best architecture school in the world. As an American, he was hardly alone in this ambition—about four hundred Americans attended the École in the peak years between 1888 and 1914, making up more than 10 percent of all architecture students at the school.¹⁷ The entrance exam, the *concours d’admission*, was a grueling affair in which students were subjected to hours of written, graphic, and oral exams in subjects such as drawing, modeling, mathematics, and history. The exam culminated in a twelve-hour *esquisse* exercise. Hood failed the entrance

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**FIG. 3**

*Constant-Désiré Despradelle*

*Beacon of Progress, preparatory sketches, c. 1903*

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**FIG. 4**

*Raymond Hood*

*Tribune Tower, Chicago, sketch no. 2, 1922*

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**FIG. 5**

*Raymond Hood*

*Tribune Tower, Chicago, sketch no. 13, 1922*

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**FIG. 6**

*Raymond Hood*

*Proposal for Electric Tower, 1924*
in an astounding move of diplomatic dexterity, for all drawings of this type were technically property of the French government and had never before been permanently transferred to a foreign country. As evidenced by these drawings by Hood and Chifflot, the history of architecture was given special weight at the École, as it was at MIT.

In 1906, Hood won his first architectural competition, organized by the popular periodical Brickbuilder, for a high-rise office building (Fig. 9). He placed first among about three hundred entries and earned a substantial prize of five hundred dollars. The design’s chamfered corner and free mixing of rounded and pointed arches anticipate elements of the Chicago Tribune Tower. The competition jury thought Hood’s design contained too much detail, but they unanimously placed it first, calling it a “tour de force.”

The readers of Brickbuilder and Hood’s own family learned of the award for his Florentine gothic skyscraper even before Hood did, as he was traveling in Italy at the time.

Hood returned to the United States in June 1906 for reasons that remain unclear. The transition to Paris had been a shock to the young, Baptist-bred Hood. An often-repeated anecdote insists that “he objected to Notre-Dame, refusing to enter or admire it on the grounds that it was Catholic. He objected to the eternal hugging and kissing on the boulevards, and to the Continental Sunday with open theatres and open cafes.”

He again spent some time with the firm Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson in New York and by October was in Pittsburgh assisting Henry Hornbostel, of the firm Palmer & Hornbostel, with designs for the newly founded Carnegie Institute of Technology. Hornbostel, who had studied architecture at the École and was the first professor of architecture at Carnegie, welcomed Hood into his office for several months.

Writing to his friend the architect Henry Boehm in 1907, Hood said that his reason for choosing to work with Hornbostel rather than return to the
École was neither financial nor "a result of lack of nerve," but rather that he was "being placed in charge of a big building (an invaluable experience) and working under a very strong man, who is disposed to teach me all he can, and who is now in the height of his enthusiasm." Other than assisting with competition drawings, Hood mainly worked on Hornbostel’s most prominent project at the time, the New York State Education Building in Albany. Although the building’s exterior makes use of traditional ornament, the interior departs from the Beaux-Arts norm to suit contemporary needs—a pragmatic and flexible approach to design that Hood would also adopt.

In another letter to his friend Boehm, Hood describes the “long dull grind” of the Albany work, as well as his concern that his Hornbostel stay might prevent him from finishing his studies at the École. His twenty-seventh birthday was approaching and he had so far earned only six valeurs. Matters were becoming urgent: one of the school’s few enrollment requirements was that work be completed before a student’s thirtieth birthday. Just a few weeks later, Hood was on his way to Europe and, about one year after that, he passed the requirements for promotion to the première classe. He quickly acquired the necessary valeurs to progress from there by submitting five projets rendus—fleshed-out versions of esquisses. Perhaps the most distinguished of these was his design for “A Stock Exchange in a Maritime City,” which earned him the esteemed Prix Cavel in 1910. Hood described his design as “Normandy gothic” and based on the buildings of Rouen, France—a style and city to which he would return for inspiration in the Chicago Tribune Tower competition.

Hood’s submission for his diplôme project is certainly the most striking of his undertakings at the École. Students were permitted to choose the subject of their diplôme project, and Hood decided to design a city hall for Pawtucket (Fig. 10). He had been considering this homage to his hometown for some time, “the tower for which,” he wrote to Boehm in 1910, “I made sketches a long while ago.” The fifteen-story skyscraper, topped by an elaborate series of diminishing tiers, is reminiscent of New York’s Singer Building, just finished in 1908 and briefly the tallest office building in the world. Skyscraper city halls were a relative rarity at the time. Hood’s project is a masterful exercise in Beaux-Arts design that places traditional ornament in a symmetrical composition on a steel frame. The main shaft rises from an oversized entrance archway, and is flanked on either side by wings housing municipal offices. The French newspaper Construction Moderne described Hood’s diplôme project as “a skyscraper campanile, worthy of Chicago.”

The project was accepted by the École on February 23, 1911, and, just one month shy of his thirtieth birthday, Hood was awarded a diploma—an honor conferred on only 144 Americans. Hood was proud of the project, toting drawings of it to architecture exhibitions in Providence, Pittsburgh, and Chicago.

Hood returned to the U.S. in April, diploma in hand, and went back to work for Hornbostel, splitting his time between New York and Pittsburgh. While Hood was in Paris, Palmer & Hornbostel had received a commission to expand the campus of the Carnegie Technical Schools into the Carnegie Institute of Technology. Hood became Hornbostel’s chief designer and supervisor of the Building Bureau, the office put in charge of all campus construction as well as other projects in Pittsburgh, such as the U.S. Bureau of Mines. Palmer & Hornbostel were concurrently finishing their Oakland City Hall—the tallest building in California at the time and brimming with exterior illumination.

Hood was active in the Pittsburgh architectural scene, and throughout his career he took seriously his role as mentor. In addition to supervising students in the Building Bureau, he maintained his own atelier with a small enrollment. He also wished to share his École experience beyond his immediate circle, publishing a seven-part “Vocabulary of Atelier French” in Pencil Points to help young students who aspired to study in Paris.

Hood moved to New York after the Building Bureau was disbanded in October 1914. He set up an office at 7 West 42nd Street, in a space he shared with Rayne Adams, whom he knew from MIT and Paris. Hood’s work in this period consisted mostly of renovations and extensions with the occasional unsuccessful competition entry—thirteen of them, by Hood’s own count. Although working on few commissions during his early independent years, he was still actively designing. The sensational skyscraper he proposed
for downtown Providence in 1916 filled the front page of the Special Features section of the Providence Sunday Journal (Fig. 11). His suggested group of buildings consisted of a six-hundred-foot central tower rising from a pedimented entrance, facing what was then called Exchange Place and flanked by two wings connected by a long loggia. The building would accommodate courtrooms, judges’ chambers, a law library, a panoptic prison, a customhouse, and municipal offices, and would include underground connections to the city hall and the post office. The shaft of the central tower resembles a fluted column, with strong, protruding vertical bands alternating with recessed areas for windows—a motif that he would repeat in nearly all of his later skyscrapers and which visibly announced the presence of the steel frame. In discussing the Tribune Tower and the American Radiator Building, the editor of Architectural Forum noted that Hood “has a deep appreciation of the importance of strongly marked vertical lines, emphasizing and indicating the steel frame which the exterior architecture protects and encloses.” This “deep appreciation,” then, was already apparent in the 1910s.

The Providence project was proposed to fill the large block between Exchange Place and Westminster Street, then occupied by the Second Empire–style Butler Exchange Building and today the location of Rhode Island’s tallest skyscraper—the 428-foot Industrial Trust Company Building. Hood did not conceive of the tower as a stand-alone monument. In style and siting it was meant to harmonize with the neighboring state house, city hall, and arcade, and the unbuilt post office. His proposed skyscraper borrowed a formal vocabulary from these other buildings, and its position would create orderly axes through downtown, thereby connecting the most important buildings of the city and the state around a public mall. This, Hood argued, would not result in a dull uniformity, but rather in a harmonized architectural group that would be “one of the most beautiful squares in America.” The uniformity, marked verticality, and provision for ample public space in the Providence proposal are features Hood would reuse in Rockefeller Center and in his plan for a “Tower City” (Fig. 12).

In many ways Hood’s background is typical rather than exceptional. Howells had also gone to the École des Beaux-Arts, as had many other leading American skyscraper architects of the 1920s and 1930s, such as William Van Alen (Chrysler Building) and William F. Lamb (Empire State Building). The French system of architectural education and its American
adaptation have been criticized frequently for an overemphasis on history, ornament, and drawing. And yet it was this very emphasis that helped to shape Hood’s celebrated ability to clad a building in any style, from gothic to Greek to moderne. In his formative years at MIT and the École, Hood found his first chances to explore the possibilities of the skyscraper form. Subsequently, while working with Hornbostel and then on his own, Hood experimented with the skyscraper as a solution to a variety of architectural problems. It was this period of training and practice which molded Hood the architect well before he became Hood the Tribune Tower victor.

Hood once agreed to an interview with a reporter under one condition: “No sob stuff. . . . None of this dope about starving to death in an attic, with only a crust of bread for my wife and my baby and myself, and all that sort of hooey.” 39 Hood knew that there was more to his story than a tale of escape from “debt-ridden obscurity” 40 by way of a single event, and that his rapid rise to stardom after the Tribune Tower competition owed much to that which came before.
Endnotes


4 Robert Grive, An Illustrated History of Pawtucket, Central Falls, and Vicinity (Pawtucket, RI: Pawtucket Gazette and Chronicle, 1897), 345–348.

5 A Design for a Parish Church, 1897), 345–348.

6 “Le Salon des artistes français,” Construction Moderne, July 1, 1911, 472.


11 Boston Globe, November 9, 1931.

12 “Diplomat Despradelle Gets Art Treasure for Tech. Professor of Architecture, While Abroad, Persuades French Authorities to Part with Prized Drawings,” and “Tech Gets Prix de Rome Drawings,” October 1902, Department of Architecture clippings scrapbook (1894–1928), Rotch Library, MIT.

13 See Pittsburgh Architectural Club, Annual Exhibition (Pittsburgh: 1912); Rhode Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Year Book (Providence: 1911); and Chicago Architectural Club, Book of the Twenty Fifth Annual Exhibition (Chicago: 1912).


17 Talmey, “Man Against the Sky,” 25.


22 “Diplomat Despradelle Gets Art Treasure for Tech. Professor of Architecture, While Abroad, Persuades French Authorities to Part with Prized Drawings,” and “Tech Gets Prix de Rome Drawings,” October 1902, Department of Architecture clippings scrapbook (1894–1928), Rotch Library, MIT.


27 Edwin Alger, “He Started a Revolution.”

Hassan Bagheri
American Radiator Building, detail, 2019
In early January 1932, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera rushed a large fresco in a steel frame up to the twelfth floor of the Heckscher Building on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street in New York City. The Museum of Modern Art, just over two years old, occupied six rented rooms there, and an exhibition of Rivera’s work had opened on December 23. In addition to the 143 paintings and drawings shown, the museum had commissioned seven new murals, five of which were ready for the opening; Rivera delivered two more while the exhibition was ongoing.¹

The museum had been founded in 1929 by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, the Rhode Island–born wife of John D. Rockefeller Jr. (Brown class of 1897), with her friends Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller was a keen admirer of Rivera’s work and decided, only a month after the museum’s founding, to invite him for a solo exhibition. Rivera and his wife, Frida Kahlo, arrived by boat in November 1931.

The fresco Rivera delivered—named by a journalist *Frozen Assets*, a name so fitting that it stuck—became one of the best-known portraits of Depression-era New York (Fig. 1). It showed the cruel stratifications of capitalism, with skyscrapers looming above a trainline bringing workers into town, and the homeless shelter at the East 25th Street Pier looking eerily like a morgue, with countless sleeping men watched over by a guard—like the one guarding assets in a bank vault underneath. In the skyline at the top, the most recognizable recent landmarks, such as the Chrysler and Empire State buildings, are relegated to the back. Instead, pride of place is given to the Daily News and McGraw–Hill buildings, with Rockefeller Center between them. All three had been designed by Raymond Hood.

In reality, of course, these buildings were not next to each other and Rockefeller Center had not even been built, but the tableau suggested Hood’s commanding position in Manhattan’s skyline.
Having designed a series of skyscrapers in recent years (each unique in appearance) and now in charge of the architecture of the largest single building project in Manhattan’s history, Hood was, indeed, at the top of his profession.

The second fresco Rivera delivered late to the show was called *Pneumatic Drill* and showed a worker on the building site of Rockefeller Center. We can safely assume that both *Pneumatic Drill* (executed in monochrome, the intended approach for murals at Rockefeller Center) and *Frozen Assets* (flattering Raymond Hood) were meant by Rivera to position himself for a mural commission at Rockefeller Center—which he would, indeed, receive a few months later.

How had Raymond Hood become the most powerful architect in New York City? Rarely has an architect traveled from relative obscurity to international fame in such a short time. It began with a chance encounter. Nine years earlier, Raymond Hood was forty-one years old, barely able to make ends meet, with a family but without a steady job, designing radiator covers for the American Radiator Company and helping out in offices. One day in June 1922, crossing through Grand Central Station, he ran into a friend from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, John Mead Howells.

Together with ten other American firms, Howells had been invited to submit an entry to the Chicago Tribune Competition. Howells, who suffered from chronic back pain and whose firm was very busy, felt he couldn’t take this on. Well aware of Hood’s talents, he asked him to design it in his office.²

**Chicago Tribune Tower**

The *Chicago Tribune*, the world’s largest newspaper at the time, had announced an international competition for “the most beautiful and distinctive office building in the world” ³ and offered substantial rewards totaling $100,000. The competition generated extensive press coverage and attracted 263 entries from twenty-three countries. Hood’s winning entry is best understood through its urban context. The new Tribune headquarters would be across the street from the most attention-grabbing building in Chicago, the Wrigley Chewing Gum Company, finished a year earlier, in 1921, and designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White (fig. 2). Occupying the most prominent spot in the new business district north of downtown, on the Chicago River at the bend of Michigan Avenue, its prominent tower was visible for miles down the city’s busiest street. Modeled on the famous Giralda Tower of Seville Cathedral in Spain, it reached the permitted tower limit of four hundred feet; the rest of the building obeyed the 260-foot cornice height. Clad in white terracotta, the building was, sensationally, lit in its entirety at night by batteries of floodlights—the brightest and most extensive architectural illumination in the world.⁴ No name or product was mentioned—the building itself served as advertising.

Raymond Hood responded with pragmatism, restraint, and sophistication. He had to adhere to the same cornice height, but managed to squeeze in two more floors than his counterpart. Instead of referring to popular Renaissance forms, Hood settled for gothic, still somewhat of a novelty in Chicago, but generally associated with honesty and simplicity. His reference point was the late-gothic Butter Tower of Rouen Cathedral (fig. 3, 4), with its flying buttresses at the top, a detail that made the tower appear wider than the permitted one-fourth of the width of the façade.
A series of sketches shows how Hood arrived at his solution and the freedom his flexible mind enjoyed in the process (FIGS. 5, 6). He considered doubling the tower to provide more office space, or, in case height restrictions were lifted one day, suggested a much taller sibling next to it. Instead of white terracotta, Hood settled on a more dignified gray limestone (FIG. 7). Responding to the unsurpassable flood of light from across the street, Hood’s text called “attention to the fact that the upper part of the building has been designed not only for its own outline and composition, but for the possibilities of illumination and reflected lighting at night.”

The Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen came in second with an elegant setback skyscraper of a restrained, vaguely gothic, vertical striation (FIG. 8). The most modern were among German and Dutch entries, such as the stern but elegant (and quite prescient) cubic massing by the Bauhaus director, Walter Gropius, and his chief designer, Adolf Meyer. Adolf Loos, from Vienna, sent a visual pun—an enormous column. Both were among seventy-four entries from abroad that arrived too late and could not be considered (FIGS. 9, 10).

The ensuing debate in the architecture journals missed most of Hood’s sophisticated responses to the Wrigley tower, and pitted his historicist design against the rising gospel of a simple, functionalist modern architecture. The Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, for example, had in 1896 told his architect colleagues how to design tall office buildings “artistically considered,” by not making them a display of architectural quotations “from some
other land and some other time.” Instead, they should, just like a plant in nature, calmly reflect their purpose, since “form ever follows function. . . Where function does not change, form does not change.” While this quote had quickly become the battle cry of European modernists, Sullivan was disappointed to see how little his advice had been heeded otherwise. Saarinen’s design should have “placed first, where it belongs by virtue of its beautifully controlled and virile power. The first prize [Hood’s] is demoted to the level of those works evolved of dying ideas, even as it sends forth a frantic cry to escape from the common bondage of those governed by ideas.” Abroad, the building became the poster child for the retrograde American approach to modern architecture, and was considered “the Triumph of Kitsch.” Gothic stone cladding for a modern steel frame, fumed Richard Neutra, a recent immigrant from Austria, had “little to do with the structural honesty of the Gothic.” No modern building “would even consider such profligacy.”

None of this seems to have fazed either client or architect. A new building code allowing greater building heights went into effect in April of 1923, and Hood added four floors to the design—lending the building an even more formidable presence (cf. FIGS. 3, 7). Construction began in 1923, and the building opened to the public in the summer of 1925.

The American Radiator Building and an “Architecture of the Night”

New commissions followed immediately, including an office tower for Hood’s former employer, the American Radiator Company at Bryant Park in New York. Here Hood, working with Jacques André Fouilhoux, came into his own as an innovator and moved away from neo-gothicism to a freer interpretation. The tower’s small footprint allowed for daylight at every desk and offered a flexible, open floor plan, thanks to a condensed utility core on the side. Hood made the unusual decision to clad the entire steel structure in black brick, creating coherence with the dark windows. He added golden ornaments (by sculptor René Chambellan), brick sections, and finials at the top’s setbacks. When finished in 1924, the building was an instant success. “What is that black building? . . . The American Radiator Building is the answer. . . . As an advertisement I consider the building a magnificent success” (FIG. 11). Hood hired a Broadway lighting designer, Bassett Jones, and they conducted experiments in situ—“multi-colored revolving lights” or “the effect of the building being on fire” thanks to “spots of light on jets of steam rising out of the smokestack.” They also tried moving lights and cross-lighting, but decided the public wasn’t ready for “extravagant and exotic effects.” Eventually they settled on fifty-six amber floodlighting units, from the twenty-first floor upwards. The public was mesmerized: “The appearance of the building at night is one of the sights of the city . . . vast throngs that crowd this district at night are blocking traffic.” “The gilded upper portion seems miraculously suspended one and two hundred feet in the air, the design has a dreamlike beauty.” The painter Georgia O’Keeffe noticed the lighting from her apartment on the top floor of the Shelton Hotel, where she lived with furnaces and heaters, a building that glowed in the dark was not such a wild idea.”
her husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, in 1927. In a painting she depicted the building’s luminous crown, floodlights shooting up into the night sky, some catching a neighbor’s heating fumes, and a red neon light advertising her publicity-shy husband (fig. 12).

For the Tribune Tower, Hood and Jones had imagined similarly dramatic light installations with backlit windows, strip lighting, and colored floodlights, including steam, smoke, and fireworks for special occasions, like “Walhalla burning in the skies, bringing to mind, perhaps, the finale of the Göttterdammerung.” A more restrained lighting scheme was installed in 1929: 174 golden-colored floodlights set off the gothic tracery, a successful counterbalance to the bright reflection from the Wrigley Building (figs. 2, 13).

In the meantime, the public had taken note. Architects saw “bewildering possibilities as to the future use of surfaces with colors, glows, and lights in order to convert the high places of New York, as seen from distant streets, into a wonderland of elaborate, fanciful and vivid masses
Urban Visions

Hood’s dreams of a colorful nocturnal modernity were accompanied by equally bold plans for urban change in Manhattan. Buoyed by his newfound fame, in 1925 Hood published his vision of “Bridge Cities” in the New York Times, dreamily rendered by Hugh Ferriss. Towering, continuous apartment houses on either side of a roadway crossing the Hudson or the East River were so “easily practicable,” he declared, that it was “strange that we have not always had them.” A densely packed bridge crossing the Hudson River could easily house fifty thousand people—a city in itself (FIG. 16).17 Two years later, Hood proposed something entirely different—a response to both Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin, with its freestanding towers, and New York City’s setback law. Hood’s “Tower City” tied occupied floor area to public circulation space. Anyone wanting to build higher would have to broaden the street, and move his building back. Over time, there would be “hundreds of fifty and sixty story buildings and corresponding open street space” with “plenty of air, light and sunshine for all. . . . The city would be a park dotted with buildings.”22 Hood’s sketches showed the successive spread of the idea (FIG. 17). Two years later, he presented the opposite

and patterns.”18 Raymond Hood had helped to introduce a new age of color and light in American architecture, a development greatly welcomed by the electrical industry and lighting companies (FIG. 14). In 1930 he published a booklet called Architecture of the Night (FIG. 15) for General Electric: “The possibilities of night illumination have barely been touched,” he declared, as he predicted a new monumental art form. “There lies in the future a development even more fantastic than anything that has ever been accomplished on a stage.”19 The critic Douglas Haskell even diagnosed a nocturnal American modernity: “The Europeans get the day, we get the night. . . . Here is modernism indeed. Thousands of years went by with their changes of style, but not until this century was there electric light, which, far, far more than the triad of steel, glass and concrete, has changed the basis of all architecture.”20
vision—a “City Under a Single Roof”—embracing urban density and self-contained city quarters whose central buildings of unlimited height would allow traffic to flow right underneath (FIGS. 18, 24). These designs would have an immediate impact on Hood’s first sketches for the layout of Rockefeller Center two years later (FIG. 21).


The end of the decade brought more commissions for skyscrapers. Hood’s Daily News building for a tabloid publisher (he again worked with John Mead Howells) became the first modernist skyscraper in Manhattan, forgoing a crown at the top and sporting a relentless vertical striation of white enameled brick, with brown and black brick spandrels in between (FIG. 19). The stark exterior (with the exception of a vivid relief by René Chambellan above the entrance) (FIG. 27) belied the magic of its mysterious lobby with a huge revolving globe under a black glass dome in the center (FIGS. 25–27).

Hood’s next project (again with Jacques André Fouilloux), on the western end of 42nd Street for McGraw-Hill, another publishing house, emphasized horizontality, with the building clad in the largest expanse
of blue-green terracotta ever applied over a façade of this magnitude. At the same time, the building’s wraparound broad ribbon windows provided unprecedented expanses of glass in the façade, while revealing the steel frame behind. Fashionable Streamline Moderne details left their traces in the horizontal lines at the entrances and in the oversize luminous advertising sign at the top (FIGS. 20, 23).

Both of these buildings were featured in the famous exhibition which immediately followed Diego Rivera’s at the Museum of Modern Art. “Modern Architecture” was curated by Philip Johnson (who would go on to design Brown University’s Computer Center and List Art Building) and the historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock. While focused on European architects such as Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and J. J. P. Oud, it also featured four Americans, Frank Lloyd Wright, Howe and Lescaze, the Bowman Brothers, and Raymond Hood, who was introduced as “the American Skyscraper Architect.” The praise offered to both Hood’s Daily News Building (“the most effective skyscraper in New York”) and McGraw-Hill tower (“a significant turning point in skyscraper design”) was dampened by Hitchcock’s criticism of the readability of the underlying structure of the former and the size of the advertising feature on the top of the latter.24

**Rockefeller Center**

In 1930, John D. Rockefeller Jr. found himself responsible for a vast urban renewal project between New York’s Fifth and Sixth Avenues when the intended anchor, the Metropolitan Opera, dropped out at the onset of the Depression. Together with the development agents Todd, Robertson & Todd, Rockefeller turned the project into a mixed-use conglomerate of office, retail, and entertainment spaces. Raymond Hood became the lead architect of a group of Associated Architects,25 suggesting General Electric and RCA as new partners,26 and steering the design of fourteen buildings around a central sunken plaza and pedestrian street. Construction began in 1931, the first buildings opened in 1933, and the core of the complex was completed by 1939. The centerpiece was Hood’s slender, superbly elegant sixty-six-story RCA Building, the synopsis of his previous skyscraper designs: he used the gray limestone cladding of the Chicago Tribune, the strong verticalism and staggered setbacks of the Daily News, with the load-bearing steel posts underneath readable, as they had been at McGraw-Hill. The RCA tower, first to be finished, was immediately lit at night (at first only on the eastern
FIG. 21
Rockefeller Center, Scheme “J,” 1929
drawing by Walter H. Kilham Jr.

FIG. 22
Hassan Bagheri
Rockefeller Center, 2019
façade), to create interest in the project and attract investors (FIG. 22). As a result, the building was 80 percent rented by 1934, while the Empire State Building down the street had a similar vacancy rate. It was “large, exciting, romantic,” according to the prominent critic Lewis Mumford, especially at night: “Under artificial lighting, in a slight haze,” it looked like the “City of the Future.”

When Diego Rivera’s Frozen Assets showed the construction of skyscrapers above the bodies of impoverished, homeless men, it made an important connection. The building boom in the early 1930s, of which Rockefeller Center was the pinnacle, was made possible because construction and labor costs fell so drastically during the Depression that skyscrapers were built at half their budgeted cost. And, for Rockefeller Center, 228 buildings on the site were razed, and some four thousand mostly low-income tenants had to relocate.

Raymond Hood imagined any art at Rockefeller Center to be subservient to his architecture—monochrome and on movable canvas. With Rivera already agreed upon, in September 1932 Hood travelled to Europe to interview additional artists. Henri Matisse turned him down, and Picasso never responded (the telegram had addressed him as “Pierre Picasso”), but the popular Anglo-Welsh muralist Frank Brangwyn and the Catalan Josep Maria Sert accepted the invitation. When Rivera heard that he would not work alongside Picasso or Matisse, he withdrew. To win him back, concessions had to be made: Rivera could use bright colors and was given the most prominent location, a sixty-three-foot-wide area above the elevator banks in the entrance hall. His theme was to be “Man at the Crossroads.” Famously, the project didn’t end well. In May 1933, Rivera was almost finished with his expansive tableau of scenes of workers’ demonstrations and police brutality, chemical and aerial warfare, scientific discoveries, healthy plant growth and peaceful family life. One day, Raymond Hood was examining potential damage from a spill of ceiling paint and discovered a recently added portrait of the Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Rivera was asked to remove it and refused. He was promptly relieved of his commission. The mural was plastered over and eventually destroyed, but Rivera had it photographed and recreated it in Mexico City’s Palacio des Bellas Artes later that year.

The “Brilliant Bad Boy” of Architecture

Hood’s skyscrapers and unexecuted visions arose just as the gospel of modern architecture began to spread from central Europe, bringing with it a defined and limited formal vocabulary and a strong sense of moral superiority. Hood, in contrast, stood for a joyful, irreverent, undogmatic modernity that embraced ornament, color and light, variety and contrast, and occasional historical references, while being structurally sound and savvy about the interior layout. Repeatedly he emphasized how little he felt bound by stylistic or other conventions, which earned him the epithet of “brilliant bad boy” from the New Yorker magazine. “I wish we could all work with our own sense of discipline and be free as the devil. For the moment we put a cast-iron frame on this International Style, that we’re all working at, this fine, marvelous movement will turn into a tight, hard unimaginative formula, just as with colonial architecture. We should keep away from ‘style’ and for once we will make of this style a freedom of the spirit.”

Frank Lloyd Wright, who felt himself similarly sidelined by the most ardent promoters of the International Style, agreed with Hood. When Hood died of rheumatoid arthritis at age fifty-three in 1934, Wright wrote to his former student Paul Frankl: “Ray Hood was a good egg. Architecture needs about ten first-class funerals of the higher-ups more than it needed his.”

2 Howells and Hood also shared a RI connection. Howells and Stokes, his earlier firm, had designed the Turk’s Head Building in downtown Providence in 1913, then the tallest tower in the city.

3 The International Competition for a New Administration Building for the Chicago Tribune (Chicago: Chicago Tribune Company, 1923), 17.


5 International Competition for a New Administration Building, 109.


25 Three firms were part of this group: Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray; Hood, Godley & Fouilhoux; and Reinhard & Hofmeister.

26 Carol Krinsky, Rockefeller Center (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 78.


29 Okrent, Great Fortune, 319.


32 Frank Lloyd Wright, letter to Paul Frankl, in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, ed., Letters to Apprentices (Pescia, CA: California State University Press, 1982), 86.
FIG. 25
drawing by Ludovic Gordon Farquhar

FIG. 26
Hassan Bagheri, Daily News Lobby, detail, 2019
Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions are given in inches, height followed by width. All works are by Raymond Mathewson Hood (1881–1934) unless otherwise noted.

Education and Biography

p. 6 Constant-Désiré Despradelle, 1862–1912
Beacon of Progress, preparatory sketches, c. 1895
Ink on trace paper mounted on paper
13 x 11½
MIT Museum

p. 5 Constant-Désiré Despradelle
Beacon of Progress, perspective, 1900
Ink wash and graphite on paper
39 x 25½
MIT Museum

Constant-Désiré Despradelle
Beacon of Progress, “Section Showing the Disposition of the Various Stories,” c. 1900
Ink and graphite on linen
30½ x 18
MIT Museum

p. 8 Jules-Émile Chifflet, 1868–1925
Temple de Mars Vengeur, Rome, May 1900
Ink and watercolor on paper
64½ x 23½
MIT Museum

Tribune Tower, 1922–1925
John Mead Howells and Raymond Hood
435 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL

p. 7 Tribune Tower, Chicago, sketch no. 2, August 1, 1922
Charcoal on tracing paper mounted on board
22½ x 12
Raymond Mathewson Hood papers, 1903–1931, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

p. 7 Tribune Tower, Chicago, sketch no. 10, 1922
Charcoal and graphite on tracing paper mounted on board
28½ x 12¼
Raymond Mathewson Hood papers, 1903–1931, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

p. 24 Project for a pair of Tribune Towers, December 13, 1922
Charcoal and watercolor on board
12½ x 8½
Raymond Mathewson Hood papers, 1903–1931, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

p. 24 Project for an addition to Tribune Tower, December 19, 1922
Charcoal on tracing paper mounted on board
24½ x 10¼
Raymond Mathewson Hood papers, 1903–1931, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

American Radiator Building, 1922–1924
Raymond Hood and Jacques André Fouilloux
40 West 40th Street, New York, NY

p. 2 Hassan Bagheri, born 1983
Tribune Tower, 2019
50 x 34
Digital inkjet print

p. 20 Vintage postcards of the Tribune Tower
Private collection

American Radiator Building, 1922–1924
Raymond Hood and Jacques André Fouilloux

p. 10 Architecture of the Night

p. 30 Architecture of the Night, brochure
General Electric Company, Schenectady, 1930
Digital inkjet print after original
11 x 8½
Centre Canadian d’Architecture, Montreal

p. 30 Golden Glow: Floodlight Projectors, brochure, 1932
Electric Service Supplies Company, Philadelphia, 1932
Digital inkjet print after original
11 x 8½
Centre Canadian d’Architecture, Montreal

p. 2 American Radiator Company Building, New York,” Plate 15, detail photographs
American Radiator Company Building, New York,” Plate 17, detail of lower stories
20 x 14 each
Private collection

Richard Haas, born 1936
American Radiator Building, 2005
Etching
20 x 16
Private collection

Wolfgang Knoll, born 1937
American Radiator Building, model, 2006
Extruded plastic, paint, LED lights
9½ x 9½ x 4½
Private collection

Hassan Bagheri
American Radiator Building, 2015
Digital inkjet print
32 x 41

Pavel Bendov, born 1988
American Radiator Building, 2017
Digital inkjet print
38½ x 30½

Architecture of the Night

p. 30 Architecture of the Night, brochure
General Electric Company, Schenectady, 1930
Digital inkjet print after original
11 x 8½
Centre Canadian d’Architecture, Montreal

p. 30 Golden Glow: Floodlight Projectors, brochure, 1932
Electric Service Supplies Company, Philadelphia, 1932
Digital inkjet print after original
11 x 8½
Centre Canadian d’Architecture, Montreal
**Tower City and City Under a Single Roof, 1924–1929**

**Raymond Hood**

Unbuilt

- **Tower City I**, aerial perspective, 1926
  - Ink and gouache on paper 11½ x 8¾
  - Raymond Hood Collection, The Architectural Archives, by the gift of Mrs. Jacques André Fouilhoux

- **Tower City II**, aerial perspective, 1926
  - Ink and gouache on paper 11½ x 8¾
  - Raymond Hood Collection, The Architectural Archives, by the gift of Mrs. Jacques André Fouilhoux

- **Tower City III**, aerial perspective, 1926
  - Ink and gouache on paper 11½ x 8¾
  - Raymond Hood Collection, The Architectural Archives, by the gift of Mrs. Jacques André Fouilhoux

- **Tower City IV**, aerial perspective, 1926
  - Ink and gouache on paper 11½ x 8¾
  - Raymond Hood Collection, The Architectural Archives, by the gift of Mrs. Jacques André Fouilhoux

- **Hood, Godley & Fouilhoux**, 1930–1931
  - McGraw-Hill Building, 330 West 42nd Street, New York, NY

**Hassan Bagheri**

- **McGraw-Hill Building**, 2019
  - Digital inkjet print 50 x 34

**Rockefeller Center, 1929–1939**

**Hassan Bagheri**

- **Rockefeller Center Center**, 2019
  - Digital inkjet print 50 x 32

Private collection

**Rockefeller Center, Scheme “T,” aerial perspective, December 21, 1929**

- Photographer unknown
  - Digital inkjet print 50 x 38

**Hassan Bagheri**

- **Rockefeller Center, Scheme “T,” aerial perspective, December 21, 1929**
  - Digital inkjet print 50 x 38

**Hassan Bagheri**

- **Rockefeller Center, Scheme “T,” aerial perspective, December 21, 1929**
  - Digital inkjet print 50 x 38