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C O U R I E R

WILLIAM LESCAZE

THE RISE OF
MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA

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WILLIAM H. JORDY

A BRIEF SURVEY OF
THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
ARCHITECTURAL HOLDINGS

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The “Modern” Skyscraper, 1931

BY CAROL WILLIS

“The Philadelphia Saving Fund Society (PSFS) seems handsomer today than when it was completed”, wrote William Jordy and Henry Wright in the 1960s, when, finding the building neglected by historians, they sought to resurrect its reputation.¹ The same assessment of the quality of the building could be repeated today, fifty-two years after the building’s opening in 1932. Indeed, the bank headquarters and commercial office tower by the partnership of George Howe and William Lescaze looks more “contemporary” at present than at any time since its construction. PSFS combines a complexity of massing with a rich variety of materials and color which is absent in most later monuments of corporate modernism, but which has become a feature of many recent skyscraper designs.²

PSFS endures in the history books, however, not so much for its evident quality as for its priority as the first American skyscraper designed in the International Style. Indeed, for over a decade, due to the interruption of commercial construction during the Depression and World War II, PSFS remained virtually the only skyscraper in the new aesthetic. During that time, however, the International Style came to be synonymous with Modern Architecture. It can be argued, then, that although PSFS is a fine building, its particular fame is contingent on the subsequent development of Modern Architecture and the writing of its canonical history. Within the orthodox interpretation, PSFS becomes a critical link in the chain—“the most important tall building between those of Sullivan in the 1890s and the Seagram Building”—as Jordy asserted in the 1960s, and as many texts have since repeated.³

The fascinating story of the commission for PSFS and the many stages of development of the building’s design have been admirably and exhaustively detailed in the writings of Robert A. M. Stern and William

1. William H. Jordy and Henry Wright, “PSFS”, *Architectural Forum* 120 (May 1964): 125.

2. In my talk, this point was illustrated by 500 Park Avenue by James Stewart Polshek and Partners, which bears a striking similarity to PSFS; many other recent skyscrapers could be cited.

3. Jordy and Wright, “PSFS”, 143.

H. Jordy.⁴ They have documented the collaboration of Howe and Lescaze, distinguishing as much as possible their respective roles, and they have analyzed the building in terms of its program, patronage, and precedents.

If, however, almost all of the footnotes have already been written about the singular achievement of PSFS, much still remains to be said about the skyscraper as a building type—indeed, the building type—of the 1920s and 1930s. In this paper, therefore, I would like to re-examine PSFS in the context of other tall buildings of the period in order to note what is either typical or extraordinary about it. The other buildings I will discuss are today described by many as Art Deco, but at the time were called “modern”, without any suggestion of polemics. Therefore, this paper is also about what “modern” meant in the years before it acquired the specific stylistic identity of the International Style.

In February 1932, the Museum of Modern Art mounted the now-famous exhibition which presented an extremely discriminating survey of the previous decade of European, and some American, modernism. Organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, the show with its related publications was a brilliantly constructed polemic, which presented the new architecture as a cohesive movement with common principles.⁵ Much of the work shown was already familiar to many American architects, but the proceedings of the symposium held in connection with the show record that even an up-to-date designer such as Raymond Hood was startled by the coherence of the style as it was

4. Both William H. Jordy and Robert A. M. Stern have published extensive studies of PSFS. The earliest pieces appeared in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 21 (May 1962); this issue, devoted entirely to PSFS, included Jordy's “PSFS: Its Development and Its Significance in Modern Architecture”, and Robert A. M. Stern's “PSFS: Beaux-Arts Theory and Rational Expressionism”. Jordy subsequently published a summary of his research in the *Architectural Forum*, cited above, and an expanded account in his book, *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), 87-164. Robert Stern has discussed PSFS with particular attention to distinguishing Howe's contribution in his book, *George Howe: Toward a Modern American Architecture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), especially 108-32.

5. The exhibition and the catalog were titled *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932); the catalog included an introduction by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., essays and entries by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, and a piece on housing by Lewis Mumford. Today, the best-known document of the exhibition, though, is the contemporary book by Hitchcock and Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932), which has been reprinted many times.

presented.⁶ In other words, the MoMA show, in a real way, can be said to have introduced the idea of a single, unified, modern style to most American architects. In the book that accompanied the exhibition, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, Hitchcock and Johnson advanced three basic criteria of the modern aesthetic: architecture as volume, not mass; regularity rather than symmetry; and avoidance of applied ornament. In addition, they stressed the importance of modern materials and the honest expression of structure.

Some American architects were included in the exhibition, apparently at the insistence of the Museum's board.⁷ Though still unfinished, PSFS was shown, along with eight other projects of the firm Howe and Lescaze. Their skyscraper was an exemplary essay in the new aesthetic (figs. 1 and 2). The complex massing reflected the different functions of the street-level shops, banking room, executive offices, and rental space, and the vertical spine of the service core was clearly distinguished from the horizontal office floors; the tower was placed asymmetrically over the tall, round-cornered base to afford the best natural light. The steel cage construction was expressed on the east and west facades by exposing the end piers, thereby accenting the vertical structural members; this break with standard methods of construction necessitated special bracing and additional expense, features which will be mentioned again below. On the Market Street side, the tower was cantilevered and the curtain wall emphasized the horizontal through the alternating bands of strip windows and continuous spandrels. Exterior ornament was limited to graphics and to their intrinsic colors and textures of the materials. All the interior spaces, fittings, and furnishings were custom-designed; in my opinion, it is these superb interiors which deserve the highest praise as an achievement of the International Style.

It should be kept in mind that when Howe and Lescaze were designing PSFS, the term "International Style" as yet had no stylistic definition. In his introduction to the catalog of the MoMA exhibition, Alfred Barr made a distinction between modern and "modernistic", and he derided this latter approach (what today we call Art Deco) as simply "decorating surfaces".⁸ Howe and Lescaze were often called "radical

6. Some of Hood's reactions to the exhibition are recorded in a speech he gave at a symposium held in connection with the show; see "Symposium: The International Architecture Exhibition", *Shelter 2* (April 1932): 6-8.

7. Stern, *George Howe*, 154, note 37.

8. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, 13.

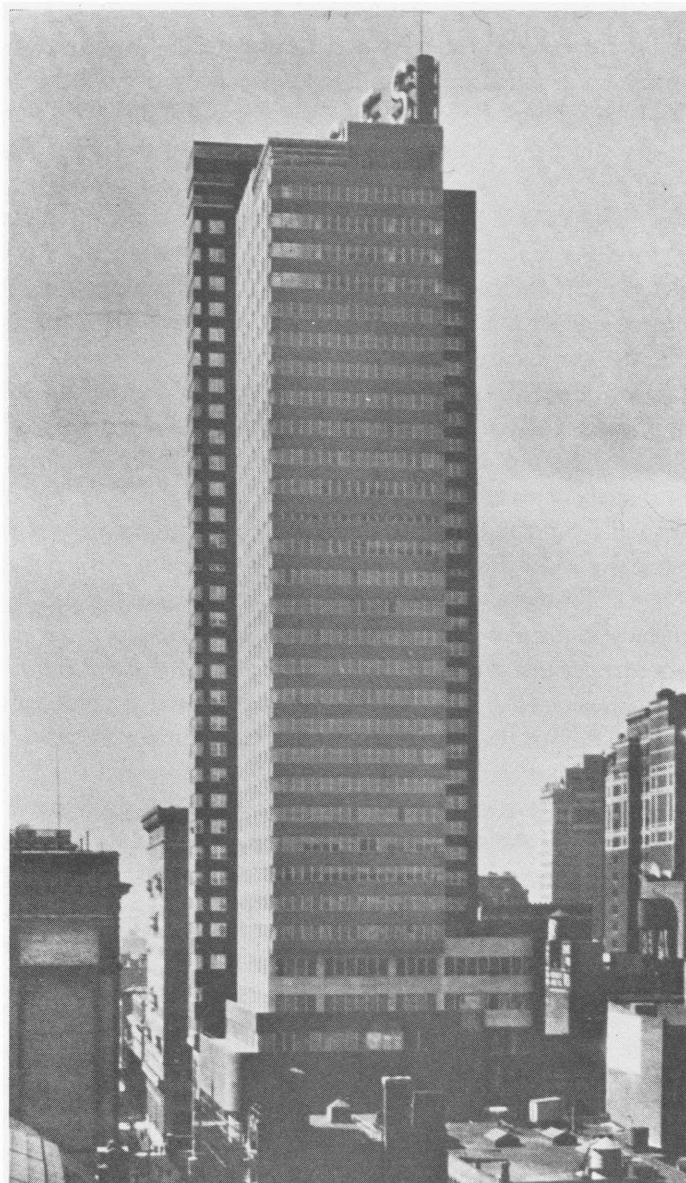


Fig. 1. Howe and Lescaze, Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, 1929-32 (PSFS).



Fig. 2. Howe and Lescaze, Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, 1929-32, north and east elevation (R. T. Donner).

modernists”, and PSFS was branded “ultra-modern”. Countering this description, the architects were said to have won the approval of the conservative bankers of the PSFS board by arguing that their design was not “ultra-modern, but ultra-practical”.⁹

We can gain a sense of the multiple meanings of “modern” before 1932 by looking at the work of the most prominent designers of the period. The architects who were reputed to be the country’s leading modernists were a trio of New Yorkers: Raymond Hood, Ely Jacques Kahn, and Ralph Walker. Allene Talmey wrote of them in 1931: “They are three little men who build tall buildings, and who probably rake into their offices more business than any other architects in the city. . . . The three live in a ferment. They change their architectural notions once a week. . . . They are constantly publicized, interviewed, quoted. They dash to Boston. They race to Chicago. They have a glorious time.”¹⁰

This description may suggest one reason why many critics have been skeptical about the work of these men: they regard it as superficial and unprincipled—which is unfair. They also find it commercial, which it is. But to disdain commercialism in skyscrapers is to misunderstand the building type completely. Certainly, the exuberance of the “three little Napoleons”, as they were sometimes called, contrasted sharply with the solemn self-examination of George Howe during his conversion to modernism or the self-image of Lescaze as avant-garde artist/architect. But although Hood, Kahn, and Walker had no polemical view of modernism as a single style, they were all very serious indeed about creating an architecture that they believed was expressive of contemporary American society.

Ely Jacques Kahn was the most prolific of the three. In the 1920s he designed dozens of speculative office and loft buildings in what became widely known as the “setback style”. An example is 80 John Street, an insurance company building in lower Manhattan completed in 1927 (fig. 3). Its characteristic stepped-back form, like a series of stacked boxes of diminishing size, was a direct product of the New York City zoning law of 1916, which established a formula for the maximum bulk or “envelope” of a building.¹¹ Characteristically, though,

9. Jordy, *American Buildings*, 90.

10. Allene Talmey, “Man Against the Sky”, *The New Yorker*, 11 April 1931, 24.

11. In most histories, the New York zoning law of 1916, the nation’s first such ordinance, is generally cited as an influence on the form of New York skyscrapers;

Kahn reduced the number of permissible setbacks and treated the building as a simple, sculptural mass. He also invented a rich variety of ornament, with which he accented the edges of the setbacks. Today, we tend to think of Kahn's modernism as residing in these abstract, Art Deco motifs, yet his contemporaries considered his subordination of ornament to the powerful expression of mass to be the major feature of his modernism.

Like Kahn, Ralph Walker conceptualized his buildings as solid masses. His headquarters for Irving Trust at One Wall Street (fig. 4), a bank headquarters and office building completed in 1931, offered a program similar to PSFS, but a very different solution. A tower rises above a tall base which recedes in a series of shallow setbacks. The building is uniformly sheathed in limestone, which makes it seem a single form. The stone cladding curves in around the windows like a curtain draped on the steel skeleton; surface becomes ornament as the changes in plane enrich the wall with the play of shadow. Walker noted that "the quality of the walls developed from the then current thought that the exterior of a modern building was in the nature of a curtain wall covering the structure of the building."¹² Like most of his colleagues, he considered this sort of facade treatment an honest expression of structure. Their logic was, in effect, that since any fool knew that a fifty-two-story skyscraper was built of steel, there could be no pretense that the stone facing was a bearing wall. For Walker, the emphasis on simple form and integral ornament constituted his rather moderate modernism.

The most celebrated of the New York modernists was Raymond Hood. Unlike Walker and Kahn, Hood avoided the setback and, whenever possible, gave his buildings the form of a tower—or at least the illusion of one.¹³ In the Daily News Building of 1930-31 (fig. 5), the massing was radically simplified. The shaft of the tower, set back from the sidewalk, rose without stepping back and its verticality was emphasized by the pattern of stripes, white brick piers alternating with dark windows and spandrels. One contemporary critic observed: "The

however, the extent of its influence in changing the *aesthetics* of skyscraper design has not been sufficiently appreciated by scholars.

12. Ralph Walker, *Ralph Walker, Architect* (New York: Henahan House, 1957), 35.

13. I developed this reading of Hood's preference for towers in the exhibition "Raymond Hood: City of Towers", which was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, January 7 - March 7, 1984; the point was elaborated in my lectures and will be documented in a forthcoming article.



Fig. 3. Ely Jacques Kahn, 80 John Street, New York, 1927 (F. Mujica, *History of the Skyscraper*, New York and Paris, 1930, Plate CX).

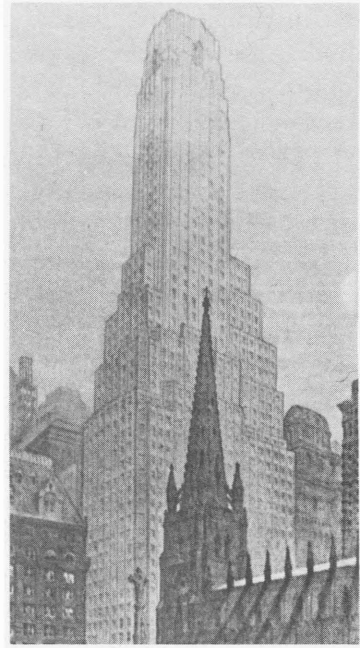


Fig. 4. Ralph Walker, Irving Trust (One Wall Street), New York, 1930-31 (Ralph Walker, *Architect*, New York, 1957).

building has no middle and no top: the stripes simply jump off into space . . . and the setbacks are so few and so generous as to seem, like the top, to have been cut with the scissors.”¹⁴

In an early version of the Daily News, the impression of a sheer tower was to have been even more emphatic. Hood wanted the shaft to soar above a base of only three stories. The switch to the present nine-story base was forced upon Hood by his client, Colonel Patterson, who against the architect’s pleas demanded the extra office floors that the zoning ordinance allowed. Patterson also vetoed Hood’s suggestion for limestone facing; he suggested more economical brick, thus setting the condition for the most distinctive design feature of the News, its bold vertical stripes.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that for both the Daily News

14. Douglas Haskell, “The Stripes of the News”, *The Nation*, 24 December 1930, 713.

15. An insider’s account of the design of the Daily News Building is detailed in the monograph by Walter H. Kilham, Jr., who worked in Hood’s office during the period; see *Raymond Hood, Architect* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1973), especially 15-27.

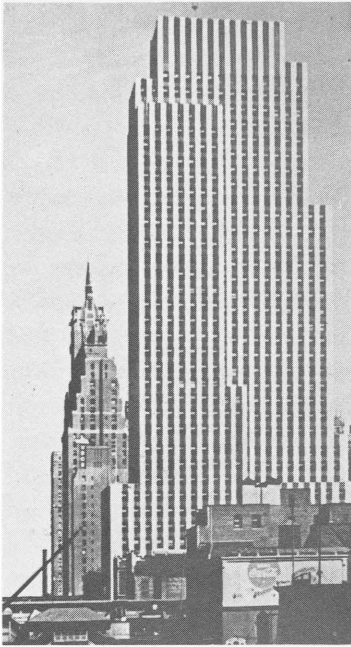


Fig. 5. Raymond Hood,
Daily News Building, New York,
1930-31 (Walter H. Kilham, Jr.).

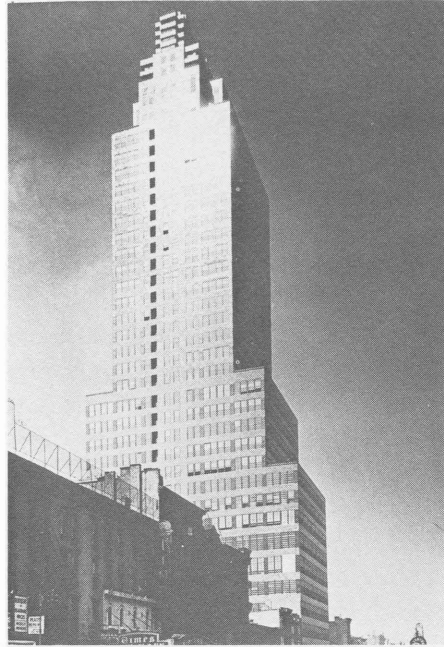


Fig. 6. Raymond Hood,
McGraw-Hill Building
New York, 1930-31 (Gottscho).

and for PSFS, the clients, working closely with the architects, gave suggestions which significantly altered the design of their buildings. At PSFS, it was the insistence of the bank's president, James Willcox, which resulted in the vertical expression of the piers on the east and west facades.¹⁶

I have focused on the Daily News Building because it clearly illustrates the idea of architecture as sculpted mass, an idea which we have seen in the work of Kahn and Walker and which was an aspect of most progressive design in the later 1920s. Another Hood tower, though, the McGraw-Hill Building of 1930-31 (fig. 6), is the one traditionally compared to PSFS. McGraw-Hill was the only other skyscraper besides PSFS included in the International Style exhibition. Hitchcock and Johnson praised it for its "lightness, simplicity, and lack of applied

16. For a thorough history of the changes demanded by the client, see Jordy, *American Buildings*, 106-110, and Stern, *George Howe*, 118-22.

verticalism".¹⁷ However, I find that the building has a more ambiguous character; alternatively, it can be interpreted as a study in the simplification of mass, and its taut tile skin can be seen as an attempt to create one coherent vertical form as much as to suggest an airy volume.

If we try to summarize the characteristics of the modern skyscraper as typified in the work of Hood, Walker, and Kahn, can we identify a few general, but valid principles which define the style? I believe we can, and that they are the following: architecture as simple, sculptural mass (not volume), with particular attention to proportion and silhouette; the subordination of ornament to the expression of form (after about 1925, the ornament is non-historicist); and finally, attention to the problems of fenestration, i.e., accommodating the pattern of windows within the wall. The applicability of these general characteristics would, I believe, be supported if we looked at a hundred more buildings of the period by many other architects.

Since I have pursued a formalist analysis, I must hasten to emphasize that the skyscraper is only marginally a formal problem. As architects of the period continually stressed, the form of a tall building was usually a "given", dictated by the specific conditions of site, zoning, and above all, economics. Indeed, the principal programmatic requirement in skyscraper design is profit, and the primary function of a skyscraper is to make money. Economic considerations affect every design decision in a commercial building. With very few exceptions, one might well say that the axiom for skyscraper architects is "form follows finance".

This commercial reality can be illustrated by looking at another skyscraper of 1931—the mightiest of them all—the Empire State Building by Shreve, Lamb and Harmon (fig. 7). In 1930, while his firm was at work on the tower, Arthur Loomis Harmon summarized the general conditions of skyscraper design in an article which bears quoting at some length. He wrote:

What are the limitations that mould the form? In bulk they are the shape of the property, the lighting of internal areas, the zoning regulations . . . and the demand that rentable area bear a proper relation to the total cubage to produce a paying investment. In height buildings are limited by the area of the prop-

17. Hitchcock and Johnson, *The International Style*, 156.



Fig. 7. Shreve, Lamb and Harmon, Empire State Building, 1930-31 (author).

erty; the economic consideration involved in the cost of steel; particularly the relation of height to base governing the wind bracing; and the economic and physical limitations in height for elevators.¹⁸

In another article, the firm's chief designer, William Lamb, discussed the specifics of the Empire State program: "a fixed budget, no space more than twenty-eight feet from window to corridor, as many stories of such space as possible, an exterior of limestone, and a completion date of May 1, 1931, a year and six months from the beginning of the sketches".¹⁹ Indeed, speed of construction was the most important factor from the viewpoint of the owner, who was anxious to turn expenditures into revenues, and the most frustrating one for the architects, forced to design under extreme time pressure. Every aspect of the Empire State Building was developed under this criterion of speed. For example, the innovative metal window and spandrel system was designed specifically to be produced quickly and in enormous quantities, and to be installed without special handwork.

How, finally, do we assess PSFS in the context of skyscraper design, both formal and economic, that I have described? The long gestation period of its design and construction (from 1929 until its completion in 1932) allowed an uncommon luxury of time for planning and revision. The quality of materials and detailing throughout the building has been described as unparalleled²⁰—though it must be added that even in the Depression economy of 1931, opulent lobbies, like the impressive gray marble and metal halls of the Empire State Building, were fairly standard. Perhaps the greatest aesthetic indulgence in PSFS, however, lay in the redesign of the structural frame for the sake of artistic expression. Moving the end piers to the exterior walls in order to express the verticalism of the steel skeleton required special bracing and complicated the interior subdivision of the office spaces. No such extravagance is conceivable in the other commercial towers that I have discussed.

There is really very little that is typical about PSFS. The formal and stylistic differences that separate it from contemporary skyscrapers are

18. Arthur Loomis Harmon, "The Design of Office Buildings", *The Architectural Forum* 52 (June 1930): 819.

19. William F. Lamb, "The Empire State Building", *The Architectural Forum* 54 (January 1931): 4.

20. Jordy, *American Buildings*, 115-16, and Stern, *George Howe*, 128-29.

apparent at a glance. As the first skyscraper in the International Style, PSFS (though derivative of European aesthetics) was wholly original in its American context. Yet, as an example of modern, machine-age architecture, PSFS was a Rolls-Royce, not a Ford Model A.

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