

FORGOTTEN LANDMARK: THE MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM OF  
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

A THESIS IN

Art History

Presented to the Faculty of the University  
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

by

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B.F.A., University of Central Missouri, 2004

Kansas City, Missouri  
2013

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2013

ABSTRACT

The Municipal Auditorium is a grand civic building in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, which encompasses venues for theater, music and athletics. Designed by Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville, and associated architects, Hoit, Price, and Barnes, and built between 1933-1936 during the Depression, the structure is a Streamline Moderne relic that has been underappreciated in recent times. More than thirty years ago, Cydney Millstein created the only dedicated study of the building, but her research dealt primarily with the history of its creation. In my research, I examine its place in the political climate and infamous boss system of Kansas City. I also underscore the city's need for a new auditorium by illustrating the outdated previous convention halls in Kansas City. Additionally, I site the Municipal Auditorium within the architects' oeuvre and examine how auditoriums from other cities

influenced their designs. Two of the most inspirational auditoriums were the Radio City Music Hall and the RKO-Roxy Theater in New York City, which have never before been compared to Kansas City's auditorium in such detail. And yet, the Municipal Auditorium retains its own impressive brand of Midwestern restraint and stateliness.

As a grand civic building, many city officials, architects, and artists worked together to create the Municipal Auditorium, but some of their contributions have been forgotten over the years. By using personal scrapbooks and a diary from architect Alfred Barnes, interviews with architect Homer Neville and with architect Alonzo Gentry's niece, newspaper articles from the 1930s, and original sketches and architectural plans, my research uncovers these significant contributions. Together they make up the streamlined shell and the opulent interior of the Municipal Auditorium.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Forgotten Landmark: The Municipal Auditorium of Kansas City, Missouri,” presented by Meghan L. Gray, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals supported my research and deserve my sincere appreciation. First many thanks to my advisor, Professor Rochelle Ziskin, who encouraged and challenged me every step of the way. Thanks to my thesis readers, Professor Burton Dunbar and Dr. Catherine Futter, for your insight and suggestions. I am incredibly grateful to UMKC Women's Council for the Joan Berkley Award, the Carol Tally Davis Award, and the Elizabeth Lillard Award in Memory of Walter J. Flueck, with which I considerably augmented my research by visiting the Radio City Music Hall.

I am also grateful to: Matt Kyle, sales manager at the Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities, for his generosity and institutional memory about the Municipal Auditorium; to David Boutros and Nancy Piepenbring of the State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City for their help in finding the thousands of documents related to the Municipal Auditorium; to David W. Jackson of the Jackson County Historical Society Archives for providing access to the Gentrys' political history; to Mary Gentry Shaw "Shawsie" Branton for granting me an interview to learn about her family; to Roberta Wagener of the Spencer Art Reference Library for patiently and professionally obtaining dozens of inter-library loans; and to Robert Cohon, Curator of Ancient Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, for his insights on the muses of the Municipal Auditorium.

My great appreciation goes: to my family and friends for their love and support; to my sister-in-law, Kalee, who lovingly watched Andrew while I holed up in the archives; to Grandmother Gray who persistently inquired about the status of my work; to my wonderful parents who cultivated my love of learning and always believed in me; and most especially to

my husband, Jayson, and son, Andrew, whose love, patience, faith, and support carried me through to the end!

INTRODUCTION  
FORGOTTEN LANDMARK: THE MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM OF KANSAS CITY,  
MISSOURI

From November 1933 until June 1936, the Municipal Auditorium rose as a new “Monument to the Public Spirit and Civic Ideals of the People” (Figure I.1).<sup>1</sup> The eleven-story, block-wide limestone edifice stands as a shrine to Kansas City’s ability to overcome economic adversity and circumstantial hardships. Despite the growing Depression throughout the United States and corrupt politicians at the helm of the city, the community persevered to erect a civic center. While the project provided much needed employment in a weakened economy, it also restored Kansas City as a convention destination that offered the finest facilities with remarkable flexibility of use, enclosed in a beautiful and modern building. When the Municipal Auditorium was dedicated on December 1, 1935, it was praised as “a remarkable achievement in architecture, combining the beautiful and the practical with sometimes astonishing felicity.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in March 1937, *Architectural Forum* named the Municipal Auditorium its “Building of the Month.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the Municipal Auditorium is significant for more than its symbolism against economic adversity; its architects, Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville, and associated architects, Hoit, Price, and Barnes, developed a cohesive and modern civic center. Their design of a simplistic and stylish modern exterior eschewed Beaux-Arts tendencies and signaled a new rationalism in

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<sup>1</sup> Inscription on the North side of the Municipal Auditorium under the roundels, *Poetry and Music, Oratory, and Athletics*.

<sup>2</sup> Austin Latchaw, “The Inspiring New Municipal Auditorium a Civic Marvel,” *The Kansas City Star* 56, no. 75 (December 1, 1935): 12A.

<sup>3</sup> *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 27.



Figure I.1. The North and West façades of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo courtesy of Matt Kyle, sales manager, Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities.

architectural thought in Kansas City. Their design for the interior, while luxurious, did not rely on classical European traditions as did the Kansas City Midland Theater (1927; Thomas W. Lamb). Instead, they combined opulent materials, clean lines and surfaces, and cheerful colors to create modern luxury. These aspects make the Municipal Auditorium a jewel of the city.

The massive civic center stands in the heart of downtown Kansas City, just east of the Kansas-Missouri border and south of the Missouri River. Due to its majestic, boxy width (approximately 300 x 400 feet), Municipal Auditorium dominates its site. The architects

minimally adorned its broad expanses of buff limestone with carefully chosen decorations. Horizontal banding wraps around the northwest and northeast corners, geometric grilles set in five round windows adorn both the west and east façades, streamlined aluminum marquees delineate the entrances, and seven bas relief roundels and two bas relief panels indicate the functions of the building and the industries that built Kansas City.

The immense building contains four separate function spaces—the Arena, Exhibition Hall, Little Theater, and Music Hall—in addition to several small committee rooms. In counterpoint to the unvaried, buff exterior, these rooms are warm and colorful. The Music Hall, with its striking geometric light-sculptures, colorful murals, and opulent surfaces, will receive special attention in this paper. Fortunately, in the seventy-seven years since the Municipal Auditorium was completed, very little about the interior and exterior have changed.

Considered by critics to be very modern when it was built in the 1930s, the architects for Municipal Auditorium combined some Art Deco and some Streamline Moderne elements while eschewing classical columns and pediments.<sup>4</sup> Art Deco, a term coined in the 1960s, was a style that gained popularity after *l'Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925. In architecture it generally refers to applied ornamentation derived from French sources, such as geometricized flowers and stylized sunbursts (for example, the Kansas City Power and Light Building, 1930-31). In this paper, the term Art Deco will be used to encompass both European and American adaptations of the style.

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<sup>4</sup> “...the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium is good modern architecture.” *Ibid.*, 217.

The Municipal Auditorium's style is more closely related to Streamline Moderne, an American decorative and architectural style of the 1930s which was inspired by industrial design and aerodynamic lines of speed. While the term "streamline" was used to describe aspects of design in the 1930s, the style was not titled Streamline Moderne until 1975.<sup>5</sup> Buildings in the Streamline Moderne style often had rounded corners reminiscent of the most modern steamships, locomotives and automobiles. The Municipal Auditorium is much more geometric and boxy, but the architects employed horizontal banding, or streamlines, to accentuate the building's massive width.

The Municipal Auditorium also retains a bit of Art Deco influence in its angled set-backs. Skyscrapers, which became a hallmark of early Art Deco design, were unique in shape and style to the landscape of the United States and indeed the world. A direct result of New York City city ordinances, the skyscraper's elongated stair-step shape is reflected in the squattier set-backs on the Municipal Auditorium.

On the other hand, the building's minimal surface decoration and neutral color correlate to avant-garde European modernism. Indeed the architects for the Municipal Auditorium adopted the spare esthetic of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Less is more," and the modernist principle of form following function. They abstracted the building by removing most of its windows and all classical columns, but withdrew from enacting a complete abstraction in the Bauhaus style. Not until Mies van der Rohe arrived in America in 1938 would true modernism appear in the United States. Understandably, the Municipal Auditorium felt modern for its time and place in Midwestern America.

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<sup>5</sup> Norman Bel Geddes was one of the most influential proponents for streamlining in the 1930s. See Norman Bel Geddes, *Horizons* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1932). The first major book on Streamline Moderne was Donald J. Bush, *The Streamlined Decade* (New York: G. Braziller, 1975).



Very little of any depth has been written about Municipal Auditorium over the years, except for one excellent study by Cydney Millstein in 1980.<sup>6</sup> Hers was primarily an architectural history, recording the planning for the building through its completion in 1936. The study was very documentary, but she made an important contribution to the understanding of Municipal Auditorium when she interviewed the last living architect and lead designer for the building, Homer Neville. Millstein's bibliography also provided an important starting point for my own research.

Other important sources for this study include the State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City, which has an outstanding collection of original documents and contracts, architectural plans, sketches, scrapbooks, and a diary by architect Alfred Barnes recording the contestation of the architectural contract. My research at the Jackson County Historical Society, as well as my interview with architect Alonzo Gentry's niece, Mary Gentry Shaw "Shawsie" Branton, provided the background on Gentry's father, an important link in the story of the architectural contract. Matt Kyle, sales manager at the Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities, was kind enough to provide a personalized tour of Municipal Auditorium, and he was a wealth of information.

My study differs from Millstein's in many ways. In my first chapter, the machine politics of Kansas City are discussed at length as it is fundamental to the outcome of the choice of architect. This aspect of the building has not been examined before. The second chapter sets the background for why Kansas City desired a new auditorium. In the third chapter, I present the architectural contract that was heavily contested for months. The contract is particularly important since it clearly identifies Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville as

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<sup>6</sup> Cydney E. Millstein, "Kansas City's Municipal Auditorium: An Architectural History, 1928-36" (master's thesis, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1980).

the primary architects, with Hoit, Price, and Barnes as associated architects. Over the years this fact has largely been forgotten, with many people misremembering only the bigger firm of Hoit, Price, and Barnes as the architects. I also explore the other contemporary convention halls which the architectural firms visited during their design process. These seven buildings have never before been considered in relation to the Municipal Auditorium. Two of these buildings, the Radio City Music Hall and RKO-Roxy Theater in New York City, were particularly influential for the architects, and that relationship is explored in the fourth chapter. I also explore in some length the Municipal Auditorium exterior and Music Hall interior, as well as the artists and craftsmen who brought about the architects' grand vision.

My paper has been considerably augmented by the photographs of Jayson Gray, who explored the Municipal Auditorium with me, and traveled to New York City with me to document the Radio City Music Hall. His photographs, including details of sometimes overlooked light-sculptures and streamlined walls, are ones that are not readily available elsewhere, and serve as important documentation of two significant buildings. With this paper, I hope to broaden the reader's understanding of the Municipal Auditorium's place in Kansas City history, as well as to develop a deeper appreciation of a Streamline Moderne landmark in Kansas City that has until now been largely overlooked and forgotten.

CHAPTER 1  
A MONUMENT OF STONE AND CONCRETE:  
KANSAS CITY POLITICS AND THE MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM

Citizens called it the Tragic Decade.<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, Kansas City experienced the nationwide Depression. It was also a decade rife with sub-machine gun fire, kidnappings, gambling, prostitution, and riots, which were all tolerated by the city's current government. The 1930s were the height of Democratic boss Tom Pendergast's political machine, which completely ruled Kansas City. No politician was elected without the machine's support. No lucrative business was done without Pendergast's approval, and no construction job was contracted without his consent.

Remarkably, the 1930s were also a time of cultural burgeoning in Kansas City. The decade witnessed the foundation of the University of Kansas City (now the University of Missouri-Kansas City), the opening of the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Mary Atkins Museum of Fine Arts (now the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art), the beginnings of the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra (today the Kansas City Symphony), the building of the skyscrapers for City Hall and the Courthouse, and the creation of the mammoth Municipal Auditorium.

The Municipal Auditorium was erected by one of Kansas City's most corrupt governments in the middle of the Depression, and it is intricately linked with some of the city's key political figures. Its main patron was "Boss" Tom Pendergast's trusted assistant, city manager Henry F. McElroy. Without the involvement of Pendergast and McElroy, the building might not exist at all. Indeed, central to an understanding of Kansas City's Municipal Auditorium was the political climate of the city.

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<sup>1</sup> George Fuller Green, *A Condensed History of the Kansas City Area: Its Mayors and some V. I. P.s* (Kansas City: Lowell Press, 1968), 125.

The Pendergast machine began in the 1890s with Tom's older brother, Democrat Jim Pendergast (1856-1911), who believed in the "friendship-in-politics ideal" and repaying a favor with a favor.<sup>2</sup> In addition to having friends, Jim Pendergast also had enemies. His rival, Joe Shannon, supervised one-fifth of the Democrats in the city, as well as the politicians in the old county seat of Independence.<sup>3</sup> Although the bosses both hailed from the same political party, they did not collaborate unless it was beneficial to both men. Usually the two factions fought for control of the city.

Upon his brother's death in 1911, Thomas J. Pendergast inherited Jim Pendergast's place as a political boss. While Jim had ruled the First Ward of the North Side of Kansas City with mediation, sociability and goodwill, Tom established a more ferocious and expansive leadership. In fact, by 1932, just as the Municipal Auditorium was beginning to take shape, Pendergast had far-outstripped his brother's political influence and was considered more powerful in Missouri politics than any man before him.<sup>4</sup> Part of his success was due to inserting his friends in places of importance. First, in 1930, he removed his Democratic rival, Joe Shannon, to Washington, D. C. to serve in Congress. Without his adversary in town, Pendergast had more room to expand his control. Then in 1932 Pendergast helped Guy B. Park win the election to governor of Missouri. Therefore, Governor Park assisted all of Pendergast's enterprises. Finally, in 1934 Pendergast exerted enough influence to ensure that Harry S. Truman was elected as U. S. Senator. Truman, a county judge from Independence, was hand-picked by Pendergast to widen Pendergast's political realm in

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<sup>2</sup> William M Reddig, *Tom's Town: Kansas City and The Pendergast Legend* (1947; repr. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Washington. By 1935, when the Municipal Auditorium was nearing completion, the Pendergast machine was at its height of power.<sup>5</sup>

Often passersby saw the evidence of this power in the long line of ordinary citizens trailing out of the Boss's office at 1908 Main Street in Kansas City.<sup>6</sup> They came seeking favors from Pendergast, who was happy to grant them in exchange for loyalty to the machine. But a machine of size of Tom Pendergast's required great amounts of money to survive. Gambling, prostitution, and racketeering had to flourish in order to provide income for the machine's constituents. Since these activities were illegal, the police were paid "tribute money" to keep them from interfering. Additionally, employees of the city and county were saddled with the "Cut," a kickback taken from their paychecks to help the city government balance the budget, and the "Lug," a fee to raise campaign funds for the Democratic Party. In 1939, it was estimated that the Cut and Lug had taken more than \$10 million from employees over a decade.<sup>7</sup>

However, one of the greatest sources of income for the Pendergast machine was city building projects assigned to the Boss's companies. The Ready-Mixed Concrete Company, Kansas City Concrete Pipe Company, Sanitary Service Company, Missouri Contracting Corporation, Centropolis Crusher Company, Midwest Paving Company, Mid-West Pre Cote Company, Missouri Asphalt Products Company, and the Dixie Machinery and Equipment Company were given preference over all other contractors despite higher bids. In fact, bids

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>6</sup> William S. Worley, *Kansas City: Rise of a Regional Metropolis* (Carlsbad, Calif.: Heritage Media Corp., 2002), 80.

<sup>7</sup> Reddig, 334.

were so high that it was obvious the Boss was getting a cut of the profits.<sup>8</sup> Understandably, Pendergast encouraged new projects, such as the construction of the Municipal Auditorium, to provide jobs for politically-affiliated workers and income for the machine. The foundation for the block-wide Auditorium was a concrete executive's dream. Even if the prices were not justified, the Boss delivered an adequate product. Although Federal inspectors were wary of Pendergast, they were never able to find any problems with the quality of his concrete at the Municipal Auditorium site.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, Pendergast's contribution to the Municipal Auditorium project was not limited to concrete work. In his capacity of assigning jobs to his political allies, he also unintentionally determined the final design of the building. He may not have had any direct interest in the aesthetics of the building, but, as we shall see in chapter three, Pendergast handpicked the firm of Alonzo H. Gentry, Voskamp and Neville to be the lead architects for the project instead of the well-known firm of Hoit, Price, and Barnes.<sup>10</sup> This choice appears to have been made for political reasons, but it nonetheless greatly shaped the design of the Municipal Auditorium.

Early on, the mayors of Kansas City campaigned for a new convention hall in addition to many other civic improvements. Republican mayor, Albert I. Beach, who served from 1924-1930, created the Kansas City Public Improvement Association. This was the forerunner of the Ten-Year-Plan, which the newly elected Democratic mayor, Bryce B.

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<sup>8</sup> Henry C Haskell and Richard B Fowler, *City of the Future: A Narrative History of Kansas City, 1850-1950* (Kansas City, Mo., F. Glenn Pub. Co., [1950]), 151.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Homer Neville conducted by Cydney Millstein, ca. April 1980; Box 50, tape 10; American Institute of Architects/KC Records (0586kc); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Smith, envisioned in 1930. The plan included the proposal for the Municipal Auditorium among numerous others, and projected to pay off the city's debt for the plan within ten years.<sup>11</sup>

A broad city building plan was undoubtedly music to Pendergast's ears, since he could count on increased revenue from the projects. And the mayors were likely encouraged to campaign for the Ten-Year Plan by Pendergast's right hand man, H. F. McElroy.<sup>12</sup> As city manager, McElroy was supposed to function as an efficient, non-partisan executive overseeing the business of running the city, while the mayor would remain the titular head of the city.<sup>13</sup> Instead, McElroy had Pendergast's interests at heart and usurped the mayor's power and voice.<sup>14</sup> The mayors were used only for their innocuous campaigning on behalf of the machine's interests. Ultimately, city manager McElroy, and not the mayor, would become one of the major patrons of the Municipal Auditorium.

Despite his occasional benevolence and spirited self-righteousness, McElroy was as crooked as Pendergast. The city manager became infamous for his "Country Bookkeeping,"

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<sup>11</sup> Chamber of Commerce (Kansas City, MO), *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: Including The Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan* (Kansas City, MO: Chamber of Commerce, [1938]), 87.

<sup>12</sup> McElroy was intricately tied-up with Pendergast. Every Sunday the city manager reported for orders at the Pendergast mansion and kept an eye out for red-penciled notations from the Democratic Club office. Reddig, 128; Haskell and Fowler, 139.

<sup>13</sup> George Fuller Green, *A Condensed History of the Kansas City Area: Its Mayors and some V. I. P.s* (Kansas City: Lowell Press, 1968), 123, 146.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in 1926 McElroy's salary was triple the size of Mayor Beach's. Also McElroy overtook the mayor's spacious office in the City Hall, relegating Mayor Smith to a small space at the back of the building. Reddig, 127, 333; Haskell and Fowler, 143; and Fuller Green, 146.

whereby he turned the city's deficit into a dishonest surplus.<sup>15</sup> In actuality, by 1939, the city had a \$1.5 million deficit. McElroy instituted the Lug and Cut, and also kept an Emergency Fund at the First National Bank through which \$6 million flowed in order to circumvent budget procedures at City Hall.<sup>16</sup> At the close of the decade, as Federal agents closed in on Pendergast and McElroy, it was revealed that the Ten-Year Plan bond program, which included the Municipal Auditorium, was filled with diversions of funds for other projects.<sup>17</sup> Over \$11 million of the Ten-Year bond funds had been spent without contracts as required by law, a majority of the money had been disbursed without competitive bidding for the projects, and \$3 million had gone to pad the machine and to pay regular city employees.<sup>18</sup> McElroy was willing to bend every rule in order to feed the mouths of the machine.

Perhaps one of the greatest qualities that endeared McElroy to the Boss was his drive to build. Indeed, his contemporaries from the *Kansas City Star*, reporters Henry C. Haskell and Richard B. Fowler, called McElroy a "builder by instinct."<sup>19</sup> New construction jobs not only provided income to Pendergast's Ready-Mix Concrete Company, but they also supplied work for thousands of machine employees. Yet McElroy did not champion the Ten-Year Plan and its construction jobs merely for the benefit of the machine. He had a personal interest in building great skyscrapers and mammoth structures. The city manager refused to

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<sup>15</sup> Haskell and Fowler, 138.

<sup>16</sup> Hartmann, 124.

<sup>17</sup> Haskell and Fowler, 157.

<sup>18</sup> Reddig 334-336, and Haskell and Fowler, 157.

<sup>19</sup> Haskell and Fowler 138.



be remembered merely through a historian's dusty volumes, but instead insisted, "I will make my record in stone and concrete."<sup>20</sup>

The first and greatest stone and concrete monument administered by McElroy was the Municipal Auditorium. From 1931 until its completion in 1936, "nothing in these years so completely absorbed City Manager McElroy"<sup>21</sup> as the Municipal Auditorium. On May 26, 1931, the Ten-Year Plan bonds passed, and the very next day an overeager McElroy used his real estate acumen to purchase the Municipal Auditorium site. He badgered landowners into selling their land to the city for unjustly low prices so that the city could begin construction immediately.<sup>22</sup> Special Agent Hartmann was struck by how infatuated the Judge was with the project:

"He built the thirty-story city hall and the municipal auditorium with those bonds as if the structures were his own, so keen was Judge McElroy that the jobs should be done according to his specifications.... He took a proprietary attitude toward these things. He actually carried the keys to many rooms in the municipal auditorium and city hall."<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, the Municipal Auditorium was McElroy's pet project.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>22</sup> "Treasury agents...interviewed the former owners of the various parcels of real estate... In almost every instance the former owners were bitter against the shrewd bargaining tactics alleged to have been used by McElroy, who took a keen delight in browbeating the owners and obtaining the property at what was considered bargain prices." Hartmann, 122.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 119-120. And Haskell and Fowler noted that, "As the great hall neared completion an elated, bubbling McElroy took personal charge of conducting visitors [through the Auditorium]." Haskell and Fowler, 142.

A photograph printed in the *Kansas City Star* on Sunday, December 1, 1935 (Figure 1.1) illustrates perfectly McElroy's ownership in the new "Auditorium for the next century."<sup>24</sup> The caption accompanying the photograph in the newspaper reads, "Buy Play— Judge H. F. McElroy, city manager, is behind the ticket window, while Mayor Smith plays the role of customer on a recent inspection visit." McElroy naturally assumes the role of owner of the Auditorium, selling tickets to the deserving public, which forces the demure mayor to act as any other common citizen by purchasing tickets at the counter. McElroy smiles slightly and proudly as he hands his co-worker a ticket to the greatest monument he has built. He seems to say, "Come in and be impressed by what I have accomplished!"

And yet, according to Architect Homer Neville, the architects never felt forced into any compromise over the style of the work due to conflict of taste with McElroy. In 1980, Neville stated that he was given the freedom to design the building as he saw fit, though tellingly, McElroy would be the one to appraise the work of the architects. He may not have dictated a style or specifics to the architects, but he indicated to them that they would not be welcomed back on other government construction jobs if their work did not please him.<sup>25</sup> The architects knew that the Pendergast machine had bestowed this job upon them and their intent was to please their patron, H. F. McElroy.

Neville also insisted, in 1980, that Pendergast and McElroy stayed out of the hiring process of contract artisans and vendors, although they were consulted when a new hire was

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<sup>24</sup> Haskell and Fowler, 142.

<sup>25</sup> "McElroy would say [to us], 'You fellas go ahead and build it and when it's all done, I'm gonna look at it. And if I like it, I'll tell you so, and if I don't like it, you can just walk down Main Street until your hat floats.' We had no trouble with him.... Although it was a political deal, there was no interference whatsoever from anybody that came in there." Neville interview, 1980.



BUY PLAY—Judge H. F. McElroy, city manager, is behind the ticket window, while Mayor Smith plays the role of customer on a recent inspection visit.

Figure 1.1. Clipping, “Kansas City Achieves Nation’s Surpassing Auditorium,” *The Kansas City Star* (Sunday, December 1, 1935): 3; scrapbook photos from the Alfred Edward Barnes Jr. (1892-1960) Architectural Collection (KC0004); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.

being considered.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, Neville felt free to make the artistic choices he desired without fear of reprisal from the machine. Yet, he also understood that Pendergast and McElroy could provide additional architectural work if the results of the Municipal Auditorium pleased them. In the end, McElroy, the proud “ticket-vendor” with the keys in his pocket, was duly delighted by the results of his monument in stone and concrete.

As we have seen, the Municipal Auditorium, a block-wide civic building, was intricately linked with some of Kansas City’s most infamous politicians. The auditorium emerged in the midst of the Depression, when Pendergast’s machine politics ruled every construction job undertaken in the city. He and his henchman, city manager McElroy, were builders by instinct, although McElroy seems to have cared more about the finished product than the boss, who only wanted the income for his machine. The two mayors of the time, Beach and Smith, may have been the faces for the early policies that brought about the building, but McElroy overshadowed his associates in his fervor to complete this monumental building. Had these people and policies not come together at the right time, the Municipal Auditorium might not have been built at all.

But why did these instinctual builders choose to build the Municipal Auditorium? What were the needs of the city that required a new convention hall? And why was this building the first project begun when the Ten-Year Plan bonds passed in 1931? In the following chapter, I will answer these questions, and explain the early planning for McElroy’s first monument of stone and concrete.

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<sup>26</sup> Neville explains that Pendergast and McElroy told the architects “at least half a dozen times, you fellas been hired to do the job and do the job the best way you can, and if we send anyone up there, listen to him if he’s got anything to say, and throw him out if he doesn’t have anything to say!” Ibid.

CHAPTER 2  
THE KANSAS CITY SPIRIT REIGNITED:  
CONRAD MANN AND THE TEN-YEAR PLAN

A convention hall can shape a visitor's opinion of a city and the city's own self-perception. An ample and up-to-date convention hall, therefore, may be seen as necessary for a prosperous city. The Municipal Auditorium, which served in part as such a center, was no different in its impact on Kansas City. The project was begun with the firm belief that a new and modern facility would "bring thousands of new visitors" and cash dividends to a city in the throes of the Depression (Figure 2.1). However, the Municipal Auditorium was not the first large civic meeting hall in Kansas City. Two other convention halls played a part in defining the city's early history, its determination in spite of overwhelming odds, and its rise from muddy cow town to bustling metropolis. But as the times changed, so did the requirements of the city. A new convention hall was necessary. With the help of shrewd planning, the Municipal Auditorium grew and expanded from the foundation of its predecessors to meet the changing needs of Kansas City.

Near the turn of the twentieth century, the community yearned for a convention hall in which to hold meetings, services, sporting events, and concerts. By February 22, 1899, with the strains of John Philip Sousa's band drifting through the air, the dream was realized and the first Convention Hall opened (Figure 2.2). Designed in a provincial style by Kansas City architect Frederick E. Hill, Convention Hall was a large rectangular building of pine, steel, stone, and glass, located at 13<sup>th</sup> and Central Streets (Figure 2.3). The building took a little more than a year from conception to dedication. Upon its completion, 32,000 people crowded inside Convention Hall, which was called the largest gathering inside a building in

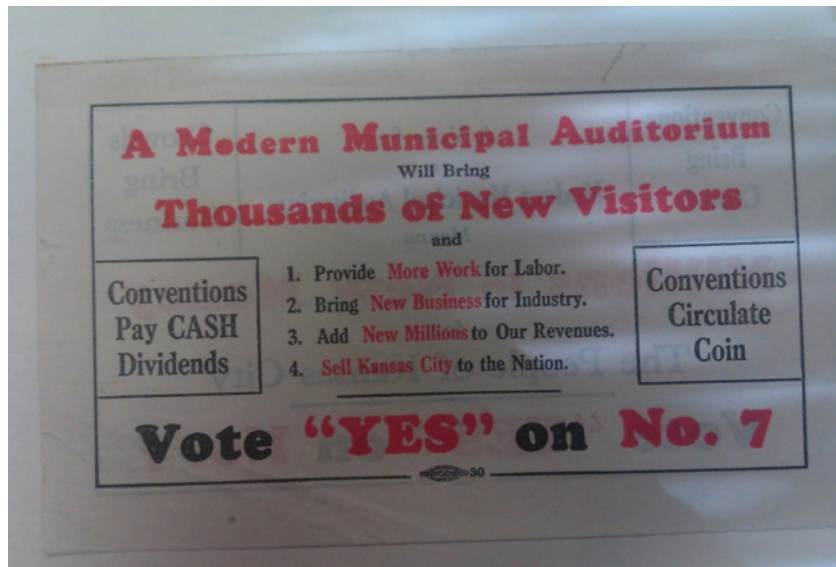


Figure 2.1. Advertisement to vote for a municipal auditorium bond as part of the Ten-Year Plan bonds. Clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.



Figure 2.2. The first Convention Hall. General Collection (P1), Convention Hall, Number 5, MO Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, MO.



Figure 2.3. View showing the scale of the upper loggia of the first Convention Hall. General Collection (P1), Convention Hall, Number 4, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, MO.

the nation.<sup>1</sup> For its size and its newness, Kansas City's Convention Hall was selected as the destination for the Democratic National Convention. The cow town of the West would finally be able to prove how modern it really was.

However, on April 4, 1900, exactly three months prior to the Democratic National Convention, the pride of Kansas City burned to the ground. The size and ambition of the first Hall may have lured a prestigious convention to Kansas City, but Frederick E. Hill had created a firebox. Within twenty minutes, the roof had collapsed upon a pile of twisted steel and charred remains. Luckily the Hall was empty and no lives were lost. However, nothing was left of the building but smoldering ruins. Despite the bleak outlook for the upcoming convention, local politicians and businessmen immediately started campaigning for funds to rebuild, boasting that Kansas City would still hold the Democratic National Convention in their hall on July 4, 1900.

Hill was given a second chance to improve Convention Hall when he was contracted to rebuild it using more fireproof materials. This time, however, he had only one-third the construction time. Not surprisingly, the aesthetics of the second Convention Hall were similar to the first yet considerably better (Figure 2.4). Probably due to the time constraints and the general success of the first Hall, Hill designed the new building in the same footprint with many of the same features. Yet the busy latticework reminiscent of the Crystal Palace was gone, and Hill replaced the cobblestone arcade of the ground floor with smoother-finished stone accented by simple roundels. Hill was clearly inspired by the Art Institute of Chicago building (Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge; 1893), with its gabled roof and pediment,

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 1999), 146.

double arcade, and decorative roundels. On July 4, 1900, the Kansas City spirit prevailed. The “90 Day Wonder” opened as scheduled for the Convention.<sup>2</sup>

The Democratic National Convention arrived and filled the building to the rafters. Kansas City was duly proud of its accomplishment in providing a large, convention space in only 90 days.<sup>3</sup> However, the building which had been quickly erected began to feel too shoddy and cramped as the years passed. The interior of the Second Convention Hall consisted of only one main room that could be set up as an arena or for theatrical performances with a stage and seats lining the floor (Figures 2.5-6). However, multiple events could not be held simultaneously and there were no rooms for smaller assemblies. In fact, when Kansas City hosted the Republican National Convention in the hall in June 1928, the attendees complained of a lack of adequate space.<sup>4</sup> Even Conrad Mann, who served on the board of directors for the Convention Hall, called the old facility a “mule barn.”<sup>5</sup> It was evident that Convention Hall was straining to provide for its guests.

In order to improve its visitors’ perception of Kansas City and to represent the city’s modernity and technological advancement, a new convention hall was necessary. However,

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<sup>2</sup> However, the building was not entirely completed. Decorative bunting covered unfinished holes in the walls and a huge American flag hung over paneless windows. *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>3</sup> It was called, “the marvel of history,” and described as “without a parallel in similar permanent construction.” The Commercial Club of Kansas City, “Thirteenth Annual Meeting, October 30, 1900,” pamphlet, p. 11, [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.

<sup>4</sup> Henry C Haskell and Richard B Fowler, *City of the Future: A Narrative History of Kansas City, 1850-1950* (Kansas City, Mo., F. Glenn Pub. Co., [1950]), 128.

<sup>5</sup> *Kansas City Star* (July 25, 1930).





Figure 2.4. Exterior of the Second Convention Hall, postcard, Rivers, Rails and Trails, University of Missouri-Kansas City, <http://library.umkc.edu/spec-col/rivers-rails-and-trails/images/postcards/1000px/convention.jpg>.

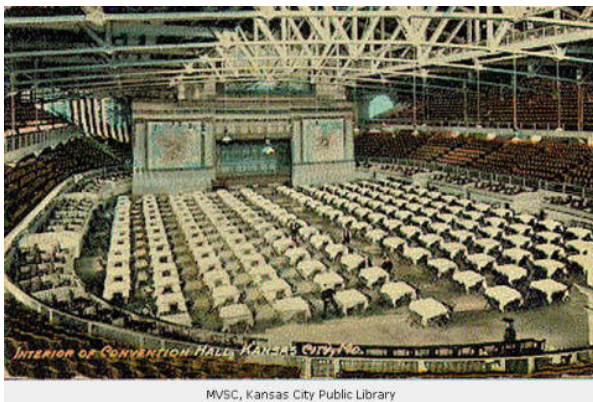


Figure 2.5. Interior of the Second Convention Hall, Missouri Valley Special Collection, Kansas City Public Library.

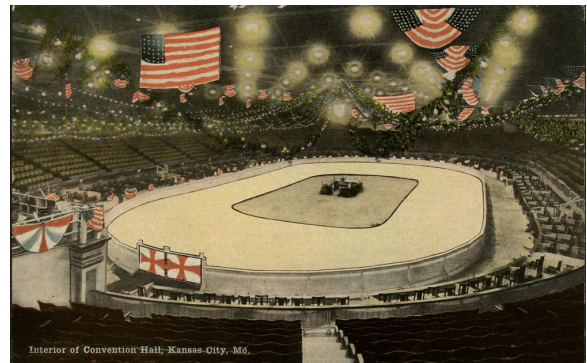


Figure 2.6. Interior of the Second Convention Hall, Rivers, Rails and Trails, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

the issue was placed on the ballot by businessmen and politicians, but it failed several times.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the voters (or perhaps the boss voting machine) had not been properly informed of the value of a new hall. Plus, with such a large variety of bonds on which to vote, the municipal auditorium bond may have been lost in the mix.

To city officials, it was clear that a well-organized plan and campaign for a municipal auditorium, as well as for other bonds, was essential to get voters' approval. Following the lead of previous mayor Albert Beach, Mayor Smith and City Manager McElroy forged ahead with plans for a Civic Improvement committee to create a Ten-Year Plan. In May of 1930 they asked Conrad Mann, the president of the Chamber of Commerce and a member of the board of directors for the Convention Hall, to lead the committee (Figure 2.7).<sup>7</sup> McElroy and Smith granted Mann complete control of the project without any hindrance from the city or county court.<sup>8</sup> Mann had been chosen because, as Mayor Smith said, "he has unusual executive ability, he knows Kansas City, he has the confidence of the public and all the

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<sup>6</sup> Twenty-three of, twenty-five bond issues, including one for a new municipal auditorium, failed at the poles in November 1925. Again in May 1928, five of seven bond issues, including one for a new municipal auditorium, failed. Chamber of Commerce (Kansas City, MO), *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: Including The Story of the Kansas City Ten Year Plan* (Kansas City, MO: Chamber of Commerce, [1938]), 88, 91.

<sup>7</sup> A German citizen, Conrad Mann came to Kansas City from Milwaukee as national secretary of the Fraternal Order of Eagles. For his connection with the Pendergast machine, Mann was indicted for violating federal lottery laws in 1932. Ultimately, Pendergast was able to negotiate a pardon for Mann from President Roosevelt. See Haskell and Fowler, 139-140, Janice Lee, "Conrad Mann: Civic Leader and City Builder, 1871-1943," *Missouri Valley Special Collections: Biography* (Kansas City, MO: The Kansas City Public Library, 1999), p. 1, <http://www.kchistory.org/u?/Biographies256>, and *Rocky Bluffs*, 113.

<sup>8</sup> *Rocky Bluffs*, 125.



Figure 2.7. Portrait of Conrad H. Mann. Photo from *Kansas Citian* (December 3, 1929), clipping, box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

background essential to a successful leader in this 10-year development program.”<sup>9</sup> He was also a Republican and not seen as a supporter of the Democratic political machine. Mann would be a strong and influential leader, who understood how to inspire non-partisan public conscription for civic improvements, for which he was already a vocal advocate.<sup>10</sup>

Mann also had a personal reason to campaign for a new municipal auditorium. He had helped to lure the Republican National Convention to Kansas City in 1928, which had given poor reviews of the old Convention Hall.<sup>11</sup> The building was not only cramped and substandard, it was also outmoded. After this disappointment, Mann was determined to remodel or replace the old building. Although he was on the governing board for the Convention Hall, he began campaigning to tear down the old facility to build a new one. He understood firsthand how a new auditorium in a fashionable style could benefit the community. The sentimentality of restoring the old symbol of the Kansas City spirit did not appeal to him as much as the greater commercial success of the city.

Upon his appointment as General Chairman of the Civic Improvement Committee, Mann immediately created an oversight committee of citizens from all facets of the city, and a group of subcommittees to manage each of the plans projects.<sup>12</sup> The subcommittee for the

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<sup>9</sup> “Ahead on the Ten Year Plan,” *Kansas Citian*, 18, no. 37 (May 27, 1930), clipping, box 001, Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>10</sup> “The Annual Meeting: Public Improvements Demanded by Mr. Mann, Finance Corporation Advocated by Mr. Holland,” *Kansas Citian* (December 3, 1929), clipping, box 001, Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>11</sup> *Rocky Bluffs*, 114.

<sup>12</sup> The committees were: Public buildings, Parks and playgrounds, County improvements, School improvements, Public health and welfare, Stadium and outdoor theater, Public Safety, Trafficways and boulevards, Blue Valley improvements, Municipal

municipal auditorium was chaired by S. J. Whitmore, president of the Whitmore Hotel company operating the Hotel Muehlebach. The vice-chairman was Fred M. Lee, who was the treasurer for John Taylor Dry Goods Company, and the secretary for the sub-committee, was W. M. Symons, who was the manager of the city's convention bureau. Their task was to identify and plan for "public auditorium facilities for large public meetings, conventions, and exhibitions."<sup>13</sup>

Obviously, the members of the sub-committee held an interest in improving or constructing a new convention hall. The chairman, S. J. Whitmore, boasted that if a municipal auditorium was built, he would expand the Hotel Muehlebach. Since a new and larger convention hall would attract more visitors, a grander hotel with a bigger banquet hall and ballroom would also provide more revenue for his business.<sup>14</sup> W. M. Symons, too, had an inside view on how the success of a new convention facility would improve Kansas City, since he was the manager of the convention bureau. Additionally and most significantly, Alonzo H. Gentry, the future lead architect for the Municipal Auditorium, served on this sub-committee.<sup>15</sup> Surely his intimate knowledge of the desires of the sub-committee and his

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auditorium, Sanitation and sewers, Water supply, Wharves, levees and river front improvements, Airport, and Ten Year Budget (Paying for the Plan). "Ahead on the Ten Year Plan," *Kansas Citian*, and *Rocky Bluffs*, 121.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Hotel Muehlebach was not expanded, however, until 1952, long after the Municipal Auditorium was completed. "Hotels May Expand: Assurance of New Auditorium Encourages Owners," *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 27, 1931), clipping, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>15</sup> *Personnel of Sub-Committees Nos. 1 to 16, inclusive, also their sub-committees, August 18, 1930* (Kansas City, MO: Civic Improvement Committee, 1930), committee no. 11, pp. 1-2, from Folder 11, "Ten Year Plan Miscellaneous Printed Publicity Matter and

friendship with the committee members only fortified his candidacy in the architectural competition.

Immediately the sub-committee got to work. After examining other top convention halls in the nation, the sub-committee developed a list of requirements for the new municipal auditorium. These included an exhibit hall on the lower level, one large arena accommodating 13,000 persons on the upper level, two smaller halls with stages, a minimum of five small meeting halls, and committee rooms separated from the other halls, all arranged inside the same building.<sup>16</sup> In a concentrated effort to begin this important project, the sub-committee reported their study complete on November 6, 1930, over six weeks before the other committees finished.<sup>17</sup> The sub-committee recommended that the new municipal auditorium be built on a site 45 feet long by 328 feet wide located just south of the present Convention Hall.<sup>18</sup> They also reported that numerous architectural plans had already been submitted and considered, although ultimately the architects would not be chosen for another two years. The budget suggested by the sub-committee comprised \$4 million for the

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Advertisements, 1930-1931”; Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC; and *Rocky Bluffs*, 246.

<sup>16</sup> “What Kansas City Is to Get for Its Ten Year Plan Bond Money: Municipal Auditorium Including Site, \$4,500,000,” *Kansas City Star* (April 14, 1931): 2; “Steps to Buy Auditorium Site Launched,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 27, 1931), clipping, box 001, Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>17</sup> *Rocky Bluffs*, 155-156.

<sup>18</sup> *Progress Report Submitted to the Executive Committee, November 6, 1930* (Kansas City: Civic Improvement Committee, 1930), 33, from Folder 11, “Ten Year Plan Miscellaneous Printed Publicity Matter and Advertisements, 1930-1931”; Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

building and \$1 million for purchase of the site.<sup>19</sup> When it was scrutinized by the executive committee, the municipal auditorium budget was cut by only \$500,000, which was less than most other sub-committee proposals.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the Civic Improvement Committee approved the revised budgets and recommendations of all the sub-committees on February 5, 1931.<sup>21</sup> But as the *Kansas City Star* would point out, the municipal auditorium “was one of the few items that came up through the Ten-Year Plan committee without a change, everyone in the organization of 1,000 apparently recognizing its necessity.”<sup>22</sup>

With a special election to vote on the city and county Ten-Year Bonds set for May 26, 1931, Conrad Mann and his chairmen began aggressive campaigning for the passage of the Ten-Year Plan bonds.<sup>23</sup> Citizens were inundated with public lectures, radio addresses, newspaper articles, pamphlets, and advertisements urging them to vote “yes” on the Ten-Year Plan bonds (Figure 2.8). With the Depression just setting in, many advertisements focused on the benefit of new jobs and income. Indeed, Kansas City could expect an economic boost, since the city council resolved on April 27, 1931 to use only Kansas City engineers, architects, and labor for the Ten Year Plan projects.<sup>24</sup> Emphasis was also given to

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<sup>19</sup> *Itemized Summary of Committee Reports, December 29, 1930* (Kansas City: Civic Improvement Committee, 1930), 21, from Folder 11, “Ten Year Plan Miscellaneous Printed Publicity Matter and Advertisements, 1930-1931”; Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>20</sup> *Rocky Bluffs*, 148.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>22</sup> “What Kansas City Is to Get...,” *Kansas City Star*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Rocky Bluffs*, 160.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

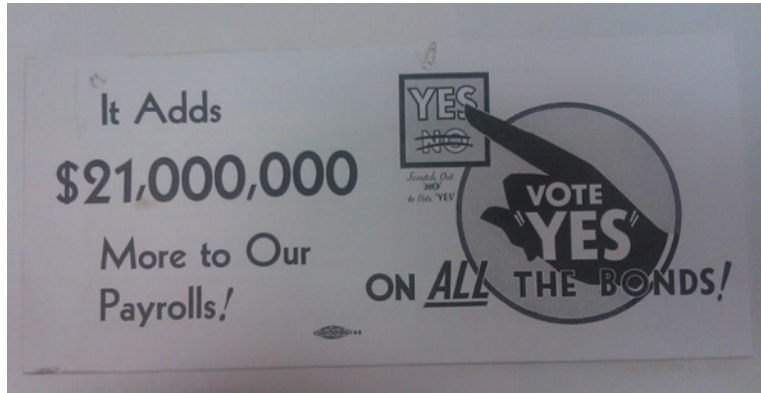


Figure 2.8. One example of many newspaper advertisements plugging the Ten-Year Plan bonds. Clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.



the long-term value of building up and modernizing Kansas City. The oft-quoted refrain from Conrad Mann was, “If you want a bigger and better Kansas City—build it!”<sup>25</sup>

On April 14, 1931, *The Kansas City Star* issued an article explaining the details and value of a new municipal auditorium.<sup>26</sup> The article enumerated 15 other cities which had already built, were building, or were about to build new convention halls as an example of the competition for national gatherings in the surrounding area.<sup>27</sup> In plain terms it stated, “Conventions put cash in Kansas City’s pockets...Many of the conventions [which have recently come] will not return to Kansas City unless more adequate facilities are provided. Some of them already have pulled away to cities offering modern auditoriums. Others are threatening to go elsewhere.” Without a new convention hall, the article—and other publicity materials—made it plain that Kansas City would not be able to compete or thrive in this new modern era.

Prior to the special election of May 26, 1931, speculation ran rampant on the Democratic machine’s opinion of the Ten Year Plan. Rumors were that the Democrats were either impartial or favorable to the bonds.<sup>28</sup> The Republicans were allegedly keeping their

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<sup>25</sup> “The Ten Year Plan—or What?,” *Kansas Citizen* (May 5, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>26</sup> “What Kansas City Is to Get...” *Kansas City Star*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> At least two of the convention halls in these cities, Cleveland and Philadelphia, were visited by the architects, engineers, and “Conrad Mann’s committee.” These visits will be discussed in further detail later.

<sup>28</sup> “Democrats Seek Voters’ Opinions on Bond Projects: No Effort Will Be Made by Parties to Get Big Registration,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (April 5, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC. “Party Workers Report 10-Year Plan Opposition: Democrats Report Many Taxpayers Frown on \$30,000,000 Bond Issue,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (April 8, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

opinions to themselves. These claims of disinterest on the part of the two major government parties may indeed have been a smokescreen to encourage non-partisan support. Even former Republican mayor Albert Beach stepped up to reiterate non-partisan support of the bonds.<sup>29</sup> Politicians realized that in order to build a better Kansas City the entire population had to be united in its support.

Throughout the formation of the Ten Year Plan, City Manager Henry McElroy kept a low profile so as not to remind the public about Pendergast the puppet-master.<sup>30</sup> However, he did, in fact, attend the executive committee meetings when city projects were considered.<sup>31</sup> He was completely cognizant of the progress of the sub-committees, but maintained a detached approach. In this photo of a meeting of the executive committee, McElroy is seated at the back of the table, second from right (Figure 2.9). While the other committee members feign interest in the discussion at hand, the domineering city manager leans back grumpily in his chair with his arms crossed. McElroy, much to his chagrin, was

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<sup>29</sup> Beach's words on this matter are particularly interesting, since so often in the contemporary literature about the Ten Year Plan (particularly *Rocky Bluffs*), Pendergast's machine is completely ignored. "No one has had a better opportunity than I to know what machine government, with its ready-mixed concrete, its inter-dealings, padded pay rolls, and its utter disregard for the charter and for things honest and sacred in popular government, has cost Kansas City... My friends, this plan has been prepared by 1,000 loyal Kansas Citians and by the city plan commission, not by the city administration. Its adoption cannot be a legitimate political issue. It is simply an economic and civic issue." "Beach for Bonds: Ten Year Plan is a Civic Duty, Republican Former Mayor Says in Radio Talk," *The Kansas City Times* (May 15, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>30</sup> McElroy was also largely absent from the book, *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet*, the most complete narrative about the naissance of the Ten Year Plan. But since the book was written by the Chamber of Commerce with the obvious goal of lionizing their president, Conrad Mann, this is not surprising.

<sup>31</sup> *Rocky Bluffs*, 157.



Figure 2.9. In this photo from January 13, 1931 of the executive committee preparing the Ten-Year Plan, McElroy can be seen at the back of the table, second from the right. Chamber of Commerce (Kansas City, Mo.), *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet: Including the Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan* (Kansas City, Mo.: Chamber of Commerce, [1938]), 157.

literally hands-off the project. McElroy and Pendergast may have recognized that the only way to win public approval for such a broad civic improvement plan under a Democratic administration was to appear detached during the planning stages. Once the bonds were approved, however, there would be no more pretenses that the Boss was uninvolved.

Conrad Mann must have anticipated that McElroy would not sit idle for long. Before the vote was even taken on the Ten Year Plan, Mann founded a citizen's bond advisory committee that intended to rein in the machine's spending.<sup>32</sup> However, the committee had power only in name and not in practice. It was merely a watchdog to report to the public inappropriate expenditure of all bonds, and it did not prevent McElroy from attaining his desires in any way he pleased.

Ultimately, the entire set of bonds passed in a 4 to 1 majority. Historians later identified this overwhelming success as the workings of Pendergast, and some even called the resultant increase in employment "Pendergast Prosperity."<sup>33</sup> As soon as the votes were counted, the Pendergast machine, under the leadership of City Manager McElroy, quickly laid claim to the Ten Year Plan.<sup>34</sup> The municipal auditorium would be the first project.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>33</sup> Haskell and Fowler, 140; William S. Worley, *Kansas City: Rise of Regional Metropolis* (Carlsbad, CA: Heritage Media Corporation, 2002), 80.

<sup>34</sup> Ironically, Mayor Bryce B. Smith was not in Kansas City during the vote but abroad in Paris. "M'Elroy Would Get Auditorium Site Immediately," *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 28, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>35</sup> "Municipal Auditorium First," *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 28, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

On Friday morning, May 27, 1931, only nine hours after the final votes on the bonds were counted, McElroy vigorously set to work obtaining the ownership of the lots of the site where the new auditorium was to be located (Figure 2.10).<sup>36</sup> McElroy was so anxious that he did not wait for the city council's meeting only three days later to begin his work. Money from the bonds was not yet available and the city council had not even authorized McElroy to proceed with contracts on the land.<sup>37</sup> But McElroy was ready and nothing would stand in his way, including the owners of the parcels of the municipal auditorium site. These citizens later complained to federal authorities of the browbeating" they had endured from McElroy so that he could obtain the site for bargain prices.<sup>38</sup> McElroy did not even wait for the land purchases to be finalized before he requested that architectural plans be bid.<sup>39</sup> This may have been an indication of McElroy's restless nature, especially after he had to refrain from inserting himself into the Ten Year planning process. But McElroy may have also intended

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<sup>36</sup> "Steps to Buy Auditorium's Site Launched," *Kansas City Journal-Post*; and "M'Elroy Would Get Auditorium Site Immediately," *The Kansas City Journal-Post*; and *Rocky Bluffs*, 173.

<sup>37</sup> "The Ten Year Plan Jobs," *Kansas City Star* (May 28, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>38</sup> Rudolph H. Hartmann, *The Kansas City Investigation: Pendergast's Downfall, 1938-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 122.

<sup>39</sup> It appears that an open competition for the architects was not held, but instead particular architects were invited to present plans. "Celebrate for Bonds," *Kansas City Star* (May 27, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC, and "Ahead on Hall Tract," *Kansas City Star* (May 31, 1931), clipping, Box 001, Kansas City's Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.



Figure 2.10. Site of the municipal auditorium prior to construction. The second Convention Hall is the white building outside the lines on the upper right side. Municipal Auditorium folder no. 23, Native Sons of Kansas City Scrapbooks [NSA] (KC395); SHSMO-KC.

this project to be his first monument in stone and concrete.<sup>40</sup>

At this point in 1931, the Municipal Auditorium had not received its official name. It was still only known in lowercase letters as the municipal auditorium. Ironically for McElroy and his selfish ambition, a petition was begun by *The Kansas City Journal-Post* calling for the facility to be officially named “Conrad Mann Memorial Hall.” Various city leaders supported the idea, reasoning that Mann had been the tireless leader who had directed the Ten Year Plan and campaigned until the bonds had passed. But the public also suggested several other names for the building, many of which were often very generic in nature, such as “Town Hall.” When Mann insisted, whether by his own will or not, that he did not want to be remembered by naming the building after himself, the matter seems to have been dropped. The name Municipal Auditorium was later adopted, since the public had voted upon a “municipal auditorium” in the ballot.

In May 1931, Conrad Mann rather ambitiously sent a telegram to the Democratic National Committee inviting them to consider Kansas City as a destination for the July 1932 convention.<sup>41</sup> The builders had not even broken ground for the Municipal Auditorium, and the convention was only about a year away. Mann may have hoped to recover his city’s reputation after the poor reviews from the 1928 Republican Convention. Perhaps luckily, the Democratic National Committee chose the Chicago Stadium (built 1929) as its venue, giving Kansas City a forced luxury of time to create a superlative building.

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<sup>40</sup> “Conrad Mann Memorial Hall,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 29, 1931); “Seek a Hall Architect,” *Kansas City Star* (May 29, 1931); and “Mann Balks on a Name,” *Kansas City Star* (May 31, 1931), all clippings, Box 001, Kansas City’s Ten Year Plan Records [Native Sons Archives] (KC272); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>41</sup> “Steps to Buy Auditorium Site Launched,” *Kansas City Journal-Post*.

Indeed, the Municipal Auditorium took an additional five years, instead of the originally planned one year. It was the longest time the city had spent on any of its three convention halls, and the time allotted created a facility that garnered national attention. In March 1937, just a few months after the building was completed, *Architectural Forum* named Municipal Auditorium the Building of the Month.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, Kansas City discovered how much a convention hall could define the city. While the city had been proud of the first two convention halls and especially the resultant proof of the Kansas City spirit, over time the city recognized that it was losing business from its inadequate and small Convention Hall. In fact, it was old-fashioned, and the city desired a more up-to-date building that would convey the city's modernity. Under the tireless leadership of Conrad Mann, the Ten Year Plan bonds passed overwhelmingly at the polls. Although the Democrats denied it, public sentiment was that the Pendergast machine had backed the bonds from the beginning. McElroy, the instinctual builder, immediately leapt to the helm and began the Municipal Auditorium project almost prematurely. With this first project, he would not only provide much-needed jobs in the midst of the Depression, but also a chance for the city to revitalize its tourist industry. And, of course, the idea that *he* would be responsible for the grandest and most modern facility in the Midwest was definitely appealing.

It was time for the third convention hall in Kansas City to take shape. With the site chosen and the land purchased, the next step was the selection of architects. Their story involves a battle for control of the project, and a parade of other convention halls from which to learn and find inspiration.

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<sup>42</sup> *Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 27.



CHAPTER 3  
SCANDAL AND SKETCHES: HOW A SMALL FIRM WON A BIG COMMISSION

In 1931, Kansas City's skyline was dramatically changing shape (Figure 3.1). Although the city already had many smaller skyscrapers reaching 10-20 stories, during the late 1920s and early 1930s, the city had the money and technology to revolutionize its skyline. Taller, leaner buildings constructed of steel were now in demand. Many of the most prominent skyscrapers were designed by the Kansas City-based architectural firm of Hoit, Price and Barnes. The firm started in 1901 when Henry Ford Hoit, later to be the firm's principal architect, joined the Kansas City firm of Van Brunt & Howe. But by 1909, Hoit's two partners had passed away, leaving Hoit as the sole architect. Four years later, Edwin M. Price became partner and acted as lead designer for the firm.<sup>1</sup> In 1919, Alfred Edward Barnes Jr. joined as the third partner.<sup>2</sup> The firm was active until its dissolution in 1941 due to the depressive effect that World War II had on the construction industry.<sup>3</sup> However, for more than twenty years, Hoit, Price, and Barnes had a dramatic influence upon the Kansas City skyline.

Today, two of the firm's most distinctive skyscrapers bracket downtown Kansas City, in some ways defining the boundaries and look of downtown for future generations: at the north end are the double-turrets of the Fidelity Bank and Trust Building (built 1929-1931;

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<sup>1</sup> "Edwin M. Price is Dead: Former Architect Here Dies in Arkansas," *The Kansas City Star* (January 11, 1957): 28.

<sup>2</sup> Cydney Millstein and Carol Grove, *Houses of Missouri, 1870-1940* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2008), 262.

<sup>3</sup> "Alfred Edward Barnes: Architect Worked on Major Buildings Here," *The Kansas City Times* (May 12, 1960): 30.



Figure 3.1. Skyline of Kansas City in 1930. Many buildings by Hoit, Price and Barnes are pictured, including the Southwestern Bell Telephone Building on the upper right, the Power and Light Building being constructed at the upper left, and the Fidelity Bank and Trust building near the upper middle. “The Most Widely Discussed Plans for Public Building Groups,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (December 28, 1930), clipping from scrapbook, Alfred Edward Barnes Jr. (1892-1960) Architectural Collection (KC0004), The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.

now known as 909 Walnut Street; Figure 3.2), and to the south is the telescoping shaft and prismatic glass crown of the dynamic Kansas City Power and Light Building (built 1930-1931; Figure 3.3). Constructed concurrently, the two buildings understandably share some decorative similarities. The Fidelity Bank and Trust Building incorporates classical elements and modern Art Deco styling (Figure 3.4).<sup>4</sup> The Kansas City Power and Light Building is more flamboyantly executed, with lightning bolts, sunbursts, and radiating orbs portraying man's ability to harness light and electricity for power (Figure 3.5). The building is Kansas City's most iconic Art Deco structure and the apogee of Hoit, Price, and Barnes' career.

Meanwhile, the architectural firm of Alonzo H. Gentry was creating less impressive and less modern structures south of downtown. Alonzo H. Gentry (1889-1967) was the principal of the new firm, which incorporated as Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville in 1933.<sup>5</sup> Gentry spent his youth in Independence, Missouri, before beginning his career with the firm George B. Post & Sons in New York City. Later, he headed up the firm's branch in Cleveland, Ohio, for several years. In 1921, Gentry returned to Kansas City and began his own architectural practice in 1923.<sup>6</sup> While Hoit, Price and Barnes were designing dramatic

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<sup>4</sup> George Ehrlich, *Kansas City, Missouri: an Architectural History, 1826-1990*, rev. ed. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 96.

<sup>5</sup> By 1941, Homer Neville had left the firm and incorporated as Neville and Sharp. *Polk and Company, Kansas City Directory*, (Kansas City, Missouri: R.L. Polk & Co., 1933), The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.

<sup>6</sup> "Alonzo H. Gentry, 80, Noted Architect, Dies," *The Examiner* (Independence, Missouri) (February 7, 1967): 2.



Figure 3.2. The Fidelity National Bank and Trust Building, General Collection (P1), Buildings--Fidelity, Number 11, Missouri Valley Special Collection, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, MO.



Figure 3.3. The Kansas City Power and Light Building, ca. 1935, Robert Askren Photograph Collection (P35), box 2, folder 10, no. 4, Missouri Valley Special Collection.



Figure 3.4. Art Deco decoration enlivens the front doors of the Fidelity National Bank & Trust Building (now known as 909 Walnut). Photograph ca. 2005.



Figure 3.5. Exterior of the Kansas City Power and Light Building featuring Art Deco elements like curlicue stylized fountains and radiating sunbursts.

skyscrapers for the city, Gentry was designing apartment buildings and hotels.<sup>7</sup>

Most of Gentry's work was unremarkable, but he made a small impact with his design of the Brownhardt Apartments with its Art Deco decoration (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). Built in 1929, the Brownhardt Apartments were called a "bizarre building" by *The Kansas City Star*.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps due to its proximity to several other boldly designed apartments along Armour Boulevard in the Hyde Park district, the Brownhardt Apartments are more sensational in their applied decorations. Since this new location did not restrict flights of creativity by imposing a neighborhood design style, like that of the apartments near the Country Club Plaza, Gentry was able to experiment with more modern ornamentation. Furthermore, his clients, the Brownhardt Investment Company, desired a "modernistic" apartment building, despite the doubt of some citizens about the longevity of this style.<sup>9</sup> On the Brownhardt, naturalistic flowers have morphed into stylized, geometric patterns, heralding Gentry's reception of the popular Art Deco style. A few lightning bolts are even present in the decoration, and set along the top story of the building are terracotta bas reliefs featuring stylized spiraling plant

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<sup>7</sup> Other skyscrapers designed by Hoyt, Price, and Barnes include the Hotel Continental (built in 1923, now known as the Mark Twain Tower) and the Southwestern Bell Telephone Building (built in 1919, addition in 1929, associated architect I. R. Timlin, now known as Oak Tower). In 1928-1929, Gentry designed three luxurious apartment hotels on Ward Parkway directly across from the popular Country Club Plaza shopping district. The Villa Serena (now the Raphael Hotel), the Villa Locarno and the Riviera (now The Hemingway) apartments harmonize nicely with the Mediterranean style of the Plaza. "Names Hall Architect," *The Kansas City Star* (January 5, 1932): 5; and Elizabeth Rosin (Principal) and Rachel Nugent (Associate), of Rosin Preservation, LLC, "Historic Name: Villa Serena Apartment Hotel; Other Name/Site Name: Raphael Hotel," United States Department of the Interior National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (December 2008), Section 8, p. 12, retrieved on March 13, 2012 from <http://www.dnr.mo.gov/shpo/nps-nr/09000207.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> "Erect Bizarre Building," *The Kansas City Star* (February 24, 1929): D1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3.6. Alonzo H. Gentry designed the Brownhardt Apartments in 1929. Photo by the author.



Figure 3.7. Detail of the terracotta overdoor featuring stylized lightning bolts and flowers in geometric patterns on the Brownhardt Apartments, 1929.

Photo by the author.

tendrils—both characteristic features of Art Deco. Even the basic rectangular shape of the Brownhardt Apartments is enlivened with small setbacks and streamlines of terracotta decorations at the building’s courtyard level. However, even in this new project, Gentry remained inspired by classical sources, as is evident in the Brownhardt’s many mascarons crowning a row of second-story windows. The building may not be a full-fledged Art Deco masterpiece, such as the Kansas City Power and Light Building, but the Brownhardt Apartments indicate how Gentry utilized the style before his most famous project got underway.<sup>10</sup>

In the summer of 1930, a new construction project, the Municipal Auditorium, was announced.<sup>11</sup> It may have seemed certain that the popular firm of Hoit, Price, and Barnes would be chosen to design and lead the construction. Awash in other huge projects, like the Power and Light Building, the firm threw together some simple pen and pencil sketches for the new Auditorium, hoping that their prestige would be the key to winning the commission from the city.<sup>12</sup> However, what the firm did not realize was that a newer, more obscure firm, Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville, were “bending over backwards” creating plans, elevations, sketches, pictures of exteriors, watercolor sketches, and black and white renderings to present to the sub-committee in charge of the Municipal Auditorium.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, on January 5,

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<sup>10</sup> Other buildings designed by Alonzo H. Gentry were the Hyde Park Hotel (built 1930-1931) and the Fairfax administration building (built 1932; possibly the Fairfax airport administration building which has since been demolished). See Appendix Figures 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> “Civic Hall Takes Shape,” *The Kansas City Star* (August 5, 1930): 1.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Homer Neville conducted by Cydney Millstein, ca. April 1980; Box 50, tape 10; American Institute of Architects/KC Records (0586kc); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

1932, the project was awarded to both firms, although the division of labor was contested for months.<sup>14</sup>

It seems unlikely that the size of the Municipal Auditorium dictated the need for two architectural firms, especially since Hoit, Price and Barnes had recently and successfully completed the huge Power and Light building. The design program for that building included a 1000-seat auditorium, a gymnasium, and a practicing physician's office, in addition to 31 floors of office spaces—no more than the program requirements for the Municipal Auditorium. Instead, the choice of two architectural firms had more to do with political favors than with design needs.

The political connections of Alonzo Gentry's family may have ultimately won his firm the most prestigious commission of his career. In a 1980 interview with architect Homer Neville, he suggested that Gentry's father, O. H. Gentry, whom he called the political boss of Independence, Missouri, had pulled some strings for his son.<sup>15</sup> This seems possible since O. H. Gentry had been a prominent Democratic politician in Independence, serving as the sheriff of Jackson County and serving three terms as county treasurer.<sup>16</sup> In addition to running a lucrative pharmacy, the elder Gentry also was a director for the Chrisman-Sawyer

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<sup>14</sup> "Names Hall Architect," *The Kansas City Star* (January 5, 1932): 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> David W. Jackson and Paul Kirkman, *Lockdown: Outlaws, Lawmen & Frontier Justice in Jackson County, Missouri* (Independence: Jackson County Historical Society, 2009): 137n283. And *Missouri Democracy: A History of the Party and Its Representative Members—Past and Present With a Vast Amount of Informative Data*, vol. 3 (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1935), 617; and "Funeral Friday for O. H. Gentry: Service For Veteran Druggist, Who Died Last Night, To Be From First Christian Church," [*Independence Examiner?*] (October 16, 1934), clipping, Mary Gentry Shaw family papers, Jackson County Historical Society, Independence, Missouri.



Bank of Independence and was chairman of the draft board of Jackson County.<sup>17</sup> Although the elder Gentry was no longer serving in political office by 1925, political boss Joe Shannon continued to visit O. H. Gentry.<sup>18</sup> By 1930, however, Shannon had won a seat as a congressman in Washington D. C., and was likely not available to orchestrate political favors for his friends in Kansas City. It is possible that with his ally gone, O. H. Gentry turned to Pendergast for help for his son. Ultimately, someone was able to persuade Pendergast that Alonzo Gentry, and not the more illustrious firm of Hoit, Price, and Barnes, should be awarded the major portion of the contract for the Municipal Auditorium.

However, for more than two years, the two firms and the city manager negotiated the architectural assignments until the final contract was signed on October 31, 1932.<sup>19</sup> An early version of the contract, probably proposed by Hoit, Price and Barnes around April 11, 1932, suggested that their firm be the lead architects for the Municipal Auditorium project, while Alonzo H. Gentry, Inc. be “relieved of” its work on the project.<sup>20</sup> Gentry’s firm was understandably unhappy with this decision, and for several months negotiations stalled while the machine determined its course of action.<sup>21</sup> By the beginning of September, McElroy

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<sup>17</sup> *Missouri Democracy*, 617.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Alonzo Gentry’s niece, Mary Gentry Shaw “Shawsie” Branton by the author, August 30, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> A copy of the contract, dated October 31, 1932, is preserved in the files of Alfred Edward Barnes Jr. (1892-1960) Architectural Collection (KC0004); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, “Contract Worksheets,” box 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Yearbook (diary) dated August 17-September 24, 1932, folder 26, box 067.

decided to reverse the arrangement and gave Gentry's firm the responsibility of the designs.<sup>22</sup> Hoit, Price, and Barnes appealed to Tom Pendergast, but he wouldn't be swayed.<sup>23</sup> Finally on October 31, 1932, all parties signed the contract awarding the structural and decorative work to Alonzo H. Gentry, Inc., and the design and construction of the heating, ventilation, air conditioning, etc., to Hoit, Price, and Barnes.<sup>24</sup> McElroy and Pendergast had everything to do with how this arrangement was finalized, indicating that the the final outcome was dependent upon political favors and was not a result of superior design bids or grander examples of previous architectural work.

With the contract finally in place, the design work could proceed. The architects, engineers, and some members from the Municipal Auditorium sub-committee visited as many newly created auditoriums in other large cities as possible, for inspiration both for what was successful and what was ineffective in their designs. Of these, architect Homer Neville,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. The contract from April, which Hoit, Price, and Barnes may have drawn up, had been later revised in red ink to reflect the final contract. These revisions were probably made by McElroy, as a copy of the letter that accompanied the first version of the contract is from Hoit, Price, and Barnes to McElroy and dated April 11, 1932. The revisions may have occurred any time after April 11, 1932 until October 31, 1932, when the final contract was signed by all parties.

<sup>23</sup> In the meantime, with concerns over their next profitable project hanging in the balance, Hoit, Price, and Barnes began investigating other work, such as the upcoming Jackson County Courthouse in Kansas City. In the end, this project was also awarded to another firm, Wight and Wight.

<sup>24</sup> 'Of the enumerated services of the Architect, it is agreed that Alonzo H. Gentry, Inc., shall perform wholly the following services on the structural and general construction branches of the work, including elevators, lighting fixtures, decorations and all equipment such as public address systems, stage equipment, seating and furnishings; preparation of all working drawings, specifications and contract forms; checking of all shop drawings, issuance of certificates and keeping of accounts; supervision and superintendence of the work; and that Hoit, Prices & Barnes shall perform wholly the same services on the heating, ventilating, air conditioning, plumbing, conduit and wiring, vacuum cleaning, automatic sprinkler and similar mechanical equipment.' -"Contract Worksheets," box 18, Alfred Edward Barnes Jr. (1892-1960) Architectural Collection (KC0004); SHSMO-KC.

who acted as the firm's lead designer, remembered five as noteworthy.<sup>25</sup> They were the Philadelphia Municipal Auditorium and Convention Hall, the Chicago Stadium, an unspecified facility in Washington, D. C. (possibly the Washington Auditorium), the Cleveland Public Auditorium, and Madison Square Garden in New York City. These five buildings had an impact on the architects in their early sketches for the Kansas City building, but ultimately the Radio City Music Hall in New York City was a nearly inescapable model.

Architecturally, early sketches of the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium are reminiscent of the Philadelphia Municipal Auditorium and Convention Hall (built 1929-1931; demolished 2005), and the Chicago Stadium (built 1929; demolished 1995) (Figures 3.8-11).<sup>26</sup> In their sketches, the Kansas City architects reused the ideas of a barrel roof for the arena, and windows framed by Beaux-Arts pilasters and friezes. However, both auditoriums had their disadvantages. Egress from the Philadelphia arena was problematic, so the Kansas City architects used ramps instead of stairs to move crowds quickly. Additionally, the Kansas City building was designed without a permanent stage in the arena, unlike the Philadelphia arena, thereby allowing for flexibility in usage and seating. The Chicago Stadium was also not a perfect model for Kansas City, perhaps due to the Stadium's emphasis on sporting events instead of conventions, musical productions, and exhibitions, which were merely secondary space-fillers.<sup>27</sup> The Chicago Stadium was boasted as the

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<sup>25</sup> Millstein's interview with Neville, 1980.

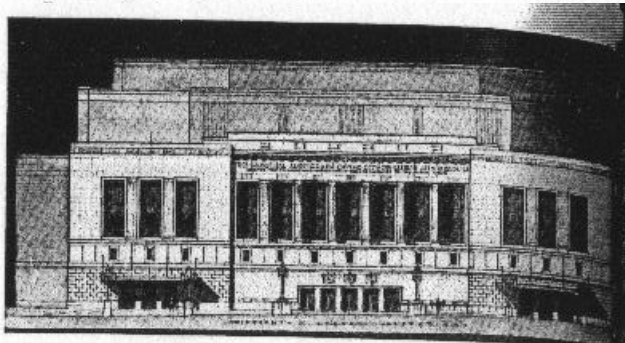
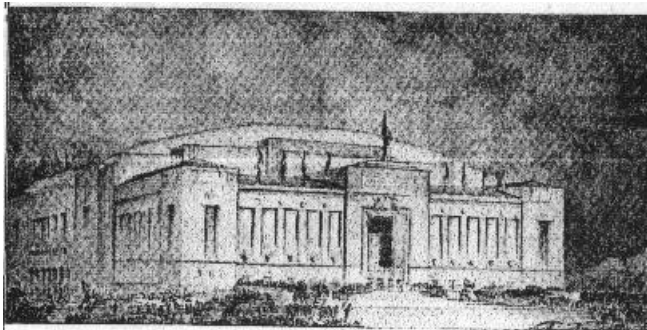
<sup>26</sup> Several early sketches for the Municipal Auditorium are at the State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City, although it is unknown whether Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville or Hoit, Price, and Barnes created them. These sketches also show the early influence of the other Beaux-Arts auditoriums.

<sup>27</sup> *The Chicago Stadium: Its Benefit to and Influence on Industry* (Chicago: Will Howell and Associates, 1928), 25.



Figure 3.8, left. The Municipal Auditorium and Conventional Hall of Philadelphia was designed in 1929-1931 by Philip Johnson and was visited by the architects, engineers, and sub-committee members of the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium during the design and construction phase of the latter building. Postcard ca. 1936, retrieved on March 27, 2012 from cardcow.com

Figure 3.9, right. The Chicago Stadium was designed by Hall, Lawrence and Ratcliffe, Inc., Architects, in 1929 and demolished in 1995. Postcard retrieved in March 2012 from cardcow.com



Figures 3.10-11, left. Early sketches of the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City, MO, c. 1932. Photos from "Kansas City Municipal Auditorium," *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 220.

largest arena in the world, but its limited functionality was seen as a detriment by the visitors from Kansas City.<sup>28</sup>

A third venue visited by the Kansas City group is uncertain, but may possibly have been the Washington Auditorium in Washington, D. C. (Figure 3.12).<sup>29</sup> Just like the facilities in Philadelphia and Chicago, the Washington Auditorium has been demolished. The building, which opened on January 27, 1925, was much smaller than the previous two, holding only 6,000 persons in its main hall.<sup>30</sup> Neville stated the building had been “worth looking at,” probably due to its combination of facilities including 35 committee rooms and a large exhibition hall in addition to its main auditorium.<sup>31</sup> Stylistically, the Kansas City architects seem to be uninfluenced by the D. C. building.

Similarly, Madison Square Garden in New York City seems not to have influenced the architectural style of the Kansas City auditorium (Figure 3.13). Madison Square Garden was the third incarnation of four buildings by this name and stood from 1925-1968. Designed by Thomas W. Lamb, the Garden was a boxy shell surrounding an arena with triple-tiered seats.<sup>32</sup> Since its landlord, Tex Rickard, was a firm believer in the lucrativeness

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>29</sup> Neville never called the buildings by name, with the exception of Madison Square Garden, but listed off public auditoriums by city. Therefore, this facility was called “the one in Washington, D. C.” Millstein’s interview with Neville, 1980.

<sup>30</sup> S. Archer Gibson, *Dedication of the Washington Auditorium and Its Great Pipe Organ: June 10, 1925* (S.I: s.n, 1925), unpaginated.

<sup>31</sup> Millstein’s interview with Neville, 1980.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Durso, *Madison Square Garden: 100 Years of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 138.



Figure 3.12. The Washington Auditorium in Washington, D. C., which was dedicated in 1925, may have been visited by the architects, engineers, and sub-committee members for the Municipal Auditorium of Kansas City. Postcard retrieved in March 2012 from cardcow.com



Figure 3.13. Madison Square Garden III, New York City, was the third incarnation of four buildings by this name and stood from 1925-1968. Postcard retrieved in March 2012 from cardcow.com

of boxing, the Garden did not feature separate spaces dedicated to theater and music.<sup>33</sup> If a stage were necessary, it was constructed in the arena. This is one idea that the Kansas City architects took to heart; the arena in Municipal Auditorium also does not have a permanent stage, thereby maintaining the flexibility of the space.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, Neville remembered the Garden as being “the best one of the bunch, more the size and scope of what we were going to do.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Neville affirmed that the size of the Garden, in addition to the sizes of the arenas in Cleveland and Philadelphia, helped to determine the size of the 10,000 seat arena in Kansas City. Even though the Garden was huge, seating up to 18,000 people for a boxing match, it lacked an exhibition hall, music hall, and little theater which Kansas City required. Plus, many of the seats did not provide adequate views of the action. The Garden was also architecturally plain, being a mere box set with many windows and ornamented only with pilasters at the second and third floors, and the marquees over the entrances.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, the Cleveland Public Auditorium was more inspiring (Figure 3.14). Interestingly, it is one of the only ones mentioned by Neville that is still standing and in use today. The Auditorium was built in phases by architects Frederic H. Betz and J. Harold McDowell, along with consulting architect Frank R. Walker of Walker and Weeks, beginning with the 10,000-seat arena and exhibition hall in 1920-1922 and following with the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>34</sup> Millstein’s interview with Neville, 1980.

<sup>35</sup> By contrast, the second Madison Square Garden, which preceded the building that Neville and his associates visited for their research, was designed in 1890 by Stanford White with a turret based on Giralda, the bell tower of the Cathedral of Seville, Spain. By 1924, the owners of the building, the New York Life Insurance Company, decided to demolish the building due to its lack of financial success. Its replacement was built 25 blocks away and focused on sporting events that could be held in an arena. Durso, 73-77, 101, 128.

Music Hall and Little Theater in 1927-1929.<sup>36</sup> Alonzo Gentry would have been aware of the project, having been a citizen of the city until 1921, when the building was already underway. Neville recalled the building as being “relatively new,” but did not comment on its desirability for the Kansas City group.

The Cleveland Auditorium was designed in the Italian Renaissance style with arcaded windows, a high rusticated podium, a cornice line, and a pink granite base course. The Kansas City architects also began by drawing a Beaux-Arts building, not unlike the Cleveland Auditorium. However, Gentry, Voskamp and Neville ultimately created a much more modern building in Kansas City.

The functions of the two buildings are similar, with both containing a 10,000-seat arena, exhibition hall, music hall and little theater. But Gentry, Voskamp and Neville incorporated more flexibility for the spaces by including separate entrances for each venue and eliminating the shared stage in the model offered by Cleveland (Figures 3.15-16). Additionally, Gentry, Voskamp and Neville decided to spread the venues out over six floors, which not only allowed multiple activities to happen simultaneously without disruption but also provided a more efficient use of space.

In Kansas City, the architects improved the design of Cleveland’s arena by placing their arena inside an almost square room with seating on all sides. Without the permanent stage as in Cleveland’s building, the architects included more seats in a smaller space and

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Tibbs, “Cleveland Public Auditorium,” *Builders Exchange Magazine* (July-August 2003), retrieved on April 3, 2012 from <http://www.bxmagazine.com/article.asp?ID=276>





Figure 3.14, left. The Cleveland Public Auditorium was built 1920-1929. Postcard retrieved in March 2012 from cardcow.com

Figure 3.15, right. Floor plan for the Cleveland Public Auditorium, designed by architects Frederic H. Betz and J. Harold McDowell, along with consulting architect Frank R. Walker of Walker and Weeks, 1920-1929. Floor plan from “Cleveland Convention Center: A Cleveland Classic,” brochure (Cleveland: Cleveland Convention Center, n. d.).

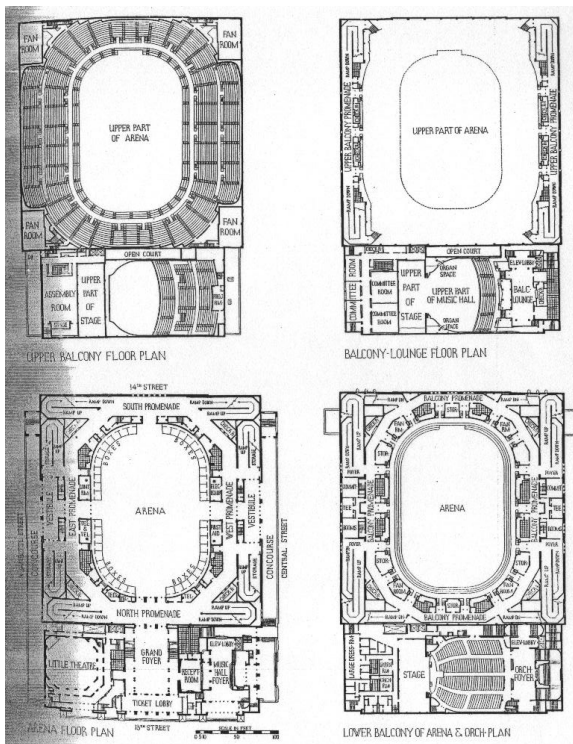
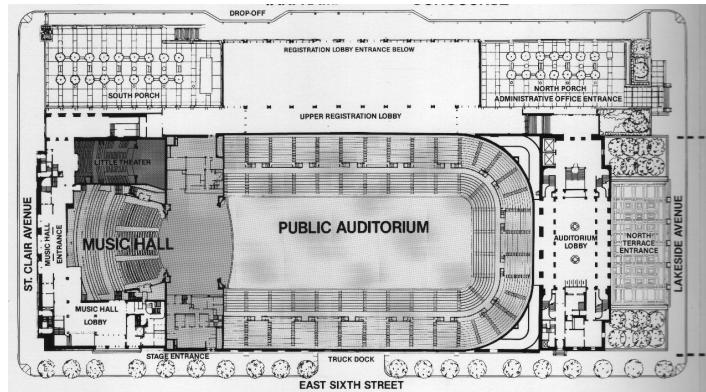


Figure 3.16, left. Floor plans for the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photos from “Kansas City Municipal Auditorium,” *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 227.

created a more adaptable room.<sup>37</sup> The square shape also provides more equal spectator viewing and acoustics. As Alfred E. Barnes explained in an interview, “We found that an arena can be too big. For example, the one in Cleveland, which does not seat so many as ours, is, nevertheless, not so good acoustically, because its elliptical bowl is too long.”<sup>38</sup>

Functionality was also a factor in how Gentry, Voskamp and Neville designed the Little Theater in Kansas City. The room does not contain fixed theater seats aligned to the stage as in Cleveland. Instead, it is an open, octagonal ball room with a small stage along one wall, thereby allowing a variety of events including concerts, lectures, dances, and receptions. The architects from Kansas City learned from the shortcomings of the Cleveland Public Auditorium and found solutions to the problems.

The architects from Kansas City visited one additional auditorium that provided the most architectural and stylistic influence. This one was only a few blocks away from Madison Square Garden in New York City, but offered an example of how to meet the theatrical and musical requirements of Kansas City. Radio City Music Hall, which opened to

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<sup>37</sup> In fact, the Kansas City architects considered placing a stage (although not a shared one) at one end of the main “auditorium,” in a similar fashion to Cleveland’s arena. Indeed, the arena was called the “auditorium” at this stage of the planning, since, in addition to a stage, the space included fixed auditorium seating on the main floor, thereby prohibiting sporting events to be held there. When the stage and seats were removed from the plan, the name “auditorium” was thrown out in favor of “arena.” “Kansas City Municipal Auditorium,” *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 218.

<sup>38</sup> A. B. MacDonald, “As the New Municipal Auditorium’s Vast Halls Begin to Take Form; the Building Now Being Constructed Will Dwarf Old Convention Hall,” *The Kansas City Star* (October 21, 1934): 1C, 3C.

the public in December 1932, was the largest and most opulent theater in the world (Figure 3.17).<sup>39</sup> As we shall see in the fourth chapter, it undoubtedly had the biggest stylistic influence on Neville as he designed the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City.<sup>40</sup>

After a year of working, the architects' sketches began to approximate both Radio City Music Hall and the final form of Municipal Auditorium (Figures 3.18-19). When the architects realized that windows would not be feasible for the size and scope of the building, decorative roundels were used instead. From the roundels decorating the stone exterior, to the use of the red and gold interior color scheme, to the dominating murals in the grand staircase, many design aspects of Radio City Music Hall were reinterpreted at the Kansas City Municipal Auditorium. Yet, the Kansas City building is a unique masterpiece, owing much of its success to the architects' careful research of other similar buildings. As the Kansas City city engineer explained after the Municipal Auditorium was completed, "We...made our mistakes on paper, not, I believe, in steel and concrete."<sup>41</sup>

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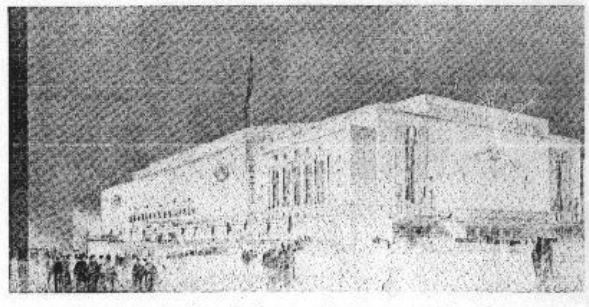
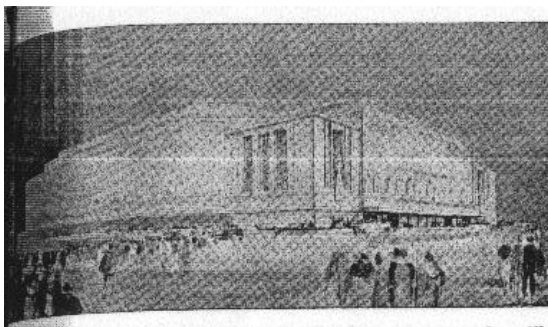
<sup>39</sup> Christine Roussel, *The Art of Rockefeller Center* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Neville explained, "Radio City had a tremendous amount of things... [including a] Music Hall and so on, [and] we had a good look at it." Millstein's interview with Neville, 1980.

<sup>41</sup> "New Hall is The Best," *The Kansas City Star* (October 12, 1935), clipping, scrapbook, box 044, Alfred Edward Barnes Jr. (1892-1960) Architectural Collection (KC004); SHSMO-KC.



Figure 3.17. Radio City Music Hall, New York City. Photo by CC-BY-SA-3.0, Matt H. Wade at Wikipedia.



Figures 3.18-19. Later sketches of the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City, MO, ca. 1933. Photos from “Kansas City Municipal Auditorium,” *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 221.

CHAPTER 4  
THE MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM AND MUSIC HALL:  
THE “RADIO CITY” OF THE MIDWEST

In 1934, construction began on the Municipal Auditorium.<sup>1</sup> Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville, and associated architects Hoit, Price, and Barnes, had visited auditoriums across the country, gleaning examples of successes and failures. The finished building would be an eleven-story high, block-wide, limestone convention center that would continue to serve Kansas City more than 75 years later. Part of the genius of the plan was spreading an exhibition hall, 10,000-seat arena, music hall, small function room, and multiple committee rooms across six floors rather than expanding it out across one or two floors as had been done in other auditoriums (Figures 4.1-2). Each of the spaces had its own individual entrance so that multiple functions could happen simultaneously.

Municipal Auditorium sits in the central business district in downtown Kansas City in the block between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> streets, with Wyandotte Street to the east and Central Street to the west.<sup>2</sup> The site is sloped from 13<sup>th</sup> Street down to 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and the architects took advantage of this natural grade to create entrances on the different levels. At the lowest point along 14<sup>th</sup> Street is the entrance to the Exhibition Hall. Along 13<sup>th</sup> Street are the three separate entrances to the Little Theater at the northeast corner, the Arena in the center, and the Music Hall at the northwest corner.

Large and imposing, the rustic buff limestone of the Municipal Auditorium is largely

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<sup>1</sup> *Rocky Bluffs*, 197-8.

<sup>2</sup> Downtown Kansas City, as defined by the Downtown Council of Kansas City, is located between the Missouri River in the north, to 31st Street in the south; and from the Kansas-Missouri state line to the east, to Bruce R. Watkins Memorial Drive (U.S. Route 71) to the west. Municipal Auditorium is located in the north central part of downtown.

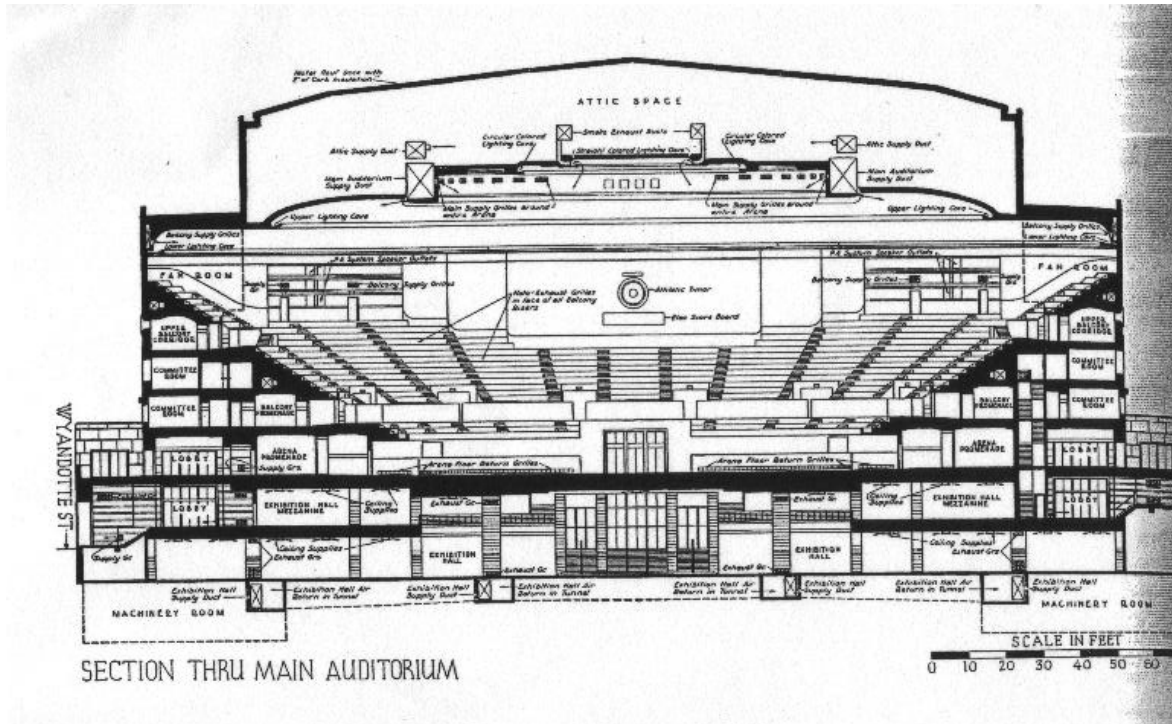


Figure 4.1. Section through main arena, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photos from “Kansas City Municipal Auditorium,” *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 227.

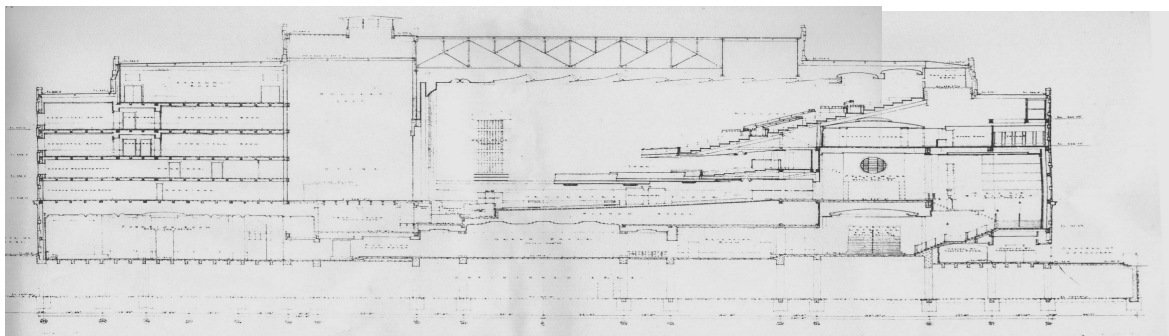


Figure 4.2. Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville, with associated architects, Hoit, Price, and Barnes, Section through the Music Hall, Little Theater, and committee rooms, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO; The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.

unadorned with windows (Figure 4.3). Instead, vast expanses of stone are selectively punctuated with decorative roundels, streamlines, and flag poles. The lower third of the structure has a slightly channeled rustication, with horizontal joints of the large limestone blocks emphasized, although the stone faces of the blocks are hewn smooth. Above this, a stringcourse of four-and-a-half-foot square panels terminates the first floor. The next two-thirds of the building are made of smooth limestone blocks in alternating thick and thin courses for a subtle pattern.

Along the north façade, above the main entrances to the Little Theater, Arena and Music Hall, are three aluminum marquees crowned by slender flag poles (Figure 4.4). Centered in the smooth expanse of limestone between the flag poles are three roundels by Albert Stewart and H. F. Simons depicting *Music and Poetry*, *Oratory*, and *Athletics*.

Horizontal banding wraps around the northwest corner and leads the eye to Stewart and Simons' plaque of *Comedy, Drama, and Tragedy*, appropriately placed on the western exterior wall of the Music Hall (Figure 4.5). At the edge of the Music Hall, the Arena wall juts out slightly. Farther along this wall are secondary exits from the Arena, and windows centered in the vast limestone wall. These are topped by five round windows set with geometric grills. At the upper left and upper right corners of the Arena are roundels by Stewart and Simons representing *Labor* and *Agriculture*.

The southern wall is the least adorned, with one marquee above the Exhibition Hall entrance in the middle, flanked by sets of aluminum flag poles that hug the wall (Figure 4.6). Centered above the first floor on the blank wall is a plaque by Stewart and Simons representing *Industry and Commerce* with the poetic inscription, "Industry has made all winds her messengers, all climes her tributaries, all people her servants, yet from the land she



Figure 4.3. The East and North façades of the Municipal Auditorium, as seen from the corner of Wyandotte and 13th Streets, Kansas City, MO. Photo courtesy of Matt Kyle, sales manager, Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities.



Figure 4.4. North façade, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo from Wikimedia/Creative Commons.



Figure 4.5 North and West exteriors. Max Bernstein, “64 Municipal Auditorium by Night, Kansas City, Mo.,” C. T. Art-Colortone postcard printed by Curteich-Chicago in 1938. Postcard from the author’s collection.



draws her sustenance and strength.” Industry would be shown inside the Exhibition Hall, and Commerce would happen as well, but in a Midwestern city, honor should also be given to its agricultural roots.

The eastern façade facing Wyandotte Street is divided into two parts (Figure 4.7). Two-thirds of the building from 14<sup>th</sup> Street north is a mirror of the western façade, with rectangular windows, round windows set with geometric grills, and two roundels at the uppermost corners. Along the wall closest to the Exhibition Hall is the roundel representing *Transportation*, and *Livestock* adorns the side closest to the Little Theater. At the edge of the Arena, the exterior wall sets back, delineating the Music Hall and Little Theater. This part of the exterior is wrapped with four large horizontal stringcourses alternated with three rows of windows.

Much of the beauty of the building is indebted to the Radio City Music Hall (opened in December 1932) and its sister theater, the RKO-Roxy Theater (later renamed the Center Theater; opened in December 1932 and demolished in 1954), in Rockefeller Center, New York City.<sup>3</sup> Aspects of exterior decoration, interior murals, color choices, streamlined design, and even plush bathrooms all inspired the designs of the Kansas City building.

Far from being a carbon copy of these New York buildings, the Municipal Auditorium is distinctively Midwestern in its grander scope of purpose and stylistic restraint. Its exterior is mostly neutrally colored with punches of color coming only from flags, unlike the vibrant medallions and marquees which adorn the Radio City Music Hall and RKO-Roxy Theaters. The architects chose exterior medallions and friezes that portray the artistic functions of the buildings, but Municipal Auditorium also includes medallions which depict

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<sup>3</sup> William Gabel, “Center Theatre, 1236 Sixth Avenue, New York, NY 10020,” *Cinema Treasures*, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/564> (accessed on August 14, 2012).

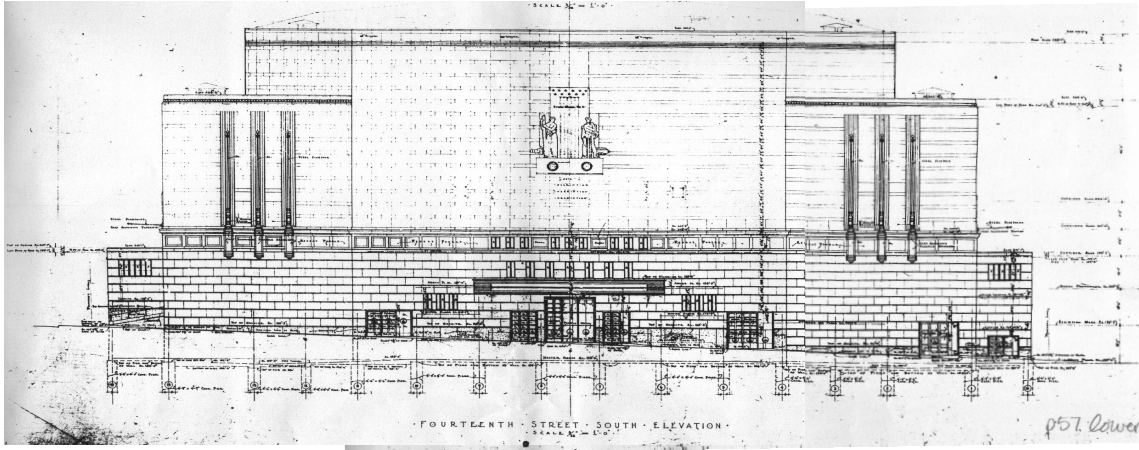


Figure 4.6. Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville, with associated architects, Hoit, Price, and Barnes, South elevation, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO; The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City.



Figure 4.7. The East façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo courtesy of Matt Kyle, sales manager, Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities.

the agricultural and industrial activities of the Middle West.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the coastal building, Radio City Music Hall, the interior of the Municipal Auditorium is not based on an ocean liner. Instead, the architects imbued it with their own brand of optimism. While drawing inspiration from some of the newest and best auditoriums of the 1920s and 1930s, the architects of the Municipal Auditorium deftly created a distinct and modern civic center for the people of Kansas City.

### **The Radio City Music Hall and RKO-Roxy Theater**

Radio City Music Hall, situated in the block between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenues at 51<sup>st</sup> Street in New York City, opened in December 1932 (Figure 4.8). Its exterior was designed by Edward Durrell Stone (1902-1978) of the firm Reinhard, Hofmeister, Hood and Fouilhou (part of the associated architects working on Rockefeller Center), and its interior design was by Donald Deskey (1894-1989). As part of the Rockefeller Center in the heart of New York City, the horizontal Music Hall was surrounded by skyscrapers. Yet its height was emphasized by vertical strips of windows along its front and sides. One large expanse of rustic buff limestone wall along 50<sup>th</sup> Street is windowless, but three 18-foot diameter, colorful enameled roundels representing *Dance*, *Drama*, and *Song* by Hildreth Meière (1892-1961) and Oscar Bach (1884-1957) enliven the space and provide insight into the function of the theater. Large vertical and horizontal marquees lit in neon red, blue and gold work to catch the eye of pedestrians and street traffic below.

Inside, Deskey created a flamboyant but cohesive interior, while collaborating with and managing dozens of artists. Four floors of spaces, from the Grand Lounge in the basement to the fourth-floor bathrooms, were designed by Deskey. Colors are vibrant,

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene C. Zachman, *The New Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, Mo.* (Kansas City, Mo., 1936), 2.

materials are opulent, and pattern and texture abound. It is an American Art Deco masterpiece.

Once situated along 49<sup>th</sup> Street, one block from Radio City, was the RKO-Roxy Theater (Figure 4.9). Designed by Reinhard and Hofmeister; Corbett, Harrison, and MacMurray; and Hood and Foulhoux, architects, the RKO-Roxy also opened in December 1932 but was demolished in 1954. On the exterior, the Roxy mirrored Radio City. Thick and thin bands of rustic buff limestone encircled the walls, and one lone colorful enameled plaque representing *Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth*, by Meière and Bach enriched the space along 51<sup>st</sup> Street (Figure 4.10). A horizontal marquee wrapped the building while two tall vertical marquees caught viewers' eyes. Gracing the top of the building are aluminum parapet ornaments in the shape of waterfall, squiggle and shell forms reminiscent of Art Deco. The Roxy was a smaller theater, but the decorators, Eugene Schoen and Sons, maintained a colorful interior with patterning similar to Radio City. In fact, some of the same artists were commissioned to provide pieces for both theaters, and the same architectural firm contributed to both buildings. Ultimately, the theater's middling size—too large for movies and too small for grand stage performances—was the reason for its demolition twenty years later.

### **Municipal Auditorium: The Exterior**

Although similarly dwarfed in height by its skyscraper neighbors, the Municipal Auditorium's massive width commandingly dominates its site, which is much more open than those in New York City. Large expanses of unadorned limestone create an imposing, solid impression. Highlighting its horizontality, the architects employed subtle architectural decorations that run along the width of the building, thereby minimizing its actual eleven-



Figure 4.8. Hildreth Meière and Oscar Bach, *Dance, Drama, and Song*, medallions, 50th Street façade, Radio City Music Hall, New York City. Photo by Elisa Rolle from Wikimedia/Commons.



Figure 4.9. The RKO-Roxy Theater, New York City. Photo taken by Browning Studios, from *American Architect*, no. 2614 (December 1932): 41.



Figure 4.10. Hildreth Meière and Oscar Bach, *Radio and Television Encompassing the Earth*, 49th Street façade, The RKO-Roxy Theater, New York City. Photo from “Radio-Keith-Orpheum Theatre, Unit No. 8, Rockefeller Center, New York,” *American Architect*, no. 2614 (December 1932): 42.

story height. This horizontality is in direct contrast to Radio City Music Hall, which is attached to a skyscraper (1270 Avenue of the Americas) and hemmed in by a sea of skyscrapers (see Figure 3.18). Even the smaller RKO-Roxy Theater had a vertical thrust with ornamentation concentrated at the roofline.

In designing the Municipal Auditorium, Gentry, Voskamp and Neville almost completely eliminated the windows that appear in their preliminary drawings.<sup>5</sup> The rustic buff limestone is instead enlivened by horizontal lines (or streamlines), stringcourses, and dentil moldings, in addition to a handful of small aluminum marquees above its main entrances. Significantly, the Kansas City architects took a step ahead of their New York predecessors by embracing a simpler Art Moderne styling and reducing the number of windows. In the matter of three years from when Radio City and RKO-Roxy opened in 1932 until the Municipal Auditorium was dedicated in 1935, the Kansas City architects embraced and executed a more modern vision of theater architecture.

On the north façade of the Municipal Auditorium three aluminum horizontally-disposed marquees clearly delineate the entrances to the Music Hall, Grand Foyer, and Little Theater. These are reminiscent of the dramatic and colorful marquees of the New York City buildings, but better mark the different parts of the structure without the bold, neon-lit script of its New York counterparts.

Stretching tall above the Music Hall and Little Theater marquees are sets of three aluminum flag poles, their tops and bottoms accented with parallel discs and their corbeled bases lined with ridges (Figure 4.11). The color that is lacking in the marquees and roundels appears here in the optional flags and banners. Behind each flag pole, three vertical ridges

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<sup>5</sup> *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 217, 221.



Figure 4.11. Marquis and flag poles along 13th Street above the entrance to the Little Theater in the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO.  
Photo by Jayson Gray.

stretch almost to the top of the building, emphasizing the height of the horizontal building.

Otherwise the broad expanse of buff limestone is mostly unadorned. “The comparative severity of its modernistic pattern is broken only by the few symbolic carvings. These are bold, strong and eloquent. These accentuate the classic note that even the most modern architects so often employ,” Austin Latchaw noted in 1935.<sup>6</sup> These carvings are seven bas relief roundels and two bas relief panels that illustrate the purposes of the building and the industries on which Kansas City was founded. Albert Stewart and H. F. Simons designed and carved these reliefs, which were clearly inspired by the two New York City theaters.

Albert Stewart was born in England in 1900 and immigrated to the United States at age seven. From 1925-1930, he studied at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, The Art Students League in New York City, and with sculptor Frederick MacMonnies. In 1930, Stewart became one of the leading assistants for Art Deco sculptor, Paul Manship. Manship’s most famous sculpture is *Prometheus* in the fountain in New York City's Rockefeller Plaza (1933), and Stewart undoubtedly was very familiar with his mentor’s work there.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Stewart must have also known Meière’s designs for the Radio City Music Hall and RKO-Roxy Theaters. By 1934, when Stewart was commissioned to do the reliefs for the Municipal Auditorium, he had already created many other architectural sculptures, including those for Buffalo, NY, Chicago, and St. Paul, MN.

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<sup>6</sup> Austin Latchaw, “The Inspiring New Municipal Auditorium a Civic Marvel,” *The Kansas City Star* 56, no. 75 (December 1, 1935): 12A.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas McClellan, et al., *Albert Stewart* (Claremont, CA: Scripps College, 1966), XV, 123-124.



Stewart's roundels for the Municipal Auditorium recall round plaques that were hung on Roman temples as offerings to deities.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, as his reinterpretation of an ancient source they provide an Art Deco touch to the new building. On the north façade above the main entrances to the Little Theater, Auditorium, and Music Hall, are three roundels exemplifying, from left to right, *Music and Poetry*, *Oratory*, and *Athletics*. These roundels embody the activities that commonly occur in the Municipal Auditorium. As Stewart explained in 1954, "...significant decoration can restore spiritual meaning to what may often otherwise appear to be nothing but a commercial shell."<sup>9</sup> Inscribed beneath these decorations is the title of the building and dedication, "Municipal Auditorium/ A Monument to the Public Spirit and Civic Ideals of the People."

Stewart's medallion of *Poetry and Music* above the entrance to the Little Theater freely departs from Meière's roundel of *Song* on the Radio City Music Hall (Figures 4.12-13). Stewart's design features a bare-breasted, athletic woman seated in the swirling clouds. Her head is bent and her thick fingers prepare to strum the strings of a type of lyre, while to her left, Pegasus, friend to the Muses, leaps from the clouds, his geometric wings fully extended upwards. Perhaps the woman represents Erato, the ancient Greek muse of Love Poetry, who is often shown holding a cithara. Following his established style of the 1930s, Stewart's figures are muscular and thick, and all of their creases, joints, and folds create a geometric weight that is lacking in Meière's design. Without the color of Meière's enamel, Stewart realized that his roundels would require extra contrast and solidity to be readable

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<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Robert Cohon, PhD, curator of Ancient Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, for this observation about the ancient Roman Oscillum.

<sup>9</sup> *American Artist Magazine* (December 1954), quoted in Douglas McClellan, et al., 93.



Figure 4.12. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Music and Poetry*, roundel on the north façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.13. Hildreth Meière, designer, and Oscar Bach, fabricator, *Song* roundel, Radio City Music Hall, New York City. Photo by Jayson Gray.

from the street level. In fact, except for its round format and nude figures, Stewart's roundel is markedly different from Meiere's earlier design.

The muse in *Music and Poetry* faces to the left, where *Oratory* and *Athletics* can also be seen. In *Oratory*, a bearded man is seated frontally with one foot above the other resting on a stone (Figure 4.14). His large toes peak out beneath his chiton. His pose is derived from ancient Greek representations of Zeus, particularly those inspired by Pheidias's colossal forty-foot tall, gold and ivory statue of Zeus for the temple of Zeus at Olympia (ca. 430 B. C. E., now destroyed; Figure 4.15). In these examples, bearded Zeus, the king of the gods, sits enthroned, with a staff in his upraised hand. In Stewart's version, *Oratory* also sits regally, but his left arm crosses his body, his finger extended in pontification. In his clinched right hand he holds a scroll. To his left sits the owl of wisdom. Stewart may have likened *Oratory* to Zeus since the spoken word can have the power of persuasion much like a god with a thunderbolt. Politicians who came to the Municipal Auditorium to campaign for office might have found strength in Stewart's model before them.

The figure of *Oratory* turns his head to his left in the direction of *Athletics*, where the nude figure of *Athletics* sits on a small pile of stones (Figure 4.16). His lap is draped with fabric, and on his right knee he balances a discus. He faces back in toward the right, where ahead of him hovers a branch of laurel tied with a ribbon. Stewart probably derived *Athletics* from a statue of Hermes by Lysippos (ca. 350 B. C. E.; Figure 4.17). Hermes was closely associated in ancient Greek culture with athletics, and many gymnasia had statues of him. The muscles in Stewart's figure are more geometric than Lysippos's, and the figure of *Athletics* seems intent to stay seated, whereas Hermes seems poised to stand up again soon. While not as dynamic, Stewart's figure was clearly derived from ancient sources.



Figures 4.14-15. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Oratory*, and *Athletics*, roundels on the north façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. The inscription beneath reads, “Municipal Auditorium / A Monument to the Public Spirit and Civic Ideals of the People.” Photos by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.16. Unknown, Greek, *Enthroned Zeus*, about 100 B.C., marble 29 1/8 x 18 1/8 x 17 15/16 in., The Getty Villa Malibu.



Figure 4.17. Lysippos, *Resting Hermes*, cast, Pushkin Museum, Moscow. The original was found in Herculaneum in the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, and is now in the National archeological museum, Napoli (inv. nr. 5625). Photo by Shakko/Wikipedia.

On the west façade of Municipal Auditorium is Stewart's plaque representing *Comedy, Drama, and Tragedy*, and two roundels, *Labor*, and *Agriculture*. Stewart's plaque is triangularly arranged with the elongated figure of Drama standing between the two lounging figures of Comedy and Tragedy (Figure 4.18). Comedy, a nude woman, leans back on her left arm, her left leg outstretched, and her right leg bent at the knee. In her other hand, she upholds a trumpet tied with a ribbon. Her heavily lidded eyes, which look up to the sky, and even rivulets of hair reveal Stewart's interest in reinterpreting ancient Greek art. Stewart may have been inspired by Thalia, the ancient Greek muse for comedy, who was often portrayed with a bugle or a trumpet.

On the other side of Drama, rests Tragedy, his bearded head bowed over a sword which rests on its point between his legs. Stewart strayed from his portrayal of female muses, and instead of depicting Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, he presents an elderly man. However, Melpomene was often portrayed with a bearded mask of tragedy and knife in her hands, which both appear in Stewart's figure of Tragedy. Again Stewart emphasized the figures' muscles, and even though the reliefs have worn away and gotten dirty over the many years since they were carved, they are still legible from the street below.

Between the figures stands Drama. She wears a skirt and shawl draped over her shoulders. In each of her upheld hands, she holds a mask for comedy and one for tragedy, and she turns her face towards the mask of tragedy. One roundel from Radio City Music Hall, *Drama*, seems to have inspired Stewart in his design for this plaque (Figure 4.19). Stewart clearly borrowed the overall composition featuring a centrally placed standing female figure flanked by two seated or crouching nude figures, above which are the masks of comedy and drama. Even the hair of Meière's figure of Tragedy with its long even waves

makes an appearance in Stewart's figure of Comedy. His changes, however, are significant. Instead of a frontally placed symmetrical woman with flamboyant drapery, as in Meière's roundel, Stewart incorporated forms derived from ancient sources. The pose of *Drama* recalls the pose of the Greco-Roman *Aphrodite Anadyomene*, especially in her contrapposto stance and her hands turned to her face (Figure 4.20).<sup>10</sup> Yet, in true Art Deco fashion, Stewart's designs are more geometric than the elegant ancient prototype. He freely departed from Meière's prototype with the smaller theater masks, the less naturalistic figures, and a mix of genders and ages. Stewart was obviously inspired by Meière's designs, but he turned back to ancient sources to create his own modern relief.

*Labor* and *Agriculture* flank the corners of the arena. *Labor* is a shirtless man in modern trousers who leans forward to his left to pour iron ore from a long-handled pouring bucket into a mold (Figure 4.21). Smoke curls behind his feet, and in the right-hand background is a hammer and anvil. *Agriculture* is a mirror of *Labor*, although this figure is a female (Figure 4.22). She leans forward to her right to hoe rows in the bumpy earth. Her hair is braided in a crown around her head, and she wears an Ionic chiton (an ancient Greek form of clothing that was pinned at the neck and girdled at the waist). In the distance is the fruit of her labors, an ear of corn. Labor and Agriculture are both industries that helped to establish Kansas City, and whose fruits would be lauded in exhibitions held inside the Municipal Auditorium.

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<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Robert Cohon for this observation.



Figure 4.18. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Comedy, Drama, Tragedy*, plaque on the west façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.19. Hildreth Meière, designer, and Oscar Bach, fabricator, *Drama* roundel on the Radio City Music Hall, New York City. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.20. *Aphrodite Anadyomene*, supposedly from Crete, 2 Century CE, Marble, height 63 cm., part of the exhibition *Die Rückkehr der Götter - Berlins verborgener Olymp*, Pergamon Museum Berlin, 2010-2011.



Figure 4.21. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Labor*, roundel on the west façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo from Eugene C. Zachman, ed., *The New Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, Mo.* (Kansas City, MO, 1936).



Figure 4.22. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Agriculture*, roundel on the west façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo from Eugene C. Zachman, ed., *The New Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, Mo.* (Kansas City, MO, 1936).



Above the entrance to the Exhibition Hall on the south end of the Municipal Auditorium is a plaque illustrating *Industry and Commerce* (Figure 4.23). To the viewer's left is Commerce, who is dressed in an Ionic chiton. Her left arm is upheld across her body and in her hand she holds a gear. In her right hand, which rests at her side, she holds a pair of calipers. She turns her head in profile to look across a tall geometric reinterpretation of an American flag to see the figure of Industry. He leans upon his upside-down hammer and anvil, and returns the gaze of Commerce. True to the style he had already established, Stewart's figures are thick and muscular, with heavy drapery encasing their bodies. Commerce and Industry are time-honored labors, and Stewart immortalizes them as figures from the ancient past.

The roundels depicting *Transportation* and *Livestock* enhance the eastern façade. One of these figures is also dressed in ancient Greek clothing. A seated man dressed in a chiton and chlamys (a type of cloak) contemplates the possibilities of the wheel as the future prospects of an airplane and a locomotive race forward on the horizon, thus embodying *Transportation* (Figure 4.24). This roundel was an important reminder of the profits available in transportation. Kansas City had recently built an airport, and had been an important stop along the railway for many years.

In the roundel of *Livestock*, the man wears modern pants although his chest is bare to reveal his deeply carved muscles (Figure 4.25). He leans against a textured tree stump, his left arm balancing his weight, his right knee raised and bent. Over his head is a hood, and in his hands he holds a bull staff, used for leading bulls by the nose. The bull stands facing the viewer in the left background. Livestock was a particularly important industry in Kansas City, and deserved a place of prominence upon the new civic center. The figures in both



Figure 4.23. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Industry and Commerce*, plaque on the south façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO.

Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.24. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Transportation*, roundel on the east façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO.

Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.25. Albert Stewart, designer, and H. F. Simons, carver, *Livestock*, roundel on the east façade of the Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO.

Photo by Jayson Gray.

*Transportation* and *Livestock* dominate the roundel, filling the space from head to toe. These figures also mirror each other. Both lean back on their perches, one leg raised, one hand extended behind to support their weight, and one hand holding a staff. They look across the expanse of the building toward each other, bringing unification to Stewart's design.

The Municipal Auditorium was clearly not a direct copy of the New York theaters. Most significant is the lack of color on the Kansas City auditorium. Stewart and Simons carved into the beige limestone instead of sculpting with metals and colorful vitreous enamel, like Meière and Bach. Not only does this reflect Midwestern and economic constraint, it also reveals how the architects did not need to employ vibrant color to catch the attention of passersby. The Municipal Auditorium is not hemmed in by eye-catching skyscrapers like the New York theaters, and its simple breadth is enough to attract attention.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, just three sculpted roundels adorn Radio City, but the Municipal Auditorium displays seven medallions and two plaques. The abundance of exterior sculpture is probably due to the greater expanse of the horizontal building devoid of many windows, which provided more space to decorate. But the Kansas City building also had a grander scope of purpose. It was not just a music hall or movie theater but a civic building, and benefited from more visual depictions of its intent.

### **The Interior**

The “dignified monumental style” of the Municipal Auditorium's exterior is a subdued prelude to the more flamboyant interiors, especially in the Music Hall and Little

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<sup>11</sup> Although a postcard from 1938 reveals that colored spotlights may have once illuminated the roundels on the main entrance. See Figure 4.3.

Theater, which were completed in 1936.<sup>12</sup> Understandably, the décor of spaces where performances are staged is less eye-catching, since the audience's attention should be on the performers. However, in the spaces where attendees gather before a performance—the Grand Foyer off of Thirteenth Street, the Music Hall's Grand Stairway and Orchestra Promenade, and the entire Little Theater—greet visitors with an exciting feeling of opulence, preparing them for the great spectacles of performance held within.

Once patrons enter the building and leave behind the soft buff of the Indiana limestone exterior walls, they are surrounded by opulent marble and warmer colors derived from “Century of Progress,” the Chicago World's Fair held in 1933-34. As architect Homer Neville explained, “The attractively gay colors of the world's fair in Chicago have taught us a lesson. People went to that exhibition to be amused and entertained. The bright colors cheered them up. People will come to this municipal auditorium principally to be amused and entertained. Why make it a drab thing? So they will come into a bright, gay colorful scene.”<sup>13</sup> During the Depression, the journey from a neutral exterior to a colorful interior may have contained a deeper resonance for visitors, who literally left behind the dreary world for a while to be entertained by fantasy.

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<sup>12</sup> This description of the style comes from Zachman, *The New Municipal Auditorium*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> A. B. MacDonald, “As the New Municipal Auditorium's Vast Halls Begin to Take Form; the Building Now Being Constructed Will dwarf Old Convention Hall,” *The Kansas City Star* (October 21, 1934): C1, 3C.

The Grand Foyer is the first room one enters after passing through the ticket lobby on Thirteenth Street (Figure 4.26). The room is encased in rich, dark Italian Levanto marble and flanked by 14-foot columns of red Spanish marble.<sup>14</sup> Above are large square coffers filled with square light-sculptures of gold and ivory by Albert Stewart (Figure 4.27).<sup>15</sup> Behind a frosted glass panel decorated with aluminum double octagons, Stewart incased the light source in an aluminum ridged box. Running perpendicular to each side of the square are five pieces of aluminum that act as anchors to the ceiling. Behind these are an aluminum square grid set surrounded by a line of smaller gold leaf squares. Stewart's geometric light sculpture perfectly harmonizes with the boxy geometry of the exterior of the building.

From the majestic Grand Foyer, any of the four main rooms can be reached, which is proof of the architects' ingenious planning for such a large, multi-purpose building (Figure 4.28). Straight ahead are stainless steel doors that lead into the promenade surrounding the Arena. To the right and left of the Grand Foyer are wide staircases descending to the Exhibition Hall below. To the left, beyond the staircase, is the entrance to the Little Theater. And to the right, beyond the staircase, is the entrance to the Music Hall.

From the lofty Grand Foyer with 14-foot columns and 3-foot plaster cornices, one enters the doors to the right into a lush and intimate Reception Room that is part of the Music Hall foyer (Figures 4.29-30). Once outfitted with streamlined sofas and arm chairs, the space is now mostly empty except for its original, heavy 1930s floor lamps.<sup>16</sup> Warm golden-brown, wood-paneled walls with black trim and a luxurious white marble fireplace remain, as does a

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<sup>14</sup> Zachman, *The New Municipal Auditorium*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



Figure 4.26. Entrance to the Music Hall from the Grand Foyer, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO.  
Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.27. Albert Stewart, gold and ivory light-sculpture, Grand Foyer, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO.  
Photo by Jayson Gray.

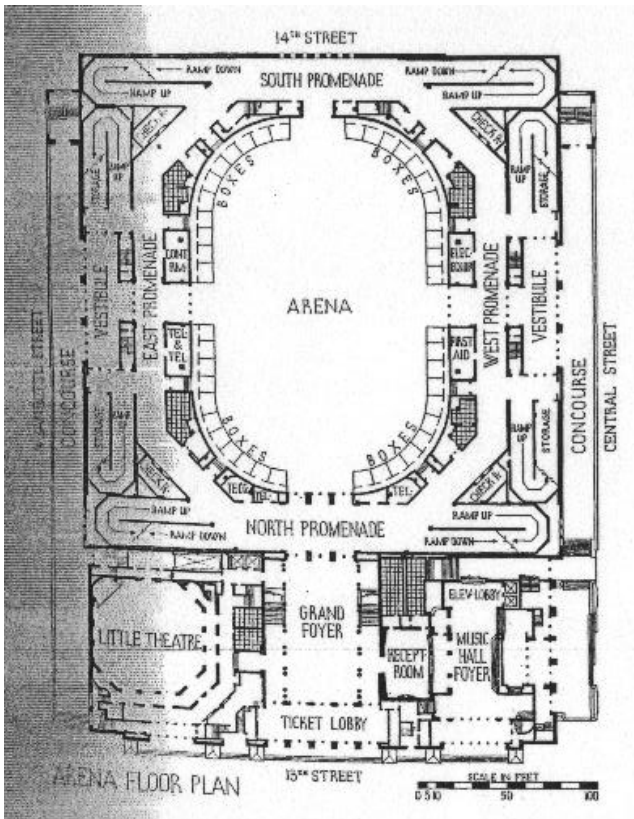


Figure 4.28. Floor plan of the ground floor, showing the 13th Street entrances, Grand Foyer, Little Theater, and Music Hall Foyer. Photo from "Kansas City Municipal Auditorium," *The Architectural Forum* 66, no. 3 (March 1937): 227.

thirteen-foot wide polished black nickel mirror along the south wall, which features a numberless clock.

Three steps, now replaced with a wheelchair-accessible ramp, led into the Music Hall's foyer, where another entrance from Thirteenth Street is available (Figure 4.31). A third entrance from Central Street is just down a short stairway and makes entering and exiting the space convenient. Adorning the walls of the Music Hall foyer and grand stairway are gray and yellow Sienna Melange marble with horizontal bands of Rellante and Breche Oriental marble.<sup>17</sup> The foyer floor is of pale yellow, brown and black travertine, with a central circular floor inlay depicting comedy and tragedy masks, horns and lyres.

Even more impressive is the twenty-seven-foot-high oil on canvas by Ross Braught (1898-1985) that astonishes guests as they begin their ascent to the grand promenade (Figures 4.32-33). Illustrating *Mnemosyne and the Four Muses*, the mural provokes a visceral response with its swirling clouds, undulating landscape and muscular nudes.<sup>18</sup> Braught, who had recently taught at the Kansas City Art Institute, said his "aim is to evoke an emotional reaction from the viewer...Style, technique, they are superficial." Dominating the top half of the painting is Mnemosyne, or Memory. Her head is thrown back, her arms overhead, and her knees fade away into the clouds, leaving her nude torso completely exposed, and making her quite memorable to visitors.<sup>19</sup> Clouds of gray, peach, and gold swirl

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in David Cleveland, *Ross Braught, 1898-1983: A Visual Diary* (New York: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, 2000), unpaginated.

<sup>19</sup> For Mnemosyne, Braught drew upon his earlier lithograph entitled *Diana*, which was illustrated in *Midwestern Artists' Exhibition*, February 2-March 2, 1936. It won the first prize in Graphic Arts.



Figure 4.29. Reception room looking east, in the Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.30. Reception room looking north, in the Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.31. Music Hall foyer and Grand Stairway, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo courtesy of Matt Kyle, sales manager, Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities.



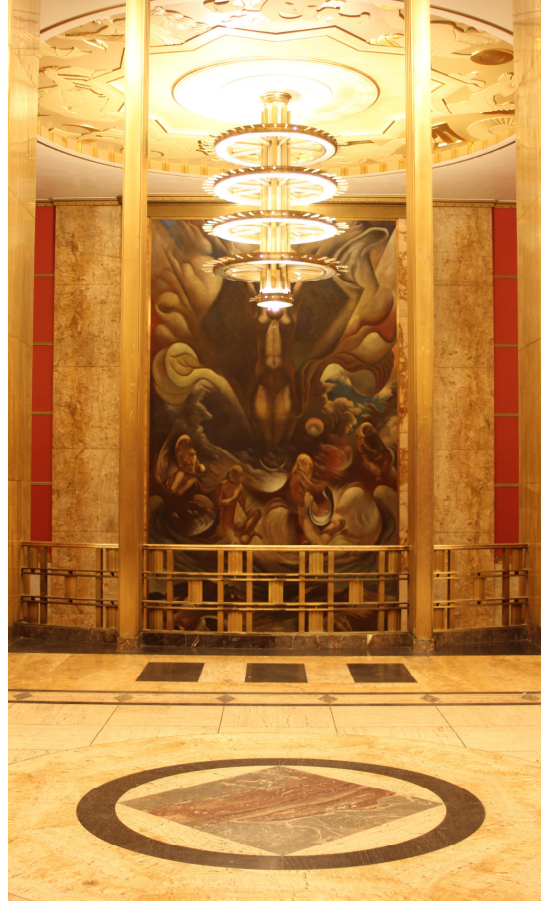
around her. At her knees is a crescent moon, and below her in a semicircle are her daughters, the four muses. To the viewer's left is the muse of Science, holding a sphere. Next to her is the muse of Plastic Arts, in whose lap rests a pyramid. Towards the front and slightly larger than her sisters is the muse of Music. Her prominence is only apt in the Music Hall, where instruments like the small lyre in her lap have been played thousands of times. Finally, on the far right is the muse of Literature, whose head is bent over a large book in her lap.<sup>20</sup> The clouds on which they hover darken and descend to a bleak landscape modeled on a painting by Braught entitled *Tschaikovsky's Sixth*, 1935 (Figure 4.34).<sup>21</sup> As Randall R. Griffey and Sally Mills have noted, it is symbolic that Braught chose this painting with its "symphonic title" to be included in his larger mural for the Music Hall.<sup>22</sup> In the mural, rolling hills, deep canyons, and wind-swept ridges nearly camouflage the small figure of humanity placed at the bottom of the canvas, who seeks inspiration from the muses above him. As guests climb the stairs to the grand promenade, they literally ascend from the level of humanity to the heights of muses as they prepare to absorb the music, poetry, and oratory in the Music Hall that also will heighten their own creativity. Unfortunately, when viewed from the balcony of the grand promenade, Mnemosyne is mostly obscured by Albert Stewart's long, four-tiered chandelier, giving her the appearance that she is hung by her head from the sculpture.

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<sup>20</sup> "Mural by Braught Adorns Kansas City Hall," *The Art Digest* (August 1, 1936): 7.

<sup>21</sup> Marianne Berardi, *Under the Influence: The Students of Thomas Hart Benton* (St. Joseph, MO: The Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, 1993), 62. The painting is now at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret C. Conrads, ed., *The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, 1 (Kansas City, MO: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007), 154-159.



Figures 4.32-33. Ross Braught, *Mnemosyne and the Four Muses*, oil on canvas; Albert Stewart, chandelier and bas reliefs, grand stairway, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photos by Jayson Gray.

Figure 4.34. Ross Braught, *Tschaikovsky's Sixth*, 1935, oil on canvas, 35 7/8 x 40 1/8 inches (91.12 x 101.92 cm), The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.



In some respects, the placement of Braught's mural on the grand stairway is similar to the placement of the mural in Radio City Music Hall by Ezra Winter (Figure 4.35). Winter's mural, *The Fountain of Youth*, presides majestically over the Grand Foyer staircase. It leads a viewer visually and invites guests up the stairs. The colors of the Radio City mural—henna red, gold, sage green, and whites—reappear in the red walls, golden accents, and browns, greens, golds, and whites of the murals in Kansas City's Music Hall.

As one ascends the stairs to the orchestra promenade, a choice must be made. The staircase splits to the left and the right at the landing where Braught's mural is hung, creating an imperial stair. The walls wrap around the staircase with the corners rounded out, and the incised horizontal lines on the exterior reappear on here. Horizontal bands of Rellante and Breche Oriental marble give way to rich red plaster with gold metal bands spaced evenly along its height. This decorative technique is quoted directly from the stairs descending to the Grand Lounge in Radio City Music Hall, even down to the tall, banded "silent ushers" that mark the railings in a crowd of people (Figures 4.36-37). The walls and ceiling in the New York City stairway are all gold; Neville made the Kansas City stairway more cheerful through his use of color.

Not to be outdone by spectacular paintings, Albert Stewart created elegant and modern light sculptures. Above the grand stairway, the chandelier of four parallel gold and silver rings pierced by spokes of Lucite hangs from a thick column of silver with gold ridges (Figure 4.38). To one critic, the commanding sculpture was reminiscent of a mariner's wheel, four times repeated.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Stewart was inspired by Radio City Music Hall, which was itself intended to evoke a huge ocean-liner. To complement his chandelier,

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<sup>23</sup> "New Music Hall Viewed," *The Kansas City Star* (May 26, 1936): 5.



Figure 4.35. Grand Foyer, Radio City Music Hall, New York City.  
Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.36. Grand stairway, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.

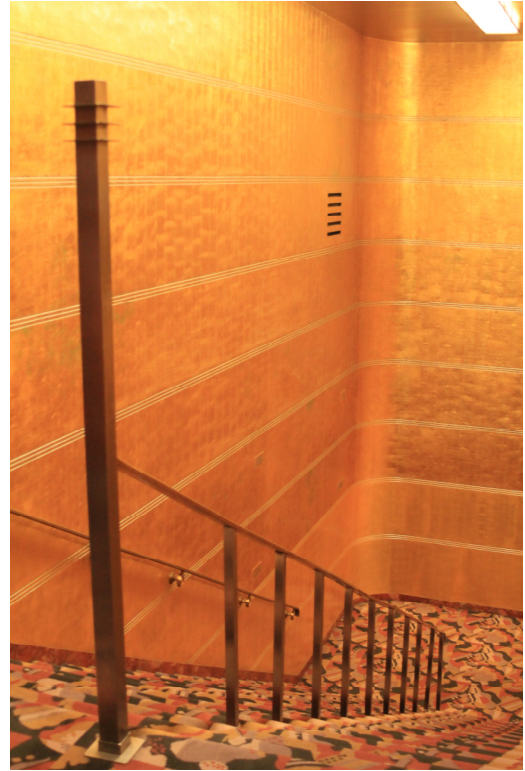


Figure 4.37. Stairway to the Grand Lounge, Radio City Music Hall, New York City. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.38. *Mnemosyne and the Four Muses* mural by Ross Braught, and chandelier and bas reliefs by Albert Stewart, grand stairway, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.

Stewart enriched the ceiling with bas relief mythical figures. Starting from the morning sun in the bas relief around to the night star and moon on the opposite side, the figures dance, write, play, strum and act, thus symbolizing the theatrical and musical arts. In the chandelier and ceiling decorations, Stewart clearly drew upon those in the RKO-Roxy Theater (Figure 4.39). At the RKO-Roxy, a three-tiered graduated funnel-shaped chandelier-sculpture is similarly set against a backdrop of bas relief mythological characters. But for Municipal Auditorium, Stewart transformed them into a more luxurious and ornate work of art.

Other smaller variations of Stewarts “mariner wheels” chandelier can be seen in the stairway and along the orchestra promenade (Figure 4.40). Concentric circles and Lucite spokes reappear to create unity in diversity. From every angle, whether glancing up to the promenade from the grand stairway or studying the promenade chandeliers up close through the porthole windows along the loge mezzanine, the light sculptures are elegant and modern (Figure 4.41).

Four murals, entitled *Four Seasons*, by Walter Alexander Bailey (1894-1989) adorn the Music Hall’s grand promenade. Bailey was born in Wallula, Kansas, and worked as an artist for The Kansas City Star before moving to Taos, New Mexico, in 1927.<sup>24</sup> Because of his early ties to Kansas City, he returned nine years later to teach at the Kansas City Art Institute and to create this series of four 17 x 9-foot paintings representing *The Seasons: Childhood or Spring, Youth or Summer, Middle Life or Autumn, and Age or Winter* (Figures 4.42-45).<sup>25</sup> Bailey painted the massive forms of mountains, forests, and valleys as seen through a screen of elongated trees. These landscapes were inspired by those found in New

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<sup>24</sup> “Two Music Hall Murals,” *The Kansas City Times* (February 26, 1936): 219.

<sup>25</sup> “Bailey’s Murals,” *The Art Digest* 11, no. 8 (January 15, 1937): 20.

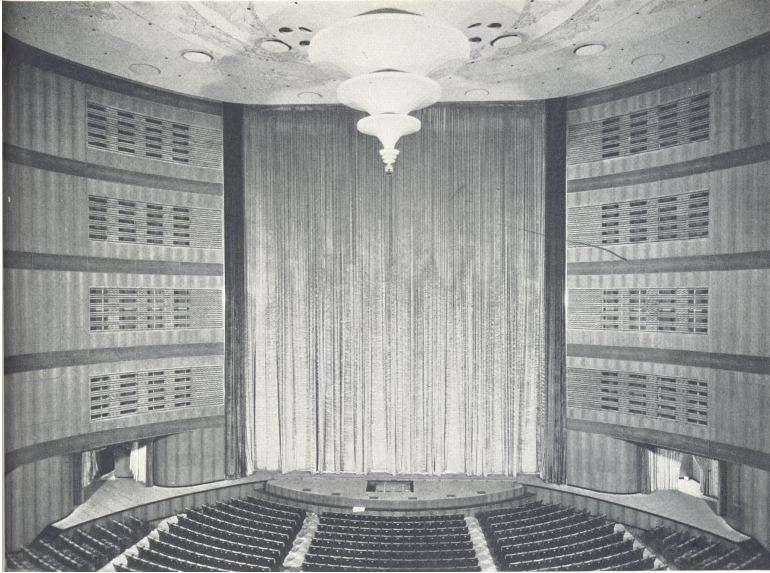


Figure 4.39. The RKO-Roxy Theater, New York City. Photo taken by Browning Studios, from *American Architect*, no 2614 (December 1932): 49.



Figure 4.40. Light-sculpture, chandelier, and bas relief by Albert Stewart, grand stairway of the Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.41. Light-sculptures by Albert Stewart in the grand promenade, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figures 4.42-45. Walter Alexander Bailey, *The Four Seasons*, murals in the grand promenade, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Above left, *Spring*; Above right, *Summer*; Below left, *Fall*; Below right, *Winter*. Photos by Jayson Gray.





Mexico and Colorado, where the artist once resided.<sup>26</sup> Tiny, shadowy human figures, their backs to the viewer, turn toward the immense landscapes in the distance, emphasizing the dominance of nature over humanity. Even when Bailey included multiple figures in certain scenes, the murals provoke an overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation, even a bit of the surreal. When they were first completed, critics called them “Wagnerian,” perhaps for the music they evoke.<sup>27</sup> His murals have an autumnal palette, including blues, greens, golds, oranges, and lavenders, and their luminosity brings to mind stained glass windows. During intermission, visitors to the Music Hall fill the grand promenade, where these murals act as elegant backdrops and even pseudo-windows to amuse waiting patrons.

If the placement of Braught’s grand stair mural is akin to Ezra Winter’s *Fountain of Youth* at Radio City Music Hall, Winter’s subject matter is more akin to Bailey’s *Four Seasons* in Kansas City.<sup>28</sup> The progress through time is the same journey depicted in Winter’s mural. In Bailey’s mural, the human figures are not specific characters and their locations represent any place.<sup>29</sup>

Along the orchestra promenade, walls of gold and ivory, with gray and yellow Siena Melange marble and Golden Siena travertine, add luxury without distracting from the murals.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Susan V. Craig, “Biographical Dictionary of Kansas Artists (active before 1945),” (faculty research project, University of Kansas, August 2006), 16, <http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/bitstream/1808/1028/1/BDKAversion1.pdf> (accessed on January 29, 2013), and “An Artist Makes Own Field of Opportunity,” *Richmond, Va. Times-Dispatch* (January 5, 1931), clipping, artists’ files under B, Thomas J. Watson Library archives, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

<sup>29</sup> Winter’s mural was based on a Native American legend about the “author of life.” Christine Roussel, *The Art of Rockefeller Center* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 48.

But the doors to the Music Hall theater with their vibrant red fabric covering beckon (Figure 4.46). Golden comedy and tragedy masks, flanked by decorative squares, enliven the doors and are reminiscent of the geometric alignment of the sixty-six bronze plaques by René Chambellan that adorn the auditorium doors inside Radio City Music Hall (Figure 4.47).

The red doors of the Music Hall act as a prelude to the rich red interior of the theater itself (Figure 4.48). Upholstering the walls is mulberry red silk, and between are gold bands that encircle the walls, reiterating the bands on the grand staircase and exterior façade. As a critic previewing the theater in 1936 noted, “They suggest the bars in music, and imaginative children of all ages are likely to fill the spaces between them with notes of music heard on the stage...”<sup>30</sup> Architect Neville again drew upon the RKO-Roxy Theater (see Figure 4.39), but with a better effect. His banding alternates between thick and thin as it wraps the theater, providing variation to the décor. The only other decoration upon the walls are long casements on either side of the stage with bronze Greek key grilles.<sup>31</sup>

When Music Hall opened in 1936, the seats were covered in coral mohair and arranged to provide a center aisle in the theater.<sup>32</sup> In 2007, the stage was enlarged, more seats were added, the center aisle was eliminated, and the coral upholstery was replaced with mulberry red to more closely match the walls.<sup>33</sup> One of the most elegant features of the theater is the white tiered, lyre-shaped ceiling, its four strings running perpendicular to the

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<sup>30</sup> “New Music Hall Viewed,” *The Kansas City Star* (May 26, 1936): 5.

<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, these are now hung with stage lighting and partially obscured by dark plum curtains.

<sup>32</sup> Zachman, *The New Municipal Auditorium*, 14, and interview with Matt Kyle, sales manager, Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities, December 14, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Kyle interview.



Figure 4.46. Doors from the orchestra promenade into the Music Hall theater, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figure 4.47. Doors from the Grand Foyer into the Music Hall theater, Radio City Music Hall, New York City. Photo by Jayson Gray.

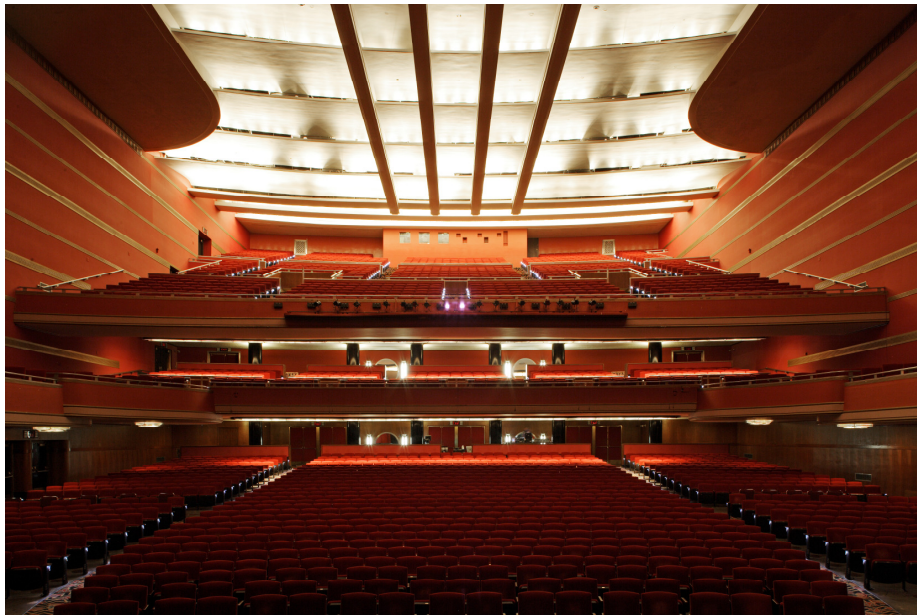


Figure 4.48. Theater seen from the stage of the Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo courtesy of Matt Kyle, sales manager, Kansas City Convention and Entertainment Facilities.

stage, which was designed by architect Homer Neville.<sup>34</sup> In a space that is mostly mulberry red, the light-colored ceiling is a respite for the eye and a subtle reminder of the Music Hall's purpose. The lyre seems to be best appreciated from the performers-only stage, where the added height and lack of overhead balconies contribute to a fuller view.

Between performances, guests had the opportunity to relax in separate men's and women's lounges off the bathrooms on the balcony promenade level. The women's lounge was wallpapered and set with delicate neoclassical furniture (Figures 4.49-50). Today a custom mirrored light fixture with graceful curves and a giant round mirror are all that remain of the women's lounge (Figure 4.51).

Even the men's lounge is nothing but a memory, which is quite unfortunate, since several murals by Lawrence "Larry" Richmond have since been removed.<sup>35</sup> Richmond had done his studies at the Kansas City Art Institute, and later worked in Chicago and Kansas City as a designer, decorator, mural painter, art teacher, and lecturer.<sup>36</sup> A critic surveying the Music Hall in 1936 described his mural thus: "On the walls of the men's lounge there is a lively mural by Lawrence Richmond. The theme is a western roundup, with cowboys in 10-gallon hats riding multicolored mustangs. Mess wagons and other appropriate objects are seen in the distance. Cacti and other desert plants carry the decorative scheme to other walls."<sup>37</sup> Richmond's mural of a "masculine subject" was appropriately Midwestern with its

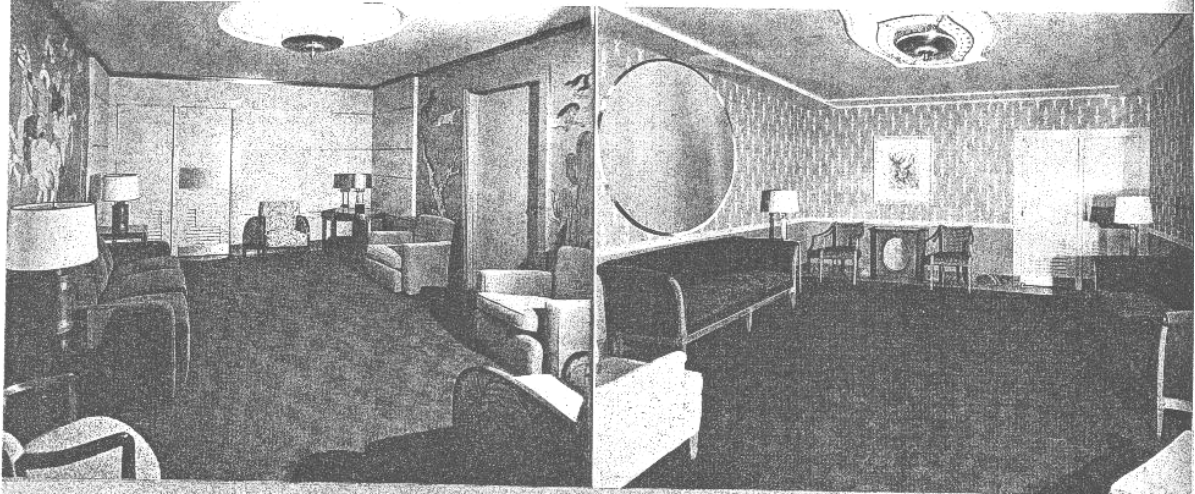
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<sup>34</sup> Although in his own modesty Neville called it merely a "gimmick." It is not, however, just a ploy, but a sophisticated and appropriate design element. Neville Interview.

<sup>35</sup> The author has been unable to find a good reproduction of Richmond's now lost mural.

<sup>36</sup> Craig, "Biographical Dictionary of Kansas Artists," unpaginated.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



Figures 4.49-50. Left, Men's Lounge with mural by Lawrence Richmond, and, right, Women's Lounge, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo from Eugene C. Zachman, *The New Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, Mo.* (Kansas City, MO: Fratcher Printing, 1936), 14. The author has been unable to find a better reproduction of Richmond's now lost mural.



Figure 4.51. Homer Neville, Women's bathroom light fixture, balcony promenade level, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.

inclusion of rodeos stunts that could be seen a few miles away at the American Royal.<sup>38</sup> Indicative of a more masculine room, the lounge was originally outfitted with heavier, plusher furniture.

Radio City Music Hall must, once again, have been the primary inspiration to the architects when designing Kansas City's Music Hall. Besides the use of the lounges, so luxuriously appointed at the Radio City Music Hall, the theme of the Kansas City Music Hall's men's lounge relates closely to the men's lounge on the third mezzanine of Radio City Music Hall, where muralist Edward Buk Ulreich (1889-1966) painted *Wild West* in oil paint mixed with sand on leather (Figure 4.52).<sup>39</sup> Flanked by cacti and steers, a cowboy rides a bucking bronco and his ten gallon hat goes flying. The Kansas City architects were no doubt struck by the relevance of a cowboy mural to their own building, in the middle of cattle country.

When Municipal Auditorium was completed, with the Music Hall and Little Theater officially opening in 1936, it was during a singular time in Kansas City's history. The eleven-story building rose up as a symbol of triumph over the constraints of the Depression and despotism of the city's government. Situated on a foundation prepared by the Ready-Mix Concrete Company of Boss Tom Pendergast, designed by architects handpicked by the boss, and overseen by the self-centered and crooked city manager, the Municipal Auditorium is all the more notable for its iconic stature in Kansas City.

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<sup>38</sup> "New Music Hall Viewed," *The Kansas City Star* (May 26, 1936): 5.

<sup>39</sup> Roussel, 74-75.



Figure 4.52. Edward Buk Ulreich, *Wild West*, men's lounge, third mezzanine, Radio City Music Hall, New York City. Photo by Jayson Gray.

But the Municipal Auditorium is especially important as one of the first and largest examples of Streamline Moderne design in Kansas City. It was the courage of the architects, particularly lead designer Homer Neville, that took the building beyond the remnants of Art Deco, even evident in Radio City Music Hall, and brought it firmly into a new decade. And these architects would not have had their chance if the Boss had not gotten his way. Because of architect Alonzo Gentry's familial ties to a politician close to Boss Tom Pendergast, his firm was chosen as the lead architects for the Municipal Auditorium project over the more experienced firm of Hoit, Price and Barnes. This allowed Neville to design a refined and streamlined building, which he did by reinterpreting aspects of recent and successful auditoriums and theaters, particularly the Radio City Music Hall and RKO-Roxy Theater.

Municipal Auditorium, with its more austere exterior, its collaboration of local artists, and its smaller scale interiors, are unique to Kansas City. This unique collaboration brought the Midwestern outlook that infuses the Music Hall and imbues it with a character particular to Kansas City. The Municipal Auditorium cost just \$500,000 less than the seven-million-dollar Radio City Music Hall, but it contains four times as many large spaces, including an arena and exhibition hall.<sup>40</sup> Despite this, Kansas City's Music Hall is cloaked in opulent marbles, colorful paintings, and dramatic light-sculptures. From its stunning chandeliers, to its tempestuous mural, and a theater that surrounds guests in mulberry red, the Music Hall still embodies the civic ambition of Kansas City's politicians and architects. From the many local hands that shaped the Municipal Auditorium, to the politicians that ensured its construction during the Depression, the Municipal Auditorium is infused with Kansas City's

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<sup>40</sup> "Radio Music Hall to be Movie House: 6,200-Seat Theatre to Go on Popular Price Basis," *New York Times* (January 6, 1933): 23.



history, life and culture in ways that make it unique.<sup>41</sup> As long as it stands, Municipal Auditorium will be a reminder of the Spirit of Kansas City.

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<sup>41</sup> As architect Helmut Jahn said, “a building is connected to a city’s life and culture....Buildings are connected to a place and they’re not exchangeable.” Helmut Jahn, KCAF Legacy Lecture Series, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, November 12, 2012.

## CONCLUSION

Over the years, the grandeur of Municipal Auditorium has been somewhat overlooked, while the story of its birth has been largely forgotten. Planning and construction for the building began during the height of Kansas City's machine politics under the control of Tom Pendergast and H. F. McElroy. These "instinctual builders" influenced their "monument in stone and concrete" primarily in their choice of architect. Pendergast and McElroy decided that the established firm of Hoit, Price, and Barnes should have the secondary role of associated architects, while the newer firm of Gentry, Voskamp, and Neville would receive the privilege of designing the entire building. This placed young architect Homer Neville in the role of primary designer for the project.

Neville drew heavily upon the Radio City Music Hall and RKO-Roxy Theater in New York City, which had been recently built. His resultant building, the Municipal Auditorium, is a thoughtful mix of Art Deco and Streamline Moderne styles, with a little European modernism. Early sketches show that Neville originally conceived the exterior in a Beaux-Arts style with pilasters and a multitude of windows. However, as the Auditorium's function became grander, the windows had to be eliminated to accommodate the many different rooms. At the same time, the architects relinquished classical elements in favor of uninterrupted expanses of stone with a few select decorative embellishments. The horizontal banding, or streamlines, decorating the northwest and northeast corners of the building are direct manifestations of the Streamline Moderne style. On the other hand, the zigzag setbacks of the roofline and geometric figures in the bas relief carvings are reminiscent of Art Deco.

Art Deco began in France in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but gained worldwide popularity after the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris in 1925. In architecture, Art Deco typically references the type and style of ornamentation applied to buildings, often geometricized roses, stylized starbursts, and zigzag lightning bolts. The Kansas City Power and Light Building is a prime example, and was built by Hoyt, Price, and Barnes just a few years before they were commissioned as associate architects for the Municipal Auditorium. Radio City Music Hall, designed by Donald Deskey, is considered an Art Deco masterpiece because of its polychrome decoration and refinement. But its urban sophistication and use of industrial materials give it a uniquely American feel. The Municipal Auditorium does not have traditional French Art Deco ornamentation, but the weighty, geometricized roundels by Albert Stewart are an American interpretation of Art Deco.

Streamline Moderne was an American style of the 1930s and 1940s that was inspired by transportation and industrial design. Horizontality and aerodynamic shapes were derived from locomotives, automobiles, airplanes, and steamships, and the architecture most often appeared as roadside diners, gas stations, and bus depots. Parallel “streamlines,” rounded corners, and shining surfaces epitomize the Streamline Moderne style. The Municipal Auditorium is not a complete example of this architectural style, particularly due to its lack of rounded corners. But its streamlines and aluminum flag poles and marquees were certainly inspired by Streamline Moderne.

Neville and his associates originally planned the Municipal Auditorium in a Beaux-Arts style, with pilasters, roundels, and friezes, but as the project progressed, the architects gradually eliminated most of these decorations. They abstracted the building to its simple

geometries, with minimal windows and a few select decorative roundels and plaques. Through their abstraction, the architects adapted a small part of the European modernist style known as the International Style. The Municipal Auditorium design does not fulfill the three core principles of the International Style: having volume over mass, having regularity over symmetry, and eliminating arbitrary decorations. However, along its wide width are great expanses of unencumbered surface, almost as if its volume was wrapped in a skin. And its decorations are sparingly and carefully sited. Indeed the architects abstracted the building to its core volume as European modernists demonstrated. However, true modernism would not appear in the United States until the arrival of Mies van der Rohe in 1938; Neville and his associates were also hesitant to adopt a completely abstract and modern style. For this reason, the Municipal Auditorium is uniquely American and Midwestern.

The Music Hall interior, too, is a more restrained version of the American Art Deco masterpiece, Radio City Music Hall, and its sister theater, RKO-Roxy Theater. The patterns in the Kansas City Music Hall are less frenzied and the vibrant colors are subdued with more neutrals. Neville's designs are opulent without being overbearing, and simplified without looking provincial. Elements of the interior were inspired by the Streamline Moderne style, such as the horizontal banding in the Grand Stairway and theater, and the elegant light-sculptures by Albert Stewart. Neville's thoughtful mix of Art Deco inspiration and Streamline Moderne manifestations created a luxurious interior unique to Kansas City

In fact, the interior of the Music Hall is reflected and enlarged on its adjacent neighbor, the Bartle Hall Pylons (Figure C.1). The four concrete pylons soar 335 feet above the roof of Bartle Hall, and are topped by 24-by-25-foot aluminum and steel sculptures, called Sky Stations, by R.M. Fischer. Constructed in 1994, the Sky Stations resemble

Stewart's light-sculptures in the Music Hall. The Sky Station on the eastern side with its radiating tiers of spokes resembles the spokes of Stewart's light-sculpture in the Music Hall's Grand Stairway (Figure C.2). The Sky Station next to it, and the one on the west side, with their single tier of radiating spokes may have been inspired by Stewart's light-sculptures in the Music Hall's Grand Promenade (Figure C.3). The globe shape and illuminated spots of the last Sky Station are reminiscent of the colorful jewels encircling the light fixtures on the Loge level of the Music Hall (Figure C.4). The Lucite spokes and gold and ivory bodies of Stewart's creations made a lasting impression on Fisher. In his reinterpretation of the Streamline Moderne masterpieces, he created a prominent symbol for Kansas City. As one views the skyline, particularly from the south, or enters the city from Interstate 70, the pylons and Fisher's Sky Stations are unique reminders of the Municipal Auditorium.

From its Streamline Moderne exterior to its geometricized roundels, and from its elegant murals to its opulent light-sculptures, Municipal Auditorium deserves to be remembered as a grand masterpiece.



Figure C.1. Bartle Hall pylons, (view from W. 12th Street, looking east), Kansas City, MO. Photo in the public domain.



Figure C.2. Albert Stewart, light-sculpture, grand stairway, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photo by Jayson Gray.



Figures C.3-4. Albert Stewart, light-sculptures, Grand Promenade and Loge, Music Hall, Municipal Auditorium, Kansas City, MO. Photos by Jayson Gray.

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