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The Romance of the Skyscraper: The American Insurance Union Citadel, Columbus, Ohio

Edward W. Wolner

On 21 September 1927 John J. Lentz, founder and president of the thirty-three-year-old American Insurance Union, conducted elaborate opening ceremonies in downtown Columbus, Ohio for America's first completed skyscraper city-within-a-city. The complex included a 1,000-room hotel, a 4,000-seat theatre, and a forty-six-story speculative office tower that was the fifth tallest building in the country, as well as the corporate headquarters for Lentz's nationwide insurance company.

While these facts made the complex unique in skyscraper development up through 1927, the American Insurance Union Citadel's greatest singularity was the extent to which it became the object of a series of both sentimental and serious romances. Embedded in the public presentations of the Union, and in contemporary responses to the Citadel by local historians and newspapers, these romances distinguished the project not simply as an operational reality but as a complex of associations directly related to what was most characteristic and compelling about urban life in the 1920s.

In this context, the AIU Citadel possesses a yet unrecognized importance in attempts to analyze historically the elusive iconic power of the skyscraper. The original responses to the canonical examples of this building type often located skyscrapers in another more mythical world whose contents nevertheless escaped precise definition. Of the categories borrowed from literary theory and popular culture to render the skyscraper's aura less ineffable, none occurred in the 1920s with more frequency than "romance."¹ And the Citadel's multiple romances not only structure the history of an important, undocumented complex of buildings, but also provide an analytical framework for a more thorough understanding of the expressive power of the skyscraper in general than these previous, purely descriptive uses of the term "romance" have allowed.

The Citadel's romances embodied the characteristics that Northrop Frye has specified for the literary form of the romance. In it members of a dominant social, economic or intellectual class hold up their ideals for approval or emulation by a larger audience. Romance thus publicly dramatizes a quest or search by means of which that class seeks to deliver itself and others from the obstacles that obstruct the establishment of a more perfect social order. This struggle usually involves heroic or quasiheroic action whose morality pits absolute good against absolute evil; it often invokes a magical or seemingly magical suspension of the laws that govern natural events and human relations; and it always results in the reconciliation of normally irreconcilable worlds.

Historically, the association of romance with an urban, commercial middle class is especially pronounced in romance's more accessible forms, in popular literature, public spectacles and ritual events such as the groundbreaking, cornerstone and dedication ceremonies for the American Insurance Union Citadel. Because it was a city-within-a-city, because it dominated an urban environment removed from the metropolitan centers of New York City and Chicago, and because its design and construction occurred at the outset of the well-known skyscraper building boom between 1924 and 1931, the AIU Citadel resulted in a more naive and therefore a richer elaboration of many components in the romance of other skyscrapers. That is, the Citadel's promotional literature and its architectural, sculptural and decorative imagery sought to reconcile or integrate civic with capitalistic enterprises, religious with secular values, technological with natural domains, impersonal metropolitan sophistication with the communitarian inclinations of towns and small cities.

The American Insurance Union and the Romance of Public Realm

The romance of the skyscraper depended in part on a relaxation of the public criticism and distrust of industry and business that had characterized both these sectors of American life since the 1880s. By the 1920s, business domination of American civilization had become a frequently celebrated fact, a development summed up in William Feather's 1922 declaration in the *Nation's Business*: "There is no doubt that the American businessman is the foremost hero of the American public today."²

In this climate insurance acquired an image of public beneficence. In the 1920s rates of disabling or fatal disease, of work-related accidents and deaths, along with the numbers and percentage of Americans with inadequate or no insurance coverage, were much higher than those of subsequent eras. These conditions led individual companies to stress the social obligation to buy insurance as well as the social service that they rendered in selling it. The romance of the AIU Citadel began as a direct architectural extension of the romance of business benevolence in general and that of the insurance industry in particular, of the profession by many corporations that their commitment to public service in one form or another approached in importance their need to make a profit.

Moreover, the AIU's advocacy between 1900 and 1935 on behalf of major social and political reforms gave it a more believable claim on the status of a quasi-public institution than most other corporations or insurance companies could make. John J. Lentz expressed these commitments in the principal address given at the Citadel's cornerstone ceremony held on 16 February 1926.³ Lentz pointed out that since World War I the AIU had supported reform of the nation's system of orphan care and of the social circumstances that produced the 500,000 "underprivileged children [who] furnish eighty percent of all the criminals in America". As part of the AIU's long-standing opposition to alcohol consumption, Lentz, a lawyer and former two-term member of the United States House of Representatives, for several years donated by his own estimate ten percent of his working hours annually to the Anti-Saloon League "to assist in the writing into the law of the land the Eighteenth Amendment, the Volstead Act, and kindred legislation." The AIU not only supported the Nineteenth Amendment, "to enable our mothers and wives and sisters to be full-fledged citizens" but employed at least three women as senior executives. The Union's campaign against child labor culminated in its petition of more than 78,000 names in favor of the Twentieth Amendment, a petition "reported in the press association [sic] as the largest. . . . filed by any organization on behalf of liberating the childhood of the nation from the slavery and degradation due to the greed of . . . mercenary employers."

Given such commitments, Lentz in effect initiated the Citadel's romance of the public realm on 21 September 1927, when he dedicated the building as a civic monument, "a Citadel that shall

stand not only as a symbol of the high and lofty ideals which motivate the American Insurance Union, but as an expression of our feeling for the city in which it stands, a monument to civic pride and duty."⁴ Just as romances end by purifying their worlds of contradiction and ambiguity, so Lentz represented the AIU as an organization that had displayed the antagonism between profit-making and doing good. His stentorian language was also quasi-oracular in the manner of many romance narratives at those moments when they reveal the purposes of a select group of people pledged to a higher good:

We expect to lengthen the radius and enlarge the horizon of the thinking manhood and womanhood and childhood that come in contact with our Society, and thus to ennoble the citizenship of this great Republic by directing their attention to the morals and the manners and the general welfare of the government which shelters and enriches them.⁵

In such a grandiloquent ambience, as in romance itself, virtue flourished with an allegorical intensity. Purity, temperance, and continence, a trinity of virtues common to the romance, were inherent in the AIU's stand on prohibition, in the rhetorical consecration of Columbus as "the shrine and altar place" of AIU ideals. Where beauty and virtue empower heroines in the traditional romance, women's suffrage was the AIU's new female agency. Romance also closely associates virtue with childhood, an association consonant with the Union's campaigns to redeem child laborers, reform the system of orphan care, and develop a form of insurance that gave adequate protection to children.⁶ Lentz' public representation of the AIU turned apprehension over life's contingencies, the motive for purchasing insurance, into the symbolized quest for socially redemptive forms of protection, into the romance theme of the chivalrous rescue. Even the building's name was tied to romance, in which the symbolism and reality of a citadel is often crucial, the action revolving around a beleaguered but finally impregnable castle.

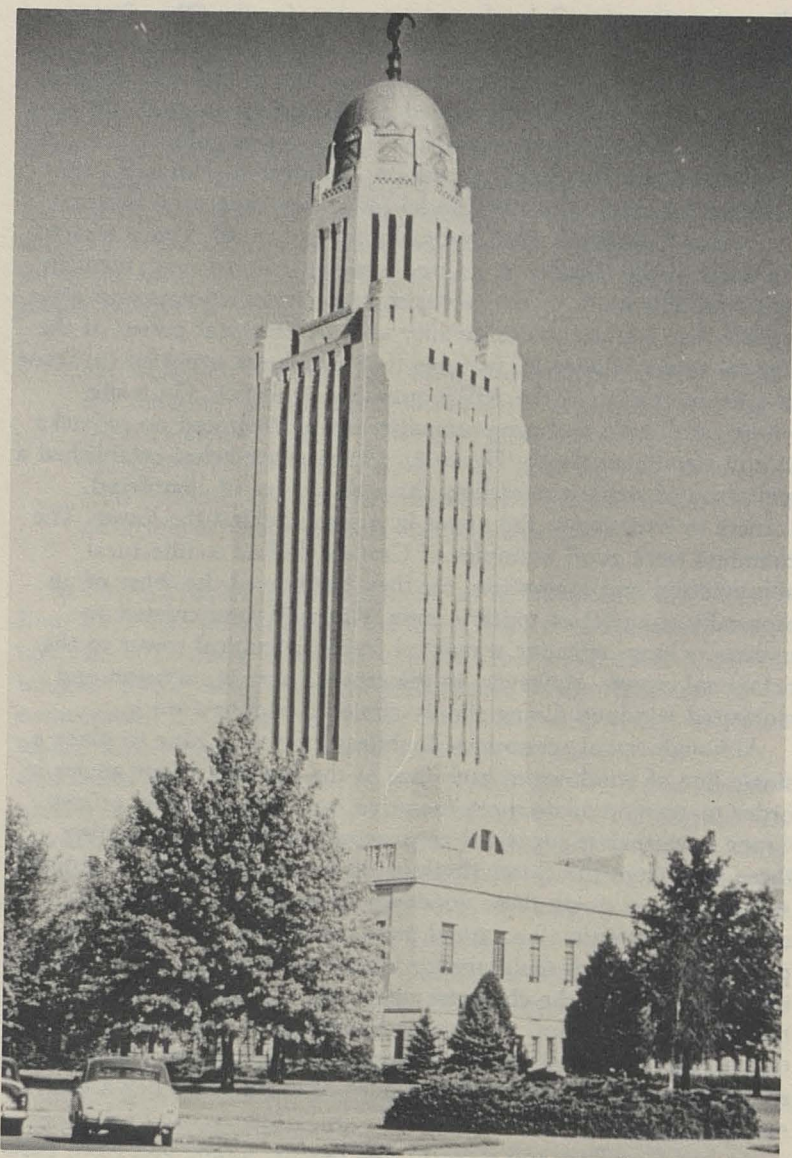
*The Romance of the Public Realm and the Architecture
of the AIU Tower*

Despite the AIU's options on other sites, it chose to build

adjacent to the new Columbus civic center, for the *Ohio State Journal* reported on 8 March 1925 that "when the civic center proposal became an assured fact the directors of the AIU decided to build on the site already owned by themselves to make their building a part of this development."⁷ To express public commitments in the building's design, architect C. Howard Crane intelligently adapted to the Citadel tower key aspects of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue's 1920 Nebraska State Capitol. Crane treated the walls of the Citadel as a Goodhuesque sculpted mass through subtle modifications of the setbacks, emphasized corners and deep reveals that marked the originality and architectural power of the Capitol tower (Figure 1), features that may have appealed to Crane as a fit expression of the AIU's quasi-public stance. On a site whose small area and programmatic density tolerated no setbacks of any significant depth (Figure 2), Crane nevertheless established a real sense of setback modelling through his use of chamfered corners in two stages, the upper in a plane behind the lower. The chamfers were good examples of Crane's skill at architectural abbreviation and suggestion, for they heightened the sense of an especially compact or unitary mass (Figure 3), and created an unusually long, effective transition from the cubical tower to the octagonal crown. However, in the crown's turrets, octagon and elongated windows Crane simply copied Goodhue's work.

Although rental economics doubtlessly forced Crane to place a single line of windows in each face of the building's four angles in order to accommodate more lucrative, prestigious corner offices, Crane nevertheless suggested emphasized corners by separating these lines from the closer rhythms of the intervening fenestration and by discontinuing these windows altogether above the first chamfer. The sense of a carved mass, combined with extensive programs of figural sculpture for both the Capitol and the Citadel, imbued each with the character of a public monument, a character that during this period of American history was still inseparably tied to the idea of a modeled masonry building whose purposes were symbolically expressed by means of a sculptor's hewn or molded figures.

As had Goodhue and sculptor Lee Lawrie, Crane and New York sculptor Carl Keck integrated form and meaning by distributing their sculpture over those surfaces of the Citadel tower that clarified and accentuated the composition of its masses, particularly at its uppermost levels and setbacks (Figure 3).⁸ On



*Figure 1. The Nebraska State Capitol, circa 1935. Lincoln, Nebraska.
Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. 1920.*



Figure 2. *The American Insurance Union Citadel circa 1930. Columbus, Ohio. C. Howard Crane. 1924.*

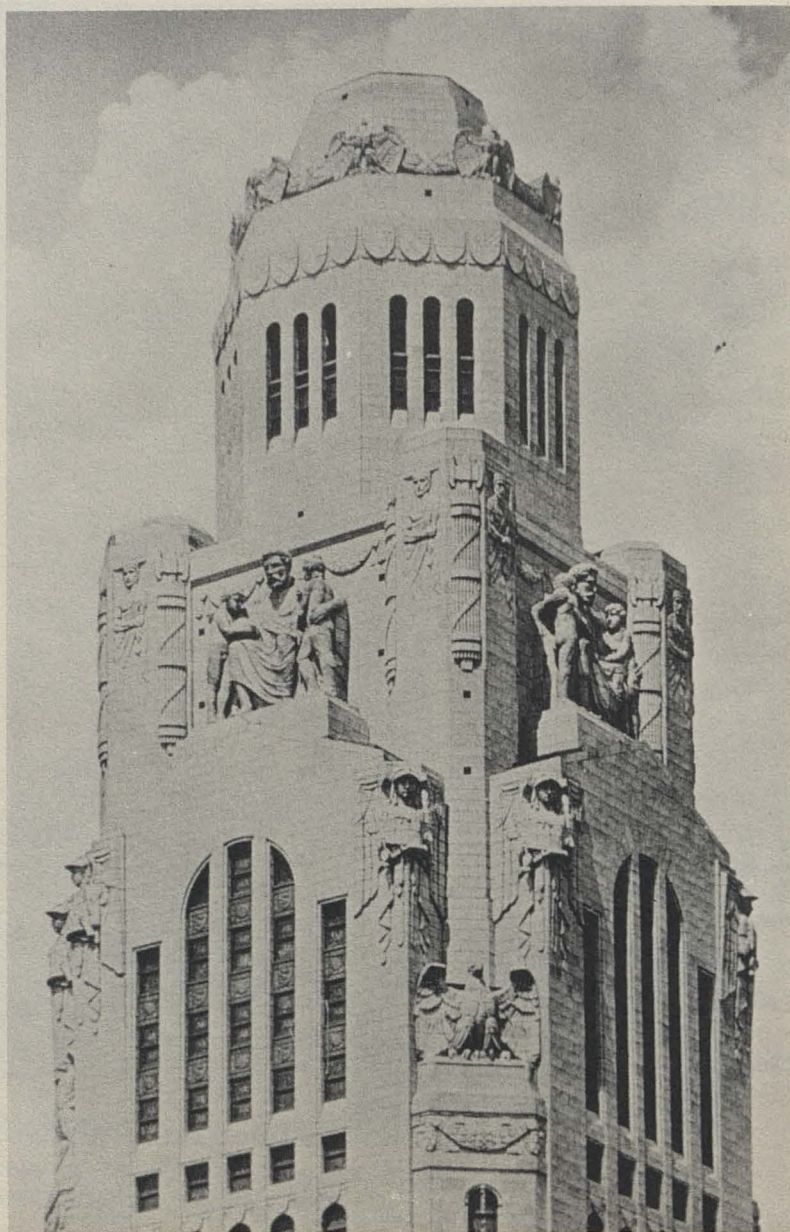


Figure 3. Crown of the AIU Citadel, circa 1935.

each of the tower's four corners, extending from the 35th to the 38th floors, are a pair of guardian angels. Their blocklike configuration and simplified detail derived from Lawrie's unification of wall and sculpture for the Capitol, in which human figures for the first time in large-scale architecture rose directly out of blocks of stone (Figure 3). Each angel in a pair holds a blank scroll, one representing the past success of the American Insurance Union, the other the Union's future achievements.

Originally above them in the middle of each side of the tower were four identical groups of free-standing sculpture, in each of which a giant gazed out from the tower with his arms paternally embracing two standing children, a gesture that according to the Citadel's 1927 dedication booklet represented "insurance protecting and educating the youth of the land."⁹ The Citadel's sculpture also joined private with public interests to an extent unequaled by the iconographic program of any earlier office building. The most prominent among several examples featured eight spread-wing American eagles ringing the penultimate level of the crown, four more originally placed between the lower and higher chamfers, and a pair flanking each of the building's two principle entrances.

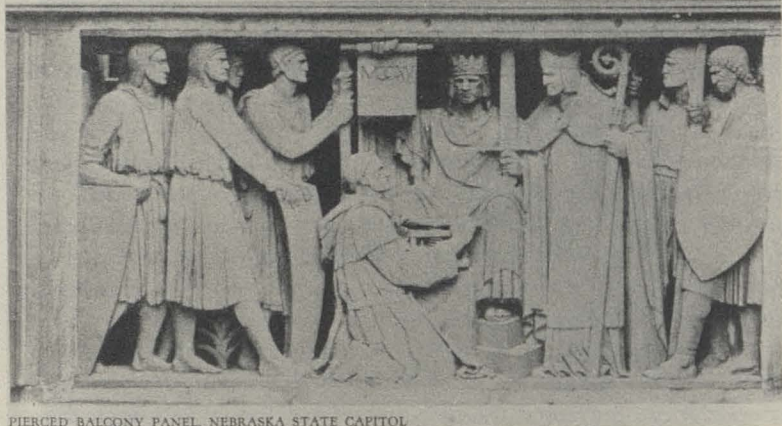
Like Lentz's oratory the tower's sculpted images presented the Union in the terms of a romance. The identification of virtue with childhood occurred in the figures of youth embraced by the giants, and in the eight cherubs who, on the crown's rim, suspended garlands of bay and laurel between them and who typified "regal splendor."¹⁰ The reciprocal figures of paternalistic benevolence were the giants and the guardian angels, the latter also figuring the romance virtues of purity, temperance, and continence.

Yet by the standards of the Nebraska Capitol's sculptural program, the Citadel's romance is naive. At Lincoln the major exterior frieze presented the development of the law through the events that gave its epic sweep historical specificity, from the promulgation of Mosaic law to Napoleonic codifications and the entrance of Nebraska into the Union (see Figure 4). Inside the building equally specific references to aspects of Nebraska's history gave the sculptural, mural, and mosaic work a complexity that sustained literary interest in the purposes of civilization and the state.

Despite the fact that Lentz and many of the American Insurance Union chapters throughout the country had participated in some of the most important social issues of the time, the eagles, the giants,



PANEL FROM THE "DEVELOPMENT OF THE LAW," NEBRASKA STATE CAPITOL



PIERCED BALCONY PANEL, NEBRASKA STATE CAPITOL

Figure 4. Two of the Panels from the frieze, "Development of the Law," at the Nebraska State Capitol: the lower panel shows the enactment of the Magna Carta.

and the angels with their unscripted tablets referred to this history in only a remote, disembodied fashion. Mixed visual metaphors involving protective figures also marked the sculpture as naive romance. The cherubs, guardian angels, and giants, along with the keystone heads of the protectress Athena over the arched windows of the mezzanine floors on the north and east wings, were from

inconsistent mythologies. Rather than the points of expanding awareness represented by the different figures in the Capitol's frieze on the history of the law, the Citadel's different guardians were redundant.

The confusions to which naive romance is subject were manifest as well in the conflict between degrees of sculptural relief. In modelling guardian angels after Lawrie's figures Crane and Keck presumably sought to capitalize on the visual drama to animate figures rising out of a blank wall. Yet the fully three-dimensional eagles immediately below and the free-standing giants and children immediately above, bracketed and upstaged whatever visual power was inherent in this drama, a weakness that the subsequent removal of both the eagles and the giants did much to remedy (see Figures 3 & 4). Originally, however, the different images demonstrated such an eagerness to make their point that they had no literary, historical, or aesthetic center.

The Romance of Religious Values

A circular bronze plaque, described in the dedication booklet as "set in the marble [lobby] floor directly beneath the center of the tower," most strongly characterized the AIU's putative integration of spiritual and secular worlds (Figure 5). At its center, within a circle of stars symbolizing America's thirteen original states, were the AIU initials, an acronym referring to both the corporation's name and its long-standing patriotic slogan, "American Ideals Uppermost." In the next circle out was the proverb, "He Loves God Who Serves Man Best." In his cornerstone address Lentz had defined this creed of the AIU as "eight words summarizing the substance of all the ten commandments of all religions of the world."¹¹ The penultimate circle represented the sun's rays and the positions occupied by the planets when Lentz laid the cornerstone. In the outermost circle was Lentz's creed of religiously based citizenship and political purpose: "An Honest Man is the Noblest Work of God and An Honest Government is the Noblest Work of Man."

On the day the building opened, a reporter for the *Ohio State Journal*, having also discovered that the plaque occupied a position directly over the center of the densest concentration of caissons that supported the skyscraper, observed that the plaque signified the following:



Figure 5. 1927 drawing of the bronze plaque in the floor of the AIU Citadel lobby.

the architectural symmetry of the tower, its structure in an engineering way . . . , its position on the earth's surface . . . its relative position in the solar system as well as its position in space and time . . . , [all] this information is embodied in an insignificant point . . . , a small circle incised at the exact center of the seal on the letter 'T' . . .¹²

The plaque symbolism effectively appropriated an archetype of sacred architecture, one in which a temple or church expresses the relationship between human and divine worlds through a design organized around a vertical axis that marks not only the center of a building, but an organizational, spiritual, and cultural center as

well, all the world that fundamentally matters to a particular group of people.¹³ In addition, the appropriation fit the terms of a romance, in which Christian or more generalized religious enlightenment is often the object of romantic quest-seeking. And since Lentz authored the two proverbs, described in the dedication booklet as "words of religious and political wisdom," he assumed in addition to his organizational and civic leadership, the mantle of the wise elderly figure, the spiritual tutor who frequently appears in romances.

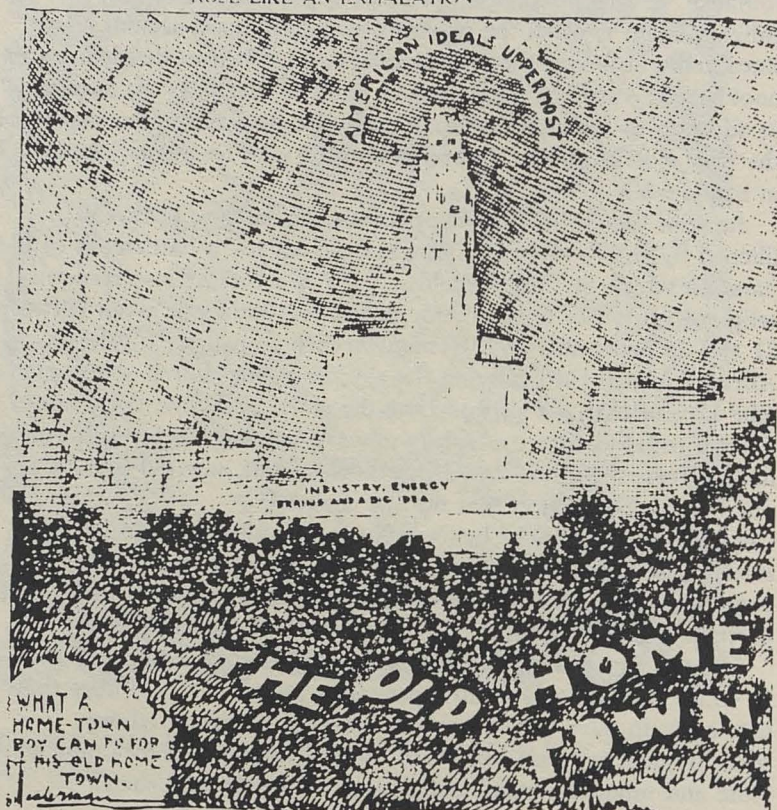
As with the earlier Woolworth Building in New York City, likened by the Reverend S. Parkes Cadman to "a battlement of the paradise which St. John beheld . . .,"¹⁴ the Citadel inspired quasi-religious responses in the major dedication addresses given between 21 and 23 September 1927. Thus Harvard University historian Alfred Bushnell Hart, allying the skyscraper to church spires and "the love of man for approaching the stars," declared that "our Citadel today carries our spirits upward beyond the level of our daily selves, thoughts, and aspirations." Lentz asserted that "it is our humble conviction that no one can visit Columbus. . . . without being influenced by [its] heaven-inspiring sweep. . . ." And for its congratulatory drawing on the editorial page, the *Ohio State Journal* quoted the Bible: "Anon Out Of The Earth A Fabric Huge Rose Like An Exhalation" (Figure 6).¹⁵

In part, these responses were a function of an historical period in which religion was a more pervasive aspect of the culture than it is now. In part, they were a function of a culture whose technological prowess, surfeit of natural resources, Protestant work ethic and uniquely broad distribution of wealth and social opportunities had since the beginning of the 19th century constantly reinforced an optimism that identified material and spiritual progress. Adding to these particular conditions was the nearly universal association in history between height and spiritual worth, so that the skyscraper joined other symbols—mountain tops, towers, ladders, and spiral staircases—that represent contact between finite and infinite worlds.

The Romance of Technological Power

In the 1920s, musical metaphors frequently accompanied celebrations of the coordination, efficiency, and precision necessary in the erection of a skyscraper's steel frame. Just such a section in

"ANON OUT OF THE EARTH A FABRIC HUGE
ROSE LIKE AN EXHALATION"



Editorial of the Day:

Letters from Our Readers

Figure 6. Dedication or congratulatory drawing of the AIU Citadel, editorial page of The Ohio State Journal, 21 September 1927.

the AIU booklet described a site where "staccato notes of merry riveting hammers resounded," where the frame's "glowing rivets" were "tossed up with unerring accuracy from the tongs of the man below," arching "through the air into the deftly manipulated

buckets of the riveters," and from there "bucked" and "flattened" into the frame "by palpitating blows of the air hammer. . . ."¹⁶

The romance here was in the form of a prose equivalent for the panegyric, or the poem in praise. The author's language, however lacking in fresh or surprising images, employed the panegyric's union of sound and sense to heighten, and thereby praise more effectively, the physical reality of an action or object. The gerunds "riveting" and "palpitating," the adjectives "staccato" and "merry," the verbs "resounded" and "flattened," and the nouns "hammer" and "blows" attempted to create similar physical pulsations in the reader. As for sight, the adjectives "glowing" and "red hot," the verbs "arched" and "tossed," and the nouns "tongs" and "buckets" and "air hammers" made up a kind of picture writing, so that the whole passage became a series of captions to scenes from a construction process that was no longer visible. Words instantly called up pictures, and pictures absorbed words; images addressed the ear through the eye, and the eye through the ear.

This dense a concentration of the aural and the visual was an attempt, literally, to chant the reader into a state of being receptive to something intangible for which the steel frame was the tangible sign. Like college yells and national anthems, this was an example of popular culture's myriad poems of community,¹⁷ a prose song that glorified work, offered a mystique of participation, invited readers to join the community of progress for which the passage attempted to create an emblematic scene.

Having already converted the risk of high-perched steel workers into an adventure by celebrating them as "utterly contemptuous of the violent death that lurked below," the text then announced that Rudyard K. Tucker, a carpenter's apprentice, lost his footing "in a temporary elevator and fell to his death from the 35th to the 20th floor." Referring to four earlier fatalities as "regrettable," the text nevertheless thankfully noted that "no greater toll of life was exacted in view of the magnitude of the project," that only "one more life, the last, [had been] sacrificed on the altar of progress."¹⁸ In this episode of the romance the man's name, position and 15-floor drop were details needed only as part of an attempt to intensify the reader's sense of the danger and honorific nature of steel work. A kind of ritual death, frequently that component in romances that is the price for some unusual power, thus consecrated the absolute faith in technological beneficence professed by the AIU.

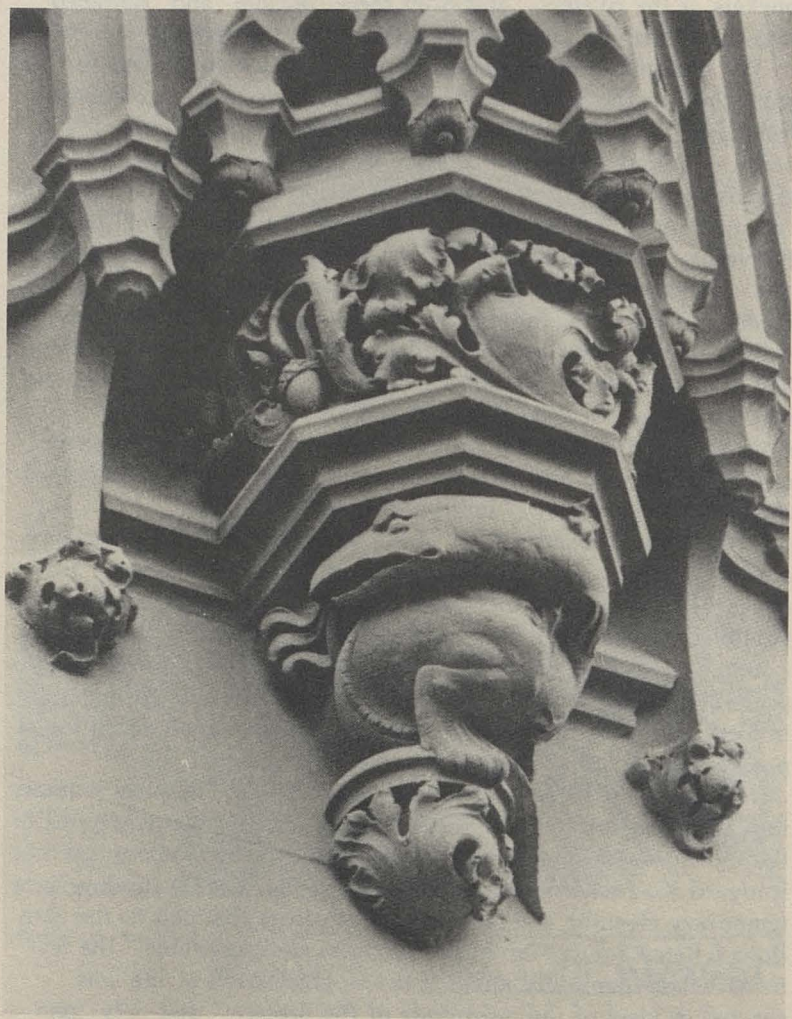


Figure 7. Main entrance and coiled salamander corbel, Woolworth Building, New York City. Cass Gilbert, 1913.

Another dedication booklet romance focuses on building-material transformations, one which begins with the Citadel's terra cotta cladding, a surface made to resemble "white oak bark." Fired to a solidity that gives the material "the resistant qualities of iron" and the partial vitrification of glass, terra cotta, according to

Roger L. Waring, Crane's architectural superintendent, is as sensitive to changes in light and atmospheric mood "as the waters of [a] lake"; unlike some other building materials worn down by the elements, "wind, rain and storm. . . . only serve to mellow and enrich its dignity," and "in its beauty and sturdiness" it resembles the "majesty" of "mighty trees" or "the forest."¹⁹

The continuing novelty in the teens and twenties of ever taller buildings in cities that had a skyscraper tradition and even in cities that did not, and the quantities of any one building material required in their construction induced a fascination with the composition of these materials and their transformation through either natural or manufacturing processes. The Woolworth Building, for example, carries a sculpted version of the same fascination. Supporting each of the two principal niches on either side of the building's main entrance is a coiled salamander, the symbol in medieval alchemy for the transformation of baser metals into gold (Figure 7). Architect Cass Gilbert used this creature to symbolize the transformation of iron and clay into the Woolworth Building's steel frame and its terra cotta cladding.²⁰

Alchemy, among popular romance's most revered suspensions of natural law, is the analogue to the interest in building-material properties provoked by the skyscraper, an interest that inspired Marie W. Vandegrift, editor of the *American Insurance Union Magazine* and Director of AIU Publicity, to write a poem about natural materials geologically compressed into the granite in the Citadel's cornerstone block:

Oaks grew to towering heights,
Fell before age,
Back to their earthly heritage.
And, lying supine in wilderness
Melted and fused. . . .
Infinitesimal grains of sand
Silt from the floods
That Covered the land. . . .
Eons and ages and decades to press
Shaping its crystalline loveliness. . . .
Beauty and strength and endurance are there
Fashioned and shaped with infinite care.
Not man-made stone, but God-made granite.²¹

Behind Gilbert's salamander, the booklet's terra cotta and Vandegrift's granite there is the same naive wonder over the essential mystery of basic forms of matter, over the process of materials transformation that, while scientifically comprehensible, still retains an irreducible element of "magic." But there is also a fundamental difference between granite and terra cotta, between iron and steel. In Vandegrift's view, granite is God-sent, a divine or natural alchemy. In the views of Gilbert and the AIU booklet, terra cotta and steel are man-made, close human approximations to the alchemist's vaunted power of transubstantiation.

That is, they represented a world in which nature no longer dominated and contained human society, in which men and women had acquired a kind of omnipotence, the successful containment of powers of nature within their own systems of order. Terra cotta in Waring's view maintained itself, was fireproof, as visually poetic as a lake surface, and not less resistant than iron. From a distance it passed for stone, while close-up the passer-by saw a wood-grain pattern, geomorphic matter having become a biomorphic metaphor for the mottled texture and coloring of bark on a tree. The romance of terra cotta in part was the romance of a total material, a man-made nature that literally and metaphorically contained the properties of other natural materials within it.

The Citadel's technological romance also included conventional statistical summaries of the extraordinary amounts of mundane objects and matter inside the building, as in the Citadel's "twenty-six miles of pipe protected by seventeen miles of pipe covering," or "2370 plumbing fixtures and 2100 radiators."²² But these "amazing details," like similar ones for earlier skyscrapers, resulted in statistical overkill and lacked the dramatic resonance of other less precise measures of the skyscraper's unprecedented technological aggregations. For example, Reverend Cadman's expostulation—"Brute material has been robbed of its density and flung into the sky"²³—succinctly expressed the poetic contradiction in the Woolworth Building and many other skyscrapers between the weight or mass of these buildings and their anti-gravitational aesthetics.

The *Ohio State Journal's* caption to its congratulatory drawing, "Anon Out of the Earth a Fabric Huge Rose Like an Exhalation," encapsulated for the Citadel what Cadman had sensed in the Woolworth: matter divested of mass, a building in apparent

defiance of gravity. Similarly, a nighttime delicacy, as when "high up in the great inky pool of altitude, lights recede to tiny glimmers," contrasted with the heftier image of "a mighty tower of unusual height [that] governs the skyline," or the skyscraper *chiaroscuro* of a tower and crown partly "bathed in illuminating glory, in part shrouded in shadows." On the Citadel's observation platform visitors could see "by day a map of curious tints lying at their feet, or by night a great dark velvet carpet, powdered by diamond dust and looped with strings of pearl."²⁴

Other equally forceful measures of scale embodied what the AIU regarded as its technological prescience. Opened in the same year that Charles Lindberg christened the airplane age with his historic non-stop solo flight from eastern Long Island to Paris, the AIU tower was to be what no other skyscraper had been, an aerial lighthouse (Figure 8) that was to send five "fingers of light vertically into the sky." Observable at a distance of eighty to ninety miles, the search lights were "to guide night-flying aviators, who may chart their courses accordingly," to warn "airmen passing over the city" that a building of great height required navigational adjustments, and finally to serve as "the recognition of one great enterprise for another."²⁵ No records show that the scheme was implemented, nor were two proposals agreed to by Lentz in 1926 to use the Citadel as a fire lookout for the city and as a platform from which to spy bank-robbers escaping in the still novel technology of the automobile.²⁶

Here the romance of technology took on a protean character, the AIU tower's repertoire of shifting and overlapping roles consistent with an inner logic, one that again involved the conceit of a protective citadel. Whether workable or not, all these ideas spoke of technology's new potency, that over and against the natural order was a distinctly human one in which planes and cars replicated and superseded the flight, mobility and groundspeed of creatures in nature, and whose skyscrapers were the means to control such natural aberrations as fires and such human ones as robbery and potentially errant aviators.

The Romance of the City-Within-a-City

The AIU Citadel inaugurated America's nearly decade-long fascination with the idea and reality of skyscraper cities-within-cities. As such the architecture of its tower, hotel, and

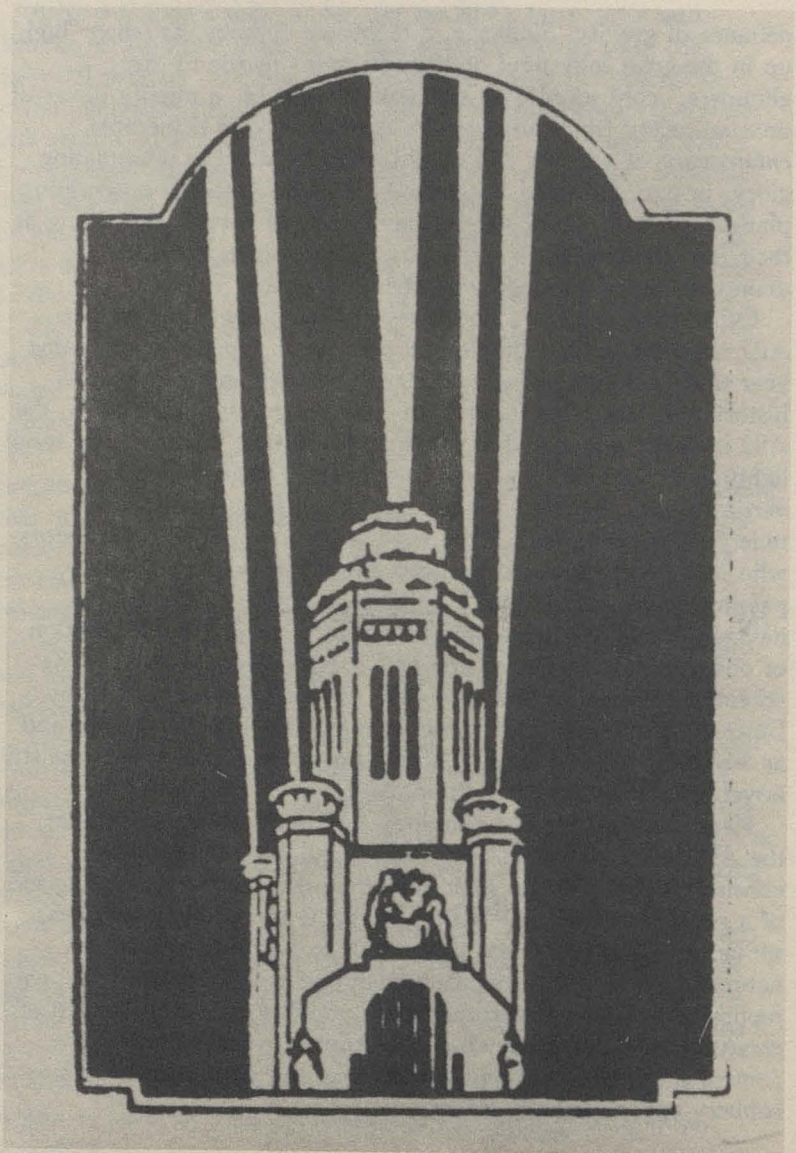


Figure 8. 1927 drawing of the AIU Citadel showing its proposed use as an aerial lighthouse. From the AIU dedicatory booklet.

theatre portions intersected or gave rise to other romances connected with the nature of city life during the one period in the nation's history when Americans in large numbers affirmed the city as a place in which to live. In this regard the Citadel's distinct functions involved a double movement: the evolution of its multiple uses out of the city's history and the grafting of a sophisticated metropolitan future into Columbus's present.

At the northwest corner of Broad and High Streets, on a block that had been owned by his family since 1817, developer John Deshler gave Columbus one of its few earlier examples of big-city sophistication with the completion in 1916 of a 400-room, 12-story grand hotel designed in a sumptuous Adamesque style by the Chicago firm of Holabird and Roche (Figure 9).²⁷ This event, extravagant opening ceremonies arranged by New York hotel managers Lew and Adrian Wallick, the hotel's ornate gold table service, period furniture, and the then unusual feature of private baths in 350 of the 400 rooms caused "even blasé New Yorkers," in the words of Bill Arter, one of Columbus' popular historians, to pronounce "the Deshler the most beautifully equipped [hotel] in America," which promptly became the hotel's permanent advertising sobriquet. Arter noted that for young Columbus residents of the time the Broad and High Street landmark symbolized "glamor unalloyed, a place of peculiar magic and ambitions to be fulfilled."²⁸

With the growing number of midwestern conventions held in Columbus, Deshler and the Wallicks agreed to lease 600 additional rooms in the AIU complex. The addition expanded on the past by filling out the romance of the original hotel, a romance flavored by New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker, who on opening night "tried to have a ceremonial sip of wine in each of the new 600 rooms. According to legend, he almost made it."²⁹

On the AIU tower site, similar changes transformed past uses. On 8 January 1927, nine months before the building opened, the first official run of an AIU elevator from the ground to the thirty-seventh floor provided Columbus Mayor James J. Thomas with a trip from his past into the city's future. Thomas's father had owned a grocery store on a portion of the Citadel's site, his family living in the second story of the building. One of the founders of the American Insurance Union, Thomas rode with a party of AIU officials on what a *Journal* reporter called "the longest haul lift in the world, as well as the fastest, with its 900-foot a minute speed."



Figure 9. Inset: The Deshler-Wallick Hotel, Columbus, Ohio. Holabird and Roche, 1916. The addition of 600 rooms to the hotel occupies the east wing, or lower portion of the AIU Citadel visible just behind the hotel in the larger photograph, in the same wing as the Palace Theater.

For Thomas it was a trip "straight up in the air from the spot where he was reared as a lad."³⁰ Similarly, the AIU Temple, a two-story structure which had been the company's headquarters since 1906, was demolished to accommodate a skyscraper, the names "temple" and "citadel" reflecting the shift in scale.

Yet another transformation of an earlier Columbus institution involved Keith's, a theatre near the AIU site and one leased since 1906 by E.F. Albee as part of his northeastern-midwestern vaudeville circuit. Wishing expanded facilities, Albee entered into lease arrangements with the AIU for a new theatre embedded in the hotel addition, the theatre opening 7 November 1926. Its romance turned on Albee's transplantation to Columbus of all major facets of the metropolitan popular culture centered in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and a design whose every aspect reflected the social and commercial realities of the movie industry and large-scale vaudeville production.

Vaudeville artists favored Keith-Albee houses because of their superior performing and lay-over facilities. Thus backstage at the Palace there was a ten-floor dressing-room tower that was virtually a small hotel. Among other facilities was a nursery where mothers wishing to attend matinees could leave their babies in the care of a nurse who provided them with toys, games, tables, and chairs, milk cooled in a "modern refrigerator," and a bathroom equipped with wash stands and "a half-size commode for the comfort of junior bottoms."³¹

As the competition in both the vaudeville and movie industries in the early 1920s intensified further in the middle of the decade, the design of the spatially and materially lavish public portions of their theatre facilities became as potent and seductive an element of fantasy as any movie or stage show booked by the management. Design sold the theatre in the same way that advertising sold its productions, a stratagem whereby managers tried to guarantee not simply that the audience went to movies or vaudeville shows but to their particular showcase.³²

The architect for nearly all the Albee houses was Thomas Lamb, one of the two or three most experienced designers of large theatres in the country, someone able to coordinate opulent materials and unusually large spaces. Thus, the walls of the Palace's large foyer and the still more capacious lobby, as well as those of cosmetic and restrooms, were paneled in Verde-Antique marble. On axis with the foyer and lobby was a white marble

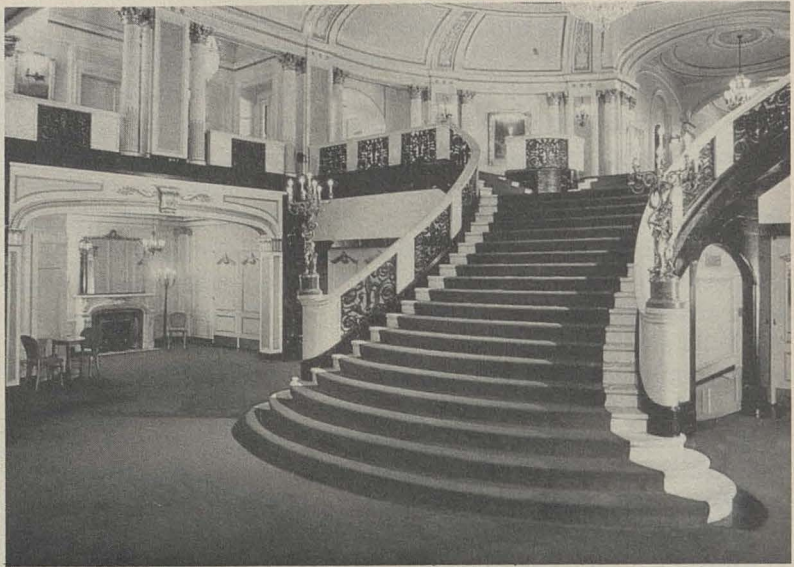


Figure 10. Lobby of the Palace Theater, Columbus, Ohio. Thomas Lamb, 1926.

grand staircase (Figure 10). Chandeliers of Czechoslovakian crystal heightened the contrasts among the Verde-Antique's myrtle and opalescent veins, the gold-tinted scrollwork on walls and vaults, and the glossy black, old-rose deep-plush carpet. While the theatre was treated as sumptuously as if it were located on Broadway itself, nothing in the design represented a significant departure from what Lamb had done in recent work. The Palace was, however, an unusually complete aggregation of contemporary means of architectural refinement in movie and vaudeville houses, and in one respect, it outdid all other theatres save one.

In the foyer of the E.F. Albee theatre in downtown Brooklyn, New York, a theatre Lamb was designing at the same time he was at work on the Palace, Albee exhibited a selection of paintings from his own collection, including work by Joseph Israels, George Inness, Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, Gustave Courbet, and Sir Thomas Lawrence. Albee lent paintings of similar quality for the Palace mezzanine, where he also installed an unattributed Renaissance bronze fountain of a slender nude woman drinking from a shell and standing in a goldfish pond.³³

All these features built up to the climactic space of the 4,000-seat auditorium, among the four largest and technically most sophisticated theatres in the country (Figure 15). Standard equipment in the better class of vaudeville houses, the huge Wurlitzer was doubly important in the Palace because the theatre from opening night onward not only presented stage shows but also silent films. Their technical and aesthetic defects the organ could mollify and even transcend through sound spectacles, symphonic excerpts, opera quotations, and other aural diversions that represented an early recognition of film as a medium of greatest emotional power when it joined sound to sight.³⁴

In its French scrollwork, Palladian arches, and other details Lamb intended to create in the auditorium "the charm of architectural backgrounds patterned after the work of the Adam Brothers."³⁵ Because of the exceptional depth of the balcony the true dimensions of the house were apparent only from the stage. Thus, auditorium size was not so impressive as to overwhelm, nor so understated as to negate an architectural statement that conferred real dignity on vaudeville.

A performers' hotel, an art and sculpture gallery, a vaudeville house, and a movie palace together created a kingdom of daydreams, constituted a city in miniature inside the city-within-a-city. The governing condition of the romance was the complete suppression of the monotony, frustration, and predictability of everyday life. High and popular cultures intermingled in a place where, as one observer in a 1929 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* wrote of such theatres in general, the "patrons may absorb . . . their knowledge of such art as is represented by . . . architecture, by sculpture, and by interior decoration. . . ." Ten or twenty years earlier only wealthy individuals enjoyed such luxury, but in this mating of regal surroundings, commercial imperatives, of education and entertainment, ordinary men and women moved at ease through a romance whose spacial and material luxuries were attended by liveried doormen, restroom maids and butlers, as well as auditorium ushers. Lloyd Lewis in the *New Republic* referred to these theatres as the "royal favor of democracy. . . . In this suave atmosphere, the differences of cunning, charm, and wealth, that determine our lives outside, are forgotten."³⁶

The final aspect of the romance of the city-within-a-city was the Citadel's impact on Columbus's self-image. Between 1924 and

1927, statements by the mayor, the Chamber of Commerce, the AIU itself, and other prominent local institutions projected an idealized equilibrium between the relative intimacy, homogeneity, and stability of community life in a town or small city on the one hand, and the instrumental rationality, sophistication, and large-scale enterprise of the metropolis on the other.

There was evidence that Columbus had some purchase on metropolitan status. Nothing in contemporary architectural or urban history contradicted Lentz's boastful assessment of America's first complete skyscraper city-within-a-city: the tower and the Deshler-Wallick venture represented "the greatest [office] building and best hotel in Ohio." S.J.T. Strauss, senior vice-president of S. W. Strauss & Co. of Chicago and New York, which had helped underwrite the AIU mortgage and those for many tall office buildings and skyscrapers throughout the country during the previous thirty years, wrote that "this building is one of the world's significant structures. No other city of similar size has such a mighty building as this. . . ." In 1927 and again two years later in October 1929, Dudley Crafts Watson, Director of the Art Institute of Chicago, focused in a more exaggerated assessment on the building's modernity, for it "belonged to no period," and therefore represented "the ideal of the present day," was "a magnificent expression of American art . . . in a nation that, thus far, had developed no school of art. . . ." ³⁷

But there was equally compelling evidence that pictured a Columbus able to provide the more communitarian advantages of a moderately sized city, advantages that full metropolitan status would have obviated. Among several measures the most pointed was the *Journal's* congratulatory drawing, "Anon out of the Earth . . ." (see Figure 8). Here the AIU tower dominated the city skyline and appeared next to a metropolitan cipher, the derrick and boom that symbolized a city still energetically expanding and building. Yet the Citadel's slogan-aureole, "American Ideals Uppermost," crystallized for Columbus an especially pure version of an identity coveted by many smaller places in urban America, that of the all-American city. Moreover, greenery completely shrouded the bottom third of the illustration, reflecting the physical reality of Columbus neighborhoods largely covered by trees, the downtown buildings the only part of the city that rose above a village botany. Within it were the words "The Old Hometown," which reinforced the community characteristics of

Columbus, as did the tribute to Lentz in the lower left corner: "What a Hometown Boy Can Do For His Old Hometown." "Old Hometown" clearly encapsulated cherished qualities of place in a way which would have prohibited its use in Chicago or New York.

There was a boosterlike ring to it, as there was in the full-page drawing of Lentz that appeared on the last page of the *Journal's* dedication supplement, a tribute by an anonymous donor: "This Page Contributed By An Old Home-Town [sic] Boy To A Great Home-Town Who Has Done So Much For The Old Home-Town."³⁸ The five uses in two consecutive days of the phrase "the old hometown" on the pages of one of Columbus's major newspapers on the occasion of the largest event in the city's developmental history assumed that most of the paper's readership understood and experienced Columbus in the same way.

The doubleness of the city's self-image was consonant with the nature of the AIU organization itself. Its size approached that of the insurance companies headquartered in the biggest cities, but its fraternal features, and its associations with such organizations as the Maccabees, the Knights of Columbus, Kiwanis, and Rotary aligned it with the values of smaller cities and towns. A similar doubleness appeared in the AIU's public commitments. While the women's suffrage movement and that behind anti-child-labor laws had roots in the progressive politics of the largest urban centers, prohibition was a distinctly rural and small-town movement, one frequently anti-urban in character. Thus, at a moment of celebration that inevitably catalyzed the most complementary formations of Columbus's image of itself, the American Insurance Union, its new headquarters, and public responses to them collectively pictured the city as a perfect orchestration of familiar and settled, sophisticated and ambitious energies and rhythms. They joined a romance of small-scale community to one of metropolitan emergence, resolving all contradictions into the larger romance of the city-within-a-city's best of all possible worlds.

NOTES

¹On romance as a literary form, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 186-203, 214-16, 304-307. Three among numerous uses of the word "romance" are: Alfred C. Bossom, *Building to the Skies, The Romance of the Skyscraper* (London, 1934); the description of the Chanin Building in its 1929 promotional brochure: "the *mis en scene* for the romantic drama of American business . . ." quoted in Robert A. M. Stern et al., *New York 1930* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1987), 597. Diana Agrest, ed., *A Romance With The City: Irwin S. Chanin* (New York: Cooper Union Press, 1982).

²Kenneth Turney Gibbs, *Business Architectural Imagery in America* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1984); Gibbs quotes Feather on p. 150 with no citation given; my understanding of the business climate in the 1920s is based on Gibbs, 149-53.

³John J. Lentz, "Cornerstone Address," in the pamphlet "The Cornerstone Ceremonies" (Columbus, Ohio: American Insurance Union, 1926), 15-16; subsequent quotations from 17-20.

⁴John J. Lentz, "A Monument to Civic Pride—Symbol of Ideals," speech quoted in *The Ohio State Journal*, 22 September 1927, p. 8 of a special section of the newspaper devoted to the opening ceremonies.

⁵Lentz, "Cornerstone Address," 16, 18.

⁶*Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁷"A.I.U. Building to be Started Next Month," *The Ohio State Journal*, 11 August 1924, p. 1, column 5; "A.I.U. Construction to Go On, Says Crabbe," *The Ohio State Journal*, 8 March 1925, p. 2.

⁸On Lawrie and the sculpture of the Capitol see Richard Oliver, *Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue* (New York: The Architectural History Foundation, 1983), 199-206.

⁹J. Dane Moorhead, "The A.I.U. Citadel" (Columbus, Ohio: The American Insurance Union Press, 1927), unpaginated, see the first section, "King of Buildings." Except for the eagles, whose meaning is obvious, the meaning of all the exterior sculpture and interior artwork is given in this section.

¹⁰Moorhead, "Citadel," the first section.

¹¹Lentz, "Cornerstone Address," 20.

¹²"A.I.U. Has Grown to Present Size in Three Decades," *The Ohio State Journal*, 22 September 1927, p. 5, columns 4 & 5, of the special section devoted to opening ceremonies.

¹³See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, 1961), Chapter 1.

¹⁴S. Parkes Cadman et al., *The Cathedral of Commerce* (New York: Broadway Park Place Co., 1917), quoted in Rem Koolhaas, *Delerious New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 81.

¹⁵Hart's speech was reported in "Moving Pictures of the A.I.U. Citadel Dedication September 21st," *The American Insurance Union Magazine*, 33 (October 1927): 11; Lentz's remarks in "A Monument to Civic Pride," *The*

Ohio State Journal, 22 September 1927, p. 8, the cartoon or drawing appears in *The Ohio State Journal*, 21 September 1927, p. 4.

¹⁶All quotations in this paragraph are from Moorhead, "Citadel," the section entitled "Steel."

¹⁷See Frye, *Anatomy*, 293-95.

¹⁸Moorhead, "Citadel," the section on "Steel."

¹⁹Ibid., the section entitled "Terra Cotta."

²⁰Reynolds, *Architecture*, 175, 176.

²¹Marie W. Vandegrift, "The Cornerstone," in "Cornerstone Ceremonies," 39.

²²Moorhead, "Citadel," sections entitled "King of Buildings" and "Amazing Details"; for some Woolworth Building statistics originally published in Cadman, *Cathedral*, see Goldberger, *Skyscraper*, 44; for statistics on the Singer tower, see O.F. Semsch, ed., *A History of the Singer Building Construction* (New York: Shumway & Beattie, 1908).

²³Both quotations are from Cadman, *Cathedral*, cited in Koolhaas, *New York*, 81.

²⁴Quotations in this and the previous paragraph are from various sections of Moorhead, "Citadel"; Orr's poem appears as "Ode to the Citadel," in *The Ohio State Journal*, 22 September 1927, p. 5 of the special section devoted to opening ceremonies; the quotation on views from the observation platform appears in "Moving Pictures of the A.I.U. Citadel Dedication," *The American Insurance Union Magazine*, 33 (October 1927): 9.

²⁵Moorhead, "Citadel," section entitled "King of Buildings."

²⁶"Lentz Offers Peak of A.I.U. as Fire and Bandit Watch Tower," *The Ohio State Journal*, 3 May 1926, p. 3, columns 3 & 4.

²⁷John Deshler, "Early History of Columbus," A Talk Given Before the Columbus Real Estate Board, 18 November 1919, pp. 3-5.

²⁸Bill Arter, *Columbus Vignettes IV* (Columbus, Ohio: Nida-Ekstein Printing, Inc., 1971), 10.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰"Mayor Goes Up in Air on Fast A.I.U. Elevator," *The Ohio State Journal*, 8 January 1927, p. 12, column 8.

³¹Phil Sheridan, *Those Wonderful Old Downtown Theatres* (Columbus, Ohio: s.n., 1980), 29; "A.I.U. Building to be Started Next Month," *The Ohio State Journal*, 11 August 1924, p. 1, column 5; Phil Sheridan, *More About Those Wonderful Old Downtown Theatres* (Columbus, Ohio: s.n., 1984), 83, 144.

³²See Stern, 1930, 240-56.

³³Stern, 1930, 262; Sheridan, *More*, 89.

³⁴Sheridan, *More*, 88-89; Stern, 1930, 248.

³⁵Lamb quoted in Ben M. Hall, *The Golden Age of the Movie Palace: The Best Remaining Seats* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1961), 106, quoted in Stern, 1930, 262.

³⁶As told to Charles Gilbert Reinhardt, "Halls of Illusion," *Saturday Evening Post*, 11 May 1929, p. 17; Lloyd Lewis, "The Deluxe Picture Palace," *New Republic*, 27 March 1929, 175-76.

³⁷"Lentz Gives Address at A.I.U. Convention," *The Ohio State Journal*

6 June 1926, p. 9, column 8, sports section; "Strauss Wires His Greetings to Lentz," *The Ohio State Journal*, 22 September 1927, p. 16, column 3 at the special section devoted to opening ceremonies; "Art in Architecture," *The Ohio State Journal*, 23 October 1929, p. 4, column 4; Watson made similar remarks in 1927, briefly referred to in the dedication booklet, in the first section.

³⁸"John J. Lentz," *The Ohio State Journal*, 22 September 1927, p. 11 of the special section devoted to opening ceremonies.