

Delirious New York
A Retroactive Manifesto
for Manhattan

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Definitive Instability:

The Downtown Athletic Club

We in New York celebrate the black mass of Materialism.

We are concrete.

We have a body.

We have sex.

We are male to the core.

We divinize matter, energy, motion, change.

— Benjamin de Casseres, *Mirrors of New York*

APOTHEOSIS

The Downtown Athletic Club stands on the bank of the Hudson River near Battery Park, the southern tip of Manhattan. It occupies a lot "varying from 77 feet wide on Washington Street to 78 feet 8 inches wide on West Street with a depth of 179 feet 1¼ inches between streets..."⁵¹

Built in 1931, its 38 stories reach a height of 534 feet. Large abstract patterns of glass and brick make its exterior inscrutable and almost indistinguishable from the conventional Skyscrapers around it.

This serenity hides the apotheosis of the Skyscraper as instrument of the Culture of Congestion.

The Club represents the complete conquest — floor by floor — of the Skyscraper by social activity; with the Downtown Athletic Club the American way of life, know-how and initiative definitively overtake the theoretical lifestyle modifications that the various 20th-century European avant-gardes have been insistently proposing, without ever managing to impose them.

In the Downtown Athletic Club the Skyscraper is used as a Constructivist Social Condenser: a machine to generate and intensify desirable forms of human intercourse.

TERRITORIES

In only 22 years the speculations of the 1909 theorem have become reality in the Downtown Athletic Club: it is a series of 38 superimposed platforms that each repeat, more or less, the original area of the site, connected by a battery of 13 elevators that forms the north wall of the structure.

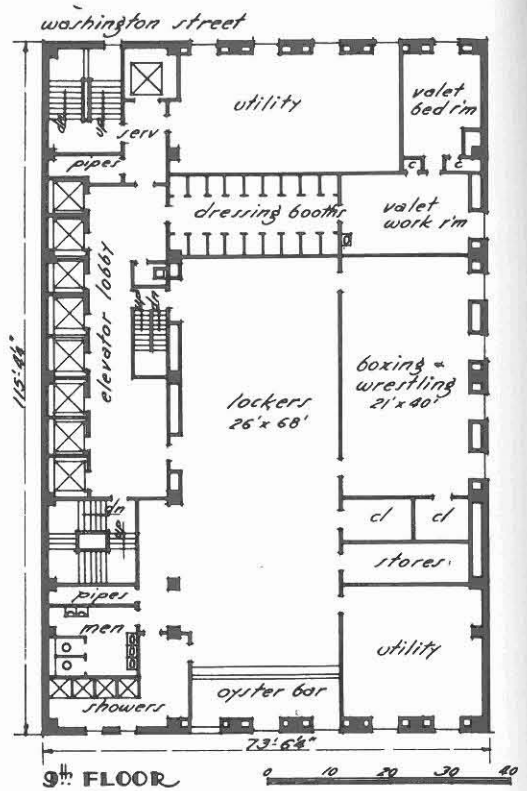
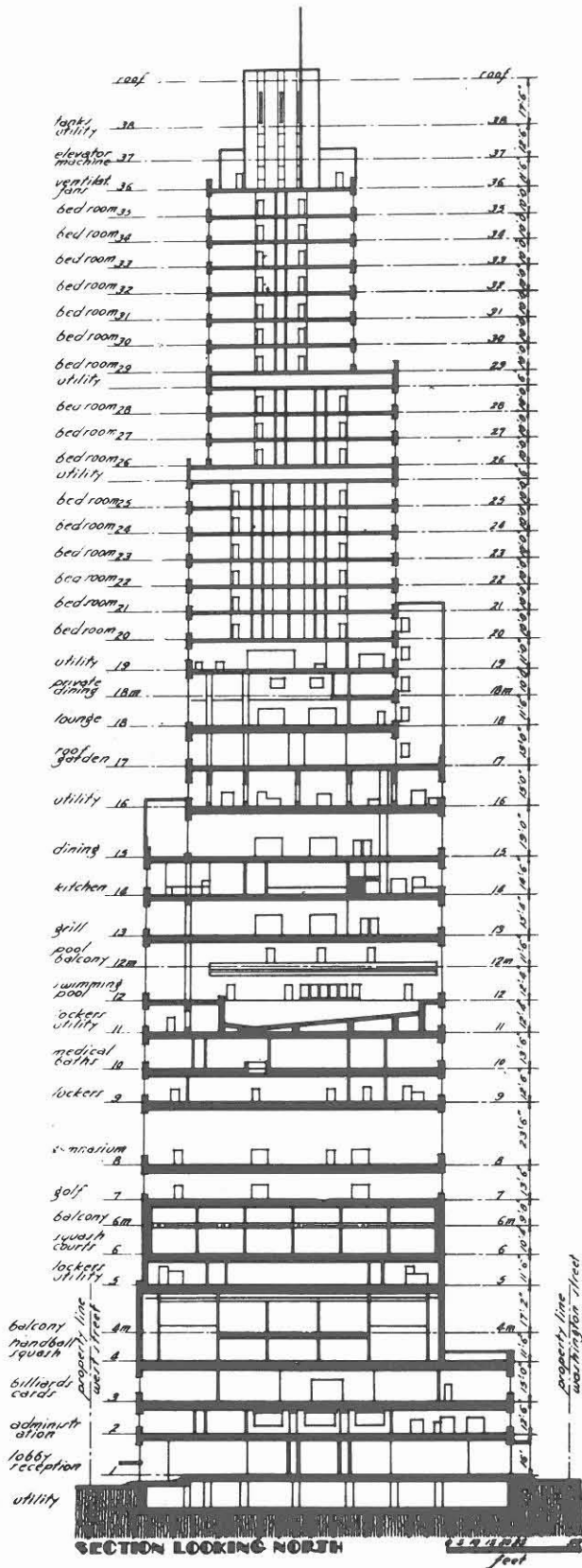
To the financial jungle of Wall Street, the Club opposes a complementary program of hyper-refined civilization, in which a full spectrum of facilities — all ostensibly connected with athletics — restores the human body.



Downtown Athletic Club, 1931 (Starrett & Van Vleck, architect; Duncan Hunter, associate architect). Successful lobotomy made this apotheosis of the Skyscraper as instrument of revolutionary metropolitan culture almost indistinguishable from surrounding Towers.



Downtown Athletic Club, site plan: a small rectangle, repeated 38 times.



Downtown Athletic Club, plan of ninth floor:
 "eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on
 the nth floor..."

Downtown Athletic Club, section.

The lowest floors are equipped for relatively conventional athletic pursuits: squash and handball courts, poolrooms, etc., all sandwiched between locker rooms. But then ascent through the upper layers of the structure — with its implied approximation of a theoretical “peak” condition — leads through territories never before tread upon by man.

Emerging from the elevator on the ninth floor, the visitor finds himself in a dark vestibule that leads directly into a locker room that occupies the center of the platform, where there is no daylight. There he undresses, puts on boxing gloves and enters an adjoining space equipped with a multitude of punching bags (occasionally he may even confront a human opponent).

On the southern side, the same locker room is also serviced by an oyster bar with a view over the Hudson River.

Eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the nth floor — such is the “plot” of the ninth story, or, the *20th century in action*.

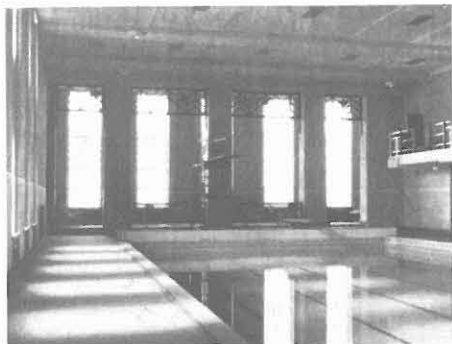
In a further escalation, the tenth floor is devoted to preventive medicine. On one side of a lavish dressing lounge an array of body-manipulation facilities is arranged around a Turkish bath: sections for massage and rubbing, an eight-bed station for artificial sunbathing, a ten-bed resting area. On the south face, six barbers are concerned with the mysteries of masculine beauty and how to bring it out.

But the southwest corner of the floor is the most explicitly medical: a special facility that can treat five patients at the same time. A doctor here is in charge of the process of “*Colonic Irrigation*”: the insertion into the human intestines of synthetic bacterial cultures that rejuvenate man by improving his metabolism.

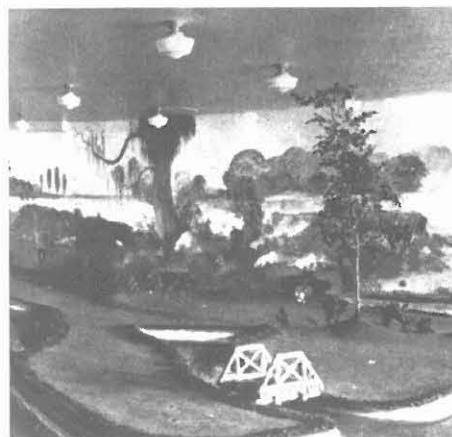
This final step brings the sequence of mechanical interference with human nature, initiated by such apparently innocent attractions as Coney Island’s Barrels of Love, to a drastic conclusion.

On the 12th floor a swimming pool occupies the full rectangle; the elevators lead almost directly into the water. At night, the pool is illuminated only by its underwater lighting system, so that the entire slab of water, with its frenetic swimmers, appears to float in space, suspended between the electric scintillation of the Wall Street towers and the stars reflected in the Hudson.

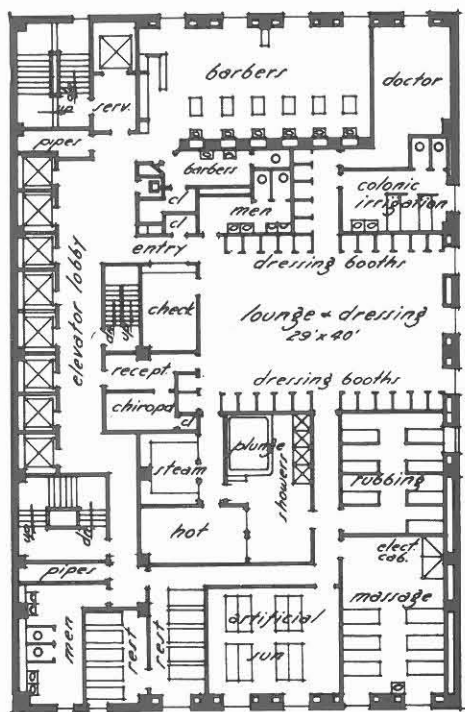
Of all the floors, the interior golf course — on the seventh — is the most extreme undertaking: the transplantation of an “English” landscape of hills and valleys, a narrow river that curls across the rectangle, green grass, trees, a bridge, all real, but taxidermized in the literal realization of the “meadows aloft” announced by the 1909 theorem. The interior



Downtown Athletic Club, 12th floor: swimming pool at night.

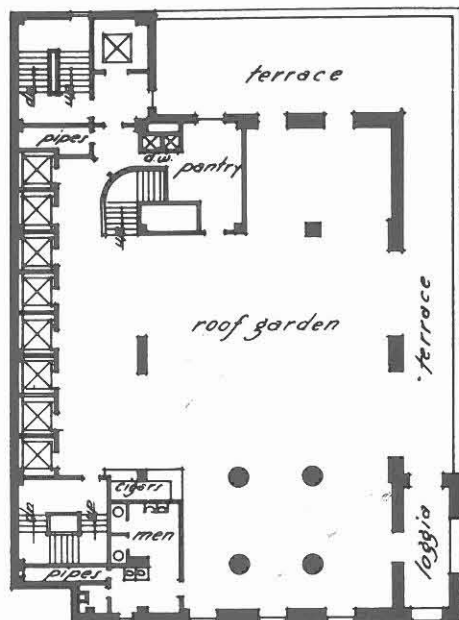


Downtown Athletic Club, seventh floor: interior golf course.



west street **10th FLOOR**

Downtown Athletic Club, plan of tenth floor.



Downtown Athletic Club, plan of 17th floor:
interior roof garden with metropolitan verandas.

golf course is at the same time obliteration and preservation: having been extirpated by the Metropolis, nature is now resurrected *inside* the Skyscraper as merely one of its infinite layers, a technical service that sustains and refreshes the Metropolitanites in their exhausting existence. The Skyscraper has transformed Nature into Super-Nature.

From the first to the twelfth floors, ascent inside the Downtown Athletic Club has corresponded to increased subtlety and unconventionality of the "programs" offered on each platform. The next five floors are devoted to eating, resting and socializing: they contain dining rooms — with a variety of privacies — kitchens, lounges, even a library. After their stringent workouts on the lower floors, the athletes — puritanical hedonists to a man — are finally in condition to confront the opposite sex — women — on a small rectangular dance floor on the 17th-story roof garden.

From the 20th to the 35th floors, the Club contains only bedrooms.

"The plan is of primary importance, because on the floor are performed all the activities of the human occupants";⁵² that is how Raymond Hood — the most theoretical of New York's architects — has defined Manhattan's version of functionalism distorted by the demands and opportunities of density and congestion.

In the Downtown Athletic Club each "plan" is an abstract composition of activities that describes, on each of the synthetic platforms, a different "performance" that is only a fragment of the larger spectacle of the Metropolis.

In an abstract choreography, the building's athletes shuttle up and down between its 38 "plots" — in a sequence as random as only an elevator man can make it — each equipped with techno-psychic apparatus for the men's own redesign.

Such an architecture is an aleatory form of "planning" life itself: in the fantastic juxtaposition of its activities, each of the Club's floors is a separate installment of an infinitely unpredictable intrigue that extols the complete surrender to the definitive instability of life in the Metropolis.

INCUBATOR

With its first 12 floors accessible only to men, the Downtown Athletic Club appears to be a *locker room the size of a Skyscraper*, definitive manifestation of those metaphysics — at once spiritual and carnal — that protect the American male against the corrosion of adulthood. But in fact, the Club has reached the point where the notion of a "peak" condition transcends the physical realm to become cerebral.

It is not a locker room but an *incubator for adults*, an instrument that

permits the members — too impatient to await the outcome of evolution — to reach new strata of maturity by transforming themselves into new beings, this time according to their individual designs.

Bastions of the antinatural, Skyscrapers such as the Club announce the imminent segregation of mankind into two tribes: one of *Metropolitanites* — literally self-made — who used the full potential of the *apparatus of Modernity* to reach unique levels of perfection, the second simply the remainder of the traditional human race.

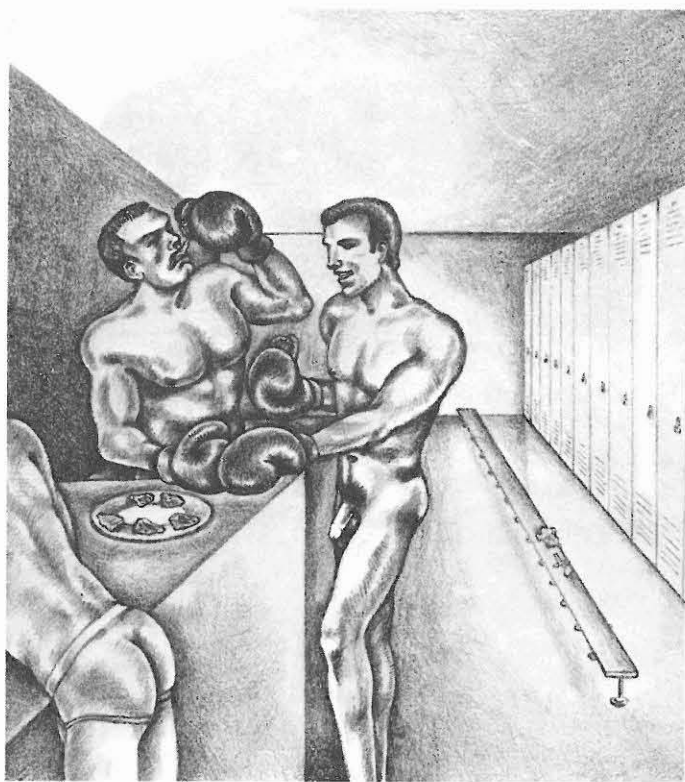
The only price its locker-room graduates have to pay for their collective narcissism is that of sterility. Their self-induced mutations are not reproducible in future generations.

The bewitchment of the Metropolis stops at the genes; they remain the final stronghold of Nature.

When the Club's management advertises the fact that "with its delightful sea breezes and commanding view, the 20 floors devoted to living quarters for members make the Downtown Club an ideal home for men who are free of family cares and in a position to enjoy the last word in luxurious living,"⁵³ they suggest openly that for the true Metropolitan, bachelorhood is the only desirable status.

The Downtown Athletic Club is a machine for metropolitan bachelors whose ultimate "peak" condition has lifted them beyond the reach of fertile brides.

In their frenzied self-regeneration, the men are on a collective "*flight upward*" from the specter of the Basin Girl.



A machine for metropolitan bachelors...