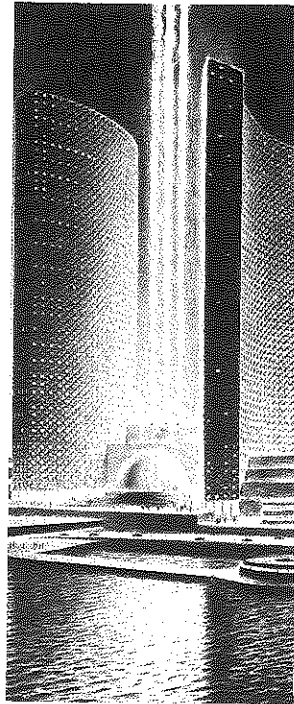


Toward the United Nations



Next to Frank Lloyd Wright, who, as the father of modern American architecture and perhaps its only true genius, occupies a unique position in his field, the person commonly regarded as the most influential figure in present-day building design in this country is Wallace K. Harrison.

Herbert Warren Wind¹

So began the second in a three-part *New Yorker* profile that appeared in the fall of 1954. Harrison was credited with \$700 million worth of new buildings within the previous twenty-five years. Yet his fame outside professional circles came from a single job: that of chief architect for the United Nations headquarters.

In April 1946, after serving the government in Washington for over five years, Harrison returned to New York to resume architectural practice. As the sole partner in the office, Fouilhoux had struggled to keep the firm going through the difficult war years, but in 1945 he had died suddenly.

With Fouilhoux gone, the office was virtually without management until Harrison returned, by which time it was generating barely enough income to pay for an apartment for him and his wife. The Harrisons were hardly the only ones in New York in search of a place to live in the mid-1940s. After the relatively uncrowded living conditions of the war years, servicemen returned to find the worst housing shortage in the city's history.

While Harrison was struggling to pick up the pieces of his life in New York, William Zeckendorf, Sr., the real estate magnate, was riding the crest of a phenomenally successful career. For almost a year Zeckendorf had been negotiating the purchase of land along the East River north of Forty-second Street. Originally a swamp, known in the 1880s and 1890s as Turtle Bay, the area east of First Avenue had become the city's abattoir district. When Zeckendorf purchased the first lots late in 1945, they were the site of a string of slaughterhouses, whose stench was so dreadful that the section of Tudor City apartments backing on to First Avenue—referred to popularly as Blood Alley—was built without windows. It is hard to imagine that cattle pens, packing plants, and charnel houses existed so recently in the midst of Manhattan or that livestock was routinely hauled to the area from the West Side docks in open trucks. Because of the obnoxious use to which this midtown location had been put, it was valued at \$2 to \$5 per square foot, compared with \$100 to \$150 per square foot in other midtown locations.

The East River property was offered to Zeckendorf at the relatively high price of \$17 per square foot. But the

idea of investing \$6.5 million in a single project did not deter him; he was convinced that once the slaughterhouses were gone the price could go as high as \$100. He was equally sure that properties around the slaughterhouses would soar in value. Webb & Knapp, Zeckendorf's firm, put up \$1 million against the total price for a one-year option, during which period the packing companies were to relocate. Meanwhile Zeckendorf frantically bought as much of the \$2- and \$5-per-square-foot surrounding property as he could get his hands on. He ultimately acquired most of the land north of the slaughterhouses to Forty-ninth Street and a great many lots to the west, between First and Second avenues—in all, about seventy-five properties, totaling seventeen acres at an average price of \$9 per square foot.² Zeckendorf faced the question of how to use the parcel once it included the abattoir area.

In his autobiography, Zeckendorf describes the evening strolls he took with his wife, Marion, to Beekman Place, where he would stare south toward the slaughterhouses. On the fifth or sixth such visit, Zeckendorf suddenly remembered how in 1913 the open tracks to the north and south of Grand Central Terminal had been covered with a great platform to create Park Avenue—and a fortune in real estate. Why not build a similar platform, stretching east from the elevation of Tudor City to the river and north to where he was standing at Beekman Place? Zeckendorf was enormously excited by his vision:

That night I could hardly sleep as I chased my own ideas, tied them down with facts and figures, altered them, made compromises, returned to original notions, and finally realized that I was no longer dealing with fantasy but with genuine possibility. Now I needed a top architect to help work these concepts out in concrete form, and I turned to Wallace Harrison, whose work on Rockefeller Center had brought him a deserved and estimable reputation. Harrison agreed to work on the East River, and his completed plan was designated 'X City.'³

For his East River property, the real estate man wanted no less than his own Rockefeller Center; to describe the idea, he picked up the same terms that had been used in the first press releases for Rockefeller Center: "A city within the city."⁴ The only architects left from the original Rockefeller Center team were Harrison and Corbett. With Corbett now in his seventies, Harrison was the obvious choice.

Zeckendorf's association with Webb & Knapp was likened to "loose lightning being drawn to a lake."⁵ In the eight years since he had joined the firm, Zeckendorf had transformed it from a small, conservative agency into a dealer and operator of properties in twenty states, reputedly increasing its assets by one thousand percent. The press had compared his vast appetite for real estate to Napoleon III's, and his appetite for life in general was on an equally grand scale. Good food and fine wines had already provided him with a baronial paunch that belied his forty-one years. He loved to lunch and dine at the Monte Carlo, a restaurant and night club at Madison Avenue and Forty-fourth Street he had bought for his firm. There associates and customers surrounded him at his habitual table, which was laden with telephones into which he barked dramatic decisions on seven-figure deals.⁶

The contrast between this high-living, flamboyant tycoon and the soft-spoken, eminently genteel Harrison was not so complete as appearances indicated. Beneath considerable differences in style, the two men shared a propensity to think big and the toughness and determination to achieve that bigness. Many years later Harrison said of Zeckendorf: "Bill to me was a relief because most of the people like him talked a lot and did very little, but Bill was ready to put up the money; he was like Moses, like Nelson—ready to act, to do the thing."⁷

X City was to be built on a concrete and steel platform forty feet above the existing level of First Avenue. The complex was to contain three thirty-story apartment houses with living facilities for seventy-five hundred families; five office buildings (one of fifty-seven stories and four of forty stories); a convention hall for six thousand; an opera and concert hall; a six-thousand-room hotel; a yacht landing; a heliport; and subterra-

nean parking facilities for five thousand cars. This was Zeckendorf's chance to rival Radio City with an Aluminum City or a Television City, assuming that either Alcoa or one of the big television stations would consent to occupy the largest projected office building, as RCA had done at Rockefeller Center. Harrison saw it as an opportunity to find at last a new home for the opera, an idea which had been in germination for Rockefeller Center.⁸

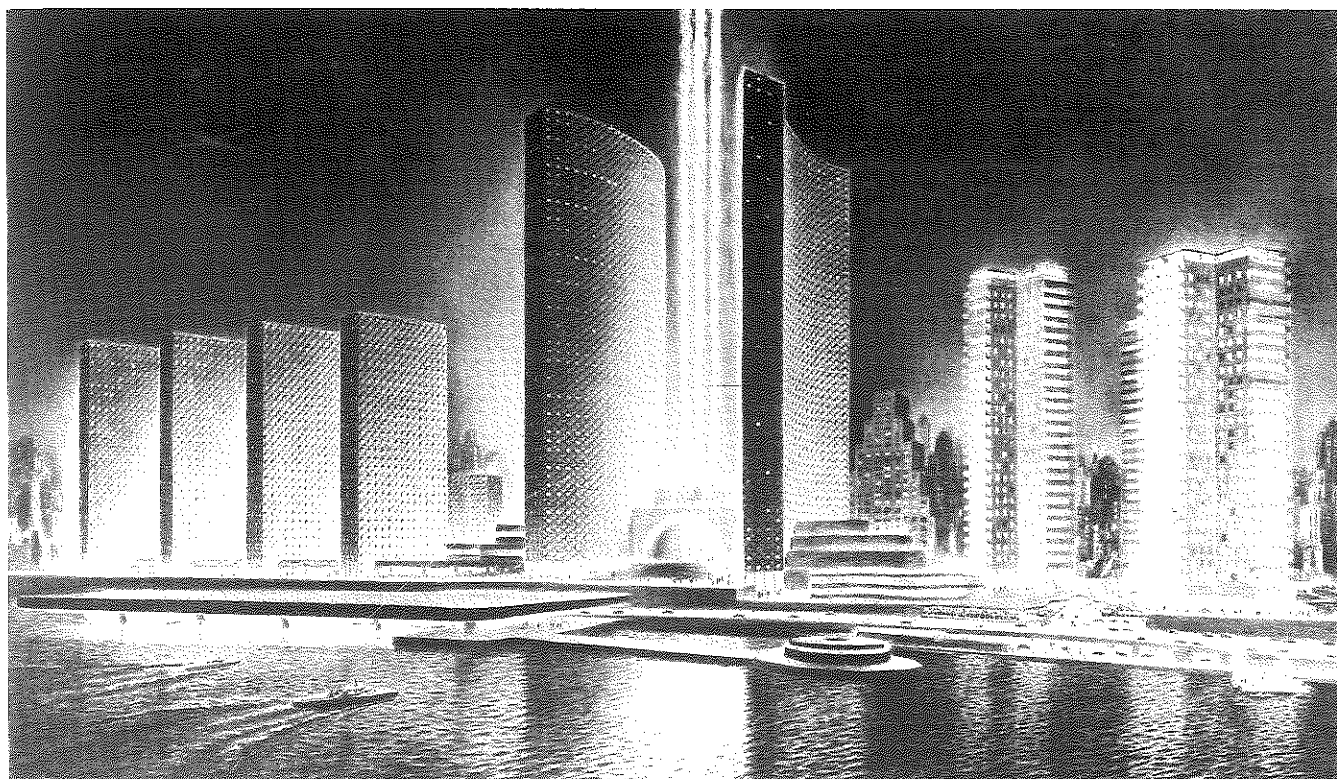
Zeckendorf, still trying to round out his holdings in the East River area, was eager to keep the new project secret lest landowners raise their prices in anticipation. Therefore, he took over a number of rooms in the Marguery Hotel, 270 Park Avenue. One suite was devoted to the top-secret X City project. George Dudley from the Harrison and Abramovitz office had been selected to study the site and draw up preliminary schemes. Zeckendorf allowed only Harrison to visit this sanctum, where Dudley lived day and night for several weeks to ensure secrecy. In September 1946, Zeckendorf installed Harrison and his family next door to this suite in a small apartment, where they lived until May 1948. At the time, the Marguery had been acquired by Time, Inc., as the site for new headquarters, for which Harrison and Abramovitz proposed a design, which was rejected.

By the fall of 1946, Zeckendorf felt secure enough about land acquisition to make the X City plans public. In its October 28 issue, *Life* magazine published drawings by A. Leydenfrost, a favorite renderer of Zeckendorf's, showing two enormous curved skyscrapers on pillars flanking a wide space in which arose a domed structure. These forms—the flattened curve of the towers and the circle, developed (among other things) into domes—are recurring themes in Harrison's work.⁹ Four slightly lower office slabs stood to the south (Fig. 89). A drawing dated December 12 by Hugh Ferriss displays a composition that makes the project seem even more monumental: the facilities for opera and concerts were combined in a massive structure that extended right through the bases of the curved skyscrapers. A heliport protruded into the East River (Figs. 90–92). Both the Leydenfrost and Ferriss drawings suggested cruciform apartment houses to the north. The X City site suddenly

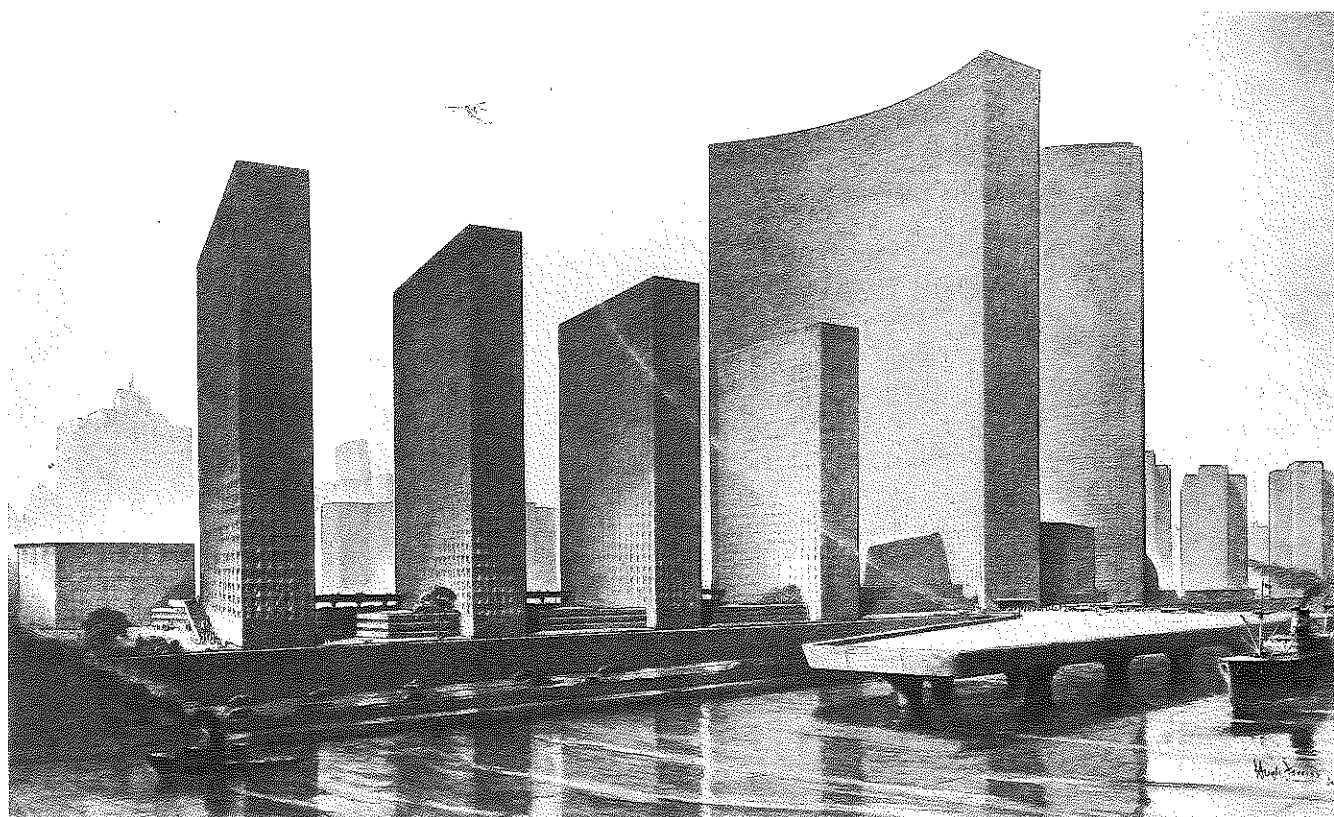
came under consideration for the United Nations headquarters in December 1946, as described below. Harrison's Zeckendorf scheme was used to promote the idea: Dudley simply penciled in the words "General Assembly" in place of the opera, and "Security," "Economic and Social," and "Trusteeship" next to various auditoriums (Fig. 93). In this way, Harrison's design, its slab skyscrapers tempered by their curved plan and by the horizontal penetration of the auditorium structure, provided a basis for the first consideration of a United Nations headquarters on its present site.

Events that brought the U.N. to New York began at a General Assembly meeting in London early in 1946. There a Preparatory Commission decided that the international headquarters would be located in the United States; no specific site had been designated. The Preparatory Commission then established the Permanent Headquarters Committee, consisting of delegates from fifty-one countries under the chairmanship of Dr. Eduardo Zuleta Angel of Colombia. To consider the site and architecture, three groups were formed: the Headquarters Commission, consisting of delegates, architects, and other professional advisors and chaired by Sir Angus Fletcher, a British delegate; the Committee on Sites and General Questions, chaired by Juan Felipe Yriart, the Uruguayan delegate; and the Headquarters Advisory Committee (created on January 2, 1947, by the General Assembly under Trygve Lie, first Secretary-General), chaired by former Senator Warren Austin, from Vermont, Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations. There was immediate debate: should the headquarters be located in a city, a suburb, or a rural area?¹⁰

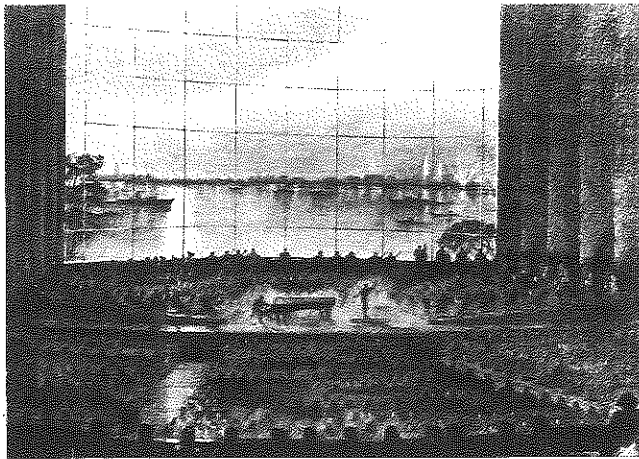
The Committee on Sites declared that the area for the project could range anywhere from six to forty square miles. Sites were proposed in New York City, Connecticut, Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco; each area was equally anxious to enjoy the prestige and material benefits the U.N. might bring to their communities. The mayor's New York Committee for the U.N. was chosen by Robert Moses, who envisaged an opportunity for the use of Flushing Meadows Park. True to character, according to his biographer, "other men



89. Harrison, scheme for X City. Rendering by A. Leydenfrost (1946).

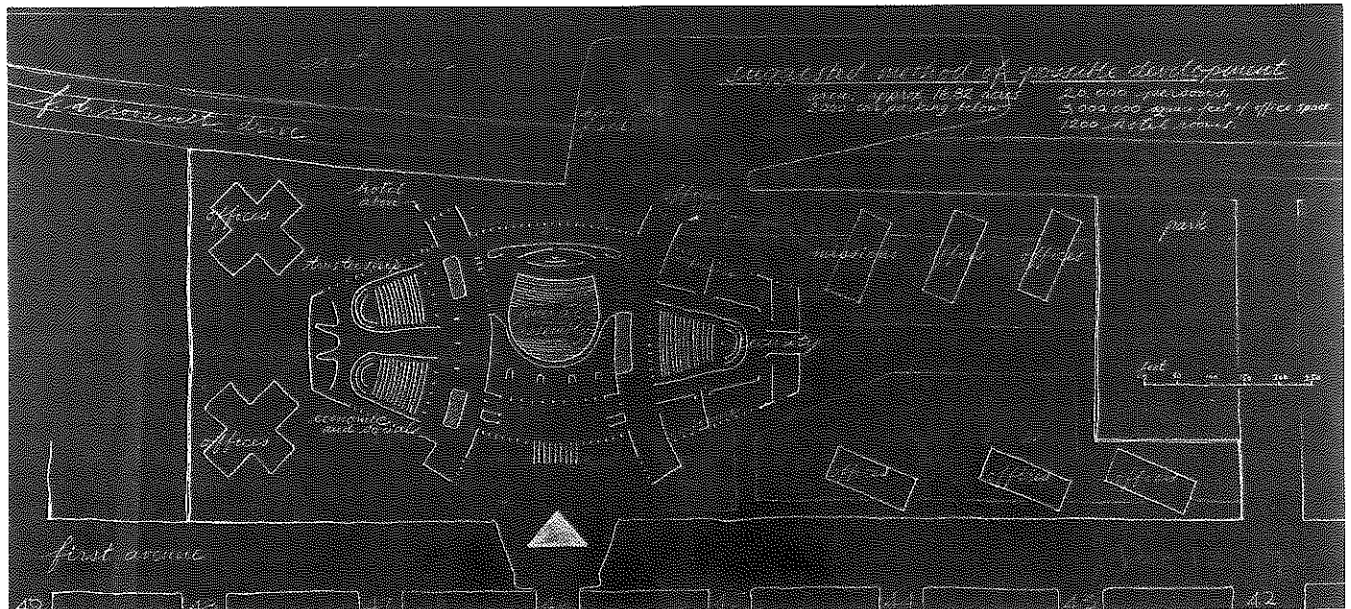
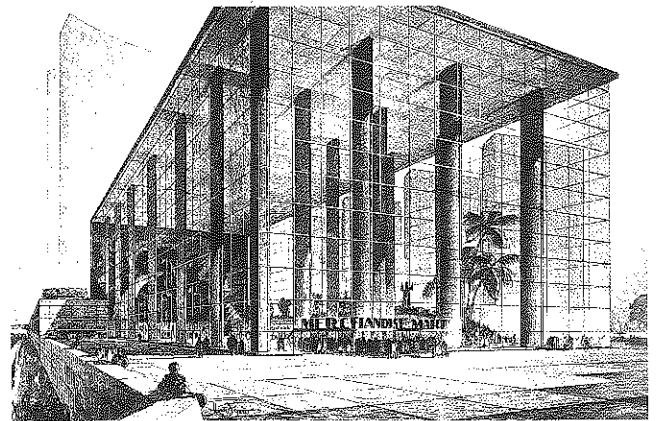


90. Harrison, scheme for X City. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss (12 December, 1946).



91. Harrison, X City concert hall. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss.

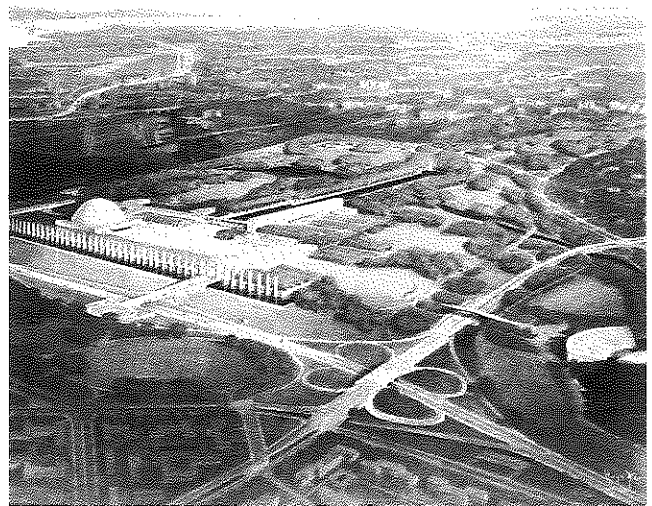
92. Harrison, X City convention hall. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss.



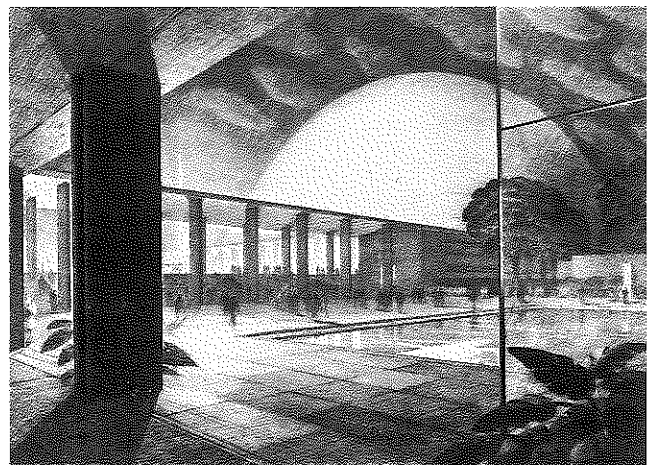
93. Plan adapting X City for the United Nations.

might see the formation of the United Nations . . . as a chance for peace, he saw it as a chance for a park."¹¹ Moses's choice of Flushing as the site for the 1939 World's Fair had been motivated by his interest in creating a park there, and he now persuaded Trygve Lie to use what had been the fair's City Building for the U.N.'s temporary auditorium: it was converted for that purpose within a record two months. While the General Assembly met at Flushing, the Secretariat and attendant services were located in a converted war plant of the Sperry-Gyroscope Corporation at Lake Success, Long Island, a few miles northeast of Flushing.

Moses's U.N. committee was made up of eleven prominent New Yorkers, including Nelson Rockefeller and Winthrop W. Aldrich, Triborough Authority board member Charles Meyer, Grover Whalen, Arthur Hays Sulzberger of the *New York Times*, Frederick H. Ecker of Metropolitan Life, and Thomas J. Watson of IBM. There were also a number of consultants and a board of design that consisted of three engineers and three architects, including Harrison, Embury, and Louis Skidmore. In September 1946 the architects produced plans and drawings—rendered by Hugh Ferriss in his usual seductive style—presented in an elaborate brochure designed to “sell” Flushing Meadows Park to the Site Committee (Figs. 94, 95). A visitor would turn off Grand Central Parkway onto a road that passed through a row of monumental pylons sunk into a platform from which water gushed into a long moatlike reflecting pond. This imposing approach led into a large rectangular entrance court that occupied the southern end of a great terrace. Facing the court at the northern end was the domed General Assembly, one of four proposed buildings. With the exception of the General Assembly, each structure was long and low—only two stories high. The Economic and Social and Security Council buildings stretched parallel to the General Assembly at the west; perpendicular to these and set beside a big central lagoon, an even longer structure was to house the Trusteeship Council and various offices. A missions building was planned north of the General Assembly. To accommodate the fifteen thousand delegates and staff members then attached to the



94. United Nations project at Flushing Meadow, New York. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss (1946).



95. Walkway, United Nations project at Flushing Meadow. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss (1946).

U.N., the project was conceived on a grand scale (Fig. 96). Harrison influenced the form of the General Assembly building, which recalled the World's Fair Perisphere. It would be difficult to associate any one name with the remaining structures.

In their eagerness to convince the U.N. to choose New York, Harrison and Nelson Rockefeller resorted to one of their wartime propaganda techniques: they produced a one-reel film that showed how attractively the city could refurbish the Meadows. Their efforts were futile. During its temporary use of the area, the Permanent Headquarters Committee remained unconvinced that the malodorous swampland could be redeemed; and by December 1946, it was on the verge of selecting a ten-square-mile tract in the suburbs of Philadelphia. The Australian and other delegations from the Pacific favored a beautiful site in the Presidio section of San Francisco overlooking the Golden Gate, but the West Coast was firmly vetoed by major European delegations and by the U.S.S.R. The only other site under serious consideration was in Fairfield County, Connecticut. This too was vetoed after an inspection trip by several members of the Committee on Sites, during which they were stoned by local inhabitants protesting what they considered a foreign intrusion!

A deadline of December 31 had been set for selection of the U.N. site. On the morning of Sunday the 8th, Harrison and Frank Jamieson telephoned Rockefeller in Mexico City, where he had attended the inauguration of President Miguel Alemán. Rockefeller realized the Meadows proposal was in jeopardy and took the first plane home. He was met by Harrison and Clark Eichelberger of the U.N. Association, dedicated to promoting the U.N. They drove directly to Lake Success, though it was late on Sunday, to promote the Flushing site. The Rockefeller team then was faced with an overly suspicious guard, who delayed them for more than an hour while he doublechecked identities.¹² When finally they met with Secretary-General Lie and Warren Austin, it became apparent that only Manhattan itself, or a site very near to Manhattan, could provide an acceptable alternative to the Philadelphia site. Zeckendorf had just of-

fered to sell his X City site to Mayor William O'Dwyer, and knowledge of this proposal strengthened the delegates' insistence on Manhattan as in fact the only possible alternative.

On Monday, December 9, Rockefeller began a campaign to ensure that, if the Flushing site were rejected, the world headquarters would still remain in the state. He organized a meeting attended by John D., Jr., and Laurance Rockefeller, John Lockwood (one of the family's lawyers closest to Nelson), Francis (Frank) A. Jamieson (a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaperman, who handled press relations for Rockefeller), and Harrison, and punctuated by telephone calls to his brothers David, Winthrop, and John D. 3d. At the meeting Nelson Rockefeller convinced his father and three brothers to give up part, or if necessary all, of their holdings in the 3–4,000-acre property they owned at Pocantico, north of Tarrytown, to create a potential site for the U.N.¹³ Three members of the Headquarters Commission—Jan de Ranitz from Holland, Le Corbusier from France, and Nikolai D. Bassov from Russia—were asked to survey the site from a four-seater plane provided by the Rockefellers. If a report of this visit can be believed, Bassov showed interest only in the cost of the private plane, while the pilot never located the exact whereabouts of the site.¹⁴ In any event, the flight seems to have confirmed the delegates' decision to consider New York only if they could be in the heart of the city.¹⁵ On Tuesday evening, surrounded by Harrison, Jamieson, Lockwood, and his own assistant, Louise Boyer, Rockefeller broke the news to his father over the phone. "Why, Pa!" he is said to have exclaimed, then turning to the expectant group: "He wants to know how much that site along the East River would cost! He wants to *give* it to them! . . . Wally, how much do you think it would take to get it?"¹⁶ When Harrison guessed \$8.5 million, and the figure was accepted by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., general exultation ensued (Fig. 97).¹⁷

It is said that several months prior to this dramatic sequence of events, Harrison had suggested the possibility of Zeckendorf selling his X City site to New York for the U.N.; according to this report, Nelson Rockefeller had dismissed the idea as too costly.¹⁸ Now, because of

Rockefeller Offers U.N. 8½ Million Gift For East River Site From 42d to 48th;



97. Announcement of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s, gift of a site for the United Nations.

his relationship with Zeckendorf, Harrison was chosen as the logical negotiator for an option on the site. How he accomplished this is well known: on December 10th he found the real estate man in the midst of a boisterous celebration of his own wedding anniversary and of the birthday of one of his partners, Henry Sears. Zeckendorf quickly agreed to Harrison's \$8.5 million offer and confirmed a thirty-day option, signing, together with Sears, his own outline of the six blocks in question on a city property map provided by Harrison. Harrison's inability to satisfy Rockefeller's subsequent request for champagne to celebrate the multimillion-dollar deal for want of sufficient pocket money became a joke enjoyed for years.

The following day, Wednesday the 11th, the Rockefeller group swung into action: agreement had to be obtained from the city to cede its rights to the streets, river bulkheads, and various strips of land it controlled within the East River site; exemption from a gift tax had to be granted by the Internal Revenue Service (a condition of the Rockefeller gift); and the U.N. Headquarters Committee had to approve the site. Zuleta Angel, who had been recuperating from a serious illness at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, had himself taken by ambulance to Lake Success in order to preside over the meeting at which the site would be offered. On Saturday, December 14, basing their decision on an inspection of the land by a subcommittee and on the rendering of Harrison's modified plan for X City (see Fig. 93), the General Assembly ratified the Permanent Headquarters Committee's approval of the East River site. After a year of indecision, the site for the U.N. headquarters was decided upon within less than a week.

During the long search, many design professionals had expressed concern about the design of the headquarters. At first there was talk of an architectural competition,¹⁹ but then it was generally assumed that several architects from different member countries would participate in the design, with an American heading the team. As early as May 22, 1946, George Howe, the noted Philadelphia architect, wrote to Eric Gugler, president of the American Institute of Architects, about a meeting of

the American Society of Planners and Architects at which candidates to head the U.N. architectural staff were discussed: "The executive committee felt that a strong man with extensive experience should be proposed."²⁰ The committee had suggested that the man who best fit this description was Roland Wank, a Hungarian educated in Europe who had come to the U.S. in 1924; Wank had built projects in Canada and in the U.S., where he had worked most recently for the Tennessee Valley Authority. According to Howe, the rationale for this choice was a wish that "the radicals and conservatives of our profession (whoever they may be—I become more confused as to the issues involved) may stand together."²¹

By June 1946, the American Institute of Architects had formed their own Committee of Arts for the U.N. Center, which included Harrison, Eliel Saarinen, Ralph Walker, and William W. Wurster. Ten years later, David B. Vaughan, the United Nations' Secretary for General Services, who attended the committee's meetings, still remembered spending "days and days interviewing, consulting, etc.," on the same subject.²² Despite considerable efforts, the distinguished professional organizations had little influence on the final result.

On January 2, 1947, Lie appointed Harrison director of planning for the United Nations' Permanent Headquarters. According to Harrison, ultimately he owed his appointment to the support of several powerful Washingtonians who had known him during his wartime effort in the CIAA—particularly Thomas G. Corcoran, known as "Tommy the Cork," and Benjamin V. Cohen, two lawyers who had been part of Franklin Roosevelt's famous "kitchen cabinet." He also had completely won over Lie.

When the appointment was announced, rumor had it that Nelson Rockefeller had put his own man into the job. While it would be disingenuous to think that the U.N. delegation was indifferent to the preferences of the Rockefeller family, it is also reasonably certain that men of this stature would give due weight to their own commitments and preferences. In any case, the job was Harrison's, and intricate problems lay ahead.

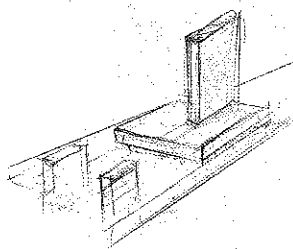
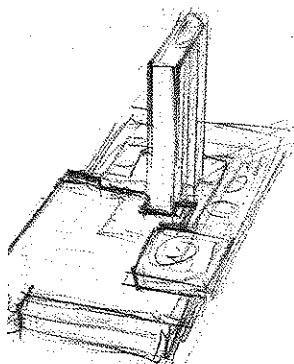
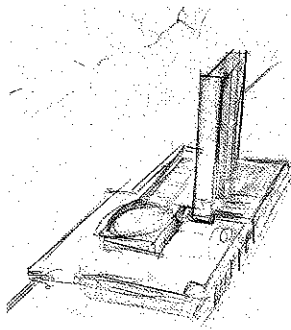
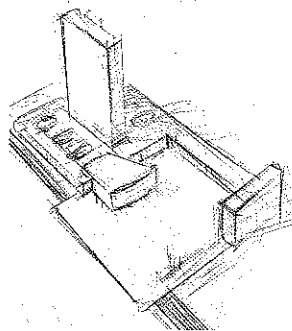
The United Nations: the battle of designs

When he was asked by the *New York Times* how he felt about his \$18,000-per-year appointment as U.N. director of planning, Harrison responded:

How do you feel when you get a job like that? It's the best job in the world almost. But it's a hell of a responsibility also. I think when I was younger, and got into Rockefeller Center fifteen years ago, I was much more elated.¹

His experience at Rockefeller Center had taught him the realities of a project that involved several buildings and, more to the point, several architects. The first matter on his agenda was the problem of the architects—who they should be and from which and how many countries—and, like most of the decisions about the buildings, the choice was left basically to Lie and himself. A successful lawyer in Norway, Lie was a big bear of a man who had proven himself a model of executive efficiency. In Harrison's eyes, he possessed the one indispensable quality for a client: like Nelson Rockefeller, Robert Moses, and William Zeckendorf, he was “a man who could get things done.”² The two men liked and respected each other and they soon established a pleasant working relationship.

They agreed that approximately ten political areas should be represented in developing the U.N. design: Western and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, the British Commonwealth, South America, the Far East, and so on. Lie favored big-name architects, although some of the most famous were considered ineligible for political reasons: Alvar Aalto, one of Harrison's candidates, because Finland was not a member of the U.N.; Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius because they were identified with the very recent enemy, Germany.³ Harrison's and Lie's discussions with delegates from twenty-six of the member countries produced thirty-three names, from which they chose for the primary Design Board ten well-known men who for the most part had made some contribution to modern architecture, and a secondary group of seven to serve as special consultants. In addition to the Design Board and consultants, Harrison invited three American architects who had contributed to the planning of the building complex to provide local expertise.



with him, on political and professional matters. Appealing to his colleagues' sense of fair play, Harrison had insisted on including Le Corbusier among the designers of the U.N.; yet, it was Harrison himself who eventually became the target of Le Corbusier's violent recriminations. Harrison had first met Le Corbusier in New York in 1933.⁶ Like many colleagues Harrison believed that Le Corbusier had been the true winner of the competition for the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva in 1927, and that he had been treated unfairly in not being awarded the commission. As is often the case for public projects, political pressures had outweighed artistic values. Harrison, eager to avoid such considerations, wanted to treat the work at hand as purely architectural.

Le Corbusier, having invested six months of his time in the search for a site, was not about to miss an opportunity to realize his own ideas. On January 12, 1947, he wrote Harrison about his personal choice of architects for the job. He approved of only five: himself, Bassov, Robertson, Niemeyer, and Harrison, to be aided by a design group consisting of Weissmann, Clive Entwistle (England), Amancio Williams (Argentina), Stamo Papadaki (Greece), Matthew Nowicki, and Carlos Lazo (Mexico).⁷ Architects of other nationalities could be designated as subsidiary participants if absolutely necessary. Sixteen days later, Le Corbusier flew to New York, and—before the design team had been designated officially—began to work feverishly on his own scheme for the U.N.⁸

On February 12 the Permanent Headquarters Committee confirmed the nomination of the Chinese, Brazilian, French, Russian, and English architects to the Design Board. Liang, from mainland China, was a frail-looking professor of architecture at Northeastern University at Mukden, and visiting professor of Far Eastern art at Yale; he had designed several university buildings in China. Niemeyer, a diminutive Brazilian architect, thirty-nine-years old, appeared always to be exhausted. In what for him was cold weather, he dressed in layers of oversized sweaters, which gave him a pitiful ragamuffin look. Niemeyer was reputed to be a devoted Communist; there was speculation about the political implications of his presence among the U.N. designers, but apparently

he was more interested in enjoying his leisure than in political activity among his colleagues.⁹ Bassov, the city planner for Leningrad, was a stocky, middle-aged Russian engineer who became famous during World War II for relocating the nation's heavy industry in the Ural Mountains. Robertson, born and trained in the United States, in 1919 went to England to complete his education and begin practice. This longtime friend of Harrison's, fifty-nine-years old, had become a polished Londoner, known for conservative work, with an occasional experiment in modernism. By March 7 Australian, Belgian, Canadian, Swedish, and Uruguayan architects also had been confirmed, as diverse a group as the others.¹⁰

As soon as he was named director of planning, Harrison had asked two young architects from his office—Dudley and Goldstone—to work on a program for the headquarters and plans for the operation of the project. Goldstone was to establish the U.N.'s needs in terms of facilities and space requirements, while Dudley was to refine his calculations for accommodating these needs to the site, with which he was familiar. Work began in the Marguery Hotel suite that had served for the X City studies. Office space was at a premium; Goldstone claims he worked in a butler's pantry, using drawers for files and with "my head in a sink!" At the same time, Harrison, with the help of Abramovitz and Dudley, started to organize a support staff and to assemble data for planning the site and its neighborhood.

The magnitude of the project was overwhelming. Twenty thousand people were expected to circulate daily within the U.N. buildings.¹¹ Goldstone refined his questions, moving from the needs of a department to those of individuals (addressing minutiae such as a request for ashtrays big enough for cigars in the men's toilet stalls—these were, in fact, included!).¹² In 1947 the General Assembly consisted of 55 member states with ten seats per delegation. The program, however, was based on a potential membership of 70 states, and planners figured that this number could grow to as many as 85, an expansion of almost fifty percent. The seating had to accommodate 700 delegates and their 240 advisors, 900

members of the general public, and 240 press representatives. The staff of the Secretariat was first tabulated at 2,300, a figure that grew within a few months to 4,400, with possible expansion projected to 5,265.¹³ These figures called for 439,595 square feet of office space; 25,033 square feet of meeting rooms; and 351,483 square feet for "other services."¹⁴ In 1987 there were 14,081 employees in the Secretariat building, which seems to have adjusted satisfactorily to the increase. Also in 1987, it was reported that 159 member countries were sending delegates to New York each year for the General Assembly, with each country's official representation reduced to six seats.

By January 23 Harrison had set up a Headquarters Planning Office on the twenty-seventh floor of the RKO Building—a location he felt was far enough from Lake Success to avoid possible political interference. The Design Board met for the first time on February 17, with only five members present: Le Corbusier, Bassov, Liang, Nowicki, and Harrison. Abramovitz, Dudley, Goldstone, and Glenn E. Bennett, secretary of the Headquarters Commission, also attended this meeting.

The architects met daily through early June for two-to-three-hour sessions in a workroom where there were a few private cubicles. They stood or sat around a table in the center of the room, talking and arguing in a mixture of French and English; only Bassov spoke neither language and had to rely on an interpreter. Next door was the drafting room, where rough concepts produced by the board were transformed into sealed designs. When the architects left for the day, designers began to work intensely, sometimes through the night, producing plans, sections, and elevations, as well as models and renderings, based on the architects' most recent ideas. Most renderings were executed by Hugh Ferriss, and plasticene models by René Paul Chambellan, both of whom, like others on the U.N. team, had worked with Harrison on Rockefeller Center. Now, fifteen years later, Harrison had exchanged his habitual cigar for an ever-present cigarette that dangled from the corner of his mouth, smoke rising into his eyes like a typical tough in French films of the day. Nevertheless press accounts

stated that Harrison "even looks like a successful architect";¹⁵ more than ever, his appearance conveyed strength and authority (Figs. 98, 99).

In charge of the important drafting room was Michael M. Harris; born in Newark, he had graduated from Cornell University and had worked as a designer in distinguished New York firms—including that of John Russell Pope, a Beaux-Arts mogul, before he joined Harrison, Fouilhoux & Abramovitz in 1942. Harris was well informed about the U.N. and its needs. He worked with thirty to forty people, including a number of young draftsmen who became architects of some renown, among them: George Rockrise, who established his own firm in San Francisco; Arvin Shaw, later a partner of Carson, Lundin & Shaw in New York City; and B. J. Barnes, a superb drafter who married Shaw.

To assist him in his immense task, Harrison asked Abramovitz to serve as deputy director and Dudley as secretary of the Design Board. Theoretically, twenty-two people were responsible for the design, but few of the foreign architects stayed in New York for more than two to three weeks at a time and technical advisors came only when asked about specific problems. Usually no more than eight or nine men were present at the design meetings. When American consultants were asked to attend, Gordon Bunshaft often sat in for Skidmore.

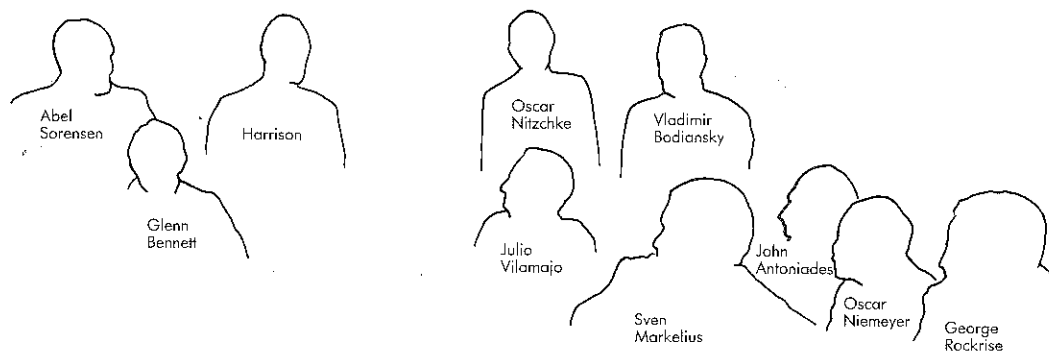
The Design Board decided almost immediately that the U.N. should contain three main elements—the General Assembly, the Secretariat, and one to accommodate different councils and committees. Harrison was intrigued to find that

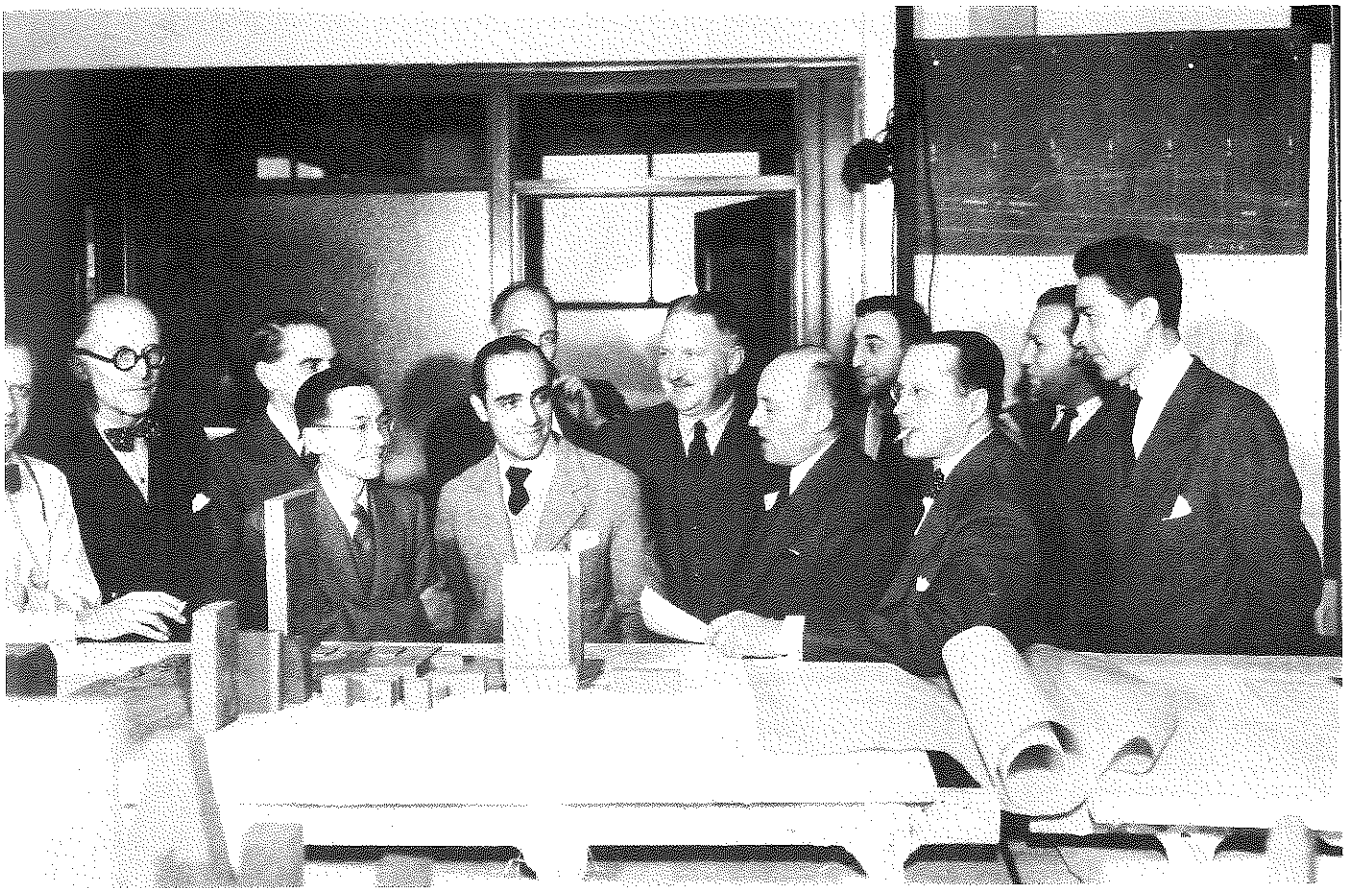
nobody talked about the Assembly, the center of the whole thing; each architect wanted to do the office building because the European architects had never built a tower and they couldn't resist the opportunity!

Each architect had a distinct idea about how the elements should be situated. Liang wanted them constructed in a square layout with a Chinese garden in the center; his plan turned its back on the city, focusing inward, like a monastery. Although Liang accepted with grace the early rejection of this idea, he never budged

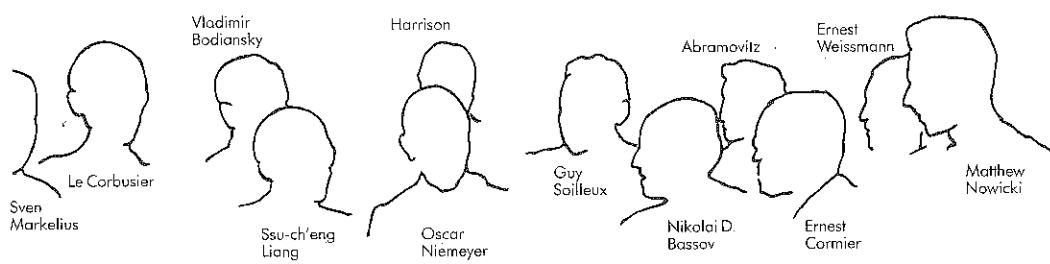


98. Thirtieth meeting of the Board of Design, 18 April 1947.
Among those also present at the meeting but not shown here
were Le Corbusier, Ernest Cormier, Louis Skidmore, Gordon
Bunshaft, Ralph Walker, and Hugh Ferriss.



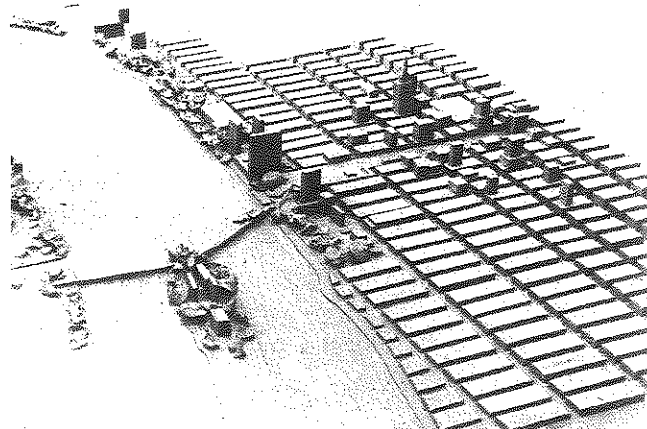


99. In the drafting room.

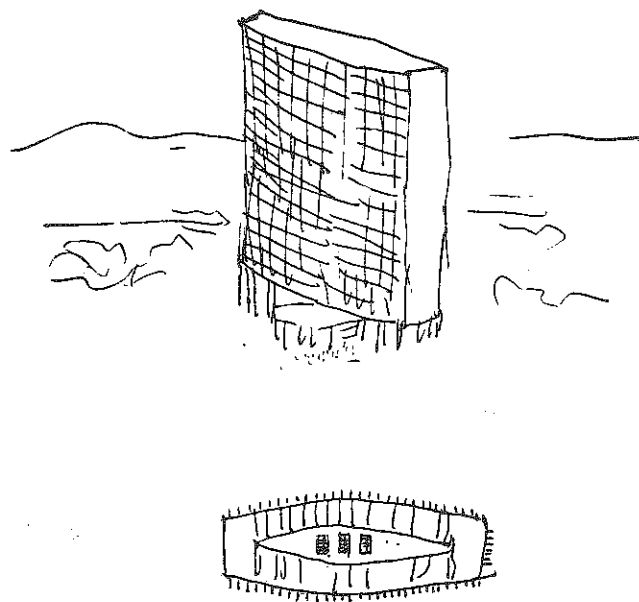


from his conviction that each building should run on an east-west axis—a tradition the Chinese had followed for three thousand years. Robertson also favored inward-looking buildings, grouped around courtyards like those at Oxford and Cambridge. Markelius, city planner for Stockholm, whose appointment to the Design Board had been confirmed shortly after the original nominations, returned repeatedly to his scheme for extending the U.N. across the East River via a bridge to Roosevelt Island, where he envisioned a housing complex for its employees (Fig. 100). This issue had been raised earlier by the Headquarters Commission, but special living quarters for U.N. employees were soon ruled out. With their salaries and tax-exempt status, employees could find housing in the current market, and many of them seemed uncomfortable with the idea of living in close proximity to one another.¹⁶

At one of the board's first meetings, Le Corbusier presented a scheme he had developed in the fall of 1946 (Fig. 101). He had no interest in considering other designs; this became more apparent a few weeks later, when he tore every scheme except his own from the boardroom walls in an extraordinary fit of rage and frustration.¹⁷ Then, surprisingly, in preparation for a visit to Paris, Le Corbusier wrote a letter to his colleagues with what was for him a generous conclusion: "We are an intangible group. There are no names attached to this work. As in any human enterprise, there is simply discipline, which alone is capable of bringing order."¹⁸ Le Corbusier left New York on July 13, after the Design Board completed its assignment. But barely a month later, after seeing a publication of the board's final proposal, he decided that he alone, directing his own hand-picked team, should be in charge of the U.N. enterprise. On August 28 he wrote Harrison to this effect, enclosing a colored diagram so that there could be no mistake about the points he was making. The diagram was divided into sections of responsibility: Le Corbusier, the "studio master," was to be in charge of design, aided by Niemeyer, Entwistle, and Weissmann; Harrison, designated director of planning, was to be in charge of "administrative relations" with the city and the banks and was to have responsibility for working drawings, esti-



100. Sven Markelius, scheme for extending the United Nations complex to Roosevelt Island, with a grand boulevard to Fifth Avenue.



101. Le Corbusier, proposal for General Assembly, Council and Commission rooms (1946).

mates, construction surveillance, and accounting. The letter made amply clear that Le Corbusier regarded himself as the architect of the U.N. and Harrison as a mere administrator.

Harrison ignored Le Corbusier's attempt to restructure the hierarchy of the offices. He regarded his role as that of leading the Design Board in an effort to learn how the buildings would be used and then to come up with appropriate forms. Characteristically open-minded, he had no preconceived ideas about the forms of the different buildings or about their placement. The one thing he didn't want was the outright adoption of Le Corbusier's scheme, which had been developed before the international process began.¹⁹

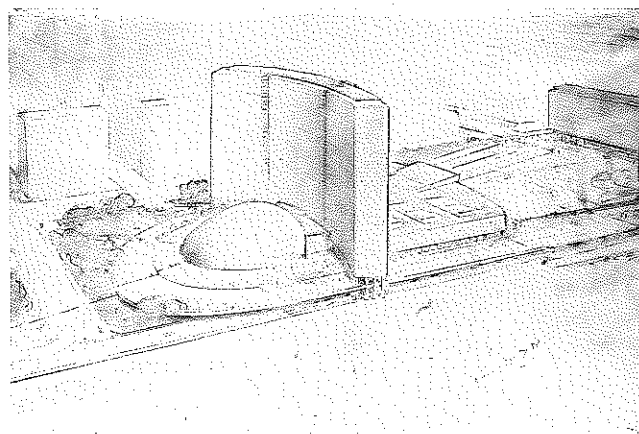
In his account book for 1947, Hugh Ferriss recorded the receipt of \$7,500 in payment for "approximately 100 presentation design studies" for the U.N.²⁰ A number of these studies have been preserved, and they help to illustrate the evolution of the architects' thinking. Some drawings, especially the earliest ones in which a domed structure is juxtaposed to a tall building, show obvious elements of the X City design (Fig. 102; see Fig. 89). One drawing even shows the structures seen by two people standing on a terrace in the foreground—like Zeckendorf's description of himself and his wife looking at the X City site (Fig. 103). Several of the early schemes show the Secretariat and the General Assembly locked into a massive platform (Figs. 104, 105).

Harrison began to anticipate problems with Le Corbusier when Frank Jamieson drew his attention to a scheme for the U.N. project published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on May 22, 1947, the day after the Design Board presented its scheme to the General Assembly (Fig. 106). The depth of Harrison's concern can be seen in his penciled notation on the caption the *Tribune* attached to the black-and-white glossy photograph it had used:

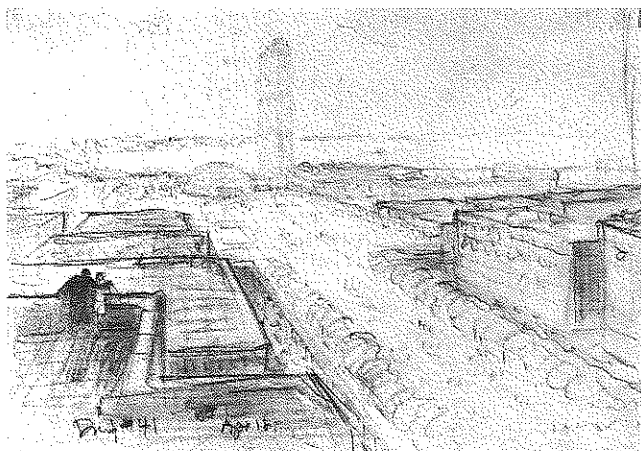
This is a lie, not at all scheme chosen.

W. K. H.

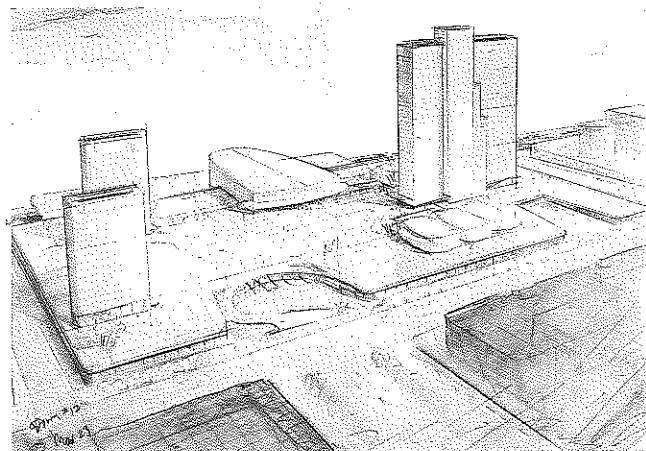
This is a photo of Corbu's modified scheme.
How did he get a photog [sic] to take
this? [Fig. 107].



102. Project for the United Nations Headquarters incorporating ideas from X City. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss (18 April 1947).

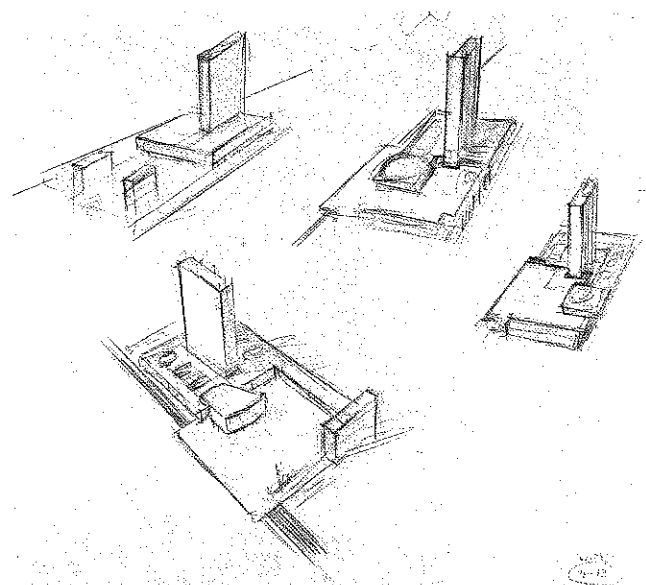


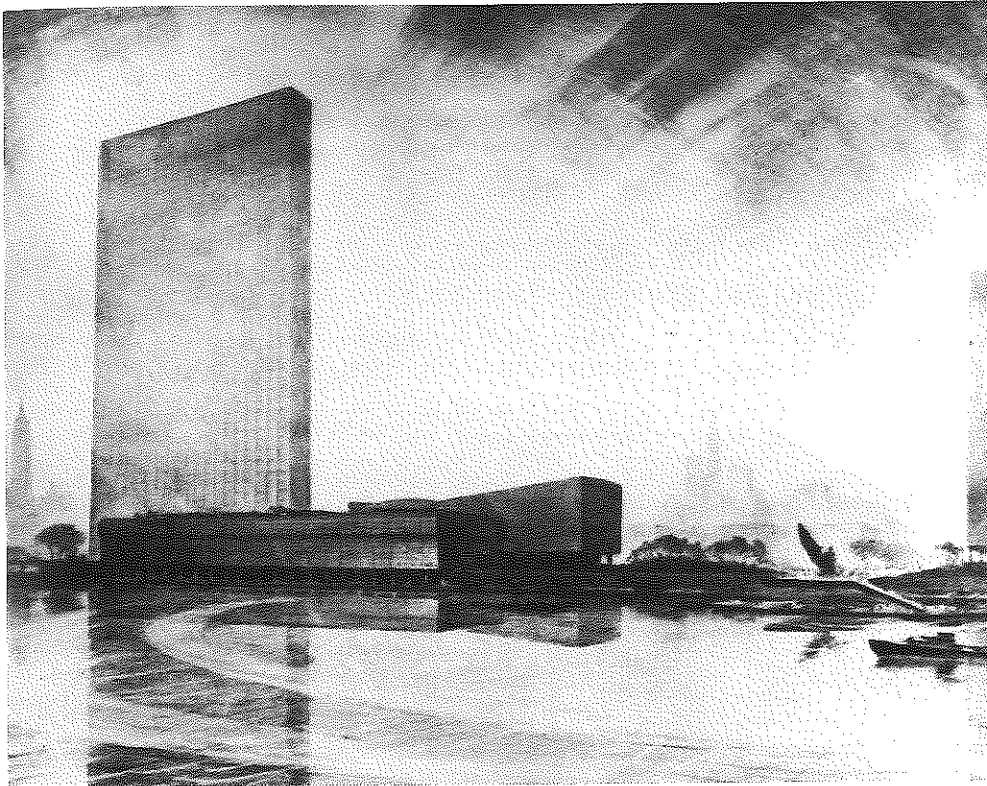
103. Project for the United Nations Headquarters. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss (18 April 1947).



104. Project for the United Nations Headquarters. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss (23 March 1947).

105. Project for the United Nations Headquarters. Rendering by Hugh Ferriss (13 April 1947).

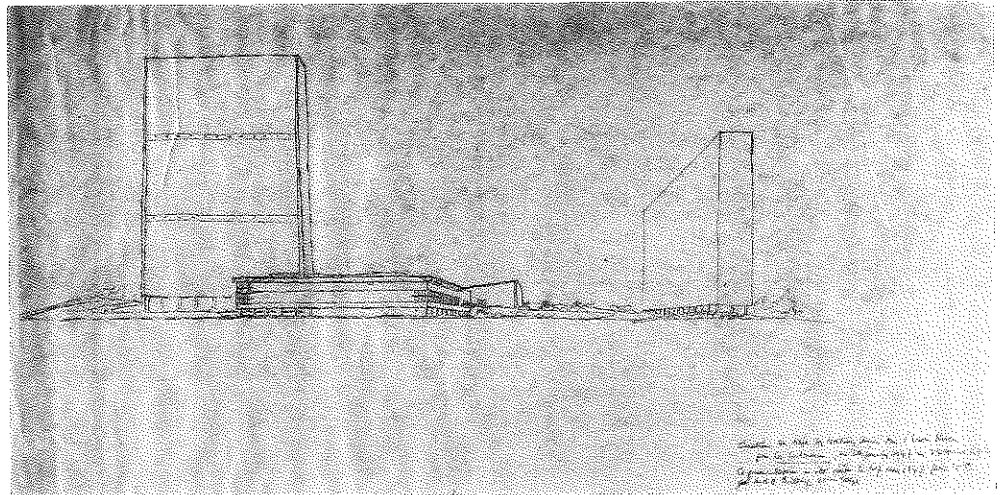




106. Project for the United Nations Headquarters published in the *New York Herald Tribune* (22 May 1947, p. 1).

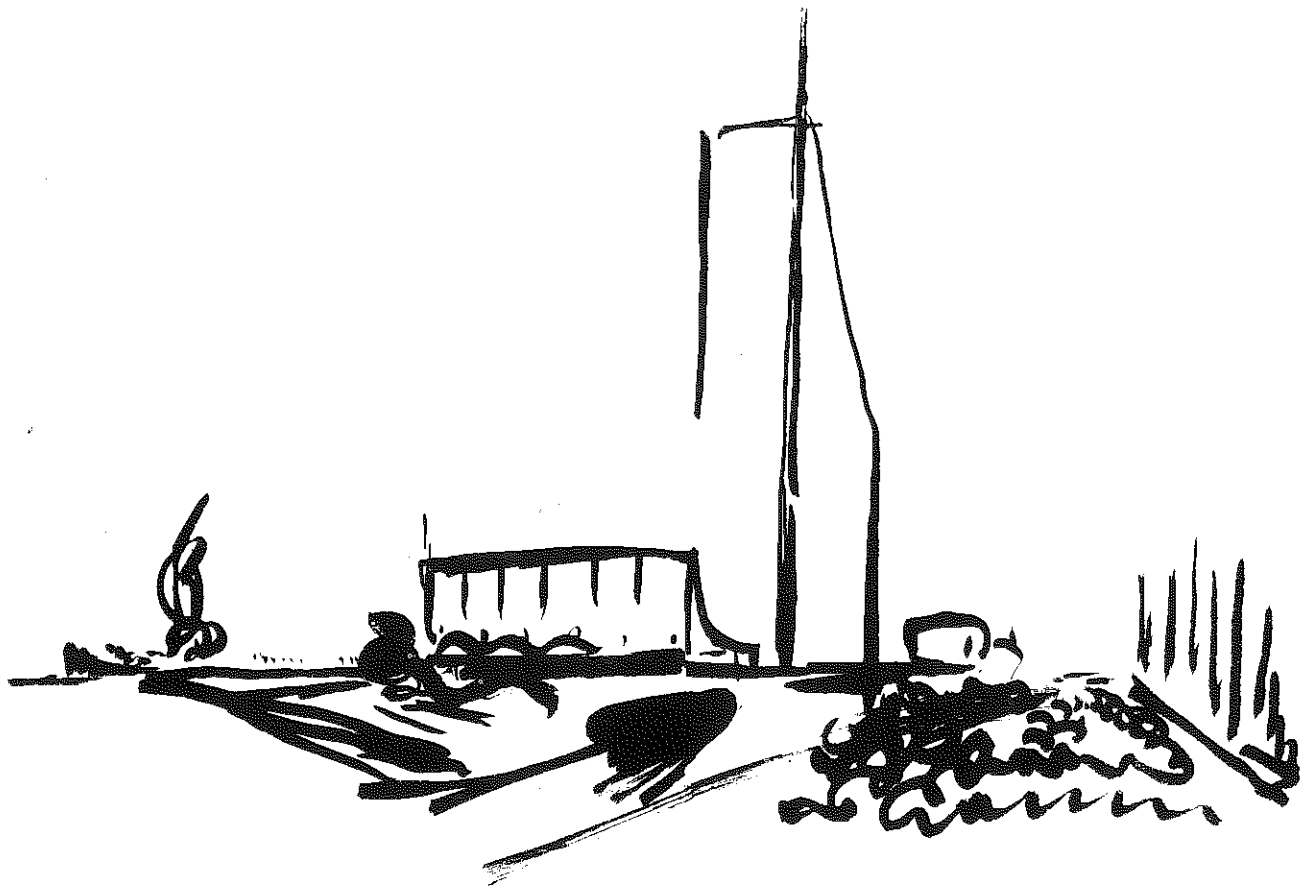
This is a lie
 not at all scheme
 chosen when
 This is a photo of
 Corbus modified
 scheme
 How did he get a
 photo to look true?

107. Harrison's notation on *Tribune* caption.



108. Le Corbusier, design for the United Nations Headquarters, signed and dated 17 March, 1947.

109. Harrison, sketch for the United Nations.



The *Tribune* scheme closely resembles a drawing dated March 27, 1947, and signed by Le Corbusier, which the latter continually cited as proof of his authorship of the U.N.'s final design (Fig. 108). Precisely because it is signed, the drawing raises questions; members of the Design Board had scrupulously left their work unsigned to reinforce the idea of a team effort.

After Harrison's death, the photograph and Harrison's notation were discovered buried in his U.N. files; it revealed his suspicion that Le Corbusier had somehow gained unauthorized access to the drafting room to secure the rendering of his choice for the press. Harrison's consummate control of a potentially explosive situation is shown by his refraining from any public expression of misgivings about Le Corbusier's behavior. A rough sketch by Harrison, also relegated to the privacy of his files, bears the inscription in his hand: "Original sketch Ass. [Assembly] U.N. W.K.H." (Fig. 109). The undated drawing shows the complex as it was built and seems to be the architect's personal notation of the difference between Le Corbusier's scheme and the final result.

As built, the Secretariat represented the culmination of Harrison's long development of the freestanding slab that Le Corbusier had promoted. The U.N. headquarters incorporated other ideas that Le Corbusier had expressed for years. The tall Secretariat standing on its own grounds recalls his earlier concepts of a vertical city in a park. Le Corbusier had realized a solid-edged slab building in the Swiss Pavilion in Paris (1930) and in the Ministry of Education Building in Rio de Janeiro (1945). He had designed asymmetrically composed civic centers for his projects for Saint-Dié and for his second scheme for the Rio Ministry of Education.²¹ Furthermore, he had used the trapezoidal form and sloping roof we see in the General Assembly Building for a number of assembly halls, beginning with one designed for the League of Nations in 1927.²²

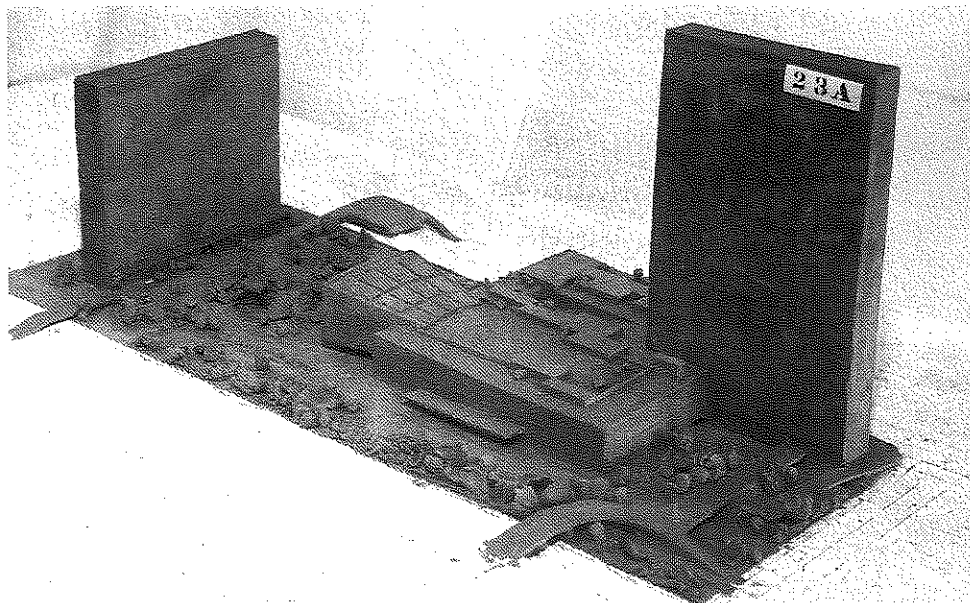
By the fall of 1947, Le Corbusier's change in attitude was complete. On November 7 he wrote a four-page letter to Harrison in which he traced his version of the history of the U.N. design. He gave Harrison credit only for what he described disparagingly as the "cupolas, fountains, etc." of the 1946 Flushing Meadows project,

claiming ambiguously, in the magisterial third person, that although "he wishes that his own name not be mentioned," the project in hand is "100% the architecture and urbanism of Le Corbusier"!

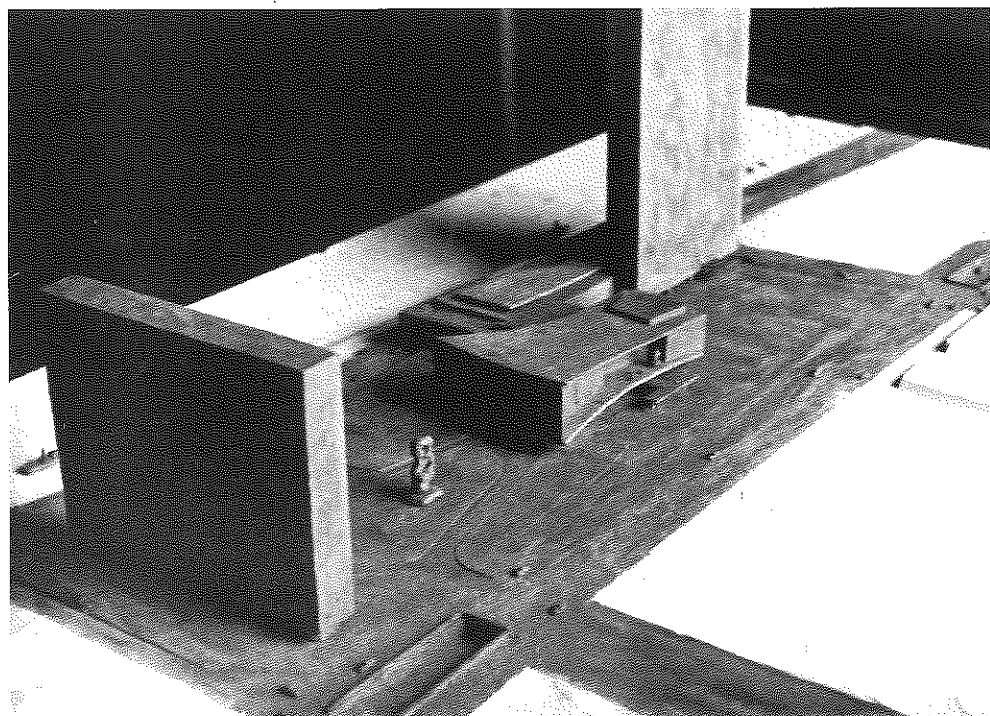
Harrison responded to this assault, as to the previous one, with silence, continuing to work on the task at hand. Whatever confusion may exist as to the authorship of the U.N. design, there is no doubt that Le Corbusier's Scheme No. 23A constituted an important element in the team effort. In 23A, the tall Secretariat intersects a massive, rectangular, horizontal block comprising the General Assembly and the Conference Building (Fig. 110). Pedestrian ramps extend from the Secretariat to the city streets.

But it was Oscar Niemeyer who provided the link between the French architect's design and what was ultimately realized at the U.N.²³ Everyone admired Niemeyer's accomplished schemes, but he was so intimidated by Le Corbusier, his former teacher and employer, that he seldom dared to present the projects to the board. One day, according to an associate architect, he produced a sketch on a used envelope that was too good not to show, and it was drawn up. The scheme separated the General Assembly from the Secretariat, moving it to the Secretariat's north; the mass of the General Assembly was reduced by taking away the conference and council rooms which were incorporated into a third structure at the river's edge. Niemeyer's solution (32) opened up the space into what seemed like a vast park with buildings in it (Fig. 111).²⁴ Even Le Corbusier eventually had to admit it was good, although he did so only after a day-long filibuster during which he called for committees to make the final design decision.²⁵ Harrison encouraged breaking apart Le Corbusier's buildings and making the other changes called for in Niemeyer's scheme; on May 1, 1947, at the thirty-ninth meeting of the advisory architects, Harrison made the following announcement:

I propose we think in terms of those schemes on the walls now [Numbers 13 (Abramovitz, Niemeyer), 17 (Niemeyer, Bassov), 23 (Le Corbusier), 25 (Antoniades), 29 (Markelius), 31 (Soilleux, Niemeyer), 32 (Niemeyer), 33, 36 (Weissmann),



110. Le Corbusier, Scheme 23A.



111. Oscar Niemeyer, Scheme 32.

34 (Soilleux)]. These are similar in arrangements of rooms and relations; they agree on the Secretariat. There are still questions about one story or two [for the Conference Building]. In the early days there were many plans. One of them was Le Corbusier's. The only scheme that gets complete satisfaction is an early idea of Le Corbusier as carried out [i.e., presented] by Niemeyer. To develop this from here on out we should all concentrate on going to the users with that scheme.

This seems a good compromise to me. That is my way of approach. Any objections?²⁶

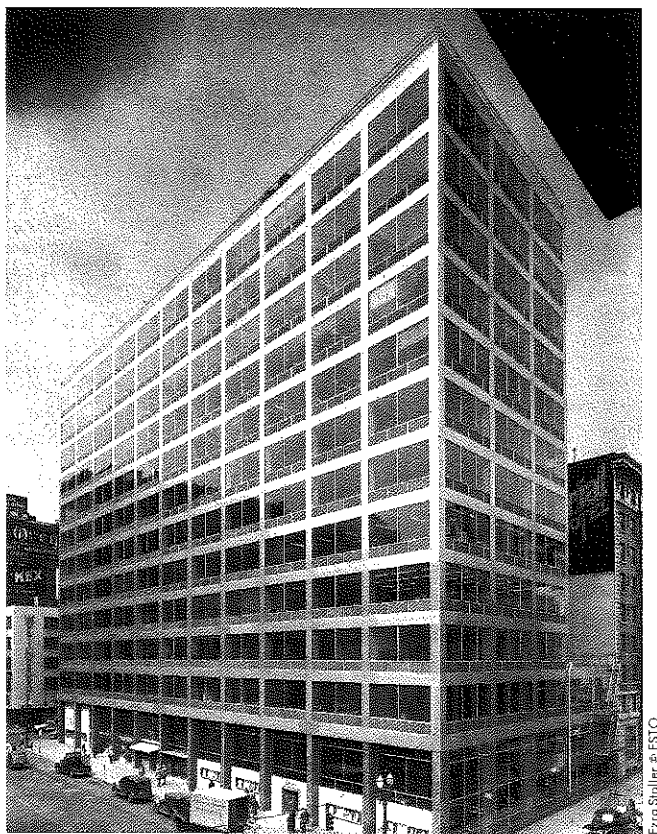
Le Corbusier, Niemeyer, Weissmann, and Bodiansky agreed to the proposed solution in a joint statement they issued on May 7, but in spite of this there was almost immediately a confrontation between Le Corbusier and Harrison. For practical reasons, Harrison was convinced that the required area in a Conference Building should be reduced in horizontal size, arranging it in two floors instead of one. Le Corbusier was adamant that it should be spread out on a single floor. Harrison decided to avoid a vote, which he felt would strain the relationship between opposing factions, and made the decision himself in favor of the two-level plan.

In later years Harrison, in his gentlemanly fashion, referred to this issue as the only obstacle Le Corbusier had posed. But an equally heated debate with Le Corbusier developed over his insistence that the Secretariat's façades be protected from the sun. Given that the Secretariat was to be a tall building, it was logical for the architects to think of it in terms of a typical American office tower, with daily, year-round use of the offices as opposed to the periodic use to be made of the meeting halls.²⁷ They agreed that the structure of each of the U.N. buildings would be in steel and reinforced concrete, but they still had to select the material for the skin to cover this framework. In one of his earliest statements about the buildings, Le Corbusier had referred to stone façades.²⁸ But for a maximum amount of sun and natural light in the Secretariat—as opposed to the artificial lighting of the meeting halls—overall glazing seemed to offer a better solution. The Design Board therefore decided

that the building's major east and west elevations would consist of glass curtain walls with the narrow (seventy-two-foot) north and south ends solidly faced with marble (carried across the long sides as a thin cornice). Lie apparently suggested the unbroken stone sheathing for the Secretariat's narrow north and south sides.²⁹

In 1947 there was only one glass-and-aluminum-skin skyscraper in the United States: Pietro Belluschi's nearly completed Equitable Building in Portland, Oregon (Fig. 112). Continuous glazing was therefore still an unfamiliar solution to the problem of the skyscraper wall. But even in those energy-rich days, the use of this much glass raised the question of heat gain and loss. Harrison knew, of course, that the Secretariat's orientation was not due north-south, as was widely supposed, but twenty-nine degrees east of north, in alignment with New York City's grid; accordingly the building's west wall would not be as directly exposed to the sun as was generally feared. Harrison initiated several studies to determine just how many hours of sun the building might expect each year and what measures could be taken to minimize unwanted solar effects. Four basic solutions were considered (each one in conjunction with the use of venetian blinds): plate glass; double plate glass; Thermopane (tinted double-glazing); and a double window of Thermopane and plate glass. As usual, Le Corbusier had his own solution—the *brise-soleil* (fixed exterior overhangs) that he had projected for his buildings in Algiers (1933) and employed later in Rio de Janeiro. Preliminary investigations revealed that the extra steel and other materials required for *brise-soleils* would add considerably to construction costs. It was also pointed out that in the harsh New York winters, they would be natural collecting places for snow and ice that could fall and create a dangerous hazard. Only the embedding of steam or hot water pipes in the *brise-soleils* could have prevented such a hazard—a precaution that would, in turn, have increased heating costs so drastically as to cancel out any possible savings they might have afforded in climate control.³⁰

As a result of Le Corbusier's obstinacy, the debate about the Secretariat skin assumed monumental proportions. Again, Harrison acted decisively and diplomati-



112. Pietro Belluschi, Equitable Building, Portland, Oregon (1948).

cally. He turned the problem over to Syska & Hennessy, the then relatively small firm of young mechanical engineers that he had selected for the project. The engineers solved the matter by administering a simple heat test: they placed two twenty-four-hour thermometers that recorded temperatures on an ink graph two feet away from two different windows oriented as they would be in the U.N. building. One window was made of thermal glass (Thermopane); the other was not. Readings were recorded for two weeks, at the end of which the thermometer in front of the thermal glass window had consistently registered a temperature of ten to fifteen degrees less than its mate. The test proved that Thermopane alone, without *brise-soleils*, could moderate heat and cold, thereby justifying its price of fifty percent more than plate glass.

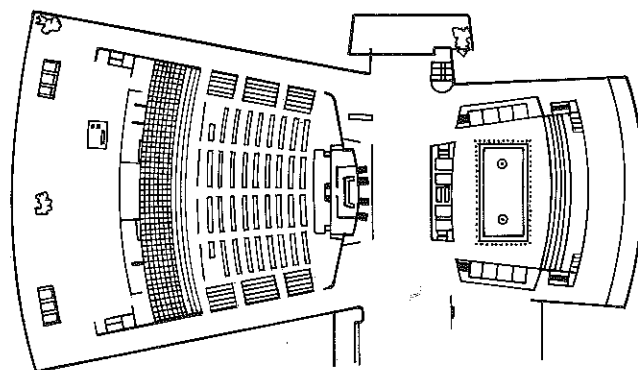
Thermopane was functionally necessary only on the west side of the Secretariat, but the architects were concerned about the psychological and aesthetic effects of using blue-green, heat-resistant Thermopane on one side of the building and clear glass on the other. To avoid such a dichotomy, they used Thermopane for both the east and west elevations, doubling their glass costs but extending the green tonality to all the building's windows.³¹ The color refinement was continued in the lobbies, where walls and columns parallel to the green east and west façades are faced with green marble; those that parallel the white north and south façades are faced with white marble. Years after the Secretariat was completed, Le Corbusier still had not accepted this solution, bitterly criticizing the tinted glass (by then common in tall buildings) for casting what he called a "cadaverous light."³²

For the General Assembly and the Conference Building the delegates requested that their spaces be kept separate from those of the press and public. Harrison ensured that this was achieved in both buildings by placing the two groups on different levels. The Conference Building rises to five stories on the river side and to four on the west side. The Security, Economic and Social, and Trusteeship council rooms are housed in the easternmost section, each with a large glass wall facing the river, similar to Harrison's design for a concert hall for X City (see Fig. 91). Below the council rooms, the conference rooms have

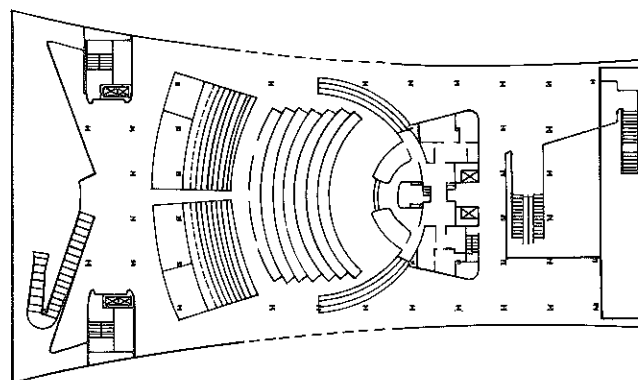
the same structural frame, with full-height windows at each side of a blank middle section.

The General Assembly was considered the heart of the new "World Capitol," and as such it occupied the plan's focal point; in preparation for the design of its interior, Harrison covered the drafting room walls with as many plans for parliamentary assemblies as his researchers could find. Ranging from the U.S. Congress to the British, French, and Italian parliaments and a number of those in South American capitals, he found that the individual arrangements showed only minor differences—with the exception of the British Parliament, where opposing parties sit facing each other. Originally, the U.N. Assembly was designed as two funnel-shaped auditoriums that met at their narrow ends, and the resulting hourglass plan was a direct expression of this functional arrangement. A major budget cut (to be described in chapter 13) eventually necessitated reduction of the Assembly to a single auditorium with open-well lobbies at either end, thereby rendering meaningless the building's pinched-middle plan. But like every other aspect of the headquarters design, the external shape of the General Assembly had been arrived at through a rigorous exchange of ideas among the members of the by then dispersed Design Board. Reluctant to reopen this exchange by questioning the relationship of the General Assembly's exterior to its new interior, Harrison simply pulled the building together with flattened curves (Figs. 113, 114).³³ The decision ignored the connection between form and function and was widely criticized on this score.³⁴ At the time, the structure was a startling new example of a building treated as a free sculptural shape. New York City was unprepared for such a radical departure from the rectilinear norms of the prevalent International Style.³⁵

In 1952, the year the General Assembly Building was completed, Harrison also completed a small auditorium for Oberlin College in Ohio, designed on the hourglass plan he had been unable to realize at the U.N.³⁶ To accommodate the wavy shell recommended by the acousticians Bolt, Beranek & Newman, he designed the interior walls and the ceiling as a series of cubic



113. Original plan of General Assembly.

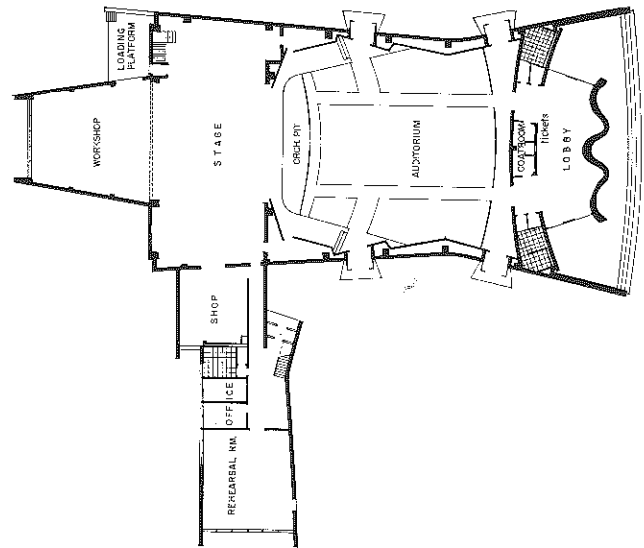


114. Modified plan of General Assembly, as built.

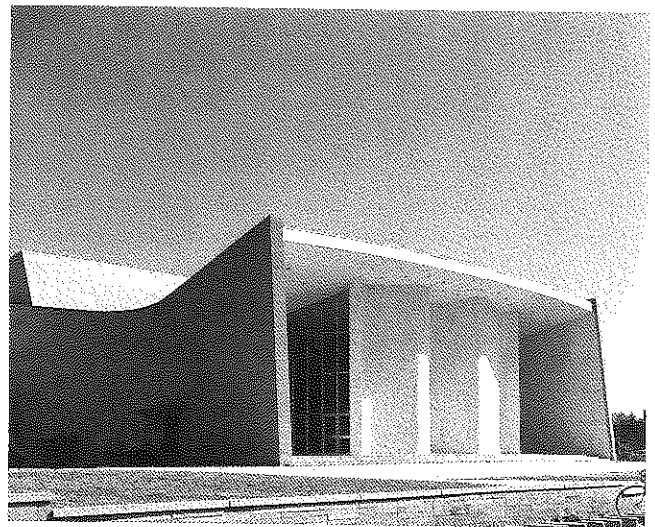
forms—with a hung, angled plaster ceiling. For the façade, he used one of the curvilinear motifs of which he was so fond. Public reaction to the design was even stronger in Ohio than in New York, as witnessed by the local press's calling Oberlin's new auditorium "The Most Controversial Building in Ohio" (Figs. 115, 116).³⁷

The Design Board had intended that the curve of the General Assembly's roof and side wall would differentiate it from the rest of the complex and thereby emphasize its importance. (Originally, the Assembly's south façade was to curve forward slightly.) But juxtaposed against the strong, tall lines of the Secretariat, the concave west wall and roof made the Assembly building seem weak and uncertain by comparison (Fig. 117).³⁸ Harrison had approved the General Assembly roof as an uninterrupted curve with minor enclosures for machinery. But the plan changed when Lie ran into funding difficulties and had to appeal for a government loan. Harrison is reported to have said to his colleagues, "According to Senator Austin, if you're going to get this loan request through Congress, the building should have a dome."³⁹ The subsequent addition of a dome—the typical American symbol of government—over the curved roof of the Assembly Hall may have helped to gain congressional approval, but even more important to the approval were a number of cost-saving alterations. One of these changes necessitated lowering the Assembly roof which made the dome more unfortunately prominent (Figs. 118, 119). The steeply angled low dome is neither dominating nor decorative, and behind it at the north, the boxes enclosing elevator machinery appear clumsy and unrelated.⁴⁰

Plans to use the same marble as the north and south ends of the Secretariat for the Assembly's flanks were also sacrificed to economy, and only a border in marble now surrounds the English Portland stone that was employed instead (Fig. 120). Neither the color nor the texture of this pinkish stone, it was soon pointed out, blends with the marble used elsewhere.⁴¹ Other aspects of the building were also criticized: the rigidity of the ramps, the overbearing canopy of the delegates' entrance on the First Avenue façade, the discordance between the north, public entrance—composed of marble piers alternating with



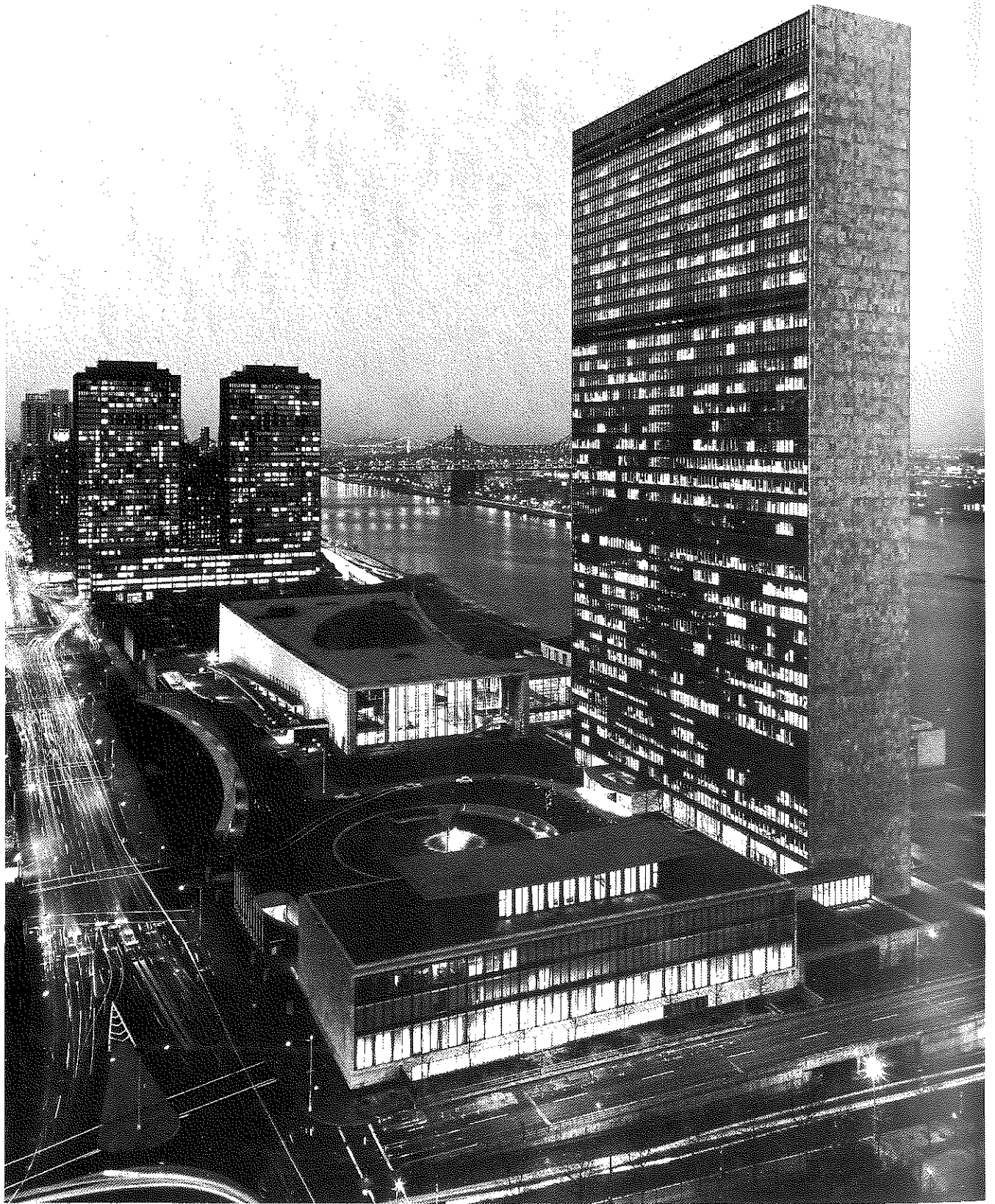
115. Harrison, plan of auditorium, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio (1952).



116. Harrison, façade of auditorium, Oberlin College.



117. General Assembly (1952) and Secretariat (1950), seen from west.

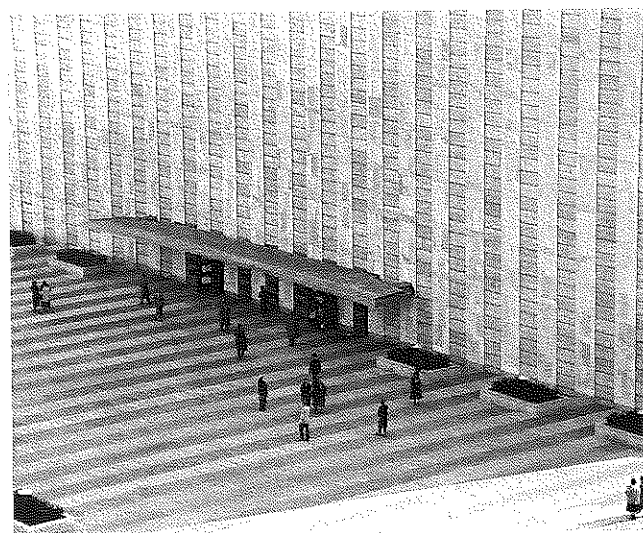


118. United Nations Headquarters, seen from south. Harrison's library (1963) is in the foreground, Abramovitz's twin tower apartment building (1966) is in the background.



119. United Nations Headquarters, seen from east.

120. Detail of north entrance to General Assembly building.



vertical bands of photosensitive glass—and the south elevation, whose glazing was similar to the other U.N. buildings. Harrison himself regretted the awkwardness of the narrow, rectangular passageway that connects the eastern elevation of the General Assembly with the Conference Building (see Fig. 118).⁴²

The Assembly Hall itself has worked well. Technologically ahead of its time, it was the first auditorium in the world to take advantage of all the (then) new mechanical and electrical aids.⁴³ The gilded wood sheathing of its slanted walls hides irregular surfaces that assure effective acoustical functioning. Reminiscent of Aalto's tilted wood walls at the New York World's Fair, the room focuses on the dramatic light slot behind the speaker's podium (Fig. 121). The majestic space of the main, delegates' entrance is also appropriate to its function. What might have been a cold, cavernous area is humanized by the gentle angle of the balconies that open onto it—an angle recalled in the parabolic arches that support the ramp (Fig. 122). Unfortunately, the ceremonial front entrance quickly took a second place to the more accessible western entrance.⁴⁴

In the last years of his life, Harrison said simply of the U.N.: "I and the others expressed the Assembly with the slope of the roof and walls. Does it go with the office building? Perhaps not, but how do you do it better?"

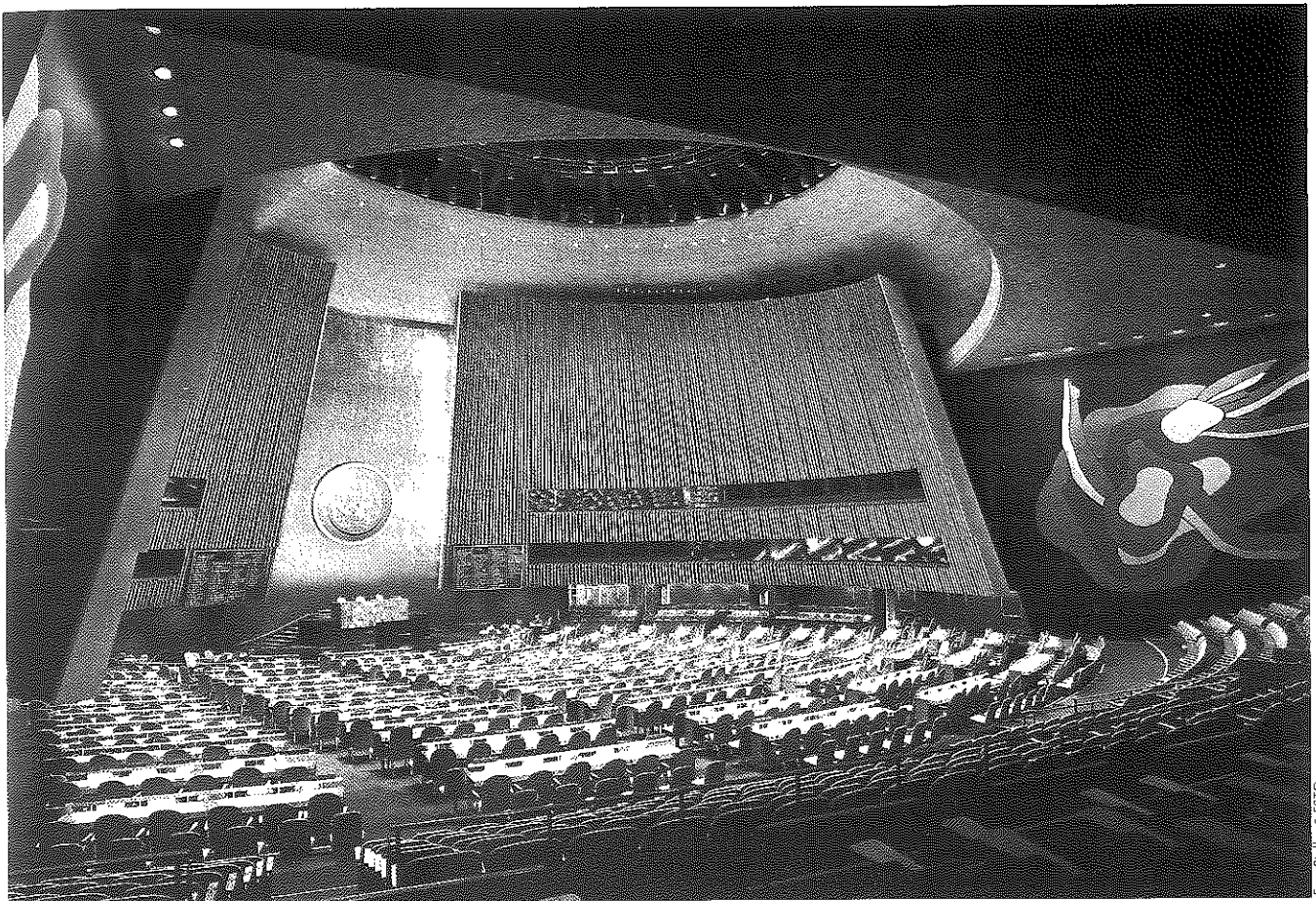
Harrison's tolerance for pressure and controversy would be tested again as the prospect of the U.N. became a dynamic ingredient in the political and business life of New York City. For if designing the U.N. buildings was one problem, the question of their relationship to the existing fabric of the city presented a whole set of other problems, which could be solved only with the cooperation of several major figures in the city's administration. One of these was the mayor, and another, the Parks Commissioner, who was also chairman of the Triborough Authority.

Harrison recalled that "no one had any use for Bill O'Dwyer, but he turned out to be great—he was determined to do the U.N."⁴⁵ The brawny, blue-eyed mayor of New York was one of eleven children of impoverished Irish parents. A Jesuit education in Spain served him well during his arduous climb up the political ladder in the

United States. Unfortunately, neither his training nor his subsequent status as a lawyer, magistrate, county court judge, and district attorney were sufficient to clear his name of its associations with organized crime. Whatever these associations may have been, O'Dwyer sincerely loved New York and was highly ambitious for the role he could play in its improvement. The U.N. provided him with a golden opportunity.

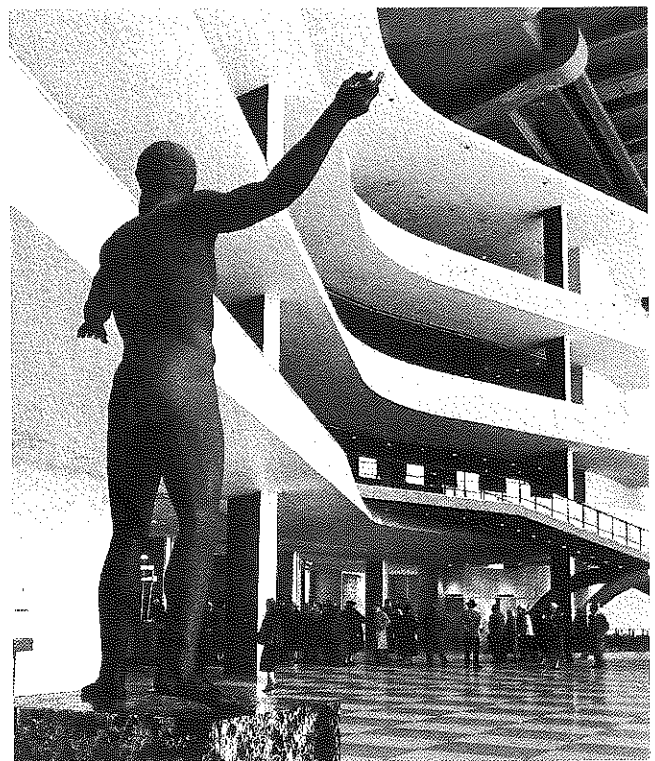
Robert Moses was another powerful figure to be contended with. Earlier, Moses had fought against a midtown location for the U.N. headquarters. For him Flushing Meadows was "The Natural and Proper Home of the Capitol of the World."⁴⁶ But even the mighty Moses was overruled by the combination of Rockefeller, O'Dwyer, and Trygve Lie. Once it was apparent that the U.N. delegates would come to New York only if their headquarters could be situated in Manhattan, the Parks Commissioner was quick to accept the East River location; and with his usual talent for coming out on top of what might seem to be defeat, he was made U.N. construction coordinator for the city and granted complete control of those spheres that affected the city, such as roads and fences.⁴⁷

On May 21, 1947, the mayor made a public statement that outlined the city's responsibility in the overall planning of the U.N. To facilitate nonlocal traffic through the site, a six-lane tunnel was to be excavated under First Avenue between Forty-first and Forty-eighth streets, with all private and public utilities in the tunnel area to be rerouted. To accommodate the twenty thousand people who would be coming daily to the site, Forty-seventh Street was to be widened between Second and First avenues. Several buildings between Forty-first and Forty-third streets on the west side of First Avenue were to be torn down to make two small formal parks. The narrow forty-foot tunnel on Forty-second Street between First and Second avenues was to be reconstructed to the full one-hundred-foot width of the street and the Forty-second-Street trolley line was to be eliminated eventually. The city agreed to sell to the U.N. for a nominal \$1.5 million its Housing Authority Building, which had been completed recently on the site at Forty-second Street. An aerial easement would be granted over FDR



121. Assembly Hall with murals by Fernand Léger, General Assembly.

122. Delegates' entrance, General Assembly.



Drive so that between Thirty-seventh and Fifty-first streets the drive could be reconstructed under an esplanade to be built by the U.N., with access/egress ramps at Forty-second and Forty-eighth streets. Work on the drive was to be paid for by the U.N.; the remaining cost of \$15 million was to be covered by the city.⁴⁸

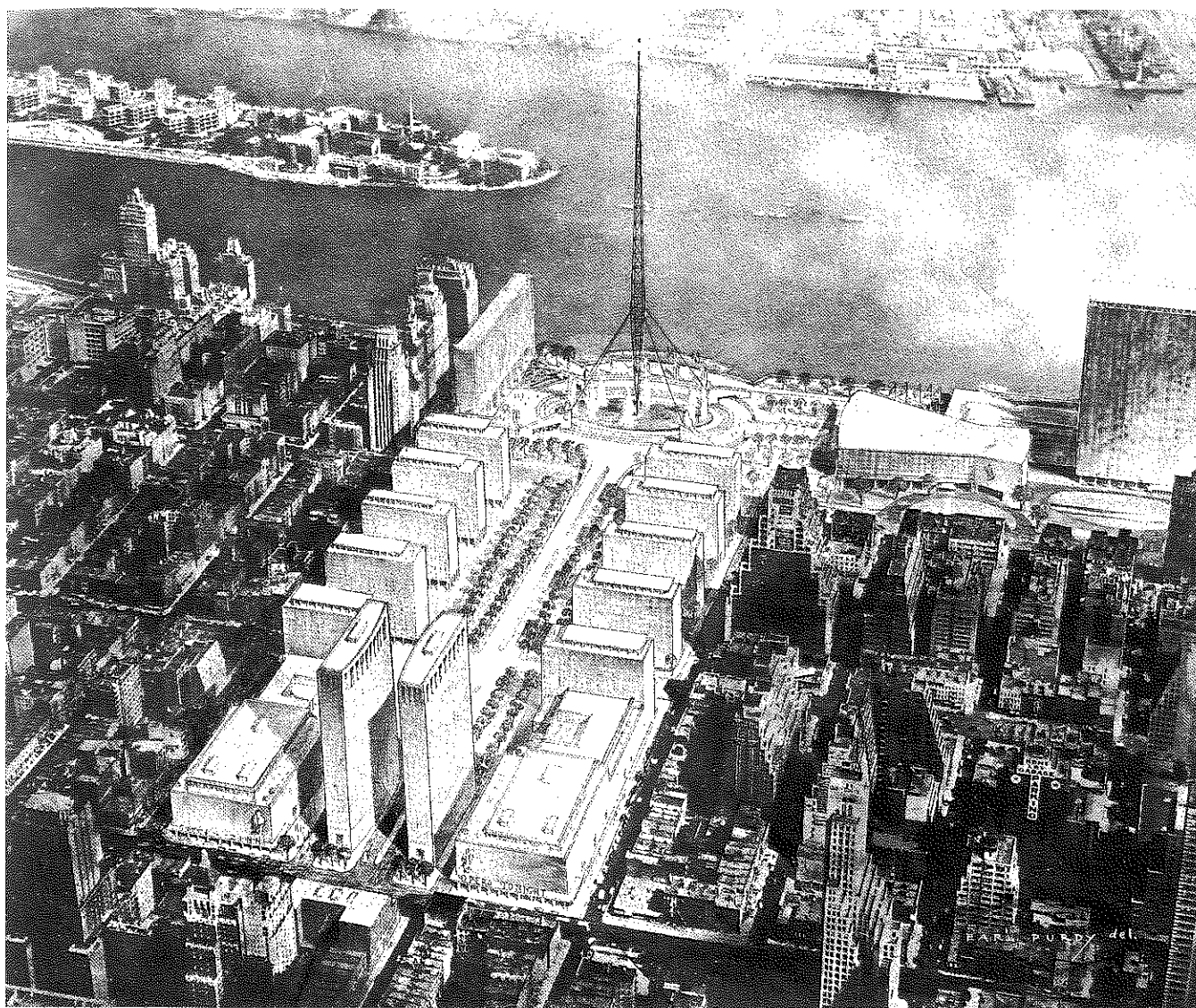
By the time the international headquarters was completed, New York City had spent \$25,806,300, two-thirds as much again as its original estimate. Additional expenses involved the costs of renovating the temporary headquarters in Flushing for use during the design and construction of the new buildings; condemning the remaining strips of private land in the area; resettling the building materials yard and freight barge terminal of the Lehigh Valley Railroad; and removing and relocating 270 residential tenants who had been living on the site. In addition, as a result of the federal tax dispensation for the U.N., the city rezoned and restricted advertising in the surrounding neighborhood.⁴⁹

The city reaped extraordinary benefits from these concessions. Before the complex was finished, property values in the U.N. neighborhood had appreciated to sixty-five dollars per square foot, and in the 1950s and 1960s several institutions and a major corporation asked Harrison & Abramovitz to design buildings near the U.N. Harrison built a twelve-story building, clad laterally in limestone with a glazed façade, to house the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1953) at the northwest corner of Forty-sixth Street and First Avenue.⁵⁰ He constructed a similar building clad entirely in limestone for IBM World Trade (1958) on the opposite, southwest, corner of the avenue. Abramovitz designed the Institute of International Education (1964) on First Avenue between Forty-fifth and Forty-sixth streets with the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms by Aalto. This was followed by a pair of large steel and glass apartment towers for Alcoa (1966) between Forty-eighth and Forty-ninth streets facing the northern border of the U.N. site. More recently, Roche & Dinkeloo's U.N. Plaza Hotel (1976) and office complex (1984) have joined the Harrison & Abramovitz buildings. Without the U.N., the city would have had to provide slum clearance for most of the neighborhood. The private capital that ac-

tively began to seek investment there might have been attracted only if the city had resorted to lowering property values. In the long run, savings and increased tax income to the city far outweighed its immediate expenditure.⁵¹

O'Dwyer and Moses were willing to make almost unlimited concessions to accommodate the new international headquarters within its site and in relation to the areas immediately adjacent to it. They were less receptive to proposals for its relation to the rest of the city, including a grand axial approach which might stretch as far as Grand Central Terminal.⁵² Moses maintained the city's resistance to this scheme and encouraged the City Planning Commission, chaired at the time by the future mayor, Robert F. Wagner, Jr., to try to resolve the problem by simply widening the south side of Forty-seventh Street between First and Second avenues—opposite the preliminary site for the Secretariat—by one hundred feet. Protesting a solution it considered inadequate, a special committee of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects confirmed the insufficiency of the City Planning Commission's proposal and in its stead suggested a six-part plan focused on redeveloping the blocks between Forty-fifth and Forty-eighth streets between Lexington and First avenues and creating a wide boulevard and an underground pass with parking facilities.⁵³

No one was more eager to apply this grand approach to New York than William Zeckendorf, who waged a futile, year-long campaign to try and persuade Moses to change his mind (Fig. 123; see Appendix B). Throughout these impassioned proceedings Harrison maintained a dignified aloofness. Considering his Beaux-Arts training, there is little doubt that he favored the grand approach. But unlike Zeckendorf, who tended to forget the practical implications of his ideas, Harrison was a realist. He knew that time and money were essential to the building of the U.N. He realized that the cost both in lost tax revenues and in the construction and maintenance of an important boulevard would be more than the city would be willing to undertake. By wisely refusing to take sides, the architect avoided a possible complication of the project at hand and at the same time kept the good will of a former client and of the city's most



123. William Zeckendorf's proposed concourse to the United Nations Headquarters (spring 1947).

powerful official, with whom he also succeeded in maintaining his personal friendship.

As usual, Moses moved quickly on his decision, ordering Forty-seventh Street widened from First to Second avenues. Within a short time the Design Board repositioned the Secretariat at Forty-second Street, but it was too late: Moses's orders had already been executed, leaving the existing stub of broadened street that inexplicably dramatizes the neon advertisement for Pepsi-Cola across the East River.⁵⁴ It is ironic that the building the sign crowns had been designed by Harrison & Fouilhoux.

Chapter 13

The United Nations: the critics

On May 21, 1947, the Headquarters Advisory Committee of the General Assembly unanimously approved the Design Board's final plan.¹ The estimated cost was \$85 million; it was now up to Trygve Lie to secure the necessary funds. Turned down by the International Bank and advised that the amount was too high for Congress to approve, he decided that the request would have to be pared down.²

Harrison greeted the news that the design had to be altered for economy's sake with stoic equanimity and immediately mustered the draftsmen under Harris's direction to make the necessary changes. The Secretariat building was reduced by six floors (from forty-five to thirty-nine); the General Assembly, as already noted, was reduced from two halls to one; four of the Conference Building's conference and committee rooms were eliminated (leaving eighteen instead of twenty-two), and in place of one of the largest (Conference Room Number 4) a smaller room was placed directly under the General Assembly hall; the generous circulation areas were cut back—in the Conference Building, for example, interior corridors were eliminated entirely; parking facilities were reduced from two thousand to fifteen hundred; and the installation of certain communication equipment was deferred. In addition, Harrison decided that an enclosing fence that seemed of particular interest to Moses would be paid for by the city.³ In short, the project's materials and details were simplified and the plan was tightened, but the general scheme remained essentially the same.

The report that was presented to the General Assembly and then submitted to Congress for funding in the summer of 1947 relied on visual means of presentation similar to the techniques used in Nelson Rockefeller's wartime chart room in Washington. Through numerous charts, diagrams, plans, and sections by Robert Pontabry (from the Harrison & Abramovitz office), accompanied by brief explanatory texts, the report described the three U.N. buildings, and suggested constructing a tower at the north end of the site for specialized agencies and missions.⁴ On August 11, 1947, Congress granted an interest-free loan of \$65 million.

The Secretary-General had been growing increasingly impatient with the international architects' complex discussions concerning the headquarters, and he was obviously relieved at the prospect of their ending. As Harrison said: "He wanted to get it built."⁵ Their task completed, each foreign architect received a \$5,000 fee and returned to his country. Le Corbusier was reluctant to leave, insisting that without him the project could not be realized properly. He finally departed only when Lie made it clear that he would not tolerate his continued participation.⁶

Having just completed the design process for the U.N., Harrison turned his attention to an even larger project. It, too, involved the coordination of buildings on a single site; in this case, about 80 acres in old St. Louis. The project was to commemorate Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, with the design to be selected by means of an open competition: the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Competition. Announced June 1, 1947, the program was unusually indeterminate: in effect competitors were asked to create their own program for land use and development of the unoccupied, government-owned site; plans were to include landscape design and sketches of sculpture and painting.

Harrison based his plan on facilities for what must have been one of the most compelling issues of the time: the constructive development of atomic energy. The linear plan included two historical museums, buildings which would provide meeting and working space for the Atomic Development Authority, and spaces for public contacts such as exhibitions and libraries. The focal building of the Authority was a tiered, circular conference center. Additional buildings would house non-Authority offices and commercial premises together with recreation areas (Fig. 124).⁷ The practicality of the concept was at polar opposites from Eero Saarinen's prize-winning, abstract design for a monumental parabolic arch. Like the calm arrangement of diverse units at the United Nations, Harrison's plan for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Competition is in sharp contrast with the more agitated manipulation of uniform units in his earlier design for X City.

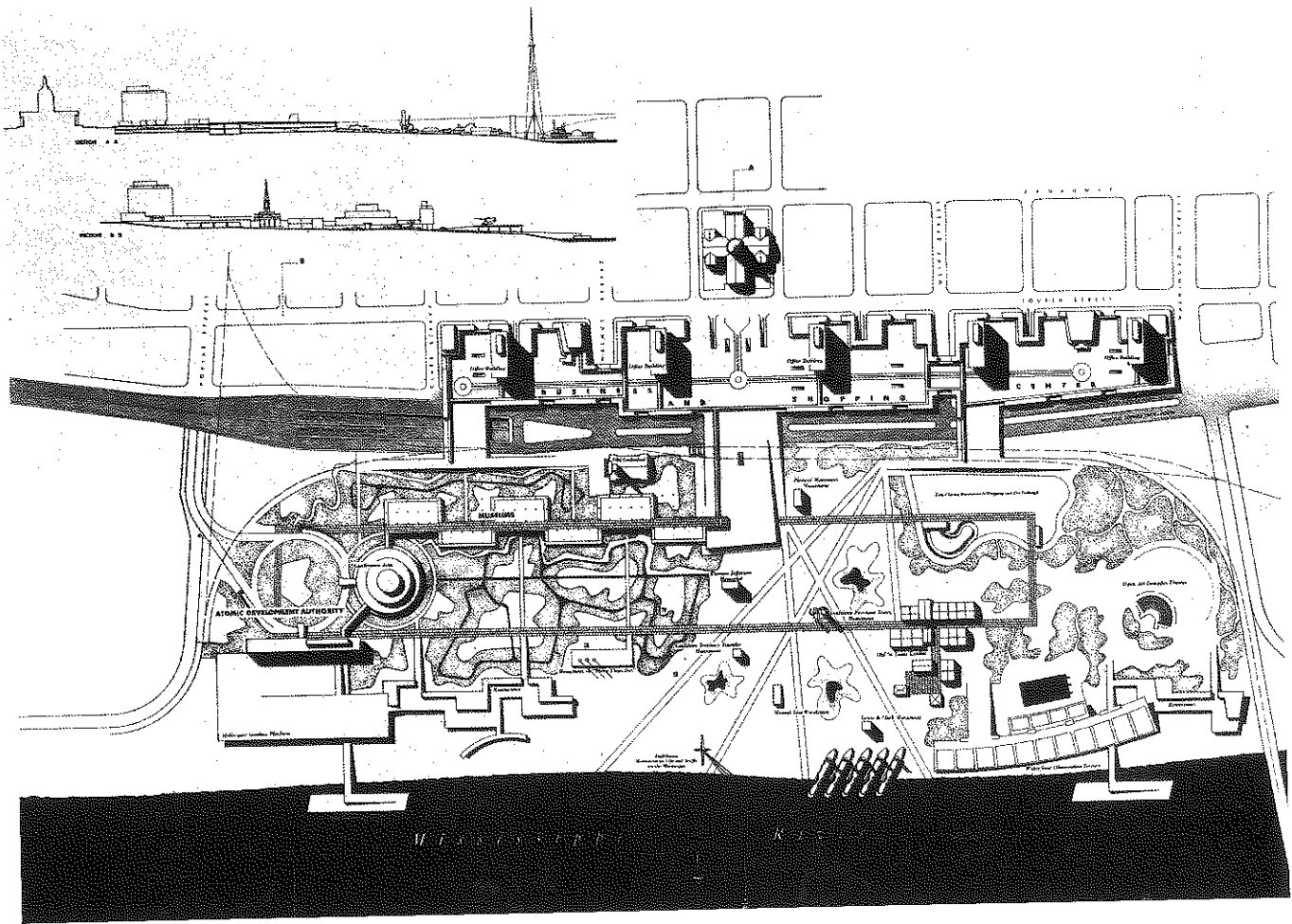
In September, the U.N. draftsmen under Harris relinquished their cramped quarters in the RKO Building

to the Harrison & Abramovitz office and moved to the site, establishing themselves on the second floor of the inherited Housing Authority building. Located at the northeast corner of Forty-second Street, it was near completion at the time of the Rockefeller gift. The ugly structure was an embarrassment to the U.N. architects, but the cutback ruled out its demolition. (It was finally torn down in 1960, when Harrison designed a new building to serve as the U.N. Library [1963].)⁸

The fall of 1947 saw Harrison dividing his time between his office at Rockefeller Center and the U.N. design rooms, a pattern that lasted for several years. Lie had engaged Harrison & Abramovitz to make working drawings for the structures. As director of planning, Harrison was therefore in the ambiguous position of hiring his own firm. "He was very tough on himself," said H. L. McLeod, the head of finance for the Headquarters Planning Office. "An architectural firm doing a job such as Harrison & Abramovitz did for the U.N. buildings would ordinarily charge a fee of several million dollars. Harrison & Abramovitz insisted on doing the job for just cost plus the actual overhead. They didn't make a cent of profit."⁹ The U.N. proved to be the first in a series of large urban facilities, including Lincoln Center and the Albany Mall, for which the firm in large part waived a profit. While the publicity value of these major monuments is undeniable, Harrison's deep civic consciousness also must have played a role.

Now began the arduous tasks of preparing working drawings and making crucial choices of contractors and experts in engineering, air-conditioning, landscaping, and the like. Two hundred fifty draftsmen worked at the Housing Authority building, where Michael Harris was spending his days and a good part of his nights. He remembered Harrison's relentlessness, driving everyone to meet stiff deadlines he had set:

His enormous capacity of getting work done at all times, by people of all ages, but particularly young people, from whom he seemed to have a knack of drawing out the most possible. But he could be infuriating, and sometimes I felt he didn't care if I lived or died as long as the job got done.¹⁰



124. Harrison & Abramovitz competition entry for Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (September 1947).

When in 1950 the Secretariat was almost ready for occupancy, the draftsmen moved to the second floor of the headquarters' skyscraper. By then major problems had been resolved and, according to Harris, "everyone was working together like one big happy family."

The Secretariat had been scheduled for completion by June 1949, and the Conference and General Assembly buildings for early 1951. The Secretariat was, in fact, ready for occupancy on August 21, 1950,¹¹ and the Conference Building was completed in July 1951, followed by the General Assembly, in October 1952. Miraculously, the \$65 million budget was exceeded by only \$2 million. The relative rapidity of construction and the remarkable adherence to budget were due to a great extent to the widespread idealism and enthusiasm generated by the idea of a United Nations. From representatives of participating countries to architects, negotiators, and even unskilled construction workers, most of those con-

nected with the project were convinced that the organization represented a step toward world peace. Like Rockefeller Center during the Depression, the U.N. was the most important construction project in post-World War II New York; in a city harassed by myriad new problems, the U.N. represented hope for making New York the political capital of the world. But efficient realization of the international headquarters was also accomplished thanks to Harrison's expertise. It had taken him barely three months to obtain a workable project from a group of architects including some of the most temperamental men in the profession. He himself said there was "no time for architectural politics, feuds and quarrels."¹² In a talk he gave in April 1947, Harrison noted his concern to avoid problems like those that had arisen at the 1933-34 Chicago World's Fair, where a voting committee of architects became embroiled in "a battle royal, with one clique working against another," and at the League of

Nations, which took eleven years to complete. He claimed to have used as a model Stephen F. Voorhees's direction of the 1939 New York World's Fair: "He had *authority*, though he hardly ever used it, and never insisted on his own ideas—but, having the authority, he eliminated the clique."¹³ Harrison followed his model well, and once the design was established, he implemented it in masterly fashion.

At the start of the design discussions, Harrison went to Washington to discuss a no-strike agreement with William Green of the American Federation of Labor. With the exception of a two-week work stoppage in September 1947, the agreement held.¹⁴ Early in 1948 major U.S. steel producers raised the price of semifinished steel. Forewarned by this increase, Harrison moved to protect the project from future surprises. When all the bids were in, he called Benjamin F. Fairless, president of U.S. Steel, and told him that his company had made the lowest bid, and it would get the contract only if Fairless guaranteed the price and availability of the steel. Fairless agreed, and the \$2.5 million contract was signed on December 10, 1948. When the Korean War began in June 1950, steel became scarce, and with outstanding deliveries still to be made for the General Assembly and Conference Building, Harrison reminded Fairless of his promise. The steel was delivered on time.¹⁵ Harrison ended his retrospective account of this incident with the observation: "Fairless was an old-fashioned entrepreneur, he kept the steel company going at a tremendous rate—he honored his word, and delivered—it wouldn't be the same today."

When Harrison served as director of planning for the U.N., he was at the peak of his prestige as founder and head of a large architectural office. At that time an architect in his position controlled many aspects of construction. Moreover, Harrison knew exactly who wielded power in a supremely power-conscious city, and he made sure he maintained access to that power in order to construct the buildings he was entrusted with in a manner commensurate with that trust.

Two special areas of the U.N. construction proved to be particularly successful. Harrison engaged Bolt, Beranek, & Newman, a firm of young men who had just

completed their acoustical training in Los Angeles with Vern O. Knudson, then considered one of the greatest experts in the field. The exceptionally good acoustics in the different public rooms at the U.N. launched the firm on its rapid path to success. Harrison's innovative solutions to the problems of air-conditioning the U.N. buildings also resulted in a remarkable quality of environmental control. Because many people of different nationalities would be working in the Secretariat, with a great variety of habitual response to climate, it was requested that the design provide individual temperature control and operable windows. This, combined with the continuous glazing of the Secretariat's east and west elevations and its northwest orientation, challenged climatological skill.

To carry wind loads and to create efficient interior space, the building had a steel frame of two exterior and two interior column lines, with girder frames between columns rigidly connected to them. Floors consisted of short-span reinforced concrete slabs. Normally, the façade would show deep floor structures and suspended ceilings required for duct work carrying the extremely heavy loads. In fact, the floor slab was cantilevered approximately thirty inches beyond the structural columns and the ceiling in that area was tilted up to meet the floor slab at the glass skin. This showed only a thin line on the exterior and left enough space for the ducts.¹⁶

Services and mechanical systems were placed in three of the Secretariat's floors (6, 16, 28), and in the top floor, and the basement. The exteriors of these floors were covered with grillwork, interrupted by a narrow, horizontal glazed band (see Fig. 117). The arrangement saved one foot in height per service floor and kept the rest of the building free of most machinery. Elevator machinery was located at the center of the floors, leaving office space at each end. A clear ceiling height of nine feet six inches was normal throughout the building. Grills and diffusers provided low-velocity air, while high-velocity air issued at regular intervals from units under the windows with water coils for heating and cooling, every other one of which was adjustable.¹⁷ The provision of six air-conditioning units for every seven window

bays and the integration of air-diffusers into standard fluorescent light fixtures provided unusual flexibility.¹⁸

In the General Assembly building, Harrison created a small scandal by making fully visible on the ceiling of the delegates' entrance the massive and complicated duct work of the air-handling system (see Fig. 120). This preference for bulky, nonrectangular forms to smooth, streamlined surfaces may reflect Markelius's influence. It can also be perceived as part of the postwar period's general movement toward greater freedom of architectural expression.¹⁹

At the U.N. (as he had at Rockefeller Center), Harrison played an important role in the acquisition of artworks. When the organization began to receive gifts from every participating country, he persuaded Lie that a review committee was needed to control the quality of works accepted. This did not, however, solve the question of funding art he wanted to buy for the new buildings. The large, lateral walls of the General Assembly's hall were of particular concern to Harrison, and he asked his friend Fernand Léger to provide rough sketches for murals. Harris was sent to Paris to describe the project to Léger, who agreed to make the drawings for \$5,000. Harrison showed the scheme to Nelson Rockefeller, who immediately donated the artist's fee. Because of Léger's association with the Communist party at the time, he was not permitted to enter the United States to execute the works, but his sketches allowed a young art student to paint the murals according to the master's specifications (see Fig. 121). Their execution by another hand perhaps partially explains the disappointing quality of these murals. Harrison also was responsible for obtaining for the U.N. sculpture by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

In widespread coverage of the design for the U.N. buildings, the press repeatedly compared them to Rockefeller Center. To understand the implications of this comparison, it must be remembered that, as Rockefeller Center had neared completion, it had been criticized as the "tombstone of capitalism . . . with windows."²⁰ Even a decade later, in the late 1940s, in a general assessment of the city's architecture Mumford condemned the whole

concept of Rockefeller Center as "the end of a period, not the beginning of one."²¹

From the first unveiling of the Design Board's model and plans in 1947 until its completion in 1953, the U.N. was the object of high praise and sharp criticism. Reporting on a preview of the design at Flushing, George Barrett wrote of the Secretariat in the *New York Times*: "The massive vitreous structure . . . is probably the most radical building design ever attempted on a huge scale."²² Philip Johnson declared the project to be "the best modern piece of planning" he had ever seen.²³ On the other hand, Mumford devoted six of his influential Sky Line columns in the *New Yorker* exclusively to the headquarters; most of them were devastatingly critical. He condemned, among other things, the inadequate site—"a fleabite of land," with no "provision for growth"²⁴—and the buildings' design, which he charged with failing to create a cohesive whole and found "far from being an admirable expression of the idea of the U.N."²⁵ For Mumford, the prominence of the Secretariat in relation to the General Assembly destroyed the expressive possibilities of the complex; they were woefully wanting in what he felt "should be as beloved a symbol as the Statue of Liberty, as powerful a spectacle as St. Peter's in Rome."²⁶

In retrospect, Harrison noted, with a hint of annoyance, that from its beginnings everyone had seemed to want Rockefeller Center to be something other than what it was, and that the same had been true of the U.N. From the day he was appointed director of planning, he demonstrated his pragmatic attitude toward the project: "The basic problem . . . is not to try to symbolize the U.N. in some highly imaginative design, but to construct a capitol where the world representatives can work efficiently and in comfort."²⁷ In an interview in the *New York Times Magazine*, he explained his perspective:

The best building in Rockefeller Center is the big one. Why? Not because we decided to raise the best and biggest building in the world to symbolize something. It's because we decided how deep in from the window an office could be and still make a place for a person working away from the light. That building grew out of our problems, not out of a philosophical concept.²⁸

Harrison wanted the same kind of practical solution for the U.N., which he thought of as a workshop—rather than a symbol—for peace.²⁹

“Not since Lord Carnarvon discovered King Tut’s tomb in 1922 had a building caused such a stir,” *Architectural Forum* declared of the Secretariat in 1950.³⁰ And there were well-publicized interviews with a variety of architectural personalities. Upon completion of the Secretariat, Frank Lloyd Wright stated with characteristic authoritarianism: “The building for the U.N. is a glorification of negation. A deadpan box with no expression of the nature of what transpires within the building.”³¹ William Delano declared that “buildings of glass look neither stable nor dignified. And they certainly do not have a monumental appearance.”³² While Mumford, in a burst of praise, wrote of the Secretariat:

No building in the city is more responsive to the constant play of light and shadow in the world beyond it; none varies more subtly with the time of day and the way the light strikes, now emphasizing the vertical metal window bars, now emphasizing the dark green of the spandrels and underlining the horizontality of the composition. No one had ever conceived of building a mirror on this scale before, and perhaps no one guessed what an endless series of pictures that mirror would reveal.³³

Although he grudgingly maintained some of his earlier criticisms, his statements—which included an accolade in the same article that referred to the Secretariat as “a snow Queen’s palace, exhaling by night a green moonlight splendor”—give the impression that he admired the buildings or at least the Secretariat, in spite of himself. Upon completion of the complex in 1953, the architect and critic Henry Stern Churchill made this judgment in his cover story on the U.N. headquarters in *Architectural Record*:

The planning of the U.N. group is a triumph of clarity and ingenuity, a putting together and sorting out of an almost incredible variety of elements and functions. It is also a triumph of

technical skill, of structural ability, of mechanical engineering. Almost every possible device of a mechanical nature has been used to further the comfort of the users of the buildings, to speed up communication, to disseminate information quickly and accurately. It is, in other words, a very fine example of American architectural skill.³⁴

The U.N. buildings are what Harrison had hoped they would be—functional solutions to the ways in which they are used. Contrary to the predictions, the architecture has proved surprisingly adaptable to the enormous increases in membership, and the people who use the buildings are unanimous in their praises of them. If it were not for the marble framing of the Secretariat’s northern and southern flanks, the building would be recognized as the first glass-wall skyscraper, a building type probably more widely imitated than any other in the history of architecture. As it is, Harrison’s Secretariat provides an essential link between Belluschi’s Equitable Building and the all-glass-wall skyscraper. Unlike Belluschi’s building, where the glass and aluminum skin is locked onto the supporting structure, the Secretariat’s glazed façades are truly independent free-hanging screens. The combination of the glass’s blue-green color with the black masonry behind wire-glass spandrels³⁵ gave it an extraordinary reflective capacity, which was recognized immediately by architects who replicated and elaborated on it to produce what has become today’s ubiquitous mirror façade. Placement of the elevator banks in the core of the building made possible the unadorned, slim rectangular form Harrison had fought for in vain for the RCA Building.

A year after the Secretariat was completed, Gordon Bunshaft produced the all-glass-walled Lever House on Park Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street. Within five years glass towers were rising across the United States and around the world. The building that may have lacked eloquence as a symbol of world peace became one of the most influential progenitors of American technology at the service of bureaucratic efficiency, and a true symbol of Western civilization at mid-century.³⁶