

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Is It Curtains For the Music Hall?

The script is familiar, repeated in city after city: the great, gaudy movie palace, symbol of glamour and a more innocent age, falls on hard times. A closing date is announced, with demolition to follow. Public protest washes up waves of sentiment and nostalgia while management points to the hard bottom line. The giant organ peals a requiem and the house lights go out forever. Curtain. Bulldozer.

Only this time it is happening to Radio City Music Hall. The doomsday scenario is being written for the showplace of the nation, the spectacular theater that has introduced millions to the performing, architectural and decorative arts for 45 years. The unique structure that has epitomized Rockefeller Center, that has made it so much more than just a concentration of office buildings, will close its doors right after the Easter show. Nice present from the Easter bunny.

Over at Rockefeller Center, the scenario is right on cue. The announcement was made on Jan. 5 that the theater would close on April 12. Alton G. Marshall, chairman and president of the board of Rockefeller Center Inc., told employees that "the heart-breaking action was being taken with a strong sense of regret." At the press conference, Mr.

Marshall fought back tears. Behind the tears were the numbers: dwindling attendance, a deficit of \$2.3 million in 1977 and a projected loss of \$3.5 million for 1978, a weekly operating overhead of \$176,000. Efforts to keep the Music Hall open—midnight concerts, operating cutbacks, attempts to find other uses—were cited. "No one wants to shoot Santa Claus" was Mr. Marshall's curtain line.

Well, one wonders. Because the same script, Rashomon-like, can be read another way. Without questioning anyone's sincerity, there are clearly other forces at work. Those who hope to save Radio City from extinction—and there are compelling reasons to do so—need to understand that there isn't any Santa Claus anywhere in sight. The Rockefeller brothers have long since hung up their Santa suits, and no one is coming down the chimney from the city or the state. Behind the hand-wringing, there is a lot of valuable real estate.

When Rockefeller Center and Radio City Music Hall were designed and built by a consortium of New York's best architects in the 1930's—Corbett, Harrison and MacMurray, Hood and Foulhoux, and Reinhard and Hofmeister—the ar-

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chitectural complex was conceived as a marriage of "maximum profit with maximum beauty." The process of accommodation of real estate and art is documented in Carol Krinsky's new book, "Rockefeller Center," just published by the Oxford University Press. Since then, the popular image that has grown up of Rockefeller Center is of a benign institutional presence somehow uninvolved with the pressures of commercial reality. This was never true, and it is less true now than ever.

In fact, what is little known outside of the trade is that Rockefeller Center itself has become an intensive real estate operation. This role developed gradually over 40 years of growth and office modernization handled by the center's own construction division. But in 1976, Rockefeller Center Inc. took the plunge to become what its own releases call "a full service real estate company and one of the largest integrated real estate service organizations in the country." It went into the real estate business in a very big way.

The Rockefeller Center Management Corporation, formed in July 1976, is a real estate, investment and development company that now builds major office buildings and commercial complexes in cities across the country. The Rockefeller Center Construction Corporation, formed in September 1976, is a contracting firm specializing in new building and office modernization, alteration and renovation on a national basis. Both companies are subsidiaries of the parent Rockefeller Center Inc. headed by Mr. Marshall.

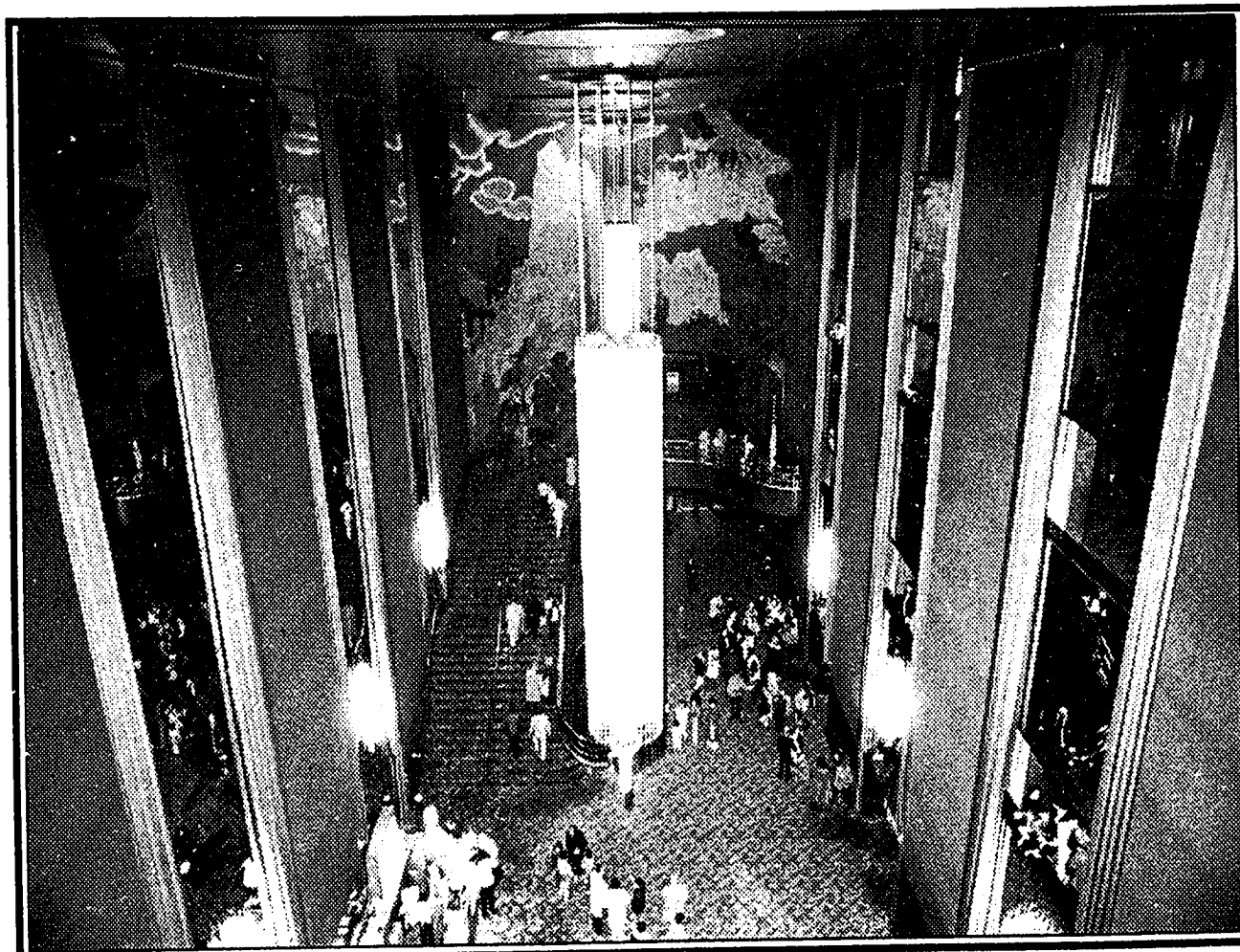
Prior to the founding of these companies, in April 1976, Rockefeller Center Inc. acquired Cushman and Wakefield, one of the country's largest real estate sales and management firms. In October 1976, Rockefeller Center Inc. bought the Tishman Construction and Research Company, formerly part of Tishman Realty and Construction.

At this time, through these companies, Rockefeller Center Inc. is operating as a national real estate developer and management organization. It is currently building a complex in Cleveland for Standard Oil, called Sohio Center, and a headquarters building in Newark for the Public Service Electric and Gas Company. It has acted as consultant for the Embarcadero Center in San Francisco and L'Enfant Plaza in Washington, D.C.

For anyone with an attentive eye to such details, there is a curious parallel between announcements of Radio City's demise and the condition of the New York real estate market. During the 1960's office building boom, when Radio City was already losing money, Rockefeller Center's architects, Harrison and Abramovitz, prepared plans to build offices above the Music Hall, which would have destroyed parts of the interior. Those plans died with the downturn in the office market. The current announcement coincides with a profitable upswing in commercial space.

With this clear bias toward real estate, Rockefeller Center cannot be seen as totally disinterested or paternalistic in the matter of Radio City's survival. One might correctly surmise that its management officers' hearts are in two places. That became evident when Mr. Marshall went to Albany in February to try to talk the New York State Historic Preservation Office out of submitting Radio City for listing on the National Register of Historic Places—an act that was taken last week. The impression was reinforced by his recent statement that he would go to court to prevent New York City from giving the Music Hall landmark status and "saddling the Center with a dead facility." Spurred by public concern, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has just held hearings, and action could be taken by the end of April.

What are being shed at Rockefeller Center may not exactly be crocodile tears—to say that would be unnecessarily unkind—but they surely express mixed feelings. And an examination of some of the studies Rockefeller Center has made for the Music Hall's reuse, which will undoubtedly be employed as ammunition against preservation, reveals a development-oriented approach of a peculiarly unfit nature, singularly lacking in any creative or cultural sensitivities.

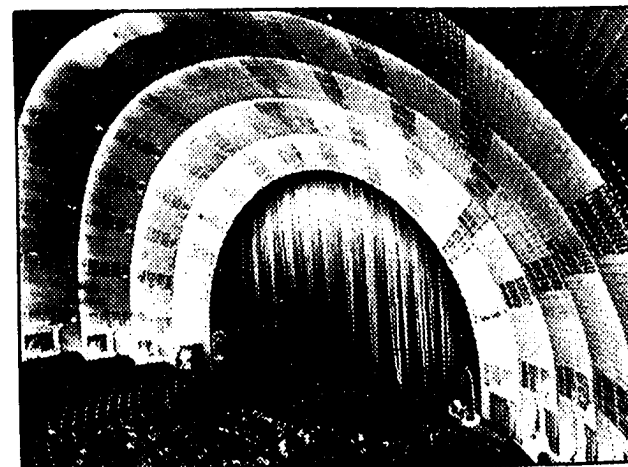


The Grand Foyer and staircase of Radio City Music Hall

Photographs by The New York Times/Marilynn K. Yee

There is an inch-thick consultants' report of an economic thoroughness matched only by its architectural flat-footedness that seriously considers salvation as an indoor theme park with a flume and other rides and food services in a completely gutted theater. An alternate recommendation is partial gutting for a "modernistic" amusement center with video games and "gizmo" exhibits in the lounges and restrooms, and relocating the restrooms to the Grand Foyer. A smaller scale suggestion calls for bigger and better popcorn concessions and souvenir stands. The figuring may be immaculate and the charts are useful, but the conceptualization can only be called tacky. There are also hot, floating rumors of a department store in the demolished Music Hall space, in connection with a shopping center in the concourse already under study by an architectural firm, the Walker Group, Inc. If none of this proves to be acceptable, the scenario would inevitably call for a sad announcement of failure, and plans for another office building.

It is quite clear that the practical preservation expertise on the rise in this country, with resounding successes behind it, has not been tapped. The creative professionalism or feasibility



The Music Hall auditorium

ity studies such as those for Boston's Faneuil Hall Markets and Old City Hall are still conspicuously lacking.

One of the report's charts, however, presents an interesting fact: as late as 1973, with diminishing attendance at 3.5 million people annually, Radio City was still a bigger visitor attraction than anything else in New York, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Natural History and the Bronx Zoo. According to management, the figures have plunged another million since then, and this is variously ascribed to the exodus to the suburbs, fear of streets and subways, the dearth of "suitable" movies and changes in entertainment patterns.

But another, unacknowledged factor insistently presents itself. Radio City is the Madame Tussaud of the entertainment world. Rockefeller Center's theatrical management has been as bad as its business management has been good. To even the most considerate critics, it is obvious that the trouble is with entertainment policy, as much or more than with the building; the Music Hall is a fossilized anachronism devoted to a myth of family entertainment, a temple of corn or high camp. It is hard to know whether this is pious miscalculation or a conscious death wish. Theatrically, Radio City has been geared to extinction.

That same revealing chart shows only one institution in the last decade where the attendance figures actually rose—the Museum of the City of New York. This turnabout took place because the museum, under new direction, revamped its programs to appeal specifically to New Yorkers rather than relying on the tourist trade.

The question, of course, is where do we go from here? What does Lieutenant Governor Mary Ann Krupsak do with the suggestions and volunteers that she has been mobilizing? It seems pointless to take them to Rockefeller Center; the answer patently does not lie there. Nor will any miraculous solution be found by April 12.

Armed with this material, the Lieutenant Governor has asked an architectural firm with both preservation and theater design expertise, Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, to study the problem professionally. There is still a need to tap an equal level of entrepreneurial and business talent to work with the architects in the evaluation of suggestions that vary from pops concerts to a Lido-type nightclub and a dance theater for New York companies to replace the City Center.

Study grants are available from the National Endowments, the National Trust and other sources. Mr. Marshall has said that Rockefeller Center is willing to break even or sustain a small loss on Radio City, which may not be conventional real estate wisdom but could be commendable Rockefeller philanthropy in the service of the performing arts.

The sticking point is the theater's huge size—6,200 seats. As Brooks Atkinson wrote on opening night in 1932, the Tuskegee Choir, "which sang gloriously until the ingenuity of the stage direction drowned it in clouds of Wagnerian steam, was large enough to form a political club." Normal audiences are lost under the glowing sunset arches.

But Atlanta has just saved the 4,000-seat Fox Theater, a Moorish extravaganza of 1929 that was the second-largest theater in the country and probably a bigger theater for Atlanta than Radio City is for New York. As important as the success of Atlanta Landmarks, Inc. in raising the purchase money has been its experience in operating the theater during the three-year campaign (New York has had three months, which have been mostly devoted to trauma); it has found a profitable entertainment formula.

Neither architects nor most preservationists believe the Music Hall's current seating arrangement to be immutable. They are certain that the theater can be saved, not through massive public subsidy, but through a judicious mix of support and profit-making. Changes are possible that would not destroy the theater or affect its outstanding Art Deco design, which includes not only architectural details but furnishings, crafts, murals and decorative arts of irreplaceable quality. The 6,000-seat theater we destroy today might be the theater we need and cannot build tomorrow. It is time for New Yorkers to get their act together.