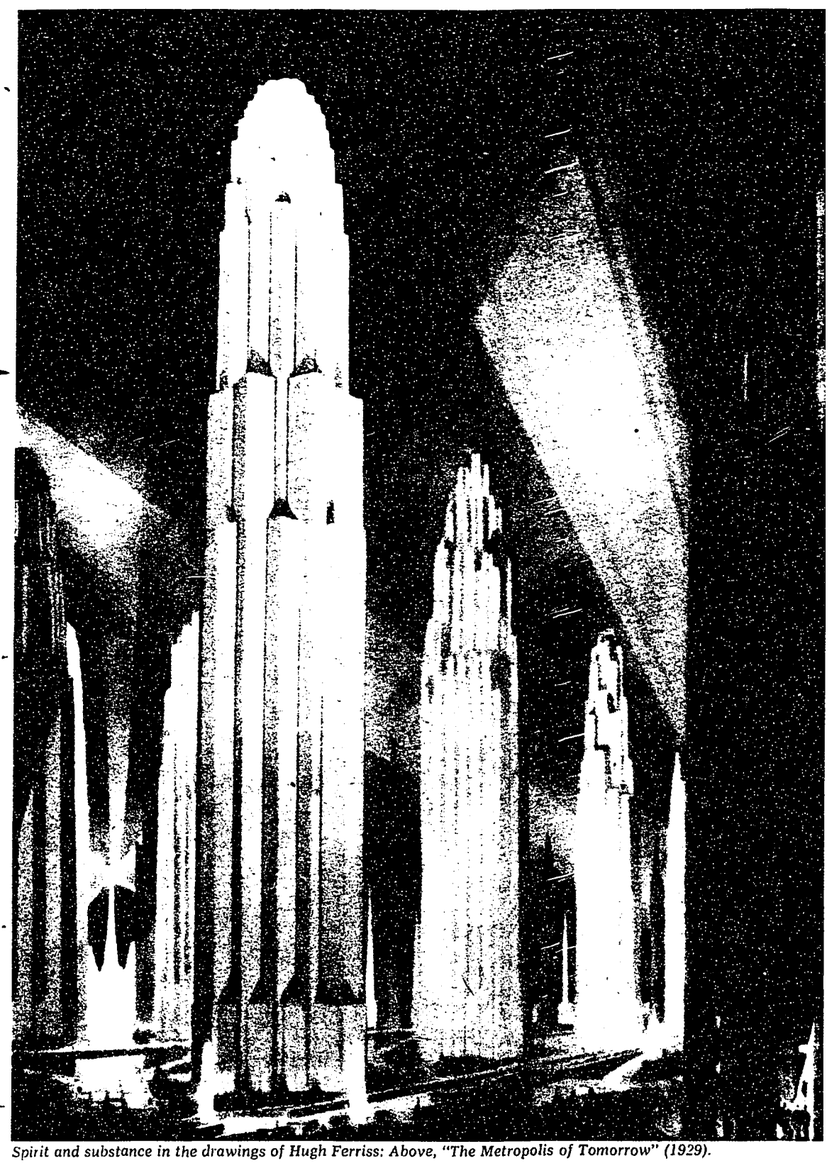
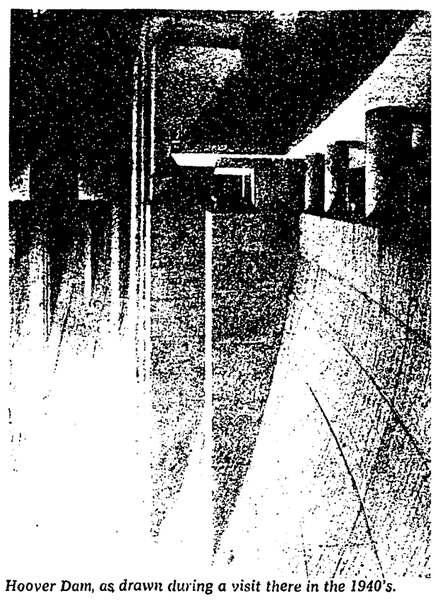
Design

Looking back at the world of tomorrow



Study showing possibilities of New York's 1916 zoning law.



Spirit and substance in the drawings of Hugh Ferriss: Above, "The Metropolis of Tomorrow" (1929).

Hoover Dam, as drawn during a visit there in the 1940's.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

It is time to celebrate near-history. It is time to look back 50 years to the world of tomorrow. Predicting the form of the future was serious business in the nineteen-twenties. But it is not a world that the world of today would recognize, based as it was on the perfectability of man and a technology for creating noble, shining cities and universal peace. From the state of mind to the state of the city, we live in another world entirely.

The city of the nineteen-twenties was hitched to the machine and the stars. Skyscrapers raced to completion. Artists and philosophers dwelt on the miracle and promise of metropolis, of the new architecture and of the new morality that would shape it. The city of the future seemed at hand. It never arrived; what followed were depression and wars and the slide of those dreams and ideals into cynicism and corruption. What came after was bottom-line architectural pragmatism and the city as setting for social tragedy rather than a brave new world.

It is a time waiting now for the historian, begging to be documented while the buildings and records last, before superficial nostalgia drains it of its deeper meanings. There are still those incredible buildings of the New York skyline that grow more strikingly beautiful as the city does its best to diminish them. And there are also the remarkable, almost forgotten drawings of Hugh Ferriss, the extraordinary architectural illustrator who caught the period's substance and spirit and style.

Familiar to all architectural professionals beyond middle age and totally unfamiliar to the young (who are currently engaged in an orgy of rediscovery), Ferriss drawings are undoubtedly due for a revival. His art was catalytic to the twenties. There is scarcely a major structure of that time in an American city, and in New York in particular, that Ferriss did not draw. He continued to be the prestige illustrator of architecture until his death in 1962, but by then neither the art of design nor the hopes of the city were the same and he could no longer synthesize the mood and structure of a special magic moment. In the later years, only sinuous expressways and monumental dams offered equivalent drama.

Trained as an architect, Ferriss chose to be a renderer, to deal in other men's designs and visions. But he had visions of his own. The personal image of the city that he developed in the second decade of the 20th century is as much a part of architectural history as the real and existing buildings that he recorded with such specialized skill. He drew in pencil, crayon and charcoal, and the strongly shaded blacks and grays and soft, rubbed tones that characterize his work project both poetry and power.

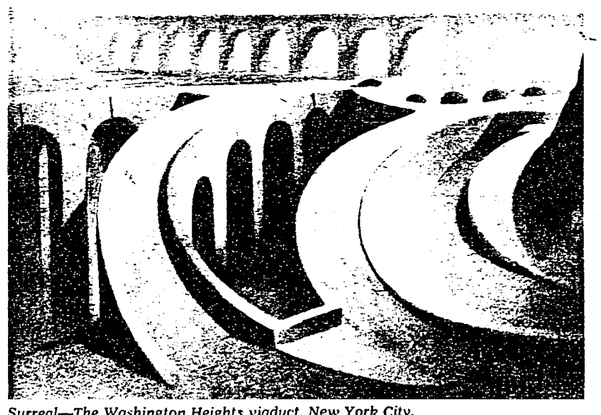
Those studies that went beyond reality to depict "The Imaginary City" make up a majestic, grisaille world of uncommon seductivity. It is tempting to say that they are Piranesi updated, but their shadowed splendors offer an ordered, monumental urban beauty rather than the dark, disturbing side of grandeur. Like Piranesi, however, Ferriss also makes the city an awe-inspiring place.

This vision, with hindsight, is full of failed dreams and impossible predictions and is rich in historic irony. It is as revealing for its inaccuracies as for its statements of actuality. The cities were unbuildable and the styles of the future enchantingly off base. But the impact of these drawings on the design of the important buildings of their own day was extraordinary; it has yet to be fully credited or understood.

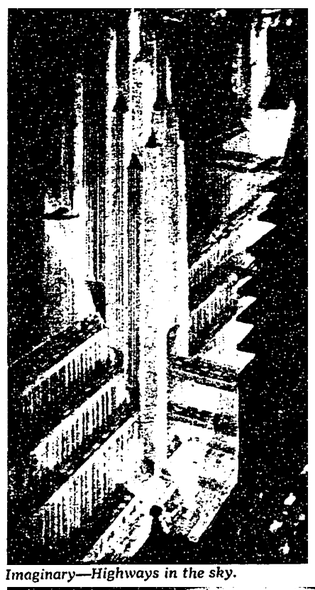
In 1930, the historian and critic Sheldon Cheney wrote in "New World Architecture": "More than any architect since Sullivan, Ferriss influenced the imagination of designers, students and public. Many a building of 1928-9 looks like a fulfillment of a Ferriss idealistic sketch of four or five years earlier." These are the buildings that have become the landmarks of their age.

For Ferriss not only created a conceptual climate for the men who actually designed the buildings; they even aspired to his version of the modern style. In those years it was a style in formulation, not yet a formula, before zoning and speculative economics had set the city in an immutably pragmatic mold. Functionalism had not yet stripped beauty bare (and cheap). The poignance of this grand ideal, of the conscious and ambitious pursuit of the largest possible environmental elegance gives the period its spectacular nostalgia. It is architecture as ecstasy. In more sedate, art-historical terms, it catches the important transition between the Beaux Arts and the fully flowered Modern Movement.

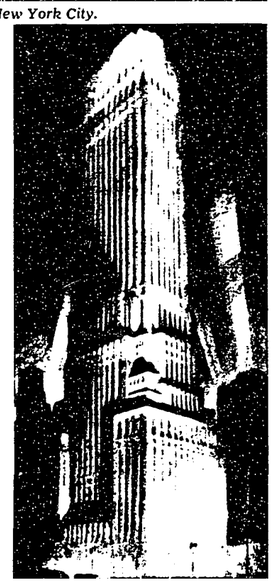
After graduation from the School of Architecture and Engineering at Washington University in St. Louis, Ferriss came to New York to work for Cass Gilbert while the Woolworth Building was being designed in the Cass Gilbert office, sometime before 1913. It was a period when skyscrapers wore historical dress and architects, as he later recalled, *(Continued on Page 42)*



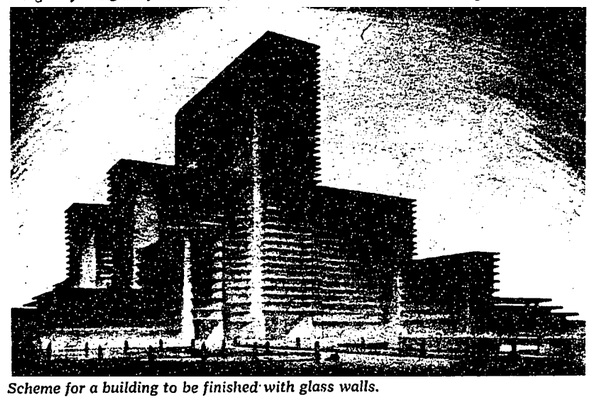
Surreal—The Washington Heights viaduct, New York City.



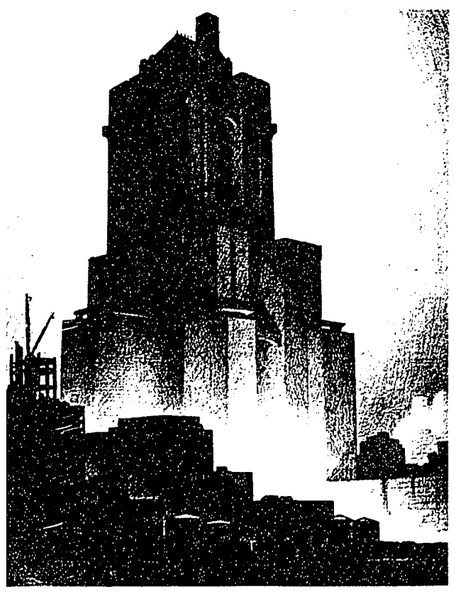
Imaginary—Highways in the sky.



Real—Chanin Building, New York.



Scheme for a building to be finished with glass walls.



Shelton Hotel, New York, 1922. Now scheduled for demolition.

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wore silk hats. By the nineteen-twenties he was filled with doubts about such elaborate eclecticism and he left to open his own studio.

He soon became the favored renderer of the leading "modernists" of the day. He drew the "seminal" structures —tremendously admired then and ignored now—such as Arthur Loomis Harmon's Shelton Hotel on Lexington Avenue, built in 1922 (now scheduled for demolition). One of the most important of the large "setback" structures under New York's new zoning law of 1916, it was highly praised for the "broad modeling" of its masses, a concept considered an extreme departure from traditional decorative façades. Ferriss wrote of it later, in 1929, "It evokes that undefinable sense of satisfaction which man ever finds on the slope of a pyramid or a mountainside."

He did a series of studies of the "zoning envelope" that purported to show how architects could build within the space defined and restricted by the law. Radically abstract, they challenge Ledoux in their boldly evocative geometry. He referred to these volumetric schemes as the "crude clay" of architecture. ("Crude clay" was later replaced by the computer.)

Sloan and Robertson's Chanin Building and Raymond Hood's American Radiator Building in New York, Hood and Howell's Chicago Tribune Tower, Albert Kahn's Fisher Building in Detroit and William Van Alen's Chrysler Building, recorded during construction, were all among his subjects. Their design ranged from elaborate skyscraper eclectic and rich Art Deco to what was then approvingly called the "stripped style," in which limited ornament of a "modern" persuasion was used to emphasize massed, plain volumes in the new mode.

This mode was characterized by Cheney as "a new massiveness and precision, clean lines, hard edges, sanitary smoothness, restless drive . . . the poetry of daring." These were "buildings grown organically out of machine-age materials and methods of structure, out of modern needs and modern living, out of honest creativeness, free of stolen trappings." Without blushing, he extended the architectural revolution to the promise of cleaner, brighter lives and a new world peace and order. The proselytizers of the new architecture had seen the promised land.

In 1929, Ferriss published his drawings and descriptions of "The Metropolis of Tomorrow." It is a curious and wonderful Elysium. Tied closely to the formal vistas and geometry of the Beaux Arts, with spaced towers organized on straight and radial axes, it also suggests something of Le Corbusier's towers in a park.

But the buildings take a variety of romantic-modern guises, and it is still uncompromisingly the City Beautiful as it grew out of late 19th-century classicism and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. There are visualizations of glass and concrete structures, stripped, streamlined and massed with a hybrid glamour reminiscent of ancient ziggurats and unborn futuramas. There are strong whiffs of European modernism. There are previsions of Carole Lombard.

It is high fantasy and high art. The city is rigidly organized into a Business Zone, an Arts Zone and a Science Zone, with superblock towers rising at intersections and ranged as vertical, faceted shafts (his gift of prophecy did not include bleak slabs) along wide avenues. Traffic was sorted into multilevel pedestrian and vehicular precincts. There were overhead roads bridging skyscrapers and airplane shelves attached to them. And it was all meant to enhance the health, convenience and pleasure of the inhabitants.

Ferriss did more than invent city forms; he transfixed the city's special atmosphere. One feels the light and the hour, whether he drew the city at dawn, or in daylight, or with theatrical night illumination. But beyond this lyrical drama, the architectural substance is thoroughly understood, as no conventional illustrator ever grasps it. Awesome and accurate draftsmanship suggests looming mysteries. "These terraced crags, these soaring towers and pylons and piers overwhelm," Cheney said of New York, in prose no more overwrought than that of most of his contemporaries. "This is at once a new Babel and a City Divine."

It is obvious that Ferriss loved it. Sitting in his studio high over Manhattan, he would watch the early morning city emerge. "A single lofty highlight of gold appeared in the mist: the tip of the Metropolitan Tower," he wrote. "A moment later, a second: the gilded apex of the New York Life Building. And then the other architectural principals . . . the eastern façades grow pale with light . . . a Metropolis appears." It was his city, and in his legacy, it is ours. ■