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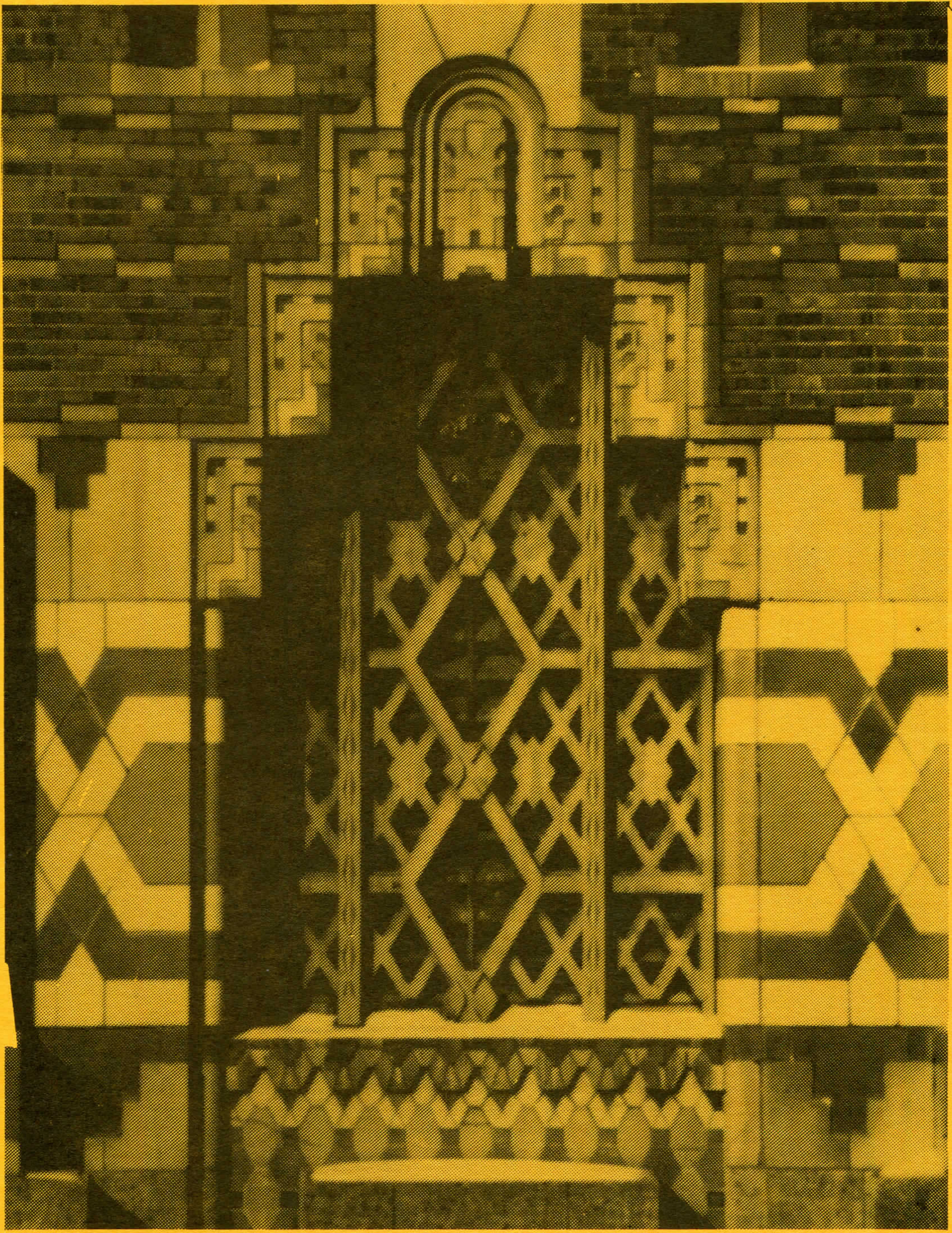

WIRT ROWLAND

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INTRODUCTION

With this issue, ARCHITEXT takes a step in a new direction toward a less generalized format and toward more specific issues. ARCHITEXT will become a voice for local architecture with criticism of works from across town or around the block. In addition, once a year ARCHITEXT will do a monograph on an important local architect or designer.

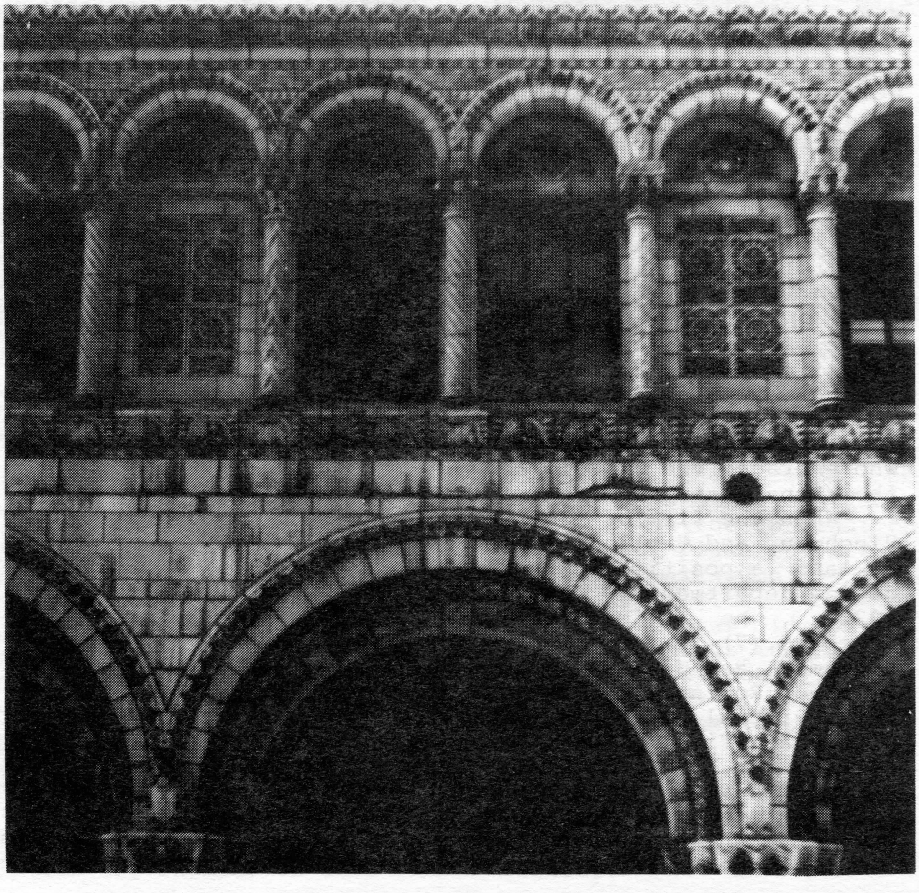
The subject of the monograph of this issue is the late Detroit architect, Wirt C. Rowland. The articles expressed here concern themselves with the specific buildings in which we know Rowland had primary design control. Sources of information on Rowland, however, are limited, which made it extremely difficult to provide a complete background on the life and work of the architect. For those wishing to learn more about him, however, we have included a fairly exhaustive bibliography on Rowland at the end of this issue.

The articles that follow provide insight to the career and character of Wirt C. Rowland. Enough information has been gathered to give credit to Rowland for the designs of the Greater Penobscot, the Guardian, the Town Apartments and the Banker's Trust Buildings. Other buildings and the amount and quality of his participation or control still remain difficult to determine.

Nevertheless, it is the hope that we have provided information that will enable and motivate our readers to understand and evaluate the contributions of this influential and significant local architect. We also hope that this interest in considering and experiencing important local works will build a stronger knowledge base concerning architecture in the local area. Without this, the breadth of the architectural community will remain narrow in the Detroit metro area and the hope of building a cultural awareness of the importance of architecture will remain, as always, dormant.

WIRT C. ROWLAND

HIS LIFE



Wirt C. Rowland was born in Clinton, Michigan (about 55 miles west of Detroit) on December 1, 1878. Little is known of his early childhood, although he was a gifted musician and singer and must have received his training while he was quite young. His only sibling, Grace Gail, died at the age of eighteen when Wirt was just eight years old. From that time on he was closely tied to his mother, Ruth Melissa. He graduated from Clinton Union School in 1896 at the age of seventeen.(1) He apparently arrived in Detroit in the early winter of 1897, at the age of nineteen.

Rowland began his professional career in the firm of Rogers and McFarland and studied at night in his rented room at the home of C. F. Ritchie. He left Rogers and McFarland in 1899 to work for the "Dean of Michigan Architects", George D. Mason.(2)

In 1901, Rowland began two years of graduate work at Harvard University.(3) Although he had received no previous formal education in architecture, he was admitted as a special student, no doubt due to his use of the fine architectural library of the firm and the paternal guidance of Mason himself.(4) Undoubtedly it was this library which first stimulated Rowland's life-long interest in the Gothic. Further study and understanding was facilitated at Harvard, and, before his eventual return to Detroit in 1911, he made numerous trips to Europe for travel and study.

It is unknown whether he was in the States in 1907 when his father Charles Clinton Rowland died at the age of 75. However, this was certainly a factor in his establishing permanent residence in Detroit. His mother remained in Clinton at the family home with Mrs. Saxton, her housekeeper.

In 1909, Rowland became a designer for the office of Albert Kahn.(5) In 1911, he was a designer and associate with Malcomson and Higgenbotham. It was here that he first began to show his attention for detail and his sensitive use of color and material. This was apparent in Detroit's Eastern and Northern High Schools, "the firm's most distinguished work." In 1914, Kahn again offered Rowland a position in his design department. Working in Kahn's office allowed Rowland, who was now 36 years old, the opportunity to design at a much larger scale. Detroit buildings by Kahn during this time included the Detroit Athletic Club (1915), Detroit News Building (1916), the University of Michigan General Library (1919), the National Bank (1922), and General Motors Building (1922). Rowland's contribution to these works, especially the last three, is unmistakable. Despite this opportunity for large-scale work and Kahn's prolific output, Rowland had to adjust his imaginative and original designs to suit the personal taste of Kahn who embraced the Classic and the Renaissance.(6)

When the firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls offered Rowland a position in their design department in July of 1922, he immediately accepted.(7) Smith, Hinchman and Grylls (SH&G) allowed Rowland to design with virtual carte blanche. Wirt had finally found an outlet for his modern ideas without having to give up his enthusiasm for the Gothic. While employed by SH&G, he dramatically changed the skyline of a rapidly growing Detroit. The Buhl (1925), Penobscot (1928) and Union Trust(Guardian) (1929) Buildings remain today as perhaps the most vital structures in Detroit's beleagured Central Business District.

Rowland's early work for the firm included the Detroit Edison Service Building (1924) and the first replacement unit of the J.L. Hudson Company (1924). The building for Detroit Edison occupies an entire block and is articulated with Gothic details. The J.L. Hudson building was the first unit in a conglomeration of another entire block.

Later buildings include the Town and Country Club (1926) and the Pontchartrain Club (1928). The Town and Country Club, which never left the sketch phase, is illustrated in a Thomas King rendering.(8) It is a soaring skyscraper with unlimited Gothic details. Its pinnacles, arches, stepped buttresses, and overall punctured and penetrable effect is a product of Wirt Rowland's love and understanding of the Gothic. The Pontchartrain Club, on the other hand, exhibits Rowland's imaginative and original use of modern forms and materials. The building was converted to the Town Apartments in the sixties.(9) During this conversion, most of Rowland's details were destroyed. The original stepped arch openings, similar to the Guardian Building's, were filled in. The third story, which appears to have been the location of exercise rooms, was a two- story space, with large, stepped arch windows. This area has been drastically altered. The string courses of angled brick in light and dark natural colors arranged in alternating patterns remain, as does the crowning, tower-like motif.

These two buildings mark the decline of Detroit's and Rowland's glory days--the Golden Twenties. The stock market crash and its consequences in Detroit were severe. According to Holleman and Gallagher in their SH&G manuscript:

> Wirt Rowland was struck particularly hard by the depressed times. A lifelong bachelor who lived in a modest rented room, Rowland had spent his impressive salary on fine living, large cars, European travel, and expensively tailored clothes.(10)

After his release from SH&G in 1930, Rowland formed a partnership with Augustus O'Dell. His work during this time included the reconstruction of St. John's Episcopal Church and the Mark Twain branch of the Detroit Public Library. After parting with O'Dell in 1938, Rowland worked for three years with Giffels and Vallet Inc., L. Rossetti, Associated Engineers and Architects, during most of which time he was at the Naval Ordinance Base in Norfolk, Virginia.(11)

Due to the lack of commissions after leaving SH&G, Rowland again began to devote time to studying the Gothic. His numerous trips to Europe and his scholarly approach to the theories of the Gothic is finally culminated in his design for the Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield Hills. (In 1925 he had designed Jefferson Avenue Presbyterian Church. However, its scale and location dictated much of its design, which is restrained and simplified at best.) This neo-Gothic structure, built in cooperation with Col. Edwin S. George, exemplifies Rowland's belief in this style, and, according to W. Hawkins Ferry, is a "distillation of Rowland's Gothic predilections."

Although he admired the cold, brilliant, structural logic of the medieval French cathedrals, he was more attracted by English Gothic because of the greater warmth and individuality of its small characteristic details. He also preferred the English facades, because they were generally uncomplicated by towers and hence were more effective when treated as a separate unit. He recognized the importance of stained glass in the total Gothic concept and marveled at the mystical luminosity...(12).

It is common knowledge that Rowland found inspiration for the Kirk in the ruins of Scotland's Melrose Abbey, established in 1136 by King David I as Scotland's first Cistercian monastery, located in Roxburghshire.(13) Consequently, a chapel in the west transept of the Kirk is dedicated in the same name. Rowland's design was submitted to Col. George in 1945, but Wirt died in 1946 two years before construction actually began. The firm of George D. Mason took over, with Eugene T. Cleland completing the working drawings.(14) It is not known to what extent Rowland's original design was followed; however, a close friend, and fellow Clinton resident, Eric R. Halliday described Rowland as "The Reigning Lord--free of all entanglements with SH&G and others."(15

Col. George and Rowland complemented each other greatly. George was affiliated with the Detroit Symphony as a director, and Rowland, as an avid musician, wrote numerous articles for the Symphony publication, All The Arts (1919-1920). These articles provided a great deal of insight into Rowland's personal beliefs as an architect and as a man. The topics for these two to three page articles ranged from public architectural education to professional club activities; from architecture and music to the architect as a residential builder. Therefore Rowland and George seemed to exemplify the perfect client-architect relationship which Rowland described in an article entitled "The Architect as a Builder of Homes":

> It is from the generalities of a client's requirements that the architect should proceed, and, with his knowledge of the principles of his art, expresses that which is outside the abilities of his client, but with which the client will be content, provided he is convinced of the architect's sincerity and sympathy. Thus the result lies equally with the client and the architect, and so it should.(16)

Twenty-four years later, in a letter to Rowland dated July 28, 1944, Col. George describes his wishes for his Gothic church. This letter perfectly describes not only Rowland's attitude for the Gothic, but also his professional philosophy:

> It is my firm conviction that a church should never be an imitation of something; on the contrary, it should be an expression of truth. Therefore, in All Souls Church (believed to be the originally intended name for the church) stone must be stone; wood must be wood; bronze or iron must be true to name; and concrete or plaster must not be an imitation of something else.(17)

Col. George is not the only person who noticed Rowland's material integrity. M. Cyrene Carson expresses this quality in a critique of the completed New Union Trust (Guardian) Building:

> Its honesty or sincerity is a matter which implies some knowledge of the materials which have gone into its making. For here is nothing tacked on extraneously by way of ornament or decoration, nothing that will fade, crumble or wash off in time. Instead, the beauty of the ornament is here an integral part of the building, inherent in the materials themselves.(18)

Rowland was an inspiration in the founding of Detroit's own professional organization, the Thumb Tack Club, which named him its president in 1918. This club was loosely modelled after Philadelphia's T-Square Club and Boston's Architectural Club. Its intention was to provide an outlet for educational and social activity.(19) Rowland was a member of the Detroit chapter of the AIA, and he was its president in 1934-35. In 1938 he was on Detroit's Civic Center Committee. And in September, 1946 was recognized as a Member Emeritus of the American Institute of Architects and its Detroit Chapter. The honor was for "his profound influence on the architecture of Detroit, the excellence of his design and for his contributions to the profession of architecture."(20)

Wirt Rowland died on November 30, 1946, one day before his 68th birthday. His death at the home of his cousin, Frank Burroughs of Grand Rapids, followed a lengthy illness that had confined him to his home in Detroit, where he had lived for 35 years.(21)

In all accounts of his death and in the Emeritus membership announcement, Wirt Rowland was described as a scholar and a musician. His affiliation with the Thumb Tack Club gained him respect as a friend of the younger men in the profession.(22) Indeed, as his Emeritus membership states:

> ...always eager to help the younger men coming up in the profession, he was responsible in large part for the development of much of the architectural talent that is Detroit's heritage today...(23)

END NOTES

(1) Records of Clinton Union School, Clinton Historical Society, Clinton Public Library
(2) p. 98 <I>
(3) <C>
(4) P. 98 <I>
(5) p. 6 <M>
(6) p. 98 <I>
(7) p. 108 <K>
(8) p. 114 (Illustration) <I>
(9) p. 115 <I>
(10) p. 131 <I>
(11) p. 6 <M>
(12) p. 276 <E>
(13) pp. 11 & 34 <N>
(14) p. 58 <B>
(15) Halladay Interview
(16) pp. 9-10 <R>
(17) p. 58 <B>
(18) <A>
(19) pp. 115, 117 <T>
(20) p. 4 <P>
(21) <C>, <M>
(22) <C>, <M>
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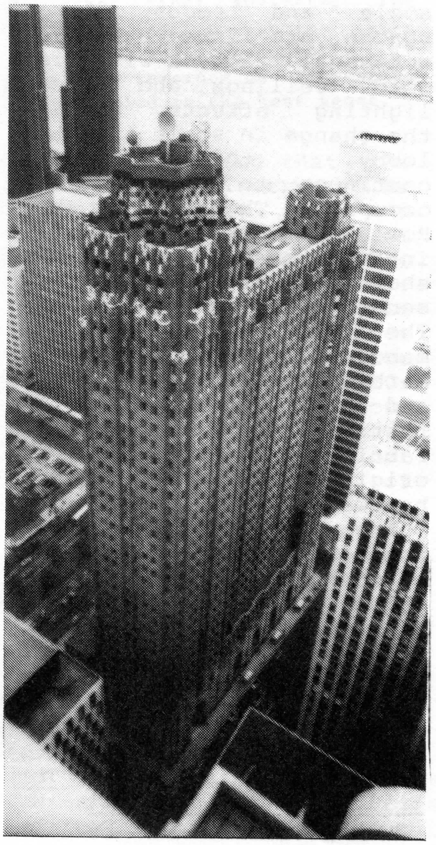
THE GUARDIAN Building

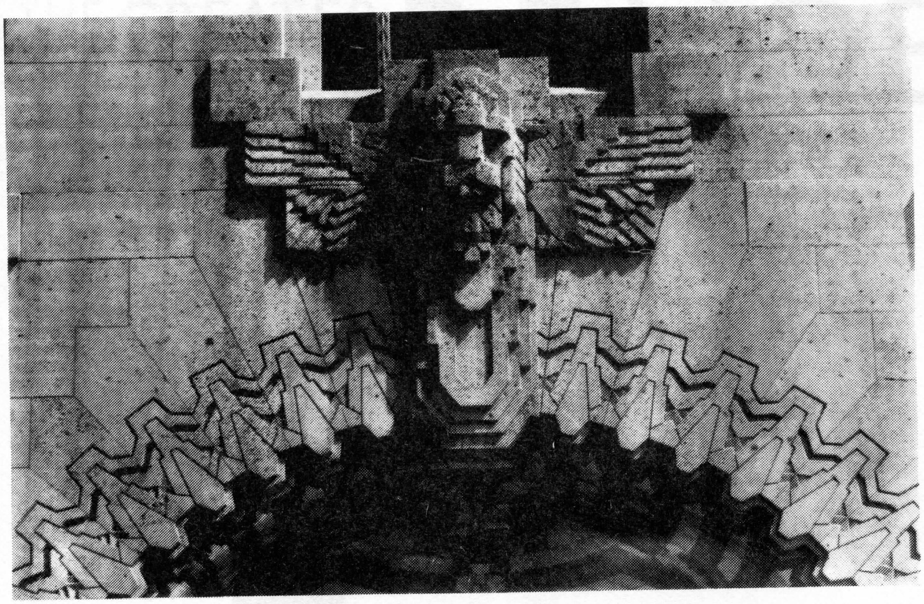
DETROIT'S JAZZ BABY



Was John Kennedy a great president, or were he and Jackie so charming that they fooled us? Is Katherine Hepburn really a great actress or is she such a dynamic personality that we accept anything from her, even acting? These are the sorts of parallels that arise when faced with commenting critically on the Guardian Building. Detroiters are enamored of this orange slab, but when asked why, their responses are usually intuitive, romantic-- not analytical or objective.

The Guardian Building and its Art Deco brethren stand in opposition to the trend that Ada Louise Huxtable summed up as "idol-smashing." Dismissed years ago as representative of a silly and shallow era, Art Deco is now being embraced as an exuberant and populist style that may go further in representing the American spirit than any other. Detroit is fortunate in having some major buildings which display the gradations within Art Deco and the many moods of the 1920s: the romantic Masonic Temple (1928); the spectacular Fisher Building (1928); and the Penobscot Building (1928) which, along with the Guardian Building, are two great achievements of Wirt Rowland while he was affiliated with Smith, Hinchman and Grylls.

In most people's mind, the Fisher Building is Detroit's most elegant Lady. If so, then the Guardian is Detroit's jazz baby: the Carmen Miranda of local architecture, the building



with the bananas on its head. It is a building that can only keep itself in check briefly, before it unleashes explosions of color, texture, warmth, and a monumental scale that compensates for occasional excesses.

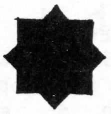
The building is simple in form, comprised of a tall, narrow slab of brick, terra cotta and tile with minimal modulation at the base and stronger geometric treatment at the top where the mass breaks down into two, roughly octagonal towers.

The plan reveals a processional quality reminiscent of cathedral design, an analogy which may be extended to the third dimension of the building as well. The soaring, barrel-vaulted spaces with their looming quality and huge, arched windows recall the mood of great religious architecture. One is drawn through the building past the dim, arched crannies of the lobby, past the gothic-Deco Monel metal grille towards the allegorical representation of Michigan--land of hope, home and family--the ideal imagery for the original owners, the Union Trust Company.

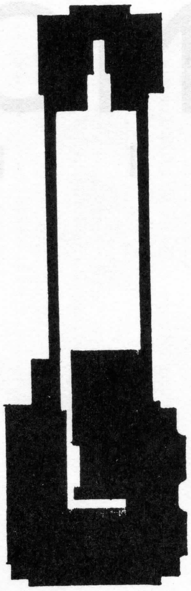
Indeed, as one experiences this internal sequence, it becomes clear that the form of the building, the relative grace of its slab or deliberate, cathedral references become secondary to the experience of the spaces and details. The colors are vivid and the exotic materials-- marbles, metals, ceramics, glass--are detailed and rendered with currently unattainable care.

Minor indignities inflicted upon the building through the years are being corrected by the current owners, Michigan Consolidated Gas Company (MichCon). They plan to remove the insulting suspended ceilings in the elevator lobbies, which will reveal more of Rowland's Rookwood tile designs. MichCon has also completed a fine restoration of the main board room on the sixth floor. The board room and its anterooms consist of a series of spaces of shifting scale and focus. Large spaces are linked by small, octagonal alcoves with rich gold ceilings and moody lighting effects. Despite the change in scale from the lobby, the building continues to surprise the occupant. These spaces show Rowland working at more intimate scale, and his work shows luster and a tactile sense that is remarkable. The tones--those of oak and mahogany, green and cream marble--are naturally rich, and have been augmented by rust and light maroon fabrics and carpets. The original brushed brass hardware carries the octagonal motif (based on a notched arch) repeated throughout the building, and helps create strong ties to the arts and crafts tradition. Indeed, when one comes in contact with such a profusion of riches in one place, something akin to reverance takes over.

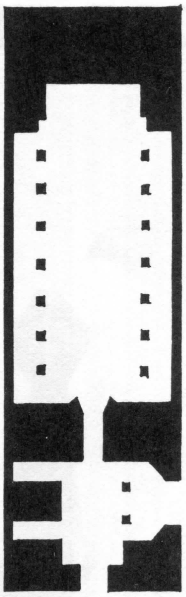
In his book, The Buildings of Detroit, W. Hawkins Ferry summarizes the



Tower Plan



32nd, Dining Room Floor Plan



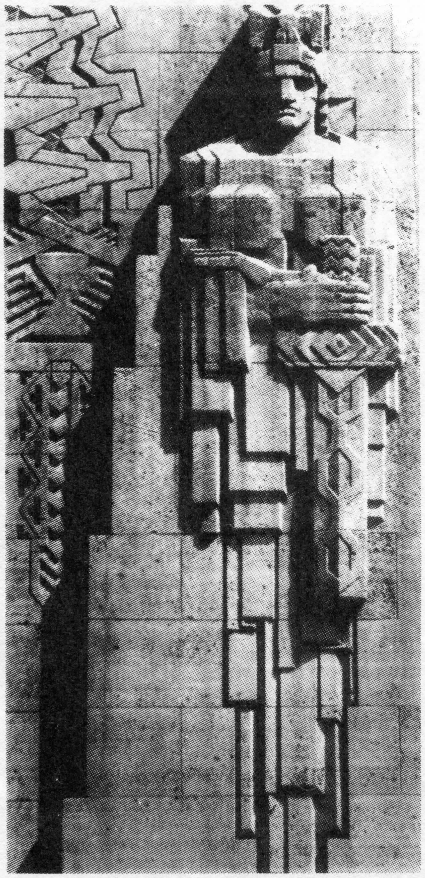
Main Banking Floor Plan

Guardian Building thusly:

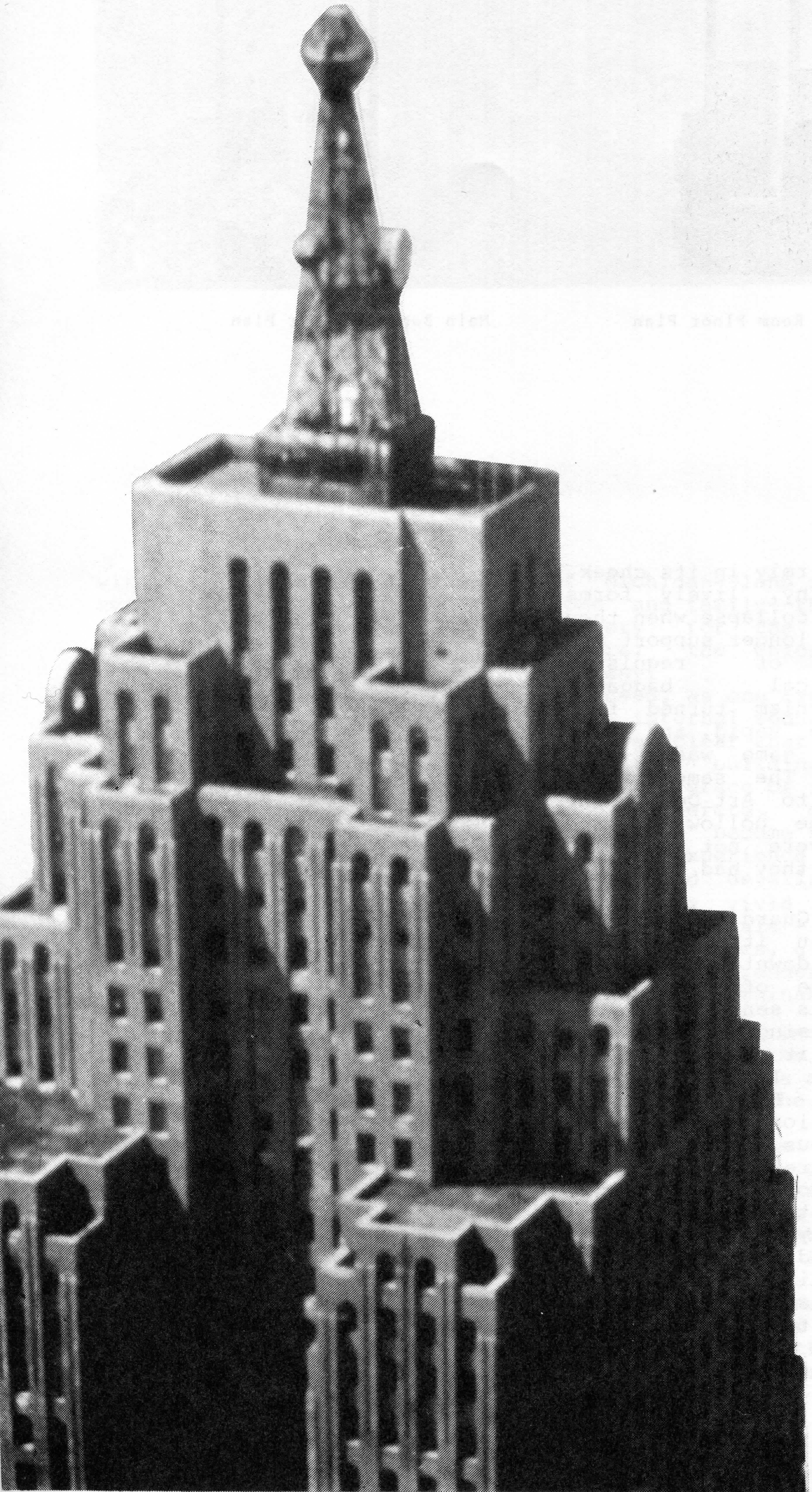
> In the final analysis, the building as a whole lacks cohesion, and consequently it cannot be regarded as expressive of its period in the best sense.

It can be agreed that the former point is true. The building bounces from one set-piece to another--from light to dark, dazzling to somber, glowing to brassy. But by doing this, the Guardian Building does express its time in the truest sense. The 1920s manifested a lack of focus through a body-and-soul pursuit of fun. It was not an introspective time of worry, as were the decades that preceded and followed. In this sense, the 1920s can be related to the 1970s, a decade in which we kicked back, relaxed and behaved as decadently as possible. Architecture in the 1970s responded with a return to the use of color and playful forms, of polished surfaces and twinkling lights. Post-modernism, in its best incarnations, had its tongue planted firmly in its cheek. Its frothy, lively forms began to collapse when they could no longer support the weight of requisite philosophical baggage. Post-modernism turned from cheery to vapid, and quit when the game wasn't fun anymore. The same thing happened to Art Deco. The joy became hollow and the people were not laughing anymore: they had their own problems.

So the Guardian Building stands in its prominent position downtown, a fond remembrance of things past. Despite its sense of fun, it is surprisingly modest in the face it presents to the street. Is it a great building? Probably not, in the traditional, "let's talk in serious tones about architecture" sense. But it is a glorious building, representative of a time when beauty was something to be savored, not glanced at. The Guardian Building says that it's okay for a building to be dazzling, to wallow in its own excesses. And who can argue with that?



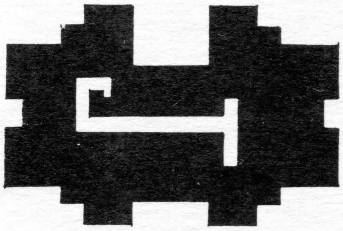
THE GREATER PENOBSCOT BUILDING



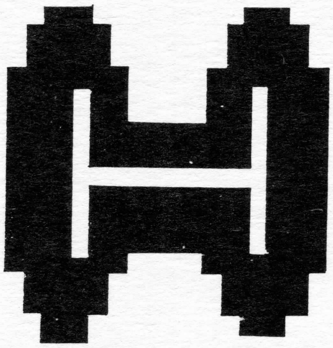
The Greater Penobscot Building is a work that affords us the opportunity to examine a successful marriage of the humane aspects of classical design and the large-scale, functional demands of modern architecture. No thought was given in the design of the building to the theoretical value of reviving a classical style for its symbolic value as is the contemporary view of some post-modernist designers. Perhaps this makes the Greater Penobscot Building that much more appropriate as an objective lesson in possible solutions to the reconciliation of historicism and modernism.

The client for the building was Mr. Simon J. Murphy, a businessman involved in the lumber industry. Murphy grew up in Maine near the Penobscot River which took its name from the Indians in the area. He moved to Michigan when his logging interests in the timberland of Michigan became significant. Shortly after his death in 1902 the first Penobscot Building, a thirteen-story structure on Fort Street, was completed. The second Penobscot Building, a twenty-four-story annex, was completed in 1916 on the adjoining property on West Congress.

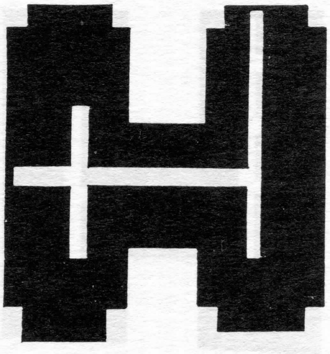
The Greater Penobscot Building is the largest of the three Penobscot towers. The two smaller and older Penobscot towers are overshadowed by the forty-seven-story Greater Penobscot Building which was completed in 1928. The



40th-43rd Floor Plan



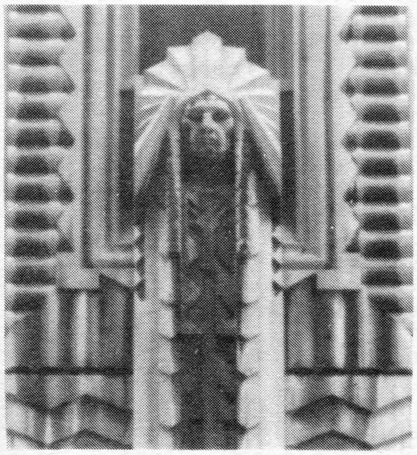
35th-39th Floor Plan



32nd-34th Floor Plan

design for the building which stands at the intersection of Griswold and Fort Streets was created by the firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls under the specific direction of Wirt C. Rowland. The tower is a massive, stone-clad, steel structure essentially "H"-shaped in plan, and rises to a height of 565 feet. Beginning at the thirty-first floor, the extruded "H" plan of the tower is reduced by a robust, irregular pattern of set-backs. This crowning composition is cubistic in character and modern in its dependence on the interaction of volumes defined by light and shadow. Despite this fragmentation, the form of these upper stories remains massive. The proportions are generous and the general impression is one of sculpted solidity, of volume and not surface.

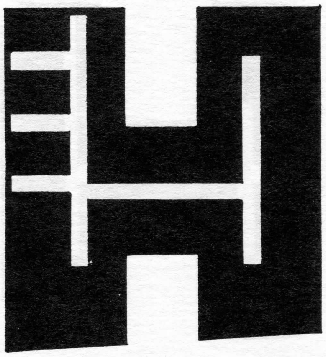
Wirt C. Rowland, the principal designer of the Greater Penobscot Building, was a Harvard-trained architect profoundly influenced by architectural history, particularly the Gothic Style. He believed, however, that stylistic considerations should be tempered by and respond to new building purposes and modern times. At the time of his designs for the Greater Penobscot Building he had begun to question the relevancy of the unilateral application of the Gothic to skyscrapers merely by virtue of associations with Gothic verticality. Rowland began turning away from deliberate reference to historical architecture. This was part of a burgeoning, initial trend towards modernism that would produce such early monuments as the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building of 1931-2 by Howe and Lescaze. Rowland's design represents the largest, if not the earliest, effort in the Detroit area away from historical allusion and towards the American heritage of inventiveness. The Greater Penobscot Building, therefore, represents Rowland's experiment with new aesthetic possibilities in skyscraper design. Instead of Gothicized monument, the building exhibits an almost organic verticality that results from the necessity of piling up floor space.



This is not to imply, however, that all traces of historical influence are absent. The purely aesthetic concern for stone cladding recalls classical architecture while symbolically referring to comfortable associations of permanence and stability. The uppermost window in each vertical column of fenestration is an arched opening which caps the movement upward, redirecting it around the arch and back down. Similarly, the major entrance is set in a four-story arch resplendent in carved mouldings and ornament. In addition, the implicit division of the tower into a base capped with a string course, a shaft, and a "capital" composed of the intricate set-back pattern of massing is also reminiscent of historical form. While not directly neo-classical, the building is decidedly nostalgic.

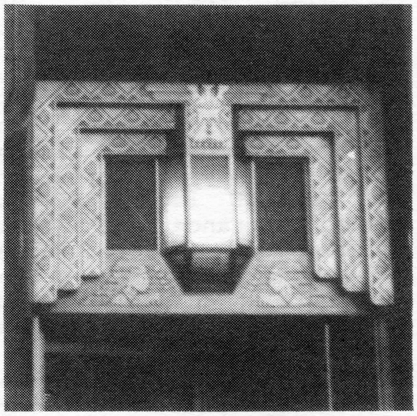
The solidity of the Greater Penobscot Building is graciously punctured at the street level by the grand entrance arch that accommodates and encourages pedestrian activity. The ornament, which derives from American Indian motifs, is reduced to a complementary, geometric pattern. It consists of abstracted, sculptural images of Indian chiefs, warriors and other symbols, and complements the geometric mass and line of the architectural forms by wholly subordinating itself to the surface. In form and color, the ornament is a dignified and quiet accent which is carried inside the building to grace the intersection of column and beam, the tiled lobby floor, elevator doors, and mailboxes.

The first five floors of the building originally were devoted to banking, entrance lobby, and a small amount of



6th-31st Floor Plan

retail space. A similar spatial and volumetric arrangement was achieved in Rowland's later work, The Guardian Building. Above this, the floors were devoted to office useage of various types and sizes. The interiors were a natural product of the underlying design concept and, as such, were in sympathy with the general tone of classical elegance and refinement. Subsequent alterations to the lobbies and main banking space on the second floor has left us only a haunting residue and a melancholy reminder of a strong and interesting public architecture of which Detroit has such a great, and unfortunately increasing, paucity.



An important part of current post-modern theory is a reconciliation of the anthropomorphic concessions of classical architecture with modern design, based on the belief that modern (International Style-influenced) architecture has become oppressively sterile, isolated and insensitive to human needs. Much public, post-modern architecture, however, despite employing historical form, is characterized by a flatness and literary abstractness that competes with its humanistic aspirations. The quality of space in these buildings is often sacrificed for referential surface. These designs suggest what is possible but are ultimately disappointing because they fail to deliver architectural substance.

The Greater Penobscot Building, however, remains a viable, enchanting work of urban design because it respects both the demands of the city and the demands of the individual. Taken within the context of Detroit's urban heart, the tower is an essential element in sustaining the physical mass that a city requires. Tightly-packed, canyon-like streets have been criticized for their cold, hard, dark personalities; but these same streets bring architecture into immediate and intimate contact with the people of the city. The ornament plays no small part in creating this relationship. Although restrained and abstracted, the presence of sculpted stone, patterned floor, engraved door, and the unadorned arch inform us, implicitly and emphatically, that the building was designed as a place for people and built with human hands.

This is the material out of which cities are truly made. The environments that architects create must provide something more than sheltered space. This must involve an artistic expression of culture and the experience of living. It must respect the monumentality and heroism of the city, while accommodating the fragility and emotion of the sentient individual. Wirt Rowland has done this in the Greater Penobscot Building. He has created a sense of human place, of habitat, by a sensitive understanding of space and ornament and a logical continuation of classicism as a cultural inheritance, not simply as style.

InterVIEW

The following represents some of the material obtained during an interview with Dr. Earl Pellerin, former Dean of the School of Architecture at Lawrence Institute of Technology, who was a close friend of Wirt C. Rowland. We, the staff, felt it would be interesting and informative to include some personal observations about Mr. Rowland in this issue. The interviewers--Tammis Donaldson, Matthew Hubbard, and Brian Hurttienne--directed the discussion around topics related to Rowland's attitudes, lifestyle, and ideas concerning design. The following conversation reveals important characteristics of the masterful architect that contributed greatly to the architectural quality of Detroit.

We would like to thank Dr. Pellerin for his help, cooperation, and insights.

BH: What was your relationship with Wirt Rowland? How did it begin? What were the circumstances?

EP: I had heard as a student of the University of Michigan of Wirt Rowland. At the time, my father was a foreman at the Cadillac Plant and knew of a man who worked at Albert Kahn's office, and got me an interview with Albert Kahn. The end of my junior year I joined the firm. That was when Kahn was a world figure. My stay there embodied two years from 1926 to 1930, and Rowland was chief designer in the same building only working for Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls. Anyone in architecture at the time knew of him and admired him. He was friendly; and that year I got to know him quite well (1926). That was when he was doing three famous skyscrapers: the Buhl Building, the Penobscot Building, and the Guardian Building. I would see him on the weekends, for lunch perhaps, and he would mention many of the things that were happening.

TD: Did Wirt Rowland have a concept for downtown Detroit that was reflected in these buildings?

EP: These were about one tenth of the buildings Wirt Rowland dealt with. Others include Northern High School, Main Telephone Building in downtown Detroit, the Jefferson Avenue Presbyterian Church, the Bankers Trust Company Buildng, the National Bank Building, the General Motors Building, and the University of Michigan Main Library in Ann Arbor...His buildings were pretty well spread although the three were in close walking distances. I'm sure that he thought of color in each building he was doing and with each building surrounding the site; but I don't believe he made any large studies that would cover a great deal of the city. Although I'm sure he had some ideas for the city in general, and the waterfront especially.

BH: Can you explain any of those ideas, and were those reflected in the three major buildings?

EP: I think Rowland was one that was thinking a great deal of skyline...I think he even had regard as to what these buildings would look like from Belle Isle and Canada.

BH: So he had a vision of what the skyline, what his interpretation of the articulation of the skyline would be?

EP: I think so.

MH: Not in a Master Plan though? Not something like what Saarinen did with his master-planning ideas?

EP: No...Of course we always have to give to the Saarinens an immense amount of credit for their research, and for what they would do with a problem. As I say, Rowland loved Michigan and his home, and I think he was very much a part of the city, state, and of the people as far as his job was concerned. While he was doing all kinds of things like skyscrapers, probably his great interest in architecture was in the Gothic and church work.

TD: Do you know if the writings of Ruskin had any effect on Rowland's philosophy?

EP: I'm sure that Rowland read a good deal about Ruskin, but he would always mention Richardson, Sullivan, and Wright as the great American architects. It's difficult to say how advanced Rowland might have been. We had the Arts and Crafts Movement in Detroit, and he was part of that movement. He was a part of everyghing that had to do with architecture...Rowland had a very active life. I think seven days and seven evenings he had activity. In studying the development of Cranbrook, which he had quite an interest in, and studying Wright and Sullivan particularly, I think he had an interest in the crafts.

MH: Do you know when he went on his first trip to Europe where he might have seen some of these Gothic structures he was fascinated by?

EP: While he was at George D. Mason's office (1905-1914), I believe he took time off to go to Harvard University. He spent two years in the Harvard Graduate School and was active in a number of things. I believe it was Professor Weir of Harvard that had a great influence on Wirt's philosophy in architecture. Apparently Professor Weir was a history instructor and that kindled his interest in the Gothic. After his two years at Harvard University, he went to Europe for a year.

BH: What made Mr. Rowland go back to Europe many times? I would think at that time it was uncommon to go to Europe at all!

EP: ...some people are such that if they see a work of art once, that's it! But a work of art has so many facets that you could actually view them many times and feel like it's been the first time. I've heard great architects lecture many times, especially Wright, and some of the same philosophies were repeated and I always find something new out of Wright's lectures. Likewise his buildings. Rowland would mention at times, while he was lecturing, that his philosophies about architecture now might be different than it was two years ago. I think, as one studies, they're looking for different things.

MH: So his idea was to go back to the buildings and study them?

EP: I had mentioned that Wright went to Japan 17 times...Stanford White (of McKim, Mead and White) would go to Europe quite often...Well, it was the thing to do then.

BH: What art forms do you feel influenced Mr. Rowland's work? Such as painting, sculpture, music? I know he played the organ. To what degree did he take his artistic talent?

EP: Music, sculpture, and poetry were his main interests, but I truly believe he was interested in every vital art...He did play the organ. He was also a soloist of the First Congregational Church. He probably made 30 pastel drawings depicting graphically his feelings about parts of his buildings. Unfortunately, I think most of them were destroyed.

BH: Did you see any relation as far as the art form influencing his work?

EP: I think he felt that a work of art should be a work of art. I think that his study of sculpture did affect his design abilities, very much like Eero Saarinen.

TD: Can you expand on the comparison with Saarinen? Is there a connection with Rowland?

EP: Well, I think it might have been a connection of minds working in the same way. I know they would meet at dinners and have discussions afterwards, but I do not know of personal meetings...I think that Cranbrook, Eliel Saarinen's work, was all there in one place in a magnificent setting. I know Rowland thoroughly admired what was going on at Cranbrook, particularly while Eliel Saarinen was in charge.

BH: From that context, what kind of artist was Rowland interested in or attracted to?

EP: I think he was attracted very much by Michelangelo. And I think some of his Europe studies show that. I suppose you can name the great artists from Michelangelo to Diego Rivera and would admire them...He also admired great landscaping, like that of Frederick Law Olmstead or Charles Platt...I really think with the painters, sculptors, and the landscape people, and so on, he was the master architect. I think a lot of the detail on Wirt's buildings that you see, Wirt had given the artist, such as Corado Parducci, a sketch pretty closely showing what he wanted. On the other hand, Parducci had worked with Rowland so much, they had got to know each other very well.

TD: Do you know anything about the Thumb Tack Club?

Were you a part of it?

EP: I was Chairman of the Committee on Education.

TD: What was Rowland's connection with the Thumb Tack Club?

EP: The Thumb Tack Club started as the Sketch Club around the turn of the century. Wirt had quite an interest in that because, when he was starting out as a young person in drafting, he would go to the Sketch Club at night and on weekends. Mind you, Michigan had no architecture schools at the turn of the century. The Thumb Tack Club was set up for people, like yourselves, who worked during the week, and you could spend nights and weekends at the Thumb Tack Club. There were people around like Rowland who were always interested in what students were doing, so that even in 1927, people like Rowland, Amadeo Leone, and William Kapp of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls and other people from major offices in Detroit were critics. The students would work four weeks on a project, the last two probably straight through, and then the projects would be sent to New York to the Beaux Arts Institute of Design. Many universities would send things in, such as Eero Saarinen's work from Yale University, and other work from California and Illinois. Also other clubs like the T-Square Club in Philadelphia, and another in Chicago would send their projects. The array of critics, for the most part, were better than the faculties at some of the universities. The depression hurt the Thumb Tack Club a great deal, and we were coming to a time where people wanted to do other things and become registered.

MH: How did the depression hurt the program, the funding for the Thumb Tack Club?

EP: The point is that the depression changed things around for a lot of people. The Thumb Tack Club was specially designed, and there were other activities including lectures. But the times were changing.

TD: How do you think the depression affected Wirt Rowland?

EP: You really asked something there! In his eight years at Smith, Hinchman and Grylls he was the highest paid designer in Detroit. I'm speaking of architectural offices. He was an associate in one of his offices and a top-flight person in the others. So he went from the busiest time in his life in the 20's, where all kinds of things were being done, until October of 1930, after his return from Europe. They told him they could no longer handle his contract, and that was the termination of his high place in Detroit offices, although he did associate with Augustus O'Dell and they did quite a number of things including a house for the World's Fair, and a number of additions and renovations to churches. Later, during the war, he went down to Norfolk, Virginia, and worked for Giffels whom he had worked with at Kahn's office earlier.

MH: Wirt must have been devasted when they couldn't renew his contract. Did Wirt become introverted because of this? Did this have some personal effect?

EP: He was quite well known, and many of the younger people used to go to him for meetings and advice. And that helped a great deal. Also, he was an honorary member of the architectural fraternity in Ann Arbor, and he would get out there quite often. They would have sessions that would help. We had the Cliff Dweller group. Maybe 14 people belonged to it at Lawrence Tech. They were a little bit older, being evening students, and we would go to the lake on the weekend, paint and draw, and then have a Saturday night session until 2:00 AM, and Wirt would be a special guest.

MH: Did Wirt Rowland write a great deal for the Michigan Society of Architects Bulletin?

EP: Yes. He even acted in a play. A Humorous play. He wrote a great deal earlier, too.

MH: I have also heard that Rowland had a car, but didn't drive. He would let his friends drive.

EP: I know of one or two people. The associates in the big offices would drive at times. But he had all kinds of friends.

MH: Did Rowland do any residential buildings? You mentioned the house for the World's Fair.

EP: He did in his later

period. Then he met Colonel George who had an estate of hundreds of acres on Long Lake Road. He was given space at Giffels to develop that entire thing. It became Kirk-in-the-Hills.

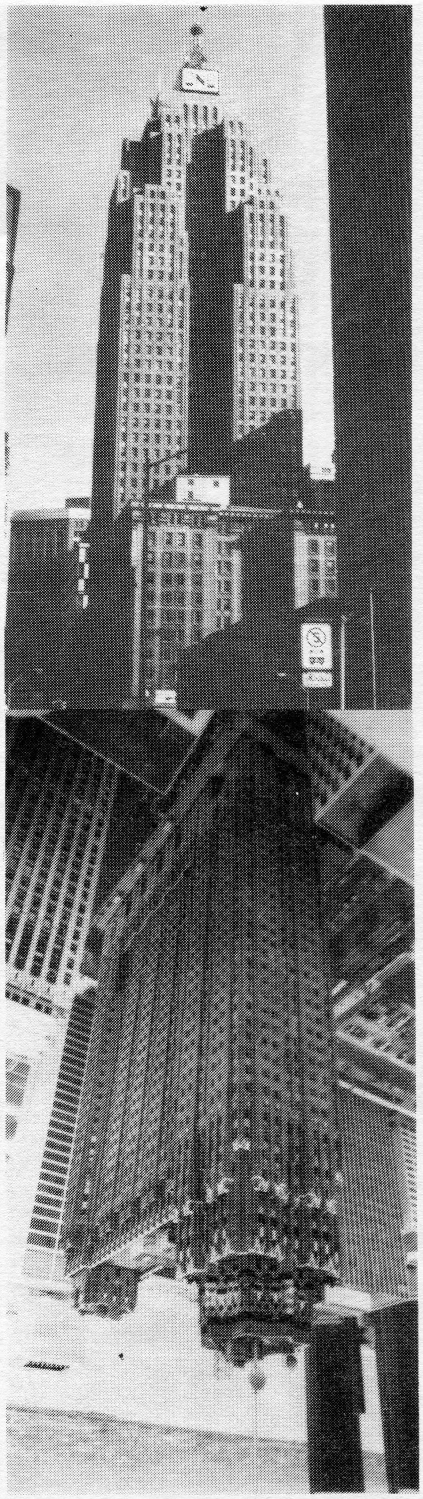
MH: Do you think the main part of Kirk-in-the-Hills was designed by Wirt Rowland?

EP: Well, he used to bring the plans to meetings and show us all these details, right in my own home. And I would visit him up where he was preparing these.

BH: Did Wirt Rowland ever express any interest in the International Style?

EP: It's mentioned in this wonderful article! As he would say

Soul and feeling are the sob sisters of architecture. Through them it is difficult to comprehend realities. One of these realities is the satisfaction we should find in a machine which is economically proportioned to its parts and those parts formed to properly carry out their duty. If this then be called beautiful, the underlying idea of functional proportioning is that which makes it beautiful, the conformance with nature's laws of motion and mechanics, and not the free and unrestrained ideas of form which man may apply out of the figments of his imagination to create what he may call art. I cannot but believe that it must be the same with vital architecture, that there must be some visual evidence in it of performing its work, first as a structure - then, as having fulfilled all of the requirements of its purpose to serve the human being and with great respect for the inherent qualities of craft which is due to those materials with which it is built.



THE GREATER PENOBSCOT BUILDING AND THE NEW UNION TRUST BUILDING

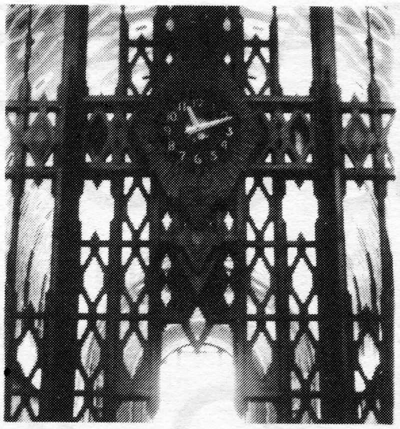
At the beginning of the twentieth century in Detroit, Michigan two streets were incorporated into the addresses of the most powerful and influential financial and lending institutions in the country. Griswold and Fort Streets, in the central business district, still deliver the banker and depositor to eclectic neo-classical facades, once the homes of banks and trust companies that are now either extinct or have been absorbed or reorganized. The first of these institutions was the Peoples' State Bank (1900) on Fort Street by McKim, Mead and White, executed by the Detroit firm of Donaldson and Meier. A three-story banking room was clad in marble and treated in an Italian Renaissance revival style that convincingly expressed

> "the importance of economic life in the community...at a time when matters of taste received much consideration."(1)

Just to the west on Fort rose the Detroit Trust Company Building fifteen years later (1915), designed by Albert Kahn, a renowned area classicist of the time.

In 1922, Albert Kahn received the commission for the twenty-four story First National Bank Building on Woodward Avenue at Cadillac Square. Kahn put the banking room on the second floor of the building to free up floor area on the first for revenue-producing retail space.(2) Above this level rose a more simply-detailed shaft of office floors resembling those of his General Motors Building of the same year. The First National Bank Building was significant in that it was the first Detroit skyscraper to combine a monumental banking space, like that of the Peoples' State Bank or the Detroit Trust Company, with a rental office tower.

With the construction of the two-story Bankers' Trust Building (1925) on Fort Street by Wirt C. Rowland of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls,



the classicizing banking space returned to the ground. Rowland based his design on that of the Bowery Savings Bank in New York by York and Sawyer.(3) Large Italian Romanesque arches dissolve wall area to introduce light and views of the streetscape. The upper story consists of smaller arches in a continuous arcade with minute Romanesque detail, reinforcing the close relationship of this building to human scale, something not true of sister institutions like the Peoples' State Bank and the Detroit Trust Company Building.

That same year, Rowland completed the twenty-six story Buhl Building, the project that gave Rowland his first practical experience in designing a high-rise office building. The design is a mixture of classical details applied to an innovative, progressive form. Clearly this was a pivotal building for Wirt Rowland and doubtless was a point of reference for him in designing the other two skyscrapers: the Greater Penobscot Building, and the New Union Trust (Guardian) Building.

It was into this area and climate that the Greater Penobscot Building arrived in 1928. It was the third and latest in the series of Penobscot structures erected for the Simon J. Murphy Company. Careful planning for the tower began in 1922, continuing for five year until ground was broken in early 1927.

The Murphy Company chose Smith, Hinchman and Grylls as their architect, with the task of design being given to Wirt Rowland,

> ...one of the foremost modernists who remained committed to traditional forms. His versatility is exemplified by his work through the city; he was in charge of design for four of Detroit's leading firms during different periods of the city's building activity.(4)

Rowland was an eclectic not shackled by a predisposition to historical accuracy as was one of his early employers, Albert Kahn. Rowland worked for Kahn until 1922, contributing to the designs of banks and office buildings like the Detroit Trust Company (1915), the First National Bank Building (1922), and the General Motors Building (1922).

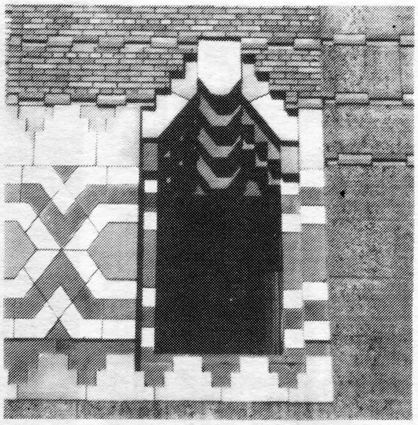
With the commission for the Greater Penobscot Building in hand, Rowland designed a building that

> ...follows no classic school of architecture. Rather it is of the modern office building type, depending chiefly upon its set-back design and bold massing of materials for architectural effect.(5)

Rowland's design provided the Simon J. Murphy Company with a more sophisticated image than it had known in its tow previous buildings. The promotional booklet for the tower summarized it all very well:

> The Greater Penobscot Building is presented to the business man (sic) of Detroit in the hope that it will meet with their (sic) approval, not only as the newest, finest, largest and most conveniently situated of office structures but also as a befitting monument to the spirit of enterprise within themselves that has made this city great. Every factor of fine materials, and the highest constructive ability that unstinted expenditure of capital may command, has gone into the building in an effort to make it the perfect expression of an ideal-- an ideal of dignity, beauty, and utility.(6)

It was to be as conspicuous a building as the First National Bank and the General Motors Building were before it, and upon its arrival it was the last word, the state of the art.

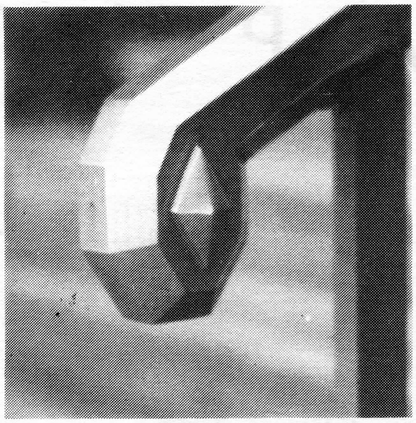


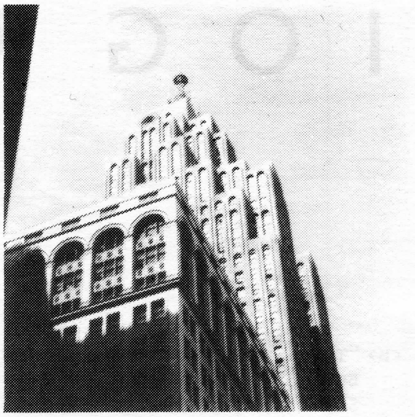
As construction progressed on the Greater Penobscot Building, Smith, Hinchman and Grylls received a commission to design a new headquarters for the Union Trust Company. This building is now referred to as the Guardian Building and is owned by the Michigan Consolidated Gas Company (MichCon). Founded in 1891, the Union Trust Company had occupied and outgrown three previous buildings. Within the span of two decades, the Union Trust had become the most popular (and subsequently powerful) trust company in Michigan. It achieved this position

> ...through the scope of its activities, its fair dealing, its thoroughness, its attention to detail, its trustworthiness, the success of its trust services, and its steadfast adherence to its creed, "The Friend of the Family."(7)

In 1924, the decision was made to construct a new building to house the ever-increasing number of employees and departments in a company experiencing unprecedented growth and success. The new building was to include sixteen floors of office space for the Union Trust Company, while sixteen more would be constructed simultaneously for future expansion. Until that time, those floors would be rented to tenants.

With the experience of the Buhl and the Greater Penobscot Buildings behind





him, Wirt Rowland was called upon to design the new skyscraper. Every aspect of the building was carefully planned, designed, and detailed. Rowland fulfilled the role of master builder for this "cathedral". As Thomas Holleman explains:

> **It was an early example of total design...Smith, Hinchman & Grylls offered interior design service at the time, and Rowland designed everything, including chairs with the 30-60 degree angle that appears throughout the building. All incidental furniture, even coat racks, wastebaskets, inkwells and deskpads, was specially designed in the repetitive theme. There was a restaurant on the 32nd floor and Rowland designed the furniture, drapes, tableware, centerpieces, and even the uniforms of the waitresses. The octagonal crown of the building emitted nightly displays of kaleidoscopic colored beams of light, adding the dimension of motion to the Detroit skyline.(8)**

The form of the New Union Trust Building was a result of the balancing of romanti and functional ideas. On th romantic side, "the disposition of the plan immediately suggested to Rowland a huge cathedral with a high tower at the north, a nave and aisles extending to the south and terminated by an apse or small octagonal tower."(9) The idea of a "Cathedral of Finance" suited the image of the Union Trust Company. They were, after all, the highest financial authority in the state.

On the functional side, the form of the building is essentially a slab, allowing a maximum of daylight and fresh air to reach deep into the interior through operable windows. The farthest end of each office is just a few steps from light, air, and a view of the Detroit River to the south. Elevator banks at the north and south ends of the building served the public and tenants, or Union Trust employees, respectively.

But color was what made the New Union Trust Building so unique. For no other aspect of the building did tributes pour in so strongly. And the psychological effects of color, warm and rich, were well exploited to portray the Union Trust Company as the friend of the family, of everyone. The lobby and main banking room are barrel-vaulted, multi-colored spaces lavishly detailed.

The decision to use brick veneer for the Union Trust Building suggested to...(Rowland) that this material might be the key to an entirely new system of decoration. Combined with glazed tile and polychrome terra cotta, it offered unlimited possibilities of color, texture, and form. Color was desirable because it could be comprehended so easily.(10)

Color was applied to the system of ornamentation on the building which was "scaled to be comprehended from a moving vehicle."(11) Rowland understood the nature of life in the city with its hustle and bustle, asserting that we no longer "move on streets from which it is possible to contemplate and enjoy minute sculptural detail. What we see we must see quickly in passing, and the impression must be immediate, strong, and complete. Color has this vital power."(12)

The building, however, has suffered the ravages of so many changes in ownership and use that it has lost much of what it was. And we, therefore, suffer this loss through the continuing insensitivity with which Detroit treats its architecture. The attempts by MichCon, the new tenants, to reuse and renovate the building, while praiseworthy, will never be able to recover that which has been removed.

As long as the buildings stand, however, the Greater Penobscot and New Union Trust (Guardian) Buildings will be two of the most prominent and significant features of the face of Detroit. They continue to represent the attributes of uniqueness, power and opulence that they did when they emerged from the mind of Wirt C. Rowland. They are irreplaceable. As more and more buildings of historic significance are threatened with destruction and demolished, the significance of the Greater Penobscot and Guardian Buildings will increase further. They, perhaps more than any other, represent the Spirit of Detroit.

(1) p. 211 <E>
(2) Armedo Leone interview.
(3) Jim Gallagher telephone interview.
(4) p. 97 <I>
(5) <H>
(6) p. 21 <H>
(7) p. 57 <U>
(8) <A>
(9) sec. 7, p. 7 <S>
(10) p. 330 <E>
(11) p. 128 <I>
(12) sec. 7, p. 7 <S>

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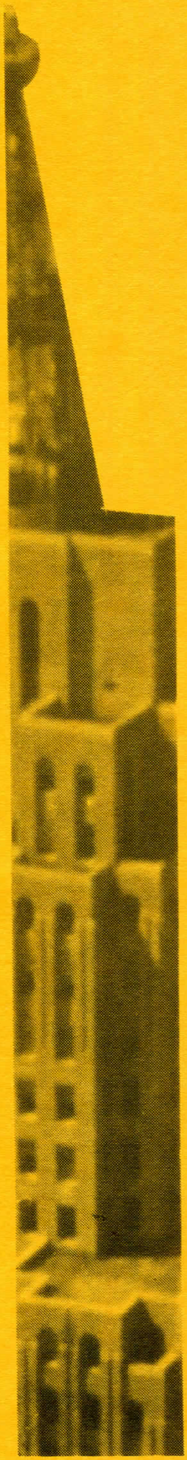

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