

The Albany Mall, named the Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza in 1976, is a complex of marble- and glass-covered structures for state government and cultural purposes, directly south of the Capitol building. It was planned initially in 1961 and built from 1965 to 1976 on 98.5 acres of downtown Albany at the behest of Nelson Rockefeller when he was governor of New York (1959–1973) in an area occupied by working- and

INTRIGUE AND MARBLE: Empire State Plaza, 1961–1976

lower-middle-class houses, most of them owned by whites. The structures lost to the Mall were acquired through eminent domain, but that cannot account for the project cost of approximately \$2 billion in 1976 dollars, equal to about \$8.4 billion in 2015. Ambitious plans, vast spaces, lavish use of marble cladding, interruptions in the construction, and the unorthodox method of financing all contributed to the final sum.

A five-story platform contains garages for state employees and a corridor linking the buildings above and several nearby. The platform bridges and partly fills a valley rising from the riverfront. A highway, planned simultaneously, passes through the base of the platform, but stops abruptly just beyond it due to local opposition to extending the road through a large public park. Above the platform, the Capitol (completed in 1899) at the north end is on axis with the New York State Museum, Archives, and Library building at the south end, beyond a street overpass. On the east side of the platform is the 44-story office tower later named for Erastus Corning II, the mayor of Albany for 41 years who was instrumental in financing the Mall; it is the state's tallest building outside New York City.

North of it stands a curvilinear building known as the Egg, officially called the Center for the Performing Arts, built at a cost estimated as \$42 million in 1970 dollars, or roughly six times that sum today. Along the west side are four identical 23-story state agency office buildings, vertically emphatic as the Corning Tower is, all with glass dominating the façades facing the platform and marble-covered cores facing the city. Two smaller buildings rise near the Capitol, and a long, low agency-occupied building flanks the Mall along Swan Street to the west.

Having worked at, and been president of his father's Rockefeller Center in Manhattan (1938–1945; 1948–1951), Nelson Rockefeller had befriended Wallace K. Harrison, the chief designer of the Albany Mall. Harrison was Rockefeller Center's leading architect after the death and retirement of his predecessors, and he led the international panel of architects who designed the United Nations complex. Nelson Rockefeller's brothers had earlier sponsored building projects—Lincoln

Center, shopping malls, resort hotels, office towers.

When he began his years as governor, Nelson Rockefeller had his chance, and determined to replace the aging, modest houses near the Capitol with buildings worthy of the Empire State. Mayor Corning proposed other sites. Both wanted to refresh downtown Albany, which had been losing population to suburbs and workers to a state office campus about three miles to the northwest. While early proposals identified alternative sites that would have displaced fewer residents, none appealed to the governor as much as the site south of the Capitol. An early project for some replacement housing vanished, owing to its cost and because it would have blocked views of the Mall from the principal approaches to the city.

The governor himself proposed the eventual plan. In a 1973 interview, he told me that his inspiration was the palace of the Dalai Lama. He explained that he had seen and admired the Tibetan wall that rose above a plain, and had an array of towers over the wall. Harrison confirmed that the governor had sketched his idea during a flight from Albany to New York City.

This exotic vision had to be refined into

something acceptably American. But the idea of something exclusively American was not current in those years among sophisticated people who had traveled widely. For them, the International Style reflected the world view of the United Nations or multi-national corporations. It suggested fraternity

coordinate various plans commissioned from three teams of architects working for the Temporary State Commission on the Capital City, an entity set up in 1961 to forestall any plans by Mayor Corning. Not surprisingly, the teams decided that the site south of the Capitol was the best.



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and cultural exchange rather than the specific cultures embraced later by post-modernists. Harrison had worked with Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, among others, on the UN headquarters. He and Rockefeller knew about the new capitals at Brasilia and Chandigarh. They brought in George Dudley, a long-time associate of the Rockefellers, to

The mayor, defeated, turned defeat to his own advantage. Normally, a building plan of this size would be subjected to the legislature's vote or to a bond-authorizing referendum in a general election. But lawmakers would not have voted for a large project for Albany's benefit alone. Rockefeller's plan threatened to reduce the efficient concentration of state workers in the existing office campus. The city of Albany would see several thousand homes and businesses removed from the tax rolls, even though

property assessments had been so spotty and corrupt that not everyone had paid honest taxes anyway. So Mayor Corning consulted people—exactly whom is not public knowledge—able to persuade the county of Albany to sell 40-year bonds to finance the project.

The mayor could make that happen because he controlled the county's political machine. He required construction contracts to contain insurance

ed for. Everyone except the displaced residents seemed to win something from the project. Neither the mayor nor the governor publicized the fact that eventually the taxpayers of New York would be liable for the bonds.

Once financing was assured, construction could begin. But part of the site was situated over clay that had been inserted into a ravine under a previous Mayor Corning. Because it was gelatinous



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written by Albany Associates, a firm in which he had a business interest. Cash from bond sales was placed in the National Commercial Bank & Trust Company, where he was a director, although some went to another bank. Contracts, such as one for hauling debris, went to favored friends. What the mayor believed to be the best soil excavated on the site was trucked to his property beyond the city limits to create flat land for sale as building lots. He persuaded the state to pay more to Albany in lieu of taxes than what the old properties would have generated. The convention center, later incorporated into the Mall's concourse circulation system, could be used by the city when it was not contract-

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and could not be built on it had to be removed at huge, unexpected expense. Stabilizing the water table was another problem, since the shifting water table would have undermined the foundations of existing buildings. The state required that individual contracts be let for each phase of construction work, instead of having a general contractor. All the firms wanted to start on the contracted date even if the clay was still being removed from the ravine, or if the previous contractor had not finished a necessary substructure. Reports circulated about workers

treading on other workers' turf, arguments about priority, and other disputes. Even when work was delayed, people had to be paid for being at the job site. The cost of the project rose precipitously.

THE BUILDINGS

The tall buildings came about because the governor liked one of Harrison's earlier, unbuilt schemes for cantilevering office space from a building's core. That design would look dramatic and would provide shade in summer and protection from rain and snow. Harrison had recently designed tall buildings with vertical striped articulation for the later Rockefeller Center buildings on Sixth Avenue. He could not cover the cores with the same granite that was used at the Capitol because the quarry had closed. Besides, the governor wanted marble, so several types of domestic cold white marble are used on the tower exteriors and in parts of the interiors. Travertine from the region of Rome—always a sign of ambition—appears at the Mall too, primarily in the entrance from the concourse to the Capitol. It may have been both too expensive and too foreign for cladding New York State's buildings and it does not project an impression of bright novelty, as white marble does. Although marble is expensive, using domestic varieties provided work for American quarrymen. The towers are inefficient by the standards of most office buildings, with only 40 to 54 percent usable interior space, but formal impressiveness, not practicality, determined their form.

The anomalous Egg relieves the monotony of the other buildings. It is constructed of exposed reinforced concrete. Its unusual shape suggests something special inside: the arts, offered in two auditoriums. A stem support sinks six stories into the

ground, surrounded by a girdle that maintains the building's curvilinear shape.

At the south end of the Mall is the four-story Museum-Archive-Library building that replaced Harrison's initial plans for a parabolic arch flanked by small buildings for the archive and library. The state's cultural personnel demanded a larger, more useful facility, resulting in the current design. It is less hackneyed in concept than an arch even if the



Museum-Archive-Library Building. © Ezra Stoller/Esto

building—a distant derivative of Le Corbusier's La Tourette priory (1956–1960)—is far from beautiful.

At the north end of the Mall are two marble-clad, visually undistinguished buildings for legislative offices and judicial facilities. The architects were James, Meadows & Howard, with Sargent, Webster, Crenshaw & Folley, nominally with the collaboration of Carson, Lundin & Shaw and Harrison & Abramovitz. They cut off the full view of the Capitol's south facade, but the blame for this may be placed on the brief rather than on these architects' desire to intrude.

Closing the west side is the quarter-mile-long Motor Vehicles Bureau, now the Swan Street Building, renamed for the street it fronts. The architects were Carson & Lundin, friends of Harrison's who were assistant architects at Rockefeller Center in its later phases. The building's scale is unfriendly to the 19th-century row houses opposite it, despite its lower height and the sectioning of its marble cladding.

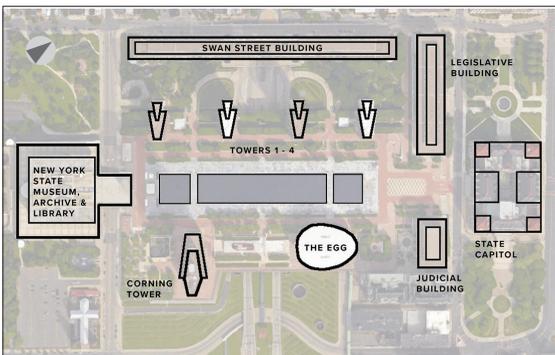


Illustration: Marissa Marvelli



The Egg/Center for the Performing Arts (L); Judicial Building (R). Photos: Christopher Brazee.

THE PLAZA

The central spine of the complex features a long reflecting pool bridged by two walkways. Early renderings show lavish fountains, but now, water jets rise in the pools. In winter, for some years, people ice-skated on the pool surfaces much like the seasonal ice rink at Rockefeller Center. Near the Capitol, the architects installed pavement in an undulating design of gray and white aggregate, recalling the paving at Copacabana beach, a design that Harrison and his business partner, Max Abramovitz had imitated outside Rockefeller Center's Time & Life Building. In summer, the Mall welcomes a farmers' market and food vendor stands and picnic tables along the northern edge of the pool. The Mall also features *Triangles and Arches*, 1965, a striking work by Alexander Calder among other site-specific sculptures.

Under the Mall are the parking levels and the vast concourse that links the buildings, providing all-weather access to offices from the garage and a bus station in the platform. The concourse also contains restaurants, a bank, a visitor center, and public restrooms. Its low ceiling makes the space poorly suited to the display of dozens of works of painting and sculpture, some of very high quality and all by prominent artists of the period. Protective ropes, high pedestals, and trash cans reduce some of the visual appeal. The interior columns, formerly simple prisms, now have vertical strips of semi-concealed lighting to improve visibility.

On the Swan Street side of the four lower buildings are outdoor sitting areas in a landscape of curvilinear forms and several levels, as well as a children's playground that Rockefeller insisted on.

The project, initially dubious and still startling in



The quarter-mile-long Swan Street Building meets Albany's 19th-century rowhouses. Photos: Christopher Brazee



FORMAL IMPRESSIVENESS, NOT PRACTICALITY, DETERMINED THE FORM OF THE TOWERS.

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low-rise Albany, has become a fact of life. However inefficient their design, the towers provide useful office space near the Capitol. Visitors to the city find it convenient to tour the buildings, the art-filled concourse, the Capitol, and the cultural building in one visit. In 2015, the Museum had on display the Sesame Street set, information about famous skyscrapers, and relics from 9/11, but also an uncritical account of the Mall's origin. New restaurants have opened downtown along with revived retailing. New and rehabilitated office buildings line Broadway, close to the river. The architecture of the 1960s has recently enjoyed renewed appre-

ciation and the Mall's art collection is impressive. The taxable value of houses nearby has risen, as one may guess by peering down from the enclosed observation floor atop the Corning Tower. So while opinions about the project vary, it is worth a trip to Albany to form your own. The Mall is really yours and mine if you're a New Yorker, because we paid billions of dollars to retire those bonds.

— CAROL HERSELLE KRINSKY

Author note: For a more detailed account of the making of the Albany Mall, including research notes, see Carol H. Krinsky's essay, "St. Petersburg-on-the-Hudson: The Albany Mall," published in Art, the Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H.W. Janson (Harry N. Abrams, New York: 1981).