

"A Super-Crate, to Ship a Fiasco to Hell."

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

OldMagazineArticles.com

Rob Wagner's

Script

July, 1947: p. 12

LIKE many a returned G.I. and family, the United Nations has had a difficult time finding housing. For the past year and a half, it has debated one city, site, and structure after another. And like the G.I., the U.N. Board of Design Consultants has had to listen to a lot of advice from well-meaning friends and relatives. It even had its doting, patronizing, and selfish rich uncle—John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who donated the \$8,500,000 tract on the East River, between 42nd and 48th streets on Manhattan, an area once filled with tenements, packing houses, garages. With a knowing wink, New Yorkers well realized what the construction of the U.N. center there would mean to adjacent property, now covered with old buildings and dingy slums.

But even with this recognition, the world accepted the decision on the site for the world capital, hoping that the house would be built before the family died. It anxiously awaited completion of the blueprint, confident that the world's greatest dream would be matched with the world's finest artists and architects and that only a fine, poetic, and majestic design emblematic of peace would result.

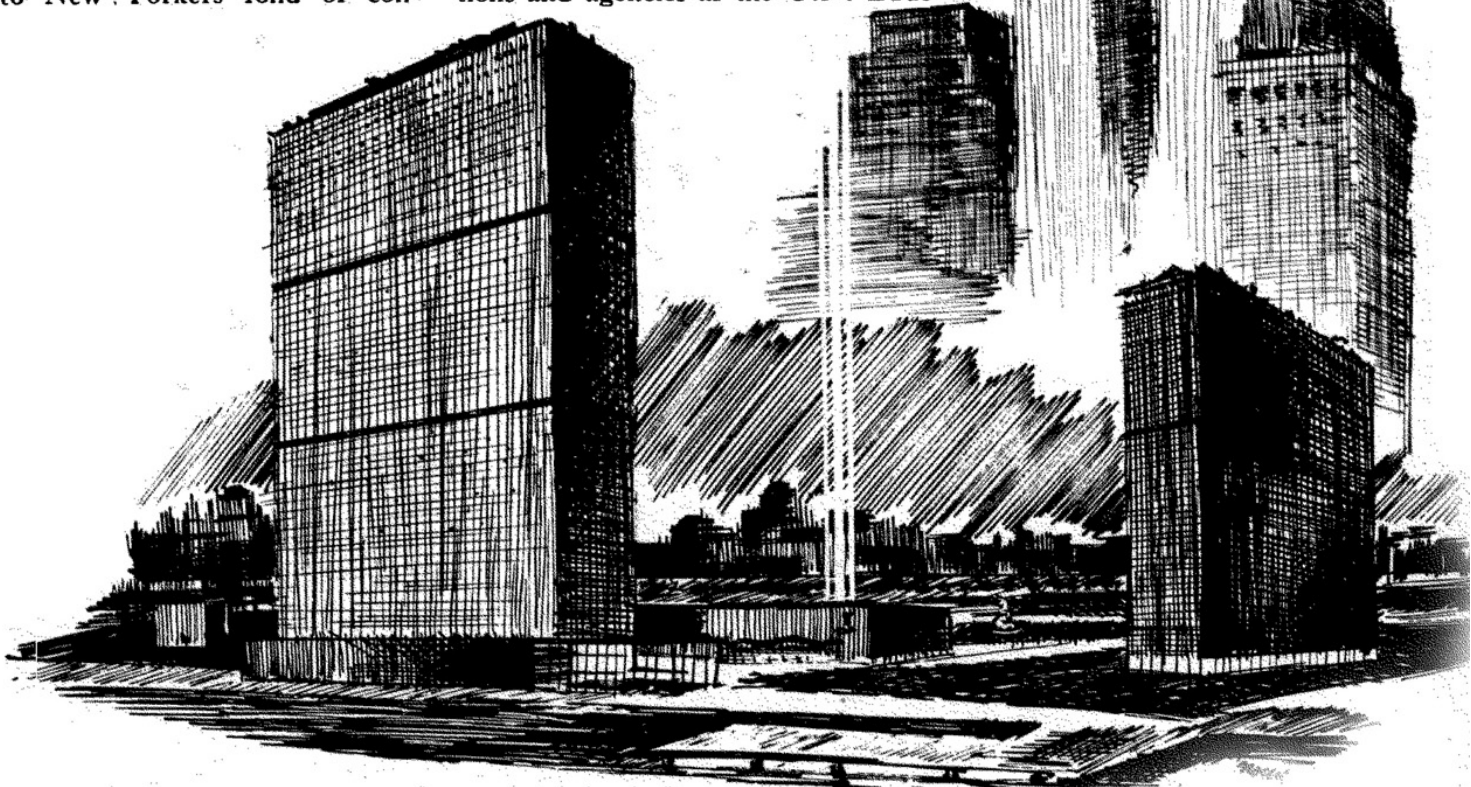
A few weeks ago, the jury of architects selected for the task unrolled this blueprint. To Manhattan money grubbers, to New Yorkers fond of con-

finer, neurotic living, and to Rockefeller and his associates, the thing was beauty. But others, reacting with varying degrees of revulsion from an ough to a sigh, believed the new U.N. center, unless its design is modified after universal protest, would hinder rather than help the cause of peace.

In Wisconsin, we contacted seventy-eight-year-old Frank Lloyd Wright, the prophet and the practitioner of organic American architecture. He viewed the jury's plan with a shudder. First he studied the monumental shaft (closely resembling the R.C.A. Building in Rockefeller Center), whose more than seventy floors will hold the employes of U.N.'s administration. This will be known as the Secretariat Building, standing broadside to the East River.

Then he looked at the blueprint for the General Assembly building, with three searchlight beacons jabbing toward the sky from a flat roof, calling the world to peace in much the same manner that a new Hollywood hamburger stand tries to attract customers. In contrast to the crate-like Secretariat Building, the General Assembly building looks like a slice of cheese.

To the far left, he saw the U.N. office building for such delegations and agencies as the U.N. Educa-



OldMagazineArticles.com

tional, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It, too, is a skyscraper of some forty floors, looking like a matchbox, stood on end. It has the perfect design for a souvenir penny bank to be sold on the Staten Island ferry. It also is remarkably similar in design to the Associated Press Building in Rockefeller Center, the Time & Life Building, the Empire State Building, and other Manhattan money factories.

"Knowing it or not, Capitalism here goes on record for world-fascism in this monstrous tombstone for the graveyard of peace," Mr. Wright snorted.

He looked at the Secretariat Building, designed by the jury of architects under the direction and dominance of Wallace Harrison, Rockefeller's personal architect.

"Witness here the 'redux ad absurdum' of the 'vox-populi,'" Mr. Wright said. "It resembles a super-crate in which to ship a fiasco to hell."

Anyone familiar with Frank Lloyd Wright knows that he does not consider the United Nations a "fiasco." From the time he first became famous as the founder of a new school of modern architecture in the Midwest, Wright has championed peoples' causes, trying to fight a skyscraper civilization that could only breed neurosis and despair, calling for decentralized communities, free, roomy, organic buildings and homes. In his liberated architecture he has portrayed his thoughts and ambitions for a liberated world.

Many of California's finest homes have been designed and built by Mr. Wright, including the settlement on Hightower Terrace back of Hollywood Bowl. Mayor Fletcher Bowron occupies one of the six houses in this group. And the beautiful house built for Richard Halliburton in Laguna Beach is still a favorite object d'art for visitors to that city. But whether it is residential or business building, Mr. Wright has portrayed in wood or stone his hope for a mature society in a free world, opposed to restrictive "skyscraperism." (*Life* magazine once quoted him as saying: "Radio City, Last Tower of Babylon, is the crime of all crimes, and there is no excuse for it whatsoever." On the Empire State Building, he said: "Look at the thing! . . . an unethical monstrosity, a robber going tall to rob neighbors.") He con-

siders the proposed United Nations center (see artist's sketch), with its towering buildings, its unimaginative design, its factory-like concentration, just some more of the same, completely lacking in anything approaching inspiration, or reflecting the hope of the world.

In fact, he told us, he believes it glorifies an ideology the United Nations was formed . . . and pledged . . . to destroy.

"If 'Four Freedoms' and 'Free Enterprise' must build (as Harrison says) a 'workshop for peace,' why must this peace factory so closely resemble factories for the making of money now standing next door?" Wright asked us. "What but war could issue from a building program such as that presented by Wallace Harrison's committee for United Nations headquarters?"

"I have long suspected most 'established' architects were minded 'Fascist.' Here, sixteen of the choicest present us with its very shape in the name of peace!"

WRIGHT feels that the entire matter of the site and design for the world capital is a mistake. A few months ago, a reporter asked him:

"What do you think of the East River site for the buildings?"

Walking up and down, stroking his flowing black tie, Wright pondered

this for a moment. Then, with a characteristic flourish:

"The East River site was no choice," he growled. "It was a subsidy."

"Well, what do you think of the selection of sixteen architects to design the buildings?"

"No architecture worthy of the name ever came out of a 'committee' alive," he snapped.

The reporter tried one more.

"What do you think of the type of buildings proposed?"

Bitterly hating skyscrapers, Wright had a ready and bitter answer.

"Skyscraperism in urban areas is exploitation, a sinister emblem for world peace."

What Wright and other independent architects may believe probably will have little if any effect on the ultimate design of the U.N. Center. In such a restricted area as the Manhattan site, little else could be accomplished. Most opponents of the present center's design agree that acceptance of the Rockefeller gift was a mistake to begin with, huddling the representatives of all nations in a six-block area surrounded by slums, confronted with almost intolerable weather, and heckled by the hustling, bustling millions in the world's most civilized but most inhuman city. The League of Nations had a more auspicious beginning. Does it mean that the United Nations is doomed to an even more dismal failure?

—J. P. F.

