

Serra Bollack Killian

# EVERYDAY MASTERPIECES

*memory & modernity*



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a study of an international vernacular architecture between the two world wars

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# CONTENTS

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Index of the photographic itinerary and of the thematic essays	pag. 8
Preface	pag. 9
Being in the Everyday (J. Raspi Serra)	pag. 11
A "Decent Table" (T. Killian)	pag. 13
The Temple and the Aeroplane: a formal study of three buildings (F. Astorg Bollack)	pag. 15
Photographic itinerary	pag. 21
Thematic essays (F. Astorg Bollack, T. Killian, P. Mascilli Migliorini, J. Raspi Serra, N. Zanni)	pag. 137
European Modern Architecture: A Chronology 1896-1933 (J. Raspi Serra, N. Zanni, P. Mascilli Migliorini)	pag. 171
American Modern Architecture: A Cronology 1918-1933 (F. Astorg Bollack, T. Killian)	pag. 187
INTERVIEWS:	
with Alberto Sartoris, conducted by J. Raspi Serra and N. Zanni (February, 1988) with a biographical sketch edited by M. Sommella;	pag. 195
with Denise Scott Brown, conducted by T. Killian and F. Astorg Bollack (May, 1988)	pag. 203
→ New York from Classic to Moderne local Architects remember (Anthony Robins)	pag. 211
Folk Modern/Moderne Sauvage (T. Killian)	pag. 219
The Past Present (J. Raspi Serra)	pag. 221
Tradition and Innovation in the Modern Architecture (N. Zanni)	pag. 223
The Architecture of Machines (P. Mascilli Migliorini)	pag. 227
Bibliography	pag. 231
Photographic References	pag. 241

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## NEW YORK FROM CLASSIC TO MODERNE: LOCAL ARCHITECTS REMEMBER

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In the years following World War I, New York City emerged in the eyes of the world as a great modern metropolis. Architecturally, that new identity found expression in a change from the traditional classical styles of the Beaux-Arts to the modernistic of the so-called Art Deco or Moderne. Most of the architects who worked in the latter styles had been trained or apprenticed in the former. Sooner or later they fell under the sway of the great monuments of 1920s New York, and became part of a mass movement that saw the city transformed from the classicism of the turn of the century to the modernism of the Jazz Age.

The three architects whose interviews are recounted below were all active in New York in the 1920s and 1930s. Each began work in traditional styles of one kind or another, and then evolved towards the modernistic. None was a giant in the field, none designed a major skyscraper, but each drew from and contributed to the city's changing image. Modern New York cannot be imagined without their work.

The architects' interviews reveal varying levels of awareness of the influence of the trends of the period on their work. Their thought on the subject ranges from straightforward denial of any outside influence, to quite specific acknowledgements of monuments and architects important to their development. Nevertheless, all three evolved in the same general direction, from the classical to the modernistic.

### Israel L. Crausman

The Bronx owes much of its typical post-World War I look to Israel L. Crausman (b. 1899), one of the dozens of architects who designed the thousands of apartment houses, movie theaters, stores, and garages that transformed a rural county into a dense urban conglomerate almost overnight. Crausman's work falls directly into the mainstream of standard New York and American design of the period, yet he seems to have been largely unaware of his relationship to the larger context, and of the three architects interviewed he had the least to say on the subject of his stylistic development and models.

Like many of his colleagues, Crausman did not have the advantage of advanced architectural training. A teenage immigrant from Russia at the outbreak of World War I, he took a B.S. degree in engineering from Cooper Union in 1919, and set up his own office in the Bronx the following year.

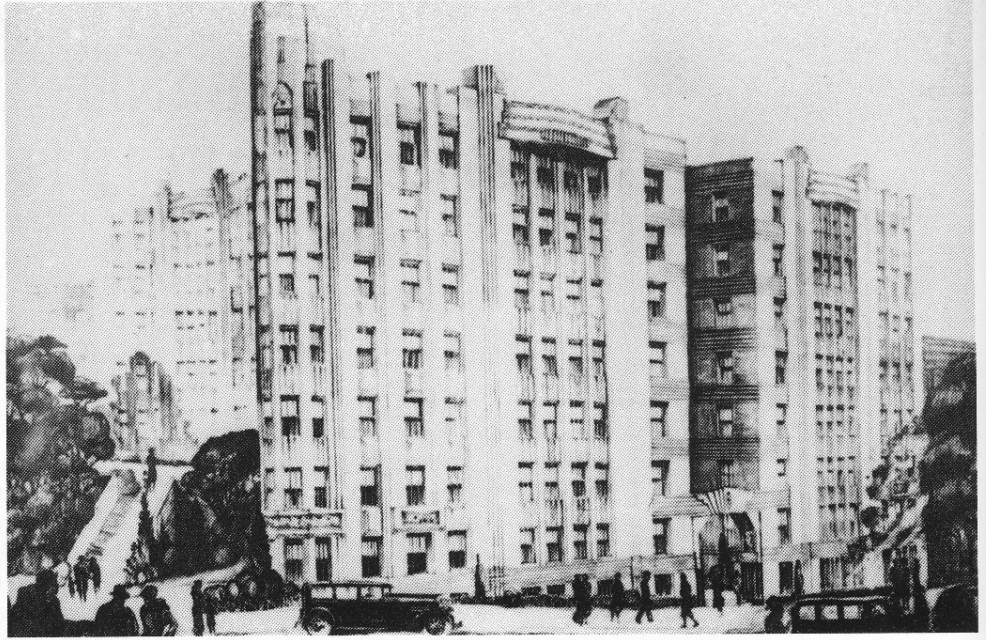
During the 1920s Crausman designed several of the hundreds of theaters which sprang up in the Bronx during the great national theater-building boom of the years between World War I and the Depression. His work reflected the standard eclecticism of the times. The theater of which he was most proud, the Avalon (Burnside and Anthony Avenues; 1928, demolished) built in memory of his father, followed the lead of the Broadway theaters of the day, particularly those designed for the Shuberts by Herbert Krapp. The ornament of its plain brick front was drawn from classical sources, and included such typical details as a parapet balustrade crowned

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Israel L. Crausman



Ca. 1931 Israel L. Crausman rendering. Bronx, N. Y.

with decorative urns. The decorative plasterwork of its interior, derived from 18th century Adamesque models, had been standard for theaters on or off Broadway for two decades. In a 1982 interview, Crausman described a similar theater, the Oxford (Jerome Avenue and 185th Street, 1928) as being «in a beautiful classic interior design».

In the 1930s, Crausman abandoned his 1920s classical repertory for the lively, colorful Bronx Modern that gradually transformed the dreary grey of the Grand Concourse and points west into one of the country's great collections of modernistic buildings. Instead of terra-cotta urns and swags, his apartment house designs featured such lively details as curving corner casements, Aztec-inspired rooflines, and - (streamline-curve) balconies.

In retrospect the influence of the great 1920s monuments of Manhattan on Crausman's development seems plausible, but when asked Crausman recalled no connection. He «...never went to Manhattan to look at their designs... Every architect had his own ideas about how he would decorate his buildings», he said, and he would not admit to any influence on his work, nor could he say why his style changed from the classic to the modernistic.

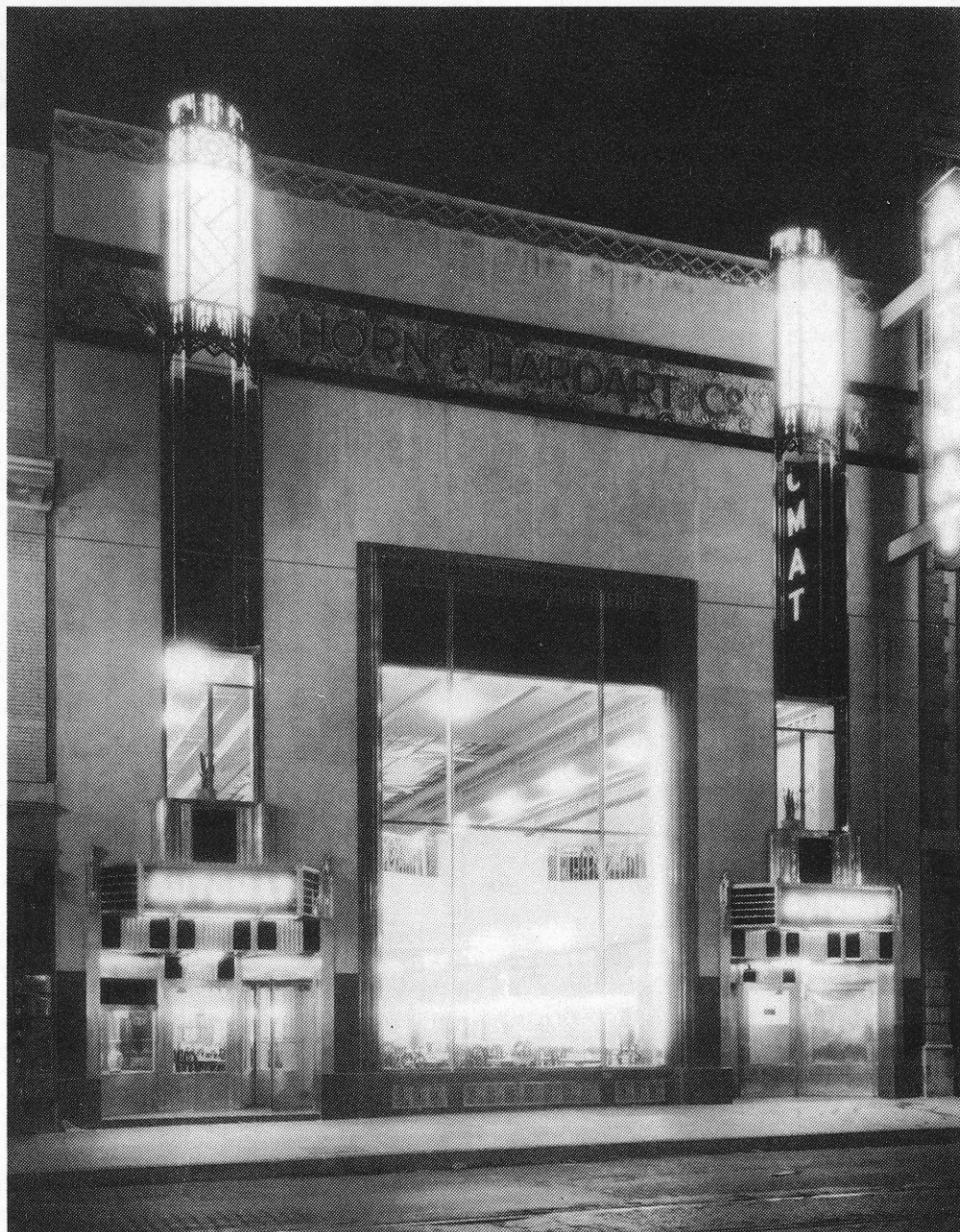
#### **Louis Allen Abramson**

A broader perspective emerges from a series of 1980 interviews with Louis Allen Abramson. A decade older than Crausman, Abramson also had a limited architectural education, but developed a more sophisticated awareness of his architectural surroundings.

Abramson (1887-1985), born in New York, began studying civil engineering at Cooper Union, found it boring and left. He also had a brief stint at the Mechanics Institute on West 44th Street. Abramson recalled that his introduction to architecture came through a job at the turn of the century as an office boy for John Duncan, one of New York's preeminent late 19th century Beaux-Arts practitioners. Duncan had completed most of his famous work by that time, including Grant's Tomb, but was still active designing the fashionable limestone-fronted, English-basement town houses that he popularized for the banker's palaces of Midtown Manhattan. After



Louis Abramson



Automat, New York v. 1930.

leaving Duncan, Abramson went West «to find my fortune». He stayed in Seattle for a few years, then returned to New York. Abramson took extension courses at Columbia University, spent a short time as a draftsman in the office of Louis Gerard, and then went out on his own.

Abramson recalled learning two important lessons from his early days with Duncan, whom he remembered chiefly as a bon-vivant who treated his teen-aged apprentice very kindly. The first: «I can only tell you what I subconsciously absorbed (from him): quality». The second: «(through him) I was introduced to (the work of) McKim, Mead & White». Duncan's great admiration for the premiere practitioners of classical styles in New York made a strong impression on the young Abramson, who was filled with: «...admiration of what they had done. And that never left me, never. Each time I'd go by the University Club on Fifth Avenue, I'd stand and



figuratively bow. I did love that building. When they started to destroy the Penn Station I used to go over there and cry. To me it was perfection, perfection. And then I'd walk, at times I'd commute to Grand Central. I had admiration for it, but in a totally different sense. Penn Station was... I don't know how I can really say it. I felt meek in the presence of that building... I recall once, and I don't know if you will recall it, as you walk in from the Seventh Avenue side, where the bronze letters, tablets, on either side... the spacing of the letters themselves impressed me. It was done as a master would do it. In fact that inspired me once to get a book of architectural lettering and study it».

In his early days, Abramson was also «an admirer of Cass Gilbert». In later years Gilbert, particularly through his designs of the late 1920s and 1930s, survived as a stubborn Beaux-Art relic in a modernistic age, but at the time Abramson «admired his modernity, if one may use that expression, his breakaway from the classical school».

Abramson's early experience in the office of Louis Gerard, a New York agent of Paul Cret, kept him in thrall to Beaux-Arts practices. He spent countless hours doing charcoal studies of shadow falling on cornices, both for Gerard and for other architects' offices to which Gerard rented him out.

Abramson's first independent work was a YWHA on Central Park North just west of Fifth Avenue. He smiled when describing its interior: «The auditorium was Stanford White's Italian. That was the influence». From «White's Italian», Abramson moved on in the 1920s to the eclecticism typical of the decade. An office building of his design on Maiden Lane (1927) recalls the Gothic detailing of Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building.

Abramson too broke with the past in the 1930s, with the design of a series of modernistic restaurants, including two Horn & Hardart Automats, six Longschamps restaurants, and Ben Marden's Riviera.

Abramson designed his two Automats in 1931. For the first, on West 33rd Street, he conceived a terra-cotta faced, modernistic, two-story facade with the blocky modern reliefs, abstract grillework, stylized floral patterns, and dramatic indirect lighting so typical of the period. Similarly modernistic friezes, reliefs, and ornamental metalwork adorned the otherwise simple interior. The Horn & Hardart representative that Abramson worked with had very specific requirements for such things as kitchen layouts and hygienic concerns, but Abramson recalls only one piece of instruction from him on design matters: «We like Modern», said the representative, «not Moderne». Abramson thought this statement amusing, had no idea what the man meant, and simply designed what he liked.

Later that same year Abramson designed one of the most extravagant of all New York's Automats, on West 181st Street in Washington Heights. Its facade included such wonderfully modernistic details as the name «HORN & HARDART» superimposed over a polychromatic glazed terra-cotta band of stylized floral patterns, and zig-zag metal and glass pylons lit from within. It was for the interior, however, that Abramson reserved his most extraordinary effects, introducing into his work the use of large-scale illustrations: to crown the two-tiered restaurant, whose walls were adorned with terra-cotta grillework, geometric glass light fixtures, and floral reliefs, he created a set of extravagant colored glass ceiling and wall panels illustrating the icons of Modern New York. In the ceiling panels the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings (modernistic skyscrapers completed in 1930 and 1931 respectively) rose towards each other, their spires meeting electrically over a central schematic diagram of the Manhattan street grid. On the end wall a female figure (whose allegorical significance Abramson could no longer remember) rose from flames through the center of the George Washington Bridge, straddling the mighty Hudson. The Washington Bridge, completed the same year as the Washington Heights Automat, provided the logical symbol for Abramson's restaurant. In his words, he had «a great deal of fun»

with the design.

Abramson continued the happy collaboration of architecture and illustration in his Longchamps chain. Beginning in 1934, he worked with painter Winold Reiss on six branches of the restaurant, each arranged around a different pictorial theme. In a Longchamps of 1936, Abramson's plate glass and satin finished chromium exterior, and streamline — and S-curved interior, was adorned with Reiss's images of "the historical contrasts» of New York City — Pilgrims and Skyscrapers on the facade, and portraits of famous old New Yorkers inside.

Abramson remembers two occasions when the question of older versus newer style came up with a client. One was for Hillside Hospital, where he was asked to prepare two possible designs, one «traditional» and one «contemporary». He did, and to his relief Hillside chose the «contemporary» version.

The second instance concerned Abramson's most extraordinary commission, which came with very precise stylistic instructions. Ben Marden's Riviera (1937) in Fort Lee, New Jersey, was to be a combination dinner theater, bar, cafe and lounge. Marden instructed Abramson to make his complex look like George Washington's Mt. Vernon home, as traditional a model as could be imagined. Abramson told Marden not to worry, and kept him away from the site as long as possible.

Ben Marden's sat on a dramatic outcropping of the Palisades, overlooking the Hudson River, in what is now the Palisades Interstate Park. Abramson designed a great semi-circular restaurant, its upper portion an unbroken band of glass affording breathtaking views of Manhattan through the cables of the George Washington Bridge. A huge, S-curved bar with indirect ceiling lighting, porthole windows, and a curving entrance bay, made for an extraordinarily contemporary design, an effect enhanced a year later by the addition of abstract murals on the walls framing the stage. These Abramson commissioned from Arshile Gorky, hardly a traditionalist. (Marden had asked for «dancing girls», and accepted the murals only after asking the opinion of Joey Addams, who approved). On clear nights, the roof of the complex could be rolled back to open the restaurant to the sky.

Marden didn't find out what had happened to his Mt. Vernon until construction was well underway. Whatever his initial feelings, in the end his public relations people put out flyers boasting that the Riviera's advanced modern style was ahead of the plans still being developed for the upcoming 1939 World's Fair.

What inspired the change in direction that left "Stanford white's Italian" behind for the modernistic approach of Abramson's work in the 1930s? Like Crausman, Abramson was reluctant to ascribe any role to the influence of specific contemporary monuments or architects. While acknowledging the impact of white on his early designs, he said of his later works only that: "I was designing according to my own tastes, my own inclinations, and while I admired a great deal of contemporary... work being done... if it influenced me I wasn't consciously aware of it".

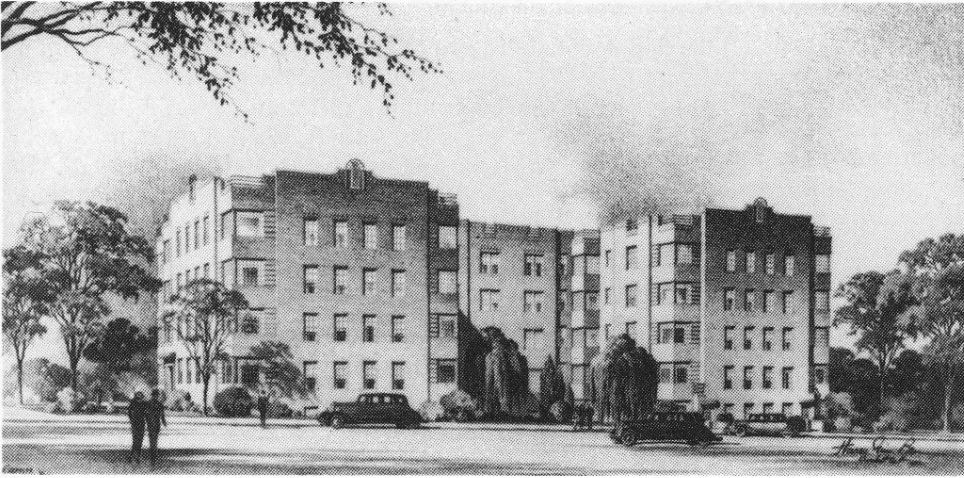
### **Marvin Fine**

Of the three interviewed, the architect who most clearly articulated the influence of period trends on his work was Marvin Fine (1904-1981). Chief designer for the firm of Horace Ginsberg (later Ginsbern) & Associates, among the most prominent in the development of the Art Deco apartment buildings of the Grand Concourse, Fine described the impact of major architects and monuments on his work in a 1980 interview.

Unlike Crausman or Abramson, Fine had a sophisticated architectural education, at the University of Pennsylvania. «Penn was a Beaux-Arts school, and my critic was Paul Cret. And Paul Cret was a real exponent of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts».

After graduating from Pennsylvania in 1924, Fine took a position with the office of Cass Gilbert, where he was put to work on drawings for the new New York Life





1936 Marvin Fine Design, Bronx, N. Y.



Marvin Fine.

Insurance Company headquarters on Park Avenue South. His job was to develop drawings of gargoyles, calculating the varying effects of light and shadow: «First you made little drawings, then you developed it quarter-scale, then half-scale, then three-quarter, then half-full size, and then full-size. We used to work on the floor. When we finished the gargoyles, we used to send them to the boss. He used to check them and see if he liked them. And if it passed the secondary boss, then it went on to the chief designer, who put it onto the overall composition of the elevation, and then it was sent on to Cass Gilbert for his comments. And occasionally he would take a big red sanguine chalk and zing it all on, he didn't like the format and so forth. That was what happened».

While working for Gilbert, Fine tried to stay in touch with the Beaux-Arts method by attending an informal atelier conducted by Burnham Hoyt. «About ten men, from all the universities, they came from all around, and we all went in and we chipped in and employed Burnham to give us criticism, and we worked in the evenings. And we loved working under Burnham, because he was a hale fellow well met, and we were not kids, you know, we felt that we were men. We were all graduates, we were all full of vim and vigour and right out of architectural school. But none of us wanted to really give up school completely. We still wanted to do *projets*. And our *projets* were things that he created».

Fine felt the lack of such experience working in Gilbert's office. He did have contact with Cass Gilbert, and considered him a... «terrific guy, terrific. Just terrific. And he went abroad a great deal. And we used to send a lot of our drawings over to him. And he used to send them back, corrected».

But Fine felt the lack of any prospects for further growth: «I had been working on these gargoyles all this time and it started to bug me. And I said, "you know, I'm not learning any architecture this way". And my immediate boss said, "your best bet is, get into a small firm and learn what the dollar amounts to", because I was completely unconscious of what construction costs were, or anything, didn't know if I was designing something that cost a thousand dollars or a million dollars. Directly out of school, you're all imbued with Beaux-Arts...».

Taking the advice, Fine left Gilbert's office to work for Horace Ginsberg, and stayed with the firm for the rest of his working life. Ginsberg may have been the most prominent of all the apartment house developers on the Grand Concourse: «In fact they used to call it the "Ginsberg Gables". And Horace was very very brilliant a brilliant man. Very brilliant architect. He could design an apartment house on the back of an envelope, have the complete layout in his mind, and just scribble a few little things and come in and develop the whole thing...».

Ginsberg left the exterior designs of his buildings to Fine, and it was Fine who developed the characteristic look of «Ginsburg Gables».

One of the first apartment houses Fine designed for Ginsberg was the Park Plaza (1929-31), an eight-story complex at 1005 Jerome Avenue near West 164th Street. The drawings show that Fine originally conceived the building's facade in traditional classical style, adorned with the usual urns and swags. At a certain point, however, he changed his approach, and the Park Plaza became Ginsberg's, and possibly the Bronx's, first «Art Deco» building. He designed the large building as a series of five blocks, separated by recessed courtyards, and faced in light brick. Its striking modernistic effect derives from the arrangement of the windows in vertical shafts of windows and recessed spandrels, and from bands of ornamental polychromatic terra-cotta. The scenes within the bands are typical of the period: panels of flamingos flanking a fountain and backed by a sunburst, alternating with panels in which the rays of a rising sun shine out from behind a Bronx apartment house. Photos of the original version of the building (the Park Plaza was destroyed in a fire while under construction and had to be rebuilt several stories shorter) show large and small chevrons lining the cornice level.

Fine, unlike Crausman or Abramson, had no doubt at all about the influences on his stylistic evolution: «I think I met Bill Van Alen originally at some architectural meeting. ...he gave a lecture, a talk, and he impressed me. And I got the, just a hankering to follow his work and look at it. And I enjoyed it».

The chevrons that once lined the cornice level of the Park Plaza, and the projecting figures of birds and squirrels above the terra-cotta bands, bear a striking resemblance to the ornament on William Van Alen's Chrysler Building. Even if Fine had not heard Van Alen lecture, or read of his exploits in the architectural press, he would have known the Chrysler Building, one of the outstanding modernistic monuments of Manhattan, because he watched it rise down the block from his office on East 42nd Street.

But there was more at work than just the Chrysler Building: «And then I also enjoyed the work, at that particular time, of, um, oh, little guy, little grey-haired fellow — worked on the Radiator Building... Raymond Hood».

It was in fact Hood's great striped 1929 headquarters for the Daily News that replaced Fine's office. Moving across the street, he then watched the Daily News Building rise. Fine «... met Raymond Hood. And he, his work, and his style, made me design all of these apartment buildings with the vertical shafts...», of recessed windows and spandrels so typical of the modernistic buildings of the late 1920s and 1930s. They were prominent elements in Hood's design for the Daily News and, earlier, the American Radiator Building. Fine «... developed his style, his vertical style. And all up the Concourse you'll see all the buildings we designed, with the colored brick, change of brick in between the spandrels... That I got directly from him».

Even as Fine turned away from the Beaux-Arts to the modernistic style of Van Alen and Hood, however something of his earlier training persisted. The modernistic metal gates on the Park Plaza were inspired by the work of Samuel Yellin: «I think he was probably the greatest designer of wrought iron. And he gave us some lectures at the University of Pennsylvania... And when I ever came to design wrought iron, I always used Samuel Yellin as my guiding light. In fact I had several criticisms from him, on work that I had designed and sent down to Philly. Great guy».

The most telling detail, however, shows up in a curious scene in the otherwise modernistic terra-cotta banding of the Park Plaza. The details of the scene are classical: a figure kneels before a temple, with an arcade in the background. The inspiration came from a French book of wrought iron ornament: «A lot of details I developed having seen that particular book... There was one that had an architect presented, carrying a building to the Acropolis, a fellow kneeling down. And I remember developing this thing, and the idea, the architect of today, presenting his building to the



Acropolis and saying, you know, well, what do you think? Kid, kid's thoughts». Even as he helped turned the Bronx towards the modernistic future, Marvin Fine looked to the personification of the classical past for approval.