

Planning and Chance

Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center

by Daniel Okrent. Published by Viking, 2003. 544 pp., \$29.95

Reviewed by Terrence Doody

When the financier Otto Kahn wanted an elegant new house for his great love, the Metropolitan Opera, he gathered a group of investors that included John D. Rockefeller II, and their eyes fell on a piece of midtown Manhattan owned by Columbia University. Columbia president Nicholas Murray Butler was eager to sell the property in order to finance a new campus in Morningside Heights. Butler got Columbia's new house, Kahn didn't get the Met's, and Rockefeller wound up with the center that would bear his family's famous name. The account of how planning and chance work (and don't work) together is the big story Daniel Okrent tells in *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center*. Okrent's book offers many other stories, including the history of the center's architecture, the mysteries of real estate, the power of money, and the even greater power of personality, all of which surface in his accounts of the characters who people this epic narrative. Some of these are truly great characters; Okrent is a powerful storyteller, and this is a terrific book.

John D. Rockefeller II is the most important figure in the book, and certainly the most interesting. H.L. Mencken called him John the Baptist—he was a teetotaler and Sunday school teacher—but everyone else called him Junior (which is almost all we need to know to guess what he was like). The burden of his father's imperial success made Junior timid, ill at ease, eager to lose himself in the million details, and brilliant at delegating responsibility to powerful men who knew their places in the Rockefeller cosmology.

Just as compelling a character, though perhaps simpler, is the architect Raymond Hood. Working for the son of the novelist William Dean Howells, Hood did the winning design for the Tribune Tower in Chicago in 1922. John M. Howells took most of the prize money, but he did give Hood his share of the credit. Hood did even better: He knew Eliel Saarinen's second-place design was superior to his own, so he learned all he could from it,

and applied the lessons to later projects such as the American Radiator Building (New York, 1924) and the Daily News Building (New York, 1930). Okrent has the highest praise for these two works (but no pictures of them, and not enough pictures of anything he writes about) and makes them his primary evidence that Hood was not by temperament a maestro but a thorough pragmatist. He believed that "Utility produces beauty" and would have been perfectly comfortable with the formulation "Form follows finance." He was a great architect who had almost no ego and absolutely no theories. And although Philip Johnson included Hood's McGraw Hill Building (New York, 1930) in the Museum of Modern Art show that defined the International Style, Hood was as unimpressed and unconcerned as he was by Lewis Mumford's performance. Okrent calls Mumford a Savonarola because he hated Rockefeller Center as it was going up (as almost everyone else did) then recanted and decided he liked it (again, as almost everyone else did), but without explaining or apparently remembering his earlier views. In one of the book's best asides, Okrent reports how much Le Corbusier, who hated New York City, loved Rockefeller Center—so much that he endowed it with "that most precious gift for ambitious architects: a theory."

Although Hood was the lead designer, many other prominent architects worked on the huge project team, and often later took full credit. Okrent, however, gives a large share of responsibility for the center's success to the developer John R. Todd, the project's CEO and enabling visionary. Todd was as brilliant as Hood and a much more imperious personage. When Junior asked how much of his time he was willing to devote to the project, Todd said, "All of my time. One-half on the job and one-half as far away as trains and steamers can carry me, to places where I can get the hair out of my eyes and a clearer and better view of things." Todd's authority was responsible for every aspect of the building's realization, from the start through to its completion and then to the way in which clients were strong-armed into tenancy. The project was massive in every respect; the Depression made it more significant; and the early failure of its rival, the Empire State Building, made its success a fable whose moral was how to do things right. The details of the process are endless, and

Okrent keeps us turning the pages for news of every one of them.

The matter of the second half of the book, however, is not quite as compelling. Stories of filling the building and turning it on are not as interesting as tales of the project's growth out of a "six-year charrette." Hood's realization that this skyscraper was not going to have a single street-side façade and his understanding of how to use setback laws to shape volume seem of more lasting value than solving the problem of the Sixth Avenue El. And the star characters of the book's second phase are of a lesser magnitude. Donald Deskey's elegant, influential Art Deco interiors are beautiful, but not as historically important as the center's setting and function. And while Samuel Lionel Rothapfel, like the Swiss hotelier Cesar Ritz, became a brand name himself—he was called Roxy, and Okrent calls him the Johnny Appleseed of movie theaters—the catastrophe that defined the grand opening of his Radio City Music Hall is this epic's moment of farce. But there's another angle here. If Hood and Todd were perfect partners, Roxy and Junior may have been dark twins. Though he was a teetotaler, Junior wasn't entirely abstemious: His summer place in Seal Harbor, Maine, had 107 rooms, 44 fireplaces, and 22 bathrooms, and Okrent hints that Riverside Church, one of Junior's great philanthropic ventures, is a Roxy-like cathedral.

Junior's philanthropy is important to his personal story; it is his conscious reparation for his father's ruthlessness. He funded, in addition to Riverside Church, the rebuilding of the cathedral at Rheims, Colonial Williamsburg, the Cloisters, and (through his wife, Abby) MoMA. Building Rockefeller Center also created a huge number of Depression jobs, and Junior was as sympathetic to labor as a Rockefeller could be. However, the need to fill the center led to practices that Okrent says come right from the Standard Oil playbook, such as buying other buildings, evicting their tenants, and forcing them to rent in Rockefeller Center.

Great Fortune is in part a family biography. Second son Nelson Rockefeller receives a lot of attention as the story moves on; after all, he is the one responsible for realizing the center as the family's flagship. But Okrent's best story about him is not exactly to his credit. Nelson and his mother both loved the work of the great Mexican muralist Diego Rivera,

and they commissioned him to create murals in the center's lobby. Rivera, as every other schoolboy knew, was a Socialist and saw this project as an opportunity to place a critique in this temple of capitalism. The Rockefellers sold tickets to the public to watch Rivera paint! But when he wouldn't remove Lenin's face from the allegory, they paid him off and tore down the wall. The question remains: Who was more naive in all of this than whom? Did the Rockefellers think their money could buy everything? Did Rivera think that art will always triumph? It is fun for the rest of us to contemplate how great a space such naïveté occupies in egos of this magnitude.

Okrent has two final statements about the meaning of Rockefeller Center. The first has to do with its relation to Junior. "If Junior ever saw [it] as his own triumph," Okrent writes, "he never said so. His natural diffidence would not have allowed him to brag. His self-image would have made him reluctant to exalt the success of an endeavor that may have begun with a socially beneficent objective [a new Opera house] but, through two decades of great fortune, had concluded in a thoroughly commercial success." After its completion, Junior said, "I really belong in Williamsburg."

In his second and more important conclusion, Okrent writes, "Why had none of the scores of office or cultural complexes all over the country, every one of them inspired by Rockefeller Center, even approached the original's aesthetic, commercial and—there's no other word for it—emotional success?...a point vividly illustrated barely a mile uptown, amid the desolate daytime expanses of Lincoln Center," the home that Otto Kahn originally wanted for his beloved Met. "Rockefeller Center's placement, right in the heart of...the city's grid, made it real in a way that, say, a development never could be." It is more than another building or destination; it is, Okrent writes, "organically, the city itself."

Great Fortune wasn't built in a day, but it suggests on every page that Okrent, despite the effort spent researching and shaping his story, enjoyed himself immensely, and his pleasure is now ours. Moreover, as we watch the World Trade Center being rebuilt, with all the conflicting demands as to what it is to be and do, this is a good book to have in hand to think with.