30 Rockefeller Plaza is an American Art Deco skyscraper that forms the centerpiece of Rockefeller Center in Midtown Manhattan, New York City. Formerly called the RCA Building from 1933 to 1988, and later the GE Building from 1988 to 2015, it was renamed the Comcast Building in 2015, following the transfer of ownership to new corporate owner Comcast. Its name is often shortened to 30 Rock.

The building is best known for housing the headquarters and New York studios of television network NBC, as well as the Rainbow Room restaurant. At 850 feet (260 m) high, the 66-story building is the 22nd tallest in New York City and the 47th tallest in the United States. It stands 400 feet (122 m) shorter than the Empire State Building. 30 Rockefeller Center underwent a $170 million floor-by-floor interior renovation in 2014.

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History

Construction
The construction of Rockefeller Center occurred between 1932 and 1940[3] on land that John D. Rockefeller Jr. leased from Columbia University.[6]

The Rockefeller Center site was originally supposed to be occupied by a new opera house for the Metropolitan Opera.[7] By 1928, Benjamin Wistar Morris and designer Joseph Urban were hired to come up with blueprints for the house.[8] However, the new building was too expensive for the opera to fund by itself, and it needed an endowment,[9] and the project ultimately gained the support of John D. Rockefeller Jr.[9][10] The planned opera house was canceled in December 1929 due to various issues, with the new opera house eventually being built at Lincoln Center, opening in 1966.[11][12][13]

Raymond Hood, Rockefeller Center's lead architect, came up with the idea to negotiate with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and its subsidiaries, National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), to build a mass media entertainment complex on the site.[14][15] By May 1930, RCA and its affiliates had made an agreement with Rockefeller Center managers. RCA would lease 1,000,000 square feet (93,000 m²) of studio space; get naming rights to the western part of the development; and develop four theaters, at a cost of $4.25 million per year.[16] A skyscraper at 30 Rockefeller Plaza's current site was first proposed in the March 1930 version of the complex's blueprint,[17] and the current dimensions of the tower were finalized in March 1931.[18][19] The skyscraper would be named for RCA as part of the agreement.[16]

Designs for the Radio City Music Hall and the RCA Building were submitted to the New York City Department of Buildings in August 1931, by which time the both buildings were to open in 1932.[20] Work on the steel structure of the RCA Building started in March 1932,[4] and the building’s structural steel was up to the 64th floor by September of that year.[21] The photograph Lunch atop a Skyscraper was taken on September 20, 1932, during the construction of the 69th floor.[22] The structure of the RCA Building was slated to open on May 1, 1933.[23] Its opening was delayed until mid-May because of a controversy over Man
at the Crossroads, a painting by Diego Rivera that was removed from the RCA Building.[24]

Early tenants

NBC was one of the first tenants in the new RCA Building, and with 35 studios packed into the lower base of the building, it was also one of the largest tenants.[25] RCA’s chief engineer O. B. Hanson was faced with designing an area of the building that was large enough to host 35 studios with as few structural columns as possible. This was achieved by placing all the studios in the 16-story, windowless center part of the building, which would have otherwise been used as an unprofitable office space.[26][27] Over 1,500 miles (2,400 km) of utility wires stretched through this part of the building, which was powered by direct current because the use of alternating current would cause transmissions to become spotty. Two floors were reserved for future TV studios, and five more stories were reserved for audience members and guests.[27] During the building's early years, NBC housed both the Red Network and the Blue Network within 30 Rockefeller Plaza.[28] The building also hosted daily tours of the NBC Studios.[29] Studio 8H was the largest of the studios in the RCA Building, with the capacity to seat 1,400 guests.[30]

The Rockefeller family's Standard Oil Company moved into the RCA Building in 1934.[31] The New York Museum of Science and Industry leased some of the unpopular space on the RCA Building’s lower floors after Nelson Rockefeller became a trustee of the museum in fall 1935.[32] Westinghouse moved into the 14th through 17th floors of the RCA Building.[33]

The Rockefeller family moved into various floors and suites throughout the same building in order to give potential tenants the impression of occupancy.[33] In particular, the family's office took up "Room 5600" on the entire 56th floor,[34] while the family's Rockefeller Foundation took up the entire floor below, and two other organizations supported by the Rockefellers also moved into the building.[34][35] By 1937, there were 392 employees of Room 5600, and by the time World War II was over, Room 5600 comprised the entire 54th through 56th floors.[36] The family offices became a hub for the family’s political activity, with ties to both the Democratic and Republican parties at the city, state, and national levels.[37] Frank Sinatra, Shirley MacLaine, Nelson Mandela, Richard Gere, and Bono all came to the offices at one point or another.[38] The family moved out in 2014,[38] and this space is now occupied by Rockefeller Family and Associates, whose offices span the 54th to 56th floors. John D. Rockefeller had a private vault in the basement of the building, accessible via a private elevator from his office.[39]

Shortly after the RCA Building's opening, there were plans to use the building above the 64th floor as a public "amusement center". That section of the building had several terraces, which could be used as a dance floor, observatory and landscaped terrace gardens.[40] On the 65th floor, there was also a two-story space for a dining room with a high ceiling.[41] Frank W. Darling quit his job as head of Rye's Playland[42] in order to direct the programming for the proposed amusement space.[40] In July 1933, the managers opened an observation deck atop the RCA Building, which consisted of 190-by-21-foot (57.9 by 6.4 m) terraces on the 67th, 69th, and 70th floors.[43] It was a great success: the 40-cents-per-head observation deck saw 1,300 daily visitors by late 1935.[44] Meanwhile, the floors below the observatory were planned as a restaurant, solarium, game room, and ballroom, which would later become the Rainbow Room.[43] The Rainbow Room opened on October 3, 1934.[45]
To transport visitors to the top floors, Westinghouse installed eight express elevators in the RCA Building. They moved at an average speed of 1,200 feet per minute (370 m/min) and made up 13% of the building’s entire construction cost.[46] One elevator reached a top speed of 1,400 feet per minute (430 m/min) and was dubbed "the fastest passenger elevator ride on record".[47] These elevators cost about $17,000 a year to maintain by 1942.[48]

**20th century**

By the mid-1950s, the Museum of Science and Industry had moved out of the RCA Building’s lower floors. The former museum space became office and retail space that was twice as profitable. Much of the street-level space was also transformed into a studio for the *Today* Show.[49]

In 1985, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission declared that the entire original Rockefeller Center would officially become a city landmark.[50] A year afterward, the observatory was closed to make way for an expansion of the Rainbow Room, which in turn isolated the observation deck from its elevators. The elevators from the ground level only reached the 65th floor, and observatory visitors were required to transfer to another "shuttle" elevator that went between the 65th and 69th floors.[51] The RCA Building was renamed the GE Building in 1988, two years after General Electric re-acquired the RCA Corporation.[52]

In 1996, NBC bought the space it had leased in the center for over sixty years.[53] The building’s address became the title of the NBC sitcom *30 Rock* (2006–2013), which follows the cast and crew of a fictional television show filmed inside the building. Aside from two live episodes, which were produced at NBC's facilities inside the building, the series used the building mostly for exterior and occasional lobby shots, while interior scenes were filmed at Silvercup Studios in Long Island City, Queens.

From the end of 1960 through October 1993, the building's mezzanine level housed the New York City weather forecast office of the National Weather Service; it was relocated to eastern Long Island, on the grounds of Brookhaven National Laboratory at Upton, New York.[54] KWO35, the NOAA Weather Radio station serving the majority of the Tri-State area, originally transmitted from atop the building and remained there until 2014. Due to interference with a U.S. Coast Guard radio channel, the transmitter was eventually relocated atop the MetLife Building.[55][56] A weather radar station was also located atop the building[57] (it was previously used as *Doppler 4000* during WNBC-TV's local newscasts).

**21st century**

Plans for the reopening of the observation deck were announced in November 2003.[58] The existing elevator shafts were lengthened so that the observatory could be accessed without going through the Rainbow Room to get to the "shuttle" elevators.[59] The deck reopened in November 2005 after a historically sensitive renovation by Gabellini Sheppard Associates.[60][61]

In June 2014, Comcast was granted permission from the Landmarks Preservation Commission to make modifications to the building to reflect its ownership of NBCUniversal. The GE Building would be officially known as the Comcast Building.[62][63] Comcast planned to replace the neon GE lettering from the top of the building with a 10-foot (3.0 m) tall, LED-lit Comcast wordmark and NBC logo, and add a 17-foot (5.2 m) NBC logo on the building western façade. Additionally, a new marquee was added to the Avenue of the Americas entrance, advertising it as the home of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.[62][64][65] On July 1, 2015, the name change and new signage were made official.[66]

In November 2018, the toy store FAO Schwarz opened a location at 30 Rockefeller Plaza.[67][68]
30 Rockefeller Plaza is 872 feet (266 m) tall and anchors the entire Rockefeller Center complex. 30 Rockefeller Plaza was built as a single structure occupying the entire block between Sixth Avenue and Rockefeller Plaza,[66] and its design was influenced by John Todd's desire for the building to use its air rights to their maximum potential.[26][70] It has three main segments: the 66-story-tall tower rising from the eastern part of the base; a windowless segment in the middle of the base; and a shorter 20-story tower on the western part of the base.[26] Some sources give 30 Rockefeller Plaza's height as 70 stories, but this arises from an hyperbolic press release by Merle Crowell, the complex's publicist during construction.[71]

As an icon of the complex, 30 Rockefeller Plaza's architecture, with its limestone facade and Gothic-inspired four-leaved spandrels,[22][73] influenced the design of the rest of the complex.[74] The design of 30 Rockefeller Center was affected greatly by the 1916 Zoning Resolution, which restricted the height that the street-side exterior walls of New York City buildings could rise before they needed to incorporate setbacks that recessed the buildings’ exterior walls away from the streets.[75][85] Hood also created a guideline that all of the office space in the complex would be no more than 27 feet (8.2 m) from a window, which was the maximum distance that sunlight could permeate the windows of a building at New York City's latitude.[78][79] Although the RCA Building was recessed so far into the block that it could have simply risen as a slab without any setbacks, Hood decided to include setbacks anyway because they represented "a sense of future, a sense of energy, a sense of purpose,” according to the architecture expert Alan Balfour.[86] The setbacks on the northern and southern sides of 30 Rockefeller Plaza allow the building to comply with Hood's 27-foot guideline, but the eastern elevation’s setbacks are merely for show, according to Balfour.[87]

The eastern tower contains the Rainbow Room restaurant on the 65th floor,[82]:325 while the Rockefeller family office occupied the tower's 54th through 56th floors until 2014.[38] The tower also serves as the headquarters of NBC,[83] and houses NBC Studios, NBC News, MSNBC, and network flagship station WNBC,[88] and until 1988, the NBC Radio Network.[84] Although NBC has continuously occupied the building since 1933,[85] it did not own the space it occupied until 1996, when it gained ownership within a condominium arrangement.[53] From 1937 on, the top of the tower also contained 24-foot-tall (7.3 m) neon letters spelling "RCA",[86] though these were later replaced by "GE" letters, and in 2014, replaced again with Comcast and NBC logos.[38]

Below the building is the complex's shopping concourse,[87][88] connected to the lobby via escalators. The open lobby's rich materials and reduced black and beige ornamental scheme is enhanced by dramatic lighting. Granite covers the building base to a height of 4 ft (1.2 m) and the shaft has a refined facade of Indiana Limestone with aluminum spandrel panels.
Part of NBC's space also extends into the central part of the tower. Since the middle of a block was seen as typically not a well-desired location for Manhattan office space, this segment was planned without windows, which was suitable for NBC's studios.[26][27] This section of the building contains a 0.75-acre (0.30 ha) "Garden of the Nations" atop its roof.[74][89][90] In 1936, the central section's roof temporarily housed a prototype of an apartment, which was used to advertise the Rockefeller Apartments between 54th and 55th Streets.[91][92] Afterward, the roof was proposed as the site of a solar heat-powered "management and conference center".[91][93]

1250 Avenue of the Americas, formerly also known as the RCA Building West, serves as the western annex of 30 Rockefeller Plaza. The building is accessed mainly from Sixth Avenue.[94] It is made of the same material as the original RCA Building, with a similar design. The facade of the annex rises straight from the sidewalk, set back from the corners because there were private properties at these corners at the time of the building's construction in 1935.[95]

Art

Lee Lawrie's carved rendering of Wisdom is located above the east entrance of the main building and is flanked by his renderings of Sound on the left and Light on the right.[96][97][98] The Wisdom frieze above the entrance is accompanied by an inscription that reads: "Wisdom and Knowledge shall be the stability of thy times," from Isaiah 33:6 (KJV).[99][100] Lawrie's three renderings are complemented by two limestone bas-reliefs by Leo Friedlander: one of Production on the north elevation, and one of Radio on the south elevation.[96][97][101]

The lobby wall of 30 Rockefeller Plaza originally contained the controversial Man at the Crossroads mural by Diego Rivera.[102][103] It was destroyed in 1934[104] and replaced by a mural from Josep Maria Sert called American Progress.[105] American Progress depicts a vast allegorical scene of men constructing modern America and contains figures of Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[105][106] Sert's other murals, all located in the northern ground-floor corridor, include Time; Spirit of Dance; Man's Triumph in Communication; Conquest of Disease; Abolition of Bondage; Fraternity of Men; and Contest-1940, depicting different aspects of the world and mankind.[107] Frank Brangwyn complemented Sert's works with four murals on the southern corridor, all of which symbolize humans' relationship with spirituality.[108]

1230 Avenue of the Americas, the annex building to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, contains two works of art on its exterior.[109] The recessed entrance portal is filled with a 79-by-14-foot (24.1 by 4.3 m) mosaic mural of "Intelligence Awakening Mankind" by Barry Faulkner.[110][111] The portal itself is located underneath four 11.5-by-4-foot (3.5 by 1.2 m) limestone panels by Gaston Lachaise, each of which signifies an aspect of civilization as it related to the original Radio City complex.[112][113]

Rainbow Room

The 65th floor of the building is an event room and restaurant named the Rainbow Room, previously run by the Cipriani family.[114] Opened in 1934, it was the first restaurant to be located in a high-rise building and remained the highest elevated restaurant in the United States for decades. Suffering from a decline in business following the financial crisis of 2007–08, the restaurant closed in 2009. In 2012, it was declared a New York City landmark by the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission.[115]
On September 17, 2013, it was announced that the Rainbow Room would reopen in fall 2014 after undergoing a full restoration, along with a new executive chef and management team. After a years-long restoration process by Gabellini Sheppard Associates, it reopened to the public on October 5, 2014, with new owner-operator Tishman Speyer and chef Jonathan Wright at the helm. The renovation includes the landmarked dance floor and a new cocktail lounge called SixtyFive.

Observation deck

The observation deck atop the skyscraper, dubbed "Top of the Rock", is built to resemble the deck of an ocean liner. It offers sightseers a bird's eye view of the city, competing with the 86th floor observatory of the Empire State Building 200 feet (61 m) higher. It is often considered the best panoramic city view, mainly because it offers a far-away view of the Empire State Building. The timed entry system and larger observation deck also results in shorter waiting times compared to the Empire State. The frameless safety glass around the perimeter of the deck dates to 2005, when the facility reopened to the public. In the renovation by Gabellini Sheppard Associates, the original limestone and cast aluminum architectural details were conserved and new interiors were added.

The "Top of the Rock" had also been co-opted for NBC's Sunday Night Football during the 2006–07 season, with the top player/MVP in that night's game according to John Madden and Al Michaels receiving the honor of being that night's "Rock Star" in the form of a glass trophy display on the observation deck; this was a replacement for the Horse Trailer Award formerly awarded on ABC's Monday Night Football. The Horse Trailer honor was restored for the 2007–08 season.

The observation deck was also used in a key scene in the 2011 science fiction film The Adjustment Bureau.
NBC Studios

The Comcast Building is well known for housing the headquarters of NBC, the New York facilities of NBC Studios, and NBCUniversal Cable. In 1996, NBC bought the 1,600,000 square feet (150,000 m²) of space it had leased since 1933. The purchase allowed the company to introduce new technologies and renovate the space; it also gave them options to renew the lease on the Today Show studios, broadcast from a nearby building, 10 Rockefeller Plaza. NBC occupies floors 2–19, 21, 27, 46–47, and 51 (leasing the floors it occupies above the 16th).

The building's studios include Studio 8H, the home of Saturday Night Live. Studio 8H was once the largest radio studio in the world, originally home to the NBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Arturo Toscanini. It was converted into a television studio in 1950. The Tonight Show was also taped at the building in Studio 6B from the early Jack Paar years until 1972, when the show moved to Burbank, California. In 2014, The Tonight Show returned to Studio 6B with its latest incarnation, The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. Tonight's companion program, Late Night, now branded Late Night with Seth Meyers, shot in studio 8G, has been produced from the building since it started in 1982; the relocation of Tonight back to New York in 2014 brought the two shows under one roof for the first time. During its run, Rosie O'Donnell broadcast her syndicated talk show from the building.

Gallery
View of the building's facade from the east, above Rockefeller Plaza.

View at night with GE wordmark, 2005.

Detail of Comcast Building entrance, showing verse from Isaiah 33:6

The building at night

See also

- Architecture of New York City
- Original General Electric Building (1931, built as the RCA Victor Building)
- List of New York City Designated Landmarks in Manhattan
- List of tallest buildings in New York City
- List of tallest buildings in the United States

References

Notes
a. 30 Rockefeller Center was the first building to start construction, in September 1932. The last building was completed in 1940.

b. As per the 1916 Zoning Act, the wall of any given tower that faces a street could only rise to a certain height, proportionate to the street's width, at which point the building had to be set back by a given proportion. This system of setbacks would continue until the tower reaches a floor level in which that level's floor area was 25% that of the ground level's area. After that 25% threshold was reached, the building could rise without restriction. This law was modified in 1961.

Citations


3. 30 Rockefeller Plaza (https://www.emporis.com/buildings/115419) at Emporis


44. Okrent 2003, p. 254.

46. Okrent 2003, p. 256


90. Federal Writers' Project 1939, p. 337.
100. Roussel 2006, p. 55.
111. Roussel 2006, p. 75.
Bibliography


Further reading


External links

- Top Of The Rock – Official "Top Of The Rock" page


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