



Empire State Plaza

Wallace K. Harrison · Albany, NY · 1976

The superblock originated in the 1920s following Le Corbusier’s radical urban vision. His “cities of tomorrow” would, he hoped, be composed of rows of immense buildings organized around widely spaced parks, supported by networks of roads. Such visions started coming to life in the 1950s and 1960s with mega-scaled projects. These schemes included Chandigarh, the new capital of India’s Punjab region, co-conceived by Le Corbusier himself, Brasília, co-planned by Oscar Niemeyer, which supplanted Rio de Janeiro as the Brazilian capital in 1960, and Philip Johnson’s Lincoln Center, which soon became New York’s cultural epicenter when it opened in 1962.

About 150 miles (240 kilometers) north of Lincoln Center, in Albany, the capital of New York State, an even more grandiose superblock was in progress. Commissioned by Governor Nelson Rockefeller and designed by Wallace K. Harrison, the Empire State Plaza was imposing by any standard. Spanning 98 acres (40 hectares) and costing \$2 billion, the Corning Tower remains the largest building in the state outside of New York City.

Determined to “clean up” the neighborhoods in his city’s south side, an area he erroneously claimed was “one of the worst slums in the United States,” Rockefeller resolved to turn Albany into “one of the most brilliant, beautiful, efficient, and electrifying capitals in the world.”

The Pharaonic complex he helped bring to fruition was accordingly designed to awe. On the one hand, there’s a marble mall (upon which sit 10 government and cultural buildings), multiple reflecting pools, and art by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. On the other hand, the mall is home to the Neo-Renaissance New York State Capitol building and the New York State Museum. Elsewhere, there’s the “Egg,” an ovoid performing arts center sitting on a thin stem that extends six stories into the earth, and a 1,318-foot- (402-meter-) long subterranean concourse known as the “Underground City.” Add in the fact that nearly everything in the complex—from the towers to the walkways, heating vents, and planters—is marble-clad, and the result is an astounding marriage of modernism and neoclassicism.

The New York State Museum, its modern floors floating on classical arches, anchors the west end of the monumental plaza.