I Have Seen the Future: Norman Bel Geddes Designs America

When you drive on an interstate highway, attend a multi-media Broadway show, dine in a sky-high revolving restaurant, or watch a football game in an all-weather stadium, you owe a debt of gratitude to Norman Bel Geddes (1893–1958). A promethean figure who was equally comfortable in the realms of fact and fantasy, Geddes was both a visionary and a pragmatist. He had a significant role in shaping not only modern America, but also the nation’s self-image as leader of the way into the future.

Norman Bel Geddes was a polymath who had little schooling or professional training in the activities he mastered. His explorations ranged across media and spanned vast differences in scale. He designed stage sets, costumes, lighting, and the theaters in which to present them. He also created offices, nightclubs, and factories and the products to be manufactured in them, as well as houses and all their furnishings. Believing that communication was a key factor in shaping the modern world, Geddes fabricated visions of streamlined ocean liners and flying cars and authored oracular books and articles that landed him and his prophesies on the front pages of newspapers across the country. Of all his utopian predictions, Geddes’s best-known project was the Futurama exhibit in the General Motors pavilion at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair. It was an immense model of America, circa 1960, that was seen by thousands of visitors who exited with a pin proclaiming “I Have Seen the Future.”

This exhibition has been organized by Donald Albrecht, an independent curator and Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of the City of New York in collaboration with Cathy Henderson and Helen Baer at the Harry Ransom Center.

All items in the exhibition come from Ransom Center collections unless otherwise noted.

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[Prologue Text panel; 1]

**Mind Over Matter: 1893–1916**

Norman Melancton Geddes was born in Adrian, Michigan, in 1893. As his father was in and out of various jobs and had died by the time Geddes was 15, he and his strong-willed mother struggled financially. Starting at an early age, Geddes was inspired by his mother’s faith in Christian Science, a religion and philosophy that promoted the power of the mind over the physical world. From his childhood on, Geddes was a strong believer that art, as well as architecture and design, could make people’s lives psychologically and emotionally richer.

A range of influences proved formative to Geddes’s poetic and emotional expression of the power of the spirit to create art—these included Christian Science and the works of esoteric philosopher P. D. Ouspensky and Claude Bragdon, an architect and writer who saw natural forms as the only suitable inspiration for the buildings of a truly democratic America.

As a child, Geddes took to play-acting, sporting Native-American dress at a time when movies and tourism were dramatizing the West and its people. Performing as Zetskey, Boy Magician, Geddes also fostered his interest in mind-over-matter persuasion, a skill he would use later to convince clients to buy his ideas.
According to a 1926 New York *World* article, after being expelled from high school at the age of 14 Geddes hired on as a bellboy on a Great Lakes tour boat. “There he picked up a magician who taught him enough tricks for the boy to tour the Gus Sun vaudeville circuit” as Zetskey (sometimes Zedsky).

[stand-alone label, Prologue]

“... *in which I say just what I think*

From June 1915 through November 1916, Geddes and his first wife, Helen Belle Sneider, published a magazine called *Inwhich*. Here was a magazine “in which,” Geddes told his readership, “I say just what I think,” writing on numerous topics of interest to him. (At that time, Geddes joined his and Belle’s first names to become Norman-Bel Geddes, a moniker he kept, without the hyphen, after their separation in the mid-1920s.) Geddes’s fusion of the practical (advertising) and the visionary (his spiritually based magazine) reflected larger American interests of the time as manifested in the formation of the nation’s consumer culture. Even as Geddes abandoned the lofty, spiritual language of Christian Science in favor of a pragmatic industrial design practice in the late 1920s, he retained a near-religious belief in art’s ability to transform people’s lives—and to sell products and ideas.

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*Cutting Ice in Canada*, 1912
Norman M. Geddes
Gouache on board

Norman M. Geddes, as he then called himself, showed an early aptitude for art and was expelled from high school for drawing a caricature of a teacher. Geddes never earned a high school diploma, and the lack of this credential later kept him from working as a licensed architect. His formal training at the Cleveland Institute of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago was brief.

A penciled instruction on the reverse of this painting provides evidence of Geddes’s early interest in lighting effects. It consists of a drawing of an oil lamp and reads “hang to right of light.” The intended three-dimensional effect was one of snow falling.

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The office of the Peninsular Engraving Company where Geddes worked flanked with caricatures of Geddes drawn, perhaps, by the co-worker seen in the photograph, ca. 1913–1914
Mixed media scrapbook page
Self-portrait poster art, ca. 1913–1914
Norman Geddes
Serigraph

Geddes achieved his first business success at the Peninsular Engraving Company by developing a new poster style of advertisement and the inks and processes to make it technically and commercially feasible.

Elbert Hubbard’s magazine, The Philistine, June, 1901
From the library of Norman Bel Geddes

In breadth, tone, and design, Geddes’s magazine, Inwhich, owed much to Roycroft founder Elbert Hubbard’s little magazine, The Philistine, published from 1895 to 1915, the year Hubbard perished on the Lusitania. Although conceived as a multi-contributor literary magazine, Hubbard soon became the sole author, offering his opinion on myriad subjects.

Geddes and Belle Sneider had visited Hubbard’s Roycroft Shop in East Aurora, New York, and Geddes may have seen himself as a successor to Hubbard.

“Bel Geddes. . . that name will mean a fortune some day”

Geddes with Helen Belle (Bel) Sneider, ca. 1915
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

Letter from Norman Geddes to Helen Belle Sneider, postmarked February 22, 1916

In this letter to his fiancé, written just before their marriage on March 19, 1916, Geddes vows that they will do everything together under the joined last name of Bel Geddes predicting “that name will mean a fortune some day.” Helen Bel Geddes did indeed contribute to subsequent issues of Inwhich and co-authored the play Thunderbird with Geddes.
Geddes and Helen had two daughters, Joan Bel Geddes who became a writer and Barbara Bel Geddes who achieved fame as a stage and screen actor.

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From the library of Norman Bel Geddes

Geddes’s library contains four titles by Eddy owned and annotated by him and his mother.

505, 506

From the library of Norman Bel Geddes

Geddes highlighted numerous passages in his copies of books by the architect and stage designer Claude Bragdon with whom he became good friends. In *Projective Ornament*, Geddes took special note of Bragdon’s assertion that “a great change has come over the collective consciousness: we are turning from the accumulation of facts to the contemplation of mysteries. . . there is a renascence of wonder; and art must attune itself to this new key-note of the modern world.”

Geddes would have absorbed some of the teachings of P. D. Ouspensky (the Russian disciple of George Gurdjieff, the Greek-Armenian teacher of esoteric doctrine) through Bragdon who, with Nicholas Bessaraboff, translated Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum* from the Russian for publication in 1920.

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Maurice Switzer’s *Wild and Tame Advertising, or, How to Become a Director of Publicity in One Lesson* (New York: Judge, 1914)
From the library of Norman Bel Geddes

Geddes purchased this book around the time he worked for the Peninsular Engraving Company in Detroit. Geddes was steeped in American consumer culture as books in his library like this one attest. Reflecting his interest in the role of psychology in advertising
and consumer behavior, Geddes’s library also included *Instincts in Industry: A Study of Working-Class Psychology* (1918).

**Los Angeles**

Geddes’s first theatrical work was done under the patronage of oil heiress and arts patron Aline Barnsdall in Los Angeles. His concept of “unity of effect,” in which sets, costumes, and lighting were conceived holistically, is evident in his production of *Thunderbird* (1914–1917) and other plays such as *Nju* (1916), which featured a highly abstract and minimalist set of only six screens. Geddes’s work for Barnsdall established a life-long habit of making models to help clients see his vision. For Barnsdall, Geddes also proposed a children’s theater, an early example of his intent to design both the contents and the container. Through Barnsdall, Geddes met Frank Lloyd Wright, who helped inspire his fascination with architecture.

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Aline Barnsdall, her daughter Sugar, and dogs in front of her Frank Lloyd Wright–designed Hollyhock House, Los Angeles, ca. 1916
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

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Players Producing Company program for *Nju*, 1916

Geddes designed the settings for this Aline Barnsdall and Players Producing Company production of Ossip Dymow’s play at the Los Angeles Little Theatre on October 31, 1916. Translated from the Russian and subtitled “an everyday tragedy,” the candid drama concerns Nju’s open love affair with a bohemian poet and her eventual suicide.

22, 23

Scenic renderings of private room in café and husband’s home for *Nju*, ca. 1916
Norman Bel Geddes
Pastel on board
Scenic renderings of bedroom and furnished room for *Nju*, ca. 1916
Norman Bel Geddes
Pastel on board

[Label for Table case 1, Side B]

**Thunderbird, 1916**

Geddes spent the summer of 1913 on the Blackfoot Reservation in Montana working for the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, furthering a childhood interest in Native American culture and dress. By 1915 Geddes and his first wife, Helen Belle Sneider, had written a four-act play recounting the Blackfoot tribe’s legend of a multicolored bird that appeared during a storm as a manifestation of thunder.

_Thunderbird_, with music by Charles Wakefield Cadman, was planned for production by Aline Barnsdall’s Los Angeles Little Theatre but appears to have never been performed.

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Norman M. Geddes in his “Indian dress,” ca. 1898
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

17, 18

Chief Thundercloud, not dated
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

Costume design for Wakexux, Act II of _Thunderbird_, 1916
Norman Bel Geddes
Oil on board

Geddes met Chief Thundercloud (d. 1916), then a noted artist’s model, while a student at the Cleveland Institute of Art. He modeled the character Wakexux on Thundercloud and dedicated the play _Thunderbird_ to him.

[text panel 3]

**Setting the Stage, 1914–1927**
In the initial phase of Geddes’s professional career he focused on theater design and theater spaces. After beginning his theatrical career in Los Angeles, Geddes moved to New York City in 1917 where the dynamic and innovative Broadway stage was the natural habitat for his ambitions. Geddes adapted for the American stage the principles of the so-called New Stagecraft movement in Europe, which aimed to free the theater from the strictures of bourgeois realism and to create settings for a new generation of playwrights, such as Eugene O’Neill, who were exploring deeper psychological and emotional depth in their work. New Stagecraft designers like Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig in Europe and Robert Edmond Jones, Lee Simonson, and Geddes in America used broad strokes of color, dramatic lighting, simplified detail, and exaggerated and abstracted settings and costumes. In his work for the theater, Geddes wasn’t content to serve only as designer. He sometimes took on the roles of director and producer so he could have complete control over a production.

19, 20

Set design for Daybreak on Ninaistukku, Act I, Thunderbird, 1916
Norman Bel Geddes
Tempe on board

Set design for Nightfall on Ninaistukku, Act IV, Thunderbird, 1916
Norman Bel Geddes
Tempe on board

[Stand-alone label, Wall R]

King Lear, 1917

Geddes’s designs for this planned Winthrop Ames production of William Shakespeare’s King Lear, although never-realized, are nevertheless significant and were exhibited frequently. They reveal that by age 23, Geddes had already formed many of his vital concepts about the theater, articulated in his own remarks on his designs. Geddes described his visualization of the play as “in a mood of pitiless shadow and tempestuous motion, where the primary forces of nature are tearing things from their proper places.” By removing all but a few massive rocks as backdrops and scenery in this rotating theater-in-the-round concept, Geddes sought to highlight the action and actors, rather than the set.

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Set design of “Hilltop Near Dover” for a production of William Shakespeare’s King Lear, ca. 1917
Geddes wrote, “A circular ramped platform, a geometrical mound, with huge variformed monoliths that are easily movable into various positions, against the vast space of darkness, are the means for setting the moods and actions for this tragedy.”

To Geddes’s eye, “The scenes, dominated by a feeling of archaic coldness, appear in pagan color against the relentless blackness, and fade into one another without pause. Shapes focus according to their importance; not an object, movement, or word that is not of fundamental importance.”

“Lear’s throne. . . symbolizes the man, the remnant, the ruin, the great rock that has been worn away by time and the elements of nature,” Geddes explained.

In Geddes’s conception” Nearly all of the characters are primitive, cold, hard, stonelike and are costumed accordingly. Their garments are heavy and seem to hold the body
inside of them, fast to the earth—figures scarcely human, monsters of cruelty and lust.
Their movements suggest a kinship between man and beast, the primitive society of an
untamed world in a state of convulsion against the mysterious powers dominating it.”

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_Hamlet, 1929–1931_

Sketch of the graveyard scene in _Hamlet_, ca. 1929
Norman Bel Geddes
Pen and ink on board

Image of the graveyard scene in _Hamlet_, ca. 1929
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

Geddes’s adaptation of William Shakespeare’s play echoed his theories about art and the
theater: “Simplicity is basic; it is unity. . . The greatest idea is the simplest.” As Jennifer
Davis Roberts noted in the catalog of her 1979 exhibition on the theatrical and industrial
designs of Geddes, in _Hamlet_ “this simplicity is expressed in the geometric blocks of the
stage which became, successively, royal halls, bedrooms, and graveyards through only
the adjustment of costumes, lighting, and hand-carried props.” Geddes’s “use of the stark
building-block stage and simple contrasts of black and white in costumes and lighting
represents techniques adapted from Adolphe Appia,” a Swiss architect and theorist of
stage lighting and décor who argued for three elements as fundamental to creating an
effective theatrical presentation: dynamic movements by actors, perpendicular scenery,
and utilizing depth and the horizontal dynamics of the performance space.

Roberts’s pioneering exhibition was on view for only six weeks at The University from
June 10 to July 22, 1979.

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Raymond Massey as Hamlet and Leon Quartermaine as Horatio in the graveyard scene,
1931
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

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Raymond Massey as Hamlet in the soliloquy scene, 1931
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print
Excerpts from Geddes’s 11 mm black and white film of Hamlet, ca. 1931

Hamlet is the only theatrical production that Geddes filmed, capturing every phase of development—action charts, the creation of the model, rehearsals, and opening night.

Throughout his career, Geddes used motion picture film to record design projects and to create his own amateur motion pictures on such subjects as insect behavior and ones in which he portrays an imaginary naturalist named Rollo. If he did indeed create a rumored film version of “Helen of Troy” using ants as actors, it does not survive in his archive.

Ensemble scene for the ballet Boudour, ca. 1919–1920

Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Geddes designed the scenery, costumes, and lighting for this one-act ballet by Felix Borowski, produced by the Chicago Opera Company. In it he introduced such modern materials as plastics in place of the traditional wood and cloth for scenery and sets. Geddes designed the costumes as “body masks” that shifted with the actors’ movements producing highly exaggerated effects.

In creating the set piece for the Idol, at the center of this composition, Geddes, as Jennifer Davis Roberts points out in the catalog of her 1979 exhibition on him, “began a tradition of sculpting three-dimensional forms by layering flat one-inch-thick planes of wood,” as he would do for his Palais Royal Cabaret figures in 1922 and for the topography of the Futurama landscape in 1939.

Comic Supplement, 1924–1925

Scene rendering for the Comic Supplement, ca. 1924–1925

Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Geddes created the setting and lighting for Florenz Ziegfeld’s production of the Comic Supplement “in the spirit of a comic American newspaper cartoon strip.” Geddes and Ziegfeld came to odds almost immediately, with Ziegfeld insisting that all designs come
from Geddes’s own hands rather than those of assistants and Geddes pointing out the absurdity of the demand given the quantity and urgency of the work.

J. P. McEvoy’s musical comedy starring W. C. Fields, Betty Compton, and Rae Dooley previewed at the National Theatre, Washington, D.C., on January 20, 1925 and at the Shubert Theatre, Newark, New Jersey on January 26, 1925. When Ziegfeld abruptly closed the show (perhaps angry that Geddes’s sets received rave reviews), Geddes and a partner bought him out. Ziegfeld relented, however, and a revised version of the supplement, with Geddes’s sets, was incorporated into the 1925 Ziegfeld Follies, which opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre on March 10, 1925.

[Wall 7A]
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**Palais Royal Cabaret, 1922**

Geddes-designed interior of the Palais Royal Cabaret Theatre, ca. 1922
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

Sam Salvin’s Palais Royal Cabaret, for which Geddes designed the interior and performance, opened in New York City on December 20, 1922, and featured the Paul Whiteman band and Wanda Hoff’s Isadora Duncan-style dancers. George S. Kaufman dubbed the Cabaret “the Geddes triumph,” asserting that it “proved... that art and the night places can go hand in hand.”

Gerstle Mack, in a *Boston Evening Transcript* write-up on April 28, 1923, credited Geddes with laying down “a bold hand” of “curves, angles, blocks, [and] layers” in his decorative approach and described in detail the room’s color scheme: “vermillion, gold and gray... the walls are shaded from deep vermillion to palest gray—almost white... The ceiling is pale gray, touched with gold on the vaulting ribs; the walls are gray, and the colonnettes and the two figure-groups in the niches are gray edged with gold.”

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Dancing couple for the Palais Royal Cabaret Theatre, ca. 1922
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor

Gerstle Mack wrote: “The figures are of wood, larger than life-size, and in high relief; but instead of being carved in the ordinary way, they are built up of four flat planes or layers. This construction produces sharp, blocky shadows, quite without gradation. The curves are all geometric... and the figures are exaggerated and stylized almost to the point of caricature... They give an extraordinary effect of movement and vitality; an effect
heightened by touches of brilliant yellow and orange and vermillion emphasizing the most important lines.”

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Palais Royal Cabaret menu, ca. 1922

[stand-alone label, wall 8A]

The Miracle

Geddes’s work on a 1924 New York production of The Miracle solidified his reputation as a multi-talented theatrical genius. The play, directed by German impresario and Expressionist Max Reinhardt, was a staged version of a medieval legend about a nun. As the designer of the show’s scenery, costumes, and lighting, Geddes pulled off an artistic and technical tour-de-force. He remade the interior of the Century Theater into a Gothic cathedral, complete with dramatic lighting filtering through stained glass windows, pews instead of theater seats for the audience, and incense wafting through the air. Geddes’s technical innovations ranged from mechanization of movable scenery and devices for quick costume changes to the creation of a single switchboard, manned by one electrician, who controlled the direction, color, and focus of the play’s lighting. The Miracle fused theater and architecture, creating an immersive environment that transformed passive audience members into active participants in a drama that surrounded them. As such, this new concept of the theater realized the transformative effects Geddes sought in all his art.

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Max Reinhardt and Norman Bel Geddes, ca. 1924
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

Geddes saw Reinhardt’s production of Sumurun on a visit to New York City in 1914. He later wrote that the experience sparked in him the idea for “a theatre appropriate to... three dimensional action and imagination. . . a theatre designed for imaginative staging and spot-lighting.”

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“How the Century Theatre was Converted into a Cathedral for the Production of ‘The Miracle’,” 1924
Scientific American Publishing Company
Geddes with his “Chief Gypsy or Jester” costume design for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Jessie Tarbox Beals (American, 1870–1942)
Gelatin silver print

Costume design (“Chief Gypsy or Jester”) for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Costume design (“Noble Gentleman”) for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Costume design (“Gypsy Woman”) for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Costume design (“Oriental Gentleman”) for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Rendering of the left panel on the stained glass drop for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Housing courtesy of an FAIC/Tru Vue Optium® Conservation Grant

Set design drawing (“The Inquisition Mob”) for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Norman Bel Geddes
Charcoal on paper
Housing courtesy of an FAIC/Tru Vue Optium® Conservation Grant

After its 20-month run in New York, as Jennifer Davis Roberts notes in her 1979 exhibition catalog about Geddes, *The Miracle* “went to eleven other cities in the next three years. Its extraordinary success is evident in the... reviews it received as well as the tales of souvenir hunters chipping pieces of wood from pews and walls and the police being called out to handle rioting crowds of people turned away without seats.”

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Set design drawing (“The Inquisition”) for *The Miracle*, ca. 1924
Norman Bel Geddes
Charcoal on paper

Housing courtesy of an FAIC/Tru Vue Optium® Conservation Grant

[stand-alone label, Wall 10A]

**The Divine Comedy, 1920–1924**

Geddes’s never-realized staging of Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy* was the most significant early example of his career-long attempts to create emotionally rich experiences in the theater. Favoring abstraction over realism, the play grounded his work within the theories and practices of Expressionism. In the 1910s and 1920s Expressionism influenced the visual arts, architecture, music, and the theater. Its creators distorted reality so that the outside objective world was colored by the artist’s subjective emotions, conveying the psychological depths beneath the surface of reality.

Geddes’s dramatization, design, and production script of *The Divine Comedy* was to be performed in Madison Square Garden in 1921 to celebrate the sexcentenary of Dante’s death. When the performance did not happen, Geddes published *A Project for a Theatrical Presentation of the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* in 1924. He also designed a theater specifically to house a newly-proposed production for the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago, but this project was not realized either.

46 [multi-media item]

Dr. Iryna Kuksa’s interactive 3D visualization of Geddes’s 1921 set concept for *The Divine Comedy*, 2007
Dr. Kuksa’s scrupulous digital reconstruction of *The Divine Comedy* revealed some construction inconsistencies in Geddes’s original set model, which was not preserved, and exposed some hitherto unknown design limitations. Working from the designer’s original drawings and plans, Kuksa concluded that although generally the original elevations are precise, the height of the front right tower and the width of the front steps vary, and there are minor distortions in the shape of all four towers. These errors would not have significantly affected the overall structure of the stage or, importantly, its functionality, but Geddes’s complicated lighting and sound mechanisms would have caused many major technical and logistical problems, not to mention prohibitive costs.

Dr. Kuksa is a Research Fellow at the School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University.

Geddes derived the circular features evident in this preliminary sketch for the *Divine Comedy* project from an inspirational vision of a pulsating spot he perceived on a bare wall. Geddes described the epiphany in his book about the project:

> I was being drawn toward that burning hole in the wall, all the time, turning round and round, like a corkscrew. My body grew hotter and hotter. I rose to my feet, to throw the illusion off, and reeled dizzily into the next room and across it into a bookcase. I grabbed a book without reading the title... It was the first volume of Norton’s Translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

The book is illustrated with photographs of scenes staged on a model set taken by Francis Bruguière (American, 1875–1945). Geddes was careful to preserve the negatives of
Bruguière’s work, noting that Bruguière “was the first photographer who found a way to photograph scenes on stages in their own light instead of using a flash bulb.”

[Wall 11A]
49, 50

Rendering of a scene (“A winged figure jumps over his head”) for *The Divine Comedy*, ca. 1920
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

Geddes’s model stage set for *The Divine Comedy* with lighting and figures (“winged figures”), ca. 1921–1924
Francis Bruguière (American, 1875–1945)
Gelatin silver print

This pairing of an original scene rendering with a photograph illustrates how closely Geddes’s vision was translated to prospective backers through a process of model photography designed to simulate an actual production.

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Geddes’s model stage set for *The Divine Comedy* with lighting and figures (“Light from above”), ca. 1921–1924
Francis Bruguière (American, 1875–1945)
Gelatin silver print

Scene rendering (“Ascent of Dante and sphere of eternal light”) for *The Divine Comedy*, 1921
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

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**Divine Comedy Theater, 1929**

Preliminary sketch of the Divine Comedy Theatre, ca. 1929–1930
Norman Bel Geddes
Charcoal on paper

Designed specifically to seat 5,000 people for Geddes’s never-realized production of *The Divine Comedy*, the conceptualized theater had no proscenium or curtain, balconies, or galleries. Instead a steep ramp enabled all spectators an unimpeded view of the
performance. All scene changes were done with lighting effects alone. Dressing rooms, costume and prop rooms, and sound resonators were beneath the stage. Offices, public lounges, and, inexplicably, a hospital occupied the space under the auditorium.

Geddes proposed building this bespoke theater and mounting his production of *The Divine Comedy* for the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago but, again, the project fell through in part because of the onset of the Depression and in part because of Geddes’s lack of formal architectural training.

Geddes’s contribution to the success of *The Miracle* attracted the attention of Hollywood film producer Jesse Lasky and led to commissions for production design work for directors Cecil B. DeMille (*Feet of Clay*, 1924) and D. W. Griffith (*Sorrows of Satan*, 1925).

In *Sorrows of Satan*, Geddes depicted a climactic battle between good and evil with high-contrast lighting—Satan rendered in dark shadows—and a swirling mass of angels and demons traversing a grand stairway. As the *New York World* reported, he achieved the effect of “a foggy, dim heaven... a place of lights and hazy shadows” by spraying gallons of Nujol on the set with massive atomizers. Although he saved the studio $25,000 on the cost of the grand stairway by “building the steps out of flat and then tipping the camera to get his effect” he was reported to have erased the savings the next day on another set and was eventually released from the project.

Nujol was a brand of mineral oil also marketed at the time as a laxative.
Geddes was called in specifically to rewrite, redesign, and direct the re-filming of the allegorical sequence of *Sorrows of Satan*. While Geddes’s work made a favorable impression, it was so unlike the rest of the film in appearance that Griffith reshot the sequence a third time, effectively erasing any semblance of Geddes’s work in the final release.

[stand-alone label, Wall 11B]

**Return to Broadway**

After an eight-year hiatus from the theater to pursue industrial design projects, Geddes returned to Broadway in the late 1930s for two productions, *Dead End* and *The Eternal Road*. In both he addressed significant social and cultural topics with his characteristic design flair. While Geddes had laid the foundation for his concepts of an immersive and transformative theater design by the late 1920s, those concepts were enhanced in Sidney Kingsley’s play *Dead End* (1935), which Geddes produced and for which he developed set, sound, and lighting designs to contrast the plight of poor urban adolescents against an adjacent affluent neighborhood. Demonstrating his wide range of aesthetic expression, Geddes followed the gritty, hyper-realistic *Dead End* with grandiose abstract sets for *The Eternal Road* (1935–1937), a musical drama directed by Max Reinhardt with music by Kurt Weill, who had recently emigrated from Hitler’s Germany. Depicting anti-Semitic events in medieval times, the play’s producers sought to engender sympathy for the current plight of the Jews in Nazi Germany.

[stand-alone label]

**The Eternal Road, 1935–1937**

This dramatic spectacle, commissioned by New York’s Jewish community and written by Franz Werfel, premiered at the Manhattan Opera House, New York, on January 7, 1937. It paired Geddes’s setting, costume, and lighting designs with Max Reinhardt, once again, as director, and featured a musical score by the newly arrived émigré from Nazi Germany, Kurt Weill. The plot centers on a rabbi who in a time of medieval anti-Semitic activities recounts to his parishioners their great histories from the Old Testament.

Almost two years in the making, Geddes reconfigured the front of the theater, designed the costumes and props for more than 300 actors, and used a recorded score for the first time in theater history. His lighting, however, achieved the most spectacular effect. As the critic Gilbert Gabriel enthused in the *New York American*, Geddes’s “burly genius has a playground of sufficiently vast size here. And that he works with the theatre’s simple materials of carpentry, canvas, paint, people and streaming lights which burrow down
towards the subway and upward towards the clouds must be hailed as the garnerings of genius.”

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Geddes with his model of the stage set for *The Eternal Road*, 1937
White Studio
Gelatin silver print

The wood block in Geddes’s hand was the relative size of an actor on stage.

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*The Eternal Road* stage set under construction, ca. 1937
Edward Gruber
Gelatin silver print

Jennifer Davis Roberts explains in her 1979 exhibition catalog about Geddes, “To create dramatic effects equal to the grandiose plot of the story, Geddes knocked out the proscenium, orchestra pit, all the box seats, and nine rows of the orchestra seats to enlarge the stage on which thirty-five different scenarios were enacted on five scenic levels. A continuous flow of actors entered and exited mysteriously from the basement and from behind the seventy-foot-high cycloramas.”

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Production photographs of *The Eternal Road*, ca. 1937
Edward Steichen (American, 1879–1973)
Gelatin silver print

[table case 3]
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Geddes (pointing up) during set construction of *The Eternal Road*, ca. 1937
Metropolitan Photoservice
Gelatin silver print

From left are: Sam Jaffe (one of the actors), Kurt Weill, Max Reinhardt, and Franz Werfel.

Perhaps Weill’s most ambitious theatrical work (its performance time exceeds six hours), the score mixes traditional aria and show tune compositions.

Program for *The Eternal Road*, 1937

Despite being received enthusiastically by critics and audience members alike and enjoying a 153-performance run, the high production costs (Geddes’s estimate of $200,000 ballooned to $468,000) bankrupted the show’s producers.

[vitrine 1]
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Model of the stage set for *The Eternal Road*, ca. 1937
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Wood and plastic

Extensive restoration was done on the model in the 1960s. The model originally seems to have had a light colored cyclorama, probably in gray.

[Wall 12 A]

**Dead End, 1936–1937**

Sidney Kingsley’s play, although directed by Kingsley, was realized entirely under the supervision of Geddes in the guise of his 128 East 37th Street Corporation. It premiered at New York’s Belasco Theatre on October 28, 1935, and ran for 268 performances before touring.

“In creating this ‘super-realist’ production,” Jennifer Davis Roberts notes in her 1979 exhibition catalog, Geddes “was concerned with achieving an impression of reality more powerful and more convincing than the depiction of any specific event. This philosophy is reflected in a note from his 1927 lesson outlines for his advanced theatre design class where he defined movement in the theater as ‘a mental action caused by sense perceptions that reach the brain causing a sequence of feelings rather than a sequence of bodily motions.’”
Scene design with source photographs for *Dead End*, ca. 1936
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Photographs and gouache on board

According to Jennifer Davis Roberts in her 1979 exhibition catalog, Geddes’s in-depth research for the scenic arrangements of *Dead End* included taking countless photographs and film strips of the New York waterfront, the lower East Side, and Atlantic City. In the production he used sounds of city streets, sirens, boys diving into the water, dogs barking, buses going by, and the bustle of crowds to create a real feeling that the action was happening out-of-doors and to help “create an emotional mood in harmony with the action.”

*Dead End* with cast of boys “swimming” in the East River, ca. 1936
White Studio
Gelatin silver print

Geddes received numerous letters from various reform and relief organizations complimenting him on the effectiveness of the production. The Director of Housing for the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works wrote to Geddes on December 5, 1935:

> You may be interested to learn that one of its strongest advocates is Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt who, having seen it once, is going again, and persuaded me to go. . . My work is directed toward the elimination of the conditions pictured in this play. We are bitterly opposed by those who claim we are destroying property values, private enterprise, and even the whole social structure of the country. I can think of no more irrefutable answer to this persistent criticism than “Dead End.”

Depiction of a scene from *Dead End* for *The New Yorker*, November 30, 1935
Inscribed “To Norman Bel-Geddes with my admiration”
Ink and wash on board
Model of the stage set for *Dead End*, ca. 1935
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Mixed media

The model was restored by John L. Davis in 1960.

[Wall Q]
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*Iron Men, 1936*

Derrick specifications for *Iron Men*, September 14-15, 1936
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper

Another “superrealist” work by Geddes in the late 1930s was his staging and production of Francis Gallagher’s play *Iron Men* that opened at the Longacre Theater in New York on October 19, 1936.

Rather than use sketches as he usually did in designing a play, Geddes created engineering blueprints with steel columns and girders labeled with numbers. In the production, actors actually constructed a steel scaffold that represented three floors of a New York City office tower.

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The cast in *Iron Men*, from top to bottom, William Haade (who was an actual steel worker) as Andy, Clark Twelvetrees as The Kid, Harold Moffett as Nils, and Richard Taber as Scratch, ca. 1936.
Lucas Pritchard Studio
Gelatin silver prints

One reviewer applauded Geddes’s set but wrote that before Geddes produced the play “he should have contacted Francis Gallagher to ascertain whether or not he had written one.” The reviewer also offered high praise to William Haades’s performance: “His is a performance that is not only technically perfect but genuinely moving. He shouldn’t have much trouble staying off construction jobs from now on.”

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*Macy’s Christmas Parade, 1926*

Geddes at work on a Macy’s parade cartoon, 1926
For Macy’s third annual Thanksgiving Day or Christmas parade, Geddes produced eight design drawings between October 7 and October 15, 1926.

A letter from the President of R. H. Macy & Co. to Geddes, dated November 26, 1926, offers a mixed though largely complimentary summation: “I want to thank you for the splendid work you did in connection with our Thanksgiving Day Parade. It was a delight to witness it for its color, its animation, its beauty and imagination. There were a number of things,—and these, I suppose, are to be expected,—that did not go off so well. But on the whole, the work was well conceived and smoothly executed. The parade was a success.”

[Text panel; Wall 9B]

**Industrious Design: 1927–1937**

Eager to move beyond the theater and broaden his influence over American society, Geddes branched out in two directions around 1927: he adapted his flair for theater to architecture and interior design, and he pioneered the new field of industrial design. Geddes blended these architecture-as-theater projects with his burgeoning interest in industrial design by creating shop-window displays and mannequins (among his first object designs) for the Franklin Simon department stores in New York. “The window is the stage,” Geddes noted, “and the merchandise the players.”

The commission to redesign Franklin Simon’s store window displays launched Geddes full-throttle into industrial design. Over the next decade he produced dozens of designs for home appliances such as stoves and vacuum cleaners, bedroom furniture, and decorative objects. In designing products Geddes sought to update every aspect of the home, achieving greater ease and cleanliness. At this time, Geddes also applied his talents to designing spectacular nightclubs and sleek offices that blurred the edges between architecture and theater. Among his peers, Geddes stood out as a designer of real products who also took his imagination into truly visionary realms.
A “before” image of a Franklin Simon “Foundations with Paris chic and summer coolness” lingerie display, ca. 1928
Worsinger
Gelatin silver print

An “after” image of Geddes’s lingerie display for Franklin Simon, ca. 1928
Gelatin silver print

From 1927 to 1929 Geddes designed store window displays for the Franklin Simon department store on New York City’s Fifth Avenue. He originally approached Adam Gimble of Saks & Co. with his ideas but Gimble declined, due perhaps in no small part to Geddes’s proposed business arrangement: “That you pay me a retaining fee of ten thousand dollars for a period of . . . six months, this fee to cover my services in an advisory and consultation capacity but not as a designer. That you authorize me to design. . . and supervise the execution of the approved designs. . . this work to be paid for by you at its actual cost to me plus twenty percent profit.”

Female mannequin heads for Franklin Simon, ca. 1927
Norman Bel Geddes
Watercolor on paper

As noted on the drawing, the heads were to be “made of frosted glass, pale yellow. . . to be illuminated inside with neon gas.”

Agnes turban and scarf display for the Franklin-Simon department store, ca. 1927
Gelatin silver print

This simple display—a metal bust wearing an Agnes turban and a scarf of vermillion and chartreuse green with a hand bag in colors to match—is what stopped pedestrian traffic when Geddes’s redesigned windows were unveiled just before Christmas 1927. As Geddes described it, “the background was composed of large triangular shapes so arranged as to center attention on the ‘actors.’ Hidden spotlights threw the grotesque shadows of the bust against this background. Simple, daring, novel, and unexpected!”

Geddes’s “Travel Smartly in Tweed” window display for Franklin Simon, ca. 1927-1929
In a 1931 interview with W. K. Wisehart, Geddes described how his vocation changed from theatrical to industrial designer by chance while walking down Fifth Avenue looking in shop windows:

Some things in life you know without knowing how you know them. They are decided, not by you, but for you. You may not be able to tell why you do a certain thing. But you know it is something you can do if you want to, and if you are not afraid of the unexpected! Every important step I have ever taken has come about in this way—as the result of some spontaneous inner conviction that came to me, I do not know how. From first to last, hunches have always been my good angels!

**Product Design**

Geddes was a member of the first generation of American industrial designers that emerged in the late 1920s. Propelling their efforts was a trend among American businesses and manufacturers to increase sales by means of style and design. This trend was succinctly expressed in advertising executive Earnest Elmo Calkins’s essay “Beauty the New Business Tool,” published in the August 1927 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine. “The appeal of efficiency alone is nearly ended,” Calkins wrote, “beauty is the natural and logical next step.”

These designers created many of the products that still define contemporary American life, from telephones to transportation vehicles and elegant, yet casual, dinnerware. Geddes’s best-known contributions to this field were his 1932 metal-clad kitchen stove that set the template for such appliances to the present day; a chrome-plated cocktail set of 1937, which was inspired by Manhattan’s setback skyscrapers; and a 1940 red-white-and-blue plastic Patriot radio, which is represented on a recently issued U. S. postage stamp.

**Streamlining**

Geddes and his peers defined the concept of streamlining through their product designs, showing far greater interest in an object’s external form than its internal workings. For these designers, the principles of streamlining defined both the forms of their vision for America and the process by which that vision would be achieved. Everything from household items to buildings should be designed in curving, unornamented shapes, while products would move from design studio to consumer homes in well-coordinated and frictionless paths. Largely through Geddes’s popularizing efforts—one magazine singled him out as “the man who streamlined America”—this concept became ubiquitous during
the economic downturn of the Great Depression, when hard times increasingly spurred companies to use striking design as a means to increase consumer sales.

House Number 3, first-floor cutaway, 1931
Norman Bel Geddes
Ink, wash, and gouache on board

Plans and axonometric projection for “The House of Tomorrow” in *Ladies Home Journal*, April 1931

Geddes’s House Number 3 included numerous advances that he hoped would make domestic life simpler and more hygienic. One such innovation was the house’s two-car garage with a turntable that allowed motorists to easily drive in and out. The house also had hermetically sealed windows for germ-free living and mechanized one-piece bath units.

In 1928 Geddes was commissioned by the Simmons Company of Chicago to create a line of modern bedroom furniture. Unlike the modernized classicism of American furniture inspired by French designers, Geddes’s steel furniture, with its right-angled lines and smooth surfaces, looked to the designers of the German Bauhaus or the Dutch DeStijl movement. For the company, Geddes not only designed individual pieces but full
ensembles. Previously, Simmons only made beds and nightstands, to which Geddes added dressing tables, a highboy, and various chairs.

When the original model suite of furniture went on display it had to quickly be removed from the storefront because supply could not keep up with demand. The model suite subsequently went to the Princess Vittoria Colonna, Duchess of Sermoneta, where it was installed in the historic Palazzo Sermoneta in Rome.

171[Table case 5 featuring Appliances, side A]

Geddes-designed Oriole stove for the Standard Gas Equipment Corporation, 1932
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

In many ways, Geddes’s Oriole stove for the Standard Gas Equipment Company set the template for today’s modern kitchen appliance. His design introduced lightweight enameled sheet metal panels attached to a metal frame, replacing the typical cast-iron body. A solid base was used instead of open legs, eliminating the necessity of cleaning underneath. There were insulated Bakelite handles and an automatic shut-off to the gas-cocks, which was activated when the lid was closed.

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Consumer and dealer surveys about gas stove use and design preferences, ca. 1931
Norman Bel Geddes & Company

173, 173.1

Promotional flyer for the Geddes-designed Modern SGE Gas Range, ca. 1932
Standard Gas Equipment Corporation

176-178 [On wall P behind table case 5]

Publicity brochure for “The New Acorn Gas Range,” ca. 1930s

181, 183 [Table case 5, side B]

Designs for the Servel Inc. Electrolux refrigerator, August 22, 1934 (without handles) and September 7, 1934 (with handles)
Consuelo de Youema and Alexander Leidenfrost for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper
Exterior and interior views of the Geddes & Company designed Electrolux refrigerator for Servel Inc., 1934
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver prints

Promotional copy highlighted the Geddes firm’s design as “the result of a concentrated and extensive study of the whole refrigerator problem and... a striving toward perfection for use. The beauty resulting from simplicity, good proportions, and fine finish was, of course, consciously attained—but not at the expense of any functional requirement nor by the application of any extraneous ornamentation. The door, carried on concealed hinges, closes flush with the exterior cabinet surface... and the circular gray and white name plate, which releases the door catch when pushed by hand or elbow, relieve the plainness (yet somehow not the severity) of this modern kitchen accessory.”

Electrolux vacuum cleaner, ca. 1934–1935
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

With the goal of making the Electrolux vacuum cleaner “as far as possible the complete household servant,” Geddes’s design simplified manufacture, improved suction and cleaning power, which reduced weight and noise, made dust bag removal easier, improved the glide function, and, with the addition of attachments, increased the appliance’s functionality to include, perhaps somewhat improbably, the “washing of rugs, spray painting, de-mothing of fabrics, and hair drying.”

Ashtray for Revere Copper and Brass, ca. 1935
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper

Ashtray for Revere Copper and Brass, ca. 1935
Pencil on paper
Cover and inside spread of the Revere Copper and Brass gifts catalog featuring the Norman Bel Geddes line, 1935

During the Depression, Revere Copper and Brass enlisted the services of American industrial designers like Geddes to create domestic products that reflected new design trends that might attract new, style-conscious consumers. Geddes’s ashtrays, candy dishes, and other designs incorporated the geometric and sculptural forms of gears and other machine parts.

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Walter Kidde Soda King seltzer bottle, 1938
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

182 [alternate label]

Seltzer Bottle, ca. 1935
Walter Kidde Sales Co.
Chromed and enameled metal with rubber fittings
Brooklyn Museum, H. Randolph Lever Fund, 82.168.2a-b

212 [Modular case 1]

Manhattan “Skyscraper” Cocktail Shaker with Strainer and Lid, cups, and tray, 1937
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Chrome-plated metal
Loan courtesy of Brooklyn Museum, gift of Paul F. Walter, 83.108.5a-c

The name Manhattan aligns this cocktail set not only with the sophisticated ideal of life lived in urban nightclubs and penthouses but also with the silhouettes of Manhattan’s setback, Art Deco skyscrapers. This visual trope is most notably seen in the set’s faceted tray.

179-180 [Wall P]

General Motors Jubilee Medal, 1933
Norman Bel Geddes
Silver plate, struck off by the Medalic Art Company
The Geddes firm’s publicity caption for this medal, designed to commemorate the silver anniversary of the General Motors Corporation and to be used as an award for achievements in the field of motor transportation, describes it as follows:

The face of the medal shows a speeding automotive body behind which a wing rises perpendicularly. Since the medal is to be used as an award in future years and the car of the future is merely a guess this car is an abstract streamline form without doors or windows. The conventionalized wing symbolizes General Motors interest in air transportation. The wing being static; the car, by contrast, seems to move more swiftly. . . The reverse of the medal shows a combustion chamber . . since it is the heart of the motor. It too has been conventionalized."

Fame and Horizons

The 1930s proved to be the decade of greatest acclaim for Geddes. His name was virtually everywhere in American society, showcased in exhibitions, books, and magazine and newspaper articles, one of which proclaimed him the “grand master of modernism.” Geddes’s reputation as a futurist, however, was cemented in 1932 with the publication of his book Horizons. Opening with the declaration “we enter a new era,” Geddes presented not only his real-life products but also visionary schemes for vast transportation networks comprising floating airports, streamlined flying cars, airplanes large enough to function as aerial hotels, and ocean liners that could house 2,000 people. Hopeful antidotes to the dark economic realities of the Depression, some of these ideas were nonetheless so strange that one magazine felt compelled to ask its reluctant readership in the article’s headline: “Are YOU Afraid of the Unexpected?”

Geddes’s fame as an industrial designer also earned him a place in The New Yorker magazine as the subject of a cartoon, which made fun of his ubiquity in the offices of corporate America and his desire to redesign the entire world by suggesting he be hired to retool the company’s signature product, a biscuit. The attention afforded Geddes, however, was not always laudatory. Enhancing his reputation as an impractical visionary, Fortune magazine described the extravagant Geddes as “a bomb thrower” whose ideas “cost American businessmen billions of dollars.”

Arthur Strawn’s “Grand Master of Modernism,” New York Herald Tribune, March 1, 1931
Digital reproduction
First edition of Geddes’s *Horizons* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1932)

The publication of *Horizons* marked Geddes’s shift away from an emphasis on the spiritual qualities of art, made him the popularizer of the streamlined style, and anointed him the prophet of the near-future.

Sheldon and Martha Cheney’s *Art and the Machine* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936)

*Art and the Machine* was an account of industrial design in twentieth-century America, and it was an important compendium of the new field. In this copy of the book from Geddes’s library, he underlined every appearance of his name. The book’s co-author, Sheldon Cheney, was a leading American proponent of modernism. He was the main editor and writer for *Theatre Arts Magazine* from 1916 to 1921 and continued to write for it afterward. The magazine advocated the modernist New Stagecraft theater movement, which Geddes advanced in his own theater work. Cheney also wrote the 1930 book *The New World Architecture*.

Geddes included this Cunningham photograph in the opening chapter of *Horizons*, titled ‘Towards Design.’ While her image of overlapping flower petals is not specifically discussed, it is shown near similarly composed photographs of multiple plow blades (by Margaret Bourke-White) and multiple eyeglasses (by Edward Steichen), suggesting that industrial and man-made products, if well designed, could be as beautiful as those created in the natural world.

The photograph of the model for Geddes’s Theater Number 14 bears a striking, if unintentional, resemblance to the forms in Cunningham’s image.
Henry Stanett’s Geddes-themed cartoon in *The New Yorker*, December 10, 1932

270 [Wall 13B]

W. K. Kelsey’s “A Peep Into the Future by the Spectacular Norman Bel Geddes” feature in *The Detroit News*, Sunday, January 1, 1933
Digital reproduction

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Kenneth Reid, “Norman Bel Geddes, Master of Design” in *Pencil Points*, January 1937

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Publicity image of Geddes with engineering blueprints, ca. 1930s
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print

224 [Table case 4 label]

“Streamlining” article by Geddes in *The Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1934

Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, read Geddes’s *Horizons* “with a deep sense of fascination” and commissioned from Geddes “a paper summing up, with new illustrations, the ideas which are scattered through your chapters on streamlining as applied to transportation. . . The battle-lines of the machine are drawn between believers in the evolution of machine design and those who follow the devolution of inherited predilections. Essentially, it is the engine versus the buggy, and I think it does not take the son of a prophet to foretell who will win in the end. But prejudice does die hard.”

Geddes ordered 2,000 reprints of his “Streamlining” article and mailed them to approximately 1,200 individuals, soliciting comments that he undoubtedly planned to use to try to sign up more clients.

227, 228

Two illustrations for “Streamlining,” depicting turbulence created by a ship’s superstructure and the ground effect flow pattern around an automobile, 1934
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper
Geddes was asked by Sedgwick to provide diagrams because *The Atlantic Monthly* “does not use illustrations.”

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Clay model of Motor Car Number 1 (convertible) designed by Geddes for Graham-Paige, 1928
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

Founded in 1927 by brothers Joseph B. and Ray A. Graham, Graham-Paige manufactured automobiles until 1940. Geddes designed a series of motor cars for the company, numbered simply one through five, that was increasingly influenced by advances in streamlining developed by a leading aviation designer, Glen Curtiss, whose work was highlighted by Geddes in *Horizons*.

Even though none of his designs were implemented, in part because of the stock market crash, Geddes viewed the work he did for Graham-Paige as his first industrial design commission.

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J. L. Orrick, Sam Taylor, Geddes (second from right), and W. A. Hall, June 1928
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

Geddes was first hired by Ray Graham to design banquet halls for various company functions. Graham then hired Geddes to design model car bodies. This photograph was taken at the outset of Geddes’s automotive work for Graham-Paige. W. A. Hall was the firm’s branch manager in Cleveland, Ohio.

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Letter of condolence from Geddes to Mrs. [Ray] Graham, August 18, 1932

Geddes writes to Ray Graham’s widow about how influential Graham had been on all of Geddes’s subsequent vehicle designs. In 1931, further developing ideas he had originated for Graham-Paige, Geddes designed his now iconic, more radical line of tear-drop shaped cars.

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In September 1933 Geddes, then in partnership with Earl Newsom and Worthen Paxton under the firm name Norman Bel Geddes & Company, signed a contract with Chrysler Corporation, although in all memoranda and minutes the client is referenced secretly only as “Mr. Q.” Geddes’s charge was to design a lighter-weight car with a smaller wheelbase (to reduce freight charges) and a rear engine. Its price class was to be “cheaper than anything built yet.” By January 1934, work had narrowed to restyling features on the “C[rysler]” and “D[e]. S[oto].” cars that would require no or only minor die changes, a major re-styling job for “C” and “D. S.” 1934 lines, and continued study on the feasibility of a rear engine car for the “C” eight-door sedan and the “D. S.” four-door sedan.

Clay models of Geddes’s car for the Chrysler Corporation, ca. 1934
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

The caption for this photograph of comparative Chrysler Airflow models gives the backstory to Geddes’s involvement: “Dies for the first Airflow had already been completed when Mr. Geddes was introduced to the Chrysler design problems. Public reaction to this radical car indicated a resistance to its novel frontal design. Mr. Geddes’s assignment was to redesign the car, maintaining or improving its streamline characteristics, but so designing the portion about the radiator and hood as to increase public approval.”

Geddes getting out of a Chrysler Airflow automobile, ca. 1933
Woolf & Cooley Studio, Chicago
Gelatin silver print

Chrysler Airflow publicity tear sheet, Saturday Evening Post, December 16, 1933

Geddes lent his name to promoting Chrysler’s De Soto Airflow line of motor car even though his design work on the 1934 model was limited to the radiator and hood.

Sketch of Motor Car Number 9, side view, 1931
Norman Bel Geddes
To Geddes, the smooth, streamlined forms of his cars and other vehicles facilitated their frictionless movement, not unlike that of birds through air or fish through water. This concept required the complete re-design of the American automobile. “Driving today’s motor car,” Geddes wrote in *Horizons*, “is a peculiar experience for one who understands in the least degree the principles of aerodynamics; for he realizes that the mechanism under his control is so inadequately designed from this viewpoint that it would be more efficient if it were operated with the rear end to the front.”

Jennifer Davis Roberts, in her 1979 exhibition catalog, details innovations in Geddes’s automobile designs—a rear fin that both stabilized and kept the car on the ground and housed the engine and gas tank, thus lowering the car’s center of gravity and increasing its ability to negotiate curves at higher speeds. The car housed eight passengers comfortably. The curving windshield provided greater visibility, and the headlights turned with the front wheels. The auto industry adopted Geddes’s retractable front safety bumper and fully enclosed front and rear wheels only many years later.

Increased passenger comfort was Geddes’s principal objective in this design. Planned amenities included conditioned air, swivel armchairs, three-quarter size beds rather than berths in sleeping cars, and a full in-train telephone system. Geddes introduced material and maintenance improvements as well. Aluminum bodies increased train speed, and lowered car heights reduced the risks of tipping. All projections were enclosed in a
smooth shell of metal and glass, and cars were connected with telescoping bellows to eliminate vacuums. Modern materials reduced overall maintenance needs.

255 [Vitrine #5]

Model of the Geddes-designed Wenner-Gren yacht
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Mixed media, ca. 1934

In designing a yacht for the Swedish industrialist Axel Wenner-Gren, Geddes streamlined its superstructure, which posed a problem for the yacht’s lifeboats. They are typically stored on the ship’s open top deck where they can be easily lowered over its sides. But by replacing the ship’s traditional slanted sides for a fully enclosed superstructure, Geddes was forced to design a patented mechanism that could expel the lifeboats and launches from within the yacht. The Geddes firm’s publicity sheet details the yacht’s features and shows how the yacht could be reconfigured from all decks being closed in against stormy or cold weather, to being open for a full recreational experience in fair weather.

Although the practicality of Geddes’s design was attested to by several naval architects and marine engineers, Wenner-Gren was slow to move forward with construction, offering a succession of excuses from 1935 to 1938: “the Swedish ship builders. . . were so busy. . . that they could not even study the matter in question,” “the general situation both here in Europe and in the States is such that one does not feel safe to plan anything whatever for the future,” and “it is hard to see how it ever can be done if this old world of ours does not sooner or later return to its senses.” A statement in the Geddes archive suggests that the partially-constructed yacht was confiscated by the German government at the start of World War II.

254 [loan item]

Streamline Ocean Liner model, 1932
Norman Bel Geddes
Wood, paint
Loan courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York
Gift of Norman Bel Geddes, 1941, M41.29A

Geddes’s design for an 1,808 foot long streamlined ocean liner eliminated all projections or enclosed them within the ship’s shell. Anticipated to reduce trans-Atlantic travel by one day, the ship was designed to accommodate 2,000 first-class passengers and a crew of 900.

Geddes photographed this model for inclusion in Horizons, which also featured renderings and detailed plans and sections. These illustrations persuasively suggested that
this fantastical ship was ready to be built and launched, which it never was. Like Geddes’s design for the Wenner-Gren yacht, the ocean liner’s lifeboats were housed within the ship’s streamlined superstructure.

246 [Hero wall]

Air Liner Number 4 (aerial, front view), 1929
Norman Bel Geddes
Pencil on paper

In designing this tailless “V”-winged monoplane, Geddes sought the expertise of Dr. O. A. Koller, an aeronautical engineer. The plane was to have had a wing span of 528 feet (23 feet shorter than the Washington Monument), carry 451 passengers and a crew of 155, and be supported on water by 60-foot high pontoons. It was projected to be able to make three transatlantic crossings a week and was fundamentally conceived of as a flying ocean liner.

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Ocean liner, stern decks open, 1932
Norman Bel Geddes
Pencil on paper

247 [Wall W]

Air Liner Number 4 (aerial), 1929
Norman Bel Geddes
Pencil on paper

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Air Liner Number 4 taking off from water, ca. 1929
Norman Bel Geddes
Pencil, pastel, and conte on paper

251 [Wall 14A]

Rotary Airport in New York harbor, ca. 1931
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Photocollage
In *Horizons*, this airport was illustrated with numerous plans, sections, and diagrams showing how planes could clear skyscrapers and manage prevailing winds. In this way, Geddes hoped to deflect criticism that building a floating airport in New York harbor was preposterous. Passengers went ashore by traveling an 800-foot-long moving walkway below the harbor.

Model helicopter and helipad, ca. 1931
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

In the field of industrial design, Geddes was unique in the way he moved fluidly from designing one type of transportation vehicle to another, from cars to trains, ships, airplanes, and tanks. At the same time, Geddes often created hybrid vehicles, like this so-called roadable airplane, a type of flying car.

Roadable Airplane, not dated
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil, pastel, and conte on paper (top), photostat of engineering sketch (bottom)

In the field of industrial design, Geddes was unique in the way he moved fluidly from designing one type of transportation vehicle to another, from cars to trains, ships, airplanes, and tanks. At the same time, Geddes often created hybrid vehicles, like this so-called roadable airplane, a type of flying car.

Section and side elevation drawings of a tank, June 1940
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper

The objective in streamlining an armored tank was to reduce “the penetrating force of attacking projectiles,” but it would have been impossible to shape armor-weight steel plates to these curvatures. This project stands as one of Geddes’s more impractical applications of streamline principles.

*Toledo Scale and Factory, 1928–1933*

Among Geddes’s most notable designs for functional, yet theatrical, interiors was the Toledo Scale factory. The Ohio-based Toledo Scale Company commissioned two of Geddes’s most famous, never-realized designs, beginning with his reimagining of their signature product—a counter scale—to his redesign of the firm’s entire factory complex.
Here, Geddes took his idea of the transformative theater and applied it to the factory, where he imagined work to be an uplifting enterprise. Similarly, Geddes designed the offices of the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency in Manhattan, where sleek walls hid all of the messy accoutrements of business to create a stage set of streamlined corporate efficiency. Another significant commission was Manhattan’s Barberry Room nightclub of 1938, where Geddes installed mirrors on facing walls to reflect the images of patrons with other night clubbers amid the club’s spectacle.

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Rendering of a counter scale for Toledo Scale, ca. 1929
Alexander Leidenfrost for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Ink wash, gouache, and watercolor on board

To create a lighter-weight counter scale (the company’s counter scales weighed 163 pounds), Geddes recommended using sheet steel instead of porcelain enamel cast iron. The search for a durable coating for steel led Geddes to the idea of making the scale entirely from plastic, an idea that so fascinated the company’s president, Hubert D. Bennett, that he abandoned Geddes’s sheet steel concept, financed the development of Plaskon, a cellulose-filled urea formaldehyde molding compound, and established the Toledo Synthetic Products Company to produce it.

280

*Industrial Engineering*, July 1930

This issue of the magazine featured Geddes’s designs for the Toledo Scale factory.

282

Toledo Scale Factory master plan rendering, ca. 1929
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Charcoal on paper

The 11-story administrative tower acted as a grand frontispiece for the Toledo Scale Factory complex, welcoming visitors from the end of a poplar-lined boulevard and circular reflecting pool.

283

Rendering of an aerial view of the Toledo Scale Factory Machine Shop, Laboratory, and Assembly Shed, ca. 1929
When presenting Geddes’s concept to the board of directors in 1929, Toledo Scale’s president, Hubert D. Bennett, warned them to be ready for designs that “would cost lots of money and be entirely different, even weird looking.”

The shop consisted of a circular, two-story room surrounded by a low-ceilinged 22’-wide co-centric ring, allowing for unobstructed assembling of precision devices in the center of the room and adjacent manufacturing areas with equal access to the high assembly space. The “saw-tooth” ceiling of the central room provided extra hours of natural light.

In 1928, at the start of his industrial design career, Geddes was hired for a fee of $10,000 to redesign a combined conference room and auditorium for the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency, officed in a two-floor space in New York City’s Graybar Building on Lexington Avenue. Geddes’s goal was to create a room “machine-like in its efficiency, in its ability to help its occupant get through his day’s work with a minimum of interference and distraction.”

As described by Jennifer Davis Roberts in her 1979 exhibition catalog, the T-shaped room consisted of 24-foot ceilings, a wall of windows, “simple, rounded, upholstered chairs around a conference table in the short wing of the room, and an ebony podium and eight rows of upholstered chairs in the long wing.” Walls were painted off-white, and carpets were gray. “Turquoise draperies and upholstery added accents. Staggered linear Art Deco trim emphasized the verticality of the room.” Lighting came from behind translucent panels. Geddes designed a ventilating system of conditioned air to eliminate...
distracting noise from open windows. Twenty-second dimmer switches, an automated movie screen, and numerous telephone jacks added to the efficiency of this “modern temple of business.”

Geddes’s work for the ad agency led to many other commissions from its clients. One of the most far-reaching of these commissions was the Shell Oil “City of the Future” ad campaign.

287
J. Walter Thompson Assembly Room (View from meeting table towards auditorium), 1929
Mary Dale Clarke (American, 1875–1936)
Gelatin silver print

In 1947, Stanley Resor wrote to Geddes rejecting a proposed re-design of the Assembly Room. Resor explained that he had instead decided to reupholster the chairs and replace the curtains in order to leave the room a “monument to that era.”

288
J. Walter Thompson Assembly Room (View of meeting space and stair case), ca. 1929
Mary Dale Clarke (American, 1875–1936) for Harry G. Healy
Gelatin silver print

Sophisticated colors and rich materials added to the dramatic effect of the J. Walter Thompson office. The room featured cool grey carpet and walls, green auditorium chairs, and black vitralite wall accents.

289
J. Walter Thompson Assembly Room (Closer view of assembly space and windows), 1930
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

A Geddes office caption describes “a dignified and formal Reception Room. . . designed to fulfill many purposes—Lecture Hall for 200 persons, Conference, Board of Directors Meetings, Exhibitions of advertising layouts with one wall of sufficient size to take two twenty-four sheet posters, motion picture showings, and a system of illumination that varies the quantity and the quality of light for all of these purposes.”
Geddes and Frances Waite Geddes returning from a trip to Mexico, March 1, 1938

Cosmo-Sileo
Gelatin silver print

Frances Waite (1904–1943), the niece of the president of the J. Walter Thompson agency, studied stage design with Geddes after graduating from Bryn Mawr. In 1928 Geddes hired her as a researcher and draftsman. Geddes and Waite married on March 3, 1933. Waite retained her maiden name as she continued to advance in the business. Her introduction of Geddes to her uncle’s advertising agency earned Geddes some of his most important commissions including the Simmons Company, Shell Oil, and Futurama.

Waite contracted tuberculosis in 1938 and died in 1943.

290 [Wall 5B]

**Barberry Room, 1937**

View of the Barberry Room (“Elbow Room”) street façade, ca. 1938
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

Geddes designed this private dinner club for New York City’s literati in 1937. An addition to the Berkshire Hotel on East 52nd Street, Alexander Woolcott originally named it the Elbow Room. In his design, Geddes installed mirrors on facing walls to reflect the images of patrons, thereby creating a theatrical spectacle.

291

View of the Barberry Room (“Elbow Room”) elevator landing stair, circular entrance foyer, June 17, 1938
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

292

View of the Barberry Room (“Elbow Room”) main dining room, ca. 1938
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print
The Geddes firm’s caption for this image highlighted “the air of spaciousness provided by the parallel mirror walls.”

Prototype dinner plate with Barberry Room monogram, ca. 1938
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Manufactured by Lamberton/Scammell

[Text panel 13, Wall R]

A Bigger World: 1937–1945

Not willing to confine his efforts to theater sets, automobiles, and nightclubs, in the late 1930s Geddes also sought to reshape the entire American landscape. In 1937, when Geddes was asked to create an ad campaign for a new form of gasoline, he envisioned a Shell Oil “City of Tomorrow.” Shell’s City of Tomorrow was a valuable dress rehearsal for Geddes’s final project of the 1930s, Futurama in the General Motors “Highways to Horizons” pavilion at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair. One of the most popular attractions at the fair, Futurama’s imaginative prowess and its impact on the national consciousness highlighted Geddes’s talents as a modeler, futurist, and urban planner. Following Futurama’s success, Geddes sought ways to influence American car culture and its imprint on the nation’s landscape. He disseminated his ideas through the book Magic Motorways, announcing that “there are too many cars” and proposing ways to alleviate traffic congestion. With the U.S. entrance into World War II in 1941, however, these ideas were put on hold, and Geddes applied the model-making skills he had developed for Futurama to the fabrication of elaborate miniatures of land and sea conflicts that gave Americans front-row seats on the battlefront.

364 [stand-alone wall label]

Shell Oil’s “City of Tomorrow,” 1937


With Shell Oil’s “City of Tomorrow,” pitchman Geddes became an urban visionary, focusing on decentralization as key to the improved city. Represented by a massive model and dramatically photographed for magazine publication, Geddes’s vision for the future city featured overpasses with ramps that permitted drivers to change direction without crossing traffic; the segregation of residential from business and industrial areas by green space; and routing of through-traffic around the city center. Geddes forecast
what we now recognize as global positioning systems (GPSs) with “automatic in-car traffic control,” directed in part by television feeds of local traffic conditions. Although Shell’s “City of Tomorrow” was born as an advertising campaign, it addressed serious issues of contemporary urbanism.

366

Geddes with a model of the Shell “City of Tomorrow,” ca. 1937
Frances Waite (American, 1904–1943)
Gelatin silver print

Triangular in shape, each side of Geddes’s model was six feet long and represented an area of 144 city blocks. Built on a scale of 1 inch to 100 feet, the tallest skyscraper (at 15 inches high) would have stood taller than the Empire State Building.

365

Workers blowing smoke on the “City of Tomorrow” model, ca. 1936–1937
Frances Waite (American, 1904–1943)
Gelatin silver print

The atmospheric effect needed to make pictures of the model look like a real city was achieved by setting off sulphur bombs. An August 1, 1937 New York Times article reported how photographers had to wear gas masks to make pictures of the “City of Tomorrow,” designed “to show how an intelligently planned traffic system can move more automobiles faster and with greater safety.”

367 [multi-media item]

Film of “Future City” model, ca. 1936–1937
Norman Bel Geddes & Company

“Future City” was the Geddes’s firm’s own name for the project.

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Park view of Shell Oil “City of Tomorrow” model, ca. 1936–1937
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print
Fame and Horizons

The 1930s proved to be the decade of greatest acclaim for Geddes. His name was virtually everywhere in American society, showcased in exhibitions, books, and magazine and newspaper articles, one of which proclaimed him the “grand master of modernism.” Geddes’s reputation as a futurist, however, was cemented in 1932 with the publication of his book *Horizons*. Opening with the declaration “we enter a new era,” Geddes presented not only his real-life products but also visionary schemes for vast transportation networks comprising floating airports, streamlined flying cars, airplanes large enough to function as aerial hotels, and ocean liners that could house 2,000 people. Hopeful antidotes to the dark economic realities of the Depression, some of these ideas were nonetheless so strange that one magazine felt compelled to ask its reluctant readership in the article’s headline: “Are YOU Afraid of the Unexpected?”

Geddes’s fame as an industrial designer also earned him a place in *The New Yorker* magazine as the subject of a cartoon, which made fun of his ubiquity in the offices of corporate America and his desire to redesign the entire world by suggesting he be hired to retool the company’s signature product, a biscuit. The attention afforded Geddes, however, was not always laudatory. Enhancing his reputation as an impractical visionary, *Fortune* magazine described the extravagant Geddes as “a bomb thrower” whose ideas “cost American businessmen billions of dollars.”

Main Features of a Theater for a More Plastic Style of Drama, 1914
Original manuscript draft by Norman Bel Geddes

One of Geddes’s most influential innovations was the diagonal axis theater, which he developed very early and published in 1915 in his *Inwhich* magazine. He re-purposed this plan as Theater Number Six in a 1922 presentation to the Architectural League of New York. Shortly after, Claude Bragdon publicized Geddes’s innovation in an article in *Architectural Record*.

Geddes, by centering the stage and auditorium on a diagonal rather than the traditional longitudinal axis, was able to double the stage area and utilize 84% of the theater space. More seats were made available in a smaller area, and, as Bragdon stated, “Every spectator sees everything on the stage at all times. The entire scene yields a sense of
luminous space and distance impossible in the existing type of stage. . . . There can be no bad seats in this type of theatre.”

The diagonal axis design was adopted by many other architects and designers and served as the basis for many of Geddes’s subsequent theater designs.

15

Angular-Garden Theatre built for Carolyn B. Hastings of Santa Barbara, California, 1917
Norman Bel Geddes
Ink and watercolor on board

Geddes’s career in theater architecture began with designing variously shaped theaters for private individuals and universities. In this commission the low walls of the auditorium and stage were achieved by clipped hedges.

115

Theater Number Six, 1923

Preliminary sketch for Theatre Number Six, ca. 1923
Norman Bel Geddes
Pencil on paper

Geddes’s Theater Number Six consisted of three separate auditoriums grouped about a central tower. A large, 1700-seat theater and a small, 600-seat theater were both to have the main axis of stage and auditorium along the diagonal of a square. Hydraulic stages that lowered into the basement for scene changes did away with footlights, the proscenium, and visible orchestra pit. A third, 200-seat children’s theater retained a conventional proscenium stage.

Each row of seats was to have its own aisle, a space wide enough between rows to allow seating without stumbling over someone else’s feet. The stage projected into the auditorium, separated from the audience by only a few low steps running concentrically along its entire curving length. Geddes developed a hidden orchestra below the stage. Sound came through perforations in the risers of the steps circling the stage. The conductor was to use a rotating periscope to view the stage and audience.

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Repertory Theater, 1929

Repertory Theater (Diagonal Axis) plan and elevation, ca. 1929
Norman Bel Geddes
Charcoal on paper

Geddes’s design for a 1929 Repertory Theater planned for the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago is almost identical to that for Theater Number Six.

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Preliminary sketch of a plan for lighting the grounds of the Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago, ca. 1930
Norman Bel Geddes
Crayon and charcoal on paper

304

Model of the Water Pageant Theatre, 1930
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

Geddes’s never-built design provided an open-air theater for water pageants, built on a group of barges anchored in Lake Michigan, with the stage separated from the auditorium by water. The scheme provided seating for 2,000 and space for 500 spectators’ canoes between stage and auditorium. The radiating piers allowed 768 boats to dock. The stage consisted of a series of platforms connected by stairs and underground passages. Starting at eight inches above the water, these platforms built up to a height of 36 feet.

93, 92

Isometric drawing of Island Dance Restaurant, ca. 1929–1930
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Charcoal on paper

Film still for *Feet of Clay*, ca. 1924
Eugene Robert Richee for Paramount Pictures
Gelatin silver print
Geddes repurposed his design-work for the 1924 film *Feet of Clay* in his proposal for a never-realized Island Dance Restaurant for the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago. The motion picture by Margaretta Tuttle was produced by Famous Players-Lasky Corporation (Paramount Studios) and directed by Cecil B. DeMille, May–June, 1924.

In a May 13, 1924 letter to Charles Lapworth, Geddes wrote about his stint in Hollywood: “My job, if you can call it that, is a cinch... I am supposed to earn my salary... by designing the three big sets for Mr. De Mille’s picture and by helping him with ‘composition’ during the shooting.”

307

Model of the Island Dance Restaurant, 1930
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

The Island Dance Restaurant was to be built on four islands in the center of a lagoon. The orchestra platform in the center of the dance floor would revolve 12 times an hour. Terraced dining areas would give up to 1,500 diners an unobstructed view of the dance floor. Kitchens and “retiring rooms” were to be located under the three higher terraces. Dock facilities provided for 200 small boats and canoes simultaneously. General illumination was to be provided by high interlacing arches of neon tubes on duralumin frames located around the orchestra platform.

[Wall label]

**Aerial Restaurant**

More than any of his other designs for the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago, Geddes’s Aerial Restaurant captured the popular and critical imagination.

This steel, aluminum, and glass structure would have risen 25 stories and rotated slowly, providing diners at each of the three component restaurants two complete panoramic views of Chicago and the fair grounds during the course of their meal. The three restaurants were designed to accommodate 1,200 people of varying budgets. The main level was a restaurant and dance floor for 600, the intermediate level was for light refreshment at popular prices, and the top level provided deluxe dining for 200. All three levels had glass windows from floor to ceiling and open-air terraces that would have served as observation decks. Nine service elevators connected a basement kitchen to the dining rooms above. In the 32-foot-wide column were three large elevators providing entrance and exit for 170 people every five minutes.
295

Sketch of the Aerial Restaurant, ca. 1930
Norman Bel Geddes
Pencil and color pencil on paper

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Minutes of a review of Geddes’s Aerial Restaurant proposal for the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago, January 21, 1930

At least one member of the Architectural Commission, Harvey Wiley Corbett, was wholeheartedly enthusiastic about Geddes’s design: “We ought to have at the World’s Fair some pure stunts of this kind which are the extreme of engineering skill and done and designed, just as this is, as an engineering stunt.”

297, 298

Geddes’s model of the Aerial Restaurant and original Geddes firm caption sheet, ca. 1929
Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

299, 299.1

Cover of Popular Mechanics Magazine, July 1930

Geddes’s Aerial Restaurant design touted as “Die Sensation von Chicago 1933” in Münchner Illustrierte Presse, 1931
Digital reproduction

[Ukrainian State Theatre and Opera House, 1930–1931]

Concurrent with his work for the Architectural Commission of the 1933–1934 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago, Geddes entered a Soviet-era international competition to build a State Ukrainian Theatre at Kharkov. Geddes submitted a plan incorporating three auditoriums.

A May 7, 1931 article in the New York Times reported that the editor of New York City’s oldest Russian daily, Novoye Russkoye Slovo, thought Geddes’s design for underground
parking for 650 cars impractical, pointing out that, at the time, there were fewer than half a dozen cars in the city of Kharkov.

Three Americans—Alfred Kestner, Eric Engerder, and Carl Meyer—shared the first prize with German and Ukrainian competitors, each receiving 8,000 rubles. Geddes was awarded a second prize totaling $770.22 U.S., paid to him in 1932. Geddes maintained that many elements of his design were actually incorporated into the built theater without credit.

Prospectus for the International Competition. . . for the State Ukrainian Theatre, ca. 1929–1930

Front elevation view of Geddes’s model for the Ukrainian State Theatre and Opera House at Kharkov, Russia; designed 1930, submitted to the U.S.S.R. Competition, 1931

Maurice Goldberg (b. Russia, 1881–1949)
Gelatin silver print

In response to the Russian requirement for a rostrum from which speakers could address 60,000 people assembled in the square outside the theater, Geddes added an outdoor stage on which 5,000 actors might play to the same audience. He equipped the plaza with lights and a sound amplification system in six great pylons. For good measure, the roof featured an additional open-air theater seating 2,000 people.

Rendering of the Ukrainian State Theater interior, 1930
Norman Bel Geddes
Charcoal on board

Four hundred pedestrians per minute could enter the building, check their wraps, and proceed directly to their seats without crossing each other’s path. The indoor auditorium seated 4,000 and employed Geddes’s signature indirect lighting, adjustable proscenium opening and stage floor, eliminated balcony, permanent cyclorama, and behind-the-scenes, clever organization of dressing and waiting rooms, workshops, and scenery preparation for maximum efficiency and reduction of off-stage sounds.
Aerial view of the General Motors “Highways and Horizons” building at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair, ca. 1939
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

The General Motors building occupied approximately seven-and-a-half acres in the Transportation Zone of the Fair. To capture most of the anticipated pedestrian flow, two monumental entrances were created for it—“a great wall . . . in the form of a giant hook” on the north side and “an actual Diesel locomotive” on the west side.

1 [Multi-media item] [Wall 15B/Wall S]

The film of Geddes’s Futurama, titled To New Horizons, is described by the Prelinger Archives as the “definitive document of pre-World War II futuristic utopian thinking.” Produced by the Handy (Jam) Organization for General Motors and now part of the Prelinger Archives, the full film is available for download from the Internet Archive under a Creative Commons license.

This edit of the 23-minute film runs five minutes.

[Text panel 17, Wall I]

**Futurama and the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair**

Geddes’s design of the Futurama exhibit was the culmination of his holistic approach to design that fused architecture and theater. In the exhibit, the audience experience was choreographed from entrance to exit as people traveled over a huge model of 1960 America, complete with highways that bisected cities and wove through mountains and valleys, bringing people breathtakingly close to nature. The model’s national roadways also anticipated the 1950s interstate highway system, representing a vision of an egalitarian America (automobility for all!) that was shaped to the last detail by a god-like Norman Bel Geddes.

How original was Geddes’s vision of an auto-centric America in 1960? Such ideas were already prevalent at the time, but this enormously popular exhibit gave dramatic visual reality to the concept of an America dependent on the car—and transformed skeptics into believers. Shortly after Futurama opened, Geddes wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt with material outlining Futurama’s “enormous popularity . . . as indicated by the nation-wide press use of the subject matter, and the consequent editorial comment.” Roosevelt responded by appointing Geddes to work on preliminary planning for the National Motorway Planning Authority, which influenced the interstate highway system of the 1950s.
Panoramic photograph of General Motors building exterior, May 16, 1939
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print

In a “Description of the General Motors Building and Exhibit” Geddes wrote: “The architectural forms... are a translation of the streamline forms used in the design of automobiles, trains, and other transportation units—interpreting not the automotive but the artistic characteristics.”

The exterior was painted with a silver-gray, gloss paint selected to highlight the building’s curved forms and to “reflect the colors of the sky, surrounding trees, flowers, and buildings.”

The designer Russel Wright wrote to Geddes about the General Motors building silhouette: “It is certainly the most distinctive building on the grounds. The scale or monumentality (or whatever you call it) which its form accomplishes fascinates me. When I look around at the other buildings, they seem like amusing ornamental ‘what-nots.’” Geddes also heard from the industrial designer Raymond Loewy who wrote “you did an unforgettable job for G.M. Three cheers!”

Highways and Horizons Future City Traffic Plan, ca. 1938
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper

George Wittbold, supervisor of construction, and Geddes with section of Futurama, ca. 1939
Gelatin silver print

Model-maker constructing a bridge for the General Motor’s Futurama exhibit for the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

Worker installing bridge on Futurama model, 1939
Richard Garri
son (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

The National Roadside Council, a group dedicated “to frame the roads in the United States with . . . nature’s natural adornment without . . . introduction of ugly things . . . particularly the obnoxious billboards,” invited Geddes to join their board. In accepting, Geddes wrote of “the battles” he had “to keep large super-billboards off the highways in Futurama.”

321

Worker placing model cars on a Futurama downtown street, 1939
Richard Garri
son (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

331

Geddes, holding blueprint, standing on a section of the soon-to-be-assembled Futurama model, 1939
Gelatin silver print

The 35,738 square-foot model contained more than 500,000 individually designed buildings and houses, a million trees, and over 50,000 motorcars, 10,000 of which moved over “the future highways revealed in the spectacle.”

322, 323 [Modular case 2]

Model cars for Futurama exhibit, ca. 1938
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Mixed media

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Model bus, “GM 99,” ca. 1938
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Metal

325

Model truck, “GM 99,” ca. 1938
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Metal

326
Model transcontinental bus, ca. 1938
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Metal

327
Miniature streamlined cars used in animated Futurama model, ca. 1938
Norman Bel Geddes & Company

508
Geddes’s concessionaire and participant identification cards, 1939–1940
New York World’s Fair Inc.
Mixed media

334
Geddes’s copy of the invitation to the formal dedication of the General Motors “Highways and Horizons” exhibit at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair held on April 19, 1939

335
General Motors souvenir booklet for its “Highways and Horizons” exhibit at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair, 1940

337
Visitors waiting in line to enter the General Motors “Highways and Horizons” exhibit containing Geddes’s Futurama, ca. 1939
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print
An estimated 6,000 people toured the General Motors exhibition each day.
In July 1939 Geddes wrote to a friend that “getting people into the [exhibit] is proving to be more difficult than doing the original job. Officials of the company are receiving an average of three thousand legitimate requests daily. I regularly get a half-dozen more a day.” Toward the close of the Fair, General Motors set up special late-night opening hours from May 28 through June 28, 1940 when, by special invitation, guests could tour the exhibit from 10 to 11 p.m.

Visitors on “carry-go-round” conveyor belt in Futurama, ca. 1939
Margaret Bourke-White (American, 1904–1971)
Gelatin silver print

Visitors descended a ramp system into a lobby that displayed a giant map of the United States and broadcast how envisioned changes to the highway system would open “a new motoring horizon.” Visitors then boarded a moving row of chairs and were conveyed through the Futurama model while listening to a synchronized, narrated description of their journey from farm to city along “the Motorway of 1960 with its stream of 1960 cars!” “As the spectator circles high about the city he is able to compare the congested, badly planned areas of the 1930s with the well-organized districts of the newer city.”

General Motors Building intersection, showing all four facades, January 31, 1941
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

Brought down closer to the city, the visitor’s “vision takes in only six blocks of the city” to be studied in more detail. Then, suddenly, the spectator chair swings around, and the visitor “is confronted with the full-size street intersection” just seen in miniature. “As the spectator steps on to the elevated sidewalk of the City of the Future, he realizes that the model he has just been looking at has come to life and that he is a pedestrian in the heart of the city he has just seen.”

“I Have Seen the Future” button, 1940
The reverse reads “General Motors Exhibit/World’s Fair 1940/in New York
Paper and metal

These souvenir buttons were handed out to fair visitors as they left the General Motors building.
General Motors publicity photograph for Futurama, 1940  
Gelatin silver print

A press release about the image reads: “These two Manhattan youngsters, in search of unusual Easter time adventure, explore the now famous General Motors Futurama, dazzling world of the future, visited by millions at the New York World’s Fair. Here, nestled in a smalltown churchyard, Mildred Cozzens and Wylie McCaffrey discover a nest of brilliantly colored eggs. The efficient motor traffic of the Futurama halted to witness the Easter spectacle, but will be resumed for the public on May 11, [the] reopening date of the World’s Fair.”

The 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair opened on April 30, 1939 for two seasons (April through October each year), and closed on October 27, 1940.

Two renderings for a proposed Skyride concession for the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair, ca. 1938  
Norman Bel Geddes & Company  
Pencil on paper

Preliminary sketch of the Crystal Lassies novelty for the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair, ca. 1938  
Norman Bel Geddes & Company  
Pencil on paper

Photograph of the Crystal Lassies building, ca. 1939  
Walt Sanders for Black Star  
Gelatin silver print

Feature on the Crystal Lassie’s concession in Glass Digest, ca. 1939

Feature about the Crystal Lassies novelty for the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair in Town & Country, August 1939

Geddes’s burlesque show of mirrored reflections of very scantily clad women was one of many offered in the Amusement Area of the World’s Fair, sharing space with other adult-
themed novelties, such as Salvador Dali’s Dream of Venus and the Cavalcade of Centaurs, as well as the more family-friendly Aquacade choreographed by Billy Rose.

Admission to Crystal Lassies, advertising “Real Girls Inside,” was fifteen cents.

346 [Wall T] [Multimedia item]

Geddes, an avid amateur film-maker, filmed this performance of Billy Rose’s Aquacade at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair from the grandstands.

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Car Culture

Letter from Geddes to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, July 21, 1939

Contemporary to the success of Futurama, Geddes sought ways to influence American car culture and its imprint on the nation’s landscape. Less than three months after Futurama opened, Geddes wrote to President Roosevelt with material outlining Futurama’s “enormous popularity. . . as indicated by the nation-wide press use of the subject matter, and the consequent editorial comment.” Roosevelt (who, in May 1939, had invited Geddes to the White House “to display futuristic highway plans and give a pep talk” in order to “stir sluggish Congressional imaginations”) responded by appointing Geddes to work on preliminary planning for the National Motorway Planning Authority, which influenced the interstate highway system.

374, 375


Map published in Magic Motorways illustrating routes that Geddes projected for a national highway system

Geddes further disseminated his ideas with his book Magic Motorways, announcing that “there are too many cars” and proposing a more tempered approach to their accommodation, including still-valid ideas such as mini-cars for city driving, suburban subway systems, and “park and ride” areas for commuters living outside the city’s core.

Although reviewers primarily focused on Geddes’s vision of an automated highway system that effectively allowed cars to drive themselves across the country in 24 hours, the book was sufficiently influential to have many of its ideas repeated (some verbatim and without credit) by the editors of Automotive Industries in a 1956 special report on the impact of a national superhighway program titled “The New America That’s Coming.”
50-Year Plan for Toledo, Ohio

Although attempts to travel Futurama’s vast model around the world as a kind of mobile cultural ambassador of the American way of life didn’t materialize, Geddes continued to be preoccupied with urban planning. His interest in the American city advanced in 1945 when he was invited to come up with a comprehensive plan for redeveloping Toledo, Ohio. The core problems to be solved in the “Toledo Tomorrow” project included transportation and traffic flow, and Geddes reiterated many of the concepts developed for Shell Oil and Futurama.

He designed and built a diorama of Toledo, Ohio as it could look in 50 years if careful urban planning were instigated immediately. The city’s Paul Block Newspapers financed the $150,000 model, which, at 60-feet long, was set up in the city’s zoological park for voters to consider the issue. The redevelopment plan advocated the removal of all railroads from the downtown area and broke up the gridiron street pattern. Parks were proposed for the river banks, a now common urban revitalization strategy, and residential areas were organized into self-contained units.

His plans for an associated air terminal to be within walking distance of downtown, although unrealistic in hindsight, were evidence of his strikingly prescient understanding that mass air transit would become commonplace at a time when such services had just been introduced to America.

While it is now difficult to know what direct impact the model had on Toledo’s post-war development, a May 24, 1946 article in Tide magazine credited the project with sparking a “reborn civic attitude,” resulting in “a rash of planning projects” totaling $225,500,000 and funded jointly by private industry and a new municipal payroll tax.

“The Toledo Tomorrow” booklet, ca. 1945
Norman Bel Geddes and Associates

The 47-section model depicting this integrated plan of civic improvements was built under the direction of Geddes in collaboration with Major Alexander de Seversky, aviation engineer, W. Earle Andrews, highway authority, and Col. Henry M. Waite and J. B. Sullivan, railroad consultants. The architect Geoffrey N. Lawford managed the project for the Geddes firm.
Dusting the Toledo Tomorrow model, 1945
Frank Scherschel for Life magazine
Gelatin silver print

Children viewing the Toledo Tomorrow model, 1945
Toledo Blade
Gelatin silver print

The Toledo Tomorrow model opened to the public at the Toledo Zoo on July 4, 1945, in order to win community support for future city planning. As with Futurama, the Toledo Tomorrow display was set up so that viewers had an aerial perspective of the model city from a theoretical height of 6,000 feet. In this instance, however, they walked rather than rode around an imagined Toledo.

Life magazine overseas edition for the U.S. Marine Corps, September 17, 1945

Whether by coincidence or design, this issue juxtaposed after-images of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima with images of Geddes’s vision for a “Future Toledo.”

497 [Graphic, Wall T]

The sitting areas in the Norman Bel Geddes & Company offices, Rockefeller Center, June 17, 1940
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

[Text panel, Wall T]

Norman Bel Geddes & Company

As a founder of the American industrial design profession in the 1920s, Norman Bel Geddes profoundly shaped the field. He imparted a visionary outlook to both his contemporaries and his successors and provided a practical training ground for such designers as Henry Dreyfuss, Russel Wright, and Eliot Noyes. The promotion, staffing, and organization of Geddes’s office represented a machine for gaining clients, producing designs, and keeping the Geddes name in the public mind. At the height of Geddes’s industrial design success in 1941, The New Yorker called him an “intense, wild-haired… super-salesman [who] moves from one grandiose venture to another, leaving chaos, and usually an awed but somehow satisfied client.” After World War II, leading industrial
designers adopted many of Geddes’s business strategies and aspects of his visionary social agenda while rejecting his theatricality and grandiosity.

487 [Wall F]

Draft announcement of the formation of Norman Bel Geddes & Company, 1928
Digital reproduction of manuscript original

Geddes invoked the title of an H. G. Wells work, “The Shape of Things to Come,” as a design mantra in an address to the plastics industry in 1941: “From my earliest days as a designer to industry—before ‘streamlining’ had become an everyday term—to the present era of high product efficiency, I have based every design concept on this unalterable premise: that any manufactured article which is not the result of careful product analysis may well be outmoded on the very day that it first comes off the assembly line, and that only by anticipating tomorrow’s trends (and by incorporating those characteristics in its design) will it be favored by consumer acceptance.”

490, scan to make into larger graphic

Inter-Departmental Office Work Flow Chart, showing Geddes at the nexus of Design, Promotion, and Management, not dated
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Digital reproduction

311, 310

Norman Bel Geddes & Company and George Howe partnership flyer, 1935

Memorandum by Geddes summarizing the history of his inability to be registered as an architect, February 4, 1940

Beginning in 1930, Geddes tried repeatedly to be certified as a registered architect in the state of New York. Despite his extensive experience designing building structures, lack of a high school diploma and formal architectural training violated the law, and he could not obtain a waiver. In 1935 he entered into a partnership with architect George Howe, although this work-around also turned out to be illegal, and the partnership was quickly dissolved.

Geddes married George Howe’s daughter, Anne Howe Hilliard, in December 1944. Like Helen Belle Sneider and Frances Waite before her, Anne was actively involved in
Geddes’s design business, working with him on a line of jewelry for the Rice-Weiner Company.

494

“Boys. Stop playing around. I won’t pay for it.”

Geddes’s admonition to his staff on a draft engineering drawing of the stair riser for his All-Purpose, All-Weather Stadium, June 1949

492

Norman Bel Geddes & Company purpose statement, ca. 1950s

493 [multi-media item; digitized page turner of contents]

Presentation book about Norman Bel Geddes & Company Inc., Designers, ca. 1950s

[table case 7, Side A]

IBM

Between late 1943 and 1947, Geddes’s office worked for postwar powerhouse IBM on the design of business machines and workstations, notably designing the enclosure for the IBM Automatic Sequence Controlled Calculator (ASCC), an electromechanical computer for Harvard, which named it the Mark I, and a new casing for IBM’s electric typewriter. Geddes’s partners in this enterprise were Katherine B. Gray, Roger L. Nowland, and Peter Schladermundt. By mid-March 1944, the partnership had dissolved, but existing contractual obligations were completed under the name of Norman Bel Geddes & Company, using, according to a letter of agreement in the Geddes collection, the “same personnel. . . now engaged. . . with identical supervision and standards of operation.”

432, 433, 434

Ergonomic motion studies at existing IBM office desk and at redesigned IBM office desk illustrating fewer movements needed, ca. 1946–1947

Norman Bel Geddes & Company

Gelatin silver prints

Mock-up of a redesigned IBM office desk, ca. 1946–1947

Norman Bel Geddes & Company
The listed outcomes for a redesigned desk were maximum efficiency of functions (“typing first”), accessibility of desk accessories, useable space when the typewriter was not in use, and vertical adjustability.

440, 441

“Order to Initiate New Work” to design a corporate bus for IBM, 1945
Norman Bel Geddes & Company

Model of a corporate bus for IBM, 1945
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print

Work started on February 7, 1945 and was completed March 3, 1945, in accordance with Geddes’s instructions that “this job is to be finished as economically and as rapidly as possible—the object of this assignment is to impress Mr. Watson with the quality and efficiency of our work.”

Graphic Design

In 1940, the same year Geddes successfully redesigned the typography and layout of the New York Evening Post, the Crowell-Collier Publishing Company announced that Geddes had joined its creative team to invigorate three of its publications—Collier’s, Woman’s Home Companion, and The American Magazine—pointing out that “To one important field of industrial endeavor Mr. Geddes has heretofore not turned his talents. That is the mass stimulation of people through the medium of the printed and illustrated word. . . Mr. Geddes brings added enthusiasm, a new inspiration, a vision of tomorrow which promises to peak up reader-interest and reader enthusiasm to new heights.”

409

The American Magazine publicity brochure announcing Geddes’s employment, 1940
Crowell-Collier Publishing Company

411

Glamour silk hosiery advertisement with a Geddes-designed zig-zag spread for The American Magazine, 1941
Geddes also designed a strip spread ad format that ran across the top and bottom of a magazine type page.

415

Geddes-designed *Woman’s Home Companion*, January 1942

439 [Modular case 3]

Geddes’s own IBM Executive electric typewriter, designed jointly with Eliot Noyes, 1948
Metal and plastic

435

“Present” and “Proposed” dimensions for redesigned IBM Electromatic typewriter, September 30, 1946
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print with ink

436

Model of the redesigned IBM electric typewriter, ca. 1946
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print

437

“Perfect Impression” advertisement for IBM Electric Executive typewriters, annotated “NBG Design,” not dated

[stand-alone label Wall U]

**The Bel Geddes Process**

When the United States declared war in 1941, Geddes converted his interest in war—he had invented a popular war game in the mid-1910s and owned an extensive library on the subject—into serious wartime activities. Geddes and his staff built elaborate miniatures of land and sea conflicts, which were convincingly photographed via the grandiosely
titled and marketed “Norman Bel Geddes Process.” Proclaimed by New York’s Museum of Modern Art as “a new form of picture journalism” that educated the public about the war, these images were featured in Life magazine, and the models themselves were displayed at the museum in 1944. Geddes also used this process to realistically depict the building of the Egyptian pyramids and the Panama Canal for the Encyclopedia Britannica. With the Bel Geddes Process, Geddes not only expanded his arsenal of visualization tools but also pointed American design in a new, largely unexplored direction—beyond the creation of discrete objects toward the creation of information systems. This field would be advanced in the late 1950s by designers such as Charles and Ray Eames and George Nelson in their exhibitions and books for IBM and the United States government.

378.1, 378.2

“Games Worth the Candle” in Arts & Decoration, February 1933

Geddes was an avid historian of military strategy. He devised an elaborate war game as early as 1915 and hosted legendary war-game parties in his New York apartment in the 1920s and 1930s using an aerial view model he had constructed.

Geddes overlapped concepts and technologies developed in his various gaming and theatrical activities (he also created an automated horse race game) in his design work. The aerial perspective of his war game was repeated in the Shell “City of Tomorrow” and in Futurama. Mechanical track systems that moved scenery in The Miracle also operated the race track and drove the model cars along Futurama’s highway system.

379, 380

Geddes with Newspaper Syndicate war map and ship models, ca. late 1939
A. F. Sozio
Gelatin silver print

Norman Bel Geddes, Batlrama map, late 1939–early 1940
McClintock Publishing Company

At the start of the war in Europe, Geddes tried to persuade news agencies to license from his firm “cartoon strips” that would illustrate the movement of troops and supplies in Europe with a degree of accuracy Geddes claimed would reach 80—90%. All declined the proposal as too hypothetical. Similarly, and equally unsuccessfully, Geddes tried to market to the general public a fold-out map on which they could track troop movement information provided by his firm.

383 [modular case 3]
Case containing battleship models, ca. 1940s
Norman Bel Geddes & Company

A 1941 *Popular Science* article about Geddes’s model photographs attracted the attention of the U.S. Navy, and for 20 months Geddes’s firm worked on top-secret projects developing photographs of enemy ships taken at specific angles and aircraft and battleship identification training materials.

385, 509, 388

Employees of Norman Bel Geddes & Company fabricating a simulated naval battle for a model-photography project for *Life* magazine, ca. 1942
A. F. Sozio
Gelatin silver print

Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print

“Coral Sea: Norman Bel Geddes’s Models Re-enact Naval Battle” in *Life*, May 25, 1942

While working in secret for the Navy, Geddes was commissioned by *Life* magazine to create model photographs depicting recent battles. His first assignment, the Battle of the Coral Sea, appeared in the May 25, 1942 issue, less than three weeks after the battle took place.

Some of the effects achieved were ship wakes made of soda, distant rain simulated by a screen of slanting wire threads, long smoke trails of cotton-batting on a framework of wire, and clouds simulated by studio lighting.

387

*Norman Bel Geddes War Maneuver Models Created for Life Magazine* exhibition catalog
(New York: Museum of Modern Art, 26 January to 5 March, 1944)

During the war, the Museum of Modern Art launched a series of war-themed exhibitions, including this one that featured Geddes models depicting “events that have already taken place,” “battle scenes that might have taken place,” and “the big event yet to come,” a possible major second front, which Geddes projected might open up through Norway or the North Sea coast of Germany. The exhibition featured a live-action installation, in which Geddes’s staff built day by day a large model of an invading army coming up against a river defense line.
Egyptian pyramids construction model 531, Assignment 2, Setup 4, Take 25, ca. 1945
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print

Geddes continued to market and to try to expand the scope of the Bel Geddes Process after the war. Model photography projects Geddes proposed to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were intended to illustrate historical events or agricultural or architectural processes, such as this one on the building of the Egyptian pyramids. In addition, he promoted the process as “a new type of journalistic technique,” tailored it to “Television, Motion Pictures, [and] Graphic Illustration,” and in 1950 pitched an economic development model for India to the Ford Foundation that involved, in part, building models of India as envisioned in 1975.

Revere Copper and Brass “Total Living” Campaign, 1941

Model of three configurations of Geddes’s modular homes, 1939–1940
Richard Garrison (active New York City, 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

Revere Copper and Brass “For us the living. . . better homes” advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 1941

In 1939 the Housing Corporation of America contracted with the Geddes firm “to design and develop a four-room family dwelling. . . to supply the needs of low income-bracket families and to sell at not more than $2,500.” The housing elements were to be prefabricated and erected by Works Progress Administration laborers under a “controlled co-operative” system licensed from the HCA. When the HCA declared bankruptcy in 1941, Geddes was able to retain patents taken out under the firm’s name and to interest Revere Copper and Brass in making his modular home design the focus of an advertising campaign.

Launched in September 1941, the “For us the living. . . better homes” campaign positioned the company to take full advantage of an anticipated post-war construction boom. By 1945 the Revere Copper and Brass Company had distributed more than 800,000 copies of a 12-page booklet describing Geddes’s “tomorrow’s homes for the many” plan. But Geddes himself was never able to capitalize on his ideas. In 1942, a collaboration with Norman K. Winston to build 100 units of a “Defense House No. 7” in Milford, Connecticut failed. Nor was Geddes able to get off the ground a proposed prefabricated “Expand-a-House” franchise in the 1950s.
Geddes and staff with prototype radios, ca. 1940s
Richard Garrison (active New York City 1930s–1960s)
Gelatin silver print

Between 1942 and 1944 the Geddes firm conducted market research and designed radios and combination radio-phonographs for RCA Victor.

“Study of Historical Development of Radio Design” and “Possible Future Trends” for radio and phonograph cabinet design in the firm’s “Quarterly Report to R.C.A. Victor Division, Stationary Combinations-Stage 1,” 1942–1944
Norman Bel Geddes & Company

Combination radio-phonograph console for RCA, ca. 1944
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gelatin silver print

Informed by the results of a review of historical designs and contemporary motion studies, Geddes designed this console for RCA as part of its “Model X” post-war product line-up.

Chart illustrating carrying preferences for a new style of portable radio in the firm’s “Quarterly Report to R.C.A. Victor Division, Personal Radio Study-Stage 1,” 1942–1944
Norman Bel Geddes & Company

Based on user studies conducted with Geddes’s employees, these images illustrate the three most popular methods for carrying a prototype portable radio. Geddes wanted to conduct the study using members of the general public, but RCA refused to grant permission for fear that a competitor might steal the design.

FC-400 Emerson “Patriot” radio prototype, ca. 1940
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Plastic
Geddes’s most iconic radio design was produced for Emerson Radio in one week and exploited the versatility of different types of plastics in combination with one another. The radio, as manufactured, had a cabinet of cast phenolic. The handle and knobs were molded of urea material, and the grill bars and pointer disc were molded of cellulose acetate. The transparent dial was made of an embossed acetate sheet.

205

Davega City Radio advertisement for the Emerson Patriot radio in the Sunday News, October 20, 1940

Geddes’s Patriot radio became a best seller for the Emerson Corporation. One store reported first day sales of 700 units.

216, 217

Brooch and earrings for Trifari, Krussman & Fischel, November 5, 1940
M. White for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper

Geddes-designed Lucite and gold brooch from Trifari, Krussman & Fischel, ca. 1940
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

The Geddes firm’s first commission for costume jewelry designs came from Trifari, Krussman & Fischel, for whom the firm designed a Lucite and gold fish brooch that is now a vintage classic.

A second, 1942 contract with L. Heller and Son was not realized because of war-time restrictions on sterling silver. On this project Geddes brought in his wife, Frances Waite, to establish the basic design ideas—“intaglios... African primitives (not idols but the jewelry worn by the idols)... bent flattened silver... á la Calder brass jewelry... Greek architectural motives [sic]... Baroque swags with a modern feel... Gothic gargoyles.”

218, 220-222

Promotional photograph for Geddes-designed Jery line of “flow-motion” jewelry, 1950
Rice-Weiner & Co.
Gelatin silver print

Three “conversation pins” (snail, poodle, rooster) for Rice-Weiner & Co., 1950
Norman Bel Geddes
Gold-toned metal
In 1949 Geddes and his third wife, Anne Howe Hilliard, worked together on designs for a line of costume jewelry for Rice-Weiner & Co. Geddes and Howard Weiner did not often agree on which designs should be manufactured. Weiner was disappointed that early designs submitted by Geddes did not convey “the lines and the flow of motion which you had captured and practically developed in the design field in some of your modern structural designs.” Geddes, in turn, was puzzled by Weiner’s preference for “gadgets in the form [of] recognizable objects.”

Geddes’s “flow-motion” designed jewelry ensembles (based largely on architectural and floral motifs) were launched enthusiastically in summer 1950. By year’s end, Rice-Weiner reported disappointing sales and abruptly discontinued the use of Geddes’s name in connection with the line.

Promotional material described the “Egretta” bracelet, necklace, and earrings ensemble, shown in the photograph, as “like the glorious plumage of the graceful egret bird. . . , this jewelry is the epitome of all that is desirable.” The snail pin, “Cornicopia,” was characterized as “an enchanting really streamline snail with really popped pop-eyes” and the poodle pin, “Pom-Pom,” as “the most distinctive canine pet you’ve ever met.”

Total Living: 1945–1958

At the end of World War II in 1945, the United States emerged as a rich and powerful nation, a seemingly ideal environment for Geddes to realize his most visionary dreams. The years between 1944 and 1947, while successful for Geddes, with designs of a new Coca-Cola vending machine, as well as window displays, radios, luggage, and boats, were also troubled. Geddes’s health began to fail, and he was further depressed by the death of his second wife, Frances Waite, in 1943. His desire to focus less on consumer research and engineering and more on design led to a split with his business partners, and his financial situation soon deteriorated. Nonetheless, Geddes remained a prescient visionary who was involved in many fields that defined Cold War America, from designing television studios to conceiving new types of suburban housing and proposing vast urban renewal schemes.

Entertainment Industry

After the war, Geddes returned to the performing arts—his first love and the field of his earliest successes. He worked for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, creating dynamic posters and designing modular cages and wagons with improved fittings that facilitated easy transfer from rail to ground transport. He also discarded the
traditional peaked circus tent in favor of a domed construction, which allowed a huge, completely unobstructed space that could accommodate as many as 2,000 people and a five-ring circus—a revolutionary re-thinking of a traditional structure. Geddes also worked for the newest entertainment media and, in the 1950s, collaborated with television pioneer Frank Stanton on a series of un-built studio facilities in Manhattan that sought to mechanize television production in the same way Geddes had mechanized theater sets in the 1920s. Television viewers were also considered in Geddes’s never-built design for an open-air sports stadium with a retractable roof for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

444, 445

**Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus**

Renderings of the exterior and interior of a circus tent for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, ca. 1940
[T. Kautzky Del] for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper and tempera and conte on paper

Geddes’s “futuristic” tent design for the circus was initially conceived for a traveling version of Futurama. When General Motors gave up on the idea, Geddes proposed the tent design to John Ringling North who then contracted with Geddes to modernize the circus operation in other ways. A prototype tent, built in 1941 for Mr. and Mrs. Gargantua the Great, “the world’s most publicized gorilla couple,” served as a scale model of the intended circus big top, a pole-less tent suspended from steel pylons 200 ft. high, that was to be built for the 1942 season. However, “priority limitations,” doubtless created by war-time rationing, caused John Ringling North to delay construction. North’s brother, Henry (who ran the business during World War II), did not have confidence in the weather-resistance qualities of Geddes’s tent design were it to be scaled up. By mutual agreement, Geddes’s contract with Ringling was canceled in January 1943. Post-war efforts to revive the business association failed.

446

Lion tamer design for a poster publicizing the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, ca. 1941
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Watercolor and gouache

In the Geddes redesigned circus “menagerie,” animals were displayed against painted backgrounds that emphasized their natural habitats. Geddes also designed two spectacles for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus—a “King Cole and Mother Goose” spectacle in 1941 followed by a “Holiday” spectacle in 1942 as well as the costumes for a “Dance of the Elephants” ballet with choreography by George Balanchine and score by Igor Stravinsky.
An anonymous reviewer detailed Geddes’s accomplishments:

The sideshow front, the lighting, the lines of ticket wagons and concessions stands—all are camouflaged in beauty. The banners of yesterday, picturing in mediocre and unimaginative daubs the wonders within are now done in the alluring poster art of tomorrow. . . The main entrance is a color symphony by day and a neon one by night. . . It is the conception of a great and understanding artist. . . Geddes has futuramaized the physical show, but he did it only after months of study of the huge troupe on the road. If, as the quotation goes, genius is the art of taking infinite pains, then The Greatest Show on Earth this season is the abode of genius.

457

Suspended Roof or All-Weather, All-Purpose Stadium

Perspective drawing of a never-built All-Weather, All-Purpose Stadium for the Brooklyn Dodgers, 1949
John A. Dilliard for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper

Designed between 1948 and 1952, 20 years before Houston’s Astrodome, this completely covered stadium, equipped with a roof that could slide open if weather allowed, was to be the new home of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Designed to be the ideal baseball park, but never built, the stadium could be converted for use as a football field or even flooded for boating events.

For baseball games seating capacity was planned at 55,000 but could be expanded to 90,000 for conventions or boxing matches by means of movable bleachers. The home run range was a constant 380 feet. No columns would obstruct vision. Twenty-one gates around the stadium would allow spectators to enter directly above or below their seats after passing through a standardized ticket control unit, and synthetic grass (the precursor to Astro Turf™) was considered for the playing field.

Geddes also attacked the problems of traffic congestion that occur before and after major sporting events. His design used less acreage than conventional stadiums while providing parking and easy access by means of bus or subway. To maximize use of the structure, Geddes included plans for a shopping center and a children’s playground to be built into the stadium below street level.

The estimated cost of the stadium was $6 million or approximately $51 million in today’s dollars.
“Baseball’s Answer to TV” in Collier’s, September 27, 1952

Left to right: Rolf Kelp, Collier’s associate editor Tom Meany, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum vice-president and treasurer Paul S. Kerr, and Geddes, ca. 1952

Collier’s
Gelatin silver print

Kelp made the illustrated rendering of Geddes’s design (with Emil Praeger, structural engineer) for a Brooklyn Dodgers “streamlined” stadium. Collier’s then presented Kelp’s work to the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

Brooklyn Dodgers’ players Jackie Robinson (left) and Roy Campanella (right) with Geddes (center) in Vero Beach, Florida, not dated
Barney Stein
Gelatin silver print

Robinson and Campanella have inscribed the photograph to an unidentified “Bert”

NBC Television Studios

Model of Studio 100 (scale: 1/8 in. = 1 ft.)
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Brass

In 1951–1952, Geddes created a preliminary design for an eight-floor television studio building that would reduce the costs and increase the output of television productions by incorporating assembly line procedures.

By presenting his design entirely in terms of economic efficiency, Geddes tried to accommodate the business priorities of the fledgling network. NBC, although beginning to move from a single- to multi-sponsor programming model, still needed to deliver adequate programming to sponsors who were backing—and sometimes even producing—aired segments. A more front-and-center Control Room, rather than one at the rear of the auditorium, had space for sponsors behind the director and production unit.
This location also eliminated the need for the director to take unnecessary steps to and from the stage.

448 [TV-2. b.1]

Split section view of the Factory or Vertical Broadcast Studio or Studio 100, ca. 1951–1952
Alexander Leydenfrost for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Charcoal and gouache

Geddes provided a seven-day breakdown of a sample stage’s movement through the Factory Studio, from the carpentry shop on the fifth floor, to the prop room on the fourth, to a blocking studio with cameras on the fifth, to a rehearsal studio on the sixth and a final stop at a replicated studio on the second floor for a dress rehearsal before heading to the audience-filled auditorium for taping.

449, 450

Top to bottom: Renderings of the actor’s and audience views of a broadcast in the Factory or Vertical Broadcast Studio or Studio 100, ca. 1951–1952
Alexander Leydenfrost for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Charcoal and gouache on paper

451

Model for the Pilot or Producer’s Showcase
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Mixed media

In 1954–1955 Geddes designed a television studio featuring an adjustable stage for the National Broadcasting Co. The Pilot Theater (also known as Producer’s Showcase) fit an efficient model of production within a more traditional theatrical space. The “Double Circle Theater” concept allowed the space to accommodate quick shifts between scenes and shows.

452

Pilot or Producer’s Showcase model, side angle, ca. 1954–1955
Fred Roha
Gelatin silver print
Using research from interviews with leading comedians, Geddes determined three main types of audience-performer relationships. The “legit [or theater] trained comic,” like Bob Hope, required cameras not closer than the seventh row of seats. The “television trained comic,” like Sid Caesar, wanted all orchestra-level seating be removed in order to give the camera maximum maneuverability. And the “radio trained comic,” like Steve Allen, wanted space in the aisle to play out impromptu scenes with audience members. As a result, Geddes included removable audience seating and a 40’ camera ramp to account for variations in performer preference.

453

Pilot or Producer’s Showcase model, Car Spectacular, ca. 1955
Unidentified photographer
Gelatin silver print

Geddes envisioned a number of staged “spectaculars” in the Pilot Theater, including a car show for up to 70 vehicles. Following a trajectory of work he had begun at General Motors, he claimed the Pilot Theater “offers another new opportunity making a theatrical event of an industrial show for a national audience.”

[Wall D label]

Post-war Architectural Designs

A theatricalized form of architecture—in which the movement of masses of people added drama—also characterized Geddes’s postwar work. His Copa City nightclub in Miami in 1948, a nightclub-cum-theater, department store, and radio/television studio, was a veritable fun-house of transparent and reflective surfaces. The next year Geddes proposed a consumers’ building for General Motors in Manhattan that was, in effect, a vertical version of Futurama—a multi-story structure in which people moved via swooping ramps set in front of large windows on the street that turned their movement into urban theater. Geddes also applied his innovative ideas for mobile sets—used in Broadway productions like The Patriot (1928)—to architecture, best seen in the moving components of his Expand-a-House, as well as his climatically efficient Walless House with garage-door-like walls that pivoted up or down to open or close the residence depending on the weather.

470

General Motors Manhattan Display Room, 1949

Rendering of a generic (ABCD) Consumers’ Building, 1949
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Charcoal and gouache on paper

In 1949 Geddes conceptualized a never-realized exhibition building for downtown Manhattan at Rockefeller Center. Pitched to General Motors as “a building for the specific purpose of selling good-will to the people... in the most entertaining and dramatic ways for easy consumption,” the 60-foot high building would consist primarily of changing exhibits focusing on General Motors products, which would be viewed by the public’s passage down a one-way ramp running from the building’s fourth-floor to a main floor 10-feet below side-walk level. Promoted as the “largest display window in the world,” the building would have featured 400 running feet of glass facing three streets.

471

Rendering of Consumers’ Building interior with imagined exposition, 1949
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Charcoal and gouache on paper

472

Rendering of Consumers’ Building cut-away to show ramp system and auditorium, 1949
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Charcoal and gouache on paper

Wall C Job 584

**Copa City Cabaret**

Geddes designed this nightclub for Murray Weinger after Weinger’s Copacabana club in Miami Beach burned down. Adaptable as a radio and television studio, department store, and theater, Copa City opened on December 23, 1948 to national acclaim.

An engineering and design marvel, the building’s suspended roof structure allowed for the construction of floor-to-ceiling curved walls of plate glass, manufactured to Geddes’s specifications, creating the impression of vast openness.

Constructed in just 16 weeks, the cost totaled $1,250,000. At its completion Geddes was quoted as remarking “I’ve never done one so good as this one.”
Rough interior perspective drawing of Copa City dining room with revealed trusses, July 25, 1949
Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Pencil on paper

In the 35-foot tall building, ceilings and walls were supported by overhead trusses rather than columns. Knowing that a night club’s profitability relied on filling to capacity, Geddes designed the rooms to be made bigger or smaller as occasion dictated. Norman Giller served as the architect for Copa City with Jules P. Channing serving as engineer.

Copa City show girl, 1948
*Look* magazine
Gelatin silver print

Front façade of Copa City on opening night, December 23, 1948
Joseph B. Brignolo
Gelatin silver print

Copa City lounge on opening night, December 23, 1948
*Look* magazine
Gelatin silver print

Gabriel Heatter, a radio personality popularly known as “Mr. Mutual,” broadcast from Copa City on opening night via the Mutual Broadcasting System. His praise of Geddes’s design was effusive: “I know I am here in a room with a thousand other people, but I don’t believe it even now. One thing I am certain of—this isn’t Dec. 23, 1948—this is tomorrow next year, 10, 15, 20 years later... Picture a great big theater... lighting as new as tomorrow’s sunrise, shops of all kinds, rooms for radio and television, and great conventions—yet I can’t see a straight wall or a column, or a door... nothing begins or ends anywhere. It curves in a rhythm.”

Murray Weinger (left) and Geddes, ca. 1948
*Life* magazine
Gelatin silver print
Despite Copa City’s early success, accumulated debts forced Weinger to close its doors in April 1949. He filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in October, owing Geddes $4,000.

[Wall C]

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**Expand-A-House and Walless House**

Sketch plan for the Walless House, also known as the Edith House; so-named for Geddes’s wife Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes, November 1956

Pencil on paper

In 1950, hoping to profit from the post-war building boom, Geddes completed a project presentation for “The Norman Bel Geddes Expand-A-House/Tomorrow’s House Today.” He conceived of the Expand-A-House project as a national franchise opportunity for low-cost houses with walls and beds that could be moved at the push of a button to reconfigure the space for other than routine living needs, which he categorized as sitting, sleeping, eating, and cleaning.

More nearly realized were his plans for a tropical Walless House, which could be open or closed to the elements as weather dictated.

481, 480 (hang 481 above 480)

Rendering of the Walless House outdoor dining area with walls retracted and wall lowered, ca. 1954

R. David Rowland for Norman Bel Geddes & Company

Pencil on paper

Geddes’s presentation book caption for these two images reads “From this ↑ to this ↓ in three minutes.”

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Model photograph sequence of the Walless House in operation, ca. 1954

Digital reproduction

[stand-alone label, Wall B]
Boca Raton Housing

In 1945 the hotel owner and real estate developer J. Myer Schine purchased the Boca Raton Club and Hotel and hired Geddes to work on master plans for the Florida property and for his Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

For Boca Raton, Geddes designed the Yacht Club and boat yard and seven houses—three to be built within a cost of $12,000, two for $25,000, one for $30,000 and one for $35,000. The “ultra-modern” homes, completed in 1949, featured extensive use of plate glass windows and doors, outdoor terraces (Geddes envisioned most meals being eaten outdoors or in the living room so none had formal dining rooms), and “husband-and-wife” bathrooms, centered by square tubs and showers. The reported aggregate selling price of the homes was $155,000.

The firm of Pope & Blake served as architects of record.

Geddes later presented this same design in a proposal for a resort hotel in Malaga, Spain.

This Geddes-designed home, built in Boca Raton Park, was described in promotional literature as “a very large frame bungalow with tile roof and oak floors of the Florida modern type. Although it has only two bedrooms, both are very large and airy. As in all the seven houses, the large living room is very cheerful and the rear side opens on to a stone terrace and a spacious lawn.”

Boca Raton Club brochure pre-dating Geddes’s work, ca. 1950
Colonial Hotel Nassau

At the request of Nancy Oakes, Baroness von Hoyingen-Huene, Geddes prepared a master plan to update and redesign the entire operations of the British Colonial Hotel in Nassau, Bahamas. Citing the need for the property to remake itself as a destination resort rather than a mere transit hotel, Geddes promised that his plan offered a “solution for the future, as well as the present.”

Oakes could not ultimately persuade her mother to finance the renovation, in part because she could not convince her mother of Geddes’s reputation and importance.

483, 510

Rendering and schematic of Colonial Hotel Nassau, aerial view, ca. 1954–1956
Lutz for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gouache on board

Geddes proposed a number of “new income features” for the property: a row of 24 shops anchored by a Mandalay Bar and Buttery, a beautified beach, pool cabanas and a pavilion night club, a boat-ski-snorkel pier, a Children’s Paradise, and a combination banquet room/theater.

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Rendering of Colonial Hotel Nassau, front elevation, 1954–1956
Lutz for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gouache on board

Emphasizing the importance of a guest’s first impressions of the building, Geddes recommended substantial changes to the hotel’s façade, recommending that its owner replace narrow guest room windows with a single wide one, create a Roof Dining Garden with overhanging eaves of plantings around the top edge of the building, reposition the lobby at the front door, and create ample, covered temporary parking for guest arrival and departure.

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Rendering of Colonial Hotel Nassau, patio, ca. 1954–1956
Lutz for Norman Bel Geddes & Company
Gouache on board
These renderings were commissioned by Geddes to provide “visual assists” to the reader of his master plan presentation and do not represent what might have been his actual final designs.

[Text panel, Wall A]

**Legacy**

As one of the twentieth-century’s leading futurists, Geddes believed that a brighter tomorrow awaited his countrymen and that it was just around the corner. While Geddes answered the question of what the future would bring in many forms—his visionary articles boasted titles like “Dreamlining Tomorrow” and “Ten Years from Now”—his most notable effort was his Futurama display for General Motors at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair. Futurama’s giant model of 1960 America gave Depression-era Americans genuine hope for a better future within their lifetimes. It was Geddes, more than any designer of his era, who created and promoted a dynamic vision of the future with an image that was streamlined, technocratic, and optimistic. Today, as seen in the “retro-futurist” looks of theme parks, animated television programs, and popular novels, Geddes’s vision of the future continues to shape and inspire the twenty-first century American imagination.

Beyond the design of products and the imagining of fantastic schemes, Geddes played a seminal role in shaping the expectations and behavior of American consumers and helping to transform both the industrial design and theater design professions into modern businesses. A paradoxical figure made up of equal parts visionary and pragmatist, serious inventor and inveterate promoter, naturalist and industrialist, democrat and egoist, Norman Bel Geddes sought nothing less than the transformation of modern American society through design.

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Norman and Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes in Jamaica, 1957, one year before he died
Unidentified photographer
Digital reproduction from original slide

501, 501a

Norman Bel Geddes, not dated
*New York Journal-American*
Gelatin silver print and digital reproduction

Geddes died of a heart attack on May 8, 1958 at age 65. He had arranged to have his eyes donated to an organ bank.
When Geddes began writing his autobiography shortly before his death in 1958, he focused exclusively on his early career in the theater.