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C O U R I E R

WILLIAM LESCAZE

THE RISE OF
MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA

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William Lescaze and CBS: A Case Study in Corporate Modernism

BY DENNIS P. DOORDAN

During the period 1934 to 1949, the Columbia Broadcasting System provided William Lescaze with a series of commissions that, considered together, constitute one of the largest, most varied, and most important bodies of work in his entire career.¹ Lescaze was responsible for the design of a major new broadcasting facility, the interior design of studio and office spaces, the design of a variety of studio furnishings such as microphones and clocks, the design of a mobile broadcasting vehicle, and the graphic design for CBS facilities across the country. A careful review of the material indicates that Lescaze made a major contribution to the development of a fundamentally new twentieth-century building type, the broadcast facility. He also contributed to the definition of the role of the corporate designer by demonstrating the advantages of treating design as an integral part of corporate planning.

The sheer volume of his work for CBS renders it impossible to discuss all of it within the limitations of a short essay such as this. I would like, therefore, to look at a selection of CBS commissions representative of the range of tasks Lescaze performed for the network and indicative of the character of the design solutions he offered.

His very first job for CBS involved the conversion of an existing Broadway theater, the Avon theater on West Forty-fifth Street, into a radio broadcasting facility. Preserved in the William Lescaze Papers at Syracuse University is a section drawing of the theater. The drawing bears the notation, "First drawing made by Mr. Lescaze for CBS. Sept. 13 - 34. Approved by Mr. Paley." The theater was renamed the Columbia Radio Playhouse. Economic reasons dictated CBS's decision to lease and remodel an existing space rather than construct a

1. I first began working on this topic while on the faculty of the Syracuse University School of Architecture. A major part of the research for this paper was funded with a Syracuse University Senate Research Grant. I wish to thank the University and, in particular, the staff of the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections for their invaluable assistance on this project. All the illustrations used in this article are from the George Arents Research Library.

new facility. Lescaze eventually converted several theaters for CBS according to the formula he developed for the Columbia Radio Playhouse.

In order to adjust the acoustical properties of the theater for broadcast purposes, Lescaze installed a series of plywood panels across the rear and sides of the stage. He designed two booths flanking the proscenium, one for the engineers handling the broadcast and the other to accommodate network and program sponsors. The stark character of Lescaze's additions contrast strongly with the ornate interior of the existing theater in a manner that boldly proclaims the novelty of the new medium of radio (fig. 1).

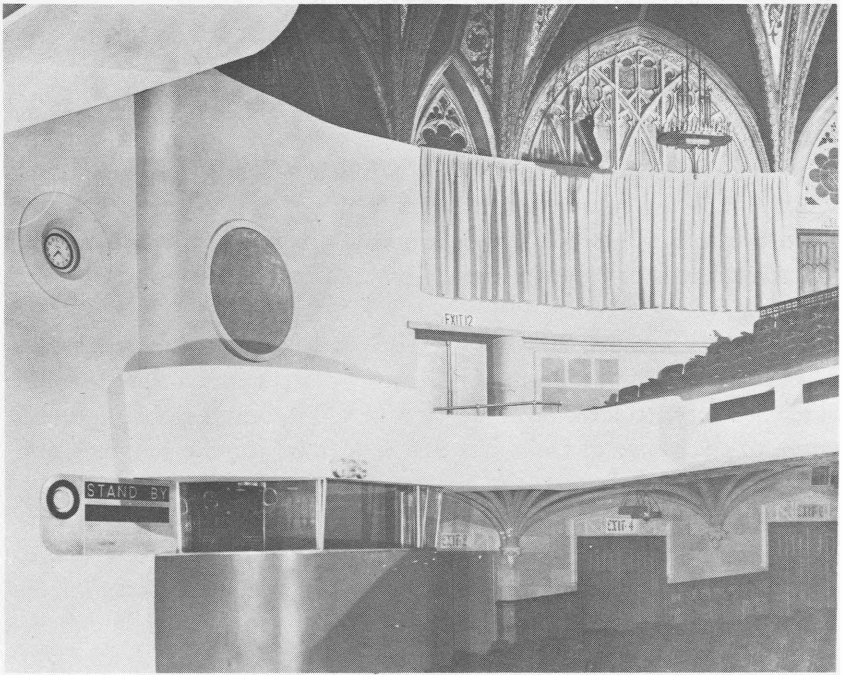


Fig. 1. Control Booth, Columbia Radio Playhouse, New York City, 1934, William Lescaze, designer.

The contrast between the old and the new in the Columbia Radio Playhouse is significant because it vividly illustrates an important aspect of Lescaze's work for CBS. From the beginning of his involvement with the Columbia Broadcasting System, he made no attempt to disguise or camouflage the new forms required by radio facilities. Instead, he identified the essential components of a broadcast studio and

sought an appropriate set of forms for the task.

Lescaze's treatment of the studio control booth is typical of his approach to designing a broadcast facility. He placed the booth to provide easy, immediate visual contact between the control booth staff and the performers. The glass enclosing the booth is slanted to avoid distracting glare or reflections. The STAND BY and ON THE AIR signs are prominently positioned for maximum visibility, and the all-important studio clock is isolated for easy reading. The form, location, and graphic design of every detail is carefully considered to insure that necessary information is conveyed quickly and unambiguously. The large number of drawings preserved in the Lescaze Papers at Syracuse attests to the careful study Lescaze gave each and every studio fixture.

Lescaze extended the formula he developed for studio spaces to other areas of the broadcast facility as well. In the mid-1930s Lescaze designed the reception area for CBS corporate offices at 485 Madison Avenue in New York. In this early design the receptionist's station is partially screened. In subsequent CBS lobbies the receptionist's station is fully screened, imitating the booth form of the broadcast studio. Mounted on the wall of the waiting room is a unit housing a radio speaker, studio indicator, and a clock. The slanted surfaces of this unit echo the slanted panels of the studio control-booth glass. Lescaze's consistent treatment of details such as clock faces, signage, and lighting fixtures unified the disparate studio and office spaces. The smooth surfaces, fluid forms, and unadorned wall planes of the reception area have clear parallels in Lescaze's residential interiors of the 1930s.

But CBS wanted more from Lescaze than a design solution to the problem of arranging studio and office interiors. CBS wanted a design solution to the problem of creating an identity. Beginning in the early 1930s, William S. Paley, president of CBS, embarked on a deliberate program to promote CBS through innovative programming, shrewd management of the relationship between the network and its affiliates, and a serious, sustained effort to create a distinctive identity for CBS within the competitive broadcast industry.² William Lescaze played

2. For a history of the broadcast industry during the period covered by this paper see: Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, vol. 1, and *The Golden Web*, vol. 2, of *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966 and 1968). For William S. Paley's own account of his career and the rise of CBS see: William S. Paley, *As It Happened: A Memoir* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979).

an important role in shaping the visual identity of CBS in the 1930s and 1940s.

An excellent example of Lescaze's contribution to this program is his work on the design of a new microphone housing. In 1935 CBS commissioned Lescaze to design a case to house a standard microphone assembly then in use throughout the industry. The idea was to transform a stock microphone assembly into a unique piece of equipment by inserting it into a new outer shell. The new housing would visually distinguish CBS from other stations and provide a uniform, formal vocabulary for the entire CBS network.

Lescaze began by studying the problem in a series of free-hand sketches. Most of the early studies are profile sketches done in pencil on white or yellow tracing paper. Lescaze devoted particular attention to the shape of the arm supporting the microphone (fig. 2). The final design had to be adjustable in order to allow the microphone to rotate or swivel through an arc of forty-five degrees. The next step involved the preparation of detailed scaled drawings, including plans, elevations, and renderings of various proposals (fig. 3). The final step involved the construction of a model of a prototype for the microphone case (fig. 4).

A comparison between one of the detailed studies and the model reveals various considerations included in the design process. In figure 4 the arm supporting the microphone case is in the shape of a squared C. The microphone unit is mounted on the arm with screws set flush with the outer face of the bracket. On the model, however, large thumb-screws are used to mount the microphone. This change facilitated adjusting the angle of the microphone itself.

The other major change between the drawn proposal and the model is not strictly functional in origin. The curve of the arm on the model conforms now with other aspects of Lescaze's work for CBS. It is, for example, clearly related to the curved stairwall found in CBS station KNX in Hollywood, designed by Lescaze in 1936 (fig. 5). The formal parallel between the microphone case and the stair detail is important because it indicates that Lescaze considered each individual CBS project in the context of a larger, ongoing campaign to develop a coherent, consistent set of related forms that spanned a range from individual studio fixtures, to the design of an entire studio, to the design of the building that housed the studio.

In the 1930s American corporations turned in growing numbers to

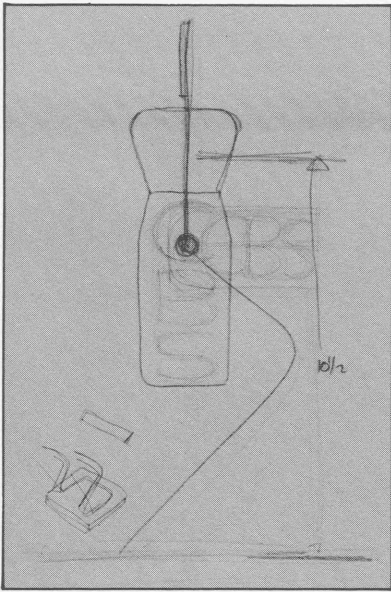


Fig. 2. Preliminary Study Drawing, Microphone Case, 1935, William Lescaze, designer.

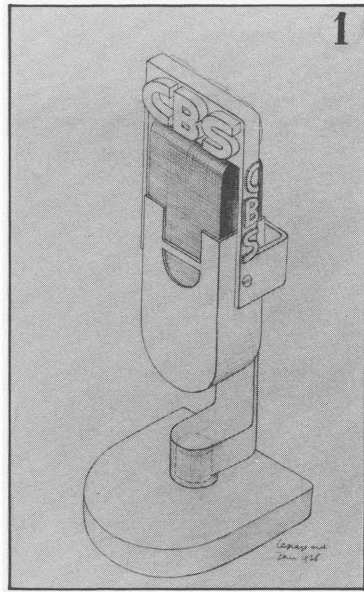


Fig. 3. Study Drawing, Microphone Case, 1936, William Lescaze, designer.



Fig. 4. Model, Microphone Case, 1936, William Lescaze, designer.

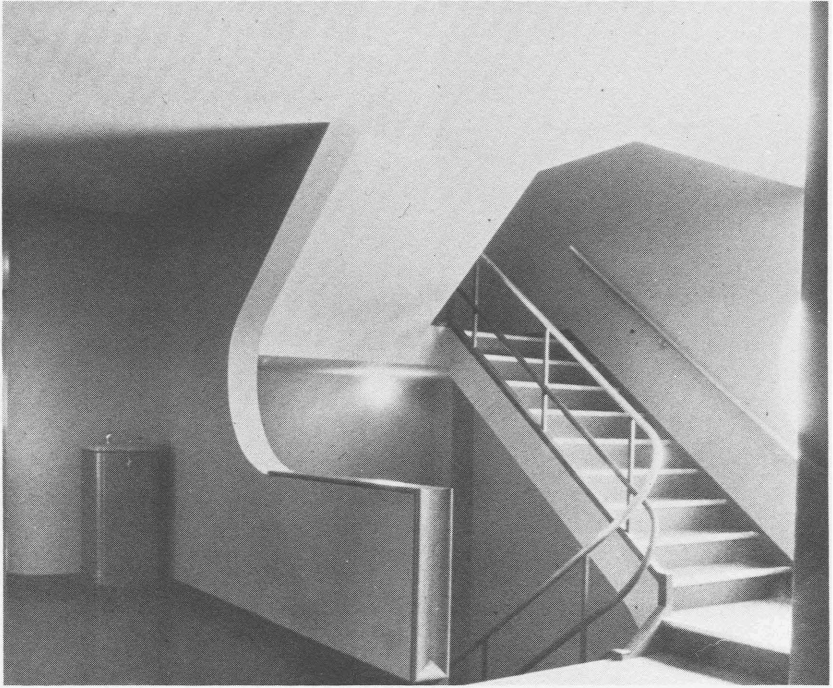


Fig. 5. Stairway, Station KNX, Hollywood, California, 1936-38,
William Lescaze, architect;
Earl Heitschmidt, associate architect.

the emerging profession of industrial design for assistance in achieving a number of goals: the rationalizing of design and manufacturing processes in order to correct deficiencies in production or marketing; the attracting of customers through innovative design solutions; the developing of a corporate identity that would convey a particular, desired image both to employees and to the public.³

A major part of Lescaze's activities for CBS belonged to this final category, the creation of a corporate identity. CBS had a very clear idea about what kind of image it wished to project through architecture and design. William S. Paley was actively involved in decisions regarding design at CBS. The relationship between Paley and Lescaze was personal as well as professional. In an interview Paley recalled at-

3. For more on the history of Industrial Design see: John Heskett, *Industrial Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Arthur J. Pulos, *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

tending parties at the Lescaze townhouse.⁴ Another key figure at CBS in those years was Paul Kesten. Kesten came to the network from a career in advertising. His position at the network was described by one former employee as “vice-president in charge of the future”.⁵ Kesten was not an operations manager. Rather, his role was that of a “concept” man, responsible for a wide range of ideas concerning every aspect of the network. Paley later recalled his association with Kesten in these words, “We saw eye to eye from the start on the importance of design and good taste.”⁶

Both Paley and Kesten were aware of new ideas concerning architecture and design. Both men had seen Modern Architecture in Europe, particularly in Paris, and were enthusiastic about progressive European design. Paley considered Modern Architecture to be functional, efficient, and attractive. He perceived a natural affinity between the broadcast industry and modern design. CBS’s image of itself was that of a progressive corporation in a progressive and growing industry. For Paley and Paul Kesten, Modern Architecture had a look expressive of the progressive aspects of contemporary culture.

In William Lescaze, CBS found an architect fluent in the language of contemporary modern European design, an architect who could solve the functional problems associated with creating a new building type and deliver an image—a “look” to use Paley’s own word—appropriate to the rise of a new industry. In CBS, Lescaze found a client sensitive to the modernist aesthetic, a client searching for a compelling visual identity, and a client attuned to the promotional value of modern design. All of Lescaze’s work for CBS was realistic in the sense that his designs were intended for construction. But many of his proposals remained unrealized due to budgetary restrictions or other limiting factors beyond his control.

In 1935 Lescaze was asked to prepare a design for a new CBS corporate headquarters building in Manhattan (fig. 6). The site was on the east side of Park Avenue between Fifty-eighth and Fifty-ninth Streets, close to several CBS studios and to the posh hotels favored by the star performers then courted by CBS. The architectural program called for retail space along the avenue, two auditoria with a capacity of approximately 1100 people each, a number of smaller

4. Interview with William S. Paley, 14 June 1983.

5. Telephone interview with Adrian Murphy, 18 July 1983.

6. Paley, *As It Happened*, 64.

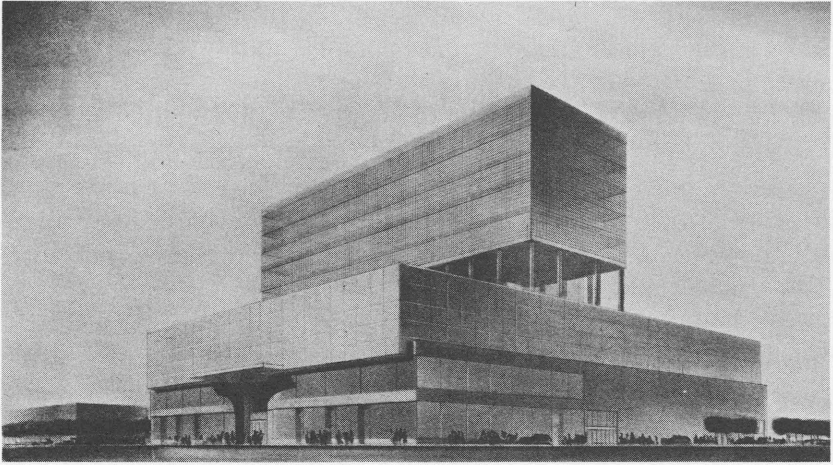


Fig. 6. CBS Building, Park Avenue, New York City, unbuilt project, 1936, William Lescaze, architect.

studios, and office space for executives and staff.⁷ Lescaze split the facility into two distinct parts: a four-story base containing the retail and studio spaces and a five-story office slab lifted over the base on *pilotis*. Lescaze's proposal included provisions for the future addition of two more office floors. The office slab was set back seventy-two feet from the Park Avenue facade. Lescaze inserted a small rooftop garden in the space between the studio and retail base and the office slab.

Certain elements of this scheme are clearly reminiscent of the PSFS building completed three years previously. The clear distinction between the base of the building and the office slab, for example, is derived from Lescaze's experience with the PSFS building. The manner in which Lescaze isolates the elevator core and expresses it as a separate element to the rear of the site repeats one of the crucial elements of the PSFS design.

This particular project had to be abandoned when CBS was unable to acquire title to the entire site. Several other schemes for various sites in the upper Fifties of Manhattan also came to naught. Although

7. This project remained virtually unknown until Ann Lorraine Lanmon published a rendering and a brief description of the scheme in her doctoral dissertation "The Role of William Lescaze in the Introduction of the International Style to the United States", (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 1979). The Lescaze Papers at Syracuse include a number of plans and elevations for this project which I am currently preparing for publication.

both Lescaze and CBS were frustrated in their attempt to build a major new broadcasting facility in Manhattan, they ultimately realized their ambition with the completion of a new home for CBS affiliate KNX in Hollywood, designed in 1936 and completed in 1938 (figs. 7 and 8).



Fig. 7. Station KNX, Hollywood, California, 1936-38, William Lescaze, architect; Earl Heitschmidt, associate architect.

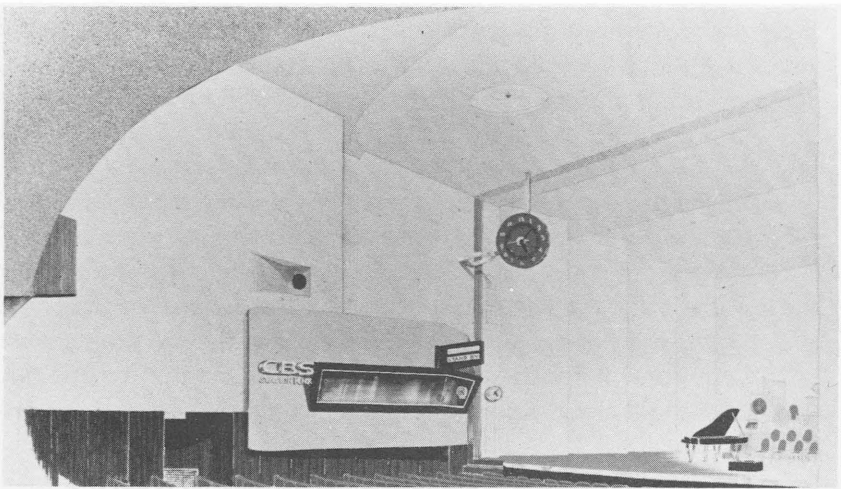


Fig. 8. Broadcast Studio, Station KNX, Hollywood, California, 1936-38, William Lescaze, designer.

The architectural program for KNX was similar to the program for the unbuilt Park Avenue project: a variety of studio spaces, office space, commercial and retail space. Although the final design of KNX arranges these requirements in a different way, there are powerful parallels between the Park Avenue and Hollywood buildings. In each, the studios are housed in low compact blocks at ground level. The office area in both projects is expressed as a slab lifted over the studios on *pilotis*. At KNX, the commercial space, including a restaurant, occupies a prominent location along the Sunset Boulevard street frontage.

On the exterior of station KNX, Lescaze extended one edge of the office slab to create a billboard-like projection with the CBS call letters aligned vertically on it. This sign, positioned at right angles to the street, announces the station's identity to passing motorists as well as to pedestrians. Lescaze attached great importance to the signage on his buildings. He once wrote:

A sign need not be ugly . . . I have yet to see one physical or mechanical necessity in any building which needed to be ugly. If a sign is ugly, it is often because it was an after-thought, that is, something not thought out beforehand, not taken into consideration when the building was designed, . . . For KNX the wall of the building itself was shaped and designed to receive the sign, and the sign was thus designed as a real part of the building.⁸

Lescaze had, perhaps, his greatest success in creating a uniform and distinctive visual identity for CBS in his coordination of graphics, signage, and architecture. From the Columbia Radio Playhouse in Manhattan to KNX in Hollywood, Lescaze produced a CBS style that extended from coast to coast (figs. 9 and 10).

For the interiors at KNX, Lescaze applied the same solutions he had developed originally for CBS theater conversions and office interiors in New York. The information booth in the lobby of KNX is treated like a studio control booth and defined by slanted planes of glass. The public studio at KNX repeats the same formula he devised several years earlier; the control booth occupies a prominent position to one side of the stage, and clocks and the necessary signage are quickly located and easily read.

8. "Signs Should Not Be an Afterthought Says Noted Architect", *Signs of the Times*, January 1944: 7. A copy of this article is preserved in the Lescaze Papers at Syracuse.



Fig. 9. Sign, Station KNX, Hollywood, California, 1936-38,
William Lescaze, architect;
Earl Heitschmidt, associate architect.

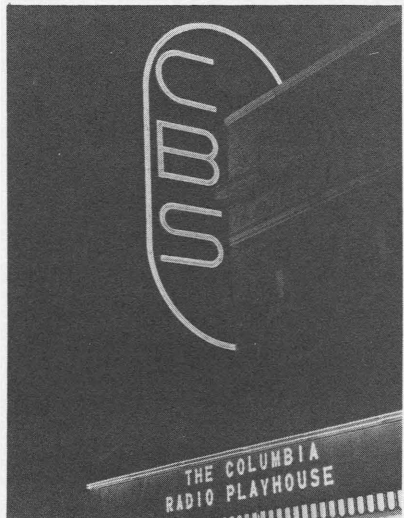


Fig. 10. Sign, The Columbia Radio Playhouse, New York City, 1934,
William Lescaze, architect.

The KNX building was the largest single commission Lescaze received from CBS.⁹ He was responsible for the architectural design of the entire building, the design of the interior spaces—both public and private—and the design of the studio furnishings. Late in his life William Lescaze made the following comment regarding Modern Architecture in general. It is particularly appropriate in connection with his work for CBS.

The visible results are forms which are beautiful, economical and efficient. The unseen results are greater happiness, better health for a greater number of human beings, the satisfaction of being honest and of being in tune with the life of our own times.¹⁰

A comparison between Lescaze's work for CBS and Raymond Hood's work for NBC does much to clarify Lescaze's distinctive—and honest—approach to the problem of the broadcast studio. Hood designed studios for NBC and in an article in *Architectural Record* he explained his approach to the assignment.¹¹ Hood reasoned that the broadcast performer lacked the stimulation of a traditional concert hall. He tried, therefore, to simulate the effect of an authentic concert hall through the use of theatrical lighting. He attempted to negate the obtrusive presence of the control booth by placing it to the rear of the stage and keeping it within the plane of the wall. Hood's studios for NBC were actually mock theaters. Lescaze's studios, in contrast, were conceived as radio broadcast studios, not dignified parlors or imitation theaters. His forthright and honest treatment of the theme is one of the most impressive and consistent aspects of his work for CBS, and one of his most important contributions to the evolution of a modern broadcasting facility.

For William Lescaze, modern meant functional. He was, first and foremost, a functionalist committed to the belief that every design problem contained within it the seed of its own solution. He accepted the

9. For more on CBS station KNX see: "CBS Broadcasting Studio Hollywood, California", *Architectural Forum* 68 (June 1938): 454-64; "Plant for CBS Hollywood", *Architectural Concrete* 4, no. 3 (1938): 2-7; "CBS Builds New Home for KNX", *Electronics* 11 (April 1938): 20-25. Earl Heitschmidt was the associate architect for KNX.

10. William Lescaze, undated typescript, Lescaze Papers, published by Lanmon, "The Role of William Lescaze", 458.

11. Raymond Hood, "The National Broadcasting Studios, New York", *Architectural Record* 64 (July 1928).

value systems of his clients. His studios for CBS reflect corporate virtues—economy, efficiency, adaptability. He welcomed the contributions of technical experts from related disciplines as part of the process of analyzing and solving design problems. In all of his work for CBS, Lescaze functioned as a member of an integrated team of technical experts, acoustical consultants, structural engineers, electricians, and advertising representatives. Lescaze was responsible for the architectural resolution of a variety of technical, commercial, public relations, and artistic concerns. The KNX building is an outstanding example of the degree to which Lescaze could resolve those various concerns in a convincing architectural entity. Lescaze could legitimately experience the satisfaction of being honest and of being in tune with the life of his own time. In his entire career he was never more in tune with his time and the needs and aspirations of his client than during the years of his association with CBS. He ably responded not only to the diverse demands of new building types, but also to the challenge of new design tasks for the modern architect and designer.

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