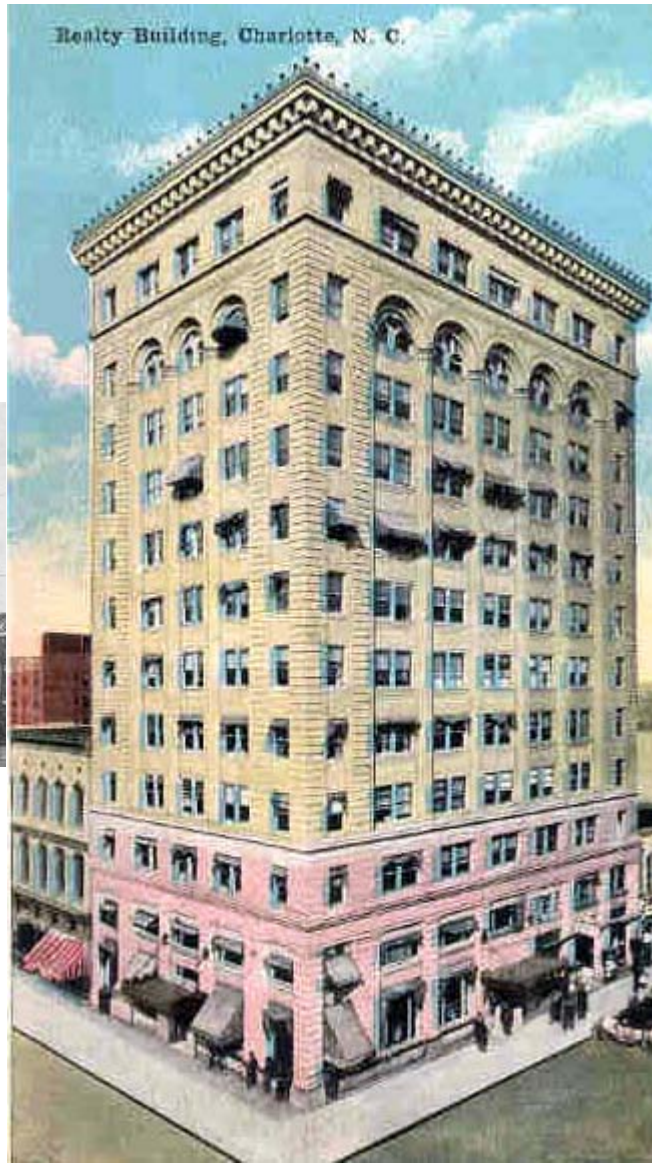
# Charlotte High Rise Buildings


**This is the cover of a promotional booklet produced by the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce in 1930. It demonstrates the importance of skyscrapers as symbols of progress.**

High rise buildings were a significant part of Charlotte's man-made or built environment throughout the twentieth century. Beginning with the Realty or Independence Building in 1908-1909, designed by architect Frank Milburn, Charlotte business leaders showed a persistent interest in the construction of skyscrapers.[1] According to the authors of *Architects and Builders in North Carolina. A History of the Practice of Building*, the "symbolic importance" of skyscrapers as a "sign of progress, permanence, and prosperity was immeasurable."[2] The people of Charlotte took great pride, for example, in the fact that they would soon have the tallest edifice in the state. To them the Realty or Independence Building symbolized the strength and vitality of the commercial and industrial base of the community. The *Charlotte Observer* spoke to this point on several occasions while the Realty Building was being

built. Particularly illuminating were the comments of two reporters who visited the top of the still-unfinished skyscraper in October 1908. “Appreciation of what the city is,” they asserted, “comes only to those who view it from this aerial spot.” Only from the top of the “most magnificent building of the Carolinas” could one appreciate that “Charlotte assumes the nature of a mining-town in western Pennsylvania, everlastingly enwrapped in clouds of smoke.” So proud were the local residents of the emerging skyscraper that they persuaded the J. A. Jones Company, contractors for the building, to “shove the towering structure 30 feet further (sic.) up” by putting the first column of the final portion of the steel framing into place, thereby letting the delegates to the Democratic State Convention in June 1908 see the extra height of the building.[3]

**The Federal style Osborne House stood on the northwest corner of the Square until 1908.**




**The Realty or Independence Building brought an entirely new scale to the skyline of Charlotte.**

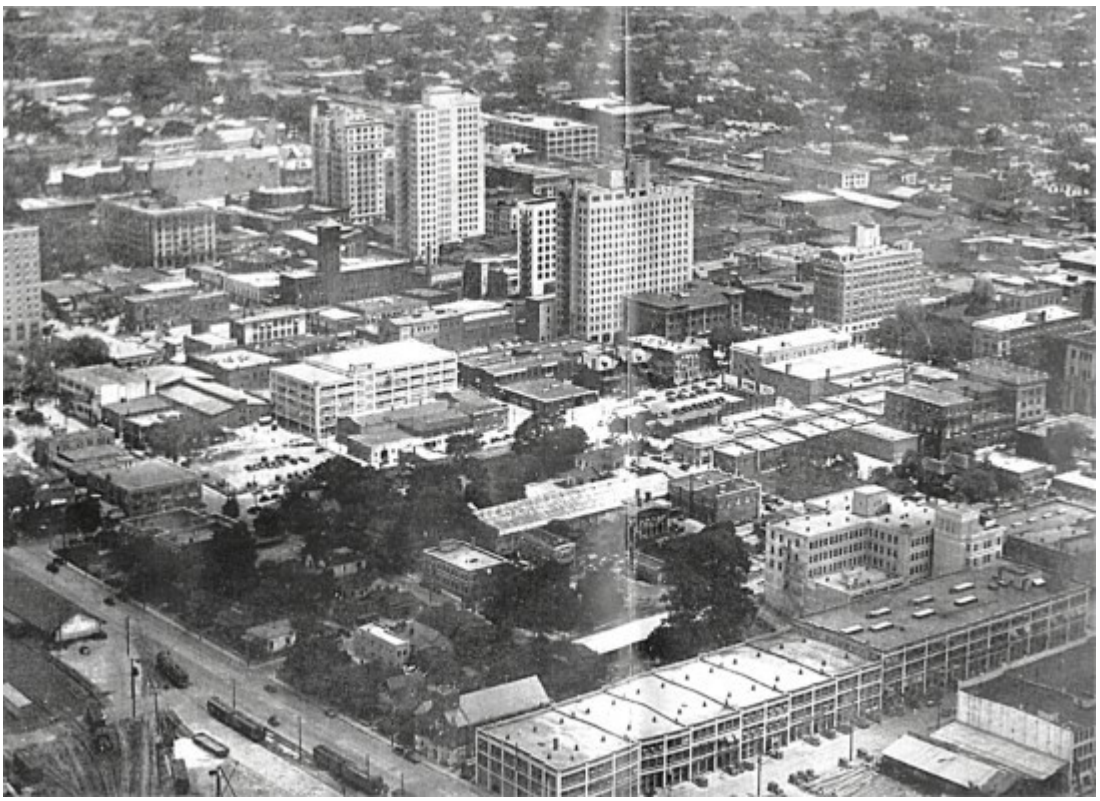
The pace of high rise construction in Charlotte during the first sixty years of the twentieth century peaked in the 1920s and the 1950s – both being decades of expanding economic activity. A 1927 publication of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce reported that the amount of money invested in new buildings more than tripled between 1920 and 1926.[4] Although distinctly different in terms of their predominant architectural styles, the skyscrapers of these two decades shared the common purpose of demonstrating that Charlotte was “up-to-date” with respect to its business practices. The Barringer Hotel, erected in 1940, is anomalous. First, it was the only high rise building constructed in Charlotte between the 1920s and the 1950s. Secondly, local interests played no part in bringing it about.


**The Independence Building was reduced to rubble in September 1981.**

The favored style of the 1920s was Neo Classical, although one high rise, the Builders Building, belongs most readily to the Commercial style. The center city has four examples of skyscrapers that survive from the 1920s – the Johnston Building, the First National Bank Building, the Builders Building, and the Mayfair Manor Hotel. Such notable buildings as the Hotel Charlotte (1924) have been destroyed.


**Hotel Charlotte (destroyed)**

In the 1950s, led by A. G. Odell, Jr., Charlotte architects abandoned traditional ornamentation and adopted the International style. Two modernist high rises survive from this decade. They are the Jefferson Standard Building (1953) at 301 S. Tryon St. and the Wachovia Bank and Trust Company Building at 129 W. Trade St (1957). Two others, the North Carolina National Bank Building (1961) and the Cutter Building (1961) were built just beyond the scope of this survey; and they have both experienced substantial alteration. An especially significant example of a mid rise Modernist office building in center city Charlotte is the 7-story Home Federal Savings and Loan Building (1967).



**This photograph of Center City Charlotte was published in 1930. It shows the results of the building boom of the 1920s. You are looking toward the northeast. Along Tryon St. you see from top to bottom the Realty or Independence Building (destroyed), the First National Bank Building, the Commercial National Bank Building (destroyed), the Johnston Building, and the Wilder Building (destroyed).**

## High Rise Buildings of the 1920s

Revivalist styles dominated Charlotte's skyscrapers of the 1920s. Architectural historians ascribe the business elite's preference for traditionalist designs to the conservative political, social, and economic values that dominated the era of White Supremacy in North Carolina. "Political power and legal control remained in the hands of the wealthy—whether former landed gentry or the newly rich industrialists—who hired architects and general contractors to create a fabric of building that was consonant with their values," assert Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury, and Ernest H. Wood III.[5] Architects and builders "attempted to meet the needs of the conservative capitalists and urban dwellers who swelled the population and the gross national product in a society that remained conservative politically and socially."[6]

**Most of the skyscrapers of the 1920s, like the Commercial National Bank Building, have been destroyed.**

Historian Thomas W. Hanchett contends that the local penchant for traditional styles, especially Neo-Classicism, resulted in part from the emergence of business leaders in Charlotte in the 1920s who were less willing than their predecessors to take risks. "The generation of New South leaders, including D. A. Tompkins, Edward Dilworth Latta, and George Stephens, who had taken enormous risks to turn the Piedmont into a major industrial region, were passing their power on to a new generation" says Hanchett. "The new leaders seemed much less adventuresome, willing to follow in the directions set by their predecessors. Their homes and offices reflected this increased interest in tradition over innovation, in social correctness rather than risk-taking."[7]

**The Johnston Building**

Local architects were primarily responsible for the design of the high rise buildings erected in center city Charlotte during the 1920s. The only exception is William L. Stoddart (1869-1940) of New York City, the architect of the Johnston Building (1924). The designer of such notable Atlanta structures as the Winecoff Hotel, the Georgian Terrace Hotel, and the Ponce de Leon Apartments, as well as the Battery Park Hotel in Asheville and the Hotel Charlotte in Charlotte, Stoddart rendered the Johnston Building in the Neo Classical style.[8] The man who provided the money for this imposing edifice was local textile magnate Charles Worth Johnston (1861-1941), a native of Cabarrus County who graduated from Davidson College and eventually became president of the Highland Park Manufacturing Company. Charlotte's tallest and newest office building is attracting favorable comment as it nears completion because of the beauty and attractiveness of its exterior," stated the *Charlotte News* on January 13, 1924.[9] The Johnston Building's original tenants included architect Charles Christian Hook, the E. C. Griffith Co, and former Governor Cameron Morrison.[10]

**This c.1952 photograph of 3rd and S. Tryon shows the Wilder Building on the left and the former Lawyers Building on the right. Note the railroad freight yard in the background that separated 2nd Ward of "Brooklyn" from the rest of Center City Charlotte.**

Louis H. Asbury (1877-1975) designed the First National Bank Building (1926) and the Mayfair Manor Hotel (1929). Asbury was the son of S. J. and Martha Moody Asbury of Charlotte. In addition to being one of the first carriers of the *Charlotte Observer*, the young Asbury assisted his father, who was a builder of houses in Charlotte

**Louis H. Asbury**

in the 1890s.[11] He subsequently matriculated at Trinity College, now Duke University, and graduated from that institution in 1900. Having acquired his professional training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Asbury

returned to Charlotte and established his architectural practice in 1908.[12] In the succeeding decades, Louis H. Asbury assumed a position of prominence and leadership in the architectural profession. He was the first North Carolina member of the American Institute of Architects and played a leading role in organizing the North Carolina Chapter of the A.I.A.[13] But his greatest contributions to the built environment of Charlotte were the many buildings which he fashioned over the years, beginning with the residence of R. M. Miller, Jr. on N. Tryon St. (1908).[14] Among his more noteworthy designs were the Mecklenburg County Courthouse on East Trade Street, the First National Bank Building, the Montaldo's Building, the Law Building, the Mayfair Manor Hotel, and several of the imposing edifices in Dilworth and Myers Park.[15]

**First National Bank Building**

The First National Bank Building was the tallest skyscraper in the two Carolinas when it opened in 1926 on the Tryon Street edge of Third Ward. The president of First National Bank was H. M. McAden. Like so many of Charlotte's New South business leaders, including Charles Worth Johnston, McAden had made his money in the textile industry. That he went into banking is no surprise, because the rise of Charlotte as a banking center was tied directly to the

emergence of Charlotte and its environs as a major cotton mill region at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Indicative of Charlotte's importance as a financial center was the establishment here of a branch of the Federal Reserve Bank. Its initial location was on the top floors of the First National Bank Building.[16]

The Mayfair Manor Hotel, also designed by Louis H. Asbury, was built on the corner of West Sixth Street and North Tryon Street in 1929 by Drs. J.P. Matheson and C.N. Peeler, who were perhaps better known as two of the founders of the Charlotte Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat Hospital.[17] The ten-story, 100-room hotel was intended for use by permanent and transient guests, with fifty rooms reserved for permanent residents.[18] Hotels were essential to Charlotte's emergence as a warehouse and distribution center for the two Carolinas in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Manufacturer's representatives, salesman, buyers, and others who came to town to do business needed a place to stay. In 1930, there were nine major hotels in Charlotte – the Mecklenburg, Central, Piedmont, Selwyn, Walton, Clayton, Hotel Charlotte, Stonewall, and Mayfair Manor. Only the building that housed the Mayfair Manor remains.[19]

**Mayfair Manor**

The Builders Building was designed by Charlotte architect and engineer Marion Rossiter “Steve” Marsh (1901-1977) and constructed in 1926-27 in response to the building boom that was occurring in Charlotte and its environs during the years immediately following World War One. Its purpose was to provide a single home for the principal participants in Charlotte’s building trades. The bringing together of firms involved in the building trades was especially popular in those communities, such as Charlotte, that were dedicated to unremitting growth and expansion. This concentration of architects, general contractors, and components manufacturers, it was argued, would allow construction professionals to respond more effectively to the increasingly complex building systems that were appearing in urban centers of the United States, including those in North Carolina, in the early twentieth century.[20]

**Builders Building**

Charles E. Lambeth was instrumental in bringing the Builders Building to fruition. A native of Fayetteville, N.C., Lambeth had located here after graduating from the University of North Carolina. Like so many Charlotte businessmen of his era, Lambeth was a champion of entrepreneurial enterprise. He wanted Charlotte to become a truly substantial place and believed that locating construction businesses in a single edifice would advance that goal.[21]

M. R. “Steve” Marsh, a native of Jacksonville, Fla., came to Charlotte in 1916 as chief draftsman for the architectural firm headed by James Mackson McMichael (1870-1944). In 1922 Marsh opened his own architectural and engineering company in Charlotte and continued to head the firm until his retirement in 1964. That Marsh received the contract to design the Builders Building was a real feather in his cap, so to speak, because the new edifice was to be a showcase of what construction professionals could accomplish. The design philosophy for the Builders Building emphasized modernity.[22]

Stylistically, the Builders Building appealed to the business elite’s preference for traditionalist designs. Newspaper articles published at the time the Builders Building was completed in July 1927 express the New South creed of urban “boosterism” that held sway in Charlotte. If the architects, painters, plasterers, electrical men, and others, had not been the type of men to develop with the city it is extremely doubtful if Charlotte could have grown,” proclaimed the *Charlotte Observer*. The newspaper continued: “Every year the number of new constructions in the city has grown. Each year the aggregate figures for building permits has mounted.”[23]

**High Rise Buildings of the 1950s.**

The 12-story Jefferson Standard Building (1953), later Union National Bank Building, although significant as Charlotte’s first modernist high rise, has lost much of its original integrity. Three stories have been added to the original building, and the exterior curtain walls of the building have been completely replaced.[24] The North Carolina National Bank Building at 200 South Tryon St., erected in 1961 and perhaps North Carolina’s first Miesian style, glass-and-steel skyscraper, has also experienced insensitive updating. The Cutter Building, also erected on South Tryon St. in 1961, has been altered even more extensively.[25] The Wachovia Bank and Trust Company Building (1958), however, retains its essential form.

**Jefferson Standard Building under construction in 1953**

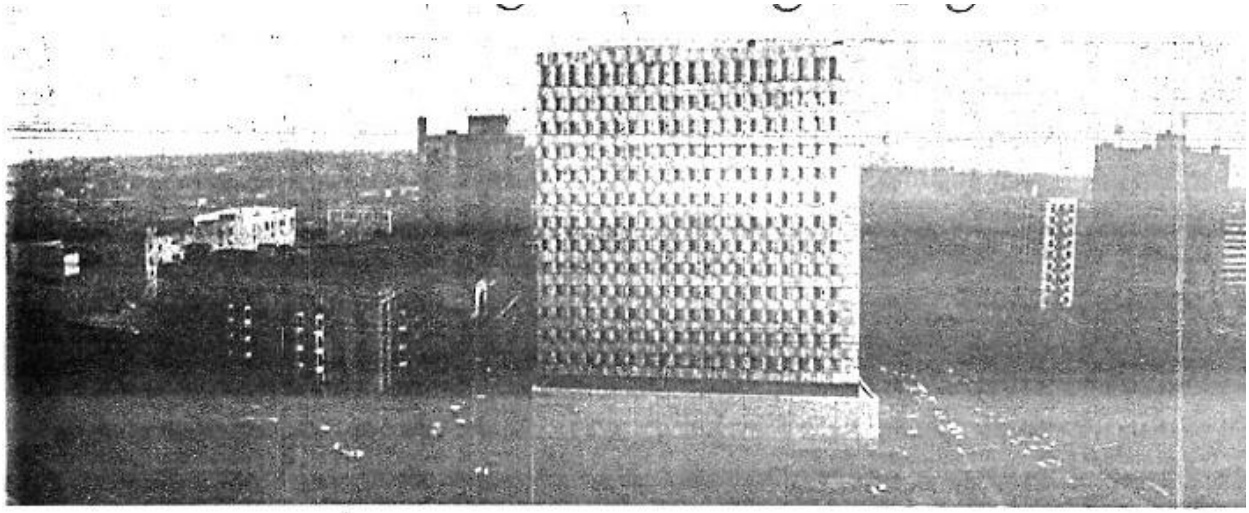
Hour-long dedication ceremonies for the $5 million Wachovia Building were held on February 16, 1958. Charlotte Mayor James S. Smith spoke, and the Queens College Choir and the Davidson College Male Chorus performed. The event took on the form of a religious service. Prayers were offered by Reverend Lawrence I. Stell of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Monsignor John P. Manley of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, and Rabbi E. A. Levi of Temple Israel. Called a "15-story colossus of stone and steel" by the *Charlotte Observer*, the new high rise building represented a major addition to the Charlotte skyline. "I want you to make the most beautiful building in the South," Wachovia president Robert Hanes of Winston-Salem told New York interior designer Dan Cooper. "We let it have the look of a well-tailored suit -- neatly done, beautifully detailed," said Cooper. According to promotional brochures, the Wachovia Building was the first structure in the United States to use "prismatic, pre-cast concrete panels in its construction." The architect was A. G. Odell, Jr. in association with the New York architectural firm of Harrison and Abramovitz. Odell, the flamboyant son of a Cabarrus textile executive, studied architecture at Cornell

**This 1966 photograph shows the North Carolina National Bank Building and the Cutter Building before they were altered. The Wachovia Bank and Trust Company Building looms over W. Trade St. The arcade portion of the Builders Building is clearly visible.**

University and came to Charlotte in 1939 to establish a one-man office. By the time of his death in April 1988 Odell oversaw the operations of one of the largest and most influential architectural businesses in North Carolina. "In a society where class connection still counted for much, young Odell had automatic entry to the offices of the area's mill owners and businessmen," writes Hanchett.[26] When Odell arrived, Charlotte's buildings, as noted above, were overwhelming conservative and revivalist in appearance and had been so for decades. M. H. Ward, one of Odell's early associates, stated: "Most architecture in the area can best be described as pseudo-neoclassical, with elements of design copied from buildings elsewhere that had already incorporated copied elements of classic design."[27] Odell set out to change that circumstance.


**This sketch of the Wachovia Building speaks to the ebullient optimism of the future that characterized that decade.**

Odell took his lead from the thinking of such revolutionary post-World War One European architects as Le Corbusier. From about 1920 until shortly before his death in 1965, Le Corbusier was an untiring proselytizer for what he called the "Radiant City." To his way of thinking, urban designers should break completely with the past. Le Corbusier had no sympathy or interest in the preservation of existing buildings or neighborhoods. "Modern town planning comes to birth with a new architecture," he proclaimed.[28] Le Corbusier envisioned people living in high rise apartments surrounded by lustrous skyscrapers separated from one another by large expanses of manicured open space and dramatic fountains. Urban cores should be hygienic, antiseptic, and ordered -- not cluttered, begrimed, and haphazard. The tradition of mixing functions in a single structure or neighborhood was an anathema to Corbusier. The city of the future would be divided into discreet sections devoted to specific purposes – working, living, leisure – connected to one another by expressways.



**This photograph of the Wachovia Building appeared in the *Charlotte Observer* on February 19, 1958. The view is looking east. The Independence Building is just to the left of the Wachovia Building. The Johnston Building is to the right. This photograph demonstrates how the Wachovia Building transformed the scale of Charlotte's skyline. The same issue of the newspaper noted that Charlotte was entering the "auto age." It predicted that by 1978 "three and four car families may be as common as two-car families were in 1958." The newspaper regarded "urban sprawl" as a positive, "as families rush to move out to the green grass and trees in the suburbs and commute to work by car."**

Le Corbusier also called for a new vocabulary of building design. "We must start again from zero," he insisted.[29] His new architecture became known as the International style. "A house is a machine for living in," said Corbusier.[30] The fundamentals of the International style centered upon the exploitation of new materials, especially reinforced concrete, strengthened steel, and large expanses of glass, to create grace, airiness, and to allow great amounts of sunlight to penetrate the interior of structures. Some suggest that Corbusier wanted all buildings to look like luxury liners. The proponents of the International style "maintained that a well- designed building could be beautiful without the addition of expensive trim that obscured its functional shapes and structure,"

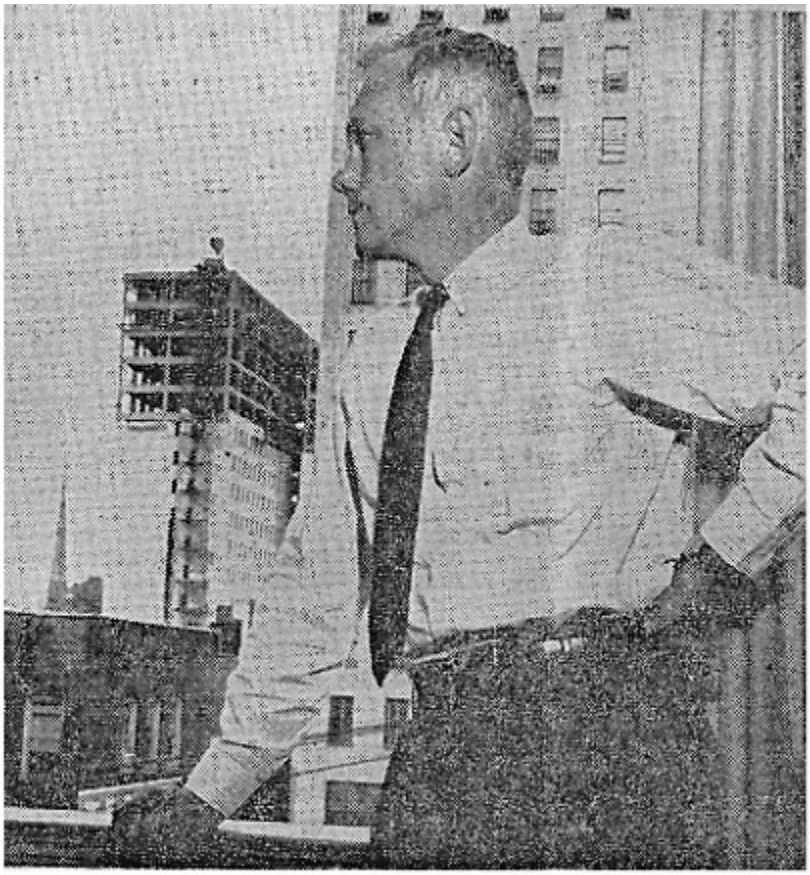
**A. G. Odell's Plan For Center City Charlotte. Devised in 1966, it was to have a major impact in shaping Charlotte's center city.**

Hanchett explains.[31] Another center of International style philosophy was the Bauhaus in Germany, where influential designers like Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe held sway. Historians Sherry Joines Wyatt and Sarah Woodard explain: “The basic tenets of Modernism emphasized function and utility; abstract beauty, sculptural form, and symbolism; honesty in materials and honesty; and the use of modern materials and technology as well as an emphasis on the use of natural materials.[32]

**The original banking lobby of the Wachovia Building**

A. G. Odell, Jr. became Charlotte's principal champion of the International style and devoted his considerable talents and energies to reshaping the local urban landscape. For good or ill, he largely succeeded. Odell embraced the architecture of "tomorrow" and had nothing but disdain for the revivalist buildings he observed on the streets of Charlotte. Describing what he saw when he arrived in Charlotte, Odell declared: "There was nothing here . . . that illustrated the honesty of stone as stone, steel as steel, glass as glass. Everybody was still wallowing in the Colonial heritage."[33]

The Center City once contained many of Odell's designs.[34] Unfortunately, except for the Second Ward High School Gymnasium and the Wachovia Bank and Trust Company, all of his pre-1960 projects have disappeared or have been so modified as to lose their essential integrity, such as the Charlotte Public Library. The Wachovia Bank and Trust Company Building is the only Odell-designed high rise that survives in Charlotte from the 1950s.



**This October 1957 photograph of A. G. Odell, Jr. shows the Wachovia Building under construction in the background.**


**Wachovia Building Completed**

The Home Federal Savings and Loan Building, like the great majority of office towers constructed in uptown Charlotte, illustrates the growing importance of Charlotte as a banking center in the twentieth century. According to Dr. Richard L. Mattson, the structure has "exceptional architectural significance as a rare surviving and outstanding example of a small-scale, Modernist office building from the postwar period in downtown Charlotte."[35] Home Federal Savings and Loan was founded in 1883 as the Perpetual Building and Loan Association by Samuel Wittkowsky, a Jewish immigrant from Poland who became a leading New South businessman in this community. "The completion of the Home Federal Savings and Loan Building in 1967 reflected not just the growth of the

bank but also the prominence of Charlotte, and South Tryon Street in particular, as a financial hub," writes Mattson.[36]

**Home Federal Savings and Loan Building**

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[1] For a detailed description of the history of the Realty or Independence Building, see Dan L. Morrill and Ruth Little-Stokes, "Survey and Research Report on the Independence Building," (http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rindependence.htm.) Hereinafter cited as Independence.

[2] Catherine W. Bisher, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury, and Enest H. Wood III, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina. A History of the Practice of Building* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 292, 293. Herinafter cited as *Bisher*.

[3] *Independence.* The Independence Building was imploded in September 1981.

[4] *Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, Charlotte, North Carolina* (Charlotte: Observer Printing House, Inc., 1927), n. p.

[5] *Bisher,* 294.

[6] *Bisher,* 290.

[7] Thomas W. Hanchett, n.d. “Charlotte Architecture: "Design Through Time Part 2." (http://landmarkscommission.org/educationarchitecturept2.htm). Hereinafter cited as *Hanchett.*

[8] http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/NC/Buncombe/vacant.html. http://www.preserveatlanta.com/winecoff.htm. Mary Beth Gatza, “Survey and Research Report on the Johnston Building,” 1991.

(http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rjohnston.htm). Hereinafter cited as *Gatza.*

[9] *Charlotte News*, 13 January, 1924.

[10] *Gatza.*

[11] *Charlotte Observer*, 16 June, 1893; 18 July, 1896.

[12] Interview of Louis H. Asbury, Jr., by Dr. Dan L. Morrill (August 24, 1978). Hereinafter cited as *Interview.*

[13] *Charlotte Observer*, 20 March, 1975.

[14] Interview.

[15] *Charlotte Observer*, 20 March, 1975.

[16] “Route VII. Uptown Walking Tour Part 2” (http://landmarkscommission.org/educationneighbuptown2.htm).

[17] Wade Harris, ed. *The City of Charlotte and the County of Mecklenburg* (Charlotte: Chamber of Commerce, 1924).

[18] Dan L. Morrill and Paula M. Stathakis, “Survey and Research Report on the Mayfair Manor, 1988 (http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rmayfair.htm).

[19] *Charlotte North Carolina* (Charlotte: The Observer Printing House, Inc., 1930).

[20] Dan L. Morrill, “Survey and Research Report on the Builders Building,” 2004 (http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rbuildersbuilding.htm).

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Interview with Tom Dorsey by Dan L. Morrill, 10 August, 2004.

[25] Sherry Joines Wyatt and Sarah Woodard, "Final Report. Post-World War II Survey (http://landmarkscommission.org/postww2survey.htm). Hereinafter cited as *Wyatt and Woodard*.

[26] *Hanchett.* For details of the dedication ceremonies for the building, see *Charlotte Observer,* 16 February, 1958. Max Abramovitz and Wallace Harrison formed their architectural partnership in New York City in 1945. Also see the vertical files for Wachovia Bank in the Spangler Robinson Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

[27] *Charlotte Observer*, 22 April, 1988.

[28] Witold Rybczynski, Witold. n.d. "The Architect Le Corbusier." time.com/time/time100/artists/profile/lecorbusier. Hereinafter cited as *Rybcynski.*

[29] Quoted in Rybczynski.

[30] Quoted in Rybczynski.

[31] *Hanchett.*

[32] *Wyatt and Woodard*.

[33] Quoted in *Hanchett.*

[34] For a photograph of many of Odell-designed buildings in center city Charlotte, see *Charlotte Observer*, 2 June, 1975.

[35] Richard L. Mattson, "Survey and Research Report on the Home Federal Savings and Loan Building," 2001 (http://landmarkscommission.org/surveys&rhomefederal.htm).

[36] *Ibid.*