

INTRODUCTION—ART DECO NEW YORK

Art Deco today is the fashionable name for all the various modernistic architectural styles, current between the two World Wars, that helped re-define New York City as the world's modern metropolis. The style is readily recognizable, but its substance is sometimes hard to pin down. Its sources can be found in European decorative arts, but also in New York's zoning regulations. Its practitioners range from socially prominent architects with sophisticated European training to immigrant builders who were largely self-taught. Its monuments include major Midtown skyscrapers and modest Bronx apartment houses. It is flowery and it is zigzag; it is intimate and it is monolithic; it is abstract and it is figurative; it is Roaring Twenties extravagant and it is Depression-era cheap. In all, Art Deco has become the collective name for all the brash, polychromatic, geometric, whiz-bang effects that could make a neighborhood diner or a multimillion-dollar skyscraper somehow suggest a skimpy dress, a rakish look, and a glass of champagne.

New York in the Jazz Age

Art Deco coalesced as a distinct manner of architecture at a time of massive growth in the great metropolis of the New World. New York emerged at the end of the First World War as one of the world's great cities. Its population was increasing by the millions, spilling into new residential districts in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, while its dense Wall Street business district grew denser and spread to Midtown, which sprouted the city's second skyline. As it grew, the city characterized in the nineteenth century as one of sunshine and shadow—of the very rich and the very poor—developed a massive middle-class population, and with it a mass culture made possible by the technical marvels of the new century. This was the Jazz Age, defined by one writer as a modern era of skyscrapers, the World Series, tabloids, radio, and the movies.

This new city—dense, modern, and a citadel of mass culture—found its built expression in skyscrapers, apartment houses, movie palaces, lunch counters, and bus terminals, all serving the anonymous millions of the

metropolis, particularly those on their way up from immigrant poverty to middle-class comfort. In the first years of the century, architects draped such buildings in exotic styles, extravagant if imprecise versions of the past glories of foreign places. But in the late 1920s, and on through the '30s and into the '40s, the glories of the past gave way to the fantasies of the future, in the explosion of exotic modern styles we now call Art Deco.

The Skyscraper Architects

Art Deco drew on many disparate sources, and ultimately touched every modern building type, but in New York it took shape first as a fashion for skyscrapers. Two dozen major monuments, conceived or completed inside nine years (from 1923 to 1932), designed by a handful of architects—several of whom regularly lunched together—created the new modern style that soon spread to thousands of buildings of all sizes designed by dozens of other architects over the better part of three decades.

The handful of Deco pioneers included four very different architects, of varying output, who were associated with the style from its beginnings: Raymond Hood, Ralph Walker, William Van Alen, and Ely Jacques Kahn.

Hood took the limelight by winning, together with John Mead Howells, the influential 1922 Chicago Tribune Building competition, and then designing four major Manhattan towers: the American Radiator (5.7), Daily News (5.1), McGraw-Hill (5.8/5.12), and RCA Buildings—the last as the seventy-story centerpiece of Rockefeller Center (6.10). Hood adopted the pose of a no-nonsense, businesslike architect manufacturing shelter, writing that “there has been entirely too much talk about the collaboration of architect, painter and sculptor; nowadays, the collaborators are the architects, the engineer, and the plumber.” And: “Beauty is utility, developed in a manner to which the eye is accustomed by habit, in so far as this development does not detract from its quality of usefulness.” Yet while writing about design as a series of effects clustered to give the greatest impact for the dollar, Hood produced some of the most imaginatively theatrical architecture of his day: the red-and-white-striped tapered stacked masses of the Daily News Building, the greenish-blue-tiled McGraw-Hill Building, and the soaring RCA tower. In the words of a 1931 *New Yorker* architectural critic, “Raymond Hood possesses the position in architecture that he wants. He is its brilliant bad boy.”

Walker, later voted “architect of the century” by the American Institute of Architects, emerged in 1923 as the enfant terrible of architecture with his Barclay-Vesey Telephone headquarters (2.4) in lower Manhattan. This was the first of a chain of Walker-designed Art Deco phone company skyscrapers based on behemoth massing, expressionistic brickwork, and huge

lobbies, many with grand pictorial schemes illustrating some facet of modern telecommunications. Most extraordinary of all Walker's work was No. 1 Wall Street, the Irving Trust Company building (1.3), a monolithic fifty-story Gothic Modern tower, with undulating brick walls, zigzag windows, and a gold-and-red mosaic-lined two-story Reception Hall.

Van Alen, once called "the Ziegfeld of his profession," produced only one major Art Deco monument before moving on to other pursuits, but it proved to be the best known of them all: the Chrysler Building (5.4). While Florenz Ziegfeld, the great showman, dazzled audiences on West 42nd Street with his Follies, over on East 42nd Van Alen dazzled the world with the first skyscraper to rise above the thousand-foot mark set by the Eiffel Tower. From setbacks marked by giant metal replicas of winged Chrysler hood ornaments, Van Alen's tower rose to a brilliantly shiny, tapering steel crown and spire visible for miles around.

Kahn, perhaps least familiar of the four, is best known for his high-profile office building at Two Park Avenue (3.4)—one of the city's earliest Art Deco skyscrapers—with its speckled, multicolored, terra-cotta façade, and for several idiosyncratic lobby designs, like the Film Center Building (5.11), which draw on a strong decorative arts aesthetic. Yet Kahn was by far the most prolific of the original group, producing dozens of loft buildings for the garment industry, the printing trade, and manufacturing businesses throughout downtown and Midtown Manhattan. Hood and Walker developed the style, Van Alen created its best-known icon, but Kahn filled up Manhattan's business precincts with solid, serviceable, workaday products.

Older, established firms soon found their way to the new modernistic styles. Schultze & Weaver, designers of such elegant, Beaux-Arts Classic-inspired Fifth Avenue hotels as the Pierre and the Sherry-Netherland, turned to Art Deco for the new Waldorf-Astoria (6.5/6.7). Walker & Gillette (no relation to Ralph Walker), known for houses and estates in a variety of traditional styles—Tudor Revival, Mission Revival, neo-Georgian, neo-Federal—produced the geometric Fuller Building (7.2). Cross & Cross, authors of sober, academically styled office buildings, turned out the wildly exuberant General Electric tower (6.4/6.6). Shreve & Lamb, formerly partners with Carrère & Hastings, masters of Beaux-Arts classicism, produced the Empire State Building (3.3/3.6). And dozens of smaller firms brought the style to buildings of every kind throughout the five boroughs.

The Art Deco Look

The great Art Deco skyscrapers owe certain of their decorative motifs to the Exposition for which they were later named, especially to the stylized

floral fashions of early-twentieth-century France. Other European sources include the French Art Nouveau, the Austrian Sezession and German Expressionism, among a host of early Modern design movements. Much of the formal conception of the skyscrapers—the internal planning of their public spaces, their external expression as major urban monuments—marks them as heirs to the grand Classical tradition of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Their ornamental forms often reflect the influence of Aztec, Mayan, and African art.

The modern American buildings owe just as much, however, to the circumstances of their own time and place. The influence on the skyscrapers of New York's revolutionary 1916 zoning resolution can scarcely be overstated. Designed to ensure adequate light and air for surrounding streets and buildings, the new law helped shape skyscraper bulk for half a century, virtually mandating buildings that fill half a city block at their base, then taper inward via mathematically calculated setbacks, rising into the skyline as slender towers. An influential set of studies in the early 1920s by Hugh Ferriss, the famed architectural renderer of the period, explored the potential of skyscraper design under the new regulations. Thanks to the new zoning laws, three-dimensionally-designed building mass, like a piece of abstract sculpture, became a chief characteristic of the new Art Deco architectural manner.

Another hallmark, on the other hand, goes straight back through the genealogical skyscraper line to Louis Sullivan in Chicago: the organization of a building's hundreds of windows in long, vertical columns. It was Sullivan who wrote that a skyscraper should be "a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation." Rather than organizing windows as horizontal rows, suggesting floors of offices stacked one on top of another, he arranged them vertically, as tall, uninterrupted bays of windows recessed behind and between tall, uninterrupted vertical stripes of brick wall, suggesting uninterrupted upward motion. The same arrangement became typical of Art Deco towers—and architects at the time, lacking a better name, often described their buildings as in the "vertical style."

The most publicly visible part of any skyscraper, of course, is its presence on the skyline. From neo-Gothic towers to International Style box-tops, all skyscrapers have skyline value of one kind or another. The Art Deco skyscrapers meet the sky in a variety of razzle-dazzle concoctions, ranging from the Chrysler Building's elegant steel spire to the General Electric Building's Gothic Modern crown to the Empire State Building's dirigible-mooring mast. Perhaps most telling of all is the disingenuously flat top of the Daily News Building. Raymond Hood later wrote that he decided to let the building simply stop when it reached its top. In fact, however, he did

no such thing—he continued the walls of the façade many feet higher than the building’s roof, to hide such ugly utilities as elevator shafts and water towers. He wanted to add to the skyline a building with the dramatic effect of stopping at the top, not the messy reality. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Art Deco skyline is that it can appear on six-story apartment houses as easily as on seventy-story skyscrapers, witness the skyline treatment of elevator buildings on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx or Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn.

Standard Art Deco ornament certainly helps identify the buildings from the period—zigzags, stylized floral patterns, striking geometries, and later, streamlined curves and speed lines. But perhaps more telling than the mold from which the forms are cut are their materials and color. The Art Deco period saw the development and use of such modern synthetic materials as Vitrolite and Bakelite for decorative use. For buildings, a major new material proved to be Nirosta, a rustproof, nickel-chrome-steel alloy that allowed the use of metal on the exterior of skyscrapers, most extravagantly on the tower and spire of the Chrysler Building. The ornamental use of metal, brick, and terra cotta, and especially the application of a variety of colors, became the decorative hallmark of Art Deco buildings, replacing in large measure a reliance on carved stone ornament based on historical styles. Hood’s American Radiator Building is black and gold. His Daily News Building relies almost entirely on the contrast between red and white brick for its decorative effects, including red and white brick spandrels set between the windows—the few metal zigzags at the building’s base hardly matter at all.

The Art of Advertising

An architectural critic writing about the Daily News Building in 1930 shrewdly observed that Hood had come to understand architecture as a variant of advertising art. And indeed, the great Art Deco skyscrapers are nothing if not giant advertisements for their clients. Exotic grand entrances, dramatic vertical towers, and long tapering spires made for buildings that could hardly help becoming corporate symbols.

But the architects went further, incorporating corporate imagery into the building’s ornamental schemes, especially at main entrances and inside grand lobbies. To the Chrysler Building’s winged radiator caps Van Alen added brick tracery suggesting a Chrysler’s tires, hubcaps, and running board, and, in the lobby, a ceiling mural showing the building’s very construction, but also suggesting the history of transportation—which culminated, of course, in the Chrysler automobile. The elevator doors at Walker & Gillette’s Fuller Building, headquarters of the Fuller Construction Company,

sport metal images of men at work building the metropolis of the future, while mosaic portraits of major Fuller projects are set into the floor. Hood's grand, three-story entrance to the Daily News Building centers on an enormous bas-relief showing the denizens of a busy modern metropolis buying newspapers, while inside, a lobby conceived as a gigantic popular science display helped educate the masses that the paper considered its core audience. Perhaps the most elaborate program was concocted for Rockefeller Center, where the symbols of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s, cherished hopes for international understanding and technological advancement covered the buildings inside and out.

The most unusual aspect of such ornamental programs may have been the glorification of the very buildings in question. The grand bas-relief over the Daily News entrance rises to a dazzling image of the great striped building itself. The ceiling mural of transportation inside the Chrysler Building's lobby metamorphoses into a tall portrait of Chrysler's skyscraper, its tip touching the top of the main entrance on Lexington Avenue. On the far wall of the Empire State Building's Fifth Avenue entrance lobby rises a silhouette of the world's tallest building. Perched above the main entrance of the Cities Service Building at 70 Pine Street (1.6) is an enormous sculpted replica of that seventy-story tower—with a duplicate over the entrance on Cedar Street thrown in for good measure.

Filtering Out and Down Across the Metropolis

The Depression put an end to the building of skyscrapers—the last ones opened in 1932—but the great towers had already transformed the skyline, and their impact was felt across the metropolis. Art Deco, firmly launched, continued into the 1930s and 1940s in building types of all kinds throughout the five boroughs.

Among the first to show the influence of the skyscraper style were Manhattan apartment buildings. Late-nineteenth-century apartment houses—accepted by New York's well-to-do only reluctantly—had early on turned to the glories of Europe for respectable architectural models. The Dakota on West 72nd Street, built in the 1880s, suggested a grand, German Renaissance palace fit for, if not a German prince, then several hundred fortunate American families. Fifty years later, the designers of the Majestic Apartments (8.3) directly across the street abandoned the European palaces of centuries past in favor of the American skyscrapers of the new century to come—creating one of three strikingly vertical twin-towered Art Deco apartment skyscrapers prominently silhouetted in the residential skyline of Central Park West. At the same time and in the same way, the new

Waldorf-Astoria, successor to the old Victorian pile that once occupied the site of the Empire State Building, was brought up to date as a twin-towered Art Deco skyscraper hotel on Park Avenue.

More unexpected perhaps was the creation of a residential skyline not of thirty-story apartment towers in Manhattan but of six-story elevator apartment houses in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Dozens of architects—many of them immigrants whose training ranged from sophisticated to rudimentary—brought the color and vitality of Midtown skyscrapers to the Grand Concourse, Ocean Avenue, and the side streets of Brighton Beach where Brooklyn meets the Atlantic Ocean. How did the high-class skyscraper style make its way to the middle-class precincts of the outer boroughs? Marvin Fine, of the firm of Horace Ginsbern & Associates, watched both the Daily News and Chrysler Buildings rise in 1930 from the ringside seat of his East 42nd Street office; he later recalled telling his boss that those red and white brick spandrels on the Daily News would make a terrific trademark for their new apartment blocks on the Grand Concourse.

By the 1930s, builders and architects throughout the city had caught on to the new style. Sedate department stores expanded into raffish modern additions, as at Bloomingdale's (7.1) in Manhattan, or commissioned brand-new Deco buildings, like J. Kurtz & Sons (14.8) in Jamaica, Queens. The exotic eclecticism of movie palaces gave way to an exotic modernism, whether in small Depression-era neighborhood houses like the Lane (15.5) in New Dorp, Staten Island, or in the grand fantasy of Radio City Music Hall in the heart of Midtown Manhattan. Parking garages and filling stations, banks, restaurants, nightclubs, airport terminals, even churches found their way to the style of the modern metropolis.

The Fall and Rise of Art Deco

Economics undoubtedly played a part in the appeal of the Art Deco style. In hard times, what could be more attractive than a simple and affordable design, in which a change in color or a geometric pattern in the brickwork could make a cheap building seem stylish and up-to-date? Perhaps inevitably, the various modernisms of Art Deco became associated with the Great Depression in the minds of the people who lived through it. By the 1960s, shortly before its name was coined, Art Deco had fallen into almost total disrepute, a depressing relic of the past, condemned as a misinformed modernism whose practitioners had been unable to comprehend the austere, pristine purity of the International Style, the True Modern.

Over the past four decades, as part of the general reappraisal of all historic architecture, Art Deco has been rediscovered, reconsidered, and

re-embraced. It appeals to us as stylish and romantic. Perhaps we see it, wistfully, as the modern road not taken, and wish it could take the place of the dreary banality that passed for modern in the decades following World War II. We have, in short, adopted it as a usable modern past. The rediscovery of Art Deco may have seemed a passing fad at times—witness a *New Yorker* cartoon captioned, “Do you realize we are living through the second time people got tired of Art Deco?” Deco lovers may note with pleasure, however, that the cartoon in question appeared in 1984, and in the decades since then the national and international passion for Art Deco has only grown.

Today, Art Deco New York survives and flourishes. Ninety years after Art Deco’s introduction to the city, its great monuments have evolved from brash modern upstarts to historic landmarks. Many have been lovingly restored, from the world-famous spire of the Chrysler Building to the lobbies of Bronx apartment buildings. And they’re waiting impatiently for you to visit and discover their many charms.