

# Deco Bookshelf

## Review by Jim Sweeney

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Art Deco architecture shouldn't be seen in isolation from what went on before, during and after the Deco era. With *Twentieth Century American Architecture: A Traveler's Guide to 220 Key Buildings* by Sydney LeBlanc (second edition, Whitney Library of Design/Watson-Guptill Publications, \$19.95 paperback) you can view Art Deco in context.

There are relatively few guidebooks on contemporary architecture, so this book helps in that regard. It's small enough to pack in a suitcase or backpack, and has regional maps. In selecting buildings, LeBlanc says he chose the most important buildings, while also striving for a balance of styles, building types, regions and architects.

A plus is that another criteria was to favor buildings that are accessible or can be seen from the street. LeBlanc provides hours and numbers for buildings you can visit. For the most part, this book lists individual structures, but it also includes groupings such as Miami Beach's Art Deco district.

LeBlanc's selections illustrate that the Art Deco style was heavily influenced by what went before it, and continued to exert an influence well into the 1950s. The 1918 Woodbury County Courthouse, Sioux City, Iowa, is a prairie style building, but the architectural rendering and detail photo show the elements of this style that would be picked up in Art Deco. LeBlanc comments that the courthouse shows "a hint of streamlining."

LeBlanc provides a capsule history of each building. Of the 1929 Bullocks Wilshire store in Los Angeles he notes that the architect's original plan was torn up after a visit to the 1925 Paris expo, to be replaced by a pyramidal design that was fairly radical for a retail structure.

He also notes that Raymond Hood's American Radiator building in Manhattan doesn't look as good as it once did. The dark exterior de-emphasized the windows, in contrast to light-colored buildings where windows appear as black rows from a distance. The windows stand out more now since the addition of white shades. Also, the roof's gold terra cotta has darkened, changing the balance of color.

Other Deco sites in the book include: the Chrysler Building, Daily News Building, RCA Building at Rockefeller Center, Empire State Building, McGraw-Hill Building, all in New York; L.A.'s city hall, central library, Graumann's Chinese Theater, and Sunset Towers, which LeBlanc calls "one of the finest examples of Art Deco architecture in Los Angeles"; the Nebraska State Capitol; Washington's Folger Shakespeare Library; Philadelphia's PSFS tower; and Cincinnati Union Terminal.

*(Editor's Note: A revised and expanded third edition, now titled **The Architectural Traveler: A Guide to 250 Key 20th Century American Buildings** is expected to be released shortly.)*



Punch Bowl, University of Pennsylvania, October 1926

That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It