

## ART DECO BOOKSHELF

BY JIM SWEENEY

When the Detroit Area Art Deco Society decided in 1993 that it needed a comprehensive survey of Art Deco buildings in metropolitan Detroit, one of its goals was to produce a book on these buildings. That goal has been met with "Art Deco in Detroit" by Rebecca Binno Savage and Greg Kowalski (\$19.98, Arcadia Publishing, available in bookstores, at [www.arcadiapublishing.com](http://www.arcadiapublishing.com) and 1-888-313-2665). Savage is a board member of DAADS, Kowalski is the editor of the Birmingham Eccentric.

The book's thesis is that "there is a significant collection of Art Deco architecture in our metropolitan area that is worthy of preservation and recognition." You can't argue with that thesis after seeing the book.

The decade that it took to produce this book reflects the detailed research and legwork that went into it. The authors clearly did their homework. The book is primarily 200 photos (taken by many different photographers) with detailed captions.

Detroit was rapidly expanding in the late 1920s, and the architectural results of that situation are summed up by the Fisher Building. Architect Albert Kahn was given an unlimited budget. The first three floors had granite cladding. The remainder of the building had marble cladding. The building consists of a 28-story base with two 11-story wings. The tower originally had gold-leafed tiles on the top.

Another indicator of economic conditions in Detroit before the Depression is the Union Guardian Trust Building (now called the Guardian Building). Architect Wirt Rowland designed custom-colored orange bricks for this building.

The 47-story Penobscot Building, also by Rowland, was the world's fifth-tallest building when it was completed in 1927. It was, the authors tell us, "Detroit's image-defining skyscraper," and the city's tallest structure for 50 years. With its setback form, it resembles the

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Empire State Building. Today, most Americans probably wouldn't recognize the building's name or its image.

With many major industries, Detroit has a lot of Deco industrial structures. The authors term Grinnel Street "the Miami Beach of Art Deco industrial buildings." Many of the companies, suppliers to the automobile or other manufacturing industries, had a fancy Deco office structure fronting the street. Behind the office building was a plain warehouse or factory.

It would have been nice to have a few maps to show where these buildings are. But to be fair, most buyers of this book probably don't need a map to know where Grinnel Street or Michigan Avenue are.

Most buyers probably will also understand the occasional Detroit slang, such as references to "downriver."

In his book "How Buildings Learn," Stewart Brand documented how structures evolve. Brand's book came to mind as I read the authors' description of Simmons and Clark jewelers, which opened in downtown Detroit in 1925 in a two-year-old terra cotta building. In 1934 the company added a Vitrolite-and-chrome storefront. In 1956, a projecting neon sign and clock were added. The building was recently restored.

The authors don't ignore other types of structures. They fill several pages with photos of simple but stylish small office buildings, mostly painted brick, curved walls and glass block. They note that clinics and doctors' offices often located in these buildings, perhaps attracted to their clean, antiseptic look.

Even the most humble structures got Deco styling in Detroit. A Grosse Pointe Park stormwater pumping station had a curved stone doorway.

The communications industry--phone companies, broadcasters--liked Deco for its modern, cutting-edge design. WWJ's transmitter building was almost temple-like, a formal building with large metal lamps at the door and big letters spelling out its call sign on the roof.

For its transmitter in Riverview, WJR hired architect Cyril Edward Schley, who did many Detroit-area theaters. It's a gaudy structure with a central tower and colorful ceramic tile. (This is one of the

times I wished the book's photos weren't all black and white.) It looks like a high-end jewelry store or temple for an exotic cult.

There are also detail photos of decorative features. A close-up of a Mayan Revival roof panel could fool you into thinking it's a Mayan temple, until you notice the electric wires.

One building has a "frozen fountain" motif over its door, a design element far more common in warmer climates.

One amusing photo shows the interior of one of five Lustron prefab steel homes in Oak Park. Since the walls are steel, there are lots of magnets attached all over the kitchen.

The authors also document some of Detroit's success stories. The 1930 J.M. Schaefer Building, at Michigan Avenue and Schaefer Road, was designed by Louis Kamper. There were 17 stores on the ground floor, offices in the second level. It was restored in 1997 and stores are coming back.

When Berkley's Berkley Theater was sold in 1993 to a drugstore chain, the community wanted the facade preserved. So the chain agreed to put the store's entrance in the rear, facing the parking lot, preserving the look of the front of the theater.

The Elwood Bar and Grill, a 1936 Art Moderne gem, was moved and restored as a retro restaurant.

Hoot Robinson's 1938 bar wasn't so lucky. It sat across from Tiger stadium. It closed when the stadium closed, and the red-and-cream porcelain enamel steel was painted over with brown paint. There are before-and-after photos. From the "before" photo, taken from across the street, the exterior doesn't appear to be in bad shape. It's not clear why anyone wasted the time and money to paint the facade.

The book offers a mix of restored buildings, abandoned structures and buildings waiting for salvation. One photo shows simple but elegant cast-concrete apartments built in 1937 by architect Talmadge Hughes. They're in Detroit's Palmer Park historic district, which the authors note features many Deco apartment buildings.

The 1942 Telenews Theater was built to show newsreels around the clock. It mutated into several other movie houses, and now, with its

elaborate facade partially stripped of decorations, is a nightclub.

The saddest photos document the Vanity Ballroom, Detroit's only intact ballroom in Detroit. The 1929 brick-and-stone Mayan Revival building sits empty. The badly deteriorated marquee had to be pulled down, and the building has suffered serious water damage.

