

ART DECO MILWAUKEE: THE WAY THE FUTURE USED TO LOOK

by David Zach

Milwaukee is a city that should have had more Art Deco buildings. For a style that blends confidence in the future, machine ability and modern design, the style is a perfect fit for a city often described as having a machine aesthetic. Once known as the “toolbox to the world,” this city was built on factories, innovation, and the rise and resourcefulness of the American worker. Always a practical population, perhaps the style was too much for us, preferring the familiarity of traditional European architecture for which the city is known.

Milwaukee does have about 70 Art Deco buildings and it seems that each time I go on a building safari, I’m discovering yet another beauty at the back of a used car lot, along railroad tracks, half hidden behind hand-painted signs and necessarily cheap renovations. Most of the Art Deco buildings in this city will be here for a long time to come; a few others have sad, short futures.

With the addition of the new wing for the Milwaukee Art Museum, designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, our design, art and architecture are gaining the attention of both residents and visitors from every country. The conversations between them and within them give an improving forecast for our city’s preservation and aspirations.

Recently the Chicago Art Deco Society came up for a tour, seeing at least 15 of our Art Deco buildings along with a few others found in our skyline, the new Calatrava addition included. As always, visitors are unexpectedly charmed by a Milwaukee both comfortable and beautiful.

Here’s a sampler of nine Art Deco buildings. When you come to see them yourself,



remember that there are at least 61 more.

The Milwaukee Gas Light Building, 626 E. Wisconsin Avenue

Located three blocks from Lake Michigan, this was built by the local firm Eschweiler and Eschweiler, and was the home office of the gas utility for some 70 years. It is now being converted into an

office building by the new owner, Paul Wiese. He’s the sort that art deco lovers wants to have care for “their” building, and is leading the building through a 3 million dollar renovation, some to undo previous “renovations.” In the 1960s, the center spandrel sunburst along with the brass doors and the twin



Most Milwaukeans know the gas building because of the colored flame beacon that sits on top. Installed in 1956, it’s filled with neon and argon lights, rises 21 feet high and weighs in at four ton. The gas company put it up there to promote its product as well as provide a 24-hour weather forecast. The current owner plans to return it to 24-hour forecasting, even though it costs over \$10,000 a month to light. It can be seen up to 30 miles away and ships on the lake use it as a harbor guide and navigation aid. The color coding has changed over the years, but if you come for a visit now, here’s the official forecast:

When the flame is red,
it’s warm weather ahead.

When the flame is gold,
watch out for cold.

When the flame is blue,
there’s no change in view.

When there’s a flickering flame,
expect snow or rain.

eagles above the entrance were discarded. Weise had a local craftsman recreate the sunburst from the Eschweiler drawings and he located the door's original manufacturers to recreate those at a cost of \$57,000.

Clearly influenced by the New York skyscrapers, this one soars to 21 stories (in Milwaukee, we can still say that a 21 story building soars), in part by the eyes being drawn upward by bricks lightening in color from darker reds and purples to light tan as they go skyward. Even on a cloudy day, the building seems bathed in sunlight. The architecture has allusions to Mayan or Byzantine style, with terra cotta friezes, geometric abstractions and multiple setbacks. Tragically, when this crown jewel of the city skyline was built in 1929-30, a speak-easy that occupied the site had to be torn down.

John Mariner Building/Hotel Metro, 411 E. Mason Street

Just a block north and two blocks west is The Hotel Metro, another Eschweiler & Eschweiler building, this one built in 1937 as the country was emerging from the Depression. Moderne in style, it has a smooth Bedford Indiana limestone façade and decorations only on the corners and speedline ribs along the top.

It was built to be a modern office building as the reemerging confidence of the nation would come to expect. It had double glazed windows and an air-filtering system that boasted an almost total absence of dust. Workspace was designed for easy rearrangement and smaller individual offices, befitting the new streamlined age of speed and efficiency.



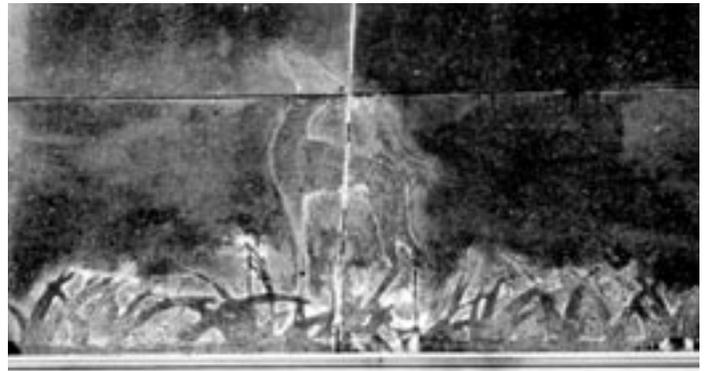
The Lou Fritzel Shop, 733 N. Milwaukee Street

Across the street from the Metro is an elegant one story, black granite façade building. It started life as a three story Italianate building, like almost all of it's neighbors, but in 1939 two floors were removed and the addition of a Moderne façade with two large display windows and bronze trim of abstract leaves and berries brought it to the leading edge of style. The building is now sealed, but rumor has it with an intact Moderne interior. Above the entrance, where the brass signage used to be, is the faint dirt outline of a gazelle standing in tall reeds, a graceful reminder of what has been lost.



Style was this street. North Milwaukee Street

was the center of women's fashions here in Milwaukee and the Lou Fritzel Shop was one of the finest. When I asked my mom



if she remembered that store from her Marquette University days, she gave a bright and wistful, "Oh, yes!" During the 1970s, the freeways grew and the street faded. By the late 1980s, fashion and life had left the street. Today, along with The Hotel Metro, hip night clubs, restaurants, condos and apartments, Milwaukee Street is alive once again.

The Warner Theater/The Grand Theater, 212 West Wisconsin Avenue

Further west down Wisconsin Avenue is the Grand Theater. Built by Rapp and Rapp of Chicago for the Warner Brothers, it was closed as a theater in 1995 and is now sealed. Considered by many as the grandest movie palace ever built here and along with the 12 story office building above it, cost \$2,500,000. An impressive thing in any city for the year 1931, but in those times a movie house was one of the best places to go to forget just what year it was.



Those who have been inside recall a three-story lobby in vintage condition with 20 foot, mirrored panels and murals of streamlined goddesses and birds. As one might not expect, with a façade and lobby in the finest Art Deco design, the auditorium is in French Baroque style.



The A.O. Smith Research Building/Tower Automotive, 3533 N. 27th Street

Designed by Holabird & Root of Chicago, this seven-story 1930 International Style tower has a mostly glass curtain façade of V-shaped bays. With over 2 acres of glass panels, each measuring 13' x 9', the company was motivated to develop a first of its kind, automated window washing system that doubles as a means to replace those glass panels. The building also has a clever air pressurization system required to prevent the windows from blowing out in high wind. As you might imagine, 1/4" glass of that size isn't cheap.



Influenced by the Bauhaus and other emerging ideas for the office environment, the building was the topic of an entire issue of *The Architectural Forum* in November 1936, which noted that the officers of the company felt their tower "was a worthwhile investment to provide the most comfortable, congenial and healthful environments for the men upon whose ideas future developments would depend." Even Frank Lloyd Wright liked it.

The outside is impressive, but the hidden pearl is the lobby. This gleaming aluminum and black formica Art Deco lobby is a perfect entrance for those involved with the research and design of metal and machines. The terrazzo floor has a looping geometrical design that runs its full length, with inset glass panels that light from underneath. (Half the lobby was converted into a conference room with all of the Art Deco details covered or

removed.) The Art Deco furniture in the lobby was designed for that space including tables that have large gears as bases.

The future of this building is uncertain. Bought by Tower Automotive in 1997, the company has slowly been shutting down this site. Only 40 people now work in this building, but it was made for over 400. The building is well cared for and is likely to survive all of its surrounding factory buildings that share the 140-acre site.

Emmanuel Philipp Elementary School, 4310 N. 16th.

This is a school built for children, with the adults maybe just an afterthought. There are storybook panels along the windows, depicting such Brothers Grimm characters as the cow jumping over the moon and Jack and Jill. Want to know how the elephant got its trunk? It's all explained in the relief carvings on the child height stairway at the front doors. You'll also see carvings of Indian braves, storks, and well, lions and tigers and bears. Look up from the steps to the balustrade to see five stone penguins looking down at you. Some windows contain leaded images: one depicts a ballerina, another a boy pulling on a girl's pigtail.



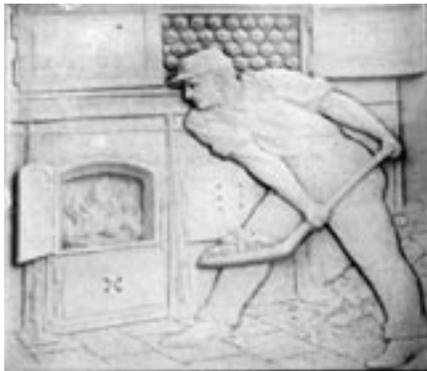
Inside are the two best kindergarten rooms on the planet. In one, there's a working fireplace with a rabbit, owl and squirrel carved into the surround. At the other end of the room is a working fountain. (This is a public school, so budgets and safety codes preclude either from being used now.) In the other room, floor panels pull out to reveal a sandbox.

Craftsman in style with Deco ziggurats along the roofline, the school was designed by Eschweiler & Eschweiler in 1931, even though the school district had their own architect. This school was built for a German immigrant working class neighborhood. The Germans invented kindergarten.



The Milwaukee Western Fuel Company/The Hanna Northwest Coal Building, 2150 N. Prospect Avenue

The Milwaukee Western Fuel building was designed by Herbert W. Tullgren, a Milwaukee architect with no formal training. Built chronologically between two of his other buildings in the neighborhood, The Hathaway and the 1260, this building shows a bit more adventure. A small, two story brick box, it has embedded orange terra cotta columns with low relief panels between them showing workers in the act of mining, transporting and using coal. This depiction of workers on the building gives recognition to the rising influence of the working man in this industrial town. The company also had such innovations as open work areas and a recreation room for their workers.



The Hathaway, 1830 Kane Place

The Hathaway was the first apartment tower built in Milwaukee. Tullgren and his partners built this and two other residential buildings in the neighborhood as a new way to live in an urban setting. Sitting at the edge of a bluff, the view here is one of Milwaukee's best, with the yacht club and bay just to the east. Each floor in this 1930 Moderne-styled building is a separate two-bedroom unit. With some units retaining the former maid's quarters just off the kitchen, it was also a residence for those of some means.



The nine stories are clad in glazed tan bricks, common in Milwaukee, on a structural frame. Vertical black bands of windows give it a stark geometric contrast. With rounded bricks at the corners, this is an almost perfectly square building (except for the fire escape stairwell on its west side looking like an regular

latory afterthought). The only jewelry on this building is the number 1830 inside a lighted, diamond-shaped frame on either side of the doorway. A terrazzo-floored entryway is charmingly round. The building has been condo-ized, which may be the reason the windows of any given floor do not match those on the next. The parking here in the most densely populated area of Wisconsin is a double driveway with space for six cars. Owners share this along with each other's car keys.

The 1260, 1260 North Prospect Avenue

This building shows the progress of both Tullgren's style as well as the nation's economy. Compared with the Viking Apartments (at 1705 E. Kane, built by Tullgren in 1931), this one is more luxurious, offering to those who could afford it, modern layouts that included built-in card tables and rounded stairwells that take you up to bedrooms and a sunroom. Tullgren was ambitiously promoting the duplex apartments concept as the answer to the urban housing shortages of the 1930s and even had the design patented. Both the Viking and the 1260 were featured in the *Architectural Record* magazine at the time as examples of innovative residential design. Built for Harry Grant, owner and publisher of the *Milwaukee Journal*, the 1260 was known by many who didn't live there as "Grant's Tomb."



Although Art Moderne in style, the 1260 is commonly known now as the "Art Deco building." The green casement windows are replacements, but have stayed fairly faithful to its original look and the color green is the only decoration. Sitting at the southern end of Prospect Avenue and overlooking the lakefront, the building has a square footprint, but has two columns of bay windows on each side adding to its Moderne look with the simplicity of circles intersecting a square. There are 8 units per floor (the elevator bypasses the bedroom floors) and two penthouses on the top floor. Tullgren died too soon at the age of 54, undoubtedly taking with him many such elegant buildings built only in his imagination.

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