

EGYPT IN CHICAGO?



■ **Opposite Page Left** A terra cotta Pharaoh guards the Reebie Warehouse entrance. Hieroglyphs at the base of the figure are translatable, not fake.

■ **Opposite Page Right** The winged sun disc, a standard trademark of Egyptian Revival architecture, is molded in polychromed terra cotta for the Reebie cornice.

■ **Left** Among the imagery that graces the Reebie building is the scarab beetle, representing the Egyptian sun god and symbolic of rebirth.

Chicago emerges in the forefront of an overlooked architecture

written by Heather Plaza-Manning

At first glance, the 2300 block of North Clark street doesn't appear to be much different from other areas of Chicago. But a second glance reveals a surprising discovery—the Reebie Storage Warehouse. Materializing out of the blur of traffic and bland backdrop of neighboring buildings, the Reebie building is a melange of polychromed scarab beetles, Pharaohs, and lotus-blossom capped columns. Many passersby, constrained in a bus or automobile, suffer whiplash while straining to catch a last glimpse of this fantastic sight as they zip by. The more fortunate pedestrians get a closer look, investigating the numerous details of the elaborate facade. Some even venture inside, where they are presented with an equally decorative view.

The exterior of the Reebie Warehouse is, without question, of great importance, but it is the inte-

rior lobby that elevates this building's significance. Virtually intact historic interiors are rare enough as it is, but Egyptian Revival interiors are even more scarce. Built in 1921-22 by George Kingsley, the Reebie was graced with Egyptian motifs from the cornice to the lobby counter. Interior windows allow light to filter into the offices from the lobby, and are constructed from colored and clear art glass in the shapes of lotus and papyrus blossoms. This motif is repeated in the bronze security grilles over the exterior windows and doors. The lobby ceiling is supported by columns with capitals in the shape of papyrus flowers, and a similar floral pattern is applied to the long counter that dominates the floor plan.

The Reebie Warehouse perfectly illustrates the qualities of 1920s Egyptian Revival. Austere, majestic architectural details are complimented with the lush, bold colors of glazed terra cotta. Form and iconography are applied to the building in a theatrical manner, rather than as a strict recreation of the past.

Contrary to popular belief, the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb was not the sole inspiration for Egyptian Revival architecture, including the Reebie building. The style had already been used throughout history—examples can be found in almost every major architectural movement, even back to Roman times. However, the Egyptian theme never reached levels of mass-popularity, and is therefore quite rare.

By the 1920s, due to rising interest in archaeological activity, the public was as well versed in Egyptian designs as architects, which is exactly the case in the Reebie Warehouse. One of the Reebie brothers had traveled to Egypt and was convinced that applying such motifs to a new storage facility would create an impressive and stable appearance that would attract clientele. The Temples of Dendera and Edfu served as models for most of the ornament. An unusual amount of attention was paid to small details, such as the legitimate hieroglyphs at the feet of the pharaohs which flank the entrance.

Out of all the Revival styles, Egyptian Revival is the most unique. While other styles have remained relatively static throughout history, Egyptian-inspired architecture has been constantly reinterpreted.

In America, the style first appeared in the early 19th century. Jails, cemetery gates, and tombs as well as commercial and educational buildings were primarily the recipients of Egyptian themes. These structures incorporated ancient Egyptian architectural standards in every aspect of their design, from overall proportions to iconography. Typically, masonry was the building material of choice, though some examples of wood construction can be found. Battered (or sloping) walls, cavetto cornices, and relief carvings of winged sun discs were consistently used. Color "schemes" consisted mainly of the hues of whatever



■ **Above** A detail of the Pharaoh (one of a pair) on the Reebie façade, showing the fine craftsmanship that is found throughout the building's architecture.

■ **Below** The Reebie Warehouse is one of the finest examples of Egyptian Revival architecture in the country, partly due to its historic lobby, a rarity in this style.

stone the building was constructed from as well as the color of the paint used on windows and door trim. Rarely were any Egyptian Revival buildings of the 19th century ever painted in the colors used in ancient architecture. The wooden structures mentioned earlier were painted, of course, but in uniform white.

By the end of the 19th century, Egyptian Revival was applied to interiors rather than to architecture. However, it was always combined with other Eastern motifs. Often it was used as an ornamental backdrop to showcase the treasures of the wealthy.

In the art deco period, Egyptian themes were extremely popular for theaters and commercial buildings. The style underwent several drastic changes—building materials changed from masonry to brick or stucco and glazed terra cotta. This created an opportunity to design in bright colors, an aspect of ancient Egyptian architecture that is often overlooked. Also, thematic details were applied to a generic building shape—no longer was the overall form and massing included in the design concept.

A few Egyptian Revival buildings were constructed circa 1950, and again in the '80s and '90s; these consist mainly of restaurants and casinos. Again, the style was reinterpreted. The focus in the postwar period shifted away from details and back to building shape, resulting in bold pyramidal forms. New materials were also used, primarily glass and steel. Color was once more not an important aspect of the design. The style was chosen for its sensationalist and commercial appeal, as opposed to the 19th century focus on “dignified” and “pure” architecture.

Although Egyptian Revival architecture is rare, Chicago boasts several buildings in this style, all dating to the 1920s. Besides Reebie, there is the former Egyptian Lacquer Manufacturing Company at 3052 West Carroll, a small but beautifully detailed building

with battered walls. The cavetto cornice is constructed of terra cotta in red, blue, and green, and relief panels of the same material surround the entrance.

A small limestone apartment building at 3734 North Pine Grove stands out from the other Chicago examples since it does not have any color integrated into the design. It is, however, ornamented with fine carvings. At 4017 North Sheridan, there is a bar and liquor store that once was a Marmon Hupmobile auto showroom. Apparently this automobile did not last long, because the building was then converted into the Cairo Supper Club. There are also many Egyptian Revival tombs and monuments scattered throughout the city's cemeteries—the most famous ones are at Graceland, but equally important and dynamic examples can be found in Rosehill and Oakwoods.

Since Egyptian Revival architecture is so rare and unique, Chicagoans should appreciate their Egyptian Revival buildings even more. Some do. As Richard Licata, Vice President of Sales and Marketing for the Reebie Storage and Moving Company, says, “We've been offered a ton of money from developers for this land. Some things are more important than money, and one of them is the pride of ownership of this building.” ■

