

# GOIN' TO Kansas City

■ A pair of “high deco” sea horse Fountains flank Kansas City’s 32-story, 1937 streamlined city hall building. Wight & Wight Architects.



■ Detail of an amusing and decorative terra cotta light pattern on the façade of a 1929, two-story commercial building. McKechnie & Trask Architects.



■ The façade detail on the 1931 Power & Light Building is considered one of the top 10 art deco skyscrapers in the United States. This 36-story building has many references to power and electricity.



written by  
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Built during the Jazz Age, art deco buildings in Kansas City are sparking renewed interest

Joyous and lyrical in detail, the structures built in Kansas City from the 1920s to the mid-'30s echo what was happening in the streets below. The style of the day was art deco, replete with setbacks and colorful terra cotta ornamentation of sunbursts and fountains. Full of life and rhythm, the works visually represented the music abounding in the city's clubs. For it was the jazz age, and this improvisational music form had made its way up from New Orleans, and into the local clubs through the great bands of the time: the Blue Devils, Bennie Moten, Andy Kirk and the Kansas City Rockets, not to mention Count Basie.

While the musicians were generating a unique jazz style along 18th and Vine Streets, Kansas City was quite literally going to town. Dubbed “The Paris of the Plains” in 1933 for its progressive architecture and some 250 to

400 jazz clubs, juke joints, cabarets and show bars, it became an oasis of good times.

Though the rest of the nation suffered financial hardships with the depression, Kansas City was to go unscathed. Bustling with jobs and money flowing from gambling and a construction boom, the town thrived, its survival attributed to Tom “The Boss” Pendergast.

Considered corrupt in some camps and a hero in others, Pendergast's legacy is having saved Kansas City from the likes of the Midwest's Dust Bowl farmers by creating a public works program. Construction flourished (so did Pendergast's bank account as he owned Ready Mix Cement Company) and some of Kansas City's most notable structures were built between 1918 and 1934. Soon Kansas City was promoted as the “city on the move.”

The buildings which elevated Kansas City to this new status include the 1931 Bryant by the Chicago firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, which was inspired by a design once slated for the Chicago Tribune; the 1930 Professional Building, known for its ornate terra cotta, which remains vacant and in disrepair; and the 1931 Power & Light Building, with its multi-color beamed pinnacle, which remains one of the city's finest examples of art deco.

Less dressy perhaps is City Hall, the Jackson County Courthouse, and the Fidelity Bank and Trust Buildings. Nonetheless, these modest structures, sometimes considered more neoclassical with brushes of art deco, remain just as important to Kansas City's architectural heritage.

What makes these buildings, then and now, worthy of study is two-fold. In recent years, movements

## WHAT IS ART DECO?

The initial belief, fostered when the art deco revival began, roughly in the mid-1960s, was that art deco was the antithesis of Art Nouveau, and was initiated in 1920 to eradicate its 1900 predecessor, which was considered a “transgression against good taste.” Today, this theory is considered incorrect. Art deco is seen not as the direct opposite of Art Nouveau, but rather, as an extension of it, particularly in its continuation of lavish ornamentation, superior craftsmanship, and fine materials.

The art deco style was actually conceived in the years 1908-12, a period considered transitional, according to *Art Deco* by Alastair Duncan. Like its predecessors, it was an evolving style that did not start or stop at any precise moment. As a result, the movement cannot be rigidly defined, as it has been, within the decade 1920-30. It is safe to say that by the late 1930s, art deco had run its course.

The characteristics of art deco defy precise definition; they drew on a variety of diverse, and often, conflicting influences. These were mostly from the world of avant-garde painting in the early years of the century. Elements from Cubism, Russian Constructivism, and Italian Futurism, including abstraction, distortion, and simplification, are evident in much of art deco. The style's standard iconography—stylized bouquets of flowers, young maidens, geometric patterns including zigzags, chevrons, and lightning bolts—reveal further influences such as high fashion, Egyptology, the Orient, and tribal Africa. In addition, from 1925, the growing impact of the machine, depicted by repeating or overlapping images, and, in the 1930s, by streamlined forms derived from the principles of aerodynamic design, played a role in the “look” of art deco.

Typical features of art deco buildings include sleek, streamlined profiles, emphasizing verticality (in skyscrapers) or horizontality (in homes and lower-rise buildings). In addition, newer materials including chrome, stainless steel, aluminum, vitrolite, and neon were used for buildings, as well as glazed terra cotta, which now appeared in bold pastels.

have begun in Kansas City to insure these art deco treasures are preserved. Among them was the 1994 Kansas City Art Deco Society, which has since been merged with the Historic Kansas City Preservation Office. Bill McDevitt, an art director at Kuhn & Wittenborn, led the initiative, calling upon local photographers to capture the art deco detail. Posters with photographs of the glorious ornamentation soon hung throughout the city and a new appreciation of the architecture began.

“There was a restorative movement in Kansas City a few years back to note the city's musical heritage,” McDevitt says. “There is a jazz district with a new jazz museum and a restored theater that recall the city's jazz age. Few people, however, have given much thought to the many empty art deco skyscrapers and incredible terra cotta buildings that dot midtown and downtown. To bring attention to these buildings, I have teamed up with several local photographers and I am proud to say that we have had three posters printed that are sold in area stores to bring attention to our wonderful art deco architecture.”

Among them is Steve Curtis, a photographer who years ago fell in love with the art deco style. “I photographed these buildings with a very distinctive style, in black and white to neutralize the color in an effort to highlight geometric shapes and patterns and the angled perspectives which help emphasize the sleek elongated design,” Curtis says. Curtis' architectural photography has since been exhibited at the Kansas City chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and at OGGI, a local art gallery. *(editor's note: see page ? for a look at Curtis' photography)*

“You can not visit Kansas City or work in Kansas City without being inundated with our architecture,” McDevitt explains. “I believe we have well over 80 documented buildings and there are plenty of industrial sites that haven't been recorded. These 80, are for the most part, within downtown and midtown, however, many have fallen into disrepair or sitting empty.” Among the deserted is the Fidelity Bank and Trust Building, a 35-story professional building, and the Power and Light Building.

Perhaps less flashy than the buildings of the time in either Chicago or New York which were becoming hubs of the art deco movement, the buildings of Kansas City were more utilitarian. With European roots, art deco made its way to America at a time when the country sought “things modern,” McDevitt explains. “The country was looking to the future and of course, jazz represented the new. It was the music of the young. It was vibrant and wild. Some of the ear-



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lier deco, the high style of the 20s was wild—the terra cotta designs, the tops of buildings that resembled rocket ships. They were flagships for the future and jazz was just a part of that movement. The wild music you could and can still hear in Kansas City you can see in some of the buildings. There is no doubt that men had jazz in mind when they were doing some of these facades.”

Slowly but surely the attempts to bring life back into these buildings is taking root. Elizabeth Rosin, a partner with Historic Preservation Services, LLC says a plan to create a Power and Light District that would entail converting the building into condominiums has been passed by the city council. This plan also includes turning a 20-block radius of the same area into an entertainment center replete with movie theaters, restaurants, and nightclubs. Meanwhile, other developers have shown an interest in restoring the building and surrounding business district.

“There is so much synergy happening in downtown Kansas City,” Rosin says. “Just south of the

Power and Light Building, redevelopment is taking place at a frantic rate. Lofts and restaurants have opened and there's a new performing arts center in the area. The restoration of Union Station was completed last fall in what is known as the freight or crossroads and it spurred the opening of galleries, studios, and lofts. There's been a trend here of people interested in getting back to the urban core.”

Is there a future for some of these vacant and seemingly unappreciated buildings that resplendently speak of a Kansas City in its heyday? Many people are certain it's possible the more the story of these buildings is told. For art deco architecture, like the notes of an improvisational dollop of jazz, is timeless. *(Editor's note: The photographs for this article were taken before the owner's art collection was in place.)* ■