

Books March 2019

Second City's third style

by Francis Morrone

A review of Art Deco Chicago: Designing Modern America by Robert Bruegmann.

Think of Chicago architecture, and what comes to mind? If you came of age when I did (in Chicago, no less), you're likely to think of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and there's nothing wrong with that: thoughts of those two can be very pleasurable. And then there's the "Chicago School" in general: Burnham & Root, Holabird & Roche, William Le Baron Jenney, and the rest. Growing up in Chicago, I, and so many, glowed with pride knowing that the most renowned architectural historians extolled these Chicago architects as integral to the genealogy of modernism—and, as such, the most important native constellation of architects in America. Score one for the Second City! Robert Bruegmann, in his introductory essay to *Art Deco Chicago*, which he edited, acknowledges the triumvirate of Nikolaus Pevsner, Sigfried Giedion, and Chicago's own Carl W. Condit as the historians who established the mythos of Chicago architecture.

That origin story goes something like this: The Chicago School of the late nineteenth century helped lay the groundwork of modernist architecture. The retrograde classicism of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition retarded the development of Chicago architecture for half a

century—exactly as Louis Sullivan predicted it would. Then came, on cue, the “Second Chicago School,” led by Bauhaus refugees from Nazi Germany, chiefly Mies van der Rohe, who, to show how History is not to be trifled with, washed up on the shore of Lake Michigan around the start of the Second World War and groomed a generation of Chicago architects who would spread the glass-box aesthetic from the Loop to the four corners of the globe, proudly reasserting Chicago’s architectural supremacy. And just about everything that came between Sullivan and Mies was negligible, unworthy even of acknowledgment in books such as Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941).

Yet many of my generation in Chicago, weaned on this narrative and filled with chauvinistic pride in our city (Did I ever really think deep-dish pizza was a culinary marvel?), felt a little uneasy in our pride. Yes, Sullivan and Wright were undeniably great. Maybe Mies was, too. But were we really to regard the many local buildings of the first half of the twentieth century that gave us so much pleasure as unimportant, as *retardataire*, as kitsch?

Of course, a reaction set in against the Narrative, but it built slowly. In his fine monograph on Minoru Yamasaki, which I reviewed in these pages (June 2018), Dale Allen Gyure deftly outlined how such historians as Rudolf Wittkower, Colin Rowe, and Vincent Scully affected certain architects as early as the 1950s, leading them to question orthodoxies and to champion a more protean modernism. Bruegmann and, in another of the present book’s essays, Neil Harris note how the post-war “camp” sensibility transformed from an ironic embrace of that which is so bad it’s good into a recognition that, actually, it’s not bad at all. This was part and parcel of the rise of appreciation of Art Deco, a change in sensibility that is the subject of Harris’s essay—and no one writes that kind of essay better than Harris. Today, it’s hard to find anyone who doesn’t regard the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building as serious and great works of canonical twentieth-century architecture.

Art Deco Chicago goes well beyond such buildings, or their Chicago brethren, which include Holabird & Root’s Board of Trade Building

(1930) and Palmolive Building (1929). For although a marvelous Hedrich Blessing photograph of the latter adorns this book's dust jacket, the scope of *Art Deco Chicago* is sweeping, taking in anything and everything that can plausibly be termed Art Deco, and emphasizing industrial design and graphic design as well as architecture.

The book begins with five essays. In addition to those by Bruegmann and Harris, there are contributions from Jonathan Mekinda, Teri J. Edelstein, and Lisa D. Schrenk. All are excellent, scholarly but pitched to the common reader, and free of jargon. Schrenk's essay, on Chicago's Century of Progress exposition of 1933–34, is especially welcome, since not a fraction as much has been written about that world's fair as has been written about the Columbian Exposition or the New York fair of 1939.

Following the essays comes the heart of the book, which accompanies an exhibition, "Modern by Design: Chicago Streamlines America," on view at the Chicago History Museum from October 2018 through December 2019. This section comprises a chronologically arranged survey of Chicago design between 1914 (Frank Lloyd Wright's great Midway Gardens, demolished in 1929) and 1949 (the Schwinn Phantom bicycle). The latter exemplifies Bruegmann's contention in his introductory essay that Chicago may be less significant for its role in the history of avant-garde design than for its place as a great manufacturing center and transportation hub that distilled design ideas, packaged them for the great American public, and distributed its products across the country. In this mode, Chicago harbored a vast array of design talent and technical expertise that helped outfit the home, work, and recreational environments of America's burgeoning middle class.

Sometimes this meant buildings, like Thomas W. Lamb's gorgeous Lake Theatre (1936) in Frank Lloyd Wright's Oak Park. (When I was sixteen, I worked there as an usher.) Sometimes it meant the neon "chop suey" sign (*ca.* 1934) of the Orange Garden Chinese Restaurant on the city's northwest side. And sometimes it meant the Sunbeam Coffeemaster

(1938), designed by Alfonso Iannelli, the Campania-born sculptor and industrial designer who had decorated Frank Lloyd Wright's Midway Gardens, as well as several other buildings illustrated in this book, including Zook & McCaughey's spectacular Pickwick Theatre (1928) in suburban Park Ridge (where Iannelli maintained his studio, about three blocks from the theater), and Barry Byrne's great St. Thomas the Apostle Church (1925) in Hyde Park.

Each of the 101 entries is two to three pages long, written by a noted scholar, and lavishly illustrated, with both period and contemporary photographs, the latter in color. *Art Deco Chicago* is a superb piece of book production. The exceptional number of high-quality color photographs, the coated stock, even the place-keeping tassel suggest a very expensive book, and, at \$75, it's not what you'd call cheap. But it's good to bear in mind that twenty or more years ago this book would have cost even more. High-quality books are more affordable than ever.

Art Deco Chicago shows off, as no other book I know does, Chicago's remarkable contributions to twentieth-century design, and it brings to light the names of designers who deserve to be much better known. At the same time, might the emphasis on "design" be a bit leveling? Many people might well regard certain Art Deco buildings—Burnham Brothers' Carbide & Carbon Building (1929), for example, long a personal favorite of mine—as authentic works of art. But a Wrigley's chewing gum billboard? Or a Radio Flyer wagon? In his essay, Bruegmann cites Clement Greenberg's famous 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." For followers of Greenberg, Bruegmann writes, "Art Deco was the very embodiment of kitsch." To highbrows, Art Deco was merely the styling of objects of mass consumerism. Yet wasn't it the Museum of Modern Art that taught us that industrial styling deserved a place beside Picasso and Pollock? I may have been raised on the Chicago Narrative, but soon enough I discovered the architectural criticism of Ian Nairn (who wrote that the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow are "tilting-horses erected by paper men because they can't or daren't recognize the golden thread of true quality") and the film criticism of Manny Farber ("White Elephant Art

vs. Termite Art,” a 1962 essay in *Film Culture*), and learned to look for golden threads and termites. An example: the late Henry Hope Reed loved the advertising illustrations of J. C. Leyendecker (featured in *Art Deco Chicago*). Illustrators like Leyendecker, Reed said, were the preservers of classical values in art. Like the Museum of Modern Art, I have no problem placing the Radio Flyer next to Frank Lloyd Wright. That said, I’m not quite sure about the inclusion of the Hostess Twinkie, though I’m weirdly happy to know (as I did not until I read this book) that it dates to *ca.* 1930 and the Continental Baking Company in Schiller Park, in suburban Chicago, and that, according to the art historian Maggie Taft, “The unadorned, rounded corners of the cake bear a surprising resemblance to the front end of the Burlington Zephyr locomotive.”

And now the \$64,000 question: what is Art Deco, anyway? In his essay in this book, the art historian Jonathan Mekinda writes,

More than a single historical style, the classical tradition was understood as a coherent body of aesthetic thought that connected antiquity to the present via an unbroken chain of masterpieces. It offered a universal approach to design that celebrated balance, order, and harmony as the basis of beauty and beauty as the measure of any successful design. Even in the face of industrialization, the many advocates for the classical tradition proclaimed its continued vitality. Confronted with the machine, they called for updating the tradition through the adoption of new materials, technologies, and aesthetic techniques while still adhering to the longstanding principles of beauty they believed central to Western civilization. In the broadest sense, that ambition to synthesize the classical tradition to the modern defines Art Deco.

That’s beautifully put. Indeed, it’s worth pointing out that many leading Art Deco designers were trained in the classical tradition—for example, both John Holabird and John Wellborn Root Jr. attended the *École des Beaux-Arts*. But note “broadest sense.” There are many exceptions. Art Deco is the last mainstream style that embraced ornamentation. Is it then chiefly “decorated modernism,” in the phrase used by Paul Kruty in his essay on Midway Gardens? Well, some Art Deco is notable for its absence of decoration—like the “unadorned” Twinkie. The term “Art Deco” never appeared in the 1920s and 1930s;

it may have originated in Paris with the use of *art déco* in a 1966 exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs commemorating the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, one of many sources of the style. In the end, you know it when you see it.

Art Deco Chicago is a sumptuous and thrilling book. Like some other books of recent years—Alexandra Harris’s *Romantic Moderns* (2010), Jane Stevenson’s *Baroque between the Wars* (2018), and Dale Allen Gyure’s *Minoru Yamasaki* (2017)—it sheds light on alternative modernist traditions. Above all, *Art Deco Chicago* helps to bury the hoary mythos of the “Two Chicago Schools.”