Skyscraper Art Rides High: ARCHITECTURE VIEW ARCHITECTURE VIEW Art ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Huxtable, Ada Louise

New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 17, 1974; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 189

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Skyscraper Art Rides High

The Art Deco avalanche is on. The period and its products are being flirted with by the popular press, puffed by dealers in nostalgia and apotheosized in a series of forthcoming books. The subject is also being celebrated right now in an exhibition at Finch College called "American Art Deco Architecture." The timing is just right. The show serves to put the movement into proper focus in the broad terms of American building of the 1920's and 30's, with emphasis on what is increasingly called the Skyscraper Style.

No style has been more neglected, undervalued, misunderstood or camped up. No style has been more vulnerable to the bulldozer, egregious remodeling or the disdain of contemporary scholars. In the peculiar terms of the growing popularity of Art Deco (named after the Paris Exposition of Modern, Decorative and Industrial Art of 1925), kitsch is being given equal standing with high art. And so the selective scholarship and qualitative standards imposed on the subject by Elayne Varian, who organized and installed the exhibition and wrote the catalogue, are exactly what is needed at this moment.

It is as easy to be enchanted by this show as it is to miss its genuine substance. There is immense visual pleasure in its fantasy world of ziggurats, sunbursts, zigzags, waves, stepped triangles, stylized machines, abstract suggestions of energy and speed, and the exotic natural wonders of waterfalls, tortoises, condors and doves. One marvels at their superb craftsmanship in marble, bronze, glass, bakelite, monel metal, plastics and rare woods.

"American Art Deco Architecture" at Finch College Museum of Art, through Jan. 5. Open from 1 to 5 P.M. daily except Monday.

The appeal of this vintage modernism—naive, romantic and upbeat—is enormous. But I believe, with Mrs. Varian, that Art Deco, or Style Moderne, is to be taken seriously. The American work is a sizeable production by men of notable talent, among them Eliel Saarinen, Paul Cret, Raymond Hood, Bertram Goodhue and others who have not yet received their due. But what is most clearly and heartbreakingly revealed in this presentation is that the buildings shown represent the last great period of decorative art. We are struck with the poignant reality that it will never be possible to do this kind of work again. The pervasiveness of the manner is attested to by illustrations ranging from Saarinen's own house to public works such as the Hoover Dam and the Golden Gate Bridge. Even these immense utilitarian structures took forms and used applied decoration derived from the esthetic spirit of the time.

But Art Deco, or Style Moderne, is primarily the art of the skyscraper and of the first skyscraper age. As such it is extraordinary that these structures have been systematically excluded from the modern architecture

Continued on page 38

Art deco in a San Francisco night club

Art

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Skyscraper Style Rides High Again

Continued from Page 37

textbooks, or relegated to footnotes. They are among the biggest and best buildings in a country that has earned its place in architectural history in large part through skyscraper development.

Because they failed to conform to the tenets of the International Style—a rigid "functionalism" with a "technological" esthetic that decreed ornament a "crime"—they have been blacklisted by the official historians of the International Style, which had a valid claim and stake in the 20th-century architectural revolution. The International Style is, in fact, correctly perceived as the prime base of modernism, but to make the point propagandistically its promoters were rigidly exclusionistic. These exclusions, particularly with hindsight, have become ludicrous.

The essential difference between the International Style skyscraper and the Art Deco skyscraper (and there were hybrids, such as Raymond Hood's 1931 McGraw-Hill Building in New York) is that the International Style struggled to reveal the expressive visual power of the structural frame, and Art Deco simply took the technology for granted and embroidered the result.

It is quite possible to read structure and function in the column and spandrel facade of the 450 Sutter Building of 1930 in San Francisco by Timothy Pflueger and James Miller. But beyond that the spandrels are decorative fantasies, and both glass and metal are angled for a richly plastic facade. One of the least recognized factors of these Art Deco skyscrapers is the extremely successful plasticity of the building as a whole, aside from the applied ornament; there is a great preoccupation with planes and volumes and sculptural effect. Such effects are further dramatized with light, often in the form of lit glass tubes—another element of the Deco vocabulary. The Niagara Mohawk Building in Syracuse, N. Y., is a spectacular example.

Most of these characteristics aim at a frankly surface appeal that is highly suspect within the puritan ethic (esthetic?) of modernism. To International Stylists, this approach, tied as it is to tradition, is original sin. Still, the ornament is often extremely beautiful. It is perhaps hard to grasp the fact that elevator lobbies can be historic interiors; Art Deco turned them into incredible 20th-century art forms. They are disappearing, however, persistently destroyed by marble-slab "modernization." A radiator grille, a mailbox or a doorknob can be, and is, a collector's item. When a building is torn down or remodeled, the discarded parts are so prized that the vultures close in.

It is worth noting that Art Nouveau and Art Deco have much in common: they both emphasize the primacy of a new vocabulary of ornamental forms of a remarkable creativity and strong sensuous pleasure, bypassing structural innovation. If one style is valid, so is the other. And yet the former is accepted as part of the official 20th-century esthetic and the latter is not.

These buildings are rarely designated as landmarks, and even their documentation has only begun. So far, their fate is in the hands of speculators. Los Angeles's Richfield Building of 1928 by Morgan, Walls and Clements was demolished in 1967; its bronze elevator doors are pictured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue. The Cities Service Company, which moved from Wall Street to Tulsa recently, is about to tear down an assortment of its Wall Street properties in spite of New York's official pleas to save them, leaving only Clinton and Russell's 60 Wall Street tower built for Cities Service in 1932 (the one model in the show). It faces an uncertain future. In a more welcome move, Oakland, Calif., has converted Timothy Pflueger's Paramount Theater of 1931 into a home for the Oakland Symphony.

Those who can should not only see the show, but take a few field trips as well. In New York, for example, the elevators in the Chrysler Building are a special esthetic experience; each cab is an elaborately different marquetry and metal Deco garden of delights. The best exhibitions of the art of architecture are still in the city streets. It will be tragic if these buildings end up as fragments in a museum.