

The twin towers of the Art Deco Majestic Apartments overlooking Central Park.



NEW YORK CITY'S ART DECO LANDMARKS— FROM MANHATTAN TO STATEN ISLAND

By Kathleen Murphy Skolnik

TO COMMEMORATE THE 50th anniversary of New York City's Landmarks Law, the Art Deco Society of New York (ADSNY) assembled a tribute of its own—a day-long chartered bus tour of notable Art Deco sites scattered throughout the city's five boroughs. The tour, *Art Deco Landmarks: Unlikely Battles and Great Successes*, included restored Deco landmarks, lost treasures, and potential landmark candidates still at risk of demolition. Led by well-known, local Art Deco and landmarks specialist and historian Tony Robins, the April 19 tour took place 50 years to the day that then-Mayor Richard F. Wagner signed the New York City Landmarks Law. Robins, a founding member of ADSNY and former deputy director of research and director of surveys at the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, is the author of an illustrated walking tour guide of Art Deco architecture in New York City forthcoming from SUNY Press.

Established as part of the Landmarks Law, the Commission protects New York City's architecturally, historically, and culturally significant buildings and sites by granting them landmark or historic district status and by regulating any alterations to designated properties. Sites must be at least 30 years old in whole or in part to be eligible for landmark status.

In the early years of the Commission, most landmarks dated from the nineteenth or even the eighteenth century. In fact, its first landmark, the Pieter Claesen Wyckoff House in Brooklyn, was constructed in the mid-seventeenth century, with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century additions. The city's first Art Deco landmark was the Chrysler Building, designated in 1974, nine years after the law was passed. Several of the great twin-towered residential skyscrapers lining Central Park West followed, including, the Century (Irwin S. Chanin with Jacques

Delamarre, 1931) at 62nd Street and the Majestic (Irwin S. Chanin, 1930-31) at 72nd Street, the first stops on the tour.

The Normandy Apartments (Emery Roth & Sons, 1938-39), located nearby on Riverside Drive at 86th Street, were presumably named for the S.S. *Normandie*, ocean liner, which departed for her 100th transatlantic crossing just six weeks before plans for the building were filed. The 20-story cooperative building combines sweeping streamlined curves with Renaissance-inspired details. A recessed semicircular entrance on 86th Street features mosaic designs in shades of beige, gold, and blue. News that some residents were planning to replace the building's original casement windows in 1985 led to a hastily organized public hearing on the proposed landmark designation. Despite a reprieve blocking alterations while a decision was pending, shattered glass reportedly fell to the sidewalk as owners scrambled to

replace windows prior to landmark designation. The building was declared a landmark and remains otherwise intact today.

Leaving Manhattan for the Bronx, the tour visited the Park Plaza Apartments (Horace Ginsbern & Associates, Marvin Fine, designer, 1929-31) on Jerome Avenue near 164th Street, one of that borough's first Art Deco buildings. Designated a landmark in 1981, it is a massive complex of five, eight-story sections separated by recessed courtyards clad in light-colored brick with polychromatic terra-cotta ornamentation. The decorative terra-cotta panels include fountains flanked by flamingos, a motif more expected at a Florida resort than a Bronx apartment building, and a tall building backed by a rising sun. In another panel an architect charmingly presents an architectural model to the Parthenon. Ginsbern (born Ginsberg) and Fine also designed the Noonan Plaza Apartments (1931) in the hilly Highbridge neighborhood, once the site of sprawling estates and woods. This similarly large complex of eight multi-story units arranged around an interior garden court has a gate lodge entrance within an angled portico. It was named a landmark in 2010.

Lunch was at the historic Marine Air Terminal (Delano & Aldrich, 1939) at LaGuardia Airport. Here the Pan American Clipper, or "flying boat" aircraft, took off in the country's first transatlantic passenger flights at a time when seaplanes were considered safer for long-distance air travel. A landmark since 1980, the building has a two-story circular core flanked by one-story wings. Its original buff brick cladding with black brick detailing is now painted light beige with dark brown details. A terra-cotta frieze of flying fish against a blue background encircles the central core. *Flight*, a mural by James Brooks, surrounds the rotunda where original Art Moderne-style wooden benches trimmed in aluminum with aeronautical details remain. The mural depicts the history of aviation, from the mythical flight of Icarus and the experiments of Leonardo di Vinci to the Pan Am Clipper itself and pilots with navigation charts. It was painted over in the 1950s but restored in 1980. Photo panels lining the walls describe the aviation history of the terminal where



PHOTO: HILDRETH MEIERE DUNN

Riverside Drive facade of the Normandy Apartments.



PHOTO: HILDRETH MEIERE DUNN

Eighty-Sixth Street entrance to the Normandy Apartments with its mosaic ornament.



PHOTO: HILDRETH MEIERE DUNN

Park Plaza, one of the first Art Deco buildings in the Bronx.

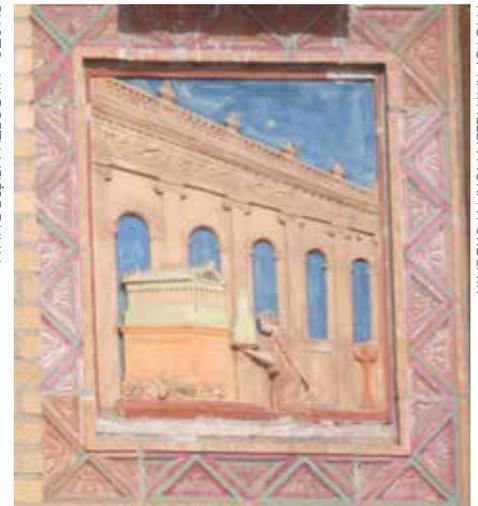


PHOTO: KATHLEEN MURPHY SKOLNIK

Terra-cotta panels on the facade of Park Plaza (above and below).

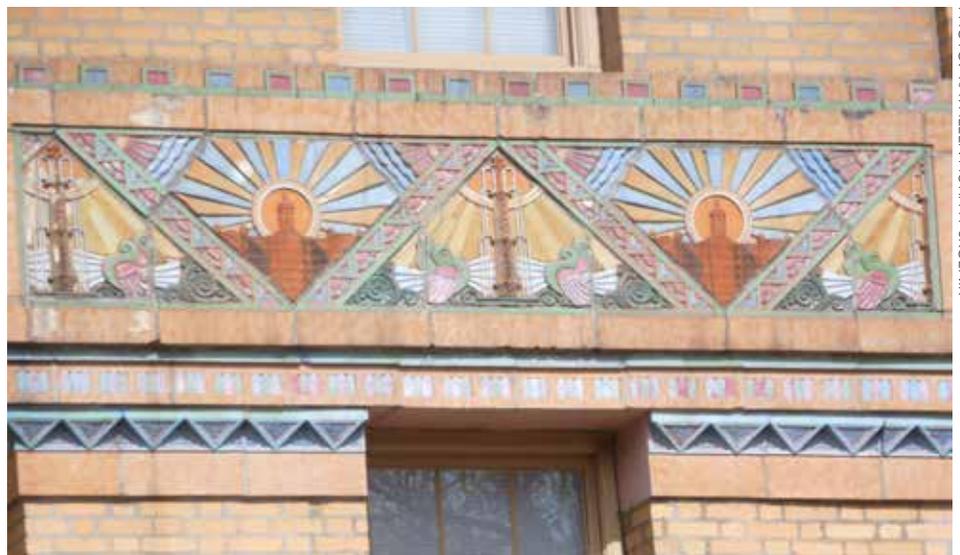


PHOTO: KATHLEEN MURPHY SKOLNIK



Detail of the mural *Flight* by James Brooks.

Delta Shuttle operates hourly flights to Chicago.

From Queens, we drove by the former Knickerbocker Laundry in Long Island City. This Art Moderne design received an industrial class award as the “most beautiful building in Queens” in the 1930s and is now a Presbyterian Church. Few of the original details remain and it has no landmark status.

Next it was on to Brooklyn and two Art Deco residences not yet designated landmarks where we admired the strikingly elegant black and gold entrance, glorious orange, blue, and green terra-cotta spandrels, and elaborate brickwork of a building on Bridgewater Court (Martyn K. Weinstein, 1934). Deco details also survive in the exterior and the lobby of the nearby Brighton Beach Gardens (Kavy & Kavovitt, 1935-36).

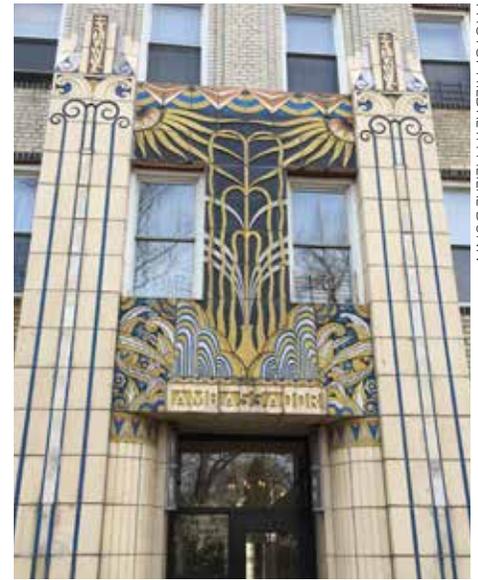
One of the sadder stories of the tour was the former Coney Island Pumping Station (Irwin S. Chanin, 1938), once described as a “streamlined jewel box” by the Historic Districts Council and now a decaying and neglected Art Moderne ruin. Visitors today have to imagine the glass block that once filled the lower wall and the limestone winged horses sculpted by Harry Lowe at the entrance, which were moved to the sculpture garden at the Brooklyn Museum of Art after being vandalized. The pumping station has been vacant since it closed in the 1970s. Although it was proposed for landmark designation in 1980, no action was taken.

However, the testimony of preservationists at a public hearing held by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in early October has raised hopes that the pumping station will finally receive landmark status.

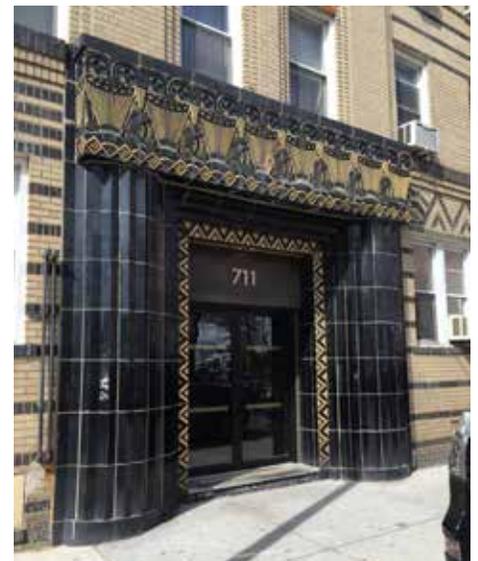
Another public facility that has survived the years much better is the McCarren Play Center (Aymar Embury II, lead architect; Henry Ahrens and others, consulting architects; Gilmore D. Clarke and others, landscape architects, 1934-36) in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. One of eleven outdoor swimming pools that opened in New York City in 1936 during Robert Moses’ term as park commissioner, this Works Progress Administration project is still in popular use.

The last stop on the itinerary was Staten Island where the Art Deco Ambassador Apartments (Lucien Pisciatto, 1932) in Saint George contrast sharply with the neighborhood’s more traditional residential buildings. A terra-cotta panel with a blue and gold frozen fountain motif tops the entrance. Former residents include Paul Newman and Martin Sheen. Other Deco sites in Staten Island are the Paramount Theater (Rapp & Rapp, 1930), currently closed, and the Bayley-Seton Hospital (Kenneth Murchison and others, 1933-36).

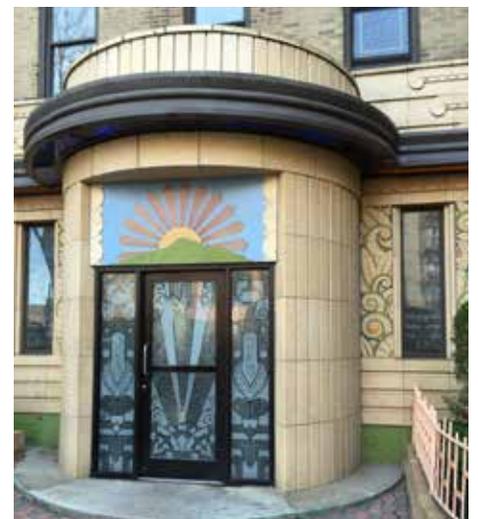
Thanks to the Art Deco Society of New York for organizing this marathon tour and to Tony Robins for his excellent commentary.



The Art Deco Ambassador Apartments on Staten Island.



Art Deco entrance to a Bridgewater Court residence.



Entrance to Brighton Beach Gardens.

PHOTO: KATHLEEN MURPHY SKOLNIK



Former Coney Island Pumping Station, now in a state of deterioration.

PHOTO: HILDRETH MEIÉRE DUNN



The Marine Air Terminal at LaGuardia Airport.

PHOTO: KATHLEEN MURPHY SKOLNIK



Terra-cotta frieze of flying fish.

BACK TO THE BRONX

Returning to the Bronx a few days after the bus tour, I was delighted to explore the borough's Art Deco gems on foot with Alex Disbrow of the ADSNY. As the Society's international ambassador, Alex promotes communication and collaboration between the ADSNY and the International Coalition of Art Deco Societies. He lives in a Deco building in the Bronx and has been instrumental in educating managers and residents of Art Deco buildings about the style and the period and encouraging them to preserve and restore their historic treasures.

We revisited Park Plaza to view the lobby which retains much of its original Art Deco splendor. The streamlined apartment building next door at 1001 Jerome Avenue (Sugarman & Berger, 1937), though smaller and less grand, has some elegant Deco details. Alex is working with ADSNY President Roberta Nusim and Vice President Stephen Van Dyk to convince the building management to restore the unusual mural painted by an unknown artist on the lobby wall.

Bronx's Grand Concourse Historic District, designated a landmark in 2011, has an especially high concentration of Art Deco apartment buildings. One of the most striking is the "Fish Building," another Ginsbern/Fine collaboration (1936-37) whose name refers to the "mosaic aquarium" at the entrance. The nautical theme continues in the lobby murals and the stained glass.

Emery Roth & Sons, the designers of the Normandy in Manhattan, also designed the apartment building at 888 Grand Concourse at East 161th Street (1937) featuring streamlined rounded bays. The concave entrance with mosaic embellishments resembles the Normandy and an Art Deco

spirit continues in the relatively well-maintained lobby.

Across the street is the Bronx County Building (Joseph H. Freedlander and Max L. Hausle, 1931-33), originally the Bronx County Courthouse. The limestone-clad building with bronze and nickel spandrels and elaborate bronze grillwork on the doors is within the Grand Concourse Historic District but was also designated an individual landmark in 1976. A variety of pink marble sculptural groups designed by noted sculptors Adolph Weinman, George H. Snowden, Joseph Kiselewski, and Edward F. Sandford, Jr. flank the four entrances.

After a fabulous lunch at Patricia's on Morris Park Avenue, which Alex described as the best Italian restaurant in the Bronx and possibly in New York City (I can't refute that), we headed to Alex's home in a seven-story building on Pelham Parkway in the East Bronx (H. I. Feldman, 1937) opposite the Bronx Botanical Gardens. Alex's urging led to the restoration of the mosaic mural in the lobby where he contributed new lighting fixtures. The ceiling lamps and sconces that he purchased from Rejuvenation in Portland, Oregon are reproductions of original Art Deco designs and are much more appropriate than the neocolonial fixtures they replaced.

Walking into Alex's own apartment is like being transported back to the 1930s. Most of the artwork, furniture, lamps, carpets, and objects d'art are from the Deco era; others are contemporary pieces designed in the Deco spirit. Alex's prized possession is a Gilbert Rohde cabinet created for the Design for Living home at Chicago's 1933 Century of Progress International Exposition.

Since my return to Chicago, Alex has

added a new item to his collection. On Memorial Day weekend, he discovered a tapestry of Shanghai Harbor from the 1930s in an Asbury Park antique shop. The tapestry is 16 inches high and 5-1/2 feet wide and is so amazingly detailed that Alex initially mistook it for a painting.

Thanks to Alex for so generously taking the time to acquaint me with Bronx Art Deco (and for the Italian cookies too). ❧



Entrance to 1001 Jerome Avenue.



The Fish Building on the Grand Concourse.

PHOTO: KATHLEEN MURPHY SKOLNIK

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Lobby of 888 Grand Concourse.



Sculptural group by George H. Snowden at the 161st Street entrance to the Bronx County Courthouse.



Segment of the restored mural in the lobby of 601 Pelham Parkway.



Bronze doors of the Bronx County Courthouse.



Gilbert Rohde cabinet from the Design for Living house at the Century of Progress.



Alex's collection includes a British Art Deco cabinet, French Deco chairs, and a tapestry of Shanghai Harbor, all from the 1930s.



Tapestry detail.