

Art deco treasures in far-flung corners

A new book on Canadian art deco tells an artful story

DAVE
LeBLANC

ARCHITOURIST

“Ah, the Marine Building in Vancouver,” he says, confidently, after a millisecond pause.

It was supposed to be an unbuildable curve ball. “It’s 200 years in the future and only one Canadian art deco building is still standing – but you get to pick it!”

Tim Morawetz, author of *Art Deco Architecture Across Canada* (Glue Inc., 2017), elaborates as his dinger sails over the (virtual) outfield wall: “The Marine Building is Canada’s Chrysler Building or Empire State Building. It is richly decorated, it follows all the principles of what an art deco skyscraper should be and it is very Canadian in the decoration that’s on it.”

He goes on to describe the ships, seashells, lobsters, dirigibles and trains that were lovingly carved into the façade of the 1929 building. Then, he mentions the connection to the Guinness family in Ireland – yes, that one – and how they backed local entrepreneur Fred Taylor, who purchased the McCarter & Nairne design in 1929 for less than half of what it cost to build after it lay vacant during the Depression.

“It’s a fascinating story,” he finishes.

Indeed, and so are the stories behind the other 150 buildings, both great and small, featured in the 320-page hardcover book. There’s pulp and paper engineer W. George Smith, who designed and built two Streamlined Moderne houses in Corner Brook, in 1950 complete with bomb shelters (the style arrived late to the East Coast, Mr. Morawetz says); in Saint John, “Eastern Canada’s most modern Drug Store,” Robbins, boasted gleaming glass Vitrolite panels on the exterior and, inside, a crazy-long lunch counter that seats dozens, including many who served in Second World War; there’s Eaton’s hubristic scheme for a 34-storey Toronto skyscraper that was never realized; and the tale of a Calgary skyscraper that did get built in 1951 thanks to the efforts of Jacob Bell Barron, who then wooed northern Alberta oil barons to headquarters in his building rather than in much-closer Edmonton.

After the success of his 2009 book, the more straightforward, somewhat catalogue-like *Art Deco Architecture in Toronto*, which picked up a Heritage Toronto Award of Merit, Mr. Morawetz says he wanted to dig deeper this time around, so he made the decision to “tell a richer story by exploring the people behind each of the buildings.”

So, he introduces us to the people behind little known automotive service stations, public buildings, high schools and local fire halls in places such as Minto, N.B., or Indian Head, Sask., as well as the celebrities behind famous Montreal landmarks such as Ben’s Delicatessen, or the home the Trudeau family has owned since December, 1979, built by Ernest Cormier for his family in 1930-31.

Also, he asks us to consider the “believe it or not” story of tiny Penitence, B.C., which, although it counted a population of less than 10,000 until 1951, was “a stronghold of art deco buildings.” So much so that Mr. Morawetz visited their archives personally and met with members of the local “Flat Top Society” – a group that organizes walking tours of the area’s disproportionately large number of curved-wall, nautically inspired homes with flat roofs – rather than rely on e-mail exchanges for his research.

His task was made somewhat easier because most of the photography was already done: a deco-head for decades, while on business trips in the 1980s and 90s Mr. Morawetz would steer his rental car towards examples of the style to snap photos and, after returning from the 1993 World Congress on Art Deco in Perth, Australia, he returned to Toronto “inspired to find and document the art deco in Canada.” So, for the next few years, he spent every vacation poking into every province to



W. George Smith designed and built two Streamlined Moderne houses in Corner Brook. ROBERT MELLIN



The Marine Building in Vancouver is author Tim Morawetz’s favourite art deco building in Canada. He loves the Canadian-themed decorations on the building. PHOTOS BY TIM MORAWETZ

do just that. So what does the self-schooled author think differentiates Canadian deco from examples found in other places? “I think the deco period was especially good in Canadian architectural history for celebrating Canada; the earlier styles borrowed European or American precedents ... and the

46 I think the deco period was especially good in Canadian architectural history for celebrating Canada.

TIM MORAWETZ
AUTHOR OF ART DECO ARCHITECTURE
ACROSS CANADA

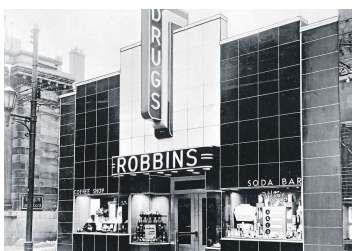
Modern movement that followed was not interested in decoration,” he answers. As an example, he points to the 1931 John M. Lyle Bank of Nova Scotia headquarters in Halifax, which has 86 different examples of Canadian plant and animal motifs carved into it by Ira Lake, and to Charles Comfort’s bas-reliefs that adorn CN Rail’s Central Station in Montreal, which “tell a tremendous story about everyday life in Canada.”

While Mr. Comfort’s work is

still on view in Montreal (and at the former Toronto Stock Exchange), many of the buildings/carvings profiled in Mr. Morawetz’s book have been lost to landfill. And certain architects, such as Robert Lyon, who designed Kelowna’s 1937 concrete post office and Penitence’s 1940 Municipal Hall, remain unsung heroes of the movement. Lyon’s work, Mr. Morawetz says, “would be applauded as fine examples of art deco not just in Canada but on a U.S. or European scale” but, in small communities especially, “the art deco consciousness didn’t arrive until too late” to save them.

Perhaps that’s because we Canadians, then as now, struggle with the fine line between pride and braggadocio, so we choose to keep quiet instead: let the Americans trumpet Miami and the New Zealanders drum up interest in Napier. Unfortunately, in the world of architectural preservation, keeping quiet is akin to a death sentence.

Mr. Morawetz’s thoroughly researched book, however, is a loud and confident voice that will add to the preservationist’s toolkit: a talisman to keep the wrecker’s ball at bay for a few more, precious decades.



There were once many art deco-style buildings across Canada, including the Robbins drug store in Saint John, above, and the Penitence Municipal Hall, Penitence, B.C. ABOVE PICTURE: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA; BELOW PICTURE: PENITENCE MUSEUM & ARCHIVE