



Figure 1. Peter Sheridan, *Sydney Art Deco*, 2019. Metro Theatre, Kings Cross, Bruce Dellitt, 1939, p.207.

Michael Bogle

Peter Sheridan has assembled a 432-page book on the Art Deco architecture of Sydney and its suburbs. Similar to earlier works in this field, Van Daele and Lumby's *A Spirit of Progress, Art Deco Architecture in Australia* (1997) and Ferson and Nilsson's *Sunrise over the Pacific, Art Deco in Australia* (2001), Sheridan's exuberant book is far more expansive in its scope, examining architecture, décor and decoration through his photography and selected period illustrations. Design historians will be familiar with his earlier works on radio design, *Radio Days: Australian Bakelite Radios* (2008) and *Deco Radio: The Most Beautiful Radios Ever Made* (2014).

Amongst *Sydney Art Deco*'s groupings are petrol stations, factories, and civic amenities such as bus shelters, gateways, bandstands, cemetery monuments and crematoria. The survey suggests that Art Deco is a style and a methodology shamelessly embraced by Sydney's architects and designers. The Mother Country's architecture critics like John Betjeman and Evelyn Waugh scolded Art Deco's exuberance, with Waugh in the February 1938 edition of *Country Life*

describing Art Deco “mansions like half-submerged channel steamers, offices like vast bee hives and [...] windows that blinded the eyes”. But as Sheridan’s *Sydney Art Deco* makes it clear, local designers had let their *Country Life* subscriptions lapse.

Art Deco

Sheridan’s study describes Art Deco as “the first global style movement” and gives it a wide frame of reference from architecture to homewares. It is significant that he describes it as a “style” rather than a methodology or a system of design problem-solving. This allows him to focus on his imagery and descriptions in the text rather than analysis.

Roy Lumby’s definition of Art Deco in the authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture* (2012) is equally comfortable with the notion of Art Deco as a style exploring two-dimensional and three-dimensional decoration, colour, expressive materials such as architectural ceramic claddings, pressed metal, ornamental brickwork and glass.

The “style” definition is limiting, however, and suggests a very modest role for the interior architecture of Art Deco. Sheridan in his pursuit of photographs of interiors has managed to evade the city’s vigilante concierges and maître d’hôtels to capture lobbies, restaurant interiors, pubs, cinemas and selected domestic interiors. The designs of these interior spaces suggest an analytical methodology for creating interior spaces. The *Sydney Art Deco* images illustrate an immodest interior expression where the corners are replaced with walls of swooping volume-enhancing curves as concealed up-lighting reflects soft lighting from ovoid ceiling plans. This is interior architecture as a performing art.

The Art Deco floor plans and the generous curves they demand create large interior volumes full of surprises. The 1938 Stephenson and Turner ACI House at 52-58 William Street, East Sydney provides an accessible example. A long hallway lined with ACI glass bricks leads from a generously curved coloured tile entrance to trace the depth of the building; then takes another surprising 90 degree curve to the left to enclose a commercial space leaving the lifts as a theatrical “reveal”.

The architect Douglas Agnew’s 1948 “Mahratta”, Wahroonga, would be amongst Sydney’s most expressive domestic examples of the interior architecture of the Art Deco era. Every line of the “Mahratta” interior is dynamic, interior dark-stained doors are glazed with large ovoid glass panels, a monumental circular stair ascends from a voluminous circular entrance foyer and rich materials are employed throughout. Sheridan has also been able to locate and photograph a surviving Art Deco bathroom in the 1939 domestic house “Mandalay”, Warrawee that retains original black Vitrolite wall linings as the background for a glistening black enamel bath and basin.



Figure 2. Mandalay bathroom, designer unknown, 1939, *Sydney Art Deco*, p.103.

Moderne

With the expressionistic architectural qualities illustrated in Sheridan's book, perhaps "Moderne" could be a more apt classification of Art Deco. Julie Willis suggests in her entry on Moderne in the *Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture* that Moderne inherited a methodology (rather than a style) from such antecedents as the Dutch architect Willem Dudok (inventive brickwork and analytical building massing) and the German architect Erich Mendelsohn (striated horizontal compositions, strong corner massing). These architects lend the movement an element of *gravitas* through their substantial commercial and civic buildings in European urban settings.

Sydney Art Deco illustrates many urban buildings that easily match the methodology of Mendelsohn including the form and interiors of Budden and Mackey's 1939 Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board building, 339-341 Pitt Street and their 1935 Railway House, York Street. Willis's exploration of

Moderne describes the dynamism borrowed from streamlining, speeding motorcars, ships and aircraft.

Dudok is often cited as an influence in Australian architecture between the wars for his inventive design using brick; widely regarded as a pedestrian material but in his hands, a most expressive material. Dudok adopted brick for major civic projects using highly original detailing, brick detailing with fired colours as well as multi-coloured brick laid in prescribed ornamental patterns. Sheridan illustrates many Sydney buildings that employ similar techniques; these certainly arise from a shared methodology with Dutch architecture s including Samuel Lipson's Hoffnung House, 155 Clarence Street, Sydney that is a brick building of commitment using multi-coloured brick from its podium to the ornamental parapet.



Figure 3. Hoffnung House detail, Samuel Lipson, 1937, p.53.

Jazz Modern Views

Jazz Modern is another term employed in discussing interwar buildings with Willis considering it a sub-set of Moderne. In Sydney it dramatically appears as a derogatory term employed by the Stonemason's Society during a 1935 protest

against F.W. Turner's Rural Bank design to clad the Martin Place building with coloured glazed tiles.

"Beautiful stone still remains to be quarried," the Secretary of the Stonemasons' Society said, "and nothing can be better than stone. Unfortunately, there are a number of young architects, with so-called modern views, who are opposed to stone." [...] The Sydney Morning Herald, 19 January 1935 reported the "Secretary said that Sydney was developing a Jazz type of building, of Jazz materials and Jazz colours."



Figure 4. The Dangers of "Jazz". Still photograph from "42nd Street", 1933. The musical "42nd Street" premiered at the State Theatre, Sydney in June 1933. Supplied by reviewer.

There was an unhealthy obsession amongst the Anglo-centric nations with "Jazz" as the 20th century destroyer. Here is the poet John Betjeman's postwar view of modern architecture in his 1943 *English Cities and Small Towns*:

"...There has grown up an absurd admiration of what is modern, as though 'modern' meant always a flat roof, a window at the corner, [...] wallpaper designed in cubes and arts of orange and brown; no capital letters, and no serifs

on shop fascias; horizontal glazing bars, in fact not genuine contemporary architecture at all but 'jazz'."

As the book shows throughout its 432 pages, there was no fear of "Jazz" architecture and design in Sydney and its suburbs. In the suburb of Potts Point, for example, Sheridan's book illustrates that during the interwar wave of apartment building, the suburb's doors were open and welcoming to Art Deco styles, Moderne methodologies and "Jazz".



Figure 5. Craigend, Darling Point, Bloomfield & McCulloch, 1935, p.94.

While many of the anticipated materials of Art Deco & Moderne design such as the UK's Vitrolite cladding, the Monel metal trim (often mistaken for stainless steel) and coloured tile mosaic work are to be readily found in *Sydney Art Deco*, there are some significant regional differences to be found in local architecture.

The book illustrates that one of the Australian distinctions of Art Deco & Moderne in commercial buildings is the frequent use of claddings of coloured glazed tiles, synthetic stone and composite stones. Wunderlich Ltd is the great NSW promoter of ceramic building cladding, ornament and 3-dimensional sculpture of local flora and fauna under the direction of Ernst Wunderlich. Roy Lumby finds Ernst attending the *Exposition Internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels*

modernes (1925) in Paris and returning with a great enthusiasm for ornament and colour.

The colour work of the New York architect Raymond Hood also received some attention in the Australian press throughout the 1920s for his new stepped pyramid “skyscraper”, the American Radiator Building in Manhattan clad in black tiles and gold-coloured ceramic detailing. In a review of Hood’s work, Sydney’s *Evening News* (5 May 1924) asked “will the new fashion spread here?” The answer was definitively, “yes”.

Sheridan’s photographic survey shows that US urban influences from Raymond Hood and others were a powerful local force with extensive photographs of the ceramic-clad 1930 BMA Building in Macquarie Street by Fowell and McConnel, David King’s Martin Place 1937 APA Building, Martin place, the Adam, Wright and Apperley 1939 Feltex House at 261 George Street and many others in the CBD and elsewhere.



Figure 6. Enmore Theatre, Enmore, Charles Bohringer, 1936, p.216.

One of the most valuable features of the book is the authors’ expanded documentation of building types that have been somewhat overlooked in earlier surveys. Amongst his groupings are petrol stations, factories, civic amenities such as bus shelters, gateways, bandstands, cemetery monuments and

crematoria. The book comes with an exhaustive index and walking tour maps of Sydney's Central Business District (34 sites) as well as Sheridan's favoured precinct of Potts Point, Elizabeth Bay and Rushcutters Bay (36 sites)

While other Australian surveys of interwar Art Deco and Moderne architecture may have provided more textual analysis of the style and methodology of this rich era, the photography of Sheridan's book Sydney Art Deco takes the enthusiast further afield by documenting an extraordinary range of architecture and design.

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