

ARCHITECTURE

Spotlight on Washington Deco: The Hecht Company Warehouse

By Richard Striner

(In 1984 Hans Wirz and I published, via Smithsonian Press, *Washington Deco: Art Deco Design in the Nation's Capital*. "Since then, ADSW has done great things to save Deco buildings in Washington. And thanks to the energetic work of hundreds of ADSW volunteers, we have learned a lot more about the Deco buildings that we either missed the first time around or else addressed with only limited background material. In *Spotlight on Washington Deco*, "a new *Trans-Lux* column, I will share some of this new information).

In 1984, all that we knew about the Hecht Company Warehouse at 1401 New York Avenue, N.E., was that it was built in 1937, that it was designed by Abbott, Merkt & Company, that it won a prize in a competition sponsored by the Pittsburgh Glass Institute, that it was lauded both in the local press and in the national architecture journals for its innovative use of glass block, and that it was obviously one of the most magnificent specimens of streamlined Art Deco design in greater Washington.

In 1990, ADSW and the Committee of 100 on the Federal City applied for local landmark status for the building. Cracks and deterioration in the building's corner tower mandated repairs, and we feared that the building might be ruined if the owners should flinch from a costly first-class restoration.

The landmark nomination was approved. Moreover -- pleasant surprise! -- Hechts discovered that a fine restoration would veritably make them money because of the federal tax credits that they could obtain for doing it. So the building was repaired to the highest preservation standards, with original materials replicated throughout. PPG actually manufactured a limited run of glass blocks in a discontinued size for this one particular job.

The background materials used in the historic landmark application made heavy use of the recent scholarship of Prof. Richard Longstreth -- a powerful friend and ally of ADSW in many preservation battles -- especially his studies on the history of department store development.

Within the retail industry in 1937, the Hecht Warehouse represented a new trend in department store theory and



Rendering of the Hecht Co. Warehouse by J Floyd Yewell for Abbott Merkt, & Co. *Pencil Points*, December 1936

practice: the use of what was called a "remote delivery station." No longer did precious floor space at the main store have to be used for storage instead of sales. Instead, most storage and shipping were consolidated at a single warehouse built at the periphery of the city (where land costs were lower) and convenient to

both road and rail transportation.

The Hechts Warehouse was designed as a key element in the firm's fortieth-anniversary program to expand and upgrade its services. Hechts announced simultaneous efforts to install air conditioning at its main store downtown, to create a six-month budget plan for installment sales (a precursor to the charge account), and to construct the warehouse to improve and speed up delivery.

The cornerstone was laid on November 23, 1936 and speakers at the ceremony included the firm's President, Alexander Hecht, D.C. Commissioner Melvin Hazen, and U.S. Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland, who, according to the *Washington Star*, "praised the company officials for the 'do and dare' philosophy that led them to build the huge new warehouse which, he said, will stand as a monument to the 'business genius which has made America the country it is.'" Why all the fuss about a warehouse? Consider: this was pointed praise in the Great Depression, when many businesses played it safe and kept their operations stabilized at a minimal but low-risk level that left the economy stagnant.

We now know that the warehouse was designed by Gilbert V. Steele, P.E., of the New York-based engineering and architecture firm of Abbott, Merkt & Company. Founded in

Even as Montgomery County's Historic Preservation Commission Votes to Sacrifice the Bethesda Theatre to Development...

Editor's Note: In December 1999, the Montgomery County, Maryland, Historic Preservation Commission approved the construction of a massive apartment building on top of the Art Deco Bethesda theatre, a National Register listed property. The following article by former ADSW President Richard Striner first appeared in the Montgomery Journal, April 19, 2000. It is reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

Viewpoint: Is Preservation Reality or Farce in Montgomery County?

On the eve of a remarkable triumph for historic preservation in Silver Spring, Montgomery County's historic preservation program is, ironically, losing its soul.

That is the paradoxical contrast presented by the imminent fates of the Silver and Bethesda theatres. Both of these art deco cinemas were built in 1938. Both were designed by nationally renowned theater architect John Ebersohn. Both were the object of preservation campaigns that I started and have led. They are *now* about to be treated in manners so different, it suggests something close to schizophrenia.

The Silver is about to be lavishly restored by Montgomery County, with state assistance, to serve as the dazzling new home of the American Film Institute. But the Bethesda Theatre is about to be ruined—ruined with the ignorant blessing of county Historic Preservation commissioners and staff who are absolutely the worst of any I have seen in more than 15 years of volunteer activism in Montgomery County.

I am capable of dishing out praise as well as blame.

Montgomery County's historic preservation leaders were once outstanding, and that—together with the policies of current elected leaders—is why the Silver Theatre is about to be treated so well.

Without the heroic leadership of former Historic Preservation Commission chair people such as Eileen McGuckian and Philip Cantelon, the Silver and Bethesda theatres both would have been destroyed in the 1980s. Without the courageous leadership of past staffers such as Marti Reinhardt decision-makers would never have had the opportunity to take a strong stand in such cases.

And without the subsequent vision of elected leaders such as County Executive Douglas M. Duncan and the members of successive county councils, the Silver Theatre would never have gotten the blue-ribbon treatment that will turn it into a national preservation showplace next year.

These Montgomery County leaders had courage and principles. In contrast, the people who have sealed the fate of the Bethesda Theatre showed little more than cowardice.

Here is how the sell-out happened: A developer named Gene Smith bought the Bethesda Theatre and consolidated it into a development parcel encompassing the better part of an entire square block. He then cut a deal with the neighborhood behind the project through an offer to pull the development out of their faces by piling most of it right on top of the historic theater.

The neighbors, out of pure self-interest, were glad to go along.

The theater was nominally protected on the county's Master Plan for Historic Preservation. The plan gives the county's Historic Preservation Commission discretion to approve major changes to historic buildings.

However, the HPC can turn a project down if it would ruin an irreplaceable resource. That's the kind of power it possesses, and that's the kind of power it squandered when the Bethesda Theatre case came before it.

Smith had the audacity to ask for the HPC's permission to envelop almost 80 percent of the Bethesda Theatre in new development. The apartment tower Smith is trying to cram on top of the theater leaves only the ornamental entrance and a bit of side wall visible. Most of the 1938 theater is totally swallowed up in the bowels of Gene Smith's building.

Testifying against the shocking plan, Society of Architectural Historians President Richard Longstreth said that it makes the Bethesda Theatre look like a "codpiece" for the apartment building behind and on top of it.

Preservationists from all over the county—and beyond—opposed the codpiece plan before the HPC. Leading the opposition was the Art Deco Society of Washington, the nonprofit group that launched the campaigns to save the Silver and Bethesda theatres in 1984. I led the campaigns in my 10 years as the Art Deco Society's president.

Smith and his bought-off neighborhood cheerleaders argued that the Art Deco Society is "unwilling to compromise." But the society endorsed a much-publicized plan 10 years ago to save the Greyhound Bus Terminal in downtown Washington—a compromise worked out in circumstances similar to those of the Bethesda Theatre case.

But there is a crucial difference as well. While the

Greyhound compromise permits an office tower to exist behind the historic building and overlapping the back of it, the society had to fight for more than five years in order to force developers to shove back the new construction far enough to give the low-rise terminal sufficient “breathing room” to be itself—to maintain its visual identity. As a result of this hard-won victory, most of the terminal is visible and free-standing to this day. Anyone can see this at 1100 New York Ave. in Northwest Washington.

Conversely, most of the Bethesda Theatre will disappear from view forever when the Smith plan begins construction later this year. The difference between these compromises is simple: the Greyhound compromise is decent; the Bethesda Theatre scheme is obscene. A 10-year-old child could tell the difference.

But the staff of the Montgomery County Preservation Commission could not. They actually hectored us to our faces with the “Greyhound precedent” as they rushed to endorse to endorse the Smith scheme. The staff report threw the HPC into the kind of disarray that would be funny if it weren’t so appalling.

To their credit, one or two commissioners found the Smith project impossible to stomach. But they couldn’t get an HPC majority to join them in voting it down.

For hours the HPC dithered as one failed motion after another was offered in increasingly feeble attempts to get the whole thing over with. The members seemed almost clueless on matters of procedure as a 4-4 deadlock developed.

They then proceeded to collide and recoil from each other like a scene reminiscent of the Keystone Kops. Dreary minutes were wasted on fretting over how to “save” particular miniscule bits and pieces of the building that was headed toward entombment. At last the exhausted commission caved in. So the Smith plan is going ahead.

What are we to make of this debacle? The preservation movement in Montgomery County is in danger right now of losing any semblance of moral coherence. The staff and commissioners are shadows of the people who launched the county’s preservation program 20 years ago.

It is time for the county to decide: When a building is given protection under the law, can citizens relax about its ultimate fate in Montgomery County? Or is it time to get busy and rebuild the county’s preservation movement from bottom to top?

Take a careful look at what happens to the Silver and Bethesda theatres next year as the months of construction play out. Only you can decide whether preservation is reality or farce in Montgomery County.

...Other Local Communities Work to Restore Their Art Deco Treasures

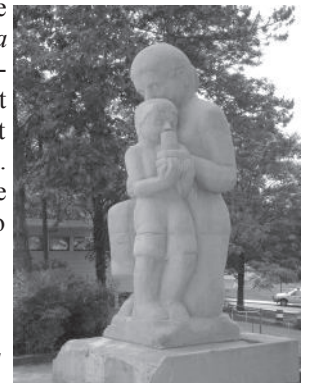


The restored marquee of the Greenbelt Theatre

While Bethesda community leaders made little or no effort to preserve the Bethesda theatre, essentially giving the Historic Preservation Commission the cover it needed to strip the community of one of its few remaining buildings of historic significance, other Maryland communities and neighboring Washington, DC and Virginia see their historic theatres as a way to revitalize their communities. In a recent segment of Bob Vila’s “Restore America” pro-

gram (Sundays at 10 pm on HGTV) focusing on Maryland, the restoration of an Art Deco theatre in Cumberland was one of the featured stories. The theatre, which had been “modernized” and converted into a furniture store in the 1950s, was restored and reopened as a theatre, bringing new life to the community. Similarly, the “Restore America” segment on Washington, DC focused on efforts by Columbia Heights residents to restore the 1924 Tivoli theatre as the cornerstone of their revitalization efforts. And, Wes Waters reports that, on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, Easton’s Art Deco theatre has recently been restored.

Perhaps the most sensitive to its past, however, is Greenbelt, Maryland. In the last issue we reported that the *Madonna and Child* statue had been restored. Now, word comes that the marquee for the Greenbelt theatre has been restored. Greenbelt continues to restore rather than replace its Art Deco commercial buildings.



Madonna and Child