

# A NOD TO DECORATION

*Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast* (Jim Parsons and David Bush, Bright Sky Press, 2008, 192 pages, \$24.95, hardback)

by Anna Mod



*Then, as today, Houston has forged its own style—not Southern, not Midwestern, not Western. Totally Texan, totally independent, playing by its own rules. At times that independence has lead to the loss of some of the early 20th-century structures that told the story of Houston's “coming out” years when the foundation was being laid for the dynamic international city of today.*

-Madeleine McDermott Hamm, Foreword.

*Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast* is a welcome companion to regional art deco publications *Cowtown Moderne*, *Pueblo Deco*, and *Tulsa Art Deco* and rightfully puts our region on the deco architectural tour map. Written by historic preservationist David Bush, currently the director of information and programs for the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, and Jim Parsons, a freelance writer, editor, and GHPA volunteer, Houston Deco includes both modest and high-style masterpieces from the metropolitan area and surrounding Gulf Coast counties. The book is long overdue and serves as a reminder that our city, despite its renown for demolishing everything in site in the name of economic growth and progress,

has stunning and important architectural treasures so obviously worthy of the uphill battle to include preservation as part of our civic culture and consciousness.

The book is organized according to the building's original use: commercial, theaters, institutional, residential, and industrial, with a final chapter titled "Hidden History" that includes side-by-side historic and current photos of some of Houston's more recognizable slip-covered buildings—the gems waiting to be rediscovered. The foreword, written by former *Houston Chronicle* Home Design Editor Madeleine McDermott Hamm, boldly states what we Texans like to hear: "If Art Deco had not emerged in 1925 in Paris at the "Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes," the then-new style probably would have been born in



Houston." She goes on to say, "Houston and Art Deco belonged together . . . Fresh and bold, both looked to the future, not toward the past. . . Houston was (and is) a forward-looking city, ready to embrace and advance the newest, freshest ideas. Yes! Hamm draws the parallels between the style and the city's rejection of traditional decorative forms and elements during the 1920s when Houston was experiencing unprecedented growth and purposefully strove to distinguish itself as a growing American city. The book backs her up showing iconic works, such as the San Jacinto monument, La Porte and the Gulf Building downtown, both designed by Alfred Finn, that serve as institutional beacons and set the new design standard for subsequent theaters, studios, apartment houses and other small commercial buildings. Art Moderne examples are also included and visually demonstrate the stripping down of the decorative elements of the deco style and modernism crept into the building vocabulary. The introduction provides the reader with enough background to distinguish between deco and moderne and highlights the careers of deco masters Alfred Finn and Joseph Finger in Houston as well as Fred Stone and Augustin Barr in Beaumont. The accompanying web site, [www.HoustonDeco.org](http://www.HoustonDeco.org), includes more information on local advocacy efforts as well as a helpful timeline of the buildings.

Despite our jaded belief that we tear everything down, this book reminds us to get out and take a look. The authors provide commentary on some of the threatened buildings, such as the Alabama and River Oaks Theaters and lament the loss of one wing of the River Oaks Community Center. Since publication, the Hawthorne & McGee Service Station in Beaumont has been sadly demolished. Publications such as this do not pretend they can save these buildings—their goal is to educate about the architectural treasures scattered around the region where, like most places, they are appreciated, neglected, threatened, revered, and lovingly restored.