

STYLE FOR AN URBAN TEXAS

Hill County Deco: Modernistic Architecture of Central Texas (David Bush and Jim Parsons, TCU Press, 2010, 206 pages, \$35.00, hardback)

by Anna Mod

It must have seemed very unusual to people accustomed to exuberant Victorian styles. In comparison, Art Deco buildings were smooth, more symmetrical, far simpler in shape and plan, and maybe just a bit too modern for some. More like that new refrigerator in the kitchen than a building should be. But soon it was “out with the old and in with the new,” and within a decade excellent examples of Art Deco architecture could be found throughout the state.

— Mark Wolfe, Foreword

MOVING INLAND FROM HOUSTON DECO (2008),

the authors rolled out the second of what is hoped to be an ongoing Texas Art Deco series. Their first book, *Houston Deco*, reviewed in *Cite 77* (Winter 2009), was an overview of period buildings in Houston and Gulf Coast towns. This new book is similarly organized by building type: commercial, theaters, residential, institutional. Additionally, it includes a chapter on commemorative pieces, biographies of the represented architects and artists, and carefully chosen architectural drawings that are juxtaposed with photographs to show the skill of hand drafting. Researchers and those wanting additional information will delight in the architect and artist biographies, and the detailed illustration credits could spark a stand-alone tour of Texas architectural archives. While the authors cut their teeth on the Gulf Coast, *Hill County Deco* has upped the ante: it is both a colorful guidebook and a credible reference on the subject.

The foreword by Mark Wolfe, executive director of the Texas Historical Commission, sets the stage, not-

ing the shift in tastes from pre-World War I Victorian-era styles to new European imports. Central Texas is a window onto what occurred across the state as Texas transitioned from an agricultural economy to one based on oil exploration, and as the population began the shift from predominately rural to urban. Art Deco was the perfect style to carry the state through this change, and murals that clearly portray the cowboy, ranching, and agricultural past, no matter how romanticized, also boldly depict the future of urbanism, rural electrification, and industry. Wolfe also mentions that the Hill County was especially well poised for Art Deco style development with the influx of new oil money and the strong Texas ties to Washington, D.C., through Vice President John Nance Gardner, an East Texas native who facilitated the state's securing of numerous WPA, CCC, and PWA projects. The height of Art Deco also coincided with the Texas Centennial, influencing the commemorative buildings, sculptures, and artwork that celebrated this important milestone. Art Deco was a favorite of court

houses, post offices, public buildings, banks, and movie theaters, and the organization of the book's chapters allows for a quick comparison of these buildings within the region.

The building styles vary from exuberantly detailed Art Deco to the pared down Moderne style, while the mural painting examples clearly bridge the transition. Specifically, San Antonio's central post office mural, titled “San Antonio's Importance in Texas History,” shows the obvious influence of the Mexican muralists, namely Diego Rivera and David Siqueros, evidence that architects and artists were looking outside of the state for stylistic execution while searching deep into Texas history for their subjects.

Facing the introduction page is an image of the mural from the 1933 State Highway Building in Austin, showing the 254 counties of Texas, the six flags, and vignettes of our agricultural past, all overlaid with images of rural electrification and modern industrialization. The introduction includes a lament from William Orr Ludlow, FAIA, taken from a 1930 article in the *San Antonio Express*, where he asks if modernistic architecture is destined to replace the prevailing styles. The authors do an excellent job placing Art Deco in its historic context, including its origin in, and evolution from, Beaux Arts classicism: though the style was called modernistic at the time, it is in fact a stylization of classical elements and forms. *Hill Country Deco* is a colorful coffee table book that is fun to flip through, while more serious readers will enjoy the comprehensive overview of the subject matter and the carefully researched and cited buildings, murals, commemorative pieces, and architectural drawings.

