

Art Deco in the Tenderloin — where it's at, what to look for

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ARCHITECTURAL historian Michael Corbett identified 20 Art Deco/Moderne buildings with the document he submitted in May to the State Historical Resources Commission, calling for establishment of the Uptown Tenderloin Historic District. The commission's nomination for federal historic district status is now in Washington, D.C., awaiting the listing of the neighborhood on the

National Register of Historic Places.

Pending federal approval, approximately 33 blocks — roughly bound by Market, McAllister, Golden Gate, Larkin, Geary, Taylor, Ellis and Mason streets — will be under certain new construction guidelines monitored by the City Planning Commission. More protection is expected because significant tax breaks will become available whenever old buildings in the district are renovated.

Corbett said he based his report, underwritten by the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Council, on research conducted by Anne Bloomfield, who started to record the value of the area's architecture in the early 1980s. The combined efforts of the two resulted in a 152-page document identifying each building's style of architecture along with other factual information. Almost all of the buildings in the designated area are represented.

The Art Deco buildings are classified in the report as Moderne. Moderne refers to the period's later years, when the look was sleek, streamlined and more rounded in appearance. Art Deco of the earlier period typically has more architectural flourish. The Tenderloin buildings seem often to have a blend of elements — Art Deco and Moderne. Approximately 20 buildings are listed in this category.

Unfortunately, many of the Moderne/Art Deco buildings in the Tenderloin today have been altered such that evidence of the original architecture is obscured or has vanished. At 280 Turk St., for example, a colorful mural on the face of this former film exchange building obscures its Moderne characteristics. One exterior light fixture suggests the past style.

Other adulterated Art Deco buildings include 546 Jones, now the Paradise Massage parlor, where the frontage has been extensively altered. A mere trace of Art Deco survives on the front of the parapet.

The Pink Diamond Gentlemen's Club at 220 Jones and the New Century Theatre at 814 Larkin have suggestions of Art Deco. The rounded blade sign is the most outstanding feature at the New Century. Another place, the King Kong Cafe and pool hall at 714 O'Farrell, still has black vitrolite glass — a popular material of the time — on its exterior and an entrance with linoleum insets in the shape of pyramids. Otherwise, there is not much left now to identify the era.

The Deco Bar at 510 Larkin St. — painted on the outside in prominent Art Deco black — has a facade true to the style, with curved overhang, blade sign and a mosaic inlay of gold and black dancing nymphs over the entrance. Inside, however, original features are missing.

Here are addresses of Art Deco/Moderne places that were named in the Corbett report. Take a daytime walking tour to find some interesting architectural discoveries. The descriptions combine the report's findings and my observations.

546-48 Jones St. — Paradise Massage, up the street from Dottie's True Blue Café. Streamline details on parapet; painted brick facade; extensive alteration to original.

814-20 Larkin St. — Formerly Larkin Theatre, now the New Century Theatre with alterations to the original; vertical blade sign remains.

125 Hyde St. — Former film exchange with

lettering "Motion Picture Studio & Laboratory" still visible; now Lily Samii dress designer on second story; street level vacant; beautiful symmetry in composition; spandrel inset; stepped parapet with decorative cast inset panels, acanthus motif; steel windows.

129 Hyde St. — Former film exchange, now Larkin Street Youth Center; exterior paint enhances terra cotta details, specially cast panel medallion over arched entrance; fluting on pilasters; three stories.

230 Hyde St. — Former film exchange for Columbia Pictures Corp., now the Faithful Fools Street Ministry; symmetry; reinforced concrete with stucco facade; decorative cast panels with grapevine motif; exterior paint enhances details; decorative tile flooring inside.

245 Hyde St. — Former film exchange, now Hyde Street Studios; rounded parapet; decorative terra cotta crest panels beneath windows; extensive window alteration for soundproofing; pilasters with fluting; two mature street trees block overall composition.

251-53 Hyde St. — Former film exchange, now La Voz Latina de la Ciudad Central on street level; Buddhist temple sign above; fluted parapet suggests a Mayan headdress; detailing of terra cotta leaves and simulated grillwork; some original windows.

255 Hyde St. — Former film exchange; zigzag detail on canopy; masks of comedy and tragedy near roofline in Egyptian motif; crenellated details and fluted piers.

259 Hyde St. — Former film exchange, now Central City SRO Collaborative. Moderne look; ornamentation of cast lion heads representing MGM studio; stepped parapet with undulated

lines; pilasters with corner details; tile insets, not all original; some original windows.

651-61 Geary St. — Formerly Career Resources Development Center, now vacant. Originally a garage converted to a Bank of America branch in 1950. Moderne, with vault composition; symmetry; terra cotta exterior tiles; spandrel panels; fluted cornice.

822 Geary St. — Originally a Safeway, now a Goodwill store. Extensive renovations; still remaining are stepped-end piers with fluting, crenellated parapet and streamlined cornice.

631 O'Farrell St. — Formerly the Alexander Hamilton Hotel, now more simply called The Hamilton, with 186 condominium units; impressive entrance and lobby, roof terrace, garden and ballroom available for public rental. Two recent awards: 2008 Art Deco Society of California for preservation and 2008 American Institute of Architects for design of lobby chandeliers. The district's best Art Deco.

741-45 O'Farrell St. — Now King Kong Cafe and pool hall. Small building sandwiched between apartments; black vitrolite fascia and side columns; pointed glass storefront; blade sign; linoleum flooring.

440 Ellis St. — Former Waitresses' Union Hall, now Mandal Hall and offices. Symmetry in composition; eight decorative sunburst panels; vertical piers; zigzag parapet; Mayan motif.

632-38 Ellis St. — Originally a machine shop, now AutoSportHouse, mechanic for high-end automobiles such as Porsche and Mercedes-Benz. One story; decorative but altered front; brickwork with tile insets; stepped parapet; some original windows.

684 Ellis St. — Hotel Essex sign added to

original building; black and white lettering in sans serif style with neon lighting.

201-29 Eddy St. — Offices of the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp. on street level with the Franciscan Tower apartments above. Corner building with decorative stylized fluted pilasters; coved cornice.

288-90 Turk St. — Former film exchange building, now the Tenderloin Self-Help Center. Building's composition in Art Deco/Moderne form; some original windows; exterior light fixture; colorful mural not original. ■



The Faithful Fools
Street Ministry
(above) at 230 Hyde St. once was a Columbia Pictures' film exchange building. Above right: The New Century Theatre, 814-20 Larkin St.; Hyde Street Studios, 245 Hyde; two former film exchanges at 255 Hyde (partial) and 259 Hyde, now home of the Central City SRO Collaborative.



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO

The Hamilton
(above), at 631 O'Farrell St., is the neighborhood's best Art Deco building. This year it has won two awards: prestigious American Institute of Architects honors and the Art Deco Society of California's prize for preservation.

Many buildings, once identified as Art Deco, have been replaced or altered

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each of its upper corners large terra cotta masks in bas-relief. They are the faces of comedy and tragedy — symbols for theater art since the early Greeks.

You'll find much humor and whimsy in Art Deco. The style was in vogue mostly during the years between World Wars I and II — a time of prosperity as well as depression, and the architecture reflects both extravagance and restraint.

Inventions and advancing technologies from the 1920s to the early '40s had a major impact on the era. Archaeological discoveries of the time — such as King Tut's tomb — provided a different non-European inspiration for artists and designers.

That's why so many Art Deco buildings suggest the exotic, the mysterious. Take, for example, the doorway at 129 Hyde, home of Larkin Street Youth Center. It suggests an entrance to an ancient temple with special chambers within.

Continuing south on Hyde, the roofline at 125 Hyde, now the Lily Samii design studio, pierces the air in the shape of a headdress — for a Mayan princess, perhaps?

Art Deco utilizes geometry and symmetry in a big way. Buildings often were stepped in some fashion. Also there was great emphasis on the detailing of the buildings both inside

and out with the application of precast molds, high-gloss tiles, metallic paints and the newly invented vitrolite glass. Columns, piers, pilasters, panels and metal grillwork were common.

Over time, many of these kinds of details both for the interior, and especially on the exterior, probably have deteriorated or have been altered or replaced. So many of the buildings in the Tenderloin once identified as Art Deco have been greatly changed from the original. The corner building at 259 Hyde is decorated with tiling in aqua and pink. How much of that tile is original?

A more reliable record of Art Deco's survival on Hyde Street is in the remaining terra cotta/stucco facades and the original metal windows still visible.

At 125 Hyde the front has a prominent stepped design on the second floor with a center rectangular medallion suggesting, maybe, a movie screen. There is definitely a sense of nature here because of the many flowers and leaves sculpted into the canopy. Palmetto and banana leaves, lotus, scallops, eagles and sphinxes, in general, were especially popular Art Deco motifs.

Art Deco remains in some manner at all the other former film exchange buildings. Speed lines — horizontal and vertical — zigzags and curves, chevrons and rays, swirls and squares are all on view. These elements are either sep-

arately attached to the buildings or built as part of the actual composition.

The interiors of the film exchange buildings, on the other hand, were more functional than ornate, consisting pretty much of an entrance lobby, a few offices on the second floor and the all-important first-level vaultlike rooms that were used for safely storing the precious films. (The silver nitrate in the early films made them highly volatile.)

In addition, it was common for an exchange to have an editing room for quick splicing of movies that were damaged during handling and also a small screening room for special advance previews — meant for the trade and press only.

Current use of the buildings varies from address to address, with a number of apparent vacancies. A few of the buildings house social service agencies; others are rented out to businesses.

The only enterprise operating out of a film exchange building that is still tied to the entertainment business is at 245 Hyde, the Hyde Street Studios. Top-name musicians and vocalists have been going through the building's now cobalt blue door as far back as 1969, when Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young whipped out their "Déjà Vu" album.

Manager Jeff Cleland doesn't want to see the day when Hyde Street Studios has to find a new location. There's a lot of sophisticated

— and expensive — sound and recording equipment that would have to be moved.

It is possible, however, that might happen in the near future because of the pending sale of the studio building, which is bundled in a sales package along with others on the block. According to Josh Nasvick, representing Zephyr Realty, the sale of the 26,640-square-foot site is "in contract." Asking price was \$3,750,000. The exact fate of the property is still to be determined, with the original proposal being a condominium development that provides limited preservation of the film exchange buildings.

The Hamilton at 631 O'Farrell St. is an Art Deco building that has come back in recent years, recognized this year with honors from the American Institute of Architects and the Art Deco Society of California. Built in 1929 as a luxury hotel/apartment having spacious rooms and kitchenettes, the then-named Alexander Hamilton Hotel became a draw for long-term residents as well as for theater and movie people staying in town. Lauren Bacall and Vivian Vance were among its registered guests.

However, the Hamilton's Art Deco gilt started to tarnish with the onset of the new "modern" hotels being built downtown. So, it was converted into condominium units in 1962 and underwent a disjointed remodeling, especially in the first-floor lobby. In an attempt to make the space look updated, many of the

notable Art Deco elements were either disguised or eliminated entirely. The now-impressive fireplace, for example, was covered up by a wall.

It was resident Patrick Carney, an architect, who took the former Art Deco of the Hamilton seriously — so much so that he has contributed a major part of his life for the past 19 years to spearhead a drive to return the place to its former elegance.

After buying his condominium in 1989, he immediately started planning the remodel of his own unit while simultaneously working on the upgrade of the public part of the building including the main lobby and adjacent fountain courtyard and ballroom area.

It was a gargantuan effort. The building, at 21 stories, is one of the tallest in the neighborhood and has 186 condo units within. And that meant other condominium owners had to be convinced that the goal to restore the ground floor of the Hamilton to its original beauty was worthwhile.

"Not everyone wanted to spend money on these kinds of improvement," says Carney, especially because the building has had continuing problems with leaks. "Many of the people who were against the remodel have now moved away and ultimately made money on the sales," he says.

Money for the interior improvements came mostly from a contract that Carney negotiated

with a telecommunications company to rent airspace on the upper roof. Still, on a tight budget, Carney was committed to finding the best deals from contractors and suppliers.

Carney himself donated thousands of pro bono hours to the cause. In the remodeling process, he supervised the selection of everything from mirrors to wall paint, flooring to furniture.

Carney's design of the lobby's Art Deco chandeliers won a prize from the prestigious American Institute of Architects, and the Art Deco Society honored the Hamilton with its 2008 special preservation award.

The Hamilton, Carney says, is an Art Deco win-win for everyone. Interior architecture has been brought back to its original, resulting in an increase of an owner's property value. "And," he says, "we've made a contribution to the neighborhood."

The Hamilton is home to a mix of people, with approximately 50% retirees. There are many young professionals who want to live in the increasingly "Trendyloin," also couples with young children among the residents.

"We're a diamond in the rough," says Carney. Diamonds, too, are very Art Deco. ■

The Hamilton's history and description are available on its Website www.thehamiltonassociation.com.