

Art Deco

BY CLAY LORD

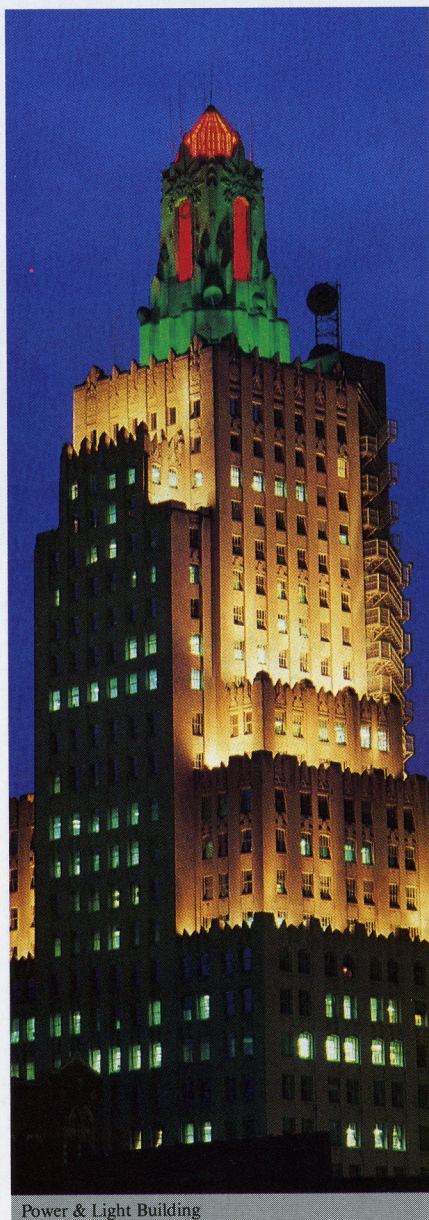
In the early 1930s, the country was devastated by the Great Depression. In many of America's largest cities, plans for new construction were abandoned as American business tightened its belt.

There was one major exception — Kansas City. Fortunately for today's art deco architecture buffs, Kansas City at that time was ruled by the notorious Tom "Boss" Pendergast, a local political boss known for his use of strong-arm tactics. Pendergast put his vast influence behind a \$40-million bond issue which was passed in 1931 and combined with WPA money to fuel a Depression-era construction boom in Kansas City. While many of the country's workers were unemployed and standing in bread lines, Kansas Citians were put to work.

The result is that today Kansas City enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a capital for art deco architecture. As many as 60 art deco buildings are still in use, and nearly every building erected between 1925 and 1940 bears some sign of art deco influence.

At the present time, Kansas City has no ongoing tour program for its fine collection of art deco buildings, although occasional tours are offered through the local branch of the American Institute of Architects. To get a good overview of art deco's influence on Kansas City, you'll have to strike out on your own. There are many outstanding buildings located just minutes away from the downtown area, and a trip to view them can be an excellent way to spend a free afternoon.

The stretch of Main Street from downtown to Country Club Plaza is a particularly rich site for art deco. This area has a high concentration of retail storefronts built during the '30s, and many of these buildings have stylized deco carvings and metal relief panels adorning building facades.



Power & Light Building

To see the major art deco buildings, however, you'll have to go downtown. Located at 1330 Baltimore, the **Kansas City Power & Light Building** has the most striking exterior of the city's art deco edifices. Topped with an illuminated red dome of scarlet-colored, leaded glass, the Power & Light Building is also adorned with large carvings depicting industrial themes. The **Civic Center** at 12th and Oak is made up entirely

of buildings erected during the 1930s. The best are **City Hall** (1936) and **Jackson County Courthouse** (1934). These two highrises face each other on opposite sides of 12th Street. The **Bryant Building** (1931), 1102 Grand, is reminiscent of New York's Chrysler Building and other skyscrapers of the period, and features the same tapered top stepping down to a wide base and foundation. On a smaller scale, the old **Skaggs Drug Store building** (1938) at 3948 Main Street features a delightful clock tower and ample use of stainless steel, giving the building a very high-tech look.

If you only have time to see one building, however, make it the **Municipal Auditorium** at 13th and Central, part of the convention center complex. The streamlined exterior gives no hint of the opulence within; the interior is a luxurious blend of marble, gold and ivory appointments, and the colossal art deco lighting fixtures are superb.

A group of interested architects and architecture buffs, the **Kansas City Art Deco Society**, has recently formed to fight for preservation of the city's art deco buildings. One of those currently endangered by developers is the **General Tire Building**, located at Baltimore and 15th. Try to visit this notable building, while you still have the opportunity.

The future of Kansas City art deco, however, remains bright. Although some buildings, like the General Tire Building, are almost surely doomed, the Kansas City Art Deco Society and other interested citizens hope to effect a compromise between development and preservationist interests, a compromise which will allow the city to expand and modernize while safeguarding its art deco architectural treasures. □