

ART DECO VANCOUVER



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Clockwise from this image: The Commodore Ballroom's facade, its neon sign, the former Paradise theatre, and the Vogue theatre.



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BUILDING A MODERN CITY



HOW ART DECO SHAPED VANCOUVER

Vancouver's skyline is modern and dramatic; a forest of sleek, glass towers set against the North Shore Mountains. Hidden amongst these contemporary skyscrapers are the overlooked seeds of this city's modernity: Vancouver's Art Deco buildings.

Although there are quite a few Art Deco structures scattered throughout Vancouver, it is not the city's defining architectural style: that style is West Coast Modernism. But later modernist styles could not have emerged here without the early modernism of Art Deco.

Although it includes elaborate, luxurious decorations and finishes, Art Deco cannot be reduced to a Jay Gatsby party

This style is often treated as synonymous with the extravagant Roaring Twenties; a symbol of the overindulgence that led to the Great Depression. Although it includes elaborate, luxurious decorations and finishes, Art Deco cannot be reduced to a Jay Gatsby party à la Baz Luhrmann. Art Deco is multifaceted.

What we now know as Art Deco started in the 1910s and continued until the 1950s. The name comes from the 1925 *Paris Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et*

industriels modernes (i.e., the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts). This exposition displayed a wide range of applied arts and architecture, and included submissions from over twenty countries. To show off the talent and sophistication of the French artists and designers involved, many pavilions were conspicuously luxurious. However, many participants in the exposition sought to democratize design.

Art Deco buildings are not homogeneous. Rather, they include a group of three related, often overlapping architectural styles: Zig Zag Moderne, Streamline Moderne, and Stripped Classicism. Zig Zag Moderne buildings include step-backs born out of New York building codes (think the Empire State building and the Chrysler Building). Streamline Moderne is a more modest style that includes curved lines and long, low buildings constructed with mass-produced materials. Stripped Classicism is the most inconspicuous and conservative of the three styles, using classical details like temple fronts.

These three styles are not unique to Vancouver; Art Deco buildings are found throughout Canada and across the world. The thing that makes Vancouver's Art Deco buildings unique comes down to the details, as explored throughout these pages.

This is not an exhaustive guide to all of the Art Deco buildings throughout Vancouver. Rather, this is an exploration of some iconic structures and some lesser-known gems—all of which brought Vancouver into the modern age.

VANCOUVER CITY HALL



BACK TO THE FUTURE

Date: 1936

Address: 453 West 12th Avenue

Architects: Townley & Matheson

Vancouver's iconic clock tower needs no lightning strike to take us Back to the Future. With four glowing-red-neon clock faces, Vancouver City Hall is a striking manifestation of where the city has been, and where it's going. Built during the Great Depression, it was a source of badly needed work and a symbol of optimism for this young city (then only 50).

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For a building built to house a democratic institution, its conception was anything but democratic. Newly elected Mayor G.G. McGeer chose the architects (Townley, the son of a former mayor, and Matheson, McGeer's childhood friend) and the location (in the former Strathcona Park). Rather than build City Hall downtown, Mayor McGeer wanted the city to grow around it.

Completed in 1936, this symmetrical, Zig Zag Moderne building stands twelve stories tall. This structure is made of reinforced concrete, clad in local sandstone and granite. Townley & Matheson kept exterior decorations to a minimum—focusing on form rather than excessive ornamentation. The major design elements are the vertical strips of windows that break up the grey edifice, and the geometric wave motif atop each wedding-cake-style step back.

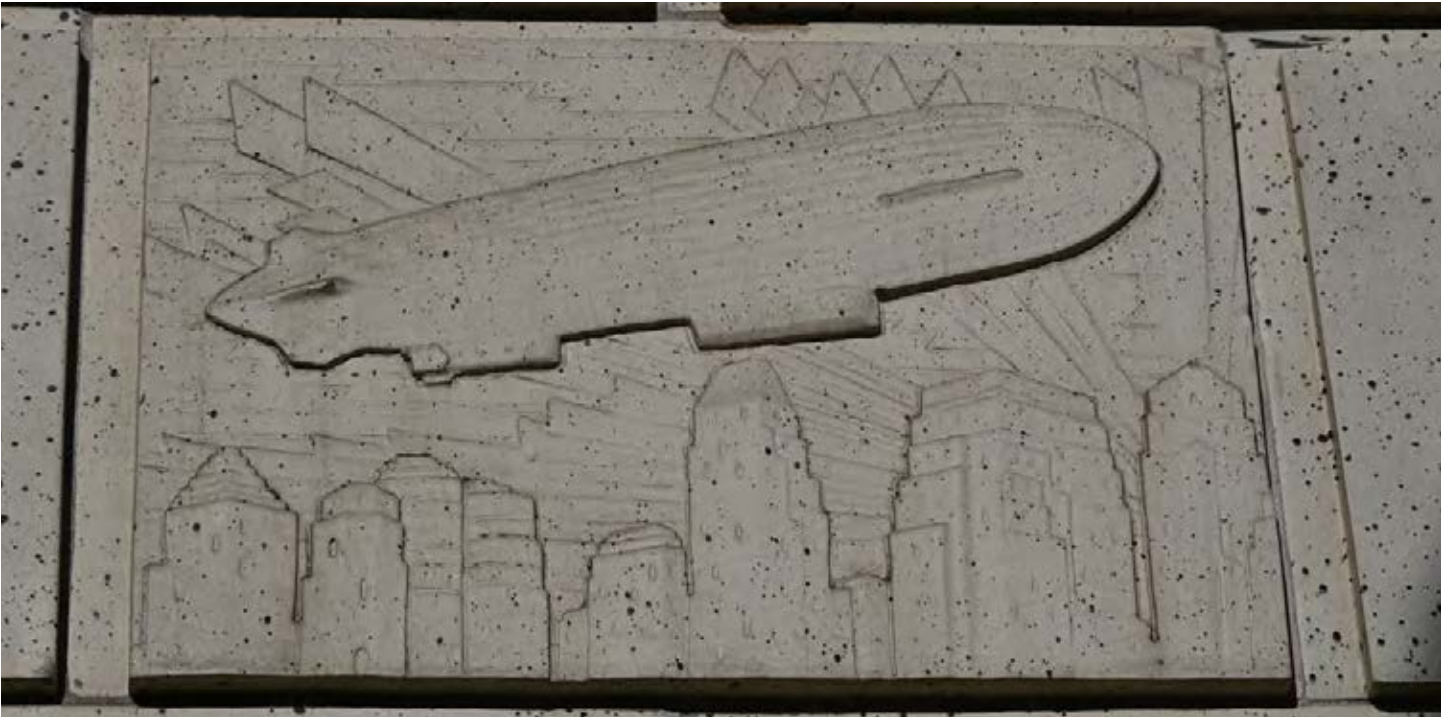
Despite its cakey shape, weddings were only permitted at City Hall starting in 2020. Couples can now rent out the double-height council chamber for small civil ceremonies. The interior still retains its Art Deco charm, with original chandeliers and wood paneling.

Although it is nearly 90, this building is still modern and inspiring. Perhaps the best time to view City Hall is at night, with its clocks and staggered roofline illuminated. Gazing up at the building, it's hard not to be transported; whether that's back or forward in time is up to you.



THE MARINE BUILDING





A VANCOUVER THAT WASN'T

Date: 1930

Address: 355 Burrard Street

Architects: McCarter & Nairne

In an alternate timeline, another Art Deco masterpiece could have become Vancouver's City Hall. The magnificent Marine Building was being raised as the stock market fell in 1929. Its developer, Toronto-based bond house G.A. Stimpson and Co., went bankrupt. They offered the building to the city for one million dollars, but Vancouver declined. In 1933, the building was finally sold for \$900,000 (a great deal, even adjusted for inflation). The buyer was a local entrepreneur named Fred Taylor (with help from the Guinness family, of stout-beer fame).

The Marine Building was built as a working symbol of Vancouver's status as a major port city. Captain J.W. Hobbs (in partnership with G.A. Stimpson and Co.) envisioned the 21-story office building as a centre for maritime shipping. Although its construction was ill-timed, and many of those offices lay empty during the Great Depression, it has since become one of Vancouver's most beloved buildings. Its own architects even leased an office there.

This brick and terracotta building is the best example of Zig Zag Moderne in Vancouver, and possibly in Canada. Its step-backed layers rise to a Mayan-style penthouse (reached by a private elevator, no less). And its nautical origins are not only evident in the name; it is encrusted with oceanic ornamentation, inside and out.

It is a vision of the Vancouver that never came to be

But one of the building's most evocative details is not an ocean-going vessel. Just above street level, a terracotta tile depicts a Zeppelin flying above an Art Deco Vancouver skyline (that includes the Marine Building itself). It is a vision of the Vancouver that never came to be—an alternate skyline filled with Zig Zag skyscrapers and Zeppelins, rather than glass towers and Helijets. Although the fire hazard posed by dirigibles is perhaps too great for this vision to have become a reality, it is nice to dream.





THE PARK THEATRE



SEE YOU AT THE MOVIES

Date: 1941

Address: 3440 Cambie Street

Architects: Kaplan & Sprachman

The Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage; the Commodore Ballroom; the Vogue, the Dunbar, the Metro, the Hollywood, and the Rio theatres: Vancouver is rich in Art Deco venues and theatres of all kinds. Out of this glitzy, storied bunch, the Park is not an obvious standout; it is a sleepy, neighbourhood, single-screen movie theatre.

We almost lost the Park to redevelopment last year

But we almost lost the Park to redevelopment last year. Cineplex, who leased the property for the last 12 years, let their lease lapse. It was a seemingly sudden end for a beloved movie house.

84 years ago, the Park opened its then-brand-new doors in Cambie Village. On August 4, 1941, the opening-day marquee displayed a double bill of *Model Wife* and *The Flame of New Orleans*. (Do yourself a favour and look up the adorable grand-opening illustration in *The Vancouver Sun*.) *The Vancouver Sun* also highlighted the theatre's "Rich carpeting and luxurious furniture," which "contrast well with the severly [sic] modern lines of the architectural design."

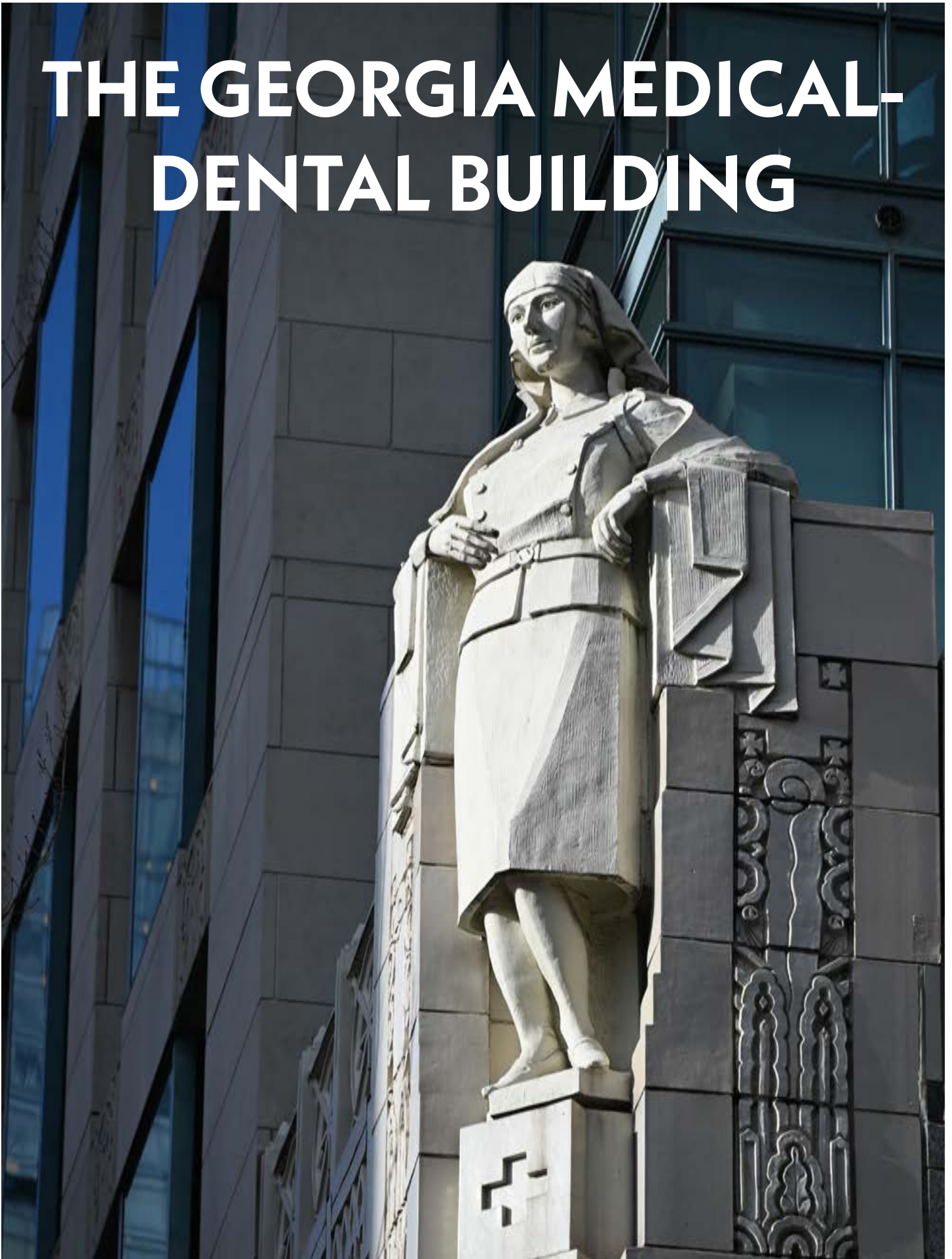
Those modern lines are most evident out front, on the distinctive Streamline Moderne façade (with a touch of Zig Zag in its step-down symmetry). The Park's face juts up and out, prow-like over the sidewalk, bearing its name in blue neon. These distinctive features were designed by Toronto architects Harold Kaplan and Abe Sprachman, noted locally for their work on the Vogue theatre (which bears some similarities to the Park, although on a grander scale). To think of this place empty just didn't feel right.

Thankfully, the management team of another Art Deco theatre stepped in—the Rio. Another local treasure, the Rio is located on Broadway near Commercial Drive. The team there, headed by Corinne Lea, knows how to keep a struggling historic theatre afloat. They brought together a team of investors, who love and make films (and have ties to Vancouver), including actor Finn Wolfhard, producer Chris Ferguson, and directors Osgood Perkins, and Sean Baker. With their help, the Park reopened its doors on the last day of 2025.

While all good things must come to an end, I am glad that the Park still survives. There is something charming about experiencing films together with an audience in the same building that has seen so much movie magic already. See you at the movies.



THE GEORGIA MEDICAL- DENTAL BUILDING





GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Date: 1929

Address: 925 West Georgia Street

Architects: McCarter & Nairne

The Georgia Medical-Dental Building is gone, but its legacy lingers. The Vancouver Sun reported before it opened in 1929 that this 15-story Zig Zag Moderne building was “Built for the Exclusive Service of Physicians and Dentists.” It was faced with Red Balmoral Granite at the base, followed by brick and terracotta trim on the upper floors—shifting from red to buff.

As with McCarter & Nairne’s Marine Building, the skyscraper that preceded it bore details of the building’s purpose. The most notable of which were the nurse statues that stood on the building’s corners, ten stories above the pavement. The interior was luxuriously detailed, with travertine floors and leather-lined elevators.

Despite a public campaign to save it, the building was demolished

Despite a public campaign to save it, the building was demolished in 1989. This loss inspired the creation of the Vancouver Heritage Register. Although the register doesn’t automatically protect historic buildings, it has helped preserve Vancouver’s architectural heritage.

Its replacement, Cathedral Place, was designed by Paul Merrick and opened in 1991. Merrick was clearly inspired by the Medical Dental Building, and replicated details from its façade—including the nurse statues (pictured left). But their lookalikes are much closer to street level.

Details from the original building also survive elsewhere. The original nurse statues now reside at UBC’s Technology Enterprise Facility III (6190 Agronomy Road). And the original mahogany-panel boardroom was recently installed at The Cardero (1575 W Georgia Street).

It is a shame that this beautiful building didn’t survive. But this great loss means that countless other heritage buildings have been and will be saved.

PHOTO CREDITS

(All photographs, except those noted below, are by the author.)

Cover: Vancouver City Hall [453 West 12th Avenue], 1946 (CVA 586-4389; City of Vancouver Archives).

Page 4: Marine Building, 1945 (CVA 586-4079; City of Vancouver Archives).

Page 13: Park Theatre interiors: Odeon Theatres Ltd., 1950 (CVA 586-13459; City of Vancouver Archives).

Page 15 (left): One of the nursing sisters [sic] statues for the Georgia Medical Dental building, ca. 1928 (CVA 1294-3; City of Vancouver Archives).

Page 15 (right): Canadian National Hotel [Hotel Vancouver], 1930 (CVA 99-3660; City of Vancouver Archives).

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Clockwise from this image: The Clydemont Centre, Granville Power Block, the Sinclair Centre, and the Gotham Steakhouse.

CLYDEMONT CENTRE





ABOUT *ART DECO VANCOUVER*

Art Deco Vancouver is an accessible, visual exploration of the city's early modern architecture. It unveils the fascinating stories behind Vancouver's art deco buildings. In this book, you'll learn about national treasures, hidden gems, and lost masterpieces (or at least one of each—this is a short book).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justine Drummond is a freelance writer and editor based in Vancouver. She loves architectural history, and especially early modern architecture. The buildings in this book hold a special place in her heart (and a couple of them are within walking distance of her house, which is convenient).