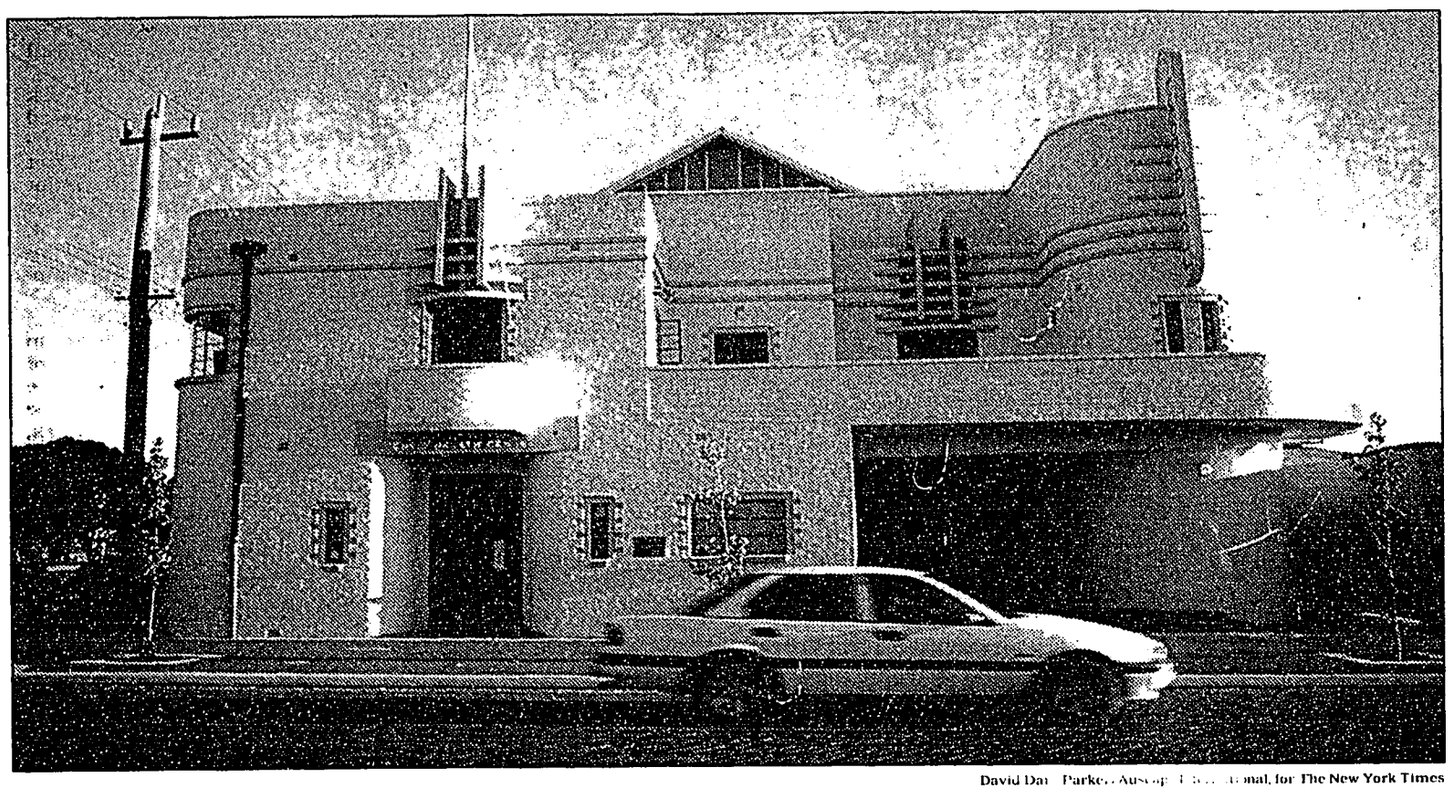
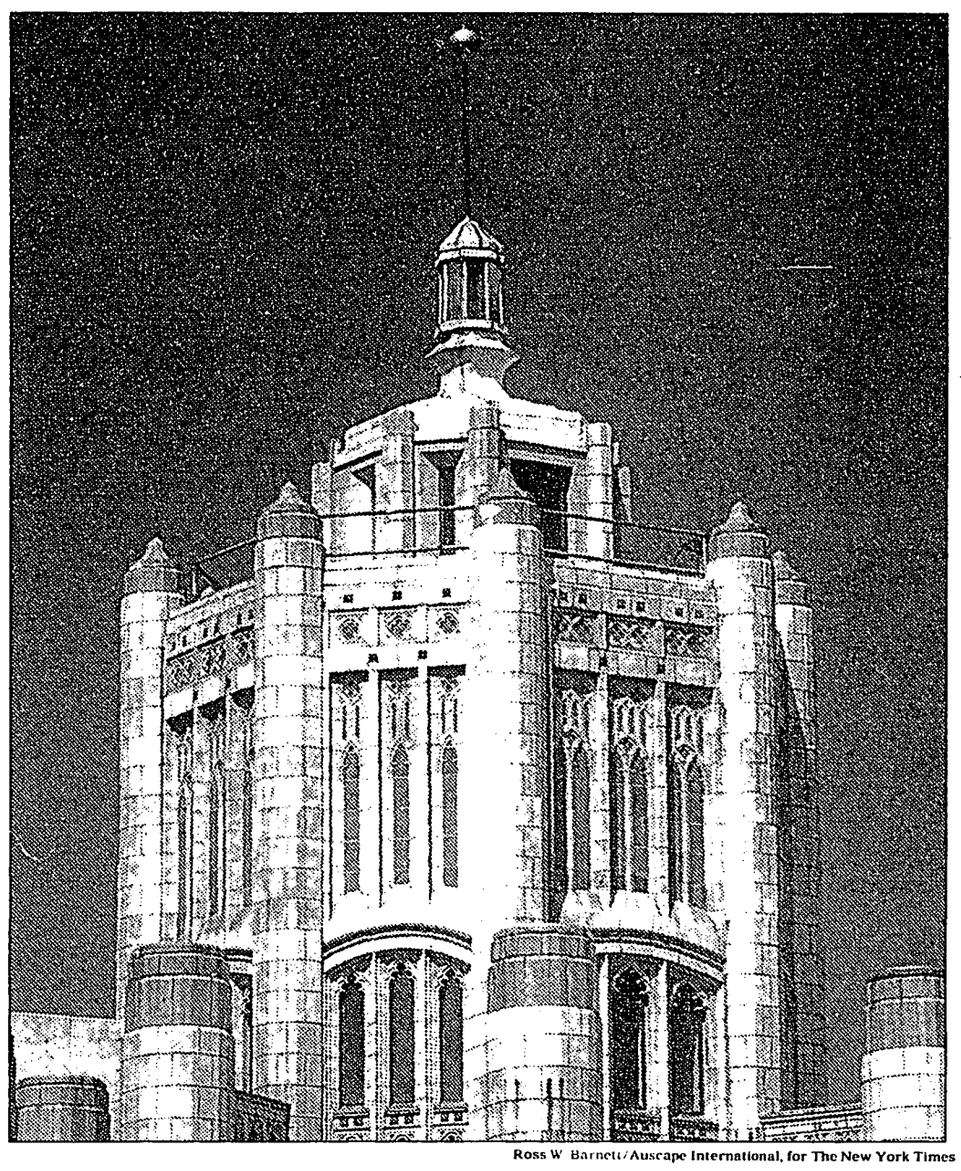


David Dar Parker/Auscape International, for The New York Times



Ross W Barnett/Auscape International, for The New York Times

In Australia's Great Cities, Art Deco Gleams On

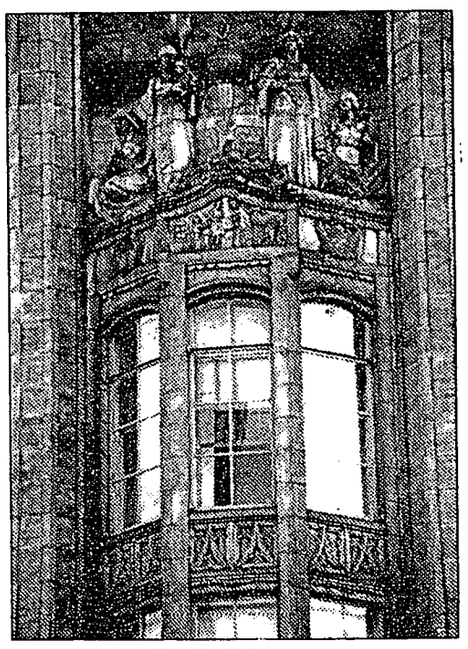
A world away from its sources, the urbane architectural style flourished

By ANTHONY W. ROBINS

TRAVEL halfway round the world, switch day for night and summer for winter, lose a day to the international dateline and you'll find a place that looks a little like home — which is to say, there's something uncannily familiar about Australian architecture.

Australia's Colonial period, not much more than the century leading up to Federation in 1901, was strongly oriented toward Britain, and its architecture was good Colonial Georgian and Victorian, though even then there were American influences, notably a romance with the Richardsonian Romanesque. But with the coming of the 20th century, Australian eyes turned northeast toward California and beyond. From early on, Australia imported California bungalows ("Cal bungs" in today's real-estate trade), Mission Revival, movie palaces, the style of Frank Lloyd Wright — even American architects, Walter and Marion Griffin, to plan Canberra, the national capital. And in the 1930's, when the country fell in love with the jazz age, Australians turned for their apartment blocks, suburban houses, theaters and skyscrapers to the style of the modern American metropolis: Art Deco. (So did New Zealand, whose entirely Art Deco town of Napier has been called the Miami Beach of the South Pacific.)

Art Deco can be found throughout the country, from the eastern gold coast and the big metropolitan centers to the small towns in the west. Perth, the capital of Western Australia, is isolated in the southwest corner of the continent between the desert and the Indian Ocean. Like so much of Australia it has something very Californian about it: a young city that expanded after a gold rush, it has endless suburbs and a near-perfect climate. The surrounding hills and valleys are covered with wildflowers — green-and-red kangaroo paws, and broad purple patches of Patterson's Curse. Though a good deal of central Perth has been replaced by a modern high-rise skyline, the older portions include a remarkable collection of two- and three-story Streamline Moderne stucco-fronted buildings and a handful of 10-story period office buildings. The Gledden Building (1936-37), on Hay Street, may be diminutive by current standards, but in its day the modernistic corner block with abstract geometric window spandrels and a curving corner tower proudly dominated the town, bringing the fashionable, sophisticated New York Art Deco skyscraper look to a provincial capital halfway round the globe. Local pride plays its part here too, however: a series of watercolors adorning its shopping arcade includes remarkably beautiful images of a mob of kangaroos (as it is called) leaping through the bush, and pictures of aborigines and the outdoor Australian life, intermingled with more standard 1930's images of progress.



Jean-Marc LaRoque/Auscape International, for The New York Times

Perth's suburbs, placidly rolling out across the hills, are a sea of one- and two-story bungalows with brick walls and Marseilles tile roofs — generically known as brick-and-tiles — above which white and pastel 1930's Moderne houses raise their heads. The many fine ones in Nedlands five miles from Perth, include the house on Viking Road whose garage is adorned with an Art Deco relief of the kookaburra, a large Australian kingfisher. At 32 Genesta Crescent, white streamline curves and a stark geometric tower make for what the local directory considers a "Hollywood dream-style home."

Where isolated Perth outshines the rest of the country in Art Deco, however, is its cinemas, including "picture gardens," theaters designed with both an indoor auditorium and an outdoor garden for summertime shows. Perth today boasts Australia's largest collection, all streamline curves, geometric colored-glass lighting fixtures and daringly modernistic marquees. The Astor on Beaufort Street in Mount Lawley, the Regal in Subiaco and Mosman Park Memorial Hall in Mosman Park, three of the best, have all been rescued from decay in recent years. The Regal's 1938 steamship-streamlined curving corner, with a wraparound marquee for protection from the sun, sits diagonally across the intersection from the Victorian pile of the old Subiaco Hotel — showing the distance traveled in Australia from one century to the next.

In central Perth, where little survives from the 19th century, Art Deco represents some of the city's earliest visible history. Back east, by contrast, the big cities have sizable surviving 19th-century centers. In Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, Art Deco provides an early modern overlay for an older, well-established core.

Following an 1850's gold rush, Melbourne blossomed into what has been called the world's finest Victorian city. Melbourne was so tradition-minded that when the congregation of St. Paul's built a High Victorian Gothic church in the late 19th century, it imported the design — one of William Butterfield's finest — from England. Yet even Melbourne turned to the Moderne in the 1930's, in a cluster of office buildings and department stores set among the Victoriana.

The City, as Melbourne's downtown is known, is set out on a carefully planned, regular grid of square blocks and streets exactly 99 feet wide, and lined with Victorian office buildings interspersed with modern towers — not unlike Chicago's Loop. In fact, one of Melbourne's finest 1930's buildings, the Manchester Unity at the corner of Collins and Swanston (Marcus Barlow, architect), is a mini-Chicago Tribune Tower. Built 10 years after the 1922 original, it is unmistakably modeled after the great Chicago icon, from its sharply vertical windows and terra-cotta angled piers to its geometric Gothic-Modern tower. Its interior arcade is lined with low-relief panels that together represent all the streams of 1930's Australian iconography: at work in the outback with kangaroos and aborigines; city life, including portraits of the building itself (a common 1930's urban device), and scenes of the charitable mission of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows — a fraternal organization, or what the Australians call a friendly society.

Down the block from Manchester Unity, side by side, Howey House and Kodak House show the progression from the earlier decorative Deco to the later hard-edged variety. Howey House (Barlow again, 1929) is softer, curving, with statues of musicians in a broad two-story arch beneath a Spanish-tiled roof. Kodak House (1934-35), built for the growing photography business is pure geometry, typically modernistic styling for a modern

ABOVE LEFT The Mosman Park Memorial Hall, an indoor-outdoor movie theater in Perth, is shipshape again.

ABOVE RIGHT The Grace Building (1930) pays tribute to the soaring Chicago Tribune Tower but obeys Sydney's height limit.

LEFT A statuary grouping above a window at Manchester Unity, one of Melbourne's finest buildings from the 1930's.

ANTHONY W. ROBINS is the author of a forthcoming book on New York Art Deco architecture.

If you go

Australians first noticed their Art Deco in the early 1970's. Today there are Art Deco Societies in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, with groups forming in South Australia and Queensland. Perth this year was host to the Second World Congress on Art Deco (Miami Beach was host to the first, in 1991). Organizations in each city offer information and guided tours.

Perth: Art Deco Society of Western Australia, 182 Broome Street, Cottesloe, Western Australia 6011, Australia.

Melbourne: Society Art Deco Victoria, Post Office Box 1324, Collingwood, Victoria 3066, Australia.

Sydney: Art Deco Society of New South Wales, Post Office Box 752, Willoughby, New South Wales 2068, Australia. A. W. R.

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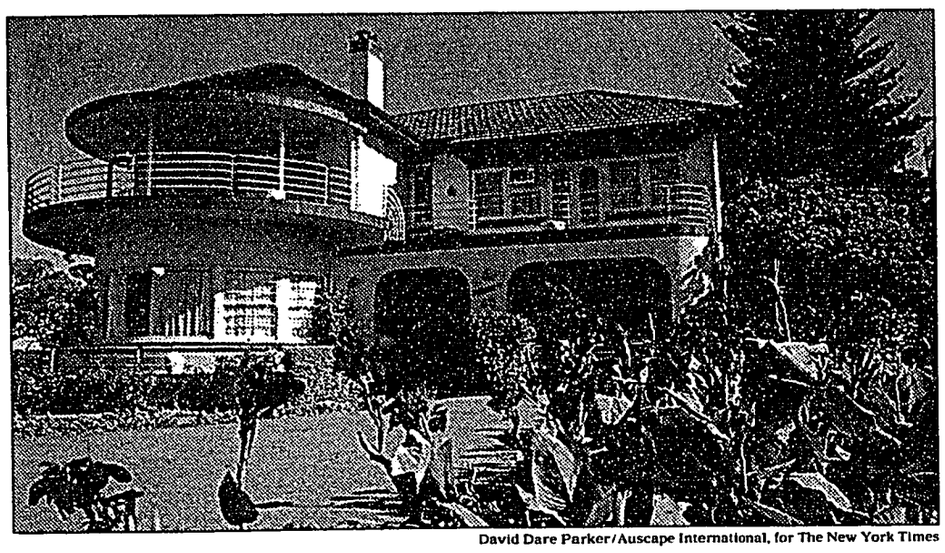
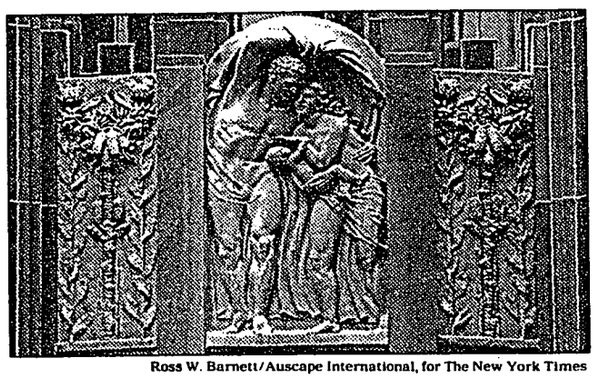


David Dare Parker/Auscape International, for The New York Times



Ross W. Barnett/Auscape International, for The New York Times

ABOVE A Moderne house in the suburbs of Perth.

LEFT Detail of the City Mutual Life Assurance Building in Sydney.

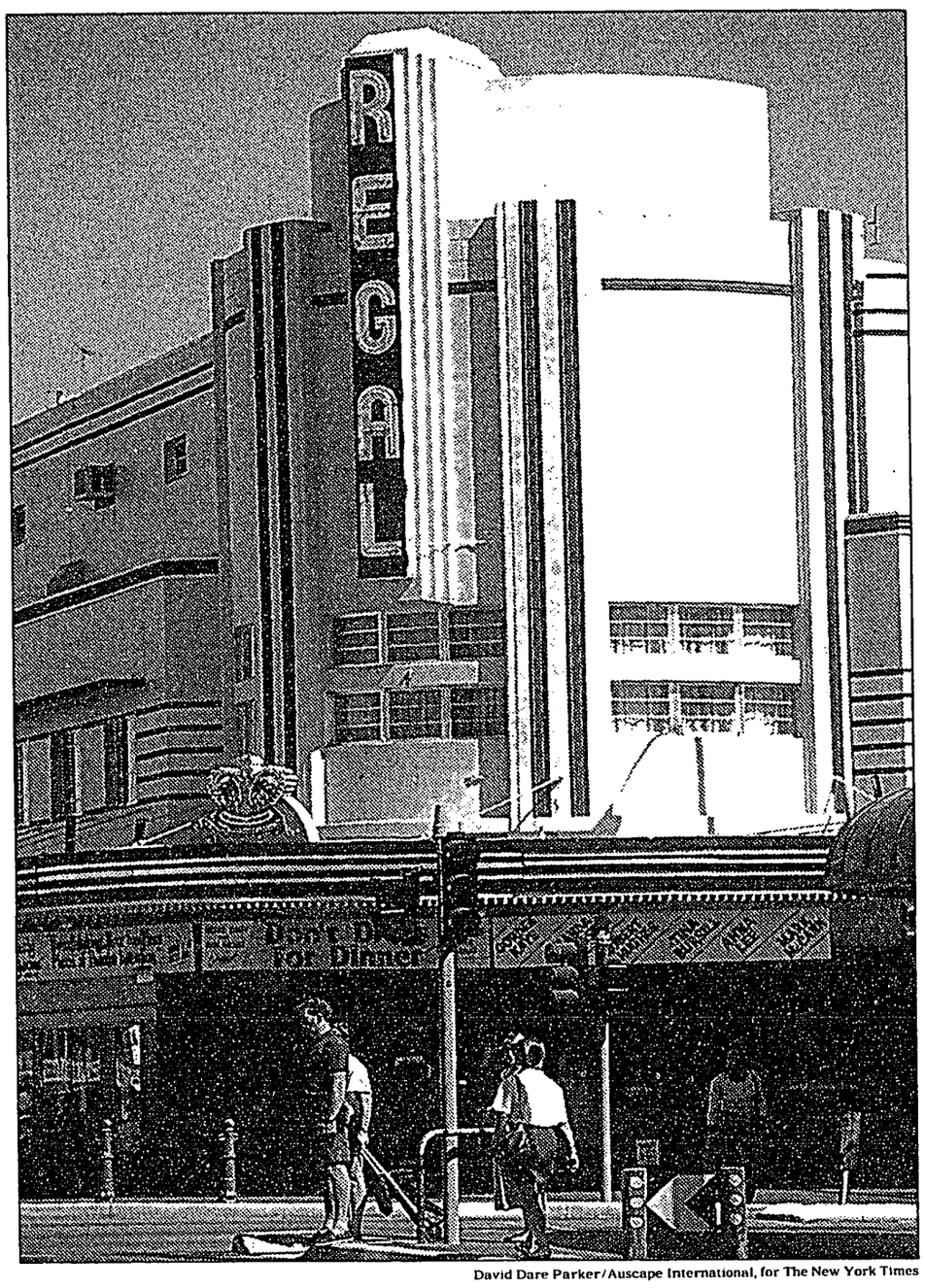
RIGHT The marquee of the 1938 Regal Theater in Perth.

industry. Across the street, the Moderne-style Newspaper House, has a mosaic by Napier Waller, Australia's great 1930's muralist, on its facade. The panel, Melbourne's answer to the New York Daily News Building's bas-relief, shows muscular figures, machinery, airplanes, dirigibles, a front page from The Herald, and the legend "I'll Put a Girdle Round About the Earth," recycling Shakespeare as a wonderfully 1930's image for the communications revolution.

The department stores are clustered on Bourke Street, Melbourne's slightly honky-tonk commercial boulevard, with game arcades, theaters, remainder bookstores and street musicians. Myer, G. J. Coles and Buckley & Nunn (the latter two now absorbed into the David Jones chain) bring the stylish modernism of Bloomingdale's to the heart of the Victorian capital. Coles (Harry Norris, 1929) is Gothic Modern mixed with Aztec; Buckley & Nunn (Bates, Smart, McCutcheon, 1934) is black-and-gold terra cotta with zigzags and decorative panels sporting men in natty jazz age outfits. The Myer store (Tompkins, 1933), in white Snowcrete, houses an unexpected treasure: fifth-floor murals by Napier Waller. Complementary to the well-dressed men at Buckley & Nunn, these are paeans to women, one based on the seasons ("Spring and the Dance Through the Centuries," "Autumn Women in Literature") and another on beauty and the arts ("Personalities of Opera," "Revelation of Fashion").

While conservative Melbourne only reluctantly permitted an Art Deco intrusion into its Victorian soul, Sydney, an even older city, wholeheartedly embraced the brash new look. Ultimately it was Sydney that the 1930's transformed into the modern metropolis of the South Pacific. A world-class city unlike any other, Sydney has aspects of many: high-rises on the harbor like Hong Kong; a focus on harbor, beach and hills like San Francisco; the energy of New York; the visual chaos of Los Angeles. Many of the names sound English: Charing Cross, Kings Cross, Oxford Street, Surry Hills — but others are Australianizations of aboriginal names, including Woolloomooloo (whose spelling is to Australian schoolchildren what Mississippi's is to our own). Sydney, originally a penal colony, developed as a Georgian market town, then as a Victorian city. Hit badly by the Depression, it recovered in the mid-1930's and blossomed with Art Deco skyscrapers, apartments and cinemas.

The heart of Sydney is its harbor, and the heart of the harbor is Circular Quay on Sydney Cove, flanked on the left by the Rocks — the hilly, picturesque village that was the first English settlement in Australia — and on the right by the famous Opera House. The Opera is one of two dramatic harbor sights at Circular Quay; the other is the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Built 1923-32, the bridge bears a striking resemblance to the Hell's Gate Bridge in New York of the same period.



David Dare Parker/Auscape International, for The New York Times

Behind Circular Quay lies Sydney's central business district, an irregular patchwork of streets lined with skyscrapers and hotels. Several dozen Art Deco office buildings are scattered throughout the area, including Sydney's own knockoff of the Chicago Tribune Tower, the Grace Building (1930) at King and York. None is very tall, thanks to the city's 150-foot height limit in force from 1912 until 1957. Even so, they reach up in skyscraper fashion.

The best of Sydney's towers are the work of two Australian Art Deco architects, Bruce Dellit and Emil Sodersten. They share zigzags, the skyscraper look and the optimistic symbolism of that myopic period before the outbreak of World War II. Dellit's 1940 office building (now A.F.T. House) at 16 O'Connell Street has a remarkable three-story base of polished granite, a huge arch with lattices and Art Deco zigzags. In its iconic decoration, the sun rises over the Pacific and New South Wales, the land of plenty, whose agricultural wealth spills out of giant cornucopias and mixes with airplanes and industrial technology.

Sodersten had actually been to New York and seen the skyscrapers that had inspired him from afar. His City Mutual Life Assurance Building (1934-36) at 60 Hunter Street has faceted zigzag walls that ripple in and out like an accordion's pleats, allowing in masses of sunlight. Its design focuses on a great, blocky black-granite geometric corner entrance with superhuman figurative sculpture.

SKYSCRAPER imagery shows up in the most unlikely parts of 1930's Sydney. Just outside the central business district is the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park, dedicated to the members of Anzac (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) from New South Wales who served in World War I. Designed by Dellit and built 1932-34, the monumental mausoleumlike block rises serenely above a broad tree-lined allee and reflecting pool. Inside, the rotunda dome of the Hall of Memory is filled with stars, one for each soldier. Below, in the Hall of Silence, lies the remarkable statue of "Sacrifice" by Rayner Hoff: a mother, wife and sister forming a pillar, atop which lies a fallen soldier stretched out on a shield, his arms flung out across the flat of a sword. It is a horrible and stunning reminder of what war is about. Most surprising architecturally, however, is the sunrise imagery that has been incorporated inside and out, jagged abstract reliefs suggesting a modern skyline.

Elizabeth Bay, a hilly area just by Kings Cross, is Sydney's smart urban neighborhood of 1930's garden apartments and towers. Tallest and best of them all is Sodersten's Birtley Towers (1934), on Birtley Place, high up on a rise, its skyscraper apartments commanding spectacular views of the harbor. The modernistic design is all in the brickwork: multicolored, multiglazed, and zigzag.

Perhaps most unusual, to American eyes, would be Sydney's Art Deco pubs, some 50 of them, scattered across the city. Australia's pubs have been the birthplaces of newspapers and the showplaces for early art exhibitions. They have no obvious American counterpart, and their names sound perfectly British: the Duke of Gloucester (1934) on Frenchman's Road in Randwick; the Charing Cross and the Robin Hood, facing each other on Victoria Street in the working-class suburb of Waverley. Though once British Victorian, during the interwar years Sydney's pubs turned Moderne, all horizontals and streamlined curving corners, with modernistic ceramic tiles and their names broadcast in bold Deco lettering.

In isolated Perth, conservative Melbourne and cosmopolitan Sydney, Art Deco survives as evidence of Australia's early love affair with American razzle-dazzle. The offspring of New York, Hollywood and Miami Beach seem right at home in that other vast English-speaking continent, and still help define its 20th-century identity. ■