

'Rock Deco'

Carbide and Carbon Building keeps the fizz as it's remixed into the Hard Rock Hotel

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Chicago's architectural cupboard is bursting with oh-so-sober modernist masterworks like the steel and boxes of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. But there's a recipe for concocting design delight in this town that toddles, and it's full of romantic, sometimes riotous fizz: stylized sunbursts, rainbows, zigzags, setbacks, even over-the-top colors such as green and gold.

That style, of course, is Art Deco, the exuberant expression of modernity and technological progress that influenced the look of everything from skyscrapers to movie palaces to dime stores to courthouses during its heyday in the 1920s. It was fun while it lasted, but then the economic woes of the Depression and the puritanical streak of 20th Century modernism, which made ornament a sin, put a stop to it.

For years, one of Chicago's most beloved Art Deco skyscrapers has been the Carbide and Carbon Building, the black, green and gold tower at 230 N. Michigan Ave. that resembles a bottle of Champagne, complete with a spire that suggests a cork.

Now, without a lot of fanfare, the 40-story Carbide and Carbon Building has been turned into a 381-room hotel for Hard Rock Cafe International, the ubiquitous global chain of cafes, hotels and casinos. Despite the chain's reputation for nostalgic glitz, the project, which cost more than \$100 million, is a match made in architectural heaven, pairing a distinctive building with a distinctive hotel, and, in the process, restoring the multicolored glory of a once-ragged landmark skyscraper.

The hotel, which quietly welcomed its first guests on New Year's Eve (a full-scale opening will occur in the spring), is Chicago's latest example of architectural recycling, a happy

trend that has turned dowager downtown office buildings such as the Reliance Building (now the Hotel Burnham) into elegant inns. It shows, as only a multimillion-dollar renovation can, the impact that Millennium Park, two blocks to the south and due to open in July, is having on its surroundings, offering an amenity that draws real estate investors like moths flying to the light. Now that Hard Rock has established an attractive beachhead in the long-dreary Central Michigan Avenue corridor, more investment is sure to follow.

The project has been carried out with an exemplary mix of care for the building's historic features and contemporary design verve, evident in a sleek new hotel lobby and a new seven-story structure, just to the south, that houses the hotel's ballroom. As a result, Carbide and Carbon has not been embalmed in the Jazz Age. Instead, its fanciful but sophisticated surfaces and spaces appear fresher than ever. Think of combining a visit to Elton John's pad with a time-machine trip back to the Flapper Age.

This is what architecture does best; it makes time visible, as Lewis Mumford once wrote. The credit goes to three firms: Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates of Chicago, which restored the skyscraper's mostly terra cotta exterior; Lucien Lagrange and Associates of Chicago, which did interior planning and designed the new seven-story structure; and Toronto interior designers Yabu Pushelberg.

More to be done

The job isn't quite done (ground-floor bronze trim and black granite still need to be restored). But John Marks, chairman of the Chicago-based Mark IV Realty Group, which developed the hotel in association with Hard Rock Cafe

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International and Becker Ventures of Troy, Mich., promises that the details will be complete in time for the formal opening.

He, too, deserves praise, as does the City of Chicago, which provided a \$5 million tax-increment financing subsidy. "That was less than what it cost us to do the terra cotta work," quips Marks, whose firm previously opened the House of Blues Hotel as part of its redevelopment of the commercial areas of Marina City. For its part, Cook County offered \$6.1 million in tax incentives, and the federal government provided about \$16 million in historic preservation tax credits.

It is the chain's first truly urban hotel and its second major building in Chicago (the first was Stanley Tigerman's postmodern Hard Rock Cafe at 63 W. Ontario). In this case, however, there are no plans for a giant freestanding sign shaped like a red guitar.

In Chicago gems like the Palmolive Building, architects such as Holabird & Root used the trim vertical look of Art Deco to shed the historical baggage that was employed for such skyscrapers as the neo-Gothic Tribune Tower. Carbide and Carbon, which was the regional headquarters for the New York-based Union Carbide and Carbon Co., made the break complete.

Finished in 1929 and designed by Daniel and Hubert Burnham (sons of the great Chicago planner Daniel Burnham), the skyscraper lacked cornices or other traditional details. It rose from a base of black granite, with a shaft of dark-green terra cotta and a green top trimmed in gold. The color scheme undoubtedly served as a form of advertising for Union Carbide and Carbon, a chemical company whose very name suggested black charcoal.

The result wasn't nearly as theatrical as New York's Chrysler Building, which sported a silver top of metal sunbursts and gargoyles modeled after the hood ornaments of the 1929 Chrysler Plymouth. But it still was one of Chicago's most flamboyant 1920s skyscrapers. As in many Art Deco towers, the lobby was a showplace of ornament, complete with bronze elevator cabs punctuated by interlocking "C's."

Appeared outmoded in '90s

By the 1990s, however, Carbide and Carbon, like a lot of early 20th Century buildings, appeared old and outmoded, even dangerous.

Its floor plates were deemed too small. Water had invaded its mortar joints and corroded the metal anchors that held its terra cotta blocks in place. Some of the blocks cracked. Even those that were in intact looked black, rather than green, because of air pollution. In 1999, a brick from the building fell and hit a pedestrian.

But where others saw a problem, Mark IV Realty saw an opportunity: a chance to capitalize on Carbide and Carbon's matchless character and location, even if it might cost more to restore it than build a new hotel.

At first, the firm sought to convert Carbide and Carbon into a 386-room Raddison Hotel. But it decided instead to go with Hard Rock, Marks said, "because a hotel that had a specific theme and concept would be better than a standard business-type hotel."

It was the right choice. The skill and sensitivity of the designers make it seem meant to be.

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Led by senior consultant Stephen Kelley and consultant Edward Gerns, Wiss, Janney, Elstner performed gentle cosmetic surgery on the building's skin.

Some 7,700 damaged terra cotta blocks, about 10 percent of the building's total, were replaced with new ones that perfectly match the textured, variegated surfaces of the green originals. For the flourishes of gold terra cotta near the tower's top, Wiss, Janney rejected imitation gold, which looked black, and instead went with the real thing — very pricey 24-karat gold (though it's only one five-thousandths of an inch thick).

The total effect of such details is striking. Instead of being two-toned black and gold, Carbide and Carbon is again a jazzy color symphony, its rich range of hues making it a standout on Chicago's monochromatic skyline.

Even if a glance upward from the sidewalk reveals that some of the green terra cotta blocks remain cracked (their surfaces have been secured with pins, an economy move), such flaws make Carbide and Carbon all the more lovable and real, giving it a patina of age that sets it apart from those cloyingly perfect imitations of Art Deco skyscrapers on the Las Vegas Strip.

None of the cosmetic surgery would have been possible without the equivalent of major internal surgery that converted the old office building to a hotel.

The credit for that unsexy but essential part of the project goes to Lagrange, who figured out the equivalent of a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, attending to such prosaic matters as how to thread the extra plumbing a hotel requires through the building's cage of structural steel.

At the same time, Lagrange displayed considerable flair in his seven-story addition, which replaces two decaying 1920s buildings and will eventually house a ground-floor restaurant behind its curving wall of green glass.

While the addition matches the height of the building's granite base and echoes the green color of the terra cotta, it makes a completely modern statement — boldly sculptural and highly transparent.

Appropriately, though, this isn't the no-nonsense modernism of Mies, whose drab black high-rises sit dourly across the street in the Illinois Center office complex. It is a more whimsical version of modernism, very much in the spirit of Art Deco, and it comes complete with a terra cotta column that pops out of the glass front like a mini-skyscraper.

There's more of that lively counterpoint in the contrast between Carbide and Carbon's original Michigan Avenue lobby and the hotel's new lobby on Wacker Place.

Cleaned and refinished, the old lobby is stunningly intact, with dazzling elevator cabs, ceiling decoration and grillwork done in a palette of gold and white.

Its new counterpart is darker and more mysterious, a long, low-ceilinged room that Yabu Pushelberg endowed with a feeling of spaciousness through such touches as a swirling black and purple carpet that runs the length of the room. There's a little rock-star glamour, too, courtesy of details such as the fake crocodile leather walls and ceilings at the front desk. The only problem is the piped-in music. It's annoyingly loud.

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The guest rooms (which range in price from \$139 for a standard room to \$1,000 for a suite, depending on timing and availability) are tastefully handled, though unremarkable. The guest floors will get a little more zip with chrome-framed, elevator lobby showcases that display a variety of artifacts from Hard Rock's vaults — drums, guitars, maybe even one of Elvis' outfits. Whatever is displayed, the themed interior manages to be sophisticated rather than cartoonish, in contrast to the House of Blues Hotel. It also is pleasingly open to the street, making it a truly urban building, another welcome shift from the internally oriented House of Blues.

What all this adds up to is a major historic preservation success story, as well as a reminder that Chicago's architectural tradition is far more richly varied than the modernist legacy of late 19th Century skyscrapers and post-World War II glass boxes. The restoration of Carbide and Carbon provides a textbook case of how enlightened developers and architects can make the past a part of the future. The handsome restoration and the imaginative additions are in perfect pitch with a skyscraper that never took itself too seriously even as it demonstrated an astonishingly high level of artistry.