

ART DECO MINI TOUR

We hope you enjoy this Art Deco self-guided tour, featuring a few of our favorite buildings from our very popular Art Deco walking tour. We'll schedule the full walking tour led by one of our knowledgeable guides as soon as we're able.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Photo: @1930sarchitecture on Instagram

FORMER WCAU STUDIOS

1622 Chestnut Street

Designed by Harry Sternfeld and Gabriel Roth, 1931

The WCAU Building stands as one of the great monuments to the "Golden Age of Radio." The façade even looks somewhat like a 1920s table top radio. The eight story building was designed for multiple uses; some changes on the façade reflect the changing interior tenants. Originally there was a Woolworth store with large plate glass windows on the ground floor. The next four floors, distinguished by crisp horizontal window bands, served as rented office space. The radio station studios and offices occupied the fifth through eighth floors. The upper floors were entered by the door on the right side of the building featuring plaques showing the radio arts: drama, instrumental music, literature and choral music. Emanating from the plaques are the zig-zags of the radio waves. The studio floors are marked by a three story, recessed, rectangular, vertical window projecting out in a V-shape. The window splits the façade and leads the eye up to the top of a glass tower which served as a centerpiece for the recessed setback top. Only the bottom of the tower remains today, but originally it rose to 12 stories. The tower was illuminated and glowed blue when the station was broadcasting.

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Photo: Hidden City

ARCHITECT'S BUILDING

117 South 17th Street

Designed by Paul Cret, 1930

The Architect's Building was designed by Paul Cret with collaboration from several others. The Art Deco skyscraper has a brick exterior, straight up from the sidewalk, with interest and variety from its beveled corners and set back top. Art Deco styling is found in the polychrome, molded terra cotta spandrels in the center bays on all four sides. There is some vertical emphasis due to the windows/spandrel lines and the narrowness of the tower, not from pronounced or projecting piers. A noteworthy bronze surround at the recessed entrance on 17th Street is original and survives.



Image: Temple Special Collections,
Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, July 1929

America did not have an exhibit at the 1925 Paris Exposition because what we did have to show was impossible to display, it was stationary, it was our architecture. Beginning in the 1870s with Louis Sullivan and the Chicago School, American architects were creating the “modern” approach to building. In America the melting pot took the European ingredients of early Art Deco design and adapted them as structural ornamentation for the new American building form, the skeletal steel tall building.

In America, Art Deco became a totally new style derived from the present and looking toward the future. It was an artistic expression to compliment the streamlined, machine-made era of mass production. Nowhere was this development more eloquently expressed than on the great American skyscraper, the soaring monument to the rise of American business.

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Photo: Hidden City

1616 WALNUT STREET

Designed by Tilden, Register, and Pepper, 1930

The Art Deco masterpiece at 1616 Walnut Street is not to be missed. The division of building into distinctive elements, base and tower is reflected in exterior materials and articulation, with the Walnut Street base massively detailed as three openings surrounded by wide piers of reddish brown polished granite. The center opening is four stories high and strongly articulates the entrance, recessed into the building. The symmetrical side openings are store fronts trimmed in bronze. A handsome bronze screen over entrance is detailed in overlapping planes and zig-zag motifs. The main lobby uses elegant materials; terrazzo floor, marble walls, and aluminum trim which were rare at the time.



Photo: Hidden City

Under the influence of the new artistic philosophy American architects began to sense the importance of integrating the interior design with the exterior of their buildings. Many firms began to design all the furniture and fixtures as well as the interior surfaces. Art Deco interiors, especially the public spaces, employed thin sheets of rare and expensive polished stone or woods, whose effect was like that of wallpaper or a painted mural. Architects delighted in experimenting with the numerous metal alloys introduced in the course of the decade. All sorts of mixtures of steel, bronze, aluminum, nickel, silver, platinum, lead and zinc were used both on the interior and the exterior appearing on elevator doors, spandrels, window frames, decorative panels and sculpture.

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Photo: National Register Nomination, on file at the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission.

SUN OIL BUILDING

1608 Walnut Street

Designed by Tilden, Register, and Pepper, 1928

Planned as a speculative office building by developer Joseph Greenburg, 1608 Walnut Street was originally designed to be 16 stories. But, Sun Oil Corporation was looking for a location for their Center City headquarters and agreed to lease significant space if the building height were increased by three floors.

The Walnut Street elevation follows conventions of classicized Art Deco, using traditional composition of base, shaft and capitol. Organization is in the “vertical style” expressed by projecting piers marking principal column lines with spandrels and windows recessed. Projecting limestone piers at the base, like abstracted pilasters, and large scale Art Deco ornament at the top complete the reference to classical architectural vocabulary.

Be sure to check out the handsome bronze metalwork enhancing the Walnut Street facade.



Photo: ChrisInPhilly5448, Flickr

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MARKET STREET NATIONAL BANK

One East Penn Square, across from the NE corner of City Hall
Designed by Ritter and Shay, 1931

Designed for Market Street National Bank, this was the first banking facility to place the banking hall on the second floor leaving the ground floor open for retail. The building is constructed of structural steel with a terra cotta "skin" that utilizes Aztec and Mayan influences.

In a great many instances, an Art Deco building's decorative elements were no longer designed by the architect. Unlike the unique and never repeating gargoyles on a 13th century Gothic cathedral, the ornamentation on Art Deco buildings was often repeated. Repeating or overlapping images expressed the growing impact of the machine, stamping out identical parts on a factory assembly line. In addition, the repetition created a pattern not unlike the two-dimensional surface of a textile, further contributing to the idea of Art Deco design as a skin over the building frame.

Throughout the 1920s Art Deco architects increasingly turned from traditional building materials to newer materials, specifically metal and glass. Since the walls were no longer load bearing, masonry could be replaced with sheets of light weight aluminum, plate glass, or glass block. Terra cotta and cast stone were slowly falling out of favor by the late 1920s. The quintessential Art Deco skyscraper, the stainless steel and chrome clad Chrysler building became the tallest building in the world in 1930.



Photo: HABS Survey PA-1517

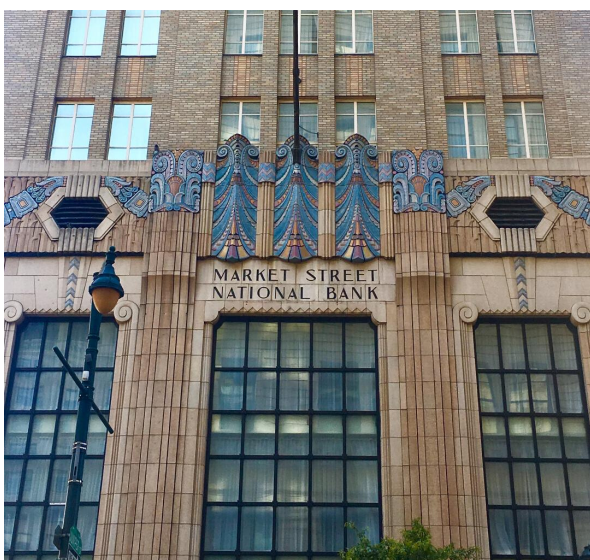
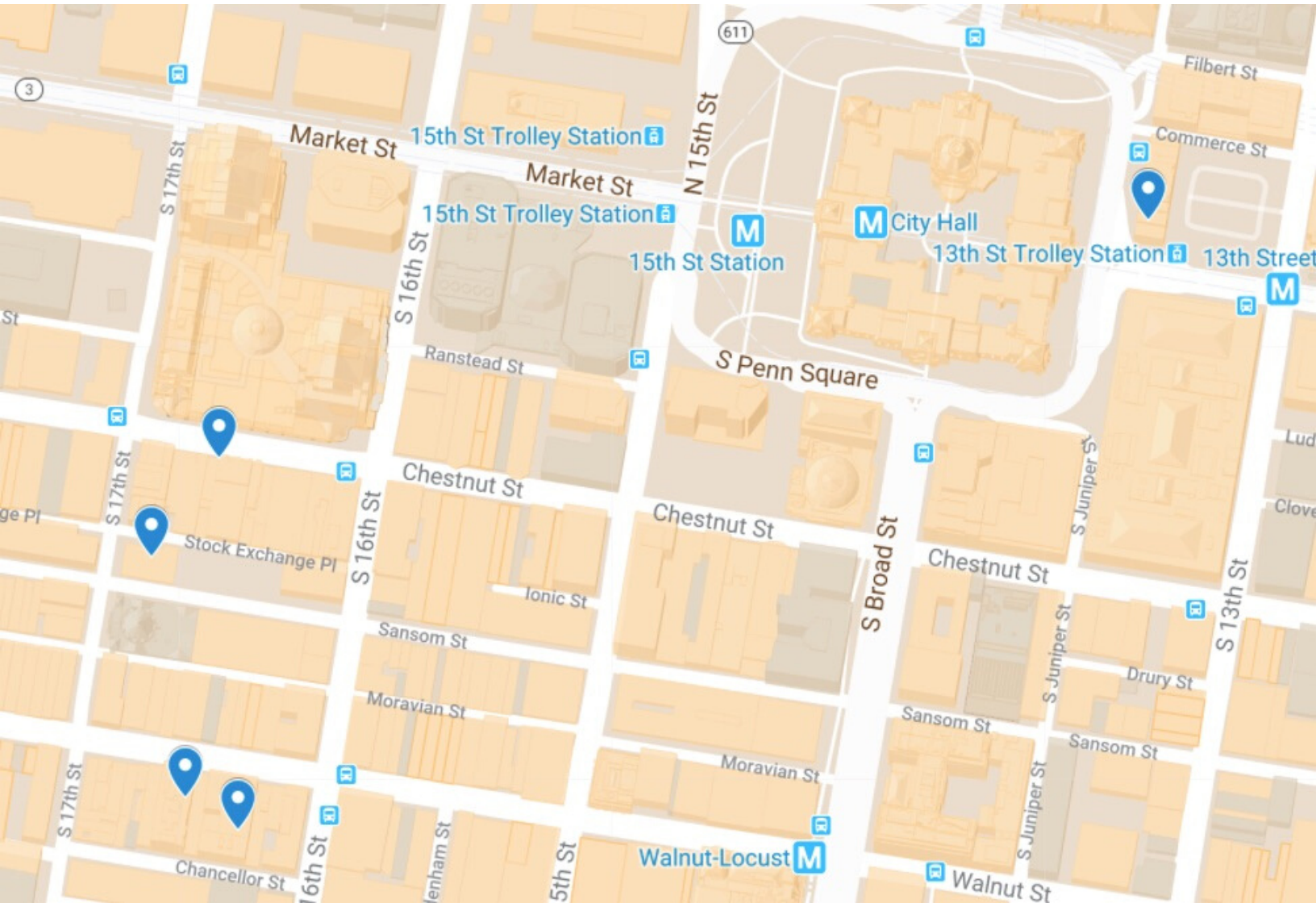


Photo: Heather McDougall

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MAP OF SITES ON THIS MINI TOUR



We hope you enjoy this glimpse of Center City's Art Deco buildings. Follow us on Instagram to see more photos of these buildings @presalliancephl and tag us in your photos when you visit them!