



# Art Deco House Styles



Trevor Yorke

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**Trevor Yorke**



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# INTRODUCTION

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**M**ost styles of house fall into neat categories: there are the rustic timber-framed structures, the symmetrical Classical façades and brick Gothic buildings, with details from each being revived and reworked every few generations. Even today, new housing estates are full of homes that, although accommodating the latest technology, are inspired by these past designs since most owners in the country find comfort and pride in traditional British building styles. Yet there was one moment when in between these reassuring rustic façades could be found something stark, foreign and shocking – white, flat-roofed houses, with curved metal windows and bold geometric patterns – the time was the 1930s and the style is known as Art Deco.

There is far more to Art Deco, though, than these familiar and unique buildings. Art Deco was a reaction against traditional forms and the tumultuous times. It could be luxurious, as represented by the sets of Hollywood musicals or adaptations of Agatha Christie's *Poirot* books, exotic as inspired by the tombs of Tutankhamun, or streamlined and modern as shown on trains like the *Mallard* and Saturday morning screenings of *Flash Gordon*. It encompassed all aspects of designs, from huge factories down to the handles on a door, using new materials like chromium and Bakelite and the latest tastes from Europe and America. Think of the Hoover building in West London, the Chrysler skyscraper in New York, and the curving façades of Odeon cinemas and you will start to recognise this dynamic and distinctive style.

This book sets out to explain the background to Art Deco, introduce the most notable architects of the style and illustrate the unique features of Art Deco houses, using clearly-labelled drawings and photographs. The first chapter defines the style, explains how it developed and its effect upon contemporary and later culture. The second chapter describes the finest houses and the work of the leading architects, giving a brief biography of each and examples of their work. The next chapter shows the massproduced housing that imitated the work of these top designers and the streamlined semis that are the familiar face of Art Deco in this country. The fourth chapter is packed with line drawings and photographs of key features and distinctive details that can help identify the style and provide guidance for those wanting to select authentic pieces when renovating a house. The final part looks inside at the rooms and describes their original appearance and the style of decoration, furniture and fittings that could be found.

For anyone who simply wants to recognise the style, understand the contribution of key characters and appreciate what makes Art Deco houses special, this book will be a colourful and an easy-to-follow introduction to the subject. If the reader is fortunate enough to own such a house, then the illustrations and text will hopefully enlighten them as to its value and aid any planned renovation or redecoration. For those of us who can but look on and admire, I hope the book helps clarify the true essence of the style and why it is such a unique and valuable contribution to a street, a community or even a town; one that is gradually gaining appreciation and is in desperate need of protection for future generations.

Trevor Yorke





# ART DECO STYLE

## Definition and Origins



**FIG 1.1: CARRERAS CIGARETTE FACTORY, CAMDEN, LONDON:** *Egyptian style decoration inspired by Howard Carter's discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922 and popularised by Hollywood is distinctive of the earlier phases of Art Deco.*

**Art Deco** is the style that reflected many of the themes from the inter-war years. The 1920s and 30s, squeezed between the cataclysmic world wars, were shaped by the economic effects and great loss of life of the first conflict and then a growing fear of the second war. This contrasted with a feeling of optimism in the initial belief that people had survived the 'war to end all wars' and could escape from the drudgery within which many still found themselves trapped – moods that were captured in images of jazz, outrageous fashion, Hollywood films and a love of the sun. Many found solace by surrounding themselves with traditional forms, their homes imitating Tudor or Georgian structures. Others, however, looked to the future and revelled in modernity and the exotic, having houses with streamlined, white exteriors and bold, geometric patterns within, inspired by designs from across the globe and using new materials. It is this latter group of buildings and objects that, although known at the time by a variety of terms, are today generally bundled together under the title 'Art Deco'.

Your chances of enjoying the benefits of a new home in this style depended very much on where you lived and the class into which you were born. The working masses, especially those stuck in terraced slums within old industrial centres, suffered as factories closed in the wake of new glob



competition; the General Strike of 1926 and the Jarrow March of 1936 are vivid reminders of the struggle faced by millions. Yet, new opportunities in the car, aircraft, electrical appliance and chemical industries, mainly in towns and cities of the south of England and the Midlands, created an expanding number of white collar workers and managers. This was such that those who would be termed 'middle class' nearly doubled in the space of a few decades to account for around a third of the population by 1939. It was this group who would be the principal driving force behind the rapid growth of suburbia in this period.



**FIG 1.2:** Art Deco could combine modernity and luxury, giving mass-produced objects a luxurious veneer. It could be glossy and exotic or stark and modern, but as in these clocks dating from the mid 1930s there was an underlining use of geometric shapes and horizontal lines as opposed to the floral and naturalistic shapes of styles before the First World War.



**FIG 1.3:** A love affair with machines and a delight in speed inspired the streamlining displayed on this contemporary car and steam engine on view at the National Railway Museum at York. This would also have some influence on the design of houses and goods. This was the period in which sun bathing was first seen as beneficial and fashionable, hence a craving for light, sun-trap windows and sun lounges.

This wave of new building, which engulfed the countryside around many towns and cities comprised partly select developments and detached houses built by leading architects and talented local builders (some of the finest Art Deco structures and notable designers are described in [Chapter 2](#)), while the rest of the stock was private homes erected by speculative builders or new estates rented by the working classes (those in this style are covered in [Chapter 3](#)). Despite the more extreme forms of modern buildings being devoid of ornamentation, most Art Deco houses have characteristic door windows and decorative features, which are illustrated in [Chapter 4](#), while inside the home, where the

style was more readily accepted, the appearance of the rooms and types of fixtures and fittings found there are described in [Chapter 5](#).

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## ORIGINS

### The Three Arts

It is typical that you get no 'Arts' in over a thousand years of design and then suddenly three come along all at once! Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and Art Deco were all terms used to describe some of the leading designs in the period from the late 1800s up until the outbreak of the Second World War and although these titles can often be confusing they had distinctive characteristics and sources of inspiration, which clearly differentiate them. At the same time, they shared many of the same principles and objectives. Before looking at a more precise definition of what we regard as Art Deco it is worth briefly describing these other styles and influences in design, which laid the foundations for this explosion of the exotic and modern, principally in the ten years from 1925.

The Arts and Crafts movement was ignited by the writings of John Ruskin and the dynamic character of William Morris, with architects and designers working individually or within guilds producing buildings that were inspired by old farms and manor houses but in new forms using locally sourced materials. In the late 19th century the design of decorative goods was generally poor and one of the key aims of Arts and Crafts practitioners was to raise the status of craftsmanship to that of the Fine Arts and improve the standard of British goods. Their methods of doing so looked back to a mystical medieval past and a rejection of machine and mass-produced goods. This meant, though, that their products became expensive and rather elitist, failing to liberate the suppressed factory worker – this mainly Socialist-inspired movement had intended. Despite this, the establishment of design schools, their honesty with structures and materials (not trying to disguise a building as something it was not), their new approach to interior design, and their responsibility for all elements from the structure of the building down to the smallest detail of the interior would inspire the following generation in Britain, on the Continent and in America.

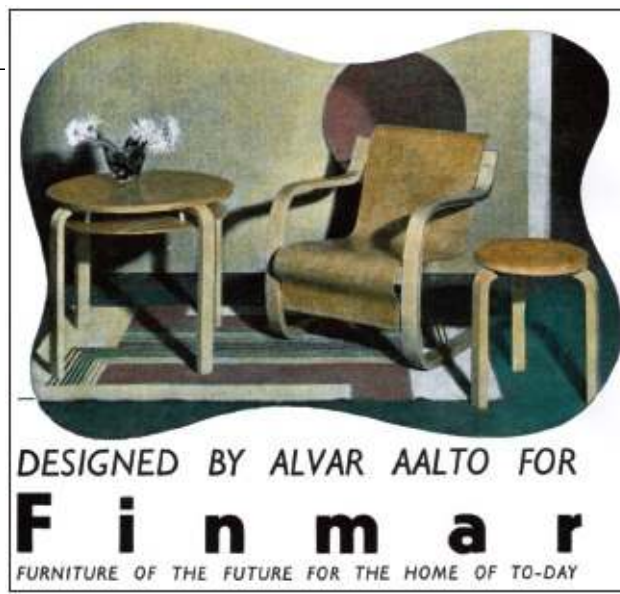
At the same time in Europe, the most distinctive form of decorative design was Art Nouveau (named after La Maison de l'Art Nouveau, Siegfried Bing's art gallery, which opened in Paris in 1895). Here, nature was the key theme, with objects featuring twisting plant stems and exotic flowers which become part of the structure. The distinctive lettering of the Paris Metro and Tiffany lamps are two of the most familiar examples of this unique but short-lived style, one that only made an impact in the British home in decorative pieces inside and some of the coloured-glass patterns in windows. By the nature of its sinuous forms, Art Nouveau did not lend itself to mass production and many of those who went on to form new groups and associations in the opening decades of the 20th century did so partly as a rejection of this style and traditional teachings but also in an attempt to reconcile the gap between art and industry. It would be this new generation of architects and designers who would be the leading lights of Art Deco.



**FIG 1.4:** *An Art Nouveau-style Tiffany lamp (left) in which the fitting appears to be organically growing out of the base and inspired by nature, as were many Arts and Crafts objects, and a later Art Deco radio (right) with strong geometric shapes radiating from the sun-like dial. The Arts and Crafts icon William Morris was one of the first to believe that art should be designed to meet the ideals of society and that there should be no distinction between form and function.*

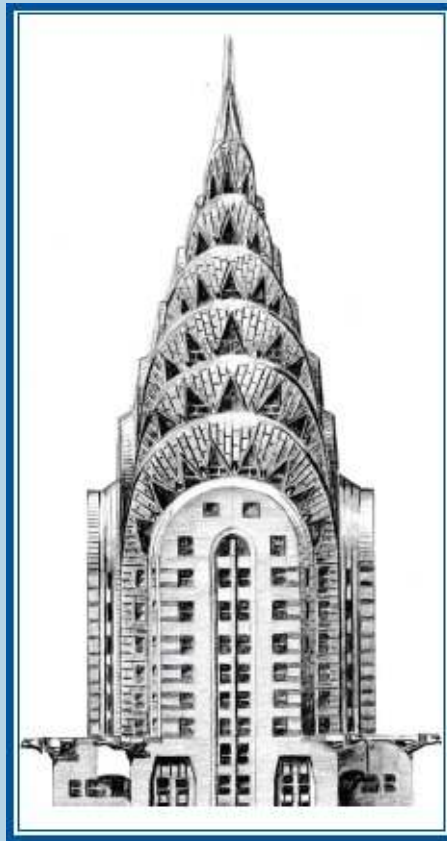
## **Developments in Europe and America**

Unlike Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau, the inspiration for Art Deco came from across the globe. Charles Rennie Mackintosh was one of the few in this country to use geometric forms in his work. Although not widely appreciated here at the time, he was of greater influence on the Continent, especially with regard to the Vienna Secession, which was formed in Austria 1897 as a reaction against the conservative local academy and its promotion of work based upon historic styles (secession is the act of withdrawing from an organisation). The Wiener Werkstatte (Viennese workshops) co-founded in 1903 by Josef Hoffmann, one of the designers who would leave the Vienna Secession over artistic differences, promoted the idea of designing every detail of a project and introduced a new abstract and geometric style of buildings and goods. The principles and works of the Arts and Crafts movement had been studied by the German Hermann Muthesius, who back in his native country helped establish a state-sponsored organisation, the Deutsche Werkbund (German Work Federation), in 1907. Unlike their English forebears, this group intended to make closer links between art and industry, designing objects with functional simplicity so as to be suitable for mass production, principally to make German goods more competitive on the world market. It included Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in its ranks, two of the pioneers of modern architecture. At the same time, in France, a new style of art in which the painter disassembled objects and then rearranged them in an abstract form, looked at from a number of viewpoints, was being developed in part by Pablo Picasso. Cubism, as it became known, had influence on later architects due to this new approach to design and its intersecting planes and geometric, stepped and angled forms.



**FIG 1.5:** *It was not until the 1930s that designers started to understand the properties of industrial materials and began making products that could be both attractive and yet be mass-produced, achieving the ambitions of earlier movements through the acceptance of the machine and modern technology. These plywood pieces by the famous Finnish architect Alvar Aalto were still too hard and uncompromising for most tastes; Modernist designs lacked the cosiness that was preferred by the public and were viewed as rather elitist and chic.*

After the First World War, two distinct styles developed, both of which sought closer bonds between art and industry and form and function, and a belief in the concept of total art. One was inspired by primitive American and African art and, after the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb by Ancient Egyptian pieces, resulting in highly luxurious and exotic decorative work; the other was a continuation of the development of a more functional and accessible, modern style. Both were displayed at the influential Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925 (it was around the time of the exhibition's revival in 1966 that the phrase Art Deco was first coined). This was designed to help increase French exports of the decorative arts and integrate their design further with machine production. Despite the ideals, much of what was displayed reflected the new, exotic style that had developed in France since before the war. It included distinctive luxurious furniture featuring beautiful marquetry and decorative fittings created by skilled craftsmen, which was clearly unsuitable for mass production. After the Exposition these exotic pieces still filled niche markets but it was the more functional and simplified modern work that became, by the 1930s, the dominant style for furniture, interior decoration and appliances; one suitable for industrial production so that it would fulfil the Modernists' ideal of having good design available to all.



**FIG 1.6: THE CHRYSLER BUILDING, NEW YORK, USA:** *One of the most iconic Art Deco buildings, it was designed by William Van Alen and completed in 1930 with its distinctive stainless steel sunbursts in the upper floors. The stepped tops of skyscrapers was due to zoning laws from 1916, which forbade them to be a solid mass.*



**FIG 1.7: GROPIUS HOUSE, LINCOLN, MASS, USA:** *Walter Gropius, the former head of the Bauhaus, like many of his compatriots fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s. He moved first to Britain and then to America where he designed this Modernist house for himself in 1938, featuring furniture from his colleague Marcel Breuer. Modernism was less a distinct group of designers and more a trend away from traditional forms of building. Its leading light was Le Corbusier, the Swiss-born architect who was key in making what at the time was termed the International Style popular in Europe and America and for referring to the house as 'a machine for living in'. His rejection of decoration and elitism was rather at odds, though, with the luxurious strand of Art Deco that had developed in France during the 1920s.*

The modern style in the post-war period blossomed in groups like the Dutch De Stijl who explored geometric and abstract forms with use of strong colours, and Russian Constructivism, which celebrated the machine as an integral part of its art. One of the most influential groups in creating the new modern style was the Bauhaus (meaning 'School of Building'), founded in Germany 1919 by Walter Gropius.

Walter Gropius. They produced wallpaper, light fittings, furniture and textiles that were suitable for mass production. Although they produced little in the way of housing, Gropius did appreciate the new direction in which building design was going, stating that 'we want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast cars'. The Nazis, however, despised the school and what it saw as foreign influence and it was closed under political pressure in 1933, with many of the artists fleeing to Britain and the United States. America had declined to display work at the 1925 Paris Exposition as it did not feel it had art of sufficient originality to meet their criteria. Instead it sent experts to study the exhibits and bring back ideas to boost its own design industry. Here a new style developed, epitomised by New York skyscrapers and the sets on Hollywood musicals. It was termed 'Jazz Moderne' and lay somewhere between the exotic and modern. Buildings inspired by the machine, speed and the obsession of industry with streamlining became more dominant in the 1930s. This, in turn, began to change under the influence of the immigrant Modernist designers from Europe later in the decade.

## British Art Deco

Despite having been at the forefront of technology in the 19th century, Britain had, at the same time, developed an insular and rather backwards approach to the design of houses. We were suspicious of foreign styles, instead using our own historic buildings for inspiration and only really creating something inventive in the hands of the finest Arts and Crafts architects. New items in the house, such as bathrooms and radios, were fitted in wooden boxes to make them appear more traditional. This ingrained attitude continued to a large extent in the 1920s and 30s with the more extreme Modernist houses and products viewed as elitist and left wing and only certain aspects of European and American Art Deco finding favour in the average home. Although some details of the exterior and interior fittings were readily accepted, the overall stark appearance clashed with our love of cosiness and decoration; and the sun lounging flat roofs were at odds with our inclement weather!



**FIG 1.8:** The most common Art Deco form of building was cinemas, luxurious and modern structures often referred to as 'Odeon-style', as with this extraordinary example from Rayners Lane, London (originally designed to represent an elephant).

The Paris Exposition of 1925 was therefore viewed with suspicion by many. Only a few of our leading designers took part, with people like Ambrose Heal (of Heal's, London) and Gordon Russe

exhibiting their furniture. There had been some steps along the lines of European attempts to integrate art and mass production: the British Design and Industries Association, founded in 1915, had echoed others in stating that sound design was firstly about fitness for use, and its own publications helped promote modern architecture in the early 1930s. Wells Coates and Partners was established in 1922, two years later being re-branded Isokon (from Isometric Unit Construction). It produced modern pieces of furniture and most notably the Lawn Road Flats in North London, which are often referred to as the Isokon Building (see [Chapter 2](#)). Walter Gropius designed furniture for them after he arrived from Germany in 1934, living in one of the apartments at Lawn Road until he left for the United States three years later; with one of his colleagues at the Bauhaus, Marcel Breuer, taking over his role.

The modern strain of Art Deco, branded here at the time as Ultra Modern or the International Style (after an exhibition of the same name at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932), had made little impact by the mid 1930s. An example is the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition of 1934, which contained the 'Village of Tomorrow'. This featured white, flat-roofed houses by leading designers who emphasised the advantages of this type of structure: it gave the owner an extra room (on top of the roof), the ability to easily add another storey if required, and to make maximum use of available sunlight (see [Fig 2.3](#)). However, at the exhibition in the following year they had all but gone: pitched roofs were preferred by the public. A style that found greater favour, especially with the younger generation, was a watered-down version of the International Style mixed with aspects of American streamlined buildings, referred to as Moderne (sometimes called Streamline Moderne or Sun-trap houses). It was usually a form of surface decoration applied to standard semis, with white rendered walls, characteristic curved glass ends to bay windows and a few geometric decorative patterns.

It was the Modernist house that was to have a more lasting influence though; the Streamline Moderne is just a distinctive feature of the 1930s. After the Second World War the crippled economy, shortages of materials and a desire amongst some for a bright new future opened the way for a more general acceptance of Modernism, at least a type softened by a facing of traditional hanging tiles and weatherboarding. As the chronic housing shortage, which was to last through into the 1960s, forced the authorities to build as many homes as they could in a short space of time, open-plan designs meant houses and flats could be made smaller without the occupants feeling cramped.



**FIG 1.9: THE DE LA WARR PAVILION, BEXHILLON-SEA, SUSSEX:** *It was in seaside resorts that the plain, white streamlined curves of Art Deco seemed more acceptable, as with this famous Modernist pavilion designed by Erich Mendelsohn in collaboration with Serge Chermayeff in 1934.*

However, our obsession with cosy, traditional, village-style houses since the 1980s means that inter-war Modernist homes are still shocking today. New Eco houses, which invariably are modern in style, are marvelled at on television but few new estates are built in this form, while the mortgage provider and private buyer have reservations about the durability of new materials and the dreaded fl

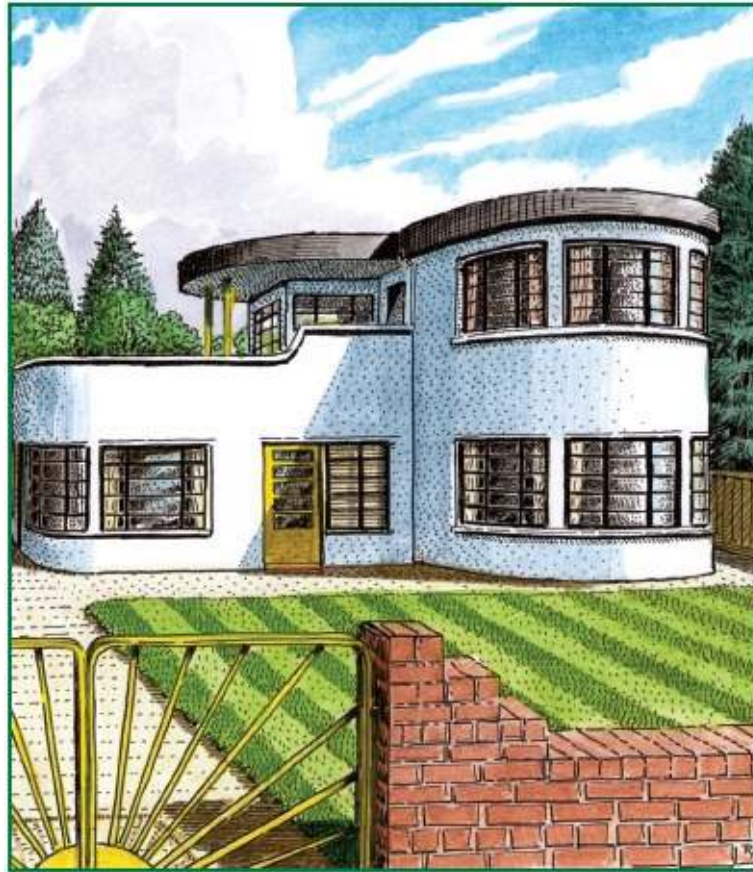
roof. Ironically, some elements of the Moderne and traditional styles, which so characterised the 1930s' semi, are finding their way back onto new houses, these having reached such an age as now to be an acceptable and reassuring part of our culture.



**FIG 1.10:** Art Deco is most notably displayed on commercial buildings, cinemas and shops where its modern form suited certain companies' profiles. Early examples have stepped profiles to the top of the building, white exteriors usually made up of glazed tiles (top examples), monumental doorways (centre right) and stylised Egyptian or Classical details. By the 1930s, exteriors are less decorative and had streamlined curves and angled steel windows. The most notable example, however, is the Hoover Building along the A40 in West London, which displays all the finest Jazz and Streamline Moderne features (bottom left and right).



## Modern Houses and their Architects



**FIG 2.1:** *Luxurious housing estates and desirable streets lined with Mock Tudor and Neo Georgian houses suddenly woke up one morning to find stark white modern houses such as this example on their doorstep, a scattering of modernity still as shocking today as it was in the 1930s.*

### Styles

For those with the money to employ an architect or in the market to buy a house designed by one, there was a wide choice of styles from which to choose. In the 1920s, Neo Georgian with symmetric fronted brick houses, usually featuring hipped roofs, short casement windows with leaded glass and prominent rainwater traps and down-pipes on each side of the façade (actually inspired by houses built in the decades before the Georgian period), and Mock Tudor with distinctive dark brickwork, timber framing (usually cladding) and an asymmetrical front or eclectic mixes of rustic features inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement were the preferred choices. On the grandest houses a playful and colourful Classical style inspired by the work of architects like Sir Edwin Lutyens shortly before the First World War was popular. Despite the traditional exterior, however, the inside of these houses could have luxurious and modern fixtures and fittings, which we would term Art Deco in style.

By the early 1930s, these more traditional houses were joined by the latest trends from Europe and America – the International and Moderne styles – often slightly watered down to suit our mo-

conservative tastes. They are characterised by their use of modern ideas and materials: white walls, steel-framed windows, glass bricks and the option of having a flat roof intended for use as a sun-lounging area. The domestic face of Modernism was branded the International Style, with the function of each room taking control of the exterior arrangement, and a strong horizontal emphasis occasionally intersected by a vertical feature. Surfaces were devoid of decoration so the eye could appreciate their dramatic, sharp-edged form, with distinctive long rows of dark windows and the occasional grouping formed into a pattern breaking up the plain walls.



**FIG 2.2: ELTHAM PALACE, LONDON:** This rather eclectic and lively façade full of traditional and Classical features hides one of the most modern interiors of the 1930s. The building was completed in 1936 for Stephen and Virginia Courtauld, with stunning and luxurious rooms and the latest electrical fittings. It now belongs to English Heritage and is currently the only Art Deco house open to the public.



**FIG 2.3:** An International Style house with labels of its distinctive features. This British version of Modernism (also referred to as the Horizontal Style or Ultra Modern) was named after an exhibition titled 'The International Style' held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1932.

The Moderne (or Streamline Moderne) was a more popular style, using details from Modernist buildings and streamlined structures from America. Most were characterised by the use of curved glass sun-trap windows, horizontal bands across the walls, and the use of the sun-ray, chevron or bold geometric pattern in the glass. Some, however, were inspired by houses from the west coast of America and seen on films. This Hollywood Moderne style was more exotic, often with a conventional structure and tall, hipped roof but covered in distinctive bright green, or occasionally blue, tiles with

white walls below, decorative metal railings across balconies and often a palm or similar tree in the garden to complete the picture.

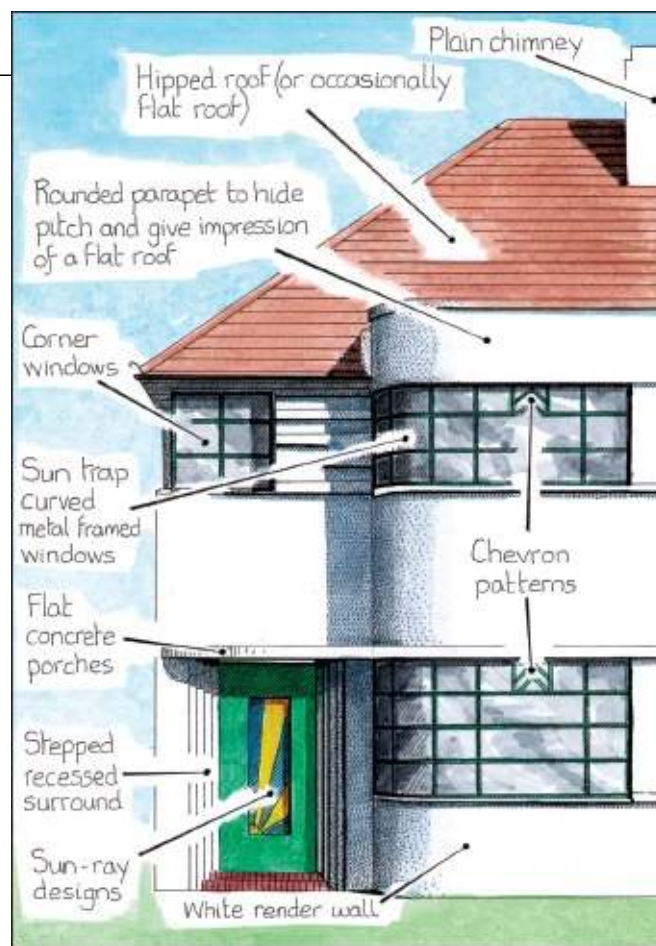
It was also common for builders to make houses with an eclectic mix of features so although it is these Moderne styles that we now term Art Deco, elements of the International Style could be incorporated. Today, the term 'Modernism' has limited appeal to the public and many of these purely functional houses are confusingly being branded Art Deco by estate agents and owners because of its greater appeal!



**FIG 2.4:** *Hollywood Moderne style houses were inspired by homes from the west coast of America with distinctive green glazed roof tiles often on top of a conventional symmetrical planned structure and the odd palm tree to complete the effect.*

## **Materials**

Art Deco structures were characterised by the use of modern materials or at least ones that were new to this form of housing. Concrete had been invented by the Romans and was reintroduced in the second half of the 19th century but was only considered for exposed walling here in the inter-war years. Poured in between wooden shutters with metal reinforcement rods or mesh, concrete made durable and quick to erect walls and floors (this form of house was not necessarily any cheaper than a brick structure at this date). In many cases, however, concrete was only used for part of the structure such as the foundations, floors and sometimes precast features like curved porches. It was a step too far for many owners and builders who were not confident with this new material, so conventional brick structures were rendered over and painted white to appear modern!



**FIG 2.5:** A Streamline Moderne house, with labels of its distinctive features. Although, as in this example, the façade was generally plain, three or more horizontal bands (between the upper windows) or raised geometric designs were often added.

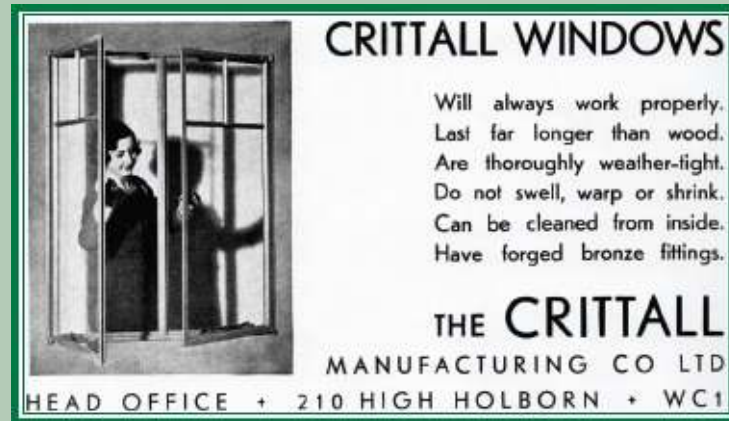
The International and many of the Moderne-styled houses were designed by the architect or builder to incorporate a flat roof although this was optional. Despite the appeal of a large area on top of the house for sun bathing, the idea of being on public show to one's neighbours clashed with our general reserved and private nature. Also, the realism over our climate and problems with rain penetrating through a flat surface meant the majority of houses were built with a pitched roof. These would usually be covered in small clay tiles or larger Roman tiles but bright green glazed pantiles (often imported from Spain) were popular on more exclusive Moderne houses.



**FIG 2.6:** Bricks with a wavy pattern pressed into their surface were a distinctive feature of 1930s' houses that remained popular into the 1950s.

Steel was another new material available, being used for window frames, railings and vertical poles to hold up overhanging roofs and porches (see [Chapter 4](#)). A distinctive feature of Art Deco houses was the use of glass in a wide variety of forms and finishes. From the 1890s through to the 1920s, glass had only been used as plain sheets or pieces in windows with coloured floral or heraldic patterns in the tops of traditional style houses. By the 1930s, however, simple geometric patterns replaced the

styles and the glass fitted could have a textured finish rather than colour to define the design. Glass bricks by companies such as Lenscrete were also used in the 1930s for the first time in the domestic housing market.



**FIG 2.7:** Crittall were the manufacturers of the metal-framed windows that are so distinctive of Art Deco houses (see also Silver End in [Chapter 3](#) and examples in [Chapter 4](#))

Despite these experiments with new materials, the vast majority of houses built in the inter-war years were made from traditional brick and timber. These structures had evolved from the Edwardian counterparts, with cavity walls now widespread and steel ties holding an inner and outer face of brick together; and the space between providing an air gap to aid insulation and reduce damp penetration. Foundations were improved upon, with concrete used to provide a firm base for the brick walls, which were stepped out upon it to spread the load better. Reducing rising damp in a house has always been problematic and the favoured method in this period was to use a line of bitumen with the walls, just above the ground floor. Slate set in cement or a couple of courses of Staffordshire blue bricks were older solutions that were also used. Before the First World War the timber ground floor was raised above the soil and air bricks vented the space to reduce the problem. Although this method was still used in the 1920s and 30s it became common for concrete to form a solid ground floor, sometimes with timber boards set in bitumen across the top. Although much of the internal structure was formed using timber, a new product, breeze or cinder block (made from waste from gasworks or similar and compressed into a building block), was increasingly used for internal walls. The vertical sides of door frames extending up to the ceiling is a sign where they were used (this was done to strengthen the wall, which otherwise was not keyed into the wooden joists).



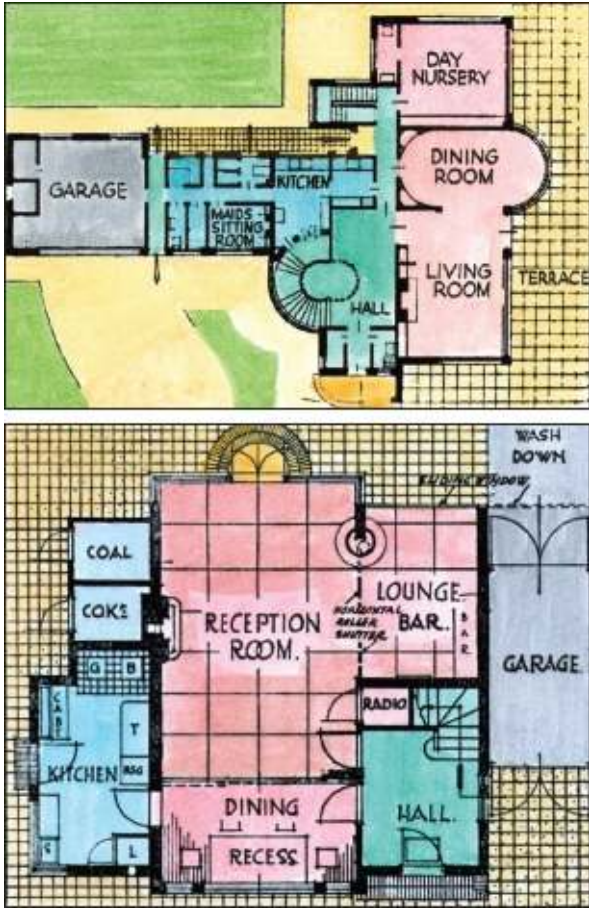
**FIG 2.8:** Glass bricks were introduced into the most modern houses.



**FIG 2.9:** Green pantiles (left) and Roman tiles (right) are distinctive of inter-war housing, although smaller clay tiles were still the most common form of roofing tile.

**Plans**

The International style with its stark white walls was not just a visual shock but heralded a different approach to planning. By using concrete, which could rest upon columns or be cantilevered out, the interior could be freed from the need to have load-bearing walls. Hence, long lines of windows, glass bricks and movable partitions made rooms light and flexible. The use of a flat roof also gave the architect further freedom as it could cover any shape or form of plan whereas a pitched roof placed certain restrictions in place in order to support its greater load and because of the limitations of dimensions due to the pitch at which it had to be set. Despite the advantages of these concrete structures and open interiors advertised by designers, especially in the early 1930s, the plan of most houses was still largely conventional, with social changes rather than architects’ opinions affecting the arrangement of rooms.



**FIG 2.10:** Two plans of modern houses from the mid 1930s, with elements of open planning between reception rooms and a garage.

Houses built in the suburbs where land was cheap could spread out over their plot and give the architect greater freedom. The International Style house could range from a plain horizontal block to a series of intersecting units, although some of the more exceptional examples featured wings at different angles. Houses built in a Y-shape with two wide arms welcoming visitors had first been devised by Arts and Crafts architects and were widely used on large houses, mainly in the 1920s. The greater size of the suburban plot also meant the wider side of the house could face the road, thus making the house appear larger and more imposing than earlier terraces and semis where the short end was seen by the public. Architects of Moderne and International Style houses also liked to maximise sunlight so made a big point of using large expanses of glass and ensured that the principal rooms for relaxing were facing south.

The most notable change to the house was caused because servants who had been plentiful in the late 19th century were now so hard to find. This shortage meant that most houses were now designed with only a daily maid or cook in mind and no space allowed for live-in staff. As a result, the service rooms had to be more presentable and easier to manage than those in late Victorian houses. Now the lady of the house was expected to become more involved with cooking and cleaning. The old rear extensions with scullery and storage were gone, and the kitchen in larger houses, usually still with a scullery or washroom off it, was now incorporated within the main body of the house. Although still small by modern standards, the kitchen in Art Deco houses would have been a step up for most new owners used to cooking, eating and living in a cramped, old-fashioned living room.



**FIG 2.11: FRINTON PARK ESTATE, FRINTON, ESSEX:** In 1934 the South Coast Development Company purchased 200 acres of land around Frinton, on the Essex coast, and employed the young architect Oliver Hill to design a housing estate featuring avant-garde designs, large windows and flat roofs for sunbathing. He invited designs from the leading architects working in the International Style, including Wells Coates, Frederick Gibberd, F.R.S. Yorke, and Amyas Connell, to design sections of the scheme and work commenced on around 35 houses designed by Hill and local architects close to the sea. However, the buildings were clearly too daring for local tastes and by 1935 the company was nearly bankrupt and Hill resigned the post, leaving Frinton Park Estate today as a small but rare experiment in Modernist housing.

## LEADING ARCHITECTS

During the 18th and 19th centuries the role of the architect had developed from an amateur gentleman to a highly-respected professional controlling not only the design but also the many and often complex parts of the construction process. However, in the 20th century, the increasing variety in building types, materials and more demanding regulations encouraged many to form partnerships and specialise, with fine houses built by these less well-known groups and local practices rather than the independent architects whose names stand out in history. There were some of note, however, who were at the forefront of design in Britain and introduced the Modern style to these shores, creating some of the most iconic buildings of the 1930s.



**FIG 2.12: LAWN ROAD FLATS, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON:** *Designed by Wells Coates and Isokon in 1934 and intended to be the first work in modern design in this country. The building was aimed at the young professionals' market in London and comprised 20 apartments, along with staff accommodation, kitchens and a large garage. Although it remained a unique experiment in its day, it was successful in becoming the centre of intellectual social life in the area with Agatha Christie one of its residents and leading artists such as Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore visitors to its bar, which was added in 1937.*

### WELLS COATES

Wells Wintemute Coates, OBE, was a remarkably multi-talented Canadian architect who also designed Art Deco Bakelite radios, the 'D' handle for furniture, a microphone for the BBC, a catamaran and a monorail system – projects that were ahead of their time and, like his buildings, trailblazing for many. He was born in Japan in 1895 to Methodist missionary parents, studied for his degree in Canada after serving in the RAF during the First World War and moved to England in the 1920s. In 1928 he set up his own design business and was a co-founder of the Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS). He employed his appreciation for Japanese simplicity in living spaces and for Le Corbusier's idea of a house being a machine to live in at his 1934 Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead (the Isokon Building). With its graceful white reinforced concrete walls, long cantilevered balconies and a tower it was compared at the time to an ocean liner and featured a communal kitchen with meals dispatched up to the flats via dumb waiters! This experiment in modern living had central heating, hot water and built-in furniture, which Coates saw as an integral part of the design in each of the 20 apartments. He was also responsible for designing the Sunspan House with David Pleydell-Bouverie with its distinctive curved glass windows designed to catch the maximum light. It featured at the 1935



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