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National Park Service

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Summary

The Oklahoma County Courthouse, built in 1936-37, is a thirteen-story building constructed of Indiana limestone.¹ The stepped-back massing, bas-relief murals, and abstract floral/corn ornamentation executed in aluminum exemplify the Art Deco style. Sited alone on a landscaped block of downtown Oklahoma City's Civic Center, the courthouse is surrounded by modern high-rise and historic buildings, including the Municipal Building/City Hall, the Municipal Auditorium, the Center Theatre, and the Harbour Longmire Building (NR, 1980). The Oklahoma County Courthouse possesses an unusually high degree of architectural integrity.

Physical Description

Sited alone on an attractively landscaped block of downtown Oklahoma City's Civic Center, the Oklahoma County Courthouse stands as a deceptively simple Art Deco massing of Indiana limestone. From a 203-foot by 132-foot base--which is relieved by wing walls and monumental steps of dark grey Cold Spring Minnesota granite--the building rises three stories out of the ground and then diminishes to 173 feet by 89 feet, forming an extremely well-proportioned, stepped-back shaft of ten more stories.

On all faces of the building, the plain surface contrasts with carved ornamental bands, dentil courses, medallions, and inscriptions incised into the limestone surface. The entrances are further embellished by decorative cast-aluminum-and-etched-glass light standards designed in the Art Deco idiom and mounted on massive, granite pedestals.

The building's fenestration is organized in vertical bands, separated by limestone pilasters, creating a strong vertical expression. These bands of

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¹Scholars have been confused about locations in the building over the years, because the first floor was initially called the basement and the fourth floor (utilities and storage) was ignored altogether in the original numbering. Thus what were called the sixth-floor courtrooms in 1937 are known today as the eighth-floor courtrooms. The two courtroom floors of double-height with mezzanines and the topmost three floors of the county jail help to create thirteen stories.

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windows are ornamented at the spandrels with abstract floral/corn expressions, executed in that very "moderne" 1936 material, aluminum. At the eleventh story, these aluminum elements form window grilles, which rise as stalks of corn to the top of the building, further enhancing the sense of verticality.

At the south entrance, a flight of granite steps flanked by wing walls leads to a monumental entry portal. Within the portal, a ribbon of four glazed, aluminum doors is graced by floriated, cast-aluminum moldings set between monumental, stepped-back pilasters executed in Cold Springs black granite. Vertical bands, designed in an abstract floral pattern and fabricated of aluminum, extend from the doors to reach an inscribed, stone lintel. Above the entrance, at the frieze, a carved bas-relief mural portrays a supposed panorama of the state's history, from Indians welcoming a mountain man, to a cowboy, to a pioneer farm couple.

At the east and west entry portals, fluted, polished granite pilasters support a granite frieze, embellished with volutes and a palmette leaf. The pilasters flank sets of three glazed, aluminum doors, crowned by ornamental aluminum transoms, which are in turn surmounted by a monumental lintel with a shield motif.

Throughout the interior, in an array of rich marbles and cast plaster, symbolic ornamentation references Oklahoma's character. Her agricultural produce is acknowledged: Corn and bundles of wheat are abstracted in plaster medallions. The ranching industry receives its due: A shorthorn bull carved in the black marble of the lobby's west mezzanine railing stares across the way at a longhorn steer on the east railing, while a bison arbitrates from the northern rail. The state's frontier history is expressed again and again: Wooden bas-relief ornamentation behind judges' benches in some courtrooms portray tribal justice, and in others, frontier lawmen; the six chandeliers ornamenting the two-story main lobby clearly take their geometric expression from wagon wheels; and ancient bows and arrows are expressed in cast aluminum over the east and west entrances.

At the top of the monumental south entry stairs, the visitor's first interior experience is a two-story cruciform lobby of polished Tennessee marbles, with rose-colored walls and black pilasters and mezzanine rails. Accents of lilac, cream, and metallic-gold tints are found in the plaster, the castings of government symbols about the tops of the walls, and the

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coffered ceiling. The carefully patterned terrazzo floor, designed in a classic sixteen-point "mariner's compass," recalls the wall and ceiling colors.

Throughout the courthouse halls and lobbies, repetition and variety distinguish each floor's public space. Each floor has its own design of hanging light fixtures, all in nickel-finish steel and restrained Art Deco vocabulary; each has its own patterned terrazzo floor, reflecting the colors and balance of its marble pilasters and walls. The unique color scheme of each floor contrasts dark pilasters (from reddish brown to ebony) with light wall panels (ranging from light grey to rich rose). The fifth through the eighth floors also display ornamented coffered ceilings that complement the shades of the pilasters. These ceilings rise higher with each floor until they culminate at the eighth-level courtroom lobby in a double-height, fully groined, barrel-vaulted ceiling, framed with an almost whimsical frieze of stylized cow skulls and corn bushels.

The eight ceremonial courtrooms--four each on levels seven and eight--are two-story in volume and finished in rich materials and ornamental elements. Here--in contrast to the courthouse's general use of hollow-steel doors and frames--courtroom doors, frames, and trim are executed in black walnut. Here the lobby's polished marble walls extend into the room as wainscots. The ornate pendant light fixtures are restated as Art Deco "stalactites" in ceilings surrounded by cast or sculpted plaster crown treatments. And here the aluminum trim of the exterior is recalled in linear ornament on the walnut rails and the judge's bench. Two of the eighth-floor courtrooms, left unfinished until some time after the building opened, are faced with Texas shell limestone. The courtroom levels possess a high degree of architectural integrity.

Additions

In 1950, the Boy Scouts of America erected a small replica of the Statue of Liberty on the grounds in front of the west entrance. This object does not contribute to the significance of the courthouse but does not affect the integrity of the property.

The Oklahoma County Courthouse remains virtually unaltered from its 1937 appearance and maintains an unusually high degree of architectural and historical integrity.

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Summary

The Oklahoma County Courthouse is significant under Criterion C as a locally outstanding example of Art Deco architecture constructed under the auspices of the New Deal. The building, completed in 1937, was designed by the prominent architectural firm of Layton and Forsyth. Its stepped-back massing, bas-relief murals, and abstract floral/corn ornamentation executed in aluminum combine to create an unusually good expression of the Art Deco idiom, which in the 1930s became closely associated with the New Deal and its extensive building program.

Historical Context

Oklahoma County was created in 1890, following the opening of the Unassigned Lands to white settlement and the passage of the Organic Act, which established Oklahoma Territory. The county commissioners rented office and courtroom space until 1901, when they erected the first courthouse building, an imposing Victorian Romanesque edifice.

In 1936, the Romanesque building was replaced by the present courthouse, a larger facility designed in the thoroughly modern style of the day, Art Deco. By that time, the county required more space and updated facilities to accommodate a wide range of government services, including legal proceedings, incarceration of prisoners, property deed record-keeping, voter registration, tax assessment, and the issuance of marriage licenses. The county turned to the Public Works Administration (PWA) to help finance the construction of the new courthouse as part of a complex of four buildings known as the Oklahoma City Civic Center. The Civic Center encompassed the Municipal Building/City Hall, the Municipal Auditorium, and the Oklahoma City Police Station/Jail, as well as the Oklahoma County Courthouse.

The PWA was founded in 1933 to increase employment and stimulate the economy through the construction of useful public works. The agency created thousands of construction jobs for skilled and unskilled workers and, thereby, helped ease the economic distress of the Great Depression.

One of the PWA workers who benefitted from the project and the New Deal's parallel interest in promoting regional art was Derald T. Swineford, who later became a prominent Oklahoma sculptor and art professor at the

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Oklahoma College for Women, now the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha. The wooden bas-relief carvings found above chamber doors and behind the judicial benches were carved by Swineford. Swineford's murals appear in public buildings in Enid, Norman, and Chickasha, as well as in the Oklahoma County Courthouse.

Importantly, when the courthouse was built in 1936--a time when the national economy was beginning to rebound from the depths of the depression--the new complex symbolized a break with the past. This symbolic break was epitomized by the juxtaposition of two photographs published in the Daily Oklahoman, one of the aging Romanesque courthouse, the other of the stately, sleek new seat of county government, with the caption "The Old Gives Way to the New."² For Oklahoma County residents, the new County Courthouse represented their hopes for a prosperous future.

Architectural Significance

The Oklahoma County Courthouse is significant as an outstanding local example of the Art Deco architecture of the New Deal. Often referred to as "PWA Art Deco," the style was transitional both between classical architectural and the International Style and between the Zigzag Art Deco of the twenties and the Streamline Art Deco of the thirties. The PWA Art Deco style was more severe than the earlier Zigzag idiom, and the ornamentation and building material relied less on the use of color. Most buildings of this style are monumental; their size and bulk conveyed "an image of strength, solidity and permanence, a sign of reassurance to a disillusioned nation."³ Hallmarks of the style include zigzag massing, symmetrical composition, the suggestion of an entablature and cornice, and the use of applied ornamentation. Ornament often took the form of relief sculpture, murals, and mosaics depicting local themes and glorifying the "common man," and it commonly found expression in "machine age" materials

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²Daily Oklahoman (Oklahoma City), 18 April 1937, Section E.

³Tulsa Art Deco: An Architectural Era, 1925-1942, with introduction by David Gebhard (Tulsa: Junior League of Tulsa, 1980), p. 100.

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such as aluminum. These hallmarks are evident in the Oklahoma County Courthouse, which fuses the geometric expressionism of Art Deco, the Southwest's lexicon of ornament and symbols, and classical motifs. The stepped-back massing and the use of floriated ornamentation executed in aluminum, bas-relief murals depicting frontier scenes, and classical ornament such as fluted pilasters, dentils, volutes, and palmettes combine to create an elegant example of PWA Art Deco architecture. Moreover, the richly ornamental interior, including the use of rich textures and contrasting colors, Southwestern motifs, Art Deco light fixtures, and patterned terrazzo floors, contribute importantly to the significance of the building.

The Art Deco expression of the Oklahoma County Courthouse has few peers in Oklahoma County. The Municipal Auditorium and the Municipal Building/City Hall, both part of the Civic Center complex, are also Art Deco in style, but not as elaborately detailed as the courthouse building. The only comparable example is the First National Bank Building, a zigzag skyscraper in downtown Oklahoma City enriched with aluminum ornamentation and graced by a Neoclassical interior. Completed in 1931, however, the First National Bank Building was the final expression of the exuberance of the Oklahoma City oil boom; it does not reflect the more restrained tone of the PWA's interpretation of the Art Deco style. Similarly, the Montgomery Ward Building (NR 1980), located near the courthouse in downtown Oklahoma City, represents an earlier impulse within the Art Deco movement. Built in 1928, the building was designed within the Pueblo Deco idiom, utilizing Mayan motifs.

The Oklahoma County Courthouse is also one of the best examples of a PWA Art Deco courthouse in the state of Oklahoma. Aside from the Oklahoma County facility, nine of Oklahoma's seventy-seven county courthouses were designed in the Art Deco style. Only the Pottawatomie County Courthouse and, to a lesser extent, the Cleveland County Courthouse and the Grady County Courthouse (a Layton, Hicks, and Forsyth design), compare in the richness of detail. None is as monumental nor as outstanding an example of PWA Art Deco architecture.

The architectural firm of Layton and Forsyth designed the Oklahoma County Courthouse. Solomon Layton, the firm's senior partner, was Oklahoma's premiere architect. He is credited with the creation of more than 150 public and commercial buildings in the state. From about 1910 until his death in 1943, Layton teamed with George Forsyth (and from 1925 until 1935,

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Jewell Hicks was also a partner in the firm). The firm made its greatest aesthetic imprint on the capital city, as it designed a prodigious number of Oklahoma City's most important buildings, many of which are listed in the National Register. Among Layton's earlier designs were the monumental Oklahoma State Capitol (in partnership with S. Wemyss-Smith, NR 1976), the Oklahoma Publishing Company Building (NR 1978), and the Oklahoma High/Central High School (with Wemyss-Smith and John W. Hawk, NR 1976). The partnership of Layton and Forsyth (and Layton, Hicks, and Forsyth) designed the Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company Building (NR 1980), the Braniff Building (NR 1980), the India Temple Shrine Building (NR 1980), the Mid-Continent Building (1978), the Skirvin Hotel (NR 1979), the Oklahoma Historical Society Building (NR 1990), the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company Building, the Baum Building (demolished), the Patterson Building (demolished), the Petroleum Building, Halliburton's Department Store (demolished), the Medical Arts Building, and four major school buildings. At the University of Oklahoma, the firm designed the Bizzell Library, and Layton and Wemyss-Smith created the plans for Monnet Hall.

Layton's firm established its reputation throughout the state of Oklahoma as the foremost designer of county courthouses. With various partners, Layton created the plans for sixteen county courthouses (eight of which were designed in partnership with Hicks and Forsyth); most of these are listed in the National Register. Layton's firm had only two rivals in shaping the state's courthouse architecture: the firm of Tonini and Bramblett, and architect Jewell Hicks (who was also for a time associated with the Layton firm), each with eight county courthouses to their credit. Layton designed the first Canadian County Courthouse (with W. J. Riley; demolished), the Greer County Courthouse (NR 1985), the second Cleveland County Courthouse (destroyed), and the Creek County Courthouse (with Wemyss-Smith; NR 1985). Working with partners Wemyss-Smith and Hawk, he developed the plans for the courthouses in Beckham County (NR 1984), Carter County (NR 1985), Washita County (NR 1984), and Craig County (NR 1984). Finally, in partnership with Hicks and Forsyth, Layton designed the courthouses for Harmon County (NR 1984), Jefferson County (NR 1984), McIntosh County (NR 1985), Muskogee County (NR 1984), Pittsburg County (NR 1984), Grady County, Hughes County (destroyed), and Okfuskee County (NR 1984). Of these, only the Jefferson County Courthouse and the Grady County Courthouse express the Art Deco style, and neither is as fine an example as the Oklahoma County Courthouse.

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