



HISTORY OF ADSW PRESERVATION INITIATIVES

"IN 1938...THE SILVER THEATRE BECAME AN INTEGRAL AND TREASURED PART OF THE REGION'S COLLECTIVE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE. BY THE 1970S, DOWNTOWN SILVER SPRING BEGAN TO FALL BEHIND...WITH THE EXPANSION OF METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON. IN 1984, THE BATTLE TO PRESERVE THE SILVER THEATRE AND SILVER SPRING SHOPPING CENTER WAS LAUNCHED BY THE ART DECO SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON WITH THE SUPPORT OF MANY NEIGHBORHOOD AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS. SILVER SPRING'S NEW DOWNTOWN CENTER REFLECTS A STRONG PUBLIC/PRIVATE EFFORT TO PRESERVE THE PAST AS A GIFT TO THE FUTURE..."

-- Plaque outside the Silver Theatre commemorating ADSW preservation efforts



THE CHALLENGE

Like many other Art Deco societies in the United States and around the world, the Art Deco Society of Washington was founded as a preservation organization in the 1980s, a time when many Art Deco buildings were threatened by a boom in urban development. Notable Washington, DC area Art Deco buildings, such as the Trans-Lux Theater, the Apex Theater, and the Roger Smith Hotel, were being demolished and replaced with uninspired office buildings.

ADSW PRESERVATION SUCCESSES

ADSW's first preservation emergency came in 1983 -- a threat to the Greenbelt Center School. Residents of Greenbelt, Maryland, which was built as a New Deal project of the Resettlement Administration in a suburban location, were proud of their community and its heritage. As Greenbelt prospered, they felt that they needed a new, modern elementary school. ADSW persuaded residents and the County public school system to build the new school on a different site and to allow the city to retain the original school building as a community center.

During this time, ADSW also had the opportunity to consult with the developer and architect planning to redevelop the long-closed Penn Theatre site as a mixed-use project that would incorporate parts of the theater.

In 1984, Hans Wirz and Richard Striner's book, *Washington Deco: Art Deco in the Nation's Capital*, was published, drawing attention to the Washington area's rich Art Deco heritage, as well as to ADSW. That same year, we launched campaigns to save two important buildings. The Washington Greyhound Terminal was about to be abandoned and demolished, while the Silver Theatre and Silver Spring Shopping Center complex was also neglected and threatened. The two campaigns occupied much of ADSW's time and energy over a span of 20 years and required the efforts of many dedicated volunteers and experts.

In the 1970s, the Greyhound Terminal had been “slipcovered” to make it appear more modern, but it obliterated its original sophisticated Art Deco appearance. As time passed, no one was sure if the original facade was intact. In 1991, the slipcover was removed, and the Greyhound Terminal reopened as the lobby of a major office building with a historic lobby display that is open to the public.

Also in the 1970s, the owner of the Silver Spring Theatre began destruction of the theatre’s Art Deco marquee, tower and other ornamental features in an effort to make the building less attractive and not worth including in a proposed Silver Spring historic district. In 2003, through the perseverance of ADSW and others, the Silver Theatre reopened as the authentically refurbished AFI Silver, while, in 2004, the Silver Spring Shopping Center was revived to serve as the centerpiece of a revitalized downtown Silver Spring.

Over the years ADSW has undertaken a great variety of preservation campaigns. In the 1980s, for example, ADSW successfully supported an application to create a historic district consisting of the unique Polychrome Houses. These dwellings are constructed of precast exposed aggregate concrete panels ornamented in Art Deco style by John Joseph Earley, a local master of this medium.

We then successfully supported the application to landmark the distinctive Bethesda Theatre, designed by the same architect as the Silver Theatre. In the 1990s, we submitted a landmark application for the iconic Hecht Company Warehouse in Washington, citing extensive research demonstrating the building’s importance in Art Deco design while remaining highly functional. We celebrated both the successful designation of the warehouse followed by its meticulous restoration by the owner, the May Company (at that time the parent company). Also, in those years, we successfully supported the landmark application for the Sears branch store in Tenleytown, and the building, though no longer a Sears store, remains a retail location.

Other efforts in Silver Spring have supported the designation of a former Canada Dry bottling plant as a residential project respectfully sympathetic to the historic building. We also supported the landmark designation of a substantial portion of the New Deal-era Falkland Apartments. In NW Washington, an iconic survivor of the Waffle Shop chain, was successfully landmarked by a coalition of preservation organizations including ADSW. This was accompanied by an agreement to allow the shop to be dismantled and reconstructed

on a new site. Reconstruction is now underway and we look forward to this iconic building taking on a new life as a restaurant once again.

The Hecht Company Warehouse, no longer owned by a department store, is now a successful residential redevelopment. ADSW worked closely with the owner and architects to find the best way to preserve this iconic Art Deco building, while adapting it for successful reuse and creating a sympathetic setting.

ADSW PRESERVATION TODAY

The above preservation initiatives often took years of dedication and were not simple projects. However, the results have saved icons of our community's Art Deco heritage and given them new lives for all to enjoy.

ADSW is committed to continuing to pursue preservation advocacy opportunities in and around Washington. Preservation is the core of our mission.