



Art Deco Mount Victoria

A Walking Guide

Mount Victoria has a number of significant examples of Art Deco architecture, built between 1931 and 1945. There are both domestic and commercial buildings, designed by Wellington's best-known Art Deco proponents, they display the iconic features of the style – streamlined design, faceted glass, abstract plant motifs and geometric patterns.

Art Deco was a style which arose quickly and ended quickly. It is generally attributed to the Paris 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes, but it was also influenced by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright from the USA and Northern European expressionist architecture. It was created mostly for big business, but the result was not austere corporate imagery. It was used by firms wishing to project a new image and was meant to entertain and be obviously 'up-to-date'.

Art Deco brought a new decorative vocabulary to architecture, ceramics, fabrics and typography which included chevrons, sunbursts, ziggurats, faceted crystalline forms, cogwheels, abstract motifs derived from plant forms and placed in panels on flat surfaces. It made the most of new materials such as stainless steel, plastic, chrome, vitrolite and neon. There was also a fascination with glass – clear, coloured and textured glass were combined to produce a fashionable, avant-garde image which reflected the fascination of the times with the machine.

Streamlined was a variant of Art Deco – rounded edges, smooth surfaces and low, horizontal profiles. It was emblematic of speed and efficiency – that fascination with the machine.

The lushness of Art Deco gradually diminished, replaced by the austerity of the 1940's and 1950's.

Mount Victoria in the Art Deco era

The 1930's was the great dance era: jazz and swing were the thing. There were two popular and well-known dance halls in Mt Victoria. There was the Oddfellows Hall in Clyde Quay, which started in the 1930's, and is now the building which houses Bats Theatre, at 1 Kent Terrace. Then there was the Brougham Street Assembly Hall, which was part of the Catholic Church of St Joseph's and opened with an inaugural dance on November 8, 1933. There was not always a happy relationship with neighbours, however, because in 1935 a petition was sent to the City Council from residents near St Joseph's describing the hall as "a great menace to the neighbourhood". It was used three or four times a week and "the guests arrive in motors . . . when they depart in the early hours of the morning the noise is terrific and sleep impossible."

It was not all fun, though. This was the time of the Depression. From 1928 until 1935, relief workers were provided with a considerable amount of work around Mt Victoria. In 1928, after gorse grubbing, 100,000 trees were planted on the Town Belt, including Mt Victoria.

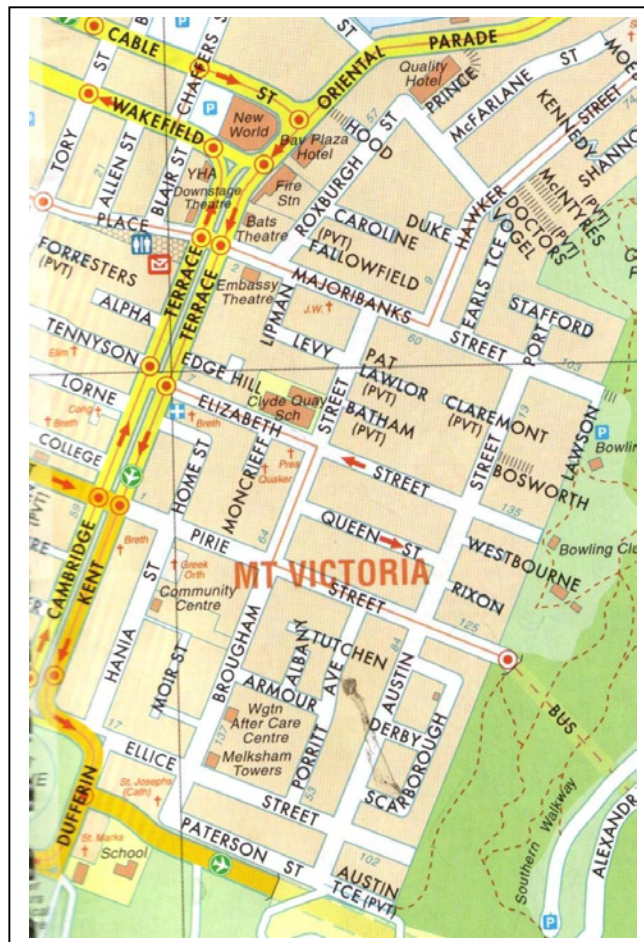
An even more solid reminder of the times is the Mt Victoria Tunnel. It was largely built by relief labour because the Relief Works Scheme allowed the Wellington City Council to raise a loan for £161,000 and construct the tunnel earlier than would have otherwise happened. The grand official opening took place on October 1931.

This was also the period when Wellington celebrated the centenary of its European settlement. A memorial was built on the top of Mount Victoria to commemorate the occasion. It was designed by Gray Young, Morton & Young in 1939 and officially opened on March 15, 1940.



Tunnel opening October 12, 1931
[Wellington City Archives 00126:0:31]

Route



Start at the central fire station on Kent Terrace (opposite the end of Wakefield Street). The walk will finish at Strawberry Fare on Kent Terrace (between Edge Hill and Elizabeth Street).

Start of Walk

Central Fire Station, Kent Terrace

The central fire station was officially opened by the Governor General, Lord Galway, in December 1937. The siting of the building was controversial and the old Clyde Quay School was demolished to make way for it. The clock came originally from the Town Hall, where it stood over the entrance until 1934, when it was removed because of earthquake risk. When opened, the building held nine fire appliances and was able to accommodate 21 married men and 33 singles.

The fire station was designed by Cyril H Mitchell of Mitchell & Mitchell in 1935.

Allan and Cyril Mitchell went to Clyde Quay School and on to Wellington College, both in Mt Victoria. Cyril Mitchell was taken on at Atkins and Bacon as a draughtsman in 1909 and became a partner in 1918. The 28 year-old Mitchell was left on his own in 1919, however, and built up the firm, renaming it Mitchell and Mitchell when his brother Allan joined in 1932.

Art Deco decorative elements include the emblem on either side of the building's name – a stylised flame and the stylised plant forms under the office entrance. Other Art Deco buildings by Cyril Mitchell are the Waterloo Hotel (1936) and the MLC Building (completed 1939).

If you wish, take a very short walk towards the sea front to see:

Fountain Court, 10-48 Oriental Parade

This block of flats was designed by Gray Young, Morton & Young in 1937 and built in 1938.

William Gray Young (1885-1962) was a very notable Wellington architect. He was the son of an Oamaru jeweller who moved to Wellington when he was very young. He joined the architectural firm of Crichton and McKay while studying at the Wellington Technical College. By the time he was 21 in 1906 he was in business on his own. By that time he had designed residences for his father in Kelburn, four workers' cottages in Petone for the Government (for which he shared a prize), the Knox Residential College in Dunedin for which he won a major prize and the Boy's Institute building in Tasman Street.

Gray Young's designs stand out because of their simplicity and character and his strength lies in the proportioning of external facades..

Head along Kent Terrace towards the Basin Reserve

Corner Kent Terrace & Majoribanks St

Designed as the New City Hotel by FH Swan in 1939, this is a notable example of the streamlined design. Note how the horizontal fire escape balconies on the first and second floors are made a feature.

The hotel was built on the site of the original City Hotel, which was owned by John Plimmer, known as the Father of Wellington.

(The top storey, spoiling the original Art Deco proportions, is a modern addition.)



Turn up Majoribanks Street and turn left into Hawker Street

2 Hawker Street

This block of nine flats was designed by FW Fielding in 1941.

Fielding was one of those steady but undramatic designers who never sought, or gained, the limelight. He carried out a great deal of sound and important work, the first of which in NZ was in 1911, two years after he arrived from England. His practice in NZ included churches, residential work and such projects as the Working Men's Club, the Trades Hall and the Evening Post Building in Wellington.

9 Hawker Street

These flats were designed by Edmund Anscombe & Associates in 1937 and built in 1939. Art Deco features are evident in Anscombe's use of plaster-covered walls, panels of bas-relief decoration and thin metal glazing bars.

Anscombe was born in 1874 in England and immigrated to New Zealand with his family in the late 1870's. At the age of 14 he visited the Melbourne exhibition of 1888, which sparked a lifelong interest in exhibitions.

In 1901 he left for the United States to study architecture and while there he was actively engaged in the St Louis Purchase Exhibition. He returned to Dunedin in 1907 and designed a number of important buildings. He held strong views on the industrial advancement of New Zealand and his vision of commercial buildings with large, flat roofs available for recreation and equipped with emergency hospitals was realised in the design for the Herd Street Post Office in 1939.

Anscombe moved to Wellington from Dunedin to design the NZ Centennial Exhibition in 1929. Probably his greatest achievement was the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington, which no longer exists, but there are a number of other buildings of his which still stand. Art Deco - and generally streamlined Art Deco - dominated his designs.

11 Hawker Street

Another small block of flats, these were designed by John Swan and William Lavelle in 1938 and built in 1939.

Head back to Majoribanks Street and turn left, up the hill

82 Marjoribanks St "Belvedere"

These flats were designed by Edmund Anscombe & Associates in 1937 and built in 1937. Characteristic Art Deco features are the plaster-covered walls, panels of bas-relief decoration and thin, metal, glazing bars. Streamlining is introduced in the rounded corners.

Go along Austin Street, across Elizabeth Street and past Queen Street on your right

53 Austin Street "St Malo Flats"

This small block of flats was designed by Prouse and Wilson in 1938/39 and built for St Malo Ltd in 1940.

Turn and come back to Majoribanks St, turn left, then left again into Brougham St.



17 Brougham Street “Owd Trafford”

One of Wellington’s most beautiful residential Art Deco buildings, this was designed by Mitchell & Mitchell in 1940.

93 Brougham Street

This small block of flats was designed by William Fielding in 1935.

123 Brougham Street

A beautiful building of ten flats, this was designed by BF Kelly and built for A Gianoutsos in 1941. It was designed about 1937/38 but construction was halted after the garages and first floor because of wartime restrictions on building materials. Work resumed again about 1944/46.



Turn and come back to Elizabeth St and turn left

24-26 Elizabeth Street

These flats and shops were officially designed by WJ Prouse in 1931. But, as with other buildings credited to Prouse, this one is more likely to have been designed by Norman Frank Wilson.

William Prouse (1878-1956) had no formal architectural training and had been suspended from NZIA membership for the year 1931-32. Wilson had been an employee of WJ Prouse since 1923 (in the firm of WJ Prouse and WH Gummer). His daughter describes the Prouse-Wilson partnership in some detail, saying that “Norman, the English-trained architect, was the partner who contributed the skills of architect and structural engineer, being responsible for all the physical work. Plans, specifications, calling for tenders and detailed working drawings, along with the followup inspections of all work, fell to Norman.” Prouse’s job was to bring in the business. Eventually, in 1934, the firm of WJ Prouse became the partnership of Prouse and Wilson.

The Hotel St George (1930) is one of Wilson’s finest buildings. Its method of construction was as advanced as its styling which, with its step-like massing and rhythmical arrangement of rectangular projections, seemed the epitome of the modern hotel. He also designed the Masonic Hotel in Napier.

Go down Elizabeth Street and turn right into Kent Terrace

25 Kent Terrace “Strawberry Fare”

This building was designed by Norman Lightbody, an architect of mainly commercial buildings, and built in 1935. It was built for E. Morris Jnr, undertaker. The faceted stained-glass windows are distinctively Art Deco, but the hints of gothic may come from the original funeral parlour function of the building.

End of Walk