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# The Huntsville Daily Times Building:

## An Early Example of Art Deco Style

by Linda Bayer

The 1920's were years of prosperity for Huntsville. With the construction of cotton textile mills to the north and south of town at the turn of the century, as well as the proliferation of a diversity of smaller manufacturing businesses, Huntsville finally succeeded in escaping the strangle-hold that the Civil War and reconstruction years had clamped on the town. The official 1920 population of Huntsville was 8,000, but the effective population swelled to more than 20,000 when the residents of the surrounding mill villages were included; and during the 1920's, the population of Huntsville proper increased by 44%.

This economic stability, complemented by a steady population growth, created a full-fledged building boom as

confidence in the future of Huntsville soared. During 1926-27 some \$10 million in building permits were issued, forcing even the **Birmingham News** to speculate that Huntsville was second only to that city in building activity in the state. The Terry Hutchens and Huntsville Daily Times buildings, the Hotel Russel Erskine, the Randolph Avenue high school, and the first building of the Huntsville Hospital were some of the major projects constructed during the second half of the decade. Streets were paved and extended, automobile suburbs were platted, utilities were improved, new houses were erected along the periphery of residential streets, and a country club was established.

So certain were local businessmen that Huntsville

would continue to prosper and become a major metropolitan center that they deemed it necessary to erect, for the first time, skyscrapers in downtown Huntsville. Both the Times building and the Russel Erskine Hotel were built to twelve floors, a height that has not yet been exceeded despite the city's even more extraordinary booms of the 1950's, 1960's and 1980's.

Just recently, a fascinating set of construction photographs of the Huntsville Daily Times building has been discovered in the possession of the H. C. Blake Company. These photos document the various stages of construction beginning with the wooden forms for the first floor columns in 1926 and ending with the building's completion at twelve stories in 1928. It was a very modern building for its date, designed in the latest style by one of the most successful architectural firms of the Southeast, to house the offices and printing presses of a Huntsville newspaper.

J. E. Pierce, president of the Times, hired the R. H. Hunt Company, architects of Chattanooga, to design the paper's new home. A crude drawing of a ten-story building, similar in scheme to the present structure but topped by a traditional bracketed cornice, appeared in the Times in 1925; however, this drawing displays none of the elegance of the completed structure, which suggests that the Hunt Company might have been commissioned after the basic configuration was set.

The architect Benjamin Hunt was frequently in Huntsville during 1925 and 1926 to oversee the construction of the Terry Hutchens building and the new Randolph Avenue and Council high schools for the city board of education. Pierce may have engaged Hunt to design the Times building because he was impressed with the other projects Hunt was already working on in Huntsville.

The Hunt Company was the premier southern architectural firm of the early 20th century with literally hundreds of executed commissions spread from Oklahoma to Florida. In Alabama alone, some thirty-five structures have been identified as works of the Hunt office. Reuben Harrison Hunt, Ben's much older brother, began practicing architecture in 1886 in Chattanooga where he founded the firm bearing his name. He made a specialty of church architecture although he also had an extensive practice in institutional buildings and colleges. The number of buildings designed by the firm for Huntsville -- nine are known -- is representative of its prolific production for cities both large and small all across the South. Of these nine commissions, seven were actually erected. R. H. Hunt died in 1937 and Ben Hunt died in 1961; the firm had been hard hit by the Depression and eventually was dissolved.

The Huntsville Daily Times building consists of a ten-story tower rising above one corner of a much larger two-story base which contained the newspaper pressroom,



Construction of the Huntsville Daily Times building began in 1926 with the erection of wooden forms for the reinforced concrete columns of the first floor. Note the horse-drawn wagon at center.

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newspaper offices, and retail stores. Between the publication of the 1925 drawing and the start of construction, the building was restyled with the very current Art Deco ornament. The Exposition des Arts Decoratifs held in Paris in 1925 is generally considered the beginning date for Art Deco design in this country. The aim of Art Deco designers was to create a contemporary, non-historically derived body of ornament that would be stylistically appropriate to the burgeoning machine age. The result was that what we now label Art Deco architecture actually consisted of traditional buildings decorated with Art Deco ornament because the Art

Deco period produced few structural or spatial innovations.

In the case of Art Deco skyscrapers, for example, the form and technology of the building itself was little different from the form that had evolved in the early years of the century in response to the changing conditions of American life. The urbanization of the United States following the Civil War had brought with it a demand for large blocks of office space, a demand that was accompanied by steadily escalating land costs. The obvious solution was to build upward, layer upon layer of identical floors set on a



relatively small plot of land. The necessary technology for such a scheme required elevators, telephones and electric lights, central heating and high pressure water systems, and of course, the steel framework on which to hang the tiers of offices, and secure foundations to support the superstructure. Chicago was the logical site for all of these elements to be merged because the great fire of 1871 had devastated the commercial core and made rebuilding the business district a top priority. The opportunities inherent in the Chicago situation attracted a multitude of architects, contractors, and entrepreneurs who recognized an enormous market for their services; and by 1890, Chicago had produced a multi-story build-

ing with an all steel frame and curtain walls. That means that the frame, rather than masonry walls, carried the weight of the building so that the exterior walls could be hung on the frame and served primarily to exclude the weather. Because the walls no longer carried even their own weight, theoretically they could be all glass.

Although the structural problems of the high-rise building were resolved relatively quickly, the proper appearance of such structures proved to be a much thornier issue. Architects grappled with the question of facade design: Should the height be minimized by stacking up horizontal floors and motifs one upon another? What histori-

Construction progresses as wooden forms are constructed for each of the piers and floors, one story at a time, then filled with concrete poured around reinforcing steel rods.



cal periods were most suitable to ransack for stylistic elements to adorn these tall buildings? It was Louis Sullivan, Chicago architect, who most thoroughly addressed these concerns and pronounced that skyscrapers should express their height honestly by accentuating the vertical components. He went on to proclaim that the base should be ornamental with a well-defined entrance, that the floors of offices above should be identical because they were, and that the top should form a decorative crown with pronounced overhanging cornice to stop the

upward movement and declare the building terminated. And while many architects continued to dress skyscrapers in historical garb (Gothic being considered particularly appropriate because of its prominent verticality), Sullivan created an individualistic style of ornament based on sensuous plant forms that could have led away from the historical recycling that dominated late 19th century architectural design. However, Sullivan's designs, executed works, and writings had little immediate impact on his profession, and most skyscrapers for the next

Brick walls are being applied to the supporting framework which has reached the eleventh floor. Note the trolley car just to the left of the automobiles.



couple of decades continued to masquerade in various historical costumes.

Consequently by 1925 when the ideas of the Paris Exposition were being disseminated in this country through professional and popular journals, the form and structure of the skyscraper had been set, and architects had only to apply the new Art Deco ornaments to the existing building form in order to be au courant. Also about that time, it became fashionable to omit the traditional projecting cornice in favor of a cleanly cut top embel-

lished with panels of low relief on the vertical faces. The emphasis on non-historical forms and ornaments, emphatically vertical compositions, and precise, machined designs were partially the result of an urge toward modernity, an attempt to bring architecture into line with industrial design where streamlining and sleek, aerodynamic forms were gaining ascendancy.

Art Deco decoration relied on sumptuous ornament, lush textures incorporating a variety of materials, and color to achieve its effect.



Here the framework for the twelfth floor has been added as an afterthought. The elevator will go only as far as the eleventh floor.

The ornament itself tended toward rectilinear patterns, such as chevrons, zigzags, frets, fluting and reeding, or geometrical curves, the latter frequently assuming the shape of curvilinear plant forms. In either case, such exterior ornament on skyscrapers appeared predominantly as low relief panels set between windows, along the base, and at the tops of the continuous piers.

The Huntsville Daily Times building displays unbroken vertical piers of brick rising from the base to the attic and even beyond, in

the case of the three central piers. This verticality is further stressed by the placement of the spandrels -- those horizontal panels separating the windows of one floor from the windows of the floor above -- which are recessed behind the plane of the piers. The tower itself is faced with brick, while the the spandrels, the two-story base, and the attic level are finished with a buff-colored terra cotta. The repeated spandrel panels of the tower are identical, each having an abstract design of geometric shapes. The spandrels of the base





Nearing completion, the twelve-story building will soon be ready to be occupied by the Huntsville Daily Times.

also are identical but are more classical in derivation, featuring a swag over the monogram of HDT, for Huntsville Daily Times. The arched entries facing Greene and Holmes streets are not wholly Art Deco in origin, but the pairs of eagles surmounting each arch are superb renditions of a popular Art Deco motif. These eagles partially emerge, each gently pushing a head and one wing through the terra cotta to frame the arch below in a subtle, suggestive manner.

On reflection, it is not surprising that some of the

Times building detailing owes more of a debt to the classical tradition than to that of Art Deco because construction was begun on the Times building in 1926 and the Paris Exposition had taken place only the previous year. The surprise is that the building is such a fully realized and successful example of Art Deco styling.

Brick and terra cotta comprised the most frequent combination of building materials employed for Art Deco skyscrapers. Terra cotta is a versatile material that can be produced to any design,



This 1972 picture indicates that the lobby of the Times building has changed very little, if any, over the years. The two elevators, far left, are next to a recessed phone booth. The Art Deco light fixtures appear to be original, as does the mail-drop box at the left of the newspaper stand.

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can be colored, and is easier than stonework to install. Basically, terra cotta is manufactured from clay much like brick, but is hand-molded, cast into hollow blocks, and fired at temperatures higher than that used for brick (2,000 to 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit). For large designs, it is formed into numerous small components which are assembled on the building itself, much like a jigsaw puzzle. The formed terra cotta pieces were frequently given a salt

glaze, a treatment that created a slick surface which could be easily cleaned of the grime produced in cities where coal was the principal heating fuel.

Terra cotta first came into common use in the United States during the 1870's in Chicago. While rebuilding after the 1871 fire, Chicago architects were searching for a material that was cheap, fireproof and non-corrosive. Terra cotta, which had all the requisite properties,



Notice the exposed plumbing for the radiator and how the concrete piers jut into the room.

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first became popular as a substitute for stone ornament because it was much cheaper to produce and install and because a scarcity of qualified stone cutters had made true stonework increasingly impractical. Early terra cotta pieces were produced in a natural red or clay color, which made them ideal replacements for brownstone trim; but after 1890, buff or cream gradually became the more popular color for terra cotta work. Multicolored terra cotta became fashionable at the turn of the century; an example of this glazed and tinted terra cotta ornament can be seen today in

the first story arch of the Law Library on East Side Square. The lush polychrome effects possible with terra cotta made it a natural for executing Art Deco designs; and the ease of turning out quantities of identical pieces made it perfect for those repeat elements such as the spandrels on the Times building. However, terra cotta also functioned as a plain building material such as on the two-story base of the Times building where it appears as simple rectangular cladding blocks. After 1930 the popularity of terra cotta began to wane, and today there are but a couple of

The building's winding stairs of riveted steel fortunately ascend all the way to the twelfth floor.



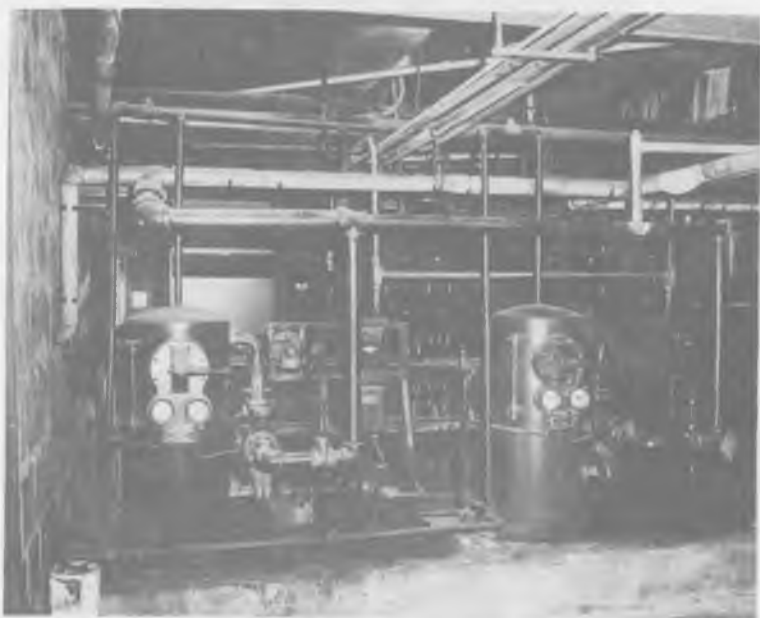
terra cotta companies in operation in the entire country.

The set of old photographs printed here reveals one other interesting feature of the Daily Times building; it has a framework of reinforced concrete rather than steel. Serious experiments with concrete construction had begun in the United States in the 1870's, but it was not until engineers discovered how to place steel reinforcing rods within the concrete beams and slabs that it could be safely used for

horizontal as well as vertical framing members. The first skyscraper to be erected of reinforced concrete was in Cincinnati in 1902-03. The photographs of the Times building clearly illustrate the process whereby wooden forms were constructed for each of the piers and the floors, one story at a time, then filled with poured concrete. The brick and terra cotta cladding were then applied to the framework, a most convincing demonstration that the exterior walls were no longer supporting the building.



In the basement are found the coal-burning furnaces and the water pumps for sending water to the top floors.



In November of 1926, the **Times** reported in a gush of self promotion that "Hundreds and thousands of people have visited the site of th. new ten-story [sic] office building for the Daily Times ... since the actual work of construction began more than a month ago .... It is the wonder of many how the workmen can do the job, but when it is considered that the South's leading firm of architects, R. H. Hunt Co., of Chattanooga, are on the job and that Earl Cline, contractor of Birmingham with A. F. Hill of Huntsville as superintendent are manning it, the work is easy and proceeds like clockwork." However, it was a year and a half before the concrete framework was completed. Again the **Times** reported, "Finished pouring the 12th floor of our magnificent 12-story office building home today and next week the columns will start up for the completion of the story and the roof ...."

The Times building was opened in 1928 and served as the newspaper headquarters until 1956 when the staff moved to their new building on South Memorial Parkway where it remains today. In 1973 Madison County purchased the old Times building which then became the courthouse

annex. Three years ago the structure again changed hands, being purchased at auction by local businessmen. Plans to convert the tower into luxury condominiums, one per floor, have been thwarted by the impracticality of bringing the concrete structure into compliance with residential building codes. The owners currently are renovating the two-story base for office and retail uses and later will announce plans for the tower.



The End



LINDA BAYER, a staff member of the City of Huntsville Planning Department, was Editor of the **Historic Huntsville Quarterly** from 1978 through 1983.