

ART DECO IN A CANBERRA CONTEXT

A WALK IN THE INNER NORTH



The Australian War Memorial (AWM)

START AND FINISH: Ainslie Primary School, 33 Donaldson Street, Braddon ACT 2601.

DISTANCE: 4 km.

WALKING AND VIEWING TIME: 2-3 hours.

KEY BUILDINGS: Ainslie Primary School and the Australian War Memorial (AWM).

LEVEL: Easy, also suitable for bicycles, wheelchairs or cars. Bicycles can be locked at the AWM.

PARKING: Available on the street and at the AWM.

TOILETS AND REFRESHMENTS: Available at the AWM. Open 7 days a week except Christmas Day.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION



This project was assisted through funding made available by the ACT Government under the ACT Heritage Grants Program.

THIS PAMPHLET IS ONE OF A SERIES OF ART DECO SELF-GUIDED TOURS OF CANBERRA BEING PREPARED FOR THE 2013 CENTENARY.

No 1. Art Deco in a Canberra Context: a walk in the Inner North.

No 2. Art Deco in Acton: a self-guided walking tour.

SEE THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CANBERRA WALKS AND ART DECO:

http://www.environment.act.gov.au/heritage/canberra_tracks

<http://www.nationaltrustact.org.au>

<http://heritage.anu.edu.au>

<http://www.actionwalkways.com>

<http://www.artdeco.org.au>

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KEY ART DECO FEATURES

Test yourself. As you walk, how many examples can you find from the list below?

- examples of symmetry and balance in design;
- examples of both vertical and horizontal elements;
- the use of stepped (also known as ziggurat) forms, both externally and internally;
- curved or ‘streamlined’ brickwork, and ‘eyebrows’;
- new industrial techniques and building materials;
- decorative motifs symbolic of a building’s function;
- nationalistic Australian Art Deco motifs;
- exotic motifs from past cultures such as Ancient Egypt;
- the principle that decorative elements should be grouped in threes: ‘the rule of three’;
- geometric patterning characteristic of Art Deco, including chevrons, octagons and hexagons. Look at architecture, floor coverings such as marble and parquet, decorations;
- curvilinear motifs, such as sunbursts;
- capitals, roundels, recessed spandrels and decorative bronze lights and skylights in Art Deco style;
- functional features used to enhance design. Look at lighting, down pipes, air vents and security grilles;
- examples of features that emphasise Stripped Classicism or Modernism;
- flagpoles or finials, and porthole windows;
- landscaping and plantings that enhance the design.



Decorative lighting features

- typical Art Deco clock face;
- parapet walls with metal capping;
- horizontal banding in line with ‘the rule of three’;
- a decorative rain head, also with horizontal banding;
- recessed setback (or stepping) that emphasises verticality;
- decorative but functional air vents beneath the parapet;
- elongated metal sash windows in groups of three;
- horizontal glazing bars that reinforce horizontality;
- a decorative geometric spandrel (the space between the sill of one window and the lintel of the one below)—this spandrel is not recessed but they often are;
- curvilinear or ‘streamlined’ brickwork on the lower level and a small step-back that adds a vertical line;
- a horizontal geometric frieze, based on a hexagon;
- horizontal banding around the brickwork.

This image illustrates a number of key Art Deco features from the list inside to help you identify them as you walk.

Read them from the top of the photo down:



TYPICAL ART DECO FEATURES

SOME EXAMPLES

INNER NORTH ART DECO

This walk introduces you to some important heritage listed buildings in Canberra that give insights into the Art Deco period and some of the social, intellectual and aesthetic ideas that informed it.

In 1908, it was decided to build a national capital here on the Limestone Plains. The design competition was won by Walter Burley Griffin in 1911 and Canberra was named in 1913. From the 1920s, construction of the new city, its major institutions, and accommodation for public servants gathered momentum. The high period of Art Deco internationally fell between the 1920s and 1940s. In Canberra, many competing influences contributed to what is known as the ‘Federal Capital Style’. However, a number of architects have left us fine examples of Art Deco, in part or in whole, particularly in public buildings.

This walk presents two very different examples of Art Deco architecture in Canberra’s inner north: Ainslie Primary School (1) and the Australian War Memorial (AWM)(6). It sets them in the wider architectural context of their period by taking you past other institutional buildings as well as showing early domestic architecture and town planning. This allows walkers to examine different designs from the same era, to look for overlap and contrast, and to reflect on competing styles and their appropriateness to their role and function.

Ainslie Public School (2), built in 1927 ten years before the Art Deco Primary School, is clearly its precursor and well worth a comparison. Now the Ainslie Arts Centre, it was designed by J.S. Murdoch, Chief Architect of the Federal Capital Commission (FCC), who designed Old Parliament House, also opened in 1927, and Gorman House (4), originally a government hostel, opened in 1924.

The suburbs of Braddon (3) and Reid (5), both built in the 1920s, offer examples of Garden City town planning. This style was encouraged by John Sulman, Chair of the FCC. The houses provide interesting examples of contemporary domestic architecture and display some Art Deco features. After visiting the AWM (6) the return walk along Limestone Avenue passes another 1920s government hostel, formerly The Ainslie Hotel, now Mercure Canberra (7), some interesting Art Deco street furniture (8), and Alt Crescent (9) another example of FCC domestic architecture. Walkers will find ACT Government interpretive signage at locations 2, 4, 5, and 9. These provide interesting additional information.



Form meets function: decorative air vents

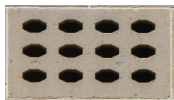
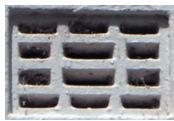
This was a time of intellectual and aesthetic tension between Tradition and Modernism, between people nostalgic for the visual symbols of a pre-industrial past and those who favoured the clean but stark lines and new technologies that characterised Modernism. In many ways, Art Deco emerged as an inclusive style that embraced new materials, such as reinforced concrete and metal windows, but softened these by incorporating decorative features from the past.

The style was characterised by a marriage between form and function; by symmetry and balance; by simple clean lines in buildings, transport, household items and industrial design; and by distinctive decorative embellishments.

As a term, it captures the spirit of an age when people wanted to put the tragedies and hardships of World War I behind them and embrace a glamorous, adventurous and elegant future.

Art Deco covers a number of changes in style, aesthetics and technology that influenced every visual medium in the 1920s and 1930s.

The term comes from a French exhibition in 1925 of ‘Arts Decoratifs’ but did not enter general use till the 1960s to describe a range of Inter-War styles.





1) AINSLIE PRIMARY SCHOOL (1938) 33 DONALDSON STREET, BRADDON

This beautiful Art Deco school, designed by Cuthbert Whitley for students from the new suburbs of Ainslie, Braddon and Reid, opened in 1938.

Symmetry and balance characteristic of Art Deco is evident in the semicircular driveway, the plantings of trees and shrubs, and most strikingly in the balanced façade of the building itself, its roof hidden behind parapet walls. Every element is in balanced harmony: from the wings and recesses that step gracefully down from the central portico, to the windows, the attractive grooved rain heads, the down pipes and even the different sized chevron air vents. Instead of disguising these practical features, they are made central to the design and decoration in a marriage of form and function.

Balance between horizontal and vertical elements is a key feature. Verticality is enhanced by narrow setbacks in the façade, by elongated windows, rain heads and down pipes.

In the central portico, the vertical glazing bars are emphasised in the window, front door, and the fluted columnar mouldings either side of the central window. Horizontal features can be seen in the lines along the top of the parapet wall, the blocks framing the entrance door, the horizontal glazing bars in the windows, and the lines where the red brick base meets the rendered walls.

Some features tie horizontal and vertical elements together. Look at the zigzag mouldings at each corner of the central parapet, repeated at the top of the central window and above the entrance doors. A similar effect is achieved by the scalloped moulding above the first side windows and around the Art Deco eyebrow feature over the porch as well as by the curved balcony railings.

You will find many examples of ‘the rule of three’ in this building. Note how often Whitley has used six as a coordinating number, within the metal windows and in the numbers of windows in the different wings.

Other features to look for include the bronze door and lights that frame it, the flagpole, the terrazzo door step, and the school lettering with its characteristic Art Deco font with low-waisted E, A and H.

2) AINSLIE PUBLIC SCHOOL (1927) ELOUERA STREET, BRADDON

It is worth a detour to the front of the original Ainslie Public School, opened ten years before the Primary School. It is a good example of the Stripped Classical style popular in 1920s public buildings. Other terms for Stripped Classical are Tentative Modernism or Austere Art Deco and this building is an obvious precursor to its Art Deco neighbour. Both buildings share a love of symmetry and balance evident in the wings, driveway, air vents, down pipes, the positioning of the windows and the tree plantings. The visible hipped terracotta roof, though, changes the overall effect. Both share decorative rain heads and railings, but in a slightly different style. The entrance portico, supported by columns, emphasises a classical style, but the horizontal banding along the parapet wall and the stepped roof line above the portico anticipate and highlight the soaring, vertical stepped elements and decorative detail of the Art Deco Primary School. Note the interpretive signage.

3) BRADDON HERITAGE AREA

Between the school and Gorman House, walkers pass through the suburb of Braddon, built in 1921-22 for base grade public servants in the Garden City style. Some Art Deco design elements can be seen on a number of cottages, particularly in the stepping around the porches.

4) GORMAN HOUSE

This residential hostel was built in 1924 for public servants coming to Canberra to prepare for the relocation of Federal Parliament in 1927. The design draws on the popular Garden Pavilion style considered appropriate to the Australian climate. Note the signage near the Ainslie Avenue entrance.

5) REID HERITAGE AREA

The Garden City suburb of Reid was constructed in 1926-27 for middle ranking public servants. The houses, influenced by the California Bungalow style, are set around community open space. Decorative features, often in geometric form, can be found above windows, on chimneys, gables and porches.

Air vents play both a decorative and functional role. Two interpretive signs at the junction of Dirrawan Gardens and Currong Street South give more information.

6) THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

Designed in 1927 by Emil Sodersten and John Crust and opened in 1941, the Australian War Memorial (AWM) is one of Canberra’s most loved buildings. It is a shrine to those who lost their lives in war; it is a war museum and library; it is also one of Canberra’s finest Art Deco buildings.

This tour focuses on three main elements of the AWM: the overall design and exterior and the two commemorative areas. These are the Courtyard comprising the Pool of Reflection and the Roll of Honour; and the Hall of Memory that since 1933 has held the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier.

BUILDING, DESIGN AND EXTERNAL FEATURES

The design and decorative elements draw on many influences from a range of places and periods. These include Byzantine architecture, which represents a meeting of Western and Eastern religious beliefs and styles; European medieval military buildings and castles; Eastern mausoleums; Mesopotamian stepped pyramids; Persian mosques and even the Alhambra palace in Moorish Spain and the Mughal Taj Mahal. Travel in the early twentieth century had encouraged interest in all these architectural forms.

As you walk up the steps towards the imposing main entrance, Sodersten’s two massive towers or ‘pylons’ jut out like the monumental gateway of an Egyptian temple, joined by a lower section over the entrance. In ancient Egyptian theology, pylons were a symbolic representation of two hills between which the sun (like the dome) rose and set, in a ritual of resurrection or rebirth. The towers can also be seen as a defensive barbican protruding from the front of a Norman castle.

Before entering, walkers are recommended to turn left towards the Sculpture Garden and walk right round the outside of the building. How many different Art Deco features can you see? These include:

- the parapet walls and large piers that step down and back with curved, streamlined corners;
- horizontal banding and vertical lines;
- symmetry and balance, especially in the configuration of windows, often drawing on multiples of three;
- form married to function; the vertical air vents in the walls, for example, look like arrow slits in a castle wall but also ventilate the building;
- the cruciform floor plan (in the form of a cross), recalls a European cathedral with the central nave bisected by a transept or side wings. These were extended in 1971;
- look up at the copper dome, sitting on a large stepped tower; this is an example of ‘massing’—an Art Deco feature;
- new technologies such as reinforced concrete clad in Gosford sandstone; flat roofs clad with copper behind capped parapet walls that largely hide the drainage system;
- original doors at the rear with an attractive Art Deco light and an original fire hydrant; decorative security grilles on the eastern side.

COURTYARD, POOL OF REFLECTION AND ROLL OF HONOUR

As you walk towards the entrance, the mood and character change. Note the geometric decoration in the polished marble around the entrance door; the bronze lights; and the Art Deco metal gates that depict stylized representations of Australian flora.

The entrance hall opens on to the Courtyard and Roll of Honour, Crust’s inspirational design. With simple serenity it resembles an open cathedral nave, flanked by cloisters, planted with symbolic shrubs and flowers. At the southern end of the courtyard, steps rise gracefully to the open space above the entrance hall. The steps at the other end lead to Sodersten’s imposing dome and the Hall of Memory. As you walk round, look for the following Art Deco elements:

- the curved marble staircase, to the right of the entrance hall, that leads to the Roll of Honour of Australia’s war dead, set into bronze panels;
- the large decorative geometric features adjacent to the flat roof above the entrance hall;
- the bronze chains that prevent access to this area;
- more decorative air vents, symmetrically placed around the courtyard beneath horizontal banding;
- the 26 sandstone gargoyles, representing the people and fauna of ancient Australia, designed by Leslie Bowles, sculptor.

When you reach the raised courtyard in front of the Hall of Memory, look back to see Capital Hill and New Parliament House framed by the dramatic pylons. This is a mirror image of the view from the front of the building.

HALL OF MEMORY

The portico with its fine fluted columns contains a second set of decorative doors, with panels representing the coat of arms of each state. The interior of the Hall, its circular form reminiscent of the apse of a church, is the emotional and decorative climax of a visit to the AWM.

The stained glass windows were completed in the 1940s. The six million individual mosaics on the cupola (centre of the domed ceiling) and interior walls were imported from Italy and installed in the 1950s. Both present fine examples of Art Deco style and were designed by M. Napier Waller, a Victorian artist. Try to identify the following elements within the detail:

- the outer cornice of the dome featuring stylized images symbolic of Australia: bulrushes, black swans and a wreath of wattle leaves;
- above them, pairs of hands release the dead in the form of winged sarcophagi (stone coffins) drawing on Ancient Egyptian or Greek symbolism;
- the brilliant sun, its seven rays representing the seven-pointed federal star, set within the Southern Cross, in the cupola;
- other geometric or sunburst motifs among the mosaics;
- the different branches and qualities of the Armed Forces, represented in the stained glass windows, along with complex symbolic features relating to each quality.

7) MERCURE CANBERRA, 39 LIMESTONE AVENUE

Mercure Canberra (formerly The Ainslie Hotel) built in 1927, is another example of accommodation built for public servants and visitors to the new city. Designed by Sydney architectural company, Burcham Clamp and Finch, who also designed the Canberra Grammar School in 1928, it draws on the Arts and Craft style popular in the early years of the 20th century but rare in Canberra. Walk on to the junction of Batman and Quick streets.

8) STREET FURNITURE

Between this junction and Donaldson Street, the wide nature strip down the centre of Limestone Avenue was planted with Australian natives in 1928. A white painted concrete seat in stepped, curvilinear Art Deco style was placed at either end to commemorate the plantings.

9) ALT CRESCENT HERITAGE PRECINCT

Continue along Limestone Avenue and turn right up Alt Crescent, a curvilinear row of seven houses facing a small reserve. This is the third Garden City Precinct passed through on this walk and contains residences built in 1926 for founding staff of the FCC. See the interpretive signage. Turn left at the junction of Limestone Avenue and Donaldson Street and continue to the front of Ainslie Primary School where our walk ends.