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Aphrodisiac is a year-old, but still in style

by Mike Fitzbon

If you've noticed that local residents appear to be dressing a tad more chic these days, one reason might be Aphrodisiac, a small fashion boutique on Dyckman Street in a space that is smaller than the city's largest walk-in closets.

Owned by designer Enelis Ureña in July 2004, Aphrodisiac began selling clothing lines that replaced Wall's unofficial dress code - wife beater tank tops, frilly skirts, and baggy jeans - with designer tops, handmade accessories, and ripped jeans, ones that can cost hundreds of dollars.

On July 28 Aphrodisiac celebrated its first year with a party attended by fashionistas crammed into the store and crowded on the sidewalk. Many had come from out of town.

Carioca Molina is a waitress in Queens but harbors dreams of opening her own boutique, and regularly visits Inwood for no other reason than to see the latest art and fashions peddled at Aphrodisiac.

"I have been to Lexington and Fifth Avenue, and (Aphrodisiac) is barely in the middle of nowhere, but for the people who know about it, it's fantastic," she said, standing on the sidewalk during the party.

Inside the red-walled shop is a selection of **APHRODISIAC p11**

'Aphrodisiac' cumple un año, y sigue con estilo

por Mike Fitzbon

Si usted se ha dado cuenta que los residentes locales están vistiendo un poco más a la moda en estos días, una razón podría ser 'Aphrodisiac', una pequeña boutique de moda en la Calle Dyckman en un espacio que es más pequeño que el armario más grande de la ciudad.

Abierta por la diseñadora Enelis Ureña en julio del 2004, 'Aphrodisiac' comenzó vendiendo líneas de ropa que reemplazaron el código de vestimenta extrahistórico de Wall - camisetas sin manga, faldas con volantes y mahones anchos - con camisas de diseñadores, accesorios hechos a mano, y mahones rasgados, unos que pueden costar cientos de dólares.

El 28 de julio 'Aphrodisiac' celebró su primer año con una fiesta asistida por seguidores de la moda que se apilaban dentro de la tienda y en la acera. Muchos vinieron de fuera de la ciudad. Carioca Molina es una camarera en Queens pero alberga sueños de abrir su propia boutique, y regularmente visita Inwood sin ninguna otra razón que ver la última moda y artesanía en 'Aphrodisiac'.

"Yo he estado en las Avenidas Lexington y Quinta, y ('Aphrodisiac') está apenas en el medio de ningún lado, pero para las personas que conocen de ella, es fantástica," dijo ella parada en la acera durante la fiesta.

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91 Payson Ave.

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What's art deco and why does it matter?



Text by James Willhite,

Photos by Landa M. Towns

The jazz-age glamour of art deco architecture may be right under your nose, right where you live. If you are a resident of Inwood or Washington Heights, there's a greater chance that your building has characteristic ornamental details of the art deco style, like those adorning the Chrysler Building and Rockefeller Center, than almost anywhere else.

"We have one of the largest concentrations of art deco buildings in the country," said Isaac Kremer, a consultant in historic preservation working with Audubon Partnership for Economic Development. "We have a responsibility to share that with other people.

"It's not only the grand monuments that deserve respect," he added.

So how can you tell if your apartment building is an art deco classic? Parapets, the ornamental brick structures at the top of the roof that resemble the jagged tops of castles, are a common feature.

"Like the sort of thing you might expect an archer to shoot an arrow from between," Kremer said. Other common features are a patterned use of multicolored bricks, imposing entryways with a large "door surround" made of concrete, and elaborate building lobbies decorated with mirrors, indirect lighting, and even murals.

"Mayan and Colombian influence can be seen in a few buildings," Kremer said.

Art deco is also known as the zig-zag style because of its geometric forms, Kremer said. The unique concentration of art deco apartment houses in Inwood and Washington Heights was discovered a few years ago during a survey by Columbia University.

But Audubon's executive director Walther Delgado has been curious about the area's buildings for even longer, noting how the style of architecture changes from the walkups on the east side of Broadway to the more modern elevator buildings on the west side. Then over the spring he watched an art deco building's façade change while undergoing renovations and he started thinking about how the area's architecture was another resource that could be used "as a tool for economic development," he said. He wrote a proposal, funded by Citigroup Foundation, that brought Kremer on board.

Audubon has identified three pockets with particularly dense concentrations: one each at the north and south ends of Inwood, and another in Washington Heights. Several of the buildings were built by Miller & Goldhammer, an architectural company, in the 1930s. Ruben Miller, the son of the founder George G. Miller, remembers exactly why art deco was so popular back when his father's business was creating many of the buildings.

"Flash. It was a new thing, an architectural statement," Miller said recently from his home on Long Island. "And in

days before my time, they used a great deal of ornamental and sculpted stones. But that became much too expensive," he said, noting that much of art deco was about seeking grandeur out of cheaper materials and simpler forms. "It's mostly in the decorations."

George G. Miller received his architecture license in 1923, a year before Ruben was born. "I'll be 81 in two weeks and I'm still going strong," the younger Miller said. As to the exact number of buildings created by his father's firm, he said: "Hard to say. My father was not one for keeping records. I joined the firm after I graduated college in '53."

"The art deco was when you got away from hard-burned brick, which is normally red brick," Miller said. "They used the enameled brick." The multi-colored and sometimes glossy bricks, Miller said, gave the buildings a modern feel that was strongly desired at the time.

"Tours in this area are a real possibility," Kremer said, who hopes that a conservation effort around the art deco housing stock of Northern Manhattan will lead to a new tourist industry as well as greater civic pride and sense of history. He also said that it could lead to an increase in property values and possible tax breaks for landmarked buildings.

"This is definitely a place to feel proud of," Kremer said. "Often the building owners and residents don't know what they have. When it comes to protection, residents are in the best position to be knowledgeable."

Christopher Rawlins, 33, is an architect and vice president of his co-op board at 91 Payson Ave. where the lobby has been restored to its original deco grandeur.

"A couple of years ago I was approached about replacing the front doors," Rawlins said. The original building doors had been replaced with something functional if not attractive, described by Rawlins as, "kind of landlord specials. Kind of aluminum storefront." Rawlins was able to obtain a photograph of the building from 1940 from the Department of Buildings. "There were no cars in the image," he said.

"While the style and aesthetic are beautiful, I didn't necessarily take a purist approach," Rawlins said of his renovation effort, which eventually expanded to the entire lobby of the building. He feels that it is not always in the best interest of the building to restrict oneself to an exact replication of the original. "They didn't always choose the most resilient materials," he said. "Art deco buildings were built during the Depression when the sturdiest and most attractive materials were sometimes outside a building's budget."

Still, stepping into the lobby of 91 Payson is a bit of a time warp. There are no corners, so the entire space feels like the hull of a cruise ship – an effect that is enhanced by the porthole light fixture immediately opposite the doors, complete with etched fish. The floors of pink and black terrazzo have been repolished, and still have the original bronze medallions with the signs of the zodiac.

Kremer said that none of the art deco buildings in Northern Manhattan have been officially landmarked, but that 91 Payson Ave. was a model restoration effort. Landmarking, he said, would mean that the building owners would receive tax benefits for restoration, and would ensure that the buildings were maintained properly. But not everyone agrees that it is a good idea.

"In my opinion it seems to help more than it hurts," said Rawlins of having a building landmarked. "Though there are some people that believe that it creates onerous restrictions."

While landmarking is very common at the southern end of the island, it's comparatively rare up here. But Kremer wants to change all that.

"Just yesterday I observed a parapet being removed from a building," Kremer said with a note of anxiety. The building he was referring to was 116 Seaman Ave. A few days later, workers were seen hauling bricks, roughly the same color as the main color in the two-tone façade, up to the roof. A tenant coming out said that the building had problems with leaks, and a window near the top had soot marks that suggested a fire had taken place.

"There's a little difference" in the way it will look from its original design, said Sukhginder Singh, owner of Ricky & Bros., the company working on the roof. "But it will be the same height as it was before."

"Will you be using the two colors of brick?" Kremer said.

"No," Singh said, and went back to his truck.

"It was a finely ornamented building by Miller & Goldhammer, built in 1937," Kremer said. "But in a single day, one man with a jackhammer can destroy it all."

"It's all up to the individual owners," Ruben Miller said, with apparent respect for the rights of owners to either preserve original designs or take less expensive but perhaps more durable shortcuts. "There are a lot of owners that feel that their buildings are an investment, and they try to maintain their investments."

If you think you may live in an art deco building, email info@isaac david.com or call Audubon Partnership for Economic Development at 212-544-2400 so it can be included in the study. Do you live in a building designed in an art deco style? These are some of the types of architectural details to look for.

