

Last of the Art Deco Cinemas

By Grant Callow



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

Completed in 1947, the Fourth Avenue Theatre is one of the last, if not the last, of the great American Art Deco/Streamline Moderne cinemas built in the United States. Its architectural style and interior décor are archetypal examples of an important period in the development of an American style of architecture, interior design and décor that came to prominence between the two World Wars.

It is said that in the 1920s Art Deco “represented luxury, glamour, exuberance and faith in social and technological progress.”² In the 1930’s, during the Great Depression, Art Deco gave birth to

a sparer and streamlined style called Streamline Moderne that reflected the economy and values of those times. These were American styles of design that in concept, form and function embodied the characteristics of the modern, industrial age of the 20th Century that the United States came to lead—powerful, inventive, efficient, streamlined, and with an understated elegance. The Fourth Avenue Theatre is a leading example of these quintessentially American styles of architecture, interior design and décor.

A man of great industry and vision, Lathrop dedicated himself to helping develop modern cities of permanence and vitality in Alaska, a purpose and goal that led him to erect buildings that were designed by modern architects and were intended for permanence, buildings built with techniques and materials, such as reinforced concrete, that Lathrop believed—and eventually proved to the skeptics—could withstand the sometimes harsh and variable Alaska environment. As described by Alison K. Hoagland: “Commercial architecture began to lose its boomtown character as wooden structures were replaced by Moderne or Art Deco buildings. Concrete, which was mixed locally and fireproof, was particularly suited for these sleek styles. Some of the most flamboyant applications of Art Deco were movie theaters erected by Cap Lathrop, who had a chain across the state.”

The Fourth Avenue Theatre is important to the history and cultural heritage of Alaska because it was Cap Lathrop's building—his last and arguably his greatest building achievement.