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Review of *Hill Country Deco: Modernistic Architecture of Central Texas* by David Bush and Jim Parsons

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In 2008, Jim Parsons and David Bush, staff members of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, published Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast, a photographic sampling intended to draw attention to the region’s surviving examples of buildings erected between the 1920s and the late 1940s in the modernistic styles popularly known as Art Deco and Art Moderne. Hill Country Deco applies this model to Central Texas, covering an area considerably beyond the geographical Hill Country to include San Antonio and Austin as well as towns in the prairie lands to the east. Like its predecessor, Hill Country Deco is intended to raise awareness of modernistic architecture by presenting striking photographs of a wide range of examples, humble and monumental, organized by building type: commercial, theaters, residential, institutional, and commemorative (monuments inspired by the 1937 Texas centennial). The selection of
images includes telling architectural details, interiors, and a sampling of murals created for post offices and other public buildings. The supporting text consists of a cursory introduction, basic captions and section headings, and an appendix with capsule biographies of some of the architects and artists.

Neither a comprehensive survey nor a historical analysis, the book provides a starting point for discussions regarding the future of these buildings and an invitation to scholars to examine their histories. As a class, the modest commercial structures the authors illustrate, such as gas stations, automobile dealerships, and retail stores, are particularly vulnerable to demolition resulting from development pressures or neglect. For historians, they are markers of a cultural shift of businessmen, civic leaders, and, to a lesser extent, homeowners who proudly adopted architectural forms strongly identified with modernity. The pathways by which this desire took root and over which the expertise to fulfill it found its way to cities and small towns across the country have not been fully charted. Equally interesting are questions regarding the degree to which clients and architects conflated modernity with local identity through either adaptation to prevailing practice, such as incorporation of the low, broad canopies that shade the sidewalks in the commercial districts of Texas towns, or iconography, as seen in San Antonio where the grafting of Spanish colonial and pre-Columbian features on buildings such as Thomas Jefferson High School (1932) was intended as an expression not of Mexico City but modern Texas. *Hill Country Deco* provides few answers to these questions but offers clues for stories yet to be told.

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