

# Chicago's Carbide and Carbon Building: A Staple of Art Deco

Located on Chicago's historic Michigan Avenue, the Carbide and Carbon Building is considered a staple of Art Deco architecture, epitomizing the lavish and decadent nature of this style. The building was created by the Burnham Brothers in 1929 and its origins are as lavish and decadent as its design. The Carbide and Carbon building stands at 503 feet tall and consists of 37 floors. It was established as a Chicago landmark May 9th, 1996 and is a prominent part of architecture tours in the city.

Said to have been inspired by a champagne bottle, the Carbide and Carbon building originally housed the regional office of Union Carbide and Carbon Co., the first producer of commercial dry cell batteries. In 2001, the structure was turned into the Hard Rock Hotel until its closure in 2017. Currently, the Carbide and Carbon Building functions as St. Jane Chicago Hotel.

The exterior of the building is coated in a polished layer of black granite, with a dark green, terra cotta tower gold leaf accents. The Burnham Brothers intentionally used the gold leaves to symbolize the prehistoric origin of carbon deposits in the decay of ancient plants.

## Carbide and Carbon: A Building Inspired by Celebrations

The top portion of the tower is coated in brilliant gold leaf, illuminated each evening to enhance its splendor. This design element has long contributed to the rumor that the Burnham Brothers modeled the building off of a dark green champagne bottle, resembling the golden foil of a cork.

The origin of the Carbide and Carbon building's mysterious champagne bottle appearance may be attributed to prohibition, which was at its peak during the building's construction. It has been speculated that the Burnham Brothers intentionally and subliminally referenced champagne bottles as a way to resist the prohibition act of 1920. However, there is no irrefutable evidence to support this claim.

## The Most Notable of The Burnham Brothers

The interior of the ground floor was designed specifically to display the products manufactured by Union Carbide and Carbon Co. Featuring black Belgian Marble and Art Deco bronze work. The exterior of the ground floor differs from the dark green, upper portions of the tower, consisting of black granite, black marble and a bronze trim.

The Carbide and Carbon building is perhaps the most notable the the Burnham Brother's portfolio of work. The Burnham Brothers, or Daniel H. Jr. and Hubert Burnham, were the sons of prominent Chicago architect, Daniel Burnham.

Other impressive structures of the Burnham Brother's designs include the State of Illinois Building at 160 N. LaSalle St. (1924), the Seneca Hotel at 200 E. Chestnut St. (1926), the Bankers Building, aka the Clark-Adams Building (1927), the City-State Building (1927), the Randolph-Wells Building (1928), and the Engineering Building at 205 W. Wacker Dr. (1928).

The design of the Carbide and Carbon building has long been compared to American Radiator Building in New York City, boasting similar stylistic elements and Art Deco aesthetics. However, the American Radiator Building features a combination of Gothic and Modern styles.

## Carbide and Carbon's Lasting Legacy

The iconic Art Deco design of the 1920's and the decedent rumors of the Carbide and Carbon Building's construction preserve a feeling of grandeur, nostalgia and mystery to those lucky enough to witness this staple of Art Deco design. Even today, the shimmering gold leaf of the foiled tower illuminates Chicago's skyline and hints at a time of perseverance, celebration and spectacular design.