



THE ROARING TWENTIES!

It was the decade that saw the beginnings of a new wave in architecture as well as a more optimistic outlook after the horrors of World War I. **ANGELA YOUNG**



A Californian Bungalow in Roseville, Sydney

In this third instalment of our 18th anniversary series on 120 years of property we reach that utterly fabulous decade the 1920s – with its perky quirky music, flappers and their marcel waves, and the very first “talkies” on the big screen.

These inter-war years saw a wave of hope break over the western world, including Down Under, and with the Great Depression some way off (its hideous effects wouldn't be felt until the very end of the decade), spirits were high and progress was on the agenda.

It was the decade that saw the introduction of the 44-hour working week (1922 in Melbourne and 1926 in New South Wales), the creation of the Commonwealth Health department (1921), the construction and then official opening of Parliament House in Canberra (1923-1927), and Greater Brisbane being inaugurated as a single municipal authority under Brisbane City Council (1925). After a whopping 60 years of construction, Sydney's St Mary's Cathedral was finally finished in September 1928.

Material prosperity – only for non-indigenous Australians, mind you – was at its highest level ever. Soldiers returning from the war were even given help with loans to help them buy property.

Chair in property and real estate at Deakin University Richard Reed describes it as a “period of enormous progress”.

“There was a rapid pace change occurring in the urban landscape, where buildings were now constructed for the long-term rather than on a relatively temporary basis,” he says.

“At this time most Australians lived in a rural location, as farming was labour-based and yet to be largely industrialised.

“The capital cities in Australia were developing new manufacturing industries close to the town or city centre, and there were the first signs of urbanisation – the relocation of households to the towns and cities.”

■ ON THE ROAD

Reed says the transport infrastructure was largely based on the railway, though motor vehicles were becoming more common (affordability was an issue there).

“However, the quality of the road network was very poor, therefore the

“Houses in this era didn't include a car garage as mandatory, due to few households owning cars.”

RICHARD REED



The Astor on Macquarie Street is Sydney's oldest apartment block, built in 1923

urban structure of towns and cities were aligned with the location of the railway station and a premium was paid for close proximity to the station.

“Also, houses in this era didn't include a car garage as mandatory, due to few households owning cars.”

Resource limitations thanks to World War I meant that the housing market was somewhat restricted in development, but it was by no means stagnant.

“The shipping industry was a major consideration for capital cities, which are all located close to the ocean for this reason,” Reed says. “The ports were also located close to the city centre and seaside workers sought housing close to where they worked, which then was accompanied by hotels and retail facilities.”

The 1920s and 1930s were also the golden age of flight, meaning Australia was no longer as isolated as it had been previously.

“Arrival of commercial flights within Australia commenced, and therefore the location of airports in towns and cities



Defining art deco

It's an instantly recognisable design that first started to appear in the 1920s and grows more and more popular, it seems, as each decade passes. According to the Art Deco & Modernism Society, the style is characterised by “clean, geometric and elegant lines that replaced the excessive decoration of previous styles”.

At the same time it was coming into fashion, massive changes were taking place in the world of technology that enabled the introduction of superior architecture materials and techniques, facilitating much more availability of goods to the masses.

FEATURE ■ 120 Years of Property: 1920-1930

INVESTOR SNAPSHOT

Cosy and charming

Thirty-three-year-old Robert purchased this beautiful two-bedroom 1920s art deco apartment in December 2011 for \$578,500, settling in February of 2012. A stone's throw from Elwood Village and just a 10-minute walk from the beach as well as the substantial Ormond Road shopping precinct, it's not just the property's character that appealed to Robert – or his tenants.

"The layout is typical of a 1920s art deco... cozy," he says. "[It] has two bedrooms, modern kitchen and bathroom, original timber floors, an open fireplace, bay window and decorative ceilings in the master bedroom and lounge.

"Elwood's beautiful tree-lined streets, proximity to the beach and abundance of cafes and restaurants initially attracted me to the area," he explains. "I've always loved the charm of art deco-style properties and I'd love to be in a position to purchase one as my primary place of residence in the future."

Currently renting a townhouse in Kew East with his girlfriend while his clothing business takes off both here and in the US, Robert's receiving \$430 a week for the apartment.

"Tenants love the location and charm of the property," he says, though he concedes that its lack of some of the luxuries offered in newer developments (such as central heating and open plan living) means the period character of the property probably doesn't attract higher rental yields.

The purchase of such an old property hasn't been without its drawbacks.

"Shifting foundations and cracking are common issues associated with century-old properties, particularly those located in Elwood, which is actually reclaimed swampland," he says. "My property is most certainly not immune to these issues.

"I was aware of a problem affecting the foundation supporting the external wall and the wall that separates the master bedroom and lounge. The timber flooring sinks steeply towards the corner of both rooms and cracks in the walls require regular maintenance.

"The problem has slowly become more

Name: Robert Di Benedetto
Invests: Elwood, Vic
Properties: 1
Strategy: Buy and hold.



significant over the years and I have cracks appearing in most rooms where they were initially isolated to one or two rooms.

"I'm in the process of trying to have the problem rectified and liaising with my body corporate manager. The cost to repair and reinforce the foundations should be covered by the body corporate insurance, meaning I won't be out of pocket."

Foundation problems aside, Robert has no regrets about his investment and would definitely do the same again.

"If my budget permits, I'd certainly attempt to snap up a period home that has undergone recent underpinning," he says.

"I'm living in Australia now and intend to keep the apartment for investment purposes but plan on spending some money renovating the property once works have been completed to rectify the foundations."



Robert's Elwood property



Inside, art deco features are evident

became increasingly important," he adds. It's interesting to note, of course, that many of the smaller airports initially located close to the CBD have now relocated to larger airfields away from populated areas and also that living close to an airport is now seen as a negative influence on residential values.

Reed points out that these shifts in industry prominence – air travel and cars on the rise, railways and shipping on the decline – would serve to have a huge effect on the urban landscape in the ensuing years.

"For example, in many cities (e.g. Sydney, Brisbane) the previous tracks used for horse transport would be gradually converted into roads for motor vehicles. These windy roads weren't designed for today's heavy traffic loads and, commencing in the 1920s, there've been many compulsory resumptions of private housing to allow for the widening of roads."

Home ownership at this time was very much seen as the number one goal for a household, which typically had just the one wage earner, since a married woman still wasn't legally allowed to work.

"The task of achieving homeownership often took the entire working life of the sole income earner to achieve," Reed says. "There was no formal superannuation and, due to much shorter longevity, there was a limited need for downsizing after the children had left home, or for relocating into a retirement village."

■ DWELLING STYLES

Most popular in the period was the Californian bungalow, with its simple, rectangular house plan, wide overhanging eaves, deep shady verandahs and bay windows.

In his books *How to Restore the Old Aussie House* and *Australian House Styles*, Ian Stapleton explains that Aussies identified with the rustic qualities of this type of building, popularised in Los Angeles and brought over to Australia in 1916, just as American culture started to get a grip.

"With its open-air veranda rooms and sleep outs, it represented the domestic solution to a healthy lifestyle," he writes.

Stapleton alludes to some of the new components being used in house building at this time – rubberised, veneered, chromed and cement-based materials. Terracotta roof tiles were

“You'd be hard pressed to find a beautiful deco style property, or a 1920s property, in a bad area.”

CATE BAKOS



It was a period that saw the first blocks of apartments start to appear, with concrete-framed construction and rather austere and symmetrical buildings popping up – the Astor flats in Sydney’s Macquarie Street being a classic example.

It’s in apartment blocks that the art deco style is most prominent in this decade and they’re hugely popular, according to Melbourne buyers’ agent Cate Bakos.

“When you get a beautiful St Kilda or Elwood art deco apartment, they’re really tightly held,” she says.

Apartments from this age rated a mention in the Herron Todd White *Month in Review September 2015* report: “Apartment developments in inner-Sydney began to become established in the 1920s and 1930s with the introduction of the art deco apartment. Often low- to medium-rise, these apartments are still commonly found in areas such as Potts Point, Elizabeth Bay, Bellevue Hill, Double Bay, Darling Point and some inner-west suburbs. This style of apartment remains very popular

apparently becoming common, while inside, cornices and ceiling roses started to completely disappear, as the straighter lines and harder edges of art deco broke through. Indeed, everything that had been a flourish and delicately patterned became a lot plainer, and Stapleton points out that to try and restore a 1920s property with such inclusions as ceiling roses is a serious error.

150 Years of Brisbane River Housing author, and agent, Patrick Dixon explains just how the decade burst onto the timeline of history.

“People embraced hedonism and escapism,” he says. “The horrors of the Great War were still too fresh... This was a time of studied flamboyance, prosperity, art deco interiors and jazz. There was widespread and very visible affluence and hedonism among the wealthy.

“Overseas immigration levels were high,” he adds, “further boosting the demand for building... the birth of consumerism had begun.”

SUBURBS WITH 1920S PROPERTIES

- NSW:** Mosman, Elizabeth Bay, Potts Point
- Vic:** Elwood, St Kilda, Kew East
- ACT:** Forrest, Kingston, Braddon
- Qld:** New Farm, West End, Paddington
- SA:** Henley Beach, Woodville Park, Rosewater
- WA:** Mount Lawley, Yarloop, North Perth
- Tas:** New Town, Dyrnnyrne, Glenorchy

with the Sydney buyer, with a premium frequently being paid to secure these character apartments.”

However, one thing that buyers need to be aware of, Bakos warns, is a particular title system being used at this time.

“The developers or the owners of the block didn’t separately strata the property,” she explains, “they’d just keep them all on one title, and they’d sell shares in a company to the owners (so the ownership structure is known as company share).

“We still have quite a few in and around Melbourne... company share’s a bit of an issue in terms of ownership structure, because banks don’t like it. If you’re going for a deco sort of apartment, the first thing I always do is look at the title, because if it’s company share, then the buyer’s at a disadvantage. I need to make sure they’ve got a sizeable deposit, often up to 40 per cent, because the lenders are pretty tough on company share,” she says.

FUN FACT

Vegemite came into being in the 1920s. Developed in 1923 by an Australian chemist to compete with the British yeast and vegetable extract product Marmite, it had to wait for the advertising campaigns of the 1950s before it became a national icon.

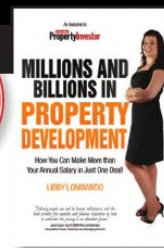


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FEATURE ■ 120 Years of Property: 1920-1930


This renovated 1920s bungalow in Roseville, Sydney, still boasts plenty of its original stylistic touches, including the leaded windows in the living room.



“You don’t technically own a piece of the dirt, you don’t have a specific title – you’re actually a co-owner, with many, many other owners. It’s a less desirable form of ownership.”

It’s possible to formally subdivide a company share property, Bakos says, but aside from the legal implications of having general consensus or majority across the group, it can also be a huge (and costly) reconfiguring exercise.

“Any investor needs to be mindful that if and when they go to sell the property, they’ll face the same issue,” she adds.

“You have a really restricted buyer pool and your capital growth is affected.”

Not that company share is a complete no-no for Bakos.

“You can usually pick it because the price expectation is lower and the agents are obliged to tell you,” she says. “I’d only go for it if I was wanting to live in it forever and a day and the capital growth was of no consequence to me. Then you get a really nice discount on what’s physically a really beautiful property.”

Strata drawbacks aside, Bakos is a big believer in the pull of the 1920s building.

“They’re quite precious diamonds and they’re still relatively scarce,” she says. “People still pay a premium for them, as opposed to a regular apartment – they’ll always outshine regular apartments. They’re scarce and they’re beautiful.”

While tenants will usually pay more for a 1920s place in good condition, Bakos points out the rental yields tend to be lower, because you pay a premium for the property in the first place. “But your quality of tenant should be great,” she adds.

Another significant drawback is their position.

“Typically they’re in the really good locations... you’d be hard pressed to find a beautiful deco style property, or a 1920s property, in a bad area.”

For Bakos, though, one of the best things about a property from this era is how hard they are to value.

“Over the course of 100 years, every house, even if it’s a very similar size or style to the one next door, after 100 years of families living in them and loving them, they’ve had their own sets of improvements, so no two houses are the same,” she says. “And that means a valuer would have a really hard time pegging a figure on a property.”

“You’re a little bit more insulated from downturns because it would be unlikely that a really similar property would have a bad sales result and would underpin yours.”

■ FURTHER FLAWS

One of the downsides to a 1920s house can be its layout.

“A typical 1920s house contained only two bedrooms,” Reed says, adding, “the toilet facilities were typically an



This home built in 1927 was relocated to Home Creek using tractors, a process that still happens today (with more efficient transport). See story, page 90

COURTESY OF JOHN O'LEARY, LIBRARY, STATE LIBRARY OF QUEENSLAND

“The location of airports in towns and cities became increasingly important.”

RICHARD REED

‘outhouse’ at the rear of the backyard [the first inside toilets were being installed by the late 1930s].”

Bakos agrees. “The positives are that they have a really beautiful style and quite often they’re lovely hardwood floors and cornices, beautiful deco light detailing and very, very big rooms, so you get a big lounge room and you get a really big bedroom, but the quirky thing about a deco floor plan, particularly a two-bedder, is your second bedroom’s always really little.

“They’re more often than not a separate kitchen [too], so a lot of popular conversions involve opening the houses up by moving walls... if it’s a double-brick property and you’re moving walls, you might have to have a builder or engineer on the task, because you might be dealing with lintel beams and that kind of thing,” she says.

“The floor plans typically need changing because back in that era, people’s kitchens were down the back of the house and their bathrooms and washrooms were often out off the porch. Over time we get lean-tos popped on the back and not-very-well-thought-out modifications, which don’t stand the test of time.” While such modifications can be “undone”, as it were, some remodelling can turn out to be very costly. Of course, as Bakos points out, “you wouldn’t buy a property like this without the intention of putting a lot of love and a lot of effort into holding it and improving it”.

Other potential problems include heritage overlays, which can lead to “being seriously mucked around by your local council and your neighbours”, as Bakos puts it, and lack of car parking provision, particularly with the apartment blocks.

“Sometimes you find a really good, two-bedroom apartment and you’ve got to park your car on the street,” Bakos says.

Every cloud has a silver lining, however, and the growing popularity of this period’s architecture is undoubtedly a boon for buyers of both houses and apartments.

Just make sure you’re getting everything checked out thoroughly with no scrimping on the building inspection. As Bakos says, “100 years is a long time for a property to be standing and to be straight!” **API**

FUN FACT

In 1926, **General Motors opened up assembly plants** in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. By 1927, new annual car registrations had reached 82,500. That figure wasn’t matched until after World War II.



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