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**SURROUNDINGS / DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES**

# **An Art Deco Landmark Will Shine Once More as Urban Living Space**

By Cynthia Daniels  
Times Staff Writer

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For years before World War II, the Eastern Columbia Building at Broadway and 9th Street stood not just as one of Los Angeles' tallest buildings but also as one of its most distinctive.

Built just after the stock market crash of 1929, the 264-foot-tall building was one of the few allowed to exceed Los Angeles pre-war 150-foot height limit. But it was the Eastern Columbia's Art Deco style — with its shiny turquoise terra cotta, clean lines, streamlined shapes and stylized figures — that really set it apart.

Now, after almost 74 years as a department store, office space and movie backdrop, the Eastern Columbia Building is changing yet again — this time into condominiums.

When Adolph Sieroty, president of Eastern Outfitting Co., commissioned architect Claud Beelman to design the structure in 1929, he wanted space to house his business offices as well as a sales outlet for his company's clothing and other goods.

A 1929 Times article reported that Beelman had traveled to New York, Boston, Detroit and other Eastern cities to search for advanced ideas about how to build a tall but architecturally distinctive building.

Construction on the 13-story Eastern Columbia Building was completed in nine months. (Beelman was also the architect for the Superior Oil Building, which now houses the downtown Standard Hotel.)

In September 1930, the Eastern Columbia opened and was hailed as one of the most distinctive examples of Art Deco style — a style that flourished through the 1920s and '30s. Its facade was trimmed in gleaming gold and dark blue terra cotta and adorned with sunburst patterns, zigzags and chevrons. Even the sidewalks surrounding the building sported red, black and gold terrazzo zigzags and chevrons.

"If you were to name two buildings that are the great Art Deco towers of Los Angeles, it would be the Pellissier Building, which rises above the Wilvern Theatre, and the Eastern Columbia Building," said Ken Bernstein, director of preservation issues for the Los Angeles Conservancy.

The vertical lines of the Art Deco style make the Eastern Columbia Building appear larger than it actually is, Bernstein said. Adding to the structure's height is its four-sided clock tower, which flaunts large neon clocks and the word "Eastern" in neon lights. For years, the tower displayed the time and chimed a song every 15 minutes.

The clocks are now silent, frozen in time, and the neon lights are dark.

Alan Sieroty, a 73-year-old grandson of Adolph Sieroty, said the clock was important to his grandfather because Eastern Outfitting Co. began in the 1890s as Eastern Clock Co.

"I was too young when my grandfather died to ask him questions about the building," Sieroty said. "But I think it's an amazing, amazing building. It's in a part of downtown Los Angeles which just is not looked at very often."

When Eastern Outfitting closed in 1957, the Sieroty family transformed the building into office space, housing tenants that included clothing designers, as well as the Los Angeles district attorney's appellate division. The 12th floor, now empty, still has a fashion runway stretching down its center.

During the 1980s, the building housed 28 art organizations, including the Los Angeles Conservancy. But the family sold the Eastern Columbia in 1985 to investors who planned to link it with the May Co. building to form a commercial interior furnishings wholesale market. That plan never materialized.

Now the Eastern Columbia stands as a skeleton of what it once was. In its lobby are the remnants of a bustling food court with grates pulled over the counters. It is only 8% occupied, serving 13 tenants.

Production companies still use the building's roof to film and the parking lot to hold their production trailers, said Anwar Khan, the structure's caretaker.

In August, the Kor Group, a real estate development and management firm in escrow to buy the Eastern Columbia, plans to start a \$50-million project that will restore the facade and transform the building's 280,000 square feet into 150 condominiums, said Ed Rosenthal, vice president of the urban redevelopment team at CB Richard Ellis.

"It's one of those buildings where the outside is so well known, it creates an identity by itself," he said. "It's kind of like a beautiful woman that really needed a makeover and a little love and care."

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