

ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

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Curves Ahead

American Streamlined Design:
The World of Tomorrow
Bard Graduate Center
18 West 86th Street
Closed June 11

The 1933 Chicago World's Fair launched a craze for streamlining in the United States. After visiting the fair, my father, a veterinarian, remodeled his office and put curved corner pieces between the floors and wall. He bought a chrome chair with a red plastic seat for his clients. He also replaced a window with a wall of glass block. I remember being thrilled as a child to ride the Eagle, a streamlined train on the Missouri Pacific line, to Kansas City, and

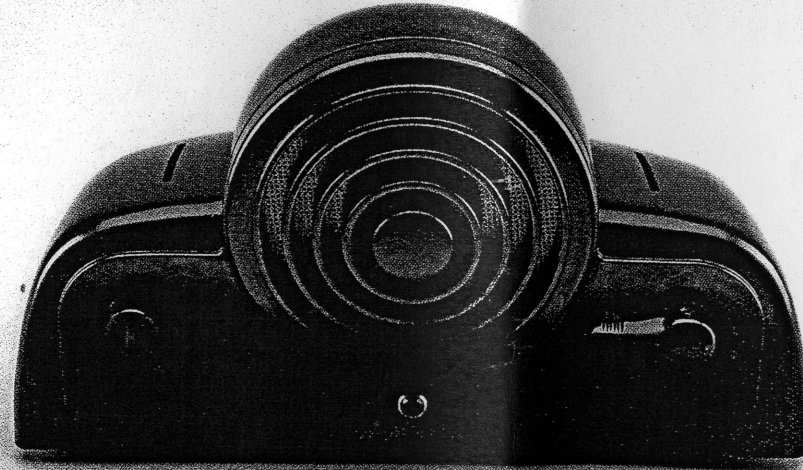
the Admiral, a streamlined boat, on the Mississippi River.

Streamlining was a new horizontal architectural order that seemed poised to replace the classical ones, and represented optimism in the face of the economic collapse of the Great Depression. It originated as a practical idea in industrial design but quickly acquired a powerful symbolic presence. Speed became a metaphor for the kind of improvement so desperately needed by millions of Americans at the time.

But streamlining ran up against opposition from intellectual modernists. It was popular culture, like the movies, and thus considered unworthy of serious consideration. In his 1948 study of the risks of mechanization, *Mechanization Takes Command*, historian Sigfried Gideon dismissed the style, writing "One need only leaf through the patents to observe how year by year the casings, from automobile to vacuum cleaner, become increasingly bloated." This dismissive attitude persists, even at the Museum of Modern Art where visitors will not find any streamlined objects on view in the design galleries.

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Amplical Intercom designed by Joseph Palma, Jr., in 1947



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Top: The Sterling Streamline Iron by an unknown designer, circa 1930-40. Bottom: Harold L. Van Doren and John Gordon Rideout's 1933 Skippy-Racer Scooter.

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Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture is more enlightened, however. A marvelous recent exhibition, *American Streamlined Design: The World of Tomorrow*, made a strong case for the historical and cultural significance of the movement, however briefly it lasted. Some 180 objects were organized in six categories, showing how streamlining entered different areas of domestic, professional, and public life, and also explored the forms it takes today. The work of famous designers like Raymond Loewy and Norman Bel Geddes is well represented, but the show also includes more humble examples. The breadth of the objects on display convincingly demonstrates how streamlining worked its way into every part of American life.

The catalogue is a trove of illustrations, but some of the essays that accompany it, written by exhibition curator David A. Hanks, who leads the school's Stewart Program for Modern Design, and Anne Hoy, an associate professor of art history at New York University, downplay the sharp split between the way streamlining was received by popular culture and the intelligentsia. This is an important oversight: In Alfred Barr's 1932 preface to the MoMA's *International Style* catalogue by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, he notes, "It is not surprising that the modern critic should feel more sympathy with the sound academic achievements of conservative contemporaries than with these modernistic impresarios." Barr is referring to the architects of the Chrysler and Empire State buildings, but this snobbish attitude doesn't change during the rest of the 1930s and '40s. Now we know better. We duly acknowledge the contributions and influence of popular culture—which is not to deny there may also have been a lot of trash. This exhibition, however, is filled with treasures.

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