

Kansas City Power & Light Building

1330 Baltimore Avenue
completed 1930-1931

by Janice Lee

In 1931 the new Kansas City Power & Light Co. building dominated the landscape as Missouri's tallest building. It rose 31 stories high, the crowning 97-foot-high pillar of changing colored lights creating a jewel-like glow visible for miles around. Decades later it remains notable both for its spectacular lighting and as a magnificent example of Art Deco architecture.

The impetus behind the building was Joseph Franklin Porter, born in 1863. He had worked with Thomas Edison in 1882, putting electric lights to their first practical use in a Wisconsin electrical plant. He joined the Kansas City Power & Light Co. as president in 1917, and in 1930 hired local architects Hoit, Price & Barnes to design the first building to house all of the company offices.

The Kansas City Power & Light Co. would occupy most of the first 19 floors, with the balance of the remaining space leased by other tenants. Because the company also sold electrical appliances, a major feature of the building would be showrooms for home, commercial, and industrial power and lighting, with model, or "ideal," small shops, apartments, and kitchens.

The structure was to be clad in Indiana limestone and designed according to the latest trends in skeleton-framed high-rise buildings. It was also a masterpiece of Art Deco design. The Art Deco style, popular in the 1920s through 1940, was characterized by an overall linear and vertical appearance, stepped facades, and vertical projections above the roof line. Exemplifying this ideal, the building was square at the ground floor and gradually tapered in a series of setbacks, or stepbacks that extended over half the total building height to create a telescoping, vertical perspective. The tapering design was not just for aesthetics: a 1923 city zoning ordinance, modeled on that of New York City, required that tall buildings use stepbacks to allow sunlight to penetrate to the streets below.

The building also featured typical Art Deco ornamental motifs, which were largely geometric and included zigzag, V, and diamond



shapes. Sunrises and lightning bolts were especially popular. In the Power & Light Building, the Art Deco ornamentation was evidenced in the sharp-planed lines and carved ornaments at key locations on the exterior. The most dramatic sunburst designs were placed above the central entrance and on the east façade. Between the street and second-story windows, five-section terra cotta panels depicted the powers of light and energy through variations of a sunburst design, a motif also repeated on the cast-iron canopies and seven other panels. The interior incorporated the sunburst motif in the elevator doors and office doors, radiator grills, tile floors, and water fountain. The jagged-edged design was most resplendently evident in the six-story-high crowning shaft with its prism-cut glass panels.

The glowing multi-color lighting was, in fact, the most impressive and eye-catching feature of the building. At night, banks of floodlights concealed in five recessed balconies and parapets bathed the building in white light while alternating amber, green, and red lights shimmered through the prismatic glass to dramatic effect. Thanks in good part to the exterior lighting, the building consumed as much electrical current as a community of 6,000.

The architects ensured that the interior matched the grandeur of the exterior. The first three floors were designated for Power & Light Co. sales and commercial use. The main entrance on Baltimore led into the first-floor merchandise display rooms, showcasing the lights and appliances that the company sold in its earlier years. Customers could admire the electrical displays in surroundings of a two-toned Italian Travertine marble floor, cream and blue-beige marble columns, and marble wainscoted walls. From the first floor, a blue-beige marble stairway with wrought-aluminum balustrades and walnut handrails led to the second-floor sales display rooms.

The other first floor entrance, on 14th St., led to company offices. The office entrance lobby and first floor elevator lobbies were as ornate as the display lobby, featuring marble walls and ceilings, floors of bordered and patterned terrazzo, and ornamented ceilings. The doors and elevator doors at this level consisted of white metal etched in patterns suggesting power and light. A bank of eight automatic-control passenger elevators whisked passenger at speeds varying from 300 to 900 feet a minute.

The uses of the fourth through seventh floors indicate the Power & Light Co.'s paternal concern for the entertainment, education, and physical health of its employees. The fourth and fifth floors consisted of an auditorium seating 1,000, with equipment for

movies and sound reproduction. Plush as well as functional, the Thomas A. Edison Auditorium featured pink Tennessee marble wainscoting, carpeted aisles, stone-textured painted walls, and an ornamental plaster ceiling containing sunken, decorative glass panels for indirect lighting. On the sixth floor a gymnasium with spectator seats doubled as a ballroom. Here employees could engage in basketball, volleyball, wrestling, boxing, and indoor baseball as well as attend company dances, all with the secondary goal of getting better acquainted.

A seventh-floor Medical Department staffed by two doctors included a spacious waiting room and two modern treatment rooms with surgical equipment and laboratory facilities. The doctors mostly treated minor work-related injuries and administered physical exams to prospective employees. The Medical Department also gave periodic programs on accident prevention to employees and taught what is now called CPR. (During the next several decades the auditorium and foyer were remodeled into the accounting department and the gymnasium converted into a lunchroom.)

The remaining floors from the 1st to 19th stories contained Power & Light offices, the most notable of which were the 18th-floor president's office and director's room, resplendent with walnut paneled walls, decorative plaster ceilings, marble mantels, walnut furniture, deep carpet, and plush draperies. All of the offices were equipped with pneumatic sending and receiving tubes. Compressed air shot money, mail, magazines, and messages to a central station, where the tube dispatcher routed the contents to the proper tubes. Most of the rest of the upper stories housed tenants, except for the 32nd observation floor, with connecting viewing balconies on four sides.

The building plans had originally included a library and employee and management cafeterias, but these were omitted from the final plan. The kitchens/cafeterias may have been eliminated because the company feared alienating downtown restaurants, to which the company hoped to sell kitchen appliances.

After opening in 1931 the Power & Light building excited such local interest that Boy Scouts led 25-cent tours to the top of the 479-foot building, as well as the equipment rooms and the auditorium. By the mid-1930s about 800 people a month took in the wonders of the Power & Light building.

Although long ago losing its claim to the tallest building in Missouri, the Power & Light building still delights the eye with its Art Deco

styling and play of multicolored light. It retains its original name even though the Kansas City Power & Light Co. moved to 12th and Walnut in 1992. In 1999 the building's future is uncertain, its role within the proposed Power & Light District retail and entertainment complex still being debated.

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