Walls, Ceilings and the Roaring Twenties

By Kathy B. Sedgwick

This second article in our historic series describes how world events in the 1920s affected the wall and ceiling industry.

During the 1920s, evolving technology had a strong impact on the construction industry. The continuous hot strip steel rolling method was invented in 1923, and improved manufacturing processes helped advance the use of low alloy high strength steel in construction. As new structural framing methods reduced wall bulk, the use of plate glass increased.

World events and popular attitudes also had an influence on construction. The discovery of King Tutankhamen’s Tomb in 1923 created an explosion of interest in Egyptology.

The Art Deco style imitated architectural elements of Egyptian pyramids and the objects found in them. As Art Deco gained popularity, the use of related building materials increased—neon, bronze and terra cotta, formica, glass and marble.

These influences are especially evident in the landmark buildings constructed at the time. For example, the Richfield Oil Building, completed in 1928, had a black terra cotta face with polished glass spandrel panels. The pinnacle of the Chrysler Building—designed by William Von Allen—is the epitome of the Art Deco’s “opulent modernism.”

As cities in North America grew,
planners wanted to avoid having the main streets deeply shadowed by tall buildings, as was the case in many European cities. To allow more direct light between tall structures, building heights were restricted. Thus, the “stepped-back” look of the archetypal New York skyscrapers was born.

**Dramatic Social and Economic Changes**

The 1920s were a time of dramatic social and economic change.

With the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920, women gained the right to vote. The first US woman senator, Rebecca Fulton, was elected in 1922. Native American Indians were made citizens in 1924. Wyoming elected Nelly Ross the first woman governor in 1925.

Several popular fixtures of American culture became prominent during this period. In 1921, Royce Hailey’s Pig Stand—the first drive-in restaurant—opened in Dallas, the first suburban shopping mall was opened near St. Louis in 1922, and the first talking picture—“The Jazz Singer” starring Al Jolson—opened in 1927.

It was a time of great scientific advancement. Medical advances included the first use of insulin to treat diabetes in 1922 and the discovery of penicillin in 1928. Goddard’s first liquid fuel rocket was launched in 1926. Charles Lindbergh flew the “Spirit of St Louis” from New York to Paris in 33.5 hrs nonstop in 1927. And, in 1928, Amelia Earheart was the first woman pilot to fly across the Atlantic.

The US stock market went from the 1922 boom to the big crash in late 1929.

The years of the Great Depression that followed would have an enormous effect on the wall and ceiling industry and its association, the CPIA. Next month’s installment will describe how CPIA functioned during the Depression Years.