

# Perspective Dr Kia Pajouhesh

Managing Director, Smile Solutions



When *Edward Steichen and Art Deco Fashion* opens in November, Dr Kia Pajouhesh will take an especially keen interest in the show. Dr Pajouhesh is the Managing Director of dental practice, Smile Solutions, which occupies several floors of Melbourne's heritage-listed Manchester Unity Building and is the Principal Partner of the exhibition. He has spent the last decade carefully restoring and renovating interiors of the 1932 building. A passionate private collector of furniture and objects from the period, Dr Pajouhesh was asked by *Gallery* why he finds the Art Deco style so inspiring.

## How did you first become interested in Art Deco?

Soon after I graduated from university I began looking for my first property, and the architectural styles I was naturally drawn to were all examples of form meeting function. I slowly realised I was singling out the interwar period in architectural history, and from then on was focused on looking for Art Deco architecture, furniture and objects.

## Why do you think the Art Deco style is so admired?

Although it occupied, relatively speaking, a very short period in architectural and design history – covering just two decades principally

between the two great wars – it has received a great deal of attention and is very much loved. I think that is because it was a very progressive period in design. With my scientific and mathematical background, the precise lines, the clean and unadulterated forms, the use of geometry and symbolism and the functionality of the design all appeal, whether in building design or interior furnishings. I'm also drawn to the glamorous yet crisp elements in the fashions of the time.

## Do you have any favourite buildings in the Art Deco style?

Apart from the Manchester Unity Building here in Melbourne, my favourite Deco building would have to be the Tribune Tower in Chicago. In 1922 the *Chicago Tribune* hosted an international design competition for its new headquarters, to create 'the most beautiful and distinctive office building in the world'. The architect of the Manchester Unity Building, Australian Marcus Barlow, took inspiration from the Tribune Tower. His fundamental incorporation of diminishing buttresses that, from ground level, fly into the sky and vanish into oblivion is a similar theme to the one you can see in the Chicago building. However, what I particularly like about the Manchester Unity Building is that, due to the council height restrictions at the time, the structure is almost palpable to the viewer at street level. By contrast, the Tribune Tower is quite tall and distant. Although the Chicago building is grand and glorious, it doesn't feel as connected to the street as our own Manchester Unity Building.

## How did the Manchester Unity Building become the headquarters of Smile Solutions?

As I tell this story I want to make sure, with my scientific background, that I don't come across as a bit of a crackpot. But the truth is, the idea of basing my dental practice in a beautiful heritage-listed building came to me like an epiphany. After an exhaustive three-year search of many Collins Street buildings, one night I had a very clear vision that my practice would need to be relocated to a church. So the next day, as I was already based on Collins Street, I started to walk around the block to look at a number of churches – including Scots Church and St Paul's Cathedral – to see if there was any available space within their adjacent buildings. I couldn't see any possibilities, so I walked along Swanston Street in a despondent mood, feeling a little silly. As I crossed the road towards the Town Hall I looked up to the first floor of the Manchester Unity Building and saw the estate agent's signs in the windows. I remember whispering under my breath, 'There's my church'. The rest is history.

## What state was the building in when your practice moved in?

From the 1960s through to the 1990s, retail businesses had moved into and out of the mezzanine floor and had treated it with little respect. Part of the renovation of this floor required us to replace ceiling mouldings and reinstate some of the marble and bronze shopfronts. Smile Solutions now occupies the mezzanine floor, much of the tenth floor, the eleventh floor,

the twelfth floor and the tower. The acquisition happened progressively, as individual suites came up for sale over eleven years, and so the labour-of-love renovation of all these spaces was also staged. The greatest restoration challenge lay in the boardroom and management offices on the eleventh floor, which had been converted into residential apartments in the mid 1990s.

## Did you need to seek expert advice for the renovation?

Throughout the renovations I've been at pains to balance two architectural considerations: the original vision and a contemporary approach. Robert Mills Architects has brought a contemporary glamour and grace to the renovation and created the workspaces and design elements we need for a modern business. Andronas Conservation Architects has assisted throughout with insight and respect for the original architecture. The vision was to restore the originality of the spaces while at the same time equipping them to cater for the demands of a modern dental clinic – the largest in Australia.

## Is it possible for the general public to see the interiors of the building?

Smile Solutions owns most of the significant heritage-listed spaces in the building, so our patients and staff relish the interiors on a regular basis. We also open our floors for Open House Melbourne two days a year, every year. It's quite competitive – last year we had over 6000 written applications for the ballot but we could only cater for 300 visitors. One of my pleasures in life is to show people through the building. We recently had a Mother's Day competition via our Facebook page and a dozen people came for morning tea in the boardroom, drinking tea from beautiful Deco teacups. Our partnership with the National Gallery of Victoria means we will be offering NGV Members a special opportunity to view the interior of the building, too.

## You have a significant collection of Art Deco furniture and objects. What are some of your favourite Art Deco pieces?

I spend a lot of time ensuring my Manchester Unity collection is true to the period in which the building was designed, even down to looking at photographs, and acquiring objects, from the specific year in which the building was opened. The collection includes original bronze spelter statues by artists including Demetre Chiparus; also long-case clocks, period radios and an extensive range of bone china from the Limoges region in France. My favourite period china, however, comes from the UK manufacturer Shelley, and in particular the *Vogue* range, which was produced for a short period in the early 1930s. The collection also includes crystal pieces in amethyst, which was very popular during the Art Deco period and is the inspiration for the Smile Solutions corporate colour.

I also collect beautiful furnishings. My preference is for the distinctive Parisian Art Deco pieces as opposed to the often more popular New

York style. This is because of my love of rosewood veneers, which were used extensively in France at this time. The French furniture has exquisite finesse and detail, more often utilising bronze, rather than chrome, in combination with refined veneers.

## Did your love of the arts come from your family?

I wish I had a much more poetic answer for you. Originally with a Persian background, my family moved to England when I was eight and then we relocated to Australia five years later. My father has a PhD in engineering and my mother is a medical radiographer. I come from a scientific background, which is probably why the Art Deco style suits me so well. I like to say that prior to the time of Art Deco designers were form-obsessed, and after it they focused principally on function. But in that short period in between, form and function met in blissful unison.

## The era of Art Deco was a fascinating period. Are you also interested in the history of the time?

The Art Deco period tells a story about the time in which it was created internationally. It coincided with the Great Depression and the lead-up to the Second World War. Historically, tough economic times often come after a period of society's preoccupation with greed. We see synergies between the early 1920s and the decade or so before the recent Global Financial Crisis in which everyone seemed to be doing well and freely spending. But through the most difficult times, the bravest, the most inspired and the biggest visionaries can truly blossom. It was during the Great Depression that the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Odd Fellows decided to purchase the Swanston Street site and to build a grand building on it. At the time the materials they used and the expense they went to were quite onerous, but they wanted to do this as a sign to the public that the company was strong and worth investing in – and it paid off for them. Today, in a similar vein, Smile Solutions has continued to expand throughout challenging times, enabling the restoration of so much of the building.

## With your passion for Art Deco, supporting the *Edward Steichen and Art Deco Fashion* exhibition must be a natural fit.

The opportunity to support the NGV in an exhibition so closely related to our building is an ideal collaboration. The Manchester Unity Building is a glorious example of a neo-Gothic building built in the midst of the Great Depression and backed by a commercially strong organisation with a good reputation and a strong business model. I hope Smile Solutions is carrying on that tradition. But the exhibition also ties in well with the nature of our profession. So much of dentistry these days is cosmetic dentistry – it is more and more about aesthetics and fashion – so supporting *Edward Steichen and Art Deco Fashion* seems to me to be a perfect match with both the Manchester Unity Building and its main occupant, Smile Solutions.