

The Ruston High School (1939) is a large, sprawling beige brick and limestone building in the Art Deco style. The building appears from the front to be two stories; however, the ground slopes to the rear to expose a basement story. The high school's park-like setting in a hilly section of town is marred by front parking areas. Because of the undulating terrain, there are impressive views of the building from nearby neighborhoods. Despite various additions, the Ruston High School retains its Register eligibility as a major example of the Art Deco style within Louisiana.

As originally built, the high school had a very unusual shape. Please refer to enclosed sketch map. It was essentially an L-shaped building with an auditorium wing protruding from the front corner and a gym wing extending from the rear corner. Its footprint was basically an elongated W. Surprisingly, the grand five-part articulation one sees today is part of a 1968 building program wherein the original auditorium wing was complemented by a library wing and recessed behind it, a new gym. The original brick was duplicated, and the Art Deco style was used.

The building's centerpiece is a dramatic, boldly vertical, faceted tower rising a story above the main roofline. The limestone tower is framed by brick piers jutting above the main roofline to produce a setback effect. Superimposed pilaster strips framing the central doorway extend the full height of the tower. Located between them, at the third floor level, are vertical strips accented with prominent chevrons. The chevrons and the superimposed pilaster strips framing them extend above the parapet level. This treatment is present on all elevations. Around the top of the tower is a slightly recessed fluted parapet above a band of stylized chevron swags. Chevron swags also accent the second floor windows. Bas relief figure sculpture panels are located between the windows and doors. Depicted are young men and women in various school related activities.

Pilaster strips extending above the parapet separate and define the classroom windows on either side of the entrance tower. (They are also on the rear elevation.) Their repetitive pattern adds greatly to the visual energy of the building. Thrusting into the air to the right of the tower is what looks like a thin chimney, but is actually a decorative element. It is ornamented with a single chevron strip on each elevation.

The original front auditorium wing is also intensively articulated. A system of piers, superimposed pilaster strips and chevron strips like those on the tower define the three part entrance. Stylized chevron swags are also used. The windows on the side elevation facing the tower are accented with vertical reeded brick panels above and a limestone panel with geometric shapes below. The original gymnasium wing, located at the rear corner, is reached via a monumental flight of stairs. Its lobby, which is articulated as a separate mass, has a three part entrance similar to that of the auditorium wing. The gym's windows are defined by superimposed pilaster strips, also extending above the roofline.

The Ruston High School has several noteworthy interior spaces. The lobby has numerous corbelled arches and quite striking Art Deco chandeliers. The building also retains its original Art Deco light fixtures in the auditorium, auditorium lobby, and gym lobby. Floors are of terrazzo, with the main lobby, auditorium lobby, and gym lobby featuring an elaborate geometric pattern. The auditorium proscenium is formed of superimposed geometric shapes. The only non-Art Deco major space is the original library, which is paneled in wood and has a pointed arch fireplace.

As mentioned previously, the Ruston High School received a major frontal addition in 1968. In effect, a complementary wing was provided for the original auditorium wing. The wing is so convincingly done that even a trained observer would think it original upon first sight. The brick is identical in color, and the entrance is articulated in a manner almost identical to the rest of the building, including the familiar piers, superimposed pilaster strips and chevron strips rising above the roofline. There are even bas relief figure sculpture panels like those found on the tower. A noticeable difference that causes the observer to be suspicious is the lack of ornamentation on the

side of the wing facing inward. While the flanking original auditorium wing is ornamented with vertical reeded brick panels and geometric shapes, the corresponding part of the 1968 wing is plain.

Set slightly back from the forward projecting section of the 1968 wing is a gym with its entrance located on the side. Its entrance pavilion also has Art Deco decorative elements similar to those found elsewhere on the building, although it is much blander.

The building has received two other additions. In the 1950s a large two story addition was made at the southwestern rear corner. The brick is lighter, and the wing is obviously modern. In 1988, a large two story wing was added to the rear of the building abutting the original gym wing. This wing connects to the rear of a two story brick home economics house built at the same time as the high school. Because the home economics house was originally free-standing and connected later, it is being counted as a separate entity, per the instructions in Bulletin 16. The home economics house is not Art Deco, but instead partakes vaguely of the French Revival style. It is being counted as a contributing element because it is contemporaneous with the high school and obviously historically related to it.

Interior changes include celotex ceilings in the classrooms and dropped celotex ceilings in the hallways.

Assessment of Integrity:

Despite the various additions the Ruston High School has received, it remains an outstanding example of the Art Deco style within Louisiana. The 1968 addition does not pose a problem because it complements the original design. Fortunately, the intrusive additions have not seriously impacted the main elevation. The 1950s wing is set well back from the auditorium and is mainly noticeable from the rear, and the 1988 wing is completely to the rear.

Significant dates	1939
Architect/Builder	Architect: J. W. Smith & Associates, Monroe Contractor: Caldwell Brothers & Hart

Criterion C

The Ruston High School is of state significance in the area of architecture as one of the most convincingly and intensively styled Art Deco buildings in Louisiana.

Louisiana for the most part was architecturally conservative in the late 1920s and '30s. With some notable exceptions such as Huey Long's State Capitol, the state is not considered a mecca for Art Deco enthusiasts. In compiling a list of major examples for a nationwide Art Deco inventory, the staff of the State Historic Preservation Office found that there were about 40 in Louisiana. A major example is in contrast to innumerable buildings across the state that could be best described as "hesitantly Art Deco" -- i.e., an Art Deco touch here and there (mainly ornamentation).

With but few exceptions, Louisiana's major examples are public buildings whose erection was made possible by federal relief funds. For example, eleven of Louisiana's sixty-four parish courthouses were constructed at this time in the Art Deco style. Other examples include schools, hospitals, municipal auditoriums, etc. There are very few major commercial examples.

Of Louisiana's roughly 40 major Art Deco buildings, the Ruston High School is ranked among the very best by the State Historic Preservation Office. In our opinion, its architectural quality

is equaled or surpassed by only six other buildings (the Port Allen High School, the Francis Hotel in Monroe, Neville High School in Monroe, the Shreveport Municipal Auditorium, the National American Bank Building in New Orleans, and the Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge). These buildings are the state's most convincingly and intensively styled Art Deco buildings, largely because the two hallmarks of the style are present dramatic massing and extensive, stylized (usually geometric) ornamentation.

The Ruston High School is quite a textbook example of the style. The architect emphasized verticality throughout his design, culminating in a bold central tower. To those who note that Art Deco was first and foremost a style of decoration, the Ruston High School supplies an abundance of stylized geometric shapes on both the exterior and interior. Its period light fixtures are among some of the most interesting in the state. The Ruston High School is, quite simply, among the most Art Deco of Louisiana's Art Deco buildings.

Major Bibliographical References

Plaque bearing date of construction, architect, etc., located in lobby.

Photo of school before any additions were made.

Division of Historic Preservation staff knowledge of Louisiana's Art Deco architecture.