



ART DECO in HAWKE'S BAY

Robert McGregor

In December last the Hawke's Bay Art Gallery and Museum opened the first stage of a major redevelopment of its museum section. Stage one consists mainly of a new display area devoted to Hawke's Bay history since European settlement began. The Museum has a large collection but limited display space and a small temporary exhibition gallery has been created for displays of a few months' duration to enable a greater range of artefacts to be seen than can be shown in permanent or semi-permanent exhibits.

The first exhibition in the new gallery is "Art Deco in Hawke's Bay", designed to show the unique architecture of the 1930s which can be seen in the cities of Napier and Hastings, with examples of decorative arts of the period. It will continue until September 1984.

The Art Deco style began to evolve early in this century and like its predecessor, Art Nouveau, was a total style, applied to paintings, furniture, jewellery, buildings and all the applied arts. But unlike Art Nouveau, which was based on organic themes and was a reaction to the threat of the machine, Art Deco was the embodiment of a new belief in the machine as the means to achieve a better standard of living. At the time when it began to be seen, freedom was indeed in



Top of page: Balcony of the Central Hotel, Napier (E. A. Williams, 1931). **Right:** Entrance to the Medical and Dental Chambers, Hastings (Davies & Garnett, 1935). (Photos: Craig Martin)

the air. World War I had begun to break down the barriers of class and poverty and women had become used to working. Their liberation from the home was accompanied by a revolution in dress. This freedom was fuelled by other factors. The motor car provided mobility and speed. The cinema gave people in isolated backwaters a glimpse of life as it was lived in the wide world. Mass production and new inventions made it clear that the twentieth century was a new era, unlike any before. And in many countries, particularly the United States, the 1920s were years of prosperity. It all added up to a frenzied decade in which vulgarity, exhibitionism and effrontery became respectable.

The Art Deco style matched this spirit. Its lines were angular and frenetic and the motifs which were used repeatedly reflected the new freedom — sunbursts, leaping animals and women, lightning flashes and symbols of power, speed and flight. Perhaps the most characteristic shape was the zigurat or stepped pyramid, adapted into many variations but used particularly in buildings, for it suited perfectly the outline required by the zoning laws introduced in America in 1916. These required buildings to be stepped back as their height increased to allow light into the streets.

The reign of the style can be divided into two distinct phases, the 1920s and the 1930s, separated by the Wall Street Crash, though with a gradual transition. Each phase reflects the spirit of its decade. During the 1920s, decoration was ornate (friezes, monumental entrances, complex relief panels), materials were exotic (rare woods, metals and leathers, ivory, enamel and sharkskin) and colours rich (red, purple, amber, gold, orange and brown). In the later phase, decoration was sparse and simple (circles and straight lines), materials were more prosaic (steel, chrome, glass, mirror and painted wood) and the colours cool (black, white, cream, green and silver). This phase is sometimes considered to be a different style altogether, 'Streamline Moderne'.

The 1930s period showed the influence of the Bauhaus School of Design, founded in Germany in 1919. Its concern with the provision of an adequate standard of living was in line with the politics of the 1930s and its simplicity suited the shortage of money. Its disciples preached that all decoration was abhorrent, and that everything created by man except pure art should be rationally functional. It was hard for the public to take and the popular response was to decorate the plain surfaces, in a simpler way than before, but still with Art Deco motifs. Rounded edges and corners and cylindrical forms were also used.

In 1929, the building boom of the 1920s was brought to a sudden end by the Wall Street Crash. Buildings already underway, including that symbol of the 20th Century, the Empire State Building in New York, were completed, but very few were begun. At that time, Art Deco was in full flower as the favoured style in public buildings in the world's major cities. But the slump prevented the style from spreading to smaller cities.



Above: Hastings Street, Napier, in 1933. The view today is unchanged. (Photo: Hawke's Bay Museum) **Below:** The Dominion Restaurant, Hastings, designed in 1935 by Edmund Anscombe & Associates. (Photo: James White)



On 3 February 1931 an earthquake of magnitude Richter 7.9 struck Hawke's Bay. Hastings suffered severe damage, with many masonry and brick buildings destroyed. In Napier, which had fewer wooden buildings in its centre, the destruction was greater. In addition, almost complete disruption of the water supply prevented the fighting of the fires which broke out. Twenty-four hours after the earthquake struck, the centre of Napier had been wiped out. Most of the few buildings which still stood were gutted by fire. 258 people had lost their lives and many more were injured. Property damage, in 1931 values, amounted to \$7.5 million.

To those who were not in Hawke's Bay at the time, no photograph or story can convey the reality of that disaster. It seems impossible, standing in the streets of Napier or Hastings today, that here were scenes of fire, death and destruction.

The Hawke's Bay Earthquake Bill provided funds for the reconstruction of damaged buildings and services and for three years Napier and Hastings resounded to the noise of builders at work. New towns were built at a time when the World was not building.

The architects practising in Napier at the

time — C. T. Natusch and Sons, Finch and Westerholme, J. A. Louis Hay and E. A. Williams — co-operated as the Napier Combined Architects. In Hastings, Davies, Garnett & Phillips were practising. The workload was enormous, for many buildings required inspection and reports before demolition or strengthening was carried out. In some offices, staff worked in shifts to complete working drawings for builders. Some buildings, such as bank premises, were designed by architects in other centres.

Although buildings in the area which had been erected just prior to the earthquake showed no Art Deco influence, a majority of the new ones did. Many of the new buildings were simple, low-cost premises for businesses which had suffered financially in the earthquake, but they all exhibit some form of decoration, at the very least a plaster frieze or emblem. The best of them are irreplaceable examples of the style which could not be duplicated today. In Napier, the Daily Telegraph, the A.M.P., Masson House, Rothmans and the Central Hotel are all fine examples and their neighbours, though less distinguished, provide a good foil for them. Later in the decade, the Ministry of Works, the Municipal Theatre and the T. & G. Building arose and in

Hastings the Medical and Dental Chambers and the Hawke's Bay Electric Power Board Building. These have a different quality, giving a revealing contrast with the earlier structures.

The citizens of Napier, the bit between their teeth, seemed to find it hard to stop building and in the late thirties embellished the Marine Parade with architectural features, of which the Sound Shell, the Tom Parker Fountain and a plaza which was originally a skating rink are all in the Art Deco style and interesting examples because of their particular functions.

For some buildings, the architects used a Spanish style, popularised in California and Florida. The Criterion and Provincial Hotels in Napier are among these. In Hastings, a complete block of Spanish-style buildings exists, terminated at each corner by particularly strong statements, the C.M.L. Building and Westermans.

There is variety in the buildings. Two in Napier — the best is the Bank of New Zealand — use Maori designs incorporated into the Art Deco setting. The buildings of Louis Hay reflect the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright which was always a feature of his work. His National Tobacco Co. Building, now Rothmans, even includes some Art Nouveau decoration. And there are a few examples of stripped classicism, most of them in the buildings which survived the quake, almost all of which were built in the five years preceding it.

But the over-all impression is Art Deco

and the result is two collections of buildings which have no match in any other New Zealand cities or, almost certainly, anywhere in the world.

After twenty-five years, during which Napier and Hastings seemed to be as modern as tomorrow, they began to appear somewhat dated. In other cities, new buildings arose in the late fifties and the sixties, higher and more severe than before, but this was not generally the case in Hawke's Bay. The reconstruction loans were not paid off until after 1961 and until then some building owners could not afford to spend money on them, although interiors had in most cases been refurbished. Furthermore, the buildings, of heavily reinforced concrete, were not easy to alter and there were few buildings really old enough to need replacement. With very few exceptions no demolition took place until the mid-seventies.

But now, as the pressure to replace with high-rise increases, so does the awareness of the importance of these townscapes. In 1982, the Ministry of Works and Development published *The Art Deco Architecture of Napier* by Heather Ives (reviewed in *Historic Places*, No. 1). It stated openly for the first time what a few people had begun to realise — that here was something that could be found nowhere else.

In 1983, Dr Neil Cossons, then Director of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum and now Director of the Greenwich Maritime Museum, visited Napier during a tour of New Zealand on behalf of the Art Galleries

and Museums Association of New Zealand and the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. He was astounded to find in Napier something he didn't know existed — a townscape of almost pure Art Deco. In his view, "Napier represents the most complete and significant group of Art Deco buildings in the world and is comparable with Bath as an example of a planned townscape in a cohesive style. Napier is without doubt unique."

Since the opening of the Museum's exhibition, Television New Zealand has commissioned a film about Napier's architecture and the Ministry of Works and Development is preparing a leaflet, in conjunction with the Napier City Council and the Museum, describing an Art Deco Historic Walk through the business area of Napier. It is hoped that a similar leaflet can be produced for Hastings. An article by Peter Shaw has appeared in *Air New Zealand's Skyway* magazine and the Museum has published a set of note cards featuring four of Hawke's Bay's Art Deco buildings.

Other visitors to Napier have been excited to see the buildings and the exhibition and one asked the question "Do people here realise what they have?" In the past the answer was certainly "No", but there are encouraging signs that appreciating Art Deco is an idea whose time has come. ■

Robert McGregor is Director of the Hawke's Bay Art Gallery and Museum in Napier.

Below: Government Buildings, Napier, designed by the Government Architect in 1936. (Photo: James White)

