Durban’s Art Deco architecture is being rediscovered. Following on from the 7th World Congress on Art Deco in Frankfurt last November, the Durban Art Deco Society (www.durbanartdeco.org), which is affiliated to the International Coalition of Art Deco Societies, managed to land the Post-Congress meeting in Durban, the epicentre of South African Art Deco.

In promoting the meeting, and the focus on Durban’s Art Deco heritage in particular, Odane Claude, who had attended the 6th World congress in Tulsa, USA, projected a project on Durban’s Art Deco for 4yr students of Architecture, a project mentored during the 2nd semester of 2002, together with the editor. The following results are the guide and the students efforts:

This is however not the first time the results of student projects on Durban’s Deco are being documented. Interested readers are referred to the articles in Plate No. 10, 1975, NIPA Journal 1/1987, and the article by Dennis Claude in NIA Journal 3/4 1992.

Having retired after 18 years of full-time teaching, in 1994, Dennis Claude has not stopped enthusing both students and the public about the cause of the Durban’s architectural heritage. I am most grateful for his continuing involvement in the education of future architects and guest-editing this issue.

Walter Peters, Editor

Durban’s Art Deco Architecture

Deco came to Durban

The city of Durban is one of the busiest ports on the African continent. Lying at latitude 30º south it has a warm sub-tropical climate and is bounded by a region blessed with a wide variety of flora and fauna. It has a large and polyglot population with significant percentages of people from African, Indian and European backgrounds.

The port grew under British colonial stewardship during the mid nineteenth century, and developed a conservative set of values that lasted for over a hundred years. Even today, it is half jokingly referred to as “The last outpost of the British empire.” The prevailing atmosphere was “British” and the architecture was either in the neo-Classical tradition, as seen in the journals, or Union Style, a blend of classic and Cape Dutch elements promoted by the Public Works Department to symbolise the recent Act of Union.

It therefore seems curious that in the year 1931, as the slump bit deeply into the economy, a strangely different building appeared in the central city. This was Enterprise Building an eight-storey apartment block and it was enriched in a way totally alien to the prevailing canons. Finished in stucco, as all Durban Art Deco buildings are, it owed nothing whatsoever to the stodgy neo-Cape Dutch interpretations that were the ruling canon of the day. Rich in angular geometric relief, stylised Mayan heads and with a superstructure over the entrance it boasted all the motifs that were later to be labelled as classic Art Deco. But it also had stylised Roman fasces (symbols of Roman authority) framing the door, symbols the Italian Fascists adopted and who had already been in power for over a century, that many of the buildings in the “Indian” quarter adopted Art Deco motifs, even those designed by “European” architects. There are charming examples like the cluster in Carlisle Street with well-scaled small blocks named

Carlisle Castle and Vel-Vet Mansions which look as if they would be at home in Miami and then there are commercial blocks like Park Building, Jena’s Centre and Mosaic Buildings which have Art Deco motifs in a rather more original free style application sometimes incorporating novel elements borrowed from Classical or Egyptian sources. Even the modest homes of Clairwood took care to add oratory motifs of imaginative, and maybe religious properties.

Conclusions drawn from the widespread appearance of Art Deco architecture in Durban of the thirties must reflect on the possibility that it was a vehicle of distraction from the prevailing socio-economic order. It is likely that the promoters represented groups discontented by the class-consciousness, snobbery and intellectual arrogance, that they had the funds and the will to show their political allegiances by adopting a culture that was in direct contrast to the established canons – a topic for further research.

By the mid thirties the dynamic lines and flying finials of Broadwayvindor indicated that architects were beginning to look more to local imagery for inspiration. This found full expression in a number of buildings but none more so than the somewhat bizarre animal forms interspersed amongst geometrical motifs on Victoria Mansions. The flying fish and lion forms and especially the vultures add a note of surrealist humour to the composition.
City centres have long been associated with a show of both political and economic values, and the ostentation that often accompanies this, gave Art Deco, with its abundance of decorative detail, an opportunity for expression.

The inception of Art Deco was strongly influenced by the rapid changes in popular social culture that predominated the ‘jazz-age’ or the ‘roaring ’20s’ that followed WW1, with the rapid economic changes satirically reflected by novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. The image of wealth associated with the times and hence with the Art Deco movement is evident, for example, in the use of coins as a decorative motif.

Two buildings encapsulate the image of economic and political power, Enterprise Building at 47–53 Aliwal Street, and Colonial Mutual Building at 330 West Street. Both make use of Gothic and Romanesque derived elements, as well as chevrons associated with the jazz-age popular culture. The reference to historical styles relies on the fact that Gothic and Romanesque buildings are imbued with a sense of trust in their longevity as well as the strength that they symbolised. Add to this, the sculpted lions, a political symbol associated with the British colonial regimen of old. The symbolic simulation that occurs between the inclusion of the culturally entrenched and popular culture, hints at the notion that the architecture of financial buildings had begun to use the eclecticism of Art Deco to broaden its appeal to the public. The Art Deco building could be seen as an architectural billboard that communicated values.

The use of the bird motif is widespread in central Durban, for example, Victoria Mansions at 124 Victoria Embankment and Broadwindsor at 7 Broad Street. The sources of this motif are manifold, being adopted by Mussolini as a fascist symbol as well as being related to exotic tribal cultures. However, the abstraction of the Broadwindsor eagles could be more akin to the image of prestige of the spires of the Chrysler building, through their stylised image of their vertically soaring wings.

Due to the setting of Durban’s Esplanade, adjacent the harbour and original beach-front, themes were drawn from both Mediterranean and sub-tropical Deco influences. Art Deco had become associated with a burgeoning affluent society which, through the increase in ocean-liner travel, could indulge in excursions to exotic destinations. Quadrant House at 115 Victoria Embankment is a well-maintained example of Spanish Deco style, complete with a decorative element that resembles a sea-shell. Formerly a residence for the Merchant Navy’s cadets, it now houses the corporate headquarters of a shipping line and its associated companies.

The influence of Miami Art Deco is evident in Williams Court at 157–159 Victoria Embankment, where the tropically themed stained glass panel is a contextual decorative companion to the adjacent tall palm trees. Victoria Mansions at 124 Victoria Embankment, with its vertical pilasters that rise through an arced first floor, also draws from its waterfront context in its Art Deco decorative elements. This is evident in the nautical, marine-animal and fantastical decorative elements, as well as the glazed panel above the entrance that commemorates the Union Castle mail ships. Nonetheless, Victoria Mansions does not escape the eclecticism within Art Deco, as it has a set of winged lions and eagles that resemble icons used by the Italian fascists.

The Albany Hotel at 225 Smith Street, is positioned adjacent to the Playhouse and the Prince’s Theatre (incorporated in the Playhouse) and could have provided a venue for the burgeoning café and theatrical society of the time, with its ground floor café. The architectural representation of the hanging folds of stage curtains, which was evident in early American Art Deco buildings, is also present on the corner façade of the base of the Albany Hotel. This creates a strong architectural-theatrical dialogue with the adjacent Playhouse building. The café society as theatrical event is simulated through the exaggerated scale of the drapes and the exotic Mayan-influenced vertical elements that frame, and therefore monumentalise this theme.
Durban’s Art Deco Architecture

The evolution of the Grey Street precinct or the ‘Indian CBD’ dates back to the early 1870s when shop and shack settlements were established on the unoccupied land along the north-western fringe of central Durban.

The area took its name from the main street, Grey Street, after Sir George Grey, the Cape Governor who acting on behalf of a group of Natal farmers, initiated the process of recruiting labourers from India. On expiry of their indentures, many of these moved to Durban, as did ‘passenger’ Indians who settled in the area, stretching from Queen Street to Greyville Race Course bounded by the railway line on the east and West Street cemetery on the west.

The streetscapes are marked by colonnades and arcades which surmount the pavement and balconies above, many of which have become enclosed. Traditionally the ground floor was given over to retail facilities with residential accommodation above. Behind this front, narrow lanes, courts and light wells gave access to a veritable maze of accommodation.

Building activity peaked between the 1930s and 1945, and many buildings carry on their facades the owner’s names (e.g. Jeena’s Court, Devshi Court, and Valjee Buildings) as well as the year of construction. Most buildings are two or three-storied, corresponding with a characteristic of medieval towns: high density, low rise, mixed-use.

The low rise development is partly due to the economic status of the developers and partly due to the policies at the time whereby large corporations invested in the white central Durban, where tall buildings such as Colonial Mutual began marking the skyline.

‘Indo-African Deco’ is the phrase we chose to describe the fusion of Indian and African details evident in many of the buildings in the Grey Street precinct, derived from the Indian developers freely expressing their economic independence. This Deco variant metamorphoses elements of Indian and Islamic architecture, with a rhythmical multiplication of round or horseshoe arches, single and coupled columns, balcony balustrade walls with openings, often resembling Union Jack designs. Detailing is geometric, perhaps due to the Moslem ban on human and animal representation, and horizontal bands streamlining the parapets of many of the buildings, especially those on corner sites.

Grey Street became the prime business and residential area of the Indian sector of the Durban City center, and also the educational, cultural and business heart of the Natal Indian community. Indian businesses flourished during the period of the Second World War and much of their economic growth took place during this period.

Subsequent to the passage of the Group Areas Act (no. 41 of 1950), the Grey Street area became proclaimed a ‘controlled area’ in 1957, and declared an Indian business area in 1973. The effect brought a freezing of all developments within the area, unless special permission had been obtained from the Minister of Community Development. As a result, building activity ceased, paradoxically preserving the architecture as a Deco district for us to now enjoy.

Charlene Pillay, Gareth Davies
The rich and varied detailing of Art Deco architecture on the Berea is a reflection of the originality and complexity which went into the design of many of these ‘classics’. Buildings which were previously designed in a ‘British’ atmosphere in the neo-Classical tradition, or in the Union Style, a blend of Cape Dutch and classical elements, were now embellished with geometric patterns stylised from Egyptian and Mayan themes as well as motifs of animals – with icons of eagles and vultures having been recently popularised by the opening of Tutankhamun’s sarcophagus. Strong verticals were the order of the day, often terminating past the last horizontal lines of the buildings in some splendid detailing, reaching into the sky.

The Berea is roughly divided in two, split by the 1960s freeway canyon which enters and exits town underneath Tollgate bridge, so named because people had to pay a toll to enter town. Astride this is busy Berea Road, running east-west on either side of the freeway, the context of Berea Court, a multi-storey apartment building with excellent detailing, designed for the Langton family by architects Langton & Barboure in 1937. A stylised theme of wings is evident in the design, and lion figures have been used to much success.

In North Berea we find examples such as Surrey Mansions, designed by William B Barboure, also in 1937, with rich detailing in various layers of stucco relief, recalling the intricacy given the patterns found on Egyptian and Mayan tombs. Rounded corners soften this multi-storey apartment block and wonderful African lions with wings (griffons) adorn the three major elevations at high level. Further north, we find Cheviot Court in Musgrave Road, the streamlined form of this building resembling the new forms of ocean liners, automobiles and trains of the time. On the corner of Argyle and Musgrave Roads is Ainsdale Court, with a marvellous entrance drawing on powerful Mayan geometric forms.

The Art Deco examples of Berea are of a very high standard. They reflect the vibrancy and excitement of the times and the effect that global trends have had on our culture and city.

Justin Caramanu
Durban’s Art Deco Architecture

Art Deco Interiors & Accessories

Typical for Durban were marine motifs, which show the sea with ships or the harbour. These images often appeared in stained glass of circular windows, resembling the porthole windows of ships. Indian influences abound in the decoration of buildings around the Grey Street area due to the high percentage of Indian people living there.

Motifs, which were typical in several kinds of Art Deco decoration are the sunburst, often applied to doors and facades as a sign for a new beginning, and streamlines which are a sign of speed and modernism, and therefore often found in car design or modern artifacts such as radios.

Art Deco in interior decoration is not only about the decoration of furniture and accessories such as door handles, lamps, windows etc. It is also about the creation of a different kind of space in the apartments. There is the example of the very well preserved penthouse in Berea Court that shows the intention of the architect (William B. Barbour) to create a more open space that should give the impression of a bigger and brighter space than usual in other apartments during that time. When stepping out of the lift one finds oneself standing in the foyer that seems higher than it in fact is because of the roof light. On either side of the foyer a stepped and splayed arch leads to the private rooms of the apartment. The form of the arch connotes a bigger space by rising upwards. This was a common characteristic in Art Deco architecture. Sometimes architects even designed ‘fake’ storeys to make the building appear higher e.g. Surrey Mansions (by Langton and Barbour) in Currie Rd. This was to impress and to awe the people who looked up at the ‘Skyscraper’.

It is difficult to say who the designers and craftspersons were, but it is established that the number of people who were working in Durban in the field of decorative interior crafts increased significantly during the period from 1928 until 1945.

Durban is a city that was strongly influenced by Art Deco, possibly because it wanted to have an identity of its own alongside the strong influence of the British. Many Art Deco interiors can still be found, some in a poor condition that await restoration.

Auke Obenland

Ms Obenland is an exchange student from Universität Stuttgart who is spending 2002/03 at Natal - Editor.

Durban has a sub-tropical climate, which no doubt has contributed to the development of a robust tradition of construction that mitigates in favour of strong, straightforward materials like brick, plaster and reinforced concrete. This is no place for timber filigree, unprotected metal or any design that embodies slender sections. Nevertheless, the skills developed by Edwardian artisans were readily applied to the stucco and brick detailing that the Art Deco architects required.

However, there were other factors in the equation. There was the fascination with African fauna and this stimulated the appearance of a unique range of animal forms that cropped up as stucco enrichment to the Deco forms on many buildings. Eagles and antelopes maintain a vigil from the heights of Colonial Mutual Building. Lions abound, dormant at the Cenotaph, alert on Berea Court and prowling into the griffons* of Enterprise buildings. Serious vulture-like figures guard the entrance to Victoria Mansions whilst Broadwindsor is crowned with a pair of tower cranes seeking the sky above. Then there was the cultural infusion injected by the rapid development of the Grey Street precinct, an area organically settled by people of Indian descent. This extends our definition of Durban Deco to include the vital and, in many cases, charming addition of voluptuous forms and eclectic detailing that resulted. Zig-zag and chevron detailing sit happily along-side the complex curves of gables that provide a backdrop to verandas that reach over the sidewalks, supported by columns bearing traces of Classical or Egyptian heritage. Hindu and Islamic motifs occur on spandrels whilst sunburst patterns illuminate from above.

Dennis Claude

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1. Mythical animals typically having the head and wings of an eagle and the body and tail of a lion. Also spelled griffon or griffon. (Ching, F A Visual Dictionary of Architecture)

2. Stained glass. Glass-painting is the term commonly used for the art by which windows are filled with ‘stained glass’. As a rule such windows are built up of panels not too big for convenience in handling, composed of pieces of glass either dyed or superficially coloured, set together in a framework usually of lead, to form decorative or pictorial designs. (Oxford Arts Dictionary)

3. The proprietary name for a synthetic resin composed of the condensation of phenols and formaldehyde, used as a plastic and for insulating purposes, named after its inventor, L.H. Burkard (Shorter Oxford Dictionary).

4. Condensation of phenols and formaldehyde, used as a plastic and for insulating purposes, named after its inventor, L.H. Burkard (Shorter Oxford Dictionary).
Since early on, the Natal Command headquarters terminated the northern extent of Durban’s beachfront development. Beyond this, the city leased parts e.g. Village Green where a masonry proscenium and tented hall provided a much used venue; Animal Farm and Battery Beach pools (see NPIA Journal 1/1989). When the leases expired, this site was identified for a casino and these developments were demolished.

Bidding began in 1997 and protracted legal battles followed. Finally in December 2001 construction commenced and the first phase was opened a year later. The second phase which fronts the beach and includes cinemas, is to open in July 2003, and the final phase is to incorporate a 160-bed hotel. Sun Coast Casino is thus the biggest single private-sector investment ever undertaken on Durban’s beachfront.

Any entertainment complex on such a site should attempt to link the city with the beach, as this concept does, albeit in Phase 2. The main entrance is from the west, where 2000 landscaped parking spaces are provided, with a secondary entrance from the north. These entrances terminate an L-shaped promenade with the two arms containing the 7000sq m casino replete with salon prive and private gaming rooms. To the south of the promenade are the 8 cinemas, the largest of which seats 500, as well as fast-food outlets. The knuckle of the ‘L’ accommodates a food court where a series of escalators link to the first floor conference facilities; and on the east, a series of restaurants open to terraces that face the ocean. Here the dunes have been re-established and give direct access to the beach. The basement is given over to servicing, administration and parking; the roof is a series of vaulted metal roofs.

The talking point of this development is the exterior, an Art Deco ‘decorated shed’. This theme was proposed by the American ‘theming architects’, allegedly to extend Durban’s Deco legacy, and thereby to revive interest in this heritage – which fortunately is happening. Thus the 45 colours to the Casino exterior and the 2.5 km of neon tubing – two small items in the budget of R1.4 billion!

Architects
MDS Architecture
(Formerly Margoles Dukes & Smith),
Johannesburg
(Graeme Smith;
Sean Pearce) and
Langa Makhanya & Associates cc,
Durban
Concept Architects
Creative Kingdom
Inc, USA
Main Contractors
Grinaker-LTA
Sivukile Joint Venture

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Left to right: Chairman of the Jury, Jeremy Rose; Cronkli Architectural Student of the Year 2002, Christian van Niekerk; and Cronkli Managing Director, Peter de Iruvez.

OBITUARIES
Brian Summerton 1941-2003
While a student at the University of Natal, Brian Summerton began working with the local practice Steenkamp, Harris & Partners. Immediately on graduating in 1975, he was dispatched as Director of the Pietermaritzburg office of that firm, involved with buildings utilitarian in nature, Brian Summerton left his mark in the restoration of numerous historical buildings of Pietermaritzburg. He was also Head of Pietermaritzburg Road Police Station, Town Hill Hospital, various Voortrekkers cottages, the City Hall, Main Post Office and the Legislature Assembly. Due to his ability as an architect and the community involvement in his adopted city, the writer of an obituary in a local newspaper could conclude: “Our city needs more Brian Summertons, committed citizens who serve, self-effacingly and without any obfuscation other than to make it better for all, citizens who are full of hope and optimism and give support to the leadership of the city, even if they may not always agree with the decisions made, citizens who find the city enviable as a place of life and work and are prepared to make a meaningful contribution to its well-being.”

Jessie Birss 1926–2003
A graduate in both Architecture and Town Planning at Natal, Jessie Maya Birss worked on the “Hollins Flat” (Durban 1983) before commencing as a Senior Lecturer at her alma mater from which she retired in 1987. Jessie was the first woman to be elected to the Provincial Committee of this Institute, serving two consecutive terms 1976–77 and 78–79. She loved to travel and explore the world of architecture, having a special penchant for the study of urban settlements in history. Having gained a reputation for language punchiness, she became for many years proofreader of this journal, unfortunately only to learn that in matters English, architects were no better than students.

News
148 Burnham Rd, Clare Hills, and the Bughwan Family house (1946) at 76 Hartley Rd, Overport.

In 1988 he had interrupted his architectural studies to serve as a volunteer during Israel’s War of Independence; in 1963 he found himself banned in his own country and unable to teach. Together with his wife, Betty, he went into political exile in the United Kingdom, where he accepted a lecturership in Architecture at the University of Wales, Cardiff. In 1970 he was appointed a Reader in Architecture, Chair, served as Dean of the Faculty for six years, and retired in 1989 as Emeritus Professor. While in Wales Lipman completed his master’s degree and doctorate, the latter in Sociology at University College, Cardiff, as a part-time student. He then launched a groundbreaking course in “Human Studies in Architecture” at the Welsh School. Together with colleagues in Sociology and Applied Psychology, the course focused on applying social, cultural, psychological and physiological – or ergonomic – studies to architectural work. This directed students’ attention to both societal and individual consequences of building designs, and an innovative concept recognized by the Board of Education of the Royal Institute of British Architects. It resulted in parallel developments at Schools of Architecture as far afield as Australia, Sweden, the United States, and in Kitwe, Zambia, followed. More than 35 Masters and PhD theses were awarded, over three decades, in this field under his supervision. On his return to South Africa in 1990 and after taking early retirement at the age of 64, Lipman spent nine more active years in universities, first serving as Visiting Professor of Architecture at the University of Natal in Durban. In addition, he continued to carry out research and long-term consultancy for both official and informal community-oriented organisations in South Africa, including the Commission on Land Rights where he was Research Consultant to the Regional Land Rights Commissioner of Gauteng, until January 1999. Lipman was a contributing author of various architectural columns for national newspapers. He was one of the most widely read in the architectural world, contributing extensively to popular print and electronic media. He continues to contribute to the Architectural Section: The mono-pitched roofs of House Meer combine with a butterfly section with a split level and a clerestory. Architects: Bernard Janks, Green & Lipman.

Alan Lipman D Arch (honoris causa) (Natal)

148 Burnham Rd, Clare Hills, and the Bughwan Family house (1946) at 76 Hartley Rd, Overport.

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Vietnam occupies the eastern strip of the South East Asian peninsula, about 2500km long and no more than a few hundred kilometres wide in the middle. Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon is the main southern city and the home of the Vietcong, made famous by Jane Fonda’s visit during the Vietnam war according to the height of the Vietnam war.

The Old Quarter is a hive of small streets and narrow lanes jam-packed with traders, coffee shops, vendors selling almost anything, buildings and street poles festooned liberally with the irre- descent Vietnamese Flag (red with a yellow 5 pointed star). Roads are clogged with the ubiquitous Honda that seems to have become the vehicle of choice for the young in so many asian cities. We counted as many as five people on a single motorcycle!

Crossing the narrowest street becomes a supreme test of faith – look straight ahead and walk, slowly.

Vietnam is dominated by the Kung tribe – modern Vietnamese – (85%) who historically occupy the flat, low west lands. The hills along the western and Northern borders are home to about 25 minorities, many of whom are refugees and spill-overs from China, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

A ‘luxury’ overnight bus took us south through the DMZ, the military border between North and South, a 200 kilometers wide band where nothing grows – a tropical waste- land thanks to the millions of gallon of Napalm and Agent Orange dumped during the war. We stayed in Hoi An, a delightful, laid back fishing village with ancient wooden houses built by Japanese traders, romantic waterside pavement cafes and romantic waterside pavement cafes and streets.

In between and alongside all this, the Vietnamese people, ever industrious, friendly, overly trusting and open.

There are few Americans on the street but the US dollar is king and buys anything and everything. Counterfeit music CDs from China for a Dollar. Woolies quality red ‘T’ shirts with the yellow star for the same. Sweet black coffee, cheap draft beer, meals of charred veggies on paper-thin spring rolls, silk suits made in under four hours for the price of a pair of Diesel boxes, fine bamboo and laquerware to feast one’s eyes on.

Shop till you drop!

We day tripped to the Perfume Pagoda (top right), an hour by bus, another by flat bottomed sampan along an inlaid waterway, two hour hike through thick bamboo forests to the holiest shrine in North Vietnam. A huge cave with an 8m stalactite (or is that mile?) considered a Buddha in its own right by the faithful.

We overnighted to Sapa in the north-west corner of the country, close to both Laos and China, and trekked through terraced rice paddies to hill tribe villages of the Red Dao.

**SOCIALIST** – modern, modulated, sun-screened, sharp-lined, concrete administrative build- ings, schools, and hospitals, gone black with mould and neglect, always offset by the ever-present flag.

**POST SOCIALIST** – colourful, exuberant, stain- less steel balousnad kitch, highly decorated, complex plaster mouldings, rounded lines, romantic and affluent.

Vietnam has fought wars against the Chinese, French, Cambodians and Americans and has yet to be defeated. Emerging only recently from years of distrustful, insular socialism malaise the economy is booming. Massive infrastructural projects are underway – four-lane highways replacing two-lane mountain paths, huge resort hotels scaring mountainsides – and it becomes clear from those that the current vision for tourism in the country has been bor- rowed from southern neigh- bour, Thailand. Perhaps the war with the Americans may ultimately be lost on the altar of globalism. Good-luck Vietnam!

Derek van Herden

Derek and Sharon van Herden visited Vietnam a second time around in September 2002 – Editor