



THE CONCEPT OF ART DÉCO Günter Weimer¹

After the political opening-up in the aftermath of the dictatorship, during which our country's traditional architecture journals had disappeared, an intense revision of architectural concepts took place. Along with it came an extensive coining of neologisms – many of which were contradictory or even absurd – in an attempt to provide a new understanding of architectural art. The most characteristic example is the concept of “modern” which, throughout the evolution of architecture, from Vitruvius onwards, had always been understood as a synonym for “contemporary”. And it was exactly to this that architects were referring around the time of World War II, when they opposed the historicism then in vogue. They wanted to put an end to the stylistic formalism taken from historical works in order to based themselves on new concepts and minimal forms, expressive from the point of view of the industrial materials being used and up-to-date in terms of constructive techniques.

This concept became problematic as time passed and concepts of architecture changed. The solution for the impasse was clever: the term “modern” was substituted by “modernist” to describe the production of the period after the Second World War. However, later on, many uninformed people continued to refer to that period as “modern”.

With the review which was taking place after the political opening-up, certain researchers began to realize that the official version that the modernist movement

¹ Graduated in architecture from the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), in 1963. He was awarded a doctorate in Architecture from the University of São Paulo in 1991 and a Master in the History of Culture from Pontifical University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUC-RS), in 1981, and a specialization in Industrial Design from the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Germany, in 1967. Retired titular professor from FAU, UFRGS, from Unisinos and from PUC-RS. Professor in graduate courses at UFRGS and PUC-RS. E-mail: gunterweimer@gmail.com

had not begun suddenly at the moment when Le Corbusier landed in a Zeppelin, and began the initiation rite of a handful of architects converted to the new creed. This transition period was given the unfortunate name of “proto-modern” and when it became clear that the modernity of the 1950s was over, the subsequent period started to be called “post-modern”. These terms were unfortunate for the simple reason that at every moment of our existence, (and here the existentialists must forgive me), we are doomed to being contemporary – just not to use the word “modern” – that is, to conform to the present moment of our existence. The so-called “proto-modern”, as well as the “post-modern”, adepts were “modern” in their own time. Hence the impasse!

The phenomenon was not restricted to modernism. As the eclectic phase of our architecture had been rejected by modernists and then ignored, reviews of the post-opening up period had to deal with an immense architectural production needing to be conceptualized so that its type could be understood. And one of the tendencies of this eclecticism was called “Art Déco”. Apparently, the name appeared around 1968 in Paris when an exhibition of the same name presented a nostalgic review of the 1920s. And, of course, according to colonial thinking, if this happened in Paris, then, it had to happen here too, if we were to be considered civilized...

A survey of publications of the time was undertaken in order to define this concept. It involved a sizeable number of issues of the French journal *Art et Décoration* (Art and Decoration) published between 1898 and 1911 and almost a hundred issues of the German journal *Deutsche Kunst und Decoration* (German Art and Decoration), published between 1911 and 1930.

The main findings of this research and its results were published in the April, 1992, edition of the journal *projeto*, number 151, pages 70-73.

The results showed that these journals were basically concerned with the presentation and discussion of issues related to painting, works of art, sculpture and furniture. Architecture was discussed in less than 8% of the articles and was given very minor consideration. To be more precise, it could be said that it was not an analysis of architecture in itself. Architecture was seen as a support or scenario for the exhibition of the above-mentioned arts. From whence the conclusion was reached that it would be absurd to speak of “Art Déco” architecture or an Art Déco “style”. In an even more objective way, it was concluded that it could not even be called “architecture” since it was conceived as a construction type intended as a prop for artistic works, very close to the positivist conception of a construction technique which, according to the possessions and disposition of the owners, would be given trimmings and decorations to show off their wealth and financial power. So that would seem to have solved the problem: it was just a question of another badly-defined concept.

Because of our doubts about the soundness of our arguments, various European authorities on the history of architecture were consulted and it was seen that this concept was not acceptable there either.

However, it turned out that shortly afterwards – in 1995, to be exact – the Rio de Janeiro City Hall raised the issue again with a publication entitled *Guia da arquitetura art déco no Rio de Janeiro*². This publication

² CZAJKOWSKI, Jorge (ed.) *Guia da arquitetura art déco no Rio de Janeiro*, Rio de Janeiro: Casa da Palavra, 3rd edition. 2000.

has the undeniable merit of inventorying a large-scale production which until then had been forgotten and relegated to silence. But because it contained several conceptual ambiguities such as the understanding that it was affiliated to the modernism of the time, and – worse still – to the so-called “international style”, it did not even define with due care the meaning of concepts such as “decorative” and “industrial style”. In our opinion, the catalogued buildings belong to different tendencies within eclecticism and could not really be classified within one single tendency. Indeed, it would be difficult to fit many of them into the concepts drawn from the analysis of the above-mentioned French and German journals.

To upset (or clarify) the way we were understanding the issue, foreign publications dealing with another tendency in Art Déco began to appear, especially a certain US production in the 1930s. It presented certain unique formal characteristics showing a particular treatment of colors and decorations proper to façades. These works were not reduced to mere props for a certain piece of decoration, rather they themselves constituted a work of art. So they fitted perfectly into the overall conceptions of eclecticism, characterized by a serious concern with form, but they showed a disregard in terms of use, or functionality, as architects would prefer.

These US works were produced at a time when that country was trying to recover from that critical period of the great economic depression which followed the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. Deep down, this phase was characterized by a search for optimistic and encouraging alternatives for a hungry and depressed population. This search was expressed in the production of delicate constructions with pleasant shapes in which the keynote was the use of rounded corners, soft pastel-

type colors and geometric but abstract relief, used not as complementary elements but as an integral part of the conception of the architectural undertaking. It was therefore a derivation from eclecticism based on its definition as architecture and not merely a prop for a certain decorative work of art.

A digression is needed here in order to point out that, in the US of the time, a parallel tendency, with similar ideological concerns, had appeared but with the intention of promoting feelings of grandiosity or almost megalomania, to show that the United States had not gone under with the economic crisis. It presented itself in the construction of works of the type “the world’s greatest” (the world’s tallest, the world’s largest covered area, the building which had used the largest amount of steel in the world, etc.). This tendency also spilled over into Brazil, especially in larger cities, but will not be discussed here.

The most intriguing question raised by this theme is the use of this style in Brazil. Everybody knows that the most pressing issue of the 1930s was the rise of Nazi-Fascism. It created its own architecture, derived from forms considered “classical” which they built to a monumental, often bordering on an insane, scale. There would seem to be no doubt about the fact that this extravagance also affected the minds of American architects and entrepreneurs leading them to adopt the above-mentioned grandiose architecture. This sense of monumentality contrasted greatly with the architecture of housing, often described as “seafront” because its most significant examples were built in Miami, Florida.

At the current stage of the development of this science, it is recognized that the largest collection of Brazilian art works of this residential type is concentrated

in Goiania and, consequently, Goiás architects are justified in their repeated demands for the preservation of these buildings. However, as an outsider, I would like to make some comments to help towards understanding the issue.

The first is the need for further study of the reasons which led to opting for this type of architecture, which is of a less pretentious nature, when the global trend was the promotion of a sometimes unrestrained monumentality, which would be more in tune with the spirit of a new capital in the central highlands under the aegis of the Vargas dictatorship.

The second is to find an explanation for the contradiction between Atílio Correa Lima's plan for the central and northern districts, clearly influenced by the monumentality of the European totalitarian regimes of the time, as opposed to the tendency towards a popular version of US Art Déco.

The third would be to explain the incoherence of erecting these buildings in the monumental area when, to the best of my knowledge, there was no building of this nature in the southern district, except that designed by Armando Godoy. This neighborhood was designed along the lines of a garden city and would therefore be much closer to this Art Déco style. In other words, if coherence had been given priority in the design of the city, works of Art Déco would have been located in the southern district and not in the monumental central district, where they are actually located.

Finally, a broader study would need to be undertaken to investigate where in the country buildings of this style exist. To date, we know that both Goiania and Rio de Janeiro can boast of innumerable examples. Visits to the north and northeast of Rio Grande do Sul have shown that there are also examples in towns founded at the beginning of the past century, especially in Erechim and Iraí. Undoubtedly, this style was not confined to specific regions: other towns in the country must also have a considerable number of unknown examples in their suburbs.

That is why I think there is a real need to convene a conference to deal specifically with this theme, in which experts would be responsible for analyzing the collection of this architecture in their respective regions. Because of the wealth of the Goiânia collection, it would be the ideal location for such an event.