



# ART DÉCO ARCHITECTURE IN BRAZIL

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### I. Art Déco architecture

Nothing characterized the landscape of the majority of Brazilian towns and cities in the 1930s and 1940s more than Art Déco trends in architecture. The style then went on to establish itself as an expression of modernity which was accessible to different social classes. In larger buildings, the style became popular and spread throughout cities and towns.

In architecture, Art Déco brings together both innovative aspects and links with the past. From *Beaux-Arts* architecture it takes its decorative aspects, expressed in a set of works characterized by the play of geometric shapes and/or façades with elements of an ornamental connotation. It also uses, and quite often at that, the *Beaux-Arts* method of composition, by adopting rules of symmetry, axially and hierarchy in the distribution of the plan, in the organization of the façades and the arrangement of the geometric elements, expressed, among other things, in the emphasis given to the main entrance and the division of the façade into base, body and crown. It also uses simplified versions of elements of classical style, such as columns, oculi, pediments, capitals, pilasters and parapets. The innovative aspect of Art Déco lies in the frequent geometric simplification of its decorative elements and the diversification and updating of its sources of ornamental reference.

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Among the features which are part of the formal repertoire of Art Déco architecture are: marquees, tiny balconies, columns, pediments, oculi, capitals, pilasters, parapets and simplified scroll forms, metal railings and surrounds, including the louvre type; ornamentation in high or bas-relief depicting geometric shapes, simplified flower themes or straight or zigzag lines; scenic use of light through neon or stained glass; textured surfaces; schematic patterns of color; geometric shapes, spans and staggered surfaces. The construction can be built with geometric composition incorporating shapes such as rectangular prisms, cylindrical or rounded shapes or horizontal and vertical surfaces.

In certain constructions, references to déco language are confined to ornamental details applied to the façades of buildings whose characteristics, in terms of implantation, technology, shape and space organization, follow models linked to the past. In other cases, however, the formal Art Déco repertoire was used in innovative buildings in terms of program and construction techniques (reinforced concrete structures, metal surrounds, etc.).



Figure 1. Church in Neópolis (Sergipe).  
Source: Nuvila Research Collection.



Figure 2. Taubaté Industrial Company in Taubaté (São Paulo). Source: Nuvila Research Collection.

## 2. Trends in Brazilian Art Déco

In Brazil, the déco language in architecture was initially expressed mainly in projects aiming at transmitting an air of modernity in association with new programs. This was the case of the skyscrapers which witnessed the transformation of our capital cities into metropolises; of institutional buildings, housing State departments which were modernizing and expanding; of department stores, introducing a new concept of business; of cinemas, clubs and radio stations broadcasting new forms of entertainment, culture and leisure. Very quickly, however, the style spread and was used in factories, churches and in small scale stores and houses.

In skyscrapers the height was emphasized by staggered diminishing compositions and/or vertical crowning elements. In institutional buildings, grandiose designs were favored in compositions of a classical origin. The scenic characteristics which déco style offered were in consonance with the glamour and magic conjured up by the cinema. In factories, the style reconciled an image of modernity with frugal means and low cost.

There was nothing more impressive in the characteristic landscapes of the metropolises of the 1930s and 1940s than the tall déco buildings which housed banks, offices, homes and businesses. A survey of Art Déco architectural trends in the city of Sao Paulo found that the most characteristic type of building was that of mixed-use, intended for multifamily housing on top, with businesses on the ground floor (CAMPOS, 1996:257).

As regards single-family homes, it can be seen from the *A Casa* magazine that designs of a déco nature began to be published on a regular basis from 1932 onwards, establishing itself throughout this decade and up to the middle of the next as the second major trend, after the *Mission Style*, among the housing projects published. The projects tried either to

reconcile the lavish use of decoration with the “functional spirit” of the “modern” (*A Casa*, 1939:17-18) or sought to point out the aesthetic qualities of a sober composition (*ibid.*, 1938:35).

The staggered composition of geometric or flat brick masonry was common in tall buildings and churches, and even appeared in certain factories. In churches the façades were staggered and vertical, bustling with volume or elements in relief, culminating in a central tower, whose superiority over the composition was enhanced by stained glass in the shape of a cross which stood out because of the scenic use of electric lighting.

A pattern adopted in factories was the composition of geometric shapes dominated by a central tower giving emphasis to the main entrance and whose verticality is reinforced by vertical lines obtained through openings or elements in relief. The tower could have the company name and at the top a clock, symbol of linear time which rules the industrialized world.

In the *Streamlined* tendency, curved surfaces of masonry or glass bricks indicated a nautical inspiration when associated with references to bridges, hatchways or masts.

There are examples of an Art Déco tendency with strong influence from the *Beaux-Arts*, through symmetry in façades and an adaptation to déco of classical elements, such as pediments, pilasters, oculi and parapets.

Staggering the parapet was one of the features most used by Art Déco in Brazil.

It can be seen that in Brazil déco style was expressed, above all, through geometric shape, staggered parapets and ornamentation, consistent with the trend known as *Zig-Zag Modern*. Rarer cases adopted rounded forms reflecting the *Streamlined* tendency.



Figure 3. Club built by the São Pedro Spinning and Weaving Co., in Itu (São Paulo). Source: Nuvila Research Collection.



Figure 4. Cinema in Neópolis (Sergipe). Source: Nuvila Research Collection.



Figure 5. São Roberto factory in a workers' village in Gouveia (Minas Gerais). Source: Nuvila Research Collection.

In tall buildings, churches and factories, the staggered composition of geometric shapes was commonly used, consistent with an emphasis on height and with the search for a grandiose style. In these and other buildings for collective use – clubs, cinemas, etc. – the use of principles of hierarchy, expressed in staggered form and emphasis on the main entrance, is evident. In housing and small shops the déco aesthetic is found mainly in the form of ornamental details on the façades, which are used fairly sparingly and which appear mainly on the parapets.

This diversity of use and tendency shows the ability of Art Déco to adapt to different projects, scales and patterns of buildings, and this is the key to its widespread use in Brazil in the 1930s and 1940s.

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