

ART DÉCO SERTANEJO AND A POSSIBLE REVIVAL: THE CAMPINA GRANDE DÉCO PROJECT Lia Monica Rossi¹

*The recent past is the most difficult to preserve;
it is neither old enough to be appreciated nor new enough to be maintained.*
Pietro M. Bardi

Art Déco Sertanejo: the baptism

But why *sertanejo*? The term *sertão* (backwoods, hinterland), a Brazilian northeastern geographic region, neighboring the Agreste and Cariri, comes from the colonial Portuguese word *desertão* (big desert), meaning a region which is distant from urban centers, the backwoods of a country or region, remote, with little civilization. We see it as something beyond its geographic definitions, whether accurate or not. The *sertão* is also a poetic place. It can express the immensity of the lonely uninhabited semiarid open countryside as well as a piece of land of fond memory, *meu (my) sertão*². It was these real and imaginary backlands which inspired us to give the name *Sertanejo* to the unregistered Art Déco style of the popular northeastern façades.

This research started when we came across popular housing in the neighborhoods of Caruaru (Pernambuco), in 1972. Who wouldn't be surprised by those delightful constructions conflicting with teachings about the so called

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² As in *Asa Branca*, a song by *sertanejos* musicians Luis Gonzaga and Humberto Teixeira.

“good design”³? The surprise was even greater on arriving in Campina Grande, Paraíba, in 1979, and it reached fascination point as we walked through villages along the highways of the Northeast. The molding relief on the façades as geometric sets (radial, parallel, stepped, zigzag, etc.), the regional creativity expressed using rulers, set squares and compasses had not been mentioned at all in the literature or existed in the minds of national designers.

For many of us, southeasterners, our vision of the Northeast at that time did not go much beyond that of stereotyped images of hammocks, fishing boats, palm-lined beaches and *carnaval* in Salvador (Bahia). This is understandable if one remembers that TV Globo (the most important Brazilian TV network) had not as yet become quite so global,⁴ so to say, and there was no internet or even direct dialing. Against this background, and when compared with today, communication between the Nor-

3. Ideas acquired at Rio de Janeiro's Industrial Design Course, deeply influenced by post-war German functionalism (Ulm School).

4. TV Globo would only broadcast in Paraíba in 1987.

theast and the Southeast was fairly rudimentary. In academia, this absence did not seem to be much different, as if imitators of the traditional styles and the avant-garde modernists had no time or space to look at their own humble backyards.

So, in the early 80s, we suspected that the geometric shapes on those pediments had similarities with Miami Beach Art Déco, but this idea had no theoretical basis. Nevertheless, in 1982 we collected examples of international Art Déco and compared them to the local production. This comparison was presented at Paraíba's 1st Design Week. Thrilled by the reception they were given, in 1984 we presented the theme at the Brazilian Society for Science Development (SBPC), under the title *Art Déco Sertanejo*. Shortly afterwards, photographic essays appeared, like that of Szilard (1986), as did the exquisite book by Mariani (1988). And our *Art Déco Sertanejo* reappeared in an article in 1994.

From the modernist to the revival project

The story goes that Teodosio de Oliveira Ledo, chief captain of the Hinterlands, founded Campina Grande in 1697. We now switch to 1936, when the Mayor Vergniaud Wanderley started renovating the traditional center by introducing new urban and sanitation laws. Very few eclectic style buildings survived this



Figure 1. Rua Maciel Pinheiro, uneven numbers / 1st block. Town Council and two-storey commercial buildings (digitized façades by Jose Marconi B. de Souza).

reform, which in less than 15 years completely changed the shape of the city. Local builders and architects from the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro set up offices to cater to the large number of obligatory clients of this “modernization by decree” (VERAS, 1988), responsible for the remarkably style unity of the city centre. This was what really attracted our attention in 1979, and which we have been documenting ever since.

In 1993, as part of our personal preservation campaign, we set up the *Campina Grande Art Déco Exhibition*. In 1994, in the City Hall Archives, we found the original architectural drawings of the buildings erected during Vergniaud Wanderley’s great renovation project. For the first time we could know the construction dates and names of the authors, and that was a moment of great emotion.

From then on, the media assumed the task of promoting Campina Grande Art Déco and stressed how important it was to preserve it. In 1996, Cássio Cunha Lima was running for the City Hall and became interested in the project, so

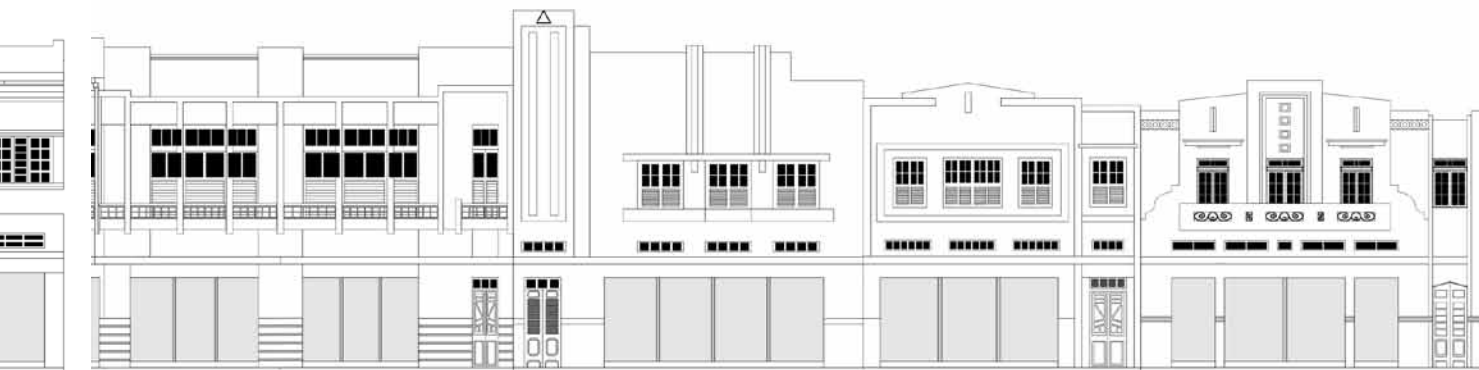


Figure 2. Rua Maciel Pinheiro, even numbers; 1st block Two-storey commercial buildings (digitized façades by Jose Marconi B.de Souza and Apoena R. Barreira).

he included it in his campaign. Then, in 1998, we began digitalizing the façades. In the following years, the City Hall, through the Secretary of Urban Planning, started the revitalization of Maciel Pinheiro Street as the first phase of the *Campina Grande Déco Project*⁵. This consisted of defining its scope, the laws on tax exemption and stylistic preservation⁶, tenders for the construction of infrastructure networks (removal of overhead wiring and concrete poles, new electrical, plumbing and telephone projects, new paving and sidewalks), removal of all façade publicity coverings in Luxalon and subsequent analysis of marquees safety by the Civil Defense, plus relocation of more than 800 street vendors to proper market areas, redefinition of parking lots, urban equipment, wheelchair access, etc.

The façades recuperation project (drawn-up by designers Lia Monica Rossi and Jose B. Marconi de Souza, architect Cristina Mello, and students of the Industrial Design Course at the Federal University of Paraíba and others) had the support of the local Trade Associations, essential for the success of this project, as the area was mainly commercial. The project consisted of completing the survey of original projects, documentation and digitalization of façades, classification of buildings by area (Preservation, Trusteeship and Listing), exploration of original colors, creation of the General Color Chart, creation of a Property index (consisting of original design, photographic surveys, stylistic characteristics, mapping of damage, gaps and chromatic projects), standards for signage and lighting, proposal for the historical

identification plaques for the buildings (which was not implemented), etc.

Method

How to be successful in rescuing something from an urban heritage? Surely this cannot just depend on our obstinacy as a single resident over a 20-year period. The fundamental questions: *What do we want to preserve? Why do we need to preserve? How can we preserve?* will all be answered by the many urban actors involved, and the result will express the power and participation of these actors in the plot. On stage: concept/idea, dissemination, media and users' support, political will, building up inhabitants' self-esteem, negotiation etc.

There would be reason for applause if, with the use of public funding, each contributor felt that they gained more than they had invested.

The “Art-de-cores”⁷

When we think about urban space preservation, we must necessarily consider updating it. The physical space is the same, but the atmosphere of the past, with its richness of synesthetic qualities, is not the same any more. Mimicking that past is just as difficult as time travel. Therefore, today's space needs updating of its internal relationships, usage, lighting, traffic, noise, smells, textures, colors, environment, atmosphere and so on. After surveying the original colors of the façades, we noticed that the 1940s palette was restricted to a few shades with a considerable predominance of yellows, some light-blue, light-green and pink, results of traditional lime washing.

From prehistoric times, people's use of color is synony-

5. In all, the program would include 150 buildings in 10 streets, covering 17 hectares in the city center.

6. Municipal Law 3721 of 6.8.1999, Segov, created the Special Preservation Zone I.

7. “Art of colors” in Portuguese makes a pun with “Art Déco”.

mous with the limits and possibilities of obtaining animal, vegetable and mineral pigments, found locally or imported at high cost. Nowadays, with current chemical techniques, we can have whatever color we like instantaneously at low cost. The use of light-color, once the domain of the rainbow, of other natural prisms or stained glass has been democratized through neon and other gases, filaments, TV cathode rays etc. So today, urban dwellers are surrounded by emissions of light and pigments in deeply saturated colors.

Against this background, painting the buildings in original pastel shades might have been the correct option from the historical point of view, but this certainly was not the choice of the community. Our team proposed a chart that respected the original color range to a large extent, but the endless possibilities available in the paint stores were more attractive and, in fact, determined the shopkeepers' choice. The opportunity to add color to the city center, now free of its Luxalon façade coverings, combined with the neighborhood tradition of painting their houses for the Feast of São João, turned the Campina Grande Déco Project into a real "Arte-de-cores" ("Art of colors"), as the style was renamed by local people and the media. And deep contrasting colors still prevail on the façades of Northeastern towns today.

Continuity⁸

The aim of this brief report is to outline certain aspects of our experience with a heritage preservation project in a medium-sized northeastern town, which, at that time, apparently did not even arouse the interest of the Institute for Historical and Artistic Heritage of the State of Paraíba, nor the local government, nor even architects⁹. For us the results, even if partial, are a real miracle. I hope that this experience, which may prove valid for other towns and cities, does not demand any more miracles! The

8. In 2011, Rio de Janeiro will host the 11th World Congress of Art Déco Societies, organized by the Brazilian Art Déco Institute, during which our book on the theme will be launched.

9. Paradoxically, even within Northeastern academia, in 2000, the Campina Grande Déco Project was accepted by the Natal (Rio Grande do Norte) Seminar on the History of City and Urbanism, but was rejected almost immediately, allegedly because "it was not proven that Campina Grande is Art Déco".

popular and the handcrafted Northeastern Art Déco, whether entitled as sertanejo or not, have been appearing in the media and would seem to be fashionable.

Ever since our first presentation in 1982, Art Déco Sertanejo has served as an inspiration for research projects and product design¹⁰. More recently a new research trend has favored studies on popular Brazilian urban architecture, which makes us very happy and hopeful¹¹.

We know that any project which has been set up involves maintenance, which in turn depends on the urban actors involved. We would hope that the preservation of memory would continue irrespective of potential adverse policies, mere negligence or inevitable urban growth:

Soon this city will look like any other large city, with buildings, buildings, buildings as far as the eye can see. Suddenly, what had once been considered pretty will become repetition, monotonous landscape, a shortness of air and quality of life. A tiny São Paulo in the semiarid? (Josemir Camillo, Campina perde seus horizontes.)

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10. BOMFIM, G.; SOUZA, J. M. B. de. *Projeto experimental de mobiliário*. CDI/UFPB, 1989), clothing (SOUZA, J. M. B. de. *Projeto de Vestuário*. TCC/CDI/UFPB, orientation by J.B. Guedes, 1990), games (CATÃO, Rejane de S. *Déco Sertanejo – blocos de armar*. TCC/CDI/UFPB, orientation by G. Bomfim, 1995), scenarios (*Cenários/Fachadas de barracas*, S. João no Parque do Povo. Campina Grande, 1988), book (RIBEIRO, Noaldo and MELLO; Lamarck B. de. *Campina Grande: livro-CD*. Campina Grande: PMCG, 1999 which contains 2 CDs of musical themes and six pages on the *Campina Déco Project*), etc., which is very rewarding.

11. As an example, we quote the researchers Marcus V. Queiroz, Victor J. B. Campos, Jorge Eduardo Rubies and Edimilson Vieira.