

A FORGOTTEN MODERNITY: ART DÉCO IN CURITIBA

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Modernity was the watchword for people who lived through the 1920s and 30s. In itself, the word conjures up the meanings of things ranging from technological innovations to postwar years. It included speed, the automobile, the gramophone, radio, and even the housewife's gas stove. The word modern described the latest fashion in vogue. Modernity, a concrete sign of emancipation and autonomy, was what had already been lived and the future in the pipeline. Even the past was modern one day. Modernity was architecture in the making.

In a certain way, the adjective described everything that was then being built, and it was common to see the term used and defined as belonging to a cubic, futuristic, 1925-style Art Moderne, fascist, water tower style, Paris 25, Jazz Modern Style, La Mode 25 architecture (ALMADA AND CONDE, 2000) – and so on, in a series of names later brought together and defined simply as Art Déco, a term derived from the name of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*.

At that time, different stylistic tendencies made it possible to reinterpret even if they watered down the artistic movements which attempted to reaffirm and give expression to the progressive efforts of industrial civilization. In many cases, pragmatic engineers and architects used concepts and theories as they saw fit, and thereby created a self-taught architecture, but which identified with

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the new. This pragmatism reinforced the modernizing spirit of Brazilian towns of the time, and enhanced the importance of these different manifestations.

Art Déco covers much of what was new in architecture and design between the 1920s and 1940s, including the rationalist tendency, as one single name used to describe the production of that period. The modernists of that time, however, did not know the term, as it was coined in 1966 during the exhibition *Les Années 25*, held at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris.

It was, however, a forgotten modernity and Curitiba is a good example of this lack of memory in the history of architecture. As in other cities and towns, in the minds of the people, Art Déco and rationalism took over as signs of modernity, and was taken up by the municipality as an expression of what was progressive and new. Despite the fact that there had been a decrease in building in the city, due to the economic instability of the country in the 1930s and a premonition of war, Art Déco, with all that the term implied, established itself as a sign of modernity for public works, housing and the first tall buildings outlined against the horizon.

The style spread further to theaters, cinemas, exhibition halls and industries. When more simplified designs were adopted, it also won over adepts and became popular in modest housing, much of it built with sidewalk alignment to conform to legislation which preserved traces of the colonial order. This was a demonstration of how popular architecture incorporates elements of everyday life, and transforms them into signs in order to bring them into line with the prevailing style. In a way, Art Déco responded to the popular appeal with its low cost architecture and easily reproducible forms and elements.

As the official style and already widespread among the population, its consecration was further reinforced by its repeated use in large temporary exhibitions organized by all spheres of government (SEGAWA, 1998:62). In the early 1940s, Curitiba celebrated feast days in two major exhibition fairs marked by the style. The first was inaugurated by Vargas on March 29, 1942; the second, with its 'international' title on account of its Uruguayan, Dominican Republic, Polish and US companies' pavilions, was opened a year later to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the city. The design of these Curitiba pavilions, by Bruno Sercelli, reflected the architecture of other international exhibitions such as those of Paris (1937) and New York (1939). This influence was more explicit in

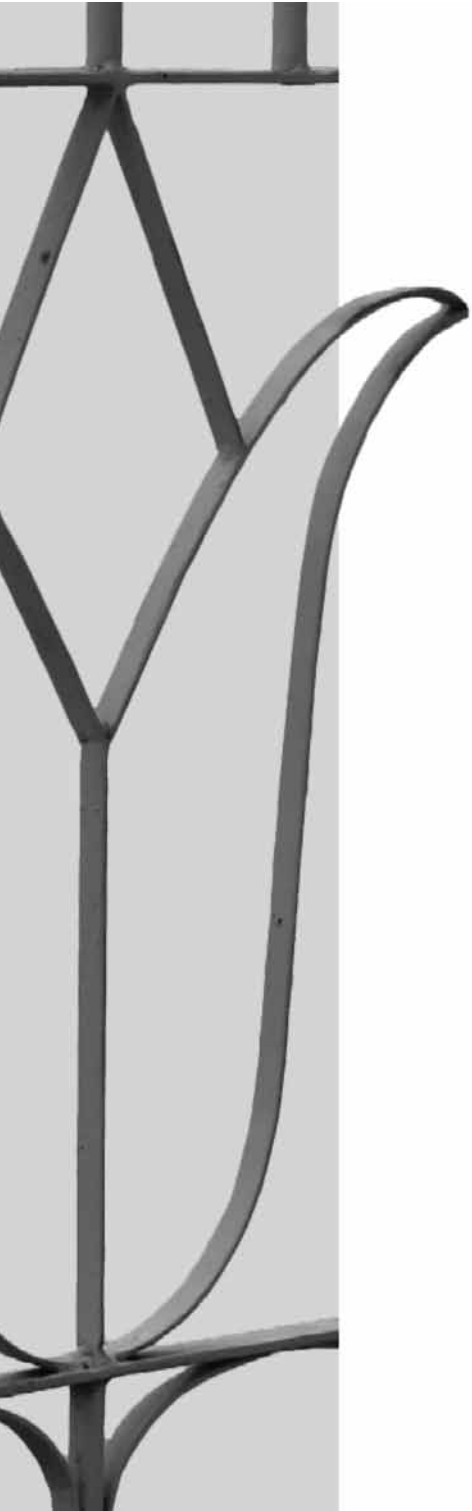
the pavilion built for the Marines, similar to that of the US Navy, designed for the New York exhibition (DUDEQUE, 2001:108).

The civic and patriotic celebration shown in the architecture of these events, with their severe modern lines, as the exhibition catalogue claimed, was transferred to the city streets, especially in the first high-rise buildings. It was grandiose architecture, inspired by classical archetypes which constituted a different symbolism, representing authoritarian ideologies and governments. Henceforth, it would always be remembered as the Getúlio Vargas New State architecture.

Curitiba, like other capitals at that time, was constructing more high-rise buildings. In many major Brazilian cities, the 1940s meant a predominance of Art Déco type or a variation of it with a rationalist content of high-rise buildings. In the late 20s, São Paulo already boasted of the Martinelli building with its eclectic airs, the A Noite building was constructed in Rio de Janeiro, where Perret's concepts of architecture with its reinforced concrete frames were followed by the déco style. Without forgetting the Oceania building in Salvador, a city which would also build within its traditional landscape another déco spectacle, the Elevador Lacerda (SEGAWA, 1998:64-65).

Nossa Senhora da Luz, built in Tiradentes Square in Curitiba was one of the most modern buildings of the period. With its three façades, one of which competed with one whole side of the neo-Gothic parish church, it was the first to break away from the landscape of eclectic housing in one of the earliest settlements in the city. With its architecture of straight lines, except for the two rounded corners, it is simple when compared to other works of the type in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but its simplified geometric shapes, which at the same time had no excessive decoration, in fact, became a model which was also followed in other buildings of that same period, such as the Pizzato, in Carlos Cavalcanti Street, and the Marumby, in Santos Andrade Square.

The buildings were widely advertised and were inevitably associated with the progress of the city. "Ten years later, Curitiba offers its visitors a new look, a real sign of development", said an article on the capital in the magazine *Vida Princesina* in 1946. When the city of that time was compared with that of the previous decade, it could be seen that the people had not changed, they had remained as cordial as ever, but the city's appearance had changed and the high-rise buildings



had contributed in no small way to this transformation. The Art Déco buildings, while considered modernity raised to a fine art by people accustomed to low construction, did in fact represent modernity, even though they were simple. In Curitiba, for this reason, the styles grouped together under that name, often competed simultaneously with the modernism shown in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo as being one more option rather than the result of a lack of knowledge of other architectures. The pragmatism of the many professionals involved, even without any clearly defined orientation, collaborated in opening up the people to the innovations and progress of a city which was continuously modernizing (BIANCO AND CAMPOS NETO).

However, despite the building work that left landmarks all over the city, they were not always adequately protected. There is a time gap when it comes to preservation of buildings of that period. The modernity that needed to be preserved in Curitiba, for example, skipped these years and went directly to the 1950s, when modern architecture, influenced by the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo schools really arrived. The result was that little was said, little research was done and a blind eye was turned to an entire building phase which is totally unrecognizable today. Whole blocks of town houses and detached houses were wiped out; buildings were altered without batting an eyelid.

The same law, which protects the eclectic and the modern, allowed Art Déco and its variations to disappear. The blame, if there is such, could be attributed to mere ignorance. What has no memory is not preserved and in order to have a memory, one must first of all get to know it and then own it. In order to own it, it must have an identity, and so... the circle continues. In this case, it is important to realize that a city which holds memories of different historical periods is a city which is confirmed as an urban space, which creates an image and appreciates a landscape.

However, a question arises: how do you preserve a city without paralyzing it in time, or worse still, without making it into a museum? The very dynamics of the urban setting cannot be interrupted, because before being cultural objects, cities are artifacts which are worked on daily. Accordingly, while a process of identification, inventory and research must be undertaken, memories too must be worked on, because we can only get to know the past through representations. And preservation is, to a certain extent, bringing the past into the present.

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