



Art Deco Trust (Inc) • Deco Centre, 163 Tennyson Street • P O Box 133, Napier NZ • Tel (06) 835 0022
Fax (06) 835 1912 • Email trust@artdeconapier.com Web Site www.artdeconapier.com

ART DECO TRUST INFORMATION SHEET 7

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WHY ART DECO?

A question that is often asked is "Why was Napier rebuilt in the Art Deco style?"

In fact, Napier wasn't rebuilt entirely in the Art Deco style, but it was the predominant one. The others were what is usually called "Stripped Classical", a simplified version of the Classical Revival style, with less ornate decoration and a flatter appearance than true classicism, and the Spanish Mission style which was popular in California and had been used in New Zealand and other "New World" countries since about 1915. There were also buildings designed by Louis Hay in a variation of the "Prairie Style", introduced by Frank Lloyd Wright and his followers in the mid-western United States around the turn of the 20th century.

We call Napier "Art Deco" because that was the predominant style, often combined with the other styles, and because all three styles are associated with the Art Deco era, generally accepted as being between 1920 and 1940, or the period between the two World Wars.

There were three reasons for the adoption of Art Deco and the other two associated styles -

- 1 Art Deco was modern. It was fashionable at the time of the Hawke's Bay Earthquake in 1931, especially in America which had already been a major influence on New Zealand architecture since the adoption of the Californian Bungalow as the most popular New Zealand house style early in the century. Napier wanted to be modern, because its past had been wiped away and couldn't be recaptured. To replace the ruins of the earthquake and fire with a modern city would give some meaning to the tragedy.
- 2 Art Deco was safe. The new buildings had to be built of concrete, the material then accepted as the one most resistant to earthquake and fire. Concrete lent itself to decoration by means of moulded shapes and low relief surface decoration, both common types of ornamentation in the Art Deco style. Decoration of this type would pose no threat in future earthquakes, unlike the ornaments on the old buildings - urns and other features balanced on parapets and high, ornate pediments on the street facades, many of which crashed into the streets, especially over entrances, as people fled from the buildings in terror during the earthquake.
- 3 Art Deco was cheap. Many of the building owners had to continue paying off the mortgage on their old building after it was destroyed because very few had earthquake insurance. Then they also had to pay off their new building. All this in the worst period of the great Depression. It's a wonder that they could afford to spend anything on beautifying them - but they did.

Although there were suggestions that a coordinated style be adopted in Napier, with the Spanish Mission architecture of Santa Barbara (also rebuilt after an earthquake in 1925) in mind, this didn't happen because of the shortage of money and the lack of any controls to impose on building owners. Each owner and their architect made their own decisions about the look of their building. But the reasons given above, the consistent use of concrete and the low heights of the buildings, imposed by economics and a psychological barrier following the earthquake, all resulted in a cohesive, harmonious townscape in which Art Deco is the unifying theme.