

Art Deco Napier

An assessment of Outstanding
Universal Value for the New Zealand
World Heritage Tentative List

SCIENCE FOR CONSERVATION 310



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A B S T R A C T

In 2006, Napier, New Zealand, was included as a site for further investigation on the New Zealand Tentative List of cultural and natural sites for consideration for World Heritage Status under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. This report commences with an analysis of Art Deco as an architectural movement within the context of 20th-century architecture. It then describes the Art Deco precinct of Napier, assesses it against the criteria of authenticity and integrity that World Heritage sites are expected to meet, and compares it with international sites that possess similar or related heritage values such as Santa Barbara, California, and Miami Beach, Florida. The report then assesses the heritage values of Napier, with its integrated townscape of small-scale buildings constructed in Art Deco and associated architectural styles in the years immediately following the earthquake of 1931, against the specific criteria for World Heritage sites. The report concludes that although Napier possesses high local and national heritage value, it does not meet the stringent requirement of World Heritage sites, which is that they possess cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.

Keywords: Art Deco, Napier, New Zealand, 20th-century architecture, World Heritage, UNESCO

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1. Introduction

The city of Napier, situated on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island, was a city of mainly Victorian and Edwardian buildings by the beginning of the 1930s. It serviced an extensive agricultural hinterland, and was both a port and seaside resort. On the morning of 3 February 1931, one of New Zealand's greatest natural disasters struck the city—an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, which devastated the city and resulted in 258 deaths. The initial earthquake devastated the masonry buildings of the central part of the city and the ensuing fires, which could not be contained because of broken water mains, destroyed most of those buildings that remained. Yet within 6 months the decision had been made to rebuild the city on its original site and the Napier Reconstruction Committee had been formed (Shaw & Hallett 1987: 6–7). However, rather than simply reconstructing what had been lost, the decision was made to continue the street-widening programme that had already begun prior to the earthquake, to splay street corners and place services, including electricity and telephone cables, underground. Verandas above shop fronts—a distinctive feature of New Zealand cities—were no longer to be supported from below by posts but instead were suspended from above. As a response to the failure of traditional load-bearing masonry buildings of brick and plaster during the earthquake, modern construction methods employing reinforced concrete were to be adopted for all new buildings. A height limit of two storeys was also imposed and projecting ornamental features were prohibited.

On their own, decisions about street layout, construction methods, building heights and the reticulation of utilities would not have produced the unified townscape that Napier exhibits today. Of critical importance was the recognition that the earthquake provided an opportunity to design a new city in a unified style, following the example of the Californian city of Santa Barbara, which had been rebuilt in a consistent, Spanish Colonial Revival style following an earthquake in 1925. The desirability of achieving architectural unity in the rebuilt city was advocated by the Napier *Daily Telegraph* in an article entitled 'Buildings of a Uniform Style', published on 16 February 1931, less than 2 weeks after the earthquake. Although the model of Santa Barbara's Spanish-influenced architecture was promoted, Napier's architects employed a more diverse range of styles, including Spanish Mission, Stripped Classical and what is now known as Art Deco. Nevertheless, the contributions of a small group of like-minded architects, working closely together over a concentrated period of little more than 2 years, produced a townscape that achieved a high degree of unity. In January 1933, the rebirth of the city was celebrated with a week-long carnival.

Today, Napier is internationally known for its extensive collection of early 1930s buildings in Art Deco and related styles. The unity of its central Art Deco precinct has been widely recognised and its success as a tourist destination is closely associated with its architectural character.

In 2006, Napier was included on the New Zealand Tentative List for consideration for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List. The UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage was adopted in 1972. Its purpose is to encourage 'the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value' (UNESCO 2008: 12). Inscription of Napier on the World Heritage List would provide recognition and protection of the site, and place it within the prestigious company of international World Heritage sites.

The purpose of this report is to assess Napier's Art Deco precinct against the criteria used to evaluate potential World Heritage sites, and to make comparisons between Napier and other cities that exhibit similar or related characteristics, in order to establish whether Napier possesses Outstanding Universal Value as defined in Section 49 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 2008). Outstanding Universal Value is defined as:

... cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole.

This report begins by examining what is meant by the term Art Deco and assessing the status of Art Deco as an architectural movement within the wider context of 20th-century architectural Modernism. It then describes the Art Deco precinct of Napier and examines evolving perceptions of this architecture from both national and international perspectives. The authenticity and integrity of the site are then examined to evaluate whether it meets these standards, both of which are essential for World Heritage listing. Because World Heritage listing requires that the value of sites must transcend those placed upon them by individual nations, a comparative analysis of Art Deco Napier has been made to assess its qualities alongside those of cities possessing similar or related characteristics. Finally, Napier is assessed against the six criteria set out in the *World Heritage Convention* to establish whether it meets the criterion of Outstanding Universal Value necessary for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

2. Art Deco: some problems of definition

Use of the term Art Deco to define the architectural character of Napier is now so thoroughly embedded in thinking about the city that it has obscured the stylistic diversity of the buildings contained within Napier's so-called Art Deco precinct. This problem of stylistic definition is not peculiar to Napier, as the term is extensively used without qualification to mean very different things, ranging from broad definitions that include almost all architecture dating from the late 1920s and 1930s, to very precise definitions that are based on specific stylistic traits.

The term Art Deco was given currency in 1968 by the English writer Bevis Hillier, who used it to define the artistic movement that derived from the stylistic tendencies that received their first widespread exposure at the 1925 *L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris (Hillier rev. ed. 1985). Hillier was not the first person to use the term, however, as he acknowledged. In 1966, it had appeared both in French (as 'Art Déco') in the subtitle of an exhibition devoted to the modern style of 1925 and in English (without an accent) in *The Times*. However, it was Hillier's 1968 book, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*, that led to the widespread adoption of the term. This usage was reinforced in 1971 by the exhibition *The World of Art Deco* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and by the accompanying catalogue, written by Hillier (Hillier 1971). The emphasis of both Hillier's book and exhibition was on the decorative arts, and discussion of architecture, where it occurred, was secondary. However, Hillier emphasised the parallel between Art Deco and the earlier movement, Art Nouveau, in which boundaries between architecture and the decorative arts had also been blurred.

It is worth quoting Hillier's working definition of Art Deco in full, as it forms the basis for all subsequent discussions of the style:

... an assertively modern style, developing in the 1920s and reaching its high point in the thirties; it drew inspiration from various sources, including the more austere side of Art Nouveau, Cubism, the Russian ballet, American Indian art and the Bauhaus; it was a classical style in that, like neo-classicism but unlike Rococo or Art Nouveau, it ran to symmetry rather than asymmetry, and to the rectilinear rather than the curvilinear; it responded to the demands of the machine and of new materials such as plastics, ferro-concrete and vita-glass; and its ultimate aim was to end the old conflict between art and industry, the old snobbish distinction between artist and artisan, partly by making artists adept at crafts, but still more by adapting design to the requirements of mass-production.

(Hillier rev. ed. 1985: 13)

This definition does not, however, address the conflict that existed between Art Deco and Modernism, which was visually encapsulated by Osbert Lancaster in 1938 in his witty comparative drawings of 'Modernistic' and 'Functional' interiors (Lancaster 1953). Art Deco was, in essence, a modern style that incorporated

applied decoration and was intended to appeal to a wide, popular audience. In contrast, Modernism was exclusive and intellectual, and emphasised the role of architecture in shaping society; as Watkin (1977) pointed out, it was a development of the ethical design theories of the 19th century. Modernism rejected any form of applied decoration and many Modernists claimed that it was not a style at all but rather the direct product of a rational process of design employing the materials of the modern age. Such claims have been disproved by Banham (1960), who convincingly argued that Modernism, as it developed in the 1920s and 1930s, was as much a style as the more mannered and self-conscious formal language of Art Deco. Nevertheless, as a result of the highly influential publications of the leading apologists of Modernism, in particular the Art Historians Sigfried Giedion (1967) and Nikolaus Pevsner (1960), as well as the more polemical writings of architects such as Le Corbusier (1927) and Walter Gropius (1935), Modernism was established as the architectural orthodoxy of the middle decades of the 20th century, dominating both the theory of architecture and the discourse of architectural history up to the present day. Nevertheless, since the 1960s the status of Modernism has been undermined by the increasing pluralism of architectural theory and the expanded concept of architectural history that has emerged. The publication of Hillier's book in 1968 can thus be seen as part of the wider reaction against the dominance of Modernism in histories of 20th-century architecture and design that occurred at this time.

The slow acceptance of Art Deco as an architectural style can be demonstrated by surveying successive editions of the widely-used *Penguin Dictionary of Architecture* (Fleming et al. 1991). First published in 1966, the *Penguin Dictionary* ignored the existence of Art Deco until its fourth edition in 1991—significantly, the first edition to be published after the death of Nikolaus Pevsner, the editor responsible for entries on 20th-century architecture. The *Penguin Dictionary* defines Art Deco as 'the fashionable Jazz Age style concurrent with INTERNATIONAL MODERN in the 1920s and 1930s... it is characterised by unfunctional "modernism"—e.g. streamlining motifs in architecture'. This definition would not, however, be acceptable to those American architectural historians, most notably David Gebhard, who draw a distinction between the Art Deco of the 1920s and the 'streamline moderne' of the 1930s. The former style is characterised by a preference for zigzag motifs, the latter for its use of sweeping curves, while the two styles are combined under the broader concept of the Moderne, as distinct from the Modern of the International Style (Gebhard & Winter 1985).

The recognition of Art Deco as a distinct style within architectural history began in the 1970s, notably with the book *Skyscraper style: Art Deco New York* (Robinson & Bletter 1975), which linked the forms associated with Art Deco to the New York skyscrapers of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The increased critical profile of Art Deco architecture that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s was, at least in part, a product of the questioning of Modernism that also took place at this time, coinciding with a recognition that the architecture of the first half of the century was much more diverse than most histories that privileged the role of Modernism had indicated. Profusely illustrated books on the Art Deco architecture of cities such as Miami Beach (*Tropical Deco*; Cerwinske 1981) and Los Angeles (*L.A. Deco*; Breeze 1991) directed public attention to buildings that

had hitherto been regarded as being of little cultural significance. Patricia Bayer's (1992) monograph *Art Deco Architecture: Design, Decoration and Detail from the Twenties and Thirties* emphasised the international spread of Art Deco, but also expanded the definition of the style to include buildings that spanned a range of stylistic idioms current during the period. Increasingly, Art Deco was defined as architecture that was *not* part of the Modern Movement. A more rigorous approach is found in Gebhard's (1996) *National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America*, a book that confined the style to the Zigzag and Streamline Moderne. However, if Gebhard's book represents a selective and critical approach, the large-scale exhibition devoted to Art Deco at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2003), one of a series of major exhibitions on the architectural and design movements of the 20th century, broadened the definition to a point where it was in danger of losing coherence; by covering the period from 1910 to 1939, a much wider range of styles was introduced to the already broad definition of Art Deco. In an essay on Art Deco architecture in the exhibition catalogue, Tim Benton questioned the very existence of Art Deco as an architectural style, suggesting that it was more appropriate to speak of buildings to which Art Deco decoration was applied (Benton et al. 2003: 245). This definition again serves to emphasise the difference between Art Deco and Modernism, which has already been described as a difference between an architecture that embraced applied decoration and one that rejected it.

Although the critical position of Art Deco is, in the first decade of the 21st century, more established than it has ever been, general histories of 20th-century architecture continue to give scant attention to Art Deco, and when it is discussed it is defined in terms of the normative values of Modernism. William J. Curtis (1996), writing in *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, described Art Deco as

... a loose affiliation of exotic and highly decorative tendencies... quite at odds with the fundamentalism and rigorous moral tenor of the new architecture... An armature of Beaux-Arts axial planning was cloaked in modern materials and elaborately decorated and coloured wall surfaces. The attitude behind such forms was far indeed from the ideals of dematerialization, 'honesty', and puritanism which were inherent in the smooth white planes and stark surfaces of the International Style.

(Curtis 1996: 290)

Such negative perceptions of Art Deco within the larger context of 20th-century architecture are widespread, and although outstanding individual examples of the style, such as the Chrysler Building in New York City, are held in high regard, lesser examples tend to be regarded as conservative manifestations of the modern spirit in design when compared with the progressive artistic and social ambitions of the Modern Movement. While acceptance of Art Deco as a populist, mass style is now widespread, and there is extensive academic recognition of Art Deco as an artistic movement, it has neither the artistic nor intellectual prestige of Modernism. Therefore, any claim for Outstanding Universal Value for Art Deco Napier must contend with this underlying negative perception of the style.

3. Description of the Napier Art Deco precinct

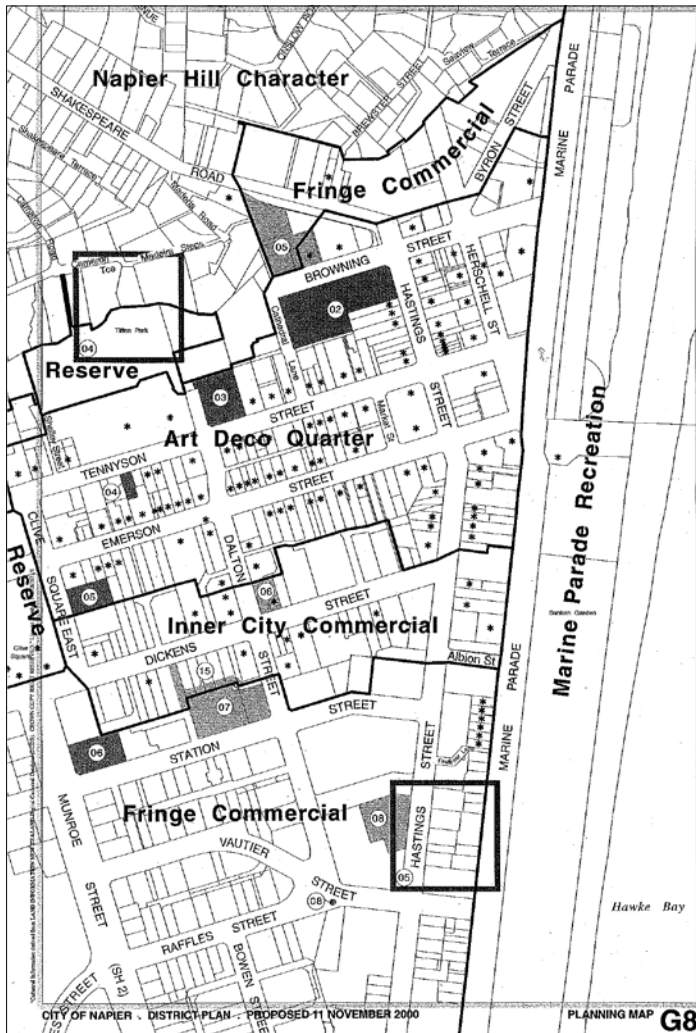


Figure 1. Art Deco Quarter, City of Napier, District Plan, 2000.

The Art Deco precinct of Napier incorporates approximately ten city blocks of the central business district, centred on Tennyson and Emerson Streets, and extending to Clive Square to the west and Marine Parade to the east (Fig. 1). This was the area of the city that was almost completely destroyed in the earthquake of 3 February 1931 and that was reconstructed in the course of the years that immediately followed. Within this area, the Art Deco style is the dominant architectural idiom, but buildings were constructed in a range of styles current at the time, including Spanish Colonial Revival, Prairie School, Stripped Classical and Moderne. There are, however, no examples of Modernism (as defined within contemporary avant garde European architectural discourse). Rather than detracting from the impact of the Art Deco buildings, these differing stylistic vocabularies add interest and variety to the streetscape, and do not seem incongruous because the scale, materials and methods of construction used throughout the area are remarkably consistent. This variety also reflects the fact that the term Art Deco has been applied retrospectively to the architecture of Napier (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Hastings Street looking northwest.

The reconstruction of central Napier occurred within a remarkably brief period of time, with a concentrated burst of activity between 1931 and 1933, followed by the completion of larger scale civic buildings over the next 3-5 years, in particular the Hawke's Bay Museum and Art Gallery (1936) and the Municipal Theatre (1937). A small number of buildings predating the earthquake survive within the area, including the former Court House (1875), Public Trust Office (1921) (Fig. 3), former Fire Station (1926) (Fig. 4) and former Diocesan Offices (1929) (Fig. 5). These buildings add a further dimension of stylistic diversity to the precinct, but are significant relics of the pre-earthquake period of the city's history, providing an important historical context for the buildings erected immediately following the earthquake. Although dating from after the Second World War, the Anglican Cathedral of St John the Evangelist (1955-65), the largest and most prominent building in the area, is of particular significance (Fig. 6). Just as the commercial buildings of Tennyson, Emerson and Hastings Streets testify to the rapid economic revival of the city, and the Municipal Theatre and Museum and Art Gallery to its cultural renewal, St John's Cathedral symbolises

Figure 3. Former Public Trust Office, Tennyson Street, built 1921.



Figure 4. Former Fire Station, Tennyson Street, built 1926.

