

# Book Review

Harwood, Elain, *Art Deco Britain: Buildings of the Interwar Years*, London: Batsford (2019), 272 pp., 125 ills. £25. ISBN 978-1 84994-527-1.

The label Art Deco was coined in 1966, in the title of an exhibition about an exposition, at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. *Les Années 25: Art déco, Bauhaus, Stijl, Esprit nouveau* explored the 1925 trade fair, also in Paris, which launched the new ‘style moderne’ as it was soon known. The shorthand ‘Art Deco’, adopted by Bevis Hillier in a 1968 book – *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s* – has stuck ever since.

That doesn’t, however, mean that the style is easy to pin down. Elain Harwood, in *Art Deco Britain: Buildings of the Interwar Years*, explains that ‘much of what we call Art Deco today is a simplified, but attractive, “moderne” style’, which perhaps prompts more questions than it answers. As Harwood admits, surveying the catchy tags given to contemporary design trends by Osbert Lancaster (functional, modernistic, Curzon Street Baroque, Vogue Regency), ‘today, “Art Deco” is an umbrella term for many of these idioms, for which there is no clear definition’. It is perhaps not surprising that the notion of architectural correctness or a national style was discredited in the wake of the First World War, in favour of architectural fluidity and fun. As Harwood explains: ‘architects were more aware of “a style for the job” than of one overriding idiom and no period embraced such diversity of building as the two decades between the world wars’.

The sources of Art Deco were as various as its products. Architects took inspiration from American classicism, the buildings of ancient Greece, Egypt, Africa, the Orient, the Mayan and Aztec empires, and the work of virtuosi like Adolf Loos in Vienna and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland. The result was a medley of stepped roof profiles, fluted pylons, silver or gold stippling on plaster finishes, low-relief sculpture, horizontal windows, and a series of simple motifs: sunbursts, fountains, dancers or figures in movement, abstracted wings. Industrial design influenced architecture, rather than the other way around, with blocks of flats that looked like ocean liners, cafés like cars. Designers exploited new construction techniques and materials: steel frames which allowed for column-less interiors and bold cantilevering canopies; faience in bright pastel colours; an opaque glass compound material known as Vitrolite; Bakelite, an early plastic. Ideas spread quickly, and globally, by car or ocean-liner, at international trade exhibitions, in the sophisticated

photography in architectural magazines and journals.

After an introductory essay summarising the principal themes, *Art Deco Britain* presents nine chapters, each covering a different type of building, with an entry per double-page-spread comprising a photograph and a short history and description. The text is engaging and succinct, with an eye for interesting details (who knew that Surbiton Station’s footbridge included ‘smoke deflectors’ to keep the pollution from the steam engines away from its bright white concrete?). The balance between historical narrative and architectural description is invariably well judged. This is catnip for the architecture tourist.

The chapter divisions are a little perplexing. ‘Houses and flats’ ranges from private commissions for wealthy clients (such as Eltham Palace) to speculatively built developer flats in the suburbs, which are surely a category difference; the gulf between the two types hinders this chapter in cohering into a compelling narrative. Offices, shops and showrooms, and industrial premises each get separate chapters, although often they were built for similar, if not the same, clients. In contrast, churches and public and institutional buildings are grouped together. Surely a place of worship is a different proposition to, say, a health centre or fire station? Part of the problem is, as Harwood so eloquently describes, the sheer diversity of influences and styles which we now categorise as Art Deco. The author has to impose some organisational principle, so why not a typological one? However, building type is most appropriate as a distinguishing factor when form follows function, when space planning is key to understanding the architecture - and this is frequently not the case with Deco buildings. So many are, as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown later observed, ‘decorated sheds’, an ornamented façade fronting a plain brick box, and it hardly matters whether it is a garage, a cinema or a branch of Marks & Spencer. This is not to say there aren’t some complex works of architecture in the Art Deco canon, including Cambridge University Library, the Daimler Garage in Bloomsbury, and Mounts Baths in Manchester. It is just difficult to see how they have anything to do with Alfredo’s, an Italian workers’ canteen on the Essex Road in Islington, the Dutch-colonial-style housing of Ealing Village or a Neo-Tudor pub in Brighton, apart from belonging to the same era. Art Deco is a broad church (although there were hardly any truly Deco churches).

One way of making sense of this plurality is via a chronological narrative. The style changed over the period, from the brash commercialism of the 1920s, which favoured modish surface ornament and conceived of buildings almost as advertisements, to the more serious-minded municipal modernism of the 1930s, when the public sector began to build more health centres, schools and town halls. Harwood’s introduction sets out these shifts and the socio-economic factors which drove them: expansion of the London Underground; new or wider roads; more leisure time; homes without servants; and then, later on, the impact of the Depression and the growth of the embryonic welfare state. Again though, the lens is often typology: ‘those buildings looking to impart an escapist or exotic image, such as cinemas, hotels and the entrances to blocks of flats, were rendered; in more serious public buildings the bands of brickwork were left exposed’.

Harwood describes ‘a decisive shift in architectural taste towards modernism... around 1933-4’. It would be interesting to learn more about the relationship between Art Deco and Modernism, two seemingly antithetical movements. ‘Modernist architecture and Art Deco have more common sources than their respective fans might admit’ is an astute observation. How to explain a conundrum like the Daily Express building on Fleet Street, probably the first curtain wall building in the UK, with a pioneering concrete portal frame by Owen Williams, yet housing a luxurious metallic foyer decorated with politically regressive murals depicting ‘Britain’ and ‘Empire’ by Eric Aumonier?

It is a shame there is no map of the entries, making it difficult for the architecture nuts of Instagram – at whom this book is surely aimed – to identify clusters of ‘must see’ Deco treasures. However, a map might have revealed the strong bias in Art Deco buildings towards London and the South East. This is not a criticism of the book, but rather a reflection of the dominance of the capital and the Home Counties in the economy of interwar Britain. Art Deco was, above all, the style of commerce, fuelled by inner-city and suburban development and a consumer boom in cars and household conveniences and the factories needed to make them (Firestone Tyres, The Hoover Building). The booming South was, naturally, the locus of Art Deco. This hints at the darker side of Deco: the style that put a shiny gloss on untrammelled commercial development; the style of fossil fuel; the style of western colonialism, for example in Eritrea; the style of global Californication, of American architecture

in Havana, Buenos Aires and Mumbai.

Still, to get back to Britain, and the book, it is no surprise that, judging by the photographs, the buildings in areas of economic deprivation have suffered the greatest degree of dereliction and decay since their interwar heyday: the pithead baths at Chatterley Whitfield Colliery in Stoke-on-Trent, Littlewoods in Liverpool, the Dex garage in Newcastle. Or rather, it is these buildings which have not experienced any regeneration in recent decades. There are, hearteningly, many good news stories of Deco revival in these pages. In London: BBC Broadcasting House; the former Regent’s Palace Hotel, now Brasserie Zedel; the Carreras factory and the Oxo Tower, now offices; the Daily Express on Fleet Street. Further afield: India of Inchinnan in Renfrewshire; the Forum, Bath; the Philharmonic in Liverpool; Liverpool Airport, now a hotel; the Midland Hotel in Morecambe, still a hotel (and a rare example of Deco-led investment in a depressed economy). The book marks the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Twentieth Century Society, whose vital campaigning work has ensured these buildings have not been demolished in the type of unplanned development that – ironically – many of them represented in their own time. It is interesting that many of the restorations, which the author takes care to note, took place in the 1990s, the era of Terry Farrell’s M16 building and James Stirling’s No 1 Poultry. Art Deco, perhaps, never goes out of fashion for long.

It would be easy to dismiss this book as a ‘coffee-table’ publication (and neat, given the coffee table emerged as a commodity in the luxurious interiors of the interwar period). Some of the hallmarks of the showpiece publication are in evidence: the bold graphics and drenched colours of the front cover, frontispiece and title-pages; the plentiful and (mostly) high-quality photographs taking up at least a full page for each building; the short, punchy descriptions, not much more than extended captions; but that would be a gross underestimation. In fact, *Art Deco Britain* is the fruit of decades of diligent research and decisive contributions to statutory casework (both listing and planning advice) on the part of the author, who works for Historic England. The book is also a testament to the way in which architectural amenity societies like the Twentieth Century Society combine scholarly research, publications, events, campaigning and advocacy to support the preservation of historic buildings such as these.

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