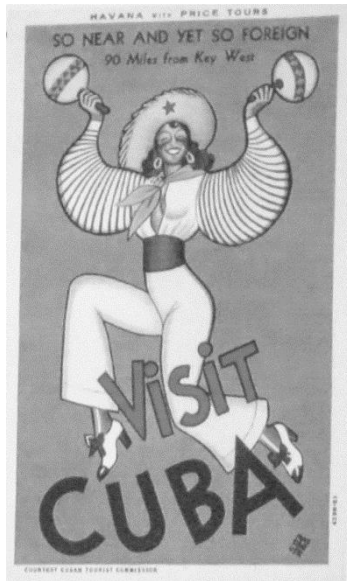


“Art Deco Architecture: A Heritage of Undeniable Value”

Text & Photos by Bruce Hamilton, AIA

Art Deco occupies a preeminent position within the context of twentieth century Cuban architecture. The influence of this decorative trend, which successfully integrated architecture interior design and industrial design, manifested in a wide variety of programs throughout the island. Art Deco symbolized modernity and spread rapidly throughout the country.

Traveling throughout Havana our tour group was able to visit all types of Art Deco structures, from public, industrial, private residence and apartment houses. It was used in the design of public open-air spaces and left its imprint on monuments and sculptures. Also noteworthy are the great



Globetrotting in a Vintage Car, Havana Cuba

variety and large number of tombs and mausoleums in Cuban cemeteries that incorporated the Art Deco aesthetics. The mausoleum of the celebrated Catalina Lisa in the Cristobal Colon cemetery is the most significant example.

According to our tour guide, and the numerous lectures we attended, three trend characteristics of Art Deco are prominent in the context of Havana - the geometric, the aerodynamic and the monumental. The first is identified by its stylized geometric forms, with the plane and line as the principal elements; the presence of simplified ornaments attached to traditional figures such as the circle, square and the triangle; and the repeated use of forms such as lighting, waves and plants among others. Another feature of this trend is the predominant verticality of the architectonic components, both stylistic and functional as well as the scale elements of construction, such as beams capitals, rails, spaces and bars. The crowning of the building is also an important component for emphasizing verticality and geometric form; a broken and zigzag parapet is common along with pilasters or vertical bands that extend from the ground floor to above the parapet.



Deteriorated Apartment Building

The aerodynamic trend is strongly related to the so-called streamline Modern style. They are designs that are characterized by massiveness and rounded angles that soften the massive. This variable reproduces nautical forms that reflect modern times and are identified with the machine era. Elements of naval architecture, such as circular windows, bars and tubular metallic handrails. And continuous walls are common in the stream line designs. The three trends frequently overlap and the result is easily recognized as Art Deco.



High Degree of Deterioration to Residential House

The monumental trend is known in Cuba as Modern Monumental and is inspired by the forms of classical architecture with the predominance of colonnades, arcades, and monumental porches of double or triple the height of a single story. In general, columns and piers have neither a base nor capital and their shaft, whether of rectangular, circular or polygonal section, is plain. The design of interior spaces likewise rests on monumentality and is characterized by the presence of great lobbies of several levels that occupy the center of the spatial composition.

Unfortunately, a characteristic common to almost all Art Deco buildings in Cuba is their state of preservation. A number of important Art Deco structures that we visited have been lost forever and others no less significant show a high degree of deterioration with respect to both the structure and the decorative details. The loss of their multicolored floors, decorative ceilings, light fixtures and exquisite Art Deco façade ornamentation is a testimony to the complete apathy and abandonment to which these buildings have been subjected.



Exterior Photo of Museo de Artes Decorativas



Partial View of Deteriorated Residence

The collection of Art Deco buildings constructed from the final years of the 1920's through the 1940's represents a heritage of undeniable value. Our tour group consisting of architects from across the United States agreed. These structures must be preserved for future generations.