

INTRODUCTION

Art Deco was a design movement that captivated the world between the two world wars. It eventually touched all aspects of style, influencing the appearance of everything from perfume vaporizers to gas station pumps, vacuum cleaners to cocktail shakers, and fashions to automobiles (Grief, 1975: 36). However, in terms of its impact on the cultural landscape, Art Deco's influence was most significant through architecture. Architecture embodies the beliefs and values of society and "[its] buildings, like landscapes, are cultural artifacts." (Lanier and Herman, 1997: 4). Cultural geographers have measured the diffusion and spatial extent of architectural features as metaphors for determining the broader patterns of culture across the humanized landscape (Kniffen, 1965: 549-77). Of particular interest is the degree to which cultural phenomena penetrate and are absorbed into the "ordinary," or everyday, landscape (Meinig, 1979: 15).

The purpose of the present study is to establish the geographical extent of Art Deco architecture and the particular diffusion pathways it followed. Many students of Art Deco architecture portray it as a style dominated by the social, political and business elite, and confined geographically to a select number of high order urban centers, in Europe and particularly North America (Bayer; 1988; Capitman, 1994; Gebhard, 1996).

As Franci et al (1997:20) noted, “the Deco style in America found its way into the urban setting, particularly in Chicago and Manhattan, with that absolutely unique and original contribution: the skyscraper.” Bayer (1988:11) adds: “the most complete expression of Art Deco architecture is, of course, the skyscraper, that symbol of success, industry and capitalism.” Most scholars appear to have overlooked the possibly much wider diffusion of Art Deco architecture to less urban areas of the cultural landscape. To address this question, this study will examine the way Art Deco has diffused in the state of Delaware.

Delaware is broadly representative of national ordinary landscapes. Its largest city, Wilmington, is its link to the wider national cultural diffusion network. Beyond Wilmington, small towns dispersed among a largely agricultural landscape prevail. At the time of Art Deco’s prominence, Wilmington was the only candidate in the state where skyscraper construction was economically viable. If Art Deco architecture was considered a largely urban, elite, phenomenon, then only in Wilmington would one expect to find examples of the Art Deco style. However, on the basis of a detailed search for Art Deco structures in Delaware, this study will argue a contrary position. Far from being an exclusively urban design feature bound to a select set of cities, Art Deco “escaped” its high order urban image, diffusing into the ordinary landscape. Furthermore, it will be suggested that the particular diffusionary routes Art Deco took as it spread across the state may reveal pathways followed by other cultural elements that compose Delaware’s broader cultural landscape. Finally, given the extent of Art Deco

architectural examples in Delaware, it will be argued that its present-day survivals deserve far more attention from cultural preservationists.

This study is arranged in five principal parts. The first chapter describes the Art Deco movement and defines the architectural features that compose the Art Deco style. A sketch of the diffusion of Art Deco at the national level follows, focusing chronologically on the key cities in the urban hierarchy in which the style predominated, and concluding with an assessment of the likely diffusion of Art Deco into the lower order urban hierarchy. Chapter Two examines the methodology undertaken for this study and the way in which the survey instrument was developed to identify all Art Deco features in Delaware. Chapter Three proceeds to report the geographical pattern Art Deco took as it spread through the state, based on the survey data, and assesses the degree to which the paths followed were in accord with predicted cultural geographic theory. A fourth chapter provides an analysis of Delaware's Art Deco examples, chronologically and geographically arranged to match the diffusion paths described in the previous chapter. Two final chapters evaluate the original hypothesis concerning the extent and paths of diffusion followed by Art Deco and examine the fate of present-date survivals.