In 1925 the 'Belfast News-Letter' published a small architectural drawing as an example of 'Modern City Architecture'. The drawing was of Vigo House in the commercial heart of London's fashionable West End. The supplementary information in the caption, that accompanied the drawing, stated that "C.R.W. Nevinson, the famous artist, has described it as the only building on Regent Street worth a second look." Vigo House was a menswear shop and is a typical example of the style of architecture that evolved in the 1920s and 1930s out of the relationship between retail architecture and Art Deco.

Art Deco was a style that emerged in the twentieth-century's inter-war years that embraced new technologies, new discoveries and also new forms of architecture. The term Art Deco is, of course, a derivative of the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925 and it is also a well-known neologism coined by the critic Bevis Hillier in the 1960s (after it had gained widespread use in the world of dealers). As a decorative style it flourished and spread through all forms of art and design and was applied with equal rapidity to all sorts of architecture. Its distinctive modern (but not Modernist) aesthetic, which is nowadays associated with zigzags and geometric shapes, was largely inspired by the visual fusion of the jazz music and industrial streamlining of the new machine age, modern art movements such as Cubism and Constructivism, ancient cultures especially Egyptian, Aztec, Mayan and even Celtic, and new innovations and new materials such as plastics and bakelite, aluminium and chrome.

Although we associate Art Deco with cosmopolitan cities it did flourish beyond the metropolis. Art Deco architectural embellishment spread across the decades of the 1920s and 1930s and it is most evident in the new commercial architecture of the high street as well as buildings associated with the consumption of new technologies and leisure. In the high street it became particularly associated with companies such as Burton's, Woolworths and the Co-op.

"More often than not Art Deco architecture, in its most full-blown manifestations, was associated with fantasy and escape."
Belfast's Art Deco architecture is associated with the increasing consumption of fashion, in many ways, recalls an age of luxury and opulence. The King's Hall at Balmoral on the Lisburn Road, built by A. Leitch & Partners, London and Glasgow for the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (1933-34), with its soaring electric bolt decorative motifs, also looks worrisomely empty and defunct.

Not all of Belfast’s Art Deco architecture is uncared for and forgotten. The King’s Hall at Balmoral on the Lisburn Road, built by A. Leitch & Partners, London and Glasgow for the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (1933-34), while

Above / Former Burton’s shop, Royal Avenue

Below / Art Deco decoration on Burton’s facade

> Belfast was no exception to this trend and has rich examples of Art Deco buildings made for such companies, all of which are presently at great risk.

As the 1925 article in the ‘Belfast News-Letter’ pointed out Vigo House was a menswear store and the relationship between menswear and modernity, between male sartorial style and the creation of physical spaces remains as hidden from history as the forgotten architecture that once encased it. The association between women’s fashion and such spaces is much better understood. In the 1920s and the 1930s the ‘Belfast News-Letter’ offered daily fashion advice for women and also published reports on the latest Parisian trends, which were available at Belfast’s great department stores such as Anderson & McKay’s, Robinson & Cleaver’s, and even the Cooperative Society or Co-op as it was known.

The store built for the Belfast Co-operative Society in 1933 by Samuel Stevenson, on York Street, is a key example of Art Deco architecture in the city. Known as the Orpheus Building Stevenson’s four-storey structure was for much of the length of York Street until near to its intersection at Frederick Street. The restrained facade of red-brick hides much exuberant Art Deco decoration inside. From the wainscot wood-paneling and stained glass on the central stairwell to the remarkable stucco plasterwork, with zigzag, sunburst and floral motifs, on the wonderfully curved and gorgeously white ceiling of the Orpheus ballroom on the top-floor of the building. This building acted as an extension for the Belfast School of Art, located on the opposite side of York Street, since the closure of the Co-op in the late 1980s. It is now the city campus for the University of Ulster, who recently acquired it.

Several other Art Deco buildings in the vicinity also presently languish. The former Sinnott’s department store on the on the junction of Royal Avenue and North Street has been vacant for several years. Designed by James Scott in 1935 its façade on North Street today is hardly recognisable as part of a former major department store on a prestigious large corner site in the city centre. Along North Street many other buildings from the 1930s and 1940s are slowly sinking into rack and ruin. The Bank of Ireland on the opposite corner to Sinnott’s on the junction of Royal Avenue and North Street, completed in 1950 by Joseph Dennes of McDowell and Shan of Dublin, is a sad ode to its former self. In distinctive Art Deco towers metal fenestration, metal doors, figurative carving and lettering all remain intact but look more and more vulnerable in its derelict state. Similarly, Thomas Rippington’s remarkable Telephone House and Central Telephone Exchange on the corner of Cromac Street and Moy Street (1933-34), with its striking electric bolt decorative motifs, also looks worrisomely empty and defunct.

Hall at Queen’s University by McSeaghd and Edward Maupl (1937 and completed after the war), and the Ritz Hall at Belfast Zoological Gardens on the Antrim Road, built by David Boyd Downes of McDowell and Dixon of London. It is a three-storey Art Deco tower, metal decoration which surely singles this out as worth saving. The Burton’s store on Greenwich’s Nelson Street, south-east London, built in 1933, has similar elephant head decorations. The building on Belfast’s Ann Street has been derelict for several years, it has lost its distinctive façade lettering but it is still recognisable as a vestige of its former glory.

More often than not Art Deco architecture, in its most full-blown manifestations, was associated with fantasy and escape. Cinemas embodied this more than any other form of architecture and although a few of Belfast’s cinemas from the inter-war years survive some, such as the Curzon on the Ormeau Road and the Strand on the Holywood Road, both designed by James Neill in the 1930s, survive as examples of cinema’s ‘glorious age’. Others such as the Stadium on the Shankhill Road now partly survives as a leisure centre, and the Ritz built by Kemp and Tacker of London in 1935 maintained its role as a cinema well into the late twentieth century becoming the ABC but was recently demolished to make way for a hotel.

These examples show how the saving of such Art Deco architecture adds much to our contemporary built environment and much more needs to be done to ensure the survival of those Art Deco structures that are still standing. The largest Art Deco building in Belfast’s city centre that four-storey store built for Woolworth’s on High Street in 1930 by F.W. Woolworth & Co. of Liverpool, the giant plinths with Egyptian decoration are explained by the fact the Burton’s also had premises on this large site between the 1930s and the 1990s, still functions as a major shop (for the Irish chain Dunnes). This edifice, in many ways, recalls an age as well as types of buildings, types of shops and modes of consumption, which are now almost extinct. Belfast’s Art Deco buildings, as such, are more than vestiges of an age gone by but tangible remnants of culture that is now falling out of living memory.

Joseph McBrinn