

FEATURE: BELFAST'S FORGOTTEN ART DECO



Above / Vigo House, London, 1925

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

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Above / Derelict Art Deco building on North Street

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. ▶



Above / Stained glass window in Orpheus Building



Right / Plasterwork in Orpheus Building, details

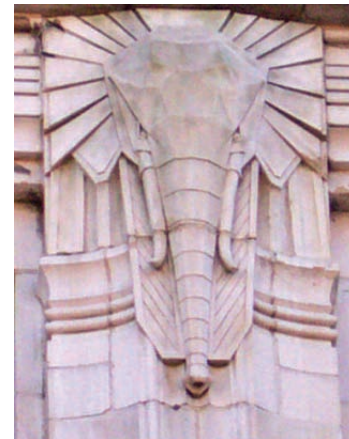
Far right / Belfast Co-Op Orpheus Building





Left / Former Burton's shop, Ann Street

Below / Art Deco decoration on Burton's façade



► 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 & McAuley's, Robinson & Cleaver's, Arnott's and even the Co-operative Society or Co-op as it was known.

The store built for the Belfast Co-operative Society in 1932 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 runs for much of the length of York Street until near to its intersection at Frederick Street. The restrained façade of red-brick hides much exuberant Art Deco decoration inside. From the wainscot woodpanelling and stained glass on the



central stairwells 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 revealed major redevelopment plans for the campus including the razing of all but the Orpheus building's façade. Already the uniqueness of the Orpheus ballroom has been largely lost by its division with a rather unsightly mezzanine floor to accommodate more students. The loss of perhaps one of the city's most important Art Deco interiors is indicative of how the remarkable architecture of the period is treated in twenty-first century Belfast.

In 1930 the psychoanalyst J.C. Flügel may have published his theory of 'the great masculine renunciation of fashion' in his 'The Psychology of Clothes' but in the 1920s and 1930s many of the new Art Deco spaces created in response to the increasing consumption of fashion were for spaces for the selling of menswear. Best known of all the high street companies is perhaps Burton's, founded as a retailer selling ready-made men's suits, by the entrepreneur Montague Burton, just after 1900. Belfast got its first purpose-built Burton's menswear store in 1933. The building on the corner of Ann Street and Telfair Street was designed by Harry Wilson of London. It is a three-storey Art Deco building with a remarkable decorative faïence façade which includes stylized geometric patterning derived from Egyptian design and two elephant heads crowning the columns. Few Burton's buildings had such ornate ►

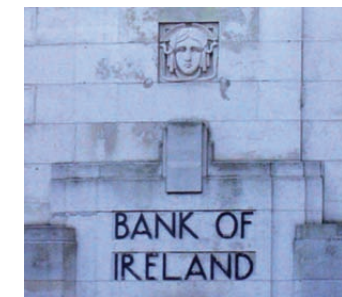
► decoration which surely singles this out as worth saving. The Burton's store on Greenwich's Nelson Street, south-east London, built in 1932, has similar elephant head decorations. The building on Belfast's Ann Street has been derelict for several years, it has lost its distinctive façade lettering but it is still recognizable as a vestige of its former glory.

Several other Art Deco buildings in the vicinity also presently languish. The former Sinclair's department store 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 recognizable 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 1920s and 1930s are slowly sinking into rack and ruin. The Bank of Ireland on the opposite corner to Sinclair's on the junction of Royal Avenue and North Street, completed in 1930 by Joseph Downes of McDowell and Dixon of Dublin, is a sad spectre of its former self. Its distinctive Art Deco tower, metal fenestration, metal doors, figurative carving and lettering all remain intact but it looks more and more vulnerable in its derelict state. Similarly, Thomas Ripplingham's remarkable Telephone House and Central Telephone Exchange on the corner of Cromac Street and May Street (1932-34), with its striking electric bolt decorative motifs, also looks worryingly empty and defenceless.

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), Whitla

Right / Bank of Ireland, Royal Avenue

Below / Bank of Ireland, detail



Hall at Queen's University by McGeagh and Edward Maufe (1937 and competed after the war), and the Floral Hall at Belfast Zoological Gardens on the Antrim Road, built by David Boyd (1935-6) are all good examples of how well such architecture can function in a contemporary way.

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,



Above / Detail of Art Deco decoration on Telephone House, Cromac Street



Above / Former Woolworth's building on High Street



both designed by James Neill in the 1930s, survive as examples of cinema's 'glorious age'. Others such as the Stadium on the Shankill Road now partly survives as a leisure centre, and the Ritz built by Kemp and Tasker 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 pilasters 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. ●

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