

JOHANNESBURG METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

HERITAGE ASSESSMENT SURVEYING FORM

Compiled by: Dr JJ Bruwer, 2002-07-29

JJ Bruwer ©
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NAME OF PLACE: ASTOR MANSIONS



Photograph: Catharina JM Bruwer.

Previous/alternative name/s :
:
:

LOCATION: Street : corner Jeppe and Von Brandis
 Street number : 178 Jeppe
 : (77 Von Brandis corner 178 Jeppe)
 Stand Number : 1094
 Previous Stand Number: 1259
 Block number : AU
 Suburb : Johannesburg
 GIS reference :

ZONING: Current use/s :
 Previous use/s :

DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:

Height : 46m
Levels above street level : eleven and a half
Levels below street level :
On-site parking :
(CJMB)

"Astor Mansions is a close contemporary of Barbican Building and, like its rival, was intended to be ten storeys high. But when it was realised that this would give pre-eminence in the Johannesburg skyline to the Barbican Building, the architects were instructed to increase the height by any means possible. Astor Mansions was completed in 1932, and with its eleven storeys and accoutrements it epitomises the prestige attached to height, for this is the highest point that the 1920s surge reached. At the lower and intermediate levels are the modernised classical detail characteristic of Johannesburg's 1920s architecture. But at the attic storey, new influences from New York had become predominant. A round arch inset with the name 'Astor Mansions' (intended to be visible above the surrounding buildings) and a serrated plastered pattern prepare one for the two incredible phallic pinnacles that project the imagery of the early-twentieth-century metropolis. These twin spires gave Astor Mansions its temporary pre-eminence as Johannesburg's tallest building. The spires, with a characteristic cascade shape, are a plastered interpretation of the stainless-steel pinnacles of New York's the highest skyscraper, the Chrysler Building of 1928-30. They express newness, noticeability, visibility, prominence – and the one word that encapsulates all these qualities: lettability. As we have noticed, even the 'Astor Mansions' echoes the New York of 1930, the year the Waldorf-Astoria was nearing completion. The Englishness of the 1920s is practically over. We have passed the moment of transition (above the tenth floor of Astor Mansions), and the predominant Americanisms of the 1930s have arrived on the Johannesburg skyline. Soon Johannesburg will be repeatedly called little New York".
(Chipkin, C.M.: Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...).

"Designed by Obel & Obel in 1931, *Astor Mansions* was a forerunner of a building type familiar later in the decade. Twelve storeys high, with complicated twin turrets, the pale grey building was weightily decorated in the Art Deco-Jazz style, yet still bearing rusticated corners in the manner of other times and other building methods. The square-plan corner building is zig-zagged by jutting bays and tiers of balconies which, towards the top of the building, alternate, bay over balcony and vice versa. Centrally placed in the towers are huge round-topped windows, their curve being important to the otherwise angular design of the towerblock. Curving around the corner of Jeppe and Von Brandis Streets, the street verandah forms a plinth, the whole structure appearing as though standing upon slender columns".
(Historical Buildings in South Africa, Désirée Picton-Seymour, Struikhof Publishers, 1889, Cape Town.)

"One Hundred Places of Outstanding Cultural, Historical, Architectural, and Natural Interest in Johannesburg
Compiled by the Johannesburg 100 Committee...
24. *Astor Mansions*, 1932/178 Jeppe Street, cnr Von Brandis Street, City"
(<http://www.amethyst.co.za/JhbGuide/JhbTop100.htm>)

At its completion at the end of 1932, the *second Castle Mansions* (see AE-2) was considered by many as a building of special qualities. According to Chipkin, it was "the first modern building of the 1930s built in Eloff Street. Commenced in 1931, it took the contractors John Barrow sixteen months to complete what was advertised as the 'greatest building in South Africa': greatest in size (a whole city block in length), greatest in bulk (massive, symmetrical, fortress-like) and greatest in height. Its pre-eminence in the Johannesburg skyline was not based on its mandatory ten-storey elevation but on the height of its central Art Deco flagmast. It was regarded as the most modern building of its day, noted for its modern plateglass shop-fronts, with Art Deco brass trim and modernistic illuminated shop signage, its first-floor plateglass showroom windows and its dramatically modern entrance with sans-serif name letters. The previous competition for height had been won in the beginning of 1932 by Astor Mansions, eleven storeys high and 150 feet to the apex of its spire. This had surpassed Barbican Building [see S-1] 140 feet to top of its attic sculpture) and Shell House, which was the *South African Builder* of 1931, in an attempt at fair adjudication, recorded as 148 feet 9 inches to the top of its lift tower. Thus Astor Mansions held its pre-eminence by a mere 1 foot 3 inches 9375 millimetres). Now came Castle Mansions – massive ocean liner of a building, ten storeys high with a central attic tower and flagmast which the owners declared was 180 feet 7¼ inches (55 048 millimetres) above the pavement – a new height record for Johannesburg, superseding the short-lived claims of Astor Mansions, which had been completed only a few months earlier. But that seven and a

quarter inches to the top ferrule of the flagmast on Castle Mansions did not in the end help much. Within five years a stepped infill building such as Annan House in Commissioner Street [see BC-2] was five floors higher than Castle Mansions, and by the end of the decade there were at least five real skyscrapers visible at the new record height-levels of the pre-war period: these held pre-eminence until they in turn were swamped by the building scale of the 1960s and 1970s.”
(Chipkin, C.M.: Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society...).

CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:

Walls: plastered brick.
Roof: corrugated iron to towers; flat, concrete.
Windows: steel casement.
(CJMB)

SITE FEATURES:

ALTERATIONS:

INTEGRITY:

INSCRIPTION:

‘One of the first high-rise buildings in Johannesburg, “Astor” referred to an extremely wealthy American family whose fortune came from real estate in New York, thus linking it to the grand apartment buildings and skyscrapers of Manhattan. In 1932 with the name emblazoned on glass between the twin towers, the architects, Obel & Obel, were able to meet their brief to make it the tallest building in town.’
(<http://home.intekom.com/parktown/artdeco/>)

ARCHITECT:

Obel & Obel
‘...the partnership in Johannesburg between Louis Theodore OBEL and Mark OBEL about 1929 1936 and renewed circa 1940. In about 1929 LT Obel moved to Durban where he set up a Durban office, retaining partnership in Johannesburg. Both travelled to America independently around 1941. While studying in America, they built two blocks of seasonal letting appartments in Miami, Florida, in 1942... (Architects In South Africa 1780 – 1940; Draft manuscript, J Walker & G M van der Waal, 1992, HSRC, Pretoria.)

BUILDER:

CONSTRUCTION DATE:

Date on plans : August 1931
Approval of plans :
Completion date : 4 March 1932
(CJMB)

BUILDING STYLE:

Art Deco - New York. 1930s.

Architectural Merit: “An incredibly well articulated art deco corner building.”
(Johannesburg Building, Space & Urban Feature Classification, 1998: Inner City).

“By the 1930 Traditional Style had become the basis for stylistic renewal, as was manifested by the imitation rustic work, pillars, pilasters and mouldings used together with, for example, Art Deco form and ornamentation elements in *Astor Mansions* (1931-2)”.
(Van Der Waal, G-M.: From Mining Camp to Metropolis...) See also BUILDING STYLE.

“n Goeie voorbeeld van n gebou waar Art Deco ornament beide as dekoratiewe panel en ekspressiewe element diens doen. Veral die boonste deel van die gebou is besonder ekspressief. Die skulpturele torings bo-op die gebou is uniek in die Johannesburgse argitektuurtoneel van die vroeë

dertiger jare.”

Opname Historiese Geboue In Johannesburg, Second Report June 1976, Inner City, RAU, unpublished.

BUILDING TYPE:

This is a shop to street and residential building. (CJMB)

ENVIRONMENT:

The area surrounding the building is neglected and forgotten by the owners and the fathers of the city. This neglected building impacts negatively on the image of the City of Johannesburg, as it is in the vicinity of the *Johannesburg Supreme Court*, which receives regular media attention. (CJMB)

CONDITION:

Health Department definition: Bad 3. “Building occupied by squatters.”
(Johannesburg Building, Space & Urban Feature Classification, 1998: Inner City).

Apexhi Prop Ltd. owns the following buildings situated on Block AU:

Arop House (AU-3) - (Registration Date: 2003-02-04).

Tower House (AU-4) - (Registration Date: 2003-02-04).

Astor Mansions (AU-5) - (Registration Date: 2003-02-04).

The three-abovementioned buildings are extremely neglected and after three years of ownership the situation have not been rectified in any way. (CJMB)

URGENT ACTION:

This building is a shadow of the original and drastic action is needed to save what is left of the original fabric of the building. (CJMB)

SAHRA RECORD REGARDING ALTERATIONS, RENOVATIONS, RESTORATION:

PROTECTION STATUS: (under National Heritage Resources Act, 1999)

General protection:	Section 34(1) structure/s	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Formal protection:	provincial heritage site	<input type="checkbox"/>
	national heritage site	<input type="checkbox"/>
	provisional protection	<input type="checkbox"/>
	heritage area	<input type="checkbox"/>
	listed in provincial heritage resources register	<input type="checkbox"/>

Relevant Gazette Notice:

Gazette description:

FORMER PROTECTION STATUS: (under National Monuments Act, 1969)

NOTES:

DEEDS INFORMATION:

Ownership: C B D Kerk Street (Pty) Ltd.
Document: T7130/1982
Amount:

Ownership: Horta Prop Inv (Pty) Ltd.
Document: T7130/1982
Amount: R NIL

Ownership: Apexhi Prop Ltd.

Registration Date: 2003-02-04
Document: T5684/2003
Amount: R24308 146.00

PRE-HISTORY OF SITE:

HISTORY:

'Facts

- One of the first high-rise buildings in Johannesburg, "Astor" referred to an extremely wealthy American family whose fortune came from real estate in New York, thus linking it to the grand apartment buildings and skyscrapers of Manhattan.'
(<http://www.emporis.com/en/wm/bu/?id=196898>)

"Have a speedy bath in an Art Deco house

April 17, 2002

By Lucille Davie

...Johannesburg's Chrysler

Further down Plein Street is Johannesburg's equivalent of New York's Chrysler building - *Astor Mansions*. Built in 1932, it echoes the round arch inset at the top of the Chrysler, with "*Astor Mansions*" in the arch. At the time, with its two spires and flagpole - a reminder of ocean liners - and its 11 storeys, it was the tallest building in the city.

Its wrought iron balconies, simple columns at street level and threesome horizontal lines up the building make it a valuable Art Deco building in the city.

But *Astor Mansions* didn't hold the title of tallest building for long - by 1933 Castle Mansions was complete. Advertised as "another magnificent city building", although only 10 storeys high, its tall flagpole helped it take the honour. Described by Chipkin as "a massive ocean liner of a building", it was as long as a whole block, but as with so many of Johannesburg's great buildings, it has been demolished..."

(<http://www.joburg.org.za/april2002/artdeco.stm>)

'Location: Sunday 25 Aug 2002 > Travel

City of industrialism

Art

Mike Alfred takes a trip through Art Deco Johannesburg

A resident enters the foyer of his apartment block in downtown Joburg and finds his access to the elevator blocked by a crowd studying the shiny brass panels on the elevator walls. A dynamic, voluble woman is declaiming their attractiveness. The man waits. She talks on. Her audience doesn't budge. His face sets in annoyance.

Eventually the woman apologises for delaying him and compliments him on the beautiful building in which he lives. She is Flo Bird, leader of the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust, and she is leading a Saturday-afternoon tour of the city's Art Deco architecture.

The building they are enjoying is Normandie Court, on the corner of Kerk and Delvers streets, designed by Leopold Grinker in the late 1930s. Probably neither the man who lives there nor the members of Bird's group have been aware of how prime an example of the genre the Normandie is. Viewed through half-closed eyes, with its sweeping horizontals and curved balconies resembling flying bridges, it creates the impression of its namesake ocean liner imposing its thrusting might upon Atlantic swells.

Earlier, on the bus taking the group into town, Raymond Cardoso, architect and passionate guide, lowered the smooth tones of Glenn Miller's band to tell the group about the history of Art Deco.

A style which burgeoned between 1925 and World War Two, the name derives from a major Paris exhibition staged in 1925, L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes, which parented a creative explosion. The abridged "Art Deco" immediately became disseminated and popularised by the fashion magazines of the time.

As a celebration of faith in modern industrialism, with its emphasis on speed, power and quality goods for all, Art Deco spawned innovative art and architecture and directed new designs in wares as diverse as furniture, glassware, silverware, jewellery, clocks and statuettes. Bakelite plastic and cathedral-like wooden radios, icons of the period, are now snatched up by collectors.

Art Deco architecture is universally and most powerfully exemplified by the Empire State and Chrysler skyscrapers in New York. But Joburg erected some impressive buildings of its own during the 1930s.

Cardoso claims that the movement allowed architects and designers to break with the past and be creative with new, external decorative forms; to capture the rampant spirit of 20th-century consumerist modernity; to deify rapid change.

We daytrippers walk west down Jeppe Street past prime Art Deco examples, the main Post Office and *Astor Mansions*; across Eloff Street, with Castle Mansions on the left, and then a block further to crane

our necks at Manners Mansions and Ansteys Building, both aglow in late-afternoon sunlight.

The more mature among us can remember tea and anchovy toast at Stuttafords, a light lunch at Fanny Farmers and buying designer items at Helen De Leeuw's in Greatermans basement. But our Joburg of vanishing memories has given way to a throng of street vendors selling Asian mass-produced or local counterfeit goods and bananas on bright plastic plates. Together with their teeming customers they grind to the vibrant percussion of rap bouncing between the buildings. An architect confesses to not having visited "town" in 20 years.

Notwithstanding that it's so little visited by the privileged, the CBD remains an architectural and artistic treasure house.

Cardoso emphasises those structural features which are quintessentially Art Deco: curved balconies as displayed by the once Queen Vic Maternity Home, now an apartment block; the soaring verticality of *Astor Mansions* with its protruding balconies, twin towers and flagpoles, its vertical ribbing resembling automobile radiators, which prompted 1930s opinion leaders to dub it Joburg's own Chrysler building. He points out the Shapshak shallow-relief sculptures which still decorate the Absa building in Commissioner Street, once tycoon I W Schlesinger's Broadcast House; the stepped-back Aztec zigurat style which marks Ansteys, Manner's Mansions and Joburg's officially named Chrysler (now Atkinson) House in Eloff Street Extension's old motor town.

Clive Chipkin, author of *Johannesburg Style*, the definitive survey of city architecture from Joburg's earliest days to the 1960s, tells me more about some of the Art Deco architects and their work.

One of the most prominent was Gordon Leith who began as Sir Herbert Baker's "pencil" at the Union Buildings. Leith invented the bronze composite capitals for the old Park Station Eloff Street concourse and designed the light pendants. He designed the Germiston Town Hall and the Rand Water Board Building in Fraser Street.

The decorations on this latter building are among my favourites: protective ground-level metal grilles designed to look like cascades of water.

Chipkin mentions the Obel partners who designed the outstanding Barbican Buildings overlooking the square fronted by the Gauteng legislature and the Rissik Street Post Office. They were also responsible for *Astor Mansions*.

Cardoso takes a few minutes to mourn the demise of the Colosseum.

For decades the cinema, together with the nearby Empire cinema and His Majesty's theatre, another Art Deco example, turned Saturday night into the city's fashionable hub of worldly escape.

I remember sitting hypnotised watching *On the Waterfront*, starring the young Marlon Brando. Spellbound, I returned three times within a week.

Many remember the Colosseum as a prime example of the atmospheric movie palace, a supreme Art Deco manifestation brought to South Africa by Schlesinger. Outside, it displayed Egyptian statuary. Inside, the auditorium was a fairy-castle world, replete with sinuous dragons and malevolent ogres under a midnight-blue dome twinkling with stars. At interval, the barmen served drinks to the clamouring thirsty at lightning speed.

When the tour ends at the pedestrian walkway between Anglo American's 44 and 45 Main Street, we have begun to realise how diverse is the style called Art Deco. Here we gaze at the rectangular, sandstone-faced monument to the might of the world's biggest mining company; a style influenced by London's Broadcast House and Rome University.

The group appreciates the shallow-relief sculptures of African animals flanking the entrance stairway to number 44. We gaze there at the great metal doorway topped by a powerful, maidenly figure and remember the Art Deco embrace of Egyptian motifs when we note the sphinx-like door handles.

Recently, in the tranquil green space, Harry Oppenheimer's famous gift to his father, Ernest, the exquisite Impala Stampede statue has been restored to Joburg after years of hiding from vandals.

Whichever way you look at it, as a keen student of art and architecture or as a voyeur of massive social change, downtown Joburg exerts a tremendous fascination.'

(<http://www.suntimes.co.za/2002/08/25/lifestyle/travel/travel01.asp>)

"JOHANNESBURG'S ART DECO HERITAGE

For Johannesburg the 1930's was Boom Time. Cranes filled the skyline. Already the 1920's had already started a break with tradition and Classicism, embracing "Americanism". Words like skyline, skyscraper, steamer, honky-tonk were coming into use. The crash of 1929 and Great Depression slowed things down, but after the gold standard was abandoned in 1932 there was no stopping development in Jo'burg. Gold was King, and money was pouring into the country.

Fashions had changed to match a much faster lifestyle. The Automobile with its curving fenders set things on the move. Motion pictures, travel abroad, the toppling of records, the new industrial technology - these were expressed in buildings which reached higher and higher, and even on smaller buildings there were speed lines, onwards to the future. Victorian architecture had been picturesque and quaint, followed by the more stolid Classicism of the Edwardian era, but the 1930's was the time for excitement, for change, and everybody was ready for it.

By 1936 more than twenty buildings in the city centre had either been recently completed or were nearing completion, with another twenty-five about to be started. The City was already demolishing

the old and building the new. Amongst these were large apartment buildings to cater for the burgeoning population. In this building boom, Johannesburg was leader. Names like Chrysler House, Manhattan Court, *Astor Mansions*, Waldorf Hotel appeared, copied from New York, and designs incorporated the excitement of the world around them - the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 inspired interest in Egyptian designs, the advances in sea, land and air travel, coupled with the huge increase in speed created soaring shapes which were incorporated into architectural plans.

Art Deco gets its name from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratif et Industriels Modernes in Paris in 1925.

In March 2003 South Africa hosts the Seventh Annual World Congress on Art Deco. This will be held in Cape Town and to link into this, Jo'burg is erecting plaques on buildings evidencing the Art Deco theme. We start with the TOP TWENTY - great buildings in the Inner City will be identified by means of distinctive blue and white heritage plaques. A further forty buildings of similar merit will follow in the hall of fame. These include more in the centre of town but also those spread across Johannesburg, noticeably blocks of flats.

Art Deco was not just the preserve of the wealthy corporates - it belonged to everyone, and the purpose of this project is to highlight a period in the history of Jo'burg which created a valuable architectural and social treasure. Some of these buildings are, sadly, deteriorating but dilapidation and decay cannot conceal the glorious and exuberant architecture."

(<http://home.intekom.com/parktown/artdeco/press-release.html>)

"Joburg's New Spin

TRAVEL + LEISURE - November 2004

Ten years after apartheid released its choke hold on South Africa, a new generation is breathing life into the country's largest city. The economy is booming, crime is falling, and now Johannesburg—not Cape Town—is South Africa's promised land. Douglas Rogers reports.

...I walk east, down grid-blocked streets to the crowded, grittier part of town untouched by gentrification, yet I feel safe here, too. The concrete canyons are reminders of Johannesburg's Golden Age, the 1930's, when South African architects visited the great Art Deco buildings of America and came back to create mini-replicas. *Astor Mansions* on Jeppe Street even has twin plaster spires modeled on the Chrysler Building. These piles are in terrible disrepair, but international restoration groups and local urban planners hope to designate them architectural landmarks and fix the façades..."

(<http://www.carltonhotel.co.za/joburg.htm>)

"Johannesburg Travel & Leisure Article

October 04 edition

Ten years after apartheid released its choke hold on South Africa, a new generation is breathing life into the country's largest city. The economy is booming, crime is falling, and now Johannesburg—not Cape Town—is South Africa's promised land.

I walk east, down grid-blocked streets to the crowded, grittier part of town untouched by gentrification, yet I feel safe here, too. The concrete canyons are reminders of Johannesburg's Golden Age, the 1930's, when South African architects visited the great Art Deco buildings of America and came back to create mini-replicas. *Astor Mansions* on Jeppe Street even has twin plaster spires modeled on the Chrysler Building. These piles are in terrible disrepair, but international restoration groups and local urban planners hope to designate them architectural landmarks and fix the façades. I walk down Commissioner Street, once the Park Avenue of Joburg, where outside the beautiful 1904 Edwardian Cornerhouse building, former headquarters of the monied white mining magnates, I am stunned to see a doorman in top hat, tails, and white gloves, looking like a transplant from Manhattan. He tells me that the Cornerhouse is home to the offices of Urban Ocean, a group of young developers who have bought nine buildings downtown and are turning them into loft apartments. The Cornerhouse will become the inner city's first boutique hotel, set to open well in time for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The biggest soccer event on earth is coming to South Africa and the finals will be in Johannesburg, further evidence of the city's arrival."

(<http://www.go2southafrica.com/South-Africa-Tours/Independant-South-Africa-Tours/Johannesburg-Travel-&-Leisure-Article/>)

` Plaques for Joburg's

Art Deco buildings

February 18, 2003

By Lucille Davie

JOHANNESBURG'S Art Deco buildings are to be recognised in the coming weeks when they have plaques placed on them in the build-up to the 7th World Congress on Art Deco, taking place in Cape Town in March.

Johannesburg has over 100 wonderful Art Deco buildings in the city centre, and although some of them are in a dilapidated state, a good deal of them are national monuments, dating back to the 1930s and 1940s when South Africa experienced a boom period, and Art Deco was at its height

worldwide.

Twenty of the city Art Deco buildings are to be the first structures to get the plaques, large blue and white circular ceramic signs, detailing the name (in Art Deco font) and history of the building, together with the city's Joburg logo at the bottom, and an Art Deco logo at the top.

Some of these buildings include the Anglo American building (Main Street), *Astor Mansions* (Jeppe Street), Broadcast House (Commissioner Street), Dawson's Hotel (Von Brandis & President), the Federal Hotel (Commissioner & Polly), His Majesty's (Commissioner), and the Union Castle Building (Loveday & Commissioner).

But there are other buildings spread around the suburbs, mostly residential blocks: Helvetia Court in Bellevue; Lauriston Court in Louis Botha Avenue; Queen Victoria Maternity Hospital in Braamfontein (now used as flats); and in Yeoville there's Diamond Court, Genoa Court and Granville Court. There's also homes in Houghton and Parktown that qualify as Art Deco. Forty of these buildings, together with other city buildings, will be included in the plaque programme.'

(http://www.joburg.org.za/2003/feb/feb18_artdeco.stm)

GENERAL NOTES:

Estimated cost of building	:
Estimated cost of drainage	:
Accommodation approved	:
Valuation at completion	:
Occupied	:

"AANBEVEEL Verklaar tot nasionale gedenkwaardigheid. Die gebou moet skoongemaak word. Die luifel en ondersteunende pilare moet ook bewaar word."

Opname Historiese Geboue In Johannesburg, Second Report June 1976, Inner City, RAU, unpublished.

PREVIOUS TENANT/S:

By 1954:

178a Jeppe – Denise Campbell, ladies' lingerie.

178b Jeppe – Astors Pharmacy, chemists and druggists.

178c Jeppe – Textile Cleaners.

77 Von Brandis – The Chocolate Box, soda fountain.

77a Von Brandis – Astor Jewellers, watchmakers and jewellers.

(The Rand-Pretoria Directory 1954 (Comprising Complete Alphabetical And Trades Directories of Johannesburg, Pretoria And Reef Towns), Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1954.)

CURRENT TENANT/S:

Impression Shoes

Astor Jewellers

SOURCES:

Published Sources

Chipkin, C.M.: *Johannesburg Style; Architecture & Society 1880s – 1960s*, David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, 1993.

The Rand-Pretoria Directory 1954 (Comprising Complete Alphabetical And Trades Directories of Johannesburg, Pretoria And Reef Towns), Cape Times Limited, Cape Town, 1954.

Van Der Waal, G-M.: *From Mining Camp to Metropolis, The buildings of Johannesburg 1886-1940*, Chris Van Rensburg Publications, Johannesburg, 1987.

Unpublished Sources

Architects In South Africa 1780 – 1940; Draft manuscript, J Walker & G M van der Waal, 1992, HSRC, Pretoria.

Johannesburg Building, Space & Urban Feature Classification, 1998: Inner City - Metropolitan Planning, Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (Cool Factory).

Plans records of surveyed buildings, Marshallstown and City of Johannesburg: Archives, Building Control, Development Management, City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality.

Opname Historiese Geboue In Johannesburg, Second Report June 1976, Inner City, RAU, unpublished.

Van Der Waal, G-M.: *Die Karakter Van Die Argitektuur In Die Binnestad Van Johannesburg Tot 1920*, unpublished thesis, RAU, November 1972.

Van Der Waal, G-M.: *Die Boukuns van Johannesburg, 1886 – 1940*, unpublished doctoral thesis, RAU, November 1984.

Rand Township Registry Johannesburg.

Newspapers, Periodicals (including Journals)

Historical Buildings in South Africa, Désirée Picton-Seymour, Struikhof Publishers, 1889, Cape Town.

Internet sources

<http://www.amethyst.co.za/JhbGuide/JhbTop100.htm>

<http://home.intekom.com/parktown/artdeco/>

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<http://www.emporis.com/en/wm/bu/?id=196898>

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http://www.joburg.org.za/2003/feb/feb18_artdeco.stm

<http://www.go2southafrica.com/South-Africa-Tours/Independant-South-Africa-Tours/Johannesburg-Travel-&-Leisure-Article/>

ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

Historic Value:

- Associated with historic person, group or organisation
- Associated with historic event or activity

Architectural/Aesthetic value:

- Important example of building type
- Important example of a style or period
- Fine details, workmanship or aesthetics
- Work of a major architect or builder

Social/Spiritual/Linguistic value:

- Associated with social, spiritual, linguistic, economic or political activity
- Illustrates an historical period

Scientific/Technological value:

- Example of industrial, technical or engineering development/achievement
- New, rare or experimental building techniques

RECORDED BY:

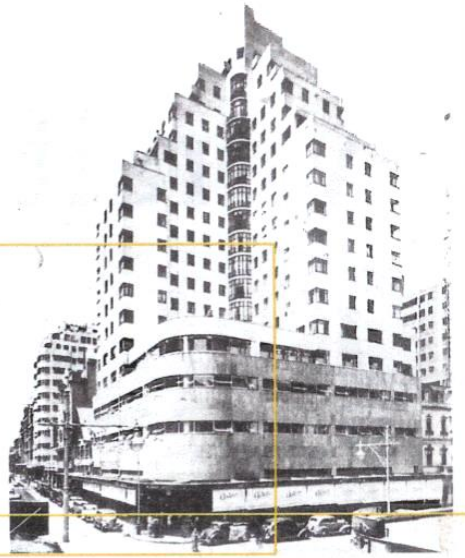


Heritage Resources Management team Johann J Bruwer and Alezea Bruwer.

And Catharina JM Bruwer.

Photographs (unless otherwise indicated) by Johann J Bruwer and Alezea Bruwer.

Ansteys Building
 Van der Waal, G (1987)
 'From Mining Camp to
 Metropolis: The Buildings of
 Johannesburg 1886-1940'
 Courtesy Chris van Rensburg
 Publications, Johannesburg



ART DECO

in Johannesburg

BY MELINDA SILVERMAN

Most people would recognise a streamlined toaster or a maple-wood dressing table endowed with sunray motifs as 'Art Deco'. They might recognise a 1930s building with pronounced vertical fins and soaring flag-posts as a classic. But what exactly are the defining characteristics of the Art Deco style? Bold rectilinear lines or sensuous curves? Chrome edging or humble plaster? It is Deco's ability to defy definition that adds to the allure. It is both slippery and streamlined. In the face of such uncertainty, an academic industry is emerging to address these questions. Last year two Art Deco conferences were held in South Africa - in Cape Town and in Durban. These have inspired renewed interest in Art Deco architecture, and many South African cities and towns are competing for the title of Art Deco capital of the country - if not the world - including Cape Town, Durban, Springs, Benoni and Johannesburg.

South Africa's claim to pre-eminence as a producer of Art Deco buildings should not be dismissed. Many South African cities do indeed accommodate large numbers of Art Deco buildings. These were erected in the 1930s when South Africa experienced one of its most spectacular booms, at a time when the rest of the world had not yet recovered from the after-effects of the Wall Street Crash. South Africa's departure from the gold standard in 1932 and an influx of foreign capital precipitated this unique revival. Soon dramatic aerial photographs appeared in the South African press illustrating city skylines punctuated by tall cranes and emerging high-rise buildings. In Johannesburg, city officials were so entranced by these tableaux of progress that viewing decks were erected to allow citizens to experience the glory. By far the majority of buildings under construction at the time would have incorporated Art Deco elements.

The term Art Deco is derived from the "*Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes au XXeme Siècle*" held in Paris in 1925. Here many new household items were exhibited, which were retroactively seen to embrace a number of stylistic elements:

- Sun-ray motifs inspired by ancient Aztec and Egyptian cultures (informed by the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922);
- an infatuation with the machine and its streamlined shapes;
- the craze for new materials such as glass bricks, vitaglass, vitriolite and bakelite;
- the sensuous forms of ocean liners and aeroplanes;
- the definitive ziggurat profile of buildings, derived from New York's zoning regulations that required buildings to taper as they rose higher and higher;
- the promiscuous use of flag-posts ensuring that buildings' measured heights could be maximised; and
- the presence of shiny materials such as brass and chrome.

It is precisely these aspects of Art Deco which made the style so attractive to emerging South African property developers in the 1930s. The decoration, the American references, the glamour all ensured lettability and therefore, more significantly, higher rentals.

Of the countless Art Deco buildings in Johannesburg, five stand out as representative examples that best illustrate the style:

- The Barbican Building
- Astor Mansions;
- Ansteys
- The Gallo Building;
- Rand Airport, at the border between Johannesburg and Germiston.

Designed in 1931 by Obel and Obel, the Barbican Studio Building at the corner of Rissik and President Streets, was the

tallest structure in Johannesburg at the time - a structural feat afforded by the innovative use of a steel framed structure. Though the building incorporates many neo-classical elements, the overwhelming verticality, careful articulation of the roofline with its three turrets, and flag-posts in distinctive machine-style brackets render the building distinctively Deco.

Within months of its completion, Astor Mansions soon superseded the Barbican Building at eleven storeys. Also designed by the Obel brothers, the building was completed in 1932 soon after the iconic Chrysler building in New York, which was an obvious source of inspiration. The following elements associated with Art Deco can be found in Astor Mansions:

- a zigzag decorative band at second floor level;
- flagpoles on the two lower turrets "each supported by three parallel rings more reminiscent of streamlined machine parts than of the stock vocabulary of classicism" (Frederic Freschi).
- the flamboyant use of signage. The name of the building is cut out of aluminium letters which are then curved around its crowning arch. These letters could "reflect light during the day, and at night be illuminated from behind" (Frederic Freschi) by means of electric light in the servants' quarters.

Anstey's Building in Jeppe Street, designed by Emley and Williamson (1935-1937) and the Gallo Building in President Street (c1935) make use of the same compositional techniques to exploit their respective corner locations. The buildings rise in tiers - not unlike wedding cakes - to culminate in stepped corner towers. The arrangement of windows in the Anstey's building owes a stylistic debt to Raymond Hood's design for Rockefeller Centre in New York. The Gallo building is altogether more flamboyant. While most other Art Deco buildings tended to rely on a palette of relatively minor Art Deco details, the Gallo Building, by contrast, "was conceived in its entirety as an advertisement for a record company. Gramophone records in relief, a sculptured crowing cock and stars were strewn all over the façade, while attention was focussed on the corner section by convex and concave plans" (Van Der Waal, 1987, 205).

Government employees were not immune to the temptations of fashion, and were also capable of sublime Art Deco flights of fancy. This can be seen in the design for Rand



Rand Airport: Chipkin, CM (1993) 'Johannesburg style: Architecture and Society 1880's - 1960's'. David Philip: Cape Town

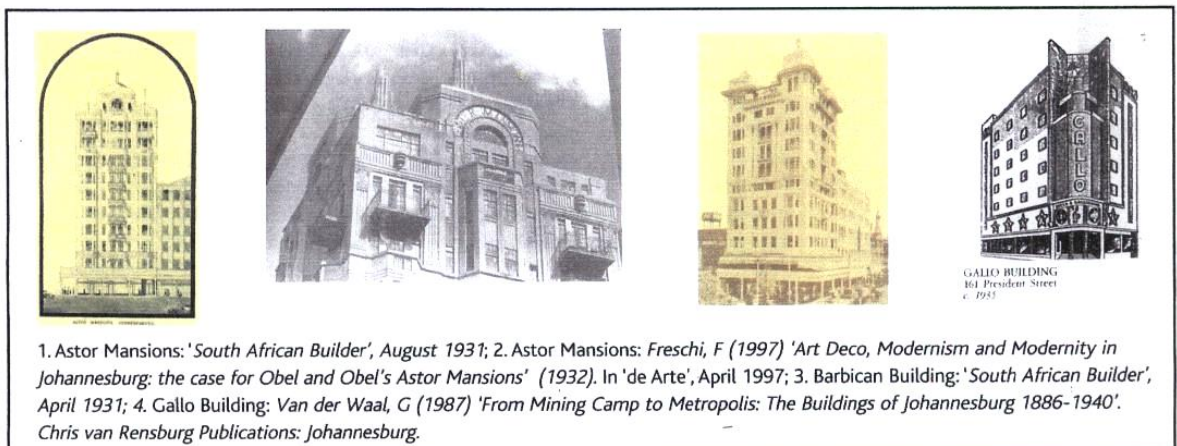
Airport (1934-36) where hovering cantilevered forms, bold sensuous curves and streamlined plastered cornices contribute to an overwhelming sense of modernity. Clive Chipkin, author of *Johannesburg Style*, sees distinct references in the architecture to the shapes found in contemporary aircraft. But the elegant balustrades also make reference to sleek ocean liners.

There are countless other examples. At present, the Johannesburg Art Deco Society has compiled a list of the twenty top Art Deco buildings in the inner city and is soliciting suggestions from the public for additional examples to enhance its list - and Johannesburg's claim to pre-eminence. You are welcome to make proposals by faxing (011) 442-7921 or sending an email to drgoeller@intekom.co.za.

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Don't forget to book for Melinda's fabulous tour:

Exploring the Art Deco Architecture of Johannesburg between 14:30 and 16:30 on Saturday 22 May. The excursion will begin with a brief illustrated lecture on campus, followed by a bus drive showing key Art Deco buildings around the inner city, Bellevue, Yeoville and Killarney. Cost: R30 per person. For more information contact Gita Patel on (011) 717-1097 or e-mail gita@alumni.wits.ac.za



1. Astor Mansions: 'South African Builder', August 1931; 2. Astor Mansions: Freschi, F (1997) 'Art Deco, Modernism and Modernity in Johannesburg: the case for Obel and Obel's Astor Mansions' (1932). In 'de Arte', April 1997; 3. Barbican Building: 'South African Builder', April 1931; 4. Gallo Building: Van der Waal, G (1987) 'From Mining Camp to Metropolis: The Buildings of Johannesburg 1886-1940'. Chris van Rensburg Publications: Johannesburg.

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JOHANNESBURG SSK
KLEINHANDEL & WOONSTELLE

ART DECO

**ASTOR MANSIONS,
h.v. JEPPE- &
VON BRANDISSTRAAT**

MARK: 083 225 6995
NORMAN: 082 553 9597

The advertisement features a photograph of a large, multi-story Art Deco building with a curved facade and numerous windows. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with a dark blue header and a light grey background for the main content.

Above: Advertisement regarding proposed sale of Astor Mansions published in the Beeld, 21 July 2006.