

A bluffer's guide to art deco

■ by Jane Binsley

Mention art deco to most New Zealanders and they'll immediately conjure images of the faceted facades and pink plaster of Napier.

The seaside Hawkes Bay city has been in the news recently because it's 75 years since February 1931, when an earthquake flattened much of the city.

The new buildings that sprang up afterwards were done in the fashionable style of the day, art deco.

But it's not just in Napier that the distinctive architecture of the 1920s to 1940s has made its mark. Homes and commercial premises from this period are dotted around the country, immediately recognisable by their clean lines and sweeping curves.

So here's how to wow your guests

with your insight when the topic of art deco comes up.

■ When did the look emerge?

The name art deco was coined in 1925 after the style hit the headlines at the Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels (a trade fair for decorative and applied arts). It spread through Europe and the world to predominate the 1920s to 1940s.

■ Where did it come from?

Art deco developed as a reaction to the previous fashion for art nouveau, a more ornamental style frequently embellished with floral motifs. The austere post-World War I period called for a more subdued aesthetic, so the flourishes of art nouveau were refined and simplified to a purer, simpler form that became known as art deco.

■ How did it evolve?

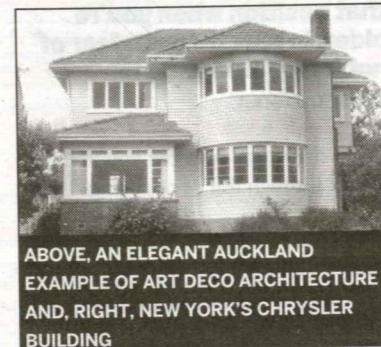
Design innovations were made possible by the emergence of technology and materials such as plastic and bakelite that allowed for mass production of furniture and everyday objects at accessible prices.

■ What are the key elements?

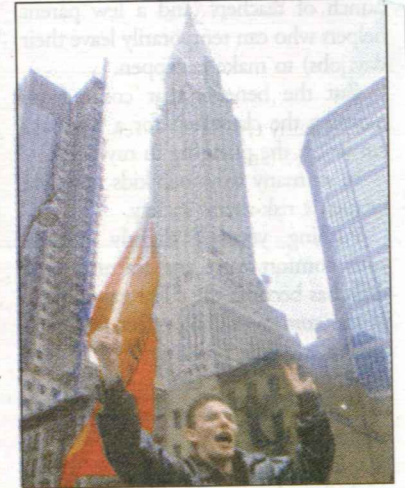
The term art deco applies to architecture, furniture, arts and crafts such as glassware, ceramics, textiles and jewellery. In architecture, we see streamlined lines, plastered or brickwork cladding and the occasional flourish of a curved bay window or contrasting trim.

In furniture, curves are once again a recurring motif, with hand-crafted wood making way for machine-worked metal as the years progressed.

In tableware, we see bakelite ashtrays and metal tabletop figurines, through to the colourful geometry of Clarice Cliff



ABOVE, AN ELEGANT AUCKLAND EXAMPLE OF ART DECO ARCHITECTURE AND, RIGHT, NEW YORK'S CHRYSLER BUILDING



pottery. Everywhere, witness a sense of playfulness and a lightness of touch.

■ Where can I get me some?

If you're keen to immerse yourself in this historical style, move to Napier. Closer to home, keeping your eyes peeled as you drive around Auckland will reveal a number of grand-scale deco designs, including the Civic Theatre on Queen St, the Central Fire Station on Pitt St and the Brooklyn Apartments on Emily Place. You'll also see gems of deco domestic architecture in the inner-city

suburbs that were populated during the 1930s, including Herne Bay, Mt Eden and Greenlane. If you just want a taste of the action, scour junk shops for chrome tea trolleys and bakelite trinkets. The style is less fashionable at the moment than mid-century pieces, so prices should be reasonable.