

EXCITING, ECLECTIC ART DECO

Many remnants remain of Singapore's flirtation with fancy edifices

By Terrence Hong

The mention of Art Deco brings to mind vivid images of the Roaring Twenties: Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing to Big Band music, Marlene Dietrich on the silver screen, flappers living it up on board the huge ocean liners that plied the Atlantic.

The style that became known as Art Deco first appeared in 1925 at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. The term 'Art Deco' was not coined until the 1960s, however, when American Bevis Hilliard published a book by that name. The Paris exposition showcased a new approach to architecture, interior design, fashion and jewellery that was a celebration of modernity, vibrancy, opulence and lavishness – most likely as a reaction to the austere years of World War I. Huge international crowds visited the exposition and spread the new style worldwide. Two of the largest and best-known examples of the Art Deco style are New York City's Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. Cities as far afield as Napier (New Zealand), Bandung (Indonesia), Miami and Shanghai still have large concentrations of extant buildings in this style.

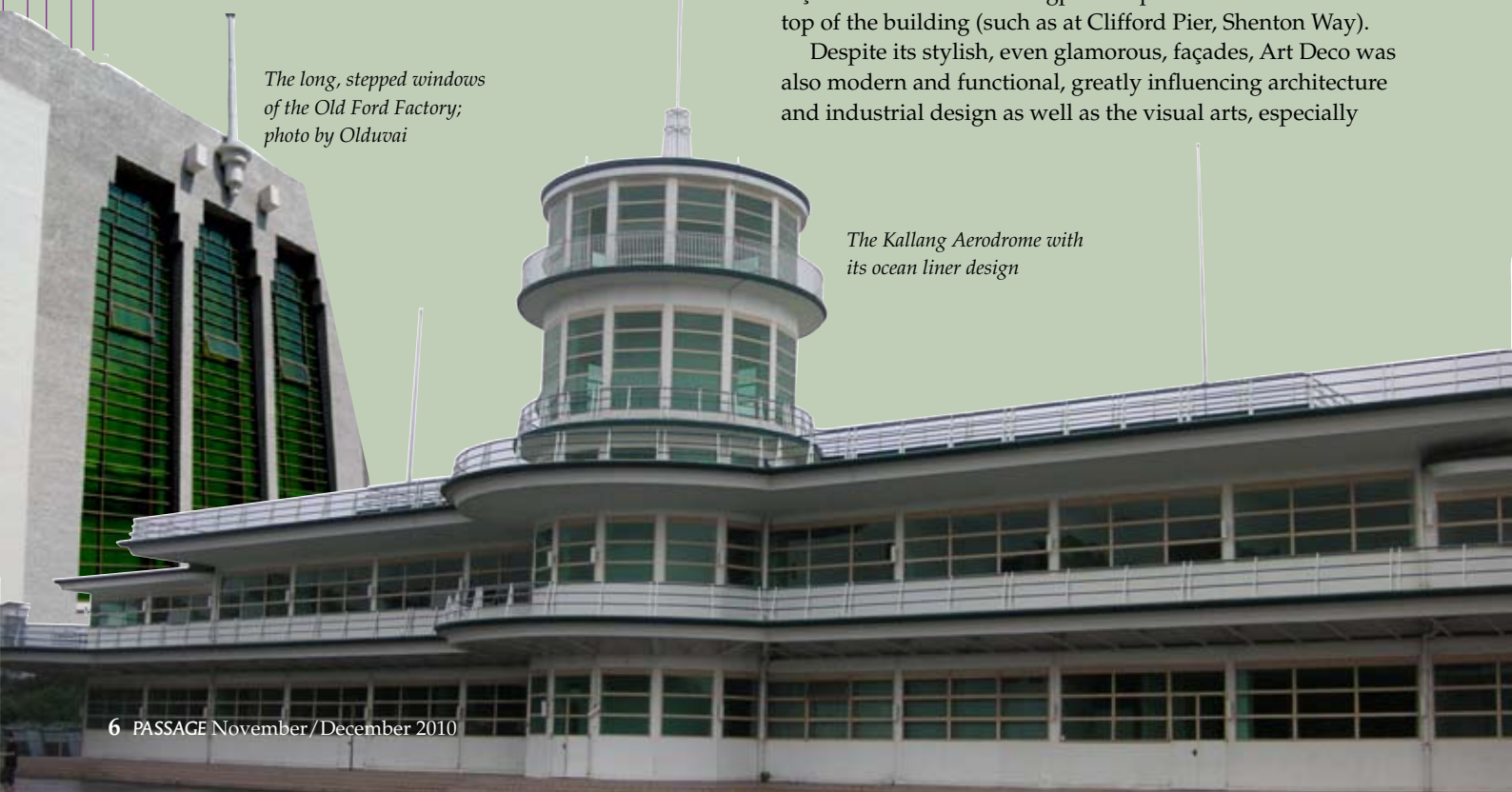
Art Deco exemplified the zeitgeist of the 1920s, a decade of hope and excitement, of renewed energy and a new social order that emerged at the end of World War I. In architecture, futuristic, streamlined designs and clean shapes that referred to modern machines such as ships and airplanes, replaced the classical ornamentation and lines associated with the royal houses of Europe. Other defining features of Art Deco are the application of simple, sweeping curved lines juxtaposed with stepped ziggurats (rounded pyramids), chevrons, fountain and sunburst motifs. Such patterns, derived from early civilisations such as the Egyptians and Aztecs, had become part of architectural iconography thanks to the popularity of archaeology during the 1920s.

In vogue in Singapore from the 1930s, the popularity of Art Deco declined here three decades later. Fortunately, the bulldozers didn't get it all, and Singapore still has streets lined with Art Deco buildings, including Geylang Road, Hamilton Road and Jalan Besar. Credit must go also to the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) for its work in conserving several blocks of flats in Tiong Bahru that were built in the 1930s as the first project of the Singapore Improvement Trust, a precursor to the Housing and Development Board. These upgraded Art Deco-style flats, much in demand today, feature rounded balconies, flat rooftops and spiral staircases. Strolling among them provides a pleasant reflection on Singapore's past. In addition, several 'newer' Art Deco-influenced buildings have been erected in the last few decades – most notably the Parkview Square Building (600 North Bridge Road).

Many Singaporeans first experienced Art Deco at the cinema. The most famous theatres here were the Capitol (1930), Cathay (1933), Rex (1946) and Odeon (1953). Those who didn't visit cinemas might at least have been exposed to Art Deco when they traversed the Elgin Bridge at the end of Boat Quay or Crawford Bridge at the end of Lavender Street, or perhaps on a visit to the original Kandang Kerbau 'KK' Women's and Children's Hospital (now the Land Transport Authority headquarters) near Little India.

The style was especially popular here in commercial buildings (such as the Ford factory) and office buildings (like the former Asia Insurance Building by noted Singapore architect Ng Keng Siang). Often typical shophouses or bungalows were adapted to Art Deco aesthetics via the addition of adornments applied to the building exteriors. A typical Singapore interpretation of Art Deco style was to inscribe the date of the building's erection prominently on its façade and to include a flagpole atop a sunburst effect at the top of the building (such as at Clifford Pier, Shenton Way).

Despite its stylish, even glamorous, façades, Art Deco was also modern and functional, greatly influencing architecture and industrial design as well as the visual arts, especially



*The long, stepped windows
of the Old Ford Factory;
photo by Olduvai*

*The Kallang Aerodrome with
its ocean liner design*

painting, graphic arts and film, throughout the 1920s and 1930s. A veritable *gesamtkunstwerk* (a universal artwork that makes use of all or many art forms), the style was simultaneously whimsical and decadent yet democratic. The numerous examples of Art Deco style that still stand in Singapore prove that the influence of the style was both international and enduring.

Terrence Hong has been a volunteer at the Asian Civilisations Museum at Empress Place since it opened in 2003. He enjoys photography and has built an extensive photo record of Singapore's historical buildings.

Photos courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted

Art Deco Treasures in Singapore:

Old Ford Factory

351 Upper Bukit Timah Road

Then: Ford's first car assembly plant in Southeast Asia, built 1941.

Now: Memories at Old Ford Factory museum

Notable features: Long windows with stepped design, roof flagpole.

Kallang Airport

9 Stadium Link

Then: Singapore's first purpose-built civil airport, built 1937.

Now: Most recently the People's Association headquarters, now empty.

Notable features: Circular aerodrome, which resembles the De La War Pavilion in Bexhill, England.

Hamilton Road

Then: Apartment blocks.

Now: Apartment blocks.

Notable Feature: Balconies resembling ocean liners.

Capitol Theatre Building

North Bridge and Stamford Road

Then: 1,686 seat air-conditioned theatre, built 1933.

Now: Shops and restaurants.

Notable features: Vaulted roof with alabaster winged horses flanking the main stage.

Elgin Bridge

Over Singapore River at North and South Bridge Roads

Then and Now: Bridge to link Chinese and Indian business districts, built 1929.

Notable features: Arches, flanked by cast-iron lamps, bronze plaques with lions designed by R Nolli (also responsible for marble statues at the Supreme Court).

Ascott Raffles Place

2 Finlayson Green near Raffles Place

Then: Asia Insurance Building, built 1954.

Now: Converted to serviced apartments for business travellers.

Notable features: L-shape with crown at top (once decorated for coronation of Queen Elizabeth II).

Mosaic staircase inside. Once Southeast Asia's tallest building.

Clifford Pier

Shenton Way

Then: Working Pier, built 1933.

Now: Fullerton Bay Hotel.

Notable features: Sunburst, flagpole.

Archipelago Brewery

Circular Road (behind Boat Quay)

Then: Office building.

Now: Microbrewery pub restaurant.

Notable feature: Wedge-shaped/triangular prism design (like the famous New York Flatiron building).

The Fullerton Hotel

1 Fullerton Square

Then: General Post Office, built 1928.

Now: Five-star hotel.

Notable feature: Interior with heavy moulding/ornamentation.

Waterboat House

(Annex of the Fullerton Hotel)

1 Fullerton Square

Then: Office building for the Harbour Authorities.

Now: Restaurants.

Notable features: Curved façade with flagpole resembling the decks of an ocean liner.

The newly renovated Ascott Building retains the Art Deco charm of the original Asia Insurance Company structure



Fans of Agatha Christie's Poirot will instantly see the similarities between this Art Deco apartment block in Tiong Bahru and Hercule Poirot's Whitehaven Mansions in London

The curvy Waterboat House

