

Napier – The Art Deco City

As the tourism boom hit New Zealand in the 1990s Napier had a trump card to play. Its central city building set created in the few years following its disastrous earthquake of February 3, 1931 had a homogeneity based on the building standards established in the wake of the earthquake and the architectural styles adopted.

These styles were Spanish Mission, from southern California and the moderne style that came to be called Art Deco. The name came from the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs Industriels et Modernes, held in Paris, which celebrated living in the modern world.



It was popularly considered an elegant style of cool sophistication in architecture and applied arts.

History

Napier was a prosperous town at the end of the 19th C and made a conscious attempt to model itself on an English seaside resort. Norfolk Island pines were planted on the Marine Parade and promoters with its Mediterranean climate in mind called it the Nice of the South Pacific.

Prosperity had given way to economic depression in 1931 when the earthquake struck. Masonry buildings collapsed and a fire devastated the CBD. 258 people were killed.

Rebuilding commenced with government assistance and standards imposing reinforced concrete construction. This restriction favoured economical structures decorated in the “Art Deco” and Spanish Mission styles.



Characteristics of Art Deco

Art Deco especially that on show in Napier puts an emphasis on simplicity. The walls are plain and decorated with abstract geometric designs: sunbursts, chevrons and zigzags.

Although later developments of the Art Deco style emphasised streamlining and asymmetry the buildings in Napier constructed in the early 1930s have straight edges and are symmetrical. The



townscape gains its effect from the consistency of the architecture and a few noteworthy buildings.

An interesting feature is that some of the patterns used have Maori origins.

Where to Look

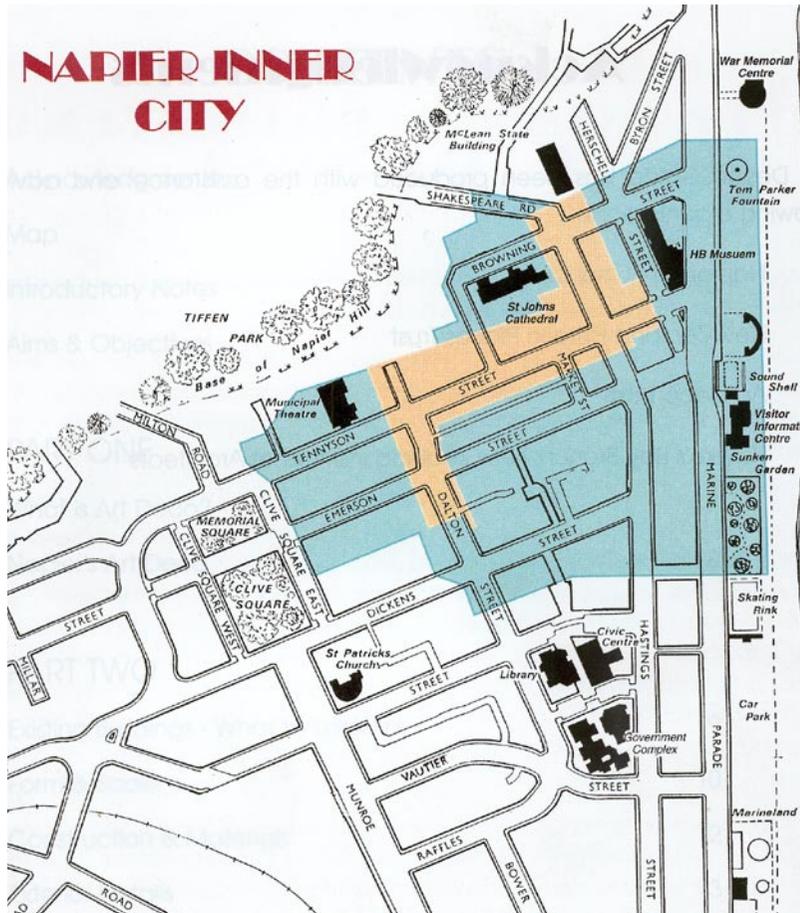
The Map shows the Napier heritage district and within it the Art Deco Quarter. On the edges and near the waterfront you will find a number of the standout buildings. Look for the Daily Telegraph Building, the ASB Bank building (1932) which features Maori motifs, the Criterion Hotel, (1932), and Kidsons Building. The long low Masonic Hotel (1932) features an Art Deco pediment.

Buildings designed later in the decade such as the A&B building (1936) and the Municipal Theatre (1937), where you should view the interior, have a more streamlined look. Ranui Flats (1938) on the Marine Parade is an example of the Streamline style seen in Miami Beach, Florida.

An outlier is the neoclassical Public Trust Building, built in 1920, which survived the earthquake.



A visit to the Art Deco shop can prove rewarding. Here you can get a 2½ hour guided tour for \$10 or buy a booklet for a self-guided walk.



Beyond the City

National Tobacco Building

The National Tobacco Building (1934) in Ahurri designed by Louis Hay has become an icon of Napier Art Deco though its design shows other than Art Deco influences and its opulence is not shared by the economically constructed buildings of central Napier. (See the separate pdf)

Marewa

Napier's Art Deco suburb was once marshy land. It was raised from the sea (Marewa) in the earthquake and developed after 1935. The detailing of its modest houses is best appreciated by following the excellent walk in the "Marewa Meander" pamphlet available from the Art Deco shop in Tennyson Street.

Activities

If you are in search of a fun time, join in Napier's Art Deco Weekend, held in the 3rd week of February each year. Vintage cars, jazz, dancing, wining, dining, and theatre contribute to the 1930s atmosphere.

Bibliography :

SHAW Peter, HALLET Peter, "Art Deco Napier: Styles of the Thirties", Reed Methuen, 1987.

