

Chapter 3

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFUSION OF ART DECO IN DELAWARE

If Wilmington is accepted as the location where Art Deco architecture began its adoption in Delaware, then the earliest examples of Art Deco architecture should be found in Wilmington before all other areas in the State. Subsequently, other areas that adopted Art Deco architecture as part of their cultural landscape should have dates later than the earliest examples in Wilmington. The theory of geographic cultural diffusion states that trends, styles and ideas spread through the cultural landscape by being adopted first in high order urban areas, and then diffusing down the urban hierarchy to lower order cities and towns (Thrall et al., 1988: 11), (Figure 33). In classical geographic diffusion theory, the ranking of cities and towns is based on population (Figure 34). This study ranked the towns and cities of Delaware based on their populations in the 1930 U.S. Census. From this ranking, the classifications of first order to fourth order towns and cities were assigned (Table 1 and Figure 35).

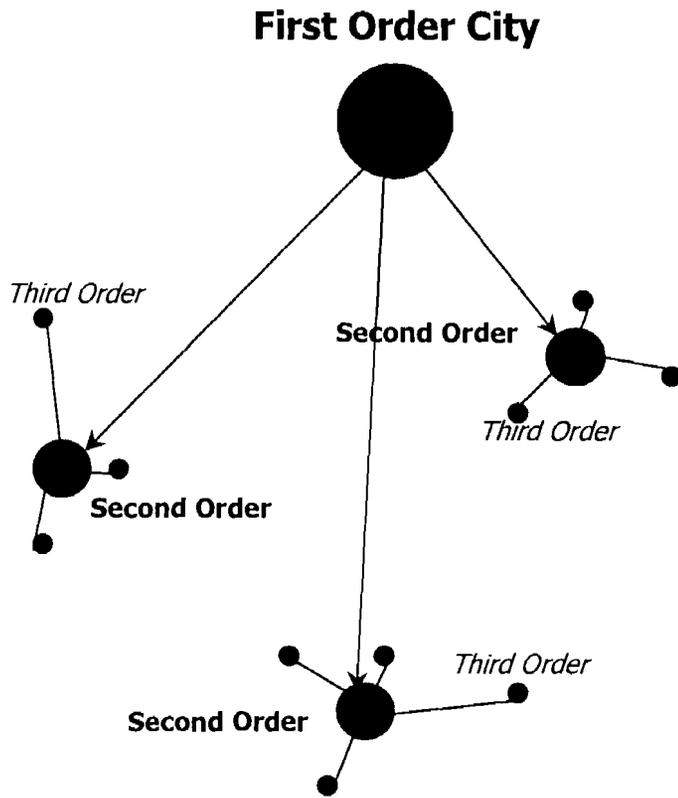


Figure 33: Hypothetical pattern of cultural diffusion in the Urban Hierarchy.

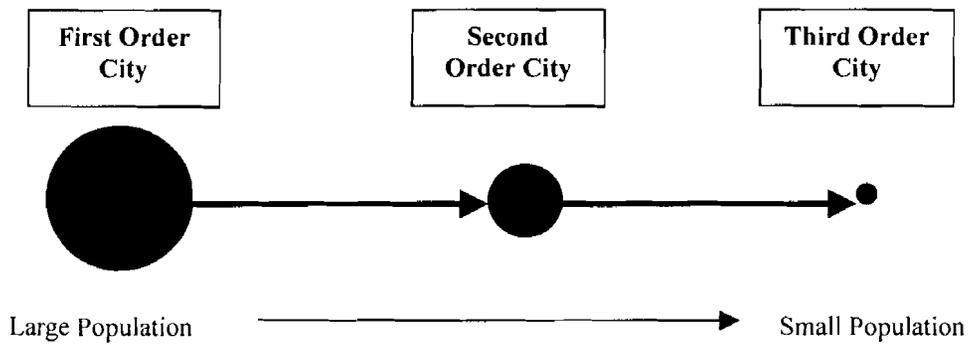


Figure 34: Population Based Ranking.

Table 1: Population Ranking of Delaware Cities and Towns (U.S. Census, 1930).

Rank Order of Delaware Cities and Towns

Based on Population (1930)

• <i>First Order City:</i>	Wilmington	(106,597)
• <i>Second Order Cities:</i>	Dover	(4,800)
	New Castle	(4,131)
	Newark	(3,899)
	Milford	(3,719)
• <i>Third Order Towns:</i>	Laurel	(2,542)
	Seaford	(2,468)
	Smyrna	(1,958)
	Lewes	(1,923)
	Harrington	(1,812)
	Georgetown	(1,763)
	Elsmere	(1,323)
	Middletown	(1,247)
	Milton	(1,130)
	Delaware City	(1,005)
• <i>Fourth Order Towns:</i>	Bridgeville	(987)
	Newport	(947)
	Delmar	(838)
	Clayton	(824)
	Rehoboth	(795)
	Bellefonte	(761)
	Wyoming	(684)
	Selbyville	(661)
	Frederica	(589)
	Greenwood	(527)

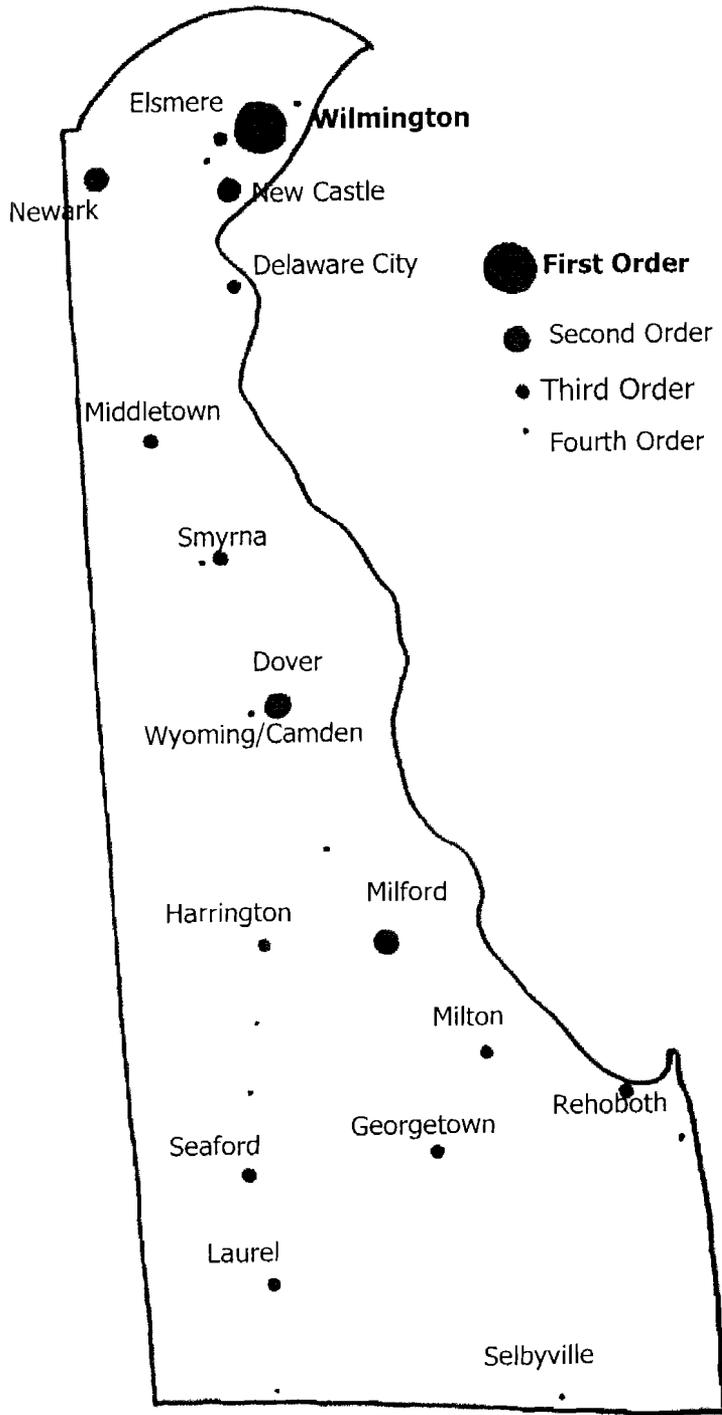


Figure 35: Geographic Location of Delaware Ranked Cities and Towns.

Following the theory of cultural geographic diffusion, it is predicted that Art Deco architecture should have diffused from Wilmington to the second order cities: Dover, New Castle, Newark, and Milford before diffusing farther down the urban hierarchy (Figure 36). The actual diffusion of Art Deco architecture deviates from the population-based urban hierarchy. The first incorporation of Art Deco architecture according to this study did occur in Wilmington, the highest-ranking city. However, beyond Wilmington the adoption pattern departs from the predicted pattern. Only Milford, among the highest-ranked cities of the second order, incorporated any Art Deco architecture before 1930. This departure from the expected theory suggests that at least in Delaware diffusion follows a geographic pattern that is as much culturally-based as it is population-based. Wilmington, at the top of the State's urban hierarchy, was the most "culturally adaptive" city. The term "culturally adaptive" refers to the rate at which a culture adopts a new idea, trend, or style. The willingness and the enthusiasm by which first adopters tell others about newly discovered ideas, trends, or styles determines the rate of diffusion. Spatial diffusion in the cultural context is adopted first by the more educated and prosperous members of society, as compared with the adoption rate of the less-educated and less-prosperous members of a culture (Morrill, 1974: 173). Stylistic trends, such as architectural designs, usually follow a pattern of being adopted by the most elite, high-order, urban areas first, and later by lower-order urban areas. Ultimately, when a trend, idea, or architectural style is adopted completely, it will then be found in the ordinary, common cultural landscape (Meinig, 1979: 19). From the inception of the first structure in Wilmington, Art Deco architecture in Delaware follows a pattern of being incorporated

Expected Diffusion

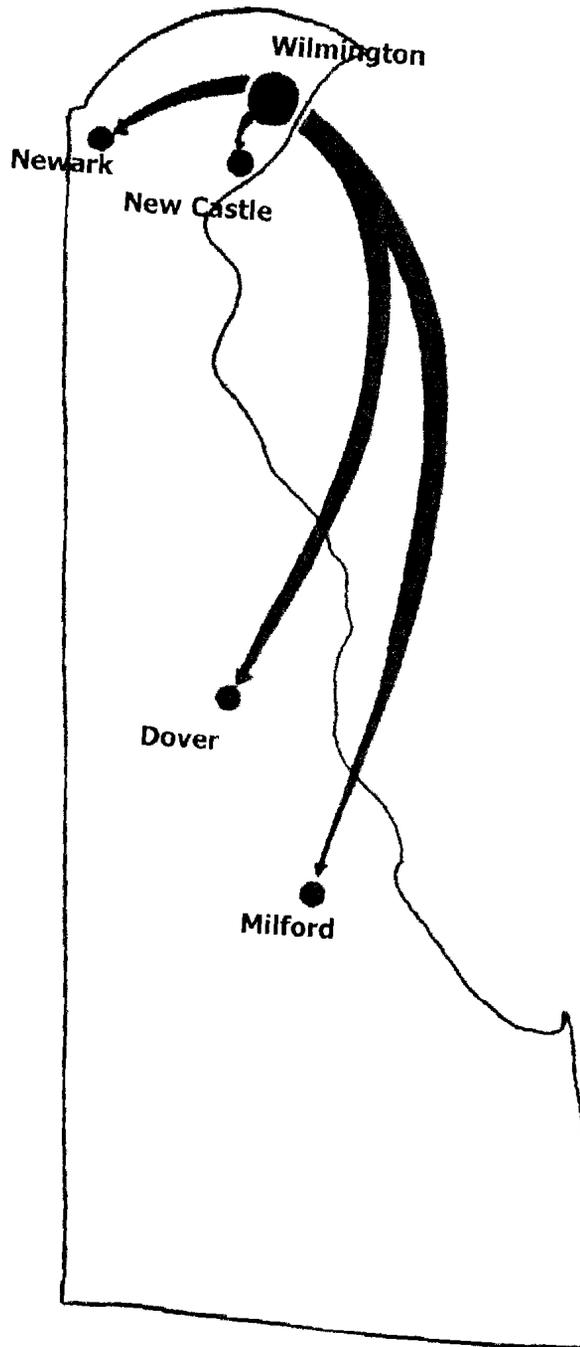


Figure 36: Expected Diffusion of Art Deco architecture for Delaware.

first into elite areas and then diffusing to more common areas.

Early Diffusion: 1922 - 1929

Art Deco architecture diffused first within the central business district of Wilmington and then beyond to the cities of Milford, Harrington, and Selbyville. All of these cities adopted single Art Deco buildings located in their own respective central business districts. This early elite period of Art Deco's diffusion occurred from the years 1922 to 1929 (Figure 37).

Harrington adopted Art Deco earlier than predicted, based on its population ranking. The town may have incorporated Art Deco architecture from the secondary influence of the neighboring city of Milford, which had built its first Art Deco structure a year prior to Harrington's. However, a connection with Wilmington, might also justify why Art Deco architecture was incorporated earlier than expected in the diffusion pattern. Harrington each year hosted visitors to the Delaware State Fair. In this earlier time, the State Fair was a significant cultural event, drawing many Wilmington residents and residents from other cities to the fairgrounds in Harrington. This would lead to the premise that Harrington was an exhibition city for the State, just as Chicago had been a showcase city for the World's Fair in 1933 at the national level (mentioned previously).

Selbyville on the other hand, considerably south from Wilmington, has no clear explanation for its early Art Deco adoption other than it was agriculturally an affluent town that prospered from an idyllic reputation as the "Strawberry Capital" of the East Coast. Visiting Selbyville today, one walks away with the feeling that, although surrounded by rural areas of less significant economic means, the area in and around Selbyville seems prosperous. Regrettably, this study was unable to discover a link between Selbyville and prominent members of Wilmington's cultural elite, but suspicions would indicate that such a link might exist.

Diffusion From 1930 – 1935

During the next phase of diffusion in Delaware, Art Deco architecture was incorporated within the city limits and areas in close proximity to Wilmington. This diffusion was especially prominent in the elite area north and west of the city, the pristine area referred to as "Chateau Country" (Figure 38).

Early Diffusion 1922-1929

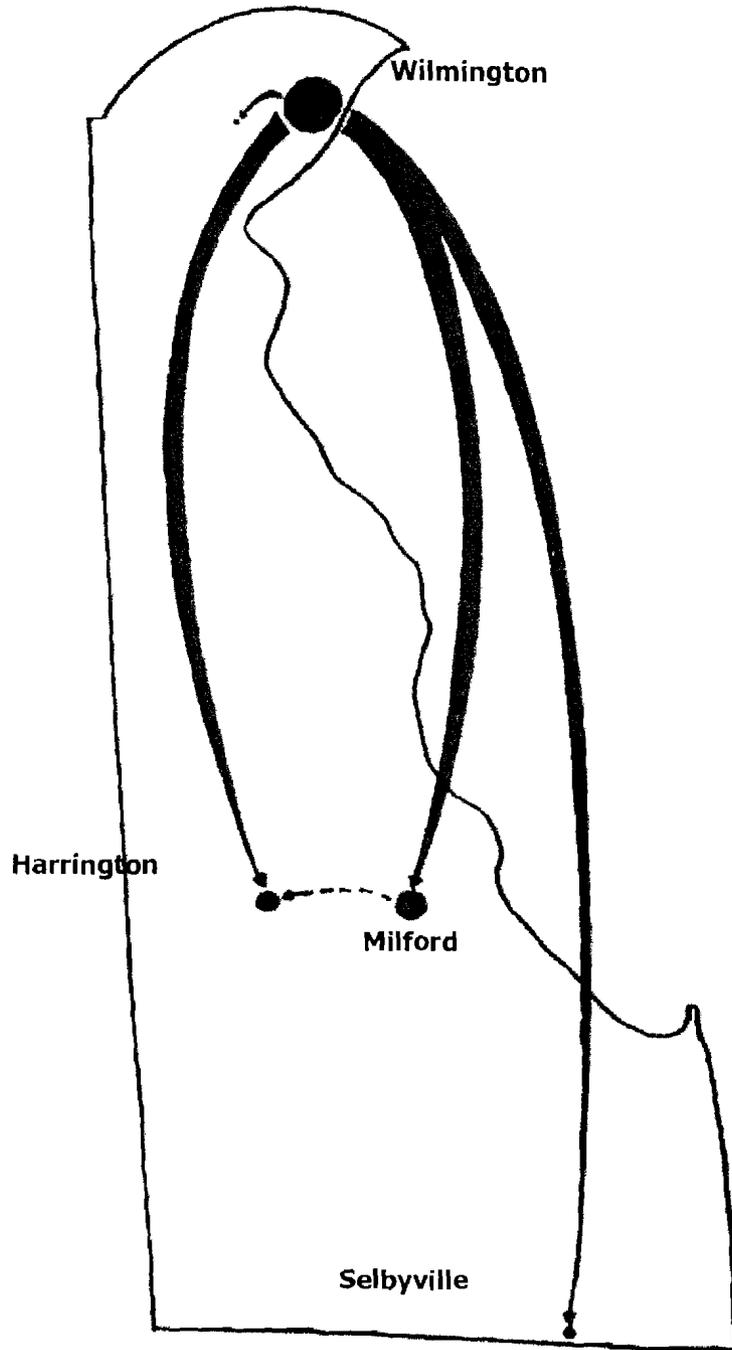


Figure 37: Actual Art Deco Diffusion.

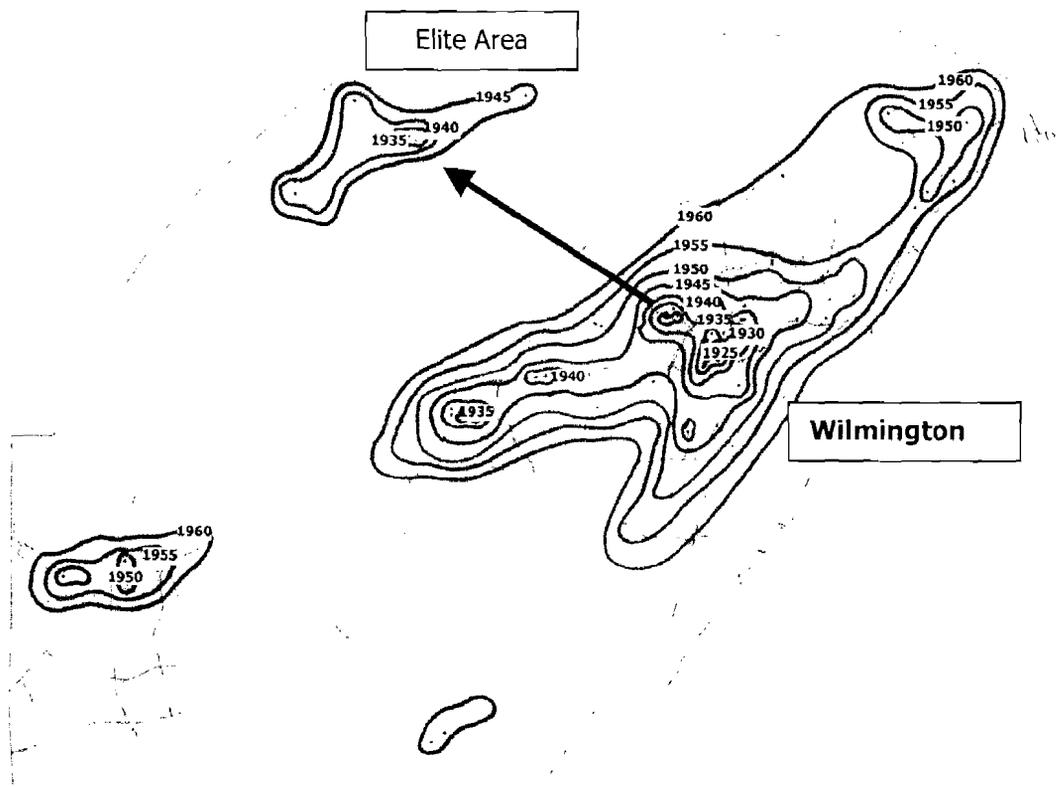


Figure 38: Northern New Castle County, Delaware. Temporal Diffusion of Art Deco architecture.

Diffusion From 1936 – 1942

The most pronounced diffusion of Art Deco architecture in Delaware occurred from 1936 to 1942 (Figure 39). After that date, World War II essentially halted most construction until the war's end late in 1945. During this middle phase, Art Deco architecture made the transition from a selective elite style to a more widely accepted, common, architectural, style. Furthermore, during this time period, the Streamline Moderne phase of Art Deco architecture was incorporated into the Delaware cultural landscape, replacing Jazz-age Deco. It was during this period, that Art Deco diffused for the first time to the cities of Dover and Seaford.

Late Diffusion From 1946 – 1960

In the final phase of diffusion in Delaware, 1946 until 1960, Art Deco architecture was incorporated further into the ordinary cultural landscape. Simultaneously, as Art Deco architecture diffused to the ordinary cultural landscape, it was further incorporated within the cities and towns that had adopted the style during the previous phases. As expected, this “intra-city” diffusion moved from the central business districts, or the most culturally adaptive areas within these cities and towns, out towards the perimeters of the municipal boundaries.

Diffusion 1936-1942

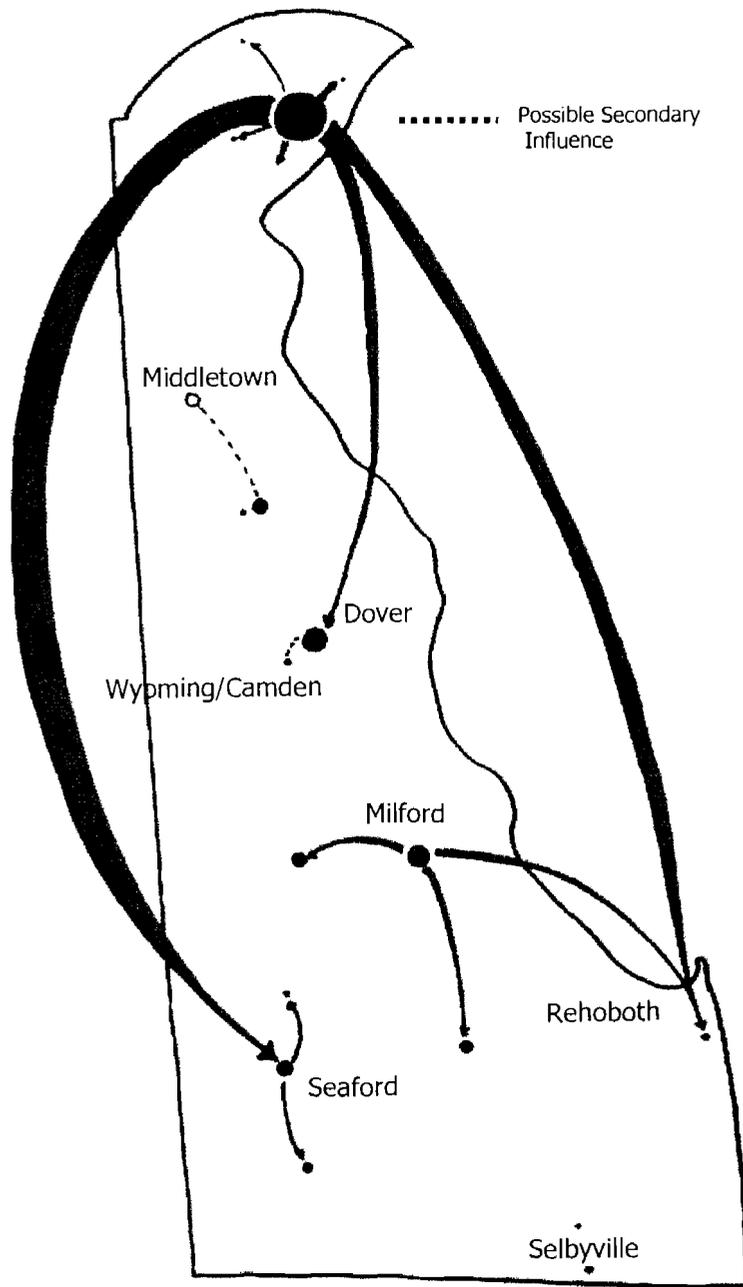


Figure 39: The “Explosion” of Art Deco architecture in Delaware.

“Intra-City” Diffusion of Art Deco for Selected Delaware Cities

Maps showing this “intra-city” diffusion of Art Deco architecture from the central business districts or commercial streets towards the outer municipal boundaries were created for this study. Each dot on the following maps indicates an Art Deco structure. The topological lines represent five-year intervals in which diffusion occurred. The maps are presented in order of their urban hierarchy, based on population size. The cities are Wilmington, Seaford, and Harrington.

Wilmington's Diffusion

The Wilmington Library, built in 1922 on Rodney Square was the first Art Deco structure identified by this study. After the commercial and financial institutions adopted Art Deco, the next to employ the style were apartment houses and the retail sector. As transportation corridors widened, Art Deco continued to spread outward and by the 1950s had reached Wilmington’s surrounding suburbs (Figure 40).

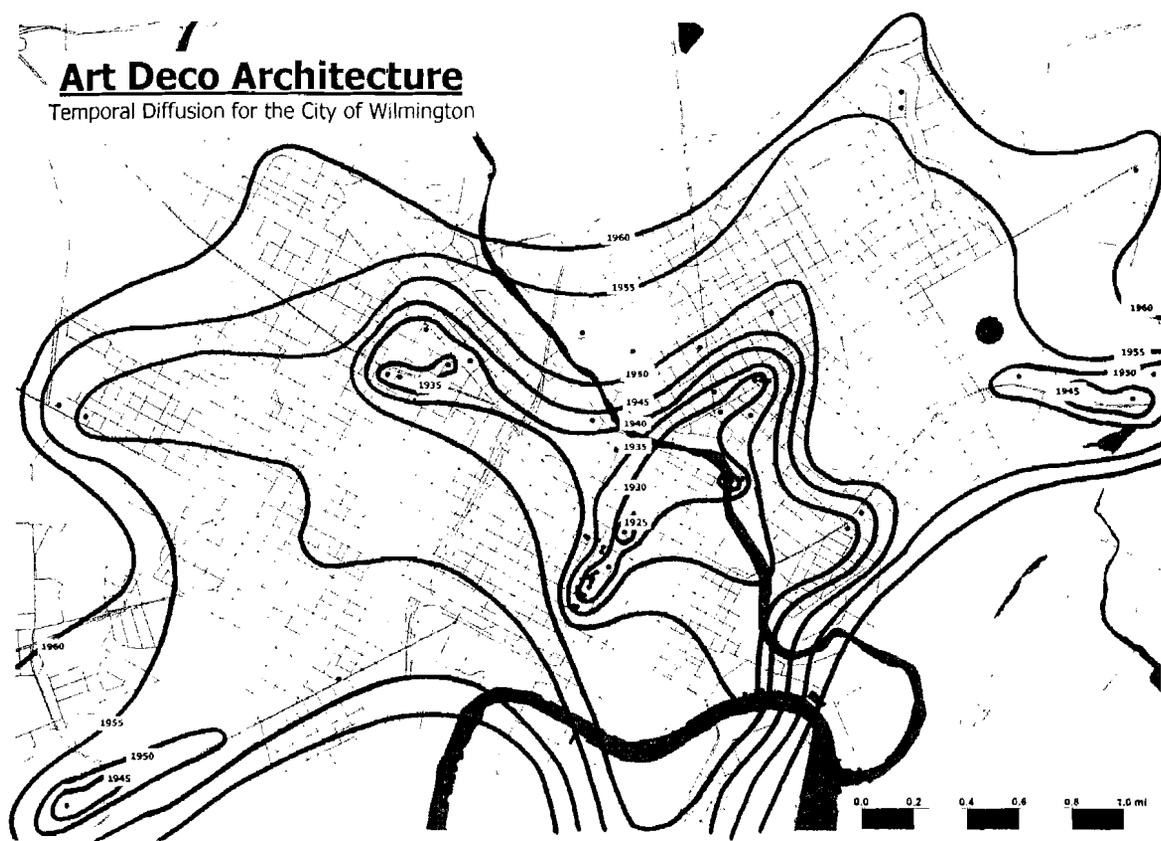


Figure 40: Art Deco Diffusion in Wilmington.

Art Deco Diffusion in Seaford, Delaware

Seaford, located in southern Delaware, incorporated Art Deco architecture by the late 1930s, and like Wilmington, the first structures were found in the central part of the city. Later structures were built expanding out towards the municipal boundary (Figure 41).

Art Deco Architecture Temporal Diffusion for the City of Seaford

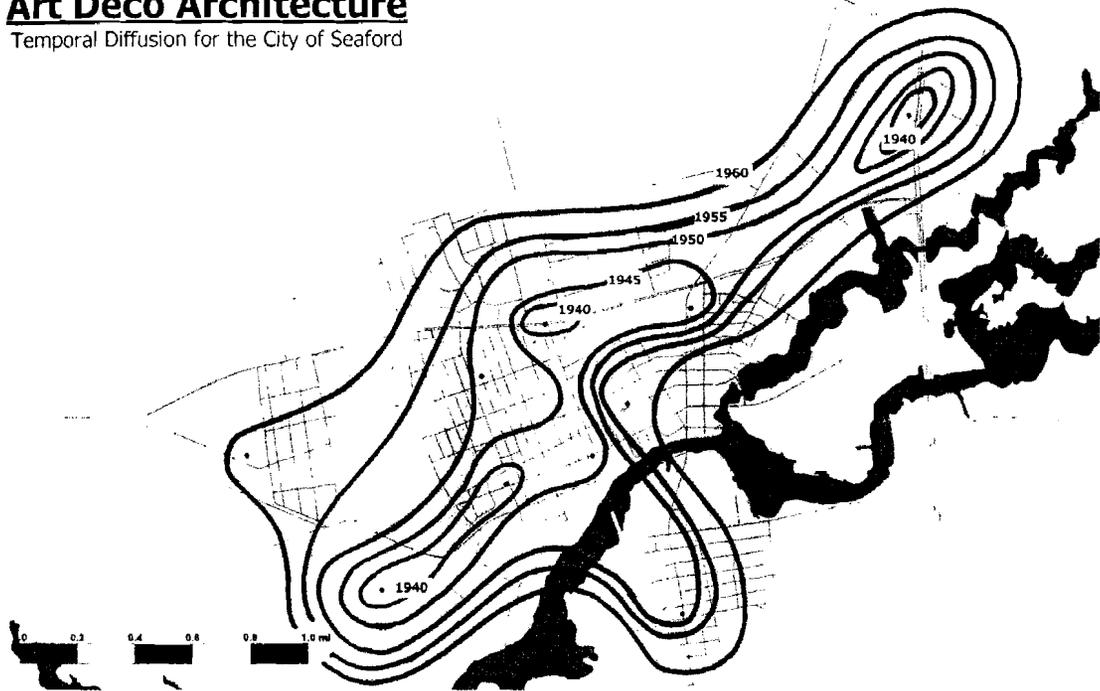


Figure 41: Art Deco Diffusion in Seaford.

Art Deco Diffusion, Harrington, Delaware

The town of Harrington demonstrates a classic example of cultural diffusion in regards to its adoption of Art Deco architecture. As one of the cities that built an Art Deco bank in the pivotal year 1929, the diffusion of Art Deco started at the most central location in the downtown of Harrington with the People's Bank Building. The next Art Deco structure built was an insurance building, an elite business involving characteristics similar to those of a banking institution. This Shaughny Insurance Building is only two blocks away from the People's Bank Building and is clad in tan brick with a black colored glass crown. The next structure, an automotive service station, was built outside the central business district in the late 1930s (Figure 42). Two more Art Deco structures would be built, located even farther from the town center. Harrington illustrates the early-elite to the later-common adoption pattern of Art Deco architecture. The first two structures were elite commercial establishments, while the later buildings were more common, ordinary structures. Furthermore, Harrington spatially demonstrates the theory that as an idea, style or trend diffuses, it radiates from its origin to envelop ever-expanding areas, transitioning from an elite movement to a common, broader-based, movement (Figure 43).



Figure 42: Harrington Service Station. Photo by author.

Art Deco Architecture
Temporal Diffusion for the City of Harrington

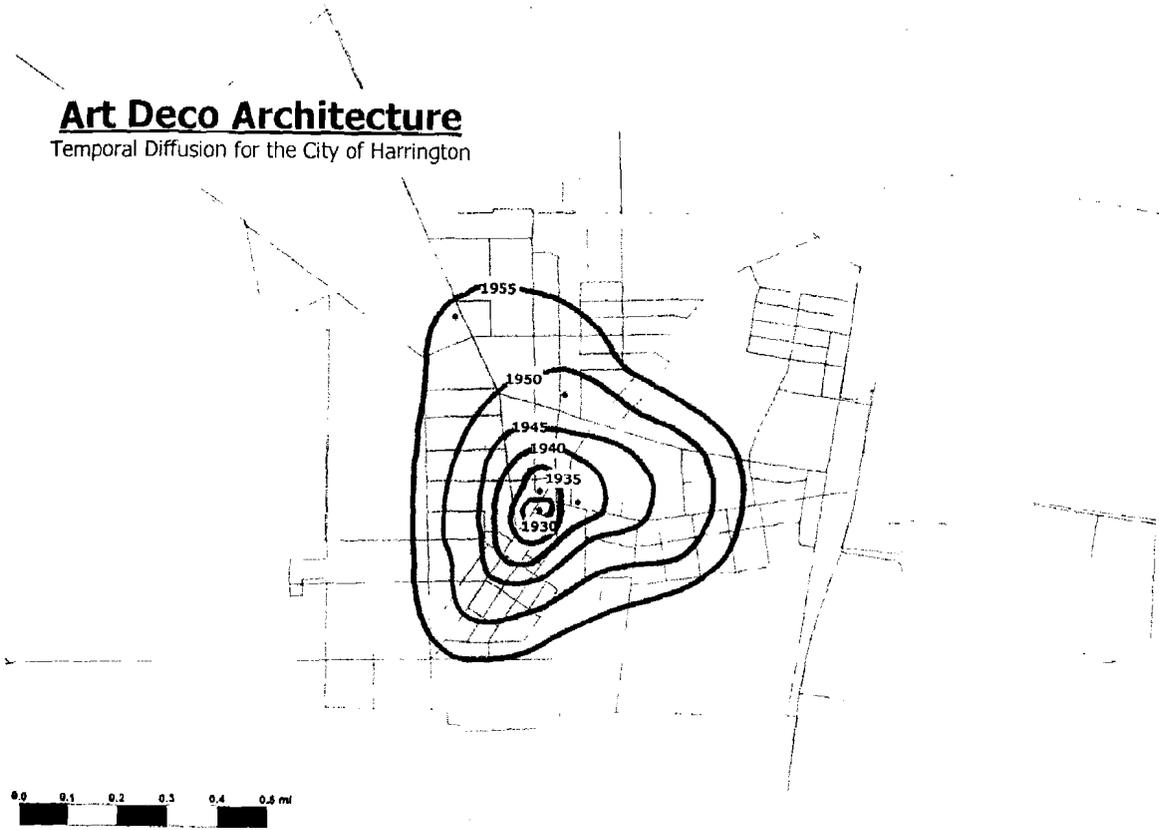


Figure 43: Art Deco Diffusion in Harrington.

Notable Cities with Little or No Art Deco

Although its diffusion was widespread through Delaware, some cities did not embrace Art Deco as a preferred style of architecture. Dover, though it has a few modest examples of Art Deco, never fully integrated Art Deco into its cultural setting. Dover is the State Capital and has a considerable number of historic buildings. Its dominant government buildings perpetuated the Georgian style of architecture. Even those built during the Art Deco era were designed to look historical. Legislative Hall for example, Delaware's capitol building was built in 1933, yet exhibits only Georgian architecture. Four other states in the United States built capitol buildings during the Art Deco era, and chose the Art Deco style. Clearly, Dover did not care to look progressively modern. Similarly, the desire of Old New Castle and Odessa to retain and preserve their historical, colonial image discouraged the building of Art Deco structures in those towns. Such places that are culturally non-adaptive are either unaware of cultural changes, or more likely, purposely resist them.

Adoption Rate of Art Deco in Delaware.

The rate at which Art Deco architecture was adopted into the ordinary landscape in Delaware lagged that of the national diffusion rate, as would be expected by cultural diffusion theory. Although Wilmington adopted the style early for the Art Deco era,

other areas of the state were either late or never incorporated Art Deco architecture into their cultural landscape. Comparing the annual number of Art Deco structures built in Delaware with the national trend, it becomes evident that Delaware's peak in building Art Deco architecture occurred later than the national average (Figure 44 and 45). Where the national peak for Art Deco buildings occurred in 1934, Delaware's peak was in 1941-1942. Likewise, the national trend shows a noticeable drop off in the number of Art Deco structures built by the late 1940s, while Delaware was still incorporating a relative high number of Art Deco structures well into the 1950s.

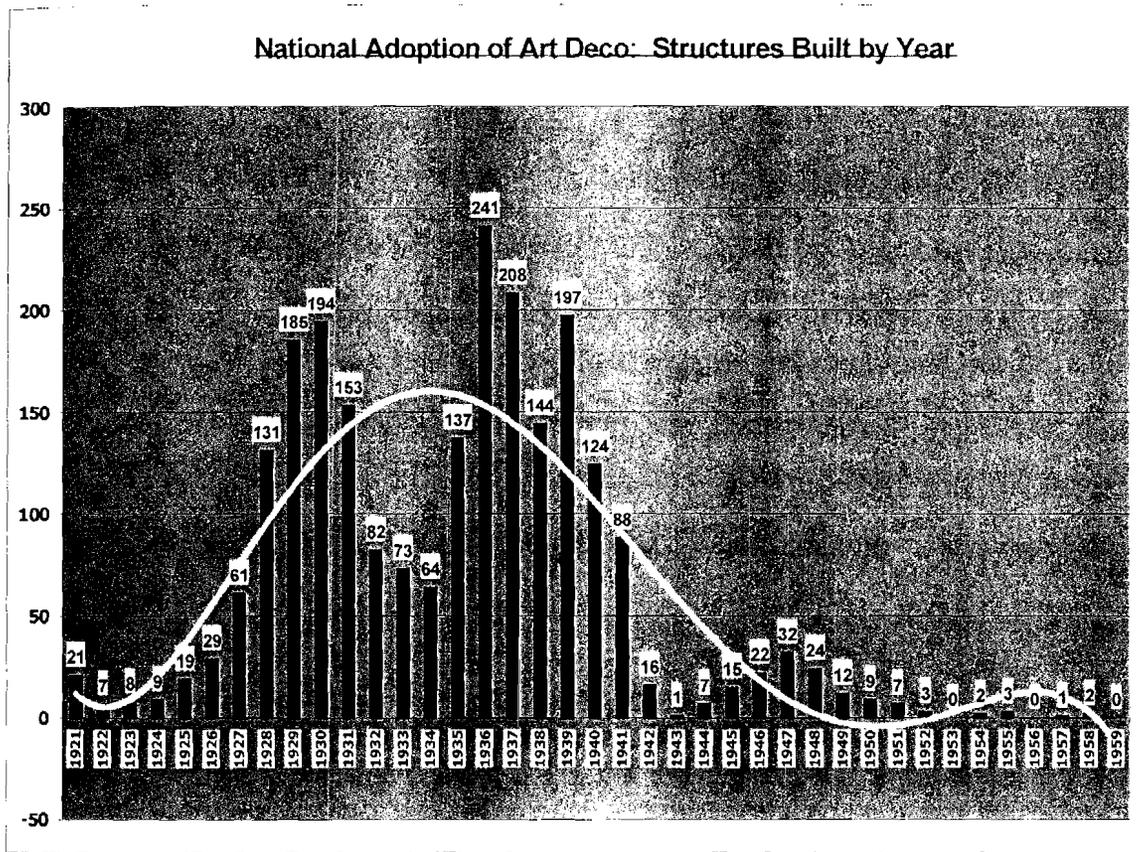


Figure 44: U.S. Art Deco Structures. (Trend Line is a 5th Degree Polynomial).

Delaware Adoption of Art Deco: Structures Built by Year

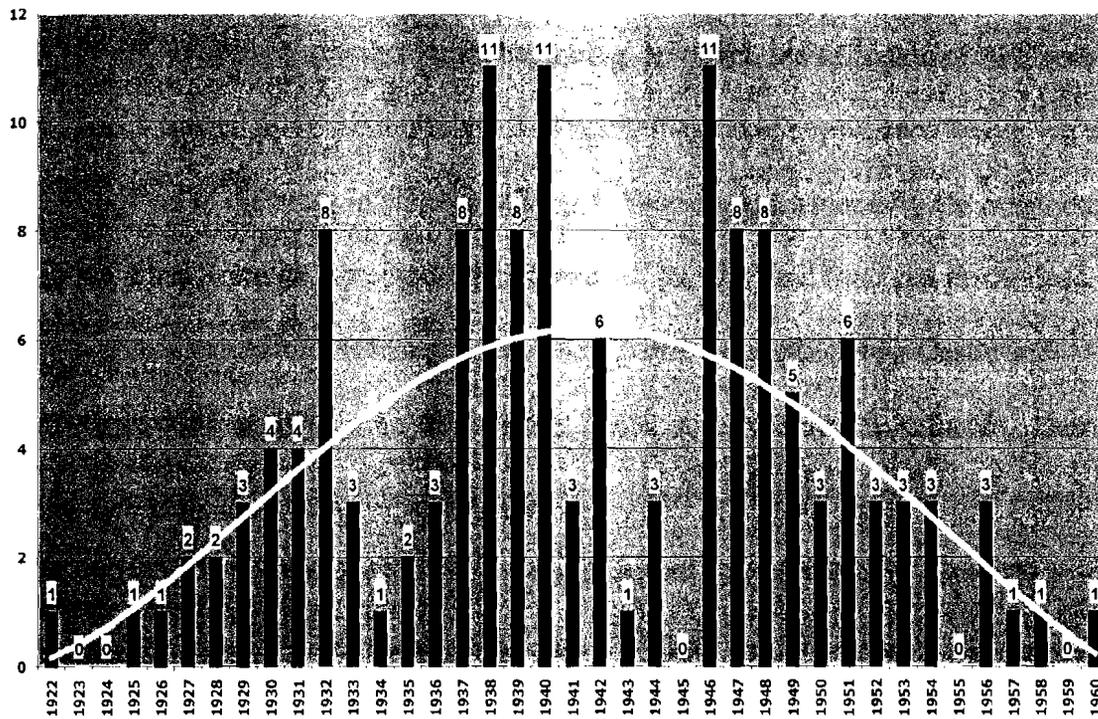


Figure 45: Delaware Art Deco Structures. Trend line is a 5th Degree Polynomial.

Summary of the Geographic Cultural Diffusion Theory
and Art Deco Architecture in Delaware

The spread of Art Deco architecture in Delaware demonstrates partially the theory of geographic cultural diffusion. The pathway of Art Deco's diffusion in Delaware did indeed come first to Wilmington, the highest ranked and culturally adaptive city in the state's urban hierarchy. Furthermore, in this first order of diffusion, not only did Art Deco come to the expected city but it also came to Rodney Square, the expected area within the city as well. From this initial beginning, however, the diffusion of Art Deco architecture followed more a culturally-based rather than population-based theory. First, Art Deco spread to the areas in close proximity to Wilmington, especially the peripheral, elite areas. Then, through the corporate influence of banking and financial institutions, Art Deco spread to Milford, Harrington, and Selbyville, by-passing New Castle and Dover, where dominant Georgian architectural styles were consciously enforced. During the early years of the Great Economic Depression, continued diffusion occurred primarily within central Wilmington. By the late 1930s, diffusion had proliferated statewide, reaching new towns and cities such as Seaford and Rehoboth, farthest from the entry point in Wilmington. During the two decades of the 1940s and the 1950s, diffusion engulfed the common areas of the state, especially the expanding automotive transportation corridors. Finally in the 1950s Art Deco architecture no longer was being built in Wilmington. It had solidified its shift to the ordinary cultural landscape, incorporated in areas surrounding Wilmington as well as to areas far removed from

Delaware's principal city, Wilmington. The Art Deco era ended, according to this study, in Seaford where the last two 100% ADF structures were constructed in 1957 and 1960.