

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

Architecture is a significant component of the human cultural landscape. Through architecture, society conveys its values and its aesthetic appreciation in the built environment. Art Deco architecture exhibits an optimistic, future-embracing view, despite having endured some of the harshest times in terms of the economy and social structure. Although certain cities in the United States are noted for their Art Deco architecture, the perception of Art Deco in Delaware has eluded most people.

This study set out to prove first and foremost that Art Deco architecture is present in the State of Delaware on a far more geographically extensive scale than is usually acknowledged. Assuming this was the case, what pathways would the spread of Art Deco architecture have followed? According to the theory of cultural diffusion, ideas, trends, or styles first follow a ranking order in their adoption and inclusion into the ordinary cultural landscape, appearing first in the highest ordered cities of the urban hierarchy. Ranked objectively by population, cultural diffusion in theory permeates from

these highest-ordered cities to lower-order cities. This scenario continues until the idea, trend, or style diffuses completely or fades and vanishes. We define its total adoption as having entered the 'ordinary' cultural landscape.

In the present study, the diffusion of Art Deco architecture was used to test this theory in Delaware. An inventory of all known examples of Art Deco in the entire state was assembled, including their dates of construction. Diffusion paths were then determined. While Art Deco arrived in Wilmington according to predicted theory, its diffusion from Delaware's principal city departed from routes that might have been expected. Instead of following a strictly population-based hierarchical diffusion, spreading to second and then third-order towns, Art Deco next appeared in third and fourth-ordered cities such as Harrington and Selbyville before being adopted in second-ordered cities such as Dover (Milford was the only early adopter among second-ordered cities). This departure from the predicted paths suggests a culturally-rather than demographically-influenced pattern in which elite business connections between higher-ordered centers such as Wilmington and Baltimore hastened the adoption of Art Deco in lower-ordered centers such as Selbyville and later Seaford. At the same time, cultural affection for Georgian designs actively resisted Art Deco's adoption in second-order centers such as Dover and New Castle. The diffusion paths followed by Art Deco in Delaware may mirror similar routes followed by other aspects of culture that spread into Delaware from higher-order national centers in other parts of the United States.

However, further study of other forms of cultural diffusion would be needed to test this aspect of the hypothesis.

A final point concerns the assertion that Delaware's widespread adoption of Art Deco justifies its use as an example of the diffusion of this architectural style into the ordinary landscape of the country. Cultural artifacts typically take time to spread out into the broader, more distant landscape from centers of initiation. As this study points out, Delaware's adoption rate peaked well after the national adoption peak time for higher-ranked cities across the country, which is consistent with the argument that the state was part of the more broadly based stage of Art Deco's adoption in America. Thus, Delaware was representative of the ordinary cultural landscape of the U.S. during the Art Deco period.

Sadly though, just as Delaware lagged in its adoption of Art Deco architecture, it is now exhibiting that same laggard approach towards the preservation and appreciation of Art Deco structures. Time is crucial if we wish to save the significant number of Art Deco structures that currently exist, before they are demolished and vanish from view. Our cultural landscape will be the richer for their preservation.