

## Chapter 5

### THE FATE OF ART DECO ARCHITECTURE IN DELAWARE

Compared to other architectural styles, Art Deco seems little appreciated in Delaware. It is estimated that 75% of all Art Deco architecture is no longer in existence nationwide (Gebhard, 1994: 18). Although complete archived records do not exist, this scenario seems to hold true for Delaware as well. According to the State Historical Preservation Office, only eight listed sites contain Art Deco styling. With so few sites officially designated, it is clear that Art Deco's imprint on the cultural landscape of Delaware is not deemed significant, in terms of its officially documented existence. Furthermore, of these eight recorded sites, all are located in downtown Wilmington (Figure 85). Even though the present study demonstrates that 143 examples of Art Deco architecture do exist in the State, many of these structures are in poor condition (Figure 86). Since Art Deco architecture is not generally perceived to exist in the state, its preservation and renovation has been essentially ignored, especially when compared with the efforts to preserve other, older, more traditional styles of Victorian, Georgian, and Colonial architecture.

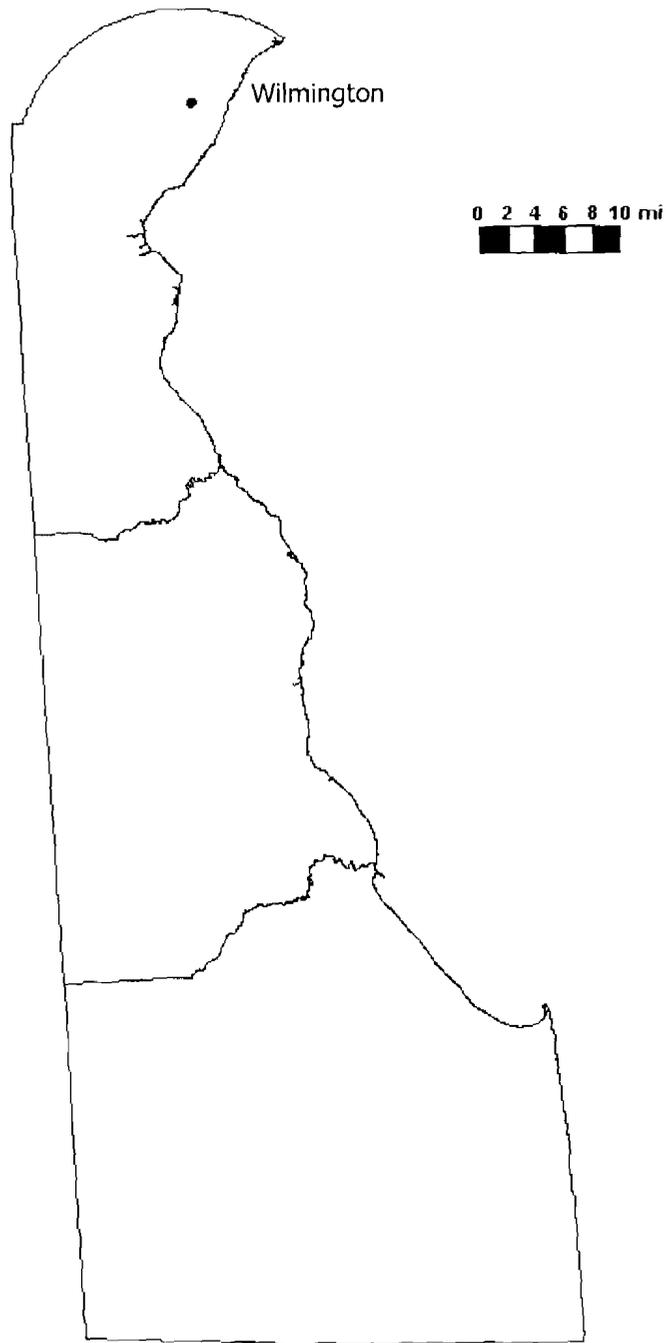


Figure 85: Acknowledged Art Deco Sites Prior to Present Study (8).

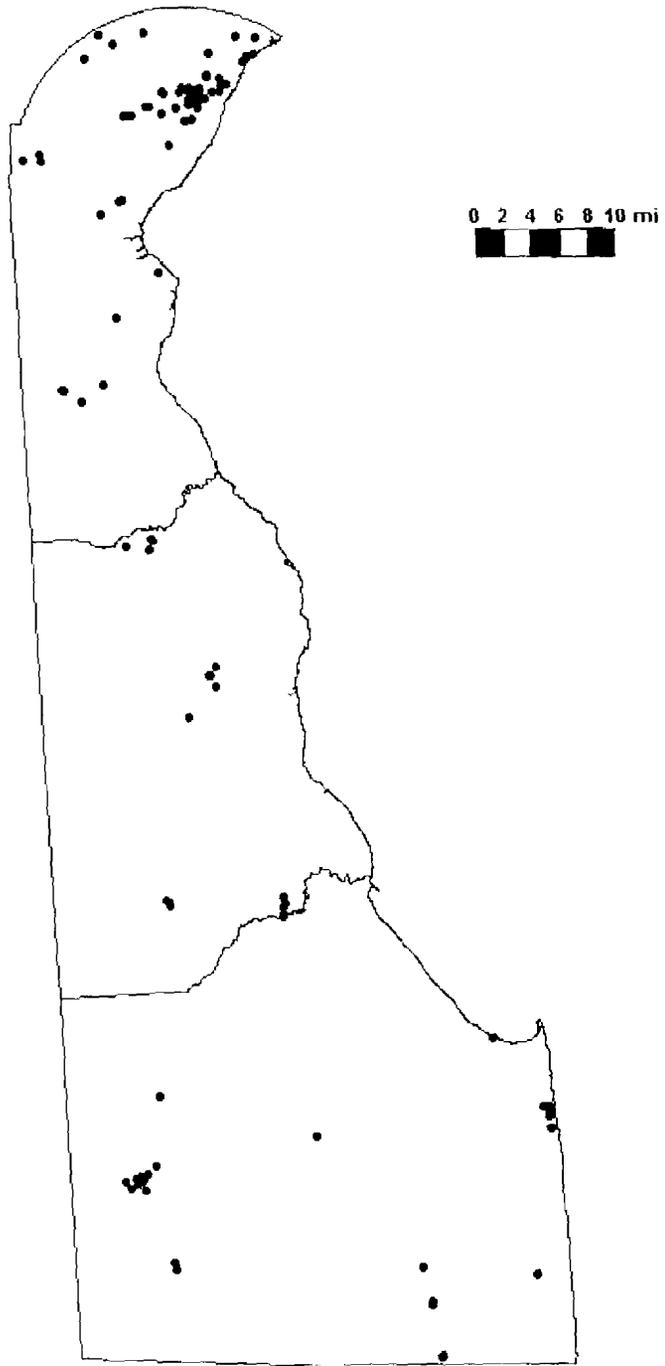


Figure 86: Art Deco Sites Identified in the Present Study (143).

This issue is not simply one of numerical superiority. The social elite of Delaware seems to genuinely favor preservation of architectural styles that preceded the Art Deco era. The DuPont family for example, helped fund the preservation of both Old New Castle and Odessa. These cities today stand as well preserved examples of colonial America in the eighteenth century. Legislative Hall in Dover, the present State capitol building, was constructed in 1933 in the colonial style, while four other states built new capitol buildings around the same time in the progressive Art Deco style.<sup>3</sup>

The Winterthur Museum, through its preservation programs, strongly sways public appreciation for architectural styles prior to the Art Deco era. An example of this influence was the fate of the Robertson house (1938), an Art Deco home featured earlier in this study. Fitting with the conservative image established by Winterthur, the Robertson house was torn down and replaced by newer homes built to resemble yet even older styled architecture. This one example of the failure to preserve an Art Deco home that was nationally featured in the February 1938 issue of *Architectural Forum*, indicates the lack of appreciation for Art Deco architecture in Delaware (Myers, Feb. 1938: 125-132).

Other examples of Art Deco structures that have vanished include the Baltimore Savings Bank in Selbyville, Delaware. Had this building been saved it would easily be the finest building in all of Selbyville today. Several Art Deco Cinemas have vanished as

---

<sup>3</sup> These states were: Nebraska, Louisiana, North Dakota, and Oregon (Capitman, 1996: 38-39).

well, replaced by larger, suburban complexes. The Warner Theater stands as a prime example (Figure 87 and 88). Completed in 1939, the Warner debuted with Olivia de Havilland, and faded with Elvis Presley. Probably the saddest loss of an Art Deco structure occurred during the completion of this study. The former Caesar Rodney High School, built in Camden, Delaware was demolished in July, 1999. The school had been documented by this study only three months prior to its demolition (Figure 89).

Nothing can be done to bring back Art Deco structures that have been demolished. Equally disturbing is the current treatment and the lack of appreciation for the Art Deco architecture that still exist. Numerous sites on Market Street in Wilmington demand architectural preservation. A notable example is the Artisans Bank Building, built in 1929, that stands as one of the best examples of Art Deco architecture in the State of Delaware. Even though it is the current home of the Delaware Historical Society and the building's structural integrity has been maintained, its Art Deco details have been neglected and de-emphasized. For example, the bas-relief sculptures, showing wonderful Art Deco stylized shapes have been covered with cement stucco (Figure 90). Observing the façade as it stands today, only a fraction of the elegant style that the bank once exalted remains. The stylized sculptures that once used to grace Market Street have been crudely covered over, leaving behind only a flat surface devoid of style (Figure 91). Furthermore the lobby of the bank now stands as an injustice to the designers who created the impressive interior. Art Deco lights and a giant frosted glass ceiling, all highlights of a sophistication that once existed during the Jazz-age Deco era, today have

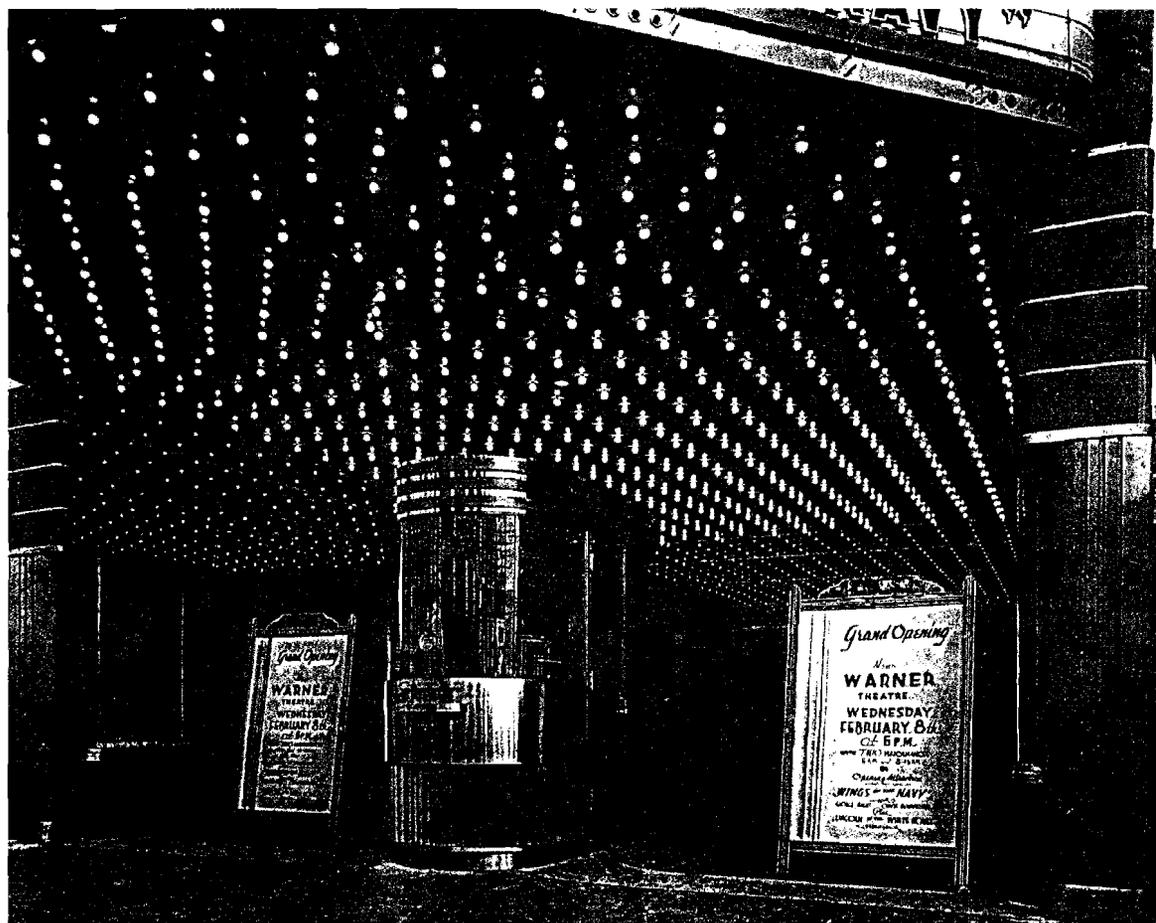
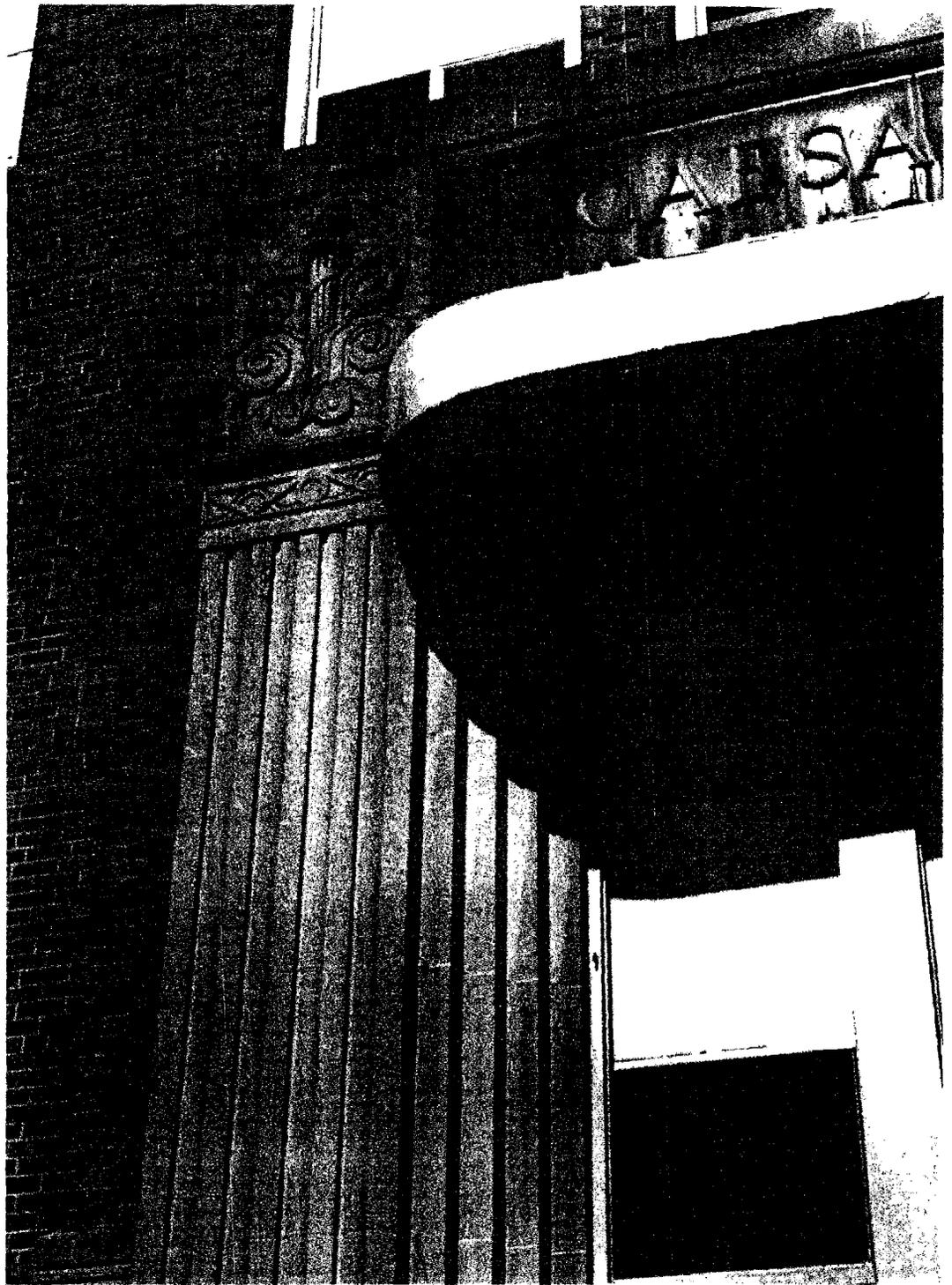


Figure 87: The Warner Theater, "Grand Opening" (1939).  
(Delaware Historical Society Photo archives).



Figure 88: Warner Theater circa 1960s. in a state of decline. (DHS Photo archives).



©

Figure 89: Detail of the front entrance to the Caesar Rodney High School (1938). Demolished 1999. Photo by author.



Figure 90: Artisan Bank as it appears now with "Blank" cement façade (1999).  
Photo by author.

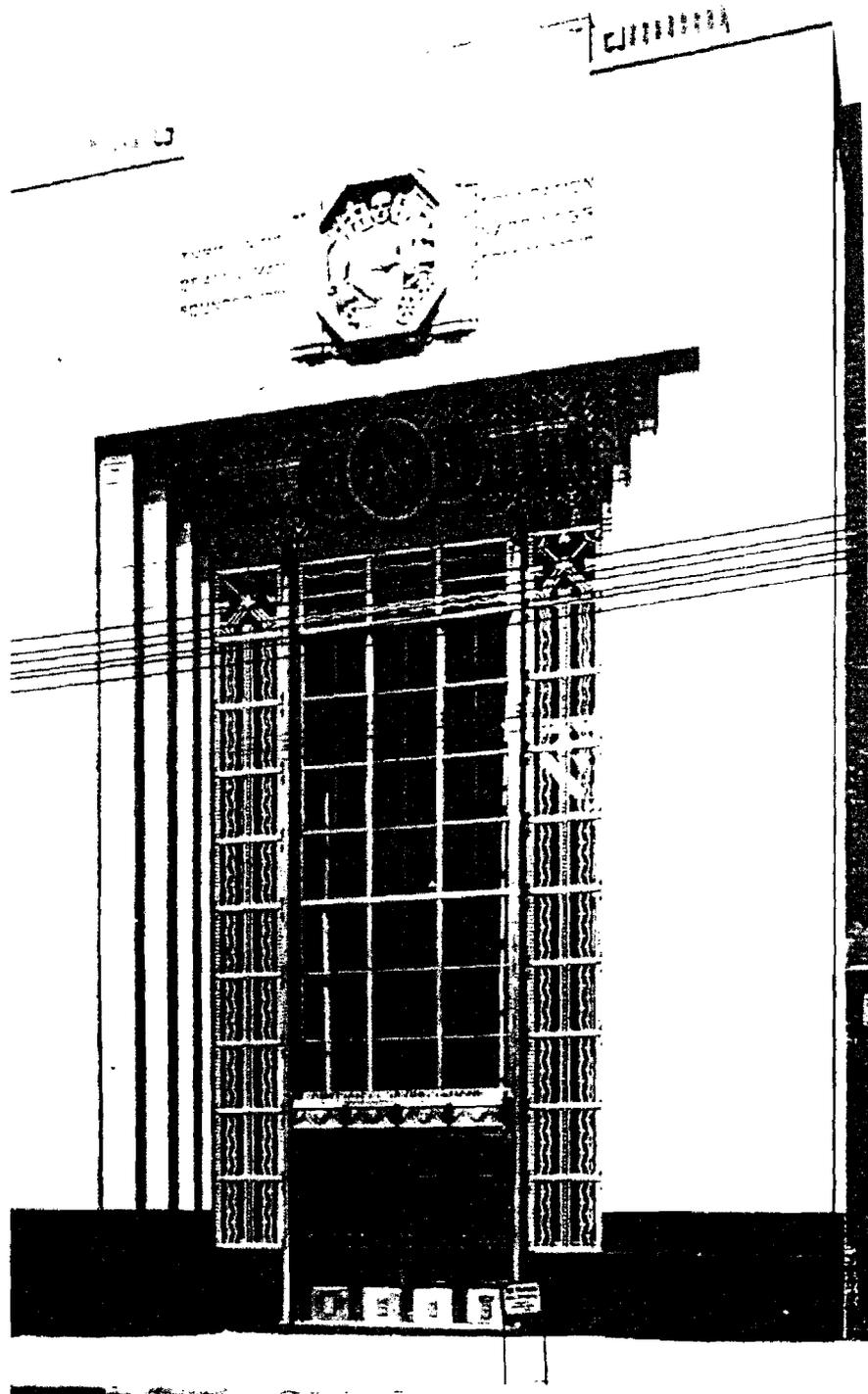


Figure 91: Artisan Bank as it originally appeared (1930).  
(Delaware Historical Society Photo archives).

been sadly neglected.

Also on Market Street at 603 North Market Street is a retail storefront where the front facade is almost completely destroyed (Figure 92). The only remnant of Art Deco is a wonderful bas-relief sculpture, placed high and in the center of the building's front facade. The outlines of the sculpture beg comparisons to other notable Art Deco sculptures found elsewhere (Figure 93).

Another example includes the streamline modern retail building at 701 North on Market Street (Figure 94). Its crème colored glazed bricks have been covered by plaster stucco, evoking images of an Italian eatery rather than a sleek retail store. Similarly, the once-glass block windows have been replaced by grooved plywood, which lacks continuity with the original vision the architect had for the building.

Only a few examples of Art Deco structures in Wilmington have been preserved or renovated in full appreciation of their stylistic details. The rest merely exist as structures for commerce or limp along from decade to decade, with little attention paid to their Art Deco uniqueness.

Outside Wilmington, other examples exist where Art Deco architecture is not being preserved or appreciated. The Milford Shines Theater is one example (Figure 95).



Figure 92: 603 North Market, Bas-relief Sculpture and decayed façade.  
Photo by author.

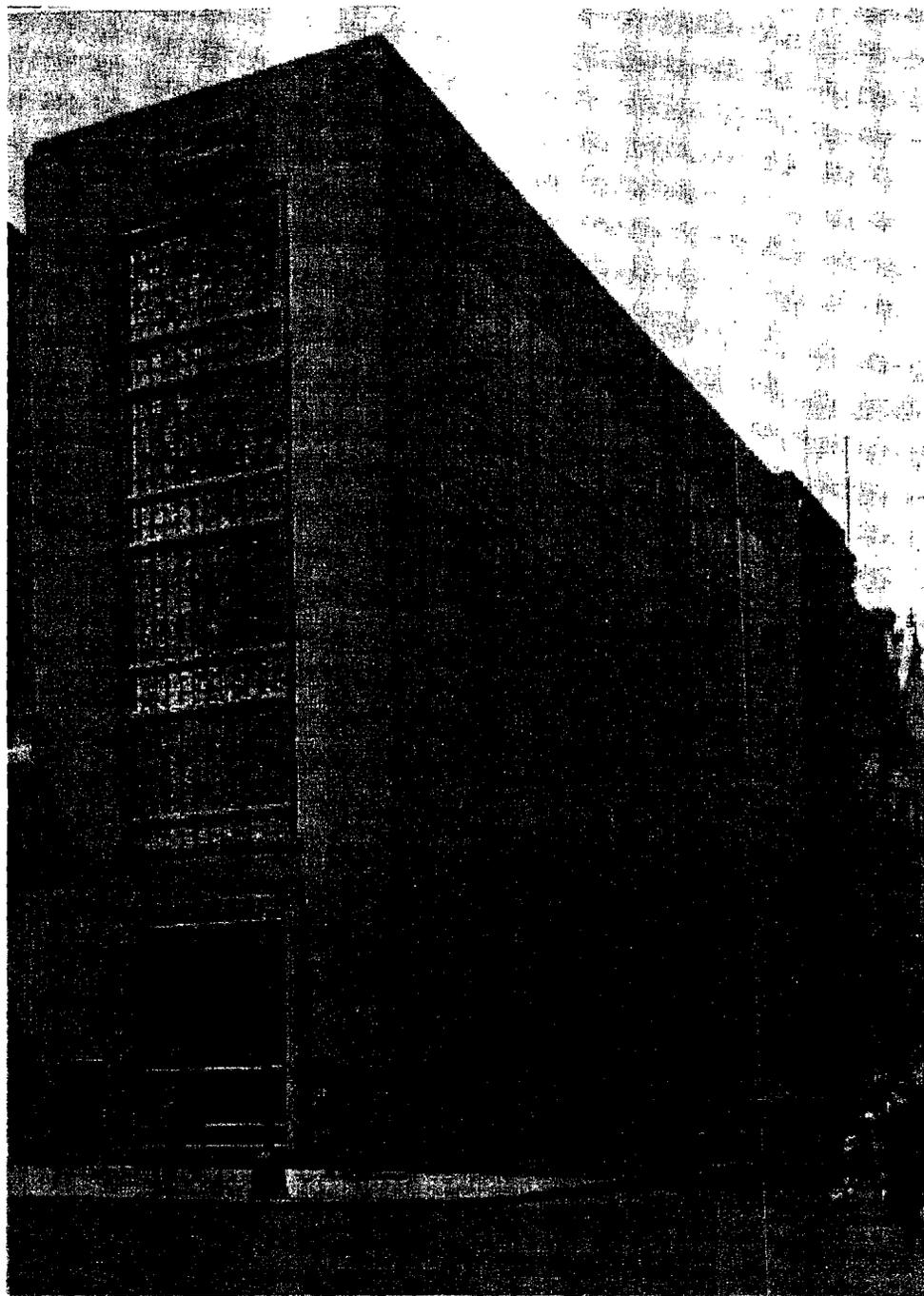


Figure 93: Corning-Steuben Building, New York City (1937). (Greif, 1975: 58).

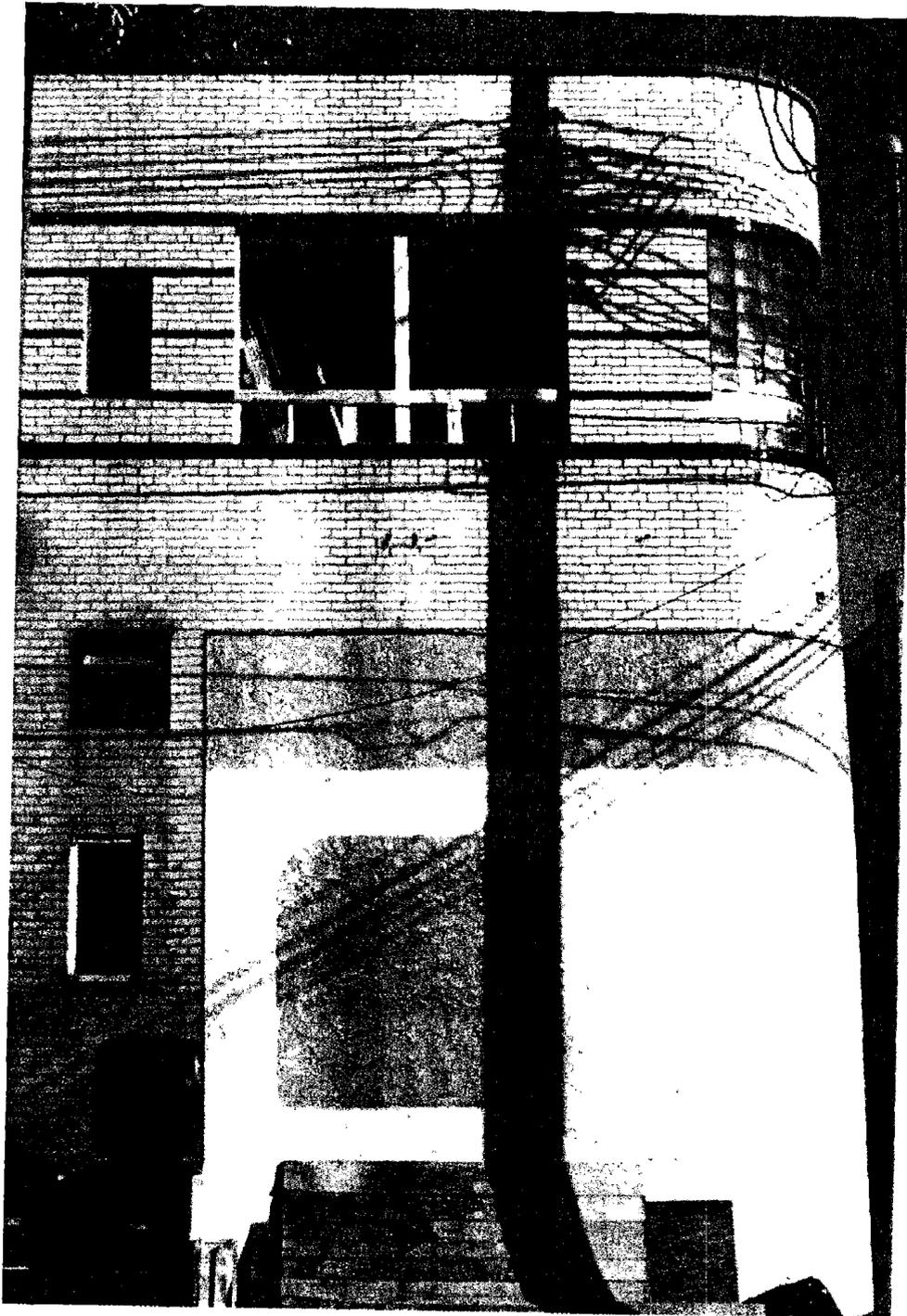


Figure 94: Retail Store at 701 North Market Street. Photo by author.

No longer a theater, it is slowly losing its Art Deco features as it serves the local community as a church. The brickwork on the front facade, which accentuates the verticality, has fallen into a state of disrepair and the exquisite interior has been refutably gutted.

Another example is the facade of the People's Bank in Harrington. It is slowly detaching itself from the building's structure. Furthermore, the large side windows that extend the two stories of the building have been bricked in, replaced by smaller, conventional, double hung windows (Figure 96).

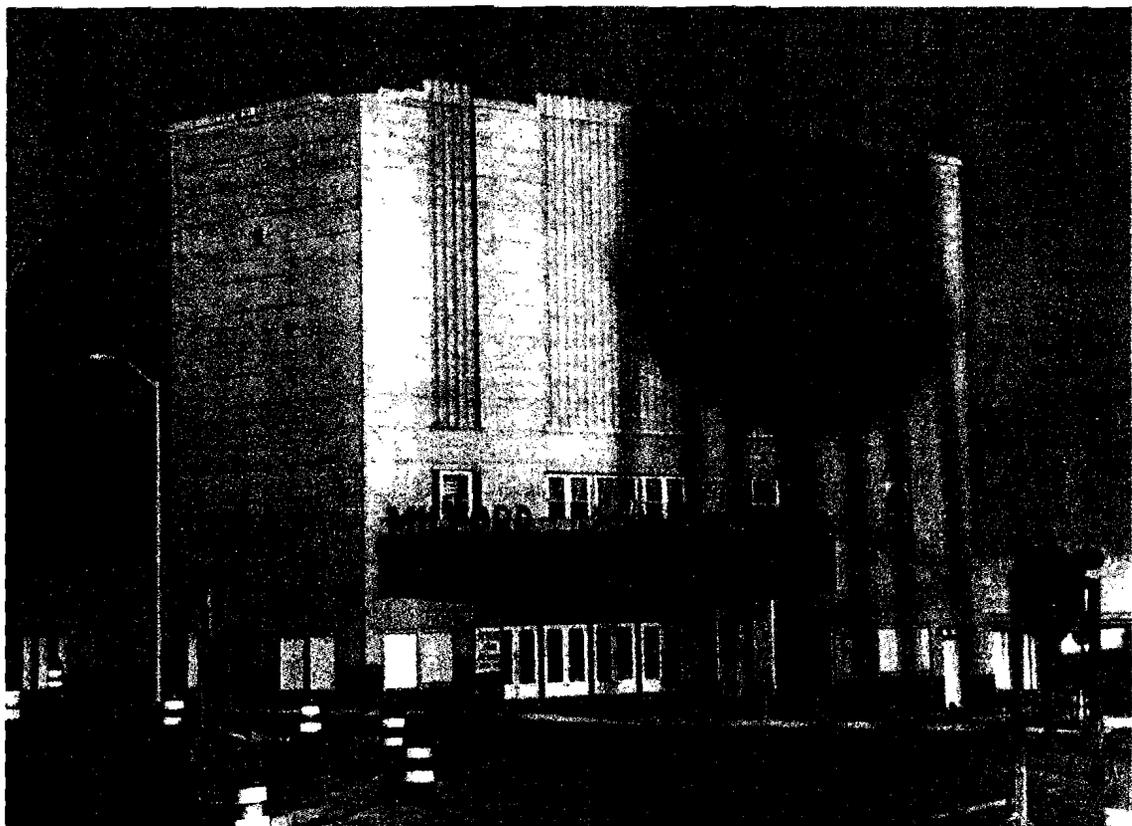


Figure 95: Milford Shines Theater (1946). Photo by author.

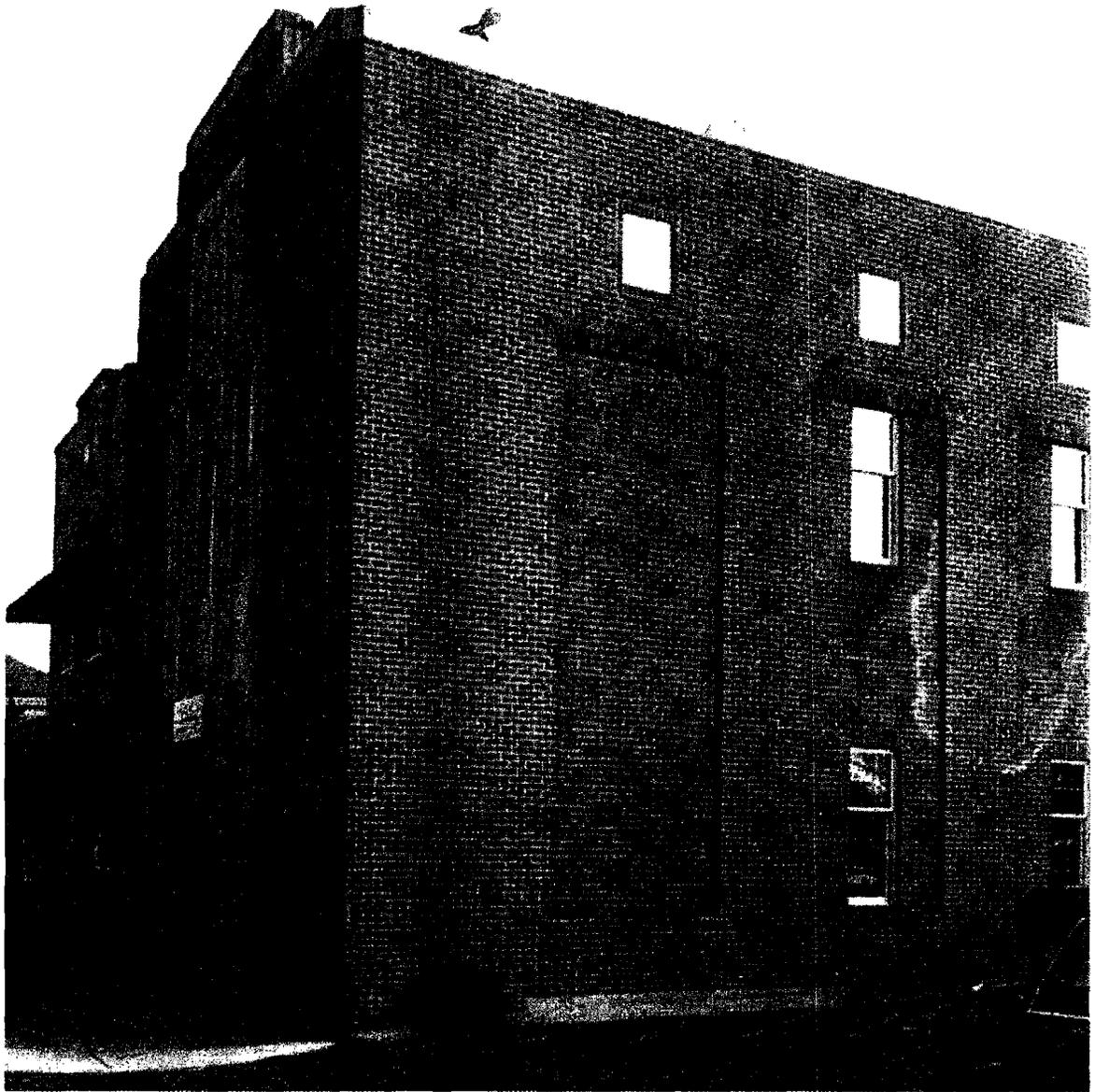


Figure 96: People's Bank, Harrington, Delaware (1929). Photo by author.

Although many of the State's Art Deco examples are in need of renovation, a few remain in good structural condition, yet their owners seem to have little regard for the Art Deco style they represent. One prime example is a private house in Rehoboth. Compared with a similar home in Miami Beach, Florida (Figure 97), this Delaware home shows a lack of appreciation for its Art Deco features and styling (Figure 98). A solid white color scheme on both flat surfaces and detailed features, combined with the incorporation of traditional accents such as window shutters, mask its Art Deco features. Rather than drawing attention to the portico over the entranceway and the rounded window overhang, the paintings on the exterior, such as Greek columns and a tropical parrot at the entranceway make a mockery of Art Deco. Instead of highlighting the streamlined and simple beauty of the house, the paintings, combined with the black railing on the portico and the window shutters, have cluttered the Streamline appearance of the building, over-embellishing its simple yet beautiful clean lines. The greatest irony is another painting on the plastered stucco that tries to make the house look as if the stucco is breaking away from a faux red brick exterior. This final painting seems to be a statement that underneath this modern, plastered stucco is really a traditional red brick home. In effect, the Art Deco design is actively discouraged.

Although many of the Art Deco structures are in generally poor condition, especially in terms of how they have been preserved and maintained, some examples have been well cared for. Such an example in Milford is the automobile showroom of



Figure 97: Nautical Streamline Moderne House in Miami, Florida (Bayer, 1992: 63).



Figure 98: "Parrot House" Rehoboth, Delaware. Photo by author.

I.G. Burton (Figure 99). Built in 1946 as a Chevrolet Dealership, this showroom stands in pristine condition today, serving now as an Oldsmobile and BMW dealership.

Another example is a private home in Arden (Figure 100). Well cared for by its owners, this house continues to show an appreciation for the simple lines of Streamline Moderne Art Deco.

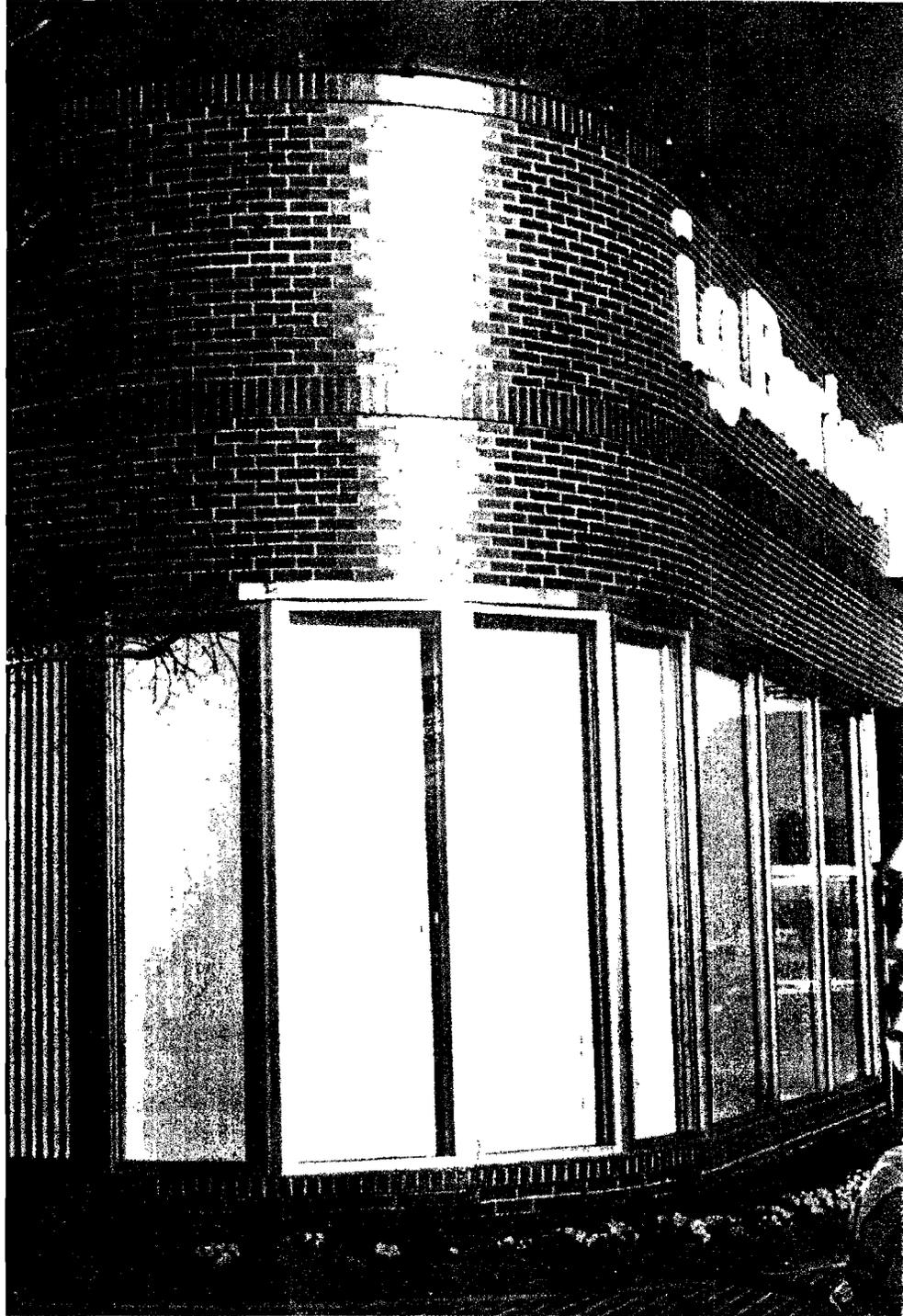


Figure 99: I.G. Burton auto showroom, Milford, Delaware (1946). Photo by author.



Figure 100: Streamline Moderne House in Arden, Delaware. Photo by author.