

Karoo Deco: Art Deco Architecture of the Karoo Region of South Africa

By Christo Vosloo*

Art Deco, often linked to urban aplomb, also featured in rural South Africa—though this aspect remains underexplored. Most studies focused on cities and flourishing industrial towns, overlooking rural settings like the semi-arid Karoo. To initiate an investigation into Karoo Art Deco, this investigation compared 38 Karoo Art Deco buildings with the characteristics of urban examples of this style in South Africa, aiming to deepen the understanding of the style's reach, regional characteristics, and reasons for divergence. A secondary goal was to begin cataloguing Karoo examples and identifying examples that should be included in the portfolio of South African Art Deco buildings in order that it might provide a more encompassing review. Findings suggest that Art Deco in the Karoo was embraced largely by the business community, especially hoteliers, but also cinemas, garages, hotels, and retail outlets in order to present a modern face. These buildings tended to be modest in size and decoration, shaped by local socio-economic constraints. The study also highlights the limited recognition for these rural architectural assets and the need for intensified preservation efforts. Further research on this topic is strongly recommended.

Introduction

This study was undertaken with the aim of deepening the understanding of South Africa's Art Deco architecture, particularly the little-documented Art Deco examples in the Karoo region. It marks the beginning of a long-term effort to fill this knowledge gap by mapping out Art Deco buildings in selected Karoo towns and comparing them to urban examples, highlighting distinctive features, and exploring their origins and calling for their protection and further research.

While the Art Deco style of architecture and design had its beginnings as far back as the years before the start of the First World War during the period 1914-1915, it became a popular style only after the war in the 1920s and 1930s, specifically after the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris in 1925.¹

It is often proposed that one of the factors contributing to its acceptance after the war was the changing role of women during the war. Their enhanced independence prompted them to enter various professions. In doing so, many, like their male counterparts, left the rural areas and moved to cities where opportunities for independent work, as well as the emancipated lifestyle during the so-called Roaring Twenties,

*Emeritus Professor, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

1. A. Lesieutre, *The spirit and splendour of Art Deco* (London: Paddington Press, 1974), 7-22.

provided compelling attraction:² change was happening across various aspects of society and change in architectural and design styles was not untoward.

While societal change of this type was one of the reasons for the international development and spread of the Art Deco style, it does indicate that the style, albeit during the early period (before the economic depression of the 1930s), was predominantly associated with cities and prosperity³ which could mean that this period might have been less favourable for rural areas. Thus, investigating the rural development of this style is relevant.

The Art Deco style has been the subject of many books, studies and articles. This is also true of Art Deco in South Africa. Wide-ranging studies were conducted by Federico Freschi,⁴ Marilyn Martin,⁵ Wilhelmina van der Linde,⁶ and Bernhard Cooke⁷ amongst others. These studies included, almost exclusively, Art Deco buildings in the major cities or the large industrial towns on the Witwatersrand. Very few rural examples were examined. Because of the nature of societal changes that supported Art Deco, rural examples could be quite different: these areas would have suffered from people's migration to the cities. In addition, the local economies would have been affected by different factors that influenced the local economies. An arid area like the Karoo (Figure 1) would have been adversely affected by what is known as the 'Great Drought' (1932-33), while the Little Karoo would have benefitted from the Ostrich feather 'boom' before suffering from the end of that period in 1914. Hence, the Karoo is the type of area many would have moved from to follow the bright lights of the big cities. In addition, the Karoo is regarded as a very conservative area where Art Deco might have struggled to find acceptance. Yet, preliminary studies have indicated that the main centres in the Karoo do indeed contain several Art Deco buildings.

2. W. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur* (Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2000), 40-43.

3. Ibid, 37-40; N. Wolf, *Art Deco* (Munich: Prestel, 2013), 182.

4. F. Freschi, "Art Deco, Modernism and modernity in Johannesburg: the case for Obel and Obel's 'Astor Mansions' (1932)," *De Arte* 32, no. 55 (1997): 21-35; Freschi, "Art Deco, modernity, and the politics of ornament in South African architecture, 1930-1940," in *The Routledge Companion to Art Deco* (eds.) B. Elliott and M. Windover (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 253-270.

5. M. Martin, "Art Deco Architecture in South Africa," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 20, no 1 (1994): 8-27.

6. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000.

7. B Cooke, "The emergence of contemporary architecture in South Africa 1927-1939," *South African Architectural Review* (1960).



Figure 1. Map of South Africa Showing the Karoo Area

Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.⁸

The article comprises a literature review that considers the Art Deco style in general, and then in Africa and South Africa, before introducing architectural styles in the Karoo before the arrival of the Art Deco style. Hereafter the research methodology is presented before an overview is given of Art Deco buildings as found during the study. This is followed by a discussion of what was discovered, and finally a conclusion which includes recommendations for further study.

Literature Reviewⁱ

Art Deco

The term Art Deco originated from the literature that discussed the 1925 Parisian exhibition titled *Exposition Internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*.⁹ The term has only been in use since 1966.¹⁰ Before 1966 the style was referred to as the Modern Style, the Jazz Age, the French Style or the Zigzag Style.¹¹

8. Britannica Editors, *Karoo Region South Africa*.

9. Wolf, *Art Deco*, 2013, 22.

10. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000; B. Hillier, and S. Escritt, *Art Deco Style* (London, Phaidon Press, 1977), 8.

11. Wolf, *Art Deco*, 2013, 22.

Art Deco has received wide attention and many publications by authors such as Duncan,¹² Hillier and Escritt,¹³ Wolf,¹⁴ and others covering this style exist.

Art Deco emerged as a distinctive strand within the broader Modern Movement, though it diverged significantly from the more austere ‘radical functionalism’ typical of Early Modern or International Style architecture.¹⁵ Its critics often labelled it dismissively as ‘modernistic’.¹⁶ The style took shape globally after World War I, flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, and extended into the 1940s.¹⁷ Alain Lesieutre described Art Deco as an ambitious pursuit of a fully unified decorative art, complete in its own structure, symbolism, and aesthetic ideal.¹⁸

Van der Linde notes that Art Deco underwent numerous transformations and hybridizations, manifesting across both tangible and intangible cultural forms—ranging from architecture and automotive design to fashion and interior furnishings.¹⁹ Echoing Hillier, she highlights the eclectic sources that informed the style, including Art Nouveau (particularly the Wiener Werkstätte), Cubism, and the Russian Ballet.²⁰ She further identifies influences from movements such as Fauvism, Expressionism, Futurism, Constructivism, Orphism, Surrealism, and De Stijl, along with institutions and journals like the Bauhaus and *L’Esprit Nouveau*. The visual vocabularies of ancient civilizations—from Egyptian and Native American cultures to Eastern and Far Eastern traditions—also left their imprint.²¹ Thus, although Art Deco projected itself as a departure from historicism, it was deeply embedded in historical reference.

Wolf supports Bevis Hillier and Stephen Escritt’s contention that no set of generally accepted guidelines for the interpretation of Art Deco artefacts exists.²² However, as will be shown below, some sources do provide such guidelines. Duncan²³ suggests that it is challenging to pinpoint the defining traits of Art Deco due to its diverse and often contradictory influences. In the absence of a precise definition, Hillier and Escritt advocate for an understanding of Art Deco through emblematic artefacts.²⁴ Among their examples are New York’s Chrysler Building (Figure 2), London’s Hoover Building (Figure 3), Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann’s cabinetry (Figure 4), a streamlined chair by Kern Weber (Figure 5), a Bakelite radio, a Shelley tea set by Royal Doulton, and a travel poster by Cassandre. Although the selection is limited and potentially contentious, it does not effectively support the article’s aim and scope. What is true though is that an empirically derived list of characteristics can be useful, particularly when space is at a premium, and as a guide for an

12. A. Duncan, *Art Deco* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1988).

13. Hillier and Escritt, *Art Deco Style*, 1977.

14. Wolf, *Art Deco*, 2013.

15. Hillier and Escritt, *Art Deco Style*, 1977, 22.

16. Ibid.

17. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van ‘n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000;

18. A. Lesieutre, *The spirit and splendour of Art Deco*, 1974, 7.

19. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van ‘n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000.

20. Ibid, 10.

21. Ibid, 13-20.

22. Wolf, *Art Deco*, 2013, 22.

23. A. Duncan, *Art Deco*, 1988, 6.

24. Hillier and Escritt, *Art Deco Style*, 1977, 19.

empirical study such as this. Thus, without disputing the positions of noted authors such as Duncan, Lesieutre and others, a review of literature has led to the list below from Van der Linde and others as cited to form a basis for this study.



Figure 2. *Chrysler Building New York, (1939) by William van Alen. Photograph by David Shankbone*
Source: Wikipedia, a.²⁵



Figure 3. *Hoover Building London (1933) by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners. Photograph by Ethan Doyle White*
Source: Wikipedia, b.²⁶

25. Wikipedia, a. *Chrysler Building*.

26. Wikipedia, b. *Hoover Building*.



Figure 4. *Coner Cabinet with Amaranth Veneer on Mahogany, Ivory Inlay (1923) by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (Brooklyn Museum). Photographer unknown*
Source: Wikipedia, c.²⁷



Figure 5. *Armchair ("Airline Chair") 1934–1935 by Kem Weber (Brooklyn Museum). Photographer unknown*
Source: Wikipedia, d.²⁸

Van der Linde²⁹ identified several defining features of Art Deco architecture. These include a pronounced emphasis on verticality, often balanced by strong horizontal elements that serve either as counterpoints or as distinct design features. Building façades frequently incorporate setbacks or stepped forms reminiscent of ziggurats. Geometric patterns and shapes play a significant role in the visual language of Art Deco, along with the use of decorative parapets and flat roofs. Ornamentation is typically stylized in the characteristic Art Deco manner, while chevron motifs commonly feature as a decorative staple.

27. Wikipedia, c. Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann.

28. Wikipedia, d. Kem Weber.

29. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 541-542.

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission³⁰ highlights Art Deco's sleek, linear aesthetic, the use of low-relief decorative panels at key architectural junctures such as entrances and rooflines, and a smooth building finish. The Encyclopaedia Britannica³¹ adds an admiration for modernity and the machine age, reflected in design traits like simplicity, symmetry, planarity, and streamlined forms reminiscent of ocean liners.

Thomann³² emphasizes ornate geometric detailing—typically stylized—such as chevrons, pyramids, sunbursts, zigzags, and florals. This decorative language is consistently applied both inside and out, creating a unified aesthetic. He also notes dramatic contrasts through the bold use of black, white, gold, and silver; the use of fragmented, upward-thrusting angular shapes capped with stepped forms; and architectural features such as glass-block or opaque windows arranged in horizontal bands, along with parapets, spires, and corner towers that lend grandeur to otherwise simple structures.

The Royal Institute of British Architects³³ (RIBA) identifies further hallmarks, including strong visual profiles and bold shapes, symmetry and prominent entrances, sculptural three-dimensionality, and a coherent use of geometric forms. RIBA also points to the integration of architecture and sculpture, richly designed foyers and lifts, and the use of decorative panels symbolizing nationalism and civic pride within an international architectural dialogue.

Schenker³⁴ adds the use of loud, vibrant and even kitschy colours, streamlined and sleek forms and sunburst or sunrise motives.

Martin³⁵ includes the use of smooth surfaces to envelop and combine internal space and disparate spaces and points out that the style was popular with specific types of buildings, for instance cinemas. Lesieutre notes that Art Deco design was smart and “avoided the pretty”. He contends it was this quality and the corresponding toughness that made it possible for the style to assimilate so many other design styles, particularly geographical styles such as African design features.³⁶ Federico Freschi explains this as follows: “As a style, Art Deco is characterised both by its modernity and its interest in exoticism, often expressed in the use of stylised plant and animal forms, and references to ‘other’, non-Western cultures”.³⁷

The abovementioned guidelines can be combined to produce the following list of characteristics for Art Deco architecture:

30. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, *Pennsylvania Architectural Field Guide: Art Deco Style 1925 – 1940*.

31. Encyclopedia Britannica, *Art Deco: art movement*.

32. L. Thomann, *What Is Art Deco Architecture?* The Spruce.

33. Royal Institute of British Architects, *Art Deco: features of Art Deco architecture*.

34. M. Schenker, *Art Deco Design: History and inspiring examples*. Brush-up by creative market. 2021.

35. Martin, “Art Deco Architecture in South Africa,” 1994.

36. Lesieutre, *The spirit and splendour of Art Deco*, 1974, 9.

37. Freschi, “Art Deco, Modernism and modernity in Johannesburg: the case for Obel and Obel's ‘Astor Mansions’ (1932),” 1997.

- A pronounced emphasis on verticality, often balanced by strong horizontal elements that serve either as counterpoints or as distinct design features.
- Building façades that frequently incorporate setbacks or stepped forms reminiscent of ziggurats.
- Geometric patterns and shapes that play a significant role in the visual language of Art Deco.
- The use of decorative parapets and flat roofs.
- Ornamentation that is typically stylized in the characteristic Art Deco manner symbolizing nationalism and civic pride, or stylized plant and animal forms, and references to non-Western cultures within an international architectural dialogue.
- Chevron motifs.
- A sleek, linear aesthetic.
- The use of low-relief decorative panels at key architectural junctures such as entrances and rooflines.
- A smooth building finish.
- Ornate geometric detailing—typically stylized—such as chevrons, pyramids, sunbursts, zigzags, and florals.
- Decorative language that is consistently applied both inside and out, creating a unified aesthetic.
- Dramatic contrasts through the bold use of black, white, gold, and silver.
- Fragmented, upward-thrusting angular shapes capped with stepped forms.
- Features such as glass-block or opaque windows arranged in horizontal bands.
- Incorporation of parapets, spires, and corner towers that lend grandeur to otherwise simple structures.
- Strong visual profiles and bold shapes.
- Symmetry and prominent entrances.
- Sculptural three-dimensionality.
- The coherent use of geometric forms.
- The integration of architecture and sculpture.
- Richly designed foyers and lifts, and the use of decorative panels.
- Use of loud, vibrant and even kitschy colours.
- Streamlined and sleek forms.
- Sunburst or sunrise motives.

The above list was used as a tool to identify Art Deco buildings in the Karoo and to distinguish the defining characteristics.

Art Deco Architecture in Africa, Particularly South Africaⁱⁱ

Art Deco architecture flourished during the colonial period, a time when much of Africa was under European control. Unsurprisingly, examples of the style are dispersed across the continent. Countries that feature Art Deco buildings are Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Cape Verde, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Morocco,

Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zambia.³⁸ⁱⁱⁱ

There are notable concentrations of Art Deco architecture in places such as Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,³⁹ Asmara in Eritrea,⁴⁰ Maputo in Mozambique,⁴¹ and numerous South African urban centres, amongst others. Architectural historian David Rifkind⁴² observes that Art Deco was widely adopted in colonial cities during the 1920s and 1930s. He notes that colonial authorities favoured the style for its embodiment of technological advancement, reinforcing the notion that colonization was a benevolent and "civilizing" effort. Furthermore, Rifkind points out that the association of Art Deco with luxury and international travel projected an image of the colonizers as modern, aspirational, and progressive.

In South Africa specifically, the Art Deco legacy is both rich and extensive—mainly the result of commissions by private enterprises. These structures, especially in urban areas, have been comprehensively studied and visually documented by scholars such as Martin,⁴³ Freschi,⁴⁴ and Van der Linde (2000),⁴⁵ and many examples are listed on the Artefacts website.⁴⁶

Freschi argues that within South Africa's architectural historiography, Art Deco holds a significant, though at times contested, place. He suggests that the term is often retroactively applied to buildings from the 1930s that feature distinctive 'modernistic' decorative motifs. However, he cautions that the label can be misleading, sometimes used loosely to denote an entire period rather than a coherent stylistic movement. Art Deco buildings, he says, differ from Modernist architecture in that they include ornamental detailing and tend toward symmetry, in contrast to the unembellished, function-driven forms of the Modern Movement.⁴⁷

This interpretation captures a key stylistic tension essential for understanding the place of Art Deco in the South African context. Martin⁴⁸ describes the architectural scene of the 1930s in South Africa as diverse and fragmented. At the time, practitioners generally fell into three camps: traditionalists who adhered to Beaux-Arts classicism, radicals aligned with the Modern Movement (Norman Hanson's so-called 'Heroic Period'), and a group in between who gravitated toward what came to be known as Art Deco. This latter group—featuring names such as

38. Wikipedia, *List of Art Deco architecture in Africa*.

39. C. Lunden, *The Art Deco Capital of Central Africa: In Bukavu, beautiful buildings have an ugly colonial history. But locals want to save them*. Atlas Obscura.

40. A. Peacock, and G. Wong, *Nine surprising art deco hotspots around the world*. Dezeen.

41. A. Yekkes, *Maputo Art Deco*. 2018.

42. Rifkind cited by Lunden, *The Art Deco Capital of Central Africa: In Bukavu, beautiful buildings have an ugly colonial history. But locals want to save them*.

43. Martin, "Art Deco Architecture in South Africa," 1994.

44. Freschi, "Art Deco, Modernism and modernity in Johannesburg: the case for Obel and Obel's 'Astor Mansions' (1932)," 1997.

45. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000.

46. Artefacts.co.za, *Southern African Built Environment: Architects, Engineers, Civil, Designs, Structures, Landscapes, Buildings*.

47. Freschi, "Art Deco, Modernism and modernity in Johannesburg: the case for Obel and Obel's 'Astor Mansions' (1932)," 1997, 30.

48. Martin, "Art Deco Architecture in South Africa," 1994, 9.

Obel and Obel, P. Rodgers-Cooke, and W.H. Grant—often received little scholarly attention.⁴⁹

Much of the inspiration for South African Art Deco came from the United States, especially its bold commercial expressions. This is evident in buildings like the ESKOM headquarters (Figure 6), which reflected both the influence of American cityscapes and the global appeal of Art Deco as an urbane, forward-looking style.



Figure 6. ESKOM House, Johannesburg (1934-1937). Original design by P. Rodgers-Cooke, completed by Pearse and Fassler. Photograph by Leon Krige⁵⁰

During the period in question, architectural journals enthusiastically championed the innovative work of figures such as Rex Martensen, Gordon McIntosh, Norman Hanson, Bernard Cooke, amongst others. However, this support within professional circles contrasted with the broader public perception. In practice, most members of the public, property developers, and many architects, commonly associated what we now define as Art Deco with the notion of modern architecture.⁵¹

As is often the case with stylistic movements, Art Deco's eclectic nature—driven by both social and professional objectives—led to its fusion with various other design vocabularies. According to Van der Linde, this resulted in stylistic hybrids such as 'Classical Deco' (featuring classical motifs), 'Gothic Deco' (incorporating neo-Gothic elements often seen in religious architecture), and 'International Deco' (which drew from the Modern or International Style).⁵² Thus, Art Deco served as a stylistic bridge, linking conservative traditions to progressive design ideologies.

49. Ibid, 12.

50. L. Krige, *Van Eck / Eskom house*, 1983.

51. Martin, "Art Deco Architecture in South Africa," 1994, 13.

52. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 540-541.

Freschi⁵³ notes that Johannesburg adopted the Art Deco style somewhat later than many international centres. While Art Deco's global prominence spanned roughly from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s,⁵⁴ most of Johannesburg's examples were constructed during the 1930s. Nevertheless, Art Deco buildings are widespread across South Africa's major cities and towns and span a broad array of functions—including industrial facilities, commercial offices, monuments, religious institutions, retail spaces,⁵⁵ and perhaps most iconically, cinemas such as Johannesburg's Colosseum Theatre (Figure 7).⁵⁶ Van der Linde's thesis offers an extensive inventory and analysis of these architectural works



Figure 7. *Colosseum Mezzanine 1933 by P. Rogers-Cooke. Photograph by Leon Krige*⁵⁷

In South Africa, the Art Deco style remained popular into the mid- to late 1940s.⁵⁸ While some attribute this longevity to economic growth following the country's abandonment of the gold standard in 1932, a rise in gold prices,⁵⁹ the end of the Great Depression, and the political steadiness resulting from the Hertzog–Smuts coalition,⁶⁰ Martin⁶¹ presents a more nuanced view. She argues that the South African economy during this time was marked by considerable instability. The lingering effects of the global depression, erratic fluctuations in gold and diamond

53. Freschi, "Art Deco, Modernism and modernity in Johannesburg: the case for Obel and Obel's 'Astor Mansions' (1932)," 1997, 21.

54. Hillier and Escritt, *Art Deco Style*, 1977, 19.

55. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 540.

56. Martin, "Art Deco Architecture in South Africa," 1994, 27.

57. Krige, *Colosseum mezzanine*, 1983.

58. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 479.

59. Johannesburg One Hundred Years cited in Freschi, "Art Deco, Modernism and modernity in Johannesburg: the case for Obel and Obel's 'Astor Mansions' (1932)," 1997, 23.

60. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 541.

61. Martin, "Art Deco Architecture in South Africa," 1994, 22.

prices, and a severe drought contributed to national uncertainty. While a phase of prosperity followed and lasted until 1937, Martin notes that the earlier instability, coupled with later urban affluence, negatively affected rural regions like the Karoo. These pressures likely triggered migration from farms and smaller towns to urban areas, deepening rural decline.

It is also vital to recognize that despite the stylistic tensions discussed earlier, Art Deco became a dominant visual language in South Africa. According to Freschi,⁶² it reflected not only urban pride but also rural efforts to define and express a sense of modernity. The style's appeal transcended linguistic boundaries and gained traction among Afrikaans-speaking communities, especially after Gerhard Moerdijk's efforts in the 1930s and 1940s to merge African elements with Afrikaner cultural identity. Moerdijk advanced the idea of *volksargitektuur* (nation-architecture), which aimed to assert a distinctly Afrikaner architectural expression independent of British influence. His Voortrekker Monument, completed in 1948, stands as the most iconic example of this ideal and influenced the design of many Afrikaans churches.⁶³

Altogether, South African Art Deco can be seen as a confident embodiment of the country's evolving capitalist and nationalist self-image within a larger narrative of modernity and aspiration.⁶⁴ Van der Linde⁶⁵ comments that although it shares many formal qualities with international iterations of the style, South African Art Deco also exhibits distinct features. These include generally smaller-scale buildings, a pronounced tendency toward stylistic fusion—such as Classical, Gothic, and International Deco, frequent use of local materials like South African marble, and decorative elements featuring indigenous wildlife, flora, and historical motifs.

In her pivotal study on South African Art Deco, Martin⁶⁶ underscores this inclination toward eclecticism, not only within Art Deco itself but across the modernist and historicist styles competing for prominence in the same era. As will be shown, the architectural output in regions like the Karoo reflects this same eclectic quality, incorporating diverse historical references into the local Art Deco idiom.

Historical Karoo Architectures

Lean-to houses featuring flat roofs and parapet walls, sometimes limited to the street-facing façade, are a familiar sight throughout the interior of southern Africa.

62. Freschi, "Art Deco, modernity, and the politics of ornament in South African architecture, 1930–1940," 2019, 255.

63. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 485.

64. Freschi, "Art Deco, modernity, and the politics of ornament in South African architecture, 1930–1940," 2019, 268.

65. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 541–542.

66. Martin, "Art Deco Architecture in South Africa," 1994, 14–17.

Scholars such as Gabriel Fagan,⁶⁷ Helena Marincowitz⁶⁸ and Franco Frescura⁶⁹ have identified this form as a prevalent residential type historically used by Karoo, Griqua, and Dutch farmers, as well as members of the emancipated Malay community.⁷⁰

In the Karoo, these parapeted flat-roof structures are commonly referred to as Karoostyle architecture,⁷¹ or *Brakdakke* (clay roofs) (Figure 8).⁷² Numerous examples still exist across the region. While many of these buildings have been lost over time,⁷³ a significant number have been restored and preserved. According to Marincowitz, the oldest surviving example in Prince Albert dates to around 1850. She characterizes these dwellings as typically rectangular in form, with a simple layout comprising two or three rooms. The front façade generally features a centrally placed door flanked symmetrically by a window on either side. The clay roof is contained on three sides by low parapet walls, with the front parapet often adorned with decorative elements that enhance the overall symmetry.⁷⁴



Figure 8. *Brakdak or Karoostyle House in Victoria West. Photograph by author*

Many towns in the Karoo, including Montagu and Prince Albert, were founded around the mid-19th century. Although flat-roofed Karoostyle dwellings likely predate the formal establishment of these settlements, they were among the first architectural forms used in their initial development. In places such as Montagu and Graaff-Reinet, early townscapes also featured several Cape Dutch-style houses. As these towns evolved, later phases of urban growth introduced Georgian or Cape Georgian architecture. Noteworthy surviving examples of this stylistic shift include 40 Long Street in Montagu (Figure 9) and the Graaff-Reinet Club (Figure 10). Cape Georgian, a new classical style adopted in these regions and marked by a restrained and thoughtful approach, aimed at innovation rather than merely replicating historic

67. G. Fagan, *Brakdak: platdakke in die Karoo* (Cape Town: Breestraat Publikasies, 2008).

68. H. Marincowitz, *Karoostyle: Folk architecture of Prince Albert and environs* (Prince Albert: Fransie Pienaar Museum, 2007).

69. F. Frescura, *From Brakdak to Bafokona: a study in the geographical adaptation and cultural transmission of the South African flat roofed dwelling*.

70. Ibid.

71. Marincowitz, *Karoostyle: Folk architecture of Prince Albert and environs*, 2007, 5.

72. Fagan, *Brakdak: platdakke in die Karoo*, 2008, 1.

73. Ibid, 1.

74. Marincowitz, *Karoostyle: Folk architecture of Prince Albert and environs*, 2007, 5.

models.⁷⁵ Japha and Japha, following the lead of Franzen and Cook, suggest that this type of classification (Georgian) will lead to confusion and they suggest that buildings of this style and the Karoostyle should rather be referred to as ‘Single-storey parapet houses’.⁷⁶



Figure 9. 40 Long Street, 1892; Cape Georgian House in Montagu. Photograph by author



Figure 10. Graaff-Reinet Club, 1880. Photograph by author

One of the motivations for the system suggested by Japha and Japha is that not many mid-19th century houses in the Karoo were “stylistically pure”.⁷⁷ Figures 11 and 12 depict examples of such eclectic houses which were and remain a common characteristic in the area. Thus, they continue that between the 1850s and 1880-90s houses in the Karoo towns were built in one of seven formats: gabled houses with t-plan one room deep; gabled houses with rectangular plan two rooms deep; double-storey parapeted house; rectangular house with two-room-deep plan; house with attached cellar; single-storey parapeted house (Karoostyle); and cottage with double pitched roof.

75. Artefacts, Southern African Built Environment: Architects, Engineers, Civil, Designs, Structures, Landscapes, Buildings. Available at: <https://www.artefacts.co.za/>.

76. D. Japha, and V. Japha, *The landscape and architecture of Montagu: 1850-1915*. (Cape Town: Occasional Publication Series, School of Architecture and Planning, University of Cape Town, 1992), 29.

77. Japha, and Japha, *The landscape and architecture of Montagu: 1850-1915*, 1992, 28.

**a****b****Figures 11a & b.** *Eclecticism in Prince Albert. Photographs by author***Figure 12.** *Eclecticism in Montagu. Photograph by author*

Houses built after the economic boom of 1880-1890 should accordingly be classified as being either double-storey parapeted, asymmetrical villas, asymmetrical cottages, rectangular house and verandas, single-storey parapeted cottages (now with veranda), or cottages with pitched roofs.⁷⁸

The period before and after the turn of the century saw many Victorian styled buildings constructed in the area. Also, during this period, many Karoostyle buildings were modernised by having Victorian-styled verandas added. Townscapes now became more urban-like with various commercial building types enriching the built character of Karoo towns. The above describes townscapes that featured elements that reoccurred in some form in the Art Deco buildings that were built there.

Finally, it must be noted that all Karoo towns are not the same and that each town is unique, with towns like Montagu and Graaff-Reinet^{iv} having many 'gabled' (or Cape Dutch) houses with most other towns having relatively few, if any. At the same time, Graaff-Reinet has many 'Karoostyle' houses while Montagu has relatively few. The foregoing highlights that symmetrical, decorated flat-roofed buildings and eclecticism were part of the townscapes when Art Deco buildings arrived in the 1930s.

78. Ibid, 69.

Research

Research Aims

The purpose of the investigation was to assist in compiling a more encompassing understanding of the variety of South African Art Deco architecture: Very little is known about Art Deco architecture as found in the Karoo. This article intends to start a long-term process aimed at addressing this gap. It provides a broad overview of Art Deco buildings identified in some towns in the area for comparison with Art Deco in urban South Africa to identify unique characteristics and provide insight into the factors that contributed to, and affected, their creation. Furthermore, it identifies some rural buildings that are worthy of protection and will contribute to a developing list of noteworthy buildings in various rural parts of the country. It is hoped that other researchers will follow with more in-depth studies of certain of these buildings and building types in order that the gap may be closed.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Are there a significant number of Art Deco buildings spread across Karoo towns?
2. What are the common functions of Art Deco buildings as found in the Karoo?
3. What are the unique characteristics of Art Deco buildings found in the Karoo?
4. What might be the reasons for choosing the Art Deco style when the buildings were designed?
5. Are any of the examples worthy of inclusion in the showcase of South African Art Deco buildings?

Research Design

Considering the above, in the main, a qualitative stance following a case study approach⁷⁹ using multiple examples was deemed to be appropriate.⁸⁰ Aspects of qualitative analysis were used in the final analysis.

79. K. M. Eisenhardt, "Building theories from case study research," *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 4 (1989): 532-550.

80. H. Elkatawneh, "Comparing qualitative and quantitative approaches," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2016): 10.

Data Collection

Thirty-eight examples of Art Deco buildings were selected using the list of Art Deco characteristics listed in sub-section 2.1 above, in the following centres: Philippolis, Nxuba (previously Cradock), KwaNojoli (previously Somerset East), Graaff-Reinet, Jansenville, Oudtshoorn, Barrydale, Montagu, Britstown, Hanover, Steytlerville, Victoria West, Rietbron and Beaufort West. These centres cover the extent of the Karoo area (Figure 13) and were chosen because they contained one or more examples of Art Deco buildings. The process of identifying these towns comprised an exploration of all Karoo towns using Google Street View and notes made during the author's travels in the region. In this study, a literature review provided essential background and contextualization for the comparison as recommended by Onwuegbuzie, Collins, Leech, Dellinger and Jiao (2010).⁸¹ A template describing the characteristics of Art Deco and the South African variation as per Van der Linde,⁸² augmented with additional characteristics uncovered during the literature review, was used to identify suitable examples and for the purpose of the comparison. All the towns were then visited, buildings photographed, and information sought from local historical societies (where they exist), councils, museums, building owners, local architects, websites such as 'Artefacts'⁸³ and local amateur historians as suggested by any of the foregoing. In some towns most of the foregoing sources could be identified, and except for Oudtshoorn, none of the local authorities could provide any information. Where interviews took place, these were mostly impromptu. Scheduled interviews were recorded, and, in all cases, notes were taken and any documents provided collected and used as part of the literature review and analysis. All interviews and interactions sought to determine when the building was constructed, who the original owner was, what the intended purpose was and who the architect or designer was. In addition, contextual data, such as socio-economic or geographic factors at play at the time, were investigated.

81. A. J. Onwuegbuzie, K. M. T. Collins, N. L. Leech, and Q. G. Jiao, "Mixed data collection and analysis for conducting research on giftedness and beyond," in B. Thompson, and R. F. Subotnik (eds.) *Methodologies for conducting research on giftedness*, 113-143. American Psychological Association.

82. Van der Linde, *Die neerslag Van Art Deco in Suid Afrika as manifestasie van 'n internasionale tydgees en styl, met spesifieke verwysing na die argitektuur*, 2000, 541-542.

83. Artefacts, Southern African Built Environment: Architects, Engineers, Civil, Designs, Structures, Landscapes, Buildings.

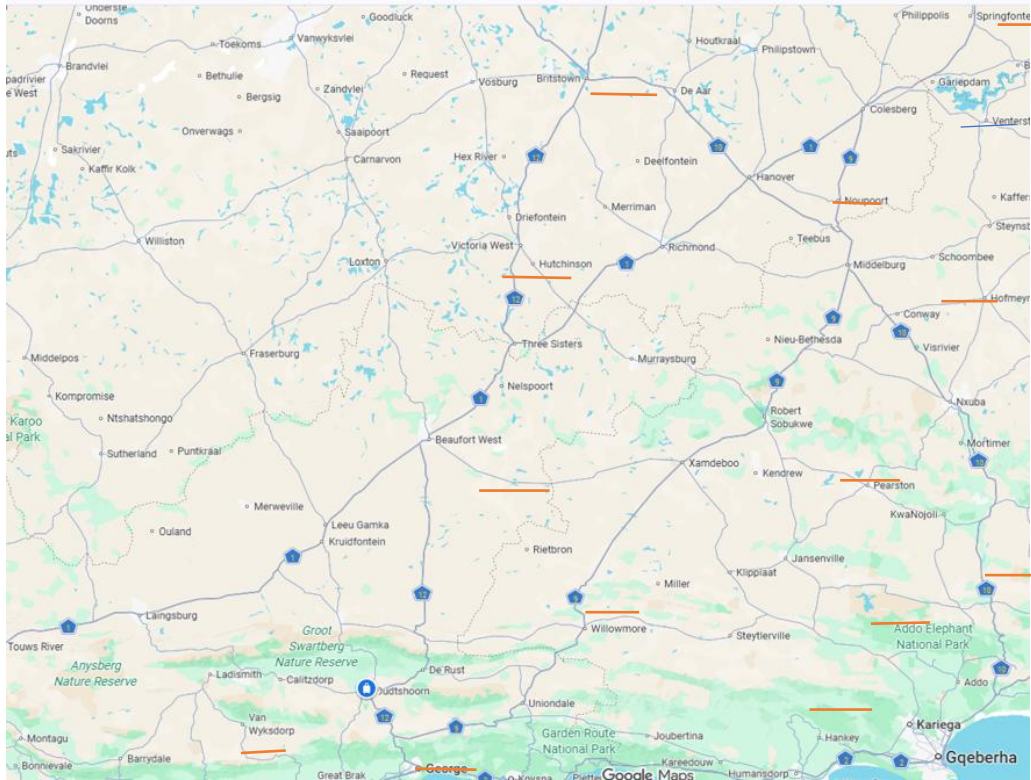


Figure 13. Map of Towns Selected for the Study by author, Based on Google Maps⁸⁴

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

In qualitative research, Creswell⁸⁵ suggests that the researcher should conduct a series of analysis, each moving deeper into the data collected to come to a comprehensive understanding of the data. Due to the limited number of interviews and the relatively short nature of the interviews, analysis could be done manually.

As a first step the data collected was organised and prepared for analysis. Photographs of buildings recorded, and other data collected were organised by building and town. The next step was to provide a detailed description of each of the examples (buildings) used for the study. This was followed by thoroughly reading all descriptions, notes and transcripts and listening to all recordings made on a building-by-building and town-by-town basis while making notes of statements made, impressions, and questions, and listing all points that warranted reflection and/or comparison. This was done to gain a comprehensive understanding of all the buildings studied and all the other data collected, and to identify common themes. Thereafter, the data was reviewed again, and data ordered per theme. Data from the literature review was then used to develop each theme further. Hereafter, the data was reviewed again before a final summary was developed for each theme. Finally,

84. Google Maps.

85. J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks Sage, 2014), 197.

summaries were analysed for use as findings and with the view of identifying meta-themes, also to be used as part of the findings made.

Limitations and Delimitations

The extent and depth of this study was limited by several factors: firstly, the limits regarding the length and the number of illustrations allowed in research journal articles prevented more in-depth and comprehensive investigation or reporting. However, since the study was conceptualised as the start to a long-term process, this was regarded as acceptable. Secondly, the newness of the study area meant that limited information could be uncovered from the previously mentioned sources, implying that in the future, further and deeper studies into the histories of the most notable buildings would need to be undertaken. Thirdly, most buildings have been crudely changed to suit a variety of purposes: Most of the interiors that could be accessed no longer were the original and provided little information, if any. Hence this study can do no more than act as an initial overview.

Because of the eclectic nature of Art Deco and the fact that many buildings had been drastically altered and extended, this study did not attempt to provide a full list of Art Deco buildings or buildings that have Art Deco elements in any of the towns included.

Art Deco Architecture of the Karoo

Table 1 lists the examples of Art Deco architecture found in each of the towns included in the study. The towns are arranged alphabetically, and a short description is included for each example.

Despite enquiries at the local council in the towns included in this study, no information about any of the buildings studied could be obtained from these sources while limited information was found at museums and historical and tourism associations. As stated above, future research to uncover such information is warranted.

Table 1. *Towns and Art Deco Buildings Covered in This Study*

Town	Building	Original Function	General Description	Date Constructed	Current Condition
Barrydale	Karoo Art Hotel	Hotel	Originally, the central portion of the Karoo Art Hotel (Appendix 1, Figure 1.1) was constructed in the late 19th century by a Mr Abramowitz. ⁸⁶ According to Lesly Howard ⁸⁷ various alterations, including the addition of the veranda occurred gradually over time, although the precise date of the veranda's construction remains unclear. A date inscribed on the main gable suggests it may have been added in 1937. Within the hotel, only the double-volume foyer provides a subtle nod to the Art Deco style. The veranda itself is modest and unembellished, reflecting earlier architectural influences. However, elements such as horizontal flagpoles mounted near the veranda's top, vertical slits in the upper-level columns, and decorative mouldings contribute to a sense of upward emphasis on the facade. This is a particularly notable example of Art Deco in the Karoo.	1937	Good
Beaufort West	Schouten Mansions	Apartments	Schouten Mansions is in Meintjies Street. The building is asymmetrical (Appendix 2, Figure 2.1) and decoration is sparse: horizontal mouldings on the balcony walls, delicate quoining in the twin main gables with symmetrically arranged air vents and centre lines. Two sets of tryptic window clumps provide verticality while accentuating the entrances. As the only example of Art Deco in this historic town, it warrants more attention.	Unknown	Fair
Britstown	Transkaroo Country Lodge	Hotel	The Southern wing of the Transkaroo Country Lodge (Appendix 3, Figure 3.1) was built in 1907 and the main (western) wing in 1948. ⁸⁸ Unfortunately, the entrance canopy was changed at some time (date unknown) and louvre shutters were added (date unknown). Without these additions, and the refurbishment of the dining and lounge areas (Art Deco decorations remain but are toned down), the building and its interiors would have been in its original form. However, it should be possible to restore this building to	1907 and 1948	Fair

86. A. M. Fullerton Thom, *Barrydale: village in the Klein Karoo* (Barrydale: Publisher unknown, 2020), 2.

87. L. Howard, *Barrydale unplugged* (Barrydale: Publisher unknown, 2013).

88. A. Potgieter, Owner and Manager, Transkaroo Country Lodge. 2023. Interview by author. [Transcript] 13 June 2023, Britstown.

			its original state and therefore this building warrants further attention. The symmetrical facade of this horizontal building incorporates two 45-degree projections that continue through the original steel windows and finishes as two vertical plaster projections, one at either end of the building. The stepped parapet wall and round columns at the main entrance accentuate the important opening while aiding the verticality described before. These are offset by the horizontal rows of windows, topped by continuous solar canopies. Again, decoration is toned down. This is one of the few examples where the original Art Deco theme and the concept of total design is evident in the stair baluster as well as simple decorative details in the dining room, passages and ceiling treatments. No plans or other documentation regarding the building's history could be found.		
Colesberg	Standard Bank building	Bank	The Standard Bank building (Appendix 4, Figure 4.1) is an eclectic building combining International-Deco characteristics with a pragmatic double hipped corrugated iron roof. No information about the histories of this building could be obtained from the local authority or museum.	Unknown	Good
	Nevilles Building	Bank	The Nevilles Building (now Capitec) at 15 Church Street (Appendix 4, Figure 4.2), while clearly Art Deco with stepping elements in the parapet wall that steps downwards rather than upwards as is the norm in Art Deco. No information about the histories of this building could be obtained from the local authority or museum.	Unknown	Good
Graaff-Reinet	Plaza Cinema	Cinema	Plaza Cinema on Market Square (Appendix 5, Figure 5.1). The building bears resemblance to the Plaza Theatre in Johannesburg and the Plaza Kinema in Cape Town, both by Kallenbach, Kennedy and Furner.⁸⁹ It could not be established who the architects of this building were. The design leans towards the International Deco sub-genre. The interior has been stripped out to make place for a supermarket. This building and its relation to the other Plaza cinemas, particularly the one in Kariga, warrants further research and efforts to recreate its original interior are recommended. The	1938	Poor. Currently used as supermarket

89. Encyclopaedia of South African Theatre, Film, Media and Performance (ESAT), *Kallenbach, Kennedy and Furner*. 2010.

			cinema was opened in May 1938 and the building built by Mr F. Raphael. ⁹⁰		
	Caledon Court	Apartment	The three-storey building is the apartment block at 8 Church Street, Graaff-Reinet. Caledon Court (Appendix 5, Figure 5.2) is one of the few original apartment buildings in the Karoo. The central part of pronounced vertical fins is recessed to give them a slenderer appearance. Furthermore, this central part extends beyond the top of the sections on either side of it, creating a stepped end to the fin. These fins include porthole-like openings towards the top-end. The building is relatively simple and unadorned	Unknown	Good
	Hepworths Building	Retail store	Hepworths Building is more ornate (Appendix 5, Figure 5.3). This building uncharacteristically includes face brick as finish in a few areas. Decorative mouldings adorn the parapet and canopy while the store name features in plaster relief as part of the decoration.	Unknown	Good
Hanover	Hanover Hotel	Hotel	This hotel (Appendix 6, Figure 6.1) features pronounced columns with stepping detail at the top extend beyond the roof line to provide height and dynamic relief from the dry and parched countryside. The walls are decorated with horizontal bands at regular intervals. No information regarding this building's history was found.	Unknown	Fair
Jansenville	House Sid Fourie	Dwelling house	House Sid Fourie in Jansenville is unique in two ways: it is a single storey Art Deco house (Appendix 7, Figure 7.1), and we know it was designed by an architect. Unfortunately, the museum display does not mention who the architect was. ⁹¹ According to the information on display the house was built by Mister Sid Fourie, former mayor of Jansenville. The curving veranda is a unique adaptation of the typical Karoo veranda or stoep and the slender proportions of the veranda with reeded decoration enhances the verticality of the building. Various fixtures and fittings in the house are Art Deco styled in keeping with the "total design idiom". The hipped double pitched roof and the veranda or stoep are typical of many houses in the karoo. This house is relatively unchanged and meritorious because of its blending of Art Deco and characteristics of	1940	Good

90. Graaff Reinet Museum, *History of the cinema at Graaff Reinet* (2020).

91. Sid Fourie Historical Museum, 6 Bridge Street Jansenville. Information on display under title 'Die Sid Fourie Historiese Huis. Visited on 09.07.2023.

			typical early 20th century Karoo homesteads.		
KwaNojoli (Somerset East)	Gall Hall	School Hall	Gill College's Gall Hall (Appendix 8, Figure 8.1) is the first example of eclecticism in Art Deco in this town. Here a double pitch tiled roof building was endowed with Art Deco decoration in the form of pilasters that culminate in a horizontal band close to the eaves.	Unknown	Good
	Town Hall	Town Hall and administration	The town hall (Appendix 8, Figure 8.2) is the most extreme and unsensitive example of eclectic Art Deco architecture found during this study. This building by Owen Eaton and Merrifield was opened in 1934. ⁹² Despite the classical portico, the building is consistently detailed in the Art Deco style. It is in good condition and relatively unchanged indicating a building worthy of documenting and protection.	11934	
	Hepworths Building	Retail store	The building at 90 Nojoli Street (Appendix 8, Figure 8.3) used to house the local branch of Hepworths. ⁹³ The date on the parapet indicate that it was constructed in 1951, years after the accepted end of the Art Deco period.	1951	Fair
	Market Building	Market hall	The erstwhile Market Building (Appendix 8, Figure 8.4) has bold, raised relief lettering proclaiming its function while doubling as decoration. It was constructed during the 1930's. ⁹⁴ This is a building of considerable merit, and it is relatively unscathed. Hence, it warrants further research and restoration.	Uncertain	Poor
Ladismith	Royal Hotel	Hotel (now apartments)	The erstwhile Royal Hotel (Appendix 9, Figure 9.1) was built by local hotelier Sam Nurick. ⁹⁵ The building has a strong resemblance to the Transkaroo Country Lodge in Britstown. In 2006 the hotel was converted into apartments. According to Weymar, one of the reasons for this was the sharp decline in bookings by commercial travellers, a professional grouping that diminished due to developments such as online shopping. These traveling salesmen at times filled the hotel. ⁹⁶	1939	Fair but converted to apartments

92. Artefacts, Southern African Built Environment: Architects, Engineers, Civil, Designs, Structures, Landscapes, Buildings.

93. Personal communication with Joy Saunders Hayton, daughter of the erstwhile Hepworths store manager.

94. Artefacts, Southern African Built Environment: Architects, Engineers, Civil, Designs, Structures, Landscapes, Buildings.

95. H. Weymar, *Written response to request for information on the Royal Hotel, Ladismith* (Ladismith Tourism Bureau: 2023).

96. Ibid.

	7 South Street	Workshop	While no information on the history of the building could be found, its location and layout suggest that this building could originally have been a garage (Appendix 9, Figure 9.2). An example of International Deco with virtually no decoration.	Unknown	Fair
Middelburg	Town Hall	Town Hall and administration	The Middelburg Town Hall (Appendix 10, Figure 10.1) was, according to a commemorative stone built in 1951, rather late for Art Deco buildings. This International Deco building has a strong resemblance to the Burgersdorp Town Hall. The building is almost undecorated except for triptychs of small round circles placed on the main facades. The building finish comprises face brick with plaster off setts.	1951	Fair
Montagu	Montagu Country Hotel	Hotel	The Montagu Country Hotel (Appendix 11, Figure 11.1), like the Barrydale Hotel, base their marketing strategy on their Art Deco designs. The present-day Montagu Hotel was constructed by Mr. A. Idelson, replacing an earlier Victorian-style establishment on the same site. Its development was largely driven by the presence of a natural hot spring at the location. The interior underwent a refurbishment in 1996 to highlight its Art Deco character, while the exterior received an update in November 2020. Enhancements included the addition of an open deck. The building's original Art Deco features comprising a few step-backs and decorative mouldings to the top of pilasters and the curving parapet walls were also brought into sharper focus through the chosen colour palette. (The street where the hotel is located, Bath Street, contains several Art Deco Buildings and even recent buildings include elements of this style. Further to this, the author noted that several houses in the central part of the town include Art Deco elements such as verandas, added to more vernacular styled buildings.)	1932	Good
	39 Bath Street	Retail/apartments	39 Bath Street (Appendix 11, Figure 11.3) next to it. Neither the construction date of 39 Bath Street, nor any information regarding the history of the building, could be established. At street level the building has four stepped flat arches supporting the balconies above. Decorations comprise boss-like reliefs and horizontal plaster relief bands.	Unknown	Fair

	41 Bath Street	Retail/apartments	41 Bath Street (Appendix 11, Figure 11.2) was built in 1937 (date on parapet wall). Decoration comprises horizontal plaster relief bands on the balcony and windows placed in double or triple virtual panels which include plaster relief panels (undecorated).	1937	Fair
	Venus Cinema	Cinema	This face brick International Deco building is almost unadorned except for a stepping parapet wall, plaster band, and several porthole-like windows. The cinema was built and owned by the Brink family who owned a large retail store in the town. ⁹⁷ No further information about this International Deco building could be found.	Unknown	Fair, but now used as storage facility
	42 Piet Retief Street	Unknown	42 Piet Retief Street (Appendix 11, Figure 11.5) was, according to the date on its parapet wall, built in 1951. No information on this unremarkable building could be uncovered. Its most recent function was a gymnasium. The building is included because of the relatively recent construction date	1951	Good
	Cape Dry Warehouse	Warehouse	Constructed by Dried Fruit Packers (now Cape Dry) (Appendix 11, Figure 11.6). This is the only Art Deco storage facility found during this study. It is of clumsy proportion and was constructed late for an Art Deco building. It is relatively under decorated with boss-like reliefs.	1949	Good
Nxuba (Previously Cradock)	Metro Cinema	Cinema	Metro Cinema (Appendix 12, Figure 12.1). Sadly, the building is in a bad condition (its present form can be seen in Figure 12.4). It has been converted to other purposes. The striking feature is the vertical fin that proclaims the building's function. This building is an outstanding example that warrants further attention and hopefully restoration and protection.	Unknown	Poor
	Veranda of the Victoria Hotel	Hotel veranda	The veranda of the Victoria Hotel (Appendix 12, Figure 12.2). The Art Deco veranda replaced the original Victorian veranda. Neither the owners (who are very conservation minded) or the local authority could provide any information on the addition. Art Deco was applied as a means of 'modernising' an older hotel building.	Unknown	Good
	10 J.A. Calata Street	Ground floor shops and first floor offices	10 J.A. Calata Street (Appendix 12, Figure 12.3). In general, the layout of the building is typical for South African rural areas, and the Art Deco decoration comprising flat plasters relief panels and horizontal plaster band on the veranda seems to have been applied without understanding Art Deco as a total	Unknown	Fair

97. D. J. Nolte, *Bioscopes of Montagu*.

			design style, as no other Art Deco elements could be found. No information regarding the history of the building could be found.		
	887 Market Street	Ground floor shops and first floor offices	887 Market Street (Appendix 12, Figure 12.4). No information regarding the history of the building could be found. Art Deco decoration comprising vertical pilasters and plaster reliefs seems to have been applied to the outside only.	Unknown	Fair
	2 Voortrekker Street	Retail shop	2 Voortrekker Street (Appendix 12, Figure 12.5). The building has a concrete roofed canopy with vertical fluting in the columns on either side of the protruding canopy. The parapet wall features horizontal plaster bands and airbricks spaced as decorative elements.	Unknown	Good
Oudtshoorn	110 High Street	Retail shop	110 High Street is a retail store (Appendix 13, Figure 13.1). The current tenants suggest that it could have been built by the Hepworths group, but this could not be confirmed. The stepping on the parapet makes this an outstanding example	1937	Good
	63 Baron Van Reede Street	Offices	63 Baron Van Reede Street incorporates gothic elements in its eclectic façade (Appendix 13, Figure 13.2). Closer inspection indicates that the remainder of the building does not include any Art Deco elements. Thus, while this is the most ornately decorated Art Deco façade discovered during this study, indications are that it is an Art Deco façade added to an older building. The meritorious façade featuring turret and ornate geometric detailing warrants restoration and protection.	Unknown	Good
	6 High Street	Motor dealership	6 High Street (Appendix 13, Figure 13.3) has sparse decoration but 'step-back' detailing at the top of the parapets. No information about the history of the building could be found.	Unknown	Good
	113 Adderley Street	Retail shop	113 Adderley Street (Appendix 13, Figure 13.4) has sparse decoration with 'step-back' detailing at the top of the parapets. No information regarding the history of this building could be found.	Unknown	Good
Philippolis	Standard Bank building	Bank (now used for storage)	Standard Bank building (Appendix 14, Figure 14.1). This is the only building found in this study with decorative panels and vertical demeanour accentuated by fluted columns so common in many more notable Art Deco buildings. Decorated lintels further enhance the vertical expression. The decorated grills and lintels typically depict local flora. This is a meritorious building, in good condition, that deserves further investigation and protection.	Unknown	Good

Prince Albert	National garage	Garage (currently a shopping centre)	The National Centre (originally the National Garage) (Appendix 15, Figure 15.1). It was built in about 1944 by Mr D.N.D. Luttig. ⁹⁸ The building is currently being used as a shopping centre. The building includes elements of Cape Dutch architecture in its parapet wall; otherwise, it is of Art Deco design. This building warrants further attention and protection as a typical example of Karoo Art Deco.	1944	Good
Rietbron	Dutch Reformed Church	Church	The Dutch Reformed Church in the hamlet of Rietbron (Appendix 16, Figure 16.1) was built in 1953, years after the accepted end of the Art Deco period). The architect was Hendrik Vermooten (historic plaque at church). The building is known because the weathervane at the top of the steeple features a Springbok and not the usual Germanic cockerel. ⁹⁹ It is the only example of a Dutch Reformed Art Deco church in the Karoo.	1953	Good
Steytlerville	Karoo Hotel	Hotel	The Karoo Theatrical Hotel in Steytlerville (Appendix 17, Figure 17.1) was constructed just outside the town's boundary due to a prohibition on alcohol sales within the town itself. Completed in 1943, as noted on its parapet wall, the building is low-profile in form and incorporates raised relief lettering used for signage and directional markings directly in its plasterwork. Decorative sculptural elements referencing beer brand logos were also included. Many of these markings have since been removed—likely because some reflected racially discriminatory directives from the apartheid era. Distinctive Art Deco features are raised plaster panels, round porthole-style windows, and interior elements such as a fireplace and original fittings that echo the building's stylistic heritage. This is a particularly meritorious building and a unique and outstanding example and warrants further research and attention to restore at minimum, the exterior facades.	1943	Fair
Victoria West	Appollo Theatre	Cinema	The Appollo Theatre (Appendix 18, Figure 18.1) is one of the best-known Art Deco buildings in the Karoo. The original building was built on the site in 1928 by Andrew Bassil. ¹⁰⁰ The original building, known as the Good Hope Café,	1956	Good

98. L. Barrella, *National Centre* (Unpublished document obtained from Fransie Pienaar Museum, Prince Albert, 2013).

99. C. Marais, *A nostalgic meander through the grand old churches of the Karoo* (Daily Maverick, 2023), 3.

100. Karoo-South Africa, *Victoria West*.

			was demolished and replaced with the present building by Bassil in 1956, much past the normal Art Deco period. Of all the buildings covered by this study, this is the only heritage site as declared by the erstwhile National Monuments Council. ¹⁰¹ Sadly, the theatre was closed when visited and the author could not photograph the inside. The building should at least be documented.		
	Radio House building	Retail store	The Radio House building (Appendix 18, Figure 18.2) combines elements of a Cape Dutch gable and a traditional 'wrap-around' veranda or stoep with Art Deco decorations. No information regarding the history of this building could be found.	Unknown	Good

Analysis and Findings

Building Types

The 38 examples selected comprised 11 different examples of Art Deco architecture if categorised based on function.^v The following categories were identified, with the frequency listed in brackets:

- Hotels (7)
- Apartment buildings (3)
- Cinemas (3)
- Businesses (retail and offices) (10)
- Banks (4)
- School buildings (1)
- Houses (1)
- Town halls (2)
- Garages (3)
- Churches (1)
- Other (3)

The quantitative analysis provided above was necessary to answer the second research question. The relatively high number of hotels is noteworthy, as is the relatively low number of apartment buildings. However, when considered in the socio-economic and geographical contexts, this distribution is understandable: hotels must attract passing traffic while the relatively stable economies would not attract many young people looking for 'the good life'.

101. Appollo Theatre Centre, *Victoria West: From bioscope to Apollo Theatre and beyond*.

Functions of the Buildings

If it is considered that hotels, cinemas, banks and garages are all businesses, a total of 27 of the 38 buildings are related to business interests. These examples can be described as businesses or buildings constructed for commercial purposes and financial gain. The high number of hotels is remarkable, but as Weymar¹⁰² pointed out, this was the period of the commercial traveller, and the hotel in Ladismith was often fully booked by ‘representatives’. The prevalence of business-oriented buildings could possibly indicate that there was a desire to present a modern face to customers.

Timespan

While the exact construction dates of all the examples could not be determined, the examples identified were constructed between 1932 (Montagu Country Hotel) and 1956 (Appollo Theatre).^{vi} Remarkably, most of the buildings of which the construction dates could be determined, were built deep into and even beyond the period normally associated with Art Deco (refer to 2.1 and 2.2 above). So, in this case Art Deco did not only arrive late but ‘overstayed’ well into the modern era. In addition, imitation Art Deco buildings were built more recently in towns such as Prince Albert and Montagu. This could indicate that in the Karoo, Art Deco architecture was well loved. Considering the development of architectural styles in the Karoo during the period 1850-1900, it confirms Van der Linde’s contention (refer to 2.2 above) that Art Deco formed a link between the traditional and the radical.

Design Character

A comparison between each of the selected examples and the Art Deco characteristics listed in 2.1 (above) reveals that in the Karoo region, Art Deco buildings maintain most of the common characteristics of South African Art Deco. Like many other examples, the Karoo buildings are sparsely decorated and in many cases decoration is functional. The exceptions to this are 63 Baron Van Reede Street, Oudtshoorn (Appendix 13, Figure 13.2), and to a lesser degree, the Standard Bank building in Philippolis (Appendix 14, Figure 14.1). The most common type of decoration found are building faces and parapet walls stepping back or up to create ziggurat-like forms. Noteworthy phenomena are the use of elements of Cape Dutch architecture, notably parts of gables in the National Garage, Prince Albert (Appendix 15, Figure 15.1) and Radio House, Victoria West (Appendix 18, Figure 18.2), as shown in Figure 14, as well as the use of raised relief lettering as decorative elements on buildings (Market Building in KwaNojoli [Appendix 8, Figure 8.4] and the Steytlerville Karoo Hotel [see Appendix 17, Figure 17.1]). Examples of eclecticism can also be found in the entrance portico of the KwaNojoli Town Hall (Appendix 8, Figure 8.2) and in the inclusion of verandas or stoeps in the Sid Fourie House in Jansenville (Appendix 7, Figure 7.1) and the Radio House in Victoria West (Appendix 18, Figure 18.2). (See Figure 15).

102. Weymar, *Written response to request for information on the Royal Hotel, Ladismith*, 2023.

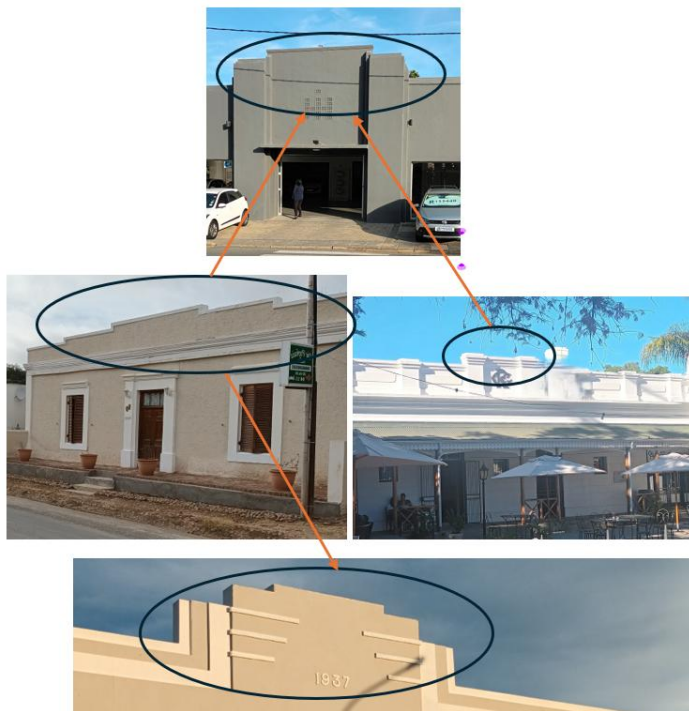


Figure 14. Karoo-style and Cape Georgian Elements Incorporated into Karoo Art Deco. Photographs by author

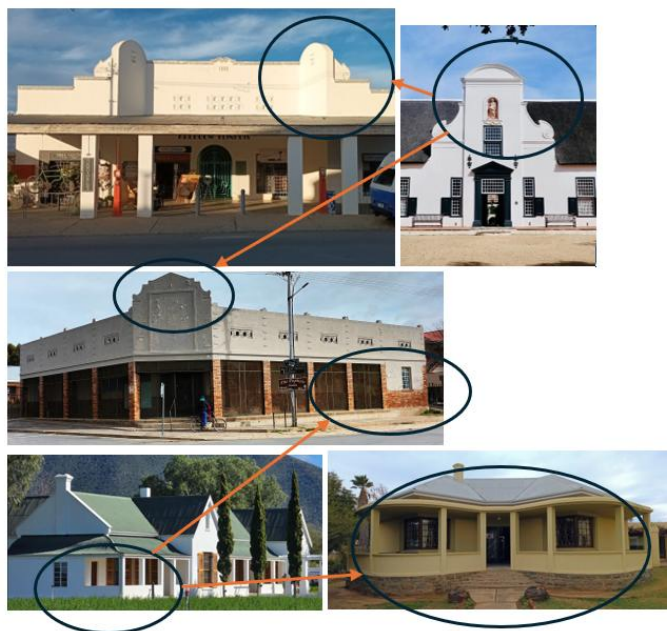


Figure 15. Cape Dutch and Karoo Farmhouse Elements Incorporated into Karoo Art Deco buildings. Photographs by author; Groot Constantia Estate¹⁰³ and Property 24¹⁰⁴

103. Groot Constantia, Wine tasting at Groot Constantia.

104. Property 24, Property for Sale in Great Karoo, Eastern Cape.

Also worth mentioning is the use of airbricks and their arrangement in patterned clusters as decoration as can be seen in 6 High Street, Oudtshoorn (Appendix 13, Figure 13.3), 113 Adderley Street, Oudtshoorn (Appendix 13, Figure 13.4) and National Garage in Prince Albert (Appendix 15, Figure 15.1). Considering the remarkable levels of eclecticism found in pre-Art Deco buildings in the Karoo, Art Deco and its eclectic character blended into the townscape.

Two other characteristics are that the buildings are of normal (even small) scale, often modest or unassuming and built using common materials without the use of any opulent materials or forms. Imitation Art Deco buildings built in the recent past, for instance the Prince Albert Theatre and the relatively recent shops in Bath Street, Montagu, seem to indicate that in the Karoo, Art Deco became an evolutionary development of the Karoo-style and late Cape Georgian which is and was well loved by the public.

There are certain concerns regarding the selected examples that need to be mentioned. The first relates to the condition of many of the examples, the unsympathetic treatment many have received, and the crude adaptations several have undergone. The second concern is the absence of information regarding almost all the examples. These concerns imply that heritage and academic organisations have ignored these buildings for too long. Clearly, it is imperative that concerted efforts need to be made to research the information and to document these buildings as they stand at now but also as they were built.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study set out to answer a few questions: The first question asked whether there are a significant number of Art Deco buildings spread across Karoo towns. The study found 38 examples of Art Deco buildings. There could be more because the aim was not to identify every example. This indicates that there are enough buildings to warrant more attention to this sub-genre of Art Deco.

The second question was aimed at determining what the common functions are of Art Deco buildings as found in the Karoo. The examples that were found comprised seven hotels, three apartment buildings, three cinemas, ten business-related buildings, four banks, one school hall, one residential house, two town halls, three garages, and one church. This could indicate that the Art Deco style was relatively popular in the Karoo region, and that it was particularly popular amongst the business community, particularly hoteliers. It was often associated with 'new' developments such as the cinema, travel (hotels and garages), and retail businesses. This situation echoes what was found elsewhere in colonial Africa where this style symbolized technological progress.

The third question looked into the unique characteristics of Art Deco buildings found in the Karoo. This aspect was covered in section 5.4 (above). Art Deco buildings in the Karoo maintain most of the common characteristics of South African Art Deco. However, there are some unique characteristics. These characteristics could be listed as follows:

- The Karoo buildings are sparsely decorated and in many cases decorations are functional.
- Elements of Cape Dutch architecture are included, notably parts of gables.
- Raised relief lettering is used as decorative elements on buildings. Also worth mentioning is the use of airbricks and their arrangement in patterned clusters.
- Buildings are of normal (even small) scale, often modest or unassuming and built using common materials without the use of any opulent materials or forms.

The fourth question considered what might be the reasons for choosing the Art Deco style when the buildings were designed. Considering the number of commercial examples this could confirm Freschi's¹⁰⁵ description that Art Deco expresses a rural self-consciousness and the desire to "articulate notions of modernity" to attract business and to appear "with-it" as later generations would have it.

The fifth question asked whether any of the examples are worthy of inclusion in the showcase of South African Art Deco buildings. The study found a few unique examples of Art Deco buildings that ought to be included in future discussions on South African Art Deco. They are the National Garage in Prince Albert, the Market Building in KwaNojoli, House Sid Fourie in Jansenville, the Standard Bank building in Philippolis, and the Karoo Theatrical Hotel in Steytlerville.

While the limitations listed under 3.3 above restricted the depth of the analysis, the study highlighted a number of aspects: Despite the efforts to present a modern face, the study showed that overall, the Art Deco buildings in the Karoo, in keeping with the conservative approach fostered by the harsh environment, produced modest buildings where decoration is understated without the use of opulent materials. Furthermore, the examples show that the style as manifest in the Karoo struggled to break with the past as shown by the inclusion of historic and vernacular references incorporated in this eclectic style.

Noteworthy, in the Karoo, the Art Deco style was used much longer than the normal Art Deco period. This indicates that the style was quite popular, more so than the other 'modern', International Style.^{vii} While the reason for this preference is not known, it is postulated that it could be because of the Art Deco style's similarity with the Karoo and Cape Georgian Styles. Because of this, it is difficult to understand why so many of the local heritage and historical societies turn a blind eye to these buildings: Art Deco buildings should be added to their respective research, protection and promotion efforts.

Furthermore, it is argued that academia should become involved and research various aspects related to Karoo Art Deco. In cases where buildings have been extensively damaged, they should be researched, measured up and reproduced in their original state as three-dimensional virtual models stored on a cloud-based databank. The same applies to the noteworthy examples identified. Besides the histories of examples, research should investigate the different building types across

105. Freschi, "Art Deco, modernity, and the politics of ornament in South African architecture, 1930–1940," 2019, 255.

the region. This could include hotels, retail shops and cinematic theatres; also, how the Karoo examples compare with national and international examples. It is only after such actions that the gap that was referred to in the introduction will be closed off.

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- d. Graaff-Reinet Museum, Graaf Reinet
- e. Ladismith Tourism Bureau, Ladismith
- f. Gerald Humphrey, Retired Architect, London
- g. Heritage Oudtshoorn Erfenis

Copilot Artificial Intelligence software was also used for language editing.

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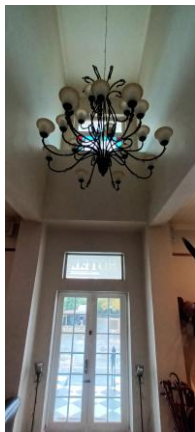
Appendix 1. Art Deco Building in Barrydale



a



b



c

Figures 1.1a & b. Karoo Art Hotel Barrydale exterior: 1937 . Photographs by author **1.1c.** Karoo Art Hotel Barrydale; Hotel Lobby . Photograph by author

Appendix 2. Art Deco Building in Beaufort West Photograph by author**Figure 2.1.** Schouten Mansions. Undated. Photograph by author**Appendix 3. Art Deco Building in Britstown****a****b****c****d****e**

Figure 3.1a. Transkaroo Country Lodge. 1907 and 1948: Original façade. Source: Transkaroo Country Lodge. Photographer unknown. **b.** Transkaroo Country Lodge. Exterior Detail. Photograph by author. **c.** Transkaroo Country Lodge. Banister Detail . Photograph by author. **d.** Transkaroo Country Lodge. Passage Detail. Photograph by author. **e.** Transkaroo Country Lodge. Current Façade. Photograph by author

Appendix 4. Art Deco Buildings in Colesberg



Figure 4.1. 26 Church Street, Colesberg



Figure 4.2. 15 Church Street, Colesberg. Undated. Photographs by author

Appendix 5. Art Deco Buildings in Graaff-Reinet



Figure 5.1. Plaza Cinema, 24 Market Square, Graaff-Reinet. 1938. Photograph by Gerald Humphrey



Figure 5.2. *Caledon Court, 8 Church Street, Graaff-Reinet. Undated. Photograph by author*



Figure 5.3. *Hepworths Building, 27 Caledon Street, Graaff-Reinet. Undated. Photograph by author*

Appendix 6. *Art Deco Building in Hanover*



Figure 6.1. *The Hanover Hotel, Hanover. Undated. Photograph by author*

Appendix 7. Art Deco Building in Jansenville



Figure 7.1. House Sid Fourie. 1940. Photograph by author

Appendix 8. Art Deco Building in KwaNojoli



Figure 8.1. Gill College, Gall Hall, KwaNojoli. Undated. Photograph by author



a



b



c

Figure 8.2a. KwaNojoli Town Hall, KwaNojoli. 1934. **b.** KwaNojoli, Facade detail. **c.** KwaNojoli Town Hall, Proscenium. Photographs by author



Figure 8.3. 90 Nojoli Street, KwaNojoli. 1951. Photograph by author

**a****b**

Figure 8.4a. Market building, KwaNojoli, Louis Trichardt Street, KwaNojoli. Undated. Photograph by author: **b.** Market Building interior: Photograph by William Martinson

Appendix 9. Art Deco Buildings in Ladysmith

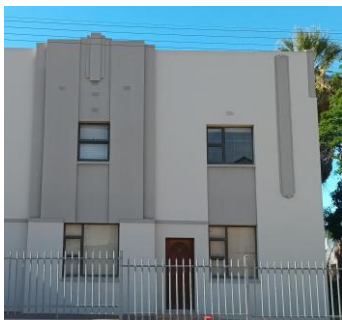
**a****b****c**

Figure 9.1 a, b & c. Royal Hotel (Now Apartments) Exterior, Ladysmith. 1939. Photographs by author



Figure 9.2. 7 South Street, Ladismith. Undated Photograph by author

Appendix 10. Art Deco Building in Middelburg



Figure 10.1. Middelburg Town Hall, Middelburg. 1951. Photograph by author

Appendix 11. Art Deco Buildings in Montagu



a



b

Figure 11.1a. Original New Hotel Montagu. 1932. Photographer unknown. Source (Montagu Country Hotel 2023:[sp]). **b.** Montagu Country Hotel, Current Façade. Photograph by author



Figure 11.2. 41 Bath Street, Montagu. 1937. Photograph by author



Figure 11.3. 39 Bath Street, Montagu. Undated. Photograph by author.



a



b

Figure 11.4a. Erstwhile Venus Cinema, Montagu. Undated. Photographer unknown. Source: Montagu Museum. **b.** Current Façade of Erstwhile Venus Cinema, Montagu. Photograph by author



Figure 11.5. 42 Piet Retief Street, Montagu. 1951. Photograph by author



Figure 11.6. *Cape Dry Warehouse, Montagu. 1949 Photograph by author*

Appendix 12. *Art Deco Buildings in Nxuba (Previously Cradock)*



Figure 12.1. *Metro Cinema. Undated. Photograph by Gerald Humphrey*



Figure 12.2. *Victoria Hotel veranda. Undated. Photograph by author*



Figure 12.3. *10 J.A. Calata Street, Cradock. Undated. Photograph by author*



Figure 12.4. 887 Market Street, Cradock. Undated. Photograph by author



Figure 12.5. 2 Voortrekker Street, Cradock. Undated. Photograph by author

Appendix 13. *Art Deco Buildings in Oudtshoorn*



Figure 13.1. 110 High Street, Oudtshoorn. 1937. Photograph by author



Figure 13.2. 63 Baron Van Reede Street, Oudtshoorn. Undated. Photograph by author



Figure 13.3. 113 Adderley Street, Oudtshoorn. Undated



Figure 13.4. 6 High Street, Undated. Oudtshoorn. Photograph by author

Appendix 14. Art Deco Building in Philippolis



a



b



c

Figure 14.1a. Standard Bank building, Philippolis. Undated. Photograph by author. **b.** Decorative Lintel Detail Photograph by author. **c.** Decorative Ventilator Grill Detail. Photograph by author

Appendix 15. Art Deco Building in Prins Albert



Figure 15.1. National Garage, Prince Albert. 1944. Photograph by author

Appendix 16. Art Deco Building in Rietbron



Figure 16.1. Dutch Reformed Church, Rietbron. 1951. Photograph by David Frandsen

Appendix 17. Art Deco Building in Steytlerville



Figure 17.1a. Karroo Hotel, Steytlerville. 1943. **b.** Karroo Hotel, Steytlerville, Decorative Detail. **c.** Karroo Hotel, Steytlerville, Window Detail. Photographs by author

Appendix 18. Art Deco Buildings in Victoria West



Figure 18.1. Apollo Theatre, Church Street, Victoria West. 1956. Photograph by author



Figure 18.2. *Radio House, Church Street, Victoria West. Undated. Photograph by author*

i. Sections of the literature review were originally used by the author in C. Vosloo, “Karoo Art Deco: Survival strategies of three hotels, a comparison,” In *Proceedings of Urban Futures - Cultural Pasts Sustainable Cities, Cultures & Crafts, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya | AMPS, 15-17 July, 2024, AMPS Conference Series 40.3, Volume 3: Heritage, Culture & Place, 2024*, 499-508. These were reworked and paraphrased with the aid of Copilot Artificial Intelligence software.

ii. Doing justice to the wealth of Art Deco buildings in Africa or even South Africa, within the confines of a section of an article such as this is impossible.

iii. Wikipedia used because no other comprehensive list could be found. The piece is well referenced.

iv. It has been proposed that the name of Graaf Reinet be changed to Robert Sobukwe Town. The change is subject to controversy.

v. As far as possible, original function was used for this categorization but because the original purpose was not always clear, current purpose had to be used at times.

vi. The Victoria and Barrydale Hotels were not included in this assessment because the main buildings hail from the 1800s.

vii. While the study did not include International Style buildings, during visits to the various Karoo towns, the author was struck by how few examples of this style exist.