

Deco Discoveries

By Clive Foss

Ethiopia's Italian Deco

Ethiopia, famed for its ancient sites, medieval fortresses, palaces and churches, and spectacular landscapes, seems an unlikely place to look for Art Deco. The traditional architecture is small scale, often of wood and thatch, and even the emperor's palace was a conglomeration of modest pavilions rather than one imposing structure. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the country opened to the outside world, a rather stodgy European style started to spread, but it remained for the legions of Mussolini to impose modern town planning and architecture whose effects can still be discerned.

The Italians, who occupied Addis in May 1936, moved with the famed Fascist speed – they were never too concerned with formal legality – to create a suitable political and visual setting for their new empire. Wherever they went, they built, especially in Addis Ababa and the regional capitals. In each major city they drew up a Directive Plan that provided for a monumental centre based on one or more piazzas to show off the power and accomplishments of the regime, as well as commercial and industrial districts that would separate the residential quarters of the Italians from those of the 'natives'. In Addis, for example, the two-kilometer long Viale Benito Mussolini (now named for Churchill) ran in a straight line from the train station to the main squares, the Piazza Littorio (named for the lictors who guarded the ancient Roman consuls and carried the symbol of power, the fasces) and the Piazza del Impero (Empire Square). Plans called for a tree-lined boulevard 40-90 meters wide (by comparison, DC's Pennsylvania Avenue is about 50 meters) flanked by monumental public and commercial buildings, while the center of the existing Ethiopian town would be cleared out and devoted to parks and villas.

The plan looked forward to eight or ten years, but the East African Empire lasted only five, for the British threw out the Italians in 1941 and restored the emperor Haile Selassie. Nevertheless, fascism had made its architectural mark, still visible on Churchill Avenue in the imposing blocks that stand scattered amidst modern commercial buildings and the ubiquitous tin shacks that serve as shops, restaurants and virtually everything else.

In Italy, the twenty years of fascism produced a vast range of buildings in a variety of styles. By the 1930s, Rationalism tended to dominate – a style that featured abstract geometry, avoiding historical reference or decora-

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tion, often producing something that looked machine made and quite different from the warm and sometimes whimsical humanity of Art Deco. Yet Italy and its empire were not immune or hostile to current trends, so that an attractive Deco structure might stand next to a ponderous official one, as in what is still called the Piazza in Addis, where this commercial building with its strong verticals, broad windows and curved sides make it an admirable representative of the streamline modern of the 1930s rises across the street from the far more somber Casa del Fascio, the Party headquarters, typically reminiscent of the Roman Coliseum.



Not far away is an even more colorful streamline example whose broad shaded ribbon windows curve gracefully around the corner of the Piazza to find their counterpart in the tall elongated window panels of the stairway.



The city of Gondar, famed for its palaces and fortress, was a regional capital under the Italians and preserves much of their work in the form of the Casa del Fascio and a residential quarter for government officials, all

suitably Rationalist, and all currently used by the municipal government. Yet down the hill the main commercial street is still preserved, with the invitingly rounded contours of the Cinema and the Moderne detailing of the Ethiopia Hotel whose small central tower, curving windows and prominent verticals wouldn't be out of place in Miami Beach.



There's probably much more to be discovered, but these buildings may not have a brilliant future. Some towns have completely destroyed their past; in others it hangs on precariously as building projects boom under what is reputed to be a corrupt and arbitrary regime. In Addis, for example, Deco survives in the rather seedy Piazza district while the city grows in other directions. Yet all these structures face a central problem: they represent a hated colonial regime which brutally conquered the country, then massacred thousands of its inhabitants. Nobody seems proud of this heritage or feels any need to preserve it. That may change with increasing prosperity and awareness that buildings are part of an historical continuum intrinsically worth keeping, but it may be a good idea to have a look at this remote manifestation of Deco while it's still there.