

Sertanejo Art Deco: an inspiration for a Brazilian design?

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This article lists design projects and researches concerning popular modernist constructions from the Brazilian northeast, entitled Sertanejo Art Deco. It introduces the style and shows how this subject has been historically unappreciated by Brazilian architects and academicians. An analytical method to classify geometric composition of the popular façades is illustrated, as well as arguments in favor of adopting Sertanejo's geometric features as an inspiration source for designers and researchers.

1. The discovery

This research started when the authors came across regional housing in 1972 and were fascinated by the villages along the highways of the Brazilian Northeast region (fig. 1). As designers from the Southeast region of Brazil, embedded with functionalist principles, they were taken by surprise when observing these “delightful” façades, which geometric compositions were in conflict with academic rules about the so called “good design”¹. Amazingly, that regional anonymous creativity that was expressed only by rustic rulers and compasses in a particular Art Deco style had neither been mentioned at all in the literature, nor expressed in the Brazilian architects’ and designers’ work and minds. This style can be referred to as the Northeast Art Deco Style or Sertanejo Art Deco, as explained further in this paper.



Figure 1. Two façades of Campina Grande's neighborhood in the 1980's. (photo by the authors)

The “invisibility” of this regional façades/buildings could be understandable if one refers to the 1970's weak or even non-existent communication between Brazilian Northeast and Southeast's trend setters. As quoted by Lemos (1981: 42), in general terms museums and architecture organizations seem to agree in keeping preserved rich “works of exception”, putting aside the “popular and ordinary goods” (Lemos 1987: 22). Besides that, Art Deco

style has been rejected and undervalued by some Brazilian academicians and architects even nowadays. For example, according to Weimer (2011: 7), “from whence the conclusion was reached that it would be absurd to speak of ‘Art Deco’ architecture or an Art Deco ‘style’”.

On the other hand, the authors have been engaged in the preservation of that regional popular modernism through a long run of talks, presentations, exhibitions, media campaigns etc. (ROSSI 1984; 1994). It is rewarding to know that since its first public presentation in 1982, Sertanejo Art Deco has served as an inspiration for other designers and researchers whose projects and products will be illustrated here.

2. Why Sertanejo?

The term “sertão” (hinterland) refers to a Brazilian northeastern geographic region. It comes from the colonial Portuguese word “desertão” (big desert), meaning a place distant from urban centers, a country remote backwoods. Poetically speaking, it is a piece of land of fond memory, “my sertão” (Rossi 2011: 42). Therefore, due to the absence of a distinct name to refer to the newly found regional style, the adjective “Sertanejo” was coined to baptize this type of popular expression of modernism not recognized by the academicians.

As usual in peripheral cultures - with few exceptions - international trends have been leading the aesthetics of architecture and product design. This directed design researchers to study mainly foreign avant-garde modernist topics rather than their own backyards’ “exotic” expressions. Fortunately, a new generation of researchers has a different approach to the subject. For example, Campina Grande (PB), the city where this research started in the 1980's, is referred by Queiroz (2010: 37) as having “a great and significant Art Deco inheritance”.

3. Official and popular Art Deco

Putting aside any conceptual debate about Art Deco, this style can be characterized as a geometric mixture of “Historicism and Modernism” (Frampton 1994: 220). Furthermore, Art Deco is also linked to dazzling shines reflected by luxurious surfaces, with fancy couples dancing Charleston in frenzy during the decades between the wars. Segawa (1995: 73) adds that Art Deco represents “an affluent American society which borrowed and multiplied the decorative artifices from a rich European culture.

¹ As we were taught at the Design Industrial Course in Rio de Janeiro, strongly inspired by HfG/Ulm, Germany.

However, in strong contrast to the American and European Art Deco, there is no shine in Sertanejo Art Deco's façades. Its luxury lies only on its anonymous builders' prolific creativity over plain masonry. The "modern" façades hiding old roofs are the core of our research interest (fig. 2), but what do those "one-door-one-window" modest houses have in common with Scott Fitzgerald's Jazz era?



Figure 2. Chã dos Pereira, Paraíba. Old roofs and new fronts, 2012. (Photo by the authors)

The answer may lie on the assumption that this Brazilian regional variation and its façades' geometry relate to the basic features of international Art Deco style, for example: stepped ziggurats, Egyptian reliefs, Mesoamerican temples, Greco-roman classicism, Streamline curves, and other elements taken from Abstractionism (fig. 3). In this respect, we would argue that the Sertanejo Art Deco is a type of "architectural dialect" that re-organizes the geometry of Modernism in a particular way. As an extension of Brito's (1983) concept of "interaction between the opposites", it is believed that there is a merging of all the "isms" into Sertanejo Art Deco's employment of meta-symbols (fig. 4).

In this regard, geometric shapes would also symbolize Modernism, but it was also in interaction with Historicism. Thus, the façades would be combined with elements of Classicism, Cubism, Eclecticism and Futurism, just to mention some. The past of art and architecture is then translated into straight and curved signals, at the limit (or within) of geometric abstraction that was expressed in icons of lime and cement, color and light in the Northeast. This is in accordance to Queiroz (2008: 234) when asserting that occupants of Sertanejo houses had "the desire of reflecting new times and rhythms, even though only through the façades".

4. Sertanejo Art Deco's geometrism: framework for classification

Due to the lack of literature on systematic analysis of mainstream Art Deco buildings, and particularly on Sertanejo Art Deco, an analytical framework is proposed by the authors. Compositional and decorative elements of approximately 2000 façades from around 60 north-eastern towns were analysed and compared against examples of international and Brazilian buildings officially recognised as Art Deco. The classification comprises 14 categories distributed into lines, polygons and polyhedrons¹, as showed next (fig. 5).

1 A detailed explanation of how this criteria was used will be subject of future articles and the book "Sertanejo Art Deco and its geometrism" (in preparation).



Figure 3. Classicism inspired façade in Pesqueira, PE, and Neoplasticism design in Bodocongó, PB, 1990 (photo by the authors)



Figure 4. Plain geometry simbology in Delmiro Gouveia, AL, 2000 (photo by Lia Monica Rossi)

This classification is presented first hand here, therefore was not yet used by the authors on projects that will be listed in the next section. Nevertheless, it can be perceived as a strong geometric similarity between the work of anonymous authors of Sertanejo Art Deco façades and other artisans, artists and designers from the same Brazilian region.

1. Stepped rectangular glazier	2. Broken lines				
	straight-parallel/chevron	straight-angle	Mix	stepped	
3. Parallel lines	4. radial lines	5. triangular	6. diamond	7. square and rectangle	
8. Other polygons				9. Overlapping polygons (neo-plasticism)	
Trapezoid-concave	Trapezoid-concave	Interwined	Miscellaneous		
10. circular	11. Complex composition	12. Triangular prism	13. Other solids	14. Tangent planes and secant (streamline)	

Figure 5. General framework for classification into geometric categories (Table by the authors).

5. Inspired projects

Examples of design and architecture constructions that have explored the Art Deco theme are briefly described and classified in two groups: (1) Products with the geometric shapes of Sertanejo Art Deco; (2) Products reportedly inspired by Sertanejo Art Deco. Though there are other initiatives engaged in the promotion and preservation of Art Deco and other forms of regional architectural expression (e.g., publications, documentaries, preservation projects etc.), these are not included here due to space constraints.

5.1 Products with the geometric shapes of Sertanejo Art Deco

Clay craft

Anonymous, C. Grande, Paraíba, undated, acquisitions from 1980 to 1990 (fig. 6)

These miniatures made by anonymous Northeast artisans were sold at the Central Fair of Campina Grande. They reproduce parts of buildings façades popular in the Northeast and measure between 15 and 30 cm tall.

Recycled glass craft

Anonymous, Juazeiro do Norte, Ceará, undated, acquisitions in 2000 (fig. 7)

These Deco-inspired miniatures are sold at the Center for Popular Culture Master Noza. The artisans reproduce and/or invent objects using scrap glass and mirrors pieces collected in glass workshops. Measure 10-20 cm high.

Truck mud flaps

Master Samuel and others, Campina Grande, PB, undated, acquisition from 1980 (fig. 8)

Mud flaps are used in the wheels of truck and are of unique geometry, manufactured by painters of the region on wooden or rubber surfaces.

Fictitious Clothes Project

Geová Amorim, Campina Grande, PB, 1984 (fig. 9)

In the 1980s the local artist Geová Amorim created a series of "fictitious clothes" based on geometric shapes, Erte's costume designs (Barthes 1976) and Sertanejo Art Deco compositions.

5.2 Products reportedly inspired by Sertanejo Art Deco

Fashion design and northeast cultura

Final work for Industrial Design BA Course, Federal University of Paraíba, 1990 (fig. 10)

Jose Marconi B. de Souza, supervised by João B. Guedes



Figure 6: Examples of miniature made of clay representing Sertanejo Art Deco façades. Collection of the authors. (Photo by the authors)



Figure 7: Miniature of drawer made with glass and mirror pieces. Collection of the authors (photo by the authors).



Figure 8: Truck mud flaps on rubber (40 x 50 cm). Collection of the authors (photo by the authors)

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This academic work contains a collection of menswear inspired by the popular aesthetic of the Northeast (i.e., houses façades and truck's mud flaps designs described before). The popular compositions were systematically analyzed, so their principles could be applied to clothes trimmings, ornaments and structure.

Campina ´s Furniture Project

Research and furniture design by Gustavo Bomfim & Jose Marconi B. de Souza

Industrial Design BA Course, Federal University of Paraíba, 1990

The proposal was to investigate elements of popular furniture produced and sold at the Central Fair of Campina Grande in order to develop a line of furniture to appeal to new consumers. The project was funded by the "International Design Forum Ulm – Conference 1989".

"Sertanejo Art Deco Building Blocks" Project

Final work for Industrial Design BA Course, Federal University of Paraíba, 1995 [fig. 12]

Rejane Catão, supervised by G. Bomfim, Jose M. B. de Souza & Lia M. Rossi

The objective was to design products that could be made of leftover materials collected from local furniture joinery industry (e.g. small pieces of wood and laminates usually discarded as firewood). When building blocks are assembled they create a variety of Sertanejo Art Deco façades' "modanatura" (i.e., arrangement of architectonic elements in accordance with certain composition rules).

Project deconstruction and construction of the Sertanejo Art Deco geometry

Jose Marconi B. de Souza, 2010

The objective is to provide step-by-step method of deconstruction and construction of a geometric composition inspired by truck mud flaps [fig. 13]. The method employs digital vector software tools such as Bezier (available on standard desktop graphic applications).

Campina Déco Project

Consultancy by Lia Monica Rossi, Jose Marconi B. de Souza, Dra. Cristina Mello e outros, PMCG/ SEPLAN, Prefeitura Municipal de Campina Grande, PB, 1999-2002

Between 1935 and 1945 Campina Grande ´s downtown houses in an eclectic style were almost totally demolished. This destruction was based on a series of decrees that promoted the

replacement of old buildings by modern Art Deco terraces ¹ [fig. 14]. Sixty years later, in 1999, the City Hall started procedures for downtown revitalization of the so called Campina Deco Project².

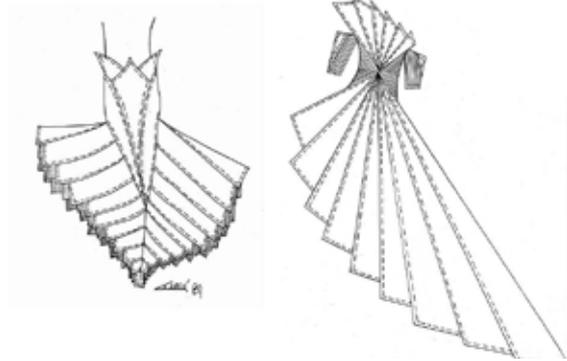


Figure 9: Two design for feminine clothes. Collection of the authors (photo by the authors)



Figure 10: T-shirts and shirts inspired by Sertanejo Art Deco geometry. Collection of the authors (photo by the authors)



Figure 12: Demonstration of the assembly process of a sequence of façades. Collection of the authors. (Photo by the authors)

1 "Builders and architects from the region or graduated at the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro set up their offices to meet the large number of customers of that compulsory "modernization by decree." (Veras 1988)

2 Mayor Cassio Cunha Lima Administration. Law # 3721, Aug.06.1999, SEGOV/ PMCG, creating Special Area of Conservation I.

Besides preserving the building's stylistic features, this project included works on infrastructure networks, new paving, removal and standardization of advertising in the façades, re-allocation of street vendors, street furniture etc.

Local Commercial Associations supported the Façades Restoration Project, and a special tax exemption laws for owners of properties involved were applied (Fig. 15). This project consisted of: Research on architectural specification files (discovered in 1994), digitization of the façades, classification of buildings by area (Preservation, Guardianship and Tipping), the design of colour guide based on original specifications, detailed actions for each building, standards for shop signs and lighting (fig. 16).

The complete project was supposed to cover 150 properties in 10 blocks occupying 17 hectares of Campina's city center. But actually, only one street was completely revitalised. Given the popularity and media support, the spreading of the historical importance of popular architectural modernism worked as an example for other governments. The authors consider this a case of rare success in Brazil, which later on motivated the creation of a larger preservation movement in the city.

Pavement design

Architect Anselmo M. Dantas & Maria Veronica R. do Vale, drawing by Gilvan J. de Lima, PMCG/SEPLAM, PB, 1998.

Within the Campina Deco Project the remodelling of sidewalks paving was envisaged. Even though not implemented, this design is clearly inspired by the Art Deco geometrism and should be made using granite material.

St. John Feast scenery

Architect Anselmo M. Dantas and team, PMCG/SEPLAM, Campina Grande, PB, 1998

Free interpretation of the popular Art Deco façades used as decorative theme of St. John Feast at People's Park.

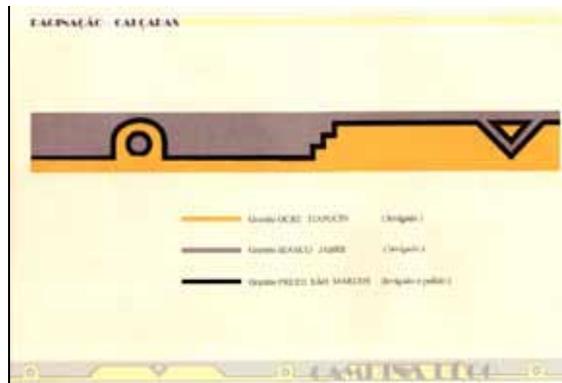


Figure 17. Art Deco inspired sidewalk design. 1998 (photo by the authors)



Figure 13: Illustration of the deconstruction and construction of truck's mud flap geometry (photo by the authors).



Figure 14: Art Deco uniformity of the 1940's downtown Campina Grande, 2005. (Photo by the authors)



Figure 15. 112, Maciel Pinheiro Street original project of Josué Barbosa in 1946. Still covered in 1999 and restored in 2000. (Photo by the authors)



Figure 16: Digitized façades of Maciel Pinheiro Street, 1st block, odd side. Design by Jose Marconi B.de Souza and Apoena R. Barreira, 1999. (Photo by the authors)



Figure 18. Stalls sequence scenario based on the Sertanejo Art Deco façades, 1998 (photo by the authors).

6. Final considerations

We can summarize this article with assumption that there are at least two approaches to the Art Deco subject: the first, whose authors deny its existence as style, and the second, whose authors defend its preservation. This work chooses the affirmative side of the discussion, supporting both the “official” features of the style and its anonymous expressions like the Sertanejo.

As usually happens in “peripheral cultures”, international trends are the “mainstream” of aesthetics whether in architecture, design, film programming or music, just to mention some.

However, as a reaction to this viewpoint, the authors remain engaged in the study, dissemination and preservation of Northeast popular Modernism, now more stimulated by the growing number of “followers”. Northeast culture as an inspiration to art often emerges in Brazil, whether as a theme in soap operas, movies, TV shows and carnival parades, confirming its potential as a creative source.

To illustrate the great possibilities of art expression of the Northeast culture, the authors presented some works in which formal characteristics of Sertanejo Art Deco were deliberately used by architects and designers. They also show how Sertanejo Art Deco's geometric shapes permeate crafts.

But, with exceptions of those few examples, it is pertinent to state that the Sertanejo Art Deco and other variants of Brazilian hinterlands culture remains an unknown field, an uncharted territory in the academy as well as for architects and designers.

Besides, it is worth mentioning that the process of preservation demands updating. In this sense there seems to be an agreement among theoreticians, as stated by Bardi (Grinover & Rubino 2009) and Reis (1970):

What is needed is to consider the past as historic present. (Bardi, in Grinover and Rubino, 2009: 165).

The cultural heritage of each Brazilian region should be mobilized

as a starting point for the creation of the present. This heritage is essential to incorporate intellectual and sensitive creative activities in today's life. (Reis 1970: 191)

Finally, the words of Mario de Andrade, a Modernist Brazilian writer and art critic, come to epitomise this topic. He advocated a “national art produced by native craftsmen” as a replacement to the foreign expertise of immigrants in craftsmanship at the beginning of 20th c. Brazil. In this perspective, one may wonder if the Sertanejo Art Deco craftsmen could be part of the necessary “artistic ballast” for Mario de Andrade’s “new Brazilian aesthetics conception” (Abbud, 1979: unpagged). We deeply believe they could.

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