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Atlanta's Moderne Diner Revival: History, Nostalgia, Youth, and Car Culture

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Atlanta's Moderne Diner Revival: History, Nostalgia, Youth, and Car Culture

The South

The traditional view of the South emphasizes the region's sense of continuity with the past and articulates a highly romanticized view of that past. Citizens of the South display a loyalty to region evidenced by a pride in state or community bordering on religious devotion or national patriotism. A Southerner's attachment to "place" implants in the cultural memory recognizable images of "local color" or heritage in which architecture, landscape, and familiar social activity intermingle: an outdoor barbeque in the church yard, an evangelist in the camp meeting ground, or noon-day gossiping in the courthouse square. Similarly, a Southerner's strong ties to ancestry and lineage are reflected by a nostalgia for the small town of one's birth and childhood. A spirit of responsibility to both parents and offspring, to past and future, encourages the preservation of the family homestead, the guarding of one's good name, the conservation of historic monuments and traditions. Southern art, in painting and in romantic photography, records such activities as fishing on a bayou or picking cotton, and such regional images as the rural vernacular of a tenant farm overlooking worn fields or Spanish moss hanging from live oaks and framing columned great houses. This latter image has entered the realm of myth: despite the siting of as many Greek Revival houses in New York state as in Georgia, for example, one still considers the white columned (especially peripteral) classic revival residence to be the typical "antebellum *Southern*" great house. In all, these bayous, cotton fields, Southern landscapes, and great houses are the traditional places of Southern recreation, work, comfort, and domesticity where time appears to stand still; these are the stages on which have unfolded life's daily dramas in the South (Poesch, pp. ix-xii).

The region, as a consequence, has been slow to change. The South resists progressivism and modernism, it has been reluctant to embrace the city, and its people typically have avoided mobility. A Southerner's pride in the uniqueness of the South may carry over to a fervency of national pride, although the flag may be that of the Confederacy alongside the American flag; moreover, internationalism is repressed in favor of a sustained identity with region bordering on isolation. Atlanta, in the heart of the New South, may be the region's greatest anomaly as it is an urban center in a rural region, a self-declared "international city" in a region conservatively proud to be Southern, a modern metropolis filled with neo-classical (although not antebellum) homes overshadowed by modern skyscrapers.

To the degree that modernism has typically been resisted in the South, Atlanta is not very "Southern." In architecture, Modernism's anonymity, internationalism, colorless abstraction, and anti-traditionalism, as well as its urban focus, have contributed to the lack of receptivity to the Modern style in the South. Colonial Revival, Georgian Revival, and Neo-Classical styles remain the architectural images of choice for Southern residences, and institutional and commercial buildings often adopt "antebellum" formal and traditional images in order to communicate a conservative and essentially Southern character.

Early Modern as Historic in a Post-Modern Age

However, it is an observable phenomenon of recent decades in Atlanta that once modern imagery was sufficiently established in the 20th century mind then a *post-modern* nostalgia for even the recent past prompted a discovery, in early modern design sources, of new models for a revivalist architecture. By the 1980s, '20s — '50s building styles were no longer novel and, like traditional architecture, had survived as fragments of an increasingly distant past; moreover, such rediscovered sources from Deco to Modern, were now perceived to be as legitimately "historic" as the traditional, often classical, models serving as archetypes for other Post-Modern¹ architectural dress. In this context of revivalism, a modern city in the New South might ignore Modernism's less admired traits—its a lack of contextualism, its ignorance of local color, its rejection of cultural distinction, and its immunity from regional expressionism, and embrace Neo-Modernism as offering, like other revivalistic styles, a dose of nostalgia for a disappearing past. The pace of Atlanta, rushing forward into the future, began to encourage, therefore, the view that early modern styles, as well as traditional forms, were adaptable to a contemporary history-based design.

Thus, the post-modern generation in Atlanta, seeing in the language of 1920s - '50s styles a spirit of youth, has revived, in its recent and contemporary roadside architecture, features of the Modern, the Deco, and the Moderne styles borrowed from only a generation ago. Out of this more recent, twentieth-century, wellspring of modernism, even in the conservative South, has emerged a romantic and glitzy return to machine-age styling. Neo-Moderne roadside buildings now position themselves alongside the more widespread history-infused eclecticism of post World War II pop culture buildings—shanties selling seafood, neo-colonial houses selling 28 flavors of ice cream, red barns hawking hamburgers, quasi Old West missions selling tacos, and vernacular frame houses dispensing home-cooked fried chicken. The forms are as familiar as the images of suburban residential architecture in various academic revivalist styles. In their own day, Art Deco, Streamlined Moderne, and Modern architecture were new, were products of the machine and technology, and represented progressivism (Craig, 17-18). But for the contemporary scene of the 1980s and 1990s they had become another potential design source to be appropriated by roadside builders along commercial strips. But in contrast with the aged traditionalism of Old South academic and vernacular forms, the New South's *Neo-Moderne*s and *Deco Revivals* offered recollections (albeit less wistful than with the melancholic sighs evoked by Tara) of a sexy adolescent age of the streamlined and tail-finned car culture. The Diner Revival embodied the free spirit of youth.

This Post-Modern nostalgic foray into a youthful past may be the 20th century architect's last hurrah. 'Fifties and 'Sixties Modernism had passed through the mid-life crisis of Minoru Yamasaki and Edward Durrell Stone during a period when architecture was more interested in styling and packaging buildings than in good taste or good design (von Eckardt, 212-223). In its old age, twentieth-century architecture then began to parade itself in the architectural dress of Post-Modern Classicism. This purportedly evidenced a more sophisticated but mis-placed high culture, in which past-its-prime Modern architecture was dressed up in what we might call Gravesian polyester suits. For example, Michael Graves's Portland Public Services Building, a seminal Post-Modern office block of 1979-82, was costumed as "Mamamouchie" Modernism in drag and became the "Bourgeois Gentleman" of the Post-Modern Movement: Modernism seeking a new respectability. Graves's building, and others it stimulated, reflected Post-Modernism's effort to redress the ills of a colorless Modernism.

The wearing of history by the "PM generation" extended, moreover, to "slip-cover Modern," that is, the reupholstering of mundane modern

buildings. Resurfacing an edifice, providing either a uniform of authority or a costume for playful masquerade, resulted not infrequently in what Charles Jencks has called “the carnivalesque” (Jencks, 1991, 8-13, 78-79, and 80-95). Jencks applies the term most pejoratively to the “the Post-Modernisation of failed or crumbling Modernist buildings” (Jencks, 1991, 78). With its excess of cosmetic, carnivalesque architecture, viewed as old and tired Modernism “made over,” smeared on its historic make-up like a clown, if not a New Orleans madam, and threatened to end the century with architectural jokes, pitiable misquotations, and caricatures of beauty.

The Commercial Strip and Pop Architecture

At the center of these theatrical effects, whereby an ordinary building adorns itself with the sartorial splendor of historic costume in order to achieve legitimacy or merely to be “arty,” is much architecture of the popular culture: commercial strip buildings where eccentricity has advertising and marketing purpose. Fast food restaurants reign supreme as the edifices of America’s roadside kitsch. Suburban strip malls and ex-urban highways are lined with painterly artifices, silly period pieces, and populist art of either of the two varieties Robert Venturi has defined as ducks and decorated sheds (Venturi, Brown, and Izenour, 45-46). Thus, the history of twentieth century Pop architecture is punctuated with ordinary buildings costumed in his-



Figure 1. McDonald's Restaurant with mansard roof and Ronald McDonald. Photo: Douglas C. Allen.

toric robes, sometimes seeking merely to stand out in a crowd of styleless uniformity and always seeking to advertise a commercial purpose in memorable and recognizable forms.

Early chain restaurants, for example, were dressed in medieval or colonial garb for purposes of immediate recognition, adopting familiar images in order to encourage traveling customers to patronize an established and reliable business. The traditional dress of White Castles, White Towers, Toddle Houses, and Howard Johnsons are examples. (Hirshorn and Isenour, *passim*; Langdon, *passim*). In the mid-1950s, McDonald's Hamburger Restaurants initially sought to avoid any already well-established traditional architectural language, in order to convey a message of up-to-datedness offering less historicist and more modern lines under futuristic arches to symbolize efficiency of service, cleanliness, and reliable products. Early McDonald's stores were jet-age drive-ins seeking to express futuristic Modernism, a spirit of tomorrow which offered a new image for a novel concept of fast food. In the early McDonald's models, red and white striped buildings with "golden" arches served as both restaurant and advertising billboard.

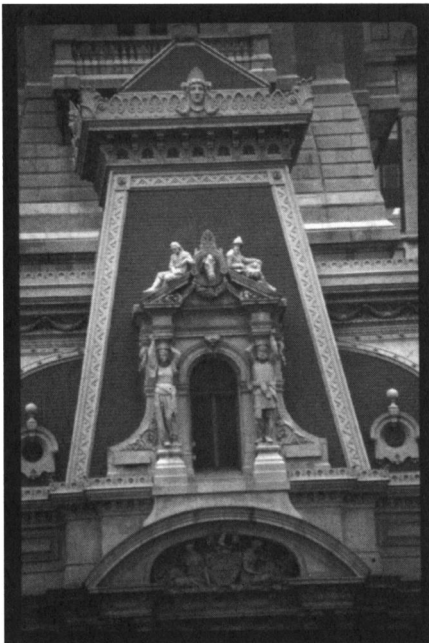


Figure 2. City Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1871-81, echoing pavilions of New Louvre, Paris (1852-57), with mansard roof echoing 17th c. Bourbon forms and sculpture based on Michelangelo's Medici Chapel tombs, S. Lorenzo, Florence, Italy, begun 1521. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Modern architecture could sell hamburgers as readily as could the Colonial Revival. But these novel restaurants were soon remodelled or replaced by roadside structures displaying the historicist authority and high-art taste of the mansard roof. Mansards in Paris were historically enriched with figural sculpture, but when McDonald's employed super-scaled sculpture in the form of balloons shaped as Ronald McDonald sitting atop the restaurant's shingled French Bourbon roof slopes [Figure 1], few observers equated the sculptured helium-filled clown with the kind of authenticating figural sculpture which more literal followers of François and Jules Hardouin Mansart historically preferred to place on their own neo-mansardic slopes [Figure 2]. It was clear at McDonald's that

the historic Baroque form of the mansard roof *had* indeed slipped into a popularized, commercial kitsch. But there were parallels. Both historic and modern mansards, with or without sculpted figures, served to advertise; the one was political, and the other commercial. Each “signed” the building’s status and function. When Baron Haussman adopted the mansard for mid-19th-century Paris, or when Americans adopted the French Second Empire Style for post-Civil War government buildings, they foreshadowed McDonald’s adoption of the mansard as an act of cultural “social climbing.” McDonald’s wanted to up-grade its image and for a moment history provided the catalyst.

Much like Howard Johnson dispensing frankfurters and ice cream from a transmogrified, orange-roofed roadside Mount Vernon, the McDonald’s Corporation was relying on history to convey a message that its operation was established, honest, and secure and that the most conservative among us could trust that the product was safe (healthful) and of good value. In similar conservative gestures, popular “family” restaurants and stores have dressed themselves as colonial mansions to sell Southern fried chicken or baked goods “made from scratch”; log cabins or weathered frame hovels offer barbeque or “country home cookin” to “po’ folks”; and New England crab houses or lobster shanties bring seafood to the consumer in structures of associational dress as literal and as regionally based as when southwestern mission *espadañas* and *campaneros* advertise fast-food tacos and burritos for sale.

These regional and traditional elements inject history into the modern suburban commercial strip creating a late-twentieth century popular architecture as redolent of kitsch as the fake folkloric “carnavalesque” of Danny Kaye’s *Inspector General*. It is such roadside buildings as these which encourage, in the mind of the Ruskin-influenced observer, that a distinction be drawn between a “building” and “architecture.” Restaurants, cafes, and hamburger drive-in “chains,” like motels and strip shopping centers, seldom appear to such observers adequately sophisticated and aesthetically rich to warrant their consideration as architecture. On the other hand, one might ask whether Graves’s Portland Building is merely a larger, more conspicuous manifestation of architectural kitsch? Post-Modern era developers have wallpapered miles of suburban streetscapes, cast like golden calves in the graven image of Graves, creating roadside 3-D props which are as paper thin intellectually as a theatrical backdrop. When history meets popular culture in America, some observers assert, building pastiche, not architecture results.

To the popular culturalist this is snobbery if not blasphemy. As an artefact of material culture and an expression of the 20th century

American culture, the “street buildings” of the commercial vernacular present themselves as worthy and meaningful objects of interest, however literal their associationist message may be. But when the roadside building is not traditional but modern in style, this line of thought would suggest, the would-be architecture is even more in trouble: it is divested altogether of its historic legitimacy; it is defrocked of the traditional garb which defined its function, and it stands naked as an abstract embodiment of a machine aesthetic. The Modern-styled building thus becomes the “emperor with no clothes.” Machine-age buildings, those roadside artifacts of the automobile culture, are therefore almost universally dismissed by the public as utilitarian, as mere building, as expressions of function but without art, as technology without beauty. Thus, in spite of the liberally-minded popular culturalist’s interest, for instance, in the gas station, the bus depot, or the streamlined, metal-skinned diner, the more conservative aesthete sees only ordinary objects of a modernity fueled by the automobile and shaped by transportation but of no interest as architecture. Such structures are ubiquitous but not noteworthy. A host of auto-buildings including auto repair shops, tire outlets, car dealerships, gas stations, and “fast” food diners, remain, to the traditionalist, instances merely of ordinary construction rather than of art.

Roadside Architecture as Historic Model: Nostalgia and Rejuvenation

By the late 20th century, however, the “classic” automobile and “auto buildings” of the ‘30s and ‘40s had themselves become historic and stimulated renewed interest. As Jan Jennings’s edited book of essays, *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture*, suggests, serious scholars by the late 1980s were taking a second look at these “ordinary buildings” of the car culture. Such inquiries paralleled architects’ new works (in Atlanta, for example, the 1980s designs of Rod Whatley) reflecting a rediscovery of the American road, roadside architecture, and the dynamism and styling which shaped the streamlined era (Bush, *passim*; Margolies, *passim*; Craig, 1988).

There may well be a detectable regional character to the car culture of the South; there is most certainly a wide-spread interest, in the South’s premier city, in the new architecture of the car culture. Auto clubs and car rallies remain popular in the South, and supe’d up sports cars and restored classics of the fifties are regularly seen enroute to Southern speedways or to college football games; on a given Saturday night, many are parked at the Hot Rod Cafe in Woodstock, Georgia, just north of Atlanta. It has been said that the South is a region where half of its “red necks” got their sunburn on a farm tractor but that the other

half were home-grown car mechanics bent over a super-charged engine of a twenty-year-old sports car up on blocks in the side yard next to the mobile home. If Southern boys know their cars and fix them up, they also show them off on Saturday night, and how better than by cruisin' at the roadside drive-in cafe?

Late-century roadside diners, like the Hot Rod Cafe, continue to offer Southern consumers romantic associations with youth and the free spirit of the road. The roadside aesthetic of Atlanta's new, Post-Modern diners, Steak and Shake Revivals, and "express" donut shoppes in the 1990s is rapidly replacing images of post-Kroc Anglo-Bourbon authentication and "upward mobility" achieved through the borrowed history of a mansard a generation ago. Atlanta's Diner Revival, interested less in upward mobility than in just plain mobility, presents itself as an architectural reference less to the authority of a *distant* past than to the dynamic and free spirit of a progressive, streamlined, and *recent* past.

One might expect Southern traditionalism to endorse the history-infused imagery of popular culture but to reject the more progressive machine imagery of modernism as embodied in the roadside buildings of either 1930s Streamlined Moderne or its 1980s revival. One might expect 20th-century sons and daughters of the Confederacy, stultified by the "lost cause" of a worn-out history, to hold to the more distant past of traditional forms and to remain slow to embrace the modernity of the machine age. But in the South there is a generation of Born Again Modernists who dig, but not very deeply, into the archaeological pits of history; the more recent history of their own adolescence, not the past of their ancestors, serves these designers of Neo-Moderne diners as they create a new wave of Southern *places*. They are places accented by soda fountains, dance floors with push-button juke boxes, booths for cozy seating, and an ambience of bobby socks and pleated skirts, of letter sweaters and penny loafers. Here is no longer the more archaeological small town or "Main Street" culture of the horse-drawn surrey but the Happy Days culture of flashy styling, speed, and the hot-blooded youthfulness of the mid-1950s Chevy.

Moderne Collectibles: Decorating the Diner

The creators of the Neo Moderne diner world effect their imagery much like the decorators of past environments of home or office. For years, the builders of the new diners have collected artifacts and recollected memories of those 1950s hamburger drive-ins and roadside eateries which they frequented in their youth; a tall, old-fashioned ice cream soda glass becomes a memento recalling a first date and a Route

66 road sign stimulates a builder's remembrances of carefree days in a '57 Chevy when the automobile brought freedom and when "cruising" was invented. Some fabricators of the Neo-Moderne are old enough to remember pre-World War II Moderne diners, manufactured, perhaps, by the Worcester Lunch Car Company, and this longer pedigree helps to authenticate their own revivalist creations in the 1980s and '90s. The design devices by which a builder of the Streamlined Revivalism create an environment of youth and nostalgia are much the same as the methods and elements informing the old eclecticism. Echoing the overstuffed parlours of more traditional collectors of Victorian art, the late-century diners of the Moderne Revival present themselves as roadside treasuries or storehouses of more modern collectibles of Americana in modern materials: stainless steel, Bakelite, bottled glass, "classic" condiment dispensers (for sugar, straws or napkins), plastics, quilted aluminum in a setting of vinyl cushions, metal soda-pop ice boxes, glass block, neon, and ceramic tile [Figure 3].

Diner interior decorators and buyers charged with the task of furnishing the Diner Revivals are as motivated to enrich and bedeck the metal-encased luncheonettes as were earlier home decorators (traditionists, who, like scholarly museum curators, accumulated *correct* paraphernalia for their historicist period rooms decorated in pre-industrial styles). The new diners, 'fifties cafes, and nostalgic soda fountains are literally stuffed with the cultural specimens of the



Figure 3. Soda fountain counter top with straw dispenser, napkin dispenser, music box, etc., Hot Rod Cafe, Woodstock, Georgia, 1995. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Moderne era. Finding the correct sugar, napkin, or paper straw dispensers for a diner's counter top, is as passionate a goal as when a Victorian dealer in knick-knacks acquired a neo-Cellini saltcellar or when an 18th c. neo-classicist, on a Grand Tour, amassed ancient artifacts and works of art to be housed in his "neo-whatever" country house. The diner collectibles join the reconstituted and juxtaposed formal elements of the Neo-Deco architecture to contribute to the New Eclecticism.

This is remembered Moderne, not the original, and nothing is pure. Comparisons of the old and new eclecticism are therefore informative. The 18th century Chippendale Style, for example, may be viewed as an amalgam of gothick, rococo, and chinoiserie—that is, an eclectic reconstitution of formal and decorative references to different times and places in an age of romantic historicism. Similarly, the neo-



Figure 4. Artifacts at Hot Rod Cafe, Woodstock, Georgia, 1995: juke box, Texaco Fire Chief gas pump, bubble gum dispenser (soda ice boxes not visible opposite).

Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Moderne expressions of 1990s roadside America may be viewed as an eclectic re-instatement of formal and decorative references to 1930s Art Deco and the Streamlined Moderne in an age of romantic, *Post-Modern* historicism. If an 18th century craftsman can translate an architectural form, such as a chinese pagoda, to a porcelain *objet d'art* or a silver decorative piece, then a twentieth-century decorator of the New Eclecticism merely sifts through a different archaeological dig to select the knick-knacks of his own, Post-Modern, historicism. The artifacts and design motifs which inform the 1980s & '90s

Diner Revival are car parts, gas station fragments, highway signage, the checkered black and white of race tracks, soft drink coolers, multi-colored bubble gum dispensers, jukeboxes, polychromatic lighting in neon tubes, and the re-used potsherds of a more recent romantic history [Figure 4]. It is a happy architecture, reflecting the car culture and reminiscent of the freedom of the road.

Kenneth Clark equated another spirited architecture and culture of youth, 18th century romanticism from Robert Adam to Mozart, with the pursuit of happiness (Clark, 221-243). The neo-classic spirit was light-hearted and youthful, and a rococo delicacy and freedom (rather than a ponderous authority), marked the decorative artistry of the day. Within the traditions of classicism, the rule by taste of earlier eighteenth century revived classicism was displaced at mid-century by a more liberal Adamesque eclecticism. The romance of the free spirit equally colored the *baroque-rococo* in architecture and the playful delights of Mozart in music. However, if mid-twentieth century youth, in their rejection of authority, fail to evoke an image of Mozartian innocence, it may be argued, nevertheless, that the free pursuit of happiness remains an expressive intention of any youth culture seeking to liberate itself from the dictates of its parental past. Mozart's relationship to the rococo in architecture and Haydn's to the neo-classical parallels Rock and Roll's association with Fifties drive-in cafes and diners.



Figure 5. Rockin' Robin's Diner, Lilburn, Georgia, 1988. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Happy Days Diners and the Hot Rod Cafe

One of Atlanta's earliest Neo-Moderne revivals of the streamlined diner aesthetic was manufactured by Module Mobile, Inc., a company which had built over a thousand diners nationwide since 1959. Suburban Atlanta's Rockin' Robin's of 1988 [Figure 5] was the first of their "Happy Days Diners" line. A second "Rockin' Robin's" Diner was built nearby in 1992-3. Recalling Bobby Day's 1958 #2 hit tune, "Rockin' Robin's"—and following George Lucas's "American Graffiti" (1973) and John Travolta's revival of "Grease" (1978)—such "Post-Modern" diners position themselves squarely in the youth culture. The ubiquitous jukebox, flanking the Rockin' Robin's entry [Figure 6], announces the intended associations with rock-and-roll jitterbugging, sock hops, and post-dance soda-jerking. Streamlined dining-car siding, semi-circular bus-depot windows, and drag-racing checkerboard join truck-stop counters and stools to create a transportation imagery, a revived roadside diner vocabulary characteristic of the late-century Neo-Diner historicism.



Figure 6. Rockin' Robin's Diner, Lilburn, Georgia, 1988. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Atlanta's most recent entry in the Diner Revival, The Hot Rod Cafe of 1995 [Figures 7 and 8], sits at the edge of a suburban expressway reflecting its metallic skin in the mid-day sun like a temporarily side-railed dining car of the Santa Fe "El Capitain."⁴ The form of its sweeping arched entry, trimmed in neon, derives from the profile of a jukebox, and the corbelled bands of parapet step out above quilted aluminum



Figure 7. Hot Rod Cafe, Woodstock, Georgia, 1995. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

walls and curved corners of glass block to create an entablature whose reflective brilliance is reminiscent of the chromium bumpers on a 1950s automobile. The parking lot becomes a suburban *parvis*, where parked cars position themselves as a procession of headlights, projecting high-

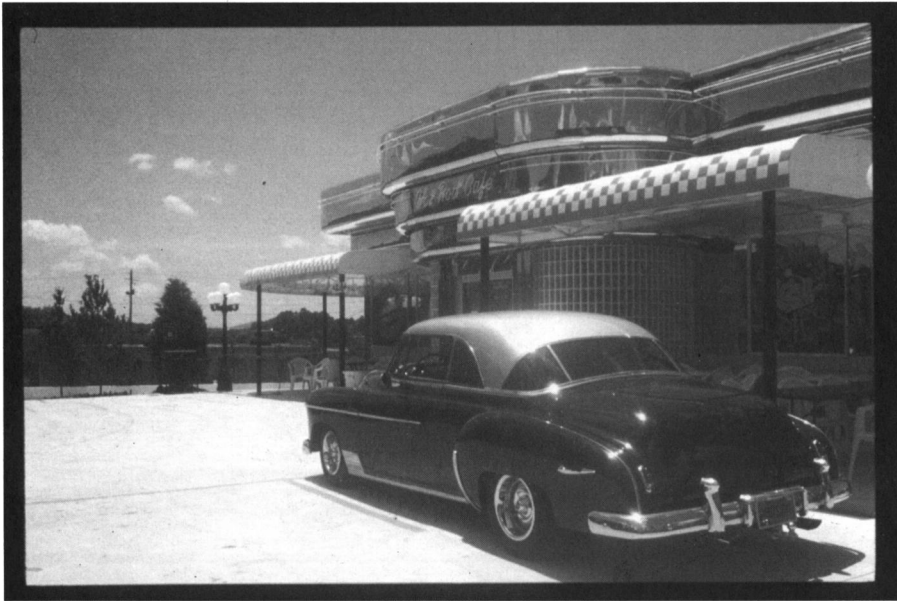


Figure 8. Hot Rod Cafe, Woodstock, Georgia, 1995. Photo: Robert M. Craig.



Figure 9. Mural, Betty Boop, Route 66 sign, and Rock and Roll graphic with guitar, Hot Rod Cafe, Woodstock, Georgia, 1995. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

tech candle power ritualistically before the altar of a pilgrimage site of secular devotion: here is the space of arrival for countless hungry pilgrims to Streamlined blue plate specials. The most devout converts are members of the Society for Commercial Archaeology. Above the entry portal, without tympanum, are double metallic lintels inscribed in neon, although one looks in vain for a signature, “Raymond Loewy *hoc fecit.*” Nothing quite prepares the devotee, however, for the decorator’s relics of soda fountain and diner-mania within this Streamlined Santiago.

Cartoons on glass [Figure 9], destined like a *secco* frescoed murals eventually to peel, greet diners with images of jalopies; of rock and roll discs, guitar, and dancing teenagers; of jukebox (designed as a bejeweled reliquary of secular music);



Figure 10. Car fin bench, Hot Rod Cafe, Woodstock, Georgia, 1995. Photo: Robert M. Craig.



Figure 11. Hot Rod parked inside Hot Rod Cafe, Woodstock, Georgia, 1995. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

and of Betty Boop, the Mary Magdalene of the new iconography. Lounge chairs in waiting areas are edged in “car-fender Moderne” [Figure 10]. In one corner, just off the dance floor, the hot rod itself is parked amidst other period *objets d’art* [Figure 11]. It is here that the stainless steel shrine, the Hot Rod Cafe, finds its liturgical focus; it is around the sacred hot rod that worshippers of youth engage in line dancing, in neo-swing jitterbuggery, and in *karioke*, the latter producing tuneless monotones like some Post-Modern, neo-Gregorian chant. On the wall, like icons of the new religion, are the graven images, the gods and goddesses of the roadside Pantheon: Marilyn Monroe, the Madonna, is as ever present here as Henry Adams found the Virgin Mary to be at Chartres; the Holy Trinity are James Dean, Marlon Brando, and the King of Kings, Elvis.²

Roadside Genre and the New Eclecticism

We may now move from the sacred to the profane. Unlike the more elitist and intellectual *l’esprit nouveau* of Le Corbusier, the machine aesthetic of the American Moderne, including this recent wave of neo-Streamlining, is egalitarian and inclusive, populist and accessible. In its furnishings and aesthetic borrowings, the Neo-Moderne revives and adapts old forms to contemporary use not for institutional or government patronage but to adorn people’s palaces of leisure, ordinary cafes and roadside diners. With this connection to everyday life,



Figure 12. OK Cafe, Atlanta, Georgia, opened July, 1987. Mural by Tom Ferguson. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

the art of the New Eclecticism manifests itself in the characteristically genre tradition of painting the work place. At Atlanta's OK Cafe [Figure 12], a waitress (painted on a brick wall but no longer an iconic



Figure 13. Fresco by Paolo Veronese, in Andrea Palladio's Villa Barbero at Maser (c. 1557-8), near Vicenza, Italy. Photo: Robert M. Craig

Madonna) balances a tray in an identifying depiction of the building's ordinary function as a roadside cafe. As with other dual-coded references of Post-Modernism, however, this roadside cafe offers an ironical reference to the history of high art. A short order cook takes a break and stands in a door enframe-ment, waiting for customers, like Jacques Coeur's servants surveying the streets of 15th c. Bourges or perhaps recalling Paolo Veronese's house servant peeking through an open door at Andrea Palladio's Villa



Figure 14. Mural, executed in 1989 for the Blue Moon Diner (now Original Pancake House, Cheshire Bridge Road, Atlanta, Georgia). Photo: Robert M. Craig.

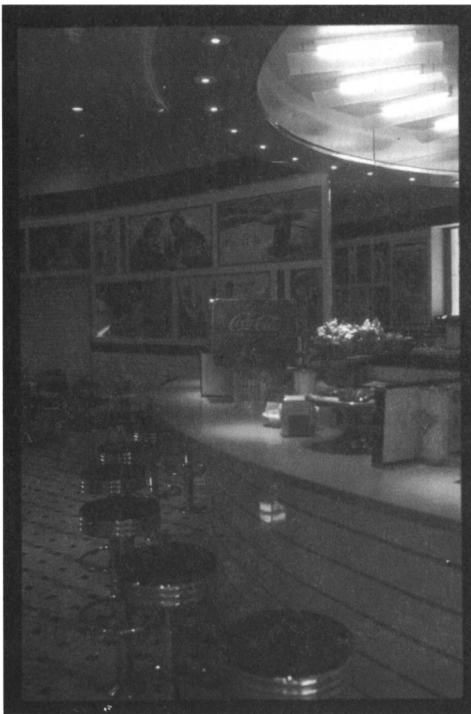


Figure 15. Coca Cola Cafe, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia, opened September, 1994. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Barbero at Maser [Figure 13]. The New Eclecticism smiles quietly at those who notice the witty gesture of dual-coded Post-Modernism.

Several murals painted by Johnny Neptune in 1989 adorn the Blue Moon Diner in Atlanta. Along the counter, on piers frescoed like *Moderne* era stations of the cross, are Deco-enframed representations of contemporary indulgences: ice cream sodas, magazines, and seltzer bottle. The culminating mural [Figure 14] offers a backdrop for a corner booth and depicts counter stools and counter, short-order cook, and waitresses in a self-referential representation of the very diner aesthetic being revived in this neo-

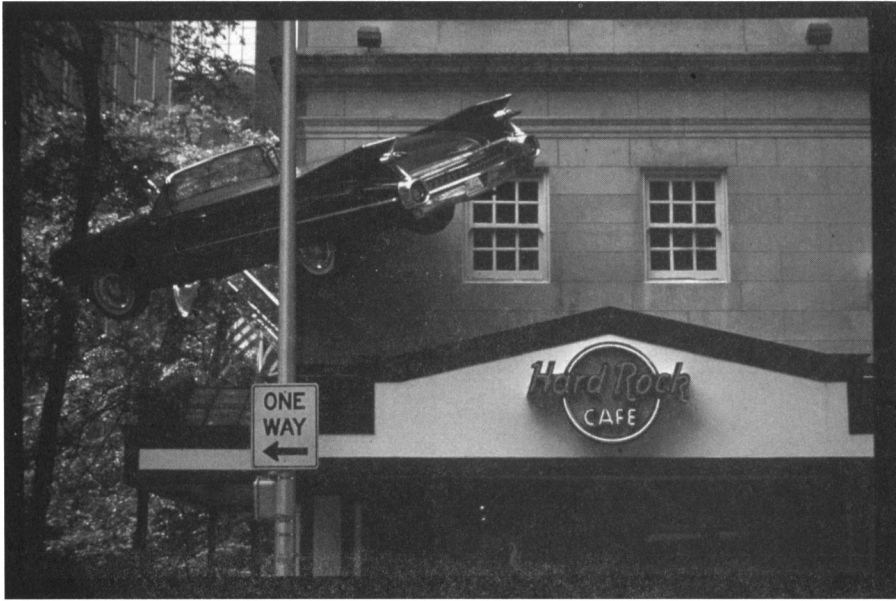


Figure 16. Hard Rock Cafe, [remodelling of 1926-7 J. P. Allen Building], Atlanta, Georgia, 1992. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Moderne interior. Genre painting remains a direct and honest mirror of society and ordinary life. When the Original Pancake House took over the diner, the new owner paid homage to the progenitor of the pancake house chain in Massachusetts [the *original* Original Pancake House]: the mural depicts a roadside diner in the tradition of the streamlined metal railroad dining car.

In Atlanta, nostalgia embraces (second only to *Gone With The Wind* and Civil War mania) a keen interest in Coca Cola memorabilia. The new Atlanta History Center has recently opened its Coca Cola Cafe [Figure 15], a soda fountain variation on the youthful diner and roadside cafe theme. Coca Cola advertisements are mounted on virtually every available interior wall surface, turning these walls, as Coca Cola historically did drug store exterior walls, into advertisement art.

Atlanta's Hard Rock Cafe [Figure 16] treats a Cadillac convertible like a stag's head in a trophy room by hanging the very carcass of the automobile on the building's exterior corner over the main entry. Appearing like the result of a major traffic accident on Peachtree Street, the Cadillac hovers overhead aiming its rocket-fin tail lights in one direction and angled as though ready to be launched into the future as its front wheels turn slightly toward Planet Hollywood across the street. Buckhead's Landmark Diner, transforms the low art diner

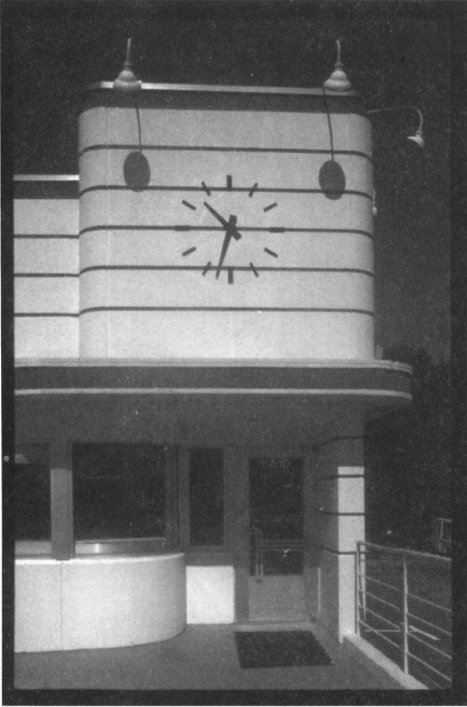


Figure 17. Johnny Rockets Hamburgers, Sandy Springs, Atlanta, Georgia, 1987. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

form to the *haut cuisine* ambiance and pricier menu of uptown, in order to attract its more yuppie Buckhead clientele. And for reincarnated devotees of White Castles and Steak and Shake Restaurants, Johnny Rockets Hamburgers [Figure 17] has built several Atlanta restaurants with period graphics, stark white exteriors, and banks of horizontal windows which light the interior space with the clarity of an Edward Hopper painting. At Johnny Rockets Hamburgers, countertop music boxes, round-topped counter stools, and the ubiquitous collection of condiments suggest a total work of (low) art, clinically clean and typically American in its appeal to Everyman.



Figure 18. Checkers Drive-Thru, 10th Street, Atlanta, Georgia, 1992. Photo: Robert M. Craig.

Drive-thru Kitchenettes with dual *porte cocheres*

In many ways the culmination of this Neo-Moderne trend of the 1990s in the South is evidenced in the roadside drive-thrus designed at the smallest scale. These include 1990s Checkers Restaurants [Figure 18] offering hamburgers, fries, and drinks at almost any suburban crossroads throughout Atlanta. The trend also includes recently-built Sonic Drive-Ins which revive the practice of providing car hops and individual menus sign-posted in the parking bays, features which only Atlanta's renowned Varsity Drive-In (streamlined form, 1940) has consistently offered since it remodeled its more conventional mid-1920s building. A third illustration of the most intimately-scaled, Moderne-packaged, roadside eatery is the new Express line of Krispe Kreme donut shops [Figure 19]. These employ metal sheathing, glass block, metallic green roof, and neon in order to attract passersby with a sweet tooth. The neon sign "Hot Donuts NOW" alerts commuting suburban vans and blue-collar pick up trucks that donuts are fresh out of the deep fat frier and ready for snagging at the drive-thru window. Krispe Kreme's express line is an emerald-capped variant on Checker's fiery red drive-thru; both are merely tiny buildings with two *porte cocheres* and colorful fireworks. Krispe Kreme is further accented by Moderne-derived parallel "lines of speed" extending the length of the long and low building. Checker's prefers fire-engine red and raceway black-and-white checkerboards highlighted by



Figure 19. Krispy Kreme Express model, Lilburn, Georgia (opened June 20, 1994). Photo: Robert M. Craig.

glass blocks and neon trim to attract attention. As any traffic engineer knows, red means stop (in this case stop and buy), and the checkerboard flag means you're a winner if you do. The purpose of these bright metallic and glossy color schemes is to link the buildings aesthetically to the road and to road machines, but the speed-stopping palette is likewise designed to be noticed. The drive-thru allows you to keep your motor running so that no time is wasted and so that soon you are back on the road again.

In the end, these neo-Moderne diners are self-advertising buildings, frequently standing out among comparatively non-descript, over costumed, or aggressively ugly commercial architecture so often found along commuter roads in American suburbia. As reflections of the car culture, these youthful "nineties" buildings are sited in large numbers at key intersections and along major highways of the New South's most progressive city, Atlanta. They revive a modern image which in its own day was machine-inspired, a-historic, and progressive. Barely fifty years old, these Moderne-era models are themselves now historic, and (oxymoron or not), it is now clear that at century's end Atlanta is experiencing a Moderne Revival.

The New Eclecticism of the American roadside, like the referential romanticism of the last century, remains historically based, albeit modern history-inspired, and it feeds on the same associationist marriage of form and function which colored Victorian stylistic pluralism. Neo-Deco's romantic, nostalgic, and youthful spirit, embodying the freedom of the highway, is as much in the spirit of *its* time and a device for conveying an appropriate architectural message in the Post-Modern era, as were revivalistic 19th-century buildings in their own age of associationism.

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Notes

¹ Post-Modern, capitalized, refers to the Post-Modern movement in architecture as early defined in Jencks (1977). Similarly, Modern refers to the Modern Style of architecture, synonymous with Bauhaus Style or International Style, as opposed to a generalized use of the lower case “modern” which, as an adjective, merely means recent, up-to-date, or contemporary. Art Deco is a term historians since the 1960s have used to refer to a distinctive style of architecture, interiors, and decorative arts dating from about 1925 into the 1930s, although contemporaries during the Deco period itself employed the French word and pronunciation, “Moderne.” Moderne is now accepted as applicable to the streamlined phase of Deco-era modernism, and is a shortened term referring to “Streamlined Moderne.” See Craig essay in Jennings, pp. 15-28, as well as Craig, 1995, 15-23.

² Lest the reader mistrust the metaphor, note that one of the most popular images of James Dean, a “movie still” from a scene from *Giant*, shows him in the crucifixion pose: he holds a rifle horizontally along the back of his neck, extended like the arms of a cross behind his shoulders, his own arms outstretched as though hanging from the cross at Calvary.

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This is an early essay which focusses on Atlanta in order to take a more expansive look at “pop” architecture in the modern era. POPular Modern in Atlanta includes the following: Art Deco as the most populist of modern styles of the 1920s and 1930s, John Portman’s hotels and convention centers as middle-class modern, historic preservation as a populist movement which saved the Fox Theatre and Olmsted parks (viewed as the people’s movie palace and the people’s landscape), and Rod Whatley’s “American landscapes” and neo-Moderne buildings as contemporary works of pop imagery and “pop architecture.” The essay is part of an “in depth” issue on Georgia published by the Popular Press.

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_____. "Carnavalesque Buildings," "Post Modernism in London," and "The Carnival: Grotesque and Redeemable," in *Post-Modern Triumphs in London [Architectural Design Profile No. 91]*. London: The Academy Group, Ltd. 1991.

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A Place to Live is a collection of Wolf von Eckardt's "columns" (essays) when he was architectural critic for the *Washington Post*. "Kitsch" takes a rude look at the "styled" architecture of Edward Durrell Stone and Minoru Yamasaki during the 1950s and 1960s and remains a classic statement of architectural kitsch defined as a pseudo art whose pretensions are little disguised by its worthlessness.

ROBERT M. CRAIG is an architectural historian specializing in 19th and 20th century American studies. He has published on widely divergent topics ranging from Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts, Art Deco, and Streamlined Moderne architecture, to John Portman and Atlanta architecture, to Chinese gardens. He is a founding member of the Southeast Chapter, Society of Architectural Historians (SESAH) and serves on its Board of Directors; he has also served on the Boards of Directors of the Nineteenth Century Studies Association (NCSA), the Southeastern College Art Conference (SECAC), the Southeastern American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies (SEASECS), and the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH). A past editor of the scholarly art journal, *SECAC Review*, Craig continues as a member of its editorial board and serves as well as on the Editorial Advisory Board of *Nineteenth Century Studies*. Professor Craig has taught at Georgia Institute of Technology's College of Architecture since 1973.