

National Tobacco Company Building, Napier

Napier's remarkable recovery

Not everyone suffered during the Great Depression. Gerhard Husheer's National Tobacco Company, founded in 1922, was making a profit of £35,000 a year during the 30s, so it had money to rebuild in style after the Napier earthquake. This quake, one of the more calamitous natural disasters of the 20th century, struck on 3 February 1931 with the force of 100 million tonnes of TNT. It killed 256 people and seriously injured over 400. Much of what it failed to flatten burned down in the fires that broke out.

Husheer turned to Louis Hay. He was one of the reconstruction architects who transformed the face of central Napier with the economical, quickly built and new art-deco style. Not that there was anything cheap about this building. The tobacco tycoon sent Hay's first set of plans back with a demand for something fancier. And here it is, an oddly successful blend with art nouveau tendrils tipped with roses adorning an art-deco sunburst. Never mind: the arch in the square is pure Louis Sullivan art deco.

Art deco is now widely appreciated and the fag factory is the poster boy for the 'Newest City on the Earth'. It was not always so. Until a visiting International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) delegation sparked interest in the city's streetscapes, Napier politicians and businesses had shown little interest in preservation. Long known as the Rothmans Building, it has recently been repainted in more authentic colours and been renamed the National Tobacco Company Building. In Bridge Street, Ahuriri, it is open to the public on weekdays. Enjoy the wooden doors, carved by Ruth Nelson of Havelock North, and the elaborate dome.

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Further reading: Robert McGregor, *The Art Deco City*, Art Deco Trust, Napier, 1998; Matthew Wright, *Quake*, Reed Books, Auckland, 2001.

