

# *Transformations in New Caledonian Architecture, 1853-1980: An Overview*

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*The French penal colony of New Caledonia was founded in 1853 on the Australian model. This unique situation within the Pacific islands, coupled with a thriving nickel-mining industry, led to the emergence of a contemporary multicultural society. In New Caledonia, one can still witness the testimonies of an architecture based on French colonial military standards, with the use of a French version of the colonial bungalow, as seen in other areas of influence, such as the Indian ocean and the Caribbean. Also, the proximity of Australia, as well as its similar colonial history, played an important role in New Caledonia's architectural heritage. Later, from the 1920s on, the advent of regionalist and modernist trends in French architecture led to local upgrading of houses and buildings, which account for a rich, mainly Art Deco, architectural legacy. Finally, the emergence of a first generation of local architects in the early 1960s, as well as a mining boom, triggered both the first large-scale development and urban planning, along with the construction of an array of modernist "international style" buildings. This article will focus on the antipodean influence of French architecture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also on how the colonial Francosphere, albeit distant, influenced local innovations and architectural transplants.*

*Keywords: New Caledonia, Oceania, colonial architecture, bungalow, Art Deco, postwar modernism*

Architecture in New Caledonia is not only linked to its recent colonial history. The Kanak, the legitimate owners of the archipelago at the time of European contact, had slowly perfected the art of house building during a process spanning three millennia, from the first Austronesian sightings of the islands to the great round huts which inspired architect Renzo Piano in the construction of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in the capital city of Noumea in 1997.

The second millennium AD witnessed the emergence of the Kanak Cultural Complex, and thus of a vernacular architectural language evidencing great richness. While the round hut is better known, different types of rectangular huts also exist, and one must acknowledge the Kanaks' deep understanding of the relation between habitat, location and customary social structure.<sup>1</sup>

European contact in 1774, followed by further incursions by whalers and sandalwood traders, had a significant impact on the archipelago's population, with the introduction of unknown diseases causing a general demographic collapse within the Kanak community. While these first Europeans did not leave many architectural traces behind, the first remnants of the European influence on New Caledonian architecture are, as for most of Oceania, the religious constructions erected by missionaries, from the 1840s on. Again, as most of these first buildings were made out of perishable materials, they were gradually replaced by lime, stone and brick masonry equivalents in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

This article, which will focus on the architectural legacy of French colonial rule since its installation in 1853, will unfold in two main parts, the first presenting what New Caledonians presently refer to as "colonial architecture" or "colonial style," with strong influences from French military and penal architectures; the second addressing the modernization of New Caledonia's constructions, mainly in the urban context of Noumea, initially between 1925 and 1960, and then since the 1960s, with the emergence of post-war modernism.

## 1 Colonial Architectures, 1853-1925

Mainland New Caledonia was indeed not the first tropical island where France decided to implement a colony. Martinique and Guadeloupe, in the Caribbean, were colonized by the French in 1635, as were, in the Indian Ocean, the islands of Réunion (in 1642) and Mauritius (between 1715 and 1814).

<sup>1</sup> On Kanak hamlets and architecture, see Maurice Leenhardt, *Notes d'ethnologie néo-calédonienne* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1930) and Roger Boulay, *La maison kanak* (Paris: Parenthèses, 1990).

Therefore, constraints linking architecture to warm climate were already well known before the installation of the colony on September 24, 1853. This explains the stylistic links between local construction, and the architecture of other French overseas territories or former colonies.

## 1.1 A Military Heritage

During the first decades of French colonial rule, governors were members of the military (until 1884), and civil servants active in Noumea were employed by the Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies (Ministry of Navy and the Colonies). Members and officers of the Penal Administration were also part of the military. Therefore, the oldest remaining masonry structures of the archipelago bear the marks of defence engineering. General dimensions of the buildings demonstrate the use of the metric system, with founding walls sixty centimetres thick, supporting ones of forty centimetres, interior partitions of ten. The military engineering overseers not only dictated housing formats but also general urban planning, as the city centre of Noumea bears a Hippodamian grid, while the capes and lookouts were requisitioned for the construction of military barracks (fig. 1).

While the prevalence of the military tends, usually, to disappear with the arrival of free settlers and the development of an agropastoral economy, in New Caledonia it was greatly reinforced by the implementation of the extremely powerful



Figure 1. Main military barracks, Noumea, constructed between 1863 and 1878. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.



Figure 2. Main penitentiary commanding officer's residence, Nou Island, Noumea, constructed in 1882. *Left and top right.* (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault. *Bottom right.* Image courtesy of *Archives nationales de l'outre-mer*, 8Fi 51N021.

Penal Administration in 1864.<sup>2</sup> The consequential arrival of more than 21,000 transported convicts (until 1897) made the need for military surveillance of the archipelago important, and the construction undertaken by penal convicts perpetuated an aesthetic based on authority, rigour, simplicity and standardisation. These constructions (military barracks, prisons, hospitals, administration buildings, official residences) are scattered throughout the city centre of Noumea and also across the mainland, where secondary penal facilities were gradually founded. These constructions, built on similar lines, made the city's public architecture coherent; because they were visible to free settlers, they also impacted, with their sobriety, the design of private dwellings (fig. 2).

More specifically, official residences feature characteristics typical of the nineteenth-century colonial bungalow, with elevated flooring, louvered shutters, surrounding verandas and corrugated iron roofs (fig. 3). They also bear classical French features, such as French doors, adjoining *en enfilade* rooms, especially for the more formal elements. This tendency to a classical aesthetic lurking behind the technical adaptation to the tropics is a well-known aspect of colonial architecture, which materialises the political ambition of the state: in the New Caledonian case, the goal was to create a little *France Australe* through the “rehabilitation” of convicts, the “civilisation” of the native population, and by means of agricultural and

<sup>2</sup> Louis-José Barbaçon, *L'Archipel des forçats: histoire du bagne de Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1863-1931* (Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2003).



Figure 3. Examples of the urban colonial bungalow or *maison coloniale*, Noumea. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.

mine “production.”<sup>3</sup> In many ways, this replicated the colonialist idea of “transforming a newly created society into its republican ideal.”<sup>4</sup>

For these reasons, New Caledonian colonial architecture, whether public or private, may seem less ornate than its other island counterparts; houses in the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean are indeed much more heavily decorated. Nevertheless, borrowings are evident, given the global formal similarities—a factor that can be linked to the existence of a colonial Francosphere, with free settlers coming from Réunion to boost the sugar cane economy from the 1870s, or penal administrators who had previously worked in French Guyana retiring to New Caledonia. Thus, the presence of Australian free settlers since the late 1850s and important economic links with Australia also explain similarities in private colonial architecture with, for instance, the rural houses of Queensland.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 The New Caledonian House: *Case créole* or *maison coloniale* ?

In New Caledonian French, private houses of colonial style are usually referred to as *maisons coloniales*, or “colonial houses.”

3 *La France Australe* (“austral France”) was also the name of the main daily newspaper in New Caledonia until 1979, while “Réhabiliter, civiliser, produire” was the official motto of New Caledonia chosen by Governor Charles Guillain in the 1860s.

4 Arnaud Le Brusq and Léonard De Selva, *Viêt Nam: À travers l'architecture coloniale* (Paris: les éditions de l'Amateur, 2011), 244.

5 Balwant Saini and Ray Joyce, *The Australian House: Homes of the Tropical North* (Sydney: Landsdowne Press, 1982).

However, in the rest of the French-speaking colonial or post-colonial world, the generic term designating the colonial bungalow is *case créole*, meaning “Creole hut.” The word *maison* (similar to the English “mansion”) is usually restricted to the large two-storey plantation houses (along with their ornamental garden and water basin, dependencies, access road, large domain, etc.). *Case créole*, on the other hand, refers to the smaller single-storey houses built in the colonial cities, with floorplans of 100 square metres or less, and made of clapboard walls. In many ways, this category corresponds to the classic New Caledonian *maison coloniale*, while the larger plantation homes are virtually absent from the archipelago. Why, then, was the term *case créole* never used to describe these houses locally?

Firstly, in French the word *créole* describes someone of European origin (fully or partly) and born in the islands. Therefore, New Caledonia-born descendants of settlers could have used the term to describe themselves, which is something the French military staff did during World War One, when New Caledonian soldiers were placed in colonial battalions along with other Creoles, from Réunion, Martinique or Guadeloupe.<sup>6</sup> Whether their New Caledonian origin carried the burden of penal transportation, causing New Caledonian soldiers to be spurned by their peers, or whether they chose to refuse the term because they did not want to be assimilated with descendants of enslavers, one might never know.

Second, the word *case*, or “hut” is also problematic for it was used in the nineteenth century to describe three types of accommodation: the large buildings that were used as dormitories on the main penitentiary on Nou island, known as *cases communes*; the provisory houses, mostly of earth walls and thatch roofs, built by the liberated convicts, known as *cases de libérés*; and the traditional Kanak hut.

Obviously, given the complex relations between the settler population and the Kanaks, the use of the word to describe a European’s house became impossible, even more so within the penal context. However, *case créole* is to be preferred to *maison coloniale* to describe these houses, despite the common linguistic use. Typologically, they are archetypal colonial bungalows and take part in a vast shared heritage with the rest of the colonial/postcolonial world. Sociologically, New Caledonian descendants of settlers (whether penal or free) are Creoles, even if the term can cause (or has caused) controversy. Furthermore, clearing away the *coloniale* element transforms the perception of these archaeological remains. They change from being the traces of an era bearing atrocities and which should be forgotten, to being

6 Sylvette Boubin-Boyer gave detailed accounts of the use of the term *créole* during World War One. Sylvette Boubin-Boyer, *De la Première Guerre mondiale en Océanie. La guerre de tous les Calédoniens* (PhD diss., Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 2001), 309.

testimonies of creolisation, and therefore of entrenchment and racial or cultural mixing, this a reality in contemporary New Caledonia.

### 1.3 Houses in the Bush

Rural examples of the New Caledonian *case créole* are a scarce and fragile heritage. The harsh living conditions and the lower durability of the coarse materials (like cob) have resulted in a drastic decrease in their numbers over the past decades. The examples still present display similar characteristics to the urban bungalows, yet some particularities can be put forth: while the general roof woodwork follows the height of Noumea houses, the verandas tend to be wider, which gives these houses a flatter appearance; and they often lack the ornaments of city houses. We have already stated that New Caledonian colonial houses are less ornate than their tropical counterparts, yet bush houses are even more devoid of ornamentation (i.e. lacking coloured glass panels, metal roof finials, decorative timber, delicate metal awnings, etc.). Finally, they are integrated in their natural landscape. Borrowings from traditional Kanak knowledge and landscaping traditions can be found in these works. Knowledge of construction materials, especially tree species suitable for certain types of woodwork were passed on to the first settlers.



Figure 4. La Résidence, near Moindou village, central New Caledonia, constructed in 1875. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.

More importantly, houses are placed in accordance with their topography, similarly to the main hut of a Kanak hamlet, at the end of an alley of sacred trees like endemic pines (*Araucaria columnaris*, fig. 4).

Following this train of thought, it is notable that after the land redistribution of the 1990s, the colonial properties of the east coast of mainland New Caledonia were given back to Kanak tribes, the traditional and rightful owners of the land. While some bungalows have been burnt down, in a way closing the colonial parentheses, most of them are now reoccupied by Kanak chiefs. This further testifies for the aesthetic/technical links between the large bush houses and the vernacular hut. Such borrowings within colonial architecture are already well documented.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, if colonial architecture is in many ways a transplant of a European standard (or of an already tropicalised European standard, in this case), one must not forget that as with any human technical creation, a piece of architecture falls into its timeframe (because it resembles what is made elsewhere at the same time), location (by the environment to which it adapts), and social context (thus using knowledge from different protagonists, settlers from all parts of France, in this case, and Kanaks).

<sup>7</sup> Edward F. Crain, *Historic Architecture in the Caribbean Islands* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), 59. For links between the elevated flooring of the colonial bungalow and the *ajoupa*, an indigenous elevated wooden hut of the Lesser Antilles, see Lawrence Waldron, "Pre-Columbian Art of Trinidad and Tobago," in *Season of Renewal: Celebrating 50 Years of Independence and Caribbean Partnership*, ed. Andy Jacob (Newtown: Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012), 18.

## 2 Architectures of Modernity, 1925-1980

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed an important demographic growth for the New Caledonian colony. Concurring factors of economic prosperity (an exuberant agricultural production, thriving nickel mining and a positive world economy in the 1920s) allowed for a modernisation of the archipelago, and of course of its main beneficiary, the city of Noumea. Furthermore, the arrival of American military forces and Anzacs in 1942 extended this phase of prosperity and modernisation. Thus the period from the early 1920s to the late 1940s created a most favourable context for the emergence of new architectural styles, obviously borrowed from the then rapidly-changing Western World. In New Caledonia, these influences come down to three main categories, the regionalist trend, the Art Deco aesthetic, and post-war modernism.

### 2.1 Regionalist Architectures

From the dawn of the modernist trend in 1925 at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris, the Art Deco aesthetic took the world by storm. Yet, within France, some



Figure 5. Example of a large “regionalist” mansion by Jules Mary, built ca. 1945, Noumea. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.

architects were not in favour of such a dehumanised style. It was thought as lacking identity, devoid of meaning and rootedness. Therefore, in opposition to Art Deco emerged a tradition in favour of the modernisation of the regional particularities found in French provincial architectural traditions, hence the *néo-normand*, *néo-alsacien*, *néo-provençal*, *néo-basque* styles which can be grouped under the term *architecture régionaliste*.<sup>8</sup> The dissemination of these styles throughout the entire French colonial empire can be witnessed in the large mansions of Dalat city, Vietnam, or within the French concession of Shanghai, for instance.<sup>9</sup> In New Caledonia, French contractors Pierre Gaüzère, Georges Derquennes and, especially, Jules Mary were important in their popularisation. Mary became popular, designing and constructing large two and three-storey mansions for the local *bourgeoisie*, with stone masonry substructures, moulded concrete imitating the half-timbering of Normand and Basque traditional architectures. An eclectic personality, Mary also created buildings of radical Art Deco style, or of seemingly contradictory influences, sharing both regionalist and Art Deco characteristics (fig. 5).

Arguably, anywhere in the world, any regional creation of a new housing design, if popular and accepted, eventually becomes a new regionalist trend. Thus, in the first half of the twentieth century New Caledonia, France was not the only source of formal transfers. Through nearby Australia, the California bungalow, inherited from across the Pacific, was also introduced, with very minor transformations.<sup>10</sup> During the previous period,

8 Jean-Claude Vigato, *L'architecture régionaliste. France 1890-1950* (Paris: Institut Français d'Architecture, Norma éditions, 1994).

9 Le Brusq and De Selva, *Viêt Nam*, 115-16. See also Spencer Dodington and Charles Lagrange, *Shanghai's Art Deco Master: Paul Veyssière's Architecture in the French Concession* (Hong Kong: Earnshaw Press, 2014), 97.

10 Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds, *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, rev. ed. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1994), 206.

strong links existed between rural Queensland houses and Noumean *cases creoles*; in the twentieth century, aesthetic links between New Caledonia and Australia were clearly maintained.

## 2.2 The Art Deco Trend

Paradoxically, it is the modifiable aspect of the colonial bungalow that allowed the dawn of the Art Deco aesthetic. These basic and small scale constructions were intrinsically evolutive. They could have their façade replaced, sometimes with concrete masonry masking the house, making it look like a completely different construction. These Art deco *façades-écrans*, applied to clapboard houses from the turn of the twentieth century, are an interesting take on architectural modernisation, and their examples in New Caledonia form an independent family. These renovations or embellishments paved the way for houses made entirely of concrete masonry, constructed by a new generation of architect-contractors.

Loosening its links with the classical language of architecture, the Art Deco movement was aimed at translating modernity, futurism and progress. Thus, and ever since, architecture is no more exclusively a perpetuation of tradition but rather

Figure 6. Examples of Art Deco façades, Noumea, including works by Jules Mary (top row, centre) and Martin Böttcher (top row, left and right, bottom row, centre), 1945-50. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.



the creation of a new form, the shape of which must follow function. Architects and designers are therefore no longer solely “ornamental creators” but rather “inventors of structures.”<sup>11</sup>

The dawn of Art Deco architecture in New Caledonia (fig. 6) was reduced to the private sphere. At a time when the colonial administration was still using the vast constructions built half a century earlier by convicts, the private housing market was on the rise thanks to a demographic increase, an economic boom, and the introduction of the automobile, which allowed Noumea’s hilly surroundings (Orphelinat, Mont Coffyn and parts of the Vallée des Colons) to be urbanised.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, the arrival in the late 1920s of several contractors (amongst whom the Czechoslovakians Martin Böttcher and Henri Reita) prompted an era of Art Deco construction influenced by the then-booming European markets. Although not formally trained as architects, they were the major contributors to New Caledonia’s Art Deco heritage, along with Australian Alexander Jamieson and Frenchman Pierre Raighasse. Böttcher (1904-84) alone, constructed no less than 34 private houses or buildings in Noumea over a 30-year career, 29 of which are still standing today (fig. 7). Born in Spišská Nová Ves (present-day Slovakia), he deserves to be considered as the equivalent of Paul Veysseyre in the architecture of Shanghai’s French Concession, or Ali Tur in the architecture of Guadeloupe.<sup>13</sup>

Typologically, the new houses produced are more complex than their older Creole equivalents. Of course, the sole use of concrete replaces the older mixed-means Creole bungalows.

11 Michèle Robin-Clerc, *Guadeloupe, années 30. Ali Tur, l’architecte d’une reconstruction* (Paris: Somogy/Région Guadeloupe, 2015), 96.

12 Christiane Terrier and Véronique Defrance (eds.), *Nouméa de 1854 à nos jours* (Nouméa: Ville de Nouméa éditions, 2012), 194.

13 Ali Tur (1889-1977) was commissioned to reconstruct Guadeloupe after the island was devastated by a hurricane in September 1928. Between 1929 and 1937, he supervised the construction of over 100 buildings of modernist style. See Robin-Clerc, *Guadeloupe*.



Figure 7: Example of a small city centre Art Deco house by Martin Böttcher, Noumea, 1945. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.



Figure 8: Modernist house in Noumea by French architect Pierre Raighasse, 1956. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.

The advantages of reinforced concrete allow the construction of bow-windows, porches, cantilevered structures, and the greater minerality of the façades can be counterbalanced by the application of decorative motifs in moulded concrete (fig. 8).

Inside, comfort and practicality are key elements; outdoor food preparation areas are abandoned in favour of indoor kitchens. We also see the architects taking advantage of Noumea's hilly suburbs to create built-in garages and basement laundries, while the main reception and living quarters are located on the first floor. This allows for better views, and the creation of interesting moulded concrete exterior stairways leading to the house's main entry. Modern roofing is made invisible by the use of single sloping and the creation of decorative parapets, which give more importance to the façade and its elements. The tendency to indulge into the modernity of a globalised world is very clear.

Notably, the rare elements of colonial architecture to survive in this phase are the louvered shutters, still in use on some

windows, and some verandas supported by concrete columns and pillars, showing great diversity.

Lastly, the major difference between the New Caledonian house of the Art Deco period and the colonial bungalow is the creation of clearer frontiers between inner and outer space. In Creole houses, French doors and verandas created intermediate spaces and constant airflow, but temperature regulation in concrete houses was dealt with in a different way. Not only do the lower roofs of concrete houses allow less ventilation, but the insulation qualities of concrete are poorer than timber. In these new houses, the veranda or porch is limited, windows are diminished in both number and size. If the colonial houses were insulated through open spaces and airflow, insulation is here provided by isolating the house from the warm exterior, and by providing new technical means: concrete dual walls separated by air, isolating the inner wall from the exterior, high ceilings, and flooring made of new materials such as granite or cement tiles, with minimal incursion of exterior air during the warm hours of the day, creating an entirely different way of life.

### 2.3 A Particular Element of the Art Deco Trend: Art Deco Furniture

If the first settlers coming to New Caledonia brought their own furniture with them, it is quite obvious that they rapidly needed its replacement. Due to the local weather conditions, veneered pieces, for instance, very common in nineteenth-century French furniture, do not resist the humidity of the tropics—a fact well documented for the whole colonial world.<sup>14</sup>

14 Michael Connors, *French Island Elegance* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006), 163; and Philip Sturm, *West Indian Antique Furniture of the Lesser Antilles, 1740-1940* (Woodbridge: The Antique Collectors Club, 2007), 37.



Figure 9: Art Deco style interior, with club armchairs and corresponding “cosy-corner” type sofa, Noumea. (Photographs by Fabienne Videault.) Louis Lagarde and Fabienne Videault, *Architectures Calédoniennes, 1853-1960* (2018). Reproduced with permission by Fabienne Videault.

At first, the penal population was once again put to work to provide new nineteenth-century French-style furniture from locally-harvested, climate resistant timbers.<sup>15</sup> After the convict period, the modernisation of houses caused a renewal of the local furniture market. The new interiors required adjusted furnishings, and Noumean architect-contractors would soon team up with cabinetmakers to provide new, fully furnished houses to the city's *bourgeois* clientele (fig. 9).

15 Jean Carol, *Le Bagne* (Paris: Ollendorf, 1903), 66-68.

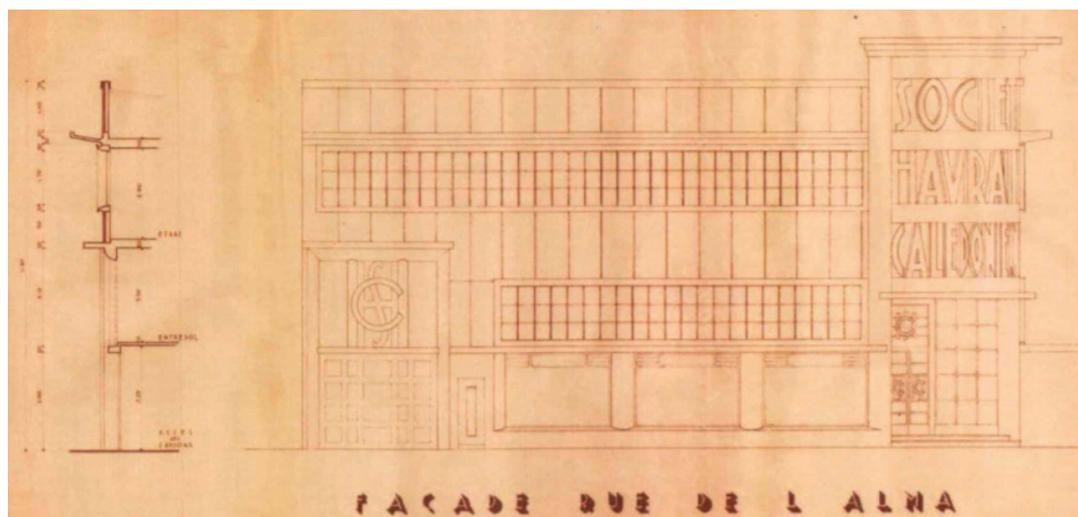
High and narrow pieces such as single-door *armoires*, two-storey dressers, and poster beds disappear in favour of larger, flatter pieces, such as sideboards and chests of drawers. New types of furniture also appear, thus mixing functions: innovative dressing tables, club armchairs, duchesses, cosy-corners, liquor/book cabinets, beds with integrated bedside tables, etc.

The exuberance of ornamentation which was the decorative characteristic of both late nineteenth-century furniture and the Art Nouveau style is here replaced by formal simplicity and functionality. As the façades of Creole houses were replaced by solemn and mineral constructions, house furnishings followed the same path, a modernising trend where function gradually takes precedence over decoration.

## 2.4 Post-war Modernism

Taking a different path from Europe, New Caledonia not only allowed the Art Deco aesthetic to survive but to thrive, well into the 1950s. The streamline aesthetics of the early post-war era are clearly visible in some of Noumea's then tallest buildings

Figure 10. South façade of the *Société Havraise Calédonienne* (SHC) commercial building, by Pierre Raighasse, 1949-51, Noumea. Courtesy of Noumea City Archives.



(Ventrillon building, by Alexander Jamieson, 1948-50; and SHC building, by Pierre Raighasse, 1949-51, for instance, fig. 10).

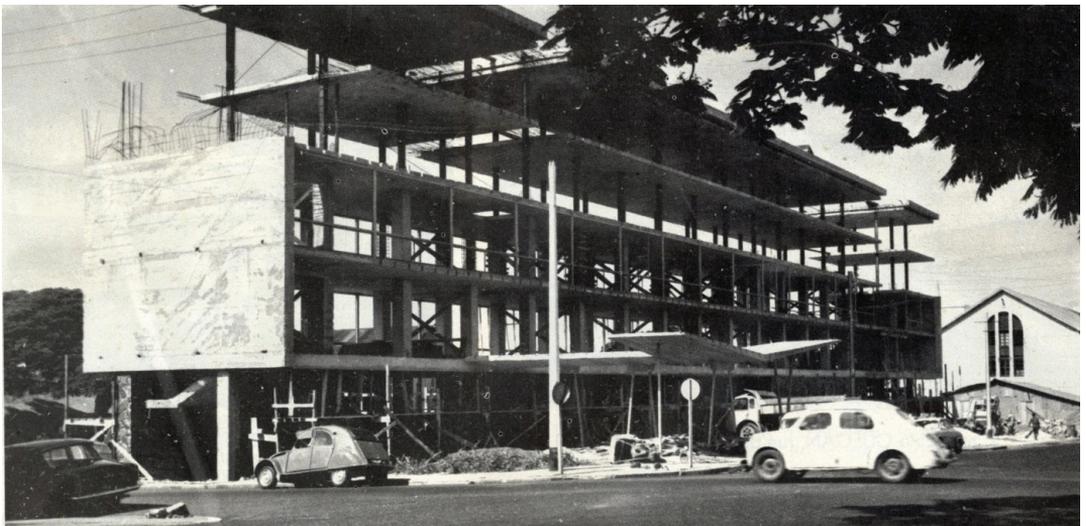
Therefore, it is only when an important modernisation of Noumea’s infrastructure was needed that new architectural styles were introduced into an otherwise slow-paced colony. This time finally arrived in the early 1960s, when it was decided that Noumea would host the 1966 Pacific Games. Thus, the construction of the Anse Vata multisport complex and Olympic pool, and the Noumea stadium, allowed the first generation of New Caledonia-born (and French-trained) architects to display their talent and love of modernity. Jacques Rampal, who had accomplished his final training in Le Corbusier’s company, and Gabriel Cayrol, an admirer of Richard Neutra and Frank Lloyd Wright, were the main contributors to the development of these works.<sup>16</sup>

Quickly following the Pacific Games, a very important nickel boom generated previously unthought of income for the territory, which paved the way for massive immigration from France and from the French-speaking Pacific. With an artificially elevated population and sudden economic prosperity, New Caledonia was primed to enter a radically renewed architectural paradigm.

Buildings like the Jacques Iekawé building (Gabriel Cayrol and Jules Mary, 1964, fig. 11), the New Caledonia Museum (Pierre Raighasse, 1967), the Noumea Post Office (René Lecourt and Gilbert Allègre, 1973), the Noumea Town Hall (Georges Buzzi and Jacques Rampal, 1979), all display evident characteristics of the “international style,” with their prismatic forms and the

16 On Jacques Rampal, see Patrick O’Reilly, *Calédoniens, répertoire bio-bibliographique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris: Société des Océanistes, 1980), 332. On the rise of post-war modernism in Noumea, and particularly the role of Gabriel Cayrol, see Jennifer Taylor and James Conner, *Architecture in the South Pacific: An Ocean of Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), specifically 44-51 and 57-61.

Figure 11. “Jacques Iekawé” building, by Gabriel Cayrol and Jules Mary, here under construction in 1963, Noumea. Courtesy of Noumea City Museum collection.



display of selected features of their structural elements. These key buildings, still preserved today, act as a chronological marker of an era.

## Conclusion

These latter constructions were finalised in the late 1970s in a decolonisation context within Melanesia, with Fiji gaining independence in 1970, Papua New Guinea in 1975 and Vanuatu in 1980.

Because of its status as a settlement colony and the demographic imbalance not favouring the indigenous Kanak population, independence by referendum was not possible in New Caledonia. The 1980s thus witnessed a period of political instability and near-civil war. It was only after many deaths, including that of charismatic pro-independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1989) that the situation began to stabilise, with a progressive decolonisation following more and more autonomy being granted by the French State.

All the architectural productions I have put forward were created by or for settlers or settlers' descendants. While their architectural qualities are certainly present, their heritage status, because of New Caledonia's difficult colonial history, remains a debatable question. Heritage is, by nature, a matter of choice, for no one can force onto someone else the acceptance of any architectural piece as their patrimony. Yet education and contextualisation can contribute to recognition, which, in turn, can lead to appropriation by communities *a priori* unconcerned with this part of New Caledonia's recent history. At a time where New Caledonia, as a future country, is searching the means of its "shared destiny," this is, partially at least, the aim of this paper.<sup>17</sup>

17 *Communauté de destin*, or "shared destiny," is the idealised future at the basis of the Noumea Agreement, signed in May 1998 between pro-independence and anti-independence political representatives, settling for a progressive decolonisation of the archipelago through extended autonomy within the French Republic, a process resuming in 2022 at the latest.