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# Art Deco Standard Schools in Rio Grande do Sul: The Relationship Between Architecture, Education, and Politics<sup>1</sup>

## ESCOLAS PADRÃO ART DÉCO NO RIO GRANDE DO SUL: RELAÇÃO ENTRE ARQUITETURA, EDUCAÇÃO E POLÍTICA

## ESCUELAS ESTÁNDAR ART DECO EN RIO GRANDE DO SUL: RELACIÓN ENTRE ARQUITECTURA, EDUCACIÓN Y POLÍTICA



**Figure 0** Assis Brasil School.  
Source: Authors' collection (2020).

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## RESUMO

O projeto para escolas de arquitetura padrão no estilo Art Déco, construídas entre as décadas de 1930 e 1940 no estado do Rio Grande do Sul, no Brasil, pretendia, a partir das características do ambiente construído, transmitir à população os ideais do governo autoritário de Getúlio Vargas durante o período do Estado Novo. Atendendo às demandas arquitetônicas, políticas e educacionais, os aspectos formais e funcionais dessas instituições de ensino, tencionavam controlar o comportamento dos estudantes, enaltecer o poder do Estado e corresponder a um símbolo de progresso e ordem. Por meio de análise bibliográfica, documental e observação do ambiente construído, com estudo de caso realizado no Instituto Estadual de Educação Assis Brasil, localizado, no Sul do Brasil, na cidade de Pelotas/RS, esse trabalho tem o objetivo de identificar como as escolas padrão *Art Déco* serviram como instrumento ideológico do Estado. Mediante esta análise, observou-se que o prédio escolar, as práticas políticas e os métodos pedagógicos, de maneira conjunta, agruparam e direcionaram os estudantes a um modelo ideal proposto pelo Estado.

**Palavras-chave:** art déco. arquitetura escolar. arquitetura moderna. política cultural. nacionalismo.

## RESUMEN

El proyecto de escuelas de arquitectura estándar en estilo Art Deco, construidas entre las décadas de 1930 y 1940 en el estado de Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil, pretendía, a partir de las características del entorno construido, transmitir los ideales de lo gobierno autoritario de Getúlio Vargas durante el período del Estado Novo. Dadas las exigencias arquitectónicas, políticas y educativas, los aspectos formales y funcionales de estas instituciones ellas estaban destinadas a controlar el comportamiento de los estudiantes, exaltar el poder del Estado, correspondiente a un símbolo de progreso y orden. A través del análisis bibliográfico, documental y observación del ambiente construido, con un estudio de caso realizado en el Instituto Estadual de Educação Assis Brasil, ubicado en el sur de Brasil, en la ciudad de Pelotas/RS, esta obra tiene el objetivo de identificar cómo las escuelas estándar Art Deco sirvieron como instrumento ideológico del Estado. A través de esto análisis, se observó que la construcción escolar, las prácticas políticas y los métodos pedagógicos, integrados, agruparon y orientaron a los estudiantes hacia un modelo ideal propuesto por el Estado.

**Palabras clave:** art deco. arquitectura escolar. arquitectura moderna. política cultural. nacionalismo.

## ABSTRACT

The project of schools built following Art Deco standards, which were built between the 1930s and 1940s in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, intended, starting from the characteristics of the built environment, to transmit the ideals of the authoritarian government of Getúlio Vargas, during the New State (*Estado Novo*) period. Given architectural, political, and educational requirements, the formal and functional aspects of these establishments focused on controlling student behavior and exalting State power, as a symbol of progress and order. The purpose of this work is to identify how the schools built following the Art Deco standards acted as an ideological instrument of the State, through bibliographical and document analysis, and an observation of the built environment, together with a case study made at the Assis State Education Institute, Brazil, located in the south of the country in the city of Pelotas/RS. Through this analysis, it was seen that the integrated school construction, political practices, and teaching methods, grouped and guided students towards a State-proposed ideal model.

**Keywords:** art deco, school architecture, modern architecture, culture policies, nationalism.

## INTRODUCTION

The standard schools<sup>2</sup> built following the *Art Deco* style of architecture in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, designed by engineer João Baptista Pianca during the 1940s, were thought of in a historical context marked by the policy of nationalization of immigrants, by the insertion of the New School, or *Escola Nova*, teaching method, and by new construction techniques that led to the rationalization of buildings, using reinforced concrete. These buildings acted to shape students, promoting a homogenization of society, and reinforcing patriotism (Cabral, 2020).

In the state of Rio Grande do Sul, from the political frictions that preceded World War II, nationalization measures were proposed that stipulated regulations to the school environment, such as the prohibition of using foreign languages and the construction of new buildings for teaching (Werle, 2014). At the same time, the new school pedagogical method<sup>3</sup>, proposed changes in the layout needs of school institutions, adding spaces such as an auditorium, entrance hall, and library, to provide training based on social relations (Oliveira, 2007).

In Brazil, the *Art Deco* language became a symbol of progress, the pure forms - with the use of straight lines referenced in the movement of airplanes, ships, and cars – marked the authoritarian government of Getúlio Vargas during the New State, or *Estado Novo*, period (Segawa, 1997; Manzo, 2010). The hygienist parameters, in force at that time, led schools to introduce spaces for medical and dental care, where items that allowed good ventilation and lighting for classrooms were valued (Viana, 2011; Alves, 2011).

The Vargas government, in the *Estado Novo* period (1937-1945), followed the temporal, political, and ideological way of other authoritarian European regimes that used architecture to consolidate a political image. The influences of German Nazism and Italian Fascism were used to restructure the country's educational system, as seen in the speeches of the Minister of Education and the President of the Republic of the time (Ribeiro, 1991). Vargas also expressed support for nazi-fascism between 1934 and 1937, and through the progress and monumentality of the constructions the power of his government was transmitted (Ribeiro, 1991; Chaves, 2008).

In the state of São Paulo, in the Southeast region of Brazil, institutional buildings, with an *Art Deco* language, built between 1930 and 1945, served as government propaganda, forming part of a new era of Brazilian administration. As Oliveira (2008) outlines, buildings with fascist architectural properties were built throughout Brazil, for cinemas, radio stations, and theaters, linking monumentality and progress to the building. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, 11 public *Art Deco* buildings, with imposing characteristics, using guidelines already used by political regimes, communicated the authority of the regime (Manzo, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The standard schools emerged through the application of standardized projects, which were replicated in an identical or similar way in different regions of the country. The standard design, despite not considering cultural and climatic issues, was used with the intention of optimizing the design and construction process, being widely applied in Brazil for public institutions.

<sup>3</sup> The *Escola Nova* teaching method was applied in Brazil by the Government of Getúlio Vargas, to reformulate teaching, providing accessibility to school and education (Valdemarin, 2010).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, educational institutions, as part of a political instrument of institutional and educational representation, promoted research by intertwining politics and school architecture as a disciplinary medium. According to Espinoza (2017), public education buildings in Argentina are part of a design tradition established between 1884 and 1910, related to the association between school architecture and public policies. According to Ramírez (2017), the typology adopted in Public School projects in Colombia was influenced by ideological issues of the government and the pedagogical method.

In this way, the rules set out for educational institutions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which followed a rigid outline of schedules, curricula, and grades, had the purpose of controlling and indoctrinating students, consolidating school facilities as tools of social control. Considering that school architecture materializes the political and pedagogical discourse in force in its layout (Frago & Escolano, 2001), the purpose of this article is to identify how standard *Art Deco* schools acted as an ideological instrument of the State. Within the exploratory research, a case study was conducted in a building of the Instituto Estadual de Educação Assis Brasil (Assis Brazil State Education Institute), located in Pelotas/RS, in the southern region of Brazil, using the following methodology: Bibliographic review, document analysis, and observation of the built environment.

The literature review was based on references that link school architecture and state ideology. The document analysis was based on the data presented in Cabral (2020), as well as little-known documents from the collection of the Assis Brasil State Education Institute (Instituto Estadual de Educação Assis Brasil) and others provided by the Secretariat of Public Works of Rio Grande do Sul, with original scanned or photographed architectural projects from the 1940s. The observation was done following the work of Sommer & Sommer (2002), seeking behavioral signs in a non-intrusive manner, that were recorded in photographs. The analysis of the data collected is qualitative, following the content analysis of Bardin (1977). The following were examined: the positioning of the rooms in the floor plan, their dimensions, the presence of furniture, and comparisons between internal and external areas.

The Assis Brasil State Education Institute, in the city of Pelotas, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was chosen as a case study, because within the standard *Art Deco* school design it is classified as the largest project, built in the 1940s, and one that has some of its historic material preserved. This article is based on other research regarding the standard *Art Deco* schools of Rio Grande do Sul, addressing a specific view that has not yet been addressed in other texts. Relevance is placed on standard *Art Deco* schools in Rio Grande do Sul regarding identification and documentation and the tangible and intangible heritage (Cabral, Cordeiro, Oliveira, 2020; Cabral & Oliveira, 2018). Thus, this article will address these schools as an instrument of state control.

## METHODOLOGY

## The influence of school space

Public buildings, such as schools, are thought of to meet community needs, and at the same time to mark political management, showing power and regulation (Alves, 1998; Kowaltowski, 2013). The use of the school buildings, related to political, ideological, social, educational, and cultural issues, can guide the behavior of people who experience it through the pedagogical method, organization, forms, and dimensions of the construction. Education should normalize, standardize, and establish a love for the motherland and a profession, addressing this ideologically. "Education produces producers, produces consumers, and at the same time standardizes, classifies, divides, imposes rules, and sets the limit of the pathological" (Fourquet & Murard, 1978, p. 118).

Educational institutions adopted methods of control and power that presented specific aspects depending on their temporal, geographical, and cultural location. The features of these methods, which were taken on in different periods, can be identified in tangible and intangible symbols that make up the school culture. The raising of flags, the singing of the national anthem, gestures, and greetings demonstrate the condition of respect and are part of a ritual (Escolano, 2017).

The layout of spaces is linked to a regulated system of order and positioning, continuous movement, separation into small groups, and visual control. Disciplinary conditioning can be understood as a means to establish authority and power to shape society. The school becomes a "machine for teaching, but also for overseeing, for hierarchizing, and for rewarding" (Foucault, 2018, pg. 144).

The school building has an educational role and, through codes, can influence the behavior of individuals. Public schools, in addition to meeting pedagogical needs, act to standardize behavior through collective meanings, responding to the ideals of the State. The internal arrangement of spaces and the delimitation of schedules are instruments of control and coercion. For students, teachers are people who demand respect and authority (Escolano, 2017). The pedagogical method, as one of these tools, does not favor students' critical thinking. In this way, in this "distorted vision of education, there is no creativity, no transformation, and no knowledge" (Freire, 2021, p. 81).

The ceremonies that take place in teaching environments are transformed into messages that influence human behavior. This ritualistic conformity in the students' actions makes their standardization visible which, for a moment, makes them equal, as a piece that is only complete when attached to the whole (Escolano, 2017). The actions that influence the behavior of the school community, as something camouflaged, not evident, can be referred to as a hidden curriculum (Alves, 1998).

In this way, based on the historiographical documentation and understanding that the school, as an architectural piece, has tangible and intangible meanings, which are rooted both in the inside and outside of the building, reiterating the purpose of this work, intended to identify, through the analysis of some spaces, in particular the case study of the Assis Brazil I.E.E: building, how the standard *Art Deco* schools acted as an ideological instrument of the State.

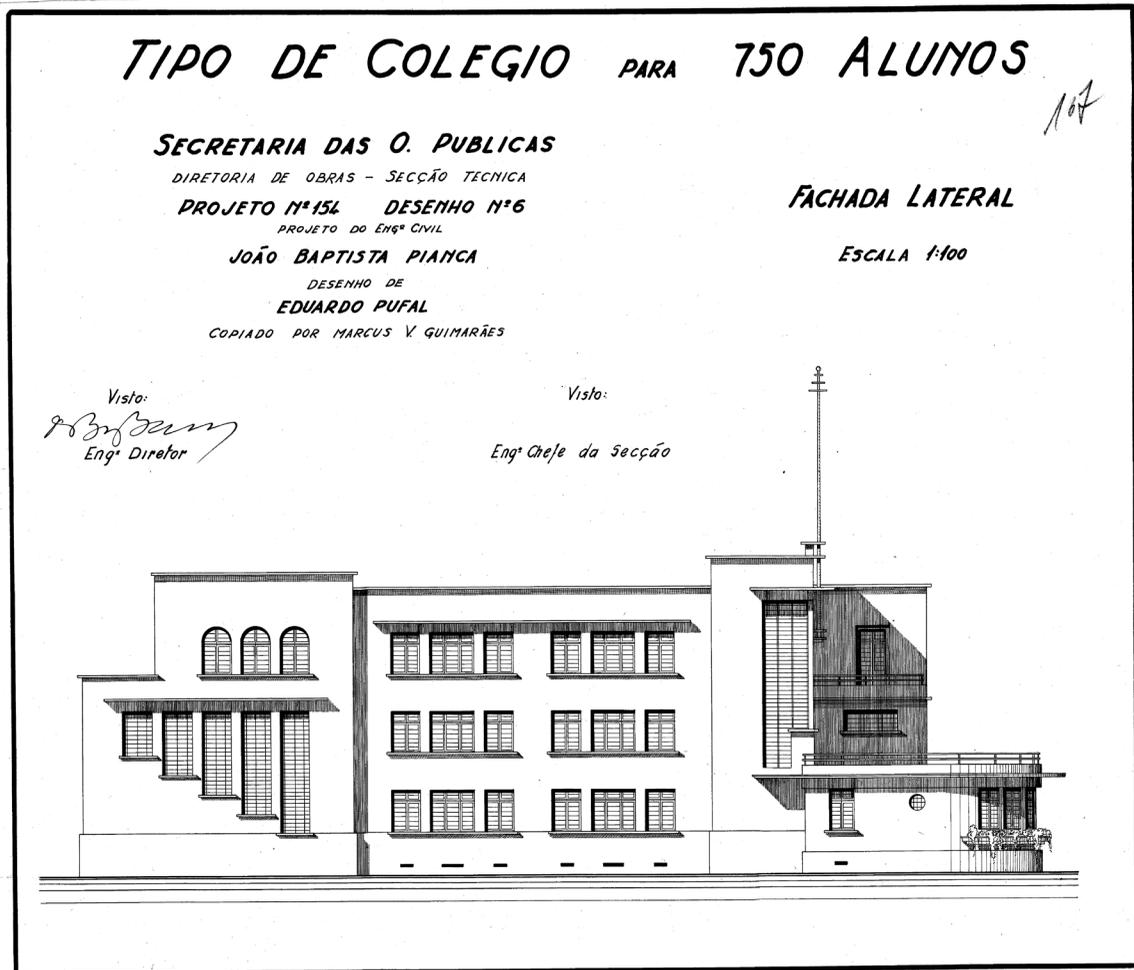
### The standard *Art Deco* schools

*Art Deco* buildings have rational, functional, and economic characteristics, where the striking points are the spaces of semicircular floor plans, the use of corner windows, and terraces (Correia, 2010). The reference to the speed of the machines is present in the friezes of the facade, the curved elements that resemble the bow of a ship, and the frames that improve the hygiene of the environment. A *Streamline* of *Art Deco* is a metaphor for the sinuous and streamlined shapes, being identified “[...] in the ornamentation and details such as vertical and horizontal striations, grading in artistic metalworking, and objects such as masts and guardrails” (Silveira Junior, 2012, p.144).

The simple and rational *Art Deco* furnishings were inspired by nautical and streamlined shapes, with a predominance of materials such as wood, granite, iron, and velvet (Rocha, 2012). The use of vibrant colors, smooth surfaces, and noble and exotic woods, which were exposed in a functional design that allowed serial production, was typical (Gurgel, 2011). The new technologies, methodologies, and compositions optimized the way of designing and building, and the *Art Deco* expressions were considered progressive (CORREIA, 2010).

The engineer João Baptista Pianca worked at the Public Works Department of Rio Grande do Sul, in Porto Alegre, between 1919 and 1945, and it was during this time that he carried out projects for educational establishments, which were implemented by the state government following the line of authoritarian monumentalism (Weimer, 2004). Through bibliographic and document research, as an example, on accessing the Map Room plans of the Public Works Directorate of Porto Alegre, 39 standard design school buildings were identified with the same formal similarities, spread throughout the Gaucho state, which were divided into five groups, considering the student capacity, of 200, 250, 350, 500, and 750 students (Figure 1). It is observed that the author of the projects named them “standard schools” referring to the standard project.

The standard *Art Deco* school projects of the engineer João Baptista Pianca had the intention of subjectively meeting physical, objective, and behavioral needs. The architecture of these schools was a communication tool, transmitting sociopolitical messages, with formal and functional aspects that portray the intentions of control. Through the presence of elements such as terraces and banners, used in civic acts, added to

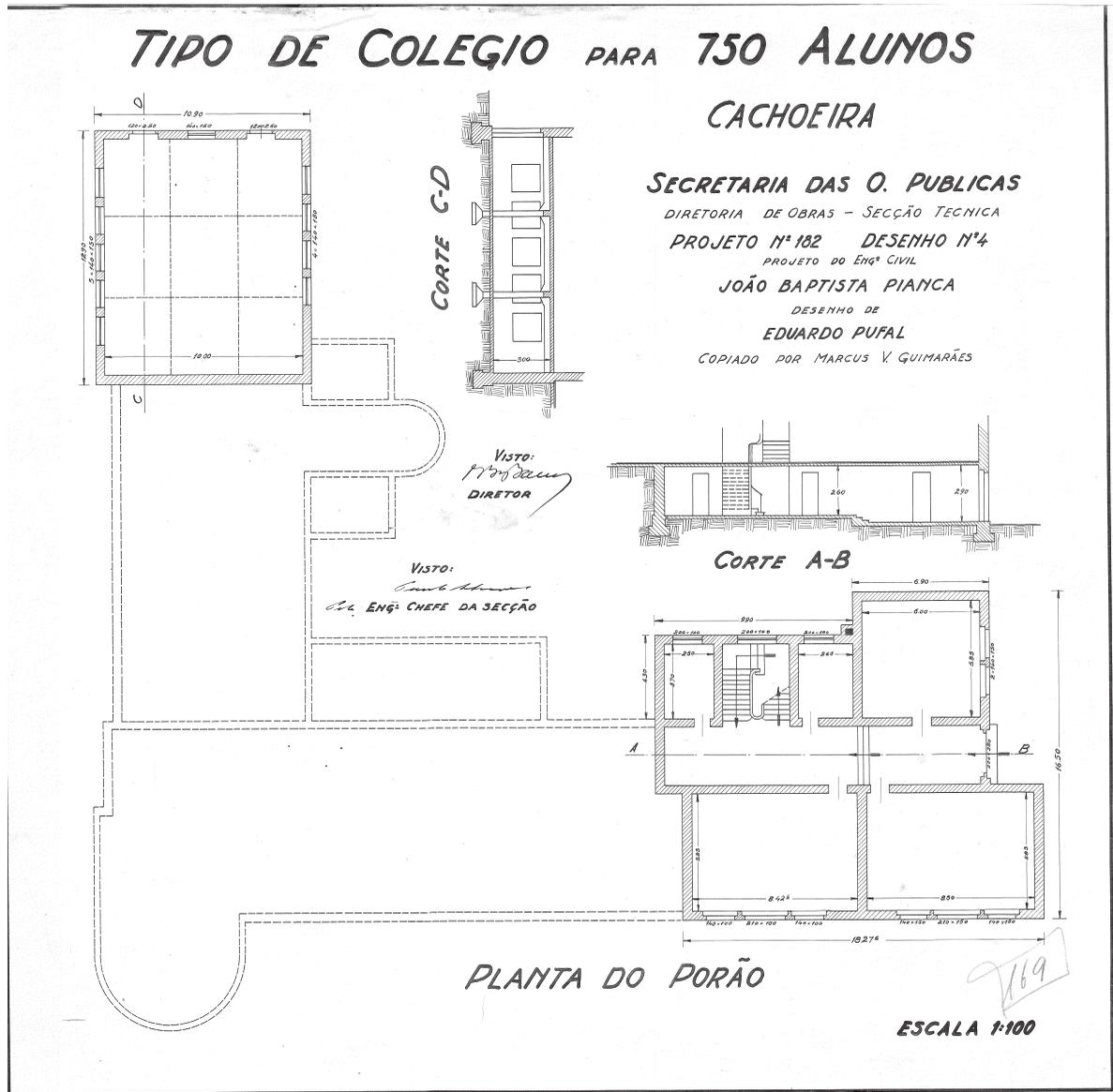


**Figure 1** Standard Project for 750 students, main facade. Source: Map Room collection of the Directorate of Public Works/RS. Accessed: 2022.

the grandeur of the building, and references to progress, school buildings legitimized symbols that represented the government and influenced the school community (Cabral, 2020).

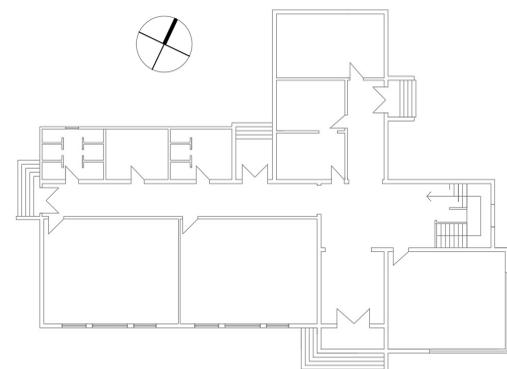
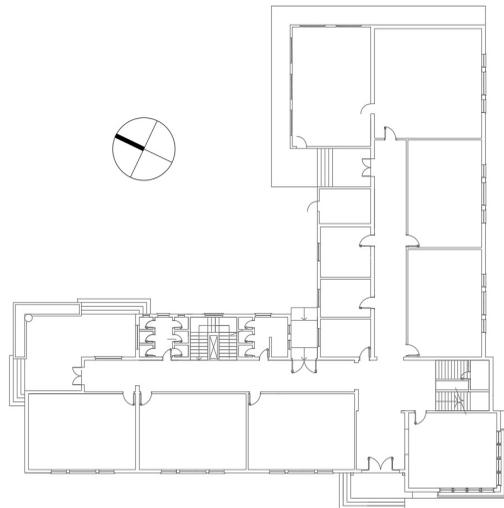
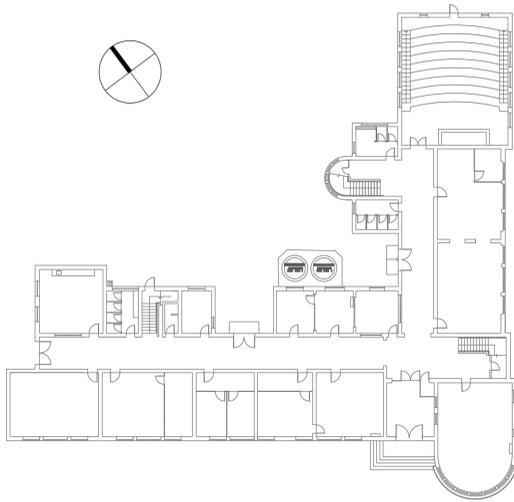
The standard design of Art Deco schools, after specifying a model, made it possible that, through some adaptations such as the insertion of basements and the mirroring of the floor plan, the projects were replicated and inserted in different topographies and cities. Regarding schools for 750 students, three buildings were found within the state of Rio Grande do Sul, namely the Assis Brasil State Education Institute (1942), in Pelotas, the Silveira Martins State School (1942) (Figure 2), in Bagé, and the João Neves Da Fontoura State Education Institute (1944), in Cachoeira do Sul.

The Assis Brasil State Education Institute (Figure 3), located in the city of Pelotas, in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil is part of the standard project layout implemented in the state during the 1940s. The school, with a proposed capacity of 750 students, is located on a corner plot in the city center. The building was inaugurated in March 1942, built by the company Haessler & Woebecke, and is considered an important milestone for the municipality and its community (Cabral, 2020).



**Figure 2** Floor plan of the basement of the João Neves Da Fontoura I. E. E. School. Source: Map Room collection of the Directorate of Public Works/RS. Accessed: 2018.

**Figure 3** Assis Brasil School. Source: Authors' collection (2020).



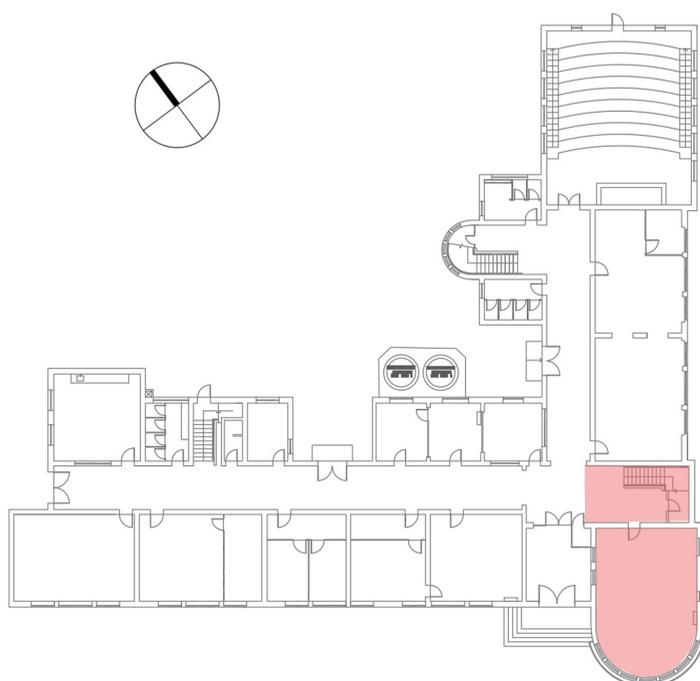
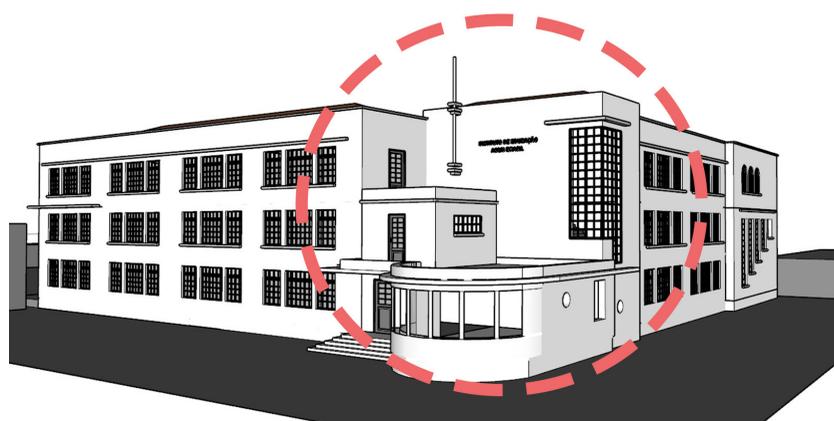
**Figure 4** Floor plan of the 1st floor and images of the facades of the I. E. E. schools, Assis Brazil, Joaquim Caetano, and Marques de Souza. Source: Authors' collection (2020).

The school, organized around an L-shaped circulation, has three floors, and the layout includes classrooms, the principal's office, administration rooms, rooms for medical and dental care, a library, auditorium, physics and chemistry laboratories, and terraces, among others. The layout of these standard schools becomes more complex depending on the number of students that attend the institution, considering the *Escola Nova* pedagogical method. Even with the increase in the number of rooms, the standard

schools have the same L shape. Examples of schools that followed the shape of the Assis Brasil State Education Institute, for 750 students, are the Joaquim Caetano school, for 500 students, in Jaguarão/RS, and the Marques de Souza Institute, for 200 students, in São José do Norte, which have this same pattern (Figure 4) (Cabral, 2020).

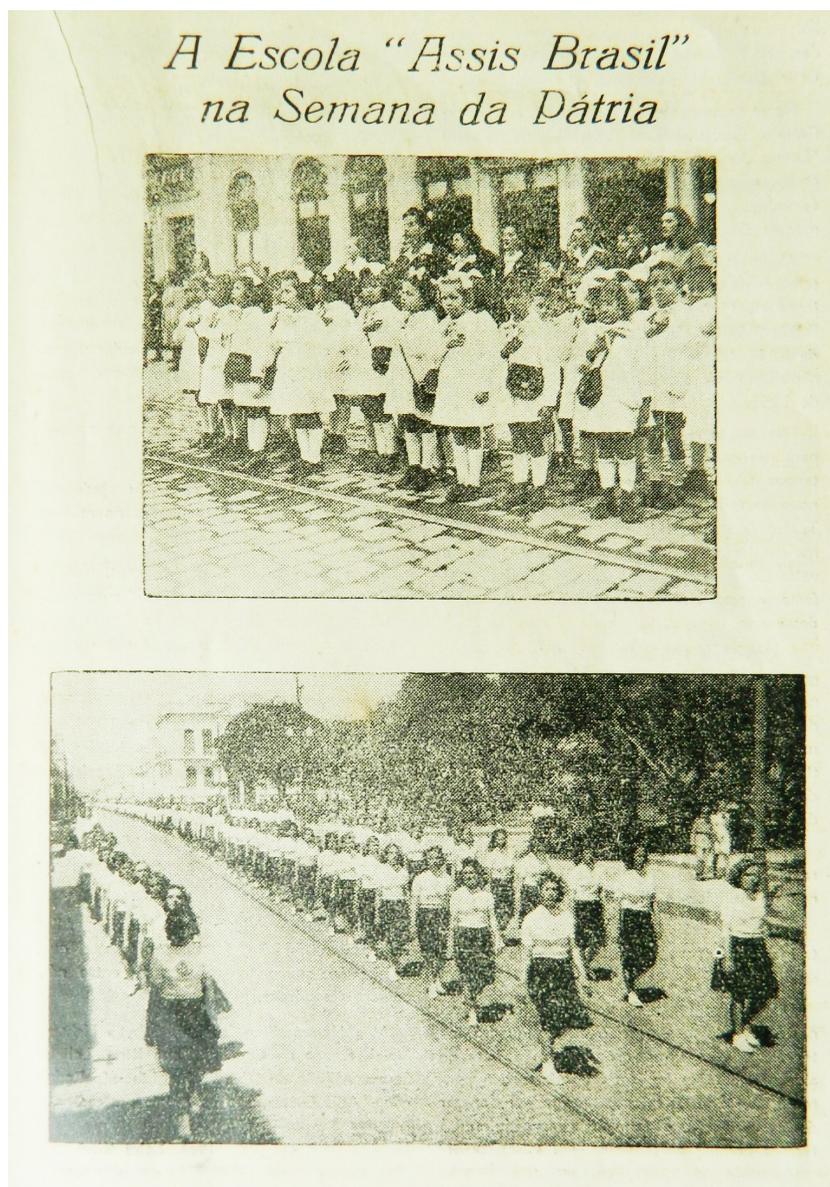
The Assis Brasil I.E.E. building preserves, both externally and internally, Art Deco language characteristics, indicating aspects related to innovation and power. On the outside, the terrace and the banner for raising the flag, used in civic acts, refer to its patriotic nature; and the straight lines allude to the means of transportation (Figure 5). From the document research conducted onsite, it is noted that when singing the national anthem, students attended at a given time, organized in lines, marched, positioned themselves, and performed the ritual, showing respect for the educational institution and the State.

## DISCUSSION



**Figure 5** Volumetry and floor plan of the 1st floor of A.B.I.E.E., with emphasis on the elements of the library, terrace, staircase, and mast, 1979.  
Source: Authors' drawing.

**Figure 6** Students of the Assis Brasil school parading in the commemoration of the Jubilee of the institution (1954).  
 Source: Authors' collection.



The implementation of Assis Brasil I. E. E on a corner lot, forming a closed L-shaped volume, guides the internal part of the building to a sheltered space, where the school courtyard is located. The building is organized around two corridors, which together make an L, where the places for innovation, such as the auditorium, the library, and the terraces, are hierarchical. It can be noted that materials such as wood, granite, and hydraulic tile were widely used in the furniture and objects, as well as the red and blue colors that represent the institution. Although the "L" shape can be considered as positive as a criterion of climatic comfort of the building, it delimits the internal and external spaces with the configuration of a sheltered courtyard and is related to the idea of observation and control of students.

The auditorium was proposed in the school's layout to be used as a games room, a place for physical education, music, dancing, parties,

educational movies, and meetings. The same place would have several functions. The provision of this space, in the Assis Brasil I.E.E., was striking for some students: "I remember that we spent many hours at the glee club and that they then brought together several classes, mainly to play, with different voices, the different musical instruments [...]" (Amaral, 2007, p. 139).

Students, inside the auditorium, played instruments in music classes, and they also took part in recitals on commemorative dates, these being moments of patriotic exaltation, organizational, behavioral, and presentations by the students. The parades were held during Motherland week, the anniversary of the institution, among others, where the students dressed in uniforms and marched through the streets of the city, as can be seen in the institution's document collection (Figure 6).

The existence of an organized concave-shaped grandstand that directs attention to the elevated stage was observed in the auditorium space, configuring a fixed environment. The frames are staggered, and hanging lights are in groups of three, with general lighting, and a wooden floor. The access door, in opaque wood, conveys the feeling of acting as a barrier, ordering that only those who have been invited can come through. It is understood that this stage may be related to a situation of control, power, and exaltation.

The atmosphere of the auditorium is characterized by the mezzanine at the top, which was reserved for the marching band, two pianos on the sides, a closet where the flags were kept, the soundness of the fixed table with the school logo, along with the five chairs at the bottom for the principal and the teachers. It is seen that the wooden seats of the bleachers, for the students, with simpler characteristics, uncomfortable in appearance, are scratched, leaving the question of whether this intervention would be a way of expressing opposition to the behavior imposed by this place.

Classrooms facing the street reduce privacy and silence and expose students, like a showcase, showing the control exercised by the institution over the students, serving as a model to the community for their behavior (Cabral, 2020). This fact corroborates the idea that, at the time, the frames gained a sense beyond the pragmatic because, through the visualization of the discipline practiced, it transmitted an appearance of severity. It is seen that the layout in the classroom respects strict regulations.

The positioning of the teacher, as the highest authority, is close to the board, isolated, and away from the students. The students, organized in rows, with spaces between them, are arranged in such a way as to subjugate before the teacher. The furniture, despite not being fixed to the floor, does not appear to be able to change places but there rather is a certain rigidity, these being the ones that delimit and configure the classroom space (Figure 7).



**Figure 7** Students working in the classroom, A.B.I.E.E., 1979. Source: A.B.I.E.E. Accessed: 2018.

The corridors, as they form an L, present an intersection where the prefect's table was arranged. They had a wide visual field, being able to control all the movements of the students who left the classrooms, referring to Foucault's panopticon concept (2018). This typology, where the environments were organized around two corridors forming an L, used in standard *Art Deco* schools, seems to be related to the intentions that these buildings looked to communicate to the school community.

The teachers' staircase was located in the highest section of the building, which is cut by a wide corner miter, which allows a differentiated view of the outside of the building. In the location of the vertical corridor, it is possible to see the existence of a hydraulic tile floor with a geometric design, handrails, granite steps, and a flat-lining in painted wood slats, common at the time.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Assis Brasil I. E. E. building was part of a program implemented by the government in the 1940s and was designed by engineer João Baptista Pianca at a time of social transitions and adversities. The school layout, meeting the needs of the new pedagogical method, hygienist issues, and guiding nationalization and patriotism, was consolidated thanks to the progress allowed by the rational innovations represented by the *Art Deco* style. Its grandeur, added to the characteristics of the building, transfigures the political-social message of control.

It can be understood that the architecture of standard *Art Deco* schools was a way to convey the messages and ideals of the State, considering the ensemble of the inside and outside of the building. It is seen that the inside environment follows the same discourse presented outside the building, an environment that demands respect, marks behaviors, is rigid, restricts the places of access according to each group, and does not allow differences to individuals, homogenizing them by the same principles. The education of these students was considered as an example and model to be followed and replicated.

Through the small details of organization, of uniformity, the teachers led and disciplined the new nation. Through the analysis made, it is seen, that the students were grouped and directed to the same ideal model. One sees the matrix and the consolidation of behavior that was based on the characteristics of the built environment, transmitting the same messages between generations. The standard *Art Deco* schools, through the union between architecture, the pedagogical method, and the nationalist politics of Vargas, consolidate in the school building political ideals that are transmitted through architecture, monumentality, progressive language, and the new layout; the pedagogical method in the organization and discipline; and politics, in the model of behavior that emphasizes morality and civic actions.

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