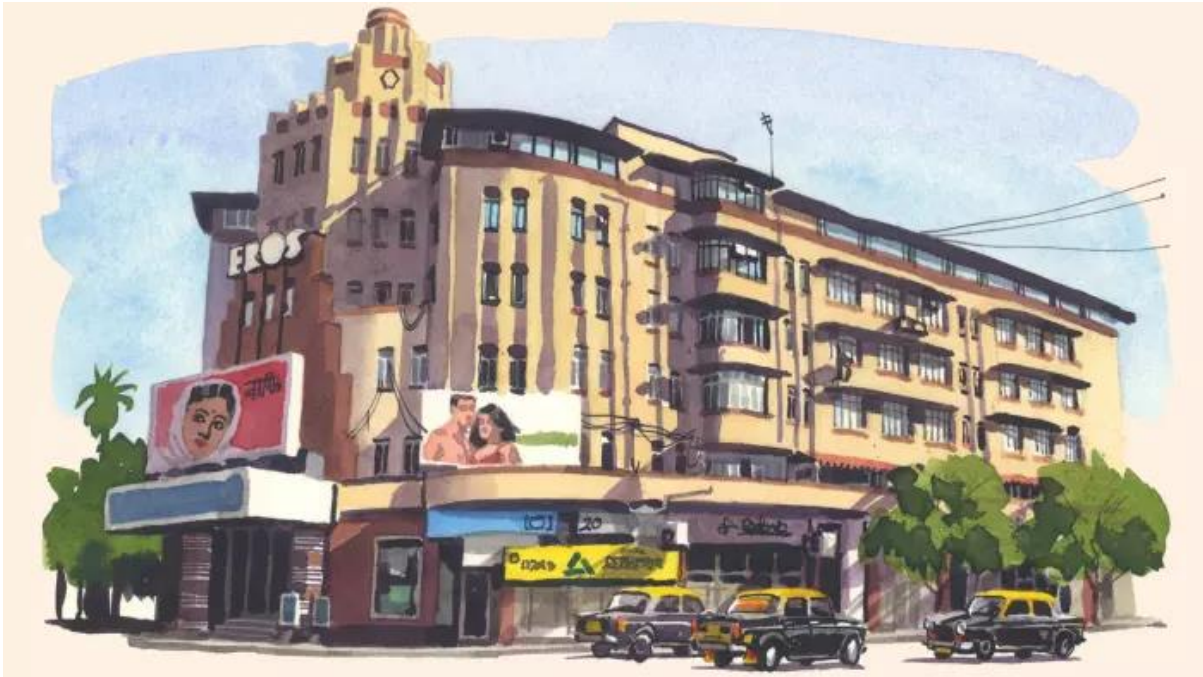


POSTCARD FROM . . . MUMBAI

THE HISTORY OF THESE BUILDINGS IS THE HISTORY OF THE CITY'S OWN FORMATION



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In downtown Mumbai, two architectural epochs stare each other down. To the east, a wall of Victorian neo-gothic institutions: the High Court, the Rajabai Clock Tower, the Old Secretariat — an ensemble once described by the travel writer Robert Byron as “positively demonic” in its ugliness. To the west, a line of perfectly preserved art deco buildings with names that might have been lifted from the address book of a Palm Beach socialite: “Sunshine”, “Horizon View”, “The Summer Queen”.

I am standing on the Oval Maidan, a 22-acre strip of land that separates the two. This is Mumbai’s equivalent of Central Park, a hallowed split of public space in the centre of one of the world’s most densely populated cities. “We are sitting on this gold mine and no one’s aware of it,” announces my guide, Atul Kumar, gesturing towards the line of brightly painted buildings west of the Maidan. A financier by day, Kumar has dedicated his free time over the past decade to promoting Mumbai’s under-the-radar art deco heritage by lobbying the government to better protect it, building an active online community of supporters through the Art Deco Mumbai social media channels and — as of last month — running small private tours of the city’s art deco precinct. After Miami, Mumbai is thought to have the highest number of art deco buildings of any city in the world. All five of south Mumbai’s

old cinemas are art deco, as is the Cricket Club of India and the New India Assurance Building — a monumental office block made of reinforced concrete, its entrance guarded by two towering Egyptian statues. The history of these buildings is the history of Mumbai's own formation. India's so-called city of dreams was once seven islands, strapped together over the course of 300 years by a series of land reclamations. Between 1928 and 1942 the Backbay reclamation scheme created south Mumbai as it looks today and this sudden profusion of available land coincided with the return home of many newly qualified Indian architects who had been studying abroad at the height of art deco's popularity. What is now the Oval Maidan was once the city's shoreline, hence the sudden change in architecture as you cross the park.

As a style, art deco was an odd bricolage that ransacked other cultures for inspiration. It took its tiered façades from the Ziggurat pyramids of Mesopotamia, its grand bas-reliefs from Egyptian decorative motifs, its polished interiors from Japanese lacquer. Kumar explains that the Indian architects who brought the fashion to Mumbai made it their own, combining it with elements of traditional design to create a style that became known as deco Saracenic. In the west, art deco was dismissed by many critics as too silly to merit serious attention. The same might be said of many aspects of Mumbai's deco-Saracenic designs — on one residential street, each balcony is topped with a concrete bank known as an eyebrow, which offers protection from the torrential monsoon rains — but the buildings themselves retain an uncommon gravitas: with wide balconies, high-ceilinged foyers and walled yards separating building from bustling pavement. And it is not the preserve of the elite: thanks to a 1940s rent freeze many families living in art-deco tenements pay 200 rupees a month to be there, the cost of a cinema ticket. Kumar ends our tour at the Cricket Club of India, an 18-acre stadium founded as a protest in 1933 after a cricket-loving maharaja was refused access to the same boxes as the British at the nearby Gymkhana. The art-deco pavilion is nautically themed, with porthole windows, rounded pediments and unnecessary flagpoles. Important fixtures are rarely played here now, since the Wankhede Stadium was built in the 1970s, and the stadium's serene pitch is instead dotted with tables and wicker chairs — this is a popular place for afternoon tea. It feels like a microcosm of what art-deco brought to Mumbai: space, elegance and a healthy dose of eccentricity. For Kumar, it's also a story about how India, when still a colony, took western fashions and made them its own. "I wouldn't call it a rebellion," he says with a polite smile. "But it was certainly a discovery beyond anything the British had ever shown us."

Details

Art Deco Mumbai can arrange private tours of the Oval Maidan area for small groups interested in architecture and design. Tours last about 90 minutes, cost Rs1,000 per person and can be arranged by emailing info@artdecomumbai.in Illustration by Matthew Cook.