

Heritage hunting with Mumbai Art Deco

This architecture conservation group's newly launched website maps art deco buildings and lets you filter-search localities

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The stairwell at Court View, Oval Maidan. Photo: Art Deco Mumbai

Art deco, the architectural style identified by its clean, geometric symmetry, originated in Europe and the US in the 1920s, and Mumbai's architects took to it with abandon. And though they may be overshadowed by the more monumental Victorian structures like the Gateway of India and Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, art deco buildings dot the city's neighbourhoods, with Eros and Regal cinema halls being some of the most recognizable.

Over the past year, Art Deco Mumbai (*Artdecomumbai.com*), a self-funded, not-for-profit group, has been holding heritage walks, documenting and creating awareness about this style through Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. It was started in May 2016 by Atul Kumar, a finance professional. “I live in Marine Drive, an art deco precinct. For years I’ve been engaging with policymakers, conservationists, architects and citizen groups to create awareness of art deco. I decided it was time to take a digital initiative,” says Kumar.

On 27 June, the group went live with its website, a repository as well as a handy tool to browse Mumbai’s art deco landscape. The “Gallery” section allows you to look at images in random order, and if you find that engaging, the “Inventory” tab lets you filter them according to neighbourhood. “Let’s say you live in Colaba and want to see where the art deco buildings are in your neighbourhood. You put on that filter and search in that area,” says Kumar. You can learn to identify art deco buildings with the help of the “Elements or Features” tab that shows details of the building facades, interiors, lobbies and stairwells. “Eye Brows”, for instance, are the streamlined extended shades over balconies and windows. And “Frozen Fountains”, the motifs that you spot on window grills and entryways that look like a fountain frozen in motion. If you want to go into more detail, there’s a “Research” tab, with articles curated under different headings like “History or Era of Theatres”.

It’s said that Mumbai may have the second largest concentration of art deco buildings, after Miami’s famous historic district in South Beach. Is there any truth in this? “People claim so,” says Kumar. “So far we’ve documented buildings just between Colaba, Fort, Marine Drive and Churchgate, and we’ve already got 120 buildings. We haven’t even gone to Mohammad Ali Road, Warden Road, Malabar Hill. They are lined with deco, one after the other. Then there is Dadar, Matunga, Chembur. It’ll be interesting when we’re able to establish the actual final number,” he concludes.

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