

SKYE A THOMAS

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**HAVE A DECCO**

In which we trace the city's relationship with the architectural style

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# Sea Face Park: The High Modern

**A poolside gazebo with a beautiful curved screen on the façade that allows sea breeze onto the lawns**

In the foreword to a collection of short stories by her mother — writer and long-time correspondent for the *BBC*, Attia Hosain — Shama Habibullah describes their early life as one of, “anti-aircraft barrage balloons over Breach Candy where we lived, and the explosion of Fort Striking, when my father was blown under his desk at Ballard Pier.”

Amidst all of this, she writes of her mother opening up the doors of their flat in Mafatlal Park at Breach Candy — now Sea Face Park — where, “anyone was welcome who had the ability to bring ideas, debate, and good conversation.” Communist Party of India members Romesh and Raj Thapar had the same open door policy, and “People flowed in and out all hours of the day and night, staying to eat and drink... The cook had a standing order for a dinner of five,” quotes Gyan Prakash in his book, *Mumbai Fables*. At dusk, when the buildings of the park would light up with a soft, yellow glow, the Thapars and their guests would take their drinks out onto the lawn and hold court until sunrise.

As one enters the Sea Face Park complex today, it is not hard to imagine it as a venue of high-glamour and intellectual mystery — Vijaylaxmi Pandit spent time in one of its flats too. Constructed in 1938 by the architecture firm Master, Sathe and Bhuta, rising stars on the Indian architecture scene, it was, in fact, the first residential complex of its kind. Theirs was a deeply influential firm, and one that sought to challenge many old notions tied to the practice of architecture in India. Looking to experiment, they explored new languages and Sea Face Park, which was conceived as a block of rental flats, a fairly new idea at the time, reflected this ingenuity in its contemporary design.

Architects Master and Sathe would meet on long commutes between Bombay and Ahmedabad, where they were working on projects for their respective firms, and spend those long journeys discussing the potential for rad-



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**Sea Face Park was built between 1939–42 by the firm Master, Sathe & Bhuta. Rounded and box balconies share straight lines and curved cantilevered eyebrows**

ical architectural practices in the country. In the early 1930s, newly graduating architects still had to process their official paperwork through the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in London. Master and Sathe met with Bhuta during late-night meetings at the Sathe house, and together, decided to set up a firm that sought to pull apart this attachment to empire.

Deco, with its new technologies and structures, formed a significant part of their design practice, and was a way to embody the political sentiment that they held so closely. Their stamp can still be seen in the city's Deco landscape with many landmark public and private buildings. But Sea Face Park was their crown jewel. They equipped each large, high-ceilinged flat with the epitome of a high modern life: marbled entrance lobbies; large windows that strategically let in a cool breeze (whatever the time of day, or year); curved pillars to decorate the interior; and even, centralised garbage chutes.

A sprawling central lawn creates a common social space, unto which each building's lobby spills. A swimming pool with views of the sea adorns the complex at its end — its decorative screen, placed across a low-set gazebo, and lavishly carved from hardwood, discreetly absorbs the pool within its folds. Fiercely protected by its residents, the complex, located on Dr Bhulabhai Desai Road, remains immaculately maintained.

If the Deco we have explored so far in this series has been of hybridity, Sea Face Park is instead a classic — effortlessly bridging the gap that Deco often straddles — between the modern, and Modernism.

**A view of the gazebo with the fountain and swimming pool in the foreground**

*The writer works with Art Deco Mumbai which showcases Mumbai's Deco. Follow them on Instagram @artdecomumbai*