

Mumbai: Victorian Gothic & Art Deco Buildings Bag City's 3rd World Heritage Tag

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As spearhead of campaign Abha Narain Lambah calls UNESCO honour for Churchgate-Fort-Marine Drive precinct outcome of 14-year-long people's movement; star team behind win discusses what tag means for a living neighbourhood



The Oval Maidan splits architectural styles that are a century apart, with Victorian Gothic buildings lining one side and Art Deco the other. The phenomenon is unique, say experts

This is the first nomination dossier from India that was drafted and supported entirely by citizens. It's a victory for this movement," the excitement in conservation architect Abha Narain Lambah's voice is palpable over the phone from Manama, Bahrain. A few hours earlier, she along with the rest of the Indian delegation had successfully ensured that India's nomination – Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensemble of Mumbai – got inscribed as a World Heritage Site (WHS) at a UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting yesterday.

As Nayana Kathpalia watched the events unfurl on YouTube from her Oval Maidan-facing flat in Swastik Court, she was relieved and elated. "It was very gratifying to see India's nomination being

praised by other countries," she tells us. For the trustee of the OVAL Trust, it has been a long journey along with Lambah, and countless other city citizen groups and associations who ensured that this 14-year-long wait culminated in a sweet victory.



"I recall having tabled this dossier for the first time in Chandigarh in 2004. Since then, at every step, we've had citizen groups pitch in for everything from sponsoring air travel to opening their homes to host visiting heritage experts, who were here to review the dossier," recalls Lambah. "I wish to thank mid-day for its month-long Save Mumbai's Heritage campaign in 2013 and for sharing photographs that were used for the dossier. Other photographers like Jehangir Sorabjee helped us immensely. I miss Sharada Dwivedi, most of all. We wrote the first draft together," she recalls. Celebrities and politicians across parties united to make this happen. "Both Shaina NC and Milind Deora, as well as Amitabh Bachchan backed this."



Art Deco buildings that are now a World Heritage Site

Atul Kumar, founder of Art Deco Mumbai, believes this could probably be the most impactful initiative that the city has taken up. "The dialogue between two distinctly different architectural styles will get an additional layer of protection. This will mean that we can maintain the integrity of the precinct."

Back in Manama, Lambah is looking forward to the relevance of this tag. "With three WHS, Mumbai is now on par with Delhi. Maharashtra boasts of five sites in total, more than any other state. This is the time to review its policy. Mumbai's as a financial hub needs to be dovetailed with its cultural policy," she asserts. Lambah is hopeful that the tag will also bring in much-needed funding from the Union Ministry of Tourism that will elevate the precinct's status.



For other steadfast supporters like Cyrus Guzder, eminent urban activist, industrialist and environmentalist, the acknowledgement couldn't have come at a more opportune time. "I hope people will wake up to respect the Art Deco style of architecture. The win also reaffirms that open spaces (Oval Maidan) can be viewed as heritage," he says.



Abha Narain Lambah, Nayana Kathpalia and Atul Kumar

Kathpalia hopes that the tag will kick-start awareness among citizen groups. "We must educate them, get together and take this forward. We need to work with the BMC and ensure that incentives are offered to owners and occupiers to keep these buildings in good form and shape," she says. Her colleague and co-'heritage warrior' - as Guzder calls them - Shirin Bharucha, of the OVAL Trust, echoes the sentiment: "While this win ensures that the buildings cannot be destroyed or made feature-less, awareness is the key. With the right expertise and direction, the government must look at preserving these forms by offering sops, like tax breaks."



Cyrus Guzder, Shirin Bharucha and Pankaj Joshi

An interesting part of the dossier, Kathpalia lets us in, was the addition of the fact that as Bombay grew and developed into its current form, many of its structures were built by public subscription. "It's something about the air here that causes this, despite the pollution!" she chuckles, reminding us of the wonderfully benevolent character that once again, came to the fore in securing this WHS tag.

Guzder's closing comments put this victory in the right perspective: "We must remember that there wasn't much enthusiasm for this initially, as the concept was considered radical. This win means that we are evolving in the way we look at heritage, as not merely being about monuments. It's an important success for Mumbai since we won against formidable competition."

A unique win

- * First instance in India's 37 World Heritage Sites where nomination process was citizens' initiative
- * Tag won not by historical monument but a living, dynamic urban cluster that's in use by citizens

Part of the precinct

A total of 94 buildings fall under this precinct – 76 (Art Deco) and 18 (Victorian Gothic). Some of them include: (Victorian) Maharashtra State Police headquarters, National Gallery of Modern Art, High Court. Art Deco buildings facing Oval Maidan, sweep of Art Deco buildings from the end of the flyover at Princess Street till the last building before Air India building

Information courtesy: Atul Kumar

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