

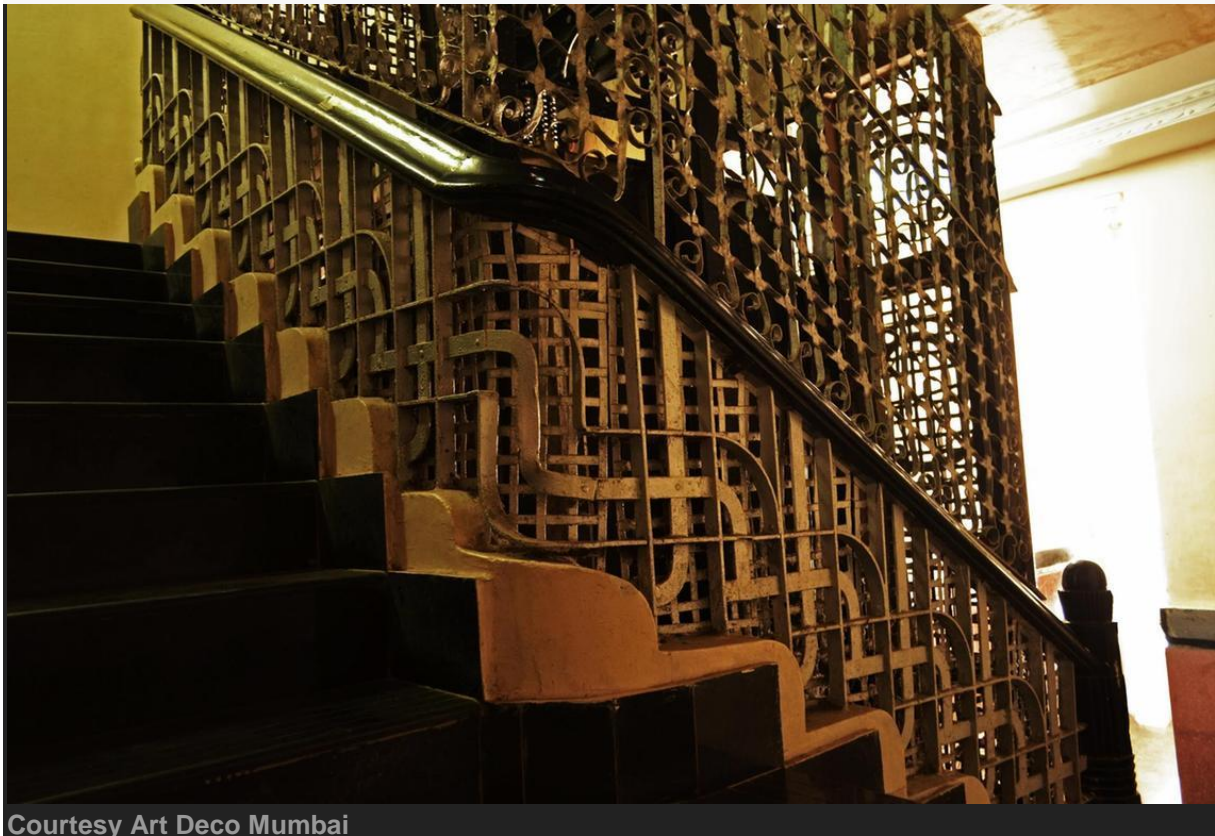
How a citizen-led initiative in Mumbai led to an Unesco World Heritage site inscription

'The process of preservation and restoration cannot be perceived as something that is outsourced to the Indian government and heritage conservationists. It has to be a reciprocal process

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Courtesy Art Deco Mumbai

The art deco and Victorian Gothic ensemble neighbourhoods of Mumbai were inscribed as World Heritage sites at the 42nd session of the World Heritage Committee of Unesco in Manama last week. This victory is a significant boost for the urban conservationists and citizen groups that have been lobbying hard to secure a safe future for Mumbai's crumbling heritage.

The ensemble that won World Heritage status comprises two distinct architectural styles – the majestic grandeur of 19th-century Victorian structures, also known as Bombay Gothic, and the curvaceous elegance of 20th-century architecture by the Arabian Sea, usually referred to as Indo-Deco, or Art Deco. The epicentre of this quaint ensemble is the palm-fringed cricket ground of the Oval Maidan.

The 14-year journey

The Gothic Revival architectural genre was introduced to 19th-century Bombay by Henry Bartle Frere – colonial Bombay’s first governor. With the assistance of famous architects, urban theorists and prominent Indians, his vision of Bombay as the country’s first city led to a cultural hybrid of international and local influences – a genre that came to be known as “Bombay Gothic”.

Art Deco, in turn, was the sign of a metropolis in its prime, when a decidedly confident urban middle-class began to flourish and socialise along the bay. It is an architectural elan that draped movie theatres, apartment buildings, corporate headquarters and trendy stores in the early 20th century.

Yet, despite such a glorious history, getting these quaint neighbourhoods in the maximum city recognised has been an arduous and long process – it took 14 years to be exact.

“It was in 2004 that Unesco had a conference in Chandigarh [the first city that was planned post-independence] to address imbalances in world heritage inscriptions,” says Abha Narain Lambah, a conservation architect who has spent the past 22 years on some of Mumbai’s most seminal urban restoration projects.

“Firstly, Europe was over-represented, and Asia-Pacific, South America and Africa hugely under-represented,” Lambah explains. “It was here that I presented a paper on Mumbai’s Victorian Gothic and art deco ensemble neighbourhoods, which received a huge response from world heritage experts.”

Mumbai's art deco structures

Heritage conservationists also have to fight perceived notions of what antiquity actually is, explains Ananya Agarwal, second secretary to the permanent delegation from India to Unesco, and a key member of the team

that scored this historic victory for Mumbai. “Very often, when people think Unesco world heritage site, they think of ancient or medieval structures. While India has a wealth of such structures, it also has a number of modern gems that merit recognition.”

“Art deco architectural conservation has been a singularly difficult path to take because it has always lived in the shadow of Victorian Gothic, which naturally is older and more majestic,” says Atul Kumar, founder of the website www.artdecomumbai.com, the only online, public domain repository of information, which includes research, building inventory and photo documentation, dedicated to Art Deco.

Very few people know that Mumbai has the second-largest collection of art deco structures in the world after Miami. Two years ago, Kumar and his comrades started photographing facades, staircases, windows and balconies of these curvaceous structures as a prelude to this World Heritage inscription. As a matter of fact, of the 37 Unesco World Heritage inscriptions that India has secured, this is the first citizen-led initiative.

“We have so far identified a total of 330 structures in the city as art deco buildings. There are many other neighbourhoods in Mumbai that are also a treasure trove of this architectural style. Matunga, for instance, has a total of 274 structures, of which 89 have so far been identified as belonging to the art deco school,” he adds.

Proactive approach to preserving heritage

Will this Unesco World Heritage status prevent erosion of Mumbai’s architectural heritage? “Yes, such recognition also means more layers of restrictions on construction. That said, the guidelines laid down for such construction, in addition to the national laws, have to be followed. It is also urgent that Indian citizens take a more proactive approach to preserving their heritage. The process of preservation and restoration cannot be perceived as something that is outsourced to the Indian government and heritage conservationists. It has to be a reciprocal process,” says Agarwal.

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Urban conservationists in Mumbai have not had it easy politically. Given India's development pressures and its teeming masses, there is a powerful builder lobby that is always vying for precious land – and heritage conservation can unfortunately sometimes be perceived as the domain of the elite. “Part of the reason that this dossier [which comprises 1,200 pages and three volumes] took 14 long years is that one had to negotiate successive state governments and the politically influential builder lobby,” says Lambah.

This sweet remarkable victory will hopefully pave the path for a more heritage-friendly metropolis. For a nation that has the sixth-highest number of Unesco World Heritage properties, this should not be a tall order.

<https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/how-a-citizen-led-initiative-in-mumbai-led-to-an-unesco-world-heritage-site-inscription-1.748074#7>