

HERITAGE

By Aliya Ladhbhoy
Photo: Art Devo, Mumbai

A Tale of Two Eras

Image courtesy: Balou46/ Wikimedia Commons

Mumbai's Victorian
and Art Deco
Ensemble is now
a UNESCO World
Heritage Site

The Mumbai University complex highlights the theatrical elements of Victorian Gothic architecture

Mumbai's Oval Maidan, flanked by Art Deco buildings on one side and Victorian Gothic buildings on the other, has found a unique place for itself on the world map. The Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensemble just entered the UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites making it the third such landmark in Mumbai.

The collective ensemble of 94 buildings is unparalleled. What makes the accreditation even more special is that the tag is not for a historical monument, but a living cluster that is being used by citizens. It was also the first instance in India where the nomination was led by citizens.

The precinct holds great significance for the city of Mumbai as the shift in architectural styles is a testament to its transformation from a colonial trading outpost to a modernised city.

In the 19th century, Mumbai (then Bombay) had established itself as a global trading hub. As industrialisation spread, many immigrants moved to the city. The city also saw a wave of planned urban development. Historic landmarks such as the Bombay High Court, David Sassoon Library, the University of Mumbai Complex and the Rajabai Clock Tower were built in the Victorian Gothic style of architecture. The buildings, influenced by Europe and the British raj, incorporated stained glass windows, external buttresses, towers, spires and perforated parapets in their designs.

The second wave of development took place in the early 20th century when the

Ram Mahal takes inspiration from nautical elements



Shiv Shanti Bhuvan features prominent rounded shades called eyebrows



Blue and green zigzag decorations brighten up Rajjab Mahal's facade.





Eros Cinema is an iconic Art Deco theatre

city began reclaiming land under the Backbay Reclamation Scheme. At that time, the world was obsessed with a style we now know as Art Deco. Mumbai, too, followed suit. So much so that it is now home to the second largest collection of Art Deco buildings after Miami.

Regal Cinema was one of the first few structures to be built in this style. It was the first building in India to be fully air-conditioned and had neon lighting. Several residential, commercial and entertainment buildings were constructed around the Oval Maidan, which then extended to Marine Drive.

These were mostly designed and financed by Indians and symbolised the growing affluence of the people. Streamlined designs, rounded corners and nautical features influenced form and structure, while decorative motifs such as fountains and tropical imagery lit up the buildings' facades.

"Art Deco is an aspirational style of architecture that captured the modernities brought about by the industrial revolution," says Atul Kumar of Art Deco Mumbai, a charitable trust dedicated to bringing

about greater awareness and conservation of this architectural style.

They host guided walks on request to sensitise people to the heritage and history of the area. These landmark buildings deserved to be admired from a much closer angle and walking around the neighbourhood is the best way to spot these features. ■



Soona Mahal's streamline design is a classic example of Art Deco