



# FACADES FROM THE PAST

Many heritage conservation projects in India are combining civic and state strengths to achieve what once seemed like a hopeless cause

**By G Seetharaman**

It's 8.30 on a slightly chilly Sunday morning and cricket matches are in progress at south Mumbai's iconic Oval Maidan. To the east of the ground are the majestic buildings housing the Civil & Sessions Court, the High Court and the University of Mumbai.

These Victorian Gothic structures, built in the second half of the 19th century, announce their grandeur, with their pointed arches, spires and gargoyles, to anyone who catches a glimpse of them, even those who have no clue about their architecture.

But the buildings on the opposite side of the Oval Maidan do not evoke a strong reaction. A passerby may not even spare them a thought. But the 17 residential buildings and one mixed-use structure (Eros Cinema), built on reclaimed land within a span of three years in the 1930s, are among the most remarkable embodiments of the art deco style of architecture in the city.

**TL;DR**

- Only a handful of sites in urban India have the Unesco World Heritage tag
- There are hundreds of heritage buildings in our cities, mostly dilapidated
- Resource-starved local administrations should find new ways to preserve their structures, including engaging the private sector

From vertical bands encasing windows, which make the buildings seem taller than they are, to ship deck-like rounded balconies, from wooden elevator cages to frozen fountain patterns on walls, these features are hard to miss once you become aware of them.

"Nowhere in the world do you see Victorian Gothic and art deco so close to each other," says Nityaa Lakshmi Iyer, who heads documentation and research at Art Deco Mumbai, a nonprofit, as she conducts a heritage walk for five of us. This is a key reason why the Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai, comprising 94 historic buildings and the Oval Maidan, were accorded the Unesco World Heritage tag in June 2018. Among the buildings is Regal Cinema, one of the city's most iconic movie halls. The status means the

facade of these buildings needs to be maintained. The World Heritage status was the result of residents' and conservation architects' efforts for over a decade.

The Mumbai Art Deco project is one of the many around the country that combine state and civic efforts to conserve heritage. These projects perhaps show the way forward in India, where conservation is particularly challenging because so much of it is located in highly populated cities and also because in a low-income country it's natural for conservation efforts to slide down the ladder of national priorities.

Around a third of Indians, or 461 million, live in India's cities, according to UN estimates in 2018. This is expected to almost double to 877 million by 2050. This means the task of our city administrations – to provide a good standard of living–will only become harder and the re-

## URBAN INDIA'S WORLD HERITAGE SITES

◀ Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, Mumbai

Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai



Historic City of Ahmedabad



GETTY IMAGES



Jantar Mantar, Jaipur



Taj Mahal



Agra Fort ▶

◀ Red Fort Complex, Delhi

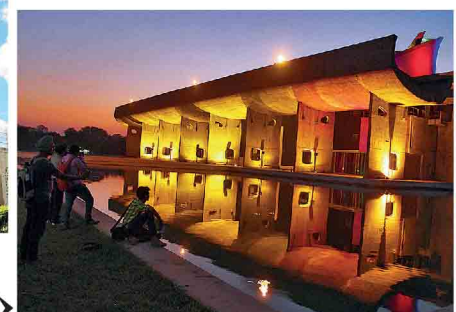
Humayun's Tomb, Delhi



Qutb Minar and its Monuments, Delhi



Capital Complex\*, Chandigarh ▶



\*One of 17 buildings designed by Le Corbusier in various countries Source: Unesco

**“We have this notion that only something older than 100 years is heritage. That’s why the World Heritage inscription for Mumbai is special”**

**Atul Kumar**  
founder, Art Deco Mumbai



source crunch will worsen. In such a scenario, protecting the heritage structures in cities could become even less of a priority than it is.

“As a citizen, I cannot claim heritage is more important than food or healthcare. But it is not a binary. Conservation does not mean freezing development,” says AG Krishna Menon, a Delhi-based conservation architect.

Atul Kumar, founder of Art Deco Mumbai, agrees. “We have this notion that only something older than 100 years is heritage. That’s why the World Heritage inscription for Mumbai is special.” Kumar, who runs a financial services firm, says he is lucky to live in one of the 35 art deco buildings on Marine Drive. Around 1,500 buildings were photographed before the nomination was filed. Art Deco Mumbai is in the process of cataloguing the city’s art deco structures and has so far identified 374.

A third of India’s 29 cultural World Heritage sites are in cities. These include the Taj Mahal, Humayun’s Tomb in Delhi and Jantar Mantar in Jaipur. In 2017, Ahmedabad became the first Indian city to be accorded the World Heritage status. Mumbai’s Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus is also on the list and so are Elephanta Caves. The Centre in 2015 unexpectedly postponed the nomination of Delhi’s Shahjahanabad and Lutyens’ Bungalow Zone. In July 2018, it said Jaipur would be its next nomination.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) protects 3,650 ancient monuments and sites, and states also protect some. Abha Narain Lambah, a conservation architect, says less than 10,000 sites are under the purview of Central and state archaeological departments. Besides, cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Kolkata have regulations to protect heritage buildings, which are graded according to historical and architectural significance. Menon says 2,200 historic structures in Delhi are notified by the state government.

But that is not enough. “The setting of a monument is disconnected from the monument itself,” says Lambah, referring to unchecked construction around historical sites. Lambah’s firm prepared the nomination dossier and management plan for the recent World Heritage inscription for Mumbai’s buildings.

Lambah is also a consultant to the Urban Affairs Ministry’s Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana for Kanchipuram. The temple town is one of 12 cities chosen for the scheme, which aims to improve infrastructure and amenities like water supply, drainage, approach roads and landscaping around heritage sites. Other cities on the list include Amritsar, Varanasi and Warangal. Of the 70 projects worth ₹422 crore that have been approved, 24 have been completed and ₹319 crore has been released. Lambah says the corpus is too little and, more importantly, cannot be used for restoration.

(Emails sent by ET Magazine to the World Heritage Centre and the ministries of culture and urban affairs did not yield a response.)

The paucity of funds from the government means other models have to be explored for conservation of historic structures. For instance, in Delhi, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has been working in partnership with the ASI, the Central Public Works Department and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

## CENTRAL GOVT FUNDING FOR MONUMENTS

ASI, which protects **3,650 ancient monuments & sites**, was allocated **₹975 crore in 2018-19 budget**

Earlier, in 2015, govt launched the Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana to improve infrastructure and amenities around heritage sites

**12 cities were selected and 70 projects worth ₹422 crore were approved**

Of the 70 projects, 24 have been completed, and of the corpus, **₹319 crore has been released**

Source: Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, PIB

## EFFORTS TO PRESERVE CITIES’ HERITAGE



### Mumbai

The World Heritage tag for the Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai, comprising 94 historic buildings and the Oval Maidan, was the result of a more than decade-long effort by citizens

### Delhi and Hyderabad

Since 1997, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has worked with govt agencies to restore the gardens of Humayun’s Tomb in Delhi and, later, the tomb complex itself. It is now restoring monuments in the Nizamuddin heritage area and the **Quli Qutb Shah Archaeological Park in Hyderabad**

### Jodhpur

Through JDH Urban Regeneration Project, V Sunil, the adman behind the Incredible India and Make in India campaigns, and three others are tapping the commercial potential of Jodhpur by restoring some of its heritage structures in three clusters in the city. They have cleaned and restored a stepwell and put cafes and retail outlets around it



## EXPLORE YOUR CITY’S HERITAGE

### Art Deco Mumbai

The walk offered by Art Deco Mumbai takes you along 18 art deco buildings opposite the Oval Maidan, ending at Eros Cinema

**PRICE:** No fixed price; donation expected

**CONTACT:** 9820155446

[www.artdecomumbai.com](http://www.artdecomumbai.com)



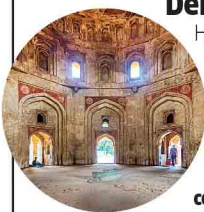
### Delhi Heritage Walks

Has multiple walks, including around Jama Masjid, Lodi Garden and Mehrauli Archaeological Park; also does customised walks

**PRICE:** Starts at ₹600

**CONTACT:** 9212534868

[www.delhiheritagewalks.com](http://www.delhiheritagewalks.com)



### Bangalore Walks

Among the walks you can choose is one through Cubbon Park, which gives you an understanding of the architecture of its beautiful historic buildings

**PRICE:** Starts at ₹600

**CONTACT:** 9845068416

[www.bangalorewalks.com](http://www.bangalorewalks.com)



### Heritage Walk Calcutta

From the South Park Street Cemetery to Chinatown, there are a few walks to choose and you can even opt for customised tours

**PRICE:** Starts at ₹450

**CONTACT:** 8777478529

[www.heritagewalkcalcutta.com](http://www.heritagewalkcalcutta.com)



Between 1997 and 2003, the trust restored the garden of Humayun’s Tomb, and between 2007 and 2013, the tomb itself. It is now working on the monuments in the 90-acre Sunder Nursery complex and Nizamuddin Basti. The trust is also restoring 70 structures, including 40 mausoleums, in Hyderabad’s Quli Qutb Shah Archaeological Park.

“We have not realised the economic potential of our heritage so we see it as a burden or responsibility,” says Ratish Nanda, chief executive, Aga Khan Trust. Finding ways other than tourism to monetise the conservation of heritage structures and roping in the private sector could be the way forward.

In Jodhpur, V Sunil, the brain behind the Incredible India and Make in India marketing campaigns, along with former colleague Mohit Jayal and two others, is trying a different approach, by putting a more commercial face on heritage conservation. The JDH Urban Regeneration Project (JDH is the International Air Transport Association code for Jodhpur airport) plans to develop three clusters in Jodhpur by combining the city’s heritage with hotels, cafes and retail outlets.

Part of the project was the cleaning of a stepwell, after which retail outlets and cafes were set up in restored havelis around it. “We should think about how to create an ecosystem instead of just developing one property,” says Sunil. The project has attracted investments from overseas funds and individual investors, though Sunil does not discuss the figures.

While renowned monuments, thanks to the interest of the general public, will attract government’s attention and money, hundreds of other heritage buildings, including residential and commercial, could fall through the cracks. Ajoy Mehta, Mumbai’s municipal commissioner, says while public heritage buildings can be maintained with taxpayers’ money, it is different for private buildings. “What happens when it’s falling apart or needs parking. Who will pay the price for it to remain the same?”

The reality is that our cities will only get bigger and messier. But our storied past cannot be abandoned in the race to the future. ■



**Abha Narain Lambah**, a conservation architect, says less than 10,000 sites are under the purview of Central and state archaeological departments

ganesh.seetharaman@timesgroup.com