

Esplanade demolition: Activists say MHCC should have taken a stronger stand

Jun 27, 2019 | Arita Sarkar

Activists say Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee's reply to MHADA left out important details as well as International Council for Monuments and Sites' offer to help restore building



International Council for Monuments and Sites has written to MHADA, BMC and the Chief Minister, offering help to conserve Esplanade

A day after the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC) submitted their reply to the Maharashtra Housing and Development Authority (MHADA) recommending that Esplanade Mansion should be preserved, some heritage movement activists feel that it (MHCC) made a weak argument to prevent the demolition of the Grade II heritage structure. The MHCC's reply will be submitted in the ongoing case in the Bombay High Court.

Members of MHCC had studied IIT-Bombay's structural audit report before taking a decision. In the reply, MHCC has mentioned that Esplanade Mansion is a heritage landmark, and acknowledged its 'uniqueness in terms of its history, construction technology, architectural character and social importance.' The reply, however, doesn't mention its status as being part of the ensemble that was granted the distinction of 'Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai' by UNESCO.

The International Council for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) had written to MHADA, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), the Urban Development Department and the Chief Minister on June 10 and offered to give technical guidance for the conservation of Esplanade Mansion. Atul Kumar, founder of Art Deco Mumbai and vice president of the Nariman Point-Churchgate Citizens' Association, found it surprising that MHCC has not mentioned ICOMOS' letter in their reply. "It would have helped the situation if they (MHCC) had acknowledged ICOMOS' concerns. It's a severe remark if ICOMOS says that demolishing the structure would put the entire inscription at risk. MHCC's reply could have highlighted the significance of the structure not only in the city but in India and the world," said Kumar.

He added that as custodians of heritage structures in the city, MHCC should highlight the qualitative cost of the loss of such a building, which can result in UNESCO removing the world heritage site inscription. "It's an unbelievable offer and one should take it. ICOMOS has the global expertise to save the cast iron institution. Why would one turn that down?" he asked.

Like Kumar, Nayana Kathpalia, trustee of NAGAR, a non-profit organisation, too felt that MHCC could have taken a stronger stand against the possible demolition of the Esplanade Mansion. "ICOMOS has offered to help which should have been mentioned in the MHCC's response. It is a complex matter because it is owned by an individual and has tenants. But even if it means bending some laws and changing some rules, every possible step should be taken to restore the structure," she said. She added that while an estimate can be drawn up, the cost of restoration should not be a factor in this case and that funding can be found from international agencies as well.

In its reply, MHCC has stated that a thorough analysis should be done of the 'possibility of preserving the original structure minus the alterations, additions and interpolations' that were made later. They also recommended that a review should be done by a committee of conservation experts who should also come up with possible strategies for ensuring the fire safety of the building. The reply also mentioned that the expert committee should assess the estimated cost and the time frame the restoration would take.

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