

Art Deco's forgotten hero

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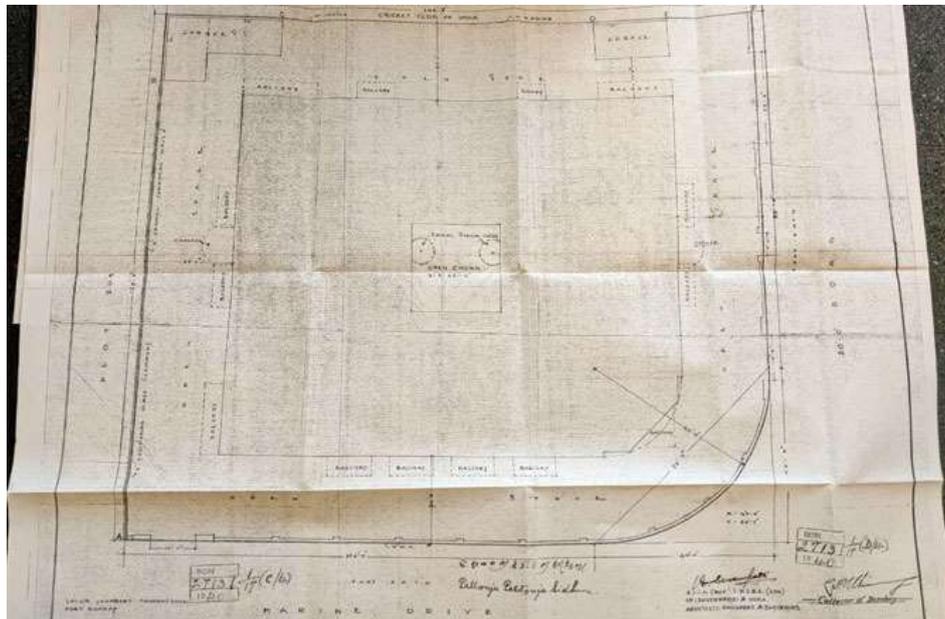
A chance mention of her great grandfather, architect Maganlal Vora, in a book, set an expat on a 13-year-long roller-coaster journey to trace his link to the city's iconic buildings



Sea Green Hotel was designed by Maganlal Vora's firm

Serena Vora is only 34, but her knowledge of Art Deco is fascinating. As we stand outside the iconic Sea Green Hotel, overlooking the Arabian Sea, she points to the round corners and streamlined designs of the structure that characterise the Art Deco style. We are then taken to the neighbouring Soona Mahal, which houses Pizza By The Bay. She speaks of the intricate patterns on its windows and the circular design of the penthouse. This skill, Serena reckons, she gets from her great grandfather, Maganlal Vora. Unfortunately, she never met him, as he passed when she was only a few years old. But she is thankful to the legacy that he has left behind for her and the family's many next generations to see — Mumbai's iconic Art Deco buildings.

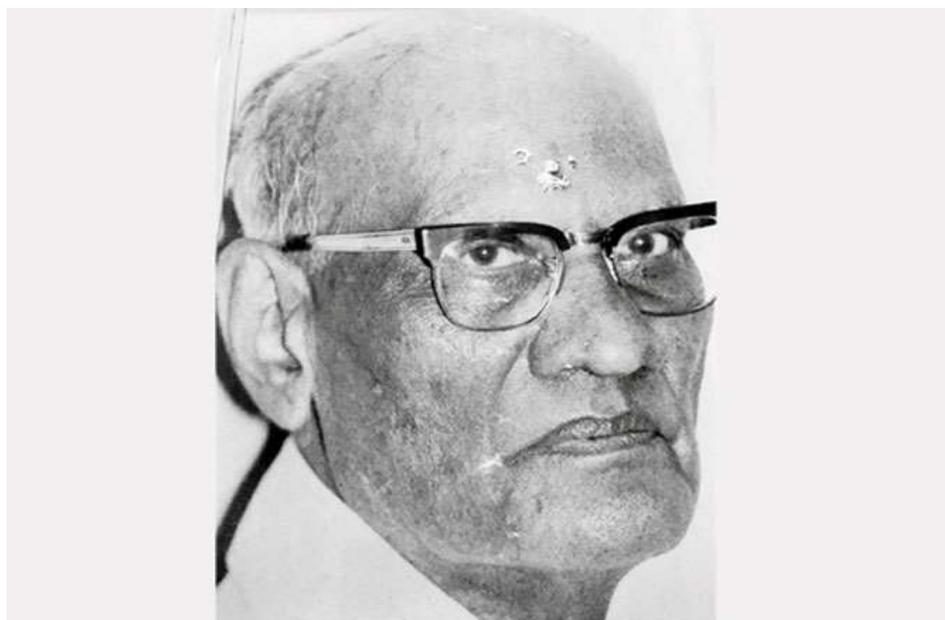
Serena's journey to finding the genius of her great grandfather goes back 13 years. The US citizen shares, "While I was born in California, both my parents are originally from Mumbai; so we always visited the city during the summers to meet our extended family. When I graduated in business administration, I thought interning with a company in Mumbai would be the safest option as I knew people here. While the plan was to stay here only for six months in 2006, the internship with a magazine turned into a full-time job and I never left the city."



Blueprint of the hotel found by Keki Sidhwa. Pics/Shadab Khan

That same year, an extended family member brought to her notice something that left her stunned, and changed the course of her visit. "They came across Rahul Mehrotra and Sharada Dwivedi's book *Bombay: The Cities Within*, which had a mention of my great grandfather. The article stated that his architecture firm, Suvarnapatki and Vora, was one of the many famous companies behind Mumbai's Art Deco buildings," she recalls, adding she and her mother quickly made a trip to the Taj Bookshop to get their own copy. "We were surprised to see his name."

From there began an unending, yet exciting quest. The mission was simple — to get the names of as many structures built by her great grandfather. But the more she looked, the bleaker were her chances of finding anything. "In those intervening years, I worked with a music company as a digital marketer. I was still looking for clues. I even contacted construction companies for leads, but my efforts were futile. There was nothing on the internet as well. But as years passed, my resolve to find this lost legacy strengthened," she informs.



At 60, Maganlal completed a degree in homeopathy

Serena's grandfather and father, too, are architects who started their own firms. "They both wanted to start something of their own and not take the family business forward. So after my great grandfather's firm was sold, all the documents were given out in the deal. We literally had nothing on his work; nobody preserved it," she says. It wasn't long before a friend brought the Art Deco Mumbai's Instagram page to her notice in February this year. Atul Kumar, founder of Art Deco Mumbai, a digital architectural repository of the city, shares, "She sent me a message on Instagram saying she thinks some of the Art Deco buildings in Mumbai were designed by her great grandfather. So I asked for his name. When she said Maganlal Vora, my heart skipped a beat."

Kumar has been working on a project to acknowledge the work of great Indian architects for three long years. Interestingly, they had already found some of Maganlal's works during this period. "Unfortunately, public access to records is restricted. It's not even stored in a manner that is retrievable. Everyone knows Frederick William Stevens designed Victoria Terminus, but how many people know that the most beautiful Art Deco buildings are created by Indian architects?" he adds.



Soona Mahal

Kumar then collated a list of four buildings designed by Maganlal and shared their locations with Serena. These include Soona Mahal (designed along with architect GB Mhatre), Sea Green Hotel, Kanti Mahal and Bhoj Mahal in Tejookaya Park of Matunga. Information, however, on these structures is scarce. But Kumar feels, Serena is the "only link Art Deco Mumbai has to the esteemed Suvarnapatki and Vora firm".



Kanti Mahal

Keki Sidhwa, owner of Sea Green Hotel, too, had absolutely nothing on the firm that built the structure. But after a day of looking, he finally found the blueprint of the hotel with the firm's signature at the bottom. "This is a fascinating find," he said. While Kumar feels there could be many more buildings designed by Maganlal, Serena has decided to no longer chase these clues. "I will wait for the information to organically come to me. For now, all I know is that he had a dynamic personality and that after retiring, he completed his degree in homeopathy at the age of 60. Can you believe he was good at this too?" she laughs.



Serena Vora