

Unesco tag invisible at Marine Drive & Fort

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On this day last year Marine Drive received a crown fit for a queen. On June 30, 2018, a cluster of Victorian Gothic and Art Deco buildings in the Marine Drive and Fort precincts bagged the coveted Unesco World Heritage Site tag. Not only did Mumbai thus become the second city after Ahmedabad to be so inscribed but the home of three Unesco sites in all, including Elephanta and CSMT.

The hard-won crown, which came after a 14-year-long campaign, should have been milked for all its tourism worth by the administration. But it's still remarkably easy to walk past the Bombay High Court, University of Mumbai, David Sassoon Library, the Eros and Regal cinemas or even the residential buildings along Marine Drive, oblivious to the global honour.

Efforts at preserving or even advertising the buildings' tag have been virtually non-existent, say citizens groups. "After having worked so hard to get the inscription it would have made logical sense to follow its mandate in letter and spirit. Instead we have received a warning letter from ICOMOS (International Council on Mo-



It's been a year since the WHS tag was awarded to 94 buildings including Fort's David Sassoon Library (above)

numents and Sites) as we head into our first anniversary which is really disturbing," says Atul Kumar of Art Deco Mumbai Trust.

Kumar is referring to ICOMOS India's letter to the state government raising concerns about the demolition of Esplanade Mansion, the 156-year-old cast-iron monolith at Fort that is part of the Unesco World Heritage group of buildings. The letter gives a clear indication, says Kumar, that if Esplanade is demolished then "we are putting the entire inscription

for both Victorian Gothic and Art Deco at risk". He adds: "That would be a black mark for India."

However, the state government has already written to Mhada to take up the repair and restoration of Esplanade Mansion, said Nitin Kareer, principal secretary (urban development department) who was part of the Indian delegation to the Unesco meeting in Bahrain. "We understand that a report done by IIT says the building needs to be demolished. Still, we are reiterating

that they seek another opinion, maybe from someone like (civil engineer) Shirish Patel," he said.

Kareer does not believe the World Heritage Site (WHS) tag is at risk, however, or that more laws are necessary to protect the area. Protection is "built into" the city's heritage regulations, he said. Ramnath Jha, the chairman of the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee, too says that existing rules are enough to deal with any proposals related to buildings falling within the WHS

precincts.

The idea of making the area into a World Heritage Site was first presented in 2004 at a Unesco conference at Chandigarh by conservation architect Abha Narain Lambah. But it took 14 years to get all the stakeholders, citizen groups and government on board. The nomination dossier was submitted by the state government to the Ministry of Culture in 2014 with a stamp of approval from CM Devendra Fadnavis. The tag established Mumbai's 200-year-old colonial legacy. But "the Bombay neo-Gothic, Indo-Saracenic, and Bombay Art Deco styles were not simply 'colonial' architectures," says poet Ranjit Hoskote. "Many of these buildings mark the formulation of a new, perhaps eccentric, but memorable architectural language. And many of our Art Deco buildings predate their glamorous counterparts in Miami, so we were there before Miami, not after."

Lambah, at the recent Sharada Dwivedi Memorial lecture organised by the Urban Design Research Institute (UDRI), said that the Unesco tag was "not for dead monuments but for living buildings that are in use". Much more needs to be done to keep the ensembles in the public eye, she had added.

Yet visual clues of the neighbourhood's heritage tag are hard to find—unlike at CST.

There are no signs which identify the precincts as a WHS or even a plaque at public buildings, noted Maneck Davar of Kala Ghoda Association. "The government needs to acknowledge this tag through various events and interventions. So you create good walking spaces, see the footpaths and roads are well maintained around the ensembles," he said.

While the lack of official acknowledgment from the government, the civic body and MHCC also rankles Nayana Kathpalia, trustee of the NGO NAGAR, she added that the Federation of Residents Trusts, of which NAGAR is a part, has prepared a signage plan according to Unesco's requirements which it intends to submit to the heritage committee.

Ideally, the tag should also have been publicized as a culturally significant site in India and overseas, said architect Pankaj Joshi, executive director of UDRI. "It would've been good to market it with a special focus to enhance city tourism, economy and also organize and manage festivals and heritage tours around it," he said.

For now, Kareer says that the state will be holding meetings with BMC about the upkeep of the area, with the PWD department in particular—since many are government buildings—besides citizen stakeholders.