

#MumbaiMirrored: Dreaming a modern city

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The story of 20th century Bombay is firmly rooted in modernism, home to the second largest Art Deco district in the world.

“The Art Deco buildings [in Mumbai] are one of the largest and most homogenous assemblages of Art Deco buildings in Asia and the world.” — UNESCO report, 2018

Built in the 1930s, Bombay’s Art Deco buildings, one of the largest agglomerations in the world, have the unique distinction of being a ‘modern living heritage’. These are buildings that we live in and have outstanding universal value in terms of their architectural and historic significance, even though they will be 100 years old over the next decade. Bombay metamorphosed quite differently from a city like Delhi, which has defining Mughal architecture. The city’s identity is born out of public and residential spaces, all of which are inhabited and in active daily use today. The story of 20th century Bombay is firmly rooted in modernism.

Art Deco exudes modernity and cosmopolitan sophistication. With a port that gave traders access to both eastern and western hemispheres, Bombay became a welcoming crucible that thrived on the latest modern styles and designs emanating from Paris in the West and Shanghai in the East. They were used by Indian architects to fulfil lifestyle aspirations of affluent merchants, who only wanted the best from the West.



Legendary Deco sculptor NG Pansare's son Kiran Pansare working on the majestic statue of Shivaji that his father sculpted in bronze and installed at Shivaji Park, in 1966

The great new enablers reinforced concrete, which allowed for speedy construction at lower cost, with decorative motifs and embellishments adorning facades. Buildings came up with seemingly impossible structural variations. The construct of a cantilevered balcony that could literally 'stick out' with no support from below became a novel reality. Warm salubrious tropical weather led to an ingenious creation, the chajja, which covered balconies and windows. This helped provide a shelter from the rain, protection from the sun, while thoughtfully placed windows caught every breath of sea breeze to make apartments ever so comfortable with just a fan. It was a climate responsive architecture — one that adapted to weather and the environment, rather than challenging it.

Bombay owes, in a large part, its cosmopolitan lifestyle to these buildings that introduced the apartment as a living space. The city saw itself transition from community-based chawls to buildings

with apartments. Neighbours, landlords and tenants engaged with curiosity. Children grew up in next door apartments forging lifelong friendships. Residents discovered and celebrated communities, festivals, foods and rituals, embracing a broad swathe of cultural and social norms that holds this city, now Mumbai, in good stead.

Celebrating the Deco men

One can hardly ignore the hallowed Brabourne stadium at the Cricket Club of India in Churchgate, designed by Pierre Avicenna d’Avoine, Partner of Gregson, Batley & King. His son, Pierre d’Avoine, himself a prominent architect in London, says his father was an avid cricketer and played for the GBK cricket team in 1929. He wielded a strong bat and turned a mean arm, taking seven wickets for 23 runs against the Barnes school, Deolali. Profession and passion melded together to reflect in the design of the stadium he built. It affords every viewer a rare intimacy with the cricket match, no matter where you are seated. Sculpted by NG Pansare, the life-size bas relief elements on New India Assurance building, Fort, designed by Master, Sathe & Bhuta, fused swadeshi elements with Deco stone clad buildings. His son, Kiran Pansare proudly shows off a photo of himself working on the majestic statue of Shivaji that his father sculpted in bronze and installed at Shivaji Park in 1966.

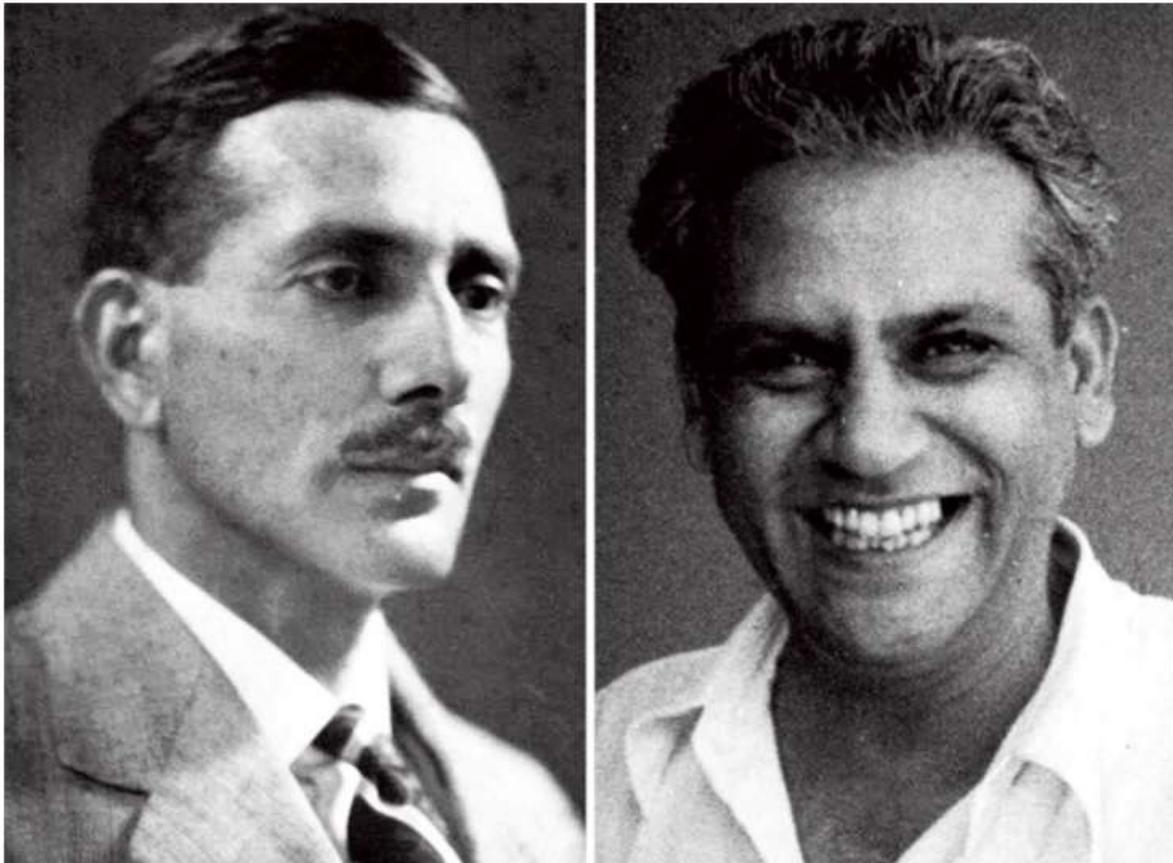


Situated in Tejookaya Park, Matunga, the city’s largest Art Deco neighbourhood, Kanti Mahal, is a rare gem

Serena Vora, now settled in California, is the great granddaughter of Maganlal Vora, of Suvernpatki & Vora, architects of iconic Soona Mahal, which stands as the most iconic façade in Marine Drive’s Art Deco precinct and host to the sea-facing restaurant, Pizza By The Bay. It was 81 years later, in 2018, that Serena discovered that her illustrious great grandfather was behind one of Bombay’s grandest Deco structure. Meher Mehta still has memories of her dashing maternal grandfather, architect Sohrabji Bhedwar, who Bombay knows of because of the red Agra stone clad Eros cinema, a magnificent V shaped tribute to the ziggurat.

If architect FW Stevens is famous for CSMT, then the city owes no less a debt of gratitude to his son Charles Stevens for designing Regal Cinema, Bombay's first Art Deco building, a landmark with air-conditioning, underground parking, neon lighting and, in a thoughtfulness way ahead of its time, limited seating with aids for the hearing impaired.

The June 2018 inscription of the 'Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Bombay' as a UNESCO World Heritage site celebrates the city's modern living heritage. The inscription affords a layer of protection to 76 Art Deco buildings in South Bombay. It will largely be the city's consciousness that has to keep this rich legacy alive for future generations. We remain accountable to them. If we let them down, they will certainly not look at us kindly.



(L) Architect Sohrabji Bhedwar designed the red agar stone clad, Eros Cinema, the iconic Art Deco theatre in Churchgate; (R) Architect P A d'Avoine, partner of Gregson, Batley & King, designed the hallowed Brabourne stadium at the Cricket Club of India in Churchgate

Across the length and breadth'

Bombay's Deco embraces both typologies and the city's geographical expanse, creating an emotional quotient for Bombayites, since it is a city built largely by its residents and many of its public buildings were gifts of philanthropy. These buildings are treasure troves of history and endearing stories. Several generations have studied at Don Bosco High School in Matung. In the Fort district, the first insurance policy available to Indians came from swadeshi firms such as Lakshmi Insurance (1938) and New India Assurance (1937), both designed by masters, Sathe & Bhuta.'

Today, while a generation remembers seeing 007 Sean Connery in Goldfinger, in 1964, at Regal Cinema. In 2006, a new generation thronged to catch 007 Daniel Craig in Casino Royale. Regal still holds its own across generations. Late Nazir Hoosein, the owner of Liberty cinema, a Deco showplace

of the nation, narrates how artist MF Husain danced barefoot every evening in the aisles of Liberty cinema, throwing coins at the screen, captivated by Madhuri Dixit, dancing in Hum Aapke Hain Kaun.



The construct of a cantilevered balcony — as seen in Commonwealth building, located off Marine Drive — that literally ‘stick out’ with no support from below, is a novel Deco idea

Liberty was designed by MA Riddley-Abbot, in 1949. The Udwadia family healed the city’s elite at Breach Candy Hospital, one of the many buildings designed by Gregson, Batley & King, who Prof Mustansir Dalvi of Sir JJ College of Architecture identifies as “the largest practice, amongst the Bombay architects during the 1930s and the 1940s”. Maithili Ahluwalia who created an epochal concept store, Bungalow Eight, often heads to catch a conversation over a drink at West End Hotel’s chic deco bar Chez Nous, saying, “it’s a rewind where she loves to unwind”. Built on the philosophy “a hotel is meant to be a home away from home”, this hidden jewel was built in 1948.

Deco's geographical breadth spreads across Bombay. Its landmarks define neighbourhoods. Matunga has cafe Koolar & Co, while Aurora cinema, by Marathe and Kulkarni, fed a different nutrient, the best of Rajnikanth to a largely South Indian community. Vile Parle has Nanavati Hospital, while Chowpatty boasts of Ideal Café at Phoolchand Nivas. Deco bungalows in Juhu and Chembur still hold their own against the onslaught of high rises affording the area a quality of life you can't find today. With its majestic sweep of 35 Deco buildings, Marine Drive remains Bombay's pre-eminent public open space that is an affirmation of diversity, harmoniously bringing together people of all cultures, age groups and ethnicity. Oval Maidan straddles two centuries of architecture.

Bombay's place on the global map is secure. It hosts the second largest collection of Art Deco buildings in the world, 552 to be precise, and we are still counting. Matunga, not South Bombay's Marine Drive holds pride of place as the single largest Deco neighbourhood. Last year, the International Coalition of Art Deco Societies took cognisance of Bombay's Art Deco by making it a member of this prestigious international body – a recognition that belongs first to the city.



Liberty cinema, a Deco showplace, opened in 1949, to a glittering premiere with the screening of the Raj Kapoorstarrer Andaz

—The writer is founder trustee, Art Deco Mumbai Trust www.artdecomumbai.com

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