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Discovering Mumbai's Art Deco Treasures

The city has the world's second-largest collection of the buildings, second only to Miami. But even as they gain attention, they are threatened.



The Art Deco buildings on Marine Drive in Mumbai have been recognized as a World Heritage site by Unesco.
Atul Loke for The New York Times

Every evening, crowds swarm Marine Drive, the iconic waterfront on the southern tip of Mumbai, India's financial capital.

Few of the families and tourists who are out taking in the air stop to look back at the low-rise apartment blocks that line the avenue — a cityscape Salman Rushdie described in the novel [“The Ground Beneath Her Feet”](#) as “a glittering Art Deco sweep ... not even Rome could boast.”

That disregard may be set to change.

The Art Deco buildings on Marine Drive, together with those on the blocks along the nearby park Oval Maidan, were recognized last year by Unesco as part of a World Heritage site, a distinction that is expected to help preserve and promote the neighborhood. The tag was the result of a 10-year campaign led by heritage activists and local resident groups, one that

reflects a growing celebration of Mumbai’s Art Deco architecture — even as it is vanishing under the wrecking ball.

“Everyone always talked about CST,” said Atul Kumar, referring to the [Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus](#), the city’s other Unesco site, a magnificent and much-Instagrammed Victorian Gothic railway station. “But we also had one of the richest collections of Deco in the world.”

Mr. Kumar, a resident of Marine Drive, set up the nonprofit [Art Deco Mumbai](#) in 2016 to raise awareness of these buildings on social media, as well as to document them in an online repository. His team has listed more than 375 buildings, including residences, palaces, hotels and cinemas, all built between 1930 and 1950. They estimate the final count — including not just wealthy south Mumbai but the bazaars of Mohammed Ali Road and middle-class neighborhoods like Shivaji Park, Matunga and Bandra — will be around 600 buildings.

That means Mumbai has the world’s second-largest collection of Art Deco structures, after Miami.



By The New York Times

The term Art Deco, or art decoratifs, gained traction in the 1960s as a way to describe a visual style of architecture, design and fashion that emerged in 1920s France. The style’s streamlined forms and geometric motifs were inspired by new technologies — ocean liners, airplanes, automobiles, movies — and by everything from Cubism to Egyptian imagery.

Mumbai’s Art Deco structures are not as grand as Jazz Age behemoths like New York’s Chrysler Building. Instead, they resemble Miami’s laid-back “tropical deco.” As Unesco recognized, the value of Mumbai’s Deco does not lie in the drama of a single structure but in the spirit of the ensemble. This fabric represents the making of modern Bombay, as it was then known.

A confluence of cultural, economic and technological changes transformed the city in the 1930s and '40s. An economic boom attracted thousands of Indians, creating a professional class. The authorities developed a reclamation plan to create new land to house them, including Marine Drive, and also created suburbs to the north of the city. Indian architects, many returning from London, along with European designers, built the first apartments on this land for merchants, industrialists and Indian princes traveling to Europe on the luxury liners of the [Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company](#).

These architects broke with the British Raj's ornate Victorian Gothic and Indo-Saracenic styles for the latest international trend — described by a leading British architect as “the nudist movement in our profession” — while adapting it to the local environment. The choice could be seen as a form of resistance, said Mustansir Dalvi, professor at the [Sir J. J. School of Art and Architecture](#), and as a backdrop of the freedom movement.

Movie houses, many built by American movie companies like MGM, glamorized the new aesthetic. A new technology, reinforced cement concrete, made all this construction quick and cheap. The apartments were snapped up by a rising urban elite “who aspired to be modern and were willing to live next to those who were not like themselves,” said Mr. Dalvi. “They sat next to each other in offices, on commutes, in cinema halls.”

He adds: “For Bombay, what Art Deco represents is cosmopolitanism.”

In a city increasingly dominated by gated communities and hodgepodge skylines, the Deco neighborhoods recall an age of openness and urban coherence. Strict bylaws ensured public spaces and amenities. Buildings had low compound walls. “The wonderful thing about the Art Deco era is that it gave us neighborhoods, not just single pieces,” Mr. Dalvi said.

From Mumbai, Art Deco spread to other cities. The style's afterlife in India lasted into the late 1940s and early '50s, and paved the way for modernism after independence in 1947. For decades, however, the contribution of the Art Deco era was overlooked. Architects worshiped high modernists like Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier while conservationists focused on ancient and colonial monuments.

For years, residents like Nayana Kathpalia, a member of the Oval Trust that supported the heritage campaign, were unaware of the historical or aesthetic value of their buildings. “We just thought it was a good place to live in and look at,” Ms. Kathpalia said.

The recent interest comes just as this layer of the city is vanishing. The Unesco tag now protects Marine Drive and Oval Maidan, but everywhere else old buildings are falling daily — and with them many memories.

“What is special about Mumbai's architecture, and about Art Deco in particular, is that unlike Delhi it is not all monuments or public buildings,” Mr. Kumar said. “It is homes and schools and cinemas, spaces we have lived in, grown up with and can relate to.”

If you want to see some of Mumbai's best Art Deco buildings firsthand, here are four good places to start.



The Regal Cinema opened in 1933 with Laurel and Hardy's "The Devil's Brother."
Atul Loke for The New York Times

1. Regal and Eros Cinemas

Mumbai's Art Deco cinemas were often funded or owned by American film companies. Regal is the city's oldest, opening in 1933 with Laurel and Hardy's "The Devil's Brother." In a neat illustration of the changing times, the theater was designed by the British architect Charles Stevens, whose father Frederic Stevens famously built the Gothic marvel of the Victoria Terminus (now Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus). The Regal was also the first building to have an underground garage, neon lighting and a soda fountain.

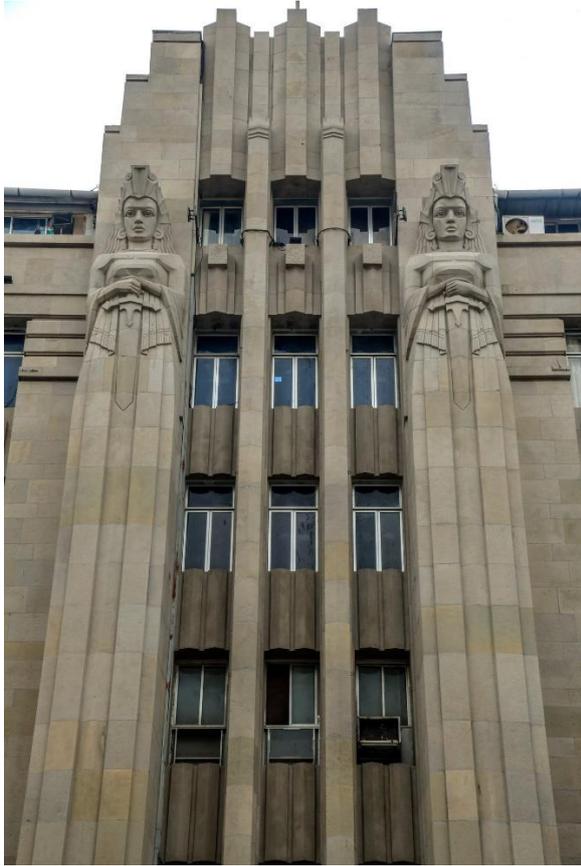
Nearby, the Eros cinema, built five years later, is more visually striking with its cream-striped red-sandstone facade, ziggurat roofline, and a lavish foyer decorated with classical and Indian friezes. (The building was designed by the Indian architect Sorabji Bhedwar, its interiors by a Czech émigré, Karl Schara.) The 1938 cinema once also hosted a ballroom and restaurant, advertised as "The Rendezvous of the East." But the Eros is closed, so if you want to catch a film, you'd have to go to the Regal, which nowadays means you're more likely to see something from Bollywood than Hollywood.



Shiv Shanti Bhuvan at Oval Maidan is notable for the “eyebrows” or concrete weather shades, over the windows. Atul Loke for The New York Times

2. Shiv Shanti Bhuvan, Oval Maidan

Shiv Shanti Bhuvan is one in the line of 1930s Art Deco apartment blocks that front the green of the Oval Maidan, looking across it to the Victorian spires of the University and High Court. This face-off between two centuries and styles is what earned the area its heritage designation. The apartments here are among the city’s earliest and perhaps the most international. You might think they were thumbing their noses at the imperial grandees across the cricket pitch — except, as Mr. Dalvi notes, that many of these new apartment buildings have names like Empress Court and Windsor House. Shiv Shanti, located on a street corner, is one of the most impressive with its yellow-and-green color scheme and stack of “eyebrows,” or concrete weather shades, jutting over the windows, a local adaptation. Note the frozen fountain design over the entrance: a common motif popularized by the 1920s French designer René Lalique.



The New India Assurance building is almost classical in its details.
Atul Loke for The New York Times



The Assurance building's sculptural reliefs idealize Indian workers.
Atul Loke for The New York Times

3. New India Assurance, Fort

The city's Art Deco cinemas exude old Hollywood, and its apartments are functional and stylish. By contrast, the Art Deco office buildings are solid, almost classical, as befits their use by banks and insurance companies. In the city's Fort neighborhood, the New India Assurance, built in 1936, has strong vertical lines, flanked by two classical-style figures. Heavy sculptural reliefs, designed by N. G. Pansare, idealize workers: farmers, potters, women spinning cotton and carrying pots of water. You'll find Indian flourishes on nearby insurance buildings too, including sculptures of elephants and of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.



The round turret of the Soona Mahal building on Marine Drive is in keeping with the structure's nautical look.
Atul Loke for The New York Times

4. Soona Mahal, Marine Drive

A short stroll from the Oval lies Marine Drive, nicknamed the “Queen’s Necklace” for the curve of lights at the waterfront at night. Building names here reflect their location — Oceana, Riviera, Chateau Marine — or their Indian ownership. Some were originally owned by maharajas and industrialists. Soona Mahal, built and still owned by the Sidhwa family, is named after the current owner’s grandmother. Typically Deco are the curved balconies and strong vertical lines. The round turret on the roof, echoing a ship’s bridge, is in keeping with the style’s nautical themes. Designed by G. B. Mhatre, an important Indian architect of the time, the building hosted a famous jazz club on the ground floor. Now a music club and pizzeria, it’s the perfect spot to grab a beer and watch the sun set on the Arabian Sea.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/travel/mumbai-art-deco.html>