

Webinar on Saturday: How Mumbai's Art Deco architecture and its maritime history are inextricably linked

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Written by **Benita Fernando** | Mumbai |

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Shireen Mansion, Mumbai. (Photo Source: Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

With balconies facing the sea on one side and a large playing field on the other, the Art Deco buildings beside Oval Maidan have some of the best views in the city. There is more at work here than just the stunning views, though. Residents recall that up until a decade ago, one didn't need air-conditioning as sea breeze was ushered in by the south-westerly wind pervading these homes. The same could be said of Art Deco structures at Shivaji Park as well.

To discuss this unique phenomenon — of sea and its influence on architecture — a webinar, titled Deco by the Sea, will be organised by the Maritime Mumbai Museum Society, in association with Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), The Museum Society of Mumbai, and the Art Deco Mumbai Trust on Saturday.



Oceana building, Mumbai . (Source: Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

“It was not by chance but by design,” said Atul Kumar, the founder-trustee of Art Deco Mumbai, a virtual project that showcases the city’s Art Deco heritage. “There was adequate air and light—the classic features of good design,” he added.

The influence of Mumbai’s maritime history on its architecture hasn’t been explored enough, according to Kumar. “Everybody knows about the seven islands and how they came together. But that’s just geographical history. There is the influence of the port and the sea on the city’s layout and building architecture that was climate-responsive,” he said. He pointed out that the city

owes its cosmopolitanism to the sea and the prosperity of trade, which served as an invitation for people to move to the then Bombay, assuring them of no discrimination on the basis of caste or race. “We had a port, and cotton, and ships, and that’s how Bombay became the city of opportunity,” he said.

During the webinar, expressions of maritime history and nautical imagery in Art Deco architecture, such as the names of buildings and the use of portals, will also be discussed. Many of these decorative elements are not as superficial as they seem, said Kumar, citing the example of the nautical relief at Shireen Mansion in Tardeo, which shows a man on a boat, with hills rising behind him and flocks of birds. “This, as [writer] Meher Marfatia researched, relates to the landlord Burjorji Bhesania’s history as a trader transporting bales of grass between Bombay’s islands on a boat,” he said.

Kumar said that the city and the sea have always been inextricably linked even though the connection is often only spoken about in the context of recent interventions, such as the Coastal Road. “To a large extent, the whole basis of the Art Deco buildings’ existence gets challenged because one more layer is added between them and the sea. This restricts their view, their air and light, and creates a more cramped environment. It goes to exemplify how much we keep taking from the sea and what precious little we have to show for what we have given back to it,” said Kumar.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/webinar-mumbai-art-deco-architecture-maritime-history-7442097/>