

Art Dekho – a history of Mumbai’s iconic Art Deco architecture

After Miami, India has the most Art Deco Buildings in the world. The movements originated in France and subsequently spread to the US and later, the rest of the world. Here's a look at how Art Deco evolved in Mumbai, and how local citizens are conserving the city's long legacy.

Written by [Mira Patel](#) | Mumbai |

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Shireen Mansion is one of the iconic Art Deco buildings of Mumbai (Art Deco Mumbai)

Few may know that [Mumbai](#), a city perhaps best encapsulated by its massively congested urban sprawl and towering skyscrapers, is actually home to the second largest collection of Art Deco buildings in the world. Salman Rushdie, in an essay for the book *Bombay Meri Jaan*, says that the style was such an integral feature of his conceptualisation of the city that he thought it originated across the seven islands. “I actually grew up believing

Art Deco to be the 'Bombay style,' a local invention, its name derived, in all probability, from the imperative of the verb 'to see.' Art dekho, Lo and behold art," he writes.



Swastik Court (Aaran Patel)

Rushdie isn't speaking in hyperbole. Estimates suggest that Mumbai can claim over 880 Art Deco buildings including residences, hotels and cinemas

spanning from the wealthy enclaves of Malabar Hill to the chaotic bazaars of Mohammed Ali Road. They belong to the affluent, the middle class, and the millions of others who call this city their home.

Popular amongst architects and princes, the Art Deco movement signified modernity and opulence, serving both as a reminder of Bombay's storied past and as a gold beacon of hope for its ambitious future.

History of the Art Deco Movement

Art Deco is best described as an amalgamation of different artistic styles, borrowing bold geometric forms from Cubism, bright colours from Fauvism and incorporating motifs from early Aztec and Egyptian art. It was the first modern style to adopt new technologies, embracing innovation and luxury while maintaining its own uncluttered and functional aesthetic. The movement was born from the industrial revolution, at a time where jazz, ocean liners, machines and aeroplanes hypnotised the world with their beauty, efficiency and the winds of change they brought along. Art Deco managed to perfectly capture that zeitgeist, positioning itself as the artistic celebration of progress and modernity.

While the description, Art Deco can be applied to various forms of design including jewellery, furniture, art and glassware, its most significant contribution was to the field of architecture.

Making its debut in France in 1904, Art Deco architecture originated in the suburbs of Paris when two French architects used reinforced concrete to design apartment buildings distinguished by their clean lines and rectangular forms. Their designs took off, and slowly, so did Art Deco architecture.

France imported Art Deco to the world in 1925, when the French Government hosted a landmark exhibition known as the Exposition Internationale Des Arts Decoratifs Et Industriels Modernes. That gathering of 15,000 artists was visited by over 16 million people cementing the popularity of Art Deco. In terms of what the requirements for entry were, the answer, which could also describe the movement itself, is that the artwork be “thoroughly modern.”



Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center and Chrysler Building (Wikimedia Commons)

Although Herbert Hoover, the American Secretary of Commerce at the time, refused to let his countrymen take part in the exhibition, he did send a travelling delegation to assess its artworks and bring back ideas for how the style could be adapted into something uniquely American. This trip inspired an immediate expansion in artistic innovation in the United States.

Unlike its European counterpart, the American Art Deco style was more sleek and less ornate. Nicknamed 'Streamline Moderne', Art Deco in America was inspired by a Gatsby-esque sense of flamboyance, glamour, and progressiveness. It soon grew into a far larger movement amongst the young generation of Americans living in the roaring 20s than it ever managed to do in Europe. Spectacular and gigantic monuments like the Rockefeller Centre, the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building in New York City, and the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco served as metaphors for America's own self-image, centred around notions of strength and power.

After the Great Depression in 1929, the same features of the movement that had made it so popular initially, eventually led to its decline. After the onset of the Second World War, Art Deco became synonymous with a sense of decadence that was unbecoming in a nation ravaged by war and economic strife.

However, while Art Deco was losing steam in the US, it was around this time that it reached its pinnacle in Bombay.

Early influencers of Art Deco in Bombay

After the Suez Canal opened in 1869, Bombay gained immense importance as a port city connecting East to West. Combined with technological changes and an economic boom, by the early 20th century, Bombay was truly a sustained metropolis, luring in thousands of Indians with its promise of grandeur and opportunity.

According to Atul Kumar, the founder of Art Deco Mumbai, "with trade came prosperity, and with prosperity came an aspiration wherein people wanted what was new, modern and trendy."



Framroz Court building at Marine Drive (Express Photo by Nirmal Harindran)

These people wanted to replicate the ideals of the West and to fulfil those dreams, there emerged a new class of architects who were willing to embrace the industrial modernity that Art Deco offered. Unlike the Victorian Gothic buildings of the past, the Art Deco buildings of Bombay were designed primarily by Indian architects returning from Europe and the US on the luxury liners of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company.

Inspired by what they had seen during their studies abroad and their revolutionary mode of transportation back home, these architects went on to build apartments for merchants, industrialists and Indian princes, influenced by the clean, bold designs that were the cornerstone of Art Deco, while also paying homage to Bombay's own cultural landscape.

Princes, in particular, gravitated towards this unique style. As Bombay expanded in the 1930s, they too rushed to seize their own slice of the emerging city. The Maharajas of princely states such as

Baroda, [Hyderabad](#), Kutch, and Gwalior built palatial homes in Bombay, with approximately 40 palaces being constructed in the city during this time.



Swastik Court (Aaran Patel)

One such structure — Dhanraj Mahal — was commissioned by the Maharaja of Hyderabad, Raja Dhanrajgir Bahadur, on the former site of the Watson Hotel. In 1932, Bahadur, known as the Rockefeller of the South, spared no expense in the construction of his 1.6 acre palace, installing over eight elevators and reserving a private apartment spanning 3,700 square metres for himself on the top floor. At the time, his residence was the only private dwelling in the city that got a clear view of the Gateway of India.

American film companies were also responsible for the spread of the movement in Bombay. According to Kumar, cinema chains such as Metro sought to distinguish themselves from their competitors through their architectural style. As they moved into India, they brought that style with them. Regal, the oldest cinema in the city, was opened in 1933, and only five years later, was joined by Eros, a multipurpose venue advertised as 'The Rendezvous of the East'.



Liberty Cinema Opening 1949 (Art Deco Trust)

Shortly after independence, in 1949, Liberty Cinema, the 'Showpiece of the Nation,' was inaugurated at Marine Lines. Named in honour of India's independence, Liberty was the first theatre to show primarily Hindi language films.

For a newly liberated class of Indians, these cinemas halls represented an opportunity to finally feel as though they were no longer second class citizens in their own cities. Lavish parties, brunches, screenings and celebrations were to be held there, attended by the elites of Bombay society.

From Bombay, Art Deco spread to other Indian cities as well. According to Geetanjali Sayal, an architect from [Delhi](#), while the focal point of the movement was Bombay, soon after, architects from the city carried the style with them to Delhi, [Ahmedabad](#), Jodhpur and several other states.

Both Jaisalmer and Dholpur Houses in Delhi were constructed by architects from Bombay.

However, while Art Deco evolved largely due to the patronage of the Anglicised rich, its popularity in Bombay stemmed from many different factors.

Practical considerations

Art Deco evolved in Bombay in tandem with a number of other developments, namely, the Black Bay Reclamation Project and the widespread adoption of cement. Prior to 1940, the area extending from Oval Maidan in the East to Marine Drive in the West was part of the Arabian Sea. After the reclamation of nearly 440 acres of land, local councils demanded that development on those lands be controlled by special laws mandating building size and structural design.

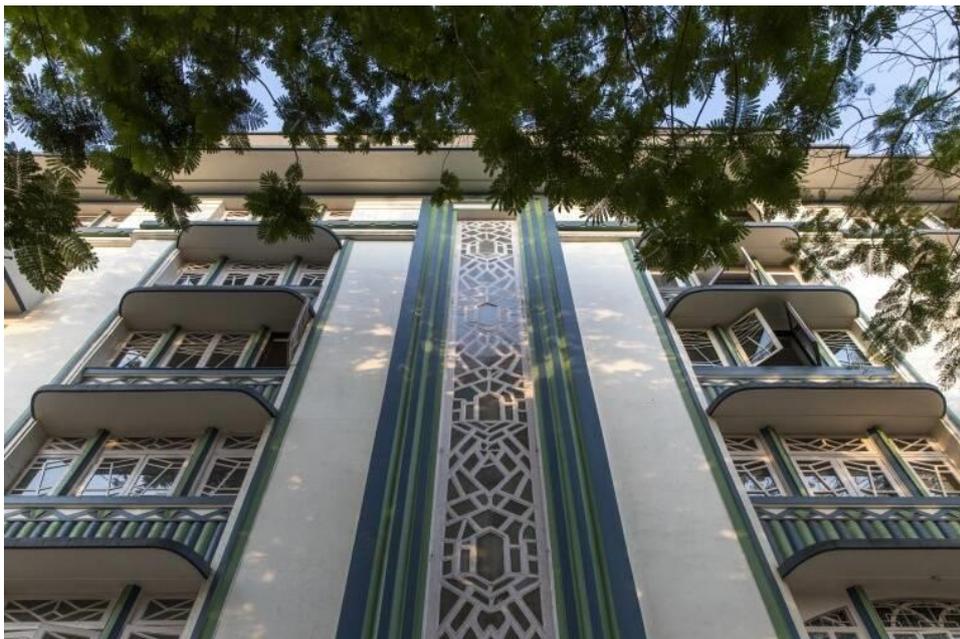


Kapadia Chambers, Marine Lines (Wikimedia Commons)

Initially envisioned as a way to ease population density, Gyan Prakash, a professor at Stanford University, wrote that “once reclamation was done, the attention turned to design and architecture – in this case, Art Deco style apartments along Marine Drive that embodied the cool, affluent, cosmopolitanism of modern Bombay.”

The opportunities for growth were aided by the availability of a new material in the form of Reinforced Cement Concrete. Produced in prodigious amounts across the city, cement allowed developers to reduce both construction times and costs, making homes far more attainable to the masses.

Apart from its economic benefits, cement changed the game in other ways too. Kumar points to the cantilevers or chajjas that are found in many Art Deco buildings. He says that while the cantilevers, known as the eyebrows of buildings, earlier needed to be supported by a foundation, with cement, they didn't need any support. In turn, with the cement revolution, the balcony was born.



Rajab Mahal (Aaran Patel)

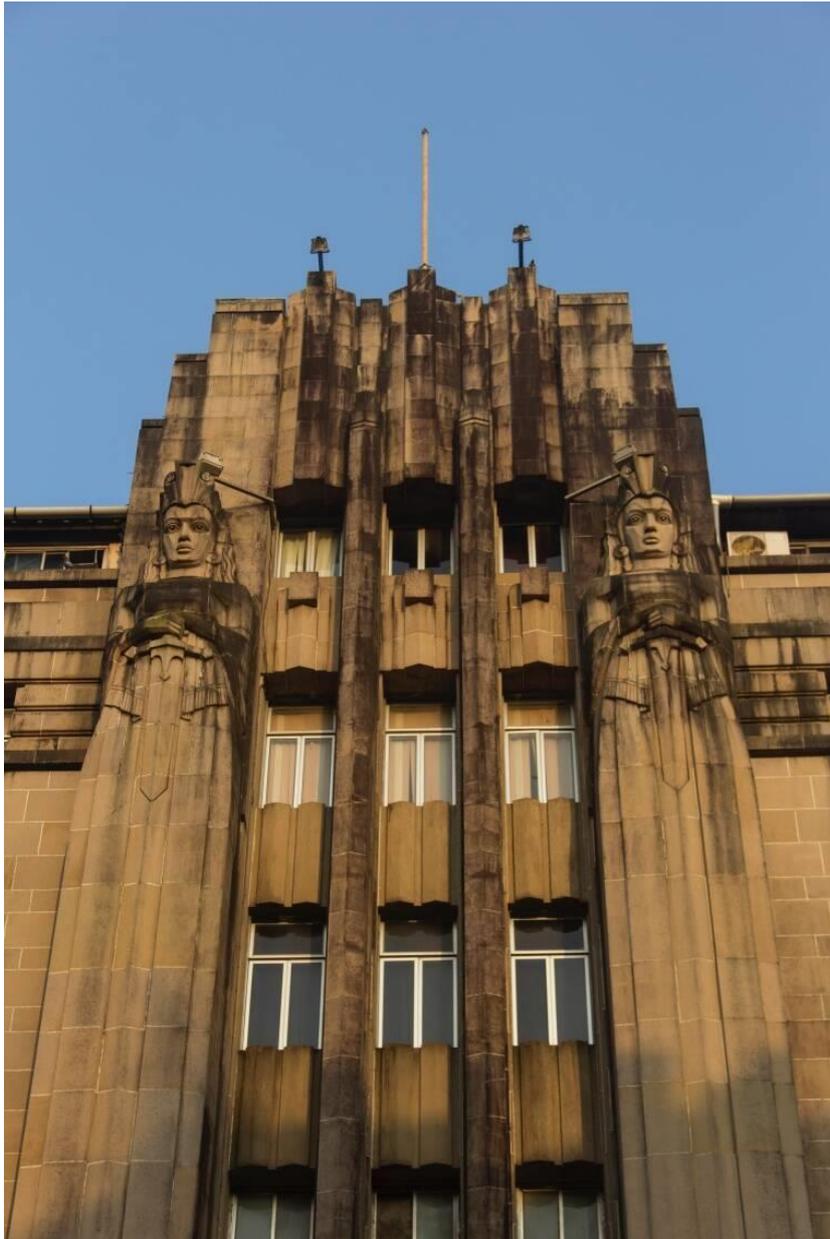
Additionally, emerging technology, including indoor plumbing, electricity, gas supply and drainage could be incorporated into these new homes, making them far more appealing to tenants than the options from the past.

Moreover, the Art Deco buildings were extremely climate resilient, designed to adapt to Bombay's landscape. As Kumar explains, all apartment buildings on Marine Drive were built on the East-West axis. As a result, the balconies face the West, allowing the sea breeze to pass through the apartment, providing a natural cooling effect. Additionally, for a generation still reeling from the aftereffects of the plague of 1869, the cross ventilation provided by these designs were a welcome protection from a similar epidemic.

Post-colonial hangover

While Bombay residents, unlike those of other major cities at the time, were particularly close to the British, they still wanted to distinguish their cityscape from the likes of London, New York, and Miami. As a result, Art Deco buildings in Bombay incorporated traditional Indian motifs, borrowing elements from Hindu and Muslim architecture.

Buildings on the East of the Oval, designed in the Victorian Gothic style, were seen as a homage to India's colonial masters. They were distinct from Indian influences, a fact perhaps best represented in their names, such as Queen's Court and the Prince of Wales Museum.



New Indian Insurance Building (Aaran Patel)

In contrast, the Art Deco buildings (usually ending in Mahal) were distinctly Indian. Many incorporate nautical motifs that allude to Bombay's heritage as a port city, with ship deck style balconies and grills resembling the crashing of waves.

In Bombay's Fort neighbourhood, two commercial buildings also stand out in particular. The first, the New India Assurance building, constructed in

1936, features huge structural motifs idealising workers, farmers, and artisans.

Another, the Lakshmi Insurance building is designed similarly. Founded by stalwarts of the independence movement like Motilal Nehru, Subash Chandra Bose and Lala Lajpatrai, the building features elements of Lakshmi's ideology such as the elephant and the lotus.



New Indian Insurance Building (Aaran Patel)

Bombay's Art Deco buildings weren't as grand as those in New York, resembling more the laid-back vibe of Miami's Tropical Deco. As UNESCO stated when designating part of the city as a World Heritage site, the value of Mumbai's Deco lies not in a single structure, but in the beauty of an ensemble. These structures, much like the city itself, incorporated elements from around the world, while maintaining a distinctly Indian charm.

Conservation

Eighty-two-year-old Moti Prakash has been living in Zaver Mahal, an Art Deco masterpiece, her entire life. She said that when she was young, she and her friends loved sitting on Marine Drive, flanked on one side by the ocean, and on the other, by rows of Art Deco buildings. Now, she laments, many of those buildings are unrecognisable from the time of her youth.

She says that landlords, looking to maximise profits and interior space, slowly began to add floors to the buildings and close off balconies, with little regard for the original architecture. “People only care about the interiors,” she decries, “they don’t care about the exterior façade that contributes to the dignity of the building and of the city.”

Prakash’s concerns are not unfounded. While the Rent Control Act of 1947 prevents landlords from evicting tenants in order to potentially sell to large developers, for the residents themselves, moving is often their only option. As families multiply over generations, these old buildings can no longer accommodate the rapidly expanding households. As a result, the younger generations are forced to either live in cramped quarters, pay exorbitant rents for other properties, or sell to developers in exchange for bigger flats in new buildings.



Art Deco Mumbai Offices (Mira Patel Indian Express)

One solution to prevent this is by designating the buildings as heritage sites. While the Art Deco buildings on Marine Drive and Oval Maidan were recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2018, many structures in Shivaji Park and other areas remain unclassified by the Indian government.

According to Kumar, this is because people have many misconceptions about the word heritage, believing that if their building is designated as a heritage site — locally or internationally — they would have to seek permission for every little change. However, without the protection afforded by such a label, there is nothing stopping the government or developers from razing them down in the name of expansion, as has been happening sadly in the recent past.

Amidst the changes in these architectural marvels, there is a glimmer of hope. Art Deco Mumbai is one of several organisations working to conserve, restore and protect Mumbai's architectural fabric. They consult owners to help them restore buildings in their original style, run workshops and walking tours, and document Art Deco buildings across the city.

Their efforts are bolstered by the intrinsic pride, Kumar believes, residents of Mumbai have for their city. He says that one story in particular fuels his belief that Mumbaikars are appreciative of their city's complex history and distinct skyline.

He recounts a recent incident in which the Maharashtra Government replaced the lights on Marine Drive with LED bulbs that emit a bright, harsh white light. Without anyone even filing a complaint, he says, the High Court called the Municipal Council and said, 'we don't care about this LED business, we want that golden light back on the Queen's Necklace.' That, he says, is the difference. "In Mumbai, people have a sense of ownership over their city. People actually care."

One such example was told by Rakesh Tripathi, a biochemical engineer, who now resides in Chicago. Tripathi, whose grandmother lived at Rakhi Mahal in Churchgate, has grown up with a unique appreciation for the need to preserve Mumbai's heritage. "From a young age, I used to visit my grandmother's house," Tripathi says, "and she would tell me stories about how she'd work with her neighbours to prevent landlords from making changes to historic buildings that would compromise their external facade."

He recalls one conversation in particular. When Tripathi was staying with his grandmother at the age of 24, he wanted to change the window in his outward facing bathroom in order to award himself a greater degree of privacy. "She wouldn't let me," he complains, adding that "she would rather

have me expose myself to the street than let me change the look of the building.”



Art Deco Mumbai Blueprints for Restoration (Mira Patel Indian Express)

According to Kumar, the Art Deco movement in Bombay, which saw its heydays in the early 1900s, began to die out after Independence. In the 1950s, Bombay adopted a more nationalistic approach and with that, did away with the Deco style, replacing it with drab, functional buildings, then steel and glass, and now, gated communities. While we still aren't seeing that many new Art Deco buildings in the city, we are, however, starting to see the style slowly come back.

Rehan Parikh, founder of Bombay Design Lab, has witnessed this resurgence. He says that while his clients don't necessarily want their entire flats to be Art Deco, they do want to incorporate certain elements of it. "Art Deco furniture is especially popular," he says, "and while people might not know the definition of the term, they appreciate objects and designs that blend together style and function."

Optimistically, with these new trends, and with the conservation efforts led by passionate citizens like Kumar and Sayal, Mumbai's architectural legacy will be preserved. Hopefully, the next generation of Mumbaikars, will have the opportunity to escape the frenzy of their daily lives by immersing themselves, if only for a minute, in appreciation of the tranquil and awe-inspiring relics of the past. Perhaps then, they too will experience the thrill of discovery, calling on their friends to 'Dekho! Dekho! Art Deco.'

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