

The court ruled by citizens

In a first for Mumbai heritage, residents of Churchgate's Art Deco residential building Swastik Court release a handbook on how to repair and restore private heritage structures with sensitivity

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SEPTUAGENARIAN Nayana Kathpalia recalls a childhood memory of watching enthusiasts learning horse riding at Oval Maidan from her balcony at Swastik Court. "There were no buses then, so this road was quiet," reminisces the old-time resident who has been instrumental in the structure and several around it winning the UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) status in 2018.

"That was a sweet victory..." she acknowledges, greeting Atul Kumar, founder-trustee of Art Deco Mumbai Trust (ADMT) on a nippy January morning. The non-profit that is committed to the awareness and conservation of Art Deco heritage sites in the city collaborated with residents of this building on its repairs. The outcome is one that its 12 resident families will benefit from. The team is behind a unique manual that documents the process from start to finish.

The residents of the cessed building obtained an NoC from MHADA to carry out repairs privately, with the appointed contractor, Mahadeo Sawane coming on board in 2019, backed by landlady Mamata Kinkhabwala.

The 1936-built landmark that was part of the first 18 blocks on Queen's Road (today's Maharshi Karve Road), has a lobby, compound walls, wrought iron balcony grilles, teakwood bannisters, banding, and bas-relief work, that speak of the unique architectural style. The last element led to possibly one of the biggest discoveries of this project. The three-panel design on the front facade was originally made from colourcrete but had been plastered over during previous interventions. Nityaa Lakshmi Iyer, the conservation architect and project head, cleaned it herself; she also consulted material scientists at Kansai Nerolac Paints for their water based paint removal technology and later, when the layers of cement came



(From top to bottom) Mamata Kinkhabwala, Nayana Kathpalia and Atul Kumar outside Swastik Court; Swastik Court resident Nayana Kathpalia points to the family crest that depicts the initials of the building's original owner Varjiwandas Motilal Saraiya; The redone mosaic on the terrace with the Swastik symbol. PICS/PRADEEP DHIVAR

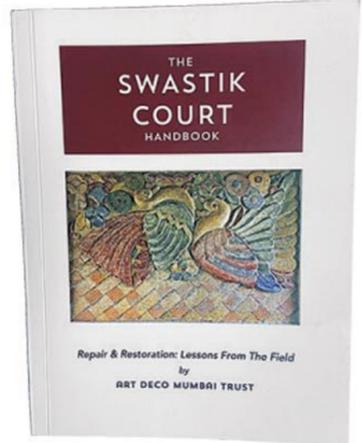
off, the original scheme revealed a pop of colour; it remains one of the most memorable days for the entire team. "In the lobby, no interventions were done for the terrazzo tiles, the Burma teak elevator cabin, wooden staircase and bannisters, letterboxes or nameplates. Cleaning and polishing was enough to do the trick," says Kumar. Kinkhabwala smiles when we ask about participation and co-operation, "We were on board with the residents and ADMT. We wanted to ensure that the restoration would be in sync with the building's vintage and aesthetic." Kumar adds, "Being original residents, they shared a common vision for their building. They also added insight through oral histories. It is special to see such co-operation in tenanted buildings. They know their building has value, with or without the WHS status."



The building was designed by Sykes, Patkar and Divecha. Built on land that was leased by the Collector of Bombay, it is a reinforced concrete frame structure and its occupants comprise landlords, tenants and self-owned flats



The bas-relief panel after restoration. Also seen is the lettering of the building highlighting its name, Swastik Court; (Left) Nityaa Lakshmi Iyer cleans the bas-relief to expose a rich layer of colours. PIC/ART DECO TRUST MUMBAI



The handbook acts as a reference for buildings of similar character and vintage. The idea to publish it emerged halfway through the restoration project. PIC/RANE ASHISH

Swastik Court and the handbook are a shining example of what you can do to overcome a complex ownership structure, manage residents dynamics, work with a limited budget, and preserve a property sensitively

Atul Kumar

As we stepped out of the Stigler-made elevator on to the fifth floor, the residence of the landlord, two impressions on its front door portray the swastika symbol and the family crest inscribed with the letters V, M and S. "It's stands for Varjiwandas Motilal Saraiya—this building's original owner," shares Kathpalia, revealing that he was her grand-uncle. Kumar shares how the need to document these findings led to the idea of publishing The Swastik Court Handbook.

"It could serve as valuable references for other buildings of similar vintage." The meticulous detailing of every stage of the restoration, the pictorial comparisons and practical solutions will aid invested and informed stakeholders linked to Mumbai's residential sites. On the terrace, the trio guided me to the iconic swastika mosaic pattern on the western side. "The original was a larger version; Sawane was initially unsure about recreating it after the terrace was waterproofed but he saw merit in retaining the now-scaled-down version. After all, the design is an important part of its identity," elaborates Kathpalia.

By now, a steady sea breeze quite literally 'blows our mind'. In front of us, the Oval Maidan and the famous Victorian Gothic skyline make for a picture-postcard setting, more so if you're a Swastik Court resident. "We were open, responsive, and pragmatic with the residents, and engaged with contractors in a language they understood. We hope the handbook spreads the word," says Kumar of the manual which will be officially released on February 11 at Durbar Hall, Asiatic Society of Mumbai, by architects Vikas Dilawari and Robert Stephens.

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From being the most decrepit building on the street, Swastik Court became the star on the block. There was huge curiosity about how this transformation took place and led to many other building residents aspiring to do the same

Nayana Kathpalia