

Why Swastik Court has caught the world's eye at a Miami meet

By Atul Kumar | Apr 22, 2023

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MUMBAI: Port cities and modern metropolises, Mumbai and Miami, separated by two oceans, have much in common -- urban expansions in the 20th century, land reclamations from the sea and a resplendent Art Deco development. Showcasing this

piece of history, at the ongoing 16th World Congress on Art Deco in Miami, the case study of restoration and repair of Swastik Court, the apartment building in the Oval precinct, is being presented -- a first for India.

Mumbai has one of the largest collections of the Art Deco style in the world, perhaps second only to Miami. Beginning in the 1930s, first at the Oval precinct, and gradually along the entire north-south axis of the island city and its developing suburbs, Art Deco became one of the most enduring middle-class housing styles in the city. Ironically, given Mumbai's wide embrace of the style, it is seldom spoken of in the city's larger architectural history, nor recognised anywhere in the world, until recently. The arrival of Mumbai's Deco in Miami places it firmly in the global spotlight. It is also a befitting homecoming for Mumbai then, to be represented in the city that championed the first successful movement in the world to protect 20th century buildings, pioneered by Barbara Baer Capitman and the Miami Design Preservation League (MDPL), who led a fiery campaign to recognise the Miami Art Deco District as a historic landmark.

Swastik Court, one of 18 Art Deco apartment buildings in the Oval precinct, was constructed in 1936 by architects Sykes, Patkar & Divecha (also known for the Cotton Exchange Building, Kalbadevi). In 2019, Art Deco Mumbai, along with the residents of Swastik Court, embarked on an audacious repair and restoration project. In a unique stakeholder initiative involving the landlord, long-time residents, a MHADA-appointed contractor and the Art Deco Mumbai team, Swastik Court went from being one of the most "decrepit" buildings (in the words of its own residents), to one of the best looking addresses on the street. Swastik Court represents a building boom in Mumbai in conjunction with many other parts of the world. Reinforced Concrete Cement (RCC) as a material finds resonance in more places than just the Indian subcontinent. More importantly, it is a building that continues to be lived in and is representative of a way of life that was cemented in the 1930s, and carries on to date. This initiative to recognise the historic value of the building, and act in its best interests, is a story unique to Mumbai's proverbial spirit. Swastik Court may be a singular building, but it symbolises something in addition to the built form, manifested through the experiences of some of its long-time residents (now 78); some who have lived here since the age of one. It stands for the vision of a new city, with open spaces, hygienic living conditions and ample space for families to start afresh in a modern metropolis.

Art Deco emerged in Mumbai and Miami in the interwar period. But the two cities share greater similarities, with the architectural character of their respective Deco lying within the same continuum. Modest in scale compared to the glass and steel extravaganza of the New York skyscrapers, Mumbai and Miami's Art Deco make extensive use of RCC,

a construction material, which became popular around the world in the 1930s. Both cities see residential as well as commercial typologies (notably cinemas and hotels) in the Art Deco style, replete with motifs and embellishments drawn from their tropical surroundings – waves, sunbursts, portholes, flora and fauna. Not to mention the playful display of pastel shades – more muted in Mumbai and daringly bold in Miami – adding a pop of colour to the urban landscape.

The truly international style heralded not only a common design aesthetic in disparate parts of the world, but shared even people, resources and ideas.

In 1936, American architect Thomas W Lamb built Lincoln Theatre, an Art Deco cinema and concert hall in Miami Beach, in between his project in India to build the Metro Cinemas in Kolkata (1935) and Bombay (1938), on the commission of the Hollywood studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). Perhaps, the presence of a Bombay Hotel on 69th Street, Miami Beach, and a Miami Apartments on Cumbala Hill, Mumbai, reflects a little more than incidental nomenclature.

The World Congress offers a one-of-a-kind platform to engage with the historic value of a built form that came up only in the last century. In India, a structure must be at least over a 100 years old to qualify as heritage – a mandate the Art Deco buildings, constructed in the 1930s, are yet to fulfil. Mumbai being represented on an international forum, however, recognises its position as part of a larger design movement that simultaneously spread around the world, even as it took on localised forms specific to its geography. The 2018 UNESCO inscription of the Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai is certainly an achievement, but Mumbai's Art Deco goes far beyond the Oval Maidan and Marine Drive.

Its ubiquitous spread itself causes it to be taken for granted. That, and the fact that contemporary constructions continue to use RCC as a predominant building material, therefore undercutting the novelty of the decorative aesthetic of the 20th century. Despite its seeming ordinariness, the style stands in for the very foundations that Bombay's modernity drew on as it emerged as a metropolis in the 1900s. It is witness to the city's rapid expansion as new lands were reclaimed to accommodate the burgeoning population that flocked to the city in search of opportunities.

The oft-repeated phrase of Mumbai being a “melting pot” is in part facilitated by this style that became a conduit for the creation of a new and modern city. The city's Deco appears across typologies, seen in apartments, bungalows, schools, hospitals, cinemas, and more. Its decorative aspects became a canvas for new forms of expressions, as motifs representing the building owner's name, faith and profession often began to appear on the facade. For a country just emerging from the throes of

British colonialism, these articulations through architecture and the built form became expressions of a newly realised identity.

The Deco era also coincided with the emergence of apartments, which offered a new way of living to modern, nuclear families beginning life in a flourishing city. As in Miami, these apartment complexes were designed with climate responsive techniques, with balconies for the Bombay summer, and protective eyebrows for its torrential monsoons. Most importantly, these living arrangements brought people of different social backgrounds into a shared space, with those of varying communities, regions, faith, even nationalities occupying flats next to each other. It's hard to say whether Art Deco was a byproduct of Bombay's cosmopolitanism, or whether it brought cosmopolitan ways to the city. What it did do was reflect Bombay's place in a larger network of trade, not only of commerce but also in a plurality of ideas and an embrace of multiculturalism – laying a social foundation for the city we enjoy even today.

(Atul Kumar is founder trustee of Art Deco Mumbai Trust and Board Member of International Coalition of Art Deco Societies (ICADS. He writes from the Congress in Miami.)

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/mumbais-art-deco-buildings-take-center-stage-at-16th-world-congress-in-miami-showcasing-restoration-of-swastik-court-apartment-building-101682104304813.html>