

Know the Art Deco history of Mumbai

Art Deco Mumbai Trust is creating reels, videos and photo stories to reach a younger demographic and promote the city's UNESCO-recognised structures

October 27, 2023 04:15 pm | Updated October 28, 2023 12:55 pm IST

PURNIMA SAH



UNESCO recognised Art Deco buildings in Mumbai. | Photo Credit: Purnima Sah

When there is a mention of Mumbai — whether in movies or books — the visual that comes to mind is usually that of Victorian Gothic buildings like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus.

But Mumbai also has one of the largest collection of Art Deco buildings in India; so significant that in June 2018, the [Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai](#) received the UNESCO World Heritage Sites tag. Mumbai's largest site in terms of area and the number of buildings, it is a collection of 92 buildings spread over 66.34 hectares and constructed in four different architectural styles — Victorian Gothic, Neoclassical, Indo-Saracenic and Art Deco.

Of these, 76 structures identified as Art Deco buildings stretch across SP Mukherjee Chowk, Oval Maidan and Marine Drive. This massive ensemble has made it the second-largest collection of Art Deco buildings after Miami, USA. (Miami has over 800 such buildings recognised by the National Register of Historic Places, USA.)



Swastik Court after the restoration and repair work carried out by Art Deco Mumbai Trust. | Photo Credit: Purnima Sah

When Art Deco emerged as a distinct style of architecture in Europe of the 1920s, it combined modern design with traditional elements such as chevrons, pyramids, florals, zig-zags, and other geometric shapes.

In erstwhile Bombay, Art Deco structures were commissioned in the 1930s by the then-Indian industrial elites like Framji Sidhwa, Shiavax Cambata, and K.A. Kooka. Art Deco

buildings that line Marine Drive and the western flank of Oval Maidan were the first to be designed by a new generation of Indian architects like Gajanan Mhatre, Sohrabji Bhedwar, and P C Dastur. They were mostly residences that were uniform in height, with high ceilings and open balconies.

“In the second half of the 19th Century, the city witnessed urban planning projects with the construction of ensembles of buildings — Victorian Gothic buildings and then in the early 20th Century, Art Deco buildings — all bordering the Oval Maidan,” explains Atul Kumar, founder-trustee of Art Deco Mumbai Trust (ADMT) and member, board of directors, International Coalition of Art Deco Societies.



Atul Kumar is the founder-trustee of Art Deco Mumbai Trust. | Photo Credit: Purnima Sah

While ADMT is a not-for-profit that has been spreading awareness about Mumbai's Art Deco heritage since 2016, the International Coalition of Art Deco Societies works towards preserving Art Deco and educating people about it.

In April this year, Atul represented Mumbai's Art Deco at the prestigious 16th World Congress on Art Deco in Miami. The fact that Mumbai has one of the largest collections of Art Deco buildings often goes unacknowledged, says Atul, "It was a great honour for Art Deco Mumbai and for India to be represented for the first time on a global platform."



Empress Court one of the Art Deco buildings in the city that recently got this new lettering nameplate on the building. | Photo Credit: Purnima Sah

ADMT documents and archives these heritage buildings, as well as educates people about them. Vishaka Bhat, head of documentation and digital assets at ADMT, identifies and

photo documents Art Deco buildings in Mumbai. “Unfortunately a lot of the historical buildings are getting demolished, so it is very important to have archives, and keep count of them. At present, our count is 1,022 Art Deco buildings in Mumbai of which 984 are approved and up on our website, there could be more in other parts of the city that we are yet to identify. This means we definitely have more Deco buildings than Miami but unfortunately, our collection is officially not recognised yet,” says Vishaka.



Ongoing repair and restoration work at Sneha Sadan by Art Deco Mumbai Trust | Photo Credit: Purnima Sah

Art Deco balconies are semi-open spaces in every apartment and are designed with metal or concrete grills or have ship-deck style railings. “ECantilevered projections or chajjas are common in buildings often in dark contrasting paints. Every property has low-height compound walls. Nameplates of these buildings are mostly made of stucco, wood, metal, or

stone and are often seen in artistic fonts and colours,” says Simran Mhatre from ADMT who also works on documentation.



The New India Assurance Building is an Art Deco office building built in the 1930s. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

How one project led to others

ADMT also received the first project for repair and restoration in 2019, when the residents of the Swastik Court apartment approached it to safeguard the aesthetics of the 83-year-old heritage building.

“Swastik Court faces the Oval Maidan and is one of the 76 Art Deco buildings that received the UNESCO World Heritage Site tag. Built during the 1930s, this residential apartment is a ground plus five storey structure with owners, tenants and self-owned flats. Back then, the owner of this property Varjiwandas Motilal Saraiya, named the building after the ancient Sanskrit swastika symbol,” explains Vishaka.



Swastik Court lettering and bas-relief after restoration and repair. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

Nayana Kathpalia, the granddaughter of Saraiya, has lived in the house, since she moved in with her parents in 1945. She talks of playing in Oval Maidan with friends, walking to school and colleges in South Mumbai, horse riding as a child in Band Stand and spending time with family at the Marine Drive... those days the neighbourhood was greener, peaceful and quiet with just bicycles and few cars plying on the roads. “Today the

neighbourhood wakes up to the honking of buses. This Maharshi Karve Road used to be called Queens Road those days,” recalls Nayana.

All the buildings in this row were the first ones to be built on the Backbay Reclamation. “In the early 20th Century it was a big deal to have such an ambitious reclamation project; these buildings were the earliest expressions of modernity in the city,” explains Vishaka who documented the building.



Eros Cinema, an Art Deco style cinema theatre in Churchgate built in the 1930s. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

Speaking of the six-month restoration project, Vishaka says that a highlight of the building was the bas relief that now looks vibrant after it was cleaned and restored. “There were

colourful birds and patterns in bas relief. The original coloured cement got covered underneath layers of paint over the years. There were also leakages on the roof, and walls, along with rusted pipes, and also required repairing of lift panels, waterproofing on the terrace, plastering and more.”

She adds, “When we were examining the terrace, we discovered the original Swastik symbol on the western side of the terrace floor. The flooring pattern of the terrace was made of China mosaic tiles which is expensive to recreate now.”



Western India House is another Art Deco building located in Fort. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

Mumbaikars understand the value of heritage buildings, says Atul, “Restoration also enhances the value of the property because these buildings are located at prime locations.

Mumbai is a commercial city, where it is all about opportunity, cost, development, redevelopment and maximising every square inch.”

Atul says after they completed Swastik Court, enquiries started pouring in from neighbouring apartments like Green Fields. “We are restoring and repairing the entire building,” he shares. At present ADMT’s ongoing restoration projects are at Empress Court, Sneha Sadan, Green Fields, Court View, Bharatiya Bhavan and Strand House, all in South Mumbai.



Windows of Rajjab Mahal has tropical imagery symbolic feature that represents Art Deco style. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Trust Mumbai)

Simran suggests, “To extend the longevity of any building, one has to do routine repairs once in every five years. The longer the properties go without repair, more cracks form and the cost of repair also increases.”

Talking about the recent repair and restoration project that she has been part of, she mentions Empress Court that is opposite Oval Maidan and also a part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. “The owner of this building approached us to get paint suggestions and recreating lettering (name plate) of the building that could match with the original lettering that was removed decades ago. We came across a brochure published in 1937 that had an image of the original lettering and we recreated that.”



Soona Mahal at Marine Drive is a beautifully preserved Art Deco building in city. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

At Sneha Sadan behind Oval Maidan, also part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the team is recreating the original flooring in the lobby that is broken due to cable work.

Suhasini Krishnan, head of outreach and content at ADMT says that by using digital platforms, they have been able to reach out to the younger demographic, “We share knowledge in the form of reels, video stories, blogs, photo features, discussions and webinars. Walks are a big part of our outreach and so far we have covered Marine Drive,

Oval Maidan and Matunga. It's also been three years of curating courses on Art Deco for students of Rachana Sansad's Academy of Architecture." The digital archive built by the ADMT team is accessible across the globe.



Students of Don Bosco International School, Matunga participate in an Art Deco heritage walk conducted by Art Deco Mumbai Trust | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

How do you spot an Art Deco buildings

Art Deco buildings are symmetrical, inspired by aerodynamic design with an emphasis on curving forms, long horizontal lines, nautical elements, metal grills with geometrical patterns, stylised imagery of sea waves, sunburst rays, clouds, moon, frozen fountain motif, tropical flora and fauna in bas reliefs. Chevrons, and repetitive V-shaped patterns on the facades of Deco buildings are other interesting elements of these buildings. In India, Art Deco buildings emerged in the early to mid-1930s and ended in the mid to late-1950s. The first-ever Art Deco building to be built in Mumbai was the Syndicate Bank building in 1932 on Sir Pherozeshah Mehta Road in Fort.



The New India Assurance Building is an Art Deco office building made of reinforced concrete. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

Indian architects who built Art Deco:

In the early 20th century, several architects and firms worked together to shape Mumbai into a modern city. Interestingly, many of them were first-generation Indian architecture graduates from Sir JJ School of Art, Mumbai and Architectural Association School of Architecture, London. Since most of them studied and worked in Europe, when they returned, they brought such Art Deco that was a blend of different cultures, explain Simran.



The round or porthole window in Sonawala building is one of the Art Deco elements that reflects Mumbai's proximity to the sea. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement (Art Deco Mumbai Trust)

To mention a few —Sohrab Kaikushro Bhedwar designed the iconic Eros Cinema, Green Fields and Queen's Court. Jehangir Phiroshaw Vazifdar designed Somerset Place, Cumbala Hill, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Girgaon. Abdulhussein Meherali Thariani is known for Karim Building in Mohammed Ali Road, Rawji Sojpal Building in Dadar and Cambridge Court in Cumbala Hill. Dattatray Raghunath Chowdhari designed Bank of India in Fort. PC Dastur designed three identical buildings along Marine Drive — Keval Mahal, Kapur Mahal and Zaver Mahal.

Art Deco buildings documented by ADMT till date in Mumbai

Location of Art Deco Buildings	Count of Art Deco Buildings
Dadar	184
Matunga	165
Fort	58
Bandra	55
Colaba	52
Girgaon	50
Sion	39
Cumbala Hill	35
Tardeo	34
Marine Drive	34
Churchgate	33
Mahim	30
Mohammed Ali Road	24
Marine Lines	22
Oval	19
Wadala	17
Kalbadevi	17
Byculla	16
Malabar Hill	14
Chembur	13
Vile Parle	11
Kandivali	11
Umerkhadi	10
Malad	8
Worli	6
Santacruz	5
Ballard Estate	5
Prabhadevi	4
Cuffe Parade	3
Khar	3
Parel	2
Mahalaxmi	2
Kurla	1
Andheri	1
Mazgaon	1
Juhu	1

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/know-the-art-deco-history-of-mumbai/article67093168.ece>