

Designs on the city, one plan at a time

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Some were British, while a majority were Indian architects. What stood out was the single-minded focus to ensure resident-friendly, progressive sites and buildings that organically assimilated into the idea of a new Bombay. That was the success of our city's Art Deco movement



silver model of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Girgaon is among the objects on display at the Durbar Hall, Asiatic Society of Mumbai. Pic/Fiona Fernandez

These buildings were based on the [city's visual guidelines](#). There was constant interaction between their architects and civic authorities, and all plans were approved by a chief architect...," said Professor Mustansir Dalvi, professor of Architecture, and trustee, Art Deco Mumbai, in his vote of thanks at the inauguration of Architects and Firms That Built Modern Bombay, an exhibition that honoured these great architects and their firms who built the city through the 1930s-50s with the intent to blend progress with the modern way of life. It immediately drew smiles from some audience members, including this columnist, who were seated inside the elegant Durbar Hall at the Asiatic Society of Mumbai. Was it the Gokhale Bridge measurement mess-up? Or, The Coastal Road Project's environmental fall-out? It was tough to guess. Irrespective of the trigger, this valuable piece of information shared from those days made for a bittersweet realisation. Bitter, because it's unimaginable to witness such democratic dialogue prevail these days between architects and the local government where citizens came first. Sweet, because this existed at some point in the city, and we are still able to admire and preserve [in many cases] their rich, invaluable legacy.

It is the latter that we were all there to celebrate last Saturday, at the opening session of this eight-day exhibition organised by the Art Deco Mumbai Trust and the Mumbai Research Centre of [The Asiatic Society](#) of Mumbai. Honestly, for this columnist the informative displays and memorabilia drew parallels with being in an antique version of the candy shop. However, before we could begin poring over those, chief guest Jean-Marc Séré-Charlet, Consul General of France in Mumbai, gave the audience, filled with the city's key voices from the cultural and heritage communities, much to raise a toast to. He admitted that Paris also had sites like he'd seen during his strolls down Bombay's streets that were ravaged by time, and that it was up to its custodians to ensure it survives, and its legacy is protected. The restoration of some of the city's single-screen theatres restored to its past glory came in for special mention. And about the exhibition, he was impressed to suggest, "I'm definitely going to tell my fellow embassy and diplomat friends to experience it." The high-point was his genuine keenness to play mediator to see this display travel to France next year to be a part of the centenary of the Art Deco Movement.

Keynote speaker, Sameep Padora, dean, Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University, Ahmedabad, gave us a historical timeline of the changing urban planning and redrawing of the city post-Independence. Using the city's map to prove his findings, we watch how key milestones like the coming of FSI changed the identity of the city, and in later decades, how cluster development [like in Bhendi Bazaar], redevelopment and climate change can and have already begun to impact its geography.

What stayed with us was his reminder to all present that the city was getting lost in the middle of real estate archipelagos. Moments later, Dalvi echoed this sentiment, when he reiterated that the need of the hour was to conserve a precinct, not just a building; local regions and neighbourhoods, and not just plots. All three speakers' words offered plenty to retrospect on, especially for today's architects and urban planners, assuming they were in the audience, substantiated by enough inspiration spilling out from the flax panels-displays of brilliant minds who got it right despite challenges of their times.

Before we left this bubble of a near-Utopian-like Bombay, we soaked in the heady assemblage at the Durbar Hall. From hand-drawn sketches by the architect of Aurora Talkies in Matunga to the OG Filmfare Award trophy aka the 'Black Lady', models of [famous Art Deco buildings](#), and writing tools and correspondence by the great minds who shaped Bombay, it was a rare showcase--spectacular and one-of-a-kind. The exhaustively detailed city map earmarking areas with Art Deco buildings, from SoBo to the suburbs [we did an imaginary jig when we spotted that our home suburb was on the map!] is a must-see. We aren't going to reveal the countless discoveries that we made as we read the portfolios of these visionary, city-loving architects and their firms. That's for you to come by and explore. In fact, I hope that heads of colleges and high schools in the city factor in visits to this exhibition that continues till March 10, because it isn't meant just for the aspiring architect or inquisitive historian. It's for anyone and everyone who wishes to learn [and possibly get inspired] about how their city was shaped by its very own folks -- one brick at a time, one plan at a time.

As Padora had aptly articulated in his closing comments, "These displayed works show us ways to imagine a better version of the city."

mid-day's Features Editor Fiona Fernandez relishes the city's sights, sounds, smells and stones...wherever the ink and the inclination takes her. She tweets @bombayana

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