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India's Architecture Fans Guard Mumbai's Art Deco Past

By Anuj SRIVAS December 21, 2024

A towering cinema with a roofline like an ocean liner stands out in India's financial capital Mumbai, part of a remarkable Art Deco architectural heritage that campaigners say needs protection.

A short walk away is a state-run insurance office with giant Egyptian-style carvings, and a palm-lined seafront promenade with pastel-coloured apartments with porthole windows, curved balconies and exotic motifs.

Architecture aficionados may go crazy over Miami's South Beach, but the coastal Indian megacity is home to what experts believe is one of the world's largest collections of Art Deco buildings.

Decades of neglect, however, have led to buildings being demolished or compromised through slapdash modern renovation.

Lovers of the dramatic architecture fear that will only increase as Mumbai undergoes a rapid \$30 billion infrastructure makeover including major road, rail and bridge projects.

A sweep of some Art Deco buildings -- including offices, colleges and residential complexes -- was listed on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 2018, alongside the city's Victorian Gothic architecture for its "unique style" described as "Indo-Deco".

Today, the city's breakneck pace of development has left a small but dedicated group of building owners, architects and heritage lovers trying to conserve the city's Art Deco character.

The job requires "constant vigilance", said Nayana Kathpalia, who lives in an Art Deco building that was recently restored -- but crucially in a manner that maintained its original character.

Many apartment building owners are eager to cash in and redevelop their old dwellings, making them part of a cookie-cutter modern skyline.

"If too many buildings get done in a totally different style, the World Heritage Site committee will say 'what the hell is happening?'," Kathpalia said.

"We are very, very clear that we have to protect that."

Losing it could strip the city of its history and character, campaigners say.

Art Deco took the West by storm after emerging as a new wave of design in France before the First World War.

Architects used geometric patterns and streamlined structures to evoke the popular technologies of the time, including airplanes and ocean liners.

As a style, Art Deco can appear as an odd hodgepodge, borrowing everything from ancient Mayan to Japanese culture.

But the first generation of homegrown Indian architects who visited Europe in the 1920s and 1930s were inspired.

After returning home, they started designing Art Deco style buildings for rich Indian business families that had profited off the economic boom in the port city, said Atul Kumar, founder of a non-profit that seeks to conserve the heritage.

Art Deco "enabled a certain cosmopolitanism" and contributed to making Mumbai a "modern, open, friendly" city, Kumar added.

While Kumar's Art Deco Mumbai organisation has spent years painstakingly documenting buildings, it has also more recently started offering "repair and restoration" help.

"We go out, pro bono, and reach out to people," he said, having supported the sensitive restoration of around nine buildings, including a couple in the core World Heritage area.

However, there are challenges, including stringent rent control laws which impose financial constraints on landlords.

Kumar also admits that residents in newer and northern parts of the city have less of a "desire" to conserve their buildings in their original Art Deco style.

A large part of this is due to a lack of awareness.

Many of the city's inhabitants walk past the vivid tropical imagery, elongated turrets and jazzy typography without giving them a second glance.

Pranati Mehta, a 46-year-old school teacher, says most Indians only look at "temples as architecture", as they "feel that is special".

Some Mumbai residents don't realise they "live amongst art", she said.

But Mehta, who was on a weekend walking tour to learn more about the architectural style, quickly adds that Art Deco isn't foreign to Indian sensibilities.

"We recognise it as a Bombay style," she said. "We think Art Deco is also an Indian brand".

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