



In 1938, Maharao Umed Singh II of Kotah constructed Kotah House in Delhi in the Art Deco style by commissioning Mumbai-based architects Master, Sathe, Bhuta and Company.

## SAVING LIVING HERITAGE

Rampant redevelopment has resulted in both private homes and public buildings from the 1930s-40s being torn down over the years in most Indian cities. One of the biggest roadblocks to conserving this form of architecture lies in sensitising people inhabiting an Art Deco structure to the importance of the building. In Chandni Chowk, it took architects Geetanjali Sayal and Prashansa Sachdeva months of persuasion to enter homes, take photographs and ask questions. "It takes several conversations with owners to convince them that we are not here to take over their residences. Often, the land is involved in legal conflicts. People are not open to sharing information," says Sayal. This makes documentation a slow process but a rewarding one.

How challenging is it to conserve "living" heritage in a metropolis like Mumbai where a burgeoning population adds to the urban pressures? Atul Kumar of Art Deco Mumbai Trust says Mumbai is no different from cities such as New York, Hong Kong or Miami in the housing shortage, commercial considerations and the constant attempts to monetise land assets. It's no wonder then that the last couple of years have seen redevelopment at an unprecedented pace. "There is little regard for the historical context of the neighbourhood or property. When the floor space index is your only matrix for redevelopment, it reduces the focus to extracting all square inches that are usable while disregarding everything else," Kumar says.

The problem lies in the fact that most Art Deco buildings are privately owned and have not been classified as heritage properties, explains Hyderabad-based architect Srinivas Murthy. As a result, they run the risk of being demolished by owners and developers.

Conservation architect Prathyaksha Krishna Prasad concurs. She knows property owners in Chennai who are aware of the value of an Art Deco building but redevelop it as they lack the resources to maintain the structure. "It is also difficult to find trained artisans to restore elements such as the motifs and terrazzo tiles. The authenticity keeps going away slowly. If the government could appoint people for upkeep, with the owner taking care of part of the cost, it would be worth it," she says.

Prominent buildings have been demolished

in the last seven years. "It's ironic that in the centenary year of Art Deco, the Secunderabad Railway Station, a famous Art Deco building, was demolished in February," says Murthy, whose team found old images and evidence in the debris. They have documented other Art Deco buildings in Hyderabad and are likely to publish a two-volume book on Art Deco of Hyderabad soon.

The change in attitudes is coming about, albeit slowly. "An interesting pivot is that people are approaching us with the idea of getting their buildings graded in order to protect them," says Kumar. "We are working on those suggestions and have written to government organisations.... People want to restore these properties to continue inhabiting an Art Deco structure. They appreciate the high ceilings and windows, the flow of natural light and the cross ventilation. Many are realising the charm of Art Deco as opposed to newer developments, which might be a plush building with a fancy lobby and gym, but the layout of the home itself is constrained," explains Kumar.

The Art Deco Mumbai Trust has been having conversations with inhabitants of Art Deco structures on sensitively repairing and restoring their buildings, and has worked on 15-16 such structures so far. "The objective is to preserve the authenticity of the building by suggesting sensitive interventions, appropriate use of materials, and incorporating archival research into the restoration process," mentions the trust's website.

Besides residents, architecture students, heritage enthusiasts and conservators, the Art Deco Mumbai Trust's repository of research and documentation has found a fanbase in film production designers. "Someone wanted a reference of a beautiful elevator cage for their film and found it in our archive, as did the designers for the period series, *Jubilee* (2023)," says Kumar. "Today, a modern interpretation of Art Deco can be seen in new restaurants' design which may not be doing it consciously but are soaking it in from the surroundings. The only concern is that the representation is more Western than vernacular and tropical, which has been the essence of the style in Mumbai... There are interesting linkages between the past and the present being made in the city." — *Avantika Bhuyan*