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AT ART

Meet the people battling to save this vanishing legacy

Mohana Das & Sneha Bhatia | 15A

A hundred years ago, Paris hosted the 1889 Exposition that gave Art Deco its name. The movement would capture the world, its language — sunbursts, zigzags, a blend of curved curves with post-war symmetry, ancient motifs with modern materials — turned architecture into theatre. Unlike past styles that clung to tradition, Deco was restless. It travelled fast and changed easily, absorbing local flavours from Madrid to Mumbai. On its century, a look at this iconic aesthetic.

IN MUMBAI, A GLOBAL STYLE GETS A LOCAL AVATAR

Few cities have worn the style quite like Mumbai, with the aesthetic shaping the city's skyline in a way that has lasted well beyond its initial boom. In fact, Mumbai is home to the second-largest collection of Art Deco buildings after Miami. But how did this architectural movement take root here and why does it still hold such sway? One big reason is that it stayed true to global design principles while adapting to the city's pulse. In cities like Paris and New York, Art Deco was all about luxury — marble, chrome, and glass — but in Mumbai, the materials used were sturdy like concrete, stone, and tiles, while the verandas, open balconies, and airy spaces were designed to beat the heat and humidity. Mastermind Davi, architect and trustee of Art Deco Mumbai Trust (ADMT), says he has been documenting and advocating for this legacy since 2010. "The design wasn't just for show but practical, to make life easier," Architect Claude Barthelemy has added, describing them simply as this new architecture.

"That new architecture entered Bombay's shores through multiple doors — cinema halls, community centres, residential buildings on newly reclaimed swamp land. These semi-circular buildings with sweeping curved balconies seemed to float above the street, with distinctive features like sunburst and wave motifs worked into wrought-iron grilles and gates, porthole windows and vertical bands — from Vile Parle to Matunga — some rare structures restored. For Davi, the fight isn't just about nostalgia. "It's about preserving not just rare structures and neighbourhoods. These buildings all work together in a sort of urban harmony. And it's about saving the profile, height and the shape of any one building, the en-

vironmental loss is essential spirit, which is unfortunately happening in many places now." While Marine Drive and the Oval Indian hotel steal the spotlight, the style took root in unlikely corners. To take the Summit Marathia Home (1930) in Vile Parle designed by Dr Chhatra Mohit-car in the post-war years. Tucked inside the unassuming Simkha building, it brought Elegance to Mumbai's healthcare in the suburbs. In Matunga, Kerala Ibaraham, built in 1936 by the Bombay Foraybes Sema, became a gathering point for Malayali dining Oman and other foreigners. Delhi's Sagar Hotel, with its curved balconies, frieze bands, and quiet facade, is easy to miss but hard to forget.

In Sen, Yabwa building stands tall with its steps dome, decorative brackets and clean modern lines — a textbook case of 'Indo-Deco' which, according to Davi, is Western in form but Indian in spirit. Datar's Gaganji Niyam looks like a ship docked on land with its marine inspired fish motifs, porthole windows and ship-like curved balconies. What makes it radical is that it was among the first to bring toilet into the home with 'self-contained' flats that sprayed caste-driven ideas of purity and pollution.

In a city where so much is being torn down, Kartika in Bahadur Estate is Mumbai's only surviving Art Deco petrol pump, and a great example of how the design touched even the most everyday spaces. Built in 1930 by architect Gaganji Bhatnagar, it has a long concrete canopy that seems to float overhead and is built on a circular classic Deco structure. Inside, the brass grilles have been carefully preserved by the Sequerra family who still own the station. In 2012, they hosted an exhibition with archival photos, original posters for the film, and vintage memorabilia for Kartika's 80th anniversary to keep the pump's legacy alive.

Davi warns that only a fraction of the city's Deco buildings are protected. "The only safe buildings are those that have the Unesco tags." "Restoration can take place in any of the other buildings or neighbourhoods." The only real danger, he believes, is awareness. "When people themselves understand that they are living in something special, they will protect it. As in, fact, happened with the Oval Madam when citizens rallied to save the precinct. We need more such localised citizen-based initiatives."

Mansir Davi, trustee, art deco mumbai trust

Their repair and restoration practice has assisted around 15 projects. "Some want just the original Art Deco interiors restored. Others find old photos and ask us to help bring back colour palettes from the 1930s. And then there are the full-scale restorations." Their interdisciplinary team includes conservation architects, historians, researchers and outreach specialists. One landmark success is a 5-year project, a five-storey Deco apartment from the 1930s near Oval Madam in 2013, it had fallen into disrepair. But in a rare collaboration between landlords,

residents, contractors and the ADMT team, the building was revived from "decaying" — as the residents put it — into a "showpiece." Another example is Empress Court, a majestic 1930 structure on a corner plot along the Oval, where residents worked with the trust to restore its original name letter.

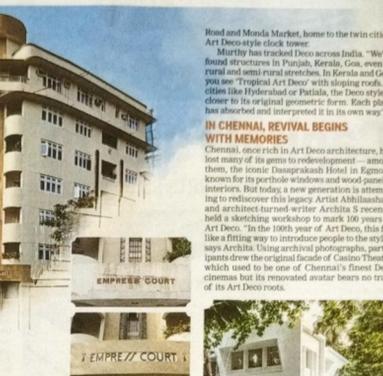
"We're seeing what I call the third pivot," says Davi. "People are now saying they don't want to lose their property to redevelopment. They're asking if we can create their building as heritage." "So the colonial buildings all get listed quite easily. But these buildings are relatively young and have been in constant use so it's not easy to get heritage protection. That needs to be looked at." It's Davi, beyond heritage status, there's also the economic pressure to rebuild.

It's not the same thing, but Kumar observes that Deco design is enjoying a quiet resurgence, be it in the lobbies of multiplexes or high-end developments in Worli. "We're getting positive word from developers who want to reuse their projects around Art Deco," he says. "They're definitely a resurgence but in a different avatar."

MAPPING DELHI'S HIDDEN 'EYEBROW' MARVELS
Can buildings have eyebrows and eyelids? In Art Deco architecture, eyebrows are overhangs or chippage above windows and balconies that shield the interior from sun and rain. Spacial eye-shielding canopies or projecting roofs that protrude from the facade. These features are some of Delhi's Art Deco buildings illustrates these features through hand-drawn details, mapping out examples — from St Stephen's College and Dwyer House to Saffordpark Airport and Delhi Cinema's tripartite creation.

The map, the work of Dr DeolDhebi, a digital archivist created by art researchers Geetanjali Sagar and Prashanta Sachdeva. When they began documenting Delhi's architecture in 2010, Art Deco wasn't their focus. But walking through Delhi's old Chandni Chowk, they began noticing streamlined balconies, porthole windows and stylised grilles. They realised they had

uncovered a scattered, little-known subculture of Art Deco in the capital, hidden in plain sight. Most people associate Delhi with grand marble, neoclassical and modern brutalist landmarks. "But Art Deco flourished wherever ordinary citizens had agency. It's the quiet anti-establishment that was especially important," says Sagar, where Art Deco buildings thrived through a mix of Delhi Improvement Trust (DIT), which was a predecessor of UDA, Progress and private families. Architects from DIT were Anglo-Indians or



EMPIRE COURT
ROMNEY SEW (Top right) Before-after shots of Empress Court's restored interior — it's one of 18 art deco buildings listed in Mumbai's 50 Most Valuable Buildings

of mixed ethnicities so they had exposure to the style, adds Sagar.

With a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts, DeolDhebi's work has expanded into documentation, photographer collaborations, archival work with bookstores about the buildings, architects, conservators etc., and a glossy in-cluding signage typography.

Sagar says the current focus is working with homeowners. "For instance, someone whose home we documented earlier on Pass Road is now collaborating with us to tell the story of her Deco-style maternal home which was demolished."

HYDERABAD'S MULTICULTURAL HISTORY DECO-DED
In the 1930s, Austrian architect Karl Mosler von Helldorf, a refugee from Nazi Germany, whose Hitler's regime was crumbling down between 1934 and 1938, brought his architectural vision to Hyderabad. He was invited by Raja Ram Rao of Wanaparthy to design a house in Banjara Hills, later known as Mount Pleasant and now part of Muffliakh Jahi Area. Architects like Mohammod Fayyazuddin and Eric Marrett later helped popularise the style across the city. Marrett also designed the Raj Bhavan, which is the residence of the governor, which recently became the fitting location for kickstart celebration to mark 100 years of Art Deco architecture in Hyderabad.

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Road and Market Maratha, home to the twin cities of Art Deco.

Murthy has tracked Deco across India. "We've found structures in Punjab, Kerala, Goa, even in rural and semi-rural areas. In Kerala and Goa, you see Tropical Art Deco with sloping roofs. In cities like Hyderabad or Pullada, the Deco style is closer to its original geometric form. Each place has absorbed and interpreted it in its own way."

IN CINEMA, REVIVAL BEGINS WITH MEMORIES
Cinema, once rich in Art Deco architecture, has lost many of its gems to redevelopment — among them, the iconic Theosophical Hotel in Egmore, known for its porthole windows and wood-paneled interiors. But today, a new generation is attempting to rediscover this legacy. Arathi Abhinav and architect-turned-writer Archana recently did a sketching workshop to mark 100 years of Art Deco. "In the 100th year of Art Deco, this felt like a fitting way to introduce people to the style," says Arathi. Using archival photographs, participants drew the original facade of Casino Theatre, which used to be one of Chennai's finest Deco cinemas but its renovated avatar bears no trace of its Art Deco roots.

DECO SEM Ram Manoj's Chennai store is a two-storey art deco house dating back to the 1930s

Prathyasha Krishna Prasad, founder of Art Deco Madras and The Heritage Art Collective, has given many talks on Chennai's Deco history and is now curating a Deco-specific walk. "I had limitless resources. I've seen conservators do things like 'kash' houses," she says. "My dream is to create a dedicated Deco museum that captures not just the architecture, but life in the 1930s."

KOLKATA'S METRO-STYLE BARI GET NEW LIFE AS CAFES, BOUTIQUES
In the 1930s, the city's architecture was a mix of modern and personal rather than institutional. "What's unique here are the middle class adapted Art Deco," says writer and former MP Jawahar Sircar, who has led public walks and tours through South Kolkata, Lake Road and New Alipore. It was often the women of the house who directed the design. "They found the maison and said, 'Metry bar' (bar) that meant they wanted geometric lines, a breeze coming from an air conditioner. These homes have proven surprisingly resilient, a breeze coming from an air conditioner. That's the most interesting part. In fact, they've found new life — as boutique cafes and designer stores and even modern jazz clubs that use the signage style."

"If young people running these cafes in Art Deco houses, Mumbai are experimenting. The life is finally being seen. In Chennai, it's not like I've walked in from another era," says Sircar. From

DECO DASH The Prakasharam Bar at the Krishna river in Vijayawada, built between 1934 and 1937, features many elements of art deco

movement, introduced Art Deco to Hyderabad. He was invited by Raja Ram Rao of Wanaparthy to design a house in Banjara Hills, later known as Mount Pleasant and now part of Muffliakh Jahi Area. Architects like Mohammod Fayyazuddin and Eric Marrett later helped popularise the style across the city. Marrett also designed the Raj Bhavan, which is the residence of the governor, which recently became the fitting location for kickstart celebration to mark 100 years of Art Deco architecture in Hyderabad.

Writer Amit Chaudhary also helped in attention to Kolkata's Art Deco in 2013 with an essay in The Guardian that led to the formation of Calcutta Architectural Legacies (CAL). And INTRACH are also working to save the Lake Temple Residency, a well-known pocket of Art Deco residences in South Kolkata.

But things move slowly, says Amit Chaudhary, "address" was about a Calcutta house that was "tagged" in its ordinances. "Art Deco often defines neighbourhoods, not individual landmarks."

HOW TO IDENTIFY AN ART DECO BUILDING

Sources: Abhinava N

Vertical emphasis and (left) curved corners, often with long horizontal sunshades

Distinctive Typography

Tropical and nautical imagery

Zigzag and Chevron patterns