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# The making of Mumbai's historic art deco heritage

**Atul Kumar, founder of Art Deco Mumbai Trust, reflects on the city's Deco legacy and its role in shaping Mumbai's identity along the Arabian Sea**

Author  
Shaikh Ayaz

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In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), **Salman Rushdie hailed Bombay's "glittering Art Deco sweep" as second to none.** "Not even Rome could boast," gushed the author, who was born in India's financial city officially rechristened Mumbai barely years before his famous novel came out. Indeed, Mumbai is home to the second largest cluster of Art Deco gems after Miami (at last count, it has over 1500 Deco properties). The residents of Mumbai like myself are proud of this heritage, which isn't just a piece of history for us but an intrinsic part of the living, breathing fabric of this teeming metropolis. What makes Mumbai's

Deco legacy unique is that it acquired a distinct local flavour after its arrival here in the 1930s.

Cut to 2018 — even more remarkable perhaps is the story behind its hard-won **UNESCO World Heritage Site recognition**. The UNESCO nomination was 14 years in the making, even as the movement to put Mumbai on the world’s architectural map was a first-of-its-kind, citizens-led initiative. **Atul Kumar**, a passionate Deco lover and preservationist with his equally committed team, worked tirelessly for the UNESCO honour finally received in 2018. Kumar and his team continue to focus on preservation, conservation, documentation and education of the Deco heritage, including maintaining a vast digital repository on Social Media.

About: spoke to Kumar, who as the founding trustee of the **Art Deco Mumbai Trust**, has redefined civic activism, proving that citizens are ultimately the custodians of any city and the power to bring change lies in collective wisdom, public-government dialogue and transformative community-driven exercises.



Arthur lodge (1950). Courtesy of Art Deco Mumbai Trust

**SA: The Art Deco movement celebrates its centenary, this year. In what ways do you think this movement, born in an exposition in Paris in 1925, has shaped our lives? Do you feel its impact has been far reaching, beyond architecture and design?**

AK: The Deco style in many senses represents simplicity, optimism and hope as it emerged in the inter-war years and reflected a new age, new ways of living, and a culture that embraced modernism and cosmopolitanism. To my mind, this was a far greater impact of the style than just its architectural dimensions. A 100 years later both endure.

**SA: After Miami, Mumbai is home to the largest ensemble of Art Deco buildings. What makes Deco architecture style stand out in our city and how do they differ from Art Deco styles in other parts of the world?**

AK: It is Mumbai's turn to be counted on the global Art Deco map as our field work and documentation over the last nine years has given us an astounding inventory of about 1500+ Art Deco buildings, which arguably is the largest collection in the world. These buildings came up in the 1930s, all the way till 1952-53, and defined the urban landscape in the Art Deco style across the north-south axis of the city, with entire planned neighbourhoods coming up. Such a proliferation that also marked the identity of the city as unique. The Art Deco style is incredibly adaptive and has been melded and moulded by different Indian architects to reflect local and vernacular sensibilities, which include representation of language, lettering, nationalistic storytelling, religious and multicultural representation, and of course, artistic design.



Cotton exchange building. Courtesy of Art Deco Mumbai Trust

**SA: Bombay Art Deco embraced a tropical Deco style, infusing local symbols/expressions and elements. Can you give some examples of how our architects localised Deco (be it, using sunbursts or streamlined balconies), fashioning it out of our own cultural context and what lessons it holds for vernacular and indigenous forms in the world today. Art Deco in Mumbai is a great symbol of how something can be global and local at the same time.**

AK: Indeed, there was a remarkable assimilation of the style to represent our identity, culture and emerging nationalist sentiment till we approached independence in 1947. Life-size bas relief work was used to represent Indian agrarian life. On the New India Assurance Building in Fort, for instance, you can see a panel which features a woman wearing a sari and carrying bales of produce, framed by scenes of farming and cultivation. The sculptural reliefs of the structure depict peasants,

craftspeople, looms, wheels, and agricultural tools. These agrarian motifs evoke aspirations of self-reliance and a dignified collective future, aligning with the broader attempt to fuse modernist design with the ideological moorings of Swadeshi. In the Cotton Exchange Building, one can see trade and commerce bas relief showing cotton being harvested, loaded and exported by ships at the Bombay port. Lettering was a nuanced symbolism of local identity, with Gujarati, Devanagari and Urdu finding their place in building signages. Ornate grillwork, religious symbolism, the use of local materials and at a broader level, the inclusion of climate responsive architecture as a predominant design style, are all intrinsic to indigenisation, local adaptation and representation.



**Liberty cinema. Courtesy of Art Deco Mumbai Trust**

**SA: Art Deco in Mumbai is unique because not only do we have apartments but also theatres, hospitals, even petrol pumps. It's a way of life.**

AK: Yes, it extends across every imaginable typology, which includes schools, colleges, hospitals, nursing homes, cinema theatres, mercantile buildings, residential buildings, hotels, clubs, and even a few places of worship

**SA: Tell us about some of your favourite Deco buildings in Mumbai.**

AK: Mumbai has such an eclectic mix of Art Deco buildings with such uniquely distinctive designs that it seems to limit their acknowledgement by picking favourites. Having said that, to name a few that stand out, by typology, would be the residential building Soona Mahal on Marine Drive, Eros Cinema at Churchgate, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (educational institution) and Purandare Nursing Home in Girgaon Chowpatty, Ratan building in Sion, R. M. Bhatt Hostel in Mazgaon.



**PNB house. Courtesy of Art Deco Mumbai Trust**

**SA: Art Deco flourished in Mumbai in the 1930-40s and instantly became a hallmark of modern living in India. What role did entrepreneurs, merchants and royals of India have played in this?**

AK: Entrepreneurs, merchants and royals were key players who contributed significantly to the early arrival of the style in Bombay, which thereafter led to its popular appropriation across the city. Apartment style living itself was a modern intervention and heralded new ways of living, establishing new social norms and enabling a certain multiculturalism. The royalty was seduced by the glamour of the flourishing city, with its wealthy merchant class defining a new lifestyle through the latest automobiles, cinema theatres, sports clubs and an emerging international culture of consumption in the modern metropolis. The Maharajas of princely states such as Bansda (commissioned Anand Bhavan, Cumbala Hill), Baroda, Gwalior, Hyderabad (commissioned Dhanraj Mahal, Colaba), Bikaner, Kutch (commissioned Dariya Mahal, Malabar Hill), Rewa and Wankaner (commissioned Wankaner House or Lincoln House, Cumbala Hill), all built palatial villas in Bombay. Amongst wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs, we have examples among Govindram Seksaria, known in the early 20th century as the 'Cotton King of the World,' who commissioned the Seksaria Building for his family, at Marine Drive. Shapoorji Pallonji, the renowned Indian construction firm, was responsible for much of Bombay's built form, including their Art Deco residence, Windmere in Cuffe Parade. Textile industrialist Mafatlal Gagalbhai commissioned Mafatlal House and Sea Face Park (formerly Mafatlal Park), in Cumbala Hill. In the suburban neighbourhoods of Vile Parle and Juhu, prominent families like the Tejpals, Paranjpes and the Wadias contributed extensively to development. Collectively, these merchants, entrepreneurs and the royal families gave the Art Deco movement an early impetus. It is important to appreciate that while the Art Deco style may seem like a Western import which was an

appropriation of a post-colonial style by Bombay, its design and execution was wholly Indian. Indian architects, emerging from J J School of Art, as it was then called, many of whom went on to study in the United Kingdom, came back to India. Their flourishing practices created an Art Deco city rich in its representation of an Indian vernacular. Prominent names of that period include the practices of Master Sathe and Bhuta, Bhedwar & Bhedwar, G B Mhatre, J P Mistri, Suvernpatki & Vora.



**SA: You have created awareness for Deco by turning to interesting activities like interactive maps, digital archiving, heritage walks and workshops.. this is civic activism at its best.**

AK: Over the years, I realised that our expectations around heritage from legislation, local administrators and government is of a very high order. The challenge is that they have priorities that address more basic needs such as housing, healthcare, education, water, sanitation, and urban planning. My appreciation of this limitation led me to reinvent our approach and talk to every stakeholder in the city in an accessible, affordable and easily understandable manner. To that extent, digital channels and the inexpensive availability of mobile data enabled it in a very big way, as it permitted democratic access not just in terms of affordability, but also being available 'whenever and wherever' the citizen wanted it. Bombay's built fabric is part of the material memory

of every person who has lived in the city and resonates with their emotional quotient in a manner, unlike any other city in India. It is a city that has grown over time, but it has been established through philanthropy, which has extended not just to private buildings, but hospitals, educational institutions, and other public places created within the realm of private enterprise. For example, the Taj Mahal Hotel, which functions as a hotel but is symbolic of Bombay for many more reasons than its functionality. At Art Deco Mumbai, we tap into this quotient, appropriating the city for every resident and giving them reasons to celebrate and enjoy its marvellous Art Deco properties.



*Gallery: Restoration activities captured by Art Deco Mumbai Trust*

<https://aboutplatform.com/now/the-making-of-mumbai-s-historic-art-deco-heritage>