

S | A | L | O | N

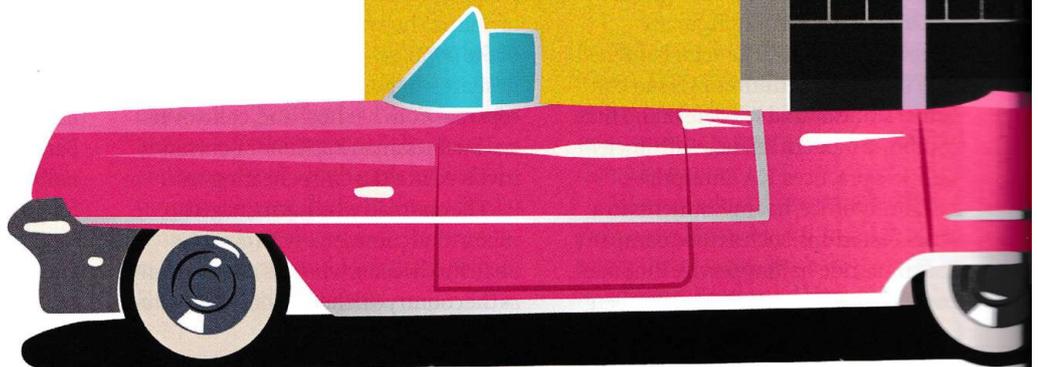
ARCHITECTURE

MUMBAI DECO FOREVER

The city is all set to
celebrate the architecture
that once defined it

By Shaikh Ayaz

The Art Deco movement
started in Miami and
Mumbai in the 1920s





COURTESY ART DECO ALIVE!

N O ONE EVER doubted Art Deco's timeless appeal, but 2025 feels particularly momentous. This year marks the centenary of the European design movement that first took

shape in the mid-1920s. With 'Art Deco 100' shindigs unfolding in cities around the world, Mumbai — home to the second largest ensemble of Art Deco architectural gems in the world, second only to Miami — is all set to join in the fun.

The upcoming Art Deco Alive! festival (November 6-25, 2025) is billed as a multi-layered, city-wide festival that will include exhibitions, curated talks, symposiums, heritage walks and other engaging events aimed at fostering public engagement, cross-cultural dialogue and creative exchange. Envisioned as a twin-city Deco-themed carnival held across Miami and Mumbai, its inaugural Miami edition has just drawn to a close and the spotlight has turned to our very own Maximum City.

"The energy in Miami was electric and collaborative. It sets the tone perfectly for bringing this dialogue finally to Mumbai, where we will explore how preservation and progress can coexist," says Art Deco Alive! founder Smiti Kanodia, a Mumbai-based entrepreneur and media professional. She is the driving force behind the extravaganza, along with her longtime friends and co-founders Salma Merchant Rahmathulla and Gayatri Hingorani Dewan. Rahmathulla and Dewan live in Miami but the troika share more than a transcontinental friendship. They are cultural enthusiasts and unapologetic fans of



"There's philosophical and visual richness to Deco design, which is traditional, contemporary and extremely versatile. Its elegant geometry and decorative detailing set amongst clean lines give it a classic vibe."

Atul Kumar, founding trustee, Art Deco Mumbai Trust

all-things-Deco. Having grown up in Mumbai and travelled to Miami later on in life, Kanodia always admired the fact that two of her favourite cities, though continents apart, share a close architectural and cultural affinity through a common design heritage. “Both cities have coastlines that shaped their urban identities and both embraced Art Deco as a contemporary style that reflected the progress, optimism and romance of its era. What makes the architectural style unique here is that these buildings are not simply a relic from the past.

Over time, they have evolved into a living, breathing part of their local and cultural fabric,” Kanodia tells *Open*.

The Mumbai chapter of Art Deco Alive! promises



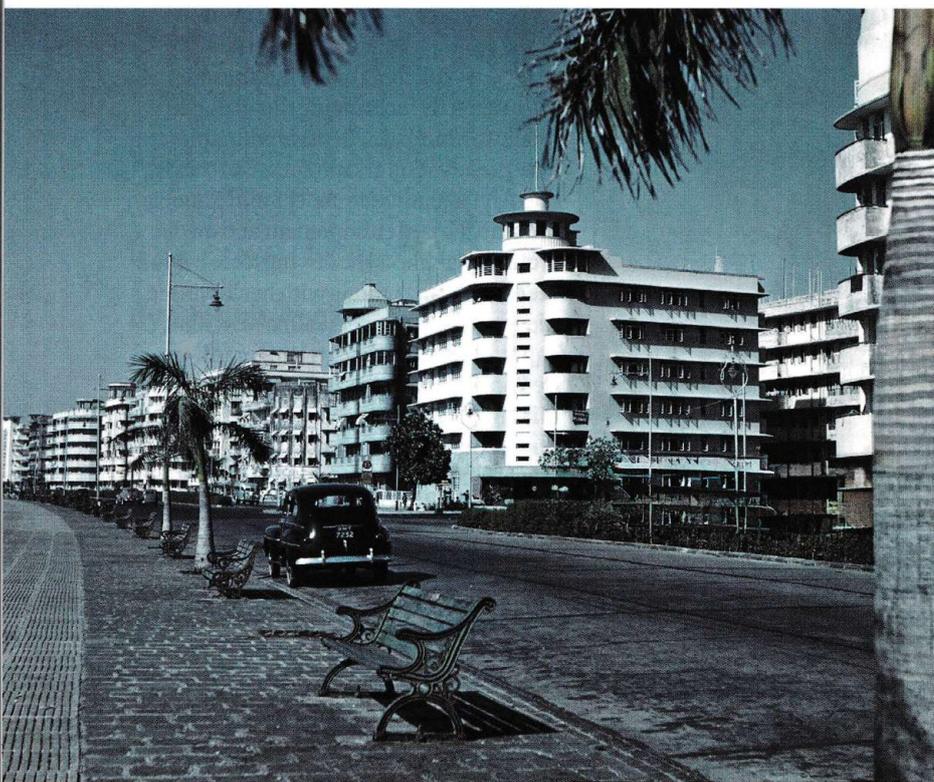
“Both cities have coastlines that shaped their urban identities and both embraced Art Deco as a contemporary style that reflected the progress, optimism and romance of its era. What makes the architectural style unique here is that these buildings are not simply a relic from the past.” Smiti Kanodia founder, Art Deco Alive!

to connect audiences to their heritage through an eclectic mix of art, architecture and musical experiences. At the heart of the festival is a sprawling exhibition titled *Ocean Drive to Marine Drive: Mapping a Century of Deco (1925–2025)*. Held in collaboration with Atul Kumar of Art Deco Mumbai Trust and Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Byculla, it will provide a glimpse into Deco’s tryst with Bombay through a series of archival trove, oral histories, multimedia exhibits and artefacts loaned from private collections. The 20-day spectacle will have film screenings, design workshops and curated retail edits from jewellery to furniture, reflecting Deco’s enduring influence on all aspects of life.

“We also have Churchgate Street Re-wind, a community celebration that will

transform one of Mumbai’s most iconic streets into an open-air Deco promenade with music, guided walks and themed menus,” Kanodia shares. Vintage geeks will get a chance to channel their inner *Great Gatsby* in a Jazz Age-inspired gala which will recapture the glitz and glamour of early 20th century Bombay.

For Kanodia and her team, Art Deco Alive! is a realisation of a long-cherished dream and a starting point for a broader conversation about Deco—one that celebrates Mumbai and Miami’s Deco legacies and commits to its conservation and education. She aptly describes her efforts as “cultural continuity,” bridging the gap between development and preservation and offering Mumbaiians a platform for creative discourse and collaboration beyond the mere optics of aesthetics and entertainment. “It is about amalgamating the different energies and creating a strong voice that will inspire people to care for their architectural and urban heritage and pass on this awareness to future generations. To me, heritage isn’t static history. It’s alive when people witness it,” she says, adding that the festival is equally aimed at advocating for better civic policies and creating more accessible archives and documentation for a wider public.



GETTY IMAGES

Art Deco style apartment buildings overlooking Marine Drive in Mumbai

ART DECO WAS born at the landmark International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts held in Paris in 1925, though the term itself was coined much later. In Bombay, for example, Claude Batley, the head of the architectural department at Sir J. J. School of Art, simply referred to it as “new architecture.” The exhibition arrived at a crucial point in history, as Europe was emerging from the harsh austerities of World War I. It is commonly believed that Art Deco was a reaction against the sinuous naturalism of Art Nouveau, drawing inspiration from such disparate worlds as Egyptian and Mesopotamia motifs, ancient African art and the automotive themes of the Machine Age—ultimately, conjuring an aesthetic where both the avant-garde and traditional converged.



AFP

Eros Cinema, an Art Deco structure in Mumbai

In recent years, Art Deco has made a comeback. From Elon Musk's curvaceous Robovan to last year's flamboyant Olympics posters, its imprint is everywhere. Perhaps, a renewed yearning for nostalgia in a fast-paced, cluttered life explains its popularity again or maybe, it is riding the wave of its centenary celebrations. Thanks to its all-encompassing ode to modernity that spans architecture, fashion, design, movies and everyday objects, Deco has been dubbed a 'total style,' or 'Gesamtkunstwerk,' as the Germans would call it. "There's philosophical and visual richness to Deco design, which is traditional, contemporary and extremely versatile. Its elegant geometry and decorative detailing set amongst clean lines give it a classic vibe," says Atul Kumar, the founding trustee of the non-profit Art

Deco Mumbai Trust (ADMT), which has emerged as one of the champions of Deco architecture in the commercial hub of India. Amidst Mumbai's urban jungle—its constantly shifting skylines, haphazard construction and densely populated slums—the UNESCO-protected Art Deco architectural marvels that dot the southern, more affluent edge of the city stand out as a beacon of joy and hope.

For many, the striking apartment blocks designed in the stylised, yet sleek Deco style that line the Marine Drive promenade and the Oval Maidan neighbourhood are synonymous with Mumbai's urban identity and whatever is left of its old-world charm. Residential apartments facing the Oval Maidan in Churchgate, one of the most upmarket enclaves of Mumbai, came up first. These

Deco masterpieces were primarily built on reclaimed land back in the 1930s to cater to a burgeoning class of professional elites. Buildings like Court View, Empress Court, Rajjab Mahal, Shiv Shanti Bhuvan and of course, the much-beloved and newly-restored Eros Cinema, exemplify Deco architecture at its peak—each showcasing characteristic Deco motifs like geometric patterns, streamlined forms, zigurat or stepped facades, sunbursts, curvilinear accents and stylised emblems such as frozen fountains, stenciled lettering and local flora and fauna. The Deco gems along Oval Maidan sit serenely on plots reclaimed by the Backbay Reclamation scheme of 1920s, overlooking the more stately and historic Indo-Saracenic and Victorian Gothic public structures.

For decades, Oval's relatively minimalist Deco remained in the shadows of Gothic grandeur, waiting for its due recognition. Its moment of reckoning finally arrived in 2018, when UNESCO inscribed both the Victorian Gothic and Art Deco ensembles as a World Heritage Site following a concerted effort by residents, scholars, conservationists and organisations like the Art Deco Mumbai Trust. All 35 buildings on the Marine Drive shoreline stand as some of the finest examples of Art Deco architecture, their streamlined curves, nautical motifs and organised symmetry transforming the city by the Arabian sea into a global symbol of wealth, glamour and ambition. In other words, the 'City of Dreams' derived much of its allure from the luxurious glimmer of Queen's Necklace, as Marine Drive has been popularly nicknamed.

MARINE DRIVE APARTMENTS, or "Mumbai's crown jewel," as Kumar puts it, were largely built between the 1930s and 1950s. As a product of the industrial age, Art Deco embraced new building materials like glass, steel and most notably, reinforced cement concrete (RCC), lending its architecture a sense of uniformity, structural efficiency and flexibility. Additionally, strict building regulations helped give Marine Drive a distinctive and cohesive look. "The building codes of the time stipulated that every apartment must only be a five-storey high or 21 metres. For instance, there was legislation in place which mandated a gap between two buildings. Everything was well defined," explains Kumar. Most of the architects who worked on it were Indians, such as GB Mhatre, JP Mistri, Master, Sathe & Bhuta, Suvernpatki & Vora and Bhedwar & Bhedwar. "They wanted to break away from the prevalent Gothic and Indo-Saracenic style which was colonial in spirit. They ushered the city into modernity while remaining firmly rooted within the Indian context," contends Kumar, whose curation for *Ocean Drive to Marine Drive* during Art Deco Alive! will uncover some of these lesser-known episodes



Courtesy ART DECO ALIVE!

The festival will include a Jazz Age-inspired gala which will recapture the glamour of early 20th-century Bombay

from Mumbai's architectural history.

Well-exposed to European trends as well as skilled in vernacular traditions, these architects ensured that an international style like Art Deco was adapted to the Indian way of living. Whether it is the emblem of goddess Lakshmi on top of the Lakshmi Insurance Company building in Fort or letterings in Gujarati, Devanagari and Urdu in signages, the Indian architects absorbed the streamlined lines and geometric forms of global Art Deco and localised them with Indian mythological imagery. Some buildings even feature agrarian motifs which evoke aspirations of self-reliance and freedom, aligning with the nationalist sentiments of a new nation looking ahead to its independence.

"Our architects integrated curved balconies for ventilation, pastel palettes suited to tropical light, and Indian motifs like lotuses, waves, and rising suns — blending modern engineering with local artistry. These choices made Deco in Mumbai unique — not imported, but interpreted," says Kanodia. Kumar adds, "What is truly special about Mumbai's architecture, and about Art Deco in particular, is that unlike Delhi it is not all monuments or public buildings-centric. It is homes, schools, hospitals and cinemas... spaces that are lived in and evoke a strong emotional response from residents and citizens alike." Kumar had founded ADMT in 2016 to promote, preserve and safeguard Art Deco's architectural and cultural value. He has since catalogued over 1,500 heritage buildings

in 44 precincts, including in and around lesser-known parts of Mumbai like Ghatkoper, Borivali, Shivaji Park, Dadar, Mohammed Ali Road and Girgaon and even several other Indian cities.

For Mustansir Dalvi, professor at the Sir J.J. School of Architecture and an advisor to Art Deco Alive!, the Deco architecture is inherently cosmopolitan. It fostered community living on a scale that never happened before in Bombay. "A new kind of typology flourished in these housings, what we today call 'apartments' or 'flats.' These middle-class, white-collared new home owners did not know which community would be their neighbour, so once you started living there, you would have to get along with them. This led to inclusivity within different communities," argues Dalvi. Another reason is that the Deco buildings were built right on the streets, "so lives of the residents of the buildings and the people outside were intricately intertwined, giving us an open city." Dalvi hopes that festivals like Art Deco Alive! will engage younger citizens to care for sustainability, identity and the urban character of their city and remind them of Deco's exciting history in Mumbai. Kanodia feels that the festival's success depends on how well it empowers the future generations in keeping the spirit of Art Deco alive. "We want the conversation to evolve and expand into public participation. For us, this isn't just a one-time festival, it's the beginning of a long-lasting cultural dialogue," she concludes. ■