

# Inside Malabar Court, one of Mumbai's residential Art Deco gems, in its final chapter

Mumbai's history comes alive in the Art Deco marvels lining its luminous shores. As some of these time capsules slowly depart, they remind us of the joys of responsive, thoughtful architecture.

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*Art Deco Mumbai Trust*

Mumbai, as with any metropolis heaving around a frothy sea, lends itself to easy romanticisation. There are practical reasons for it. Set against a geographical timeline, the city is relatively new. Unlike Delhi or Lucknow, where just ploughing through a crumbling mausoleum will reveal multiple dynasties, those of Mumbai are all of our own making; barely any of the layers are more than a few hundred years old. Bandra was, quite literally, a space for farming less than six decades ago, before the matcha cafes trickled in and housing rent shot through the stratosphere. Consider the boulevard of Marine Drive, perhaps one of the most distinctive markers of the city. It was only fully built by 1940 as part of the Backbay Reclamation Scheme. The project was the breeding ground for Art Deco in Mumbai, as it was an ambitious undertaking that pushed back the Arabian Sea to create 439.6 acres of brand-new, stable land.

In 2026, the ravens of history have finally arrived in Mumbai to roost. Enough time has passed for us to compartmentalise the city. We can segment it based on what remains and what once was, as Imtiaz Dharker put it in her poem ‘Hiraeth, Old Bombay’:

*I would have taken you to Bombay  
if its name had not slid into the sea.  
I would have taken you to the place called Bombay  
if it were still there and if you were still here [...]*



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Malabar Court, a residential Art Deco property, spread across an acre and adjacent to the Malabar Hill Club, has renegotiated its relationship with the sea, much like the ‘Bombay’ of Dharker. Its owners have decided to go down the redevelopment route. There are the usual questions: What are the socio-cultural implications of this? Was it only a matter of time? Can Mumbai afford to remain in stasis? While we arrive at our own conclusions, nothing stops us from understanding the story of the Malabar Court, of the

value one small residential block holds in the imagination of a city that can never forget it.



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Atul Kumar, founder of Art Deco Mumbai, tells *AD* that even the history of the creation of Malabar Court is fascinating in and of itself: “It was built by the architect David William Ditchburn, who earlier used to work for W.H. Chambers and Company, which designed the Taj Mahal Hotel. Thereafter, he joined a company called Mistri and Bhedwar. It was a hybrid firm of Indian and foreign partners in 1944.” In terms of the style of the building—the spaciousness, the high ceilings, the balconies, the beautiful garden at the back—he adds, “Malabar Court symbolises a way of living which today is slowly getting erased.”



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Malabar Court's structural integrity has been well-preserved. Kumar notes that this speaks of the incredible quality of construction. Even though the building is close to 80 years old, to witness it in pristine condition is a rarity. But what is it about Malabar Court that ensures its longevity? Is it the people who care for it, or something inherent in the architecture of it, the way it was planned?



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Kumar attributes it to a combination of factors. One, of course, is just the quality of materials at that time, which were far superior to what we have now. Secondly, because reinforced concrete was a relatively new construction material in the 1930s and '40s, builders used more of it than was needed, as they weren't sure about its structural capability. "There is the maintenance by the owners too because if you look at the building, its architectural integrity is very high," he says. "So, there have not been many interventions: the balconies, the lobby, the staircase, the wooden hand railings, and the metal grilles are all intact. All that adds to the character of the property."

Art Deco developed in Mumbai in response to the rhythms of the sea. Almost all its elements, even the decorative ones, speak to this relationship. The architects abandoned the heat-trapping, European approach so that the

structures could breathe. Studies have noted that one of such features is the chhajja, known as an ‘eyebrow’ in Art Deco lingo. These are projecting concrete edges, designed in curved forms or just flat shelves placed directly above windows and building porticos—acting as permanent weather shades, protecting the interiors from the harsh sunlight, and shielding the windows from the wrath of the monsoon. However, the conservation architect Vikas Dilawari says that these elements slowly wither away if one is not too careful about the context in which the architectural elements of Art Deco survive.



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“If someone has been born and brought up in an Art Deco space, they will enjoy everything about it,” says Dilawari. “Now, such a space is like a vintage car. If you change some part of it, it will be a misfit. There are people who feel that cement mosaic tiles, so inherent to Art Deco, are not appealing,

so they have replaced them with marble—this is how you lose the original grace and charm of Art Deco’s historic colours and patterns.”

For some, the choice of tiles might be too small a battle to pick. With a wave of hands, the mosaic tiles, the chajja ‘eyebrows’, the balconies jutting into the sea—all of them slowly recede away. Malabar Court, though, shielded itself away from it, resisted mediocrity. Kumar notes that it retains all that makes Art Deco the wonder that it is: “Every element of it is focused on the access of light and air, and on enabling a better quality of living. That means the staircase is extremely wide, and even the ceiling within the staircase is extremely high. There is no claustrophobia or space limitation,” he says. “We need to have a lot of conversation about how we want to imagine our lives, or reimagine our lives, in the city.”



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The significance of Art Deco—in the consciousness of Mumbai and all those who have been touched by it—can hardly fade. Last month, while travelling for another AD story, I made a surprising discovery in a 200-year-old Shekhawati haveli in a remote Rajasthan village. On the frescoes, between elaborate scenes of Marwari women and caparisoned elephants was something unmistakably Art Deco: a streamlined plaster medallion with horizontal speed-lines and a centralised cartouche. You could just as easily spot this motif in Regal Cinema. The owners had introduced these Deco elements in their haveli in 1956 when they'd frequently travel to Bombay as merchants. The restoration team, 70 years later, decided to retain it. If Art Deco can make that journey, how far can it truly be?

<https://www.architecturaldigest.in/story/inside-malabar-court-one-of-mumbais-residential-art-deco-gems-in-its-final-chapter/>