

SKYE A THOMAS

HAVE A DECCO

In which we trace the city's relationship with the architectural style

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Art Deco: the style that heralded a new future

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**Mumbai is a city with the second-largest collection of Deco in the world**

I had no idea that it was Art Deco, but then we had somebody come to do up the children's room and they told us that it was Art Deco, that's when I looked it up for the first time. And that was in 2015," a resident of an iconic Art Deco building in the city tells us, rather anticlimactically, when we ask what the lived experience of a Deco Building is. This is not uncommon to hear in Mumbai, even though it is a city with the second-largest collection of Deco in the world, which has thrived since the 1930s, with stunning examples that extend across its sprawling neighbourhoods — starting in Colaba, to Churchgate, Marine Drive, Marine Lines, Cumbala hill, Mohammed Ali Road, Matunga, Dadar, Juhu, Chembur...

Smooth curves, slick typography — a brightly painted accent against a mute background. An electric blue Miami sea front, high-waisted chiffon and cocktails with a view of the sunset. Just at the mention of Art Deco the imagination soars — fed by the old-world Hollywood charm that the popular imagination still retains. But Deco is not always nostalgic; in fact, its South Asian presence is one of a dizzying hybridity, and, of course, high glamour.

Deco arrived in Mumbai at a time that the city was fashioning itself a modernity; articulating its desire to be a counterpart to any other continental metropolis, yet not solely defined by the legacy it carried of the British Raj. It was almost as if to say we no longer want the old Gothic to define us. These buildings were built fast, and entire neighbourhoods emerged with great speed. The Deco in Bombay is thus the pinnacle of its aspirations toward the future: a highly streamlined and aestheticised architecture for a coastal city with broad ambitions, and a diverse population looking to express itself through a modern language.

At the same time that the Cubists were abstracting the pictorial plane, and the Futurists were creating experimental abstractions in relation to vision of the future (namely industry and technology), architecture too, was playing with these ideas. This gave us the birth of the clas-

sic Deco motifs — identifiable by their clear expression of flowers, birds, faces, fountains and waves. Deco is about the meeting of rhythms and geometries, fluidly translated by its curvilinear forms.

Deco was brought to India by a prosperous business community who had access to the World Exhibitions that were very popular in the 20s and 30s — most often held in Paris and London. These were grand fairs that sought to initiate the aspirations of a "new future" as envisioned through the late-industrial period. It is not unusual thus, to see in Deco the evidence of such future visions: many buildings are nautically themed, streamlined and use modern materials.

The material palette enabled speedy construction and ease in conception of sculptural and curvilinear forms: marble with stucco, wood with terrazzo, stained glass, stone cladding and metal work. It was about working with new materials and techniques that liberated structures from the confines of the late-Victorian and neo-Gothic landscape of the old city. All of which converge onto signature ornamentation: curved balconies, decorated surfaces, intricately patterned flooring, motifs and stunning street corner-facing facades. And upon their arrival into South Asia, Deco buildings were imagined as everyday spaces such as apartment complexes, and public spaces like cinemas, hospitals, insurance buildings and even an Agiary.

This column marks the first in a series that will tell you a story of the Deco of Mumbai, especially with examples that perhaps don't come straight to mind. It is an effort to contextualise Deco not only within its history, but with a discussion of its present iteration — and the dynamic and hybrid way by which it still retains its hold over Mumbai's skyline. A city is after all, social relationships — animated as much by its buildings, as by the people that inhabit them across neighbourhoods.

This weekly column is the first in a series on the story of Art Deco in the city. Follow the author on [instagram @artdecomumbai](#)



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