

SKYE A THOMAS

HAVE A DECCO

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

Write to her at mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com

Deco Hotels: The Last Sentinels



West End's Chez Nous, a Deco bar

There is a rare breed of hotelier that inhabits the marbled lobbies of one of the last remaining Deco hotels in the city. His knowledge of the hotel, its guests, and the city is far beyond the ordinary imagination. "A hotel is meant to be a home away from home," says Arjun Ramani, a third generation hotelier and owner of the West End Hotel, near Bombay Hospital. He is no typical host, the Hotel is a living, breathing map in his mind.

The Deco hotels of the city themselves occupy a space in the imagination that matches their velvet, wood-paneled interiors, each an iconic building in its own right, and each unique to its time and place in history. Waterfront Hotel Shelley's, now under renovation, drips with a pink and red baroque detailing, and it is perhaps the most extraordinary of the set. Deco meets Baroque on Shelley's surface.

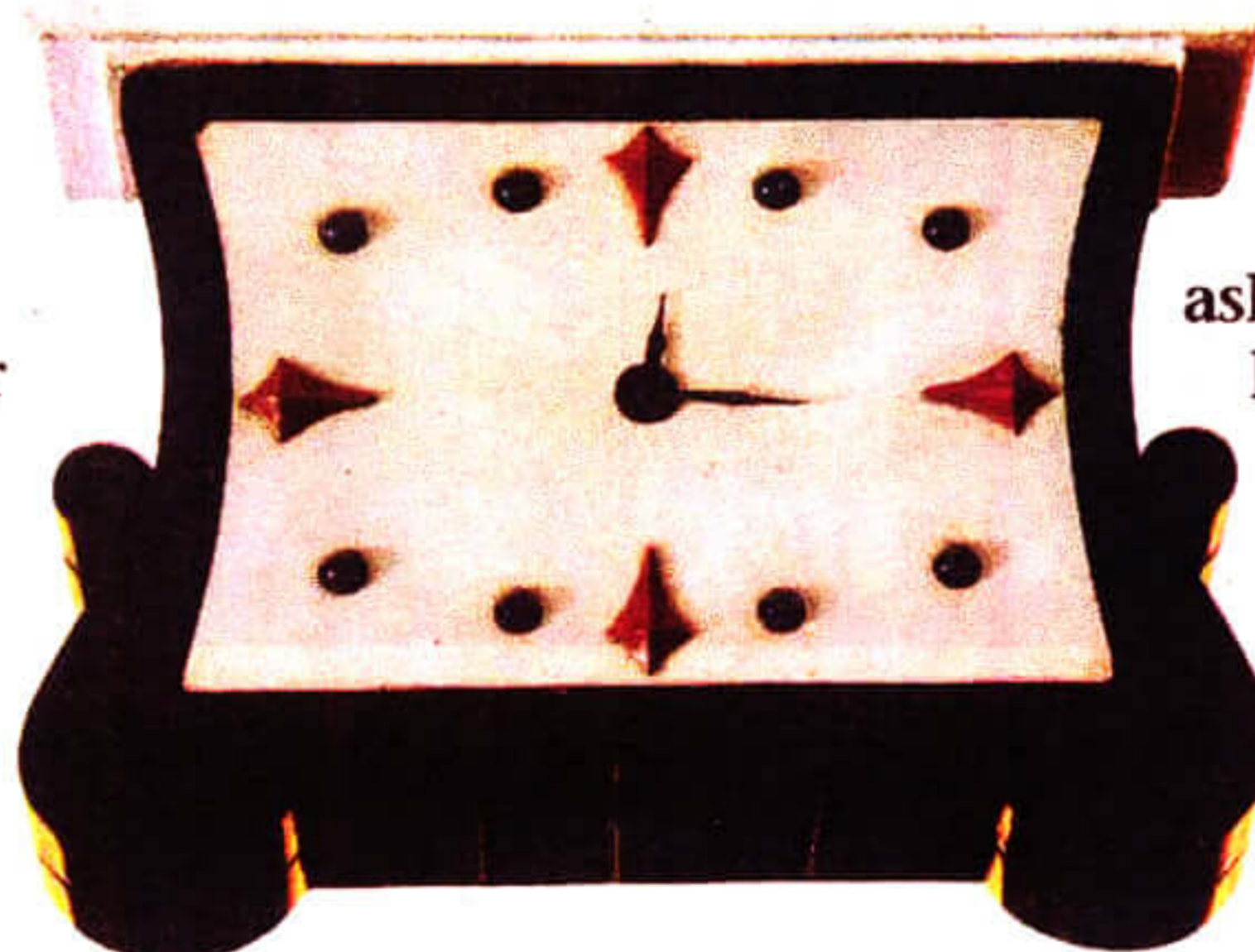
Another eccentricity is in the sharp angles over at the Sea Green Hotel — the shimmering, pistachio green icon, which stands resplendent on Marine Drive. Its front facade is a cascade of clean, right-angled balconies, with no visible rounding that is so typical of the Deco period. The truly striking detail is in its corners: where triangular balconies fall one after the other in a sharp line to the floor. "I like its form and symmetry," says Pesi Sidhwa, third generation proprietor of the Hotel. Sidhwa is preparing to hand over to his sons, continuing a line of fourth generation hoteliers, who have all, at different times, lived on the premises. "I am so proud to see that it is in a good condition," he continues.

"After all of these years it has lasted, and even though we stand against the salt laden sea-wind." During the Second World War, Sidhwa says, the entire building was requisitioned and taken over by the British Army as a mess hall. At the time, it was primarily a residential building, and once the war was over, not many residents moved back as they had already settled down elsewhere. It was at this time that the family decided to run it as a hotel, says Sidhwa. The West End Hotel, on the other hand, unlike the several Deco Hotels in the city, including Shelley's and The Ritz, was built and designed in 1948 specifically as a hotel.

There appears to be an almost unspoken and avowed promise between proprietor and building, where there is little inclination to make additional changes to the hotel exterior or interior: both Sidhwa and Ramani declare that they would do little to



Southern facade of Sea Green Hotel



West End's Deco clock in lobby

the Deco elements of their buildings, unless it was an urgent concern. Both have drawers full of letters from guests asking them not to change a thing. The hotel bar of the West End, Chez Nouz, is one of the most remarkable in the city, and is paneled with grey velvet cushions. It has an S-shaped bar that allows intimate conversations with bartender and fellow guests alike — and has remained the same since it was first conceived by a Russian architect. At the entrance of the West End is a wood enameled clock, its flat surface characteristic of Deco abstraction, and sharp wood paneling

that still glistens in the light.

"The only reason that we are able to maintain this as a budget hotel is because this property was leased by my grandfather — at that price, and at that time," says Sidhwa. The future is reeling itself in quickly for property owners on Marine Drive, particularly because many were built on 90/100 year leases, most of which will come to an end in the decade.

The Deco of the city, like its remaining hotels, occupies a contradictory place in the city's existence: with its remarkable design, most people who frequent its spaces have a strong relationship with its architecture, yet there is a great risk to its continued existence.

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The writer works with Art Deco Mumbai which showcases Mumbai's Deco. Follow them on Instagram @artdecomumbai