

SKYE A THOMAS

HAVE A DECCO

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

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Meet the deco men

An unassuming bungalow, which was previously known as the Dean's Bungalow and which sat at the edges of the Sir JJ School of Art, is at the heart of our story today. On May 12 1917, a group of men gathered together at the Dean's Bungalow to host the inaugural meeting of what is today the Indian Institute of Architects.

In 1937, the Institute held an exhibition to display to the public, and primarily to other designers and architects, interior rooms filled with Art-Deco style furniture. Materials like metal and simple woods crafted in highly streamlined shapes both shocked and awed viewer. It was there that, perhaps, a new aesthetic definition was born.

As our time with Mumbai Deco draws to a close with this column, we thought it only fitting to pay homage to the very creators of our Deco landscape, the architects to which these buildings may be attributed. It is undeniable that the architects of a modern Bombay were particularly innovative. But Bombay Deco is characterised by how the buildings showed restraint in design. In the Indian context of ornate and elaborate, this restraint was an exceptional design response. They maintained spatial and material constraints. The buildings prominently feature carefully chosen, and largely handmade, architectural attributes. As our favourite buildings in the city show us, many architects adapted Indian decorative motifs onto their classic-Deco style planes. Indian firms spearheaded by architects such as G B Mhatre, Master, Sathe and Bhuta; Bhedwar & Bhedwar and Merwanji Bana and Co., were the pioneers and executors of the Bombay Deco tradition.

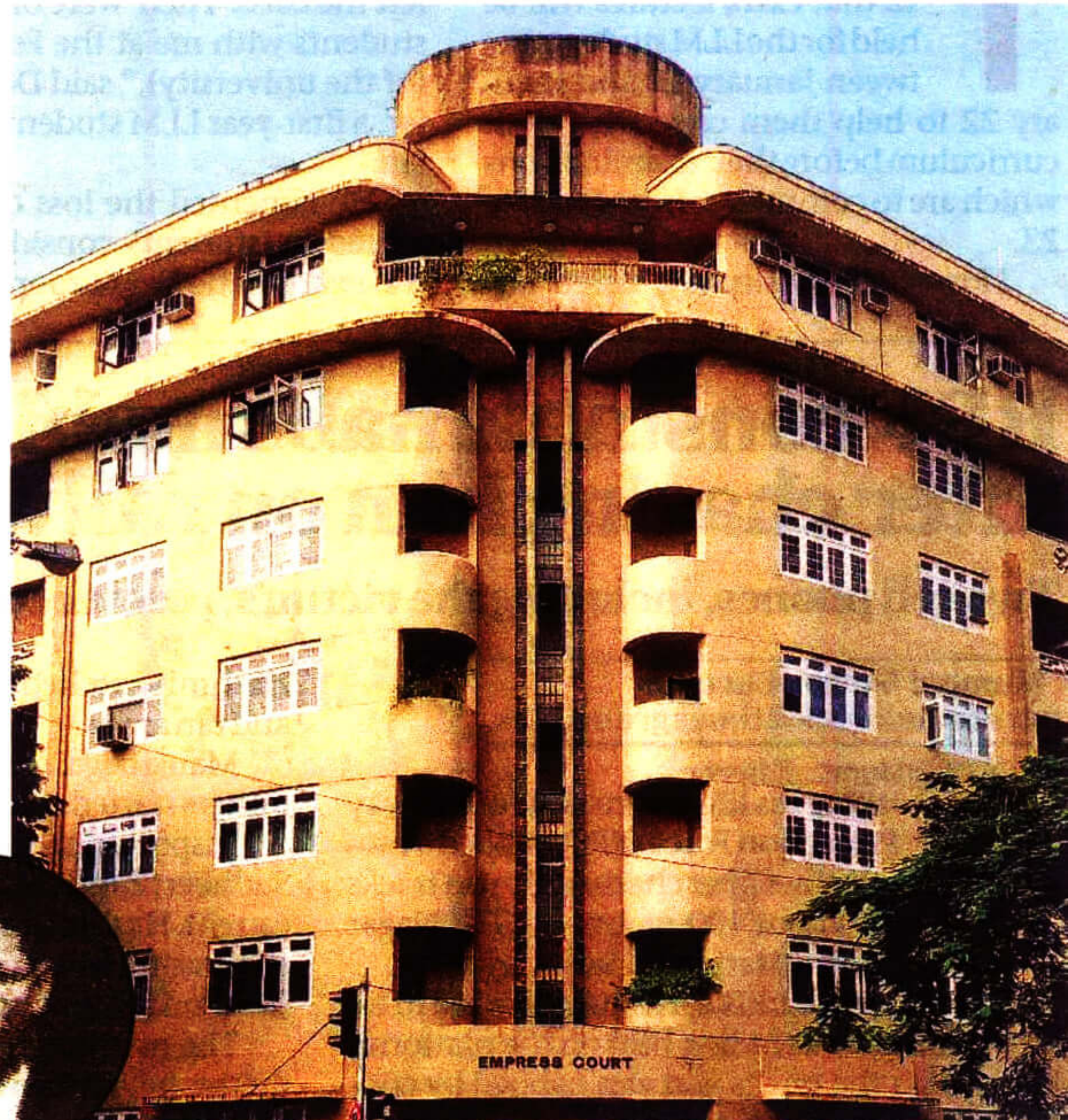
Mhatre was coined the 'shadow architect' by Batley as he rarely got credit for his designs since he never signed them

The showpieces of Bombay Deco are often considered to be its cinemas, of which The Regal was designed by Charles Stevens, The Metro, whose plans were drawn by Thomas W Lamb and executed by Ditchburn and Mistri, while the boldest of the lot,

Eros, by architect Sohrabji Bhedwar. Eros' V-shaped foundations were first laid in 1935, and upon its construction it was soon seen as an epitome of modern design, style and finish not only for its majestic ziggurat laden exterior but also its lavish interiors. Bhedwar founded the firm Mistri & Bhedwar with Jamshedji Pestonji Mistri in 1890, and by the 1930s their firm undertook major development projects for the city including mills, mosques, fire temples, churches, cinemas, schools and even hotels. Their residential projects included buildings on the Oval Maidan, Cuffe Parade and Marine Drive.

Of the firms, Master, Sathe and Bhuta were the most prolific, and in 1935 they designed the Bombay Mutual Life Building for one of the country's oldest insurance companies. The main entrance is, in a classic Deco style, placed at the corner of the building. In 1936, the firm undertook the construction of the Laxmi Insurance Company building, at the very peak of which they had installed a bronze sculpture of the goddess. Mhatre, influenced by Claude Batley, learnt early that buildings of the past were friends and not enemies, and was the most prolific of all Bombay Deco designers. Mhatre was coined the 'shadow architect' by Claude Batley as he rarely got credit for his designs since he never signed them. Mhatre, as quoted by architect Kamu Iyer (once an intern at the firm), insisted that, "Design was a matter of good proportion and refined detail." As such, Mhatre brought this tendency of detailing onto every minutiae including balcony railings, weather shades, brackets, and staircase details.

The writer works with Art Deco Mumbai which showcases Mumbai's Deco. Follow them on Instagram @artdecomumbai. This is the final piece in this series



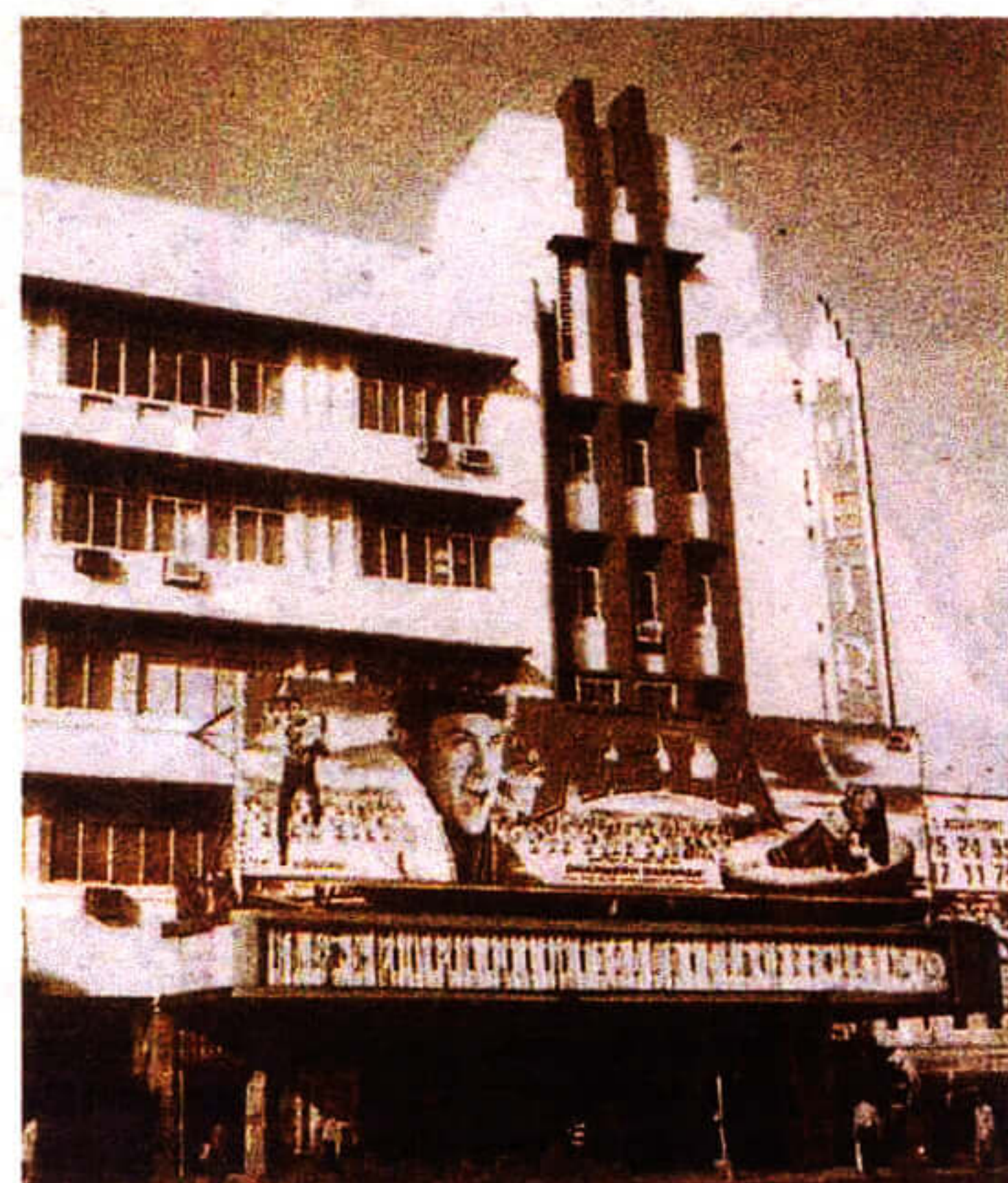
G B Mhatre (left) designed Empress Court



Gregson, Batley and King's Dhanraj Mahal



CM Master (left); Master, Sathe and Bhuta firm designed the New India Assurance Building



D W Ditchburn's Metro Cinema