

SKYE A THOMAS

HAVE A DECCO

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

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The Ismail Begmuhammad High School has intricate pattern work on its facade



Mimson balcony

Mohammed Ali Road: The Deco Collage

A flyover, by definition, erases a neighbourhood from the imagination of a city's residents — rendering it as something to overlook, or to speed past. As a result, all you see as you rush across the J.J. Flyover are fragments of some of the most intricate Deco in the city, or nothing at all, depending on the pace at which you are travelling. Starting from J.J. Hospital all the way down to Dhobi Talao, Mohammed Ali Road is one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods in Mumbai, frequented by thousands during Eid, and yet little known for its Deco marvels.

Underneath the flyover is the potential for numerous narratives: articulated by the ways in which one building after the other reveals a kind of decorative frenzy. 'Fancy Mahal', on the ground floor of which sits Zam Zam Bakery, an outrageous green and beige building with mughal balconies. If one pays close attention to the structure, however, suddenly, as when sharpening the focus of a zoomed-in lens, the building's features begin to reveal themselves. Such is the nature of the Deco on Mohammed Ali Road, as the buildings bear the trace of generations of aspirational additions onto their surface, which sometimes make their Deco origins completely invisible. One could consider these surfaces as though they are collages: sometimes elegantly, at others messily, pulling together many motifs and layers, where each layer is the representation of a particular history.

These surfaces may thus be read as surfaces of assembly: and on a single plane, you may find Deco features, neo-Classical features, Mughal features and even, neo-Gothic features (arguably a spillover from M. Ali Road's proximity to the neo-Gothic Fort area). Yet, in rare and rather glorious instances, some buildings have maintained their Deco integrity. The most striking example of which is certainly Mimson House, a play yellow corner-



The buildings in Mohammed Ali Road are closely packed

facing building with red banding and a facade of long, tubular forms — as though the flutes of a church organ have been clustered together into a bouquet.

Another example is the Ismail Begmuhammad High School, a dusty blue building with intricate pattern work on its facade, whose peeling surface reveals that underneath is actually a brickwork structure, and that perhaps the builders could not afford reinforced concrete. In fact, it is RCC that has enabled several buildings on M. Ali Road to undergo so many transformations — as making concrete additions to concrete structures is far easier.

Often enough, the facade of a single building has been split into several separate facades. Take for instance, Bandukwala Manzil, whose typography reveals that it was constructed in 1936 (which in fact seems to be the period that many of the buildings on M. Ali Road were constructed), and its street corner facing minor weather shades (which are colloquially referred to as 'chajjas') have lace-like floral motifs. Or, there's Karim Building opposite Fancy Mahal, whose balconies are supported by red geometric chatris that seek to draw your attention.

As crowded and closely-packed the streets may be, once you step into one of the buildings it is as though the angles shift — because these are still Deco buildings, bearing the careful planning and attention to open space as is characteristic of their style. Most buildings still have wide and spacious lobbies, mosaic floors and hardwood staircases. One even feels the movement of a soft breeze at their entrances. M. Ali Road is truly unique — and the collagist nature of its Deco reveals multiple, and intensely visual, histories.



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