

SKYE A THOMAS

**HAVE A DECCO**

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

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# Matunga: The Family Deco



Pai House in Matunga

**W**here otherwise Deco is immediately recognisable because of its well-maintained accents and motifs, in Matunga, it is a process of excavation, as many buildings have fallen into ill repair. As we walk through the Matunga streets we stop and exclaim, 'look, there', a corner-facing display; a frozen fountain in bright red; a courtyard with two seats in the shape of pearl-bearing oysters — especially opened to offer us a treat. And each time we see an enclosure, or a gap in the landscape marked by blue tarpaulin or scaffolding, we know that we have just lost a piece of the neighbourhood's historic skyline.

The Deco in Matunga, unlike some of its southern counterparts, remains strikingly localised — infused with details distinct to the identification of its residents. Indian themes begin to blend in, take for instance, Kanti Mahal, or the swastika embedded into a grill at Tejookaya Park. An Om sits proudly atop a window frame in Nalini Kunj — and even, an archway that betrays the influence of early Islamic art. As one travels upward from south Mumbai, the experiments with Deco begin to get more elaborate — showing how local aspirations were not afraid to move away from classical features and play with form.

Not all of the Matunga Deco has fallen to ruin however, and Pai House stands out rather brilliantly as such — with a crisp new coat of white paint and red banded balconies, like a delicately frosted cake. Inside of Pai House is an immaculate display of the customisable facilities that a deco interior offers — smoothly partitioned areas that can be integrated into single living spaces; or a delicately inlaid mosaic floor, the warm patina of which ties together the entire house.

Dr Pai is ever the modernist, and the furnishings of his home reveal exactly this — including a freshly painted plant-pot striped with a classic zigzag deco motif, placed precariously upon a small mid-century kidney table. Not to mention the chair upon which he sat, with a piping detail that almost exactly matched the stairwell. It's all in the detail with Deco, and with Dr Pai. He reveals that the building indeed has an



Tejookaya Park

elevator, but one that he has hidden behind wood paneling at the centre of the building. Dr Pai is of the family of the Pai Hospital, one of the first private hospitals in the area, of which he says proudly, "a third of Matunga was born in our hospital."

There is also a narrative of Partition here: as several of the buildings quickly exchanged hands when many Muslim families from the city were forced to relocate. Pai House too, underwent such a transition, and was renamed by its new proprietors.

"This is not an ownership place," adds Dr Pai when we ask about why he maintains the building so well, a choice not reflected by the landscape of the rest of the neighbourhood. This building is not

about ownership, is what he tells us, or about marking a certain identity or territory. This is perhaps at the heart of the reason why Pai House stands out in the way that it is maintained — it is quite simply, the careful and concise maintenance of a living legacy.

Then there is the Don Bosco boy's school, a legacy too, a powder blue building at the entrance of which hangs a long tassel inside of a frame, an example of how, with Deco, it is all about the framing of metaphor, and narrative.

Matunga shares its Deco features with its neighbour, the Dadar Parsi colony, each side separated by the interlocking, and impressive, Five Gardens. About the divide, a resident remarks, "On the other side of the street they play piano and take ballet lessons, here, we learn Bharatnatyam, and play the violin — and of course, there's the Vedic maths."

The amount of Deco in Matunga is staggering, and indeed, surprising, because of its density. Where at the mention of Mumbai Deco the first impulse is to bring up examples in south Mumbai, Matunga is easily as rich, and complex. Public space in Matunga is deeply social, and several histories overlap and entangle in a neighbourhood that is now host to a route that is the pulsing heart of every city resident's commute.



Nalini Kunj's Om symbol

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