SKYE A THOMAS

Aurora Talkies: The Public Deco

Facade of Aurora Talkies with Deco speedlines and saucer canopy

ART DECO MUMBAI

"What else do we have in Mumbai for the Tamilians?" It was requests like these that led Nambi Rajan to purchase Aurora Talkies in the 1980s. A single screen cinema, it shows in five languages: Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi and Marathi. It is a building deeply embedded in the history and imagination of its neighbourhood – Matunga.

Aurora, a smooth, circular building in the shape of a vessel docked at port, is nestled between a flyover and a busy street. It used to be the last stop on the tram, the 'lands end', but today, it falls along one of the city's busiest routes. If you live in Matunga, you or perhaps a member of your family once marked your days to its tower clock, which used toll at the hour, every hour, for over six decades.

It is a classic example of a '30s Deco interior and a late-'40s Deco exterior, betraying a strong nautical theme. It also connected the landscape of the Deco cinemas together: "Prints would be taken to Metro at 8.30 am, 9 am to Eros, 9.30 to Regal – three shows for 12 Sundays, all house full," says Rajan of the network that involved a team of people scurrying the prints across the city in time for each show.

But the Aurora is not just a cinema. While walking around its disk-like curves, we spot men getting their ears cleaned, or couples holding hands, whispering in its nooks. It is a public space as much as it is a private cinema, and with a hybridity characteristic to this city – the surrounding neighbourhood uses its steps and landings as spaces to socialise.

Aurora is an ideal example of how conservation projects are not only for the privileged. The type of social activity that it breeds would not so easily translate onto the steps of a large multiplex or mall. In fact, this type of public sociality is integral to Matunga's history, being as it was a hotbed for Communist Party mobilisation in the 1930s. It housed the densely populated Matunga Labour Camp for the city's mill workers, and encouraged performance poets and dramatists, such as the infamous Annabhau Sathe, to congregate and conduct meetings and study groups. In fact, mill workers were Aurora's primary patrons for many years, hence its regional specificity.

If Deco is about rhythm and geometry, then certainly the smooth bends of Aurora Talkies delivers this masterfully, and thickly painted blue accents guide the eye along the building's inner movement. And, of course, as you enter it, at a single glance, a history comes to life. It is as though the sky has cracked open and splintered itself across the floor in a delicate mosaic of deep blue, yellow and brown – the colours of a sea-side sunrise. Louvered windowpanes let in a soft light, and leak in the city. Nothing here is exactly fixed, and the building breathes itself into its surroundings.
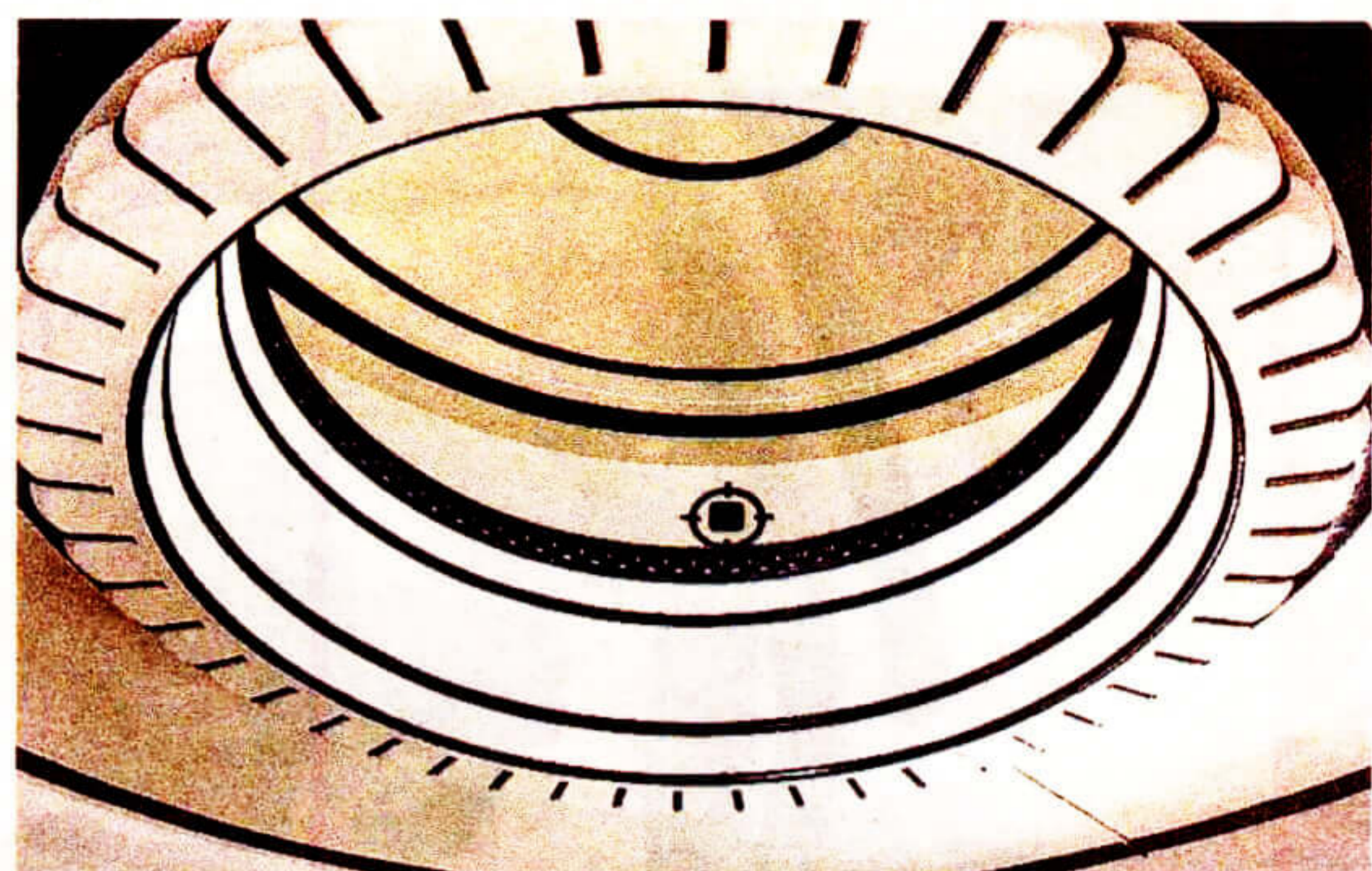
Circular opening on the first floor that provides a visual connect with the entrance lobby at the ground floor

Interior view of the entrance lobby of the single screen theatre

However, Rajan struggles to maintain its architecture, according to the new demands made by its environment and infrastructure. For instance, the building is not equipped for the monsoon that the city faces every year. Where he can, Rajan adapts, and he has built his own drainage method, for instance, with pipes that spill out of the architecture and onto a blue tarpaulin underneath. But this, of course, is temporary.

"How to survive? Business is going down, expenses are going up," says Rajan. This building makes him emotional, and it is clear that he loves it dearly; it is truly an emblem of its neighbourhood, which itself is a Deco marvel, "Matunga is called Mylapore of Mumbai. It is very similar – the crowd, the market – the smell of coffee," he adds wistfully.

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