

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

Marine Drive: The Deco Necklace



Soona Mahal, is one of the more striking of the Marine Drive collection; The green and ivory marble feature in front of wood-panelled elevator at Seksaria (right)

Would anybody in their right mind ever swim in these waters?" asks our host for the afternoon, Mehernosh Sidhwa, gesturing towards the west end of his flat, outside of which sits Marine Drive. "But we used to swim in that water as kids. Trams still ran at the time, and a haircut was just four annas." It is hard to imagine Marine Drive different than it is today — with a clean and well-maintained promenade, curving slimline bus stops, and wide decks upon which to congregate. Where its views of the sea are not the only arresting sight, as 33 Deco buildings follow each other all along its curve against the bay.

The bus stops are an important detail, and reflect the careful planning and attention of the team of citizen stakeholders that worked on the 2012 UNESCO submission to nominate the Deco and Victorian Gothic precinct of south Mumbai as a world heritage site. In keeping with the Deco of Marine Drive, the designers have employed the classic curvilinear form on the bus stops, as well kept them simple and bare so as not to impair access to the sea. The views from a Marine Drive flat are bewitching: windows frame an endless, rippling expanse of silvery blues and greens, as fishing boats move their way slowly through the waters.

"I am a purist, and I try to do things exactly as they were done a 100 years ago," says Sidhwa about his property Soona Mahal, one of the more striking of the Marine Drive collection, which straddles the Marine Drive Churchgate junction. "My grandfather Kawasji Fakirji Sidhwa used to come home and put broken eggshells in the cement mixer — and now look at the finish on the smooth walls." At the top of the building sits a round turret structure — bearing likeness to a docked spaceship, perched as though merely seconds from taking off. Almost all of the buildings on Marine Drive have one, or the remnants of one, and these were viewing galleries, social spaces for the residents to take in the sun blinking up and down the horizon ahead.

The lobbies of the buildings on Marine Drive are embedded with precious materials — brass door handles, teakwood doors, balustrades and staircases — which the salt laden breeze has not yet disintegrated as one would expect. A resident of a differ-



ent building along the Drive points to newly-installed brass lamps that have seen more damage than the 100-year-old door handles, a testament to the truth to material of the Deco time. Good material, Deco constantly reminds us, can go a long way.

Marine Drive lobbies are, in fact, some of the most exquisite. One to note is certainly the lobby of Seksaria building, its layered marble patterns and geometries beginning at the first step of the entrance, and carried up through each of its floors. Third-generation building owner, Rajkumar Seksaria proudly points to the billowing green and ivory marble feature in front of wood-paneled elevator doors, which he exclaims remind him of a cheetah's roaring mouth, or a lion's elaborate mane.

Simply with a walk along its wide sea-lapped decks, one of the largest public spaces in use in the city, one is able to gather how Marine Drive is an inclusive space that embraces people across age groups, ethnicities and socio-

economic profiles. Different worlds collide: on a weekend morning, young revelers head home at 4 am, just as the marathoners and morning constitutional groups start out for their daily round of the stretch. Lovers huddle under umbrellas, finding a space for intimacy that they may not find at home. And the low building compound walls create a fluid dialogue between people, buildings — and of course, the Arabian sea.

Most buildings on Marine Drive have a round turret structure. These were social spaces for the residents

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