

SKYE A THOMAS

HAVE A DECCO

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

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The Oval: The Deco Landing



Shiv Shanti Bhuvan has layered chevrons and inverted sunbursts with an Egyptian influence; (Below): Rajjab Mahal's bright green and blue zigzag decorations split up its street-facing facade like the musical notes of a jazz ensemble

Along the edges of over a thousand hand-planted palms, the architectural remains of two historical moments face each other. At one end stands the Victorian neo-Gothic, the Mumbai High Court and the University of Mumbai, while on the other, the smooth, clean lines of a row of classic Art Deco buildings. Their interlocutor: the Oval Maidan. Now, to walk along the centre of the Maidan, with glances either side, is to be privy to a dialogue that is at once political, as it is aesthetic: the neo-Gothic legacy of the British Raj is set against the Deco articulation of a city at the brink of its modernity.

The Deco precinct that fringes the Oval Maidan was completed in the 1930s. Gone were the days of spacious and airy verandas with high ceilinged-bungalows, land in Bombay was scarce, and development projects sought housing that was able to make do with compact pieces of land. Thus, Backbay streets were laid out in a precise grid, and architects had to devote attention to space. But what makes the Deco around the Oval so ingenious is the architects' attention to surface.

Take Shiv Shanti Bhuvan, built in 1934-35, whose stucco facade wraps around the corner spot: its windows and balconies neatly aligned to create a sweeping vertical elevation. We have layered chevrons and inverted sunbursts with an Egyptian influence. The surface decoration sits like a second skin, fluid and seamless.

Shiv Shanti Bhuvan's wildly beautiful neighbour, Rajjab Mahal, is certainly the loudest kid on the block — its bright green and blue zigzag decorations split up its street-facing facade like the musical notes of a jazz ensemble. The window frames of Rajjab Mahal each have a diagonal mullion that slices the glass panes in half, a purely decorative feature — adding a sudden disruption to a facade that itself behaves like paean to chaos. The architecture firm Merwanji, Bana & Company designed both Shiv Shanti Bhuvan and Rajjab Mahal, and were famous for introducing flamboyant decorative motifs such as stylised fountains



and tropical imagery. The firm primarily worked on residential properties, they also designed Court View (along with Maneckji Dalal & G B Mhatre) on the Oval, and its architects were inclined toward sculptural stucco work and dramatic ornamentation on the facades.

On the 10th of April 2016, Kate Middleton played a round of cricket at the Oval Maidan, husband Prince

William in tow. He watched as the ball she hit flew over his head, and into the roaring crowd. That year it was the British monarchy, and this year, the Belgian — the attachment to empire continues, acted out over the smoothly levelled green of the field. Little do these celebrity guests consider, as they place their photo-shoots at exactly the right side of the Maidan, that it would not be the picturesque public expanse it is today, were it not for the initiative of a local group of residents.

The Oval Cooperage residents association, later the OVAL Trust, spearheaded by Shirin Bharucha and Nayana Kathpalia, filed a request to manage the Oval Maidan, when the park was in total disrepair. They received the 22 acre land on a "trial basis" about 15 years after the request in 1997, after which there was no turning back. They spent every single day for two years out in the field — clearing debris, leveling land, putting in a watering system, recreating the walking path and fencing the OVAL. The area was listed as a Grade I heritage site, but due to its remarkable renovation, it became the heart of the successful stakeholder-led UNESCO world heritage site nomination of 2012.

At the end of the day we were laying out our own time and money, and we knew we were doing the right thing, say the two women. In a neighbourhood where two histories collapse into each other — across a chessboard of cricket-games — the Oval Maidan is a reminder — that all we have to do is pay attention to the spaces we frequent every day.

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



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