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FAR EAST OF SOUTH BEACH
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Next time you're on the phone with tech support or read about another Mumbai-born whiz kid among the 200,000 Indian millionaires in the US, try to visualize Bombay (officially Mumbai). Hint: Think Miami Beach. Subtropical climate, Art Deco details adorning Jazz Age façades of buildings with name like the Riviera and the Oceana, curving along not Ocean Drive but Marine Drive. Throw in bas-relief elephants, the glory of the British Raj and the glamour that begat Bollywood, and you get the picture.



An interior detail from Bombay's 1936 Eros Theater

A new book and a recent Miami Beach event highlight the connections between three cities that have a lot to learn from each other.

Bombay Art Deco Architecture - A Visual Journey 1930-1953, (Lustre Press/Poll Books), by Navin Ramani, recounts in elegant but not academic prose the genesis of Bombay's great Thirties Deco and Forties Streamline neighborhoods, which were built on reclamation land along the bay.

Very "early adopters" of the new international Deco style were princes and maharajahs attracted to urbane Westernized attractions such as theater, cricket, jazz, and horse racing. Like empty-nesters swarming into downtowns all over the US, some moved into apartments in the tony Cricket Club of India, designed by British architects in 1937. As the nationalist struggle accelerated, the names of the buildings evolved from the St. James Court apartments (1935) to the later Krishnabad or New India buildings with an all-Indian cast of architects. Among Bombay's superb new movie theaters, where pubescent future Bollywood directors drank in the Hollywood mystique, were the aptly named Liberty and the Eros.



The Oceana apartments, on Marine Drive in Bombay.

All this is lavishly on view - and then there's a photo of Jerry's Famous Deli, on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach (1940). The book features some 15 pages juxtaposing Bombay's Deco treasures with their 'separated at birth' twins built at the same time in Miami Beach.

Ramani grew up in an all - Deco neighborhood of Bombay. After study and work abroad and becoming an American citizen, a move to Miami in the 1980s sparked a new love of Art Deco.

SOUTH BEACH; ART DECO WEEKEND

The Deco axis, of course, isn't just Miami and Mumbai. At a recent

celebration of Art Deco in Miami Beach, audiences of preservationists, planners and aficionados were treated to presentations on the best property money could build in both Shanghai and Bombay in the 1930s, with a focus on efforts today to preserve those works. Attendees included a delegation of 23 from Shanghai that included two of the city's top planners, who were hosted by Miami Beach Commissioner Jerry Libbin and Rockefeller Group International, a sponsor of the event. A small Bombay contingent included architect/planner Rahul Mehrotra, now a professor at the University of Michigan, who led master planning efforts for the restoration and preservation of the Taj Mahal and surroundings.



Carmbhoy Manor, Bombay, 1036-40.

A cross-section of Miami Beach politicians, developers and preservation architects and the overseas visitors were able to confront key issues common to all three cities. Bombay and Shanghai's 1930s building booms resulted in stunning waterfront Deco buildings. Today, preservation decrees in Shanghai are administered 'top down,' while Bombay's urbanistic and preservation efforts proceed in the much messier democracy of India.

Just as the "Miami Vice" television series had a hand in illuminating certain qualities of Miami Beach's Deco heritage. Professor Mehrotra made it clear that the pop culture might of Bollywood is helping to preserve whole stretches of beloved buildings in Bombay. Still awaiting 'historic district' status, a process begun by Mehrotra and others over ten years ago, the Back Bay the Marine Drive buildings have appeared in so many movies and music videos that developers wrecking ball dare not attack. The inertia is helped along by an antiquated regime of rent control that has frozen both investment and necessary improvements.

Preservation in Shanghai is a different matter. Ben Wood, one of the leading brains behind the 'new' Times Square and Lincoln Road's makeover, has become a fixture in the Chinese city's growth process, and he wrapped up events with a one hour presentation on the new Shanghai. His talk was punctuated with somewhat Wood-en philosophy flashed onscreen ('The city should be respected for what it is,' etc).

Wood seems like the perfect look/feel instant makeover planner for a society clamoring for all the outward signs of consumer culture. Prefacing his visions for new Shanghai public space. Wood showed black-and-white footage of warrens of run-down Shanghai neighborhoods he filmed in the 1980s. Old ladies snapping string beans, a young woman brushing her teeth outside her front door, old folks blinking amiably as they sit on stoops, bicycles leaning, no cars. Wood convinced mega-developer Vincent Lo to preserve whole areas of Shanghai's most distinctive architecture, comparing demolition of Shanghai's best to wantonly taking down Sienna (Lo had just returned from a Tuscan Vacation). Wood's gentrification of a district known as Xin Tian Di (which translates as Little Heaven on Earth) is considered so successful that 'to xiantiandi' is now the verb for such make-overs.

However, as Wood showed Miami Beach preservationists acres of low-scale, grubby intersections suddenly chirpy bright with awnings, cafes, boutique signs. Photo Shopped shoppers and Starbucks. A sense of dj vu swept the room. Instant piazza with Starbucks is a formula Chinese planners look eager to buy. But when Wood reported that Shanghai's population is so driven to achieve wealth that 'those not being evicted are very unhappy' it seemed a new chapter - writ large by New Urban fantasists - was being added to the planner's little red book.



Bombay's Lakshmi Insurance Building, 1936-40.