



• The Sonavala Building, Mumbai



• The Cricket Club of India. India's largest sports club, anchored by modernized minarets.



• Looking up at Hotel Victor, Miami Beach

## Mumbai Dekho

India's financial capital has a great deal in common with, of all places, Miami Beach. Monika Joshi explains



• Detail of the façade of Regal Cinema with stepped-up parapet, Mumbai



• Haddon Hall, Miami Beach

For those who have been to Mumbai, Navin Ramani's book, *Bombay Art Deco Architecture: A Visual Journey (1930-1953)*, will come as a nostalgic trip past the city's immortal landmarks, zooming in from time to time to catch the details. From Liberty Cinema in New Marine Lines, with its bas relief that resembles piano keys, to the flamboyant terrazzo flooring in the lobbies of many buildings, and the vertical banding in the Astoria Hotel, Churchgate - these are among 222 images in the book that express the art deco style of the 1930s and 40s.

Bombay Art Deco also provides an exhaustive introduction for those who aren't familiar with the city. Toward the end, it pulls out the city's astonishing architectural similarities with Miami Beach, Florida, which is half a world away. Ramani wrote the book to bridge the cultural gap between the two cities and familiarize an international audience with Mumbai's art deco architecture (He has intentionally used the name Bombay, which was the city's name in the era the book examines).

Art deco, French in origin, is a 1930s style influenced by various modern art movements like Bauhaus, Cubism and Constructivism as well as aerodynamics and Hollywood. It surfaced on the international stage in 1925 at an exposition in Paris. Ironically, it was not in Mumbai, but in Miami Beach - his home since 1989 - that Ramani discovered the art deco style of his hometown.

Miami Beach is famous for its architecture, and no trip to the city is complete without a tour of the historic district. "I found so much resemblance with Mumbai's art deco buildings - the same nautical details, a lot of the same tropical imagery, the eyebrows (ledges above windows) and angular features," he says. "I looked at the buildings, the terrazzo floors, and thought I was back in Mumbai!"

The book developed over the last 36 months during Ramani's yearly trips to Mumbai, where his family lives. Armed with his Sony digital camera (plus powerful zoom lenses and other fixtures), he would tour the neighborhoods on early mornings to beat traffic and click away at peace. "I grew up in an art deco building (Court View at Churchgate, Mumbai), so I have been a little partial in covering a lot of the interiors there," he says.

Watching his photo collection grow, his friends suggested he bring out a book dedicated to art deco architecture.

Ramani works as a consultant; he has ties with community-based urban planning organizations such as the Congress for New Urbanism, which is campaigning to promote pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. He is also an art deco tour guide for several heritage management companies. Mumbai's art deco architecture has been written about in the past by,

for instance, architect-planner Rahul Mehrotra, a University of Michigan professor, and conservationist Sharda Dwivedi. But Ramani, who has acknowledged both in the book for their support, says he wanted to dedicate his work only to art deco and bring out an illustrative book "that expounds the style."

Since 2002, he has conducted art deco tours in Miami Beach and, while doing them, can't resist telling participants about the architecture of Mumbai. "They wouldn't believe we had such architecture," he says. Even in India, people outside Mumbai didn't know of its existence, which boosted his decision to complete the book. The project also gave him a chance to rediscover his hometown. "Growing up, you take this for granted," he says.

Ramani migrated to the United States in 1981, got a master's degree in business administration, and began working with an Indian-owned industrial group that had operations in India and West Africa. The group soon expanded and branched into architectural projects, including developing high rises to house its headquarters and leasing out other spaces.

This was a project Ramani, who was general manager of operations, coordinated. In this connection, in the early 1990s, he got the opportunity to work with Kamal Malik, a well known architect based in Mumbai. He also worked with the architecture firm Morris Lapidus & Associates, which designed most of Miami Beach's resort architecture - today recognized as 'Miami Modern.' The firm is no longer in existence.

Once his interest developed, Ramani signed up for classes run by the Miami Design Preservation League, a non-profit dedicated to preserving and promoting the historic district. With his family - interior designer wife Seema and children Riya, 14, and Romel, 13 - he lives on the waterfront, and loves to swim, take nature and beach walks.

After studying, albeit informally, the architecture in Miami, the obvious next step was to compare it with what was so visible in his hometown.

The most laborious part of the project was shooting the pictures, a majority of which he shot. "I would lick 30 to 40 images before I thought even one was worthy of consideration," he says.

Additional material came from Raymond Daniel Ritmeester, a tour member of the Cinema Theater Association in the UK, Mumbai-based architect Kamu Iyer, and David Vinnels and Brent Skelly, authors of *Bollywood Showplaces*, who also wrote the foreword to *Bombay Art Deco Architecture*.

If you like what you see, the book is available at Amazon.com