



The sun and other tropical elements are standard art deco motifs, here seen on the floor of Eros theatre and the balcony grilles of Ratan Mansion in Matunga

# Home truths

**Navin Ramani tells Naresh Fernandes how he found a bit of Mumbai in faraway Miami.**

When business consultant Navin Ramani moved to Miami in 1989, he was delighted at how similar it seemed to his hometown. "I was enchanted to discover not only the architectural beauty of Miami Beach's art deco district, but also its astonishing resemblance to Bombay," he said in an email interview. "The smell of the ocean and the sight of coconut trees, the compact world of small-scaled geometric buildings decorated with tropical and nautical bas-reliefs all evoked the place of my childhood."

Over the next few years, Ramani gained new insights about Mumbai's architectural heritage from afar as he began to lead tours of the Miami Beach art deco district for The

Miami Design Preservation League. "I realised, in fact, that the apartment building in Bombay where I lived until I was 21 years old, Court View [along the Oval in Churchgate], was one of the art deco style's premier examples," he said.

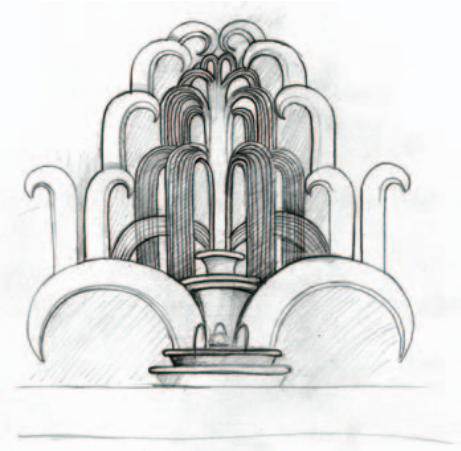
At the end of his tours, Ramani would often tell participants about how Miami shared an architectural style with Mumbai. "They would be amazed," he said. To "bridge this cultural gap", Ramani began to photograph Mumbai's art deco buildings on trips home to use at his lectures in Miami.

Ramani's research has finally found its way between covers. This fortnight, he will be in the city to launch *Bombay Art Deco Architecture: A Visual Journey (1930-1953)*, a fascinating survey of some of our city's finest art deco buildings. The picture-led book is an excellent introduction to the ideas of the art deco style – which first gained glob-

al recognition at an international fair in Paris in 1925 – and the architects who gave it a unique Mumbai flavour. Especially enthralling are the sections that explain how art deco's favourite motifs find expression on buildings around Mumbai (see accompanying photos).

There's also a selection of the photos that first thrilled Ramani's audiences in Miami, in a chapter that he calls "BoMi Deco" – or Bombay-Miami Deco. "What makes the link between Bombay and Miami Beach so special is that these two cities are both built on the oceanfront and are subtropical in climate, have been built on islands, have large portions of their land that was reclaimed from the bay and have a large concentration of art deco buildings that were built in few districts during the same era," Ramani said.

He added: "In both cities the architectural design addressed their seaside geography



The frozen fountain, a symbol of eternal life, can be seen at the entrance of Court View along the Oval and on the gate of the Great Social Building on PM Road



Nautical features appear as waves on the railings and porthole windows at Krishna Mahal on Marine Drive and an observation deck at Kala Darshan on Queen's Road

and warm climate, optimism about the modern age and a Hollywood-inspired sense of romance. Motifs such as nautical and tropical details, streamlining, ziggurats and the use of eyebrows, angles and grilles, all characteristic of the art deco style, are found to be strikingly similar in both cities."

Ramani said that Mumbai embraced art deco when the Backbay land reclamation scheme from 1928 to 1942 sparked a construction boom. But strict building codes about design created the need for builders to adopt a new kind of architecture. "The art deco style precisely expressed the requisite optimism," he said.

Around the same time, Ramani notes, Mumbai's first generation of Indian architects trained in Western traditions was coming of age. "Progressive-minded and eager to express themselves as being part of the modern world, the buildings they designed as part of the land reclamation scheme became the first to employ reinforced concrete frame structures and smooth stucco-clad facades," he said. "They borrowed imagery from the new age, incorporating nautical details of the steamship lines, aerodynamic designs of the car, train and aeroplane, influences of Egyptian and Classical art, tropical imagery and the glamour of Hollywood films."

But these architects – prominent among

whom were the firms of Poonegar & Billimoria with Gajanan B. Mhatre as principal designer, Master, Sathe & Bhuta, Merwanji Bana & Company, Bhedwar & Bhedwar and Iyengar & Menezes – didn't just copy Western designs. "Bombay Deco is one of a kind because of the introduction of Indian tradition and mythology for sculptural decoration into essentially western-styled building facades of this era," said Ramani. They created a style that's referred to as "Indo-Deco".

"Sculptural works depicting Indian

**"The art deco buildings of both Bombay and Miami reflect their warm tropical climate."**

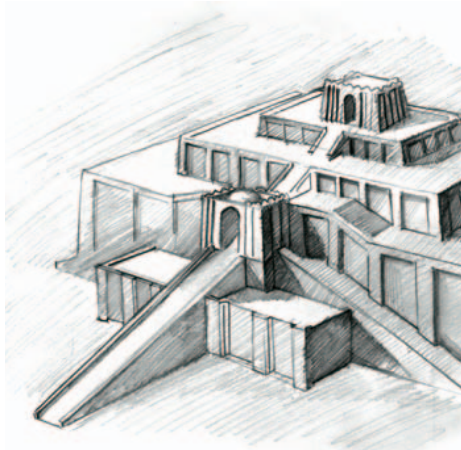
themes of farmers, village craftsmen and the female Indian beauty along with symbols of Hindu gods and goddesses can be seen gracing the entrance facades of many commercial buildings designed by the firm of Master, Sathe & Bhuta in the Fort district," Ramani said. "It introduces a sort of East meets West component to these buildings and is prominently visible especially when you look at the westernised ziggurat form given for the tow-

er of the Lakshmi Insurance building [on Pherozeshah Mehta Road] which is then surmounted with a lifelike sculpture of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi."

Another feature: "The open verandah of the traditional Indian bungalow that translated into wide open balcony design for the modern 1930s multi-storey building also brings a special regional touch to Bombay's art deco style. You certainly don't see these open balconies in the art deco buildings of Miami Beach!"

Ramani's favourite art deco building remains Court View, in which he grew up. Even though he left it when he was 21, it still moves him to poetry. "A frozen fountain frieze for the entrance, first-floor balconies emulating lilted sea waves that incorporate bas-reliefs of tropical imagery, a jazz age rhythm for the interior foyer balustrade, exuberant geometric expressions in terrazzo flooring for the first floor inspired by Hollywood dance stage sets of the 1930s and a wrap around foyer evocative of the steamship age – all these combine to bring out so many artistic elements of the art deco style," he said.

All the photos accompanying this piece are from *Bombay Art Deco Architecture: A Visual Journey (1930-1953)*. For more about the book, visit [www.BombayDeco.com](http://www.BombayDeco.com).



The entrance of Oval View on Queen's Road and the turret of Eros theatre have been inspired by Babylonian ziggurats