

More than just buildings

A visual tour of Mumbai's Art Deco architecture should extend beyond Marine Drive, writes Sidharth Bhatia

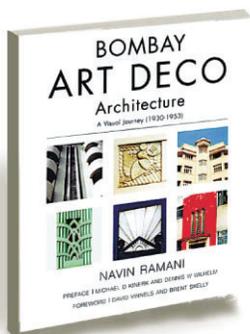
Sidharth Bhatia



Style apart: (Right) Eros cinema, featuring a roofline of volumetric masses culminating in a cylindrical tower; (top left) a relief panel on the New India Assurance building, featuring agricultural themes; (bottom left) detail of wrought iron entrance gate of a building in Fort. The geometry of the metal gate approaches the baroque in its effusiveness.

Bombay Art Deco Architecture: A Visual Journey (1930-1953)

Navin Ramani
Lustre/Roli
296 pages
Rs1,295



towards the sea represent romance and modernity like nothing else.

The Art Deco buildings on the three kilometre stretch are therefore seared into the Mumbai citizen's mind. Though seven decades old, they still represent the unattainable goal of the Bombaywallah — he would still like to live in Marine Drive more than in some of the new towers.

For those who value architectural design, the buildings also provide a wealth of information

and detail about the Art Deco movement which swept the world in the 1920s and 30s and came to westernised Bombay soon after. The city was in one of its periodic construction booms around that time, and Art Deco buildings — cinemas, office blocks and flats — came up rapidly in and around Churchgate, Colaba, Marine Drive, Shivaji Park and Bandra.

Strangely, there has hardly been any literature on this delightful architectural legacy. Navin Ramani has now filled that gap with a coffee table volume, and gone one step further by twinning Bombay with Miami, another city with an Art Deco district, albeit a better preserved and more heralded one.

Bombay-born and US-naturalised Ramani is a dedicated urbanist. He comes to this project with nostalgia — he was born in one such building in Churchgate — and a fair amount of technical knowledge. The opening essay is well-researched, guiding us through some important buildings and telling us about their architects.

The rest of the book is a compendium of photographs, with informative captions that illuminate many of the features of the buildings, some of which are generically Art Deco and others specific to the Bombay style. Thus, the Ziggurat on top of Eros cinema, arguably the most well known Art Deco building of the city, is something that could be found elsewhere in one form or the other; but the relief panels showing industrial and agricultural themes or even religious motifs could only belong to India. Bombay's Art Deco has everything — from the nautical styles and the streamlining, to the frozen fountains, the magnificent typefaces and even the glorious sunburst balcony railings. They continue to delight each time one looks at them, reminding us about the strong internationalist spirit of the metropolis. A book such as this, therefore, should be a source of much joy to fans of the city and of the most enduring architectural movement of the 20th century.

Though it is, it yet disappoints on a few important counts. First, it mostly sticks to the Churchgate-Marine Drive area, taking just cursory detours to the rest of the city — there are just seven buildings from Dadar-Matunga and one from Pydhonie.

Admittedly, Churchgate and its environs have some of the best Art Deco buildings in the metropolis, but there are some quirky buildings in Bandra and elsewhere, with pastel colours truer to the spirit of the style. Here the author's own nostalgic bias, or worse, lack of interest, shows.

Then — and this is a glaring omission — there are almost no residential interiors. Some homes in Marine Drive have the most splendid Art Deco features, such as floor designs, but these have not been covered. That could be because of lack of access, but then, that is what sets a book apart from the herd. Instead, they have taken what appears to be the easy way out — photograph buildings from the outside (and quite insipidly, in some cases, one may add) and put a collection together.

Also, the Bombay-Miami connect is a bit overwrought; similar connections can be made with other cities like Durban, too. Yet, all said and done, this book is a good start, and, scanning its pages, one cannot but marvel at the vision and grace of our city's builders and architects of the time. Alas, the city lacks both of them right now.

Mumbai's Art Deco district, as Marine Drive is sometimes grandly called, is now the signature of this thriving metropolis. Though relatively young, compared to say, Indo-Saracenic monuments such as Victoria Terminus, Marine Drive has captured the popular imagination; the sweeping sea front, the promenade, and the outward gaze