

# Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage site

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*Mumbai: Mumbai's Victorian and Art Deco architecture buildings in the Fort precinct and on Marine drive have earned the prestigious UNESCO heritage label, the third in the city to do so. Mumbai has the second largest collection of Art Deco buildings after Miami and a wide range of Gothic structures, ranging from the majestic Central Railway headquarters (Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, earlier called Victoria Terminus) to the municipal corporation headquarters and the High Court.*

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The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT) and Elephanta Caves off the shore of the city are the other two on the list. The announcement was made at the ongoing UNESCO meet in Manama, Bahrain on June 30.

The heritage site will cover buildings on Marine Drive, in Churchgate area and the precinct known as Fort. What makes it unique is that a long stretch of Victorian Gothic as well as Art Deco structures stand face to face, separated by a large public playing ground, the Oval Maidan.

Some of the better known Gothic public buildings include the Bombay High Court, Mumbai University, Old Secretariat, National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), Elphinstone College, David Sassoon Library, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj

Vastu Sangrahalaya (Museum) and the Western Railways (WR) Headquarters. All of them were built during a sudden burst of construction activity under the British Raj in the 1860s and several were co-financed by wealthy Indians. The famous Rajabai Clock Tower, attached to the University was paid for by the financier Premchand Roychand who had lost all his money in the post-cotton crash of 1865, when several well-known businessmen went bust.



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CREDIT: URMİ KENİA

On the other hand, the modern buildings that came to be known as Art Deco, were almost wholly designed, financed and built by Indians in the mid-1930s as the new style swept through the world. In recent times, academics have shown interest in studying the international connections of Bombay Art Deco with Miami, Havana and other coastal cities.

The entire stretch of Marine Drive, the Cricket Club of India and well-known cinemas like Eros, Regal and Liberty fall in this category. Art Deco bungalows and houses can still be seen in

central and northern Mumbai. These structures are accessible and visited by the public on a daily basis. Also, unlike the earlier nominations from the country which were mostly of ancient and medieval sites, this was, for the first time, that India's modern architecture was considered and has also made it to the list.

Nayana Kathalia, a trustee of O.V.A.L Trust, a citizens' group of residents in the Oval Maidan area, was elated. "It has been a long haul. We went through a complicated process, dealing with two chief ministers in the past ten years and two governments at the Centre. In some states, the efforts are made by the state government, but in our case, it was essentially the citizens' group making the efforts."

Kathalia also said that since the government has been involved in getting the heritage sites inscribed in the list, the onus on them to ensure that the structures, especially the Art Deco buildings which have people residing in them are maintained and preserved well. Heritage activists have long been asking the government to provide incentives to maintain the structures, many of which are in poor shape due to age and exposure to natural elements. The UNESCO tag means that they cannot be demolished and zoning laws have to be strictly enforced in the areas.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, Urban secretary Nitin Kareer and conservation architect Abha Narain Lambah, who helped prepare the dossier that was presented to UNESCO are in Bahrain to attend the conference.

"Just inscribed as @UNESCO #WorldHeritageSite: Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai, #India Congratulations!" UNESCO tweeted. Fadnavis, too, took to Twitter to express his gratitude to those who have worked towards getting the city's significant 19th and 20th century architecture included in the list.

Atul Kumar, founder of Art Deco, Mumbai and a heritage

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conservationist, says the announcement is a very significant one and would get Mumbai's rich architectural heritage global recognition.

UNESCO's advisor, International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), had recommended that the precinct area be given a tag of “architecture district”. In an evaluation submitted by the Council, it was acknowledged that the waves of urban development in the 19th and 20th centuries had brought in complete transformation of Mumbai from a “fortified trading outpost to the first city of India”.

The decision to add the new Mumbai precinct, which is collectively called as the ‘Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai’, comes at a time when the city has been going through several development projects. Along the precinct area, the Metro III construction work has been going on for almost a year, blocking the view to most of these heritage structures. Fears have been expressed that some of the buildings will suffer structural damage.

Lambah, who is the main person behind this recognition, had first mooted the idea about pushing Mumbai's heritage treasure at a UNESCO conference for Asia Pacific back in 2004. Lambah, who is part of the delegation in Bahrain, was quoted as saying, “From 2004, when I first presented this idea at the UNESCO conference on representation at Chandigarh, it's been 14 long years to get all stakeholders, citizen groups and the government on board to make this happen. This inscription acknowledges Mumbai's position in the world as the finest collection of 19th and 20th century modernism, and a city where heritage does not just include dead monuments but a living, breathing dynamic urban centre with buildings in active use by citizens. This is the first case in India's 37 world heritage sites where the nomination process was a citizen-driven initiative.” Lambah had put together the



AN AERIAL VIEW SHOWING THE STREETScape OF KALA GHODA.

IMAGE CREDIT: JEHANGIR SORABJEE

three-volume nomination dossier and management plan, which contained over 1,500 pages of historical narrative, maps, drawings and notes on each of the 94 buildings in the area.

This journey, Atul Kumar says, has been possible due to the active participation of citizen groups, conservationists and governments. Now, with the new endorsement of the UNESCO tag, Mumbai's Victorian and Art Deco district will help raise awareness among citizens and tourists, he observes. "It might be a step towards preserving the city's heritage." He also said that the addition to the UNESCO list would boost cultural tourism in the city. "A study says that not even 2% of those who transitioned from Mumbai stopped by to visit these unique heritage sites. But now, there would definitely be a boost to the cultural tourism in the area," he added.

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