



Esplanade Mansion: As 155-year-old Mumbai landmark faces its end, a look at its past, present and future

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Mumbai's Kala Ghoda locality is flanked by several iconic buildings, but even among such stately facades as the National Gallery of Modern Art, Jehangir Art Gallery and Bombay High Court, Esplanade Mansion holds its own.

This is strange because Esplanade Mansion has been — for many years now — decrepit, its dilapidated appearance in stark contrast to the better-maintained heritage structures around it. And yet, the eye is drawn to it.

In June this year, the 155-year-old five-storey building was marked for demolition, after an IIT-Bombay audit found it was beyond repair. The Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority issued eviction notices to the hundred or so tenants who still continue to inhabit/run their businesses in the building. (MHADA had declared Esplanade Mansion unsafe in 2007, and asked all tenants to vacate it in 2011. However, a court order allowed tenants to stay on, at their own risk.)

A Times of India report then stated that the Indian chapter of International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) had expressed its reservations to MHADA, over the loss of an invaluable heritage building. ICOMOS, according to the report, had offered its technical guidance and put forward several recommendations regarding the conservation of the building, which has 'an unassailable place in the history of Mumbai'.

REPUBLISHED FROM FIRSTPOST
WITH DUE PERMISSION FROM
SURYASARATHI BHATTACHARYA.
PUBLISHED 19TH JULY 2019

IMAGE CREDIT:
CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI

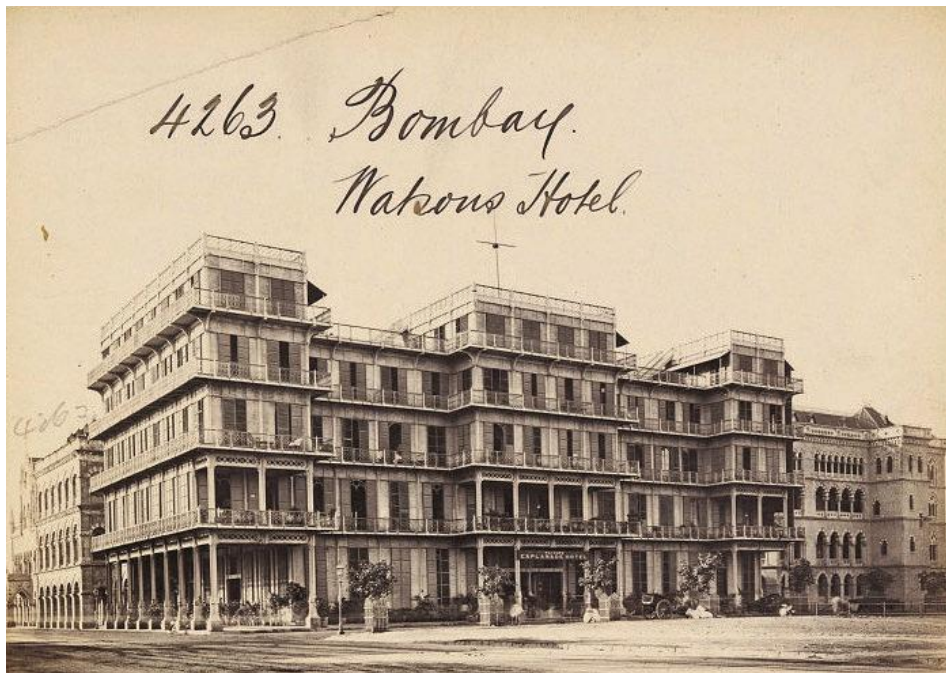
What makes Esplanade Mansion special? Here's a look at its past, present — and future.



A PAINTING OF WATSON'S HOTEL AT WATSON INSTITUTE, NOW THE VILLAGE HALL, IN CASTLE CARROCK. IMAGE VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A Glorious Past

Esplanade Mansion was known as Watson's Hotel, and considered an architectural marvel in its time. Built in the 1860s for an English businessman, John H Watson, and designed by the renowned architect and civil engineer Rowland M Ordish, Watson's Hotel was fabricated in cast iron at the Phoenix Foundry Company in Derby, England. The skeletal structure was then shipped to India and assembled piece-by-piece in Bombay, in present-day Kala Ghoda. The Kala Ghoda precinct had served as an esplanade where the British Army paraded, right outside the wall of the Bombay Fort. The area was among the first pieces of land outside the Fort to be auctioned — at an exorbitant price — after the wall was brought down, and Watson is believed to have bought two adjacent plots to build his dream hotel.



WATSON'S HOTEL, BOMBAY IN THE 19TH CENTURY. IMAGE VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The luxury hotel opened in 1867; its 130 plush rooms and 20 suites were meant to cater exclusively to elite English guests — not Indians. In fact, the story goes that Jamshetji Tata came up with the idea for Mumbai's Taj Mahal Hotel after he was denied entry in Watson's. (Incidentally, the Tatas owned the Esplanade Mansion for a while, circa 1960- 65, when several of the Taj Mahal Hotel's employees were allotted quarters here.)

Other anecdotes abound, of the Watson Hotel's heyday: The novelist Mark Twain was a guest here, during a three-month stay in India during 1896. He is said to have written about the crows of Bombay in his book, *Following The Equator*, while sitting in the balcony of Watson's. In 1896, a large room in the hotel was the venue for the Indian premiere of the Lumiere Brothers' collection of six short films (*Entry of A Cinematographe*, *Arrival of A Train*, *The Sea Bath*, *A Demolition*, *Leaving The Factory* and *Ladies And Soldiers On Wheels*). This was 17 years before Dadasaheb Phalke made India's first full-length feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, in 1913.

But beyond its famous guests and events, the building represented a historic achievement, in and of itself.

'The Brighton Pavilion and the Crystal Palace in England were also built around the same time, but Watson's Hotel is the only structure built of cast iron with en-suite bathrooms that has still survived. It is one of the oldest inhabitable cast iron constructions in the world, as also one of the few surviving structures of its kind,' says Mumbai-based conservation architect Abha Narain Lambah.

Pankaj Joshi, executive director at Urban Design Research Institute (UDRI), adds, 'The building was very hybrid and futuristic when it was built in the 1860s. At that time, nobody thought of buildings like a LEGO set where you ship modules from England and build it here. What we are doing now, Watson's Hotel did 150 years ago.'

A distinctive building, it comes as no surprise that people have distinctive memories of the Esplanade Mansion.

This becomes evident when you hear Rabindra Hazari, a Mumbai-based lawyer and historian. Hazari had his law firm's offices in the building from the years 2000 to 2015 — but 'knew' the building long before that. As a 10-year-old, Hazari visited friends from school, who lived in Esplanade Mansion. He was struck by the entrances to some of the rooms — salon-style doors reminiscent of Westerns starring John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. There were grander doorways as well, made of sturdy teak. 'The rooms had 18-foot high ceilings, and floors made of Burma teak. The building had a 60-ft broad Burma teak staircase, which was polished until it glistened,' Hazari recalls, describing the exterior of the building as 'equally handsome'. 'It had beautiful yellow bricks — exposed, not covered with plaster and paint — unlike the usual red earth Indian bricks. They were made with a superior baking technology of the 19th century using ceramic firing, which made them very smooth, polished.'

By the time Hazari became an occupant of Esplanade Mansion, its glory days were part of the distant past. Despite the

problems that plagued it, the building remained a hub for a truly cosmopolitan population. 'There were a lot of blue collar workers, peons and drivers who lived here. Lawyers from nearby places in Gujarat and Maharashtra... Sometimes their families would join them for a few days. If you had an attached bathroom, the accommodation was quite decent. You had the key to your place and could come and go anytime, unlike the strict deadlines in many south Bombay buildings then,' Hazari says.

He also remembers men of various backgrounds, from all over India, and in varying states of undress, sleeping in the building's lobby at night; he speaks of an old lift, which carried only three people at a time, and for whose cantankerous services, you'd have to queue up — perhaps the sole democratic facility in the building.

Cultural theorist and independent curator Nancy Adajania's father and grandfather had a homoeopathic clinic at Esplanade Mansion; she'd visit it every Sunday. 'My grandfather, Dr Ardeshir Adajania, started his practice in the 1950s in this historic building. My father joined the practice in 1967. Esplanade Mansion was owned by the Tatas then, and well- maintained. It was only in the 1980s that the building started down the path of its ruin. In the 1990s, my father was heartbroken to have to leave Esplanade Mansion. It was impossible for him to continue his practice in a fast dilapidating building,' she explains.

Nancy's father, Dr Jamshed Adajania, still recalls the spectacular view of South Bombay the windswept terrace of Esplanade Mansion offered, the building's Minton tiles and 20- foot high ceilings. The family's clinic was on the fourth floor (the eighth storey, in today's times) and Nancy and her brother would slide down the bannisters of the enormous flight of stairs. 'Sunlight streamed through the open balconies, turning the building's interiors into a flim set. Then there was the gorgeous

sun-kissed atrium, which was perhaps used as the ballroom of the hotel,' she says.

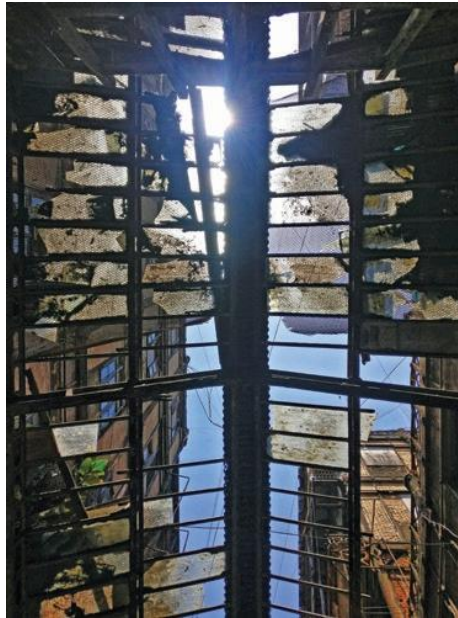


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A Steady Decline

With the passing of time, the fortunes of Esplanade Mansion changed too. Perhaps it was inevitable, but might the ravages of the years been staved off somewhat? It's a difficult question to answer.

In the 1960s, the building's ownership was taken over by Sadiq Ali Mohamed Noorani. He made certain structural changes to the Mansion, converting the 150 hotel rooms into smaller commercial spaces that found favour with lawyers who practised at the nearby Bombay High Court or Mumbai City Civil and Sessions Court. The balconies too were occupied by lawyers, doctors and other professionals.

Like other buildings of a certain vintage, however, what sounded the Esplanade mansion's death knell was the Bombay Rent, Hotel and Lodging House Rates Control Act, 1947 (aka the Bombay Rent Control Act), which froze rents at 1940 rates or at

rates decided by the courts. Under the Act, tenants could not be evicted (unfairly) by landlords, and tenancy rights could be inherited as well. As a result, tenants stayed on for generations, paying nearly negligible rent (Rs 60 a month, in 2017) for property in prime locations. The landlord thus has neither sufficient income from rent nor any incentive to invest in the building's upkeep.



IMAGE CREDIT:
CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI

Abha Narain Lambah considers Esplanade Mansion a textbook case of how rent control has impacted several historic buildings in Mumbai. 'Watson's Hotel exemplifies the challenges faced by privately owned heritage buildings,' she says. 'It is among the last vestiges of a specific construction period, of a particular genre of architecture, yet it is faced with the problem of underfunding and overcrowding.'

It isn't that there were no attempts made towards the building's restoration. But these were beset by hurdles. For instance, Lambah explains that the materials used in Esplanade Mansion's construction couldn't be replaced with just any substitute to rebuild it. 'If you look at thousands of buildings in

the island city, you will notice an archetypal historic construction with Burma teak for rafters, Minton tiling for floors, cast iron railings. You cannot replace a rotten Burma teak rafter with normal wood with steel sections in place, or a damaged cast iron staircase, railing or balcony with brick masonry infill. Authenticity is key to conservation.' The situation is further complicated when institutional bodies such as the MHADA repair board are involved because they may not have the required conservation-specific expertise.

Lost Opportunities — And The Beginning Of The End

In 1998, architect Renzo Piano (who designed the Centre Pompidou in Paris) was visiting India. He came across the Esplanade Mansion, and impressed by its history and architectural importance, presented some seed money to the Urban Design Research Institute (UDRI) to prepare a conservation report. However, no other funding came in, so the project was put on the backburner. Six years later, Lambah (along with late author-historian Sharda Dwivedi) prepared a nomination for Esplanade Mansion to be included on a list of the 50 most endangered buildings globally, under the World Monuments Fund. (This was around the time that a balcony of the building collapsed.) However, even being added to the list in 2005 didn't bring about a significant influx of funds for the building's conservation.

Then came the series of events detailed at the beginning of this report: the eviction notices from MHADA, the court-ordered structural audit by the IIT-Bombay team which stated the structure was too compromised to be repaired. Signed by Prof RS Jangid of IIT's civil engineering department, the audit report states: *'Any kind of structural repairs are neither logical nor economically viable... It is of the opinion that it will be prudent to*

demolish the building.' The building was sealed by 30 May and its occupants had no choice but to vacate their rooms and offices.



IMAGE CREDIT:
CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI

Among these occupants was Bharat Chhotu Moleshri, 53, who has lived in Esplanade Mansion, with his family, for over three decades now. Moleshri alleges that 'all the damage done to the building is due to the bad quality materials used by MHADA'. 'The original portions from the time of Watson's Hotel are intact... they are not at all damaged,' says Moleshri, who works as a cleaner.

Then there is 45-year-old Vijay Dhar Dubey. Dubey worked as a liftman in the building and lived here since 1993. 'We weren't charged for electricity, water or rent by the owner in all these years. After the building was sealed, MHADA asked me to stay here as a caretaker. They will also give me a salary. But I don't know how long this will last,' Dubey says. He shrugs off the suggestion that he should be apprehensive of living in such a dilapidated structure, saying simply: 'The fear of death is everywhere. *Kahaan kahaan bhaagoge* (Where will you run)?'

The building's end also brings the shutters down on iconic establishments like the Army Restaurant and Smart And Hollywood Tailors that were housed on these premises. Army Restaurant (rechristened in 2018 as Sabalan Restaurant) has closed down, while Smart And Hollywood has moved to a Colaba Causeway shop — a much more cramped space, rented for Rs 20,000 a month (and a 10 percent increment in the offing). Smart And Hollywood's current proprietor Raees Ahmed remembers visiting the shop as a child on his way home from school. 'We'd return home with our father in the evenings,' he says. The shop, established in 1942, was located in what used to be the building's ballet dance hall — replete with wood floors and a glass ceiling.

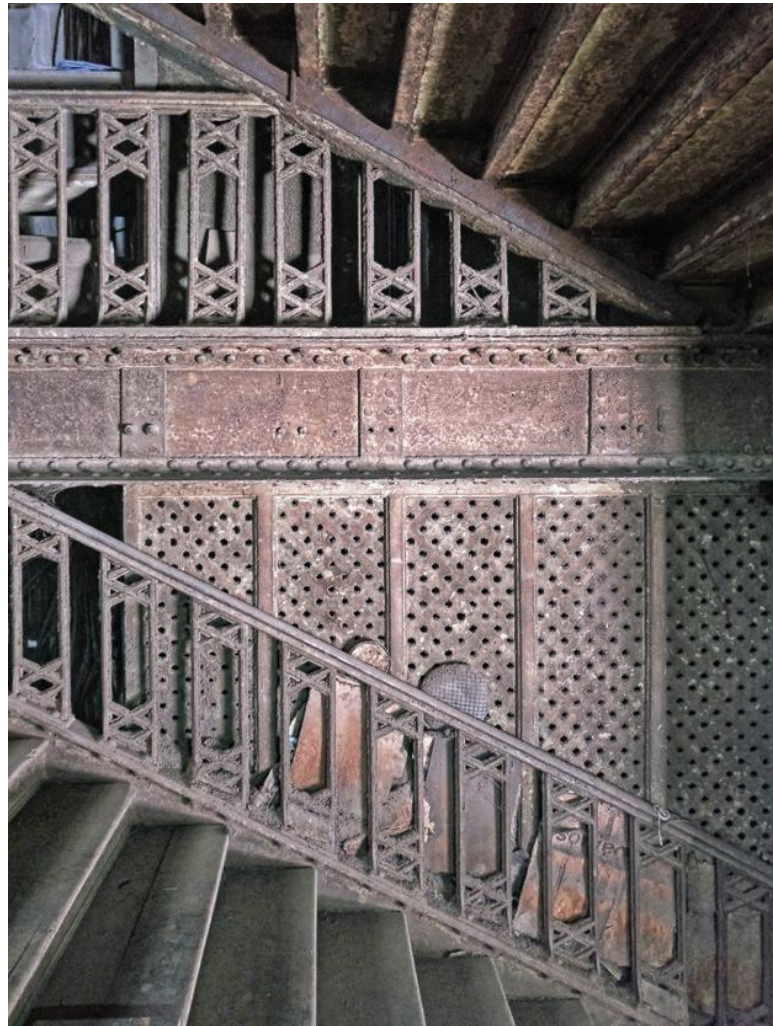


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CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI

Ahmed says Esplanade Mansion's owner Sadiq Ali has a lot to answer for, in terms of the building's present condition. He also believes the number of tenants mentioned in media (and institutional) reports are inflated: that these rooms fell vacant and their ownership reverted to Ali.

On the other side of the building was the Army Restaurant. Inexpensive, and close to the court, its visitors included many of the prisoners and undertrials who were attending their hearings. 'They would come here to eat and stock up on basic supplies,' say Raza and Sara Irani, who recently joined the family business to help revamp the restaurant and make it more contemporary. 'That's why we started keeping an inventory of toothbrushes, soaps etc, in addition to serving food. Many lawyers would also come here with their clients. In a way, our restaurant mainly served the court.'

What Next?

Heritage and conservation experts say the Grade II status accorded to Esplanade Mansion belied its significance as a historical monument and urban heritage symbol.

It took a 14-year struggle for Esplanade Mansion (along with a few other buildings) to be inscribed among the Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles of Mumbai in June 2018, and to be declared a World Heritage Property by UNESCO. Noted conservation architect Vikas Dilawari observes that the 'World Heritage' tag should have ensured the building was respected, and its conservation considered a matter of course. The lack of concern over the loss of a heritage structure like Esplanade Mansion is what Dilawari rues most. 'If it is such a significant building, we should have kept it on a higher pedestal in terms of grading — not as a Grade II structure,' he opines.

Organisations like INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and

Cultural Heritage) have stepped up to offer technical assistance for the conservation of Esplanade Mansion. Rajan Jayakar, convener of INTACH's Greater Mumbai chapter, says while the IIT Bombay report leads to 'the conclusion that the building should be demolished, that was not the purpose of the report'. 'They haven't suggested any means of restoring the building, which is part of the World Heritage Ensemble,' Jayakar says, adding that the state had a duty to maintain Esplanade Mansion. 'They had made a commitment to maintain it. But now with MHADA and other authorities, they are brushing off their responsibility. MHADA has even filed an affidavit in the High Court saying they will go by the IIT-Bombay report and demolish the building,' Jayakar says.



IMAGE CREDIT:
CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI

A conservation effort for Esplanade Mansion too doesn't come without its share of concerns. Given its decrepit state, complex tenancy structure, what would be the financial viability for the state to spend funds on its restoration? As Shalini Singh, conservation Planner at Mumbai Metropolitan Region Heritage

Conservation Society (MMRHCS), points out: 'What does the state get in return? Why would it spend money on a building that is under private ownership, and even if it did, what is the assurance that the building will be looked after by the owners in later years? These are also questions we need to look at.'

Sustainable conservation with a vision for the future is what Singh champions. Instead, in Mumbai, conservation of heritage structures has led to 'gentrification of spaces', she says. 'As of today, there are more than 1,000 important heritage structures all across Greater Mumbai including Matheran. What we have seen is many of these structures which served as public spaces, once conserved, end up becoming establishments for designer houses, restricted art galleries; it serves a completely different class of people. Is that what we want?' Singh wonders.

'Restore with dignity and grace' is Vikas Dilawari's mantra and he offers a few suggestions on how this may be achieved in the case of Esplanade Mansion: First, consensus needs to be built on the way ahead, by seeking alternative approaches, studies and reports regarding the conservation effort. Then, decisions on logistical issues like who will use the building, and what it will be used for, need to be arrived at, within a short period of time.

'It is time the government takes a proactive role in conservation. The cess funding for heritage properties can be increased from Rs 200 to maybe Rs 600. They can cross subsidise it from other buildings that are being pulled down. Rent Control needs to be amended, either according to commercial versus residential (properties) or as per economic status,' Dilawari further recommends.

UDRI's Pankaj Joshi says the only way to accommodate the rights of people living in the building is through a larger acquisition process by the state, with the building then made into a public site. 'The state does that for open spaces and roads,' Joshi notes. 'If road

widening has to be done, you have to give away your property. You are compensated but you still need to give away your property. The compensation could be in the form of rehabilitation or monetary benefits.'

An international participatory process, where people are invited to brainstorm over the best possible ways to restore the building and determine its future, might also be helpful in revitalising Esplanade Mansion's lost glory, Joshi thinks: 'Let people ideate over making it a more egalitarian and open, reformative space. After all, we live in a democracy and not a dictatorship.'



IMAGE CREDIT:
CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI

In 2019, filmmakers Ragunath V, Nathaniel Knop and Peter Rippl made a documentary on the building, titled *The Watson's Hotel*. It was an interesting experience for the filmmakers, who got to witness firsthand, the relationship the residents of Esplanade Mansion had with the building.

'People had such a mixed response to the building's heritage,' says Raghunath V. 'For some, it didn't matter at all and for others, it was just a nice fact. In the end, it didn't make a difference to their status or the status of the building. We hope that the

building is restored to its former grandeur. Being the place where cinema has its foundations in Bombay, we think that the building deserves more respect. Perhaps, once restored, it could be a museum for Indian cinema!'

Adds Peter Rippl: 'We saw the building through the eyes of those who lived in it. The 'For Whites Only' history of the building adds another layer. In spite of everything, these people were proud and very happy to live in Esplanade Mansion, no matter its present condition. Some of them lived here for generations. These people *are* the house. The house opened up possibilities for them, for their children. They are poor, and [if not for this building] they would not have been able to find a proper place to live in — right at the centre of Mumbai.'