
MODERNIST HERITAGE OF KARACHI: AN ARCHIVL OF A COLLECTIVE MEMORY FROM AN RT DECO LENS.

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ABSTRACT

“To look at emotion and desire in architecture is not to discount the simple fact that most buildings have a practical purpose. But that practical purpose is rarely pursued with perfect detachment or indifferent calculation. To build and to inhabit are not small actions, and it is hard to undertake them with coolness.”

Rowan Moore's text ‘Why We Build’ talks about desires shaping and giving form to the spaces we inhabit (Moore R. 20213). Practicality is always underlined by a necessity that gives rise to a desire. In my grandparent's house from the '50s, all the interior spaces of the house were clustered around a *sehen*¹. The spaces were connected by a seamless concrete floor, commonly present in most houses built in the '50s and '60s. This had a very practical purpose to it. Every summer the whole house was hosed down with water. Because of a seamless floor that connected all the rooms to the lounge and the lounge to the *sehen*, water could easily flow outside into a drain in the *sehen*. It proved to be sustainable in many ways as it lowered the temperature of the whole house for most of the day. There is a very simplistic desire behind a concrete floor.

Domestic spaces of such a typology are nostalgic and a part of a collective memory of houses and apartments from the 50s and 60s. Many houses in Karachi within areas like North Nazimabad, P.E.C.H.S., and Bahadurabad are examples of a regional language that developed in these two decades. When it comes towards nostalgia and memory we often find the built spaces that preserved a memory were heritage from the colonialist period. A built reminiscent of power and dominance. But there is another kind of collective memory that talks about the simplistic details shared earlier. This detail is a part of a typology that speaks to another kind of heritage. A heritage that we reclaimed in post-colonial times. Using the lens of Art Deco homes, the paper studies the transformation of a global movement into a local aesthetic. By recording the narrative of the inhabitants of these structures, this research can create a conversation about the sensitivities we have towards these vernacular techniques that developed a modern and brutalist-inspired heritage for the city of Karachi. The city's heritage is more than the colonial architecture found in the old town. These modernist structures present another kind of heritage, unique to the architectural vocabulary of Karachi, and represent a climatic sensibility that developed over the 20th century, building a modernist identity of Karachi's architecture.

Keywords: Modern Architecture, Art Deco, Post-Colonial, Collective Memory Nostalgia.

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¹ A local term for a semi covered space that opens into a courtyard.

INTRODUCTION

Karachi in its built form has a diverse history. The majority of its historical landmarks are known through the colonial remnants and have always been the object of archival and preservation, to preserve a kind of *history*. Post-independence, the city of Karachi reclaimed its freedom from the colonial structures by creating its own identity in built spaces, specifically domestic space. The 1940s and '50s served as a time when art and architecture were heavily inspired by the Art Deco movements. The city adopted this style quickly - as it was already being applied to the many monumental landmarks in the developing metropolitan city - into its domestic spaces. Much of our memories today are nostalgic for the local implementation of such a global art movement. This paper is an attempt to *archive* a heritage which defines the post-colonial modernisation of our city. A modernisation that re-thinks the hegemony of modernity by understanding a global artistic movement -Art Deco- from the lens of vernacular architecture.

To study Art Deco within the region of Karachi, most of the data found was in the form of primary data including oral histories, and on-site investigations. Very little secondary research or literary sources were found on the influences of art-deco in Karachi, particularly in a domestic context. With the key theme of this research, looking at these domestic spaces in the category of collective memory, interviews and oral narratives of the inhabitants of these spaces are used as research data to create an argument of Art Deco as a modernist heritage for the city of Karachi. Further, a lot of the sources are based on an article published by Marvi Mazhar in 2020 called 'How Art Deco Helped Karachi Shake its Colonial Look' published online on (Samaa English). This article also creates a foundation for the argument of looking past the colonial ruins as a heritage to see what heritage means in a post-colonial context. Much documentation has also been done in the sister city of Karachi, Bombay. When Art Deco entered the sub-continent region in the 1930s. Karachi and

Bombay as trading hubs, were being developed as cosmopolitan cities as well. This aesthetic also resonated as a sign of wealth due to its Western origins as well and became a part of aspirations for the built spaces (Mazhar M.).² As per the article by Maya Sorabjee for 'Art Deco in Mumbai' this aspiration developed in the regional context as well when local architects began to utilize these aesthetics in domestic spaces (Sorabjee M., 2019)³ resulting in a hybrid that was neither a complete replica of the Western-built form nor identical to the indigenous ways of looking at the built.

For this research, choosing Art Deco as a lens, domestic spaces in the city of Karachi have been documented. This research by archiving spaces of a post-colonial period, looks beyond the heritage of the colonial empire to establish a modern heritage unique to the sub-continent and in the case of this research, the city of Karachi. I explore the question if these modernist structures are a part of the heritage now. Do such techniques need to be preserved or revived to preserve an architectural vocabulary that is possibly unique to this metropolitan city? This paper also looks at the shift in desire towards our built spaces. Art Deco is an internationally recognized aesthetic, it made its home in our regional techniques because of the desire to build a cosmopolitan city post-independence. While documenting these spaces, the modifications done to these structures talk about a new desire and a new way of living that is our aspiration now.

A CRITICAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF KARACHI'S ARCHITECTUREAL AESTHETICS

It's a well-known fact that Karachi has a strong architectural presence from the colonial period. What is known as heritage today, is the ruins of a colonial empire that developed the city into a duality of native quarters and the British quarters. Calling it 'ruins' is not a nostalgic memory of the past but a ruin that symbolizes an oppressive power that plundered

² At its zenith in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Art Deco became a worldwide symbol of luxury and modernity, representing the very qualities that an increasingly restless set of Indians aspired towards. At the moment of its introduction in the subcontinent, Art Deco was seen as a simultaneously Western and universal style: Western in its geographic origins but universal in its wide-ranging visual inventory and eventual ubiquity. Its ability to occupy both these categories made the style an appealing choice for aspirational Indians. On the one hand, the eclectic motifs of Art Deco made it easier to inflect buildings with varying degrees of Indian iconography.[1] On the other, Art Deco's lingering associations with Europe and the United States allowed its Indian strain to benefit from the hegemonic status of Western culture.

³ Beginning in the mid-1930s, actively began to use . They modified the style in response to an Indian cultural and geographic context, resulting in a formal mixture of foreign and regional design. Although Art Deco's curvilinear geometry, setback volumes, and nautical motifs were often still visible, specific climatic and urban conditions prompted architects to adjust its distinct spatial compositions and to commission bas-reliefs depicting mythological Indian imagery. In its application in Bombay, the symbolism of the new architecture straddled two opposing political discourses, expressing neither a reverence for the colonizing world nor a total return to local roots.

the sub-continent for a long time. A concept borrowed by Ann Stoler in her volume 'Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination', where she critiques the colonial remains as something to not memorialize as a monument, but to see in the context of their political history.(Stoler, A.)⁴ Lari in her book 'The Dual City' mentions the alien rule which disrupted the indigenous ways of life (Lari Y., 1996)⁵. This is not seen in most regimes before the British as they would intermix and intermarry (Lari Y., 1996)⁶ with the natives. This is also a known fact that because of Karachi's strategic link to the Arabian Sea, it is an important location for trade, commerce, and economic opportunities. This location attracted different empires as well. With such an influx, this city hosts the remains of architectural aesthetics from multiple different periods in history. The most prominent architectural presence is from the colonial period. If the British empire left architectural remnants that have a visual language of power and dominance, and little to do with the local ways of living. At one point with the end of the colonial power, the city began to reclaim its architecture by reclaiming it with the local aesthetic vocabulary. Places like Empress Market grew around itself an organic market which in recent times has been unfortunately demolished. This act of reclaiming Western aesthetics into our local vocabulary is an important lens to move forward from a heritage bounded by the colonial period. In this scenario the lens of this paper is not colonial architecture and its post-colonial presence, but a more concrete form of a global-to-local translation of Western aesthetics that started to develop in the early 40's and 50's.

The architecture of this time had a unique visual vocabulary under the Art Deco movement and became synonymous with metropolitan cities like Karachi and Bombay in the Sub-continent. This paper looks at a brief history of this movement and sees the translation of Art Deco vocabulary in the domestic context. Art Deco very obviously translated into commercial buildings, for example, The Karachi Cotton Exchange building built in 1936 earmarking the start of Karachi's modernist landscape of architecture (Mazhar M.)⁷. This paper aims to look at these visual aesthetics translated into domestic spaces as this is the typology where modernist and brutalist architecture sinks into everyday built practices. These domestic spaces are evidence of how an international movement that made its way to the Sub-continent, intermixed with the local narrative and generated a local typology. While maintaining the climatic sensibilities of the region in its spatial language. It created a hybrid, unique to our context and seen in multiple residential areas of Karachi that developed in the late 40s and early 50s.

FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: A TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ART DECO HOMES

Art Deco is an international movement that originated in France post World War I. Post-war architecture was reduced to functional spaces and was pushed to become standardized. This visual culture was pushed back by traditionalists who believed in the craft and the decorative elements of

⁴ But in thinking about "ruins of empire," this volume works explicitly against the melancholic gaze to reposition the present in the wider structures of vulnerability, damage, and refusal that imperial formations sustain. Nor is it the wistful gaze of imperial nostalgia to which we turn. Walter Benjamin provides the canonical text for thinking about ruins as "petrified life," as traces that mark the fragility of power and the force of destruction. But we are as taken with ruins as sites that condense alternative senses of history, and with ruination as an ongoing corrosive process that weighs on the future. Unlike Benjamin's focus, a focus on imperial debris seeks to mark the "trail of the psyche"—a venture he rejected—as much as it seeks to follow his acute alertness to the "track of things."

⁵ The city where alien rule brought about an upheaval in cultural norms and affected the entire living pattern of the indigenous urban society, became the most visible manifestation of the colonists' reign. The new city pattern that emerged reflected their attitude towards the native population: the traditional sections of the city were relegated as 'backwards' or inferior parts while the new cantonment, Staff and Civil Lines became the 'progressive' sections, synonymous with the modern city.

⁶ The case of British settlers was quite different. Barring the early period, they remained aloof throughout the three centuries of their contact with the Subcontinent, secure in their feelings of cultural and military superiority. As Governor-General William Cavendish-Bentinck pointed out to the British Parliament after leaving India, 'In many respects the Mohammedans surpassed our rule; they settled in the countries which they conquered; they intermixed and intermarried with the natives; they admitted them to all privileges; the interests and sympathies of the conquerors and the conquered became identified. Our policy has been the reverse of this; cold, selfish and unfeeling; the iron hand of power on the one side, monopoly and exclusion on the other' (Moorhouse 1984: 75).

⁷ In the meantime, while traveling across India, Bombay's merchants found themselves attracted to Karachi's port. In a DAWN article, Mohammad Salman states that the gradual growth of enterprises and cotton trade on Karachi's port led to the creation of the Karachi Chamber of Commerce, earmarking Karachi's genesis as a business hub. Soon cotton trade shot up, resulting in the organisation of the Cotton Association in 1933, and its formalisation in 1936 as a physical structure: . This building adopted Art Deco and revolutionized the architectural scope for Karachi's landscape, effectively transitioning from Art Nouveau and Revivalist architecture to a newer and diverse array of designs as part of .

architecture (Mazha M.)⁸. Art Deco came as a movement that revived the decorative arts back into architecture. The visual culture was inspired by aeronautics, the post-industrial age, and the geometric imitation of cars and aeroplanes. This inspiration translated into the aerodynamic forms of Architecture. As it brought back the decorative elements into the built spaces, the designs mimic these dynamic details as well. Usually applied with concrete they adorn the facades of many Art Deco buildings found in our context. The concrete adornments take up linear or radial designs. Showcasing a geometrical understanding inspired by Greco-Roman Classicism, yet a modern aesthetic prevailing due to the simplification or the reduction of geometry into minimal patterns.

As the premise of this research is the domestic spaces that were built during this period, we can draw out a basic typology that is unique to Art Deco homes and remains common in most of the houses documented. This documentation also takes into account the narrative of a personal and collective memory of these spaces as well. It is an important aspect of this archiving as the majority of these spaces have undergone massive renovations as well.

The earliest memory of my childhood home is of a *sehen*. This space connected the courtyard and the bedrooms and served as a threshold between the public and private spaces, functioning as a semi-public space. Interchangeable with the modern-day lounge, this space was the locus of everyday life. The layout of the whole house emerged from this locus and had many functional and sustainable merits to it which are important factors part of the discussion later in the essay. An important part of this childhood memory is of the summers spent in this house. The house was located on the outskirts of the city of Malir. Though evenings were pleasant as it was further from the dense urban landscape, the afternoons have always been of a significant heat index in this city. To cool off the spaces, every room was hosed down in the summer. The waters would just drain out into the *sehen*, further draining into the courtyard. It was a passive way to cool down the house and the seamless concrete floor in my grandparent's home and in some other cases, a terrazzo floor ran from the rooms into the *sehen*, making sure the water could flow easily. The layout of the house and this flooring



Figure-1: Art Deco Home in PECHS Block 3.

detail were effective in cooling down the temperature of the interior spaces.

The house mentioned above was built in the early 50's and the layout of most of the homes from this era is always around a central courtyard. There is a verandah between the courtyard and the interior rooms which serves as the living area as well in most cases. The daily life activities play out in these verandahs, from lounging around to meeting visitors. The private spaces are usually interconnected with each other in this layout and there is rarely a concept of an attached bathroom. A bathroom is usually a shared one on each floor.

The spaces observed also had significantly higher ceilings, most of them around 12 feet. This high ceiling modifies the proportion and details of the doors and windows as well. They are always accompanied by clerestory windows which ensure the circulation of air even if the doors are closed. A sustainable and vernacular way to regulate air around the house. Every door and window is designed with the decorative elements of Art Deco. Dynamic and linear patterns are found on panelling within the interior spaces in addition to the facade.

Another material and visual unique to these spaces is the terrazzo floors. This flooring technique emerged in both Karachi and Bombay post-partition as they became independent of reliance on British imported goods (Mazhar

⁸ The Art Deco design movement originated in France postWorld War I, and can be traced back to the 1925 International Exhibition of the Decorative Arts (Exposition Des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels) in Paris. With the arrival of the Machine Age and Functionalism, many design fields such as architecture had started focusing on creating functional, machine made and standardized designs for the masses. This caused pushback from conservatives who wanted to retain traditional arts and craftsmanship by delving into decorative arts, which is where Art Deco was introduced to the world. This design movement, though widely criticised as solely indulging the wealthy, dominated various fields such as decorative arts, architecture, interior design, furniture, and graphics.



Figure-2: Dyer's Family Home. The Proportion of a Door in an Art Deco Home.

marvi)⁹. Every other house seen comprises these terrazzo floors in multiple different kinds of vibrant patterns. In some cases wrapping up on the columns themselves. Terrazzo floors are very nostalgic for the spaces of this time. In recent years this trend has made a comeback in architectural practices as well. Grooves with glass inlays are found in intervals in the flooring to avoid cracking of the concrete as well.

Art Deco homes are also identified by their dynamic forms. Most commonly found are the rounded balconies accompanied by ribbon windows on the facade. Below these



Figure-3: Terrazzo Floor in Dyer's Family Home.



Figure-4: Terrazzo Wrapped up on Columns.

balconies are shaded verandahs or entrances as well. Now hidden behind walls added because of security reasons. Following are a few homes documented in the past few months and are shared here as per the permission of the owner. The domestic spaces documented for this study are

⁹ In South Asia, another major Art Deco influence was the emergence of Terrazzo flooring. Terrazzo's presence in the Indian Subcontinent has its origins in Mumbai, where it became extremely popular from 1950-1970. The company Tiles, , was one of the first to pioneer Art Deco floors in Mumbai, installing Terrazzo tiles in the iconic cinema houses and Art Deco buildings of Marine Drive, Oval, Malabar Hill and more. Jamshed Nusserwanji, the first elected mayor of Karachi, established a tile factory in Karachi that was the inspiration for their sister-factory Bharat Tiles. Today terrazzo can be found in many homes and buildings across Karachi, and in the childhood memories of Karachiites. Terrazzo flooring feels nostalgic, comfortable and familiar to most, and is a local craft that artisans have to train to create.



Figure-5: Entrance to Sana Naqvi's Home.



located in two areas PECHS and SMCHS. Residential growth in these areas started post-partition in the early 50's. One of the documented homes is of Sana Naqvi, located in PECHS Block 3.

Her house was built in 1954 by her paternal aunt. She is currently living in this home with her mother and her brother's family. The area was called the teachers housing society¹⁰ and the plots were given to such professionals by the government post-independence. Every house in this area is of a similar typology as mentioned earlier. The signature courtyard is surrounded by living spaces. In the case of Sana, as told by her. Multiple houses were built in this area following a standard layout, with freedom towards the decorative elements. Every home had an interior courtyard around which the private spaces were arranged. The courtyard of the two houses shared a single wall as well. It was a more communally cohesive way of lifestyle where at all times one was visually connected to one neighbor. A lot of modifications have been made to the home as well. The courtyard is now covered on top by a poly fibre sheet. The wall that is shared has been raised to completely cut off the visual connection with the house next door. The terrace on the first floor that looks into the courtyard has been walled off as well with a metal sheet.

Another home that was documented is located in SMHCS. Like PECHS it developed into a residential area post-partition. This house is on a 1200 sq yard of land and was built in 1954 as well. With a significantly larger square footage than the previous home, one of its entrances opens up to the main Shahrah-e-Faisal. The plots on both sides of the house which may have been residential till some time, are now replaced



Figure-6: Sana Naqvi's Home in PECHS Block 3.

by high rises.

Its ownership distributed between the family is evident in the modifications the house has gone through as well. Previously the house was built around a common courtyard from which all the interior spaces are accessed. Now the first floor has little to no access to the courtyard and a small staircase has been added on the external facade at the back for access. The doors and windows accompanied by the clerestory windows are usually kept shut now because of the traffic pollution and noise from the main Shahrah

¹⁰ Excerpt from the Interview.



Figure-7: Additions are Marked in Red.



Figure-8: House Documented in SMCHS.



Figure-9: House Documented in SMCHS, View from a Pedestrian Bridge on the Main Road.

infiltrating the private spaces.

Another house documented in PECHS belongs to the Dyer family. An industrialist family in textile owns this plot of 4000 sq. yards on which four houses are built of a little less than 1000 sq. yards. All four of them are of the similar typology of an art deco home with its decorative features in great condition.

From an exquisite terrazzo floor to the courtyard and roof tiles. The house is in great condition even today. What is even more interesting about these four houses is a shared roundabout in between. Replicating the typology of an individual house to a street character as well. The walls around them are low in height and nothing like the walled-off houses present in contemporary times. Upon asking, they take care of security measures by hiring a guard rather than dealing with it architecturally and constructing more walls.

This particular house had a unique street character that has been maintained from the point it was built in the late 40's.



Figure-10: Plan of House Documented in SMCHS. Courtesy Tashfeen Shuneed.



Figure-11: Dyer's Family Home is Documented in PECHS Block 3.



Figure-12: Entrance to One Unit and Shared Courtyard Between Four Units.

The owner of the house talked about not changing a single thing from the day it was built.

A SHIFT IN DESIRE TOWARDS THE BUILT

Through the archiving of the three homes above and from the oral narratives of the residents, one can understand a shift in the ways of life of the people within this city. Post-

partition the homes carried forward a communal way of life which is a part of the sub-continental ways into the architecture. This is what translated a global movement into a local vocabulary as well. In today's time and as observed by the modifications done to these homes, the aspirations and our desires towards built spaces are becoming more and more individualistic. We desire to always increase the private square footage as much as we can. Buildings today

do not have a street character or any relationship to the street at all. The boundary walls seen in the Dyer family home are porous to the urban environment. Not directly but strategically placed to not have a living space open visually to the public, but still inviting enough to maintain its relationship to the street.

Most of these homes are also subjected to property disputes or disputes within families. Leading to further modification of homes by giving separate entrances, raising walls, and covering the courtyard. Patching over the actual typology of an Art Deco home. This has led to a courtyard losing its meaning and a verandah or a *sehen* almost vanishing from the built practices. Speaking to these homeowners, they reminisce about a time when families lived together in these compounds. They tell stories of evening tea and hot summers spent in the verandahs. They speak about kids playing within the courtyard and wandering into the streets and the adults would be comfortable knowing that they won't go out of a visual reach.

In today's built spaces, such an idea is quite unfamiliar as private spaces become more and more isolated. The wall heights increase to cut off from the streets entirely and the only relationship it has to the urban environment is of security barriers. What this documentation and the arguments lead us to is, are these homes the modernist heritage of Karachi? If the social patterns have changed in today's time implicating a change in the built environment, archiving such domestic spaces becomes important. It is an important documentation of a time when the city reclaimed its power for a colonial empire. In this case, are colonial buildings the only remaining heritage of the city which in actuality is a ruin of a colonial regime?

The definition of modernity is not a single definition that begins from the West. Modernisation took its unique shape throughout the world, localised in many vernacular languages. J. Robinson (2009) in an essay 'Dislocating Modernity' referenced Timothy Mitchell;

Mitchell agrees, and hopes that these tactics might deprive modernity of 'any essential principle, unique dynamic, or singular history' (2000: 12). We need to find ways to write modernity outside of the historical time of the West. The only way to do this is to ensure that there are grounds for appreciating and experiencing the modern without necessary reference to the West, or



Figure-13: Dyer's Family Home is Documented in PECHS Block 3 Approach form the Main Street.

Western capitalism. This means disconnecting the social transformations and cultural valorisations indicated by theories of modernity from assumptions about progress and from any fixed geographical referents. Decentering the West in theories of modernity means seeking to understand the sources and sites of social transformation wherever they may be and allowing for newness and innovation, along with their cultural valorisation, to emerge and exist anywhere.

Art Deco buildings in Karachi are one example of a way to re-think what modernity means and to move past the colonial remnants as the singular idea of *heritage*. To look for the Art Deco in domestic spaces is also a way to get to the root of the localisation of such a global movement and in the above-mentioned quote a way to 'Decenter the West in theories of modernity'. Archiving Art Deco homes as a heritage offers us a step towards such a decentring.

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