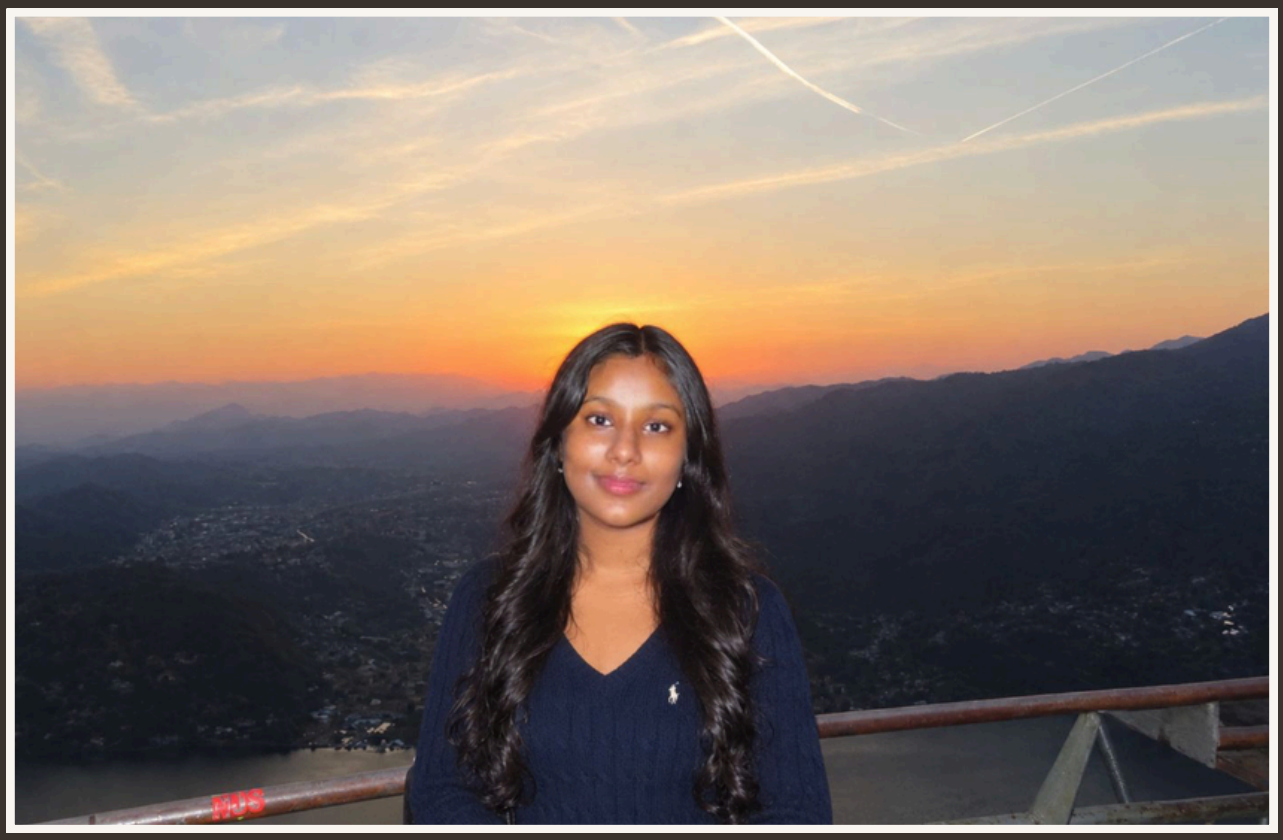
Between Stone *and* Glass

Reading a city through its buildings, one era at a time



Falak Shah

About the photographer



Falak Shah is a prospective student of architecture and urban planning based in Mumbai. This book grew out of summer school coursework and a habit that outgrew it, walking the same stretches of the city with a camera, slowly enough to notice what a daily commute trains you to stop seeing.

Between Stone and Glass is a first attempt at putting that practice into a single, deliberate sequence reading Mumbai's architecture not as a backdrop but as a record of who the city was being built for, era by era.

The photographs in this book were taken on location across South Mumbai, Worli and Bandra Kurla Complex over the course of this project, on foot, mostly in the early morning and late afternoon when the light along these facades is at its most legible.

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Origin of the Project

This project began with a simple observation, made on an ordinary commute and backed by studies made in a classroom, Mumbai does not have one skyline. It has several, stacked on top of each other, and on certain streets you can see three or four of them in a single frame. For example, a Koli fishing boat pulled up on the sand beneath a fifty-storey glass tower in Worli, a Gothic spire that was once the tallest thing in the city now dwarfed by everything around it, an Art Deco cinema hall with a phone-repair stall wedged into its ground floor.

Most people who live here stop noticing this after a while. It blends into the background. As a prospective student of architecture and urban planning, I wanted to do the opposite, to stop letting the collision of eras be a backdrop I walk past, and instead make it the actual subject of sustained attention. That meant slowing down enough to ask, building by building, why does this exist, who asked for it, and what did the answer to that question look like at the time?

My camera became the tool for slowing down. A photograph forces you to decide what to include in the frame which means deciding, again and again, whether to crop out the incongruity or to let it stay in.

What this book is

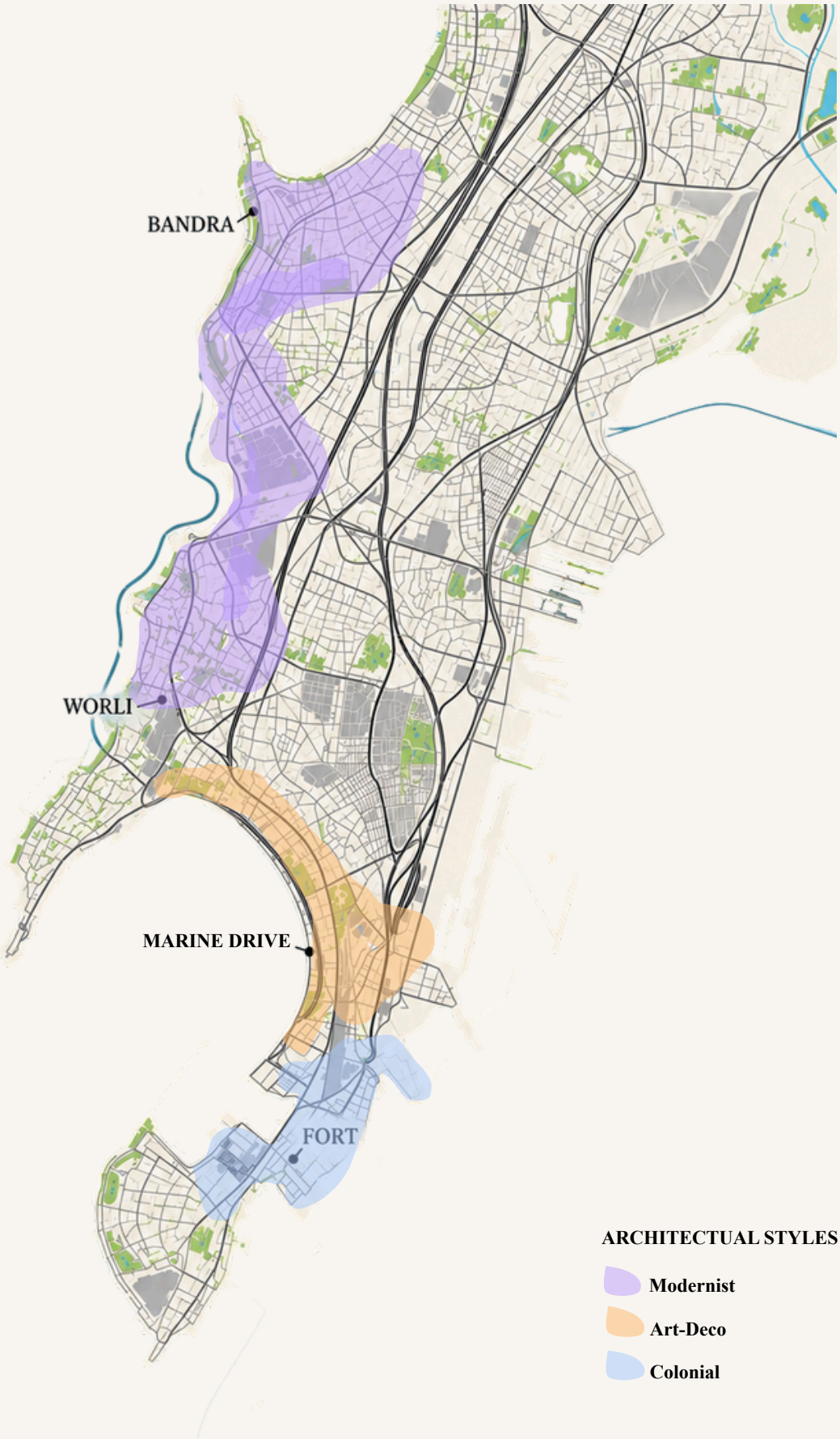
Between Stone and Glass is a photographic memoir that traces the physical evolution of Mumbai through three built eras: colonial Gothic and Edwardian, Art Deco, and contemporary modernism.

These three are read alongside a fourth, older thread that runs beneath and around all of them: the informal and vernacular city of the Koliwadas, the chawls, and settlements like Dharavi. It predates the formal city and has persisted through every phase of it.

This is deliberately not a comprehensive architectural survey, a heritage-conservation catalogue, or a real-estate coffee-table book. It is closer to a memoir, because its throughline is not the buildings themselves but my own process of learning to read them, what I noticed on a first visit compared with a fifth, and which building changed my mind about something.



Map of the locations



Chapter 1: Colonial Architecture

It was the first time the city tried to create a monumental, readable skyline, not only to use as infrastructure. In the 1860's when the fortification walls of Bombay were demolished, the land released in the Fort area was the subject of an almost unerringly Victorian Gothic Revival architectural campaign, as Gothic in Britain was already coded as serious, moral, and permanent. The colonial government wished Bombay's new civic heart to do just that: wholesale borrowing of authority; university buildings, courts, libraries, and churches, all speaking the same visual language, irrespective of what they contained.

This chapter is not so much about the style as the confidence behind it. These buildings were designed to be there, and to still be in control, 100 years later. Some of that confidence was merited, as the buildings remain standing and working, some of them virtually unchanged. Some of it obviously is not: the administration that constructed them is no longer here, and the stone has had to find new uses; a railway terminus, a colonial shopfront repurposed as a fashion boutique.

Geographically, this chapter is the most focused in the book. All the sites in it are within a 15 minute walk of each other and are grouped in three contiguous precincts at the south end of the island: the former civic and commercial centre of Fort, the arts and institutional precinct of Kala Ghoda and the planned dockland business precinct of Ballard Estate just to the east of Kala Ghoda. That compactness is part of the case: nowhere in the book is any era so pure in its own time as to have remained undiluted by what followed it.

Locations in this chapter:

- Afghan Church (St John the Evangelist) - Colaba
- David Sassoon Library & Reading Room - Rampart Row, Kala Ghoda
- Elphinstone College - Kala Ghoda
- Flora Fountain - Hutatma Chowk, Fort
- Oval Maidan and Rajabai Clock Tower - University of Mumbai, bordering the Oval Maidan, Fort
- Pernia's Pop-Up Shop (Ismail Building) - Kala Ghoda
- Western Railway Headquarters - Churchgate
- Ballard Estate - reclaimed dockland immediately east of Fort









Afghan Church

St John the Evangelist, Colaba - consecrated 1858

The church was built as a memorial, not a parish a response to the catastrophic losses of the First Afghan War, and later the Sindh campaigns, with the regimental dead of the British Indian Army named on plaques inside. The spire is deliberately severe: no colour, no ornament beyond the tracery, rising straight out of the cantonment it once served. For most of the nineteenth century it was one of the first landmarks visible from an incoming ship, which gave it a strange double life a war memorial that also functioned as a navigation aid. The grounds still feel cordoned off from the rest of Colaba, shaded and quiet in a way that most of Fort's churches aren't anymore, and the light through the trees at the gate is almost always better than the light on the spire itself.





David Sassoon Library & Reading Room

Rampart Row, Kala Ghoda - opened 1870

Funded by the Sassoon family, one of Bombay's great Baghdadi-Jewish merchant dynasties, this was conceived explicitly as a public good rather than a private collection a reading room anyone literate and respectably dressed could use, at a moment when that was not a small thing to offer a colonial port city. The Doric portico out front borrows its grammar wholesale from Greek civic architecture, which was the international shorthand for "institution" in the 1870s regardless of what city you were building in. Inside, the regency staircase and the wrought ironwork are original, and the library still functions exactly as intended a working reading room, not a museum piece, which changes how you're allowed to photograph it. Go in the late afternoon when the light through the tall windows falls across the stacks.




DAVID SASSOON LIBRARY
AND READING ROOM
FOUNDED 1847


THE SIR COWASJEE JEHANGHIER BUILDING
FOR THE ELPHINSTONE COLLEGE
DR. HOMI BHABHA STATE UNIVERSITY
MUMBAI









Elphinstone College

Kala Ghoda - Victorian Neo-Gothic

Named for Mountstuart Elphinstone, a governor who argued unusually for the period that Bombay's colleges should teach in English and in the vernacular both, rather than treating English-medium education as the only legitimate kind. The building itself doesn't fully commit to that idea: it's Gothic Revival through and through, pointed arches and buttresses borrowed straight from an English public school, with almost nothing in the facade that reads as local. The real photograph here isn't the street elevation everyone shoots it's the inner courtyard, where the stone changes colour with the time of day and students still move through the arcades exactly where their nineteenth-century counterparts would have.









Flora Fountain

Hutatma Chowk, Fort - unveiled 1864

Commissioned to honour Governor Sir Bartle Frere and carved entirely in London from Portland stone before being shipped out in sections, the fountain puts the Roman goddess of flowers and abundance at the dead centre of what was then the busiest intersection in the city a strange thing to build in a tropical port that has nothing to do with Flora or Rome. It marks almost exactly where the old Fort wall had a gate, so the fountain sits on a genuine historical seam even though nothing about its iconography admits that. Today it's a traffic island as much as a monument, which is part of the story: it photographs very differently depending on whether you let the traffic stay in frame or wait it out.









Oval Maidan and Rajabai Tower

University of Mumbai - tower completed 1878

Designed by George Gilbert Scott, the same architect behind London's St Pancras, and modelled loosely on the proportions of Big Ben, Rajabai Tower was for a period the tallest structure in the city, built to be seen from the harbour as proof that Bombay could build vertically and still look serious doing it. It's named after the mother of the merchant who funded it, on the condition the bells ring out specific tunes at specific hours, which they still do. The Oval Maidan in front of it is doing most of the compositional work in any good photograph: the palm line gives you a natural foreground, and the cricket matches that run most evenings put human scale into a frame that would otherwise just be a tower against sky.



Pernia's Pop-Up Shop (Ismail Building)

Kala Ghoda - a colonial shell, reclaimed

This one sits slightly outside the chapter's logic and I kept it in anyway. It's a nineteenth-century commercial structure same stonework, same arched openings, same proportions as half the buildings around it that now houses a contemporary fashion retailer rather than whatever it was originally built for. Nothing about the shell has changed; what's changed is the question being asked of it. I think that's worth including precisely because it complicates the chapter's tidy "colonial buildings as frozen artefacts" framing: this is a colonial building that's still economically alive, still being renegotiated, rather than one that's been conserved into a kind of architectural taxidermy.





Western Railway Headquarters
Churchgate - early twentieth century

Less famous than CST but doing a related job: Indo-Gothic massing pointed arches, a clock tower, decorative stonework wrapped around a working railway administration building, with one of the city's busiest commuter terminals running underneath it. The building's grandeur and its actual daily function sit in real tension here. Hundreds of thousands of commuters pass through Churchgate station every day and almost none of them look up at the facade above them; the photograph that captures that disconnect — crowd at street level, architecture ignored above it says more about how colonial-era buildings actually function now than a clean, empty elevation shot would.









Ballard Estate

Reclaimed dockland, Fort - laid out in the 1920s

An entire precinct, not a single building laid out to one unified masterplan by the Scottish architect George Wittet on land reclaimed from Ballard Pier, in a Scottish Baronial style that has essentially nothing to do with Bombay's climate, materials, or history, and everything to do with projecting a specific kind of institutional calm onto a brand-new commercial district. Wittet also designed the Gateway of India, so Ballard Estate is in some ways his quieter, more private work built for shipping companies and trading houses rather than ceremony. The best way to photograph it isn't any single facade but the streets themselves: the uniform cornice heights and matching stone give Ballard Estate a coherence no other part of Fort has, because unlike the rest of the district, this part was never allowed to accumulate piecemeal.

Chapter 2: Art Deco Architecture

This is the pivot point of the book, and the most optimistic chapter in it. Art Deco arrived in Bombay in the 1930s not through colonial patronage but through Indian architects, developers, and residents building for themselves on the newly reclaimed Backbay land along the western shoreline. It was a deliberate stylistic break from Gothic streamlined curves instead of pointed arches, sunburst motifs instead of tracery, whole buildings named after ocean liners (Chateau Marine, Soona Mahal) rather than after governors and viceroys.

It's the moment the city started narrating its own modernity instead of inheriting someone else's. The confidence in this chapter is a different kind from the colonial chapter's not about permanence or empire, but about arrival. A rising Indian middle class was saying, visibly, in stone and ironwork and curved glass: we live here now, and this is what we choose to look like. Photographing it means paying close attention to that difference, because at a glance Deco and Gothic can both read simply as "old Bombay architecture" the distinction is really about who was doing the building, and for whom.

Geographically this chapter runs along a single curved spine: Marine Drive, the reclaimed seafront promenade, and the Oval Maidan that sits just behind it on the Fort side, with a scattering of buildings in New Marine Lines immediately adjacent. It's a UNESCO-listed ensemble ninety-four buildings in total across the full precinct and this chapter samples ten of them, chosen to show the range inside the style rather than just its most photographed landmarks.

Locations in this chapter:

- Soona Mahal - Marine Drive
- Eros Cinema - Churchgate
- Liberty Cinema - New Marine Lines
- Zavar Mahal - Marine Drive
- Ambassador Hotel - Churchgate
- Palm Court - Marine Drive
- Shiv Shanti Bhuvan - Oval Maidan
- Rajjab Mahal - Oval Maidan
- Empress Court - Marine Drive









Soona Mahal

Marine Drive

The building that ends up in almost every photograph of the Marine Drive crescent, whether the photographer meant to include it or not its curved corner and ribbon balconies wrap the site exactly the way a ship's hull wraps its bow, which is not a coincidental resemblance. Ocean-liner imagery was central to Art Deco everywhere, but it reads with unusual precision here, on a boulevard that is quite literally the edge of the sea. The building has been an apartment block, offices, and a small hotel at various points, and its ground floor currently hosts a well-known ice-cream parlour, which means this is one of the few Deco landmarks in the book that's also a genuine neighbourhood meeting point rather than a monument people only look at.





Eros Cinema
Churchgate - opened 1938

Designed by Sorabji Bhedwar, Eros was one of the most expensive cinema builds of its era and it shows the Frozen Fountain motif carved into the stone above the entrance, a tower that functions purely as a marketing device (there's nothing inside it, it's there to be seen from Marine Drive), and a restored marble staircase indoors that is, on its own, worth more attention than most people give it on their way to a seat. The building survived a serious fire and a long period of decline before a careful restoration brought back the original colour scheme and signage. It's a rare case in this book of a Deco building whose interior is as photographable as its facade.




EROS

Liberty Cinema

New Marine Lines - opened 1949

A single-screen cinema that has mostly dodged the glass-box, multiplex-conversion fate that's taken several of its contemporaries. The vertical signage "LIBERTY" running the height of the tower is original and still legible from two streets away after dark, which is increasingly rare for Deco-era cinema signage in the city. It opened just after independence, which makes it a slightly later and more confident entry in the Deco catalogue than most of the Marine Drive buildings: less about announcing arrival, more about a style that had already become the city's default visual language for anything meant to feel modern.




HISTORY







Zavar Mahal
Marine Drive

Deco massing the stepped profile, the horizontal banding folded around a rooftop detail that borrows from temple architecture rather than anything European or nautical. It's a small gesture, easy to miss from street level, but it's one of the clearest examples on this stretch of Marine Drive of the style absorbing a local reference instead of importing one wholesale, which runs slightly against the chapter's general argument that Deco here was mostly about looking outward and modern. Worth a longer look specifically because it complicates its own category.

Ambassador Hotel
Churchgate

A circular tower built around a rooftop restaurant that was designed to rotate Bombay's own, more modest answer to the ocean-liner silhouette that recurs throughout this chapter, except built as a hotel rather than a cinema or a residential block. The curved form reads completely differently depending on which side of the building you're standing on: from Churchgate station it looks almost industrial, a plain drum; from the Oval side the Deco detailing around the base becomes much more legible. It's a reminder that this style, for all its glamour in photographs, was also just ordinary commercial infrastructure hotels needed to be built somewhere, and this is what "modern" looked like when they were.




PALM COURT





Palm Court
Marine Drive

Pink facade, palm-frond motifs worked into the balcony grilles named for the decorative reference rather than anything actually growing on the building. The colour is original, not a recent repaint, and it shifts noticeably through the day: warm and almost coral in early morning light, flattened to a duller rose by midday once the sun has moved directly overhead. If you're choosing one time of day to shoot the whole Marine Drive chapter, early morning is non-negotiable for this building specifically it's the one that loses the most to harsh light.







Shiv Shanti Bhuvan

Oval Maidan

Egyptian-influenced detailing worked into the facade in green and yellow a clear, slightly unexpected example of how widely Art Deco's catalogue of borrowed references actually extended. The style arrived in India partly via the same global current that produced Egyptian Revival motifs in Deco buildings from Miami to Mumbai, riding the wave of popular fascination with ancient Egypt that followed the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. It's easy to walk past this one assuming the colour scheme is just decorative whimsy; it's actually a fairly direct citation, once you know what you're looking at.









Rajjab Mahal
Oval Maidan

The ground-floor ironwork here is some of the best-preserved in the entire UNESCO-listed Oval Maidan ensemble stepped, sunburst-pattern ventilation grilles set into the stonework at exactly the height most people walk past without looking down. Rajjab Mahal is a good argument for shooting details as seriously as full elevations: the wide shot of this building is pleasant but unremarkable among its neighbours, while the ironwork alone tells you more about the craftsmanship Deco actually demanded than most facade photographs manage to.

Empress Court

Marine Drive

One of the taller blocks in the Marine Drive line, and a deliberate closing note for this chapter: by the time Empress Court went up, Art Deco in Bombay had stopped being an imported novelty and become the default architectural language for anyone building here, regardless of whether they were especially invested in the style's European or American origins. That shift from statement to default is really the argument of this whole chapter, and this building is where it's most visible: competent, confident, slightly less ornamented than its earlier neighbours, because by now nobody needed convincing.



Chapter 3: Modernist Architecture

This chapter is about a different kind of confidence again: global capital's architecture, which by design could belong to Singapore, Dubai, or London as easily as Mumbai. Glass curtain walls, corporate plazas, and super-luxury residential towers by international firms make up most of this skyline, and most of them are less interested in saying anything specifically about Mumbai than in signalling that the city now belongs to the same financial conversation as every other global city.

That's not a criticism so much as an observation worth sitting with this is the first of the book's three built chapters where the architecture is explicitly not trying to look local. The colonial chapter borrowed Gothic to claim moral authority; the Deco chapter borrowed Art Deco to claim modern arrival; this chapter mostly isn't borrowing a historical reference at all, just a contemporary international standard. Kanchenjunga Apartments is the deliberate exception kept inside this chapter specifically to complicate that pattern proof that Indian modernism didn't always mean importing a silhouette wholesale, even when it was reaching for comparable height and ambition.

Geographically this chapter is the most spread out in the book, which is itself part of the point unlike the tightly clustered colonial and Deco chapters, modernist Mumbai doesn't have one neighbourhood, it has several disconnected financial and residential nodes: Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC), the planned business district; Worli and Lower Parel, the former mill lands now dense with luxury residential towers, including Lodha World Towers and Indiabulls Blu; Tardeo, where Imperial Towers rises out of an older residential fabric; and Malabar Hill, where Kanchenjunga sits apart from the others both physically and philosophically.

Locations in this chapter:

- One BKC - Bandra Kurla Complex
- ONGC Building - Bandra Kurla Complex
- Lodha World Towers - Worli
- Kanchenjunga Apartments - Malabar Hill
- Office tower, Lower Parel - Worli/Lower Parel
- The Capital - Bandra Kurla Complex
- Imperial Towers - Tardeo
- Indiabulls Blu - Worli


NK OF AMERICA









One BKC
Bandra Kurla Complex

Glass curtain wall, column-free floor plates, a lobby built to international commercial-real-estate specification rather than any particular reference to Mumbai. This is the first building in the book that's legible to an arriving international tenant before it's legible as being specifically of this city and that's not an incidental side effect, it's close to the design brief. BKC was planned from the outset as a business district that could compete for the same global capital as Singapore or Dubai, and the architecture follows that mandate precisely.


अॅव्हेन्यू 3



ONGC Building

Bandra Kurla Complex

Headquarters for India's largest state-owned oil and gas company, housed in a curved glass form that reads as corporate rather than civic a notable shift from the colonial buildings earlier in the book, which were mostly government structures built to look unmistakably like government. Here the state's architecture borrows the visual vocabulary of private enterprise instead of asserting authority through historical reference, which says something about how institutional power presents itself differently depending on the era.





Lodha World Towers
Worli

Designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners the firm behind several major international commissions this is three residential towers rising to 76 storeys at their tallest point, visible from most of south-central Mumbai on a clear day. The scale here is genuinely disorienting at street level in a way photographs tend to flatten out; standing at the base looking straight up does more to communicate the building's actual size than any wide shot taken from a distance.

Kanchenjunga Apartments
Malabar Hill - completed 1983

The one deliberate exception in this chapter, and worth lingering on. Charles Correa's design uses double-height garden terraces, staggered and angled across the facade specifically to catch the prevailing sea breeze and block the harshest of the afternoon sun climate-responsive design worked out from Bombay's actual weather rather than imported wholesale from a cooler climate. At 32 storeys it predates BKC's glass towers by decades and makes almost none of their formal choices, which is exactly why it belongs here: proof that Indian modernism didn't have to mean copying an international silhouette, even when it was reaching for comparable height and ambition.



Office tower
Worli

A curved glass commercial tower among the newer stock that's filled in the old mill-land south of Worli over the last two decades the kind of building that could plausibly be relocated to Singapore, Dubai, or a dozen other cities without anyone needing to redesign it. That's the chapter's argument condensed into one structure: by this point, "modern" and "generic" had become difficult to tell apart.




Bank
भवन
Bhavan



The Capital
Bandra Kurla Complex

The circular atrium cut into the facade the feature that gives the building its nickname has made this one of the most photographed structures in BKC, and for good reason: it's one of the few buildings in this chapter actually attempting something formally interesting rather than just stacking identical glass floors to a target height. The atrium functions as a kind of vertical plaza, pulling light and activity into the middle of an otherwise fairly conventional office tower.



Imperial Towers

Tardeo

Twin residential skyscrapers that were, briefly after completion, among the tallest buildings in India a status Mumbai's skyline has since moved past at a remarkable pace. From certain angles along the street below, the two towers frame each other almost perfectly symmetrically, which is the shot most photographers end up reaching for here, and for good reason: it's one of the few modernist compositions in the city where the symmetry isn't accidental.



Indiabulls Blu
Worli

Included as the chapter's closing image, shot looking straight up through the gap between towers rather than at any single facade. Blu is a cluster of residential towers sold on sea views and altitude, and from street level what you actually get is a compressed strip of sky between glass walls a description of how this part of the city feels to stand in, rather than a portrait of one building. It also places the chapter's final frame in Worli, a short distance from the Koliwada that opens the next chapter, so the book ends this section looking up and begins the next looking at what sits beneath it.

Chapter 4: Informal Architecture

This isn't a fourth "style" in the same sense as the first three chapters it's the thread that was already there before Chapter 1 starts, and it's still there after Chapter 3 ends. The Koli fishing villages predate the colonial city by centuries; the mill-worker chawls and dense, self-built neighbourhoods like Dharavi grew out of the same economic forces that produced the formal city around them, but were never granted the same architectural legitimacy, and rarely appear in books like this one at all except as scenery for someone else's point about inequality.

I wanted to avoid that specific failure. Each site in this chapter is a functioning, internally coherent urban form in its own right, not a contrast shot for the glass towers three chapters back. That's also why these pages are left intentionally unfinished rather than filled with placeholder stock photography: photographing this chapter carries a different responsibility than photographing a facade. These are people's homes and livelihoods. Each site below is reserved for a specific, planned visit several with a resident-led guide rather than alone so the chapter gets completed properly rather than quickly.

Geographically this chapter is the most scattered in the book, which is itself meaningful. The formal architecture in Chapters 1 through 3 consolidates into tight, plannable districts Fort, Marine Drive, BKC. The informal city refuses that pattern: it persists wherever it was first established, pushed to the coastal edges and the inland margins, present in small pockets all along the shoreline from Colaba to the northern suburbs rather than occupying one legible precinct of its own.

Locations in this chapter:

- Worli Koliwada - Worli
- Khar Danda - Khar
- Sassoon Dock - Colaba
- Dharavi





Cuffe Parade Koliwada /Worli Koliwada

Five minutes' walk from Colaba and the Gateway of India, yet almost never visited by anyone headed there narrow lanes, murals of fishermen and boats painted directly onto the walls, a settlement that predates every colonial building in Chapter 1 by a wide margin despite sitting a few hundred metres from some of them.Oldest of the city's fishing settlements and the one with the clearest physical evidence of its age a British-era fort built into the settlement to guard Mahim Bay, still standing among the houses. The compositional idea for this one: a dawn shoot from inside the Koliwada looking out toward the Worli towers, so the two chapters of the book share a single frame rather than staying separated by a page break.





Khar Danda

A Koli and East Indian Catholic settlement known for its piers and its distinctive, two-days-early Holi celebration a local calendar quirk with its own origin story worth including as text alongside whatever image ends up here.







Sassoon Dock

Mumbai's oldest working fish-landing dock, in continuous use since 1875. Only genuinely alive between roughly 5 and 8am, after which it empties out into something closer to a parking lot this one has a hard scheduling requirement that the other locations in this chapter don't.


शिवनेरी रहिवासी सेवा संघ

Dharavi

I didn’t get inside Dharavi, so this is the view from the building next door, and that limit is part of what the picture shows. From above, the settlement reads as a single pattern, dense and unbroken, where the formal chapters of this book read as individual buildings. What the frame can’t show is the part that matters most: the leather, pottery, textile and recycling work going on in the rooms beneath those roofs, and the people doing it. I’ve left this chapter as one image on purpose, rather than pad it with pictures taken at a distance that pretend to know the place.



Colophon

Between Stone and Glass

A photographic memoir of Mumbai's architecture

Photographs and text by Falak Shah

Set in Times, on a cream ground throughout.
Compiled as a working draft for a student photography project on colonial, Art Deco and modernist architecture in Mumbai, alongside the city's informal and vernacular building traditions.