

# BUILT HERITAGE AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN MUMBAI

## MATERIAL CULTURE AND CONSERVATION PRACTICES

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### 1. Introduction: material culture and political economy

As cities of the world are faced with problems raised by increasing urbanization and globalization trends, arguably the most basic and inescapable issue they are confronted with is the fact that their aspirations to grow, and mold themselves elastically to rapid changes, clash inevitably and evidently with their physicality. Economic and social relations are constantly changing, but the architectural skeleton of our urban landscapes, made out of steel, stone, and concrete cannot respond as quickly.

In this scenario of tensions between weight and lightness, materiality and fluidity, where additionally land becomes increasingly scarce and density grows, logics of demolition and reconstruction that try to accommodate urban change have to deal with the desire, on the part of civil society or of politicians and city-branders, to preserve a certain “cityness”. However, actors that live, use, and plan the city have different and often diverging ideas, interests, imageries of what the city looks or should look like, and of what use should be made of its built environment; all cities virtually exist, in people’s cognitive landscapes, in millions of different forms, each slightly or completely different from the others, each representing a different identity and a specific type of “cityness”. This makes it practically impossible, when it comes

to urban change, to find consensus about which “cityness” one wants to preserve, and thus which pieces of the urban fabric should stay, and which ones should go.

Mumbai, more than other cities, is dealing with problems of extremely high land prices and scarcity of land. At the same time, its long history makes it a palimpsest of different political regimes, economic ways of production, and architectural styles. With its complex and archipelagic cartography of actors, in Mumbai even more than elsewhere lives a multitude of diverging images of “cityness”, with different types of attachment to the urban fabric.

In its processes of urban change, different types of buildings have lived different stories, and I would like to point at the possible discriminating factors that result into varying degrees of conservation, demolition, or adaptive re-use. While the architectural and historic ‘value’ of the buildings – very frequent in the Indian legislation as a criterion – could be a factor, it remains a subjective matter, and I don’t think it can appropriately explain the differences: being extremely subjective and volatile, depending even on fashion, culture, etc., it can be a tool, not a real variable, to discriminate conservable buildings from the ones that do not deserve preservation.

This chapter represents an effort to incorporate elements of material culture studies within a political economic analytical framework: in a same context of land regulations, traditions of conservation, and raising land values I will try to give some importance to the physical properties of buildings and to their meaning, which inevitably changes for different structures, uses, and owners. Ultimately, this chapter will try to look at the paths that different buildings in Mumbai have followed, and ask the questions: what do buildings mean, and for whom? And, could this be a relevant factor?

Starting from a material culture assumption of interaction between built form and social phenomena (Gieryn, 2002), I argue that (i) buildings and their materiality have a meaning for people, and this meaning is an important element in explaining their conservation or redevelopment trajectories, and (ii) in Mumbai, where conservation

practices are decentralized, the value that the owners of the structures attribute to them, the relation they have to their physical existence matters sometimes more than the government's efforts in preserving certain memories and identities over others. I will draw examples from the Art Deco buildings in South Mumbai, especially the movie theaters, and from the industrial cotton mills of Girangaon.

## 2. Buildings, identity, and memory

Heritage preservation as a practice is strongly linked to the “character” that built structures help to preserve. The Indian *Handbook of Conservation of Heritage Buildings*, published in 2013, states as a criterion for the conservation of landscapes and structures the fact that they should “provide character and distinctive identity to cities”. This confirms the assumption that buildings are often conserved, or not, based on whether they are considered to be a component of the city's identity. However, following the material culture assumption that there is an interaction between built forms and social phenomena (Gieryn, 2002), different buildings, with their different architectural elements and historical pasts, give different materialities to the city, and trigger different types of “memory” in the viewers. Let's look at the Art Deco buildings and at the industrial structures more closely as examples.

Mumbai's Art Deco heritage is one of the richest in the world, second only to Miami's. Designed by Indian as well as European architects during the 30s and 40s, it is comprised of residential, administrative, and commercial facilities, all located in South Mumbai. In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s the Art Deco style spoke a narrative of modernity, and its development in Mumbai is representative of the post-war growth of a local bourgeoisie, with aspirations for the city to be modern, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan. Art historian Michael Windover understands Art Deco as a style which conveys a universal artistic and architectural language of mobility, where shapes such as the streamline served as visual and physical representations of the new modern aes-

thetics and ways of life. In particular, he argues that Bombay Deco is making a statement of “cosmopolitanism”, which includes in its meaning the question of mobility as well as the “willingness to borrow from multiple sources”, while remaining tied to an “elite class association, even in more ‘democratic’ forums, such as movie theaters” (Windover, 2012: 174). This language is arguably very much embedded in Art Deco’s visual style, in the graphicness and uniqueness of its forms: its lines and shapes speak to us, like an alphabet, and say “modern”.

While Art Deco buildings convey ideas of a modern, bourgeois urbanity, the built industrial landscape of Mumbai speaks a very different language. Its structures, namely the mills and the residential *chawls*, bring back memories of an industrial past that powerful actors in Mumbai have been recently overcoming in their effort to make the city more global, cosmopolitan, and attractive to local and international investment (Chatterjee 2013, Nainan 2008). The mills and the *chawls* convey the imagery of a manufacturing-based society, that is being substituted in Mumbai by a “post-industrial” economic model, materially concretized in tall office towers, commercial centers, and gated communities. The industrial landscape, Chatterjee (2013) argues, was “considered to be the birth place of the working class and its culture in the city”: now that the image of the city is changing, the working class is being displaced towards the outskirts, while the city-center is being re-crafted through operations of demolition and reconstruction, aimed at making it speak a language of globalization, service-economy, and commerce.

The Art Deco buildings of Mumbai, with very few exceptions, are still present as of today in their original form, while the vast majority of the mills have been redeveloped throughout the 1990s and 2000s. If we stand by the material culture assumption that architectural forms do have a social and cultural meaning, we could intuitively say that the Art Deco buildings are surviving redevelopment because, contrarily to industrial structures, they speak a language – no matter how outdated in the 2010s – that fits into today’s most powerful idea of “cityness”: the one being propelled by public institutions and bourgeois actors.

However Mumbai's case is surprising: as we will see in the following section, the Art Deco structures do not enjoy much greater attention from the government in terms of conservation than the mills do. It can be argued, instead, that in Mumbai the government is not fully responsible for this discrimination, because in fact it does not actively engage in preservation practices in the city.

### 3. The State and preservation: a decentralized approach

The previous section maintains that different materialities in the built environment evoke different imageries of the city, and thus imply different potentials for preservation. In her paper "Mumbai's Quite Histories" Nakamura argues that the logic of heritage preservation "is by its very nature exclusionary; as a form of enclosure it valorizes some material pasts and futures over others" (2014: 272). Although this fits in with the above explored idea of a connection between materiality, identity, and memory, in some ways such a statement logically leads us to imagine the actor in charge of preservation practices to be unitary, and to set up and enforce regulations in a way that leads to the conservation of a certain type of memory over others, in an effort to give a consciously selected historical and material character to the city. If we imagine preservation as the practice of one single agent, we would by consequence imagine this agent to be the government, the one in charge of the regulatory system. In the case of Mumbai, though, is this true? Do the government's preservation efforts really account for the fate of material structures in the city?

India has a long and important tradition in heritage preservation: in 1861 the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) was established to "initiate legal provision to protect the historical structures all over India"<sup>1</sup>; the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) was

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1 "Handbook of Conservation of Heritage Buildings", 2013, published by the Directorate General, Central Public Works Department, p. 3.

founded in 1984 to promote heritage preservation through the Country at large. The INTACH developed a Listing of Heritage Buildings, based on a grading of buildings (Grade I, II, III) with different levels of conservation, mainly based along the lines of geographical and social importance and identity (“national” for Grade I, “regional” or “local” for Grade II, and finally related to the townscape, or to the lifestyle of a particular community, for Grade III).

Despite this important framework, the institutions in charge of enforcing preservation are not particularly powerful. In Mumbai, the provisions put forward by the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC, created in 1990) are often ignored by planning agencies, as it was the case with the publishing of the 2014-2034 Development Plan for Greater Mumbai<sup>2</sup>, which ignored over 70 per cent of the heritage structures in the city<sup>3</sup>, giving rise to a huge controversy amongst conservation architects and planners.

Additionally, it should be noted that the government does not propose itself (not even nominally) as a centralized and enforcing actor for preservation practices: the clause 8.2 of the *Conservation of Heritage Sites Including Heritage Buildings, Heritage Precincts and Natural Feature Areas* states that “it shall be the duty of the owners of heritage buildings and buildings in heritage precincts or in heritage streets to carry out regular repairs and maintenance of the buildings” (p. 130): the state thus decentralizes conservation practices, shifting the responsibility for the latter to the buildings’ owners. However, it does not provide the owners with any particular incentives to engage in these practices, which is another point that the MHCC reproached to the 2014-2034 Development Plan<sup>4</sup>. As a result, many listed heritage buildings are now endangered. The example of the residential buildings of Marine Drive is blatant: falling under the Rent Control Act of 1947, the tenants living

2 “Government ignored heritage panel’s advice for conservation incentives”, The Indian Express, April 2nd, 2015.

3 “Treat Heritage as an Asset, not Liability”, The Indian Express, April 23, 2015.

4 Ibid.

there pay rents that are frozen to 1940 levels, in an extremely expensive area. This creates a huge disincentive for the owners to re-modernize the structures, as doing so would involve very high expenditures with no returns.

#### 4. Use value, exchange value, and individual practices of preservation

While the vast majority of Mumbai's industrial fabric has undergone redevelopment, the Art Deco structures largely remain standing, but that the state is not a strong enough agent in the city's preservation practices to fully account for this discrimination. We will see in this section that political economic factors of market trends and land regulations are in some cases not exhaustive variables to explain the phenomenon: the focus will shift to individual owners and users of the buildings, who, as I am arguing, offer a better understanding of the different trajectories of built heritage structures in Mumbai.

In this section, specifically, elements of material culture will intermingle with political economic questions and mechanisms. I will use Marx's distinction between *use value* and *exchange value* as a conceptual starting point in order to understand the different relationships that link buildings to their owners and users, and the different meanings that buildings can have for individual actors. This will allow us to understand the preservation of buildings in Mumbai through a perspective that takes into account the attachment of the owners to their meanings and physical structures: the land regulatory frameworks and market trends that are typical of a political economic perspective can maybe explain the redevelopment of the mills, but do not suffice in the case of the Art Deco theatres. This is because the actors' relationships to the buildings are fundamentally, essentially different.

In the first chapter of *The Capital* Marx writes of use value as "an aspect of the commodity [which] coincides with the physical palpable existence of the commodity"; he goes on: "the utility of a thing makes

it a use value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited to the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity” (p. 17). On the other hand the concept of exchange value, which is concerned with the quantitative properties (essentially, money) of commodities, makes different commodities with the same exchange value indifferent between themselves. To put it – simplistically – in practical terms, if I consider a coat for its use value, trading it for a diamond would not make sense; but if I consider the coat’s exchange value, trading it for a diamond would be a very convenient deal.

Now leaving Marx aside, and his well-known critique of capitalism that follows, let’s try to apply this concept to our case. Use value is concerned with the palpability and materiality of an object, while exchange value takes into consideration the amount of profit that the object will be able to provide, either through further trade, or because it represents an asset for capital transformation. The owners and users of the buildings we are taking into consideration attribute a different type of value to the different structures, and this difference represents a way of understanding the preservation trajectories that they followed.

Let’s take the example of the Art Deco movie theatres, which are for the most part still family-run: the owners of these buildings, who are – as provided for by the “Conservation of Heritage Sites Including Heritage Buildings, Heritage Precincts and Natural Feature Areas” – the ones in charge of their preservation, seem to be enormously attached to the structures and to their physical materiality, despite adverse regulation, taxation, and fierce competition from multiplexes not allowing them to make profit.

In terms of regulations, the Maharashtra Cinema (Regulation) Rules of 1966 states in its clause 125 that “no cinema premises shall be used for any purpose other than the exhibition of cinematograph films (musical and dance performances, display of electronic and video transmitted images and conference facilities)”. This means that the owners, who are attached to the structures and for the most part reluctant to sell out to multiplexes, cannot truly diversify their business



activities, making it really hard for single-screen theaters to survive, as the adaptive re-use of the structures is not an option.

Additionally, the Bombay Rent Control Act of 1947, which provided for a rent-freeze to 1940-levels of privately owned structures and apartments, has kept the owners' rental possibilities very limited<sup>5</sup>. In terms of taxation, while the multiplexes have been treated with indulgence since their first appearance, the old single-screens find it basically impossible to make profit. The Entertainment tax provides for 45 per cent of the profit on each ticket in single-screens to be given to the State of Maharashtra, while the rest is split between the theatre and the producer/distributor.

To give a specific example, Nazir Hoosein, owner of the Liberty Cinema and son of the original owner Habib Hoosein, has maintained the theatre in its original Art Deco form, but is experiencing great difficulties in running the structure: while it takes 9 lakhs (about 14,000 USD) per year to run, high taxation on the movie tickets makes revenues extremely low (27 rupees per ticket – about 40c USD). The high costs of film purchases, together with an electricity bill of 400,000 rupees (about 6000 USD) per year for only three screenings a month, is making it extremely difficult for the theatre to keep the shows going, so Hoosein is renting it out for music and theatre events. He is also renting locales in one wing of the building for office use, but since the structure falls under the Bombay Rent Control Act of 1947, the charges cannot go higher than 1 rupee (about 1c USD) per square foot, in an area where land is extremely expensive<sup>6</sup>.

However, Hoosein has so far continued taking care of the structure as much as possible, and visibly appreciates its architectural and design qualities. He says: "Wood has been used extensively in the cinema, and consists of a blend of Canadian cedar and Burma teak. The carpeted foyer is another unique feature. The actual heavy-duty main-

5 In 2015 the State decided to exclude properties of over 500 square feet for residential, and of over 800 square feet for commercial purposes, from the Act.

6 "The math doesn't add up for Mumbai's Art Deco cinemas", Livemint, May 19th 2009.

tenance at the hall is done almost daily. The carpets and the woodwork go through daily cleaning”.<sup>7</sup>

The Liberty is not an exception: other theaters, such as the Regal, are following similar trajectories, their structures being saved and preserved by the perseverance and attachment of the owners. The owners see in these buildings something unique whose value would be lost if the land – although very expensive – were to be sold for multiplex redevelopment, as it happened to the Metro Theater. Additionally, these structures embody for them a tradition of movie-going and a collective past for the community of South Mumbai, representing a space of social proximity and gathering (Mabbott, Athique and Hill, 2007: 108-118). This type of value is a use value: though the buildings do not produce much profit (actually, they incur into losses), their value would not exist outside of their physical existence, and therefore transforming them into something else would not make sense.

A completely different case is that of the Girangaon Mills. First of all, factories as buildings are intrinsically different from movie theaters. Not only have their imagery – that of an industrial society – been (arguably wrongly) associated with filth, poverty, and danger. But as structures, they essentially represent tools for capital transformation: they are understood as the machines that generate value, not the value itself; they do not have a public, but rather they host the economic productivity of the city. The structures may be not so valuable for themselves, or for the qualitative use that was made of them, as it is the case for the movie theatres; instead, their owners saw their value in quantitative terms, in terms of exchange value, which made the physical structures fairly interchangeable with other, new ones that would generate more profit. Thus, in a framework where preservation practices are decentralized, a smaller potential for conservation.

In terms of regulations, while before 1991 the cotton textile mills were protected as the economic engine of the city, the new Develop-

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7 “Mumbai’s Art Deco heritage a nod to a history of style”, *The National*, March 29th, 2013.

ment Control Regulations of 1991, and in particular the clause 58, allowed for “sick mills” to be redeveloped. In case of demolition of the structure, the one-third rule applied: 33 per cent of the land had to go to the BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) for the creation of public spaces and amenities; 27 per cent was to be given to the MHADA (Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority) for public housing, and finally 40 per cent could be used by the owner for the development of commercial or residential buildings.

The one-third rule, with slightly different percentages, also applied to “lands of cotton textile mills for purpose of modernization” (but only 33 per cent to the owner), and to land of cotton mills that were being relocated outside the city-center (with only 30 per cent for private redevelopment). This made it more convenient for all mill owners (and 33 out of 48 mills were privately owned) to let the structures fall sick rather than to re-modernize them, especially after the textile industry had been de-licensed by Congress in 1991. Additionally, in 2001 the DCR 58 was amended, providing that the one-third rule only applied to the vacant land of the plot (that which was not occupied by the mill's structure).

This, of course, created incentives for the owners to sell the mill land for redevelopment: by the 90s, the value that the owners would get from the land as an asset to be transformed was far higher than the value that the textile production was able to give them. Without the owners' attachment to the materiality of the buildings, market factors and legislations remain the only solid variables for the understanding of redevelopment. However, an enquiry on the type of relationship that the owner has to the physicality of the structures is necessary, prior to excluding material culture factors from the equation. People who are attached to buildings and attribute to them what I defined in this chapter as a use value will go past economic rationality and complicate the scenario of conservation practices, as even a negative balance sheet will not be enough big an incentive to push them to sell.

## 5. Conclusions

This chapter represents an effort – though far from being exhaustive – to combine material culture studies with a political economic analysis to further the understanding of built heritage preservation in Mumbai. The case of Mumbai is interesting because the government, though equipped with a solid institutional and regulatory framework for conservation, actually does not play an active role in enforcing and carrying out preservation projects; additionally, it decentralizes the responsibility for preservation to the individual owners of the structures, without providing them with the necessary incentives. In this respect, the idea that the state's practices of discretionary conservation can fully explain buildings' trajectories is to be excluded.

When it comes to individual practices, it becomes useful to employ Marx's distinction between use and exchange value, in order to look at what type of meaning different buildings have for their owners and for those in charge of their preservation or redevelopment. While regulations, taxation, economic trends and incentives are very important factors accounting for land use practices in a city as dense as Mumbai, they are not always sufficient, and elements of interaction between the buildings and the owners should also be taken into account for a more comprehensive framework of understanding.

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