Domestic Modern: Redecorating Homes in Bombay in the 1930s

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On 11 June 1934, a large advertisement appeared in the weekly Beautiful Homes section of Bombay’s Times of India (Figure 1). Addressed “PERSONAL—to a lady,” the text offered lively advice to women eager to start redecorating their homes. The first step was to win over husbands who might not have noticed “that there has been as much change in furniture as in fashion” in recent years. To draw attention to change, the ad suggested the reader wear an old dress to make her husband “wonder how you could have seemed so lovely then in a dress that looks so old-fashioned now.” Once the lesson in the progress of fashion had been achieved, the ad advised both husband and wife to turn to the Beautiful Homes pages for ideas. “To-day you can read about the furniture you want and even go and see it in the dealers’ showrooms; and to-morrow you can tell him your plans for a beautiful home. Now is the time to refurnish; and now is the time to get your husband to say ‘Yes’ to your plans. They need not be expensive with so much to choose from.”

Although relatively few residents would have been able to take this advice to heart in Bombay, a city where, as of 1931, 75 percent of the population lived in single rooms for lack of affordable housing, the ad spoke to the new popular interest in western India in introducing modern styles into Indian homes. Bombay’s upper classes of the 1930s were bombarded with ideas and products intended to bring their homes up to date. English-language newspapers and popular journals launched regular sections devoted to home decorating advice, and designers used books and trade journals to publicize their latest ideas about modern dwellings. Major retailers in the city opened or expanded showrooms to show off new furniture designs, bathroom fixtures, and rug styles, and took to print to advertise their wares as offering the most modern look of the day (Figure 2). Surveying the attention given to home decorating ideas in 1937, Indian Institute of Architects (IIA) president P. P. Kapadia confidently declared, “There appears to be a growing public increasingly interested in the art and comfort of the home.”

Kapadia offered his comments in a speech opening the Ideal Home Exhibition, a ten-day event put on by the IIA displaying model rooms filled with the latest home furnishings, along with architectural plans for urban housing. Noting that the event was the first of its kind in India, Kapadia declared he was “both glad and proud that once again, as on many occasions in the past, the City of Bombay gives a lead to the rest of India.” In Bombay or elsewhere, he argued, there were “no two opinions” about the necessity for such an event, given that the home was “a sphere of life which touches every one of us vitally, a sphere in which we spend more than half of our lives.” Calling on everyone to pay closer attention to domestic space, he invited visitors to the exhibition to explore new products, understand new building practices, and gather new ideas for the home. Indeed, the goal of the 1937 exhibition was, he declared, “to bring within the ken of each one of us, in a pleasant and easily accessible form, the latest devices to make this vital environment of our lives more comfortable, more modern, more congenial and perhaps more artistic.” Although many, even among the middle classes, could not “immediately afford drastic reforms in the home,” he hoped that, regardless of income, all could take inspiration from the exhibition, drawing from it a vision of “the ideal home of the future.”
The bright vision of modernity for Indian homes that Kapadia and others saw at the Ideal Home Exhibition was, it should be noted, quite novel. Throughout the nineteenth century, British observers regularly complained that Indian homes failed to offer the material necessities expected in European domestic spaces. Accustomed to drawing rooms filled with upholstered sofas and chairs, occasional tables, sideboards, and more, Europeans found traditional Indian reception rooms, furnished with rugs on the floors and bolsters against the walls, barren and uninviting. More damning still, Europeans assumed Indian homes to be closed off to modern influences and mired in conservatism. As J. E. Padfield wrote in 1896, in India “it is the home that seems the last place to be affected by progress and enlightenment,” with superstitions “in the home life . . . as deeply rooted and as powerfully binding as ever.”

Even Indians who resisted British colonial hierarchies agreed that Indian homes were unlike homes in the modern West. Those who had adopted Western furnishings and embraced European definitions of progress defined Indian homes primarily in terms of lack—of furnishings, industrial commodities, and comfort alike. For example, a visit to the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 prompted the progressive maharaja of Baroda to recall “the interior of a typical Indian home and as I contrasted it with the truly surprising inventions around me, all devoted to that one object—refinement—our much boasted simplicity seemed bare and meagre beyond description.” For the maharaja, the contrast was one of “empty rooms,—without even a chair or a table” compared to “the luxury, the conveniences, which are the necessities of a European cottage.” Others viewed the distance of Indian homes from Western norms in a more positive light. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, late nineteenth-century Indian nationalists asserted a fundamental opposition between the home and the world, between private and public. Whereas modern European civilization dominated the public world of courts, schools, offices, and streets, nationalists declared home to be the stronghold of Indian culture, celebrated as the site of tradition and spirituality, where “the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate.”

Given that historical context, the idea that in 1930s Bombay wealthy Indian homes epitomized modern styles marked a sharp break with the past. For many, the novelty of the new look in home furnishings seems to have been part of their appeal. Writing about modern buildings erected in 1930s Bombay, architectural historian Mustansir Dalvi argues that the art deco style offered “the image of the modern, ocean voyaging/jet-setting, international Indian, emerged from the shackles of backwardness and ignorance, seeking his

Figure 1 Advertisement (Times of India, 11 June 1934, 13).

Figure 2 Advertisement (Times of India, 10 Sept. 1934, 12).
place in the New World as an equal.” Much as Bombay’s female Anglo-Indian film stars of the same era embraced the “Modern Girl” look, new ideas about domestic spaces and decor offered Indians a creative appropriation of global modernity: cosmopolitan, metropolitan, thoroughly modern, and yet still Indian. Through that appropriation, designers and consumers helped to domesticate modernism in Bombay—bringing the modern into domestic space and making it a local style. With my study of home furnishings in 1930s Bombay, I hope to help forge what Partha Mitter has called “a more heterogeneous definition of global modernism” by which “multiple local possibilities illuminate the global processes of modernity.”

If exploring the history of modern furnishings in Bombay helps to forge alternative stories of the global modern, focusing on avowedly cosmopolitan styles in an increasingly anticolonial era also helps to underline the complexity of cultural politics in 1930s India. Like other cities in the subcontinent, Bombay was deeply engaged in struggles over British colonial rule. Bombayites produced and sold salt as part of Mohandas Gandhi’s satyagraha, marched and rallied in the hundreds of thousands to protest the arrest of key nationalist leaders. For some, the goal of these individual activities was to end British power in both political and cultural realms. As the Bombay Congress Bulletin put it in January 1931: “India is in a state of War with Great Britain. . . . Let us not forget that the War is waged against the principle of exploitation that dominates modern civilization.” Not everyone joined this battle against “modern civilization,” however. Among those who refused to condemn the modern were supporters of empire as well as activists working to dismantle imperial rule. Most famously, declaring that the past posed an “over-powering, and sometimes suffocating” burden, the future first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, argued that building a new nation meant embracing modern developments, albeit on Indian terms. It was among such locally rooted but outwardly oriented groups that new global modern furnishing styles became popular in 1930s Bombay. The emergence of this style thus reveals the complexities of local engagements with the new, as Bombayites indulged in new consumer opportunities against the backdrop of profound attempts to reimagine the politics of empire and nation.

In exploring the creation of a domestic Indian modernism, I follow the work of architectural historian Jordan Sand and argue for the importance of new styles in the putatively private space of the home, styles that rendered the home not only a crucial site in which to experience and inhabit the modern but also a space increasingly open to new influences. Following Sand, I also explore how modern styles were interpreted and created in the Indian context, resulting in an experience of the modern that fit local interests and needs. The domestication of modern-in-the-home and modern-as-Indian, I argue, went hand in hand: modernism took root in Bombay within the home, offering broader and more intimate opportunities for change than were available through architectural innovation alone.

This was a period when significant innovation occurred in Indian built space. In the years following the Great Depression, Bombay saw an explosion of new construction that combined the visually arresting motifs and lines of what came to be known as the Bombay deco style and the structural possibilities of cement. Residential buildings in the new style arose throughout the city: apartment buildings in the Bombay Reclamation scheme near the business district, luxurious flats and bungalows overlooking the sea on Malabar Hill, and ownership flats for the middle classes in emerging suburbs to the north. Whether in new buildings or old, furnishings helped to define the modern style. In new construction, the sleek lines of new armchairs or dressing tables complemented modernist window details or floor patterning. In the older buildings where most of the city’s residents lived in rental units, access to a modern look came through furnishings, not built space. Whatever the building, introducing a single modern wardrobe, table, or carpet offered a way to explore new styles without the expense or commitment of structural changes.

There is a growing global literature on how domestic spaces, ideas about home decor, and power over home decorating reveal national, class, and gendered identities, with particular styles of consumer goods helping to define new kinds of families and negotiate changing relationships to tradition or the modern. This literature reveals the rich dividends of studying the domestic in the context of spatial structures, consumption strategies, and social relationships. The scholarship shaping our understanding of ideas and contents of the home in South Asia, however, has tended to focus on space, consumption, or social relationships in isolation. In terms of spatial analysis, many scholars have focused on “traditional” expressions of domestic space, attempting to document disappearing architectural styles and understand religious ideas guiding spatial practices. More relevant to this study, historians in the past ten years have taken nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in Indian domestic architecture seriously. They have analyzed how changing ideas about space led to new building practices, the reinvention of traditional building styles, and efforts to develop styles of domestic architecture appropriate for an emerging, modern nation. While important, this more recent work has privileged architectural space over its material contents. The exception has been work on British homes in South Asia, in which historians have analyzed how imported goods, European furnishing styles, and built space together worked to shore up British identities.
Drawing on work on British homes in the subcontinent, in this article I focus on the domestic modern as a way to explore new kinds of Indian identities in 1930s Bombay. By arguing that home furnishings were central to the emerging definition of modern styles in the 1930s, I want to disrupt current understandings of both modernism and home in Bombay. Whereas the story of modern styles in Bombay is usually told through streetscapes and public spaces, by focusing on furnishings, soft goods, and interior decor I not only explore a different site for modernism but also bring women into a story usually dominated by men—male architects, engineers, town planners, and movie theater owners. As the ad quoted at the opening of this essay suggests, many assumed that women rather than men were bringing new styles into the home; in keeping with that assumption, interior decorating writers regularly pitched ideas to women readers. In terms of home, new modern fashions for domestic interiors bring into question a strict separation between public and private spaces, home and the world, an ideological distinction explored by scholars of domesticity in India.21 As the new public interest in home decor in 1930s Bombay suggests, homes were understood as set apart from the world but simultaneously open to it—through new trends and fashions; the services of designers, architects, and furniture fitters; and the real or imagined gaze of outsiders.

Imagining the Modern Home

Bombay in the 1930s was a sprawling, growing, polyglot city, the second largest in the British Empire after London itself. As one of the most important ports in the empire, it drew trade and traders from across the Indian Ocean. At the same time, as an important educational, political, and industrial center, the city attracted ever-expanding numbers of migrants from across South Asia. For many Bombayites the city's diverse population was a source of pride. One 1931 guidebook boasted that “Bombay is generally acknowledged to come after Constantinople as the second most cosmopolitan city in the world.”22 Aside from population diversity, Bombay as “the gateway of India” was also cosmopolitan in terms of its openness to ideas and trends from outside. In the arts, for instance, Bombay helped launch first the Parsi theater and then the Indian film industry. Similarly, Bombay provided particularly fertile ground for early Indian labor organizing, with some 406 industrial strikes in the city from 1920 through 1924 alone.23 Bombay's cosmopolitanism was also visible in its social leadership; although still colonial subjects, some wealthy Indians with fortunes built through industry, trade, and control of land shared economic and social power with the British in Bombay in ways that were impossible elsewhere in the subcontinent. Writing about his time in the city in the 1930s, British author Dennis Kincaid argued that, even during the rising nationalist agitation under the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, “the cordiality between English and Indian in Bombay survived the recurring political tumults.”24

In this diverse, rapidly changing city, new ideas of the modern home took root. Those ideas did not appear fully formed in Bombay's upper-class flats and bungalows. Rather, they were actively nurtured and promoted by a range of voices—all of which were closely tied to new consumer markets and building developments in post-Depression Bombay. The Depression had brought widespread unemployment to Bombay, particularly among textile workers hit by a wave of mill closures (one-quarter of Bombay's mills had closed by October 1930), but also among those employed in banking, insurance, and the trade in raw and manufactured cotton.25 At the same time, the Depression brought new opportunities to the city. For industrial producers, the declining profitability of agriculture pushed capital out of the countryside into urban areas; the result was new investment in local industrial enterprises, generally for Indian consumption.26 For consumers, falling agricultural prices freed up money in household budgets for the purchase of industrial goods—both new Indian products and imported items, the prices of which were kept low by a high rupee-sterling exchange rate.27 For merchants, the Depression forced foreign firms out of many local markets, allowing Indians to step forward to control more of the movement of goods to Indian consumers.28 For builders, a dramatic fall in the costs of construction materials, the emergence of new building styles, and growing confidence among Indian architects led to a building boom, including the start of the much-anticipated Backbay Reclamation scheme and the city's relentless expansion northward into the suburbs.29

Emerging professions were poised to help shape the new construction. Increasingly involved in the building of housing at the municipal level, among cooperative housing societies, and for private clients, engineers offered detailed plans for everything from private cottages to multifamily apartment buildings, working-class tenements, and luxurious mansions. These visions of improved homes appeared in book form, such as Pune-based engineer R. S. Deshpande's frequently reprinted works Residential Buildings Suited to India (1931), Cheap and Healthy Homes for the Middle Classes of India (1935), and Modern Ideal Homes for India (1939).30 They also filled the pages of the Indian Concrete Journal, which was started in 1927 to promote and support the use of concrete in construction. Alongside engineers, architects staked their own claim to authority over housing, explaining the principles of domestic architecture and the importance of engaging architects to prepare designs through lectures given at the monthly meetings of the new Indian Institute of Architects (established in 1929); speeches to local groups like the Rotary...
Club, the Social Service League, the Bombay Presidency Adult Education Association, and the Nagpada Neighbourhood House; and articles published in the *Journal of the Indian Institute of Architects* (JIIA; established in 1934).31

Together with new ideas for architectural space came new dynamism for markets for home furnishings in Bombay as employment picked up after 1933. In this heady time, journals and newspapers offered regular sources of advice on how to decorate a modern home. Aiming at a wealthy, cosmopolitan Indian and European audience in a breezy, photo-filled magazine format, the Bombay-based *Illustrated Weekly of India* started a section titled A Page for the Home in October 1934, offering articles on how to modernize Indian bungalows, new colors for furnishing schemes, and how to render modern flats comfortable with built-in furniture and attractive decorative touches.32 Even more extensive coverage of home decorating was offered in the *Illustrated Weekly*’s sister publication, the *Times of India*. Oriented toward the European and English-educated native population of Bombay, the *Times* launched its own Beautiful Homes feature in March 1934, stating that it was “designed to afford practical aid to our readers in the achievement of beauty, character, comfort, and efficiency in their houses.”33 Emphasizing how to make the most of current furnishings or spaces, articles offered advice on how to arrange furniture, choose colors, modernize bathrooms, and refresh tired rooms. At the same time, regular features extolled the benefits of new electrical gadgets, cleaning supplies, furnishing fabrics, and pieces of furniture, advocating both the latest styles and the most modern technologies.

In architectural, engineering, and popular publications, articles appeared surrounded by advertisements (Figure 3). In the ads, companies promised readers transformation of the home on every level, if only they bought the correct goods from the correct sources. “Restful comfort” was offered by Kamdar Karyalaya Furniture’s new designs for couches.34 Efficiency and convenience were made possible throughout the house with the purchase of electric toasters, kettles, irons, and more.35 “Beauty and distinction” came to bathrooms with new tubs, sinks, and other bathroom fittings.36 Health was assured via lavatory deodorizers that promised “pure air where cleanliness is most essential,” aluminum cooking utensils that were “easier to keep bright and clean,” gas cookers that were “smoke free and soot free,” and cleaners that removed “germs as well as grime!”37 Underlying all these qualities was the promise of modernity: new goods would render homes up to date, current with the latest styles and trends, and engaged with the latest technologies. In many ads, modern appeared as the default term of approval. Thus, dressing tables exhibited “beauty in the modern manner,” shops offered “modern alcar- pets for modern homes,” particular paints were “the modern distinctive treatment for walls,” living room sets were “mod- ern to the minute,” and “modern chandeliers” were declared to be “the vogue.”38 Crucially, however, none of these goods could achieve modernity independently; the key was their combination, within the home, into a comprehensive embrace of the new, the novel, the stylish. As E. F. Messerschmidt & Company, Interior Decorators, advised, “In a modern scheme of decoration, lights, fabrics, carpets, ornaments, furniture, wall treatments, floors and ceilings must all harmonise.”39

Supplementing the design ideas offered in print were opportunities to see new architectural and decor ideas in material form. New buildings dotted the city—most particularly on Malabar Hill and in the expanding northern suburbs—and were featured prominently in photographs appearing in the *Indian Concrete Journal* and the *JIIA*, as well as in later editions of plan books by Deshpande and others (Figure 4). At the same time, the 1930s was the era of the showroom, with stores opening new retail display spaces or expanding and modernizing existing spaces with the inclusion of...
model rooms. Evans Fraser was one of the largest department stores in the city, occupying some 66,000 square feet over four floors and offering everything from cooking utensils to refrigerators, linens, games, clothing, and furniture. Bombay's Army and Navy Stores carried a complete line of furniture and furnishing fabrics, promising everything needed for home decoration (Figure 5). Operating on more nationalist terms and offering a broad range of goods, the Bombay Swadeshi Cooperative Stores moved in 1938 to expanded quarters on what became Sir Pherozeshah Mehta Road, where sales grew. More specialized stores offered extensive showrooms as well. Throughout the later 1930s Pohoomull Brothers offered Indian and Persian carpets along with jewelry, silks, and furnishing fabrics at their shop at Apollo Bunder, while provisioners Shah and Company added a carpet showroom to their Hornby Road premises in 1934. A range of local furniture companies emerged—McKenzie's, Apollo, Sheraton's, Kandar, Dewjee Canjee—offering showrooms filled with the latest, most modern styles. The Bombay Electric Supply and Tramways Company (BEST) operated a showroom at Electric House on Colaba Causeway featuring the many appliances that could utilize electricity in the home; similarly, the Bombay Gas Company used its showrooms on Hornby Road to demonstrate the advantages of gas cookers, refrigerators, and water heaters. One prominent supplier of sanitary fittings, the firm Richardson and Cruddas, went so far as to install four model bathrooms in various styles and color schemes in its showrooms in Byculla. Celebrating the new showrooms, an article in the Times of India warned, “Buying a bathroom is in a way like buying a hat. It is difficult to imagine what it will look like until the complete ensemble is seen.” The model bathrooms promised a solution to that problem, in that “prospective customers may see exactly how the wares they buy will look in their bathrooms” (Figure 6).

An even more dramatic opportunity for the public to see both architectural and home furnishing ideas in material form came with two exhibitions in November 1937 at Bombay’s Town Hall. Early in the month, the IIA’s Ideal Home Exhibition featured a series of furnished rooms “designed to show how the best of the most modern equipments [sic] can give a genuine comfort which human beings are entitled to enjoy” (Figure 7). Each room—lobby, drawing room, dining room, kitchen, bathroom, bedrooms, nursery, office, home library, and more—was fitted out by local firms, including everything from floor treatments to furniture, wall hangings, lighting, and window decor. Public response was enthusiastic. Thanks to extensive coverage in the press—including, on opening day, nine full pages in the Times of India—some one hundred thousand people visited the exhibition over its ten-day span. Those visitors had another chance to see home ideas on display later that same month at the Art in Home Exhibition put on by the Gujarati Stree Sahakari Mandal (a women’s association). Offering full-size model tenements for the working classes as well as “a typical Indian drawing-room” decorated with Indian furnishings, the exhibition aimed “to make people more conscious of the possibilities of Indian materials and workmanship for the improvement of their living conditions and the beautifying of their homes.” The exhibition also featured an architectural competition organized by prominent members of the IIA, which brought together “models and drawings of one and two-roomed tenements and country cottages” as well as “a good collection of drawings of smaller domestic architecture, both ancient and modern.”

A fundamental unanimity existed across architectural and home decorating articles, advertisements, showrooms, and exhibitions. All shared a common commitment to modern styles then available to consumers in Bombay, styles that, as Gyan Prakash has noted regarding art deco,
“projected capitalist modernity in the image of an elitist, fashionable lifestyle.” The unity of the vision was also built via a densely interwoven network of cross-referencing and mutual promotion. Articles extolled advertised goods and services, as when a short piece in the 4 June 1934 *Times of India*’s Beautiful Homes section discussed a new kind of electrical fan while that same fan appeared on a nearby page in an ad for AEG India Electric. Similarly, a March 1934 article about the latest furnishing trends was illustrated with photographs of rooms designed by the local decorating firm John Roberts. The same firms that advertised in the *Times* were responsible for the rooms of the Ideal Home Exhibition, prompting an editorial in the *Bombay Chronicle* to ask, “What . . . could distinguish specifically the present exhibition from the window display and shop interiors, monotonously familiar to the average citizen of ‘modern’ furniture makers, dealers in building equipment and the ‘latest devices’?”

Figure 5 Advertisement (Journal of the Indian Institute of Architects 3, no. 2 [Oct. 1936], back cover; courtesy of The Indian Institute of Architects, Publication Board).

Figure 6 Advertisement (Times of India, 28 Jan. 1935, 12).

Figure 7 Model bedroom displayed at Bombay’s Ideal Home Exhibition, November 1937, with furniture supplied by the Alwyn Steel Equipment Company (Times of India, 13 Nov. 1937, 18).
Defining the Modern Home: Architectural Ideals and Building Practices

If major tastemakers worked together to promote new domestic ideals, they also agreed on the core values that should guide domestic space. In books of plans for houses and flats and articles in the *JILA* and elsewhere, architects and engineers proclaimed the modern home to be sanitary, efficient, aesthetically pleasing, and comfortable. These attributes, they argued, set the ideal home of the present apart from both older forms of architecture and the inferior specimens being constructed by untrained or unskilled builders. Through these attributes rather than through more abstract concerns with theories of space, design professionals sought to define what modernism meant in an Indian context.

In the eyes of many writers, improved hygiene and sanitation were primary among the benefits of the new modern style. The onset of bubonic plague in Bombay in 1896 had sparked a sense of crisis about the insanitary nature of residential areas, prompting state and private interventions to clear slums, improve conditions within structures, and build improved housing for the poor. R. S. Deshpande argued that individual houses could destroy health, noting that “Malaria, Typhoid, Anaemia, Tuberculosis, Neuralgic diseases, Cholera, Plague, etc., which take annually such a heavy toll of human life, owe there [sic] origin entirely to deficient light and ventilation, to damp, and to generally insanitary conditions in and around habitations.”

Responding to (and, at the same time, fanning) those health fears, architectural plan books from the 1910s through the 1930s devoted an enormous amount of attention to drainage, ventilation, and the disposal of waste: how to connect to sewer systems, how to get enough fresh air into rooms, how to build latrines, and how to deal with garbage. At the same time, these books assumed a particular space for new construction: the emerging suburbs. These books had little to offer those living in densely built-up areas, with only a very few plans indicating the possibility of contiguous construction. Many of the buildings literally could not have been built with shared exterior walls, due to the angles and outcroppings of their exteriors (Figures 8 and 9). Even those that did have

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**Figure 8** Plan for a small cottage (R. S. Deshpande, *Modern Ideal Homes for India* [Poona: Aryabhushan Press, 1939], 137).

**Figure 9** Plan for a luxurious mansion (R. S. Deshpande, *Modern Ideal Homes for India* [Poona: Aryabhushan Press, 1939], 263).
straight sides featured windows along all external walls, indicating they were intended to be set back from both the road and neighboring buildings in open plots on their own. In the era of the medicalization of the Indian middle-class family, when preserving health “became one of the family’s most demanding objectives,” the modern homes featured in plan books offered the opportunity to improve health on two levels.  

First, by moving to the suburbs, the middle classes could secure more space while simultaneously escaping the dirt, pollution, and disease of densely packed urban areas. Second, by building the right kind of house—marked by careful attention to basic laws of light, ventilation, and drainage—owners could, as William Glover has demonstrated, express their commitment to modern visions of health and sanitation.

If one principle guiding architectural plans was sanitation, another was functional efficiency. At an IIA meeting in October 1934, Claude Batley, professor and head of the School of Architecture at the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (JJ) School of Art in Bombay—India’s first architectural school—argued that “this new Architecture is, in one sense, the nudist movement in our profession” in that it removed the “unnecessary trap-pings,” the “fancy dress” of excessive and misapplied ornament from buildings in order to reveal underlying, true forms and functionality. For Batley this was not a mere matter of taste or fashion; rather, new forms of architecture were dictated by the very conditions of urban modernity. For, in the era of “the gramophone, the cinema, broadcasting and the popular picture paper, cheap transportation, ... the ‘stream-lined’ motor and the aeroplane ... spreading themselves through every sphere of life,” the architect could no longer “comfortably stagnate in the still back-waters of the day-before-yesterday” but must “take his place in the vanguard of progress, serving his own day and generation in its own spirit.” With this commitment to progress in mind, Batley called on architects “to realize that ‘architecture is but the creation of perfect, and therefore also beautiful efficiency’ and that, as Corbusier says, ‘A house is a machine for living in.’ Its very efficiency will give it the beauty that comes of truth.”

Functional efficiency meant not just attention to climate and conditions but also a close focus on the layout of rooms and services within often-crammed spaces. In this area, male writers suggested involving women in conversations about house plans. Deshpande, for instance, advised, “If the house, which is going to be built, is calculated to give happiness to the family, one must take the counsel of the partner of his life’s happiness in respect of its planning.” Arguing that “it is a mistake to suppose that a woman cannot understand these things,” he noted that “ladies are very sensitive to appreciate the conveniences and especially to feel the inconveniences of a living house.” In encouraging men to consult their wives, Deshpande assumed an exclusively male readership. He was not alone in this assumption: virtually all Indian pattern book and broader architectural writing of the period was addressed to men, deploying the language of engineering, sanitation, durability, and capital return to render domestic concerns into suitably technical registers. Regarding the use of space, for instance—an area where women might have particular insight—Deshpande defined the core issues to be efficiency and maximum utilization. As he put it, “An efficient home must have not only ‘a place for every thing’ but also ‘everything in its own place.’” Pattern book plans never left the use of space to chance or habit. In Deshpande’s books, as well as in the Gujarati book Grībādhan (House planning) of his contemporary V. C. Mehta, this meant first and foremost that floor plans now followed the modern Euro-American model of assigning particular functions to specific rooms. As William Glover has noted, earlier Indian plans left spaces blank; now every room was carefully labeled as bedroom, dining room, kitchen, and so on (see Figure 8). The rooms, furthermore, were aligned with one another for maximum convenience and comfort; the kitchen, for example, was close to the dining room for ease of serving, but not so close to the drawing room that food smells and smoke could disturb guests.

Proper furnishings ensured the proper use of each room. As a 1934 ad depicting a bedroom suggested, specialized furniture made it difficult to disrupt the assigned use of rooms (Figure 10). This bedroom could not easily be converted to an eating space, thanks to the immovable bed, or used as a study, due to the low height of the dressing table. Making the connection between space and use even more inevitable, Deshpande advised designing rooms around the furniture that would go into them. Thus, for a bedroom, the door should open in such a way as to shield the bed, windows should be placed so as to prevent glare in the eyes of someone lying in bed, and the room should be large enough that the various pieces of furniture do not get in the way of either the door or the windows. Such instructions assumed, of course, that a physical bed would be permanently present in a fixed position in a separate room devoted only to sleeping. Deshpande’s ideals did not accommodate the traditional Indian practice by which mattresses might be brought out only in the evenings, with rooms used for different purposes during the day.

At the 1937 Ideal Home Exhibition held in Bombay’s Town Hall, furnishings defined the different spaces on display. In plans that appeared in the Times of India on the opening day of the exhibition, a series of more than twenty different rooms were carefully labeled as familiar elements of homes: bedroom, bathroom, dining room, drawing room, billiard room, nursery, and office (Figure 11). More unusual spaces appeared on the plan also—a petrol station, a film studio, a bar, an operating theater, and a cloak room—suggesting that the purview of the exhibition was not confined to domestic space but stretched to include a broad complement...
of architecturally designed interiors. Although the actual exhibition diverged somewhat from the plan, photographic evidence indicates that the exhibition conformed to the plan in at least one key way: with the rooms’ fairly similar floor plan allocations, the differences between an office and a bedroom or a drawing room lay solely in the furnishings included (see Figure 7).

Provided by local firms, the furniture, wall fixtures, floor treatments, and accessories in the rooms at the Ideal Home Exhibition came together to prove that the sphere of the architect extended to every element of the home, an idea that architects of the period were eager to promote. In a 1941 article, architect H. J. Billimoria argued that since architecture is but the art and science of building beautifully and well for human needs, decoration, as a means of infusing beauty into building, is in its truest sense interwoven with architecture. . . . Principles of composition are as applicable to furnishing as to the architectural setting itself for the purpose of infusing beauty into the surroundings we live in. Furnishing but helps towards the attainment of this aim and is therefore inclusive and not a mere thing apart.66

At least some local retailers supported the principle of a broad scope of architectural expertise. One 1936 ad for the Army and Navy Stores of Bombay declared: “Facades were not enough. The Architect’s plan now embraces the Copenhagen China figure on the bookcase and the colour of the electric lamp flex—which is as it should be” (see Figure 5).67

As the number of commodities on display at the Ideal Home Exhibition suggests, another key principle of the modern home was that it offered room for consumer accumulation. As noted above, in his speech opening the exhibition, IIA president Kapadia argued that one of the goals of the event was to introduce all “the latest devices” that could make the home more comfortable and modern.68 Deshpande, for his part, was very concerned about building houses that could accommodate a plethora of goods, calling for particular attention to the storage of not just traditional items such as clothing, foodstuffs, and kitchen utensils but also more novel goods, including sports equipment for tennis or badminton, fishing tackle, golf clubs, hockey sticks, vacuum cleaners, china, glassware, bicycles, baby carriages, tents, sewing machines, luggage, and travel equipment. Warning his readers not to be surprised by how much space was needed for storage, he admitted that “if we sit down to make an inventory of the things we have actually stored in our house, we shall be surprised to see how many and how odd they are—things which we never dreamt we ever possessed!”69

Defining the Modern Home: Style, Principles, and Products

For all the confident claims of architects and engineers to authority over the physical space of the home and the types and distribution of its contents, the actual influence of pattern book authors and professional architects was limited. As noted above, pattern books of the era generally featured plans suitable only for the suburbs, not the urban core. The purview of architects was even narrower. In a 1943 editorial, the Journal of the Indian Institute of Architects noted that, with the IIA having fewer than three hundred architect members across the entirety of British India, most recent construction had never involved an architect.70 In 1939, summing up the overall state of housing in the country, a JIIA editorial declared that, out of the entire population of India, “hardly 5 per cent are, at present, adequately housed”—a fact that perhaps justified both the journal’s existence as a source for new ideas on housing and the employment of the institute’s member architects to supervise housing development.71

Supplementing architectural professionals and publications in defining new ideas about the modern home were advertisements and advice literature that appeared in newspapers and journals like the Times of India and the Illustrated Weekly of India. These popular sources focused on the use, decoration, and distribution of commodities to transform home life, not the design of architectural space, which
most decorators admitted lay outside their control. At the same time, these sources addressed a female audience, assuming that, while men might control decisions about construction, women were likely to guide decisions about decor. Like architects and pattern book authors, those aiming to shape consumption had a sense of the core values that should guide the home’s furnishing and decoration. To start with, a truly modern home demanded style: furniture, lamps, rugs, and so on, all designed according to the fashions of the day. But it also demanded the appropriate deployment of those items according to a broad set of principles relating to efficiency, utility, and more. Balancing these competing demands of style and utility, fashion and efficiency, was never easy, but tastemakers argued that women could do it—with the right products and the right guidance.

One 1936 *Times of India* article identified key components of the new, modern style. Echoing Batley’s definition of modern architecture, the unnamed author declared: “Modern furniture is straightforward in design, sound in construction and serviceable for every day use,” offering streamlined or straight-lined contours without applied decoration or superfluous ornament. . . . Simplicity of outline, fitness for purpose and a preference for woods of light colour are the principal points of difference between prewar furniture and that of the present day.”

In ads from this period, clean lines, swooping curves, and simple shapes replaced the ornate, carved forms of Victorian furnishings. But style extended beyond items of furniture to the entire ensemble of a room, with color crucially tying everything together (see Figure 10). Although black-and-white images from the period depict a world of grays, decorators advocated adding color everywhere: painting walls, hanging curtains, installing colored porcelain bathtubs and bathroom fixtures, adding tiled or colored concrete floors, and sprinkling cushions liberally over furniture. To prevent the color from overwhelming rooms, the modern style demanded a corresponding commitment to brightness and reflectivity: mirrors to bring daylight into rooms otherwise protected from the tropical sun, electric lights to illuminate dark corners, washable wall paints to banish grime, well-shined brass-ware and metal detailing to keep the effect light.

In addition to style, decorating writers of the period agreed with architects in arguing that the modern home needed to operate according to core organizing principles of efficiency, utility, openness, comfortable health, and economy. A 1935 *Times of India* article summed up these principles for the modern woman, noting:

> Though the up-to-date woman is content with a smaller house than her grandmother had, she demands more actual space in it. Being a creature of movement, of sudden hospitalities and of nerve-wearing activities, she must have soothing spaciousness at home. She must have freedom of movement, air and light, but devoid of pomposity and affectation.

To achieve that effect of spaciousness, air, and light, designers advocated clearing out space. As one article advised, decorating “has long ceased to be a question of ‘what to put in,’ and
furnishing a modern room has become infinitely more a problem of 'what to leave out.' Anything that did not serve a specific purpose had to go; so too did anything offering only sentimental meaning but no intrinsic beauty—since such an object would be "merely boring" to anyone who did not know its history. With inessential items removed, the next step was to use every inch of space as efficiently as possible. This meant built-in cupboards, closets, seats, and shelves, which took up little floor space while allowing useful items to be tucked out of sight. It also meant making individual furniture pieces serve multiple purposes: a chair with bookshelves built into the arms, a radio that doubled as a cocktail cabinet, a couch with a built-in radio (Figure 12).

For all the designers' advice to eliminate items, the modern home they envisioned remained dependent on new and expanded commodity consumption. Writing in 1935, one author noted that even comfortable flats in earlier periods did not have their own bathrooms; now it was not only the norm to have modern bathrooms, but also "every presentable bathroom has an enameled stool with a cork seat." The answer was racially ambiguous but firm with regard to cosmopolitanism, class, and individuality. Whether Indian or European, the inhabitants of the modern home were assumed to be open to global influences; comfortable moving around the city in search of new ideas; upper-middle class, of comfortable but not extravagant income; and, for women in particular, able to use decor to define a modern sense of self.

Defining Residents for the Modern Home

In the advice given on decorating, the modern home was supposed to be stylish and open, filled with sleek furniture, yet efficient in its use of space. That advice both reveals the tenets of home design and presumes a set of inhabitants for the ideal home. Who were these “modern men and women” of the 1937 article, whose rooms reflected a genuine understanding of “the demands of modern life—all rush and hurry without, demanding peace, comfort and efficiency within”?

The average bedroom is now than even ten years ago.” By the 1930s, what would have been novelties or extravagances in earlier decades were declared to be essential for modern living: portable fans, gas stoves, porcelain bathtubs, built-in drain boards in kitchens. In 1936 the Times of India even went so far as to argue that "the refrigerator, once a luxury, has become a necessity." Even furnishings from earlier eras were amenable to modern transformation—washable paints could freshen up furniture, metal accent details could change the look of cupboards, and new fabric covers could transform old iron cots.

Taken together, correct styles and principles created a comfortably modern home, one in keeping with the tenor of the age. As a 1937 Times of India article put it, an ideal home should contain “nothing stark or aggressive, but pieces designed for modern men and women,” where “the wireless set and the gramophone cabinet do not need either dissimulation or apology” but are a natural part of the overall scheme. In this ideal home, “there is a genuine understanding, at last, between . . . the decoration of these light but not colourless rooms, and the demands of modern life—all rush and hurry without, demanding peace, comfort and efficiency within.”

Such a look could not be achieved easily. It demanded that consumers pay close attention not just to what was available in local markets but also to the entirety of their own domestic spaces. It was no longer enough to refurbish dining and drawing rooms while bathrooms remained inconvenient or kitchens dingy; now decorators declared every room in the house worthy of design attention. Thus, a 1934 article in the Times of India's Beautiful Homes section declared “our neglected kitchens” to be “Cinderellas of the home,” ignored by Indian and English women alike, and called for a thorough remaking with tiled walls, painted woodwork, built-in cupboards, and modern stoves.
Whereas household manuals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had addressed separate racial audiences, the advice flowing in 1930s Bombay imagined the possibility of styles and products being shared across communities of a certain class. The modern look appeared universal, expressed equally in the homes of Hollywood stars and in the Juhu mansions of wealthy Parsis, and appealing equally to European and Indian couples striving for comfort in Bombay’s cramped flats. Both the Times of India and the Illustrated Weekly of India revealed a core European orientation in articles about memsahibs pining for “Home,” struggling to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of Indian cooks, or trying to set up house in India for the first time. And yet neither pitched home furnishing advice only to Europeans. The Illustrated Weekly, for instance, regularly ran items that would be “interesting and useful especially to our Indian women readers,” including a series on kolam patterns intended for “decorating Indian houses” and advice on changing sari fashions; the publication also held a photo contest in June 1936 titled “Indian Decoration for Indian Homes.” In advertisements, the quintessentially Modern Girls posed at pianos, in modern bathrooms, or next to refrigerators might have worn sleek evening gowns, but their black bobbed hair suggested racial ambiguity, allowing Europeans or light-skinned Indians to imagine themselves represented (Figures 13 and 14).

Although blond Modern Girls were ubiquitous in ads for cosmetics and foodstuffs, they only rarely appeared in furnishing ads—most often in association with bed linens. Modern Girls in saris, on the other hand, appeared fairly regularly, evoking distinctive signs of Indian womanhood (Figures 15 and 16). More rarely, some ads addressed particularly Indian concerns in their text, including one from March 1935 declaring Kamdar Karyalaya Furniture to be “the ideal dowry gift: What dowry can be more gratefully accepted than fine furniture?”

If racial boundaries were somewhat fluid, community and class assumptions were more rigidly expressed. Almost all the Indian women depicted in furnishing ads wore their saris in the Parsi style, linking modern styles to that community in particular. All ads depicting Indians, without exception, featured exceptionally light-skinned subjects; this narrowed down the presumed audience another way. On yet a more basic level, decorating advice assumed a certain amount of disposable income available for purchasing new furnishings, repainting rooms, or remaking curtains. The goods advertised in home furnishing pages only rarely claimed to meet basic needs such as sustenance or shelter. Instead, they promised improvements: in comfort, style, distinction, durability, or efficiency. Tubular steel chairs, drinks cabinets with built-in radios, chrome lights, and electric irons clearly made sense...
only in homes that had wealth and space enough to boast dense furnishings. Recognizing this fact, B. G. Kher, Bombay’s premier, chided the organizers of the Ideal Home Exhibition: “While thinking of improving the home, inhabited by the well-to-do people, we may not lose sight of the very urgent problem of improving the homes of the working class people, who form the large majority of the city’s inhabitants.”

But if the ads and decorating advice assumed that readers had some disposable income, they did not presume budgets were unlimited. Articles explaining how to make small flats feel more spacious or demanding the construction of more affordable housing addressed readers who, while not confined to single rooms, still struggled with Bombay’s high rents.

Frequent advice on how to transform old furniture with a coat of paint or make bedside tables out of packing boxes draped with cloth demonstrated that those giving the advice assumed readers could not afford to purchase all new furniture. In advertising, retailers regularly used the language of economy to appeal to readers, declaring over and over again that relatively modest outlays could transform a home. Thus, one March 1934 ad for Sheraton’s Furniture asked readers: “How often have you admired the distinctive charm of modern furniture—and regretted that you yourself cannot afford it? You can, from Sheraton’s! Although . . . our furniture may be seen in great hotels and famous palaces; yet it is available on terms which modest incomes can well afford” (Figure 17).

Even refrigerators—which, at a rental price of 14 rupees a month, were too expensive for most budgets—were sold as economizers in a 1934 Volkart Brothers ad that declared, “Kelvinator: Saves hours in the kitchen, money in the household budget.”

This emphasis on economy can be read in two ways. For one, pitching goods in the language of affordability suggests an attempt to expand the audience for new home furnishings, reaching beyond the very wealthy to a slightly broader market among the upper-middle classes. If a middle-class family could not manage to redo their whole home, they might still be convinced to buy a single new armchair, dressing table, or set of bath fixtures. Apollo Furnishing Company tried to reassure cash-strapped customers interested in “Modern furniture” with offers of “reasonable cash rates,” “easy payments,” and a new “Buy Back Guarantee” scheme. But advertisers stretched the language of economy only so far.
promising reasonable prices, many also enticed customers with a level of luxury otherwise out of reach. One Dewjee Canjee furniture ad declared that a set of linked armchairs “looks expensive—it feels expensive—but actually it is one of our biggest bargains.” Similarly, an ad for Pallonji Edalji and Sons boasted, “We have installed bathrooms in some of the biggest hotels, palaces and clubs in India” while also reassuring customers that “our fittings are not extravagantly priced.” Whether actually affordable or not, the goods on offer spoke to middle-class aspirations for elite consumer comforts—comforts that someday, somehow, might be introduced throughout the home.

On a different level, advertisers may have deployed the language of economy as a way to help customers rationalize what were essentially luxury purchases. Many communities in western India had long-standing strictures against conspicuous consumption; many traditionally espoused the ideal of “plain living and high thinking,” with high value attached to simplicity and austerity in everyday life. Even if not always followed in practice, those ideals formed part of the cultural context in which consumers explored new wants and desires. By assuring readers of affordability, advertisers offered consumers a way to defend their purchases. In a March 1934 ad for Apollo Furnishing Company, one woman asked another—perhaps in envy and perhaps in critique—“How can you afford such lovely furniture?” (Figure 18). Noting that “everyone wonders where the money came from for such beautiful furniture,” the ad solved the mystery as follows: “The proud owners went to the Apollo Furnishing Company—that’s the secret.”

Health fears offered another way to justify consumption. Ads for refrigerators regularly played up the danger of food contamination, with one 1936 BEST ad declaring: “You cannot afford to take risks with the health of your family. Hot, humid weather has a bad effect on many foodstuffs which is often undetected until it is too late. An electric refrigerator will keep all your food safe and fresh, and will avoid the great dangers of food poisoning” (Figure 19). Similarly, another 1936 ad called the Crosley refrigerator “your greatest protection in the tropics” since it “protects your food; thereby saves your health and prevents diseases like typhoid and dysentery (especially in children) caused by eating food containing decomposed tissues.”

Whether reaching out to an aspirational market or trying to assuage concerns about conspicuous consumption, advice literature and advertisements in the Times of India and the...
Illustrated Weekly promised comfort and style in the home, if only readers would buy the correct goods. Part of the appeal of the advice and ideas offered for domestic furnishings was the lure of mastery. In articles and ads, home problems appeared with clear causes—making them easily solved with the appropriate home products. With the correct cleaners, paints, fabrics, and more, readers could banish dirt, enliven old things, and introduce beauty; with proper design ideas and use of space, readers could wrestle light and comfort out of small flats. In this literature, home offered a place where ideals could be achieved; as one furniture dealer confidently stated, his store was “where dreams of a perfect home come true.”

This mastery was to be achieved by women. Advice literature of the time was not content to leave the crafting of domestic space in the hands of male architects or engineers. Instead, writers called on women to make crucial choices about color, style, and products for the home—thereby asking women to define what modern style meant in the home. Making such choices allowed women not just to change the look of their homes but also to express their individuality. Thus, one 1934 article in the Times of India declared: “A room to most men is merely a place where one eats, sleeps, bathes or sits, but to a woman it means considerably more; for her it is a medium of self-expression, a frame for her personality as well as an environment capable of affecting her moods.” While in clothing women might have to suppress their “innate longing for flamboyant colours and sumptuous silks . . . there is absolutely no reason why the home should not provide an outlet for this passion.”

The Modern as Indian Climatic Efficiency

The modern designers who became fashionable in 1930s India offered few if any ideas for the lower classes. Home advice in Bombay embraced the idea of emancipatory change in terms of achieving freedom from dark, cluttered rooms or bad taste, not in terms of ending oppressive social relations. Nor did Bombay modernists embrace revolutionary design ideas. Instead, advocates of the new styles emphatically distanced themselves from what they saw as the excesses of early European modernism. Thus, one 1934 Times of India article tried to reassure those who might “shudderingly recall the stark exaggeration and freakishness that marred the futurists and cubists’ work,” or who remembered early modern furniture that was “at first often crude and designed in a reactionary spirit too brutal and obvious.”

By contrast, a room by contemporary Indian designers stood as “a revelation of the charm and comfort which can be achieved by a modern artist whose mediums are woods and fabrics, metals and glass, and the use of lights and colours to surround his work with an atmosphere of friendliness.” Much like what Mark Jarzombek has called “good-life modernism” in the 1950s United States, modern styles within domestic space in India promised comfortable, upper-middle-class life through indulgent consumerism.

This vision was enabled by an insistence that modern styles were, in fact, Indian—not foreign or external to the subcontinent. Modernism’s connections outside India were obvious and frequently invoked in references to the influence of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, articles illustrated with photos from European design magazines, and regular images of the stylish homes of Hollywood stars. Advocates of modern styles in Indian homes, however, argued that those foreign developments did nothing to obscure the fact that the new look was appropriate to—in fact, possibly perfect for—the climatic conditions of the subcontinent. As the author of a 1937 article in the Times of India put it, modern furniture is eminently well-suited to the country. There is something about these clean, cool, modern lines that almost demand to be put in the Tropics where the heat and glare make the sense demand quiet. The eyes need rest after the dazzle of colour and sun in the streets and the mind wants soothing not a constant jangle of line and colour. This very element now so disregarded by those who furnish houses, was the keynote of interior decoration through the history of India.
Deshpande offered an even more thorough articulation of the modern-as-Indian principle. Employed by the provincial Public Works Department, Deshpande came to modern architecture late in his writing career, with his fourth major book, Modern Ideal Homes for India, published in 1939. In his introduction to that book, Deshpande admitted that when he first read the great masters of modern architecture he had been put off by their “merciless logic” and “astounding views.” But after spending eight months traveling around the world in 1936, he concluded that the new style “was not a revolution which was sweeping over the Western countries, but a natural, inevitable evolution” that supported “only what is sound and durable both in theory and practice.”

Thus, a modern house should be “judged by its utility and convenience, by the comfort it provides and the success with which it meets with our needs.”

None of this, Deshpande argued, went against Indian architectural traditions. Indeed, he insisted that “Modern Architecture seems to transcend not only the limitations of time and space, but even national traditions and bias. It is not the property or patent of any particular body or any one nation, but a universal art offering boundless scope for development.” Having dismissed criticisms that modernism was foreign, Deshpande even went a step further, claiming its particular logic in India:

Modern Architecture is most suited to our country. In the first place, it is keeping with our philosophical ideal viz. “plain living and high thinking.” Secondly, in a land of sunshine with a contrasting effect of light and shadow, bold, clear-cut features with smooth, sweeping lines present a more effective appearance. Thirdly, plain smooth surface (whether in the exterior or interior of the house, on walls or furniture . . .) allows much less chance for dust to deposit itself in a tropical country like ours; and, lastly, it is the poor man’s architecture, because, with the growing development of the indigenous cement industry, cement promises to be even cheaper. . . . Thus the modern architecture caters equally for the needs of the rich as well as the poor.

Other writers made similar arguments for furniture, declaring modern styles ideally suited to India’s tropical climate. This was partially a question of clean lines and bold shapes. Thus, one 1938 Times of India article noted that “simplicity is the keynote of modern woodwork, and in India where both insects and climatic conditions are against one the simple lines and frugal decoration of the new furniture are a most decided asset.” Other assets of modern furniture involved the materials used. The solid woods used in traditionally made furniture expanded and contracted in response to India’s dramatic humidity shifts, which created structural weaknesses; at the same time, solid woods were vulnerable to insects. The veneered surfaces so popular in modern furniture were less susceptible to the effects of dramatic climate changes, since their thin veneer layers were laid over base structures of plywood stabilized with binding agents. Tubular steel was even better suited to Bombay, since it “cannot warp or go off colour during the monsoon” and was impervious to silverfish and other bugs.

This is not to say that everything about modern styles translated perfectly into Indian contexts. Although Deshpande rejected as “national bigots” those who wanted to hold on to traditional styles at all costs, he embraced the principle of a distinctive Indian modern. Thus, after his round-the-world trip, he “laboured for over a year in giving a shape to the ideas picked up from abroad with a view to ‘Indianise’ them, i.e. to make them suit the climatic conditions and social customs of the people of this country.”

The changes he suggested included adding verandahs, putting drawing rooms to one side of the house so as to protect women inside from public view, and making flat roofs into terraces whenever possible (Figure 20). JJ School of Art architecture professor Claude Batley similarly insisted that global forms should be adapted to local conditions. Arguing in a 1939 speech to the IIA that the modern style “is really, at its best, a move back to primary and essential forms, unfettered by any tradition whatsoever,” he quickly went on to add that Indian designers would succeed in the style “only, in so far as, in their planning and elevational treatment, they entirely base their work on a true functionalism, arising naturally out of the modern needs of the India of to-day and take into consideration the full implications of the climate, local conditions, and the genius of the people.”

Designers of domestic interiors shared this focus on rooting global ideas in local practices. Many noted that, whereas the kitchen was “the touchstone of a house’s modernity” in Europe, the frequent use of hired cooks in India meant that few upper-class homes invested in new features or fixtures for that room. The result was that in the subcontinent the bathroom was “the one entirely modern room,” making it the logical place for modern experiments with color and decoration. More broadly, since furniture that made sense in Europe was not always appropriate in India, India needed its own modern styles, produced in India, according to Indian conditions. The numerous furniture companies operating in Bombay—including the London-based Army and Navy Stores—all claimed to offer just that, advertising local production of new styles carefully curated for local needs. Playing on desires for local design expression and trying to clarify their place in a crowded field, Bombay decorators

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John Roberts & Company declared in a 1934 ad that, with fifty years of experience, they could justly claim to be in a better position than any other firm in the country to give expression in their work to the modern trend in furniture design, eliminating all that is unsuitable from Western styles and introducing and combining elements best suited to the East, thus producing what is in every respect an ideal home both in design and comfort for India.123

Lives and Afterlives of the Domestic Modern

In a January 1937 article, the editors of the JIIA declared that modern styles were now inevitable. In the face of calls for more traditional architecture in urban areas, they defended the art deco buildings being put up in Bombay’s suburbs and the Backbay Reclamation scheme, noting:

Like all the people of the world Indian clients are demanding a comfortable arrangement of rooms and a functionized [sic] treatment rather than a reproduction of the past styles that belonged to an entirely different outlook on life than that of the city dweller to-day. Young people, fed on the international outlook day by day, by the newspaper, the cinemas and the radio, with the speed lines of the motor car and the aeroplane as familiar as were once the family bullock cart and the richly caprisoned [sic] elephant...are not satisfied with the old traditional family home that took generations to come to its fruition.124
According to the editors, modern urban life in Bombay demanded modern urban styles.

How many young people in 1930s Bombay would have embraced these heady ideas of modern styling in the home? The short answer: it is difficult to tell. Visual evidence of actual Bombay homes in the 1930s is frustratingly thin. Few photographs of domestic spaces from the era are available. At the same time, the cosmopolitan orientation of most 1930s advice literature meant that print articles generally drew on images of Hollywood or English homes to illustrate ideas; the only Indian homes that appeared in the pages of the Illustrated Weekly were princely palaces or the official residences of the viceroy and provincial governors.125

Even among those who could afford to do so, not everyone took up the new styles. Suggesting the breadth of tastes, the Army and Navy Store in Bombay continued to offer a mix of old and new in its 1933 catalogue, with theModerne Suite, the Art Nouveau Suite, and the Regal Suite, “designed on modern lines,” appearing alongside the Malcolm Suite and the Wycombe Suite, designed “on early Jacobean lines,” and the Hawkhurst Suite, “designed in the early Cromwell period style.”126 In 1935, Bombay designer Fritz von Drieberg admitted that there remained “a definite preference on the part of the public for more traditional styles”—a fact that he attributed to insularity as well as to the fact that “the appearance of the modern house represents far too abrupt a change from what the average conservative man has been accustomed to.”

But, von Drieberg was quick to add, “in spite of everything, the standard of taste in our decoration is steadily rising. We are gradually learning the value of simplicity, form, proportion and the right use of colour, and our newly acquired knowledge is making us less ready to follow merely fashion, and more critical and discriminating in our choice of furniture and fittings.”127 That this was not just the wishful thinking of a decorator in search of clients is suggested by scattered sources. Photographic documentation of Bombay’s art deco architecture offers glimpses of furnishings that appear to include period pieces.128 More recently, responding to twenty-first-century consumer interest in deco furniture, Bombay antique dealers have collected numerous examples of the style, suggesting that it had some measure of popular demand.

Whatever the appeal of modern styles, the 1930s celebration of domestic consumption did not survive into the postwar era. The Times of India discontinued its Beautiful Homes section in May 1939, and it seems to have offered little coverage of or ads for home decor in the 1940s and 1950s. In early 1936, the Illustrated Weekly of India’s Page for the Home became the Women’s and Home section; from that point on, although ads for home goods like furniture and kitchenware continued, articles rarely discussed new products for the home. Instead, consumption advice focused on the body through an emphasis on clothes and cosmetics, while home advice was restricted to craft projects that could be done at low cost using recycled materials. Despite confident predictions in 1937 that the Ideal Home Exhibition would become a yearly event, that popular experiment was not repeated in the decades after the war.129

With the end of World War II and then Indian independence in 1947, public concerns about the home gave way to discussions about housing: specifically, how to build more houses, as quickly as possible, for as many people as possible, within the constraints of limited budgets and even more limited supplies. Public attention was focused on schemes both to relieve slums in cities and to house the millions of refugees displaced by the partition of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947. The key questions were how many units to build, how to arrange them to maximize land and functionality, and how to utilize modern materials to speed up construction.130

That does not mean that private interest in home decor and modern furniture disappeared after 1947. Decorating plans for wealthy clients from the 1940s through the 1960s held in the collection of one of Bombay’s major interior design firms, Kamdar Furniture, present lavishly appointed homes, restaurants, hotels, and store displays, usually filled with modern styles. Aiming at consumers of slightly more limited means, advertisements for industrially produced home goods from the 1950s offered images of domestic interiors carefully appointed with steel furniture, plastic housewares, and mill furnishing fabrics.131 These sources and others suggest that the novelty associated with modern styles in the home in the 1930s had worn off by the 1950s, when the sleek lines, new materials, and dense furnishings of the new style had become commonplace.

Novel styles of home furnishings helped to domesticate the modern in 1930s Bombay. New designs and types of furniture, carpets, curtains, and more allowed upper-class Bombayites to experiment with the new look on the intimate, personal level of the home. Whether they were among the fortunate few able to move into the new concrete buildings marking the city’s architectural modernism or part of the multitude stuck in old, rental accommodations, wealthy residents could declare their cosmopolitan outlook through home-based commodity consumption, even as they adapted global styles to local needs and conditions. As such, home furnishings played a central role in the arrival of modern styles in India, illuminating a local engagement with global processes of modernity.

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Notes

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13. Quoted in ibid., 221.


29. On Bombay’s suburban expansion and its consequences for housing habits, see Rao, House, but No Garden.
64. Deshpande,  *Modern Ideal Homes for India*, 32.
65. Ibid., 33–34.


82. “Equipping the Kitchen: Need for Space and Light,” Times of India, 8 June 1936, 16.

84. “In Tune with the Times: Furniture That Fits the Age,” Times of India, 22 Feb. 1937, 16.
86. “In Tune with the Times,” 16.
91. Quoted in “While We Provide Art and Comfort,” 8.
94. “You Can Possess Furniture Like This,” 9; “Kelvinator Saves Hours in the Kitchen,” advertisement for Volkart Brothers, Times of India, 22 Oct. 1934, 12. In yet another example, the Apollo Furnishing Company on New Queen’s Road promised in April 1935 “a well furnished house for a few rupees a month,” with rent and rent-to-own plans that “offer everyone the delights of good furniture—without the expense.” “A Well Furnished Home,” 16. On refrigerators, see Haynes, “Making (Fracturing?) the Ideal Home,” 12.
103. “Carpets for Modern Rooms,” Times of India, 16 Apr. 1934, 5.
105. Jarzombek, “‘Good-Life Modernism’ and Beyond.”
108. For a more in-depth discussion of Deshpande and his ideas, see Abigail McGowan, “Consuming the Home: Creating Consumers for the Middle Class House in India, 1920–1960” (paper presented at the conference Politics, Spaces and Social Relations of Consumption: Urban India in the Twentieth Century, Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August-University, Göttingen, July 2012).

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/jsah/article-pdf/75/4/424/184698/jsah_2016_75_4_424.pdf by guest on 27 June 2020
His earlier books were Deshpande, Sulabha Vastu Shashtra; Deshpande, Residential Buildings Suited to India; Deshpande, Cheap and Healthy Homes.

Deshpande, Modern Ideal Homes for India, 7–8.

Ibid., 76, 80.

Ibid., 81–82.


Deshpande, Modern Ideal Homes for India, 79.

Ibid., 8.

Ibid., 47–49.


Mar, “Modern Lines Mean Efficient Furniture.”


See, for instance, Dwivedi and Mehrotra, Bombay Deco, 257.

See, for example, D. N. Dhar, Industrial Housing for the Tropics (Bombay: Concrete Association of India, 1958); Exhibition Souvenir: International Exhibition on Low-Cost Housing (New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Works, Housing and Supply, 1954); Low-Cost Concrete Houses, 3rd ed. (Bombay: Concrete Association of India, 1959).

See, for instance, advertisements for Khira Furnishings in Illustrated Weekly of India, 2 June 1957, 5.