

Architect Vikas Dilawari's dedication, expertise and sound vision help restore the pride and dignity of the imposing 100-year-old structure of the YMCA at Dr Bhadkamkar Marg, Mumbai.

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- [1] The restored original entrance to the building
- [2] Architectural details of the Bowen Memorial Hall, which is next to the main entrance
- [3] A view of the front and side facade

I remember the time I shifted to Mumbai — fresh out of college, and looking at the city differently from my earlier visits, as the study of architecture had changed my perceptions totally. The primary change was that the same majestic buildings could now be classified into victorian, gothic, baroque, classical and the like. Soon after

I shifted from mainstream architecture to architectural journalism, I met architect Vikas Dilawari who, I was told, had the burning passion to revive, restore and reuse these old buildings. Today, more than 15 years and a few dozen amazing accomplishments later, the passion to breathe life into and restore the beauty of old buildings still burns strong in the man's,



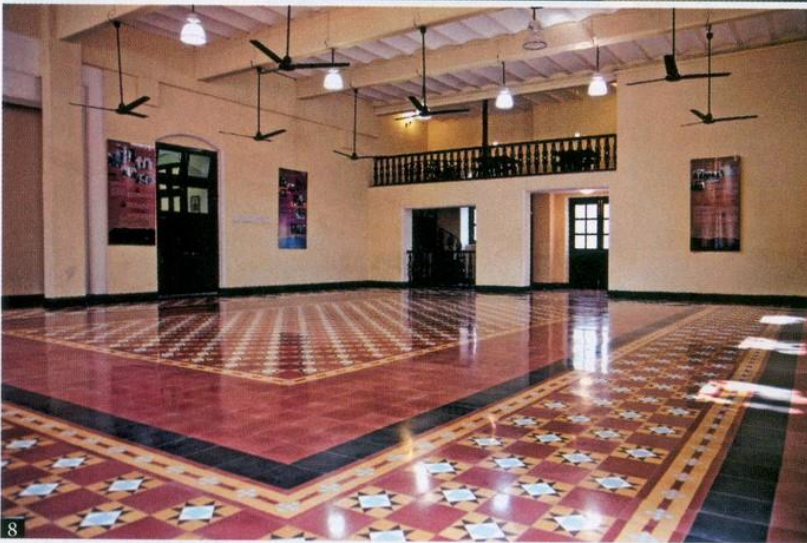
heart. "I may want anything, but clients with similar mindsets are truly hard to get," shrugs Vikas modestly. "Any project succeeds because the client understands the need to preserve the building, and has the resources, the will, and the patience to get it done."

The YMCA building on one of the busiest business zones of Mumbai was in a similar shape. It was absolutely decrepit, and the facade had been botched by the two banks that had taken the ground floor on lease for almost 40 years. "The courts ruled in our favour," smiles a visibly relieved Paul George, YMCA Secretary, and the guiding force behind this project. "So, the bank had to vacate the premises and we got back the ground floor. We desperately needed the extra space. We had to increase the accommodation facility and other amenities as well."

Once the ground floor was free for usage, Paul and the YMCA management had to figure out the best option. Though the building was a majestic structure, several ill-informed repairs and modifications had been done. After some debate, the YMCA decided to preserve the building, and contacted Vikas. "Yes, there were quite a few things

- [4] The balcony on the west rear side of the structure is supported by teakwood brackets
- [5] The reception and lobby area. Left from the arched entrance to the passage leads to the staircase to the first floor, the YMCA's Secretary's office, the library and then the Bowen Memorial Hall
- [6] The staircase leading to the first floor. Note the detailing of the arches





- [7] This is the passage that lies to the left of the arched entrance. It is lined with photographs of old Mumbai. Straight down is the door to the Bowen Memorial Hall. On the right is the way to the Secretary's office, while on the left is the door to the library
- [8] The multi-purpose Bowen Memorial Hall. A portion of the Hall is reserved for indoor table games. The mezzanine serves the same function

that had gone wrong in the building, but that's the challenge we enjoy," smiles Vikas. This included terribly corroded beams, woodwork jammed because of many coats of paint, and an incredibly rundown, ugly staircase leading from the ground to the first floor.

Vikas explains the project with his customary discipline and meticulousness, "The YMCA student's hostel located on Dr Bhadkamkar Marg was designed by well-known local architects, Chambers & Fritchley (C 1910). They had done several buildings around this area like the Taylor Methodist Church

[conceptmaterials]

>CONCEPT

Structural repairs and restoration of the YMCA Students Branch, a nearly 100-year-old hostel in south Mumbai.

>MATERIALS

Wall	External two facades facing road are in ashlar masonry (lower two floors). Original brick and lime plastered with jack arch ceilings, repaired in past and walls have cement render. External facade on remaining two sides were done in Crete plaster
Flooring	Originally, it had encaustic tiles but these were all replaced with vitrified ceramic tiles a few decades ago. Now, it is restored back to cement tiles matching the original in colour and pattern
Ceiling	Jack arches in lower floors, RCC slab in the extensions above and light-weight AC sheets resting on steel trusses
Lighting	Dome-type polycarbonate fitting with 2 x 18 CFLs and dome-type metal halide fittings in the hall

(C 1906), the Knesseth Eli Synagogue (C 1884), Army and Navy building (C 1898) to mention a few prominent ones. The foundation stone was laid by the then Governor of Bombay, Sir George Sydneham Clarke, on 14th April 1910." He goes on to tell me that the original ground-plus-one-storey structure was built in the neo-classical style, with some Palladian elements. Seeing the growing demands, sometime prior to independence, an extra floor was added (following the original architectural vocabulary but devoid of a stone facade), and then, some time later, post independence, the structure was extended by another storey.

The land use pattern of the locality also plays a role here. The location of the YMCA building, especially the road it faces, had a mixed use of residential and commercial space. Many of these buildings look fairly rundown on account of poor maintenance (owing to the Rent Control Act) and are



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often misused, overused and abused due to the growing commercial land use. Many of these buildings are being pulled down and replaced with high-rises which stand out in total contrast to the harmony created by identical scale of the old buildings. This is a very common and lucrative option for most owners and property developers. "The YMCA building was not even a listed heritage property, so the management could have easily pulled it down. However, they very wisely chose to restore the building and improve its detailing, while incorporating all its present-day needs into the new scheme," says Vikas.



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"Do you know that the building was never fully vacated in all those months of work? It was vacated floor-wise, as the work proceeded. The students were on the premises sleeping on mattresses, under the scaffolding, amidst all the dirt, dust, grime, wherever they found space! But everyone wanted it to happen, it was a shared dream," muses Paul.

In terms of planning, it was decided that the ground floor should be used for the public spaces and offices, while staying facilities on the upper floors were extended, and amenities like extra bathrooms added. Also, a nice cafeteria has replaced the earlier dingy mess. "The third floor is the real proof of Vikas' talents and skills. We would have never

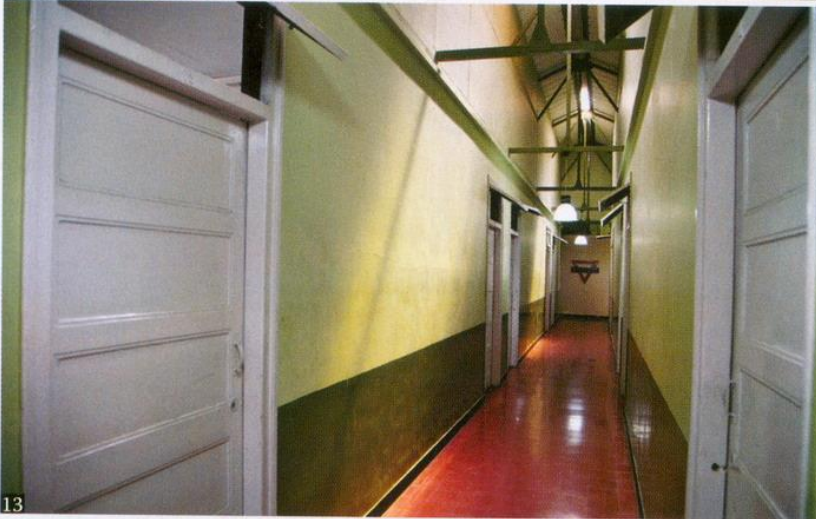
[9] A spiral staircase connects the ground level with the mezzanine. The rich pattern of the cement floors matches that of the original Minton tiles

[10] Stairs connecting the second to the third floor. All they needed was a new coat of paint

[11] The redone mess has trompe l'oeils, showcasing the vantage-point views of bygone Mumbai



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[12] View of the corner room on the second floor with bay windows

[13] The ceiling of the passage of the third floor has clean ridges that let in sunlight

imagined that anything could be done with that space. It was a horrible, hot, dark attic-like space covered by asbestos sheets, without ventilation or ceiling fans! Now, it is so pleasant," smiles Paul. This transformation was achieved by replacing the asbestos with a mangalore-tiled roof and a fibre-glass ridge at the centre. The fibre-glass pieces were specially manufactured to let natural light into the space. The false ceiling was torn down and ceiling fans installed. Such simple and thoughtful changes alter the perception as well as the livability of the space.

Today, the building has been radically transformed, thanks to the dedicated efforts of Vikas' team, including his associate Abhijit Athalye and the conservation contractor M/s Savani Construction. The restoration project has cost approximately Rs 1.8 crores. This includes a generous donation of US\$30,000 from the Cultural Ambassador's Fund towards the restoration of Bowen Memorial Hall, which has become a multipurpose space for recreation, and exhibitions and lectures. The hall now looks grand and graceful, and has a lovely cast-iron spiral staircase on one end (replacing the earlier ugly one). "The original railing details were maintained, but most of the pieces were broken. Fortunately, we found them lying around the place, and tried to re-use them as far as possible... but a few new ones had to be custom-made," informs Vikas. The flooring (painted by the bank that had rented the premises) was replaced by specially-designed tiles, custom-made by Dilnavaz Variava of Bharat Tiles, to suit the architectural era that the building belongs to. As Paul rightly points out, this hall is the pièce de résistance of the project.

"The greatest gift for any architect is to get a favourable response from the users' of his creation. One can sense the students' enjoyment of the space. On the day of the opening, one of the students spontaneously got up and said that this was the finest hostel in the city and in the country. This kind of endorsement makes it worth the effort," concludes Vikas. 📌

[factfile]

Project	YMCA Students Branch Hostel
Location	Dr Bhadkamkar Marg, Mumbai
Area	20,000 sq ft (approx)
Principal architect	Vikas Dilawari
Associate architect	Abhijit Athalye
Duration of restoration	18 months