

## **Display Typography of House Names in Mumbai's Residential Buildings: A Semiotic Intervention**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to reveal modes of signification in house-names on Mumbai's residential buildings, seen (simultaneously) in the choice of names and display typography. Their visual characteristics are pragmatic or symbolic, depending on the semiosis that underlies the meanings of the building's names.

This interplay between house name (word) and display (typography) on a building together creates a 'name-sign', and presents two modes of signification:

Firstly, some building names pseudo-signify, as no direct rule of signification is evident.

They represent a patron's aspirations, and meaning is related only to the interest of preserving his/her own name on the building as posterity. The typographical 'name-sign' formulation communicates the *denotata* (that signifies the mundane labelling of the facade or declaring its location).

Secondly, some buildings celebrate a metaphoric signification in their names. These significations are often obscure to the location or inhabitants. Such buildings envisage *connotata* through their 'name-sign' display (that signifies some other ideas/beliefs/memberships beyond the local context of the building).

We conclude by analysing these two modes of significations in the 'name-signs'. The insights developed help us understand local and period contexts for Mumbai's buildings, the governing modes of significations and the respective visual features of the display typography.

*Keywords* : display typography, name-signs, residential buildings in Mumbai, semiotics

### **Introduction**

Historically, architecture displays diverse signifiers that signal content and usage. Buildings in a city are typically arrayed either to form icons or to merge into an urban fabric, and thus together impart a sense of urban place. Iconic buildings become their own signs, while the typographical 'Name-signs' displayed on all buildings bring direction and meaning. They create the 'figure' on the 'ground' of a building's exterior that collectively forms the urban fabric. Signage brings fixity and identity to an otherwise monotonous urban surface.

It may be considered normative that the building's name and the building itself are unconnected, the name being a subjective choice (often personal or whimsical) of the patron or owner. Buildings names often denote familial, religious or totemic propitiation, and are exclusive for self-consumption. On the outside of a building, such names act as signage or way finders in a given location. This paper explores the denotative and connotative signification that house names evoke and the manner in which they are displayed in the buildings. Is it possible that these can collectively define and document the period in which they were built and baptised? Display typography in the form and location of name boards plays a significant role in understanding this context and revealing semiotic meaning.

In the case of Mumbai, urban growth stems from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the settlement of the Fort and the native town, and continues through the period of colonisation and the setting up of the Bombay Presidency. It was during the penultimate decades before Indian independence that neighbourhoods came up as planned precincts in different parts of the city. For this paper we have chosen to study the residential buildings in the Oval Maidan/Marine Drive precinct that is architecturally representative of a specific period of the city's growth as a thriving metropolis.

### **Aim and Objectives**

This paper aims to reveal different modes of signification in 'Name-signs' on Mumbai's residential buildings of the Oval Maidan/ Marine Drive precinct, seen (simultaneously) in the choice of building names and in the forms of display typography.

The visual characteristics of a display type/style/letter-font play performative roles, depending on the semiosis that underlies the meanings of the names for these buildings.

This paper aims to archive and discuss the following:

1. The pragmatics of display typography of the House names on the building:
2. The relation of display typography of the House names to the buildings architecture
3. The relation of display typography of the House names to the urban context
4. The major connotative trends in the House names of buildings
5. The major denotative trends in the House names of buildings
6. The participation of display typography in the discourse of the city
7. The participation of display typography in the discourse of the period

## Methodology

For this research, 27 buildings from South Bombay in and around the Oval Maidan and the Marine Drive are selected for semiotic investigation. Of these, 25 are residential in usage (including one hotel) and 2 are cinema halls. All these buildings were built in the space of a decade or so from the early 1930s to the early 1940s. These buildings are also significant in that they were built on land newly acquired from the Arabian Sea, after two major land reclamation projects (called the Backbay Reclamations) that were completed in 1929 (Oval Maidan) and 1940 (the corniche, created at Marine Drive) (Jaffer, 2010, pp. 382-383).

These buildings show a consistency of architectural styling prevalent at that time where building, architectural ornament and typography all combined and were conceived as a whole. In Mumbai (Bombay in the 1930s), these buildings represent the best of 'Art Deco' Architecture. Being located on self similar plots along two distinct precincts, these buildings harmonize in the placing of their footprints, the heights and floor lines of their facades, their architectural details and the prominence of House-name displays, consistently located for maximum visibility.

In the case of each of these buildings, the 'name-sign' is studied to reveal modes of signification by documenting the following:

1. Building name
2. Building location in the urban context
3. Display typography of the house-name
4. Location of the house-name on the building
5. Architectural or ornamental embellishments surrounding the house-name
6. The choice of typography and its development as display signage

7. The connotative signification of the house-name

8. The denotative signification of the house-name

Seen (simultaneously), the choice of building names and the forms of display typography create a 'name-sign' which is analyzed for trends of signification in the urban or period context.

### Observations/ Results

Summarized in the table below are the display typography and the pragmatics and semantics of meaning of house-names. (O.M. is Oval Maidan; M.D. is Marine Drive)

	Name/ Usage	Location	Year	Typeface	Material	Pragmatics (Denotata)	Semantics (Connotata)
1	Eros (Cinema)	O.M.	1938	Fat Cat 1920s	Metal base neon outline		God of Love (Greek)
2	Court View (Residential)	O.M.	1935	Copperplate	Metal cut out	Sited across High Court	
3	Fairlawn (Residential)	O.M.	1935	Avenida 1930s Spain	Metal cut out	Greens of Oval Maidan	Pastoral (Old English) Peaceful Place
4	Motabhoy Mansion (Residential)	O.M.	1935	Lloyd's geometric	Metal	Owner/patron's name	
5	Swastik Court (Residential)	O.M.	1935	Plaza (variation) 1920s	Metal		Auspicious symbol, Religious Affiliation
6	Green Fields (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Deco	Plaster Relief	Greens of Oval Maidan	Pastoral (Old English)
7	Queen's Court (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Deco variant	Plaster Relief		Queen Victoria, aspirational
8	Windsor House (Residential)	O.M.	1936	<i>unidentified</i>	Wooden cut out on base		Ruling Dynasty in Britain, aspirational
9	Rajesh Mansion (Sohrab Mansion)	O.M.	1936	Broadway	Metal	Owner/patron's name	
10	Empress Court (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Cable	Plaster Relief		Victoria, Empress of India, aspirational
11	Rajjab Mahal (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Playbill variation	Wooden Rounded mounted	Owner/patron's name Dr. Rajjab Ali Patel	
12	Shiv-Shanti Bhuvan (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Roman serif variant	Wooden mounted		Propitiatory term. Religious affiliation
13	Belvedere Court (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Trajan	Metal		Building located for view (Italian, Vatican)
14	Oval View (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Avenida variation 1930s	Metal	Sited across Oval Maidan	
15	Palm Court	O.M.	1936	Independant	Wooden		Atrium with palm

	(Residential)			1930s	cut out		trees, tropical Art Deco trope
16	Ivory (Residential)	O.M.	1936	Augustea	Wooden Rounded		Substance resembling ivory, pure, white, also Biblical reference from the Song of Songs
17	Sunshine (Residential)	O.M.	1935	Premiere Lightline variation	Metal mounted on sunburst icon		Universals
18	Moonlight (Residential)	O.M.	1935	Mostra Bold	Stone relief		Universals
19	Firuz-Ara (Residential)	O.M.	1937	Busorama variation	Metal mounted on wood	Owner/patron's name	Persian Name
20	Chateau Marine (Residential)	M. D.	Post '40	Hand crafted	Metal	Sited across Arabian Sea	Large Villa (French)
21	Oceana (Residential)	M. D.	Post '40	Rebecca Round	Plaster relief	Sited across Arabian Sea	
22	Riviera (Residential)	M. D.	Post '40	Atlas 1920s	Plaster relief		Famous French Seafront, Also called 'Cote d'Azur', aspirational
23	Sea Green (Hotel)	M. D.	Post '40	Hand crafted	Metal	Sited across Arabian Sea	
24	Keval Mahal (Residential)	M. D.	Post '40	Hand crafted	Plaster inset coloured	Owner/patron's name	
25	Kapur Mahal (Residential)	M. D.	Post '40	Hand crafted	Plaster inset coloured	Owner/patron's name	
26	Ivanhoe (Residential)	Church Gate	Post '40	Roco variant	Plaster relief		Hero of Walter Scott's Novel
27	Regal (Cinema)	Colaba	1932	Hand crafted	Wooden block letters with neon trim		Referring to Royalty, ostentatious

**Table 1: Summary of Observations of Display Typography and House Names**

The following observations were made:

### *Urban Context*

The buildings under study form part of a planned precinct. All the buildings (other than those mentioned) are residential apartment blocks of the same height. Variations in the buildings (and in the location of house-names) are either when a building is presented with a front face to a road, or when it straddles two roads at a crossing.



Fig 1. Court View-  
building presented with a front face to  
the road



Fig 2. Shiv Shanti Bhuvan  
Building straddles two roads at a  
crossing

It was observed that the house-names of buildings that were frontal were located uniformly above the entrance doorway to the main lobby of the buildings at the ground floor level. On occasion they are found on or above the cantilevered porch.

On the corner buildings, name boards are located to be easily comprehensible from both roads, as such they are presented to the centre of the crossing. The buildings themselves sweep around the corner in a quarter circle, as is the norm in urban planning schemes, but the name boards as in the case of Moonlight or Firuz-Ara are placed on one or the other street.

The last building at the northern end of the Oval Maidan stretch is the Eros Cinema. The cinema presents itself in a series of stepped curved facades to the corner and the name board is high up on the stepped facade above the marquee. It is also neon lighted. Buildings like these, as is the Regal Cinema are designed as urban icons, unlike the other residential buildings which form the larger urban fabric.



Fig 3. Eros Cinema Building as icon



Fig 4. Keval Mahal Building as urban fabric

### *Display Typography*

The display of house names are of three types: with wooden letters (cut out or arrayed on wooden frames), metal letters cut out or wrought and placed on wooden bases or inset directly into the plaster and letters made in the plaster itself in the form of pushed up relief. Only the cinema houses have the additional requirement of neon light trims.



Fig 5. Types of Display Signage- in Wood



Fig 6. Types of Display Signage- in Metal



Fig 7. Types of Display Signage- In Plaster Relief

The choice of fonts are bold and chunky, almost all are san-serif and uppercase. These displays vary in size from around five inches in height to more than a foot (as in the cinemas). While it was possible to discern the fonts chosen in some cases (or their closest contemporary versions) in some cases the letters were clearly hand crafted by local artisans (Sea Green, Keval Mahal, Chateau Marine) and are probably distorted versions of locally prevalent fonts.



*Embellishments*

The house name displays can be seen as part of the larger ornamental schema on the buildings under study. In most cases the location of the display are flanked with architectural ornamentation consistent with the Art Deco look that evoke a futuristic aura. Sunbursts, lightning bolts, stepped ziggurats, zigzags, chevrons and all manner of power symbols are employed (Heller & Fili, 2006, p. 30). In Court View the name is the base for a frozen fountain motif made as a jail in the stairwell. In Swastik Court a set of three exquisitely carved reliefs of tropical birds in the Art Deco style are directly above the signage. Green Field and Oval View are flanked by stepped ziggurat motifs, while Queen's Court and Rajjab Mahal have chevron friezes above the signage. Riviera's signage is surrounded by a stucco frame with an abstracted Ionic capital, while Oceana has porthole windows to evoke the side of an ocean liner.



Fig 8. Embellishments- Court View with Frozen Fountain motif



Fig 9. Embellishments- Green Fields with stepped ziggurat motif



Fig 10. Embellishments- Oval View with stepped ziggurat motif

In the case of Moonlight, the name display has been created as a complete entity, located under the curved bracketed porch. Its letters are kerned to make the two 'O's interlink evoking the various phases of the moon. In Sunshine the display is created as a self contained 'logo', The Lightline Font in metal is superimposed on a flaming sun motif created on the plaster itself. Here both word and image though tautologous work together to form the 'name-sign'.

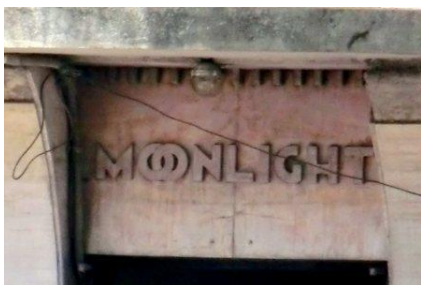


Fig 11. Embellishments- Moonlight, interlinked O's invoke phases of the moon



Fig 12. Embellishments- Sunshine  
Word and image redundancy in the formation of a 'name-sign'.

### *The choice of House-Names*

The choice of house names can be categorized as under:

1. *Personalization in Names:* Names (or family names) of patrons/owners (Motabhoy Mansion, Rajjab Mahal, Rajesh /Sohrab Mansion, Kapur Mahal)
2. *Religious Identity in Names:* Names of religious or auspicious/propitiatory significance (Swastik Court, Shiv-Shanti Bhuvan)
3. *Place Identity in Names:* Names derived from the immediate location (Court View, Oval View, Sea Green, Oceana)
4. *Historic/Period Identity in Names:* Names based on the ruling dynasty of the Raj (Queen's Court, Windsor House, Regal, Empress Court). Also the use of words like Court and Mahal (palace).
5. *Language and Grammar Explorations in Names:* Names with English literary connotations (Ivory, Ivanhoe, Greenfields, Eros, Belvedere Court)

The pragmatic (denotata) and semantic (connotata) signification of the house names are discussed below.

### **Discussion**

The buildings under study are all built more or less contemporaneous, from the early 1930s to the early 1940s. This period also represents the change of building structure and material

from that prevalent earlier. The former massive dressed-masonry load-bearing constructions were now giving way to the lighter, streamlined RCC framed structures with their cantilevered balconies and slim columns, their wraparound chajjas and flat stucco ornaments (Prakash, 2010, p. 98). In the older buildings from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century stone carving was a prevalent craft and writing would be incised into the stone itself. In the new buildings, lettering assumed importance as a design element and received architectural prominence in regard to style, choice of material and location (Ramani, 2007, p. 150). A new manner of house name display is now needed and the use of wood, metal or plasterwork becomes necessary.

This leads to the use of typography that is, according to Heller and Fili, rooted in the rightness of certain basic forms: the circularity of a circle, the squareness of a square (2006, p. 37). Bold and rounded typefaces are selected mainly developed from geometry rather than from classical rules. The developments in the typography of the times led to newly designed fonts that evoke modernity and power. The fonts are mostly san-serif and uppercase. Some displays are also 3-dimensional (Regal Cinema), and the edges of the fonts are rounded. This is in keeping with the spirit of the Art Deco age that developed streamlined, flat ornament and color to evoke contemporary aspirations. Message and manner coalesce in an unprecedented celebration of speed and travel (Sparke, Hodges, Dent Coad, & Stone, 1986, p. 114).



Fig 13. Regal Cinema- conceived as a total work of art.

Ornaments in buildings are the collective agglomeration of several semes or parts of ornament-signifiers (after Greimas, 1966). In the buildings under study they can be discerned as a secondary level of signification after the building's structural form itself. Isotopy, according to Greimas are "a redundant set of semantic categories which make possible the uniform reading of the story" (Hebert, 2009). Ornament forms a conceptual layer on the architectural articulation, and allows for a uniform reading. Elements like patterns, edges, cornices, panels, pinnacles, fenestration and display typography (house-names) are figurative semes directly appreciated by the senses. The house name in these buildings has to read in conjunction with other ornamental embellishments rather than as a stand-alone entity. Buildings of this period were conceived as 'Gesamtkunstwek' or total works of art where signage was integral to the architectural schema.



Fig 14. Denotata- Oceana  
Place Identity in Names



Fig 15. Denotata- Rajjab Mahal  
Personalization in Names

In the choice of house-names, the subjective and personal does tend to be fore-grounded, although as can be seen in the table above, not entirely so. In several instances the names of buildings are denotative (or pragmatic) in that they proclaim their location in the neighborhood. Court View is directly across the High Court on the far side of the Oval Maidan. Oval View or Green Fields refer to the Maidan itself; so do buildings like Oceana or Sea Green that denote their location on the cornice of Marine Drive, facing the Arabian Sea.

Such names serve primarily as way-finders and do not allude to anything beyond their immediate presence.

The use of proper names in buildings like Rajjab Mahal, Motabhoy Mansion or Keval Mahal is more personal. This choice belongs entirely to the patron or the owner and is chosen for posterity. Also personal are the names with religious or propitiatory significance (Swastik Court or Shiv-Shanti Bhuvan). In the local context that they exist, these names may be considered denotative too.

On the other hand, some names are connotative and period specific. Building names referencing the Raj were common enough in Bombay even before this period (Britannia Hotel, King's Circle, Queen's Road, New Empire, Imperial Cinema), but the death of George V in 1936 and the tumultuous ascent and descent of his successor Edward VIII must have brought a renewed attention to the dynasty again. The buildings on the Oval built at almost the same time pick up on this with names like Windsor House, Queen's Court, and Empress Court). Victoria was indexical to the Empire and is referenced often as Queen or Empress. The choice of these names has to be seen as proclamations in the public domain, and connote both aspiration as well as the membership of a group that is part of the ruling elite. This aspiration is also seen in the use of the word Court or Mahal. It is also common knowledge that several of the apartments along the Oval and Marine Lines were leased out to British tenants, and names like these would only seem appropriate. Other words have their own connotation to literary references like Ivanhoe, the eponymous hero of Walter Scott's novel of 1820, or Biblical like Ivorine which comes from the Song of Songs.



Fig 16. Connotata- Empress Court  
Historic/Period Identity in Names



Fig 17. Connotata- Ivanhoe  
Literary Explorations in Names

Connotative name choices are double-coded. At one level they signify to the name-giver alone. However since these names are displayed prominently in the open with signage they also signify to the world at large and connote semantic meaning to ‘those in the know’. The double coding crosses paths with the display typography itself (and the choice of contemporary fonts) which are modern, geometric, bold and connotative of speed. Conflated, they form a ‘name-sign’ that signals meaning in the public realm. A building without the ‘name-sign’ is incomplete, while the name-sign is inherent to the building itself.

### Conclusions

Display typography of house names in Mumbai’s residential buildings form a incisive document of the period. If the name-signs are ignored, the buildings studied come across as self-similar exercises in modern living at the time.

However when fore-grounded, as for this research, they yield signification that allows us to comprehend the socio-political processes at the time. As mentioned earlier, the buildings came up only as a result of reclamations. As such they have no prior context, and as such they can be studied as texts within themselves. Semiotic references are released upon the deeper examination of the formation of ‘name-signs’.

The Oval Maidan buildings were built in a space of just three years. During this time the aspirations of the elite who built and occupied these apartments drove them to proclaim

membership to the project of the Raj very publicly. The precinct became an upmarket site occupied by the British, even though both builders as well as architects were Indian (Prakash, p. 103).

On the other hand the Marine Drive buildings that came up after the 1940s, when the Queen's Necklace was fully reclaimed and shaped, addressed themselves to a more modern lifestyle beyond the need to acquire credentials with their rulers. On the other hand, both in the architecture as well as the 'name-signs' they proclaimed a more international association, imagining the Marine Drive to be Bombay's Riviera, where the sea becomes indexical for travel and an international presence. The buildings on the Marine Drive are far less ornamented, and adapt a more streamlined modernistic design. The display typography of house-names follows using fonts from the 1930 that are less ornate, but derived from sans-serif families.

Both these sets of buildings defined the urban fabric of a growing metropolis, fast filling up with the educated English speaking middle class, who participated and contributed to the fortunes of their city overtly, and displayed their aspirations in the 'name-signs' of the buildings they lived in.

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