

A landmark blends old and new

Park Mansions makeover

MOHUADAS

The shine is back on the state-by Park Mansions, standing four storeys tall since 1910 at the crossing of Free School Street and Park Street.

Constructed by Armenian jute merchant T.M. Thaddeus — a short man with a big tummy who moved around in a rickshaw, resting his Rolls in the garage — it was acquired in 1948 by Jit Paul, one of Apeejay Surrendra Group's founders.

The 105-year-old landmark has been repaired and some layers of chequered history restored. Spread over five big-his (about 71,741sq feet) with five blocks of four-storey buildings, the Rs 10-crore restoration over the past five years by its owners, the Apeejay group, has brought back the glow and charm to the Victorian architecture. Gothic windows, shiny teak stairways and quaint interiors.

Park Mansions, 57A Park Street

1910: Armenian T.M. Thaddeus constructs it
1948: Jit Paul, one of Apeejay Surrendra Group's founders, acquires it
2008: Restoration starts
2013: Work finishes
5 big-his: Spread over approximately 71,741sq feet, the Raj-era mansion has five blocks of four-storey buildings
Rs 10 crore: Cost of the restoration project

More than reliving the East European aura, the outstanding conservation and restoration earned the Apeejay group the CMC-INTACH Heritage Award 2013.

Paul had initiated the restoration in 2006 while nephew Karan Paul completed it following his uncle's death.

57A Park Street is a mix of residential and commercial spaces on the roof — oozing old-world charm. So do the wooden banisters, arched coloured windows, antique letterboxes and old grilles elevators — gentle reminders of the days when General Manekshaw would walk across the Maidan from Fort William for an evening at Park Mansions.

The renovation started with Block Four that was razed in a devastating fire in 1958. "The whole block suffered a lateral twist from the heat. It's been reborn from scratch," said Bibhas Kumar Sanjal, the Apeejay group's senior project manager. "It is still vacant and will be leased out soon."

The wooden stairways on the rest of the four blocks had

to be recast with fresh teak and sprayed with a fire-retardant solution. The burnt wooden stairs of Block Four were replaced with marble. "The five entrances to the blocks had chessboard-style marble floors. That's almost gone. We replaced them with Valentino and black Marquina marble," Sanjal said.

"Post-restoration, the building now is as it used to be a century ago. The blocks continue to be individual units, connecting on the roof. The ground floor is commercial space, the other floors are mostly residential and partly rented out to offices," he said.

Park Mansions housed many well-known establishments: Alliance Francaise, the Bombay Photo Stores, the fabled Skyroom restaurant and Arts & Prints, one of the first galleries to display contemporary art, which opened in 1960 with an exhibition of the works of Paritosh Sen, Gopal Ghosh, Prakash Karmakar, Rabind Mandal and Chintamani Kar.

The big daddies still shop over the years and corner stores dotted the ground floor. These little shops have morphed into smart retail spaces with a designer touch: Pizza Hut, Burlington's, Subway, Veda, Delsey, Reliance Digital, GKB, VIP, Wonderland, Matthews & Company and Rajnikanth.

There were no drawings or pictures of the original building. Over the years, arches had blighted and the structure of certain sections completely changed. Based on whatever remained of the original building, we recreated a uniform look," Sanjal said.

Architect Dulal Mukherjee anchored the design solution. French architect Laurent Fournier was deployed to design the terracotta balustrades that line the roof, fusing Victorian architecture with Bengal art. "These are handmade by Hooghly artist Gopal Das," Sanjal said.

The restorers hired six masons from a Midnapore village who specialised in Armenian architecture to work on the arches and designs. "The stained glass was specially procured from old razed buildings. These were to fit the arched windows of Park Mansions," Sanjal said.

The challenges went down the line because identifying each tenant's electricity cable took almost a year. The leaky roof posed another problem.

"The time roofing had to be peeled and replaced. The entire building had to be plastered with lime that usually takes three months to dry. We had to use the same materials that were originally used in accordance with the strict heritage guidelines," Sanjal said.

BORN AGAIN, HERITAGE LIVES IN CITY'S HEART



After five years of hard work that includes conceiving the design since the original was long lost, Park Mansions oozes its old-world charm again



(Clockwise from left) The wooden staircase lands on a chessboard-style marble floor; the coloured glass windows and the old grilles elevator

The dome (top left and right), overlooking the crossroads and another one on the roof. Post-restoration pictures by Biswajit Dutta

'A painstaking labour of love'

KARAN PAUL, the chairman of Apeejay Surrendra Group, tells Metro what it takes to restore an old building like Park Mansions and how it felt to receive a heritage award.

■ Congratulations on the CMC-INTACH Heritage Award 2013 for Park Mansions. We're very proud of it, thank you. It was a painstaking labour of love since the (restoration) project started five years ago. There are so many amazing old buildings in the city... usually decrepit and rundown.

On Park Street, in particular, there are three or four

buildings. It's great to be recognised that Apeejay is the pioneer in investing in such a building and making it visually appealing. It's about time INTACH and CMC pushed their agenda further. Kumartuli, VIP Road, Dalhousie have such great heritage... recognition is the first step towards getting more activity around it. I think there should be more proactive work.

■ What was the thrust of the makeover model for Park Mansions? No changes at all, keep it the way it was. The idea was to get in a more sophisticated look especially for the retail shops. We looked at heritage

buildings in Paris and London. Colonial structures housing high-end retail. We looked at images in terms of the shop windows and signage. That helped create a nice look. We were looking at the best international practices. That made a big difference to the look of Park Mansions' Park Street facade. They look uniform.

The window is clear and the signage small and elegant. We've redone the lobbies of all five blocks, in wood and marble. Found the traditional lift-makers and kept the lifts the way they were.

■ Can we expect some well-known retail stores at Park Mansions? We don't want retail chains

or restaurants inside the buildings or in the flats, unless they're high-end designer ateliers or studios.

The top-end hasn't come to Calcutta and whatever has, have gone to Sanjiv's (Goenka) mall (Quest). Maybe in the next three-five years we can see it evolve into a high street but Park Street very much remains F&B.

■ It was a landmark building with an art gallery, photo store and famous restaurants. It had Skyroom and Burlington's, two places that I'd go to a lot as a child. I've always been in and out of Park Mansions as a child because some close friends lived there.

We used to have a guesthouse.

■ People miss it... I suggest everyone should go back to Flury's and taste the fantastic food and tea there!

(Laughs) I know everybody sheds a tear for old Flury's and the cooks who made the cheese toast and the beans on toast. The taste changed... people crib, but sales have been up 400 per cent after renovation. So we have no plans of opening an old outlet again.

■ Your favourite heritage buildings.

St. John's Church, the Park Street Cemetery, the Central Avenue stretch... stunning from both sides, and the railway house on the riverside.

— MD

JOB DONE WELL

The CMC-INTACH Heritage Award 2013 was awarded on Friday to Park Mansions at a function, attended by major Govan Chatterjee, Apeejay Surrendra group chairman Karan Paul, architect Dulal Mukherjee and INTACH's state convener G.M. Kapur among others. A plaque was unveiled too.



It was my duty to form a heritage committee. It is a tough job to

maintain and conserve heritage buildings, like this one, that house so many tenants. The tenants often pay minimum rent and cannot maintain the building. It is difficult to maintain heritage structures in the city with the corpus funds available for the purpose. But the Apeejay group has managed to do the job pretty well... Everybody should come forward and help maintain our heritage

Sovan Chatterjee



This award is a great honour. Park Mansions was a labour of love... I

am grateful to all for surpassing great challenges and working meticulously on this beautiful architectural heritage. We are proud of what we have achieved together. Because of all our efforts history will live on. I have more plans for Park Mansions that will add grandeur and value to Park Street.

Karan Paul

The idea of giving the award is to inspire other heritage-



building owners to follow suit and maintain their property. We deliberated on a few choices but Park Mansions won hands down

G.M. Kapur



This award is an honour for both the Apeejay group and me. We have worked in a compatible way, with a lot of emotions for all these months. The loss hanging electrical wires and the pipelines inside the building were horrifying. Good to see we have come so far. This is not the end but the start.

Dulal Mukherjee

Text by Chandreyee Ghose