

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

BOHEMIAN MUMBAI

The Kala Ghoda district is fast becoming a global destination for its public arts festival, blue-chip galleries and boutiques—and its resistance to reckless development.

BY SARAH KHAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE MORRISONS



EAST MEETS WEST One of a fresh crop of Kala Ghoda dining spots, The Pantry is meant to evoke a Parisian cafe, with its bright, airy décor and a menu that includes roast chicken and flourless chocolate cake.

IN THE SOUTHERN REACHES of Mumbai, the Kala Ghoda district's cobbled lanes are fringed by a motley architectural spectrum: the Indo-Saracenic Prince of Wales Museum, the neoclassical Army and Navy Building, the powder-blue Victorian Keneseth Eliyahu Synagogue. "It's almost like a museum of architecture," says Rahul Mehrotra, chair of the department of urban planning and design at Harvard, who helped delineate the city's conservation zones in 1994.

So when India's government announced in September that it had sweeping visions of recasting the historic precinct in the mold of New York's Times Square—awash with behemoth electronic billboards, costumed characters and glowing steps, all of it continuously streamed online—Mehrotra almost mistook the proposition for political bombast. But the plans were quite serious. "It's a bad idea," he says. "Actually, it's almost ridiculous. It reflects a complete misunderstanding of the nature of an arts district in Mumbai."

Until the late '80s, Kala Ghoda was known mostly for its colleges and libraries. Today, in a city that largely lacks pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods and arts-focused public infrastructure, it's becoming a cultural nerve center—and a growing global tourism destination.

Much of that imaginative energy flows from one event on the city's social calendar: Every February, thousands of Mumbaikars converge for the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, when the crescent-shaped sliver of land wedged between the Prince of Wales Museum (now renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya) and the Bombay Stock Exchange hosts a brimming roster of plays, art exhibitions and concerts. This year, the program runs from February 7 to 15. You can attend events such as a cooking demonstration on Parsi cuisine or a lecture by author William Dalrymple in a lush garden backed by the ornate facade of Elphinstone College. The event has been a citywide attraction for 16 years, and Brinda Miller has been heading the festival committee for six of them. "We started the festival to create awareness," says Miller, standing on the terrace of the committee headquarters, "and Kala Ghoda is now known as an arts area."

While in years past the quiet pocket came alive only for the festival, today it buzzes year-round, thanks to a wave of new restaurants, boutiques and galleries that feel both entirely international yet uniquely Indian. "It's become good real estate to be in this area," says Miller.

The name *Kala Ghoda*, or "black horse" in Hindi, derives from a statue of King Edward VII that once presided over a plaza. South Bombay was the heart of the colonial city, and its elegant buildings are a legacy of the British Raj (as is the name Bombay, which was officially changed to Mumbai two decades ago—though locals prefer to ignore that fact). Still, until recently, wealthy Mumbaikars and the hot spots that cater to them had been migrating farther and farther north, to converted mills in Lower Parel and Worli and the Bollywood-star-studded suburbs of Bandra and Juhu. South Bombay became the

domain of businesses and tourists, and Kala Ghoda a bastion of academic institutions.

That's changed with Kala Ghoda's evolution into Mumbai's artistic core. The colossal Jehangir Art Gallery, a neighborhood fixture since 1952, has served as a model for dozens of smaller galleries that have recently opened. Gallery 7 moved from upscale Cuffe Parade, and behind its hulking black door on Rampart Row, whitewashed walls explode with colorful contemporary canvases by Indian masters such as Tyeb Mehta and M.F. Husain. The four-story Delhi Art Gallery, which opened in late 2013 as the Mumbai satellite of a venerable 20-year-old institution in New Delhi, represents blue-chip artists such as Krishen Khanna, Rabindranath Tagore and Akbar Padamsee.

The anchor of the Kala Ghoda dining scene is Trishna, a local seafood joint with a cult following for its delicate pepper-crusted Hyderabad *rawas* fish, deep-fried prawn *koliwada*, sweet-and-spicy chile squid and garlic-butter crab that's best sopped up with naan (if you're up for it, the waiter will bring out wriggling live crabs for you to select from). But a spate of younger eateries now vies for its stature, like the tiny Kala Ghoda Café—a mainstay for creative types brainstorming over coffee and chile-cheese toast—or the Parisian-inspired The Pantry. The Nutcracker, a retro-chic 26-seat diner serving an all-day breakfast menu, opened last November; pocket-size La Folie Patisserie sells sculptural pastries and a rainbow of macarons; and jazzy Nico Bombay, in a 120-year-old building near the stock exchange, boasts a mouthwatering fettuccine daubed in a roast chicken *jus*.

When Tina Tahiliani Parikh began working at her family's clothing boutique Ensemble in 1992, Kala Ghoda's cluttered by-lanes teemed with machine showrooms. "This was the most unfashionable area of the time—the Meatpacking District without the hides of meat," she says. These days, Ensemble, with its racks of gem-encrusted saris, *lehengas* and *churidaars* by Manish Malhotra, Anand Kabra and Parikh's own brother, Tarun Tahiliani, is considered one of the city's most fashionable addresses.

One afternoon last year, a bride had flown in from Kenya for the final fitting of her shimmering Anamika Khanna wedding lehenga. "Please open a store in Nairobi," she entreated Parikh, "I've flown to Mumbai four times in the last few months just to shop here."

"Kala Ghoda was always a cool neighborhood, but now people are finally seeing its potential," Parikh says. "It's gaining critical mass."

Fashion designers make up an important part of that critical mass. Noorie Sadarangani opened her furniture and clothing atelier, Obataimu, in November 2013; a few months later, designer Masaba Gupta—whose quirky prints and bold colors have made her label a top red-carpet choice for many a Bollywood star—launched a joint store with jewelry line Valliyan by Nitya Arora next door. Online tailored-shirt purveyors Bombay Shirt Company went brick-and-mortar last July, and trendy designer Gaurav Gupta unveiled a flagship last October.

At the Japanese-inspired Obataimu, Sadarangani experiments with everything from sumptuously soft cloud-cotton shirts and sculptural hand-quilted tops to Art Deco chairs. There's also a tailoring school in the back, and each month the whole space converts into a cultural salon where Sadarangani hosts lectures and musical events. "The space was built to transform in a few different ways, like a Rubik's Cube," she says. "The idea was also to build a cultural platform for the neighborhood."

Brinda Miller and other community leaders say they learned about the government's development plans, launched by the Ministry of Tourism, only from the newspapers. But rather than capitulate to what they consider misguided ideas about capitalizing on the area's newfound energy, they've instead mobilized to voice their concerns. "It's a Heritage Site; how can you put neon signs on an old building?" asks Miller. "If a neon sign goes up, people will physically bring it down."

So far, their efforts seem to be paying off—the government now says it's reconsidering its initial Times Square-inspired plans. "That's not going to happen," says Valsa Nair-Singh, the managing director of the state-level Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (she hadn't yet taken on her role when the plans were first released). "We will be keeping the heritage precinct intact." Instead, she says, resources will be put toward promoting Kala Ghoda as a global tourism destination. "We want to make it a very happening place," says Nair-Singh.

Miller hopes the funds will go toward rendering Kala Ghoda even more pedestrian friendly—"definitely more of a European square or British square than an American-style Times Square," she says. While the area is more easily navigated on foot than are other parts of the notoriously gridlocked city, it's hardly immune from heavy traffic. Walkable areas are increasingly rare in Mumbai. As thousands of Indians migrate to the financial center of the country each year searching for employment—33 percent of India's income tax is generated here—the city's population has surged to more than 12 million, resulting in a density that hovers above 70,000 people per square mile, with one out of every three residents living in a slum.

Even if it never receives government funding, Kala Ghoda is already providing a model for what an arts-driven Mumbai neighborhood might look like. "It's exciting because there's a new wave of people coming in," Sadarangani says. "It's a fresh way of thinking in Bombay, and we're hoping that it catches on." ●



ON MUMBAI TIME Clockwise from left: The serene interior of restaurant Nico Bombay; Radhika Menon, a sales clerk at clothing boutique Ensemble, wearing a dress by Manish Malhotra; paintings at Gallery 7.



PASSAGE TO INDIA Right: Kala Ghoda is a nexus of architectural influences, such as the European-style The Pantry. Below: A waiter serving tea on the back patio of the small but welcoming Kala Ghoda Café.

