

Past perfect: Why luxury brands are investing heavily in heritage

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Restoration and maintenance aren't easy, but this segment of real-estate offers vintage charm, spacious premises and an exclusivity that complements brand identities.

At Horniman Circle, French fashion house Hermes, shoe couturier Christian Louboutin and coffee chain Starbucks wiped the dust off colonial buildings' stately facades, to set shop. Scentido, a niche perfumery, moved into Kala Ghoda in February.



Zara's move into a 111-year-old building at Flora Fountain reflects the global retail trend of high-end labels opting for the snob appeal of a standalone store in a premium property. (HT File Photo)

"Before we moved into this space, it was used as a godown by a tobacco brand; the doors and windows were boarded up, the stone walls caked in paint, there was shattered stained glass above the doorways and unlicensed hawkers camped in the foyer," Shishir Mehta, founder and partner of Scentido.

Architect Kavita Trivedi was roped in to restore the Art Deco building from the 1800s. "We have recreated original detailing in the woodwork and the beams, restored the stained glass and the wooden staircase. The stone walls were restored inch by inch to their former glory. The external

stone facade had to undergo several washes to clean off the grime that had accumulated over the years,” she says.

Retail renaissance

All five storeys of the 111-year-old Yusuf Ismail Trust building at Flora Fountain were leased out to Spanish fashion label Zara last year. The building had previously housed banks and offices.

“Around the world, the company has shown a keen interest in housing themselves in historic properties, in line with the brand’s vision of marrying technology with tradition,” says architect Kirtida Unwalla, the Indian associate of Zara’s in-house design team, which headed the restoration.



The hunt for premium space is in the line with the Starbucks ‘Third Place’ philosophy of wanting to be a consumer’s third hangout choice, after home and work. (HT File Photo)

Her statement is reflective of a global retail trend: high-end labels opting for the snob appeal of a standalone store in a premium property.

“Historically, international and Indian luxury brands have moved into heritage buildings for the unique charm and regality they offer, allowing the premium brands to offer an ‘experience’ to the shopper,” says Ashutosh Limaye, head of research and REIS at JLL India.

“Some brands also have a philosophy of heritage and culture conservation. In actual architectural terms, the positives include higher ceilings that allow vertical space for creative interiors, display

and stocking. The demand for such properties is high as they are limited in number and are therefore viewed as marquee properties in both real-estate and retail industries.”

Bean there

For Starbucks, the hunt for premium space is in the line with their ‘Third Place’ philosophy of wanting to be a consumer’s third hangout choice, after home and work.

“This is a brand built on superlative coffee, enhanced by an elevated store ambience,” says Veetika Deoras, head of marketing for digital and loyalty at Tata Starbucks. “The heritage structures we locate ourselves in in India include Elphinstone Building store at Horniman Circle, Hamilton House at Delhi’s Connaught Place and on Kolkata’s Park Street, all housed in beautiful heritage structures. Starbucks, whilst bringing an international experience to different cities, also believes in embracing and nurturing the varied rich history of the cities it launches in too.”

Retail gentrification is a cyclical pattern that has occurred in many beautiful cities of the world, says architect and conservationist Brinda Somaya. Her 1990 restoration of the Phillips Antiques Stores was an act of adhering to the design philosophy of a brand that has been around for nearly 200 years.

“The Phillips Antique Store was established in 1860 but moved to its present location in 1920 at Oriental Mansions, an Indo-Saracenic style structure,” says Farooq Issa, the proprietor of the store. Opticians Lawrence & Mayo and Westside are other examples of retailers operating out of addresses listed as heritage buildings.

Colonial buildings, Portuguese homes

In Goa, retail is just beginning to expand its footprint, and already niche labels are moving into 300-year-old homes and refurbishing them as commercial establishments.



A wooden staircase was restored to its former glory at Scentido, a niche perfumery set up in an Art Deco building in Kala Ghoda.

“Every other Indo-Portuguese style house and old church here is a heritage structure. In a British-ruled Bombay, all the public buildings were grand, but in Goa, colonial architecture touched the lives of the common man,” says Subodh Kerkar, the curator of the Museum of Goa.”

That sense of nostalgia is seeing cafés and home décor stores, big brands and indie ventures, opt for heritage over main street. Literati, a quaint bookshop in Candolim, the Tommy Hilfiger store in Panaji, The Linen Shop in Campal and the Paper Boat Collective home décor store in Sangolda all occupy centuries-old Goan homes

“Indians are used to retail being unsegregated in their urban settlement patterns, so this is like going back to the basics. It’s the mall format that was new for us,” says Raya Shankwalker, secretary of the NGO Goa Heritage Action Group. “There is great incentive for aspirational brands to move into heritage buildings, present in prime urban historic locations, so they can have unique settings for their products. It’s essentially inner city revival.”

Renovating a relic

Moving into a heritage building does, of course, entail an additional cost of restoration and modernisation of infrastructure, plus a lot more maintenance than a modern structure.

“A tiled roof needs regular maintenance. Windows with oyster pane inserts are almost impossible to find,” says Bhagyashree Patwardhan, founder of Paper Boat Collective.

Acquiring the materials can be difficult; finding the skilled labour, even more so, adds architect Unwalla. “It requires patience and perseverance. Most importantly it needs an understanding of why authenticity and aesthetics matter.”