



Original Article at: <http://www.timeoutmumbai.net/mumbai-local/features/american-tale>

American tale

The 1950s-era Petroleum House marked a milestone for office culture and architecture in the city.



Petroleum House, 17 Jamshedji Tata Road, Mumbai-400020

In the fall of August 1952, **Baaqer Shirazi** had just begun a master's degree in engineering at the University of Kansas in the United States when he got a call from Standard Vacuum Oil, Exxon- Mobil's old avatar. The company asked the twenty-something from Byculla if he would give up his studies to come back and help build its India headquarters. Shirazi, who had come to the US four years earlier on a trooper ship, responded that he would - if they sprang for an airline ticket. "That was the first time I flew in my life," said Shirazi, "to come back to Bombay and build this building."

That building was **Petroleum House**, one of the city's first modern office blocks. Even today, the seven-storey construction, with its black granite visage and art

deco signage, stands out among the more conventional structures on Jamshedji Tata Road in Churchgate. For its time, it was unique - an American upstart in a newly independent city. Many of the elements of office life we take for granted today were first seen together here: **the open plan office layout, central air-conditioning, concealed wiring and plumbing and an automated telephone system, at that time one of the two largest in India. The building was also an early experiment in green design, using louvres to reduce heat and rain, a technique that was more famously deployed to modulate light by Le Corbusier in Chandigarh.**

Buildings from the 1950s are not found on heritage lists. But several including Petroleum House “broke new ground architecturally while displaying the fervour sought to be realised by Nehru in his vision of a modern India”, notes architect Mustansir Dalvi in the Urban Design Research Institute publication 4 from the '50s. The design of Petroleum House reflected the emergence of the US as a postcolonial superpower - through the expansion of its oil companies - as well as Mumbai's embrace of modernism in the decade after independence.

For two young Indians, Petroleum House was their first major professional assignment - **Shirazi**, who was paid `650 a month as construction manager, and **Kamu Iyer**, a student at Sir JJ School of Architecture who worked for a princely sum of `1.50 an hour, or 35 cents, in 1953. For both of them, working with Americans - including architect Chauncey Riley and engineer CV Plogg - was a formative experience. Compared with the stiff-lipped British, the Americans seemed “rough”, reminisced Iyer. Many were “red-necks from the mid- West”. But they were also more open and hardworking. Senior company men never shut the doors of their rooms, Shirazi said. British officials in the rival Burma Shell were known to take a “chair siesta” after lunch, but “not the Americans, they worked from 9am to 12 noon and from 1 to 5pm”. Unlike in British firms, added Iyer, Indian employees at Standard Vacuum were allowed to wear dhotis instead of trousers.

The openness that characterised American office culture was apparent in the innovative design of the building. It had the first open plan office in the city and was one of the first to eschew a compound wall. The pink dining tabletops in the canteen were made of formica, then a novelty worldwide. Plywood was used instead of timber in the cabins and metal partitions installed in toilet stalls, recalled Iyer. There were Yale locks and **Otis elevators, perhaps the fastest in India at the**

time. “Eighty feet per second,” said Shirazi, “We had to slow it down because people got dizzy.”

The oil company headquarters was also innovative in what would be today called “green design”. A cork insulation roof reduced heat while asphalt floors reduced noise, said Shirazi. **The most important green feature was also its chief architectural one: the 1180 vertical louvres and the 1347 horizontal louvres that wrap the building, saving 20 to 25 per cent of the air-conditioning load.** They were built according to a study of the angles of the sun’s rays, the first analysis of its kind in Mumbai. Another important but less obvious feature: the concrete was left exposed, thanks to special techniques that averted the honeycombs that typically makes plastering necessary.

In 1954, barely two years after construction started, Petroleum House was inaugurated by then chief minister Morarji Desai. In 1962, Standard Vacuum became Esso, and in 1974, it was nationalised into Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited. Much has changed since. An annexe has been built in the compound and the interiors have been revamped - for the better, said Iyer on a recent visit. But the elevators and Italian marble in the lobby remain, as does the essence of the structure.

As for the two young men who worked on the project, they never forgot their first job. Iyer, now 80, became the founding partner of Architects Combine and a noted modernist. Shirazi, who is 87 and till recently was an avid squash player, went on to work with and then buy up one half of R A Cole, the waterproofing and painting contractor for Petroleum House (founder Cole later brought polystyrene to India, which may have resulted in its name here: thermocole).

Both men still attend office every day, as if they never lost the zeal of the 1950s. And like the Americans, said Shirazi, “I always keep the door of my office open.”

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Article by Vaishnavi Chandrashekar on August 17 2012

Photos by Mohnish Dabhoya

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