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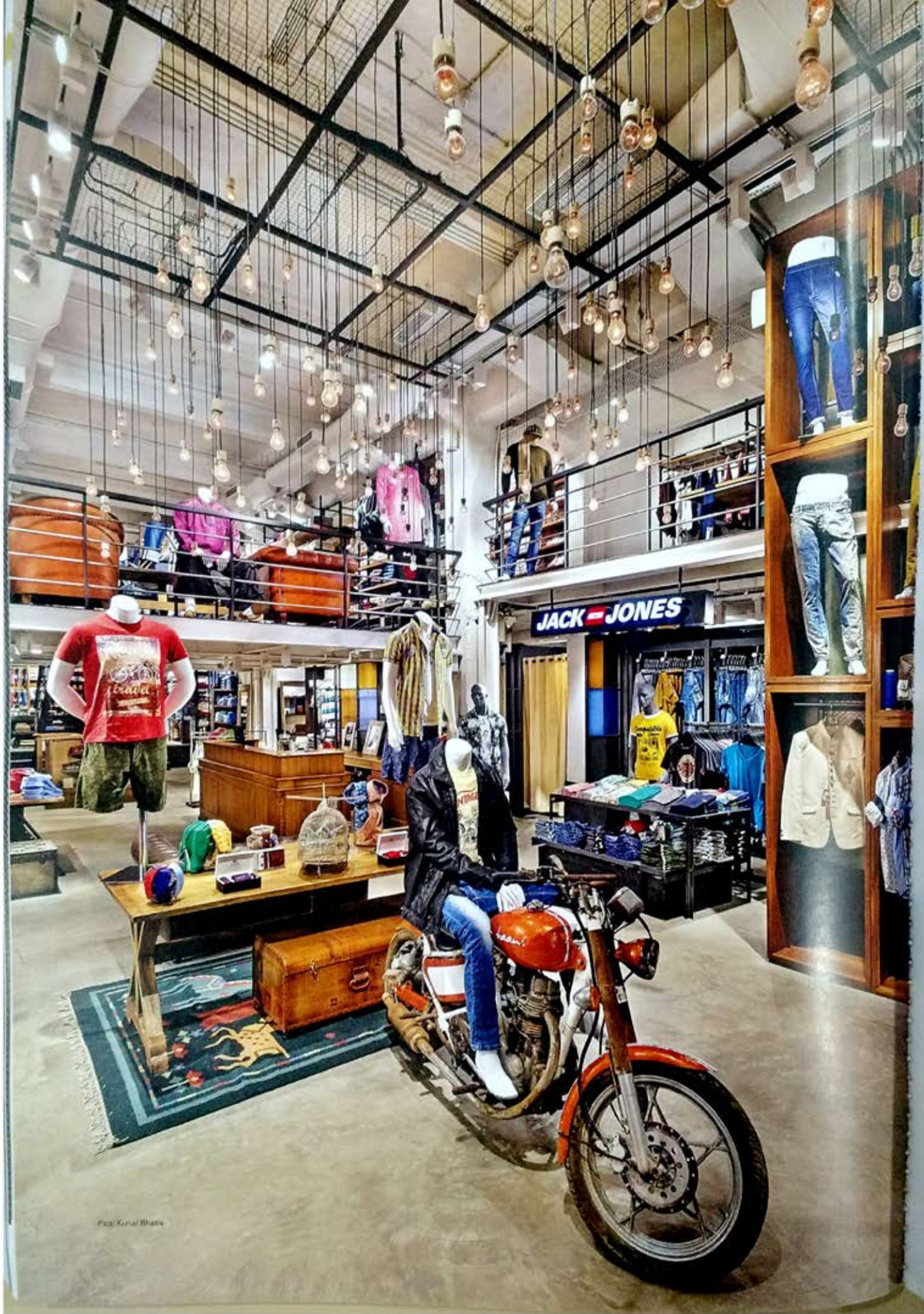


Photo: Gopal Bhatia

OF NEW WINE AND OLD BOTTLES

Stripping the old premises to its bare shell, DCA Architects give a new lease of life to a century old store in Mumbai. Retaining the vintage feel of the space while introducing an industrial chic ambience appropriate for a men's store, the marriage of old and new is an easy going one, finds out Devyani Jayakar.

"Let's see the bones," could well have been the thought in the mind of Amit Aurora of DCA Architects, as he set about peeling off more than a century of haphazard renovations to this store. Not just any store, but one that had been a household byword in its heyday - the 'go to' place for shopping by the family. "Although it was located in the heritage area of Mumbai's Fort area, we were lucky that this particular building was not listed, which allowed for great flexibility in the design process," says Aurora. "However, it had potential by virtue of the shared character of its neighbours in the location."

Originating in 1897 as the first departmental store in India, Akbarallys showcases the rich legacy that derives from its existence of over 118 years. Conversing with the historicity of the city, today the 10,000 sq.ft. space is a multi-branded departmental store for men. With a shop-in-shop format, it reinvents its original concept of 'everything under one roof.' To maintain its antique character, the brief was to transform the old site into a

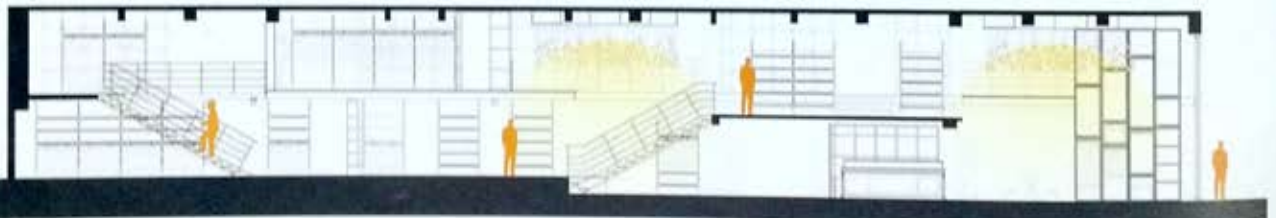
contemporary avatar, while retaining the celebrated inheritance.

The store has been in this location since the 1950's and was renovated multiple times over, each time with layers covering its original form and structure. Soon it became evident that the façade itself had been altered a few times during previous renovations, to the extent where it was impossible to tell whether the multitude of beams served an aesthetic or structural purpose. There was no documentation and the owner could not recollect the details of the changes. "However, we had a very meticulous engineer, who used props before removing a beam and then checked for deflections. With each subsequent removal of a beam, the windows kept getting bigger," says Aurora.

As the renovation progressed, many surprises were unearthed. "What emerged was a blend of half-broken cornices and capitals, old arches and multiple structural systems, and all of these - good, bad and ugly have been retained as is, to demonstrate the authentic character of

the site for a novel aesthetic," says Aurora. From low height spaces with padded beams where one had to mind one's head, a reinforced structure with a reduced load has emerged.

Aurora defined the store's lighting strategy as a blend of traditional and contemporary styles while serving functional, ambient and decorative lighting effectively. The extensive lighting intent is indicated at the very entrance to the store, with its name being backlit and fixtures on vertical tracks flanking the windows, one of which is adorned with a striking installation of suspended LED lamps echoed in the double height space within. The narrow entrance leads into a deepened, elongated interior; the front providing the only entry for natural light. In Aurora's reckoning, this didn't matter, since, "Natural light is the enemy of garment retail. The colours of sunlight keep changing with the passage of the day, weather and season, making it impossible to predict or control. The harsh glare can also make it difficult to contend with. Strangely, the more the natural light,

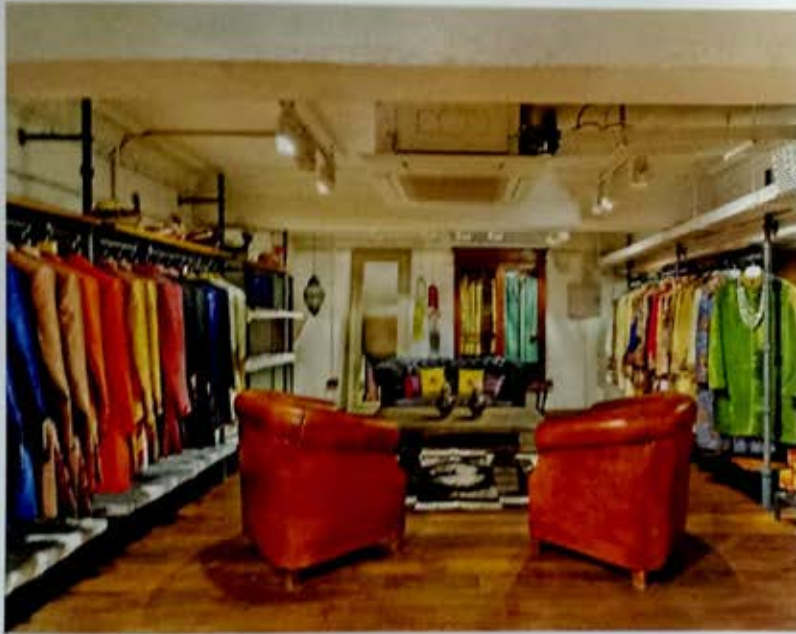


Drawing: Courtesy DCA Architects

the more the artificial light required, as the eye adjusts to the brightness.” Addressing the need to accentuate multiple focal points, the lighting scheme creates contrasts between display areas and general ambience to highlight laid out products. Ceilings and walls are deliberately painted white to reflect the light and attain a uniform glow, while track mounted spotlights are used to emphasise the merchandise. Double height spaces are layered with a metal grid on the ceiling slab, which is periodically used to suspend clusters of LED lamps that create an atmosphere of celebration, and at the same time are reminiscent of a by-gone era. They meticulously hover over displays of new arrivals of the season, drawing the eye to fresh merchandise. To carry forward the historic imagery of the store, while celebrating its spirit

towards industrialisation, salvaged old ship and machine parts were sourced from the Mumbai ship breaking yard, and used as props that align with the theme of the interiors. The entrance façade was refurbished using corten steel to uphold the design and maintain the old structure and bequest. “Space planning and enhancement has been crucial to the design intent. Most of the store has hence been painted white in order to visually maximise the space available. Sub-mezzanine levels are created to work around the structure and to obtain better clearances and clear circulation patterns,” says Aurora. Added features such as an in-house barber shop and a pedicure and manicure station catering to quick grooming and styling needs, have also been designed within, enhancing the customer experience. Old wood was reclaimed and used to

make furniture as well as flooring of premium sections on the mezzanine. This is complemented by the use of a chequered plate on the casual section of the mezzanine, IPS on the entire ground floor, with black and white terrazzo in the barber shop. “The raw, rustic intent in the materiality is carried forward by using coloured galecha glasses and antique mirrors in-filled in lacquered mild steel framework, to form partitions and panelling through the store,” says Aurora. The shelving and display has all been designed as ‘nuts and bolts’ to create a unique identity, while simultaneously creating a flexible system to meet the needs of modern retail. Restored to its original structure, the store’s interiors in shades of black and white are minimalistic and classic. The pillars continue to bear



beautiful mouldings designed during its glorious past. The entire space has been embellished using curated antique furniture in leather and accessories that are sourced from local vendors and the renowned Chor Bazaar of Mumbai, reused as highlights to enhance the functional as well as luxury quotient. Retrofit wall sconces adorn the barber section to give it an old world charm, while retrofit LED lamps in antique fixtures and chandeliers throughout the store lead to savings in energy consumption, all the while maintaining the distinct character of these decorative lights. Sources with 3000K colour temperature and high CRI values have been used to facilitate a fine visual atmosphere for clearer perception of products and materials for sale. "The serendipitous find of several cut glass globes led us to use them in a way which we had not planned earlier," says Aurora.

Old chandeliers, rugs, antique glass and tables, carts, chesterfields, sandooks (old trunks) and vintage mirrors, either locally sourced or belonging to the family for generations, all augment the elegance of the store's ambience, while enhancing the functional elements of retail. Antique chandeliers have been used to enhance the ambience of the occasion in the parts of the space that signify 'heritage wear'. Natural light affects the setting of the store only through the facade, so the relationship of space, shadow and daylight is minimal, hence showcasing decorative lights, energy efficient lights, antique lights and lights that add a raw and rustic feel to the store, to maintain the authenticity and remember times gone by. "Moreover, by using LEDs, we have kept the heat load and maintenance as low as possible," concludes Aurora. www.groupdca.in

AWARDS

- VM&RD Retail Design Awards 2016 Best Visual Merchandising
- VM&RD Retail Design Awards 2016 Merit Certificates: Department Store, Best Shop Fitting, Best Lighting
- IID Anchor Awards 2015 | Zonal Runner-Up: Retail

PROJECT DETAILS

Kharaljiy Nav, Mumbai
 Client: Ritesh Khosla
 Architect: DCA Architects
 Project Team: Anil Aurora, Rahul Bansal
 Structural Consultant: Chetani Consultants, Mumbai
 Electrical Consultants: Design Matrix, New Delhi