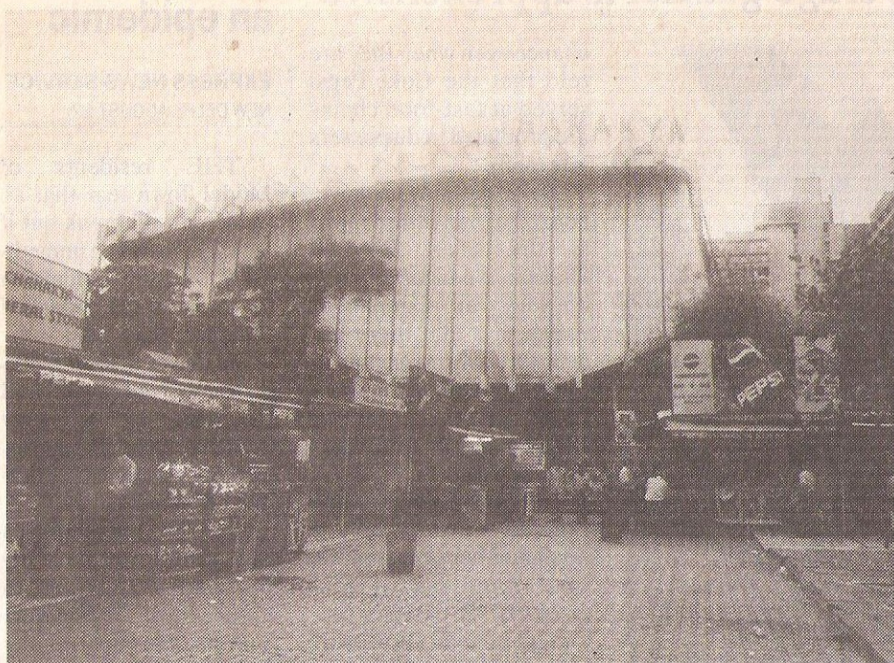


Take over Chanakya cinema but protect it

SUDHIR VOHRA

THE Delhi High Court's order to restore Chanakya cinema back to its owner NDMC was much awaited and welcome. But with the hullabaloo about the legal case, there are also sounds about how Chanakya theatre could soon be demolished to make way for what is called a multiplex complex. And this is where the problem lies.

Chanakya is a symbol of a unique style in contemporary Indian architecture of the early sixties. It is not just any old cinema building. Before Chanakya appeared on the skyline, the only popular cinema halls were the ones built during the times of Edward Lutyens — Regal theatre, Odeon, Plaza and Shiela. These were boxed in buildings built amongst the com-



The NDMC wants to demolish the theatre and build a multiplex.

mercial complexes of the time. Chanakya's architecture had a few firsts.

It was a stand-alone structure set far away from other buildings with a grand parking space. A

soaring concrete building, it was designed such that the scientifically shaped forms of the theatre were visible from outside — unlike the old style *dabba* shapes of earlier theatres.

Chanakya's public lobbies are large and grand, designed to accommodate a large number of people in well-lit and airy spaces. The building is stronger than the signage spaces meant

The structural design has been a monument for architecture students. The theatre has the first 70-mm cinematographic screen, curved in a scientific manner to suit projectors of the time

for displaying the daily movie. Perhaps, Chanakya can be compared in these respects to the new theatres being built in those times in Chandigarh — Neelam in Sector 17 is another example of the stand-alone style.

Moving away from the

then traditional system of a lower hall and the upper balcony, Chanakya had two additional side wings. The upper balcony had escape routes to the lower floor as well — in wide passages going down the two wings. Safety was an important element in the design — its exit points opened out in all directions.

Chanakya's RCC structure was also one of the first of its kind as it does not contain the normal asbestos sheet shed roof. The structural design has been a monument in itself for students of architecture. It contains the first 70-mm cinematographic screen, curved in a scientific manner to suit the projectors of the time.

The water body on one side of Chanakya at one time served as the air-conditioning plants' cooling waters. Though now, ugly cooling towers occupy a part of the parking space.

When Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* was premiered, it was at Chanakya. The first few film festivals were also screened here. The NDMC needs to restore this building as a symbol of contemporary Indian architecture. In any other city, it would have been declared a heritage building, retained and brought back to its former glory.

The NDMC does not have too many cinema halls in its 27-sq km jurisdiction but it has a lot of other venues to earn revenue from. It has a huge budget because of its importance and locations. Making money by selling off well-located lands and heritage buildings is not the mandate of the NDMC. Retaining the good things of life is.

(Sudhir Vohra is a prominent architect who writes on issues of urban chaos)