

Fault Lines in Chennai's Heritage Conservation

Investigative Project

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The Spencer Plaza in Chennai, built in 1863, is India's oldest shopping mall. It was constructed in the Indo-Saracenic architecture style with Moorish arches by Charles Durant and JW Spencer. It was suspiciously destroyed in a fire in 1983, and rebuilt into a modern, stylish mall, erasing the architectural landmark.

In another fire incident in 1985, the 120-year old Chennai Central Moore Market Complex, located at the centre of the first British settlement in India, suffered irreparable damage and was later demolished to build a commercial complex.

The Gokhale Hall, constructed in 1915, witnessed iconic speeches by Annie Besant, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu during the freedom struggle. The Hall is in a deplorable condition today and is struggling to find people who can fight for its restoration.

The Bharat Insurance building on Anna Salai road, built 122 years ago, is one of the finest examples of the Indo-Saracenic architecture, a combination of Dravidian and Islamic architecture, with stained glass panels, domes, arches, and 100-foot minarets. Repeated attempts were made by its owner Life Insurance Company (LIC) to demolish the structure due to its unreliable structure. The intervention by Indian National Trust for Architectural and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) made the High Court issue an order in 2009 regarding a conservation committee for the protection and conservation of heritage structures and stopped LIC from demolishing. Today, the building is in a dilapidated condition; exterior infested with vegetation, broken window panes and floor covered with water.



Bharath Insurance building in its dilapidated condition (Photo credit: The Hindu)

These buildings, and hundreds of more such buildings, is why historian and chronicler S. Muthiah called Chennai "the city of firsts". The first Dutch settlement in India was at Pulicat, almost 50 km from the city. Before the British drew the Northern belt of the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia on their colonial map, they made Madras their first settlement.

The first engineering college outside Europe was established here. The first British Corporation and judiciary system functioned for the first time in Madras in the mid-1600s.

However, the city fails its reputation in protecting these “firsts” from deteriorating. The Tamil Nadu Heritage Commission Act was established in 2012 to identify, restore and preserve heritage buildings in the State. Before that, the State only had a protection law for monuments and archaeological sites under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 (Central Act) and the Tamil Nadu Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1966.

“The 2012 Act has been passed by the government. However, the rules are yet to be framed and a new committee will be formed to implement it, disbanding the current Heritage Conservation Committee (HCC),” said Mr. M. Kumar, a Deputy Planner, HCC. The HCC was formed in 2010 after a High Court order and works under the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA).

The HCC works with the Justice E. Padmanabhan Committee Report of 467 heritage buildings in Chennai that was provided in 2010 to protect them. The HCC was ordered to document all the listed structures and tag them as heritage buildings. However, the first phase of the documentation only happened only last year. “We document the present use of the structure, its location, owner, architecture style, and heritage value,” said Ms. S. Kanchanamala, another Deputy Planner, who heads reclassification and documentation.

“In the first phase, 164 structures were documented and sent to the State government for approval in 2017-18. We are still waiting for the approval,” Ms. Kanchanamala said. “Currently, we are in the third and last phase and the documentation is still in process,” she added.

“The conservation law is in place but it doesn’t have the teeth to bite,” said Mr. Xavier Benedict, founder of The Art & Architecture Research, Development and Education (AARDE) Foundation. He has been working on the promotion and conservation of heritage in Pulicat for over a decade now. His Rs. 37 lakh-proposal to the government to conserve India’s second-largest marshland and its neighbouring Dutch architecture has been repeatedly bounced back.

“The main role of the HCC right now is to give No Objection Certificates to individuals who own one of these 467 listed buildings and want to remodel, renovate or restore it,” said Mr. Kumar. “A committee, comprising of members from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), INTACH, School of Planning and Architecture, Anna University and other experts, follow the given guidelines and give permission accordingly,” he added. The construction, he added, is carried out by engineers and registered architects

According to Mr. Kumar, the project of restoration or even conservation of the listed heritage structures has to be initiated by their owners. The government doesn’t initiate any restoration or provide any funds, unless it is a government building. Mr. Kumar said that in case of a government building, like the Public Works Department (PWD) Annexe Building which is currently undergoing restoration, that department itself has to initiate the conservation process, send it for approval to the CMDA, and raise funds from its own department.

“For a person who owns a property, the prospect of conserving the building for its historical value might not be suitable as it would not fetch him/her any money. Instead the owner himself/herself has to invest a great deal of sum into conserving or restoring it. Therefore, they resort to demolition because it is easy money. Now the question is, why is the government hesitant to intervene in this case and conserve the building, especially if it is of historical importance,” said Mr. Benedict.

Mr. Benedict said that there is a lack of political will within the State government to conserve ecological and architectural heritage. The government’s failure to notify the rules of the Act has brought down many important buildings. In a span of 16 months in 2017-18, three of the city’s important structures were brought down to rubble –the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate’s Court at Egmore, Ice House police station in Triplicane, and Binny Limited headquarters on Armenian Street in Parry’s.

These buildings, haven’t been listed in the 2010 Padmanabhan committee and hence are out of the purview of the HCC. These three structures are among three hundred other structures in the city which have been listed in the INTACH’s list of 800 heritage buildings in Chennai. The Padmanabhan list limits itself mostly to institutional buildings and memorials, while the INTACH list also includes old residences.

Although Tamil Nadu is said to be one of the few states in the country to have a proper legislation for conservation of buildings by experts, there is no framework for its execution. However, heritage conservation by the PWD is run by its Engineering division, which only conserves the “skeleton of the structure” and misses the aesthetics, the fine detailing, and the landscape of the structure which can only be offered by architects.

Besides the issues in the government’s initiative and the implementation of the Act, there are other challenges regarding the availability of skilled craftsmen and original construction material like lime from seashells or charnockite bedrock.

According to Mr. Muthukrishnan, a junior architect in PWD, materials such as lime extracted from sea-shells, wire-cut bricks and other elements that have been used in frescos in these Indo-Saracenic buildings and are not readily available in the local markets. Murals and painted Canvas panels on the ceilings similarly need specialised supervision over a longer period of time which involves investment of money, energy and resources, says Muthukrishnan. He also cites the lack of skilled labour with the required knowledge and expertise to undertake conservation projects of historical buildings.

According to Tara Murali, co-convenor of the INTACH Chennai chapter, there is an urgent need to address this gap in the knowledge of the craftsmen by “creating a demand for restoration and conservation and recognising artisanal skills with proper remuneration and seeing it as an avenue to address the question of employment.”

“The present structure corporate-political nexus promotes vertical growth of buildings over their horizontal development. The flourishing industry of real estate today thrives on the demolition of these old buildings and reconstructing them into modern buildings for commercial enterprise,” said Mr. Benedict.

Journalist Kanta Murali, in a Frontline article in 2003, said that the project of conservation seems to be competing with urban development and modernisation of cities. The economic

and population pressure on the urban land has sacrificed the city's heritage. In his essay 'City and Public Life- History of Public Spaces in Chennai', urban designer A. Srivathsan talks mentions how the idea of social spaces has changed from accessible-to-all public spaces to private social spaces such as clubs, shopping malls and theatres, that exclude the native population.

Murali suggests the model of "adaptive reuse" to make conservation more economically rewarding. "The use of heritage buildings and areas for tourist purposes has been perfected in the West but several States in India are beginning to recognise the fact that value can be added to old buildings through creative uses. In New Delhi, the historic Hauz Khas village is now a thriving area of shops and restaurants geared to tourists. Similarly, the Fort Kochi area and the French Quarter in Pondicherry are being promoted in heritage tourism ventures. Heritage buildings can be viewed as a resource and can become self-sustaining projects. In Chennai, there are many areas that are ripe for such reuse," he said.

"The government doesn't have enough funds to work towards the conservation of all the heritage structures. It should be open to a public-private collaboration. But, the government should have strict guidelines under which the restoration work by the private collaborator takes place. This partnership shouldn't end up ruining the essence of the building," said Mr. Benedict.

"Private owners of these heritage structures don't always have funds to restore them. In that case, the government should come forward and give them funds," said Mr. M. Kumar. "The government should give monetary benefits, and permit them to sell the ownership for better chances of conservation. What's the point of giving a 'heritage tag' then?" he added. "Two or three years ago, Bata's building (which is a part of the Padmanabhan list) on Anna Salai fell down. We are losing a lot of heritage buildings and the government needs to take action soon," he said.

The Architectural Heritage Division (AHD) of INTACH was introduced in Chennai in 2012 and is actively working towards the conservation of the built heritage of the city. It supplements the work of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) by accounting for unprotected historic buildings and sites and has documented and graded about 800 buildings in Chennai. The conservation guidelines of INTACH vouches for retaining visual identity of the building and adaptive re-use which enables the economy to flow back in the place through employment generation and exposure through conducting events and/or promoting tourism. It is also pushing for Heritage Regulations in various cities in the State.

Some of the few heritage buildings that have been well-conserved and restored by the government are structures inside the Fort St. George, which come under the protection of the ASI, and Senate House (Grade 1 heritage building) inside the complex of University of Madras. Built with Byzantine and European architectural features of onion domes, minarets and arcades in 1873, the Senate House was 100 % restored under INTACH- Tamil Nadu Chapter, ASI, PWD, and the State government. The project involved conservation of brick masonry, restoration of stained glass, timber work, lime plaster and fresco, and rehabilitation of the towers and domes. The building has the University library inside and held the month-long Chennai Photo Biennale this year and attracted a lot of visitors.

Its restoration shows how an old, dilapidated structure can be restored to provide public space for events and aid the economic and social development.

“Unless the public pressurises the government to take action towards heritage conservation, they will not allocate funds and rules for it. Whenever there has been strong agitation by the public to protect an important structure, the Court or the State has been forced to take some action,” said Ms. Murali.

As a part of their awareness program, INTACH conducts workshops in schools on the importance of art and culture, organises competitions and forms Heritage Clubs to initiate conservation projects.



Senate House during its restoration process (Photo credit: University of Madras library)



Senate House after restoration in 2012 (Photo credit: University of Madras library)