

Paper Title Isolated by elitism: pitfalls of recent heritage conservation attempts in Chennai

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Isolated by elitism: Pitfalls of recent heritage conservation attempts in Chennai

On 4 April 2003, the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa informed the State Assembly, in a *suo motu* statement under Rule 110 that does not allow a discussion, that the “run-down” buildings on the 30-acre, 88-year old Queen Mary’s College (QMC) on Marina beach in Chennai would be razed to make way for a brand new secretariat complex¹. Although delivered with her characteristic abruptness, the statement officially confirmed rumours circulating around for months. Earlier on in January the state government had inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Malaysian Government’s Construction Industry Development Board for several development projects in the state, including the proposal for an administrative city on the southern outskirts of Chennai. Spanning over 5000 acres the hub was planned as an administrative centre to house the Assembly, the Secretariat, and all government offices with housing provision for the concerned officials and politicians. But when the initial feasibility study indicated a time span of fifteen years to realise this proposal, the Chief Minister settled in for an interim alternative to relocate the Secretariat Complex at the site of the Queen Mary’s College².

This was not the first time that the state government had sought to relocate the Secretariat. Since the 1980s, it has expressed itself to be inadequately housed in the Fort St. George Complex, also located on Marina Beach, and has time and again looked for alternative sites and accommodation but nothing had come to fruition³. This time there seemed to be an immediacy and urgency to the proposal coming at a juncture when Chennai was making all-out efforts to place itself on the network of global cities, with corresponding architecture projects endorsing its commitment to globalisation and high-technology development. The new Secretariat complex complete with ‘state-of-the-art facilities’ including a helipad, spacious assembly hall, and modern office chambers for the governor and the chief minister was meant to be an exemplar, reinforcing the transnational aspirations of the government. But such intentions proved to be far from ground reality as the proposal provoked protests from a wide range of interest groups beyond anyone’s imagination.

¹ ‘Shifting Secretariat a farsighted move: Jayalalithaa’ 2003, *The Hindu* [online], 05 April, n.p. [Accessed online on 22 March 2005].

² In making the announcement, the Chief Minister also clarified that a new QMC with modern facilities would be provided, and that students in the meantime would be relocated in the nearby Lady Willingdon College Campus and the Presidency College

³ The Fort St. George Complex is under the direct purview of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and is extremely regulated in terms of renovations and constructions that could be undertaken within the complex (no construction is allowed within 200m of the Fort). A 10-storey annexe building was built in 1975 but is in a dilapidated condition today with poor maintenance and insufficient offer of facilities.

Within hours, the QMC students organised themselves to protest on the Marina, bringing traffic to a halt. An impromptu 'Save QMC' movement was launched and when the government ordered closure of the college and its hostels the following day, the students and staff members staged a sit-in protest with overnight vigil to prevent demolition. Support snowballed quickly from various quarters including teacher's associations, women's groups, human rights, environment and heritage activists. All issues ranging from concerns over women's education to environment and heritage protection came to a heady mix in this crisis where nine different public interest litigation (PILs) petitions were filed from different quarters including the Tamil Nadu Government Collegiate Teachers' Association and the Students Federation of India, the Citizen, Consumer and Civil Action Group (CAG), and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). They all expressed inter-related concerns as the former argued against the arbitrariness of the order given the fact that the location in question is a heritage site with not just environmental significance but also prioritised and privileged women's education, the CAG petition claimed violation of a host of existing development laws, including the provisions of the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ)⁴, the Town and Country Planning Act and the Constitution, while INTACH argued that the QMC complex was part of the 12 buildings on the Marina Beach stretch identified as a heritage precinct, and that even though the heritage list was a draft and there was no Heritage Act in the State, it did not mean that all such buildings would cease to command historical significance.

After an interim and extended stay issued by the Madras High Court against demolishing any building on the campus, the controversy raged through the month of April expanding into the political circuit with various parties getting involved and attempting to arbitrage the crisis to their own advantage. The issue was finally sealed on 22 April 2003 when the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests exercised its powers under the Environment Protection Act (1986) and imposed a blanket ban on demolition or reconstruction of a wide range of buildings, including those of archaeological or historical importance, heritage buildings and public use buildings on coastal stretches as well as regulating all activities with an investment of Rs. 5 crores or more. While it was obvious that the intervention was mainly an act of one-upmanship between rival political parties (in this instance the ruling ADMK at the state level and the opposing DMK which happened to be a member of the coalition government at the Centre and whose MP TR Balu held the MEF portfolio), it did

⁴ The CRZ act passed by the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1991 has trumped all acts in terms of its ambiguity, and thus enhanced exposure to free-wheeling interpretations. With four categories of classification from CRZ-I to CRZ-IV to control the development of land within 500 metres of High Tide Line of the landward side, and many allowances for exceptions, the CRZ has been least effective in controlling development, let alone fighting legal cases with. Yet it is constantly invoked in many Public Interest Litigations (PILs) to argue against proposed new developments such as the one at Marina Beach.

little to dampen the jubilant and celebratory spirit of the different activist groups in the city that had been involved in the crisis.

Heritage and environmental groups particularly saw it as a shot in the arm for their cause as they battled the state to save the coastal stretch of Marina encompassing a fragile environment and heritage. It seemed like a truly momentous occasion as interest groups representing different layers of cultural objectives had come together and collectively stalled an insensitive development move made by an autocratic state. At the local community level, QMC catered to the educational needs of women from socio-economically under privileged groups⁵. The campus is also home to a charitable primary school, the “Social Service League School” which teaches more than 140 children from neighbouring slums and has a coaching centre to help disadvantaged girl students in preparing for competitive civil service examinations. For the heritage enthusiasts, the complex of 26 buildings is home to historic structures from the colonial era, seen as a crucial component of the celebrated “Madras skyline” worthy of preservation, and for environmental activists, the concern revolved around protecting the coastal environment threatened by a large footprint legislative complex and its impact via the enormous amount of traffic and waste that would be generated. Also, looking beyond the architectural merit of the buildings underlining its aesthetic and visual appeal is the general acknowledgement of these buildings’ signification of history as argued by the city historian Muthiah (2003) when he reminded that that the college more than being a heritage site is an edifice of women’s emancipation⁶. It was thus heartening to note that the response to the crisis revealed a tacit coming together of multiple sectoral groups ranging from the elites to the disadvantaged, each drawing on the resources of the other, and the general debate itself being able to comfortably accommodate their various different conceptual frameworks.

Such enthusiasm was unfortunately short-lived; with dust settling on the crisis the explicit show of support between the different actors failed to evolve into a long-standing and institutionalised ‘politics of partnership’ which could have been successfully developed to impress upon the state alternative sustainable development visions for the city. Instead, the students went back to their classrooms, opposing political parties disappeared from the ‘crime scene’, and the heritage and environment activists fell back to the comforts of their ‘armchair activism’ writing and whining mostly through the medium of English-speaking press about the lack of heritage consciousness in the city and laying the blame squarely on the inability of

⁵ Highlighting this was a plea from the “Tamil Nadu Fishermen Development Union” and “The Fisher Movements Co-ordination of Tamil Nadu” to the Chief Justice of the High Court stating that almost 400 girls from the fisherfolk community were studying in the QMC and that demolishing the campus could disrupt their chance of gaining education. The college also reserves 2 percent of its seats for the physically handicapped.

⁶ Krishnakumar, A. 2003, ‘The end of a women’s college?’, *Frontline* [online], **20(8)**, n.p. [Accessed on 18 March 2005].

the state government or its associated public bodies to legislate a coherent heritage act. This paper focuses its attention on this particular aspect of heritage activists. Given the elite nature of such participants, a display of superiority and isolationist tendencies doesn't come as a surprise. But the need for heritage to break the imposed class boundaries and go beyond the concerns of one particular class is paramount if heritage is to take on a comprehensive role and be an invaluable part of an alternative development blueprint for the city. It also means, on the part of the elite and middle class activists, acknowledging and incorporating the diverse range of class interests which will invariably clash and collide over competing ideologies and visions of use. The following paragraphs elaborate the historical circumstances under which heritage activism developed as an elite interest and remained confined to the same for most part of the postcolonial development era. It then explores through a few example in the city of Chennai the way heritage as an issue has been thrown into the limelight as it emerges from its niche exclusion to a problematic encounter with the state and other interest groups (mostly the poor and lower classes), as the city shifts gear from a modernist, development agenda to that of a transnational, globalised one, making the interface between the objectives of heritage and development not only viable but necessary as well. The penultimate section before conclusion scores the need for heritage activists to resolve their position with respect to certain development tendencies of Third World cities if this interaction is to have a meaningful function in the future.

Heritage: a postcolonial impossibility

Discussing the future of the past in Latin American cities, Dickenson (1994) explains that Third World urban concerns are heavily problem-oriented towards the present and the future, as a result of which their empirical characteristics 'have been identified as hyper-urbanisation, the growth of mega-cities, industrial concentration, income inequality, poverty, rising unemployment and informal activities, social underprovision, land and property speculation, and rapid expansion of slums and shanties' (p. 13). Under the pressures of such concerns the past of the Third World city is neglected as the rapid economic growth of the city leaves no time or place for the preservation of historic values. A conflict between the dynamics of urban development and the passive protection of old property was often foreseen and cited as the reason for forsaking the latter in the interests of the former. He believes that such protection hardly go beyond the recondite interests of urban historians, and even though a strong case for the significance of the past for the national identity can be made, he queries the value of the past in the "country of the future": 'What urban space should be reserved and what scarce resources should be committed, to the perpetuation of the urban heritage vis-à-vis the need for basic urban services, modernisation of the city, and the capital requirements of schools, hospitals, housing and factories?' (p. 21). Such an understanding was so firmly entrenched in planning approaches of most Third World cities that when the UNESCO Charter of 1975

argued for the conservation of the historic quarters or cities, counter arguments were effectively produced to the contrary: ‘conservation takes a disproportionate amount of time, money and administrative and political negotiation...very clear justification is necessary particularly in developing countries, where available resources are usually scarce, and the scramble for development on almost any terms tends to sweep all other considerations aside’ (Shankland 1975, p. 24 cited in Dickenson 1994, p. 23).

In addition to this classic development versus conservation debate, there is yet another good reason as to why heritage preservation, particularly in the urban condition, failed to capture the state’s attention in the years of post-independence governance. This had a lot to do with the nationalism of postcolonial governments and the equivocal nature of the postcolonial ‘historic constructions’ that ensued. Mitchell (2002) outlines the situation of such new nation-states who in order to prove that they were modern also needed to prove that they were ancient, and that ‘deciding on a common past was critical to the process of making a particular mixture of people into a coherent nation’ (p. 212). It required the fabrication of an ideologically manufactured “tradition” which would simultaneously drive the nation forward towards modernisation (Coté 2002). As a result of this process whereby ‘traditions’ and structures were cast as prime expressions of a new found national identity (AlSayyad 2001), any genuine invocation of heritage proved to be awkward and compromised. Moreover, for nations with colonial history and an explicit anti-colonial stance of nationalist historiography such a move instantly negates any attempt in this direction: how was one going to frame the colonial structures of the urban landscape that were clearly part of a past yet denied as ‘tradition’? And even though nationalist governments tried hard to ensure that they had little purchase in the urban symbolism of a postcolonial city (Ghosh 2002), it hasn’t been that easy to rid the urban landscape of the trappings of the colonial past, the refiguring of which with respect to the positioning of representations of the postcolonial nation-state has proved to be a double-side problematic (Alley 1997). The ambivalence is clear for all to see: even though the colonial city and its built form was the theatre where the subjection of the colonised was most graphically and regularly enacted, at the time of independence, the nationalists found themselves unable to turn their backs to it, with the nationalist state quietly taking up residence in the city, invariably in the same colonial structures vacated by the colonisers (Khilnani 1997). And in instances where the colonial material infrastructure posed a structural obstacle and restricted the ways in which landscapes could be modified and redefined in postcolonial India, the nationalist state projected the new nationalism to the people by repopulating adjacent public spaces with newer accounts of political history. For instance, in Chennai, while many of the government departments and institutions moved into the stretch of colonial buildings along the Marina, the public space across the road was used by the regional government for ‘constructing’ a Tamil identity. In 1968, on the occasion of the Second International Tamil Conference, the government erected statues of ten writers and scholars who contributed to Tamil language and literature (Pandian

2005). Thus, the national (or in this instance, the regional) self and the colonial other stood side-by-side in juxtaposition, with the latter languishing mostly in neglect (because of the ambivalence of the postcolonial government, it wasn't easy to obliterate the iconography of a colonial past, but at the same time to make it part of a common material heritage would have seemed skewed and distorted), and the former attempting to successfully reproduce postcolonial spaces of power and symbolic authority in a manner similar to that of the colonialists.

Enlightened by history – elite pursuit of heritage

It is against this background that elite involvement in pursuing issues of heritage and historic preservation needs to be understood and explored. While colonialism left heritage concerns in the postcolonial context unresolved, and in many cases the colonial past was seen at best as a prelude to the present and at worst a harbinger of contemporary woes (Dickenson 1994), the indigenous elites and English-speaking middle classes viewed heritage as more than a 'frill' issue. First of all, for the elites and the middle classes, the urban domain loaded with colonial meaning carried immense value as they willingly imitated the ideologies and lifestyles of the coloniser. The colonial city, despite being a site of India's subjection was an object of Indian craving, housing the promises of modernity. 'By the time the British were packing their trunks to leave India, the emulative will of the Indian middle classes had.....made the colonial centres very passable editions of modern cities' (Khilnani 1997, p. 126). They had gained a lot materially from colonialism and therefore sought to encompass the materiality of colonial buildings and streetscape within the definitions of national heritage. They believed that colonial heritage projects far from being extraneous to an official ideology can contribute to the writing of an "autonomous history" of the colonized in the city. 'Such reimagining of heritage conservation projects can assist in repositioning "the city" as part of a continuous history which reconnects pre- and post-colonial national narratives with the colonial experience' (Coté 2002, p. 126).

Alley (1997) explains that heritage activists and professional elites view heritage not merely from a perspective of political history but more importantly in terms of recognising the need to preserved symbolic structures, its aesthetic values and architectural principles, a position which stipulates that all architectural heritage are equally important and thus need to be retained and preserved. For professional architects and urban planners, a colonial-era urban heritage is a legitimate source from which contemporary architects could draw lessons to take the nation forward. Professional interest in heritage conservation focuses on preserving the built structures as sources of reference and inspiration, with non-governmental bodies like INTACH engaged in recovering an architectural past emphasising the need for a national narrative of architectural development without any bias or discontinuity. Professional elites sought access to a knowledge and portrayal of the past which

transcended the historical model contained in the official developmentalist paradigm, with its “backward-looking cultural framework of the national-state”, and for the new middle classes who had acquired affluence as a result of successful national economic development, participation in heritage preservation issues was a public status marker as they sought an alternative to what appeared to be an increasingly aimless regime-driven development (Coté 2002, p. 128).

Even if in a broad sociological term, such conservation instincts could be interpreted as reflecting the demographic and political maturity of the postcolonial society, elite ideology of conservation goes beyond the desire of intervening in the official national project and inserting an autonomous one. For many elites and middle class groups, heritage preservation was a system of political protest wherein by expressing interest in a disappearing urban past they were simultaneously expressing concern over the burgeoning pace of urban development and population growth. Elite employment of heritage was a means of raising the spatial profile of the urban condition that was becoming increasingly run-down. Conservation is a mechanism to rectify the current unattractive and undistinguished status of our cities, and heritage is effectively used to reflect an imagined sense of loss to the supposed agnostic modernisation of the city (Jones and Varley 1994).

In presenting conservation as a tool to raise the Indian city’s international standing, heritage supporters, professionals and activists have adopted a position contrary to the state’s gestures of a similar nature. In the case of Chennai, when the Chief Minister announced that the new Secretariat would be an exquisite mix of the façade of the Vidhan Soudha in Bangalore and the modern interiors of the Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi, insisting that the proposed complex would not only be more aesthetically pleasing than the above two but also be replete with modern facilities, heritage professionals were quick to react with criticism. Condemning it not only as a personalised, obsessive fantasy of the powerful, they also slammed it for its inauthenticity. If the state intended that the mixture of ‘modern’ interior and ‘traditional’ exterior would be the new global, transnationalised imagery of the cityscape, professionals criticised the incongruity of such a proposition. Emphasising the inappropriateness of a ‘neo-classical’ building amidst a series of Indo-Saracenic buildings dotting the Marina, architects insisted that “[i]t is not desirable to copy a building, which has no great architectural value....How can you decide a project based on the façade of a building”, they queried⁷. The ‘traditional architecture’ that the state offered in anticipation of newer investment opportunities for the city was just a pastiche where the skin of the past was used to allow the present to pursue the future. It seemed that under the circumstances of global aspirations and its pressures

⁷ Cited in Ahmed, F. 2003, ‘Teachers, architects flay plan to demolish QMC building’, *The Hindu* [online], 26 March. See also Srivathsan, A 2003, ‘Art for the power hungry’, *The Hindu* [online], 27 April [Accessed on 24 November 2006].
 ‘Shifting Secretariat a farsighted move: Jayalalithaa’ 2003, *The Hindu*[online], 05 April, n.p. [Accessed online on 22 March 2005].

on re-presenting the city, a hard-pressed state could only allow for such a superficial concession⁸. This is exactly what Sorkin (2000) warns against when he cautions that space-making could get caught in a matrix of simulation, and '[a]s culture is increasingly globalized and the architectural forms of authenticity become even more easy to manipulate and reproduce, we risk a condition of general architectural mendacity' (p. 61). The validity of such arguments notwithstanding, the efforts of elites and middle classes in stimulating historic preservation measures hasn't been free of criticisms and scepticisms, primarily revolving around their selection bias, of what constitutes heritage and what is worthy of being preserved.

All that glitters.....: limitations of elite interest in heritage 1

Surrounding the appropriateness of historic preservation and heritage conservation in the Third World is the looming suspicion that this is yet another of those First World indulgences and fetishisms that have been imposed onto the Third World as a dominant capitalist paradigm by its highly westernised elite. This concern is substantiated by AlSayyad (2001) when he argues that 'First World nations are often the main advocates for and financial patrons of the preservation of Third World built environments as part of what they define as "universal" heritage – even when the "natives" do not recognize its historic value' (p. 4). In this context, even the UNESCO World Heritage Site criteria demanding "outstanding universal significance" has been criticised for its tendency to overshadow a multiplicity of other significant perceptions associated with our heritage, concentrating instead on one particular value and thereby distorting the wider perspective and generating potential future conflicts in their management (Prothi-Khanna 2004).

At a more specific level are several concerns – first and foremost is the issue of whether heritage is merely a tool for promoting elite self-interest defined narrowly by their sense of aesthetics. Often there is an overriding emphasis on the aesthetic and visual aspects of heritage with a restricted primarily architectural view of heritage which is not sufficient to address larger environmental and development pressures⁹. As Bhattacharjee (2004) quipped, nothing that is without shine can become heritage as a result of which heritage is reduced or rather elevated to the royal premises that have rarely been shared by the people. Harrison (2005) in this regard clarifies that in most cases, the 'choices of the most lowly stakeholders – whose houses were built of wood or thatch rather than stone – are muted or silent, and those whose lives were blighted by massacre, torture and discrimination are also less remembered' (pp. 7-8), a point equally endorsed by Dickenson's (1994) account

⁸ This is the line of argument that Abbas (2000) pursues in underscoring recent historic preservation attempts from the state's perspective in Shanghai. See Abbas, A 2000.....

⁹ INTACH does repudiate such criticisms insisting that heritage initiatives in India recognizes larger issues and adopts a comprehensive framework in its approach. See for instance the collection of articles published in *Seminar* 2004 on Conservation.

of Brazil where he finds that the overwhelming majority of designated sites are of the elite, and that there is very little of the vernacular or the ordinary that is preserved in the Brazilian scene. This, according to him, ‘inevitably reflects elite taste in what is to be preserved, together with the very ordinariness of the vernacular past, and its relative fragility’ (p. 20). A good illustration of this can be seen in the response of heritage activists to yet another crisis over the transformation of Marina Beach in Chennai.

A few months before the eruption of the April 2003 crisis involving the proposed demolition of the ‘historic’ buildings on Queen Mary’s College (QMC) on Marina Beach the state government had issued a statement in January proposing the first leg of transformations to the beach stretch. It again involved a MoU with the Malaysian Government where, after reviewing the ten year old plan of the CMDA for the beautification of the Marina, the proposal for a 1.5 km stretch of the beach was considerably revamped and upscaled to outline the development of multi-storeyed complexes of international standards providing office administration for multinationals and embassies. The plan required modifications to the existing Development Controls Regulations (DCR) which protected the existing ‘skyline’ of Marina and prohibited development of ‘tall’ structures, and also openly acknowledged that the fishermen settlements or *kuppams* dotting this stretch of the beach would have to be relocated elsewhere. Environmental activists were quick to jump into the fray in support of the fisherfolk arguing that in a context where the livelihood of ‘artisanal fishermen’ were already threatened by larger ‘developmentalist’ interventions such as mechanisation and industrialisation of fishing activities, combined with the general effects of pollution and climate change, the proposed redevelopment of the Marina and the relocation of the fishing communities would worsen their already depleted livelihood opportunities¹⁰.

Interestingly enough, heritage activists participating in this debate expressed concern over the proposed changes to the DCR and the impact that multi-storeyed buildings could have on the unique heritage character of this historically significant stretch but not more. Preoccupied with protecting the monuments of stone, not for once did any of the activists acknowledge the heritage value of the fishermen huts dotting the Marina and whose presence as a community along the seashore predates the colonial structures¹¹. In fact, despite their historic association with this seashore,

¹⁰ Prominent amongst the supporters was Medha Patkar of the National Alliance of Peoples Movements, an environmental activist of repute who has for many years rallied against the Narmada Valley Dam project in India.

¹¹ To be fair, there is a growing acknowledgement amongst heritage activists to expand its understanding of heritage beyond “monuments” and include vernacular housing. For instance, at Orchha, Madhya Pradesh, INTACH worked on a conservation strategy that included the urban morphology with all its qualities such as the human scale of streets and open spaces, their multiplicity of usage, the safe and secure environs of *cul de sacs* and the *otlas* as an interface between the private and public realms. It recognized that any future development plan for Orchha had to respect and

the hutment clusters have been time and again portrayed as ‘slums’ defacing the beach, accusing them through their ‘clandestine’ and ‘deviant’ activities of having made the beach less attractive for the visitors and tourists¹². It is obvious that the heritage vision of the elites runs the risk of pursuing a kind of monumentalism that emphasises a few very significant structures but tends to ignore broader concepts of cultural townscape. Given this tendency, Coté (2002) reminds us that if conservation projects are to adequately register the “urban memory” of heritage sites, they must first involve placing that site in a local and not a narrowly nationalist or colonialist history. This will involve the construction of a social history beyond a history of dominant colonial and indigenous power structures, and requires not simply putting “the native in the picture”, but more generally recognising that a postcolonial public needs an understanding of the broader everyday urban culture, one where conservation projects will be embedded in a yet-to-be-written people’s history. Yet in most instances even when there is a gesture to recognise the vernacular traditions, it is undertaken only with intentions of promoting its active consumption to the abetment of which tradition is disassembled and rearranged in order to recreate a marketable semblance of “authenticity”. Thus, in this regard, the so-called heritage site of “Dakshinachitra” in Chennai can only be described as an “interpretative” heritage centre refit with new “symbolic economies” (Robinson 2001) in what Gregory’s (2001) would term as ‘a space of constructed visibility’ within which “tradition” is seen in particular, partial, and highly powerful ways, some illuminated, recuperated and privileged, and others dimmed, marginalised or erased¹³.

More importantly, in reference to the preference for the built form of the urban landscape, Jones and Varley (1994) note that it is integral to the symbolisation of the elite culture, a particular configuration of power relations. The most flamboyant architecture that is chosen for preservation is often the one that demonstrates the most the symbol of power and planning in the city with renovation programmes implying the conservation of an idea or idealised image of the past as well as the architectural artefact that is then used to recreate an ideal image in order to symbolically “recapture” the city. Historical representation through heritage

enhance these features because they were sustaining a quality of human existence worth conserving (Singh 2004).

¹² See for instance Vydhanathan, S. 1996, ‘Squalor on the shore’, *The Hindu*, 16 September, M1.

¹³ Spread over ten acres, this project (completed in 1996 with grant assistance from the Ford Foundation) is a collection of ‘carefully’ reconstructed 17 heritage houses and is presented as an exciting cross cultural living museum of art, architecture, lifestyles, crafts and performing arts of South India. Although drawing on corporate patronage and support, there are some laudable intentions such as its educational outreach programme to cover all corporation and village schools, currently reaching over 15,000 students per year. Nevertheless caution is raised against the pitfalls of this ‘themed cultural environment’ and its associated symbolic capitalism focusing on global markets and international tourists. Hancock (2002) critiques it for being tied to consumerism and elite perceptions of regional and national heritage, an aspect also noted by the UN-Habitat (2004) study when it mentions that the language used at Dakshinachitra is predominantly English, and ‘the programme of the crafts complex as a whole is directed toward a cosmopolitan rather than a local audience’ (p. 42).

preservation becomes a significant means of disseminating elite perspectives on representations of place and identity. By employing discourses revolving on pride and dignity in the built environment, the middle and upper classes developed heritage preservation as 'a tensile apparatus of power, knowledge and geography (Gregory 2001, p. 115). In this aspect, heritage discourse exposed a power differential as it was mapped out within a systematic power grid. It could be easily manipulated for hegemonic articulations, producing and enhancing the hierarchical intentions of the upper classes. Elite invocation of identities and symbols aid and enhance the proliferation of existing social inequalities and class polarities. Known for their penchant for developing socially exclusive agendas, conservation efforts are suspected of similar intentions.

Don't cast pearls....: limitations of elite interest in heritage 2

The marketing of heritage symbols and the conferring of historic status involves a system of selectivity which promotes certain value systems over others and can result in the "disinheritance" of non-participatory, marginalised groups (Robinson 2001). This "disinheritance" is mainly constructed by exuding a sense of respectability, wherein heritage debates are used successfully to pit the cultured, respected self of the middle and upper classes against the uncivilised and dangerous 'others' of the lower classes. Spaces that could be potentially contested are appropriated through a discourse and a variety of practices that range from a class-conscious passion for the arts to performative stagings of heritage. Guano (2003) through her study of la Boca in Argentina shows that '[m]uch of the process of legitimizing exclusion is inscribed into the very medium of the perpetuation of *boquenese* "heritage" as a widely publicized appreciation of the arts that is in itself a strategy to mark social boundaries' (p. 365). Such a discourse, according to her, valorises certain inhabitants and identities while reminding the lower classes of their status as *persona non gratae* as they are held directly responsible for the physical and moral degradation of the neighbourhood and the erosion of local heritage. Middle class entitlement to the neighbourhood is consolidated through a sense of belonging and ownership establishing a privileged viewpoint of authentic local culture.

Addressing this tendency of middle and upper class heritage activists to alienate and 'criminalise' the lower classes through invocations of superior understanding of history and heritage is important in the context of Chennai as heritage activists attend their concerns to historic quarters like George Town in the northern part of the city spatially claimed for their heritage value yet at the same time are 'home' to the poorer sections of the society. This claim needs to be located within a larger turn of events affecting the development objectives of the city as a result of which a socio-physical fault line is emerging simultaneously dividing and connecting two different realms of the city, the geographic north and south. Both in different ways are being subject to an overwhelming bourgeois imaginary, a

distinction that has been, oddly enough, cemented strongly since the anachronistic debate surrounding the historical authenticity of the city's name, when in 1996, Madras was officially renamed as Chennai. But in a bizarre twist to the issue, a dyadic employment of Madras and Chennai has persisted, as the 'proper nouns' have come to spatially inscribe the north and the south signifying the uneven geography of the city. Thus, Chennai and Madras exemplify the tale of two cities, where the newly developing, globalising 'South' Chennai exhibits an elegant and ordered bourgeois landscape, replete with flyovers and expressways, high-rise buildings, and cleaned-up public spaces, while an economically stagnant, 'North' Madras portrays filth and decay, and is condemned as a 'slum' with poor infrastructure. Given this contrast, heritage activists are focussing on the colonial fabric of 'North' Madras whereby the now languishing historic district could be reinvigorated as 'vintage' Madras through heritage conservation and historic preservation efforts.

Laudable as such efforts can be there is equally room for concern in this potential resurrection. Even if one acknowledges that heritage conservation has come a long way from its earlier promotion of a much criticised manicured reconstruction of the past, "freeze-dried" and positioned in a time wrap (Baig 2004), making genuine attempts to step away from 'museumisation' and commodification strategies, current practices still leave plenty of questions unanswered. Much caution needs to be exercised if heritage activists are to undertake efforts at restoring old historic quarters like George Town, celebrated by heritage connoisseurs as 'the first "planned" native settlement of British Madras' complete with buildings reminiscent of a colonial architecture (Kalpana and Schiffer 2003). Today, almost universally in every developing city, be it Cairo or Chennai, historic quarters are receptacles of the poorer and less privileged sections of the society, who under economic and social pressures (that includes establishing home-based small-scale factories and manufacturing units, and large, sometimes even multiple families living in tight, dense areas), have transformed the urban fabric of these areas, with such changes rarely meeting the standards of approval of heritage activists and promoters. There are several reasons why a quarter like George Town in Chennai which was a thriving indigenous settlement in both social and economic terms during the colonial period is now reduced to a state of congestion, chaos and dilapidation. It includes a combination of state-led development decisions wherein major economic drivers like wholesale markets under the guise of decongestion measures have been removed and relocated elsewhere outside of the quarter, affecting the economic livelihood of several businesses connected to these markets, and the lifestyle desire of several residents who with economic prosperity seek to move out of the area to newer residential neighbourhoods in the southern parts of the city promising larger layouts and modern facilities, leaving their properties to fall into disrepair¹⁴.

¹⁴ See Jones and Varley (1994) for their elaboration in the case of Pueblo, Mexico.

As heritage activists step into such districts with proposals for revitalisation projects, they need to do so with the mindset that the opportunity here is not merely for the preservation of a few buildings of architectural merit but of an entire social, cultural and economic landscape and all the activities traditionally associated with it. Sorkin (2000) stresses that as important as architectural authenticity is social authenticity, the pattern of life as lived, the ecology of living. The challenge that confronts the effort of heritage conservationists is their ability to reconcile and establish a productive symbiosis between the historic architecture that they seek to preserve and the everyday practices of the social classes that inhabit them, particularly when the latter is seen as the cause of ruin or neglect of the former. This pressing issue of heritage or historic apathy is well illustrated by Kaviraj (1997) when he elaborates on the process of plebianisation in Calcutta as a result of which the poor set in motion a very different use of the city's public objects including the trees, the statues, the railings and the paved paths. The commemorative figures, statues, and busts of nationalist leaders instead of being venerated are used to dry clothes as '[t]he idea of a nationalist conception of the civic that celebrated great lives in the cause of the nation by turning them into public art stands at a great and hazy conceptual distance from the thinking of the destitute. They appreciated the physical stratum of the statue or the railings rather than their symbolic or aesthetic values' (p. 107). In this regard, he also observes that the middle classes 'would not have shared the poor classes' indifference or inability to appreciate the idea of the civic and would not have thought that the best use of a statue of a great nationalist leader was to hang washing on it. To the poor, the nation of which they were now an indispensable and sovereign part was a more distant and tenuous imagination. Since this imagination is primarily created in schools, through the relentless repetitiveness of the curricular forms of historical memory, and the destitute are deprived of that essential constituent of citizenship, they find it difficult to participate in these highly emotive struggles over the past' (p. 109)¹⁵.

It therefore doesn't come as a surprise that the structures in George Town have been continuously updated through the post-independence decades through extensions, renovations and demolitions to meet the changing functional needs of its inhabitants using and producing an aesthetic vocabulary completely different from the ones prescribed by the heritage preservationists. Moreover, as Holston (1991) has emphasised, unlike Bourdieu's (1984) claims that the aesthetics of working class people are determined by their pragmatic, functionalist requirements, working-class taste cannot be reduced to the rack of functional necessity where it has, by definition, no aesthetic distinction, but indeed is driven by a visual calculus of appearances, albeit one that is constructed entirely differently from that of the 'distinctive' tastes

¹⁵ This practice of reconstructing the past through an 'enlightened' medium is characteristic of elite pursuits. In Chennai, INTACH's Heritage Education and Communication Service (HECS) promotes the formation of heritage clubs in the city's predominantly English-speaking schools where by quoting the Indian Constitution's position on heritage and culture, a greater awareness is created amongst the students.

of the elites and middle classes. But what heritage activists tend to do is disparage the contemporary aesthetics of historic quarters like George Town as kitsch, vulgar, irrelevant and demeaning to the significance of the historic fabric, failing to acknowledge the fact that aesthetics is conceived of and experienced differently according to how it is placed within the various kinds of conceptual frameworks that people bring to it. At a point when the aesthetics of subaltern spaces such as the favelas in Brazil are being celebrated as alternative tourism trails, a rigid historical definition of heritage and its aesthetics becomes questionable. Owens (2002) warns that 'the historical mode of explanation has become so naturalized that it can blind us to contemporaneous aspects of places that may be most salient to those who inhabit them' (p. 277). Instead of capturing the multiplicity of meanings implicitly present in such spaces, preservation becomes a means of imposing just one meaning congruent with an ideologically defined image of both the past and the present, implying the destruction of present ways of life.

Informality in heritage: reconciling elite-mass conflicts

In addition to this inclination of heritage preservationists to dismiss 'pop' aesthetics is also their proclivity to deride the 'popular' social uses dominating the public and external spaces of these built environments. Ignoring the fact that places are born of practice as well as discourse, they exhibit a tendency to join the general bourgeois brigade condemning the presence of informal traders and street hawkers as encroachments and calling for their removal from the public spaces. Historic preservation in this context becomes a special supplement of value that pathologises such quotidian stewardships and is presented as an antidote to the popular practices dominating these spaces. Commenting on the various informal bazaars lining the Victorian arcades in the Fort Area of Bombay Mehrotra (2000) mentions that the chaotic marketplace of shops, stalls and hawkers are the symbolic image of metaphor for the physical state of the Indian city indicating the wearing down of the physical environment as a result of the overlaps of an alien imagery and building materials. For the elites and conservationists the Victorian core represents a city centre with icons that have acquired even greater meaning as crucial symbols of the city's fast-deteriorating historic image. The shrines and stalls that abut the splendid Gothic buildings and fill the spaces in the arcades are seen not as thriving businesses but as economic pressures that compromise the urbanistic, formal and material authenticity of its setting. Consequently hawking is deemed illegal by city authorities who constantly attempt to relocate the bazaars. Such decrees fail to acknowledge that many worlds can inhabit the same space, relating to it and using it in different ways, for doing so would imply that we must accommodate and overlap varying uses, perceptions, and physical forms. A rehabilitated urban fabric instead subtracts the informal trading spaces out of the equation removing the livelihood opportunities for the inhabitants of such spaces. It expedites the depopulation of the area of the social classes that thrive on these activities, turning them over to institutions and groups

who are considered worthy of the structures and their history. The Fort Area in Bombay which is the largest conservation area with a third of conservation-worthy buildings in the city has become the hub of financial institutions and multinational banks that prefer to be located in a historic environment, often providing financial banking for the restoration processes. Overlooked in this process is the fact that they only do so because such a move instantly gives them an identity and a connotation of having been around for a while (Mehrotra 2000), allowing in the process global actors to take on a local-friendly look (AlSayyad 2001).

For heritage conservation to have a meaningful social relevance, it is crucial that preservationists clarify and resolve their position vis-à-vis informal traders and street hawkers, particularly in terms of the effect of this economic group (both perceived and real) on the authenticity and sustainability of the built environment (in most cases, historic structures share spaces cheek-by-jowl with the informal traders and dwellers posing a challenge to preservationists in terms of framing their heritage strategy). In recent years, with increasing embourgeoisement of the urban debate in Indian cities, the question of 'illegality' of informal spaces (including squatter settlements and traders) has become a prime preoccupation requiring immediate redress. Chandoke (1993) traces the source of this problem to the state sponsored development projects and policies where the poor are accommodated in the spaces of production but not in terms of spaces of reproduction. By building cities that have no place for the urban poor, 'illegal' land occupation became the critical dimension of urban India, dissolving the fact of ownership and putting instead in place a completely different system of land and property rights which subverts the dominant ethos and interrogates dominant values and their codification of law. But more lately, rather than seeing such spaces as symbols of exclusion and an exercise in geographical remapping challenging the spatial and social order, the cognitive mapping of the middle classes tends to void out the informal spaces, resignifying them as dangerous areas instead (Guano 2003). Reflecting on the growing visual economy of commodity aesthetics in neo-liberal India, Rajagopal (2001) focuses on how the hawkers peddling on the streets have come to symbolise the disorder of an illicit enterprise and metropolitan space gone out of control. Not recognising the fact that origins of these predicaments are structural and located elsewhere at a macro level of governance, planning and policy, street traders and squatters are problematised at a micro level in terms of obstructing movement on the street, as tax evaders, and generally undermining the quality of the environment through their sheer imposition of physical pressures (overcrowding, waster generation, non-compliance of hygienic practices, etc.).

The imagined geography and history of heritage conservationists is cleverly applied to settle the fundamental contest for spaces, domesticating opposition and conflict. This is not uncommon as seen in Jones' and Varley's (1994) assertion that conservation policies can be destructive towards the plight of street traders as they promote a selective notion of historic centres at the expense of the urban ways of life

of the majority. The pragmatism of the street traders whose hawking activities are framed in terms of economic survival is illegalised through conservation strategies that propose disciplining the 'errant' human bodies to a common economy of order and suggest that hawking activities be legalised and formalised through licensing and regulating their spaces of operation. The Urban Design and Research Institute which seeks to help restore the heritage value of Mumbai's architecture recommended that hawkers function only in clearly demarcated spaces, in uniforms and with visible license plates, regulated and arranged for optimal surveillance (Rajagopal 2001). This is the general strategy that is being adopted across major Indian cities and has even been scripted as a national policy on urban street vendors (2006). But the creation of such "spaces of prescriptions" via routes and sights of imaginative geographies, regularising, standardising and making predictable the cityscape rather than the spaces of negotiation that is fluid, individual and improvisational (Gregory 2001) is superficial as a solution and doesn't address the structural characteristic of a Third World economy. Gladstone (2005) explains that in countries like India where over 90 percent of the businesses are informal and together account for more than 60 percent of the economy's value added, a nexus of dependency runs as a continuum from the purely informal production to formal production. He also clarifies the issue of informality and illegality stating that because economies are informal they cannot achieve the economies of scale necessary for legalisation and because they remain illegal they continue to be informal. Any attempt to formalise the informal would only adversely affect this nexus of dependency. Moreover, the magnitude of numbers that the informal spaces accommodate cannot be matched by the offerings of the regular spaces (the number of licenses offered is far below the estimated number of unlicensed hawkers). The ambulatory nature of the informal traders allows more of them to weed in and out of the public spaces than if they were to be made stationary and spatially fixed. Even as heritage activists rarely concede that the chaos and apparent disorder of the bazaar are precisely the essential features that make the Indian cities distinctive, their attempts to discipline and marginalise the community of informal traders and street dwellers reveal the inherent tendency of culture to bend and blend itself to the fixed nature of capital as against the 'informal' flows of cash economy.

Conclusions

Serageldin and Shluger (2000) in an edited volume published by the World Bank draw a connection between cultural roots and urban futures, insisting that cultural heritage preservation and poverty reduction are closely intertwined as the former can establish a sense of solidarity and empowerment amongst the disenfranchised. Echoing UNESCO's earlier report on *Our Cultural Diversity* (1995), they maintain that a positive synergy can be created by linking cultural concerns with poverty reduction programmes and that they can perform like development projects. While this paper does not challenge or question this position, it explores the issues of

incorporating the protection of built heritage into the general realm of development as a complex iterative process involving multiple actors (politicians, civil society groups, private actors, funding bodies, etc.) and partnerships between them. This paper argues that one cannot get too complacent or seek comfort in the fact that multiplicity of actors automatically ensures an equally distributive partnership. It instead focuses on class lines that divide and fracture the different interest groups as they are drawn apart by differing ideologies and conception of heritage and history. Through the examples of recent heritage debate in Chennai, the paper highlights the dominance of an elite and middle class discourse which fails to successfully encompass all social groups, using heritage issues instead to mark the setting of a new order of power and precedence, and fixing the spatial evolution of the city through a one-dimensional accounting of history. As Upton (2001) appropriately asks, ‘[w]hen do concepts of heritage and its wealth-making potential become tools of power for indigenous elites...[and]...[i]n what ways can residents use the concepts of tradition and heritage as a rubric within which to resist that power..?’ (p. 299).

Much as there is an emerging concern to link the quality of life, particularly in historic areas, with its built heritage, the issue that this paper raises is whether the notion of quality of life is defined by a bourgeois normative framework ignoring the multiplicity of alternative conceptions. Even though there is a realisation that conservation and heritage efforts should not affect the daily living of people who are prominent stakeholders and that conservation proposals have to form part of the larger economic and social planning for the area, the inability of heritage activists to adopt a reconciliatory position towards the presence of informal traders and street hawkers, and the everyday practices of the poor in general (including their sense of aesthetics) exposes their position to be straitjacketed by very conventional norms of legality and legitimacy, and history and geography. In such a case, one wonders whether full justice can be done to the word stakeholder as it is limited to the networking dynamics of ‘legal’ residents and businesses to the exclusion of marginal groups. In *Seminar*’s special issue on Conservation (2004), climaxing everyone’s exulting position in terms of the evolution of conservation debates in the last few decades is Bhattacharjee’s rather rhetorical yet relevant rant: ‘Poverty, deprivation, conflicts and how they influence human lives rarely inform our perception of what constitutes heritage....Disassembled and thereby no longer menacing, history becomes heritage and heritage conservation a tale of exclusion and elimination of all those who lost the race of survival....What these people [marginalised groups] need is not an “endangered” status so favoured by conservationists, but a real partnership with people and organizations concerned with a more problematised version of heritage and culture’ (n.p.). The need is for a heritage discourse that allows for a history to explore spatially the “social meanings of its built environment as transformed by social, political and economic conflicts between different groups with different claims on the city” (Coté 2002, p. 141). While conservationists acknowledge the need for stakeholder participation, avoiding a top-down,

hierarchical approach, ensuring instead the involvement of local community, in reality the complex matrix of a diverse range of actors and the contradictions, paradoxes and biases they bring to the issue problematises heritage to such an extent that the elites instinctively shift to a defensive gear, defining and propagating heritage from a dominant, normative perspective. Through examples of recent heritage initiatives and examples in Chennai, this paper draws attention to the still unresolved nature of elite-mass linkages underlining these efforts, working at best as a patronage but never lasting as a partnership.

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