



# THE DEATH AND LIFE OF HERITAGE

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Mumbai's built form has, as in any other mega city, adapted to the local population, economy, the weather, the city's historical evolution and social mix of the people living here. Whether it is the forts dotting Mumbai or the Art Deco collection that lines Marine Drive, the East Indian architecture in Khotachiwadi, Matharpakhadi and Bandra's Ranwar Village or the numerous Parsi and Hindu low rise planned neighborhoods in Mumbai; this built form is delicately both global and local and works for the people in economy, scale, functionality and social expectations. This built form encourages diversity, vital human interactions and uncompromising tolerance for each other. It is this diversity, this uniqueness that makes Mumbai interesting to its residents and to its visitors. The Heritage Conservation movement began with the notion of protecting these stories of pride for our future generations; it was never to prioritize colonial over native or vice-versa. Heritage conservation is rooted in the belief that citizens are mere custodians of cities and while cities evolve, there are ties that need to be maintained for future generations to learn from. The chawls, the mills and the native Parsi and Hindu colonies are witnesses to these ties; they teach us about the successes, the failures and the deep struggles of those who passed before us in making Mumbai what it is today.

Understanding this, the first heritage list was proposed in 1991 by the Government of Maharashtra. While an

important step, the list focused solely on the built form in the island city that was predominantly colonial and completely excluded the native heritage existing in the western and eastern suburbs of Northern Mumbai. The review of this list was undertaken by the MMR Heritage Conservation Society (MMRHCS) and was finalized in 2005 with new additions from the suburbs to the original 1991 list, and forwarded to the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC), a body under the aegis of the Government of Maharashtra. The MHCC worked for close to three years on painstakingly reviewing this list in terms of architectural significance of the buildings, the social context of the precincts and the rich quality of life this urban form provided. This process focused on both native and colonial built form in the true spirit of the city and the list was finalized in 2008. The initial listing of 603 heritage structures in 1991 expanded to a comprehensive list of about 1500 structures all over Mumbai in 2008.

While the heritage list was being articulated by its advocates on human, design and long term economic principles, a powerful force in the city was also at work, primarily focussing on short term profit. A large part of the real estate community felt that any recognition of heritage would interfere with their maximisation of their financial interests. They have tried to reduce any insightful and detailed discussion about the housing, environmental and sociocultural aspects of living in

Mumbai to a misplaced argument of redevelopment and discrimination against "locals".

The finalized list of 2008 was ignored by the MCGM (not surprisingly, the senior most official advised MCGM to ignore the list and leave the heritage structures vulnerable to redevelopment). The next four years saw the heritage advocates filing RTIs to seek answers to the status of the revised heritage list. Due to the unwavering spirit of this movement, the MCGM finally relented and published the list in 2012, a full seven years after the 2005 list.

The damage done to the conservation movement by parts of the real estate lobby during these lost seven years can never be undone; what remains is small and vulnerable to the greed of this lobby. The wrecking ball of greed masquerading as redevelopment razed many important structures, ignoring community contexts in Khotachiwadi and Willingdon Colony for personal gain. It is doubly important now that we understand the relevance of this diminishing pot of riches to the culture, economy, the social fabric, housing, the environment and strengthening of the due legislative process.

## **Culture and Economy**

Mumbai's economy has undergone an wrenching transition to a service economy. Manufacturing has moved out to other cities such as Pune, Chennai and Hyderabad with knowledge

capital. This is not unique to Mumbai; but fortunately other cities such as New York and London too have dealt with this transition and we can learn from them. The service economies in these cities had to be augmented with culture to bring in tourism, media and entertainment based industries. Restaurants, cafes, hotels and other service sectors thrive in cities where cultural heritage is rich, not in cities that look like monolithic culture neutral Soviet blocks. Tourists all over the world travel to India and Mumbai to experience the diversity in Banganga, Bandra, Mahalaxmi, Dhobi-Ghat, Gaumdevi etc. The tourists bring important livelihood opportunities to tour guides, waiters, rickshaw and taxi drivers, street vendors; people who suffered the most from the loss of manufacturing activities. Undoubtedly, culture is an enabler of these new opportunities, hence loss of culture will lead to economic losses to these masses.

The importance of tourism and a vibrant cultural economy assumes serious proportions especially when banking and other high tech service based industries also move out due to high real estate rental costs in Mumbai. Gurgaon and Hyderabad with their new infrastructure and affordable rents now attract the global service based industry giants.

With no new cultural landmarks post-independence, Mumbai is left with a very small smattering of heritage landmarks. We are fighting to save about 1500

structures from a total building footprint of more than 175,000 buildings in Greater Mumbai. This translates to less than 1%. Compare this to about 5000 landmark sites in New York and about 500,000 buildings in London that are preserved for the future. If we lose out on conserving these remnants of Mumbai's built heritage then **'Mumbai Darshan'** will be reduced to Gateway of India, Elephanta Caves and Sanjay Gandhi National Park!

Would you rather not preserve the buildings and neighbourhoods than build a fake new cultural landmark in the middle of the Arabian Sea to promote tourism? Our biggest resource is our built environment and we should preserve these assets for our economic development.

## **Social Fabric**

The one bond that unites most political parties is their opposition to heritage conservation. In a lighter vein, it means we're doing something right. Arguments predictably term us as the 'arrogant elite' and that we deprive the local Marathi and Parsi populations of redevelopment benefits. This while proclaiming to build Shivaji statues and renaming all monuments after Shivaji to retain the **'Marathi Asmita'**.

The strongest symbol of Marathi fabric and civic mindedness in Mumbai is found in the Shivaji Park precinct in Dadar. The scheme acknowledged the importance of open spaces in urban

life and provided for the Shivaji Park maidan, one of the few large public open spaces remaining in Mumbai. The architecture is an indigenous response to the Art Deco movement where the architects blended their vernacular symbols with a global architectural influence prevalent in the pre-independence era. Mustansir Dalvi, of the JJ School of Architecture notes this in his essay, "The buildings around Shivaji Park, Five Gardens and the Dadar-Matunga estate were predominantly designed by pioneering Marathi Manoos." Mr. Dalvi notes that architects such as G. B. Mhatre, S. H. Parelkar, V. M. Suvarnapatki, R. K. Joshi, D. P. Borkar, S. J. Narvekar, G. D. Sambhare, G. W. Marathe, D. G. Vaidya, S. M. Kini; Patki, Jadhav & Dadarkar, Jaykar & Gupchup, Parelkar, Ovalekar, Gore & Parpia and the Dhurandhar brothers are Maharashtrians and have contributed much to Marathi Asmita.

The Samyukta Maharashtra Chalval where Acharya Atre spoke to crowds of lakhs was held at Shivaji Park. The Shiv Sena led by the late Bal Thackeray had its first rally here and the affinity for Shivaji Park is evident in its headquarters being a stone's throw away from Shivaji Park. Bal Thackeray's funeral procession culminated here, witnessed by hordes of his loving followers.

The sense of this middle class ethos and the democratic public space that this precinct has encouraged through its architecture is evident even today.

The built form is small and facilitates communal exchange and face-to-face contact. The older generation walks around the maidan and on the small streets in the neighbourhood. Grandparents take their grandkids to play while exchanging political notes with their neighbours. A complex order of buildings, sidewalks, street vendors, sweepers, yoga practitioners, walkers, housewives watching from balconies and morning joggers produce the energy and vitality in Shivaji Park. This lifestyle can never be replicated in 30-40 storey towers. The notion of public diversity and social linkages built through "Sarvajanik" public spaces is lost in the monolithic superblock of wasteful oversimplified architecture. When a city or town loses a historic building or a neighbourhood such as Shivaji Park in its center, it loses a piece of its identity; that part of the 'Asmita' that communities must have to distinguish themselves, to be cared for and loved. Mumbai is unique for it allowed such expressions of local architecture in Shivaji Park and Hindu and Parsi colonies to flourish yet integrated them into the global aspirations of Mumbai. It is important, that such places be not just sustainable but also sustained for the future generations.

## Housing

The most rabid and illogical opposition to heritage conservation comes from parts of the builder and real estate lobby. The heritage conservation movement, they argue, drives up

the real estate prices in Mumbai and deprives the city of affordable housing. Foremost in this opposition are the bodies MCHI (Maharashtra Chamber of Housing Industry) and PEATA (Practising Engineers, Architects and Town Planners Association) which believes in conserving only a few notional symbols of city architecture and redeveloping every inch of the city's developable land for housing. The members of this body and other real estate lobbies in Mumbai have built only luxury and upper middle class housing over the last 15-20 years while the current shortfall in low income and affordable housing in Mumbai is about 1 million units. That real estate in Mumbai at the higher end is stagnating and approaching an imminent correction which is evident from the 180,000 apartments (**each costing between 1 crore – 150 crores**) lying unsold. If the real estate lobby hearts bleed for affordable housing, these vacant apartments are the right place to start.

Instead emotions are stirred wrongly amongst the citizens to kick and punch the heritage conservation movement. The same citizens who have suffered due to inaction of the government on the Rent Act and the Urban Land Ceiling Act now see redevelopment of the buildings as the way to the illusion of affordable home ownership. Home ownership in new developments comes at an unaffordable price, as much of the new developments carry north of Rs. 10,000 as monthly maintenance charges. Many of the families who lived in older

buildings and who don't earn more than Rs 20,000 a month are either forced to sell off these new apartments because of unaffordability and move north to Mira-Bhayander, Virar, Vasai etc., or worse, live as outsiders in their own neighbourhoods. The redevelopment process has robbed them of their central location in the city, their personal social connections and banished them to lives of stress and 2 hour commutes to their jobs in South Mumbai.

The redevelopment lobby has never solved the home affordability issue in Greater Mumbai and their arguments for removing heritage are misleading and at best opportunistic. They have used every FSI incentive given under the Development Control Regulations by MCGM and SRA and have barely scratched the surface for affordable housing.

The government on its part continues to languish at solving the housing crisis in Mumbai. It ignores the range of ideas that experts have mooted to bring down home prices in Mumbai; ideas that include in-situ provision of services to slum communities, investing in more public transportation such as rail and road linkages to Navi Mumbai investing in rental housing, and opening nearby vacant lands for low cost housing.

Heritage has become the popular whipping boy for these shortcomings and for lack of a rational housing policy.

## **Environment**

Heritage conservation finds its roots in the environment movement. Older buildings have a tremendous latent energy stored in them. These structures were built during periods when cooling and lighting technologies were not developed. Hence their design incorporated optimum use of sunlight, shade and the wind. Additionally lower labour costs and material costs allowed owners to build these buildings stronger and resilient to adaptation. There is a huge energy loss in demolishing a building and then rebuilding it. The construction debris is dumped in the sea or in mangroves for reclaiming, causing further environmental damage. New trendy aesthetics use glass facades which put heavy demands on air-conditioning and lighting. These structures are environmentally unsustainable. If all buildings in Mumbai are redeveloped using these standards, the rest of Maharashtra will become a desert.

Heritage conservation does not prohibit minor repairs or even major ones like lift installation to adapt to the new lifestyles and an aging population. The MHCC has actually approved repairs on varying scales based on the request of the residents.

Adaptive reuses of buildings receive the highest "green" rating all over the world. A city must use old buildings for new ideas just as it might use new buildings for old ideas. Old buildings



have a greater tolerance for trial and error. Newer construction is less environmentally friendly than reusing existing older construction.

### **Rule of Law and Legislative Process**

The heritage conservation movement aspires to achieve a balance of retaining our ties to history with planned development and future economic growth. This balance, as in every other civic matter is achieved through dialogue and negotiations amongst aspirations of the local citizens. There is a due legislative process that accommodates suggestions and objections to the heritage list and makes an informed decision after due deliberations by the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee.

**The Development Control Regulation (DCR) 67 dealing with heritage conservation gives explicit and specific instructions for Suggestions and Objections under DCR 67(IV). Moreover under DCR 67(V), the Municipal Commissioner is empowered to make alterations, modifications or relaxations to the heritage grading but only after the Suggestions and Objections process is over and the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee is consulted.**

Part of these deliberations have been the drafting of financial incentives package to offset economic hardships, if any, to the residents in the heritage neighbourhoods. But the finalization

of these financial incentives is in a perpetual state of limbo further aggravating the citizens against the heritage movement.

The heritage conservation movement has seen repeated attempts by parts of the real estate lobby which wants a blanket subversion of these participatory dialogues. Part of these efforts was to file lawsuits since 2012 under the guise of infringing of constitutional rights to property. Delicate neighbourhoods at Chembur, Shivaji Park, Dadar Parsi Colony and Willingdon Colony are the flash points of these lawsuits. The MCGM as usual constituted a review committee under the leadership of former chairman of MHCC to institute the Suggestions and Objections process with the city. This committee instead of conforming to the process of eliciting and collating public opinion oversteps its own mandate and begins deleting structures and sites in Mumbai, beginning with Shivaji Park precinct and Shivaji Park maidan to appease the builder lobby. Shockingly it also frames guidelines to encourage high-rise development in the Shivaji Park precinct. What will happen to the collective sustained effort for conservation due to the arbitrary behaviour of this committee is a scary prospect that remains to be seen.

**The legislative process has to be completed for a logical conclusion to the heritage conservation movement; the city should not tolerate any interruptions in this process.**

## Finally...

Cities are complex systems where the poor reside with the rich and the old resides with the new. Mumbai is no different in its tolerance of imperfection in the search for the perfect. This continuous conflict has bestowed upon Mumbai a unique economic and cultural vitality. It has made Mumbai the magnet for human migration. The built urban heritage is the city's response to the intensity of economic and social forces. This heritage has witnessed Mumbai's lure to people from Maharashtra, India and rest of the world and should therefore be retained as an invaluable resource for future generations to learn about the foremost Indian city and the churn of urbanization in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Using the pretext of development and not saving the built heritage is unfair to the city's past, present and future. The city's present should solely hand over the past to the future without destroying it. We, the city's present are mere custodians and should treat the city's urban form as an inheritance to be bequeathed to those coming after us. Else when the time comes and Mumbai transforms into a cultural economy, future generations will have lost hope in finding the small slivers of culture that we today are bent on destroying. Heritage will remain the quiet enabling force for culture, economy, environment and all the good things Mumbai has to offer. We cannot and will not allow it to be dispensed off.

