

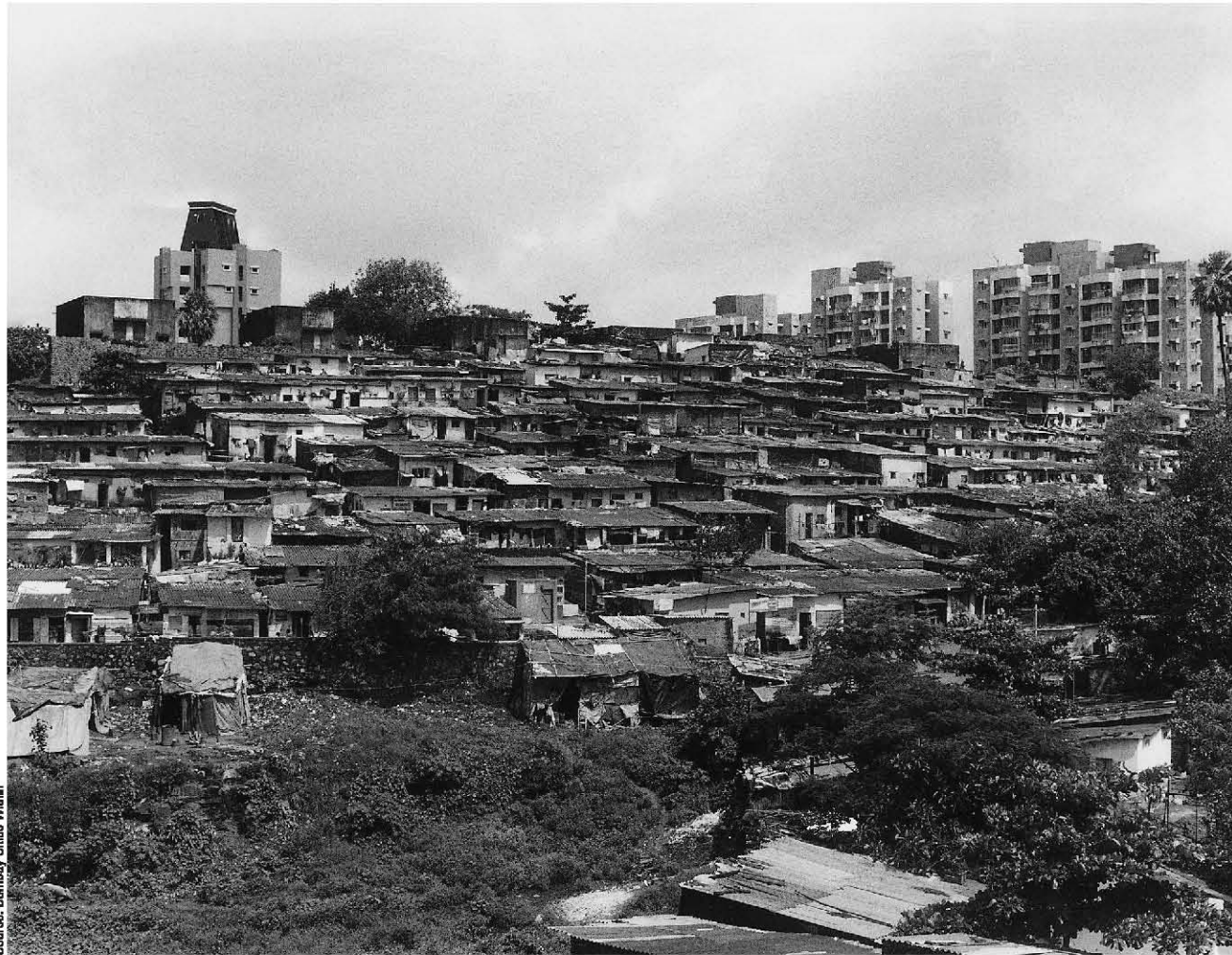
INDIA and particularly urban India is emerging as a unique landscape of bewildering architectural pluralism. The urban Indian landscape is characterized by intense duality where modernity, tradition, prosperity and acute poverty, communality and communalism, medieval society and cutting edge information technology coalesce to create incomprehensible cities. These complexes defeat conventional notions of the city and are represented more accurately through 'motion' and mutation of urban space rather than conventional notions of the city as a largely 'static' and stable entity.

Today in our urban areas there exist two cities – static and kinetic – two completely different worlds that cohabit the same urban space. The static city is represented through its architecture and monuments built in permanent materials. The kinetic city that occupies interstitial space is the city of motion – the *kutchi* city, built of temporary material. In the kinetic city architecture is no longer the spectacle of the city; rather processions and festivals form its spectacle and memory and the very expression of the city is temporal in nature, in constant flux. In this dynamic and near schizophrenic situation how does one approach urban or architectural conservation? How do we reconcile the static and kinetic? What does conservation of the built heritage mean when architecture is no longer the spectacle of the city? How do we conserve with a divided mind?

It is here that the notion of 'cultural significance' gains importance – an idea where culture, place and perhaps aspirations intersect in interesting ways, opening up several questions about conservation approaches, where the act or thrust of conservation movements must necessarily go beyond the static to also encompass the kinetic city.

The notion of 'cultural significance' as an all encompassing idea emerged clearly in the conservation debate in the 1980s (with the Burra Charter to be more precise). The Burra Charter defined 'cultural significance as the aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present and future generations.' Implicit in this definition is the belief that 'significance' is static. It is a definition that is 'object' centric (devoid of life) with its roots in the debate propagated by the antiquarians of the Renaissance.

What is the validity of such a notion in a highly pluralist society where cultural memory is often an enacted process? What is our cultural reading for the kinetic city which now forms a greater part of our urban reality? In this dynamic context, if the act of conservation has to be informed by our reading of cultural significance, it will necessarily have to include the notion of 'constructing significance' both in the architectural as well as conservation debates.



Source: Bombay Cities Within

Unfortunately, most conservation debates discuss change in terms of the loss of something as opposed to new possibilities – because people (especially the propagators and patrons of conservation effort), will easily react to any sort of new condition as worse than some 'magic moment' in the past. Conservation professionals then easily develop a rationale to describe that sense of loss. But, in the context of our contemporary urban state, the issue is how to actually simultaneously identify new typologies and work with them rather than dwell in the 'postcard city' – a city that only flights of nostalgia momentarily recreate!

In fact conservation activists often take on an attitude that Italo Calvino describes in his seminal book *Invisible Cities* where '...the traveller is invited to visit the city and, at the same time, to examine some old postcards that show it as it used to be... if the traveller does not wish to disappoint the inhabitants, he must praise the Postcard City and prefer it to the present one, though he must be careful to contain his regret at the changes within definite limits.'

How do we then embrace this 'change' as integral to the conservation movement, especially where the creator of that environment and the present custodians represent completely different cultural constructs? How do contemporary aspirations 'inspire' the process of conservation where we look forward and backward in a simultaneous gesture? How does one identify the contemporary engines that will drive this process of urban conservation? How does one read cultural significance and the validity or necessity to sometimes *invent* 'cultural significance' to drive this process?

Some of the work carried out by citizens' groups in Mumbai's historic Fort area addresses this issue of using 'contemporary engines' to drive this process of conservation and, more importantly, animating interstitial spaces in the city and creating thresholds between the many different worlds that exist in the city. In short, engaging with the idea of also simultaneously creating new urban typologies and inventing 'significance' in response to specific problems and emerging aspirations.

While Mumbai was fortunate in 1995 to have enacted a legislation to protect historic buildings and precincts, the first phase of its existence was dominated by the postcard city syndrome – nostalgia and sentiment! Conservation standards came to be benchmarked by a 'purist approach' perpetuated by trained professionals, obviously intellectually detached from the larger emerging cultural landscape of the contemporary city. While this was a great strategy to establish a 'niche of specialization', it



resulted in 'conservation' being perceived by the citizens at large as an expensive, elitist process and preoccupation.

However, as a broader range of professionals and NGOs understood and engaged with the implications of the legislation, they began looking at and grappling with the transforming nature of the city and issues related to urban conservation as well as the general degradation of the environment in historic precincts. What was the point in restoring individual buildings when everything around them was falling apart?

These exercises, besides achieving improvement in the physical state of the environment, shifted the (often myopic) debate from architectural conservation exercises to urban conservation approaches. This was a critical shift, as it involved engaging with the larger cultural landscapes and treating it as an evolving entity. This shift allowed the conservation movement to drive closer to the planning process – which is what after all directs the form of our cities. Furthermore, the conservation efforts resulting out of this shift inspired and set precedents for other such processes in the city, making their relevance go beyond the conservation debate to the larger planning process.

It would be useful to look at some cases from Mumbai's historic Fort area. The first sub-area in the Fort to engage in such a process of conservation was a Grade I open recreational space, the historic Oval Maidan, which upto 1996 had been under the jurisdiction of the state government. As this is a city-level open space (chiefly used for cricket), there was a general detachment of local residents from the upkeep of the maidan. As a result, this open space had deteriorated to such an extent that it was transformed into a spot for drug dealing, prostitution and gross misuse.

A citizens' group, OCRA (Oval-Cooperage Residents Association) comprising mainly of women residents of the area, took it upon itself to petition the Maharashtra government to maintain the Oval maidan. The state government did not respond, resulting in the citizens' group taking it to court. The High Court ruled in their favour directing the government to either maintain the space or hand it over to the citizens' group, which subsequently took over this space in 1996.

Plans were then drawn up for the area and money raised to fence the open space, put in signage and introduce a walking track – all within the guidelines stipulated by the Heritage Conservation Committee. In fact, the walking track became the crucial element by which it became possible to engage the residents of the area to use the space and look after its well-being. Besides effectively using the legislative

and judicial system for the conservation of this space, the introduction of a walking track connected the citizens, driving the process to a new constituency of potential users in this area and engage them in the conservation process, thereby inventing a new significance for the space that gently extended the historic (cultural) significance of this maidan.

From the participatory conservation viewpoint another important area of relevance is Kala Ghoda in South Mumbai. While the area derives its name from the statue of King Edward VII seated on his black horse, this icon no longer exists. However, the memory of the horse (sans its rider) continues to persist. A group of young architects, with the support of the Urban Design Research Institute, carried out detailed surveys of the area. They studied traffic patterns, land uses, and so on, and discovered that the sub-precinct contained the largest concentration of contemporary art galleries in the country.

The study was followed by the formation of an association (a public trust) for the area, with the intention that it would synergize their resources for conservation. The association petitioned government to officially designate the area as an art district and an art festival is now planned every year (the first one was held in February 1998) as a way of raising money to physically improve the area as well as draw attention to the conservation of its intrinsic values. This process has been successful in raising money as also initiating the conservation and restoration of both the public spaces and buildings in the area.

Promoting the area as an art district was a means of driving the process of its restoration, though historically Kala Ghoda was never considered an art district. However, its inherent resources have now been channelised to drive the conservation process. Perhaps the process will successfully take on this new significance in the future to truly be

recognised as an art district. Equally that the process may evolve to a point where the area will dissipate into yet another transformed identity. In any case, the process has engendered this area with a new significance which has not only driven the conservation process but also restored public space for use by multiple worlds to express their aspirations.

An effort to bring together establishments in the Ballard Estate area has similarly resulted in the formation of an association that is working towards addressing the issue of the physical degradation of the precinct. Hawkers and vendors had over the past decades colonized the streets, resulting in great inconvenience to pedestrians using the pavements. Recognizing that the hawkers and the services they provide are necessary, the association worked out a scheme to accommodate these functions in disused service courtyards at the rear of the buildings.

To nestle the kinetic city in the voids and interstitial spaces within the static city is a way of creating 'spaces' where many worlds coexist even as the illusion of the architecture remains intact. This could well become a powerful image of the contemporary Indian city where the compression and coexistence of two worlds in the same space, if managed successfully, becomes emblematic of the tolerant pluralism as well as the rich humane dimension that cities in the West sometimes so completely lack.

As a community, we have a better chance of ensuring the survival of some of our historic icons, buildings as well as heritage precincts through gently balancing these dual aspects, agendas or aspirations. In any global city, it is the negotiation which occurs between different constituencies, vested interests and points of view that hopefully results in a healthy equilibrium. Essentially, conservation efforts around the world, howsoever they might be disguised, are about making our transition into the future more gentle, for change is inevitable.

These cases (all in the Fort area) in Mumbai have significantly highlighted the fact that unless the community is sufficiently engaged in the conservation process no degree of success can be

achieved despite legislation. Also, the idea of identifying a contemporary purpose or use as the 'engine' to drive this process has been successful in not only facilitating this process of conservation but simultaneously addressing the contemporary realities and issues in these areas. Breaking the area (the Fort precinct) into smaller units allowed professionals and committed citizens to organize constituencies to lobby for improvements. The chances of articulating common aspiration increased, given the manageable size of each unit.

This process also foregrounded a fundamental issue when dealing with conservation in post-colonial situations where the urban conservation movement invariably grows out of the environmental movement and not a cultural desire to preserve historic icons. In fact, for an entire generation of citizens, the Victorian core of the city in Mumbai represents repression and exclusion – the buildings are clearly icons of our colonial past. To others, the historic centre is a segment where cohesiveness of urban form and the integration of architecture and urban design create a pleasant (or at least potentially beautiful) environment in sheer contrast to the laissez-faire growth that has come to characterize the contemporary Indian urban landscape.

Therefore, in this context, conservation approaches have to treat their 'object' purely in terms of 'building and environment as resource' devoid of its iconographic or symbolic content. Currently, many worlds inhabit the same space in the city, relating to and using it in different ways. In order to facilitate this process of conservation, it is critical that conservation processes encourage the recycling of buildings as well as urban spaces as a conservation strategy.

The interplay of this discipline of keeping the external illusion intact while adapting the inside to evolving social needs and contemporary aspirations is worth serious consideration. It is through this process that there will be a draining of the symbolic import of the edifice and a deepening of the ties of architecture with contemporary realities and experiences – where a particular urban typology will be transformed through general architectural interventions and placed in the service of contemporary life and realities.

Similarly, to deal with this highly complex entity of urban India, notions of 'cultural significance', which limit efforts to 'object-centric' projects, should be broadened to respond to our highly pluralistic society where cultural memory is often an enacted process. This is specially relevant given the fact that the 'kinetic city' now forms a greater part of our urban reality! In this dynamic context, it will be necessary to include the notion of 'constructing significance' in the conservation debates. In fact, an understanding that significance 'evolves' will truly clarify the role of the conservationist as an 'advocate' of change, not only as one who opposes change – a facilitator who is an agent giving expression to contemporary aspirations.