

Leveraging the Past, for the Future

By Shruti Rajagopalan

Heritage conservation in India is often considered as a beautification process. The result of this mindset can be witnessed in Indian heritage cities where often the visible market streets and monuments are well-restored and protected but it seems like a different world altogether as soon as we walk out of these protected boundaries.

UN-Habitat along with GIZ with the support of Government of India, hosted an Urban Symposium on “Harmonizing Heritage and Innovation in Cities” in Jaipur on 19th and 20th of December 2019, as a precursor to the World Urban Forum which is going to be held between 8th and 13th February, 2020 in Abu Dhabi, UAE. The symposium brought together conservation experts, local government agencies, city managers, and NGOs to discuss the current day condition of heritage in Indian cities, and the future of the same.

Session 1 - Cities of Opportunities: Connecting Culture and Innovation, particularly, highlighted the key challenges in recognizing the importance of heritage, and presented local and international case studies that have been successful in tackling such encounters. As a result of the discussion, four main themes appeared:

- 1. Heritage is potentially a strong cultural asset.** Mr. Divay Gupta from INTACH emphasized that to maximize the value of heritage in cities, it needs to be considered as not just a thing of the past but also an integral part of the future. Heritage can be valued through various lenses, like; i) Aesthetic, Architectural, Environmental, Functional; ii) Cultural Resource, Historical, Associative; iii) Economic & Commercial, etc. For instance; the Mumbai Municipal Corporation decided to take up one their old dilapidated heritage buildings (used as a file storage space) and adaptively re-use the same into a majestic conference hall. Similarly, Raja Mahal in Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh has been repurposed a computer training centre. This exercise not just accommodates another use into the building but ensures its preservation and maintenance due to its users, hence successfully converting a liability into a highly valued asset.



Before



After

Figure 6: Adaptive Reuse - Bassian Kothi, Ludhiana, ITI & Cultural Park

Source: Mr. Divay Gupta, INTACH – Presentation “Creating Cultural Assets”

- 2. Heritage conservation needs to be embedded in the masterplan of cities.** Conserving and enhancing heritage should be an integral part of city planning and should not be approached in an ad-hoc fashion. As highlighted by Mr. Nitish Singla from Amritsar Municipal Corporation, the city of Amritsar has taken the advantage of various national-level urban missions like HRIDAY, Swachh Bharat mission, AMRUT and Smart Cities mission to formulate an integrated approach towards the preservation and revitalization of their core city area along with the implementation and enhancement of basic services delivery by creating effective linkages bringing together urban planning, economic growth and heritage conservation in an inclusive manner. In addition to the visible physical makeover, the city has also achieved an enhanced quality of life for its citizens by tackling the deep-rooted urban issues of the place.



Pedestrianization of Heritage complex



Pet Bottle Crusher (one of many initiatives to maintain the cleanliness and sanctity of the area)

Figure 9: Projects that complement and support the Heritage Conservation

Source: Mr. Nitish Singla, Amritsar Municipal Corporation- Presentation "The beginning of change"

- 3. Innovation is an opportunity to create unique identity.** The integrated heritage revival from a 'Demolish and Build' strategy to an 'Old and New' strategy through the 3R (Retain, Restore, Repair) principle is one of the effective ways that was suggested by Ms. Olga Chepelianskaia from UNICITI. She illustrated this by sharing how, in the year 1983, Singapore was observing an annual decline of 3.5% in their tourism. The root cause of the same was the deterioration and demolition of heritage buildings and landmarks. Around the same time, the city developed the first large-scale urban conservation program in Southeast Asia gazetted thousands of structures in 100 areas since then. As a result of this holistic approach, the city has been successful in weaving together the old with the new by the usage of contextually sensitive design guidelines (street, material, facade, etc.) and has managed to attract foreign tourists more than thrice of its population just in 2018.



Kampong Glam, Singapore – integrated street



China Town, Singapore – integrated metro station

Figure 3 : Blending of heritage with respectful and well-kept surroundings

Source: Ms. Olga Chepelianskaia, UNICITI – Presentation – “Building Unique Cities”

4. **Citizen engagement is an effective tool for building awareness and buying consensus.** It heightens the importance of the subject matter among citizens and makes them feel involved in the decision-making process. Most importantly it builds the priceless sense of pride and ownership among citizens which feeds back into the motivation loop of planning better cities. For example, Mr. Aditya Vidyasagar from State Mission for Clean Ganga-UP, shared that in its efforts to engage different groups of people, the Namami Gange project has managed to create a lot of livelihood along the banks of River Ganga. There is a sense of belonging now among all the “Ganga Grams” (villages along the river) and the people are actively involved in the development process.



Figure 4: Stakeholder Meeting for cleaning Ganga collectively

Source: <http://smcg-up.org/gallery/>

Globalization has done a lot of good world-over by blurring geographical boundaries and providing unimagined exposure to growth, progress and development. But, this melting pot has come at the cost of fading cultures, traditions, structures and the environment. Heritage in cities are considered as a low priority or sometimes, completely ignored during the planning process unless explicitly labelled important at a national or an international level. With lack of attention, and with the pressure of development, Indian heritage constantly remains under threat and is the most vulnerable target for people seeking growth opportunities within cities. It is therefore crucial to innovate models and

practices that motivate all stakeholders to value and conserve heritage in their cities as a part of a planned process, for ages to come.



Figure 5: L to R : Ms. Olga Chepelianskaia, Principal Consultant and Founder, UNICITI(Panellist); Mr. Divay Gupta, Principal Director, INTACH (Session Chair); Mr. Nitish Singla, Joint Commissioner, Amritsar Municipal Corporation(Panellist); Mr. Aditya Vidyasagar, Implementation Support, State Mission for Clean Ganga – DoUD, Government of Uttar Pradesh (Panellist)