

# Tracing the identity of a city

Gauri Shiurkar\*

Department of Architecture, STES' Sinhgad College, India

## Abstract

*The soul of the city lies in its heritage structures which give it its identity and stand out as a reminder of the past glory. As we relate the varied aspects of conservation, we must understand that cultural heritage is vital because of the values that people associate to these objects or places. These meanings, associations, and values must be counted as part of the larger sphere of sociocultural processes.*

*This paper focuses on the conception of cultural heritage, derived from the way people remember, organize, think about, and wish to understand the past. The stories associated with objects and places by people enhance the value of cultural heritage.*

*Every place has a soul of its own. Certain places may have extremely powerful charisma due to an interesting blend of their unique symbolic and physical attributes. This research tries to understand this through studying the Physical Attributes of some parts of two different cities. In one case the conservation effort has been done to retain the sense of place and the second one has a lot of potential but needs some serious conservation effort.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural significance, identity, Values, Sense of place, socio-cultural process*

## Introduction

The soul of the city lies in its heritage structures which give it its identity and stand out as a reminder of the past glory. All that remains is this quiet and melancholy sight, but even in its sadness it retains its grandeur as a golden leaf out of the history of human beings.

Human civilization has established its footprint on earth through such edifices, and they are as much part of our heritage as the rich natural settings of the earth. Conservation today has acquired the status of a global movement, with support from almost all cultures of the world, as evident from the famous 'NARA' document<sup>27</sup>. There is global awareness now that all the human traditions & culture are an irreplaceable heritage for the mankind and need to be conserved.

Hence, though the Conservation movement began with the exotic, it has come to the terms of accepting that the traditional vernacular architecture, the settlement patterns of cities, art & crafts, the technology & materials, the music & painting, food collection & preparation, dress & fashion - almost everything which embodies the empirical knowledge learned through generations of experience by the mankind needs to be protected.

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<sup>27</sup> The Nara Document on Authenticity was drafted by the 45 participants at the Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention, held at Nara, Japan, from 1-6 November 1994, at the invitation of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Government of Japan) and the Nara Prefecture.

This is now the driving force of the conservation movement all over the world. As the NARA document succinctly puts it *"The diversity of cultures and heritage in our world is an irreplaceable source of spiritual and intellectual richness for all humankind. The protection and enhancement of cultural and heritage diversity in our world should be actively promoted as an essential aspect of human development."*<sup>28</sup>

### **1. Cultural Heritage: A historic perspective**

Heritage represents character of the society. It plays a strong role in development of the society. Historic events, people do a major contribution in the making of a heritage place. Heritage is an integrated feeling. It is neglected in the daily routine. It is a spirit which needs to be awakened. And it is a job of conservation professional.

Society has a Sense of Identity which is very important. The conservation movement tries to rekindle it. The concept of heritage has changed a lot over the years.

As per the Athens Charter 1933, Heritage is 'an artistic and archaeological property of mankind is one that interests the community of the States, which are wardens of civilization'.<sup>29</sup>

Venice Charter, 1964, says that, 'The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time'<sup>30</sup>.

However, Burra Charter, 1972, broadened the definition to 'site, area, land, landscape, building or other work, group of buildings or other works, and may include components, contents, spaces and views. Place as used in the Charter has a broad scope: it is geographically defined and includes its natural and cultural features. Place can be used to refer to small things, such as a milestone, and large areas, such as a cultural landscape. A memorial, a tree, the site of a historical event, an urban area or town, an industrial plant, an archaeological site, a stone arrangement, a road or travel route, a site with spiritual and religious connections — all of these can fit under this term.'<sup>31</sup>

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, in 2003 further broadened the scope to 'The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environments, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.'<sup>32</sup>

The latest INTACH charter, 2004, has an all inclusive definition of Heritage which says, 'the tangible heritage includes historic buildings of all periods, their setting in the historic precincts of cities and their relationship to the natural environment. It also includes culturally significant modern buildings and towns. The intangible heritage includes the extant culture of traditional

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<sup>28</sup> Clause 5, NARA document

<sup>29</sup> Athens Charter 1933

<sup>30</sup> Venice Charter 1964

<sup>31</sup> Burra Charter 1972

<sup>32</sup> The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, 2003

building skills and knowledge, rites and rituals, social life and lifestyles of the inhabitants, which together with the tangible heritage constitutes the 'living' heritage. Both tangible and intangible heritage, and especially the link between them, should be conserved.'<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Heritage & Identity

- 1) Heritage is what we have without our asking, Perhaps that is the reason we do not notice it
- 2) Heritage is what gives us the identity we have as individuals & also as a people,

### 2.1 Question of Identity

- 1) Identity is what we are
- 2) How do we recognize ourselves in the changing global scenario?
- 3) Is it the dress, language, colour of the skin, religion, faith, beliefs, superstitions, lifestyle or value systems?
- 4) And how do we know that whatever we are, it is worth clinging to this identity?

### 2.2 Identity of Habitat

In our day-to-day life we normally do not stop & observe the habitat around us. The images of the city are mixed and have more to do with the activity than the built form around which these activities happen.



Fig. 1: Street vendors in Pune

Source: The Author



Fig. 2: Street vendors in Hyderabad

Source: The Author



Fig. 3: Traffic in Pune

Source: The Author

Images of the new development are juxtaposed with the old city, and the newer kind of habitat is trying to establish a striking visual image of the city contrasting with the Old Historic **images**. These images demonstrate the delinking of our present day architecture from the earlier heritage buildings .And how do we identify the place?

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<sup>33</sup> Article 2.1 INTACH Charter , 2004

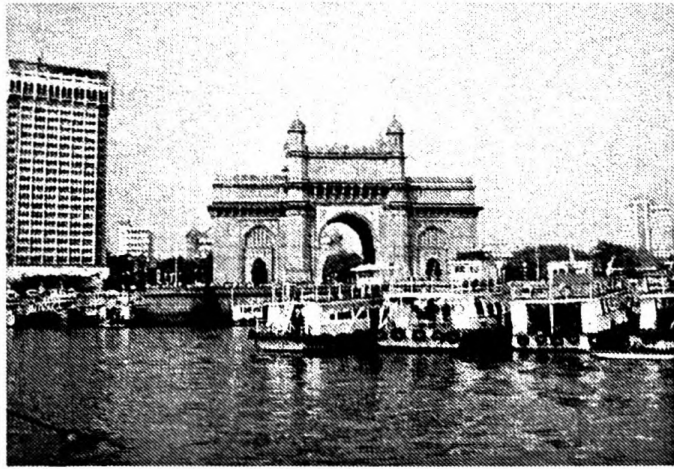


Fig. 4: Gateway of India, Mumbai  
Source: The Author



Fig. 5: People travelling in local train,  
Source: The Author

The images of Gateway of India, and the local train with its overflowing passengers (Mumbai). It is these images that get ingrained in our consciousness when we mention a city. The following photographs are from Hyderabad, but it could be from any one of the cities in India.



Fig. 6: A typical office building  
Source: The Author



Fig. 7: Street vendors in Hyderabad  
Source: The Author

But strong visual character of the Historic monuments dominate and identify a place. Every day, as we move through our cities, the monuments are always at the backdrop, almost like a setting in the movies, and the life goes on oblivious of the background. What do these historic buildings represent? They are a reflection of our lifestyle, our customs & rituals, culture & traditions and most important they represent a sustainable system of functioning-be it the use of materials & technology in building .Today everyone recognizes their value as a permanent reminder of the past glory of our civilization-and may be saved in spite of the growth of our cities & the resulting urban pressures on the lands in the cities.



Fig. 8: Charminar, Hyd  
Source: Sharmila Khatri



Fig.9: Mahalakshmi Temple, Kolhapur  
Source: The Author

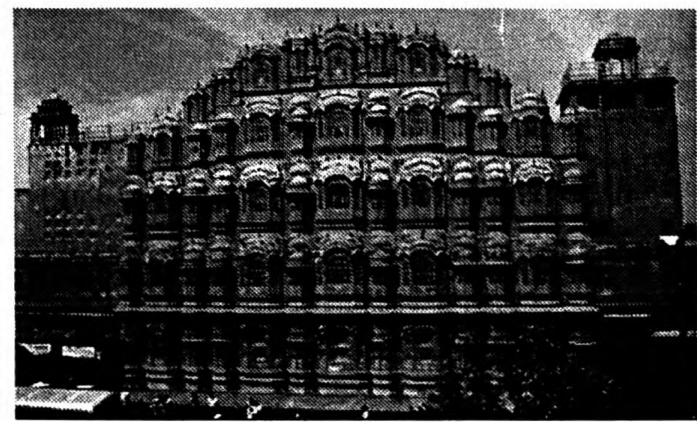


Fig.10: Havamahal Jaipur  
Source: Kshitija Pratinidhi

Similarly Historic urban landscape is composed of the built and unbuilt heritage and it ultimately shapes the city and gives it its identity. 'Historic Urban Landscape takes into account the complexity of present-day (historic) city centres: they cannot be described through their unique functions (traditional urban activities), by simply opposing to other parts of the city (sociologically, geographically, from the point of view of urban planning, etc.), or by their mere aesthetical value (monument protection). They are considered as a bearer of a local identity, which is expressed by specific - intangible cultural – practices'<sup>34</sup>.

In today's pace of development, the presence of such areas contribute to the historic fabric of the city, assets of our past, representing the histories of communities, embodying their tradition, heritage and culture through architecture and urban form.

### **3. Case Studies**

Two cities were studied to understand the importance of physical conservation along with the intangible aspects of built heritage. Pondicherry where Conservation efforts by INTACH have helped the city to retain its sense of place and Some areas in the historic city of Pune where the lack of awareness and negligence have added to the loss of character of the city in the present times ultimately losing the sense of place.

The areas were studied through cognitive surveys like trace mapping, behavioural mapping, transect walks and also through interviews.

#### **Limitations:**

Though I am looking at the intangible attribute which also defines the identity of a place, the mapping of these attributes through a scientific method was not feasible within the limited time span for the study of the paper.

#### **3.1 Case Study Pondicherry**

Pondicherry is a Heritage town with rich cultural diversity, mainly due to the cross-cultural 'Indo-French' influence. It has given Pondicherry a Unique identity. The architectural character is a result of hundreds of French and Tamil houses that create the milieu. The boulevard town has inherited a significant architectural heritage that can evidenced from its well planned grid pattern housing two distinct settlements, Tamil and Frenc

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<sup>34</sup> Gábor Sonkoly, 2012 *The Meanings of Historic Landscape* (<http://rfiea.fr/en/articles/meanings-historic-urban-landscape>)

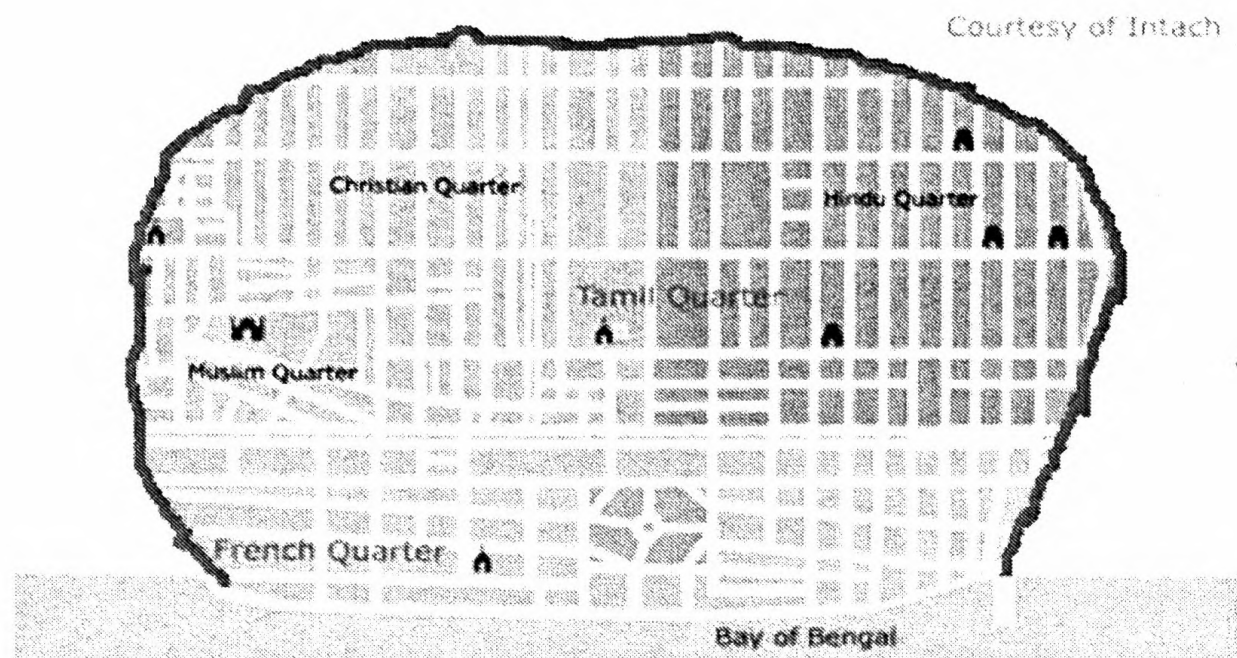


Fig. 11: Pondicherry  
Source: INTACH Pondicherry

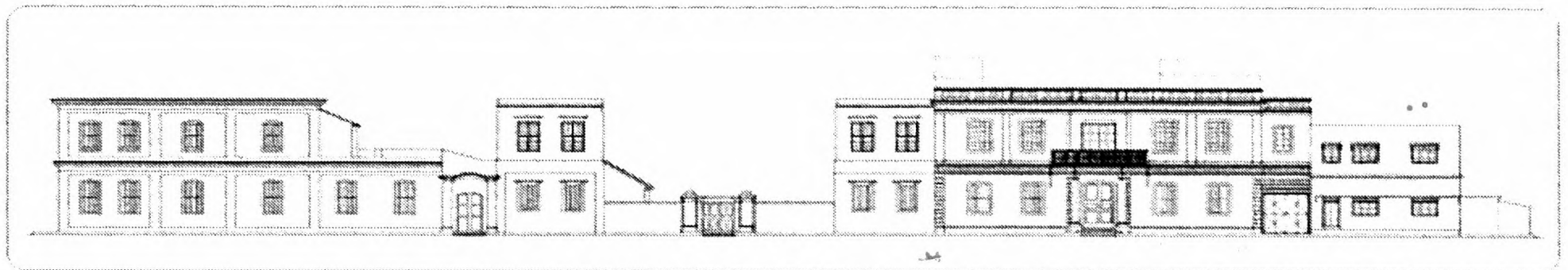


Fig. 12: Streetscape, French Quarters, Pondicherry  
Source: INTACH, Pondicherry

French streets are characterised by mansion type houses with garden courtyards behind ornate gateways while the Tamil streets are characterised by their tiled verandas. The synthesis of these two styles has resulted in a town which has a unique 'Franco Tamil' architectural identity.



Fig. 13: Streetscape Tamil Quarters, Pondicherry  
Source: INTACH, Pondicherry

### 3.1.1 French Quarters

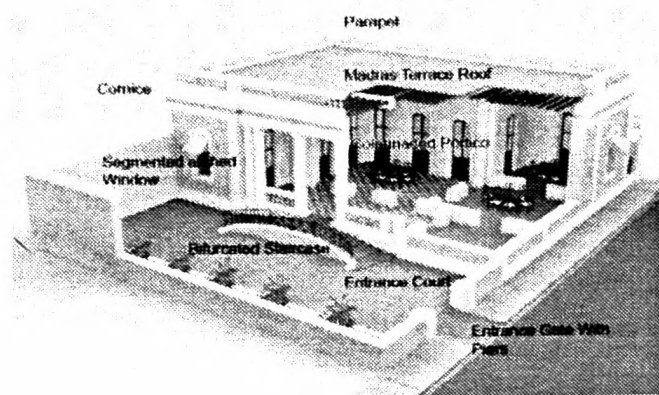


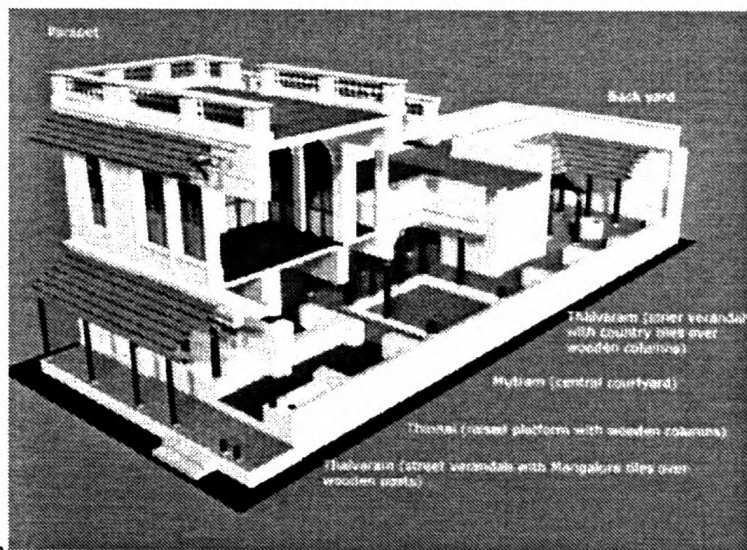
Fig. 14: French Quarters, Pondicherry  
 Source: Sinhgad College of Architecture



Fig. 15: French Quarters, Pondicherry  
 Source: The Author

- The street facades in the French quarter are characterized by continuous wall-to-wall construction with high garden walls and elaborate gateways.
- They feature flat or segmental arched windows with bands and louvered wooden shutters. wooden balconies over iron brackets and continuous parapets with simple ornamentation
- The exterior façades are a little less complex than the Tamil houses.
- They have plain walls with almost no interactive spaces inside the building complex trying to maintain their privacy.
- The construction of roofing system consists of beams and series of rafters.
- On top of it, it has a layer of bricks laid on the edge diagonally with lime mortar treated with jaggery and nutmeg extracts. Then over it, is laid with a layer of flat bricks and over it is laid a layer of the brick bat concrete.

### 3.1.2 Tamil Quarters



1) Fig. 16: Tamil Quarters, Pondicherry  
 Source: Sinhgad College of Architecture



Fig. 17: Tamil Quarters, Pondicherry  
 Source: The Author

1. Tamil quarter of the city gives a fine impression of collective culture. Visual street is one of the well-known historical areas of the Tamil towns, with many well preserved traditional houses.

2. The exterior façades mainly feature a Thalvaram (street verandah with a lean to roof over wooden posts and a Thinnai (semi-public verandah space with masonry benches for visitors).
3. The entire street stretch is homogeneous because of connecting elements like lean to roofs, cornices (horizontal) and pilasters with ornamental parapets which define the skyline.
4. In the Tamil part of the city, restoration materials used were, wooden pillars to reminisce the very essence of the Tamil typology in their Thalvarams and Thinnais.
5. The roofs being lean-to roofs Mangalore tiles have been used.

### 3.1.3 Franco Tamil Houses



Fig. 18: Franco-Tamil Quarters, Pondicherry  
Source: Sinhgad College of Architecture

- 2) The ground floor is usually Tamil type with Thinnai, Thalvaram, pillared courtyard and carved wooden doors, while the first floor displays French influence through fluted pilasters, columns with capitals, arched windows and plaster decorations.
- 3) The Franco-Tamilan houses thus have an amalgamation of restoration techniques of those of the Tamil and French houses.

All these typologies represent the effect of cross culture of Pondicherry and formulate the Sense of place of the city. Conservation of these areas ensures that historic values are restored in its original quality. Each structure has its own unique experience due to its special Architectural character.

Architecture is the backdrop of life, a container of past memories and events. Today, though at one level these typologies are frozen in time, yet many of its layers have percolated through the society in Pondicherry. And formed a base to the way people live and think. Conserving the traditional quarters of the city has helped in creating a link between what they were once meant for and its position and role in the society today. It enables one to delve into these lost layers and sensitively recognize the meaning and significance still lodged in them which is actually 'Sense of Place' of the city.

The conservation effort has restored the character and hence the experience. The character of the city holds presidential value in the hearts of the people living around as it has left timeless impacts on their lives.

### 3.2 Case Study- Dastur Meher Road, Pune

Pune is the eighth largest metropolis in India and second largest in the state of Maharashtra. It is also known as the cultural Capital of Maharashtra. Once the center of Power of the Maratha Empire the Historic City of Pune is known to have existed since 937 AD. In 1730 it became an important political center as the seat of Peshwa, The prime minister of the Chatrapati of Satara.



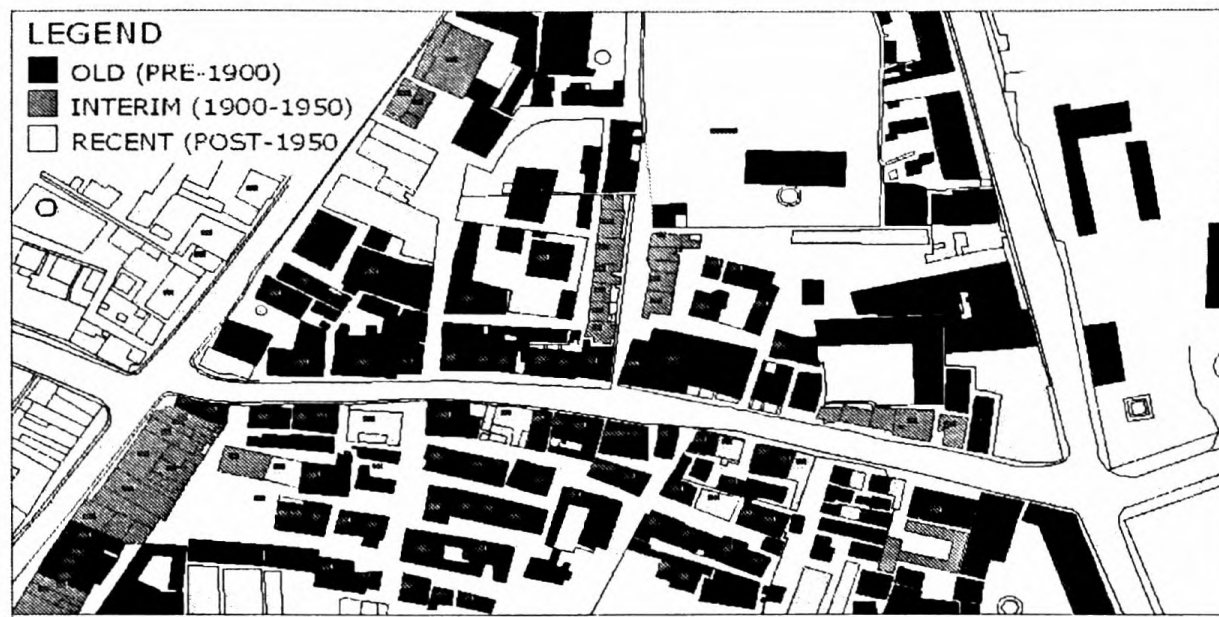


Fig.21: Pune Map  
Source: The Auther

The Dastur Meher Road area represents a specific stage in the historic development of the Pune Cantonment Area and has outstanding heritage value in terms of its historical significance & vernacular architecture. Dastur Meher area has a unique character, representing a specific stage in the development of the cantonment area, and like most such settlements in the old historic cores of Indian cities-a 'living' community. Dastur Meher Road, as a part of the civilian area follows the second pattern with a streetscape similar to the old peths in Pune, and has been able to retain this character due to a variety of factors.



Fig. 22: Streetscape, Dastur Meher Road, Pune  
Source: The Author

Dastur Meher Road got its name from the Saint Meher Baba who is revered in the entire region. Character of Dastur Meher Street is hybrid and a mix-up of variety of architectural styles. The character of houses & built form for mixed users - ground floor shop with upper floor residence with a sloping roof were built on the lines of existing Peths in the city. The scale of the buildings & the open spaces is humane; the buildings in most cases only ground plus one floor, and the street width & height make interesting composition. The buildings do not overbear on you as you walk along the street.

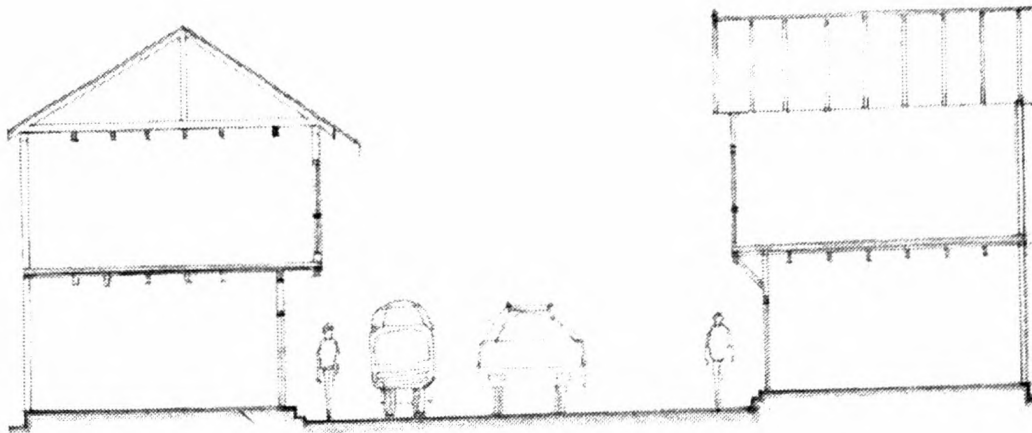


Fig. 23: Cross section of Dastur Meher Road, Pune  
Source: The Author

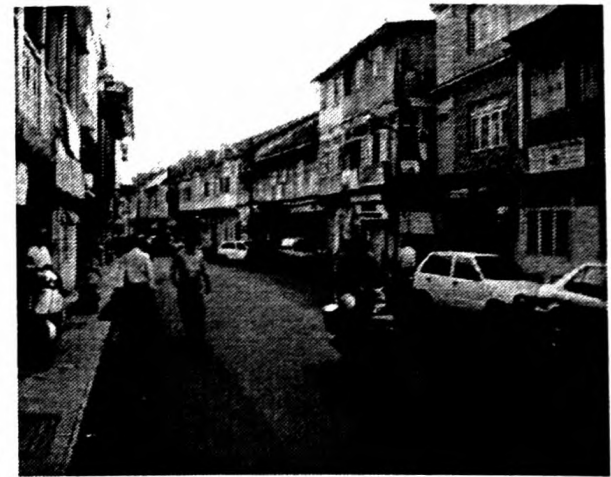


Fig. 24: View of Dastur Meher Road, Pune  
Source: The Author

The buildings are mainly constructed with wood frames with wood floors & sloping roof (with the typical British Timber truss) with tiles and brick infill walls. The front of the house was a shop front and was done with wood framed large openings with folded shutter in the beginning. A balcony projection at first floor is a typical detail, with the balcony front wall is made up of decorative wooden windows all through. The side walls are in brick in most cases.

The detailing is borrowed from many regions like - curved wooden brackets & pillars (Gujarat), cusped arch & cypress columns (Maharashtra) , Glass paneled enclosed balconies & protruding ornamental windows (Goa) and pilasters & neo-gothic or neo-classical details (British European) .All these represent the cross cultural influences on the entire precinct.



Fig. 25: Structure on D M Road  
Source: The Author

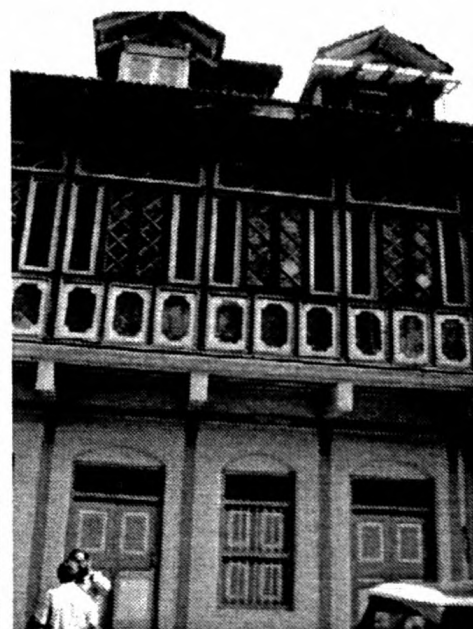


Fig.26: Str. on D M Road  
Source: The Author



Fig. 27: Structure on D M Road,  
Source: The Author

The pattern of the street & the by-lanes of Dastur Meher Road closely follows that of any old Indian city, with community spaces as a part of the housing area. The meandering and narrow lanes inside the were shaded by the closely packed houses-formed wind channels-always cool, even at midday. The internal roads in the layout afford privacy & safety as they are not through streets. The social life is vibrant and shared by all communities. The layout of buildings has evolved over a period of time, and has influenced the way people respond to the public spaces.

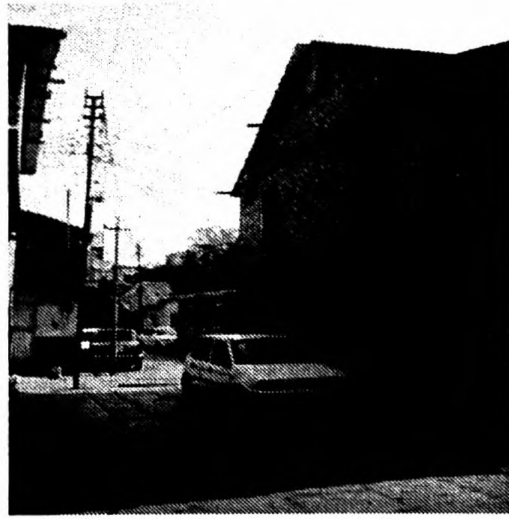


Fig. 28: By-lanes, D M Precinct  
Source: The Author



Fig. 29: Internal Open spaces, D M Precinct  
Source: The Author

Further, most of the buildings (at least along the street) are full of rich craftsmanship in wood, with variety of motifs. The balconies are supported by decorative brackets (architectural sculpture) and the individual elements are rife with small ornamental details of various kinds.

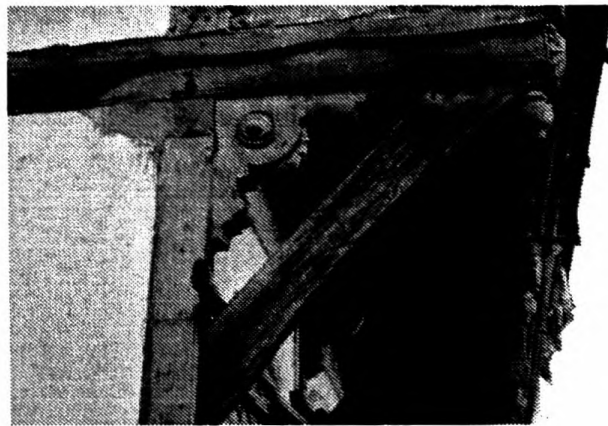


Fig. 30: Decorative Bracket  
Source: The Author



Fig. 31: Structure displaying rich craftsmanship  
Source: The Author

Even though the place has rich cultural heritage, it does not prevent people from doing substantial renovation without demolition. In two such cases, the character of the building has already changed beyond recognition.

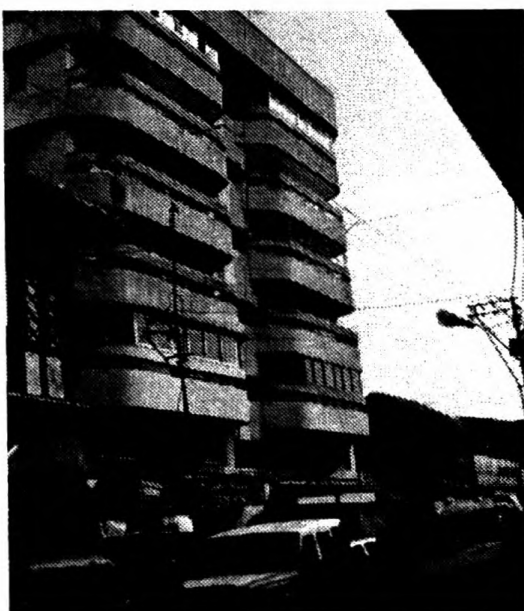


Fig. 32: insensitive development

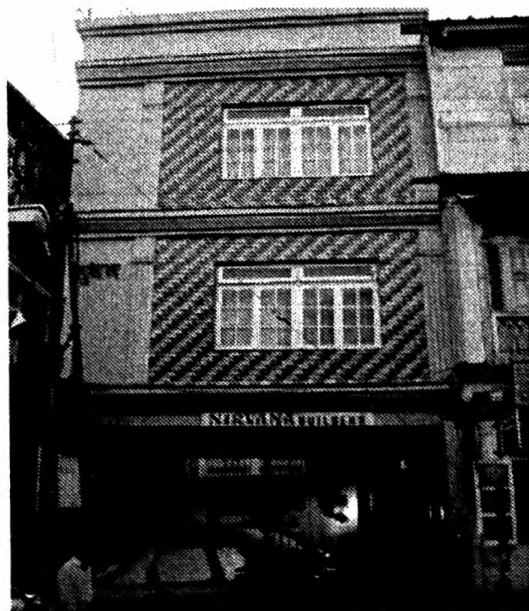


Fig. 33: Incongruent renovation  
Source: The Author



Fig. 34: incongruent additions

Onslaught of the current development has made its dent in this area. Already a building with G+6 floors has come up on the road, which destroys the character of the road. There is not even a pretext of belonging to the street. In two other cases (not so blatant as the earlier one) the existing building was demolished & rebuilt with modern materials, with ground plus two upper stories, and the visual character has no relevance to its context.

Unless we plan & formulate a policy for the entire precinct, there is a danger of the original character being lost totally. Conservation of architecture can not happen without conservation of a value system. The values of community living & communal harmony, facilitated by the planning & architecture of Dastur Meher Street need to be re-established in the minds of its residents to help conserve the architectural heritage.

Neighbourhoods here, are caste-based. So Temples and shrines are also built in community areas for community deities. Community-centric festivals keep the place happening throughout the year. The Ganesh Festival, Pateti, Id and Meher Baba's festival are celebrated with the same enthusiasm till date. This led to the growth of strong community feelings and close networking with each other in times of trouble. Developed over the generations, was a sense of community that was to become Pune. This by itself would be a good reason to conserve the ambience of this area.

Dastur Meher area should be managed as a 'living community' with residential population and a community that includes residents, tenants and visitors. The visual and historic setting of Dastur Meher area and the current urban structure, including subdivision and characteristic built form, should be maintained. The fine grain and human scale of Dastur Meher area should be retained. Original fabric of historic elements, including design details and patina, should be retained. Intangible aspects of the heritage of Dastur Meher area, including significant uses and historic associations and meanings, should be conserved.

#### **4. Role of Conservation**

The concept of Conservation, embodied in the initial Acts & International Charters was to convert the Monuments of the past into museums, by protecting the status quo<sup>35</sup>. Acts like the Indian 'Ancient Monuments Act' came out with the idea of protecting the heritage from the people, who were viewed as untrustworthy. Of course, one cannot blame the rulers as the so called 'heritage' had not been treated either in India or any other third world countries by the inhabitants as anything more than a place to loot. Be it the search for the hidden gold in the Pyramids, or the hidden treasures in the Temples, the once sacred places were in ruins, uncared by the population around, when the British conquerors first set their foot in these places.

In the countries conquered by the British, conservation was seen as the 'white man's burden', as Kipling would put it, to protect the monuments of the past as a 'heritage of the mankind'. The museumization was seen as the only way to protect, and hence the emphasis on 'keeping the sanctity of history', in each & every clause of the International Charters. It was an attempt to freeze history at some point, with no scope for any present day use. The sentiments for keeping the historical authenticity in all these charters are very strong, and all the layers of history are

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<sup>35</sup> **Article 3. Venice Charter 1964:** *The intention in conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence.*

seen as authentic additions<sup>36</sup>. That would actually put all this exercise as arbitrary; as much as the limit of 100 years specified in the Ancients Monuments Act, because, by that token alone, any alteration done today could well be thought as 'authentic' after 100 years.

But all through these movements, the concentration was on the exotic, outstanding monuments of the past, supported by the idea of past glory and the grandeur & scale of the buildings. Hence it was natural that all such monuments & places became the focus of conservation. This, of course, also included the archeological sites, which by their very ancient & forgotten history had an additional component of mystery.

The inherent logic is clear; these are symbols of the glorious past, evoking national chauvinistic feelings, and in a democratic set-up, politically important too. This is the reason why the 'Raigad fort' can get large amount of grants for conservation in Maharashtra, and why anything that happens to 'Tajmahal' can become national news. Heritage monuments remain living witnesses of people's age old traditions and making people conscious of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage.

Hence the primary concept of Conservation, particularly in the initial phase, was to conserve symbols of the historical past of the mankind, be it a building, a garden or an object - i.e. a place with associative memories. Its only present use inherent in the premise of conservation was a physical, experiential reminder of a past culture. It is no wonder, therefore, that such experiential reminders are accentuated at many of these places by trying to convert the place as close physically to its original character, adding the sound & light and such other features, trying to accentuate & recreate the atmosphere of the past for the visitor.

The value system of the human civilizations of the past was discussed along with these conservation proposals, but that it would have any direct relation to the way we live today was not a part of the conservation thinking. This realization only came when the movement started for the protection of the 'not so exotic' historic cities, and the vernacular traditions of the world, particularly when these cities started getting mutilated & started losing their character by the 'development' after urban growth all over the world.

Washington Charter puts this feeling clearly across. In its preamble it states that '*urban communities...are an expression of the diversity of societies throughout history. ....these areas embody the values of traditional urban cultures*'. It accepts that '*many such areas are.....threatened....by the impact of the urban development*' and declares its intention as '(to) encourage preservation of those cultural properties....that constitute the memory of mankind.'<sup>37</sup> (Washington Charter, 1987)

I see this as a sea change from the initial concepts of conservation, which was concerned with the protection of monuments with their association of outstanding events or persons from the historical past. For all we know, the historical associations may or may not be a part of public memory today. The preservation here is centered on things which have a continuing value in the present for the people living in the city.

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<sup>36</sup> **Article 11 Venice Charter 1964:** *The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration.*

<sup>37</sup> **Charter for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas – (Washington charter 1987) adopted by ICOMOS General Assembly in Washington, DC, October 1987:**

Conservation cannot be dictated. One cannot live in the past, one cannot think in the way people used to think about their surroundings. We cannot recreate it, nor do we intend to mummify it.

## **5. Approaches to Conservation**

The earlier concepts of Conservation of Monuments have slowly evolved to include all human endeavors and the humble contribution by common folk along with the spectacular achievement. Monuments of the past had specific historical associations, and were a part of public memory.

The third set of traditions involve the cultural & religious rituals, which are essentially intangible, and include places but may or may not include the objects associated at the same level of sanctity. Culture in the fullest sense can be viewed as the totality of the tangible and intangible landmarks. Apart from art and literature, it also embraces ways of life, fundamental value systems, traditions etc. Cultural heritage is organization of cultural resources and concerned with materials resulting from human activity in the past. It is an evidence of a society's intellectual activity in tangible or intangible form.

How do we evaluate the value of this heritage is an issue. If we can prove that the cities have a value for today & for the future, and a direct bearing to our identity as a people, we can get support from all over to the Conservation effort. It is the common responsibility of the society to safeguard the heritage for future generations and to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity.

## **Summary & Conclusions**

Cultural heritage conservation preserves a community's history, traditional practices, milieu and therefore its sense of identity and continuity by preserving the physical attributes of the built form.

My argument is that what we actually conserve is the spirit of the place, for which we need to sustain its tangible and intangible attributes. The conserved place in turns associates and strengthens the attachment to it. So actually in conservation, our serious effort is to preserve the identity of a city through symbolic and physical attributes of the environment that evoke the sense of the place. Conserving the unprotected heritage sites ensures the survival of a city's and ultimately the country's sense of place in history and its very character in a globalizing environment.

Conservation Practices should focus on the fact that it is the intangible that expresses itself through the tangible. Built form and ultimately the urban fabric of the city is the resultant of many intangible aspects like arts, crafts etc which are part of the social and disciplinary memories. That means what we should preserve is actually the ways of life, fundamentals, resources and memories and ultimately identify through physical conservation.

One thing comes out as a distinct conclusion: All historic places have associative memories, and these memories are linked to the ambience of the place. Qualities which should be preserved:

- 1) Relationships between buildings and green and open spaces;
- 2) The formal appearance, interior and exterior, of buildings as defined by scale, size, style, construction, materials, color and decoration;
- 3) The ambience created by the functions of the place & the activities of people in and around the place

- 4) The relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting, both natural and man-made.

Furthermore this research can be carried forward on the issues like

- 1) Associative memory and value assessment of cultural heritage.
- 2) Public participation for conservation of Cultural heritage.

The conservation efforts for any place must include all these associations in account to make the conservation effort meaningful for the people for whom we are carrying out the effort.

The role of conservation architect is to identify the heritage, bring out the importance of these factors in our present day life, and help preserve this heritage for the future generations.