Inventory of Cultural Resources in a Community

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation has been taking an active role in the protection and preservation of historical monuments and buildings in the city of Kolkata, India. It initiated a programme of surveys and preliminary documentation of heritage buildings, digitized the information, informed the property owners, and provided legal support for safeguarding heritage structures. **Shivashish Bose**, who was involved in the said inventory tasks, offers his experience in this case study.

Inventory

With increasing global concern for the protection and preservation of historical monuments and buildings, their identification and classification with proper inventory have become essential for preparing core data information. Although various methods of inventory exist, heritage identification and documentation are given less priority than architectural and urban development in the cities of the developing world. Moreover, the practice of inventory has been made more difficult by the problems relating to faulty renovations, additions and alterations; complex ownership status (with various occupiers); huge municipal taxation, and lack of finance and determination to carry out maintenance, as well as controversial classification.

The first step in preservation and conservation of cultural properties is to identify and document such properties, following a particular inventory system. The documentation provides knowledge on the properties, their architectural character and values, ownership, occupancy, use, physical condition, maintenance and availability of fund for it, including the degree of complexity for conservation.

Kolkata
Parinee Srisuwan

During the last couple of decades, the conservation movement in the developed as well as developing parts of the world has generated great momentum. Some countries follow an inventory approach that adapts to current practice. Others adhere to inventory guidelines that take into account local needs. In the developing countries, where development of new buildings and infrastructure are given maximum importance in meeting the demands of increased populations, the conservation of cultural properties has been neglected or carried out in a very limited fashion or scope. Often, historic buildings were demolished to be replaced by new buildings, in which situation, a thorough understanding of both the cultural properties and the necessity to preserve them is of paramount importance, along with the political and administrative will and action supporting the cause of preservation.

Various factors regarding the maintenance of historic structures, the question of authenticity, ownership, status of occupancy, use, responsibility of maintenance, increased municipal tax and other issues make identification and documentation of such heritage properties difficult. In this regard, a debate has been raised about the inventory system, categorization and final declaration of heritage properties. Nevertheless, inventory and heritage documentation are crucial to community goals, management issues, and the decision-
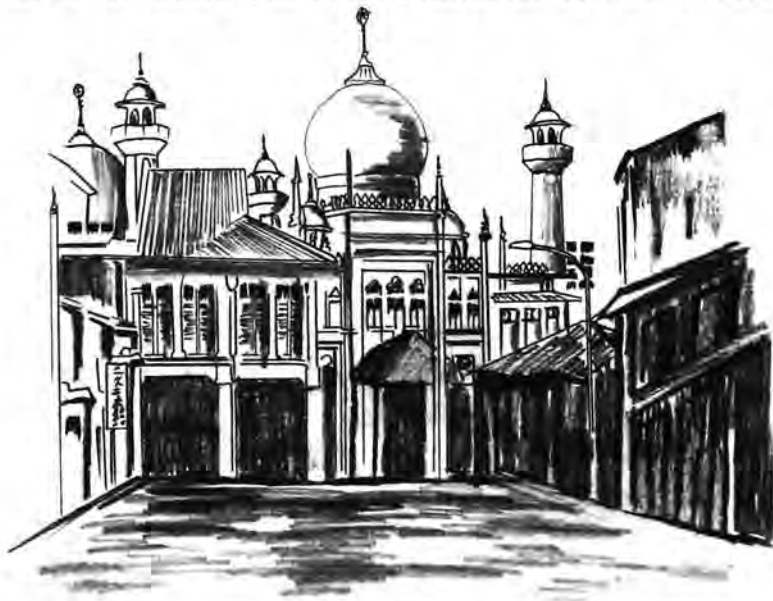
Pattanapong Varanyanon

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making process of integrating conservation in the policies for overall planning.

Kolkata has been experiencing tremendous development which has created problems in conserving cultural properties. During the 1990s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and a segment of the population formed a strong conservation movement, which was gradually supported by the governmental and municipal authorities. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation undertook inventory, and started identification, survey, documentation and recording of heritage buildings in Kolkata city. The first inventory was implemented in 1999, and survey and documentation continue to date.

Wilasinee Siangwan

Inventory System in Kolkata

The first declaration of heritage buildings in Kolkata by the government was published in 1996, which included a list of only seventy-two buildings. Many sectors of society, especially owners of traditionally known heritage buildings, and some NGOs immediately criticised the listing. A new list was prepared by a number of governmental and independent organisations, ward councilors of the city municipality and public individuals. This heritage list, containing nearly one thousand and two hundred buildings, structures and precincts, should have included more buildings.

The selected buildings were chosen primarily on the criteria of having the following values: historical or links with historical persons, settings and/or events of the city; architectural; distinctive landmark; socio-cultural and/or religious; a combination of the abovementioned, and some other values.

However, in 1999, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) initiated a survey and preliminary documentation of buildings, and an inventory was prepared. Three teams of qualified conservationists were appointed for this work. The objective of the task was to collect information and determine which buildings should be declared 'heritage property'; deleted from the list if they lack merit; or referred to the 'Heritage Conservation Committee' of the KMC. The committee (consisting of representatives from the central and state governments,

the KMC and knowledgeable persons from the universities and the public) is empowered with the responsibility of making the final decision regarding heritage declaration.

During the first phase of the task, it was felt that queries in the inventory were insufficient. A second inventory was formulated, widening the scope to include information concerning municipal assessment records of the building that were available, its location in the ward map, ownership status, types of occupancy and use, the duration and history of construction, historic persons and socio-cultural historic events related to the building, its architectural character and value, use value, structural and physical condition, and the authenticity of the original structure, as well as the chronological history of additions and alterations, state of maintenance and condition. Sketch floor plans and photographs of both exterior and interior of the building, and a general heritage rating, were included.

Writer's Building
Parinee Srisuwan

There were three gross categories of rating a heritage property: i) properties having exceptionally high heritage value, and to which the municipality will not allow physical structural changes to be made; ii) properties having moderate heritage value, to which some additions and alterations, upon the recommendation of the committee, will be allowed; and iii) properties having little or no heritage value, or whose authenticity is questionable, and to which physical changes or even demolition is allowed.

Accordingly, listed heritage buildings are surveyed and documented by the department of the Chief Municipal Architect and Town Planner (CMA&TP) of the KMC under the direction of the KMC Commissioner (who is also the Chairperson of the heritage building committee).

After the survey, reports by the engaged conservationists are submitted to the department of the CMA&TP, and all the data are recorded in a digital core compilation with the help of computers. The heritage building committee meets to review the reports for final judgment regarding heritage declaration, and their decisions are presented to the KMC councilors, whose endorsement is requested. In the process, listed buildings that are found unsuitable for heritage

declaration by the experts and the committee would be deleted from the list. Notification to the owners of property declared heritage buildings is made through the KMC Commissioner.

Recently, the department of CMA&TP engaged experts for a host of tasks, including the preparation of satellite imagery of Kolkata through GIS; aerial views of the city; a detailed digitized survey map of the site (heritage property) and the surrounding area; information regarding municipal service systems and boundaries around the property, heritage buildings, sites and precincts, water bodies, wet lands, parks and open spaces. The efforts are aimed at raising awareness of the heritage properties and ecological and environmental conservation.

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Preparation and Difficulties

An inventory is basically utilized as a means for determining which assets should be protected and which are to be given importance of a lesser degree. During the survey of the Kolkata's heritage buildings in the primary list following the inventory, some facts raised concerns about the determination of heritage values with regard to authenticity of ownership and original heritage structure, legal litigation, responsibility of maintenance, misuse, extreme dilapidation of the structure and complete abundance.

Benoy-Badal-Dinesh Bagh
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The experience from surveys in the historic area of Kolkata reveals several issues and practical problems which make it difficult for actual and accurate appraisal of the property's heritage value, such as changes from single to multiple ownership; fragmented and disputed ownerships, abandonment of property by the owners; multiple families' illegal occupation or leasehold, decade-old tenants refusing to pay increased rents or contribute to the investment required for restoring and maintaining the buildings; higher municipal tax; etc..

The government does not really provide any financial assistance for the restoration or maintenance of the heritage buildings owned now by the private sector.

There is a general fear among owners and inhabitants of such buildings that once declared 'heritage', their property may be subject to impositions set by the municipality. Though the municipality has suggested tax-waiving or reduction for the declared heritage buildings that are properly maintained by the owners, nothing has been done during the last couple of years even after declaration of heritage of many buildings. Hence, due to fear and disinterest, many of the owners and rental occupiers either deny permission for survey or do not cooperate fully with the survey-team.

A debate regarding heritage declaration has centred on how the additions to, and major alteration and demolition of, the heritage structure greatly diminish its authenticity. Placed under intense scrutiny are also properties under ownerships which are disputed and challenged in legal litigations, as well as other properties that are occupied illegally, or whose occupiers are indifferent to the need for repair and maintenance of the building. Some buildings had tenants who are recognised for their expertise and efforts in many artistic, cultural, social, political, educational and other fields, that contribute to the society. However, there are heirs and successors of such tenants who do not take responsibility of maintenance of the buildings. In such a case, the argument is that declaring the property

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a 'heritage' only strengthens the right of the tenant or occupier to stay, paying phenomenally low rents.

Other properties which may not pass the test are those in a dilapidated physical state, with owners who are unwilling to spend huge sums of money on repair and maintenance (when in their view, a new building with more space and healthy environment can be built with the same amount of investment).

There are also many cases in which the owners of buildings with no recognised architectural value lobby for the municipality to declare their buildings as heritage buildings so that they can benefit from the status and possible funding for restoration.

Some buildings were built by reknown historic persons, but whose heirs or successors have sold the properties to others, long before the preliminary list of heritage buildings were prepared in Kolkata. Now the debate is whether the new owners should legally bear any responsibility that accompany the status of being declared a heritage building. The questions remain as to whether the municipality can impose legal duties and restrictions on such owners if they are not willing to safeguard and conserve the properties as heritage structures.

There is a large number of buildings which are fit to be awarded the heritage status, and their owners are supportive of its new status. The tasks so far prove that preparing inventory for such a community in a proper way is an extremely difficult exercise. Kolkata is a large Asian mega-city, inhabited by a multi-cultural community of people, with a wide and diverse range of cultural properties, driven by a tremendous force for development of new buildings and infrastructure to boost its economy, and meet the challenges of globalization.

Proposals

Making an inventory that satisfies all the questions concerning values, authenticity, legality, and market force in Kolkata is a difficult job. The more important work is to prepare an inventory first, obtaining information and establishing a database on the cultural properties of

the city, which grew relentlessly during the last three hundred years, and saving the debatable issues for discussion later. The difficulty of preparing the inventory without spontaneous public co-operation can be alleviated by enforcing governmental and municipal rules in this regard, on the one hand, and by informing, educating and

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inviting the participation of the people with regard to heritage conservation. The role of the people as responsible citizens co-operating in safeguarding such properties, and the necessity of their active participation in the entire conservation process, can not be ignored. Unless the pluralistic community accepts and addresses conservation as a mandate in their development goal, the process of preparing and completing inventory would be difficult.

Aspects of litigations on ownership, tenancy and occupancy are to be addressed as separate issues, and should not influence the consideration of the heritage value of a property. Also, a proper legal framework needs to be drawn and enacted for safeguarding heritage buildings from partial or complete demolition.

Establishing a fund for the conservation work was recommended. It will be made up of contributions from the Central Government, the

State Government, private organisations, donor agencies, world organisations and the public, with the provision that public contributions would be exempted from tax. This fund shall be utilized for practical conservation work on buildings, based on the merit of its heritage value and degree of degradation. Furthermore, a mandatory contribution from the owners, tenants and occupiers of such heritage buildings are to be legalized, with exemption only for those adjudged to have the lack of financial means.

Owners or occupiers who maintain their heritage buildings at their own cost are supported and shall be given financial incentives in the form of waived property tax and other benefits. It is recognised that unless people find some source of contribution and financial benefit for and through conservation work, the possibility of practical conservation work, maintenance and safeguarding heritage buildings in Kolkata would be difficult, as market forces compel new development. In meeting the challenges, public participation and co-operation in preparing inventory for the community is indispensable.

The media too has a major role in transmitting information to the public regarding preparation of inventory and the issues of conservation of cultural properties. Through advertisements, public participation and debate sessions in the government, as well as programmes on private television channels, public awareness and active involvement can be better ensured.

Another recommendation, obvious as it may be, is to harness the use of computers and the latest technology in digitizing information for better accessibility, management and storage at the Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

Appropriate rehabilitation of historic buildings can be economical, often costing only two-thirds of constructing new buildings in the same area, according to Sir Bernard Feilden, a world authority on the conservation of historic buildings, and a well-known architect. It eliminates the cost of renewing the infrastructure. Moreover, conservation of an existing building, irrespective of its heritage value, for continued use is presently considered an economic and ecological

imperative under the philosophy of "Sustainable Development". An existing building is interpreted as an existing design component and a potential energy resource, either to be preserved for continued use, or to be skillfully integrated in the new design proposed for development. On the issue of sustainable development, conservation of old buildings becomes a great part of the whole issue of management of existing building stock. Hence, keeping it in the planning and management objective, and in the preparation of the inventory, the 'use' value of the historic or old building is to be given greater weight.

Authenticity

The debatable questions regarding authenticity of the heritage structure and many related issues, which influence the decision on heritage declaration, such as legally allowing demolition of such structures for new development, are to be addressed with the broad perspective of the sustainable value of conservation. If authenticity becomes a barrier between bestowing a building the heritage status and the matter of sustainability, then perhaps conservation and sustainable development are not complementary. Hence, a suggestion is raised that the inventory system should consider also the issue of 'use value' of an existing structure in the perspective of sustainable development.

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