

Getting the city back to the people: Community heritage conservation in Ahmedabad How the heritage trails have transformed Indian cities

Section 1

Most Indian cities with a long history have at their core areas of strong architectural and urban character. However, these areas have become marginalised in the process of urban growth causing decay, depressed economic conditions and dilapidation leading to migration of the population to newer areas. In today's pace of economic development historic resources are often perceived as inefficient, unproductive sometimes inconvenient. They are often replaced with buildings that appear contemporary and more efficient.¹

It is against this background and after undertaking a number of surveys, studies and initiatives and learning experiences the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) in collaboration with the Foundation for Conservation and Research of Urban Traditional Architecture (CRUTA), an ngo, established the first Heritage Cell in 1996, which has now become a National Model for Heritage revival.² This case study explores the strategic interventions undertaken by the partnership towards heritage conservation and development of built heritage in the Walled City of Ahmedabad.

Various factors were identified as impeding heritage conservation efforts, including problems with policy and regulation, economic changes caused by the closing of textile mills and growth in gold and silver industries, and a lack of awareness about conservation.³ The project has national and international links as CRUTA initiated its first Heritage Walk in Calcutta in 1988 and there are MOUs with French and Dutch counterparts.⁴

Section

The Heritage Cell has two aims: to build awareness among citizens and develop a comprehensive plan for the conservation of the Walled City of Ahmedabad; and to enable communities to take pride in traditional buildings and get involved in their revival. Its objectives are to create awareness of heritage resources; promote traditional built forms; support participatory action; coordinate the efforts of different stake holders; undertake tasks related to the promotion of traditional built forms, mobilizing finance and resources that would not otherwise available to the area; and interface with concerned citizens public and private sectors.

The Heritage Walk aims to initiate public awareness and interest in conservation activities by show-casing the cream of Ahmedabad's built heritage and facilitate participation. The process also involved training programme for guides, physical restoration of the walk area and publicity. The walk attracts thousands of native and foreign visitors.⁵

Section 3

Concerned with the rapid decline of cultural heritage resources AMC, with Ford Foundation support, undertook a study in 1985 to initiate policies for the better heritage preservation. AMC then worked with CRUTA to initiate measures to arrest decay and preserve the city's heritage.⁶ The idea behind establishing the Heritage Cell was to build awareness not only within the municipal system, but also amongst local communities at large. By working with ngos, professional and voluntary agencies, it ensured community participation at a much larger scale.⁷ The success of any intervention depends on the building of strategic partnerships and in stimulating wide spread participation of a variety of stake holders.⁸

In order to propagate and popularise the city's heritage the partnership launched a heritage walk through the historic core of the old city in 1997.⁹ Until 2009 when the contract was

changed, the AMC paid the CRUTA Foundation Rs1.5 lakh to manage the Heritage Walk.¹⁰ The Walk was one of several efforts undertaken to conserve architectural heritage through inter-departmental and public-private partnerships to carry out actual restoration projects, listed in results below.¹¹

The launch of a similar heritage walk in Jaipur in 2001 initiated a process of community conservation assisted by INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage) through awareness raising work, developing heritage projects and bringing together different partners (Jaipur Municipal Corporation, the state government, the tourism department among others). INTACH also facilitated the formation of a citizens' forum – Jaipur Virasat Foundation – a joint initiative with the government to conserve and revitalize the city¹², which launched the Jaipur Heritage Walk, also designed by Debashish Nayak of AMC, in collaboration with the Rajasthan Government.

Section 4

The Heritage Walk has proved an effective tool at allowing people to explore the architectural, cultural and craft heritage of parts of the City so often hidden – community districts, beautiful temples, heritage buildings, havelis, pols, shops – but also as a catalyst for community conservation and restoration projects. The Municipal Corporation has provided some basic infrastructure, such as proper paving, clean streets, street lighting, signage and public amenities. The successful project has inspired the transformation of heritage buildings into cafés or tourist accommodation, façade restoration and a new museum with the help of the Vastushilpa Foundation resulting in a total change in the economy.¹³ Further effects include the launch of a special newspaper, the development of craft products and children's books, the publication of a tourist map, improved water conservation and waste management, the training of administrators in heritage management and the launch of the Ahmedabad Heritage Festival.¹⁴ Now the unique process employed at Ahmedabad has become a national model and many cities like Jodhpur, Udaipur, Jaipur, Amritsar, Pondicherry, Cochin, Lucknow, Pune, Puri, Patiala, Madurai, Mysore, Agra, Banaras and Delhi are replicating it.¹⁵ "It is not about the number of havelis restored. It is about bringing a change in people's minds, and changing their lives," says Nayak.¹⁶

Section 5

The lessons learned from this project are:¹⁷

- The need to understanding the history and urban character of an old city.
- To build on past experiences in Ahmedabad, other parts of the country and abroad.
- Developing strategic partnerships with communities, various departments and agencies, elected representatives and others.
- Establishing a sustainable process of transformation.

"Since the economy is weak and people are struggling to earn a basic living, conservation cannot be reduced to the repair and restoration of monuments. To be sustainable and successful, the process has to improve people's lives. At the local level we need to facilitate participation in heritage management and urban governance, build technical capacity and raise awareness of the value of local heritage to ensure socio-economic development. At the institutional level there is a need to improve tourism facilities, ensure compatible land use, regulate development and improve the infrastructure facilities" urges Nayak in recommendation.¹⁸

An additional recommendation is for municipal governments to follow the Ten Commandments for the conservation of heritage zones:

- Intervene strategically
- Start with available resources
- Elicit support of local architects, professionals and NGOs
- Get support of local people
- Identify implementable projects
- Involve elected wing
- Coordinate with other government and non-government agencies
- Establish a heritage unit in the local government
- Sensitize all official agencies towards heritage work
- Recognize and cooperate with international bodies and coordinate their actions¹⁹

Section 6

Debashish Nayak
Advisor, Heritage Cell
Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation
Tel: + 9824032866
Email: debashishnayak@rediffmail.com

Section 7

¹ Proceedings of the City Managers' Association workshop on The Transfer of Best Practices in 'Heritage Initiatives' of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation with Urban Local Bodies of Gujarat, 5th and 6th January 2001, reproduced on the USAID website
http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACN137.pdf

² Proceedings of the National Workshop on Cultural Heritage and Religious Cities organised by Peer Experience And Reflective Learning (PEARL), JNNURM, 2nd February 2009, Madurai reproduced here
http://www.indiaurbanportal.in/pdf/Urban_Local_Bodies_DebashisNayak.pdf

³ Ibid The Transfer of Best Practices in 'Heritage Initiatives'

⁴ Ibid Cultural Heritage and Religious Cities

⁵ Ibid Cultural Heritage and Religious Cities

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid The Transfer of Best Practices in 'Heritage Initiatives'

⁹ Getting the City Back to the People: Municipal Initiative in Heritage Conservation - The Case of Ahmedabad, by Thiru Debashish Nayak, Seminar on Conservation of Heritage Buildings/Precincts in Chennai Metropolitan Area, 8th October, 2010
http://www.cmdachennai.gov.in/pdfs/seminar_heritage_buildings/Heritage_Conservation_in_Ahmadabad.pdf

¹⁰ Quoted in *DNA India* on 7 December 2009 http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_amc-refuses-renewal-of-cruta-s-contract-on-heritage-walk_1320927

¹¹ Ibid Cultural Heritage and Religious Cities

¹² Revitalising our walled cities by Debashish Nayak, 2 October 2003 published by the Monthly Symposium <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/530/530%20debashish%20nayak.htm>

¹³ Ibid Getting the City Back to the People

¹⁴ Ibid Cultural Heritage and Religious Cities

¹⁵ Ibid Getting the City Back to the People

¹⁶ Quoted in *The Week*, 17 December 2011 http://week.manoramaonline.com/cgi-bin/MMOnline.dll/portal/ep/theWeekContent.do?contentId=10641046&programId=1073755753&tabId=15&BV_ID=@@&categoryId=-168921

¹⁷ Ibid The Transfer of Best Practices in 'Heritage Initiatives'

¹⁸ Ibid Revitalising our walled cities

¹⁹ Ibid The Transfer of Best Practices in 'Heritage Initiatives'

Author profile

Catherine Leonard joined the UK National Trust in 1999, when she was responsible for the Trust's work with overseas heritage groups and managing the European Network of National Heritage Organisations. Catherine now heads the Secretariat of the International National Trust Organisation (INTO) and is the strategic lead for the organisation's international co-ordination, including resource management, programme development, communications and relationships with INTO members, other ngos, policy makers and institutions worldwide. Catherine studied languages and literature at university and has spent time living and working abroad. Prior to joining the National Trust, Catherine worked for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.