

Old Houses for Tomorrow: Deliberating a Societal Need for Conserving Unprotected Heritage Houses in India

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Abstract : Heritage conservation often holds different meanings and values for different people. To a cultural or architectural body it might be about protecting relics of the past, while for an government body or corporate it might be the value of the real estate which generates profits in terms of hospitality, tourism or some form of trade. But often, a significant proportion of the built fabric in our cities comprises of what usually does not come under the common lenses of collective heritage or conservation i.e. private houses. Standing ode to a bygone era of different communities, trades and practices that once inhabited the city, old private houses of certain architectural or historic character face the gravest challenges of heritage conservation. These - despite being significant to the heritage fabric of a city - neither get the social attention nor the financial aid for repair and periodic maintenance, that many monuments and public buildings do. The situation in India is no different. Private residences belonging to affluent families of an earlier time, today lie in varying degrees of neglect and dilapidation. With the growth of nuclear families, drastic change in people's and expensive repairs of historic material fabric (amongst other reasons), houses of heritage value often become liabilities, and metaphorical to a white elephant in a poor man's backyard. In a capitalistic setup that values time and money over everything, it is not reasonable that one justifies the conservation of individual / family assets solely through architectural, historical or cultural values. It is quite logical them, that the houseowner - in most cases, a layperson - must be made to understand of both tangible and intangible values in order to (1) take the trouble of the effort, resources and aid (if possible) to repair and maintain a house of heritage character and, (2) choose to invest into a building that today might've lost its practical relevance, over demolishing and building new. The question that still remains is - Why? If heritage conservation is to be seen as an economically viable and realistic building activity, it must shed its image of being an 'elitist, cultural pursuit' in the eyes of the common person. Through contextual studies of historic areas in Ahmedabad and Calcutta, reading of theoretical pieces on the subject and conversations with multiple stakeholders, this study intended to justify the act of heritage conservation to the common person - one who is assumed to have no particular sensitivity towards architectural or cultural value, and rather questions what these buildings tangibly bring to the table. The theoretical frameworks (taken from literature) are then tested through actual case studies in Indian cities, followed by an elaborate inference on the subject.

Keywords : heritage values, heritage houses, private ownership, unprotected heritage

Conference Title : ICARS 2024 : International Conference on Architectural Restoration and Sustainability

Conference Location : Berlin, Germany

Conference Dates : May 16-17, 2024