

Material continuity and innovation as an emerging design practice in India, UK and Europe



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Abstract:

The rapid transformation of major industrial cities in India has raised pertinent questions on the changing relationship between people and their urban environment. Buildings are designed for functional and transactional purposes rendering most of our urban spaces lifeless. The paper addresses the gap in rehabilitating old buildings beyond the static nature of preservation methods such as repair and retrofit. The museumification of old buildings and cultural spaces alienates and disconnects them from the burgeoning areas of the cities. There is a need to evolve a design language within the local context to bring the old and new together without making it look fragmented or messy. The paper highlights diverse local and global design-based responses to reinterpreting cultural heritage. It aims to widen the definition of heritage beyond the 'state-protected' buildings to everyday places and traditional design practices with an intrinsic and vital role in fostering a sense of belonging.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part highlights contemporary design practices in India engaging in the cultural renewal of urban spaces by fostering collaboration with local craftspeople and artisans. Their design language focuses on reinterpreting traditional building materials such as mud, brick, bamboo and local stone to mitigate social and environmental challenges caused by unchecked urban development. The second part of the paper describes design strategies such as adaptive reuse of domestic and industrial heritage and urban infill practised in the UK and Europe as a *non-engineered response* to sustainability and its key takeaways for the Indian context. The aim to achieve net-zero goals has led many practices to reinvent and recalibrate their design approach towards the built environment. As a result, the paper focuses on materiality and brownfield regeneration strategies using local cultural references that enable a sense of continuity with the past without disrupting the existing.

Introduction:

While the universal definition of heritage includes objects and practices inherited from the past and therefore subject to preservation, recent years have demonstrated new approaches taken by design practices in India and globally to reinterpret the local socio-cultural heritage of various

cities and geographical regions. The paper focuses on the diversity of strategies using examples of place-specific interventions by contemporary design practices. It also includes key learnings from global practices in modifying and adapting old buildings and city spaces while maintaining their spatial and material continuity.

The following research redefines 'heritage' notwithstanding a specific period in time. It goes beyond formal listings and designation given to historical buildings by national and international organisations thereby focusing on places and practices of local importance and everyday use. Multiple versions of a city co-exist together and are part of an evolving social and architectural narrative. Kevin Lynch (1972) describes this concept of 'layering' as a 'visible accumulation of overlapping traces from successive periods, each trace modifying and being modified by the new additions, to produce something like a collage of time'. The paper goes beyond strict preservation methods to counter the museumification of buildings and urban sites. However, we have yet to find ways to situate a 21st-century intervention within the 18th -19th century or even older parts of the city without making it seem fragmented.

Cultural Renewal in Indian Design Practices:

Currently, practices in India include two distinct ways of re-interpreting cultural continuity. The first is by integrating local materials and building technologies in modern interventions. The second is to adapt and repurpose heritage buildings and sites for socio-cultural use. Contemporary practices such as Delhi-based Studio Lotus focus on fostering creative collaboration with artisans thereby integrating local craftsmanship in their interventions like in the 'Krushi Bhawan' project in Bhubaneswar (see, FIG.1). The project uses local bricks, laterite and khondolite stones as building materials. Different coloured bricks used in the building construction represent the 'geographical diversity of the region' (Studio Lotus, 2018). It further integrates regional motifs and aspects of local mythology in designing furniture, screens and installation.



FIG.1 Krushi Bhawan, Bhubaneshwar by Studio Lotus, New Delhi, (Studio Lotus, 2018)

Other practices such as Sketch Design Studio use natural building materials like reclaimed stone, lime, mud and bamboo (see, FIG.2). The practice integrates traditional methods such as filler roof slabs and rammed earth walls (Sketch Design Studio, 2014) thereby preserving vernacular techniques of building construction specific to Rajasthan. Similarly, AT Architecture in Mumbai used traditional bamboo construction for its 'North-East Pavilion' project thereby re-imagining and preserving local practices of the region (see, FIG.3). The pavilion houses eight Indigenous weaving looms and their working methods, representing all North Eastern states of



India. FIG.2 Gol Ghar, Rajasthan by Sketch Design Studio (Sketch Design Studio, 2014)



FIG.3 North-East Pavilion, Surajkund Lake, Faridabad by AT Architecture, Mumbai (Dezeen, n.d.)

The geographical diversity within India allows practices to implement place-specific strategies in collaboration with local consultants and communities. 'Birkha Bawari' is a stepwell constructed to conserve rainwater (see, FIG.4). Designed by Ar. Anu Mridul, the project is located in Umaid Heritage Housing Township in Jodhpur. The stepwell is built of sandstone quarried from the site due to ecological and contextual considerations. Cultural continuity has been practised in India by using local materials and traditional design elements to revive old patterns of inhabiting space. Besides re-interpreting local building practices, Indian designers use urban renewal-based strategies like preservation and adaptive reuse to reinforce cultural continuity within the local landscape. Re-vitalising existing structures with modern configuration of spaces, structural repair and refurbishment breathes new life into the building fostering a sense of place within the larger social and historical context.

Brownfield Regeneration in Europe and UK-based Practices:

Similar to the Indian context, historic buildings are adapted and modified within Europe and the UK, but the primary purpose is to meet the city's social and economic needs. Adaptive reuse of older buildings is used to solve the urban housing shortage in the city or are revamped into



FIG.4 Birkha Bawari, Jodhpur by Ar. Anu Mridul, Jodhpur (A.Mridul Architect, 2009)

offices and other mixed-use development projects (Kollewe, 2025). A strong case for sustainability can be made by minimising the carbon footprint of the new building. Hence strategies such as retrofit and reuse that reduce the need for rampant demolition of urban heritage are prevalent.

Europe's fine example of adaptive reuse in recent years is the Sala Beckett project in Barcelona by Spanish architects Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats. The abandoned building originally used as a Peace and Justice Cooperative was transformed into a theatre and drama centre. The new design of the space was envisioned to preserve the collective social memory of the site (see, FIG.5). The architects retained the 1920s exterior of the building while reconfiguring the interiors using existing elements from the site thereby creating a circular design model (see, FIG.6). Most adaptive reuse strategies use a stark visual contrast between the old and the new whereas this project was re-imagined into a third category called 'renewed old' (Gomez-Moriana, 2019). The architects have retained the traces of changes on the walls to establish a language of spatial and material continuity (see, FIG.7).



FIG.5 Sala Beckett, Barcelona by Flores Prats Architects, Barcelona, (ArchDaily, 2014)



FIG.6 Inventory of Existing Elements for Reuse in Sala Beckett, Barcelona by Flores Prats Architects, Barcelona, (Gomez-Moriana, 2019)



FIG.7 Section showing traces of the past in Sala Beckett, Barcelona by Flores Prats Architects, (ArchDaily, 2014)

Contrary to the Indian landscape, practices in the UK and Europe have a more structured approach to heritage renewal which creates an additional barrier with codes and policies that architects and designers navigate. The concept of cultural continuity goes beyond interior



*FIG.8 Lavender Hill Housing, London by
Sergison Bates Architects, London,
(Sergison Bates Architects, 2016)*

modifications to exterior relations between structures of different periods. The demarcated conservation zones and the dense urban fabric of London create new ways of responding to heritage using material and cultural references. Hence spatial continuity strategies such as urban infill and redevelopment of existing housing estates are prominent in London's current architectural language, an example of which is the Lavender Hill Housing project in London by Sergison Bates Architects (see, FIG.9). The redevelopment of a metal sheet engineering and processing factory was envisioned as an urban infill proposal. Residential homes were to be designed within an urban block accessed by an old historic street. The brickwork on the façade and the twisted metal balustrades were designed to resemble the

Victorian industrial heritage (Sergison Bates Architects, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion: Key Learnings from Global Practices

The following are the key takeaways from globally established practices in cultural continuity:

1. Cultural and heritage spaces evolve with time

Cultural continuity is a dynamic and constantly evolving concept fostering new ways to inhabit spaces. The act of preserving the old thereby 'encapsulating some image of the past, an image that may in time prove to be mythical or irrelevant' (Lynch,1972). Preservation strategies like repair and restoration are a type of time-bound response. Therefore, there needs to be a diversity of responses towards cultural and heritage spaces within the city to maintain their vitality in the present.

2. Urban heritage includes living and inhabited structures

Heritage structures in the UK include not only palaces and Art Deco buildings but also green landscapes, vernacular Georgian and Victorian terraces and post-war social housing estates like the Barbican that was built in the late 20th century. Heritage status is granted due to the intrinsic value and unique nature of the site as a part of the collective memory of the city. Such an integrated approach towards existing buildings can be applied in India as well, with many

vernacular housing schemes that can be considered as a part of urban heritage. For example, the inhabited *wadas* (traditional houses) of old Nashik which include the load-bearing brick structures with wooden balconies are the remnants of the early housing schemes forming a part of the architectural and social history of the city.

3. Additive nature of City spaces

Major post-industrial cities in the UK and Europe have a dense urban fabric due to extensive building activities. Yet cities like London face massive housing shortages in the present times. However, the city allows additions to be made to the existing fabric to accommodate the rising needs of the local communities. Such additions are seen as extensions to listed buildings for public use or urban infill strategies for building new residences. Historic centres in Tier-2 cities of India have the potential to become the engines of growth with sensitive additions to the existing fabric.

4. Association of the built heritage with the neighbourhood

Enhancing the associative nature of the built environment with the public realm strengthens its integration with the wider neighbourhood. Our treatment of the existing buildings is largely inward with modifications of the interior spaces. The public realm, the streets and the neighbourhood buildings need to interact through spatial and material continuity. Modernity without context will make each of the structures look like fragmented pieces of the city. To establish a coherent language of cultural continuity, one has to recognize and reconnect with spaces outside the structural footprint of the built like the streets, common courtyards, promenades and other transitional city spaces.

5. Reusing existing materials to create a circular design model

The reuse of space and materials is part of a global response to mitigate the climate crisis. Salvaging materials from the site rather than disposing of them can be used to create an urban collage thereby developing continuity through building materials. Circularity in design and materials symbolises a wide diversity of time structures which can be a significant change in the way we perceive rehabilitation of the existing structures.

Establishing an association of the existing heritage with the newly built is an essential criterion for cultural continuity in any city. Restoring cultural heritage only for tourism will reduce it to a museum object. Adapting and modifying existing buildings to the current socio-economic needs will integrate its purpose into the daily lives of the communities. In conclusion, cultural continuity in the Indian context is still in its nascent stage where we treat every building as a separate entity. The research aims to begin a conversation around revitalising the heritage and cultural spaces of the city by associating them with the larger neighbourhood. The paper only lists suggestions to view the old and new holistically. Local design models should be envisioned that effectively situate the existing with the present and near-future interventions.

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