Activities of INTACH
Indian National Trust of Art and Cultural Heritage

Heritage Conservation in Pondicherry

working with the GOVERNMENT and PEOPLE of Pondicherry
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In collaboration with the Department of Tourism,
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and ADEME (Agence de l’Environnement
et de la Maîtrise de l’Énergie)

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The intent of this publication is to foster awareness of Pondicherry’s unique architecture, the threats it is facing and what is being done by INTACH, in collaboration with the Government and the citizens of Pondicherry, to preserve this rapidly disappearing heritage, a valuable generator of local income and employment in tourism. Most of all, this booklet is to stimulate you, the reader, to work with us and help us achieve this and other goals.

It is by no means an easy task, as preserving architectural heritage is not a priority in a developing country like India beset by countless other problems. But it is extremely important to take action to preserve the unique identity of the city. Otherwise this valuable asset may completely disappear – an asset that can generate income by tourism promotion.

INTACH is a non-government, non-profit organisation that makes strategic and timely interventions to conserve and promote India’s natural, built and living heritage. It is a nation-wide network of volunteers working through more than 100 chapters to increase awareness of heritage, to prevent acts likely to degrade a region’s cultural and natural wealth, and to act to preserve and enhance local heritage.
Pondicherry’s recorded history goes back to when traders from the Roman Empire knew it as Poduke. It later flourished as a port-town of the South Indian Chola empire under the name Puducheri ("new town" in Tamil) that became Pondicherry under the French. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to trade in textiles in 1521 and in the 17th century the Dutch and the Danes followed suit. This flourishing trade inspired the French to establish a settlement in 1674. Under Governors such as François Martin and Jean-François Dupleix, Pondicherry became
a prominent fortified town and an important port of call. It is the residual French influence that has affected the built form of the town. In the tit-for-tat battles that marked the 18th century, the British avenged the French taking of Fort St. George at Madras in 1746 by capturing Pondicherry in 1761 and razing the French town to the ground. The Treaty of Paris returned Pondicherry to the French in 1765 and by 1768 much of the old town of Pondicherry, as we know it today, had been laid out and rebuilt on its former foundations.
Pondicherry has an interesting **cross-cultural history** and its built form lends a unique identity to the town. The old part of Pondicherry is known as the Boulevard Town since it is bounded by four boulevards that once constituted the outer limits of the city's fortification. The Boulevard Town presents two distinct architectural styles in the Tamil and French quarters, which are separated by a canal and unified by a rectilinear grid plan. In the French Town the buildings are in European style adapted to a tropical climate, whereas in the Tamil Town area they are in the local vernacular. While maintaining their individual identities, the two styles have influenced one another, evolving into a synthesis: **Franco-Tamil architecture**. There are few monumental buildings in Pondicherry, and the architectural character of the town is the result of hundreds of traditional-style houses (both in Tamil and French Quarters) that form the unique streetscapes so distinctive of Pondicherry.
Documentation and Intervention

Documentation of heritage buildings, comprising preparation of measure drawings and taking photographs, is a central part of INTACH’s work. It is the basis for carrying out various activities related to preservation of the built heritage. These activities include restoration, adaptive re-use and extension of listed buildings, design of new buildings in heritage precincts, preparation of publications and conducting awareness programs.
Residents and long-time visitors agree that Pondicherry is fast losing its special physical character and atmosphere not just because of the increasing population, traffic and pollution, but also due to the alarming loss of old buildings in the name of development.

Pondicherry has lost more than 700 listed heritage buildings in the past 10 years, most of them in the Tamil Town. These are being replaced by structures that are aesthetically jarring to the traditional streetscapes, leading to loss of identity.
Legal Protection of Heritage Buildings

As of now there is no legal protection for listed heritage buildings. This means their demolition cannot be prevented.

The Government of Puducherry is preparing a Detailed Development Plan (DDP), with the assistance of INTACH, to provide **legal protection** as well as financial and other incentives to heritage building owners. Under the DDP, the old Boulevard Town of Pondicherry would be declared a “Heritage Zone” comprising of Tamil and French precincts.
The first priority is to restore heritage buildings so that they can be provided with modern facilities and meet the needs of owners and users.

Under “adaptive re-use” old houses can be converted into shops, restaurants, hotels and the like. A number of such projects have been carried out in the town, often with the help and assistance of INTACH. But much still needs to be done.
This project was awarded the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award in the year 2000 as an outstanding project.

The citation stated:

"Restoration of the Hotel de l'Orient proves that successful heritage conservation does not require massive intervention or rebuilding. This inspiring project was completed with minimal intervention, done relatively inexpensively, and maintained the integrity of both the exterior and the interior original architecture. The care and attention given to original design elements in the interior restoration gives to the Hotel de l'Orient admirable charm and historic authenticity. The addition of two guestrooms and a staircase in order to make the project economically viable illustrates the creative approach to the structure's adaptive conservation. In addition to contributing to the cultural enhancement of the community, the popularity of the hotel has underscored the validity of the decision to restore the building rather than demolish it."

Following the example of this project a number of "heritage hotels" have come up in the town.
When unable to prevent the demolition of a heritage building, INTACH works with owners to develop...
alternative façade designs so that the new building continues to fit harmoniously in the streetscape.
The Asia-Urbs Programme was an initiative of the European Commission to assist Asian cities in improving urban environments in partnership with European cities.

Pondicherry Municipality, in collaboration with INTACH, took the initiative in the year 2002 to apply for the programme to partner the cities of Urbino (Italy) and Villeneuve-sur-Lot (France). The objective of the programme was to achieve urban economic and environmental goals through heritage preservation initiatives.

The main projects under this programme were a model street restoration project, a matching grant scheme, the installation of building plaques and street signboards, solid waste management, and a battery charging station.

**Model Street Restoration Project**

A stretch of Rue Calvé Subbarya Chetty (Vysial Street), between Rue de la Cathédrale (Rue des Missions) and Mahatma Gandhi Street in the Tamil Town, is one of the rare streetscapes where the traditional continuous verandahs (thalavaram and thinnai) have survived. For that reason it was chosen for the Model Street Restoration Project. In close cooperation with the owners, twenty traditional house facades were restored and another four new buildings in-between were re-designed to harmonise with the traditional streetscape.

The objective was to showcase a typical Tamil streetscape and to persuade the house owners to appreciate their heritage houses. The total cost was about 50,000 Euros.
42, Rue Calvé
Subbraya Chetty
(Mysial Street)

Before

after

model street

71, Rue Calvé
Subbraya Chetty
(Vysial Street)

before

after
77, 77a, 79, Rue Calvé Subbraya Chetty (Vysial Street)
Matching Grant Scheme

With the objective of improving the survival rate of listed heritage buildings, this scheme provided financial assistance to ten owners (grants of up to 50% of the cost, with a ceiling of Euros 5,000/-) to restore and modernize their properties.
Building Plaques and Street Signboards

To highlight the heritage aspects of the city for both Pondicherians and tourists, 15 stainless steel plaques (each with a brief history of the site) were fixed on important heritage buildings.

Old Pondicherry, like many cities in France, had blue-white enamel street signboards. Over the years most had been replaced with either plastic or concrete. About 300 new enamel signboards have been fixed, mostly along heritage walk-routes.

Battery Charging Station

This station, with modern charging equipment, was built to encourage the use of electric 8-seater micro-cabs in the city with the goal of reducing traffic pollution.

A set of depleted batteries can be exchanged against freshly charged ones in ten minutes.
Heritage Awareness Programmes

One of the essential ingredients of the heritage preservation efforts is the generation of awareness. We conduct programs in schools and colleges with the goal that children and youth will absorb the message and its values and convey it at home.

Heritage walks are also proposed for local citizens as well as tourists so that some parts of the town which are normally not seen but have heritage character, can be discovered.

Other instruments are developed to reach the general public like publication of brochures and videos on heritage protection and solid waste management.
Bharathi Park Revitalization

The fenced urban parks in France inspired the Bharathi Park re-landscaping scheme.

The main idea was to turn the park into a haven for pedestrians by preventing the entry of motor vehicles. The protective cast-iron fence with four gates has created a new experience of peace and quiet and an up-to-date lighting design has enhanced the overall ambience.

The next stage would be the conversion of the Gandhi Thidal into a pedestrian plaza with craft stalls on either side and the re-landscaping of the Beach Promenade. These two schemes are now under planning.
Government Buildings

The Government of Puducherry owns a number of listed heritage buildings and has decided to restore some of these buildings to encourage similar efforts in the town.

INTACH has prepared a number of schemes for these buildings, as can be seen below.
Le Café
Beach Promenade

before

after

Residence
26, Rue Labourdonnais

before

after

Residence
49, Rue Suffren

before

after
An integrated five-year **Heritage Preservation Mission** would comprise:

- The implementation of heritage legislation (DDP)
- The creation of an appropriately-sized Heritage Fund
- The relocation of government offices outside the Boulevard Town to decongest the French Precinct
- Further initiatives to create a "clean and green" Pondicherry