

Goa, 3-5 April 2008

Background note to the session on BOOSTING AND UPGRADING THE HUMAN CAPITAL REQUIRED BY URBAN DEVELOPMENT

By Heritage Department, Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation

**An Introduction to
AHMEDABAD HERITAGE CENTRE**
*Institution for rehabilitation and conservation of
Historic Cities of India*

Background Note

Most Indian towns and cities with a long history, have areas of strong architectural and urban character, which are not formed in a day or even in a decade. These in fact are the result of centuries of growth in the course of which new elements are constantly juxtaposed with older ones. Old buildings and older areas of the city are the assets as they represent the history of communities, embodying their tradition, heritage and culture through architecture and the urban form. However, these historic urban settlements are undergoing rapid change and decline due to pressures of urbanization.

Urban heritage is like the spiritual search. We think about it only after satisfying our material needs. But it is better to be late than never. Antiquated tenancy laws, family connections, lack of finance etc. have allowed surprising amount of old architecture and the building craft to survive into the 21st century. A stroll within an old city would show up spectacular architecture. These buildings are constructed to last and usually they need little more than a bit of paint and imagination along with the removal of irritating billboards.

There lies great opportunity for Indian cities to create cities with ‘character’ that will live beyond current architectural ‘fashion’. As India’s economy gather momentum, its cities will face the same pressures faced by other Asian cities. Economic prosperity means that alternative users for the land will begin to tempt insensitive developers.

In India, there has been an effort only since a decade or two towards this cause. Currently there are very few trained professionals and still many think conservation comes with wealth (only rich people’s hobby) and not common man’s domain. For a vast country like India and its rich diversified legacy, the task is long. Heritage Conservation is not yet a mainstream vocation and is taught only in School of Planning of Architecture, New Delhi and CEPT University at Ahmedabad at postgraduate level. It will take some time to be fully established at the professional level.

Besides these trained specialists what we need is a collective effort by the citizens, authorities and all of us. The best way is always to make the beginning in a very humble manner such as knowing about the city that we live in and work for! By learning and sharing simple facts and thus caring about it can be a part of daily life and hence adding meaning to it. As an example – the Manek Burj (where the foundation of Ahmedabad was laid) in Ahmedabad was partially destroyed. Many would not care as it was just a pile of rubbles but what if they know it is where located is the foundation stone of the city. It is important to establish a knowledgeable relationship between the residents and the city to make the later a better place to live in.

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PURPOSE OF AHMEDABAD HERITAGE CENTRE

With the diverse and unique characteristics of the Indian heritage, philosophies and perception, several contentions are being made with regard to the suitability of applying international standards on the restoration and the management of cultural resources in India. In most circumstances the concept based on western ideals cannot be easily adhered to by the countries in this region because aforementioned diversity in characteristics and political/administrative systems. There is an urgent need among societies to share their unique experiences and to act in complementary to each other in establishing cultural resource conservation and management.

Aims

The aims of Ahmedabad Heritage Centre are identified as follows:

- a) To exchange experiences of cultural heritage planning and management among Indian cities that will facilitate the development of “Indian Standards” for cultural heritage planning and management.
- b) To understand and investigate tangible cultural heritage sites ranging from the listed World Heritage Sites to small urban historic quarters.
- c) To seek appropriate measures to improve the management of cultural heritage sites that would be applicable to Asian countries.

Objectives of the Centre

- Providing assistance to Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) in formulating policies and programmes for the conservation of heritage of the city Ahmedabad.
- Providing technical assistance to the occupants and owners of heritage buildings for the conservation and restoration of the properties including guidance for legal and financial assistance.
- Providing a forum for promoting awareness and education related to heritage issues, including networking with all relevant institutions.
- Ensuring that traditional building materials and the know how required for their construction and use are available to the inhabitants of the walled city. For this, the heritage centre shall maintain a list of architects, skilled craftsmen and providers of building material.
- Calling upon International and Indian experts in the field of heritage conservation and restoration and allied avenues to assist it as and when the need arises.
- Providing training for technicians and artisans

Proposed Activities at the Centre

- Degree courses in Urban Heritage with academic institutions.
- Short term certificate courses.
- Training courses for Government officials.
- Training modules for Government, Quasi-Government, Non-Government, Corporate and other agencies involved in the work of conservation and restoration.
- Training modules for technicians and artisans.

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PROPOSED OPERATIONS OF THE CENTRE

The new centre is expected to address a variety of concerns, broadly categorised into the following five operations, which will have a specific set of objectives and scope of work. The structure of personnel is provided in the following section.

Operation 1: Heritage Outreach and Advocacy – To develop and promote strategies to educate the public about the value of heritage, and to structure initiatives and products that further promote public awareness.

Operation 2: Technical Support Services – To provide architectural and structural engineering services towards preparing detailed structural assessments of heritage buildings, preparing restoration drawings, and expertise in building materials conservation.

Operation 3: Documentation – To develop a state-of-the-art multimedia documentation archive of heritage structures in the Walled City of Ahmedabad. The operation proposes to build internal capacity through periodic staff training in documentation technology, and experiment with new methods of architectural and historical documentation.

Operation 4: Financial Management – To research and develop financial mechanisms for project financing, and to locate sources of funding for restoration projects.

Operation 5: Project Design and Development – To develop and carry out conservation planning projects of three types: (1) architectural conservation, (2) local resource development, and (3) conservation planning.

WHY AT AHMEDABAD?

The city of Ahmedabad boasts of a rich architectural heritage, that is vital to the local identity and continuity of the place. The foremost heritage assets are the Indo-Islamic monuments of the 15th to 17th centuries: the Jama Masjid, the Teen Darwaza, the Bhadra Gate and Tower and the Tombs of Queen and King located in the historic core, the remaining sections of the original fort wall, 12 original gates and a number of other monuments protected by the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India). Besides these monuments, there are potential heritage precincts in the form of the Pols, the traditional residential clusters of the medieval period, which makes Ahmedabad exceptional. Also, a large enclave of the Maratha period survives in the Walled city. The colonial era once is valuable from the viewpoint of industrial and civic development and the Walled city is dotted with many such fine examples of colonial era architecture.

This urban heritage of housing and architecture constitutes a living context, a technology and a morphology, which can be restored and adapted to meet the needs of the day. But, in the absence of any protective measures and pressures of urbanization, demolition has continued destructuring the walled city in particular. The protection of any city as a whole is under the auspices of urban management and cannot be limited to mere aesthetic concerns. Hence instead of a piecemeal or a fragmented approach an overall conservation strategy is required. It should be coherent from a technical and economical standpoint and at the same time possible in Ahmedabad.