

CHENNAI

# Restoring the old a new challenge for the PWD

The PWD has taken up the restoration of three historic buildings in Chennai as part of a new initiative

**MADRAS HIGH COURT**  
Year of construction - 1894



- The Madras High Court is spread over 1 lakh sq. ft. and was designed by architect Henry Irwin, and built by Nampunam Chetty
- Lime mortar and brick were used to construct the majestic buildings in the Indo-Saracenic style of architecture
- It houses 36 chambers in 2 floors
- The PWD had earlier initiated a ₹12.2 crore project to repair the Madras Terrace roof of the main building and the old light house
- Now, work is on to repair the 22 domes in the main building, in association with the National Research Laboratory for Conservation of Cultural Property, Lucknow
- A conservation architect has also been engaged

Project estimate: nearly **₹100 crore**

**HUMAYUN MAHAL**  
Year of construction - 1770



Project estimate: **₹50 crore**

- When the British took over the palace, then government architect Robert Chisholm transformed the structure into the Revenue Board building
- In the Kalas Mahal fire in 2012, a portion of Humayun Mahal was affected due to a roof collapse
- A minor fire in 2014 led to further damage

**PWD OFFICE BUILDING**  
Year of construction - 1865



- The Public Works Department office, spread over 1.20 lakh sq. ft., is part of the Chepauk palace
- Facing Marina beach, the main building was constructed in the Indo-Saracenic style and was later extended in 1910
- Designed by Robert Chisholm, the main block was built mainly with brickwork and has a wooden staircase and a Madras Terrace roof
- The arched portion on the entrance leading to a wooden staircase and long verandas on the first floor lend much beauty
- Offices of various wings of the PWD and the Water Resources Department are housed here

Project estimate: yet to be decided



- Though the Buildings Wing of the PWD undertakes periodic maintenance work, the structure is yet to undergo any major conservation
- The Department now proposes to renovate the building and is awaiting the government's nod



- Once a residence of the Nawab of Arcot, this single-storey structure is located adjacent to Kalas Mahal that was recently restored to its original glory
- Humayun Mahal, which is spread over nearly 66,000 sq. ft. and faces Wallajah Road, has a connecting corridor to Kalas Mahal

SOURCE: PWD AND JUSTICE E. PADMAKISHAN COMMITTEE REPORT  
PHOTOS: S. ADITHYANMUNINGAM AND CV. SRIKARAN

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## Acquiring domain expertise may be key to preserving heritage buildings

Many heritage buildings languishing in neglect for several years across the State may soon get a new lease of life with the Public Works Department embarking on a major project to conserve these structures.

Among the major projects the PWD will take up is the complete renovation of the majestic Madras High Court main building at a cost of nearly ₹100 crore. Mumbai-based Abha

Narain Lambah Associates, which facilitated the Bombay High Court restoration project, is the consultant, and the project will be completed in five years.

The PWD's confidence in taking up such projects arises from its experience in restoring the 248-year old Kalas Mahal that was ravaged by a major fire in 2012. After a five-year-long struggle, the heritage structure sports a new look now.

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## Dedicated division

A separate division, 'Building Centre and Conservation Division (BCCD)' has been formed to restore such structures under the supervision of the Superintending Engineer (Buildings), Planning and Designs Circle, Chennai and Chief Engineer (Buildings), Chennai division. It will have sub-divisions in Tiruchi, Madurai and Salem as well.

At present, such heritage structures belong to various government departments and data about these structures would be compiled. "The available list has details of about 200 structures. We have written to various departments seeking details and the history of such buildings. We will study the structures that need urgent attention and restore them in a phased manner. We plan to compile the data in six months," said an official.

Humayun Mahal, a dilapidated structure adjacent to Kalas Mahal, will be the first to be restored under the supervision of the BCCD and estimates are being prepared for the project. A visit to the Humayun Mahal revealed that both the main and annexe buildings were in a decrepit state. A portion of the roof has collapsed and charred wooden beams are still jutting out from the roof. Debris, heaps of paper and thick vegetation on the terrace need to be cleared. "We plan to get a detailed survey done to test the stability of the structure. These walls are of two-foot thickness. The entire project to restore the structures to their original shape will take three years," said the official.

"While the BCCD is a good initiative, issues like training PWD engineers in techniques to conserve heritage structures need to be taken care of. Heritage structures demand a

different procedure, unlike other buildings. The department would need the support of conservation architecture firms for a few years,” said A. Srivathsan, professor of architecture and academic director, CEPT University, Ahmedabad.

## Fidelity to the original

One of the biggest challenges for the PWD would be to ensure that the original architectural style and integrity of heritage structures are restored, said Tahaer Zoyab, one of the co-creators of the House of Mylapore, a project that documented heritage buildings in and around Mylapore. “Methods need to be studied meticulously before execution. Heritage structures have a definite character that reflect a golden era and they need to be celebrated,” he said.

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