

HISTORY & CULTURE

The century-old houses of Chennai's Mylapore were built to survive



Sweta Akundi

JANUARY 13, 2020 17:35 IST

UPDATED: JANUARY 14, 2020 13:28 IST

Pot tiles, coloured window panes and well-lit courtyards — the century-old houses of Mylapore boast aesthetic planning

Puzzled faces peep out the windows of the upper floors of the century-old houses nestling wall-to-wall at Kutcheri Road in Mylapore. In return, the large crowd gathered on the narrow road looks up, not at their bemused expressions, but at the Art-Deco style of the grilled windows.

“Look at the rejection of extreme ornamentation, the celebration of geometry, straight lines, and arches,” points out Tahaer Zoyab, suggesting that the houses may have been built in the 1920s, when the Art-Deco movement originated.

As part of Mylapore Festival, the architect, along with the Madras Inherited team, is leading a curated walk exploring vintage houses of Mylapore.

At 7 am on Sunday, we start from the Rasi Silk Store off Kutchery Road, checking out *agraharam* houses. The houses on this street are built linearly – with expanded interiors that allow ample circulation of light and air – so as to best make use of the limited space.

VDO.AI

In one of the houses on Nadu Street, the home-owners – an old couple – greet us volunteering to share information about their home. In a feeble but eager voice, the lady of the house talks about how they still use water from their well and how long their home is. “It is like the Brindavan Express inside: compartment after compartment,” she quips.

Tahaer shares his “jugaad tricks” to identify the age of a house: “It is easy to assess how old it is by looking at the material used. For example, if it has pot tiles, it could be close to a century or older, because after that, the Mangalore tiles became popular. Another trick is to check if the balcony has cast iron handrails, which implies it is from before the 1930s.”

Additional floors began to be built, after this period. “You see how narrow the staircases generally are? That is because they were an addition once we figured out how to build on top.”

The ground floor was generally the office space, while the family lived upstairs. Drawing our attention to the vertical posts outside most houses, he says, “This is where they would hang signages for the offices.” Moreover, if you look at some of the signages in the nearby shops, some of them still have landline numbers with six or five digits -- in that sense, they are stuck in time.

Innovative techniques

The houses surrounding Kutchery Road used Burma teak, many of them over 100 years old and still not requiring repainting. Walls are made from lime plaster, which may feel rough to the touch but have great properties of thermal insulation. The wall-to-wall construction as well as the the red oxide tiles both keep the air cool.

To understand this better, we step inside a century-old house, owned by Neeraj Vaid from Ajmer. The dusty, two-floored building, currently uninhabited, has Madras Terrace roofing, Chettinad-style tiles in one room, and the most striking of all: a central courtyard, letting in sunlight blinking through the bars. “Many of these courtyards are a refuge for sparrows. Their world is the courtyard itself, which is ironic because it was the world for humans too. It used to be a social space but today it is utilitarian, like for drying clothes,” says Tahaer.

The Madras Terrace roofing was an important innovation, as it helped build new floors without having to introduce pillars. The parallel wooden beams and flat bricks laid diagonally to each other, helped distribute weight so that we could have flat roofs, adding more terrace area.

We pass by more houses, sporting windows with beautifully coloured glass panes imported from Belgium. (Imagine the light streaming in the morning and late afternoons). Meanwhile, spouts, to let off rainwater, are in the shape of animal heads.

This area also boasts of remarkable planning. “It does not get flooded because of the planned elevation and the presence of multiple tanks. That is the reason why land prices will always be high here.”

Given the limited space, and now the additional issue of parking, houses in this area have taken to growing vertically, breaking the general unwritten agreement that the gopuram of the nearby temple should be the tallest point in the area.

On Arundale Street, we spot a cream-coloured building with a lion head crest, distinctive to Dutch architecture. It has arched windows and small coves, for birds to perch. A broken pillar similar to that of the house beside, suggests that once upon a time, the street was witness to similiar architecture.

Despite the association of Mylapore with temples, the region is more cosmopolitan than it is given credit for. As we move to Devadi Street, Tahaer explains, “There is one theory that says the name was inspired by ‘deodi’, which in Urdu means archway. The area has had Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jains; all living peacefully within a two-kilometre radius.”

Why you should pay for quality journalism - [Click to know more](#)

Printable version | Apr 24, 2020 10:47:22 AM | <https://www.thehindu.com/society/history-and-culture/the-century-old-houses-of-chennais-mylapore-were-built-to-survive/article30558163.ece>

© THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD.