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# Photo documentary celebrates vanishing heritage of Madras

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CHENNAI: The buildings in the older localities of Mylapore and Royapettah – however decrepit or decorated – have their own stories to tell. And since January this year, two “teams” of architects, urban designers and photographers, under a ‘vanishing heritage project’ grant from Ashvita Foundation have been exploring these neighbourhoods to photo-document structures, which are not in the public domain.

“The aim is to provide multi-layered architectural and socio-cultural contexts to these structures, to make them more relevant. The particular neighbourhoods were chosen for their distinct geographic and cultural histories and the alarming rate at which heritage treasures are being lost,” says Ashvin Rajagopalan of Ashvita Foundation. The photographs will be

displayed on August 31 at Ashvita Bistro in Alwarpet, as part of the Madras Week celebrations. “A grant amount of Rs 1 lakh was disbursed to each group for a documentation process that included geo-tagging, mapping, and photography. Buildings and structures more than 50 years old that display a definitive and hybrid architectural styles were chosen,” he adds.

The project, say its documenters, felt like a race against time, because structures seemed to be disappearing faster than they could be catalogued. “We found that a number of the private heritage structures in Royapettah had a mix of architectural influences from different eras,” says Tahaer Zoyab, an architect, urban designer and heritage enthusiast, who was part of Team Royapettah, along with photographers Pooja Chordia and Uttara Chockalingam. Zoyab is also part of a ‘Houses of Mylapore’

project, which documents homes and conducts heritage walks in the area. “We have found that the homes we feature on one walk may be demolished by the time we host the next walk. We are hoping awareness will help engage more people with the history of their localities,” says Zoyab, who will be holding a heritage walk on August 20.

The experience of Team Mylapore was similar. “We started photographing the structures in January, and then revisited some of them recently only to find that quite a few were either demolished or in the process of it,” says Sivaranjani S, one of the young architects.

Rajagopalan believes that in the face of large-scale redevelopment and the absence of a heritage act, the structural identity of the city faces the threat of erasure. “It is of utmost urgency to create a heritage map of the city before it is permanently reconfigured,” says Rajagopalan.