

ART

How Chennai's Kannagi Nagar is turning into an art district



Gowri S

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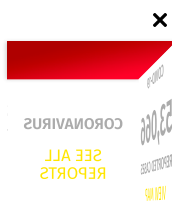
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Kannagi Nagar is now a canvas for artists from India and abroad. How is the community welcoming this initiative by St+art India?

Nila, a transgender artist from Chennai, walked along Kannagi Nagar wielding a megaphone a couple of weeks ago. She was surrounded by boisterous children, who put up notices around the many identical multi-storied apartments, as she made her announcements.

She was inviting residents to participate in an informal open mic on the empty grounds of Kannagi Nagar. Today, she is riding pillion on a bike that whizzes past the many colourful façades – again, megaphone in hand – announcing the festivities that are to unfurl in the evening; festivities that will officially mark Kannagi Nagar's transformation into an art district.

Done in collaboration with Greater Chennai Corporation and Chennai Smart City Limited and Asian Paints, St+art India's pet project, which identified one of Chennai's most neglected rehabilitation neighbourhoods, is well on its way to completion. Sixteen façades feature the work of 16 national and international artists. But it is not just the walls that deserve attention: the many interventions that St+art has had with city-based NGOs and other collectives, in an attempt to engage with the community, bring more stories.



A resettlement area with a population of 80,000 people relocated from settlements for the disadvantaged and the river beds of Cooum, Adyar, and the Buckingham Canal, Kannagi Nagar is often associated with crime. And most reportage from this area have magnified only this aspect, according to Guilia Ambrogio, curator and co-founder of St+art India Foundation.

Standing against the lively background of a children's volleyball game, she says, "If we do a Google search of Kannagi Nagar, we only see reports of crime, and problems of the past. There was a discrepancy and polarisation in what we found on media and what we felt on the ground. This is not to say that there is no crime, but definitely, it has become the only reading of the space, which is not right. There is a lively community here that many seem to ignore," says Guilia.

She adds that many residents even find it difficult to acquire jobs owing to the space's reputation. "By changing the face of a space, we are also trying to activate it through positive consequences," she says.

St+art initially considered Nochikuppam and Black Town, before zeroing in on Kannagi Nagar, mainly for its diversity.

This outlook is entrenched in the minds of the children here, as Madras Inherited found out through the project Kannagi Nagar in Kanganal, where they approached four schools in the locality and interacted with students from Class V to VII. The children were given activity sheets with questions about their thoughts on Kannagi Nagar. The children's uninhibited drawings showed gang wars, men wielding swords, water, and sewage problems. In fact, one of the posters read, 'Kannagi Nagar *naale fightu thaan*' (If it's Kannagi Nagar, it's a fight).

By calling the area an art district and encouraging artistic interventions, St+art wishes to change this.

The murals magnify scenes that encapsulate the community. Viennese artist David Leitner's untitled work featuring a woman who has joined her hands in prayer, and a family shown mid-move amidst a drought, draws attention to the community's water crisis.

A combination of line drawings and paintings, the mural has these distinct parts. The arrangement of pots in the left bottom corner – some filled, some empty, some overflowing into others – signify multiple avenues for sharing. Further into the parallel streets, Bengaluru-based Aravani Art Project's vibrant wall shows women sitting in a circle. This too, is a scene from community-driven, relaxed evenings that are part of Kannagi Nagar.

"Most of the walls we do are celebrations of the people who live in the area. And mostly, we depict trans women in the area. When we were walking around, we realised that the women and transwomen in Kannagi Nagar are very active. They sit around talking to each other, celebrating life, while doing their own thing – peeling vegetables for instance," says Sadhna Prasad, art director of the collective.

A group of seven trans women who are part of the Aravani Art Project joined other artists to create the mural which also depicts the patterns, colours and faces that they had seen around. A part of the mural is left unfinished, inviting passers by to try their hand at painting.

The other side of the coin

A live graffiti jam is underway led by artist Zero from Delhi. Donning masks and spray paint cans, the group has been at the L-shaped walls for hours now.

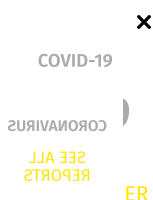
Residents from the apartment opposite take their chairs out, to lounge and watch. Devika, who is preparing to write her Class X board exams seems elated: "I am not able to recognise my own street. *Semma ya panranga!* (They are doing it well)," she says. Her family was relocated from Thideer Nagar. She listens to her neighbour with fascination as he informs her that their "street has made an appearance even on YouTube."

There is a sizeable number of people who are uncertain about how the project will help them on a personal level. "The streets have become colourful. But, beyond that, I don't know how it is going to benefit us," says a middle-aged woman who prefers to be anonymous. She, along with her family, sells toys and other miscellaneous items on a pull-cart.

But, many small vendors that line these streets are expecting to see more customers at least in the coming weeks. So much so that, an enterprising tea shop working out of one of the apartments, popped up days after work began.

Will this facelift work in residents' favour? Only time will tell. If the space continues to be activated, it could become a public venue for other artists and their work, like Delhi's Lodhi Art District's collaboration with the latest edition of India Art Fair. But whether this makeover will lend to societal changes or awareness, and even if so, how long it will remain for, are factors that remain uncertain.

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