

HISTORY & CULTURE

Chennai's iconic buildings narrate their history



Gowri S

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In the social media initiative The Talking City, iconic, but lesser-known buildings in the city, narrate their stories in first person

"If you lived the last 20 years of your 123-year-old life in neglect, I'm sure you'd appreciate how stunning I manage to look today. There is much about the rotting wood and crumbling brick in my body to suggest that I am barely alive. But I have lived many lives and certainly seen more than you..."

While driving down AnnaSalai, past the many iconic structures that line it, how many times have you glanced at The Bharat Insurance Building, opposite Higginbothams? How many times have you wondered about its 123-year-old history? If the building could talk, what would it say? Overshadowed by their overachieving cousins, some of these buildings nestled in different parts of the city, frozen in time, have interesting tales to tell. Madras Inherited, the heritage wing of the architectural firm, Triple O'studios, gives these buildings voices of their own, in their latest social media initiative, The Talking City. In a series of posts, published on Instagram and Facebook every week, the buildings narrate their own history in first person.

The idea came to Anirudh Venkat, a research assistant at Madras Inherited, and his colleagues during one of their terrace sessions where they take pictures and discover buildings from above. "One very moody evening, one of my colleagues started writing a poem for herself as if a building was talking – the building was a very insignificant one, she just happened to, on a whim, give a personification to it," says Anirudh about the inception. The idea of talking about heritage and history through the building itself, intrigued them instantly.



Madras Inherited's broader research involves heritage buildings across the city, which is incorporated into their walks. Interesting pointers for certain neglected buildings, have found their way into this particular series. "For instance, The Bharat Insurance Building is a unique building that has gone through many lives and it's only recently, owing to its derelict state, that people have forgotten about it," Anirudh explains.



Weekly engagements about such buildings will also expand their visibility. The second in the series was about Victoria Public Hall, which stands sandwiched between the much talked-of Central Railway Station and Ripon Building. The building was used as a public gathering and event space during the Independence movement, says Anirudh. "We are trying to spotlight buildings that deserve credit in two ways: Because of their beauty and architectural significance; and the historical events that happened there," continues Anirudh. In George Town, the Gokhale Hall built in 1915, has hosted significant personalities, the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and K Kamaraj.

Some of the other buildings that will be featured in the series are Wellesley Hall (inside Fort St George, built in late 1700s), Victoria Hostel (on Victoria Hostel Road, Triplicane, built in 1888), and Gokhale Hall, Anirudh adds. Will the series materialise

into something else beyond the gamut of social media? "For now, the posts will be out on social media but we are also open to collating all of it into a blog. We are still exploring such collaborations," he concludes.

The series is available on @madrasinherited (Instagram)

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