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What's An Ideal Home in a Pandemic? TN's Old Architecture Has Tips

Here are a few elements of heritage architecture that offers the best tips for safety and hygiene.

SMITHA TK

Published: **31 Aug 2020, 02:52 PM IST**

VIDEOS

5 min read



Growing up, my mother would always ask me to wash my feet, hands and face every time I entered home after having stepped outside. I was expected to change my clothes, wash them immediately and only then be allowed to sit on the sofa. “You never know the germs you will drag in from outdoors,” she always warned.

But what we once reluctantly followed to escape the wrath of parents and grandparents is now the need of the hour as coronavirus continues to pose grave threats to our health.

“Back in the day, this was our everyday practice. We ate neem leaves and *nilavembu* concoction for boosting our immunity. I don’t even wear slippers but I have never been sick in my life,” said Subramanian, a Mylapore temple priest.

To explore how rigorous hygiene practices were followed in the yesteryears, **The Quint** hit the streets of Chennai with Taher Zoyab and Ashmitha Athreya of [Madras Inherited](#), discovering elements of heritage architecture that serve as a clairvoyant reminder of times to come. Here’s proof that old is gold.

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1. Thinnai

The thinnai served as a reception of the house. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

Back in the day, *thinnai* was the space where you could catch up with friends and even served as a resting place at noon to escape the sun’s heat.

“In this day and age when we can Dunzo or Swiggy, most of them come with the option of a



The thinnai served as a reception of the house. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

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2. Muttram

You don't need to switch on the lights through the day because of the direct sunlight pouring in. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

Most old and traditional homes have courtyards. All the rooms are positioned around it, so that they are well ventilated.

The courtyard ensures sunlight through the day which is a huge money saver. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

The courtyard allows sun rays to stream in, and during a lockdown like we are experiencing this year, it offers much needed fresh air and sunlight.

Add to it, since we wash all items that we buy for fear of contracting the virus from touching them, the courtyard is a great place to dry out the items.

At the entrance of every room, there is a small drainage hole which makes it easy to drain the water after mopping a room. The flooring is slightly tilted towards the centre of the house so that all the water can flow into the courtyard and it becomes easier for the water to dry out in direct sunlight.

A favourite aspect of the courtyard is the noles on the wooden frame of the central area. VISIT any old home and you will see at least a couple of sparrows that would have made their nests in these spaces.

These are holes made for sparrows to build nests. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

In a few homes, the courtyard is fashioned into a verandah at the entrance of the house that doubles as a sit-out area with friends and family. With all of us working from home, the verandah now serves as a great space to work from.

It also saves you electricity as you have enough natural light until sunset.

A verandah that can be an excellent spot to work out of. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

3. The Madras Terrace

The rafters are made of Burma teak. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

The Madras terrace-roofing is a traditional roof building technique using handmade 'achikal' brick, wood and lime plaster.

The rafters are made of Burma teak and it absorbs the heat that penetrates from the top, keeping the house cool.

The roofing helps keep the house cool. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

All the rooms also have one tile replaced by glass to let in sunlight so that you do not need to switch on the lights during the day.

All the rooms also have one tile replaced by glass tiles to let in a stream of sunlight so that you do not need to switch on the lights during the day. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

4. In-Built Temperature Regulators

Mani in his century old home with red oxide flooring. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

The cool and glazed red-oxide flooring, like the skin of a plum, is a common feature in many houses in south India. The process of oxide flooring consumes a lot of time and requires keen attention. The mix consists of lime plaster or mud or cement, and coloured oxide. This type of flooring is considered to have antiseptic properties and keeps the house cool.

The six-inch walls work as great insulators during summers and even today, you do not need an air conditioner in these homes.

The ceiling is quite high and supported by beams or pillars which allow for a lot of ventilation and helps maintain a low temperature indoors.

Great money saver indeed.

5. Hygiene

In these homes, the bathroom would mostly be right at the entrance or back of the house, for the sake of convenience and hygiene.

So every time, one returns from a funeral or a journey, he can clean himself before entering the house. This practice if possible today would be of great advantage because of the nature of this pandemic.

Many houses also have a tulsi plant and neem tree at home and the members consume it regularly. Now, the Tamil Nadu government is distributing them to help boost immunity but this concoction has been part of the people's diet for centuries.

Many even grow their own vegetables in the yard thus ensuring free supply of chemical-free



A tulsi is mandatory in most homes back in the day. While it is worshipped, eating a few leaves is a daily habit. (Photo Courtesy: Smitha TK/ The Quint)

We could seek a lot of inspiration from our ancestors to stay healthy and safe during these times. And after reading this, if you feel like taking a walk down these old lanes and revisiting history but cannot do so because of the pandemic, check out these [beautiful virtual walks](#).

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