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CONTEMPORARY TREATMENT OF HISTORIC GARDENS- ISSUES AND INSIGHTS



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Fig 1 - Gardens created around Hampi World Heritage Site

INTRODUCTION

The treatment of landscapes, settings and gardens enclosing historic monuments or heritage enclaves as contemporary recreational spaces with little or no effort to convey their historicity has resulted in undermining this significant heritage resource. As conservation professionals awaken to the reality of giving due credit to historic contexts whether site settings, gardens or historic landscapes, there exists a lacunae with regard to the permissible extent of intervention that safeguards the authenticity of the historic landscape while ensuring its viability as a functional space in keeping with current requirements especially of our urban environment.

Citing the case studies of sites such as Hampi World Heritage Site (mid 14th to mid 16th Cen.), Karnataka; Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site (mid 16th Cen.), Delhi; Pinjore Mughal Gardens (mid 17th Cen.), Haryana; Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens (mid 18th Cen.), Bangalore, the discussion in this article focuses on the extent of intervention permissible in historic landscapes employing contemporary vocabulary of design and materials available to Architects and Landscape Architects in the Indian context.

ISSUES IN TREATMENT OF HISTORIC LANDSCAPES

Due to a dearth of trained landscape conservation professionals in our country, most historic contexts and projects are being redesigned/ restored/ conserved by landscape professionals proficient in the design of

contemporary projects. Though these professionals contribute with regards to design and material skills, however, the authenticity of use and historic value of the space are often not completely understood and expressed. For instance at Hampi, a World Heritage Site, the effort to beautify the surroundings of the primary monuments has resulted in the creation of gardens using lawns and colourful shrubbery and in some cases encased in boundary walls around individual monuments or enclaves for ease of protection (Refer Fig. 1).

While many monuments in the West may be adopting such an approach because grass turf is natural to many of these areas, this approach when used in the Indian context creates a frivolous park like setting which neither befits the monument nor is authentic to the historic landscape. This approach is becoming evident in a large number of properties being managed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) such as the Mahabalipuram Shore Temple, also a World Heritage Site, Tamil Nadu, where polished granite planters with exotic palms stand in the foreground trivialising the experience of the temple itself.

Tipu Sultan's Palace in Bangalore (Refer fig 2) and historic temple complexes at Halebid and Belur in Karnataka also

Fig 2 - Tipu Sultan's Palace in Bangalore





Lal Bagh- Botanical Gardens or Public Park?

under the ASI are a few of the numerous examples of this inappropriate methodology.

The changing perception of aesthetics also plays a vital role in the redesign or conservation of historic spaces. For instance, at the Humayun's Tomb precinct, the garden plots in the chahar bagh Mughal layout which would have been used earlier for productive purposes with citrus or mango or other orchards were probably developed as grassed areas for the last century during the British period.

The popular perception of lawns as the 'new' landscapes deeply embedded in the horticulture approach to date may have justified the continuation of the garden as a series of grassed plots alternating with a few plots with fruit trees instead of attempting to revert to what may have been the original intention.

Due to the extent of transformation of gardens, landscapes and settings, it usually proves to be difficult to ascribe the exact

Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site



use and date of every intervention to restore these spaces authentically. The continuing transformation in vegetation, one of the main components of landscapes, offers a serious challenge to restoring or recreating the original experience of a garden or landscape. Due to ease of availability, budget constraints and often absence of appropriate research, hardy hybrid varieties and ornamental species of trees, shrubs and ground covers get precedence over species which may have been historically used. The pressure on open spaces in the present urban context often challenges the need to retain historic landscapes in their original use. For instance, being a major green lung in the heart of Bangalore, the Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens are extensively used as a public park.

The complete lack of perceiving this environment as an ecologically sensitive zone, requests for swimming pools, children's parks, food courts etc. continue to flood the Department of Horticulture that is responsible for the management of these gardens. At the Pinjore Mughal gardens, under the management of the Department of Tourism, Haryana, for instance, one experiences loud music, food kiosks and picnic grounds in place of Mughal garden design. The areas outside these gardens has been leased to an amusement park that further adds to the psychedelic confusion that greets most visitors to a historic site in India today. This new founded notion of pleasure and recreation in treating every available open space as picnic grounds is creating havoc with many historic spaces around the country. This also compromises the opportunity to express an alternative to popular recreation by presenting historic landscapes as a means of reconnecting with our past.

In the following section are discussed some brief pointers towards treatment of historic gardens, using contemporary tools to an extent that the authenticity and significance of the garden or landscape as a whole is not compromised.

UNDERSTANDING SIGNIFICANCE

Before commencing on undertaking any level of repair or restoration works on a historic garden it is fundamental to clearly understand and state the significance of the particular site. While the open space at Humayun's Tomb was meant to be a garden representative of pleasure and productivity and later as a setting to the monument, Pinjore was envisaged as a terraced garden on the lines of the Kashmir gardens. Lal Bagh, though laid out on the lines of a Mughal garden by Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan, became a centre of botanical enterprise in the British period and enjoys an eminent position as a Botanical Garden.

The landscape setting at Hampi, on the other hand, is a highly treasured resource due to its unique natural beauty and cultural significance thereby prompting efforts to recognise this site as a Cultural Landscape in the context of World Heritage.

In all of the cases cited above, and as is the case in architectural conservation as well, the treatment meted out towards repair, restoration or revival of historic spaces may threaten authenticity which made the resource significant in the first instance.



Pinjore Gardens

Therefore, before commencing on such an exercise, it is important to understand the significance of that space or resource and develop an approach that does not compromise that value. One of the main issues confronting landscape designers working on a historic project is the choice of appropriate materials and technology.

While it is obviously preferable to use materials as close to the genuine as is possible, practical concerns or lack of ample evidence of the original layer may make that impossible. In such a case or taking into consideration issues of long term maintenance, cost etc. a decision can be taken to repair or replace with a suitably selected contemporary material as long as it has been used and tested before. The repair work undertaken in the Pinjore gardens adequately illustrates the importance of using well tested materials. In early 2000's, the central water channel of Pinjore was re clad using pattern of light and dark blue ceramic tiles by ripping out the decades old Dhoulpur stone. While the stone had proved to be a durable material that would have probably lasted out a few more decades, the present choice of synthetic tiles is proving to be disastrous after just a few years. These tiles are easily damaged, besides being very difficult

Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens



to clean thus lending a shabby appearance to the whole stepped water channel defying the subtlety of the Mughal period creation. Worse still, the beautifully carved fountain spouts in natural stone, carved stone chadars over which the water cascaded have all been replaced with cheap replicas in concrete which are already showing signs of staining and disrepair. In this context, it becomes evident that unless there is enough justification for change of material, the existing material and technology should be continued for repair or replacement of the primary constituents of the historic garden comprising of water features, pathways, chabutras etc. However, for purposes of interpretation and tourist infrastructure one can experiment and adopt innovative designs or materials as long as they do not compromise the basic fabric of the design or significance of the resource. Therefore, benches, signage, lighting and irrigation fixtures etc. can use state of the art products and latest technology to maximise the efficiency of the garden without in anyway compromising its significance.

Another important aspect that tends to be overlooked when we begin treatment of a historic site as a contemporary open space is the choice and arrangement of planting. In the context of a landscape, this is a rather sensitive issue as it relays the authentic image of a space as it would have been in times gone past. This subject also requires considerable research from historic texts, paintings and garden descriptions from the same period or region. Further, translating the historic references to the botanical names of today and investigating the availability if this is the next step in recreating authentic planting.

Procuring specimens that are not hybridised versions of the Chandnee or Jasmine or Citrus varieties mentioned in historic texts proves to be another challenge. Subsequent to the choice of the material and its procurement, the planting layout requires further research and understanding to inform site decisions of the planting pattern and spacing for productive and ornamental trees, flowering shrubs and ground covers. Interpretation of a historic garden or landscape is one of the primary means of relaying its significance to the visitor and engraving it in the minds of the site managers as well. It is also recommended to tie in the significance of the setting while presenting details of the architecture or ruins so as to not detach one from the other.

Organising maps for heritage trails or guided walks for adults and children, airing documentaries and publishing reading material are often extremely useful in guiding people to engage with the site and its history and not merely treat it as another public park. In conclusion, in order to do justice to the large body of the landscape resource in our historic environment we need to develop an appropriate mechanism of using contemporary advancement and historic understanding to guide our public in rediscovering this genre of their historic past.