



text & photographs: courtesy, the architect

Drawing on the historic to inform contemporary landscape aesthetics

Nupur Prothi Khanna, Founder and Director, Beyond Built Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi India



Why would a World Heritage Site such as Mahabalipuram, sitting at the cusp of the sea and dense habitation offer a stark contrast to both, as expressed in its expanse of lawn and stone planters?



bara gumbad mosque - lodi garden.

Drawing on my professional experience of engaging with the contemporary as well as historic landscape realm, I have often wondered that the richness of our past no more informs the present, rather is increasingly influenced by it. In this article I address the concern that the current trend of manicured landscapes, primarily lawns and ornamental planting, has become the predominant aesthetic of the time. The fact that this is now an acceptable approach towards treatment of our historic sites is a matter of further concern. This article proposes that heritage sites allow a certain engagement with past research which

logically should contribute to our contemporary environment. We commonly attribute our penchant for lawns/topiary and a particular manicured aesthetic to our erstwhile colonial past. However, it is of interest that this aesthetic has lasted as long as it has. It is important to acknowledge that this approach is seen most often as the only alternative to leaving sites unmaintained.

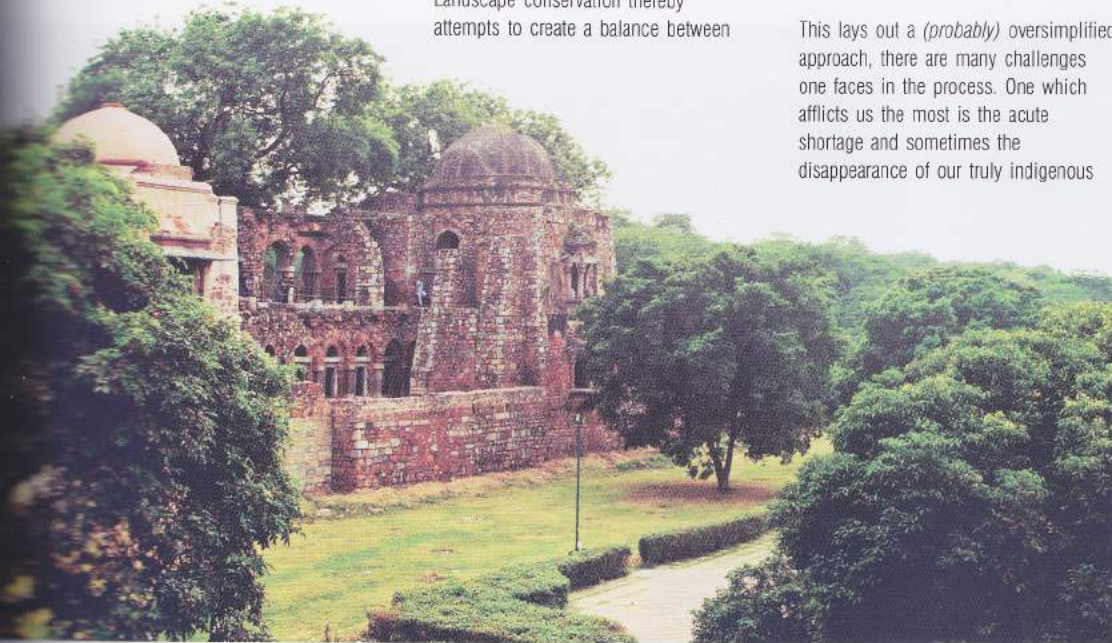
Therefore, green lawns, ornamental planting and reasonably maintained gardens are hailed as a commendable effort, today, as many historic sites discard their disorganised and untidy past. While applauding the efforts of agencies and individuals in bringing our

heritage experience to somewhat acceptable standards when compared with our Western counterparts, we unknowingly seal the acceptance of the general public towards this 'clean and green' look. Why else would a World Heritage Site such as Mahabalipuram, sitting at the cusp of the sea and dense habitation offer a stark contrast to both, as expressed in its expanse of lawn and stone planters?

How then do we bridge the gap between popular appeal and a cultural environment which is historically contextual and adaptable enough to responsibly inform the future?
To realistically plan for the future of our

past', we need to evolve further in our thinking and treatment of these precincts. Further, the uniqueness and significance of these sites offers a golden opportunity for them to be trend setters for our environment in general.

Delving deeper, we find that when we conduct research on historic landscapes (used interchangeably here with gardens), much of what we find creates a visual treasure-trove of aesthetics and experiences which our contemporary environments have lost. In their place has appeared an aesthetic, which has a 'global' appeal taking away from the distinctiveness and richness of our context. The opportunity of creating a unique identity through our environment is thus being compromised time and time again. Looking around us to the mechanical, global, monotonous environment that has begun to engulf us, **what can we take away from this practice towards the creation of distinctive, contextual and thereby sustainable landscapes for the future? What role**



hazrat nizam complex.

then, can landscape conservation play in the process of creating a relevant environment for the future?

This offers, in my view, a leap of faith in showcasing the distinctiveness and adaptability of historic research in (re)creating an aesthetic for the future. To trail our heritage projects as beacons for the future, tests their resilience and also helps in ensuring their longevity. This also offers an opportunity to showcase alternate aesthetics which may gain a wider acceptance amongst the genre of contemporary landscape works.

A typical exercise in historic garden restoration requires, amongst other

things, research related to indigenous species, historically used varieties and gardening practices. This effort, using sources such as paintings, poetry, prose, court records, contributes to the simulation of historic environments of the past. Garden restoration exercises, in general, face the challenge of conjecture, in attempting to recreate planting or environments in their 'original or erstwhile' formats. Historic research coupled with the availability of planting material, gardening practices as well as the client brief for the project, all give rise to a technical approach which balances functional priorities with the historic or other significance of the historic site. Therefore, any exercise in the planting of a historic site must be informed as much from the past as it is from the present.

Historic projects offer an opportunity to develop the most financially viable options as funds allocated to garden restoration projects are often limited. Landscape conservation thereby attempts to create a balance between

the revitalisation of the past and the practicalities of the present and future.

How are these recreated historic landscapes then relevant for our contemporary portfolio of works?

In this way, rather than emulating a global aesthetic, we obtain an alternative approach to landscape design in our present. Its applicability to the present and future also tests the flexibility of our approach - thus bringing the historic environment to the forefront of setting in place design aesthetics, instead of it being treated or perceived as fossilised remains of our past. This in turn symbiotically benefits both the historic precincts and

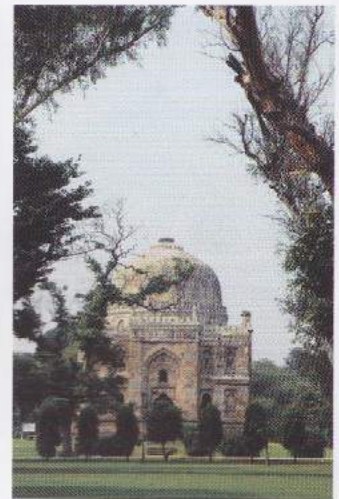


saidarjung garden tomb complex.

contemporary inserts in the urban environment. This also, indirectly, contributes to evolving a (currently lost) sense of identity or sense of place, the lack of which so plagues our urban realm.

This lays out a (probably) oversimplified approach, there are many challenges one faces in the process. One which afflicts us the most is the acute shortage and sometimes the disappearance of our truly indigenous

plant palette. The nurseries today are flooded with species which are hybridised versions of what existed making the exercise of maintaining



loahi garden - sheesh gumbad.

authenticity of our historic environments almost impossible.

Funding available for contemporary projects can work in favour of setting up enterprises/nurseries/ landscape practices/ contracting outfits which invest in the (re)creation of this 'new/old' aesthetic. While this would benefit the historic garden restoration project it will also contribute to enriching our contemporary environment.

In conclusion, we find that **compartmentalising** our environment into the historic and contemporary contributes, in some measure, to a lack of conversation between the two. The current trend is for 'monotonous' non-contextual environments, as they are appearing today, to inform much of the treatment of our historic precincts. I propose, what may be viewed, as a reversal of this trend, working with our heritage in evolving a contextual design aesthetic that can then be introduced, tested and adopted in the design of our contemporary environment. ▲

Peer reviewed by:

Nikhil Dhar (Landscape Architect)

Prashanta Bhatt (Landscape Architect)

Malvika Bajaj Saini (Conservation Architect)

Photo credits:

Sowmya Lakhamraju (Architect)

Nupur Prothi Khanna, is Founder and Director of the firm Beyond Built Pvt. Ltd., Delhi. The team were local landscape consultants on the DIAL Terminal 3 project, Landscape consultants to L&T for ELANTE MUD, Chandigarh, Historic landscape consultants to CRCI on Pinjore Gardens. Nupur was on the team at Shaheer Associates working on the AKTC project on the landscape redevelopment of Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site. She is a Physical Planner, Landscape Architect and Heritage professional contributing as visiting faculty at the departments of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at SPA, New Delhi. She is currently the Honorary Secretary of ISOLA (Indian Society of Landscape Architects, Delhi Chapter; Member, ICOMOS India Cultural Landscape Scientific Committee; Member, International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISoCaRP).

Architecture

ARCHITECTURE | INTERIORS | LANDSCAPE

UPDATE AU



Romanticizing the Ruins

Humayun's Tomb
Hazrat Nizamuddin, New Delhi, India