

Holistic urban heritage management of an historic temple town

Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Purpose – Urban heritage management is motivated by the alarming rise in destruction of historic buildings; the implementation of pointless urbanization plans and uncontrolled commercial development threatening to overwhelm our historic built heritage. Hence, there is an immediate need for urban heritage planning in historic towns, especially in India where urban growth is rampant. The purpose of this paper is to examine how development in the historic temple town of Kumbakonam can be managed by using a holistic approach that preserves the town's historic flavor, sacred traditions and built heritage.

Design/methodology/approach – The historic center of Kumbakonam has been surveyed and is the focus of this study. Utilizing a case study methodology, the authors made multiple field visits to document the special heritage character of the town, conducted interviews with people living in the study area and evaluated the existing policies and guidelines for development of Tamil Nadu in view of the holistic approach.

Findings – The study reinforced the belief that the historic temple town of Kumbakonam has significant urban heritage worthy of preservation. However, due to chaotic and ill-planned urban development, changing land use, intrusion of contemporary architectural styles, commercialization and the lack of strong policy guidelines for holistic management, the special heritage character of the town is threatened with continued destruction.

Practical implications – This research on Kumbakonam can help urban planners to develop viable heritage management programs for other historic temple towns of Tamil Nadu. The authors describe and evaluate some guidelines for retaining the social and cultural flavor as well as the built heritage of towns like Kumbakonam by taking a holistic approach.

Originality/value – Up to now, there has been no attempt to come up with comprehensive management guidelines for integrating the unique urban heritage characteristics of the historic temple towns of Tamil Nadu in plans for urbanization.

Keywords Heritage management, Temple town, Urbanization, Holistic, Preservation

Paper type Research paper

Background

Challenges for urbanization of historic towns

Historic towns all over the world have a rich urban heritage with singular town elements like unique buildings, precincts, public spaces, squares and streetscapes (Feilden and Jokilehto, 1998). A town's physical and cultural attributes inevitably change and that is not a bad thing, but uncontrolled development often destroys too much in its focus on progress. The 2009 report of the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) emphasized the dangers of haphazard urbanization that is irrevocably transforming historic urban environments throughout the world. Poor planning for urban development, commercial pressures and globalization are major factors causing loss of urban heritage, but physical continuity and place identity are also threatened by intrinsic factors such as pollution, neglect, acculturation and lack of knowledge, and the intrusion of contemporary building models



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into the townscape (Cheng *et al.*, 2017). Increased land values in historic town centers can motivate speculators to build modern high-rise structures leading to irreversible heritage loss. Such changes can destroy the traditional fabric of the town—those distinctive urban elements that created its identity and cultural diversity.

Over the decades of the twentieth century, and now into the twenty-first, historic cities in developing countries have continually faced the major challenge of how to integrate development and modernization with conservation of their traditional character and individual flavor (Macdonald, 2011). Governments have tried to prevent the loss of valuable old buildings along with a town's architectural heritage by enacting conservation laws, but these have frequently been circumvented by developers interested primarily in profit. This might be due to weak policies and unrealistic guidelines; but most of the developing countries adopted the same modes of planning used by western countries, in which historical preservation often took second place to unbridled urbanization and the creation of an amorphous, characterless environment (Shah, 2016). There is also the issue of private ownership that can be an impediment to maintaining the sociocultural heritage of urban areas. Orbasli (2002) argued that local stakeholders must support the plans for urban conservation and heritage management in order for them to succeed.

Historic towns and urban heritage conservation

The concept of urban conservation as a major goal in city planning has really only emerged since the nineteenth century. Renowned urban planners from all around the world have created possible solutions for historic cities (Rodwell, 2008). The GCI report detailed the chronological evolution of urban conservation from the viewpoints of nineteenth century thinkers and planners up to the present (Siravo, 2011). Starting with Victor Hugo and his influential novel, *Les Misérables*, and the redesign of Paris by Haussmann, there were innumerable ideas and concepts proposed for urban modernization while still preserving historic city areas. John Ruskin, Camilo Sitte, Patrick Geddes, Gustavo Givannoni, Giovanni Astengo, Donald Appleyard, Gordon Cullen, Jane Jacobs, Saverio Muratori and Leonardo Benevolo were some of the notable thinkers who addressed the challenge of modernizing historic towns without destroying their traditional beauty and individuality (Veldpaus *et al.*, 2013). Van Oers and Roders (2012) also contend for promoting methods for technical tools which become the component of a robust toolkit for effective urban heritage management.

Since the 1960s, most heritage-related international cultural policy documents recommended a holistic approach toward urban planning. The World Heritage Convention mandated that nations must adopt realistic, comprehensive plans for modernization of historic towns to lessen the damage and destruction brought on by changing social and economic conditions:

General policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programs (UNESCO, 1972).

In 1976, UNESCO endorsed the Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas; and in 1987, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) adopted the Washington Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas:

Every historic area and their surroundings should be considered as a coherent whole [...] whose balance [...] depends on the fusion of various parts [...] including human activities as much as the buildings, spatial organization and the surroundings. All valid elements [...] have a significance in relation to the whole [...] bringing the question of integrity in addition to that of authenticity (UNESCO, 2011).

In 2011, ICOMOS endorsed UNESCO's recommendations for conserving historic urban landscapes (HULs) as social, cultural and economic assets and outlined sustainable strategies for urban heritage management. The most consequential aspect of HUL is to bring out various urban scales and typologies including different networks of stakeholders. Implementing the HUL Approach enhances and revamps the existing management settings of urban development at any stage, even though it necessitates immersion of various tools in both the national and international agendas (Erkan, 2018).

Need for urban heritage management

India is an ancient country with a rich and diverse culture and unique heritage stretching over thousands of years. Despite its long history of preserving historical traditions, the trend today seems to have shifted toward rapid transformation fueled by unchecked urbanization and unrestrained development. The efforts of urban conservationists seem weak and limited in the face of the juggernaut of progress and profit (Thakur, 2011; PEARL, 2015). Nalini Thakur (2011) eloquently depicted the situation of Indian heritage conservation in which monuments and some historical heritage buildings are secured under the official monument preservation act, whilst the remaining non-monumental structures, the accessories that comprise the urban fabric of the historic towns and the traditional vernacular architecture are neglected. She argued that true heritage management requires that urban planners develop a new system of assigning values to the traditional heritage characteristics of a place. Current master plans for city development fail to consider the urban heritage character while concentrating on only a few commercial models. Only a few cities like Delhi, Ahmedabad, Jaipur and Hyderabad have developed far-reaching heritage management plans as part of their master plans to address the preservation of historic centers. Apart from these few cities, most historic towns are rapidly losing the battle against unbridled urbanization to preserve their unique character, colorful history and sacred traditions.

Jain (2008) exposes evidently the fact from the book *Heritage and Environment*, written by Shyam Chainani that indeed there is a lack of consistent and effective approach at the legal protection and the conservation of heritage in India. The central and state laws not covered the most places of historical or artistic interest. The legislations enacted in States are found inappropriate or inadequate and do not afford sufficient protection to areas of natural beauty or areas of architectural or historical interest. He also highlighted that this is due to conflict of development plans along with its objective of heritage conservation; inadequate of capacity and professionalism on the subject of heritage conservation; instead of whole cities/towns and its built-heritage environment, focused on the particular monuments alone.

In 2015, India's Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs adopted a scheme for the revitalization of the infrastructure of 12 selected heritage cities called the National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY). However, there were some serious negative consequences. The introduction of new, so-called amenities, although based on accepted global practice, resulted in loss of physical continuity with the original community and its traditions. City planners must take the time to achieve a deep understanding of the urban heritage of a town in order to retain its unique sociocultural environment. In light of these grave problems, there is a critical need for a new system of holistic urban heritage management. Developers must work with the people who live in the town to understand their values, to define the characteristic elements of the town, delineate important areas for conservation, and take precautions to retain the panoply of social and material features that make the town a living entity in the minds of its people. This would help the planners, architects and authorities to frame heritage-based guidelines to prevent the uncontrolled, chaotic "modernization" taking place in historic cities all over India.

South India is renowned worldwide for the architectural splendor of its temples and the elaborate sculpture that adorns them, but their symbolism, still ritually enacted today, is less well understood outside India. Complex interrelationships of art, architecture and ritual are expressed in the evolution, through the past thousand years, of the topography of one of the most important of the temple cities (Nanda, 1999).

Kumbakonam is an ancient South Indian temple town located in the Kaveri River basin (Figure 1), the core of Tamil civilization (Conversion of City, 2007). It was founded probably in the early centuries of the Christian era, and epitomizes the traditions of urban Tamil

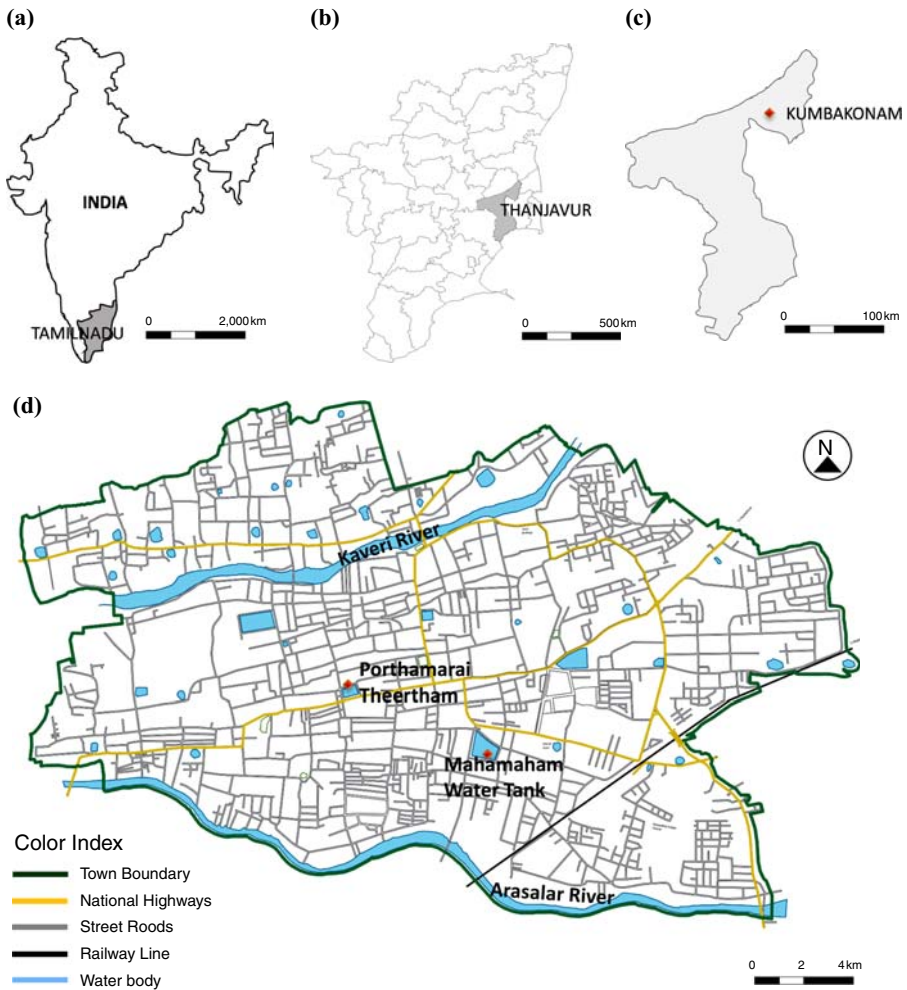


Figure 1.
Location map
of Kumbakonam

Notes: (a) India map showing the location of Tamilnadu state; (b) Tamilnadu map showing the location of Thanjavur district; (c) Thanjavur map showing the location of Kumbakonam; (d) Kumbakonam municipal boundary map

culture through its cosmological mythology, its temples and tanks, palaces and institutions both scholarly and philanthropic (Dallapiccola *et al.*, 1996). There are hundreds of temples that grew up around the urban settlement, but the major temple complexes of the town were built beside the two sacred water tanks and act as the settlement's core. During the seventh to thirteenth centuries, the Cholas emperors developed the town along with Pazhayarai (group of villages nearby Kumbakonam), was the royal center and residential capital, with its palaces, and were the scenes of major political and diplomatic events throughout the Chola period. The town acted as a major urban complex and religious center; also consist of significant temple complexes, brahmana settlements, royal palaces, and military campsites (Champakalakshmi, 1978). The Mahamaham tank is strongly connected with the cosmological myths of the town's evolution under various legendary rulers and their dynasties. The evolution of the town and its legends, its architecture and urban fabric are described in Figure 2.

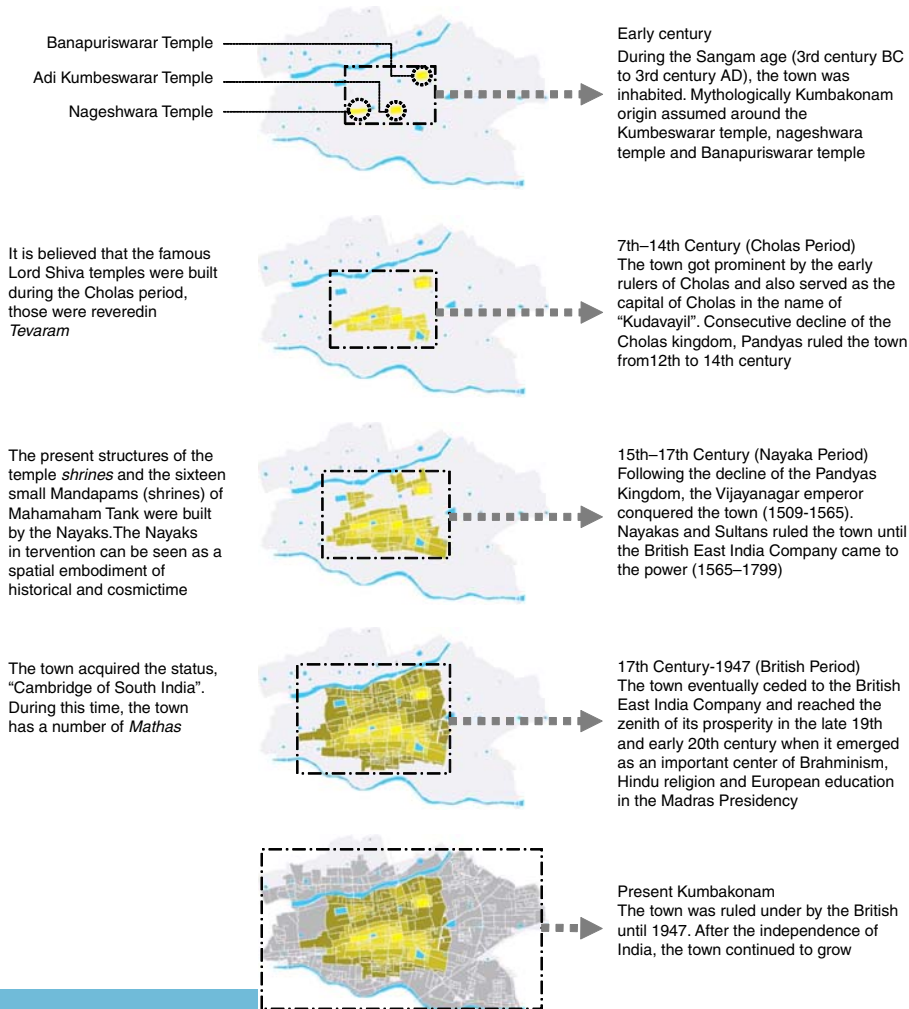


Figure 2.
 Maps of Kumbakonam with its history

Most temple towns in Tamil Nadu are “single centred” i.e., the origin of the settlement evolved around a single focus, which is invariably a temple or palace. Kumbakonam is unique in being one of the very few multicore temple towns. The towns urban fabric and tradition architecture is one of the best surviving Kumbakonam has been the birth place for several religious and philanthropic institutions, it being a renowned sacred as well as a literary center. “Matams” (religious establishments), “Chattrams” (charitable institutions for pilgrims) and “Mandapams” (civic and cultural centers) are therefore of great importance. As the urban area of Kumbakonam is encompass between the two rivers “Kaveri” and “Arasalaru” there are ghats or “Padithurai” as they are called all along the banks.

Urban heritage characters

The particular character of Kumbakonam cannot be addressed from any single point of view, but rather from the reciprocities and relationships between ritual and civic life and their embodiment in the city’s architecture. The urban setting of Kumbakonam stands in a unique position among the other temple towns of Tamil Nadu (Kiruthiga and Thirumaran, 2017; Kiruthiga and Thirumaran, 2019). According to the Charter of Historic towns, “qualities to be preserved include the historic character of the town or urban area and all those material and spiritual elements that express this character” (ICOMOS, 1987). The Charter summarized the elements which express the town character. From this, urban heritage character of the town has been framed with relevance to the historic temple town, illustrated in the Table I.

The manner in which each characteristic feature of the temple town was integrated into the overall urban heritage is detailed in the following.

Ritual topography: temples and sacred water tanks. Kumbakonam was renowned for its ritual topography from the medieval period (Figure 3). The temple complexes and the sacred water tanks of Mahamaham and Porthamarai Theertham dominated the architecture and culture throughout the town’s history (Champakalakshmi, 1978; Champakalakshmi, 1999). The main temple complexes of Adhi Kumbeshwara, Kasi Vishvanatha and Banupureshwara together with the sacred water tanks constituted the ritual configuration of the early imperial Chola kings (Nanda, 1999). The long-standing religious customs and elaborate festivals gave life to the urban heritage. During the famous Mahamaham festival of Kumbakonam town that takes place every 12 years, lakhs of pilgrims come and take the holy bath in the sacred water (Plate 1). There are 16 “Mandapam” around the tank, built along with the steps during seventeenth century. These Mandapams have sculptures in them which denote the 16 types of charity that should be performed. This tank receives water from nine springs (Priya, 1998).

Riversides along with Ghats (Padithurai). Most historic settlements were started in river valleys, and Kumbakonam is no exception. The town is bordered by the Kaveri river to the

S. No.	Elements that express the historic town character	Relevance to the historic temple town of Kumbakonam
1	Urban patterns as defined by lots and streets	Ritual topography; and streetscapes
2	Relationship between buildings and green and open spaces	Temple and sacred water tank precincts
3	The formal appearance of buildings	Community settlements
4	Relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting	Riverside along with Ghats
5	The various functions that the town or urban area acquired over time	Processional routes of temple Chariots; skyline is accentuated by the temple shrines

Table I.
Historic town character and its elements

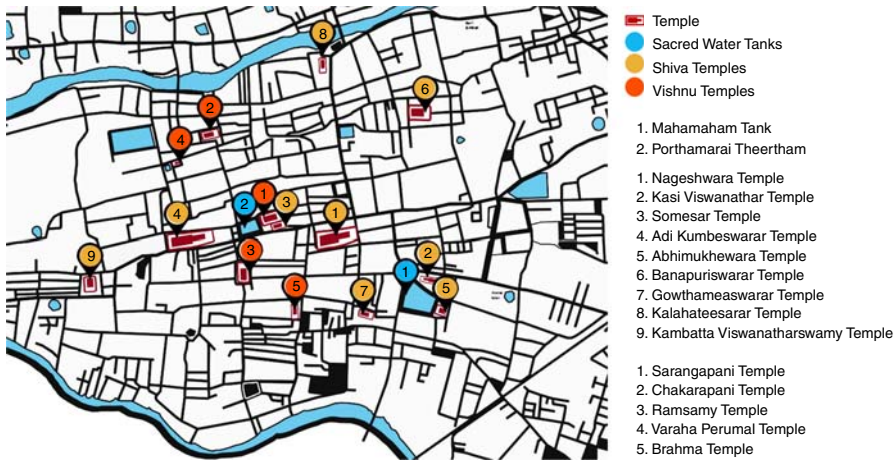


Figure 3. Ritual topography of Kumbakonam showing the main temple shrines and sacred water tanks



Notes: (Left) Pilgrims attend the bathing ritual during the Mahamaham festival at Kumbakonam, February 25, 1956; (Right) Devotees at the Mahamaham tank during the Mahamaham festival on February 22, 2016

Sources: Getty images, Deccan Chronicle

Plate 1. Mahamaham festival at Kumbakonam

North and the Arasalar river to the south, and there are water channels connecting the two rivers. Kumbakonam has bathing Ghats (Padithurai) all along the town from Melakottaiyur to the government hospital with steps leading down to the river (Plate 2). There are three Padithurai in the town – the Bhagavath Padithurai, Dabir Padithurai and Chakkara Padithurai. The ghats which have religious significance have developed into a complex with temples as in Bhagavath Padithurai or have “Mandapams” built as in Chakkara Padithurai. The Bhagavath Padithurai is architecturally interesting with a central “Mandapams,” two shrines and colonnaded hall around with vaulted roof which was built after the eighteenth century. The Chakkara Padithurai is used for temple rituals when the deity is brought there for Pooja and immersion. The Padithurai is also used for funeral rites also. The Pushkaram ritual of welcoming the Kaveri river is celebrated during the month of September every 12 years (Maha Pushkaram happens once in 144 years) in which farmers and devotees offer flowers, turmeric and milk to the Kaveri river and worship for a good livelihood. For the inhabitants, the Kaveri river is the goddess, and architecturally the Padithurais provide the link between the urban land and the water to the people.



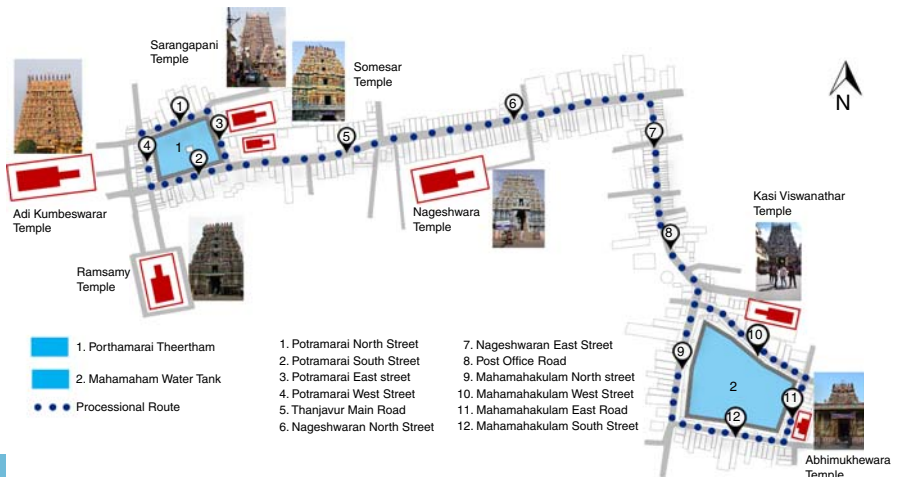
Plate 2.
Kaveri River during
Maha Pushkaram

Notes: (Left) Padithurai across the Kaveri River; (Right) People gladly receiving the Kaveri water during Maha Pushkaram (*The Hindu*, 2017) on September 17, 2017

Source: *The Hindu*

Processional routes of temple chariots. The processional route of Kumbakonam comprises the primary streets which give access to the main temples and the sacred water tanks (Figure 4). During festival time, the chariots carrying the God and Goddess idols of the temple move along the processional route around the town. The processional route through the densely populated block in the center of the town is wider than the other road networks (Plate 3).

Temple and sacred water tank precincts. The temple and water tank precincts play a vital role in historic temple towns. The axial street to the temple shrine is mostly commercial (bazaar) where the trade of the town is conducted. The rest of the precincts are comprised of residential zones. As the settlement evolved around the temple complexes, the residential heritage buildings in the temple precincts adopted diverse styles of architecture. Beside the Temple precincts, the Mahamaham precincts include residential settlements while the Porthamarai Theertham precinct consists of commercial businesses. These precincts also include Mandapams (shelters with stone colonnades and roof, Plate 4), Matha (monasteries) and Chatrams (places to offer food, perform weddings, functions, etc.).



Streetscapes. Kumbakonam's streetscapes exhibit the vernacular architecture of the region, in which the buildings are arranged in a pattern of rows. The building facades feature architectural elements such as arched windows, pilasters, cornices, ornamental parapets, lean-to roofs, pot-tiled roofing, entrance gateways and decorated entrance doors that define the local character of the buildings. The combination of the attractive building facades, the open spaces in front of the temples and the street nodes provide harmonious perspective views. The commercial bazaar streets filled with shops containing a wealth of copper, bronze, and brass vessels and stores selling silk sarees, the traditional wear of Tamilnadu. Kumbakonam is famous for its bronze sculptures, brass utensils and silk weaving industry.

The skyline is accentuated by the temple shrines (gopurams). The visual appeal of the temple town is strengthened by views of the gopurams, which form the skyline of the town configured according to standards devised in the medieval period. The heights of temple shrines in Kumbakonam range from 100 to 150 ft and buildings in the temple precincts are proportioned such that they are one fourth of the temple shrine height. The temple shrines are the predominant built structures in the skyline of the town. The residential and government institutional buildings are of G, G+1 and rarely G+2 types, these combinations of built forms creating a rhythmic pattern in the skyline.



Notes: (Left) Chariot procession near the Mahamaham water tank; (Right) Chariot procession near the Adhi Kumbeswarar Temple

Plate 3.
Temple chariot
procession during the
Mahamaham festival



Plate 4.
Mandapam in the
Mahamaham
west street

Community settlements. As a renowned religious center from the earliest centuries, Kumbakonam has two major Hindu traditions called Shaivism (worship of Lord Shiva) and Vaishnavism (worship of Lord Vishnu). Kumbakonam has eight Lord Shiva temples and 12 Lord Vishnu temples. Two of the Lord Shiva temples (Nageshwara temple and Kasi Vishvanatha temple), representing the Shaivism settlement, and one Lord Vishnu temple (Sarangapani temple) representing the Vaishnavism settlement, date back to the ninth century BCE. Later, the communities were based more on traditions and occupations. The Brahmin community was situated in the Agraharams (residential areas) near the temples. The community of Chettiyars (merchants, traders, farmers and land owners) was settled nearer to the market. The Pathers (goldsmiths, blacksmiths) settled close to the Sarangapani temple and the weaving community was located near the Nageshwara temple.

Methodology

Surveys of the inhabitants

The inhabitants of a historic town are the people most responsible for maintaining the sociocultural values and the architectural unity that create the special flavor of a cityscape. As a key part of our study, we used targeted interviews and survey questions to gather qualitative data from a variety of people living or working in the historic center of Kumbakonam. The interviewees included temple priests, residents who had lived at least four decades in the historic center, visitors to the town and academic experts. The interviewers asked subjects to explain their views toward heritage management and how they would like to see the challenges of retaining their town's heritage character addressed by planners and government officials. A total of 35 people were interviewed and the respondents took 30 to 45 min to give their opinions and discuss the issues. These private, personal meetings were exceptionally revealing and useful for understanding the dynamics of the challenges facing Kumbakonam.

Findings

Challenges to retaining the heritage characteristics of Kumbakonam

Like many temple towns in India, Kumbakonam is undergoing a rapid, ill-planned transformation in which urbanization, urban development and commercial pressure play the dominant roles. Preservation of historical traditions and adherence to religious and cultural practices are either ignored or very far down the list of priorities. If an urban heritage management plan is not initiated soon, Kumbakonam will fall victim to the axe of progress as the cultural and material beauty of the town and its people fades away and disappears forever.

Demographic changes are another indicator of the threat to the urban fabric of Kumbakonam. The daily "floating" population of the town is 15,000 according to a recent municipal survey. During festival periods the town's large number of temples within its urban center, leads to huge increases in the numbers of daily visitors and pilgrims threatening to overwhelm the town's service providers. Sometimes even basic amenities cannot be provided, and the inadequacy of the existing infrastructure to manage the influx of people creates an unhealthy and dirty urban environment. Traffic congestion along the processional routes further adds to the problem:

Rural people seeks good education, job and fond of town life, shifted their family into towns. The demand of housing can be seen everywhere. They can accommodate within the small portion which leads to the partitions in the houses and make it for the rental business of the house owners (Interviewee 2017).

In spite of the crowding, traffic and dirt, business around the temple precincts in the urban center is booming. This lucrative commercial area attracts foreign entrepreneurs as well as

local merchants all targeting the temple visitors and pilgrims. Local traditional ways of trade are superseded by profit-driven global practices that drive up real estate values. Overseas developers with huge budgets construct tall buildings using contemporary standards with glaring advertising signs, modern glass panels, aluminum cladding for facades, clashing colors, etc., which obliterate the traditional urban character that residents enjoyed for generations – until now:

We are doing this silk saree business for more than 7-8 decades. Since the last 10 years, we renovated the shop for two times. The showcases, glass panels were added later. It's a tough task to compete with outside traders. To attract the customer, we are in need to do this. Land speculations become very common, people are waiting for like when we fall and waiting for take over (Interviewee 2017).

This property is belonged for my family. Earlier, we were doing the brass utensil business in front of our house. As the business was not going well, I destructed the whole building and constructed commercial complexes. Now, here, they are totally five shops, two shops in ground floor, two in first floor and last one in second floors. Due to the land demand, the rental value is high (Interviewee 2017).

The residential sector is not immune to the effects of urbanization. In a growing quest for contemporary styles, the beautiful heritage buildings that have lasted for centuries are callously demolished to be replaced by new construction totally out of character with the historical context of the cityscape. The shared social life of joint family traditions has continually declined while western-style nuclear family units have emerged in their place. Traditional architectural elements are rarely seen in the new buildings, while increased building heights are rapidly changing the skyline and the centuries-old rhythmic patterns have vanished except from memory; streetscapes are struggling to retain their character and losing the battle. In the new modern vision, owners of the heritage buildings are abandoning them or allowing them to fall into dilapidation. The Chatrams and Mathas are gone; very few only existing:

The town changed rapidly since the last three decades. Most of our cultures are not followed regularly. For the sake of job, education, people moved out of the town. When they come back they don't have any attachments towards their tangible and intangible values. They wanted to build the houses as their desires (Interviewee 2017).

Modern amenities seek space for them. For instance, we don't have four wheel vehicles in our houses. While buying the Car, we can't park it outside; the modifications are started like that. Instead of doing the maintenance or renovation, the owners rented the houses and settled in the other places. The rental value depends the condition of the house, but the renovation costs high (Interviewee 2017).

The ownership aroused when the repair work initiated in the old buildings. The disputes among the owners remained with the affected buildings and retained with ruins (Interviewee 2017).

Kumbakonam does not have an urban heritage conservation plan. There are few guidelines related to the built heritage enacted in municipal regulations and the existing laws are often ignored. The inhabitants are not aware of the threat to the heritage character of their town posed by the adoption of global practices of city planning until it is too late. Some of the cases highlighted in newspaper articles are:

The Porthamarai Theertham is in utter neglect. The Mahamaham tank is slightly better than the Porthamarai Theertham and the Chakkara Padithurai. While the Porthamarai Theertham is filthy, the bathing Ghats on the banks of Kaveri River is full of clothes left behind by the devotees [sic.], leaving hardly any space to reach the small stream of water flowing in the middle Ms Vellaiyammal, Visitor (Srinivasan, 2016).

Though the temple town of Kumbakonam is blessed with the Cauvery, the glory of the river seems to be slowly dwindling with it being turned into a cesspool during summer and dumping yard for plastics and other wastes. The Ghats remain dilapidated and need renovation.

Moreover, some places where water remains stagnated have become a breeding ground for mosquitos, said V. Giri, a resident of Kumbakonam.

Only during Mahamaham festival held once in 12 years, some renovation works are carried out in the river, feel a section of residents (Renganathan, 2016).

Today, agrapharams are fast disappearing to make way for bigger, swankier apartments and modern houses. With the younger generation migrating to cities or other countries across the world in search of jobs, agrapharams now stand alone with only memories of a way of life. Urbanization has made the performance of elaborate rituals shorter, and there is a marked change in modern lifestyle that can no longer be adapted to the agrapharam and its community. Privacy is valued a lot more today, which means common walls are a source of discomfort and common wells are no longer in use with every household having a plumbing system (*The Hindu*, 2017).

Like most towns in Tamil Nadu, Kumbakonam struggles to provide funds for the growing needs of urban services. The town revenues are barely sufficient for basic needs, much less to address the issues related to urban heritage planning.

Discussion

From the earliest time of the Christian era, the temple town of Kumbakonam has had a remarkable history. Though the temple town still exists as a prominent religious center with an eventful history, the dual attacks of uncontrolled modernization and ill-planned urban development in Kumbakonam are rapidly annihilating its urban heritage. Commercial pressure is growing exponentially. Local businesses struggle to survive and keep modifying their shops as external traders bring in foreign goods and foreign shop practices (Plate 5). The residents are just as much affected. Motivated by persuasive marketing and thirsting for access to global trends, the younger inhabitants keep changing their social life and its customs. This is reflected in changes in the built environment which ultimately will cause the town to lose its identity. In the midst of all this negative evidence, however, we still find glimmers of hope. Some residents who still value the past traditions and architectural beauty of Kumbakonam is sticking with their orthodox family businesses:

This is my ancestors business, grandfather's father, grandfather, my father, doing this bronze sculptures, since the 17th century. Even ours the small shop, we have our own reputation over the period of times. Though the demand for bronze sculptures, it's difficult to find the labors, they demand his labor charge. Due to this, we need to raise the price, and then it is afforded for high ended people. The profit is not so high, but we feel proud in this family business (Interviewee 2017).

Plate 5.
Commercial buildings
in the processional
route with
contemporary
façade elements



Kumbakonam is one of the best examples of how a thriving society in a temple town can be integrated with an ancient built heritage. Without the residents' or the stakeholders' involvement in heritage planning, the efforts to retain the urban fabric would be wasted because the historic urban environment is not the product of traditional built forms alone, but also of the lives and values of the people who lived there and who live there today. People living in a town need the basic amenities and providing them usually takes priority over preserving the urban heritage; but this should not have to be the deciding factor. Unfortunately historic preservation in Tamilnadu state is a low priority for non-governmental organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, INTACH, DRONAH and IHCN in spite of its ancient religious and social lineage. Therefore, it is up to local city planners, architects and representatives of the people to come together and create a holistic urban development plan that recognizes the true value of the urban heritage.

State agencies and municipal governments need to work together to develop guidelines for urban conservation to help planners carry out development and modernization projects in historic areas without negatively affecting the traditional character of the town or the well-being of its inhabitants. Each town or urban space has its own history where culture and customs evolved together. Some towns are listed as historically significant in the national protection act, but in most cases it is up to the municipal government and planning groups to study the characteristic elements of the town, its historical significance and heritage values and incorporate them into a positive framework for rational urbanization:

Kumbakonam should have the integrated heritage management in the historic urban environment. The stakeholders' like planners, practitioners, promoters, politicians, and residents must value their heritage significance of the place and should take efforts to preserve. Instead of looking into the government actions, we, ourselves, initiate the discipline of protecting our own urban heritage values (Interviewee 2017).

Our conversations with the people of Kumbakonam clearly show the challenges and difficulties of urban planning with a view to retaining the living heritage of the temple town and its built environment.

Urban heritage management

Our study of Kumbakonam and its urban heritage, and especially the interviews with its long-time residents, provides unequivocal evidence that the town is in need of a holistic urban heritage management plan. The town's historic center has undergone several transitions and has lost much of its original flavor and charm. Poorly planned developments, increasing commercial competition, real estate marketing and demographic changes in addition to adoption of global trends in contemporary building styles and materials threaten the heritage settings of the historic center of Kumbakonam. Immediate action is required to protect the built heritage. The holistic heritage management plan needs to be detailed and specific with mandatory bench-marks that must be met on a specified timetable. As a start to implementing these changes at Kumbakonam, our study suggests some measures which government enterprises and community participants should include in a local development plan (LDP).

Local development plan (LDP) for the heritage zone

The preservation and renewal of the historic center of the temple town of Kumbakonam is the whole essence of its urban heritage of architectural, cultural and social values. The processional route which encompasses the sacred water tanks and main temples has been delineated and defined as a heritage zone. Specific measures must be taken in order to preserve this critical part of the town's heritage as follows:

- preparation of base map and land use map for the heritage zone;

- documentation of the existing conditions of townscapes of the heritage zone, including informative data for administrative and public perusal;
- studies on the architectural character of old buildings;
- identification of the defining elements of the character of the heritage zone;
- restricting contemporary styles of construction in the heritage zone;
- managing commercial activities and curtailing outside retailers in the heritage zone;
- establishing architectural styles and construction standards for commercial buildings;
- restricting building heights to a maximum of 7 m at a distance of 100 m from the main temples, 10 m at a distance of 100–200 m from the main temples, and 14 m at a distance of 200–400 m from the main temples;
- regulating traffic and restricting heavy vehicles in the heritage zone; and
- maintaining the authenticity and visual integrity of Kumbakonam's heritage characteristics.

Government enterprises and community participation

The city government must encourage community participation in the heritage management plan, and community and government leaders must work together to revive and preserve the urban heritage of Kumbakonam. Tourism plays a key role in the town's economy and integrating the social and cultural life of the community with the tourism factor could help to maintain the heritage integrity of the town.

Cultural aspects. The town's cultural activities are the one element that all stakeholders – local community, municipal authorities, visitors, decision-makers and others – agree is most important. As long as the built heritage is integrated with Kumbakonam's cultural traditions, the living heritage can be retained. In order to guarantee the stakeholders' participation in preserving cultural activities and awareness of the cultural heritage we would suggest the following measures:

- promoting cultural programs for visitors and residents;
- organizing cultural events in public spaces, particularly for young people in the heritage zone;
- Mahamaham tank and Porthamarai theertham should be part of the cultural activities;
- religious processions should take place in the morning during bhajan – sharing the religious theme and spiritual songs;
- organizing heritage walks in the heritage zone; and
- creating awareness of the importance of cultural heritage among community leaders.

Tourism. Kumbakonam town encompasses a large number of temples to visit, with an ancient cultural heritage and a vibrant local community. Heritage tourism is one of the best ways to preserve the flavor of the city center while still allowing the benefits of trade. The local community's active participation and involvement are necessary for the equitable distribution of costs and benefits of heritage tourism among stakeholder groups and the establishment of transparent institutional structures (Li and Hunter, 2015). Suggestions for promoting heritage tourism include:

- installation of basic amenities such as public toilets and parking areas;
- monitoring clean-up activities in the heritage zone;

- establishing information resource centers;
- management of tourism logistics (visitors' parking, walking, food trucks, information, etc.);
- management of services for tourists in temples; and
- monitoring commercial development of hotels and restaurants.

Conclusions

This report has presented an overview of present challenges to historic towns and urban heritage conservation, using as a case study the ancient Tamil Nadu temple town of Kumbakonam, its urban heritage and eventful historical background. The urban heritage characteristics of Kumbakonam such as its ritual topography, the Ghats along the river sides, the processional routes of temple chariots, the sacred precincts of the temples and water tanks, and the streetscapes are all undergoing transitions in which they lose some of their heritage characteristics. Questionnaire surveys employed in our study revealed significant differences in perception among temple priests, residents in the historic center, visitors and academic experts regarding the causes behind urban heritage decay. Lack of awareness about the heritage settings, unplanned development, demographical changes, commercial interest, real estate boom and people's desire for modernization and the adoption of amorphous international styles are highlighted as the major reasons behind the threats to Kumbakonam's historical heritage. With improved understanding from the survey data combined with direct documentation, we propose a holistic heritage management plan with suggested measures to revive and preserve the urban flavor of Kumbakonam. Our study can help planners in other towns with similar situations. Kumbakonam has the potential to revive its urban heritage and sustain its status as an historic religious temple town. As new challenges appear, further research can be conducted to develop possible solutions for mitigating their negative impacts.

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Further reading

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