

Cultural Jugaad in Historic City Transformations: India

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Abstract

Several historic Indian cities have managed to retain the original urban character by using readily available materials, craftspeople, and cultural traditions despite increasing urban transformations. This notion of sustaining/preserving/continuing certain cultural elements and rituals has survived in various forms in the last two centuries. Historic cities showcase their living heritage at the global level and are exemplars for studying the strong linkages within traditions and indigenous modes of preservation. In such situations where stakeholders have centuries of association with the site, it is essential that professionals look beyond conventional solutions to better understand local perceptions and thereby establish the appropriateness of any urban level interventions.

This article draws from various urban conservation works carried out in the historic cities of Rajasthan over the last two decades. It illustrates the discoveries and challenges in understanding the traditional local mindset for working in such areas. The indigenous methods practiced in these historic living cores are often at variance with the norms and logics of Western city planning being followed in post-colonial India. Examples in the cities and settlements of Jaipur, Udaipur and Ajmer, feature in this article, highlighting the urgent need to understand the local community mindset and the Indian approach to solutions for rapidly modernizing historic urban centres.

Introduction

In a country like India, where national highways often transform into pilgrim routes, urban streets and squares corroborate as ritual spaces, stones on pavements evolve into living temples and temporary infrastructure for the mega-scale Kumbh Mela organization. This diversity has come to be accepted as an international solution to city planning; clearly, such examples of local innovations which often defy all norms of conventional urban planning need to be acknowledged.

The north-western state of Rajasthan in India is equally rich and diverse in showcasing such innovations in its historic walled cities. These medieval period cities have sustained centuries of developmental changes and retained their historic character to a large extent. In various sub regions in Rajasthan these cities have managed to retain the local character and urban vocabulary pertaining to available materials, craftsmanship and the cultural traditions of that place. The cities and towns of Rajasthan thus present some interesting cases of urban adaptations in historic city areas that can be termed as a 'cultural jugaad', in which modern technology or urban planning is molded to accommodate local cultural tradition. This essay draws from various heritage planning and urban conservation works carried out in the historic cities of Rajasthan over the last two decades to illustrate the discoveries and challenges in understanding the local traditional mindset for working in such areas. The indigenous methods practiced in these living historic centres are often at variance with the norms and logics of western city planning. Using examples in the historic settlements of Udaipur, Jaipur and Ajmer, this essay aims to address the crucial need for understanding the local community

mindset and the Indian approach to solutions for living in rapidly modernizing urban historic centres.

Strategically located amidst a saucer shaped basin and surrounded by hills of Aravalli Range on all sides, Udaipur lies in eastern Rajasthan. The entire city area serves as a good catchment facilitating a network of lakes in the city. Founded in the mid-16th century, it was formerly surrounded by a circular defensive wall from all sides - except at the western side which was bound by lakes (Jain and Arora, 2017). Udaipur possesses a unique local landscape including spectacular views and a vulnerable watershed, outstanding built and urban heritage with urban villages, public spaces, historic houses, palaces and temples, traditional crafts, and a great deal of potential for development as a destination for sustainable cultural tourism.

During a survey of the lake city of Udaipur in 2005 when it was suffering from a drought and the lakes were dry, our work team observed an interesting phenomenon. A group of women stood on the dry lakebed forming a circular enclosure while a municipal water tanker parked close by supplied them with water. After inquiring with the locals, we gathered that this is a usual phenomenon in the case of any deaths in the family. As part of their traditions, the women must take a communal bath in the lake after any death ceremony in the family. Although their houses now have modern bathrooms with tap water, this venerated spot

of the lake should be used for this ceremony. Even when the lake is dry, they order a municipal tanker and take the communal bath on the lakebed to complete this ritual (Fig. 1). It can clearly be seen that the local traditions are inherent in the people's mindset, and often new technology is adapted to cater to traditions rather than shedding them.



Fig. 1: Udaipur City – Lakes and Rituals Picture
Credit: Shikha Jain.

Another case from the 18th century planned historic city of Jaipur is associated with the simple innovation in parking systems used by the local vendors for inner streets. The planning of Jaipur is world renowned and has recently been recognized on the World Heritage List in 2019. While the main bazaars are still able to take the traffic of a 21st century urban capital, the situation is much worse in the inner streets. While designing a heritage walk in the inner city area, we came across traffic as a major issue – interestingly, however, we observed that some solutions were already in place through the local ‘cultural jugaad’ of the thelawalas (Vendors with 4 wheeled wagons); who parked their wagons against the walls when not in use, thus helping to save space. Significantly, it was observed that similar parking systems were being designed for cycles in the western cities for space saving (Fig. 2).

In the case of Ajmer (Fig 3), another historic city of Rajasthan, we came across the challenge of designing for the various multifold activities such as drying of sarees by textile shops in a bazaar while providing solutions for the sidewalks and façade conservation.

One needs to understand these inherent associations that govern the functioning of an average Indian citizen and realize that planning is more cultural than technical. In India, (even in this day and age) we find several pockets of living historic cities that continue to function with inherent traditional knowledge systems ensuring sustenance of socio-economic and environmental aspects often grounded in the locals' religious beliefs. The roads and public spaces of most historic cities are often congested with processions of such a kind, oblivious to any traffic congestion. But the question is: Can conventional western urban conservation solutions respond to the needs of this living heritage in the cities in Rajasthan or India?

Our case studies made us realize the need to advocate for value based (Marta de la Torre; 2002), process-oriented conservation planning that balances theory with practice. In such situations, where stakeholders have centuries of



Fig. 2: Contemporary Western bike storage facilities juxtaposed with local ‘cultural jugaad’ by the thelawalas



Fig. 3: Challenges in designing for informal activities in Bazaars, Ajmer.

association with the site, it becomes essential for professionals to first engage with the site and understand it in its entirety, before deciding the extent to which the proposed theory (plans, frameworks, guidelines) needs to dialogue with the on-the-ground situation (stakeholders, use and centuries old traditions).

Conclusion

Today, Indian cities display the greatest capacity to react, withstand, adopt, accommodate, include, use, and benefit from contemporary challenges, while continuing to retain an indigenous mechanism for these adaptations. Indian

cities present dual development strategies; clearly demarcating post-independence archaic colonial planning norms and local cultural aspirations that determine the design of improvised urban spaces. It is evident that history, culture, religion, and faith play a proactive role in urban planning at an informal level in India. Therefore, there is a need to understand, record, and capitalize on such locally adapted solutions within planning frameworks for historic city areas in the future.

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Keywords

Urban conservation, Rajasthan, indigenous, traditions, community

