

Our city, our heritage

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On International Day for Monuments and Sites, also known as World Heritage Day, three Mumbaikars who are invested in the conservation of its urban and planned heritage, share their wish lists for the city.



Pic/Rane Ashish

Brinda Somaya, architect and urban conservationist

WISH: Effective recycling of built resources

Mumbai gives me my 'Sense of Place'. There are some buildings that connect us to the past and to one another, which tell us who we are.

Many cities of India, with their relatively long history, have abundant and rich inbuilt heritage with several noteworthy heritage structures. These include vernacular and colonial architecture, individual buildings as well as buildings with a group value. Our heritage constitutes everything that we have inherited, so the focus must now shift to finding new uses and upgrading the bulk of our heritage buildings.

Today, the preservation of landmark buildings and monuments is an accepted norm. Effective recycling of our built resources: the vast stock of under-utilised buildings at the local city level, distinguished or plain, with tremendous potential and living heritage, is critical.

Dr Stone said: “Urban quality depends more on the standard of maintenance and improvement of existing buildings than on the standards to which new buildings are built.” Nothing could be truer in our Indian cities. Today, conversions are competitive in cost, apart from the un-quantifiable value of age, character and architectural quality. Waste must disappear as an idea. Hence materials, buildings and infrastructure of our built environment must be used, reused and recycled for the same or different uses.

Atul Kumar, founder-trustee, Art Deco Trust Mumbai

WISH: Uniform mapping and holistic dialogue

A dream when it comes to heritage conservation in Mumbai would be a well-thought, vibrant heritage plan for the whole city that does not take an ad hoc approach. We require a greater sense of ownership for each ward in the city, so documentation and mapping can happen more uniformly, based on which one can plan ahead.

Ad hocism or temporary solutions is what ails not only conservation, but also urban planning in the city. For example, Mumbai has no visible street signage plan that reflects a comprehensive identity for the city reflected in a design language. We have no uniformity of font or colour or size — it’s almost entirely a creative project! Similarly, I think a comprehensive holistic deliberation of the city’s heritage conservation needs as a whole, not just individual neighbourhoods, would be a nice ideal to hope for.

Vikas Dilawari, conservation architect

WISH: Retain green cover and original identity

There is a need to acknowledge the preservation of trees and vegetation that are integral to every space. It must be retained as much and as long as one can. As change is inevitable, slower the change, the better it is for the environment. The fast pace of redevelopment has been transforming the city and this burdens the fragile infrastructure and also disrupts the social cohesiveness and sense of belonging. It also affects the quality of life.

Another wish is to retain the overall character and scale of heritage spaces. This is important while making changes to interiors of heritage spaces; it should be done as required, and by retaining the same usage as far as possible so as to ensure the integration of present-day needs and infrastructure.

With no acknowledgement or governmental support to conservation of built, lived-in heritage, it continues to get step-motherly treatment, whereas in reality, redevelopment is flourishing. I wish that this scale was balanced by giving incentives to repairs which can also help in arresting climate change as the larger picture is the need of the hour. This can emerge as an effective income-generating venture, and will help in boosting local tourism too.

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