TRANSFORMING TRENDS IN URBAN AESTHETICS OF SOUTH INDIAN TOWNS

A study in Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli

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Abstract: Rapid urban growth often manifests itself as overcrowded and chaotic growth in uncontrolled urban developments. This puts intense pressure on existing urban development compromising the aesthetics of urban environment. Urban spaces created in traditional Indian towns were clearly structured with their own intention or in many cases were created for certain specific purposes. The aesthetic qualities of these urban spaces were well maintained in these towns. In traditional towns of south India there is a change in aesthetics of urban space with incoherent urban entities resulting in fragmented and highly inappropriate urban structures. Unfinished edges in these towns are an area of concern from the perspective of urban aesthetics. Change in glory of Urban fabric in traditional settlements are a result of inappropriate safeguarding measures by authorities and poor awareness. As a city or town has certain distinctive elements, this paper takes these elements in to consideration for analysis and presents the changes in aesthetic quality of urban spaces in traditional towns of south India (Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli) due to changing culture and activities.

Index Terms - **urban aesthetics, traditional towns**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Aesthetics is very often subjective and varies from individual to individual. Urban aesthetics is the image or visual quality of a space in an urban environment captured by an individual. In traditional towns of south India the aesthetic qualities of these urban spaces are functional spaces like tank, temple and spaces of heritage value.

In K.Lynch's book "The image of the city" the author defines a legible city which is characterized by easier understanding of the city while moving around. Lynch classified the contents of the city images into five elements: Paths, edges, districts, modes and landmarks[1]. According to Cullen (1961), the buildings that are seen collectively give visual pleasure which cannot be given by each building separately. The building, which stands alone called architecture, but a set of buildings together is an art of forming. The cityscape cannot be evaluated technically, but as an art of relationships that need to be aesthetic and visual sensor[2]. With these framework traditional towns can be analysed in the perspective of urban aesthetics. The intense pressure in urban environment due to increased population, tourism related activities and commercial activities has affected the urban fabric.

At the beginning of the 3rd millennium, when urban settlements become more and more crowded due to the work and life conditions they offer, urban aesthetics is becoming increasingly imperative [3].

II. AESTHETIC ELEMENTS OF TRADITIONAL TOWNS

Aesthetics in a town or city can be looked from various perspectives. The approach for analyzing the aesthetic quality of traditional south Indian towns has been done taking in to consideration the elements of a city by Lynch, K. (1960). The elements of a city are related to elements of traditional south Indian towns.

III. LANDMARKS

Landmarks, are simply external references to the individual. They are physical elements, which are different in scale. Most of the time when a person is not very familiar with a city, he depends on landmarks as a guide. The identity of these landmarks, prominent buildings, activities have made these landmarks less prominent can result in disorientation, reflecting a poor image of the city or town.

Fig.1. Street corner, Kumbakonam

Fig.2. Sarangapani temple, Kumbakonam

Spatial prominence can establish elements as landmarks in either of two ways: by making the element visible from many locations[4], The visibility of a landmark is very often affected by hoardings, structures that affect the line of sight (Fig.1). In traditional towns urban development are rapid due to increased commercial activities promoted by pilgrimage tourism. This has invited more activities that spill over the streets. Increased height of buildings with different building characters has affected the landmarks to a greater extent that they remain hardly invisible. (Fig.2) Uncontrolled Hoarding, poorly designed urban elements can affect the landmarks.
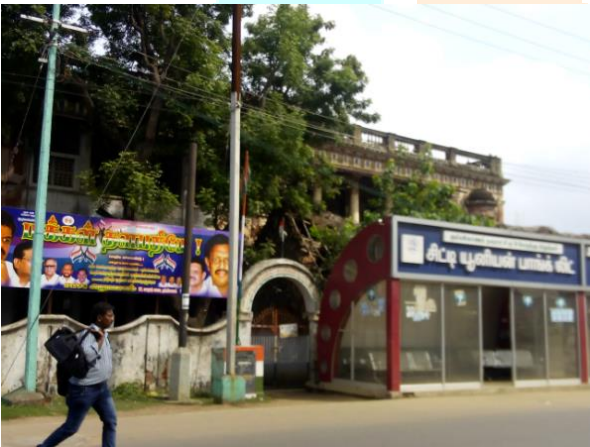

Fig.3. Chatram, Kumbakonam

Fig.4. Palace facade, Thanjavur

As an example the bus shelter (Fig.3) in kumbakonam as a part of an urban element proposed by civic bodies through out the town has failed to respond to the heritage value. The prominence of Thanjavur palace is masked by uncontrolled new urban developments (Fig.4)

Imageability defined as follows, "It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful images of the environment." Imageability is also called legibility or visibility in a heightened sense, where objects not only can be seen but also are presented sharply to the senses. Imageabiity is affected by changing urban environment. Changes in Urban environment can be modern buildings with contemporary architecture and forms. New and advanced building materials often that do not respect the traditional context. As an example the use of glass and metal claddings that are totally not suitably used affecting the urban aesthetics. Another way of looking at the scenario is commercial developments demand use of glass and materials which are unavoidable. Hoardings are other unfavourable elements in urban environments which are unavoidable. Architectural control in urban spaces can revive urban aesthetics.But many of the south Indian towns lack control mechanism of urban growth from the context of aesthetics.

Complexity is related to the number of noticeable differences to which a viewer is exposed per unit time (Rapoport, 1990a, 1990b). Pedestrians need interesting things to look at and, thus, a high level lof complexity. Complexity creates an interest to the people and helps in identifying and recording information. Complexity generates a rich urban fabric by maximizing, for instance, the points of contact, exchange and interface. A beautiful city has complexity which will be appreciated by the public. This can be seen when tourists appreciating urban spaces. Monotonous and less complex spaces do not interest them. Complexity in many of the south Indian towns are also created by narrow lanes, small temples at street corners, ponds etc.These create point of interest when a pedestrian moves through the town.

Fig.5.Rockfort temple, Tiruchirappalli

Fig.6. Shops in Rockfort area, Tiruchirappalli

Lack of policies and guidelines in the interest of urban aesthetics have deteriorated the prominence of them. The observer can find difficulty in orienting him at many instances. Rockfort temple (Fig.5), an important landmark is surrounded by high rised commercial spaces with glass and metal claddings (Fig.6). These developments block the view of rockfort and are not contextual to the urban space.

IV. EDGES IN TRADITIONAL TOWNS

Edges are the linear elements not considered as paths: they are usually, but not quite always, the boundaries between two kinds of areas. They act as lateral references. Those edges seem strongest which are not only visually prominent, but also continuous in form and impenetrable to cross movement. [5],

Fig.7. Adikumbeswarar temple, Kumbakonam

Fig.8. River Vaigai , Madurai

The edges in typical towns of south India are mostly rivers and ponds. The peculiarity in traditional towns is that the boundary of certain temples also defines an edge. The lengthier boundary wall of Adikumbeswarar temple (Fig.7) in kumbakonam is an example of edge in traditional towns. These physical edges remain intact due to the religious value associated with them. In comparison the banks of river vaigai which acts as an edge for Madurai is unfinished though it has potential for urban design. (Fig.8). Lack of distinct edges is not visually prominent due to encroachment, change of landuse and building's traditional character.

V. DISTRICT

Districts are the relatively large city areas which the observer can mentally go inside of, and which have some common character. They can be recognized internally, and occasionally can be used as external reference as a person goes by or toward them. [6],

Fig.9. Bhaskararajapuram agraharam, Thanjavur district

Fig.10. View from Rockfort temple, Tiruchirappalli

In Traditional towns district the common characteristics are Agraharams or Brahmin's quarters seen in Kumbakonam, Thanjavur and Srirangam town. (Fig.9). Because the urbanization process affects traditional culture, the impact of these changes becomes physically evident, particularly in most rural settlements and vernacular houses. [7]. The buildings and space between the buildings are under the control of individuals or small groups of individuals who can interfere in the larger urban pattern [8]. The increased urbanisation pressure has resulted in commercialization and change in character of the dwellings. Lack of policies to retain the character of these areas in Development regulations can be the known reason apart from general awareness of the citizens. As a result of this an observer finds it difficult to recognize the area.

In Urban areas Narrow buildings with different sizes, shapes, colors, materials, numerous doors, and windows add to complexity. This is evident in the development around Rockfort temple, Tiruchirappalli (Fig.10).

VI. NODE

Nodes are points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling. They may be primarily junctions, places of a break in transportation, a crossing or convergence of paths, moments of shift from one structure to another. Or the nodes may be simply concentrations, which gain their importance from being the condensation of some use or physical character, as a street-corner hangout or an enclosed square. [9],

Fig.11. Mahamaham Tank, Kumbakonam (source: Google maps)

The Prominent node in Kumbakonam town is the Mahamaham tank (Fig.11). which acts as a functional space during festivals and a recreational space. This node acts as a space for public gathering of political meetings. In Alexander, C., Ishikawa, S., & Silverstein, M. (1977) book " A pattern language" the author discusses on the creating nodes of activity by modifying the layout of the paths in the community to bring as many of them to these spots as possible.[10]. This can be compared to the Mahamaham tank which was the intend it was made for. The edge character in Mahamaham tank of Kumbakonam town is a notable one. The separation of mahamaham tank from the road is made with a protective fence for security. Though this has not affected the visual link it had reduced the physical interaction the people had with the tank. In traditional context the ghats leading to the tank were accessed all around from the road side but the fencing which was created for security reasons has created a restricted access thereby affecting the interaction to a larger extend. If the purpose of the node for what it was created was not achieved then the aesthetics of this

space can never be appreciated. The character of Traditional houses around this tank have changed over time without any respect to the tradition of this place.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions can be summarized as follows. Urban aesthetics in Traditional towns are so unique and peculiar as it often relates to certain activities. In traditional towns of Tamilnadu with heritage structure there is a total lack of urban design and policies to protect the aesthtical value. The implementation of modern spatial planning policies and management practices regulating urban growth can create a radical shift in the sense of the traditional streets. To overcome the negative effects of urbanisation special attention given for future planning can bring back the glory thereby retaining the functional and aesthetical qualities of these traditional towns.

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