

Conservation and Adapted Reuse “City Beautiful” Buildings The Case for Victoria Terminus, Mumbai

Introduction

The *City Beautiful* movement impacted not only planned cities but also organic cities that were in flux due to industrialization. Colonial cities, mostly those ruled by the British were heavily influenced as the governments attempted to instill a sense of grandeur and order in otherwise chaotic local settlements in eastern countries. India was a British colony until 1947 and the architecture and urban form was heavily influenced by the British city planners. Mumbai, the commercial capital and the largest city on the Indian subcontinent was primarily settled by the British as trading outpost. The East India Company acquired the trading outpost in 1667. The city’s economic development was given a boost as merchants arrived from the hinterland to conduct trade and soon, the town was known for its shipbuilding industry and cotton trade. However, the town flourished especially after establishment of railway connections with the inland and opening of the Suez Canal. This prompted the Governor of India to embark on a major city planning exercise that involved land reclamation and construction of several High Victorian public buildings along the sea front. Undoubtedly the Victoria Terminus originally intended to house the main station and the Great Indian Peninsula Railway was the most magnificent of all (UNESCO, 2004). I am going to analyze this structure in the city of Mumbai as an example of conservation of a City Beautiful building in changing times.

Buildings from the era of *City Beautiful* movement have struggled to sustain their existence in the rapidly evolving urban landscape and often historic preservationists have to restore to the emotional appeal of “conserving the culture”. This is especially true in the Indian context where conservationists repeatedly use the tag of “glorious past” as solitary justification for valuing something as heritage. However, in times of land scarcity, even historic monuments have to justify their existence with respect to financial feasibility (Shetty, 2000):

“Buildings change because it is financially better for its stakeholders. So even if it is cheaper” to restore a building than rebuilding it, it might be more “profitable” to make a new building. If we deliberate beyond financial sustainability to economic sustainability, the concern for protecting traditional skills and work patterns, stink of an elite preoccupation for making museums out of cultures.”

It bodes better for historic buildings to be conserved if they fit in the urbanscape of the ever-evolving city. Utilitarian historic buildings are more likely to be treasured by the general public than those that are “deemed” historic. Victoria Terminus (now renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus), Bombay (now renamed Mumbai) is one such example of perfectly utilitarian historic structure.

Functional Consistency

Victoria Terminus, Mumbai was completed in 1888 and was named after Queen Victoria on Jubilee Day, 1887. The building, started in 1878 was based on a design by F.W. Stevens, was originally designed to serve as the headquarters of the erstwhile Great Indian Peninsula Railway (GIPR). It currently serves as the administrative building of Central Railways of India and is the southern end of central and harbor lines of Mumbai’s suburban rail transportation system. A large part of the building currently houses the administrative offices of Central Railways including railway reservation offices. The surrounding ancillary building built at a later time house the rail lines for Central Railways outbound rail network and Mumbai’s suburban rail network. In fact, it is one of the only few buildings that continue to house the functions that it was originally intended for. Sunil Jain, the Public Relations Officer, Central Railways considers this aspect for continued attention paid to the originality and conservation of its heritage legacy.

Victoria Terminus has the unique characteristic of being the only “monument” that is in use. In fact, it is subject to highly intensive use since it is frequented by almost 3 million inhabitants every day. This adds enormous stress to any structure let alone a world heritage monument (UNESCO, 2004). Of course, the major bulk of passenger traffic is restricted to the concourse and not the building itself; it still is considered an exception wherein the utility of a building is unchanged in its 120-year-old history.

Place on the World Heritage List

The building was accorded a World Heritage site status by UNESCO in July 2004 and joins other esteemed Indian monuments like the Taj Mahal, Khajuraho Temple, Ajanta-Ellora, etc. on the list. The UNESCO approval however didn’t come by easily (the application was rejected first in 2002). In order to adhere to UNESCO “world heritage” standards, the officials in charge of conservation removed *paan* stains that marred its columns and corners and also

removed the ugly hoardings that despoiled the façade (D'Monte, 2004). The inscription by UNESCO was based primarily on two aspects (UNESCO 2004):

Criterion (ii): Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (formerly VT) of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) exhibits an important interchange of influences from Victorian Italianate Gothic Revival architecture, and from Indian traditional buildings. It became a symbol for Mumbai as a major mercantile port city on the Indian Subcontinent within the British Commonwealth.

Criterion (iv): Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (formerly VT) is an outstanding example of late 19th century railway architecture in the British Commonwealth, characterized by Victorian Gothic Revival and traditional Indian features, as well as its advanced structural and technical solutions.

Incidentally, it is the only functional office building to receive the honor. An office building that is adjoined to a railway terminus that witnesses almost a fifth of Mumbai's population in its corridors. On the long-distance side of the terminus, it is also witness to the arrival of 48 migrant families from the various corners of India daily to find jobs. For both kinds of people that throng its space, the much-honored inscription doesn't matter; as long as it continues to serve as the railway terminus for the past hundred years.

Architectural Legacy

As mentioned in the UNESCO inscription, the building represented the successful collaboration of Victorian Italianate Gothic Revival architecture and Indian influences and craftsmanship. The architectural style is High Victorian Gothic style. The façade of the building is adorned with filigrees, carvings and arches and the southwestern part is topped with a dome holding up a statue of a lady symbolizing Progress. Although the building is modeled on late medieval Italian architecture, the complicated ground plan, the stone dome, turrets, and pointed arches are distinctively Indian (UNESCO, 2004). This successful meeting of two distinct cultures – British Gothic and Indian traditions lend Victoria Terminus its uniqueness. The site on which it is built dates back to the 14th century when a shrine dedicated to Mumba Devi, the goddess after which Bombay was renamed to Mumbai, stood on this ground.

The interior of the building is dominated by the 330 feet deep platform connected to the 1200 feet long train shed that houses the rail platforms. The rooms were originally intended

to be series of large rooms with high ceilings. However, these have been modified later on to house modern functions that did not require high ceilings and large rooms. The side wings enclose a small courtyard garden that opens out to the street (UNESCO, 2004). However, this entrance is open only to the office building and does not serve as the primary entrance to the terminus, which is located to the right hand side of the courtyard.

The construction materials also signify the fusion of two cultures. The main structure is built with light brown sandstone and limestone whereas the decorative elements are carved into high quality Italian marble. The ground floor of the North Wing, also known as the Star Chamber is floored with Italian marble along with polished Indian Blue stone.

Preservation and Restoration

Due to its historical importance to the city of Mumbai and functional utility, Victoria Terminus has been constantly maintained and works of restoration and preservation have managed to keep most of its features intact. Upon the recommendation of World Heritage, Central Railways has actively begun to lighten the load on the structure starting from the 1980s. A restructuring plan of the railways in the region would also seek to reduce the pedestrian pressure on the terminus. The building also was subject to air pollution damage but this has been significantly reduced due to relocation of industries away from the city and reduction in dockyard activity. Central Railways has appointed Architectural Conservation Cell (ACC) as consultants in 1997 and currently the second phase involving restoration of the Terminus, traffic management around the site, tourism management, and training of personnel is underway (UNESCO, 2004). Also, for the next two years, as part of historic preservation, the external surface area of around 50,000 square feet will be covered in silica. In September 1999, after much deliberation and controversy, pedestrian access to the terminus was moved underground after constructing a subway at a cost of Rs.150 million. The high cost was partly due to the high-traffic location of the terminus and conservation concerns of the building. A minimal fiber-glass domed structure was attached to the pedestrian entrance of the terminus to facilitate access. The people however, hated this new “plastic addition” and likened it to “caterpillars gaping foolishly at the elegant terminal” (Joseph, 2004). The words of Rajesh Agarwal, UNESCO consultant seem pretty lenient while laying out the conservation principles for the structure:

"Let's admit it; the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus is a government office building. We may not be able to stop someone driving a nail or sticking a calendar on the wall. The concentration will be on the conservation of the whole structure."

I do not completely agree and feel that UNESCO preservation policies should be enforced stringently irrespective of the fact that it is a government office.

Use and Reuse

As mentioned earlier, Victoria Terminus is the only functional office building on the UNESCO heritage list. Interestingly, the use of the building has been virtually unchanged throughout its existence. It was intended to house the headquarters of GIPR, the erstwhile British railways network and currently houses the headquarters and administrative offices of Central Railways. However, the building was increasingly subject to tremendous pedestrian traffic, traffic congestion in its surroundings, air pollution, and myriad government functions housed within its premises. A large section of the main office building houses the administrative functions of Central Railways including commercial operations such as railways reservations. At one point of time, even the train tickets printing press was located within its premises. During the expansion of railways during 60s and 70s, changes and additions were made to the building to accommodate an increasing staff size. At the height of expansion, almost 2,500 people worked inside and this number was reduced to 1,100 during the 80s. After the UNESCO refused to provide inscription for the building in 2002, the strength was further reduced to 700 although the structure was designed for 650 (D'Monte 2004).

Heritage conservation was put on the backburner for most of the time when these changes occurred and awareness was raised only in 1987-88, the centennial year of the building.

The Future

Although conservation efforts have been stepped up, I feel that the structure would be greatly benefited if such efforts are persisted with. The UNESCO inscription provides a much needed boost for continued conservation efforts. The main building is largely shuttered down for public access and some of the more beautiful carvings and adornments on the building are visible only from the balconies (or atop a double-decker bus). It would bode well for raising awareness of the structure if the government offices are reduced to the minimum acceptable

standard and building is opened up for public access via guided tours. Although this might slightly diminish its standing as a functional office building, the long term efforts for historic preservation and allowing the public to enjoy the “City Beautiful” buildings is closer to the ideals of the movement. Bringing historically significant buildings into the public domain should be the top priority. The structure’s historic integrity will be largely better maintained if the people of the city identify with the treasure amidst them. This will also help in bettering the persistently apathetic attitude of the people that pass by or through it everyday. Grand Central in New York City, is a perfect example of opening up a historic space to public use yet maintaining its architectural and historic identity.

In a recent movement to nationalize identity, India experienced a massive renaming movement and almost 3 of the 4 major cities were renamed (Bombay to Mumbai, Madras to Chennai, and Calcutta to Kolkata). Victoria Terminus was also a reminder of the British Raj legacy and nationalistic party people wanted to change that. Thankfully, everyone was on the same page regarding the historic importance of the building and the crazy suggestion for demolishing the building was instantly dismissed. Instead, the name of the building was changed to Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, after a great Maratha warrior of the 17th century. Although, what one writer considered as the “biggest sex-change operation in history” (Joseph, 2004), I consider this change as means by which people struggle to alter things that are in their control as part of a regime change. Regime theory suggest changes due to current political trends but this proved to be a better alternative at historic preservation in Mumbai by balancing the interests of the government, political interests, and preservation advocates (Newman, 2001). The general public still insists on calling the terminal VT although the official connotation has been changed to CST.

Conclusion

It is widely agreed that Victoria Terminus should continue to be used in its current capacity as a railway terminus office building. Only when a building is under functional use, will its historic preservation be justified by all concerned. Supporting a building purely on “heritage” status doesn’t last long and soon, commercial interests dominate. By appealing to both sides of the issue, it is beneficial to keep the rail network running in the adjacent train shed while reducing the office functions in the main building. The building should be opened up for public

access and the entry fees can help pay for the maintenance. The subway entrance that adjoins the main terminal should be replaced by a aesthetically pleasing reflective glass feature that will reflect the adornments on the building rather than hide it. The juxtaposition of modern materials with historic buildings has been tried before with pleasing effects (not without controversy though) as in the case of the Glass Pyramid in the Louvre. The surrounding district is virtually a historic district by itself (Lambah, 2002) and reducing the traffic on the periphery in the entire South Mumbai district. The recently constructed flyovers have eased the traffic a bit but more buffer zone is needed. Also, pedestrian-dominated traffic should be given prominence over automobile traffic, effectively curtailing the rising problem of pollution while opening up the critical junction around Victoria Terminus as a open public space.

In a recently tried experiment, designers displayed contemporary Indian art along the concourses. This allowed millions of people who otherwise wouldn't go to a museum to see modern art a chance to catch a glimpse as they scurried by to and from work. Occasionally, some one would pause to ponder on the seemingly inane doodling and random figures. The artists were thrilled; they manage to bring their art to the general public, breaking barriers of an "intellectual art". Also, the suburban railways demarcated one train to be painted by the citizens of the city; almost like a moving graffiti board. This was also a tremendous success as both amateur and professional artists sought to express themselves to a wider audience. Incidentally, students of the JJ School of Art, then headed by Rudyard Kipling's father, added some touches like the gargoyles and other sculptural relief to the Victoria Terminus structure (D'Monte, 2004). So these experiments with public art weren't completely new. Such public experiments with history and art go a long way to personalize heritage and bring it down from a pedestal of exalted acts of observation to a more participatory act.

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