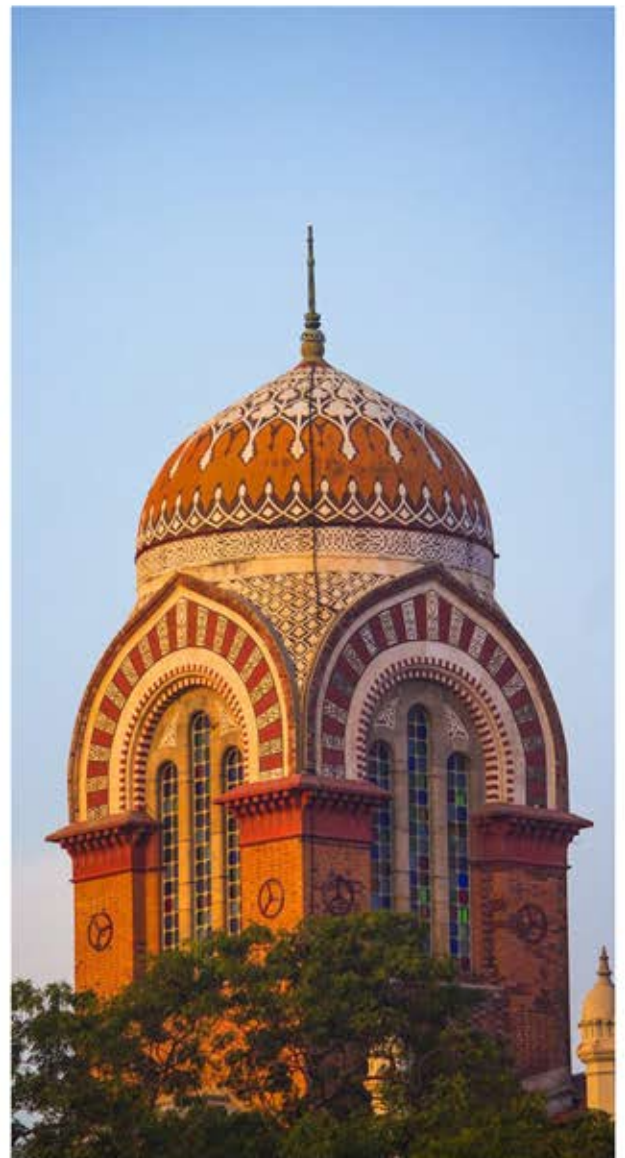


SB CONSTRUCTION - RENOVATION OF SENATE HOUSE, CHENNAI

SB Construction and Conservation architect K. Kalpana was a part of Conservation and Restoration of Senate House in Chennai. The restoration of the Senate House was completed in 2006 to coincide with sesqui-centenary (150th year) celebration of the Madras University.



Senate House - Chennai



The 147-year-old Senate House of the University of Madras, a towering example of Indo-Saracenic architecture, was restored to its former glory about five years ago. Since then, it remains virtually unused.

In September 2006, this historic monument, fronting the Marina beach, was re-opened after inauguration. After that, the building has been barely used. Former Vice-Chancellor of the university S.P.Thyagarajan, who took up the renovation work, said that before his tenure ended, a public meeting addressed by the then Governor was held there. “When we requested the public to contribute to the restoration process, we had projected that the halls would be used for all cultural, heritage and public meetings, besides Senate meeting. It was fully functional until my tenure ended,” he said.

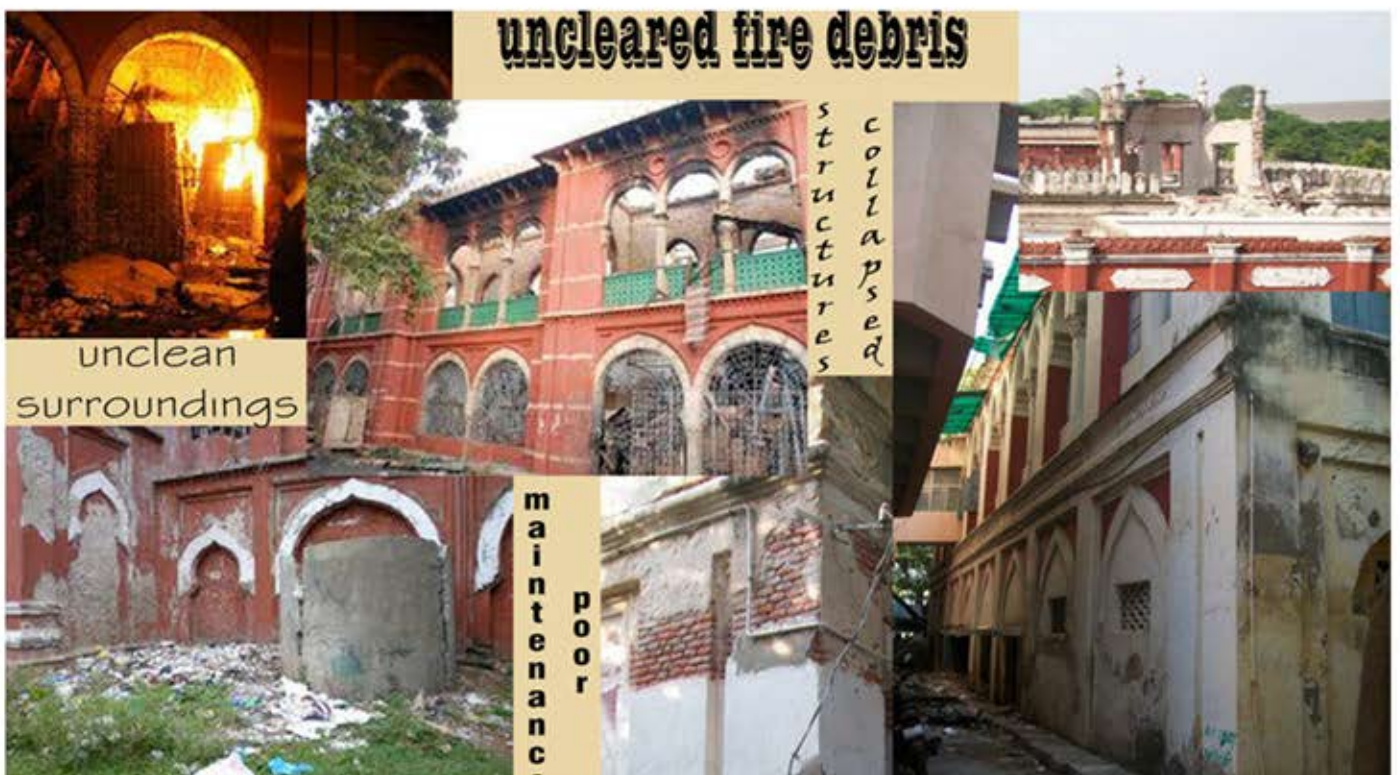
When the hall was at its best, it was the venue for the university gatherings, December music festival, grand convocation meetings and even meetings of the legislature. After the building was restored to its full splendour, apart from a few smaller meetings, only one Senate meeting was held when the present Vice-Chancellor, G. Thiruvassagam, took charge. “During that meeting there were complaints from Senate members that voices echoed in the hall,” said Mr. Thiruvassagam.

To a question raised at the last Senate meeting on why the hall was not put to use, Mr. Thiruvassagam said acoustics of the hall was poor and promised the gathering that he would consult experts. “We will consult professionals to make sure that Senate meetings can be hosted here.” However, those who were part of the restoration project said issues related to audio could have been easily resolved with help from sound engineers and technicians.

Mr. Thiruvasagam also said work is in progress to use the building for holding exhibitions of photographs, manuscripts and educational material. The building being of heritage value cannot be used for public meetings because there are chances that it might be damaged, he added.

P.D. Balaji, coordinator, Senate House, said the university would soon appoint a curator for maintenance of the building. However, experts seem to have a different view. They emphasised that the best way to preserve a building is to put it to use. "After so much effort, the building should not be left to disintegrate again. Unless the building is put to use, there will be no impetus to maintain it. It is also important to keep the doors and windows of the building open for sufficient ventilation," said K. Kalpana, an architect who supervised the Senate House conservation project.

Before Renovation



Conservation architecture

These other cities not only have policies in place and the active participation of INTACH, they also have dedicated conservation companies. Typically, these companies are involved in the rehabilitation, restoration, and conservation of heritage and historical structures, says Arun Menon, Convener, National Advisory Board, National Centre for Safety of Heritage Structures (NCSHS).

They develop a detailed project report (DPR) after an investigative phase that involves historical research and a scientific study on materials used. This document is the basis for the identification of items of work, costs, etc. A contractor is then hired, and the work executed under the supervision of the conservation architect. The work could also be awarded as a turnkey project to the architect.

In most cases, contractors with specialised skills are required to work with lime mortar, timber and joinery, traditional flooring and roofing techniques, sculptural and painting works, etc. “There hasn’t been a conservation movement in the city. We do not even have a legislation to protect heritage structures,” says Menon.

Conservation practice stems from a deep-rooted passion and love for history; a degree in conservation is secondary. Raneer Vedamuthu, Professor of Architecture, Anna University, says the many architects involved in conservation are driven solely by interest. “Chennai lacks these practices and that’s one reason why there is no awareness of conservation management.

During Renovation



Materials Used

Two aspects of the conservation that had a lasting impact;

- Use of very highly polished lime plasters
- Embossed patterns using lime plasters.

Unlike common paints, they used soft stones that were grinded to a soft paste and mixed in different ways to get the current finish.

The dome of the senate house has a pattern called Sgraffito.

These patterns had to be laid one above the other and at a height of two hundred feet above the ground. With the wind blowing, we had to work out our own methods of doing it.

They require interventions which are largely structural to stabilize them from falling apart.



After Renovation

