

HERITAGE



VAASAL-THALAM (left to right) The ornate main door has been preserved, the naturally lit terrace has been converted into an usable space, while the facade of the building facing Nainiappa Street, now restored to its former glory, has a carefully concealed entry that gives a secondary street access without taking away the essence of the architecture

RESTORE and reuse

Chennai architect V.S. Vigneswar talks to HEMA VIJAY
about the best way to preserve the few remaining Beri-Chettiar homes in the city



Ever visited any one of the few remaining traditional Beri-Chettiar houses that are located in the Chennai areas of Park Town, George Town and Chintadripet? Well, city-based V.S. Vigneswar, principal architect, A+V (Architecture Plus Value), has just concluded his research and documentation of these houses. Based on the intriguing findings of the study, a research paper was authored by Vigneswar and Dr. Ramee Vadamuthu, Dean of SAP, called 'Structural Strategy and Construction Systems in the case of Beri-Chettiar Dwellings in Chennai'. Now selected by the

Structural Analysis of Historic Constructions (SAHC) forum, it is to be showcased in the SAHC 2014 conference to be held in Mexico City in October this year. Vigneswar, who also teaches at the School of Architecture and Planning, Anna University, shares his findings.

Why did you take up this study?
It was primarily done to generate a historic perspective on these houses and to provide an impetus for their conservation. They form an important link in the historic and cultural evolution of the city.

How many Beri-Chettiar houses are left standing now?
That is difficult to say, but I have documented six.

Why do you recommend 'adaptive re-use' for these buildings?
Re-inventing these buildings and retrofitting them to

suit today's needs is the only way they can be preserved for future generations, as most of these are being torn down for commercial purposes. It cannot happen without an economic motive.

Has there been any tangible fallout from your research?

One of the case study houses, Kalathi-Chettiar house on Nainiappa Naicken Street in Park Town, was taken up for conservation. To make the venture suited to present needs, minor modifications were made to preserve its historic nature, service layers were added, and the house was retrofitted to become an office space.

Who are the Beri-Chettians?

The Beri-Chettiar community settled in the areas around Fort St. George far back in the 18th century. Their predominant occupation was trade in iron and steel with the British East India Company. They were also closely associated with a class of artisans called Kammalars, one of the reasons for the architectural richness of their houses.

What is the chief ar-

chitectural device in a Beri-Chettiar house?

What primarily defines the Beri-Chettiar house is the 'making' of the building. The material, assembly and ornamentation, and the carving and exquisite craftsmanship give these homes their unique identity.

For example, the main door is typically elaborate with detailed wood-cut work that includes a wooden *kalasam*. There is enormous ornamentation and detailing even on the rafters and supporting columns. Externally, however, they present a plainer look.

The houses have excellent natural light and ventilation thanks to the open courtyards. These houses were built next to one another and shared common walls. This is actually more space-economical in congested areas. For the same reason, they are earthquake resistant and structurally economical on material.

What was the predominant building material used?

They had material such as egg-lime plaster, columns made from red sanders and Burma teak, hand-painted ceramic tiles imported from Europe, Italian marble, Athangudi tiles...



MUN MUTRAM The primary courtyard, an internal sanctuary for the homestead retains all its charm; and (left) V. S. Vigneswar