

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Setting Straight the Priorities: A Conservation Report from Kerala [Speaking of Places]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0m09p7pm>

### Journal

Places, 18(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Fels, Patricia

### Publication Date

2006-10-15

Peer reviewed

# Setting Straight the Priorities: A Conservation Report from Kerala

Patricia Fels



For thousands of years, urban civilization has flourished on the Indian subcontinent. In modern, independent India, the fate of historic monuments (temples, mosques, palaces, and forts) varies: some buildings are protected; some have become heavily visited icons; others have been left to decay. Completely off the heritage radar, the Indian vernacular (housing, shops and warehouses) remains unrecognized and ignored, left to slowly deteriorate or be demolished. Frequently massed in historic enclaves, these structures display an artisan skill with local materials, an appropriate response to climatic con-

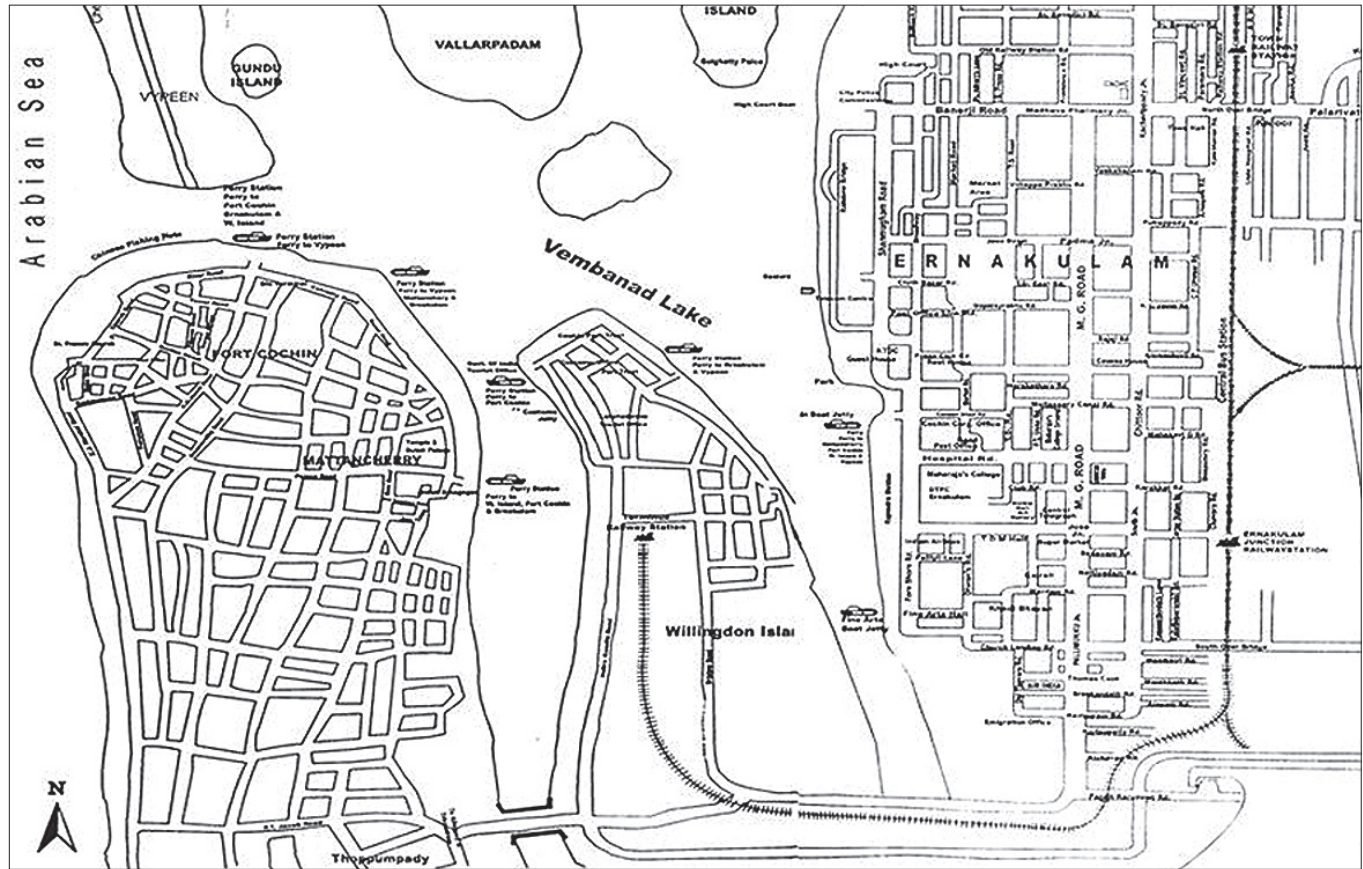
ditions, and designs that reflect social and religious patterns.

The state of Kerala stretches along the Malabar Coast, in southwestern India. Isolated for millennia from the rest of India by the dense forests and mountain peaks of the Western Ghats, the people along the coastline peacefully interacted with traders from the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The exotic spices that grow there have long been objects of desire around the globe. They were freely traded to Arabs, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, North Indians, Chinese, and Southeast Asians—until the Portuguese arrived seeking control over the trade.

Midway up the coast, Cochin (recently renamed Kochi) is a jewel of this trading culture. It gained

ascendancy after the great flood of 1341 silted up the historic port of nearby Kodungalloor. The arrival of Vasco da Gama at the end of the fifteenth century began a long period of European domination. Fort Cochin, at the tip of the peninsula, became a colonial outpost, the first European settlement in India, and one of the few with a history of Portuguese, Dutch and English presence. Meanwhile, the adjacent, older settlement of Mattancherry remained home to the ruling maharaja and site of the port. Here, the storage, shipping and trading of regional products (from spices to rices) took place. A unique vernacular architecture developed, reflecting the local environment, the trade, and the traders.

Above: A wholesale man sits in his shop on Bazar Road.



### The Cochin Peninsula Today

The state of Kerala is well known in development circles for its high rates of literacy, life expectancy, and live birth—comparable to those of developed nations. The people of Kerala may have low incomes, but they uniformly experience a quality of life unique in India. After Indian independence, a radicalized Kerala state government instigated broad land reforms along with social mandates that brought health care and schooling to all residents of the state.

However, the Cochin peninsula slipped into a daydream as the mainland area of Ernakulam became a modern city and a new port was built on an adjacent island. Lack of demand meant the buildings of

Cochin were not torn down; but neither were they maintained. Now, with an expanding tourist industry and soaring property values, local government has taken the first steps toward recognizing this rich patrimony. The city tourism office has declared the colonial center (Fort Cochin) a heritage zone, and a Center for Heritage, Environment and Development has been established. Yet, despite a series of studies on the importance of Cochin/Mattancherry heritage, legislative action has not been forthcoming. No state or local guidelines for a historic district have been enacted, and no legal status has been given to historic buildings.

Part of the problem is that the Mattancherry area and its inhabitants,

labeled “marginal” (i.e., poor) by the government, have in fact been “marginalized.” Instead of examining innovative ways to reinvigorate the urban settlement or help the spice trade metamorphose into a twenty-first-century activity, local officials continue to turn obsessively to tourism. As a result, historical buildings are visualized as museums or tourist destinations, while residents remain unaware of their uniqueness, or potential for reuse. Meanwhile, many areas still have no water service or sewer,

**Above:** Map of the greater Kochi area. The Cochin/Mattancherry Peninsula is to the left. The modern city of Ernakulam is to the right. The new port is in-between.





and open drains carry a foul mixture of refuse. The inventive spirit of post-independence is no longer discernible.

### Elements of Urban Form

In terms of layout, the Cochin Peninsula has two principal foci linked by a commercial spine. The Fort Cochin neighborhood, site of the original Portuguese fort, is bounded on three sides by the sea. A large parade ground, surrounded by huge

**Above:** A Catholic Church on Bazar Road shares the neighborhood with Hindu temples, a synagogue, and many mosques.

rain trees, occupies the center of this old colonial area, and is in continual use today by local youth for cricket and soccer matches. Around this space are a series of historic bungalows and the oldest European church in India. Private individuals have renovated some of the bungalows (many turned into tourist guesthouses or hotels). The adjacent streets are lined with rowhouses. Both the bungalows and the rowhouses in this area show signs of Dutch, Portuguese, English and Keralan influence. These buildings were once home to major players in the history of Cochin: coffee and

tea merchants, Jewish businessmen, the Dutch governor who compiled Hortus Malabaricus, and many more.

The Fort Cochin area is connected to Mattancherry by Bazar Road. At its southern terminus is another important building complex that includes the maharaja's palace (now called the Dutch palace) and a Hindu temple. Immediately adjacent is Jewtown, once home to Middle Eastern traders. Here, godowns (Asian vernacular for warehouses) stretch along the waterfront, while shophouses line the lanes leading to a sixteenth-century synagogue.

Today, Jewtown has become an





antique center where aged godowns are packed with old furniture, building parts (including granite columns, wood carved gable ends, and doors), religious artifacts (Hindu, Jewish and Christian), and a dizzying array of lamps, statues, photographs, jewelry and household containers. Few buildings remain in use for the spice trade, and it is almost a shock to see a warehouse full of ginger.

However, moving north toward Fort Cochin, the activities of the city's older trading days continue. Rice, ginger, rubber, cashews and spices are moved in and out of large godowns. Hard-

ware stores and numerous wholesalers of goods occupy small ground-floor shops. On roads leading inland, ethnic communities with connections to local trade maintain unique historic enclaves, such as the *agraharam* of Tamil Brahmins (an internal street off the temple with rowhousing). Even today, thirteen different linguistic groups can be found in Cochin. And within a one-kilometer radius can be found Hindu and Jain temples, a Catholic church, a Syrian Christian shrine, a Jewish synagogue, and at least four Muslim mosques. This is the heart of Mattancherry—a center pulsing with diversity.

### Godowns and Courtyards: An Urban Typology

Narrow and long, Bazar Road was once a bustling regional marketplace. In its heyday, its two-story buildings, with decorated windows, patterned eaves, and carved doors, must have presented a formidable, unified facade.

In general, the impressive Mattancherry godowns run perpendicular to the street. Grand doors lead from

**Above:** The shophouses of Jewtown once housed Middle Eastern traders, but now its streets are primarily for tourists. The building at the end of the street is the sixteenth-century synagogue.







Bazar Road to expansive courtyards surrounded by structures that extend to the water's edge. Designed for storing goods in a hot climate with two monsoon seasons, these wharf buildings have steep wood-framed gable roofs covered with clay tiles. Their thick, stuccoed, brick walls are punctuated by air vents in a medley of styles.

These vernacular buildings offer countless opportunities for adaptive reuse. New electrical services, plumbing, and cable could be installed within them, and their walls could be replastered. A set of guidelines, neither complex nor intimidating to local owners, could include information on proper window and door treatments, the technology of brick and plaster walls, timber and tile roofs, and concrete floors. Private restoration work could be paired with civic utility improvements, especially new water, sewer and electricity lines.

The combination of a linear streetfront with the deep godown courtyard forms a marvelous urban typology. Viewed from the water, the massing of the godowns presents a unique panorama, in which basic rectangular shapes gain complexity from their juxtaposition and from the attendant intersections of their large gabled roofs. In terms of use, the layout of buildings and courtyards also provides the invaluable urban amenity of protected open space with waterfront access.

The Bazar Road ensemble is an excellent example of a townscape touched by daily activity and the styles of many diverse lands. Over time, this kaleidoscope developed into an identifiable whole through the process of people working together. Merchants from the Middle East, North India, and Europe adopted and adapted the local vernacular.

### A Vision for the Future

The history of the spice trade and the power of the architectural spaces in Cochin provide potent images. In particular, the Parade Ground and surrounding colonial gardens contrast dramatically with the linear, dense Bazar Road streetfront. These historic patterns of a trading culture are major cultural resources begging for protection.

Unfortunately, some state planners have labeled Bazar Road “obsolete” because of its narrow width. This judgment might be valid if one were only concerned with commercial access by truck. But before writing the area off, planners should seek alternatives; in particular, the tendency to think that “new” cities must all have wide roadways needs to be more closely examined, especially in a city founded on water transport.

Cochin is blessed with an extensive network of navigable waterways (the famous Kerala backwaters). Until quite recently, all goods were moved by boats plying these waterways. A recent study found that moving freight by water is more fuel efficient, economical, and environmentally friendly than moving it by road—for example, using one-sixth the energy consumed by auto freight.

In Mattancherry a revitalized system of barges could be combined with a schedule of off-peak truck deliveries. For residents and visitors, ferry and bus terminals at each end of Bazar Road could provide a foundation for regional transport. Bicycles, auto rickshaws, and small electric buses could then move employees, residents, merchants and customers around the neighborhood.

Cochin has the opportunity to lead the way in reexamining the workable patterns of a pedestrian city. Street-front shops and markets, narrow lanes, green spaces, water transport, walled

compounds, and godown courtyards can all work together to create density and livability.

It is a fact that the spice trade is no longer a dominant force in Cochin. And Fort Cochin and Jewtown are, and will likely remain, tourist centers—hopefully with graciously restored buildings, not cheap imitations. But Bazar Road offers a counterpoint, a chance to maintain a vital commercial center. With improved infrastructure, new businesses could move to the godowns there. Printing operations, digital technology, software designers, call centers—all current fixtures of global commerce—could reinhabit vacated spaces.

In addition, the pepper exchange and other still-active segments of the spice trade could be encouraged to remain. The use of medicinal plants and spices is gaining popularity, and the flower oils/scent trade remains strong. Much trading today in these commodities is done electronically, and with improved infrastructure this activity could continue.

Indians want to modernize, but only a few realize the potential role of old structures such as those of the Cochin Peninsula within the modern context. Indeed, problems regarding housing, employment, sanitation and infrastructure may all be better resolved by reinvigorating older parts of cities than building entirely new ones.

Housing can be rehabilitated, sanitation systems installed, and small businesses encouraged to move in. Development funds could be better spent funding public transit in existing areas than building new roads over

**Opposite:** Tamil Brahmins created *agrabaram* settlements where rowhouses line the street leading to the temple. The sidewalk is decorated with *kolams* (traditional chalk designs).



open ground. Making use of its fine old building stock, Kochi, a metropolitan area of 1.5 million people, could maximize its urban resources, containing sprawl and protecting nearby agricultural land.

### **Conservation and the “New” City**

Why are Indians, who are otherwise socially conservative and reluctant to break with tradition, so complicit in the erasure of their native patterns of city building? Historic preservation has a limited following in India, and interest in vernacular conservation is even more circumscribed. However,

improving the relevance of the conservation movement could be crucial for Indian cities. The global city of the future need not be uniform; it could be specific to place, reflecting differences of site, culture, and human networks.

Following a trend seen in much of Asia, construction of skyscrapers, apartment blocks, and wide roadways has splintered many older, still viable urban settings. Instead of seeing conservation as a guide for maintaining the integrity of the existing urban fabric, preservationists, government officials, and developers appear oblivious to the value of older urban

centers: preservationists focus on individual buildings (monuments); government officials (including planners) look to their paper schemes, many of which include no survey of extant buildings; and developers follow the glossy trends of superficial modernism, demolishing old buildings at a rapid pace.

Concern for the collectively built and owned city of the last four centuries has dissolved. Speaking about the Indian city in general, one professor noted how “the historic city has been ignored or at best represented as a blob in the city master plan.” And so,



in Kerala, old towns are being transformed by bleak, concrete-framed buildings punctuated by glitzy shopping centers.

The tools of historic preservation were largely developed by Europeans. But the effort in India will need a different focus. Western experts come from a different climate, build with different materials, and have much wealthier home economies. Their conservation plans deal with arcane matters of “which period should be restored,” and “what uses are appropriate.” Such experts often seek to set what (in the West) are reasonable standards for a “proper” restoration. But the sheer quantity of buildings in India requiring assistance indicates the need for a different approach, one involving a simpler set of standards and a strong partnership with local property owners.

Cochin does not have a Taj Mahal—it has a townscape. Local vernacular building is known for quality of execution, simplicity of form, and functionality. Even the famous maharajah’s palace is just an expanded version of the basic Kerala house. When trying to save a nineteenth-century structure with a deteriorating roof, it is essential to stress the importance of providing a new “in-kind” roof. The authorities don’t need to study the “options”; money spent studying and consulting could pay for two new roofs. Projects are needed that are affordable in rupees—not euros. When the same seriousness is devoted to saving a nineteenth-century warehouse as a fourteenth-century temple, it is no surprise that people feel historic preservation is too costly.

It is time for an Indian version of conservation—one that is flexible and innovative and responds to the natural chaos and energy of Indian

cities. When renovating vernacular ensembles, the strict tenets applied to monuments (in India, almost an entombment) should be relaxed. New procedures are needed whose primary purpose is to return buildings to a useful role in the twenty-first-century city.

In India there is a desperate need to provide low-cost housing, shops and schools. Conservation could play an important role. While it is important to understand proportion and appropriate materials, it is imperative to remember that purity has never been part of India’s layered, eclectic urban landscape. To lose integral parts of the city fabric because owners cannot afford, or do not understand, historic preservation is a great tragedy for India. Owners, residents and community activists need to see conservation as a tool for upgrading their neighborhoods, not displacing them. This will only be possible when real projects are instigated and completed.

The media today constantly extols the wonders of a new home, but rarely expounds the beauty of older “vernacular” designs. Likewise, sustainability advocates rarely celebrate the natural cooling techniques of traditional buildings or the ingenious use of local materials. Neither sexy enough for future-oriented youth or affordable enough for the masses, preservation has cut itself off from reality. As a result, few are restoring or expanding old buildings. Even maintenance is rare; a pattern of consistent neglect reigns, from government facilities to two-room homes.

The Indian architectural community is today looking for that which is distinctively Indian. But much current design is clearly Western inspired, creating a new form of imperialism, as damaging to regional cultural assets as colonialism.



Western styles and attitudes do not have to be imported unchanged for Indian cities to become dominant players in the world economy. The passage to global status will be more humane for everyone if revitalization efforts are encouraged that maintain the scale and pattern of neighborhoods like Mattancherry. City dwellers need to have something familiar. Architects need to use the existing patterns as both restraint and inspiration. In the rush forward, Indian conservationists, developers, and government officials must remember to bring everyone along.

All Photos are by the author.

**Above:** The impressive Mattancherry godown reflects its initial use: a storehouse for the wealth of goods that came through Cochin.

**Opposite:** The canals of Cochin provide protected moorage for transport & fishing vessels.