

Conservation of Red Fort: Confronting the Nostalgia Agenda

Sonal Mithal

Tekton

Volume 5, Issue 2, September 2018

pp. 80 - 89



Sonal Mithal holds a PhD in Landscape Architecture from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a master's degree in Architectural Conservation from the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. She is Director and architect-artist at People for Heritage Concern, invested in developing research-based artistic and professional practice

informed by systematic archival inquiry, political critiques, and design environments. Her work prioritizes architectural design as an active medium to contest heritage politics—formalizing historical urbanscapes as sites for informed and engaged user experience. Her art practice explores the palimpsestic nature of history and critiques the archivability as a condition of historicity, by exploiting the tensile and compressive properties of material, and has been exhibited in India, US, and Europe. Her professional work includes architectural conservation, exhibition design, and installations. She also teaches history intensive studios that critique the dominant formalist narrative at the Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University, Ahmedabad.

In this Practice Essay, Sonal Mithal weighs in on the recent controversy of the newly floated scheme of Adopt-a-Heritage by the Government of India. While doing so, she addresses the larger issue of lack of a clear conservation policy of historical monuments in the country in the absence of which credibility of public sector suffers and accountability of private sector remains vague ruling out any innovation or a way forward. She is critical of what she calls nostalgia agenda which comes in the way of bringing heritage closer to the people.

✉sonalmithal@gmail.com

Adoption of Heritage – What is the Fuss?

How long can the practice of heritage conservation and management simply rely on nostalgia and capitalize on sentiments? Contemporary history of conservation practice in India has shown that unless the built heritage becomes a part of the contemporary society, it will remain in oblivion and hence abused. The problem is

Can restoration strategies go beyond an almost eroding nostalgia agenda and activate the monument as a living exhibit of its own time? This question is the central one if one were to unpack and analyze the potential of *Adopt-a-Heritage* scheme.

a lack of adequate interpretive strategies for making the visitor engage with the monument. The monument is always glorified as a symbol of a glorified past—which must not be touched in any manner—intellectually, or otherwise. However, that creates a distance between the visitor and the monument which fails to engage the curiosity and intellect of the visitor. Can restoration strategies go beyond an almost eroding nostalgia agenda and activate the monument as a living exhibit of its own time? This question is the central one if one were to unpack and analyze the potential of *Adopt-a-Heritage* scheme.¹

Adopt-a-Heritage is an initiative of Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with Ministry of Culture and Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to channel public companies and individuals for providing visitor amenities

at heritage sites. The public company or the individual that adopts a site becomes a *Monument Mitra* (friend of the monument) and is responsible for provision and maintenance of amenities. It is mandatory for the *Monument Mitra* to adopt sites of low visibility and low footfall, although adoption of sites with high footfall is optional. The *Monument Mitra* gets visibility in the monument premises as well as the Incredible India website, although the visibility design has to ensure that it does not violate the architecture, and ambience of the site, and is approved by the ASI.

Recent “adoption” of the Red Fort in Delhi, built during the reign of Shahjahan in the 17th century, now a World Heritage Site, by the *Monument Mitra* Dalmia Bharat Limited through the *Adopt-a-Heritage* scheme for achieving Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) goals has caused a backlash from conservation professionals and historians, not to mention the opposition of political parties. However, it is not enough to speculate all that can go wrong with the new model—it is equally necessary to deliberate on how this model may be advantageous for built heritage and what role conservation professionals might play to take proactive charge for careful management of heritage sites.

Art and Culture as CSR Goals by Corporate Houses

Even though government embracing private funding for cultural heritage is a relatively new paradigm, the United Kingdom embraced this as early as 1997. Since 1974, American Express has contributed to preserving more than 500 historic sites

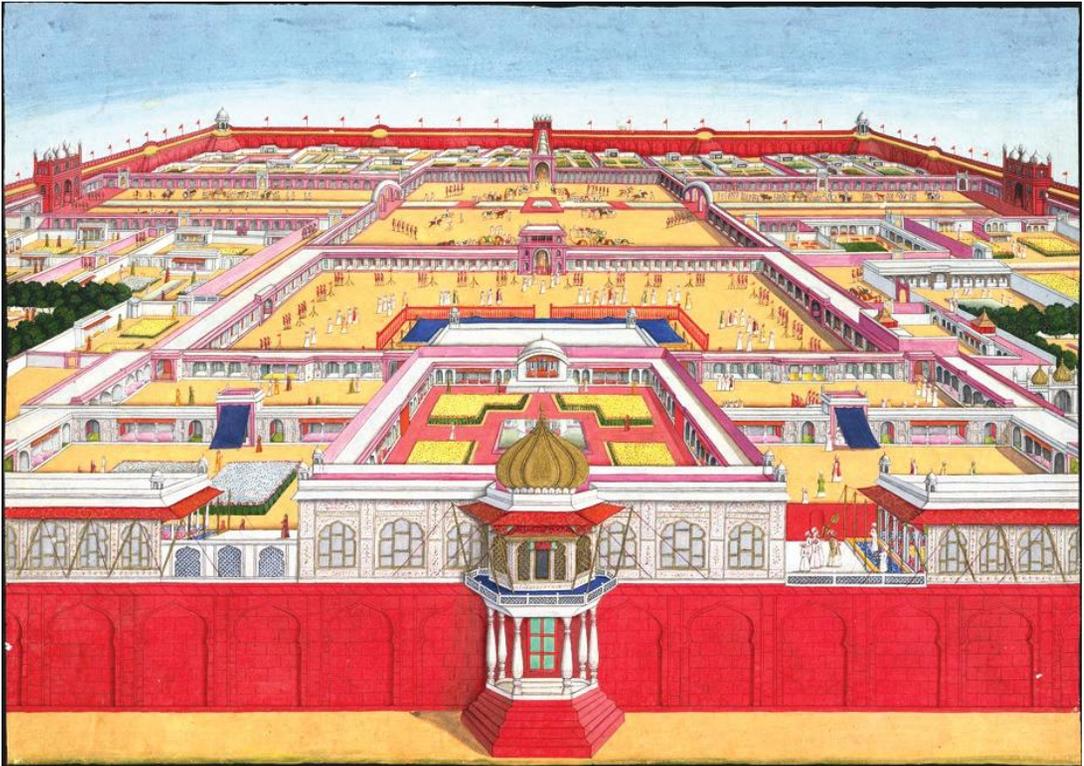


Figure 1: Opaque water-colour rendering of the Red Fort Delhi by a company artist c. 1780
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Fort#/media/File:Red_Fort_Delhi_1785.jpg

including the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in the USA. With the 1993 *Ronchey Law*, Italy opened up the management of museums and individual sites to private companies and went on to conserve the archaeological site of Pompeii. In 2003, France passed the *Loi Aillagon*, which combined private philanthropy with an attractive tax deduction. This law encouraged the concept of CSR that differentiates pure philanthropy from sponsorship and prompts a combination of both. According to a study by cultural management professional Laura Hagood, companies who trade on France's historic expertise and flair, such as Dior, find in Château de Versailles "a natural partner for expressing an exclusive, elegant, and

prestigious brand."² An admiral³ study suggests that corporate philanthropists choose art and culture for three major reasons: attractiveness of the project, CEO's personal conviction, and possibility of a unique communication strategy.

CSR and Heritage Conservation in India

Unlike the examples above where corporate houses channel their CSR towards heritage or culture out of choice; it took India not just to make CSR mandatory but also to incentivize it by way of ensuring brand visibility to activate corporate interest. Prior to that, The National Culture Fund (NCF) was set up as a trust in November 1996, by the Ministry of Human

Resource Development under the Charitable Endowments Act 1890. It was set up to enable institutional and individual support for arts and culture, in partnership with the government. Several corporate houses have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the National Culture Fund (NCF) to restore and maintain heritage sites.⁴ Gas Authority of India Limited for Tughlaqabad Fort in New Delhi, Apeejay Surendra Park Hotels Limited for Jantar Mantar, and Steel Authority of India Limited for Lodhi Tombs are just a few such examples.

The restoration of Humayun's Tomb in Delhi, a World Heritage Site, has also been realized because of a similar MoU signed in 1999 by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Oberoi

Unlike the examples above where corporate houses channel their CSR towards heritage or culture out of choice; it took India not just to make CSR mandatory but also to incentivize it by way of ensuring brand visibility to activate corporate interest.

Group of Hotels. However, their scope of work went beyond provision of basic amenities such as illumination of the site to also include conservation, research documentation, revival of water systems, restoration of garden, and creation of an interpretation centre. On the other hand, the scope of work for the *Monument Mitra* includes provision of public convenience, barrier free movement, illumination, signages, wi-fi, interpretive material such as multi-lingual audio guides, and ensuring cleanliness. In addition, *Adopt-a-Heritage* scheme also aims to facilitate adaptive reuse to encourage night visits, create an interpretation centre, digital

interactive installations, battery operated vehicles, and an advanced tourist flow management system in accordance with the monument footfall and its carrying capacity. A more detailed scope is available in public domain on the *Adopt-a-Heritage* website.

In May 2013, parliamentary standing committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture headed by Sitaram Yechury recommended

By that definition, *Adopt-a-Heritage* falls short of being a PPP as it does not necessarily state the allocation of risks. The contract document centers the decision rights and hence the risks, on one partner—the ASI.

an inclusion of culture and heritage in the Indian Companies bill as a CSR activity.⁵ The panel noted that the corporate sector was not contributing to the NCF as expected, and that they could be incentivized by letting them place plaques on monuments to facilitate image building. Similarly, in 2015, Forbes India published a piece⁶ recognizing the potential of CSR in promoting heritage preservation. It sought to increase the scope of CSR beyond education, water, and poverty alleviation to initiatives on art and culture. This is essentially worth flagging as the *Adopt-a-Heritage* in CSR and incentivizing by allowing corporate image building. However, using the monument for brand visibility is now one of the biggest concerns⁷ among the left-leaning historians. CSR was made mandatory in April 2014 with an amendment to *The Company Act 2013*. With that amendment, companies to which CSR is applicable are required to spend at least 2% of average net profit towards CSR goals.

This requirement rules out any possibility of financial bidding in any *Adopt-a-Heritage* scheme as speculated by many heritage enthusiasts.⁸

***Adopt-a-Heritage* Scheme, Accountability and Privatisation Debate**

A research funded by Getty Conservation Institute in 2014 pointed out that all forms of PPPs are transactional and fundamentally focus on sharing resources, responsibilities, and risk. By that definition, *Adopt-a-Heritage* falls short of being a PPP as it does not necessarily state the allocation of risks.⁹ The contract

***Adopt-a-Heritage* is clearly not a privatization model as the public sector is responsible for maintaining accountability. Hence, sentimental outcries such as “we just sold the Red Fort” seem more like uninformed sensationalism than substantiated concern.**

document¹⁰ centers the decision rights and hence the risks, on one partner—the ASI. For example, the Indemnity Clause of the MoU holds the *Monument Mitra* immune against any loss, costs, and expenses of any claims made by the ASI. This makes ASI solely responsible for quality control, expense management, and performance check. Hence, the partnership component of the PPP appears to be rather weak and the model appears to be a mere budget enhancement scheme.

The Getty research, however, also points out that PPPs are not the same as privatization. A PPP contract avoids privatization by ensuring that the public sector maintains long-term bottom-line accountability. *Adopt-a-Heritage* is clearly not a privatization model as the

public sector is responsible for maintaining accountability. Hence, sentimental outcries such as “we just sold the Red Fort”¹¹ seem

If the ASI itself has been lacking in taking informed decisions regarding conservation work, on what basis will it approve corporate conservation? In this context, it is even more urgent to demand and ensure transparency of conservation parameters set by the ASI.

more like uninformed sensationalism than substantiated concern.

Credibility of the Public Sector

Critics ask why the state can't take care of the Red Fort.¹² In this case, ASI, which represents the state has earned severe flak for its insensitive restoration work at the Red Fort. A few concerned architects with the help of a senior advocate petitioned to the Supreme Court and sought stay of the work in 2003.¹³ Following which the ASI appointed a private conservation firm to prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP), and with the Supreme Court approval began the restoration work in 2010. If the ASI itself has been lacking in taking informed decisions regarding conservation work, on what basis will it approve corporate conservation? In this context, it is even more urgent to demand and ensure transparency of conservation parameters set by the ASI.

Measures Needed to Strengthen *Adopt-a-Heritage* Model

To strengthen the model and ensure risk reduction for efficient conservation work, there are four major essentials: clarity from



Figure 2: Royal apartments within the Red Fort complex whose preservation and upkeep under the aegis of the ASI has received a lot of criticism. Photo credit: Smita Dalvi

the ASI about what needs conserving, by following which conservation standards, what constitutes appropriate change; certainty

There is no document in general for the *Adopt-a-Heritage* model and specifically for the Red Fort, in public domain or in the conservation discourse in India that clearly outlines what needs conservation.

about the regulatory framework; consistency in the application of the regulations; and open communication between the ASI and *Monument Mitra*.

There is no document in general for the *Adopt-a-Heritage* model and specifically for the Red Fort, in public domain or in the conservation discourse in India that clearly outlines what needs conservation. The criteria are unclear and rely on age, uniqueness, and imageability quotient.¹⁴ This makes the discourse more centered on connoisseurship rather than be scientific. Connoisseurship itself is questionable, because it brings up the question

of who decides what is worthy. Is the ASI the principal legitimate connoisseur, or is it the conservation architect or the historian who might sit on the panel? But, a larger concern here is that connoisseurship outlined by art historian Alois Reigl¹⁵ which became basis for formulating the World Heritage criteria, amplifies the nostalgia rhetoric. It distances the monument as historical evidence far away from the people who end up looking at it from the connoisseur's lens.

Secondly, have any standards been framed which guide the *Monument Mitra* while undertaking conservation process? If they have not been framed, who will frame them, and what will be the basis of framing them? In the absence of such standards, the quality assurance of "sensitive conservation" is under the threat of being at the discretion of the ASI, again pointing to an insufficient connoisseur model.

Thirdly, it is necessary to outline appropriate level of change within the conservation work, especially if the project intends to bring in

accessibility and amenities. It is imperative to qualify certainty of regulatory framework in terms of processes that need to be followed and

Conservation efforts world-wide are going beyond the mere restoration and revival of monuments that have gone into disrepair to also re-imagine newer ways of engaging people with history.

the time it would take for the regulatory body to take action making both sides accountable. Ensuring effective and open communication between ASI and *Monument Mitra* regarding all of the above is crucial. However, it still remains to be known that what norms and expectations have been established for a clear communication, without relying only on mutual goodwill.

Where is the Yardstick for Sensitivity?

For “sensitive” interventions at the site, *Adopt-a-Heritage* document outlines the following guidelines:

- Protection of cultural significance of heritage site as a priority
- Accessibility as a historical layer of heritage to meet the contemporary needs
- Reversibility of design solutions
- Visitor movement and management as key to enhance experience
- Universal design principles of signage
- Minimizing environmental pollution

These criteria even though well intentioned do not specify the yardstick to measure “sensitivity,” and “enhanced experience for visitors.” Secondly, does “reversibility” mean that all interventions must be possible to undo and the site should be able to return

to its original state? In that case, has the “original state” been identified? The insertion of “accessibility” as a historical layer is commendable—implying a valorization of present day intervention as a necessary part of history. However, will this layer’s identity feature in the “reversibility” agenda?

Conservation Needs Going Beyond the Nostalgia Agenda

Conservation efforts world-wide are going beyond the mere restoration and revival of monuments that have gone into disrepair to also re-imagine newer ways of engaging people with history. Methods of interactive installations, integrating VR technology, history apps, library apps, crowd sourcing, Google Open Heritage, are some of the many examples that artists, architects, and conservation professionals are experimenting and in the process, addressing three major concerns.

Firstly, many such approaches do not incur any physical harm to the structure. Secondly, such approaches acknowledge the decay of a structure to be an equally legitimate stage in the life of a monument. They consider the long standing *authenticity* argument in conservation discourse to be insufficient, and hence question the legitimacy of restoring to authentic form. They consider the act of restoration-to-original form an act of intervention itself. They offer creative ways of invoking history all the while making the structure’s ruinous condition visible, sometimes even celebrating that.

Thirdly, such approaches reduce the distance between the visitor and the monument by erasing the monumentality and making the building a means of learning history. They activate the imagination of the user.

One of the expected outcomes of the proposed adoption scheme is an “overall tourism sector perception.” This is not to be confused with increase in tourism as a solely economic agenda. Here is an opportunity to facilitate a change in the way tourism is perceived in India—from being a visit to an abandoned site having deficient amenities (toilets and drinking water facilities) where people take pride in etching their names as a mark of immortality, to a lively place of engagement with the monument as the archive where they learn about the site by engaging with the building itself. Would the “sensitivity” agenda incorporate developing that knowledge base for visitors, making the monument a living exhibit of its own time that can arouse the visitors’ curiosity and interest? Hopefully, the Vision Document to be submitted by the *Monument Mitras* will have answers to these questions. ■

Notes:

¹ Adopt-a-Heritage official webpage. Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <http://adoptaheritage.in/>

² Hagood, Laura Brower. (2016) *A Paradigm Change: The Case for Private Philanthropy in the Arts in Germany, the Netherlands, and France*. Bosch XXXI.

³ A French association promoting corporate philanthropic engagement.

⁴ MoU executed with the NCF. Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from http://ncf.nic.in/ncf_role_mou.htm

⁵ The Hindu Business Line. (May 03, 2013) “Include ‘culture and heritage’ in CSR list, says House panel.” Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <https://>

www.thehindubusinessline.com/companies/include-culture-and-heritage-in-csr-list-says-house-panel/article23113551.ece

⁶ Forbes India. (July 31, 2015) “Preserving heritage, still an alien CSR concept.” Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <http://www.forbesindia.com/blog/the-good-company/preserving-heritage-still-an-alien-csr-concept/>

⁷ Hashmi, Sohail. (April 30, 2018) “Will Red Fort Become Dalmia Red Fort?” Indian Express. Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/will-red-fort-become-dalmia-red-fort-5156808/>

⁸ Hashmi, Sohail. (May 6, 2018) “Red Fort Branding: To The Lowest Bidder?” India Legal. Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <http://www.indialegalive.com/did-you-know-facts-about-news/perspective-news/red-fort-branding-to-the-lowest-bidder-47988>

⁹ Macdonald, Susan and Caroline Cheong. (2014) *The Role of Public-Private Partnerships and the Third Sector in Conserving Heritage Buildings, Sites, and Historic Urban Areas*. The Getty Conservation Institute.

¹⁰ Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture, ASI, and Dalmia Bharat Limited (April 13, 2018). *Memorandum of Understanding*. Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <http://www.adoptaheritage.in/moupdf/Red%20%20Fort%20MoU.pdf>

¹¹ The Free Press Journal. (April 29, 2018) “Mitron, we just ‘sold’ the Red Fort!” Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <http://www.freepressjournal.in/india/mitron-we-just-sold-the-red-fort/1267092>

¹² The Financial Express. (April 29, 2018) “Why can’t Centre take care of Red Fort: West Bengal CM

Mamata Banerjee.” Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/why-cant-centre-take-care-of-red-fort-west-bengal-cm-mamata-banerjee/1149284/>

¹³ The Hindu. (November 29, 2003) “Red Fort renovation work suspended, Centre tells Supreme Court.” Retrieved on June 9, 2018 from <http://www.thehindu.com/2003/11/29/stories/2003112904511200.htm>

¹⁴ Landmarks—usually easily identifiable physical objects in the urban landscape—contribute to the imageability of a place. Hence, their distinguishing factor is necessarily visual in nature. This idea has been furthered by urbanist Kevin Lynch in his 1960 book, *The Image of the City*.

¹⁵ Riegl, Alois. (1996) “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and Its Development.” In *Historical and Philosophical Issues on the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, 69-82. Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Conservation Institute. Originally published as *Der moderne Denkmalkultus, sein Wesen, seine Entstehung* (Wien: W. Braumüller, 1903).

