

REVITALIZATION OF HISTORIC TEMPLE PRECINCTS IN URBAN CORE AREAS – A SOCIO-CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract. Urban revitalization is a viable approach to revive historic temple precincts which imbibe physical, social and cultural aspects of not only bygone times but the present, woven seamlessly into the precinct's functioning, offering a rich cultural milieu. This paper discusses the case of one such revitalization project of the 'Tali Temple Tank Precinct' in Calicut City, Kerala; to demonstrate the value added to society through such initiatives. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to gauge socio-cultural factors contributing to perceptions of success and failure of the project. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 20 key stakeholders within the temple tank precinct. Thematic analysis of responses suggests that a relatively high percentage of respondents appreciate the revitalization, as it contributes to maintaining the cultural character and integrity of the temple heritage precinct while solving societal challenges and issues. The study underscores the need for community stakeholder participation during developmental stages of the project, and to carry out subsequent community perception assessments. This will allow successes or failures to be monitored and measured for sustainable development or remedial interventions and improvements. Such a cyclic process of management for the urban revitalization of sacred precincts will enable it to be genuinely appreciated and successful.

Key words: urban heritage, urban conservation, cultural heritage, stakeholder participation, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Historic urban precincts are a repository of invaluable knowledge systems imbued with values that serve as an inimitable resource for an urban area (UNESCO, 2011). Cultural heritage assets in urban precincts embrace the potential to connect people with their past, build understanding among communities through shared experiences, enrich the quality of life, and serve as drivers for achieving social, economic and equitable sustainable development goals (Figueiredo, 2014; Zancheti and Hidaka, 2011). These urban spaces serve as a palimpsest through time, undergoing unremitting alterations to meet surging demands (Abdurahiman and Kasthurba, 2022; Labadi and Logan, 2015; Udejaja *et al.*, 2020). Rather than approaching the historical heritage site in urban cores as a resourceful asset for future generations (Steinberg, 1996), urban revitalization proposals in developing countries like India see these sites as a deterrent to innovation and change (Udejaja *et al.*, 2020).

Even in cases where heritage conservation is practiced, the heritage asset is often conserved or protected in isolation while neglecting the benefits they can accrue if integrated into the urban fabric and the community at large. Hence, they fail in the upkeep and seldom create a sense of ownership and belongingness from the communities living there. In recent years, the importance of urban conservation has gained renewed national and international attention, with a demand for sensitive transformations while trying to develop historic precincts within urban areas. It is vital that revitalization ought to be seen as a sustainable urban conservation approach through sensitive

utilization of urban heritage assets as development resources. Thus revitalization projects in historic urban areas incorporate interventions that upgrade the urban infrastructure and amenities, improve the socio-economic and cultural fabric, enhance the quality of life, and solve social issues while seldom tampering with the historic built fabric (Abdurahiman *et al.*, 2022; Grazuleviciute-Vileniske and Urbonas, 2014; Licciardi and Amirtahmasebi, 2012; Serageldin and Martin-Brown, 1999).

Community participation and public perception are vital to the success of these efforts for arriving at contextual strategies for successes and minimizing failures. However, a majority of the studies are simply focused on the project itself, i.e. the transformation of the built form or landscape and not on analyzing the perceptions of the community members living in and around the historic precinct. This paper aims to fill this gap by first presenting the 'Tali Temple Tank Precinct' revitalization project in Kozhikode City in the State of Kerala, India, and then discussing findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with stakeholders about their perceptions of the success/ failure of the project. The study aims to demonstrate the value added to society through such qualitative perception studies of historic precinct revitalization efforts in urban cores.

2. Urban revitalization

There are two broad approaches to urban revitalization of urban public spaces in historic precincts- one being a place-centric approach and the other being a people-centric approach. The former aims at improving the overall quality and performance of an urban area, not just

physically, but socially, economically, and environmentally, while the latter focusses on addressing the community needs primarily (De la Roca *et al.*, 2017; Ramlee *et al.*, 2015). The scope of revitalization projects varies with the intention such as infrastructural upgradation, provision of urban amenities, revamping streetscapes, or largescale redevelopment proposals. Urban revitalization is often interchangeably referred to as regeneration, rehabilitation, refurbishment, renewal and redevelopment (Spandou *et al.*, 2010). The main intention of urban regeneration is to revive the core urban area by restoring commercial activity and provide strategies and interventions that can enhance the environmental quality. Revitalization projects are often focused on beautifying the deprived regions of an urban area, to attract the upper class and tourists and reduce the 'feel of poverty' by cutting down squatter settlements (Tatian *et al.*, 2012), rather than seeing these heritage assets of economic value or a boost to the community (Evans *et al.*, 2016).

Conservation goes along with revitalization and is considered as an approach that incorporates physical interventions, sensitively to ensure a continuum in the heritage fabric (Baroldin and Din, 2018; Samadi and Yunus, 2012). Recently, the significance of multi-disciplinary and integrative planning is reflected while undergoing urban conservation and regeneration proposals (Peerapun, 2012). Revitalization proposal components determine the unique urban experience based on the treatment of various urban elements that contribute towards the character of the urban space (Zancheti *et al.*, 2006). But there appears to be a lack of understanding and awareness among the public regarding the potential for utilizing local heritage assets as resources

to enhance and add quality to urban environment (Grefe, 2004).

3. Public perception and heritage conservation

The Faro Convention of 2005, a 'framework convention' suggested that member States devise their own strategies for cultural heritage preservation according to their national norms and institutional frameworks. It urged people to recognize that objects and places are not, in themselves, what is important about cultural heritage. They are important because of the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent (Fojut, 2018). The Faro convention underscored the responsibility of public participation, either as an individual or as a collective, in cultural heritage management (Fojut, 2018). For effective heritage conservation and management, seeking and understanding public perceptions about the project is likely to evoke a sense of shared responsibility and commitment (Aas *et al.*, 2005).

Public perceptions can be defined as a collective summation of views and opinions obtained from random individuals of a random group in the public domain, collected over a specified period for a specific purpose, through a formulated public survey (Dowler *et al.*, 2006). The public can help in formulating context-specific, pragmatic solutions and decisions through knowledge sharing (UNESCO, 2011) for sensitive, sustainable development in historic urban areas (Günaydin and Yücekaya, 2020; Moroke *et al.*, 2019). Bearing in mind the present situation of the poor management and lack of vision in historic urban precincts, understanding the public's perception can be a fundamental step in identifying critical issues and needs within the social,

cultural, and economic environment of the residents or community at large.

4. Temple precincts and sacred landscapes

Temple complexes in Kerala are used for religious Hindu services and worship as well as serving community needs. Hence, a portion of the temple complex includes spaces for social gatherings such as marriages, dance and music classes, cultural processions and festivals, and water tanks for cleansing and sanctifying oneself before prayer. Larger temple precincts in Kerala are likely to include a number of temple buildings for various deities and paths for circumambulation, residential quarters of the priests and temple management authorities, commercial streets/ processional pathways, sacred groves and water bodies. The natural entities such as the temple ponds (also known as "chira") and sacred groves (also known as "kaav"), with protected medicinal species of plants and trees, constitute the natural landscape of the temple environs. They collectively enhance the ecological aspects of the area and promote the spiritual satisfaction of the believers. The regular upkeep and maintenance of these temple complexes have been possible through offerings made by the local community members with great reverence, enthusiasm and dedication throughout the year.

Another feature of Kerala temples is a manmade temple tank just outside the main temple complex as part of the precinct. The water provides a cooling effect during very hot summers, and functions as an aquifer to recharge the nearby wells and retain ground water levels. The shade and fresh air provided by the sacred trees and shrubs around the temple create a peaceful environment

inspiring calmness, away from the bustle of a busy urban city core. Unfortunately, with rapid urbanization and scarcity of resources for the upkeep of the landscape, many temple precincts have been neglected and are in a state of decay and blight.

Acknowledging the myriad benefits of these religious heritage landscapes, their protection and revitalization as part of the urban core redevelopment is worthwhile. Retaining their character and espousing their cultural meanings which uphold stories of past glory and traditions of the region is vital for sustainable conservation and development of the region. They are the keepers of local aesthetic, historic, scientific and social values from the past to the present, and future generations, and as such invaluable.

5. The Kozhikode Tali temple tank revitalization project

The Tali temple tank precinct represents one of the oldest and most significant heritage sites of Kozhikode. It reminds us of the life and polity of the Zamorins, the mighty rulers of Kozhikode who first settled here in 1000 A.D. (Ayyar, 1976). It also reflects the historical, social, cultural, aesthetic and technical developments that the city has undergone over the past century or more. Traditional rituals embodied in the annual cultural festival called the "Revathi Pattathanam" and monthly and biannual temple festivals associated with the Hindu calendar are held here. This area was used to host various performing arts and social activities in addition to ritualistic prayer and religious festivals. It continues as the only public space which retains the culture and memories of the bygone era of Zamorin rule in Calicut. Fig. 1 shows

an aerial view of the Tali temple complex locating the temple tank on the north side.



Fig. 1. Aerial view of the Tali temple complex (Source: Authors).

The 21st Century saw the Tali Temple Tank historic precinct witnessing threats due to rapid commercialization and lack of awareness about heritage. Tali chira which forms the central focus of the settlement was in a much neglected state. Rules and legislation for the upkeep of the heritage and grandeur were systematically ignored and lacked monitoring. Issues of environmental degradation due to waste water disposal into the tank, clogged rainwater drains, use by drug addicts, and vehicular congestion needed to be addressed urgently. Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 show how the Tali Temple Tank was before and after the revitalization respectively.



Fig. 2. Tali chira before revitalization (Source: Authors).



Fig. 3. Tali chira after revitalization (Source: Authors).

The Kozhikode Tali chira (temple tank) precinct revitalization project was initiated in 2019 and was completed in 2021 amidst the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project was conceptualized and designed by the Department of Architecture and Planning at the National Institute of Technology, Calicut, and executed by the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC) and overseen by Nirmithi Kendra. It was completed at a cost of ₹2 crore, and was partially funded by the DTPC and the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). The project aimed at reviving the cultural landscape of the temple tank precinct with minimal interventions, by simultaneously conserving the natural heritage, and introducing an educational component through open air mural panels that help raise the awareness of the public of all ages, to the history of the Zamorins. Fig. 4 shows the final layout of the revitalization proposal.

The most significant intervention to the area is the Zamorin Memorial Concourse or the Zamorin pavilion, located on the east side of the tank (Fig. 5). It includes eight relief murals to recall the events of the Zamorin era and is part of a living museum. It aims at educating and creating awareness in the present and

future generations regarding the history and heritage of the Zamorins.

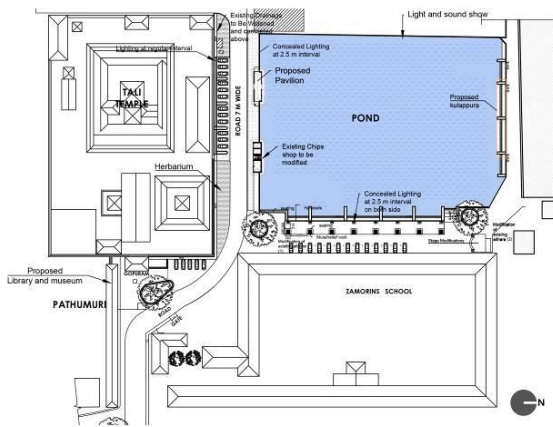


Fig. 4. Layout of revitalization design proposal (Source: Authors).



Fig. 6. Relief mural art with landscaped seating facilities (Source: Authors).



Fig. 5. Layout of revitalization design proposal (Source: Authors).



Fig. 7. The shelter pavilion on the south side of the tank (Source: Authors).

Each relief mural depicts a particular event related to the life of the Zamorins and the significance of the Tali temple in it. The series of events depicted as relief murals as one walks from the South to the North of the pavilion creates a pictorial narration. Seating facilities for the visitors have also been provided along with landscape detailing and ambient lighting (Fig. 6).

A longer rectangular covered pavilion with a traditional hipped roof has been constructed on the South side of the tank as a space for visitors to rest (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Interior of the shelter pavilion (Source: Authors).

The north side of the tank is designed as a public bath-house (also known as "kullapura") with two segregated sections for women and men to afford privacy (Fig.

9). Public signage, maps and display boards have also been incorporated in the design and a stage redesigned at the rear end of the Zamorin pavilion.



Fig. 9. Bath-house (Source: Authors).



Fig. 10. Traditional design elements (Source: Authors).

The material palette for the architectural and landscape features were carefully

chosen to complement the features of the Tali temple and its surrounds (Fig. 10). All the spaces around fully grown old banyan trees (“Alatharas”) have been conserved and incorporated into the design as social spaces, by adding a circular platform below them to allow visitors to relax and enjoy their shade (Fig. 11). An herb garden which includes Neem, Asoka and Thulsi herbs, have also been planted along the street side abutting the temple as part of the design intervention.

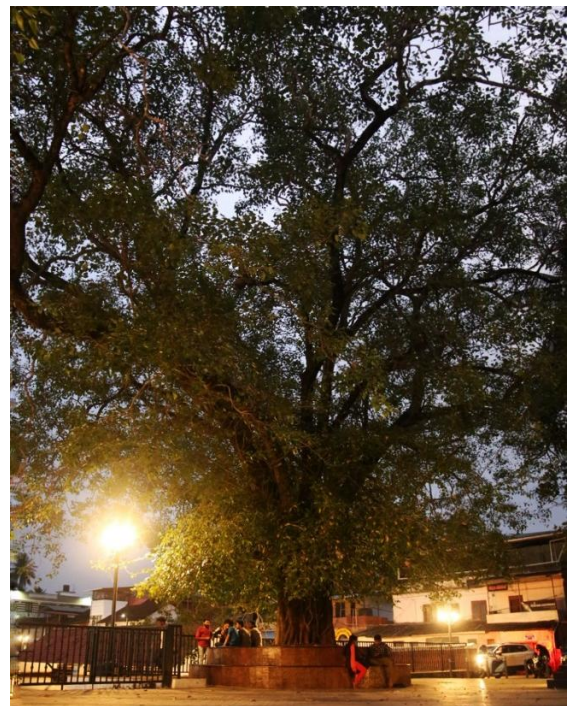


Fig. 11. Preserved Banyan tree (Source: Authors).

6. Methodology

After completing the project built in 2021, in March 2022, a mixed-methods approach was adopted to gauge public perceptions about this revitalization project. First, an extensive review of news media reports, blog posts and publications in English and Malayalam was conducted. Subsequently, a semi-structured survey instrument was designed based on the commissioned project guidelines. In addition to demographic questions, the survey questions were designed to gather

information regarding the respondent's awareness of the history and heritage of the Tali temple precinct area; whether they believed the repair and revitalization project was necessary and, if so, why or why not; their opinions regarding the completed revitalization project and its impact on their lives, for the better or worse; and finally, any additional viewpoints they wanted to share.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the temple tank precinct in Malayalam and were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed to English. Additionally, observations were noted on paper and photographs were taken to further understand and explain the responses. A total of 20 people were shortlisted from diverse professional backgrounds, levels of education, age and gender. The sample was identified from a stakeholder meeting conducted during the initiation of the revitalization project, whom were identified to having a shared common opinion among a larger group. The perceptions of different stakeholders and their subjective viewpoints were collected, condensed and discussed.

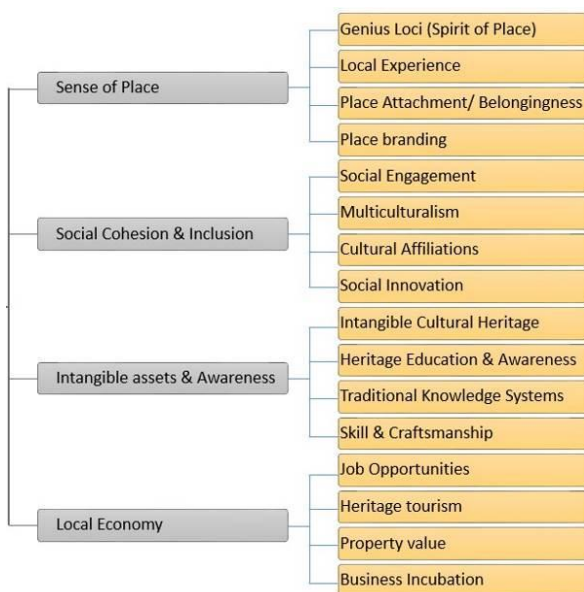


Fig. 12. Socio-cultural aspect (Source: Authors).

6.1. Socio-cultural aspect

The questionnaire survey was framed and respondents were interviewed in a manner to gather the impact of the revitalization project from a socio-cultural perspective. This focuses on criteria: (a) sense of place, (b) social cohesion & inclusion, (c) intangible assets and awareness, and (d) local economy. The criteria and sub-criteria that derived the questionnaire are shown in Fig. 12.

7. Analysis and findings

The interview sessions provided the information which could be refined in order to draw key themes from the dialogue. A general overview of the survey findings based on the responses has been presented. In general, all the respondents were excited about the revitalization project and believed the precinct's cultural heritage added value to the area. Of the respondents' a majority were men (75%) ranging in age from 30 to 70 years and included the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), temple authorities, community residents, and the general public as tourists, shopkeepers, and auto-rickshaw drivers. The respondents commented on the neglected state of the temple tank and the presence of anti-social elements like drug addicts, open defecation and public nuisance around the tank before the revitalization project, and how women were fearful of walking around the tank even during the daytime. All the respondents appreciated the project's positive impact on improving the quality of the space and their life, and one respondent enthusiastically remarked that we are now living in a "beautiful, charming heritage area" and believe that it contributes to the quality of life.

7.1. Interview responses

7.1.1. Active uses of spaces

Interview respondents noted that the covered seating area pavilion (also known as “mandapa”) was very well utilized and enjoyed by visitors and area residents alike. Another respondent noted that both men and women have started to use the area for jogging and exercises from as early as 5:30 am, and a good number of visitors, including devotees, college students, the elderly and other professionals, can be seen relaxing after office hours in the evening, until around 9:30 pm. He added that visitors were also using the area for wedding albums taken by professional photographers, with the permission of temple authorities. The responses reflect the positive impact of the project with the public spaces being accessible and actively engaged by all user groups.

7.1.2. Limited use challenges

One respondent noted that people hesitate to occupy the seating area during the daytime (from 11 am to 4 pm) due to the heat and lack of shade from trees. Another respondent mentioned that non-Hindu visitors, especially ladies, are reluctant to use the area as it is associated with a Hindu temple but was quick to add that this is not a negative judgement. He noted that the businesses that now operate in the precinct have to attract tourists and locals to spend time and money within the area and that businesses are bound to change over time. All the shopkeepers expressed concerns that local businesses around the temple precinct area were not very successful as their customers remained the same old residents from the area. They hoped that with the revitalization, their customer base would grow from

visitors who come to experience the heritage landscape and spend money at the local establishments. Shopkeepers emphasized the significance of reviving the dilapidated buildings owned by temple authorities in front of the temple as well and suggested that those can be developed for commercial purposes. Moreover, they felt that businesses could also benefit from commercial and heritage-related festivals. Though the project has created a fresh aura to the precinct, certain challenges do persist within certain users due to preconceived notions of the area and its functionality.

7.1.3. Increase in number of devotees

Responses from the Tali temple authorities were also positive. They noted an increase in the number of visitors to the temple this year, resulting in increased income from devotees' offerings during the Shivaratri festival. Auto-rickshaw drivers who parked in front of the temple commented that they were also benefitting from the revival of the temple precinct. However, authorities from other temples surrounding the tank (Fig. 13) mentioned that only three sides of the tank had been considered under the project, and no attempts had been made by the Government and tourism council agencies to clean up their side of the tank, which remains neglected (Fig. 14).



Fig. 13. Sree Ganapathi temple (Source: Authors).

Table 1. Key themes (Source: Authors).

Respondent Groups	No. of Respondents	Key Theme (success)	Key Theme (failure)
Residents	3	Improved quality of space for living/ safe place for women	Nil
Shopkeepers	4	Improved quality of space for commercial activity	No improvement in business / Not much commercial establishment happed around
Temple authorities	3	Improved quality of temple precinct/ Increase in devotees/ temple income	No development happened for the nearby temples
Visitors	4	Good ambience created/ Awareness about the heritage value	Not used during daytime (11 am to 4 pm)
District Tourism Promotion Council/ Government authority	3	Well maintained/ imparted awareness to the public	Nil
Auto-rickshaw drivers	3	Improvement in business	Nil



Fig. 14. Neglected areas on the northern side (Source: Authors).

7.1.4. Public involvement

The DTTC members stated that public involvement plays a crucial role in heritage conservation initiatives, and suggested that the residents and temple authorities take responsibility to improve their facades in a complementary way, so as to reflect the heritage value being preserved in connection with the revival process. The DTTC officials believed that continuity is based on the idea of moving into the future while valuing and honoring a past that reflects the buildings and culture of its times. Hence, the project was started with the consent of

residents and other public from the area, to get a real sense of what needs to be done at the ground level. In addition, they were happy to impart heritage awareness and environmental values to the public with this project. They added that the temple authorities were extremely satisfied with the project, and the maintenance of the temple tank precinct is being carried out through an agreement with them. However, few respondents were unaware of the project and were not included in the decision-making process. One of them emphasized that the local residents want to be aware of what is happening in their communities, and this can be done by engaging the public as much as possible.

Key themes were drawn out from the qualitative comments made by the respondents that provide a profile and summary of the participant responses, as shown in Table 1.

8. Discussions and conclusions

The majority of the respondents perceived a positive attitude towards the revitalization project. The interview

survey was chosen to attain critical views from a socio-cultural perspective, which were more personal and subjective. The survey pointed out that the revitalization project has positively impacted community cohesion and inclusion in socio-cultural activities. The project has inspired residents and visitors alike to engage with the space actively, and there is evidence of a sense of place and belongingness among them. This revitalization is likely to start a ripple effect of other redevelopment projects, including repairing and clearing up other dilapidated buildings in the area, thus attracting new commercial activities and increasing the economic benefits accrued. The project successfully builds awareness in the public of their history through installations, creating a sense of continuity with the past and giving them a sense of comfort. However, there were also suggestions to improve the public's participation since the inception of such projects and facilitate opportunities for the economic growth of businesses. Public consultation is one of the critical elements in planning, and even though public discussion and stakeholder inputs may slow the process, it results in better framing of contextual policies. Inviting community stakeholder participation during the developmental stages of such heritage conservation projects is vital. These need to be followed up with community perception studies after the rebuild to enable successes and failures to be monitored for sustainable maintenance or remedial interventions and improvements, respectively. Such a cyclic process of management for urban revitalization of sacred precincts will enable it to be truly appreciated and succeed. A critical review of the community would be a valuable input for the area's future development. Revitalization can only be successful in so

far as it has community support, hence, a worthwhile endeavor.

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