

Continuity and Change in Santhusapete

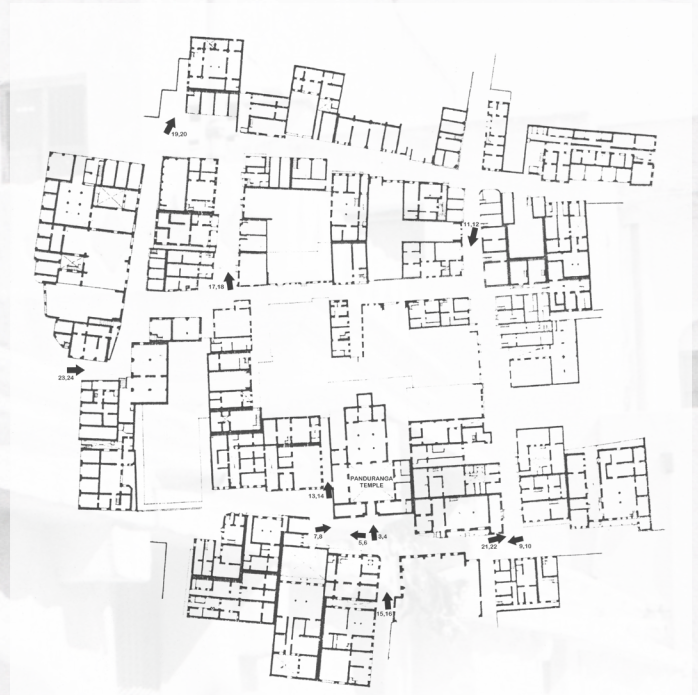
Dinesh Rao

Pre-liberalisation Bengaluru was a very different city, with no mobile phones, internet, and software industry. There were no pubs, big-box retail, malls, or home delivery. The Pete was where we went for clothes, footwear, appliances, or anything besides daily groceries.

Everyone walked, cycled, or took the bus. The privileged few had scooters or cars. Santhusapete, where I took these pictures in 1987, was traditionally a silk-weaving community, with a commercial periphery, and a residential core, arrayed around the Sri Panduranga Vittala temple. Buildings were one or two stories tall, with lime-plastered brick walls, Madras-terraced or Mangalore-tiled roofs. Wooden or cast-iron columned verandas identified the older structures. Social life was in the streets, and tight-knit communities ensured safety and security.

Revisiting this precinct thirty-five years later in 2022, I find that changes are simultaneously very little and very extensive. Trying to identify structures for this 'before' and 'after' pairing was difficult, and the surprising constants proved to be locations of electrical junction boxes, lamp posts, and the parking of garbage handcarts.

Building lines are largely intact, but most are now concrete-framed structures of three to six floors. Streams of two-wheelers and three-wheelers flow through the lanes, and once clear communal spaces are now stagnant pools of parked vehicles, and concrete has replaced the granite flagstones. It remains a well-integrated society with Hindus, Jains and Muslims, Kannadigas, Marwaris and Gujaratis, but there is a lot of flux too, and few of the older residents remain. It is demonstrably a vibrant, well-socialised, harmonious and prosperous piece of urbanity.





The iconic Anand Bhavan building remains on the main Chickpet road, a constant landmark, though the lodge has moved elsewhere. Some shops have stayed on, with newer, larger back-lit graphics & signage. The ornamental balustrades & metal grillwork are mostly gone, with 'modernisation' taking the forms of sliding windows & aircon.



Sri Panduranga Vittala temple is unrecognisable, in contrast. A simple, stucco-finished oasis of white calm at the heart of Santhushapete has been replaced by vast slabs of dressed granite, carved panels, and polished teakwood. The post-and-beam granite structure is covered up with a 'classical' layered plinth, wall and entablature, with elaborate plinth, *chajja* (sunshade) and parapet mouldings. Prosperity and faith go hand in hand.

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This little pocket of urban space housed the shelter for the temple chariot, a doctor's clinic, and the entrance to the priest's house, buffered with a small courtyard. *Jaglis* (raised platform) served as the doctor's waiting room. Now it is just a space for the innumerable two-wheelers. Mannequins add a touch of colour, though.

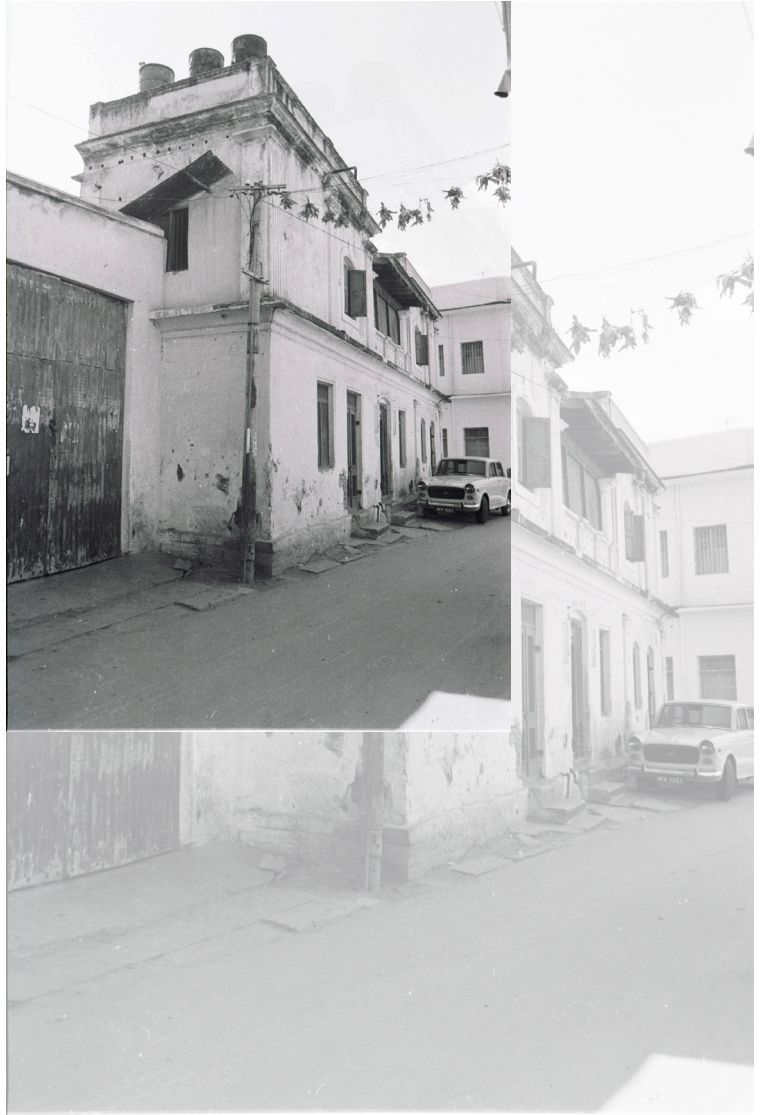


The original blank peripheral walls of the temple created a sense of mystery that was resolved when one saw the entrance, with the courtyard and *sthamba* (flag post) beyond. Now, the temple announces its presence loudly and clearly. The absence of the plinth was an invitation to enter and walk on the cool flagstones inside, while the new, raised entrance is a perceptual hurdle, to be humbly negotiated.





This once grand mansion, opposite the temple, now stands abandoned. Absentee owners and legal disputes cause holes in the urban fabric. Whenever these are infilled, the new buildings will still respect the building lines and the integrity of urban space, however different their architectural expression and material may be.



In less frenetic times, the local tea stall was an important place – meeting point, discussion room, bonding and sharing for the men of the neighbourhood. News, viewpoints, advice and help were sought and found here. Now a lack of time, mobile phones and the internet have made these irrelevant and unsustainable. Here, the typology of shop/residence has replaced the local institution.



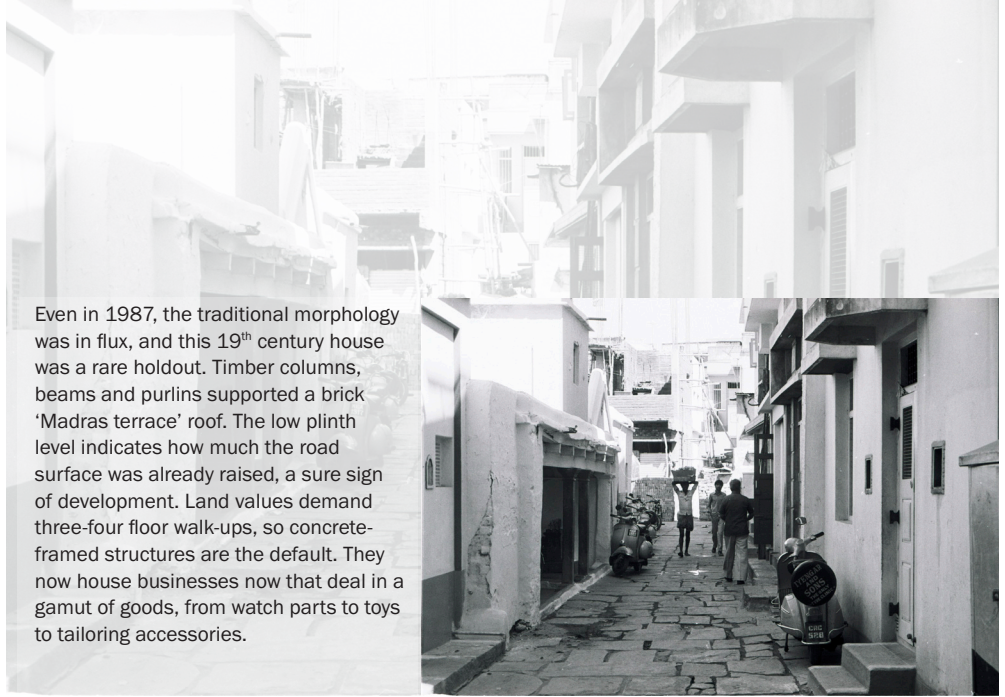


Traditionally, the 'space' of the house extended into the street or lane, and the *jagli* or bench was a legitimate expression of this. Used for sunlight and socialising, drying *papads* or hair, this cultural signature is dying. New forms of communication and entertainment, new notions of privacy, propriety and property lines, communities that are dispersing and dissolving, have confined life to the interiors. Oh, and pollution too.

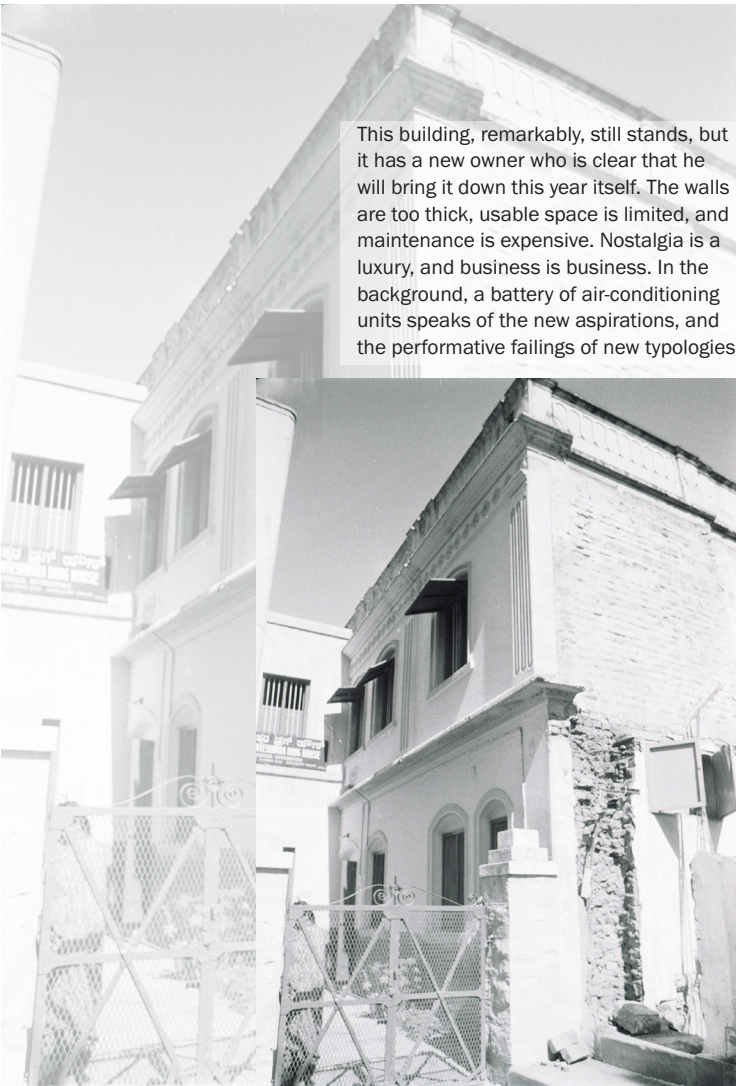


Increasing land values, extended families, and suburban aspirations see residences being converted into shops and godowns. Privacy needs now irrelevant, windows are larger, to invite retail traffic. The 'clickety-clack' of looms is gone forever.



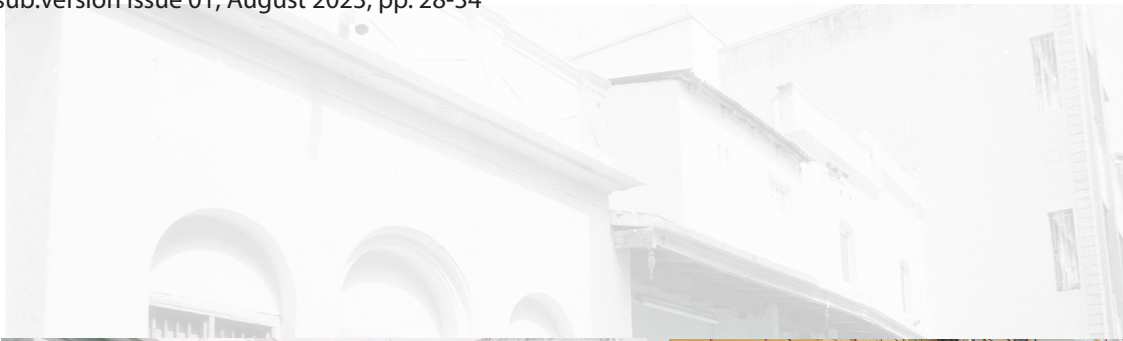


Even in 1987, the traditional morphology was in flux, and this 19th century house was a rare holdout. Timber columns, beams and purlins supported a brick 'Madras terrace' roof. The low plinth level indicates how much the road surface was already raised, a sure sign of development. Land values demand three-four floor walk-ups, so concrete-framed structures are the default. They now house businesses now that deal in a gamut of goods, from watch parts to toys to tailoring accessories.



This building, remarkably, still stands, but it has a new owner who is clear that he will bring it down this year itself. The walls are too thick, usable space is limited, and maintenance is expensive. Nostalgia is a luxury, and business is business. In the background, a battery of air-conditioning units speaks of the new aspirations, and the performative failings of new typologies.





These residents are still in the neighbourhood, but decided to monetise the value of the properties their families owned, and lived in, for generations. When shown my pictures of their houses from thirty five years ago, they were excited and even amused, but not at all regretful. It is just practical to build as much as possible. Those houses were too dark and cramped, they leaked, and were just plain old.



With continuity and change...

Note: All images, both black and white and colour, are taken by, and belong to the author. Black and white photos were part of an unpublished dissertation, 'Building Typology & Urban Morphology: A Study' at the School of Architecture (now Faculty of Architecture), Centre for Environmental Planning & Technology, Ahmedabad, by the author, 1989.



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