

EXPERT

Inheritance of Cause

India's heritage structures may be peeling at the walls but one man is intent on saving the country's architectural legacy—one building at a time

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Most people find it difficult to appreciate the charms of Mumbai's chawls. The single-room tenements are dispiritingly cramped places replete with the problems that exist in such places. In his book *Serious Men*, author Manu Joseph called the low-income housing colonies "the mother hell", comparing each apartment's size to a Mercedes. For an even clearer picture of how the world sees these >



SURFACE HISTORY

A rooftop view of the Elphinstone Building in Mumbai, a Venetian Gothic revival structure from the 1870s.

< neighbourhoods, pick up *Vaastav*, *Satya*, or any other Mumbai-as-gangstaland film. But then there's Lal Chimney Compound. This colony in the busy bylanes of midtown Mumbai is none of the above—in fact, it looks like what could be called 'a model chawl'. Exactly what architect Vikas Dilawari had in mind.

Six years ago, Lal Chimney Compound was just another yellowing 'mother hell'. Till Dilawari, the country's foremost restoration architect, shaved off the neglect from its walls and unearthed the heritage structure hidden below. Hosting four independent buildings, the Compound is built on principles similar to most chawl systems. They are typically a series of rooms plus a kitchenette, with communal bathrooms and wash areas for vessels and clothes on the ground floor. The Compound's buildings were dilapidated when the Garib Zarthostiona Rehetan Fund approached Dilawari for intervention. Despite being over 100 years old, the structures are not on the heritage list and hence were at risk of disintegrating or worse, redevelopment. (A similar neighbouring colony was razed to make way for a multi-storey building.) It is a nostalgic place, secluded and unglamorous, comfortably ensconced in its past.

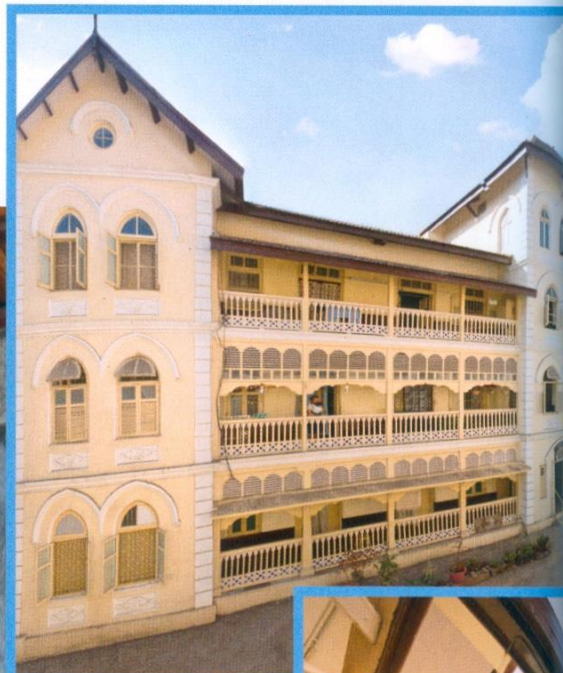
PILLAR OF HISTORY

These are the best of times and the worst of times for heritage architecture. As much as there is destruction of old buildings there is an increased effort to restore what was once beautiful. Dilawari's job is just that. A history buff, he studied architectural

history at the L S School of Architecture in Mumbai. Dilawari found it particularly fascinating as he unravelled the chronology of important historical monuments around the world. In Mumbai, especially South Bombay, most people know Dilawari's work. They walk by it everyday. From Flora Fountain to the Rajabai Clock Tower, they include important landmarks around this city. One of the buildings he's worked on is the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum, which won the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award of Excellence in 2005. But neither the man nor his name is well known outside of the trade.

That may have something to do with the fact that Dilawari is exceptionally media shy. He's a quiet man, armed with standard answers to standard journo questions. (He was exceedingly worried about the photo shoot for *AD*.)

But this is a person who knows the innumerable lanes of Mumbai like the back of his hand. It was his interest in history and a natural affinity to back the underdog that fuelled Dilawari's interest in this branch of architecture. During his time as a student, Dilawari says he presented a plan to redevelop Crawford Market, the Mumbai landmark that was designed in 1869 by



(Clockwise from left)

FACADE GUARD

Vikas Dilawari at Elphinstone Building, which is currently being restored from the outside; the Lal Chimney Compound is one of the many unlisted buildings over a hundred years old that Dilawari has restored; the restoration work on the staircase ensured that original timber treads and balustrades were retained; gable roofs with Gothic arches and wooden balustrades define the exteriors of the Lal Chimney Compound.



(From the top)

FRESH FINISH

Examples of Dilawari's restoration work include the art deco-influenced staircase within Mumbai's Elphinstone College, which was last modified in the early 20th century; the Dr Sir Jivanjee Modi Memorial Hall at Mumbai's KR Cama Oriental Institute, an art deco building from 1916.



2012 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, a large-scale cultural festival in Kerala. The former chief minister, who initiated the programme, wanted to hand over the architectural projects to experts. The organizers, including artists Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, made a beeline for Dilawari. "We called Dilawari because we were well aware of his respect and admiration of India's heritage, and his talent for restoration and sensitivity towards historic buildings," says Bose. The historical associations of the enterprise appealed to the architect. The Biennale takes its name from the lost city of Muziris, which presumably existed 30 km from Kochi. In the first century BC it was a world-famous seaport and a key link in the Indo-Roman and Indo-Greek trade routes. Muziris eventually disappeared, apparently drowned in the great Periyar river flood in 1341 AD. The region is an important historical site since it is home to what is said to be India's first church—the Mar Thoma church, first mosque—Cheraman Juma Masjid, and oldest European monument—a Portuguese fort. Today there are a series of archaeological sites here, and the Durbar Hall project is part of the collective restoration effort.

DOUBLE ORDER

While they inherently support the same cause, restoration and conservation are obviously two different processes. Conservation preserves the fabric of

a structure, arrests decay, retains cultural significance and increases the life of the building, while restoration is about revitalization. Given its dependence on both technology and craftsmanship "it is an art and science both" says Dilawari. Despite the good intentions of such projects, they're usually bridled with mind-boggling issues. Sometimes the buildings are inhabited, so relocation is a hassle, sometimes decision-makers change and not everyone thinks of restoration as a healing process. Oftentimes there's just not enough documented information on what a building looked like when it was built, or what changes have taken place over time. A case in point is the work Dilawari did on the Corporation Hall at Mumbai's municipal corporation headquarters,



Lockwood Kipling. A blend of Norman and Flemish architectural styles, it is spread across 72,000 square yards and is one of Mumbai's oldest markets. Dilawari learnt an important lesson when his ideas were rejected. "I presented a plan to restore it (Crawford Market) but I flunked the test. And those who razed it to the ground got the highest grades. I suppose I couldn't deal with it," he says.

RENAISSANCE PLAN

Dilawari's first heritage conservation project in the country was the Gaiety Theatre in Shimla, under the aegis of Ved Segal, the famed architect of landmarks like Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai. It was a time when few people understood the concept of restoration architecture. Dilawari says people questioned what a conservation architect actually did. He's come a long way. Today Vikas Dilwari Architects, in suburban Mumbai, is inundated with project proposals from trusts and government bodies.

His latest assignment is the 150-year-old Durbar Hall Art Gallery at the Kerala Lalitha Kala Akademi in Kochi. The project is part of various restoration initiatives taking place alongside the

which was gutted by a fire in 2000. Dilawari and his team went in blind. The objective was to use traditional skills and techniques to restore the structure to its 19th-century origins. Though charred beyond recognition, underneath all the ruin, he says, was "an entire wall originally painted with gold".

There are other upsides to his work, as Dilawari discovered, while working on the Compound: "I've made many friends here," he says waving to an old man riding past on a Bajaj scooter. "People here live like extended families. We need these spaces to be conserved." It's not quite the dark world of the movies. ♦