

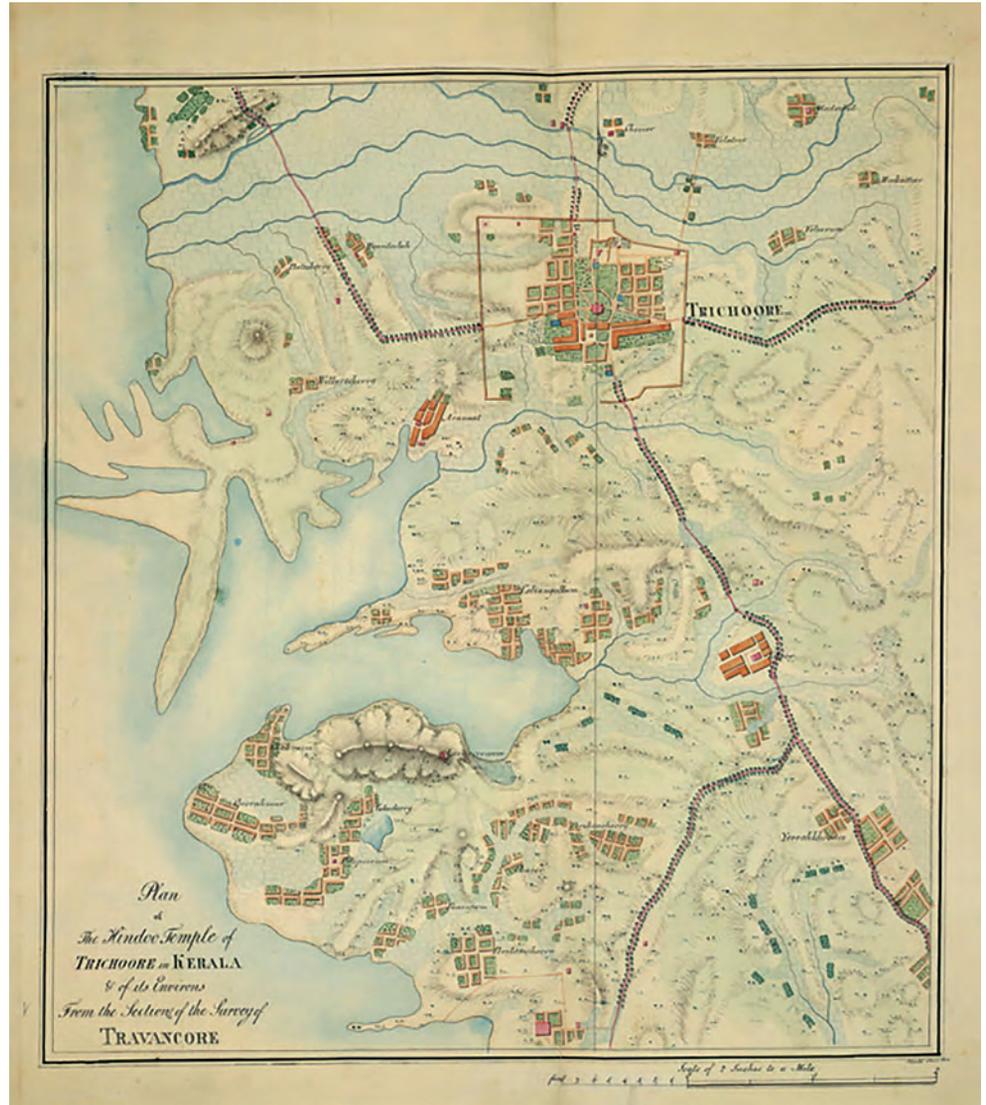
# CONSERVATION FOR CONTINUITY

Sree Vadakkunnathan Temple Conservation Project, dd Architects

Images: ©dd Architects, PV Padmanabhan; courtesy Vinod Kumar MM, PV Padmanabhan and Studio Matter, Isha Raut



Restored through a continuous effort spanning over a decade, Sree Vadakkunnathan Temple Conservation Project was carried out under the supervision of Thrissur-based Vinod Kumar MM of dd Architects. The process focuses on the authentic, with an idea of reviving traditional workmanship through an amalgamation of interdisciplinary interventions.



Located in the heart of Thrissur - the cultural capital of Kerala, Sree Vadakkunnathan Temple (incrementally built around twelfth century) has played a significant role in the evolution of the temple town. Conceived as the conceptual centre of the temple town, the place continues to be a living institution in the core of the new and aggressive developments around. The sprawling fortified temple complex consists of multiple structures performing their specific roles – a comprehensive cluster in the urban fabric of Thrissur. The orthogonally planned temple complex sits on a hillock with four entrances at the cardinal access points of the main axis, following the traditional scheme of the Kerala temples.



With an undetermined date of origin, the temple is a time-honoured illustration of the local architecture headlining a reserve of invaluable knowledge systems of the past. The elaborate open spaces, institutions, vernacular housing, the customs and practices along with the social, spatial and the spiritual fabric of Thrissur has built an irreplaceable relationship with the geography of the temple structures.

After centuries of exposure to tropical monsoons and no recorded holistic repair and restoration works, a structural assessment conducted in the 1990s flagged up concern for a considerable part of the complex that was left in a state of disrepair and distress. The Vadakkunnathan being a repository of heritage and culture, an integrated approach for restoring this intangible landscape was essential. The legacy and the heritage of this place is a crucial driver in shaping the identity of Thrissur. A living entity, the temple complex

is a continuing link to the viscera of the history of Thrissur. Enveloped by a changing urban fabric and yet effectively located amidst a conservative community, the residents were the prime drivers of efforts behind the conservation of Vadakkunnathan. Day-to-day activities of the temple are administered and managed by the state agency - Cochin Devaswom Board, while the temple is protected under the aegis of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The funding and the human resources for the project were provided by the VGKT, which is the Venugopalaswamy Kanikaryam Trust, Chennai.

Vinod Kumar MM of dd Architects co-ordinated the decade long project. Outlining the philosophical rooting in executing this process, he writes, "The temple conservation process itself is incomplete without the elaborate traditions and rituals which are performed with the same respect and vigour as they were hundreds of years ago."

Previous Page: Pen-and-ink with water-colour: drawing of the plan of the Hindu temple at Thrissur, by John Gould, dated 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1816

Facing Page: An aerial view of the Vadakkunnathan Temple precinct positioned centrally in the dense urban fabric of Thrissur

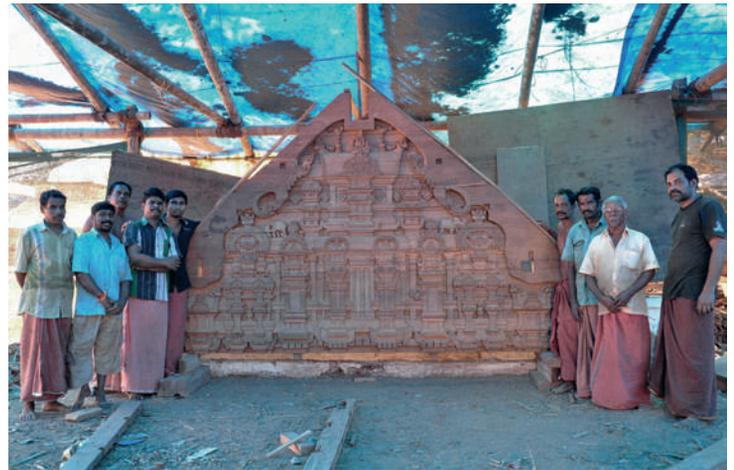
Right (Above and Below): The Gosalakrishnan, before and after the conservation process. The replacement of the shingles is visible



Below: An account of the transition of the temple and the process of restoration

Facing Page (Above): The restored timber elements of the temple blend in with the original elements

Facing Page (Below): The roof shingles creating a visible account of the restoration process







## SPATIAL EXPERIENCE

Positioned in a unique cultural realm, the commanding multifaceted temple precinct embodies dynamic systems and sub-systems with physical and metaphysical hierarchies. Being a sacred and religious site, many customs dictate the access routes and controls for the spaces within the precinct. The main shrine, positioned in the centre of the complex, is surrounded by multiple verandas and courtyards. At the Vadakkunnathan, the innermost sanctum is wrapped in complete darkness and the progression into this space is a ritualistic movement where one undergoes dynamic experiences through the hierarchies of transition spaces filtering light in various qualities before reaching the sanctum. Light is an endemic element to the planning and design of

the temples of South India. There is an inherent building diagram that follows the solar and the lunar calendar in response to metaphysical and mythical layers.

The Vadakkunnathan has a complex and distinct timber construction system which is characterised by a refined craftsmanship. It is a repository of formal knowledge, structural clarity, tradition, symbolism and above all, material and workmanship in timber. There is an inherent endurance to the materials used, and the monumentality of the place is evidenced by the intricate use of timber and copper details and not through imposing scale or form.



Above: A panoramic view of the temple grounds during the process of restoration displaying the hierarchy of spaces within the complex

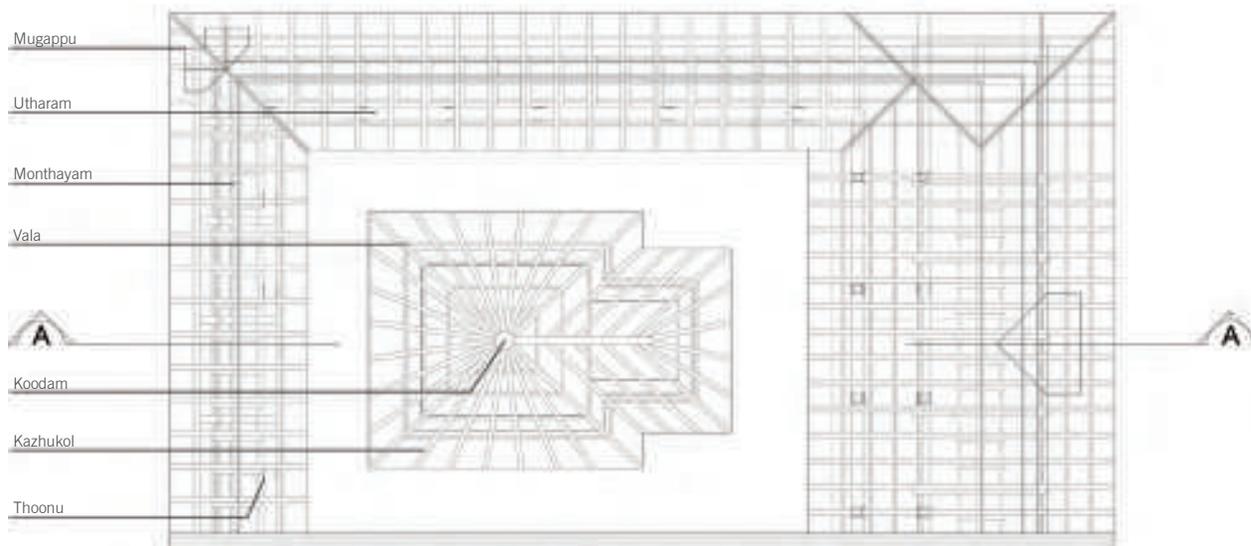
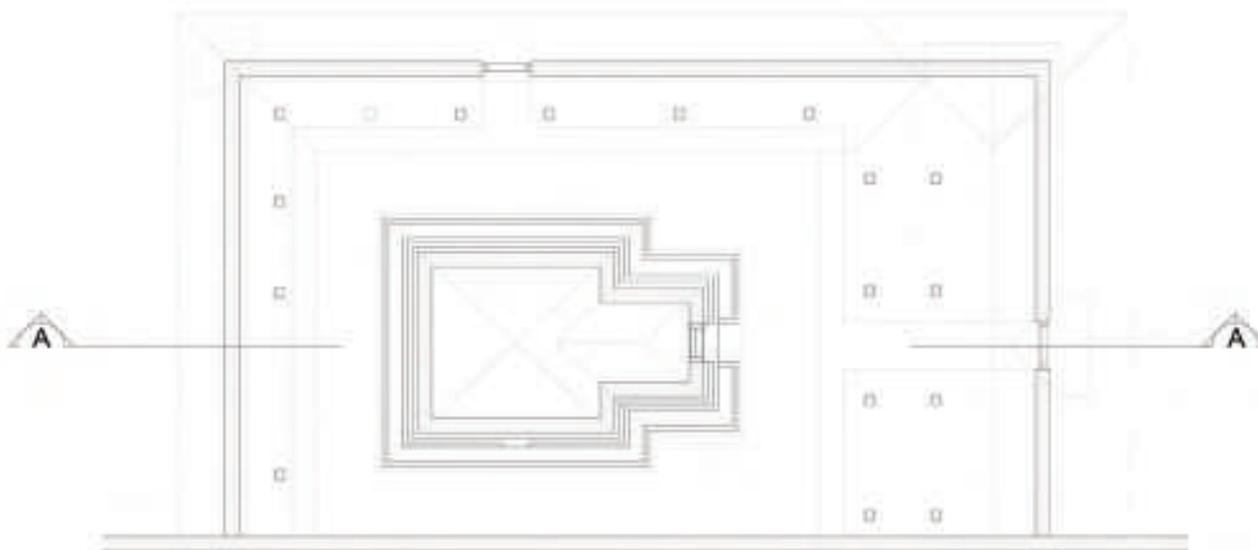


Below: Devotees in traditional outfits exiting the inner sanctum which is enveloped by the corridors and courtyard

Left: The documentation of Vrishabhan, post the restoration process  
 A. Floor Plan  
 B. Rafter Plan  
 C. Section AA

Facing Page Above Left: The restoration process being carried out in traditional methods

Facing Page (Three Images): Restored elements from the temple complex



## MATERIAL HERITAGE - CONSTRUCTION CULTURES

The authenticity in place is reinforced by its cultural milieu. Being closely involved with the process for years, the project has been restrained to a minimum intervention in an attempt to retain the ethos of the existing structures. The Vadakkunnathan Temple Conservation Project is an example of an intervention in living heritage – a case for many historic spaces across India. The learnings from the process has also informed Vinod’s contemporary practice. His vision to revive the craftsmanship informs his practice as well. While contemporary conservation attitudes either swing towards more stylistic restorations to outright insensitivity, this project addresses the critical aspects of heritage - its ancient atmosphere and its ritualistic significance remains unchanged. The execution is rooted in the traditions.

Emphasising these ideas is a thought that “every sacred space has its relationship with the cosmic energies and renews itself at intervals. It is highly important to understand these energy fields as well, the use of organic materials compatible to them

while attempting any conservation interventions. The significant materials used for the temple construction were timber, lime, stone and copper. A traditional herbal mixture in oil called Ashtakuttu (a mixture of eight ingredients) was applied on to the wooden members used in the temple construction for protecting it from termites and other weathering issues.”

In replacing the copper roof shingles, the architect limits the work to the places where it is absolutely necessary and by treating only the damaged parts of the timber, makes this project an important precedent. The patina of transformation is visible through the layers of the old and the new. These visible accounts of transformation now remain open to scrutiny. History and contemporary practice have found a place in a building which has been restored over a certain period of time, and while it does not reject the notion of transformation, it deals with it with a degree of reverence, choosing to expose the magnificence of the old in proximity to the new and the restored.





The architect references collective knowledge. In India, the patterns of building trade occupations have traditionally followed a conservative caste system, and recognising and working with this reality was intrinsic to the conservation process. Around five hundred artisans and craftsmen were associated with the restoration process over a time span of fifteen years. The idea of the community engaging with the project helped resurrect the crafts and the sentimentality towards some processes. These craftsmen engage with local contemporary practices today - thus safeguarding the practices as custodians of this intangible heritage of making.

#### RITUALISTIC CONTINUITY

A restoration project of this scale is not just an effort of looking into the material aspects, but it also demands a careful study of the ritualistic heritage. The processes that are intrinsic to the life of the building must not be overwhelmed. The work had to be carried out in collaboration with the temple authorities running the cultural establishment to ensure that these essential continuities remain unbroken. His process has been conscious of this rich cultural repository. A considerable amount of contribution, guidance and

knowledge also came from the occupants who administer the temple. The multiple philosophical layers of indispensable traditions attached to architectural space have an equal standing in the process of conservation. The execution of the project carefully accounts for and is done in conformity with the conventional building techniques and craftsmanship. This makes the Vadakkunnathan Temple Conservation Project a distinct illustration for contemporary heritage practices in the country. It is an exemplification of restoration of the intangible through a restoration of the tangible. The project balances the conventions and the mandates put forth by the various stakeholders and agencies involved in the execution with a clear structure and hierarchy along with a defined scope of work. These stakeholders include the heritage authorities, communities, the local government and the administrators of the complex.

#### THE PUBLICNESS OF THE LIVING HERITAGE

Shree Vadakkunnathan Temple precinct is a living structure which will always remain relevant to the transforming realities of town of Thrissur. It sits in a contested, yet a democratic realm and the consequences of this conservation process is accessible to all. It is an





effort of restoration in the public domain. The engagement and the participation of the community is not limited to the ritualistic use, but it extends to the changing urban landscape of the temple. The process of design and the restoration effort takes into account the space surrounding the temple complex – its immediate context. Being an ASI protected monument site, the immediate radius remains porous to the urban community engaging with the space. The temple precinct remains adaptable and behaves as a nodal

entity for the town. The conscious interventions do not extend to materiality solely but also to these larger ideas including blurring the thresholds, thus allowing flexibility while reinforcing present urban connections. There are not many known, similar examples of living heritage within our urban centres that can afford the rich open space Vadakkunnathan possesses and to deal sensitively with this space is central to the new interventions. In this process, there is an underlying idea of preservation of an ancient public space.

## GOING BEYOND

What emerges as a reflection of this process is that “communicating the significance of a heritage site is equally important as conserving it. All efforts including expert workshops, exhibitions, seminars and publications - have been taken to communicate the essence of works done to protect this living monument with all its authenticity and integrity.”

The Vadakkunnathan Temple Conservation Project was honoured with the UNESCO Asia Pacific Award of Excellence for Cultural Heritage Conservation in 2015. It presents a compelling vision which potentially allows us to understand better, the changing roles of heritage spaces trapped within aggressively growing urban centres. The discourse initiated here is celebrating the idea of preserving and continuing the rich heritage of material craft along with a consciousness of the experiential heritage – the real and the mythical – a philosophy deeply embedded in our culture. A celebration of collaboration and a commendable effort, the values embodied over the components of the built environment - its identity, analysis and preservation processes and its historic significance - is a step further for community efforts in preserving the fragile thread of continuity that connects our collective past to our collective future ■



Previous Page: The Vadakkunnathan Temple lamp facade that wraps the inner sanctum

Facing Page Above: The Vadakkunnathan Temple Precinct

Facing Page (Below, Left-Right): The Restored copper roof and the lamp facade

Below: The area around the temple precinct being used as a public space by the locals

dd Architects started as the individual architectural practice of Vinod Kumar MM. During his architectural training at Ahmedabad, Vinod was introduced to Kerala's rich architectural traditions. Soon after his graduation in Bengaluru, Vinod left to work in a French-Malaysian architectural company at Kuala Lumpur. There he worked on modern high rises. A sudden turn of events brought Vinod back to his home-town in Kerala and he started travelling around the state exploring its indigenous architecture, people and art forms.

In 2002, Vinod Kumar MM started design dreams with his first formal public project – Sakthan Tampuran heritage gardens at Thrissur. In the next one decade, design dreams undertook a variety of projects – architecture, conservation, landscape, interiors and urban revitalisation. In 2013, design dreams evolved to a full-fledged studio – dd Architects.