

# COUNTER STORIES      A case of Conservation Site Schools in Ahmedabad

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*The Historic City of Ahmadabad, A World Heritage Site*

UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 2017, recognized the 5.5 sq. km area of the historic part of the city of Ahmedabad, also known as the Walled City or the Historic City of Ahmadabad, as a World Heritage Site. The Outstanding Universal Values were identified under two criteria: Criteria (ii), “to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design” and criteria (v), “to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change” (World Heritage Center, UNESCO). In the justification of inscription under criteria (ii), the historic architecture of the city of the 15th century Sultanate period was presented for its “unique provincial Sultanate idiom... (where) local traditions and crafts were accepted in religious buildings of Islam, even when they did not strictly follow the tenets for a religious building”. More than thirty such religious structures representing this unique value of the city are listed. The city’s hierarchical settlement planning, neighborhoods (Pol) with its wooden houses and community spaces is identified as an outstanding example of human habitation under criteria (v) (Description, Historic City of Ahmedabad, World Heritage List).

The site managers of the historic city of Ahmadabad, since then have ensured that a comprehensive heritage management and conservation plan is being laid out to protect the OUV. There, however, is a constant negotiation between the histories, places, and processes that the inhabitants consider valuable and what is intended to be conserved through formal processes. While the narrative of Ahmedabad’s history is presented as a multicultural character with layered community life, most of the policies and projects introduced in this part of the city since 2010 (the Historic City was nominated in the Tentative List in this year) distinctly privilege a clean, ordered, legible narrative of history that can create a sense of wonder for the visitors who are uninitiated to the messiness of Indian cities (Desai, 2019, p. 197). That heritage places can invoke a distinct sense of place



Figure 1.  
Tankshal ni Pol  
Masjid tucked  
away within  
Kalupur,  
Ahmedabad.  
(November 2020)

based on how various inhabitants form a place attachment; histories of contestations can invoke a sense of citizenship and agency; and that heritage places with its layered, possibly ambivalent narratives can stir memories of reconciliation is entirely missed out. Today, many listed structures within the historic city lie vacant and dilapidated due to out-migration, lack of active funds, or resources. One such example is a dilapidated Jain temple in a Muslim dominated Pipardi-ni-Pol and another is an abandoned Mosque in Tankshal-ni-Pol. Through the example of the Conservation Site School initiative at Tankshal-ni-Pol Masjid, this paper intends to represent these forgotten, or marginalized, narratives that continue to be fresh in the memories of the inhabitants.

### *Tankshal-ni-Pol and a curious case of a wooden mosque*

The City of Ahmedabad was established in AD 1411 with the Bhadra Citadel as a fortified town with places for palaces and all other facilities for the king and his noblemen. From there on until the arrival of Marathas in the later 18th Century, the city went through processes of consolidation and densification. The Fort Walls of the city were built 50 years after the Citadel and various pur (blocks, administrative units) of the city, located between the Citadel and the Fort Wall came into being one after another. Administratively, these pur were independently headed by the noble men appointed by the king (Gillion, 1968, p.26). Each of these pur also had a prominent Mosque, made of local sandstone, for prayers, usually on the highest land of that pur. These pur consisted of pol; a group of houses with one of two gates. A Pol is usually a self – governing social unit of the residents based on family ties, caste, religion or occupation. However, some pols were organised around its city level economic function and had diverse group of people living in it, sometimes in a branched out street known as khanch or khadki. Mandavi ni Pol, for example , was a neighbourhood where major markets with structures linked with tax collection (mandavi) were located. Tankshal-ni-Pol, similarly, had a mint (tankshal) and both these pols were populated by families of traders and administrators closely linked to these structure, at times specially invited by the king or the noblemen. And as evident through the wooden mosque, each of these groups of people had a unique trajectory of migration before they settled here, whose histories are not part of the dominant narrative.



Figure 2. Elements of Sultanate architecture, typical of mosques featured in the city's dominant narrative of World Heritage. (left to right: Ek toda Masjid, Ahmed Shah's Tomb and Mosque, Sidi Sayyed, Jama Masjid)



Mosques in Ahmedabad, as identified in the World Heritage narrative, are built in sand stone, ornamented with jalis, with iconography of various craft traditions and are exemplars of Sultanate architecture, built under patronage of the kings and the noblemen. The mosque located in Tankshal-ni-Pol is not that. Apart from the obvious difference in the materiality of the mosque, Dr. Gauri Bharat, architectural historian observes, “The mosque had an upper level that was used as a jamtkhana, a place of gathering among sects such as the Ismailis, for instance. More interestingly, the mihrab was semi-circular in plan with a semi-circular arch and the enclosed, pavilion-like space meant for prayer was supported by 16 columns. The connection, in my mind, was to the sola khambi masjid (literally translates as ‘mosque of sixteen columns’) in Bhadreshwar, Kutch, which scholar Mehrdad Shokoohy analyses as part of a tradition of maritime mosques. Shokoohy suggests that the semi-circular mihrab is found in mosques along the coasts of Gujarat, Malabar, and extends all the way to the Indonesian archipelago. The differences between the maritime mosques and those further inland emerged from the different routes through which Islam reached the subcontinent” (CEPT Site School Blog, 2021). The materiality and the construction of the mosque which is closer to the domestic architecture of Ahmedabad, indicate that the mosque, unlike the stone mosque, was possibly built under the patronage of members of an affluent community rather than it having a royal patronage.



Figure 3. The curious case of the Wooden Mosque at Tankshal Ni Pol.

### *The stories of abandonment and empathy*

Since 1714 CE, the city has seen many instances of communal discord between the Hindus and the Muslims, which has since 1970s been politically exploited, affecting the social fabric of the Place. The fabric of Tankshal-ni-Pol was most affected in the riots of 1985 resulting into all Muslims of the Pol moving out and the mosque being abandoned. As historian Howard Spodek writes, by the time (of 1885 riots) in the city of Ahmedabad “the Hindu – Muslim conflict may have taken on the kind of status which racial conflict has had in the USA and religious and ethnic conflict has shown elsewhere, for example Belfast, Bierut and Jerusalem: an underlying tension which may be tapped, opportunistically, to inflame quite unconnected political issues” (Spodek, 1989). The present condition of this neighborhood, some many abandoned – partially destroyed houses,

mostly commercial – day use buildings and a very few remaining Hindu households is a result of what followed the rupture in the social fabric. For everyone who live there, work there, and own the vacant dilapidated houses there, the wooden mosque is a reminder of what happened at the time as it not only acted as a temporary shelter for many, but it also stands as a reminder of what the community was before those riots.

The Dave Commission, in its official report about the 1985 riots, attributed them to the violent minded Ahmedabad residents. This not only refutes the description of people of Ahmedabad by many historians (Gillion, 1968 and Jote, 1920), who describe the residents as business minded and believers in negotiation and peace, rather than violence. Accounts of the residents confirm it.



Figure 4. Violence in Ahmedabad shown through riots and protests.

Source: Outlook India

Ahmedbhai (name changed), in his late 70s, remembers his time as a child in a large residence behind the Masjid. He narrates, parts of his resident was rented out to a Sindhi family that migrated from Pakistan after the Partition of 1947. He also recalls, later in 60s, one of the floors was rented out to a Hindu government officer, while his family and the Sindhi family continued to stay in various parts. A phenomenon that is very difficult to come by today. In his memory, as a young ‘modern’ boy, mosque was not a place for praying but to socialize with people. It was open and welcoming. He remembers the day when the attack on Muslims took place in 1985. He says, “no one from the neighborhood would hurt one another, we all were too close and had respect”. According to him, “a large group of people from outside came in, the neighborhood Hindus, who saw them coming from afar, or heard about them, came into our homes and made sure we all left the neighborhood safely before the attacks took place.” He narrated instances when a local Hindu lady helped a Muslim man who could not get away in time by hiding him in her house. This story is corroborated by Lataben (name changed), now in her 60s. The incident however, left a deep mark on the community. Subsequent instances of violence in the city, in many cases systemized enough to shift demographics for political gain, and as argued by some scholars (Shani, 2007) material gains by manipulating property market (close to the phenomenon of gentrification). The city has seen communal violence to great degree since then, 2002 Gujarat.

#### *Gendered movement and the promise of reconciliation*

As mentioned earlier, the primary, most visible structure of the historic city has pur that have within them pol (neighborhoods). This structure is underlaid with another path structure that was a result of specific gender hierarchies. Women of the city were generally, never encouraged



to be on streets unless they were there for some specific purpose. Their places for interaction with one another were chowks (small plazas) and streets within the pol. While most of these neighborhoods had one visible access through a gate, there were small connections to other pols through a back alley, or sometimes through a house. Women, usually used these alleys for movement to subvert the gendered restrictions. During the riots, when the main gates were slammed shut for people of the other community, women interacted with one another and were often active agents of peacebuilding.



Figure 5. Gender movement within the pols. Source: Dr. Jigna Desai and Mrinal Bhatt

*Creating a Counter Space, Conservation Site School*

Center for Heritage Conservation (CHC), CEPT Research and Development Foundation in agreement with the Ahmedabad Sunni Muslim WAQF Committee (ASWMC) collaborated to intervene with the initiative of Conservation Site School in the Tankshal-ni-Pol Masjid. The sites that are identified by CHC for Site School are a significant repository of historic knowledge and present an opportunity for conservation training and knowledge sharing (Center for Heritage Conservation, 2020). Through these Site Schools, CHC initiates processes of repair, restoration, and upgradation of the site while foregrounding voices of the local community that share narratives of marginalized histories excluded from World Heritage. These Sites Schools, therefore, stand as platforms to showcase counter stories of the place. Mr. Rizwan Kadri, leading member of the ASWMC sees this Site School as an opportunity to talk about the pasts that created ruptures in social structures. According to him “only if we talk, that we will understand each other better”.



Figure 6. Interviewing voices in and around Tankshal ni Pol Masjid to understand the site’s counter stories.

A Counter Space is a space that functions very differently from the spaces around. It has a very different activity to its surroundings, a dissimilar character and an altered pace. Spaces like these are important for a city as it makes the inhabitants pause and think, and possibly reflect. The wooden masjid at Tanskal-ni-Pol is one such space in the neighborhood of the Historic City of Ahmedabad. A neighborhood that usually hustles with commercial activities during the day time, and is a dead negative space during the night time, had this enclosed space open to the city and especially the neighborhood for a day during the Open House of the Site School. Most were awed by the calmness of the space in the otherwise bustling noisy neighborhood at that time of the day. Many residents saw the space for the first time, and the discussions were then around the possible introduction of educational activities in the middle of this neighborhood that has a history of violence and rioting. They felt, this could bring the much needed texture to the place. In their words “kai alag thashe” (something different will happen). The most interesting aspect of the day was the presentation by Dr. Aryanti, who spoke of production of women’s spaces in mosques. One was left wondering, in a place that has uncomfortable memories, can introduction of women’s narratives bring reconciliation? This, considering that the neighborhoods in the historic city have a substructure, where women’s interactions with one another have always been crucial for the city to get back to life after an event of destruction or disturbance. The Tankshal-ni-Pol Masjid promises to be a complex and layered lesson in conservation.



Figure 7. The Mosque as a ‘Counter Space’.

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## Interviews

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- Prof. Bombaywala, Historian, Pir Mohommadshah Library, Ahmedabad
- Mr. Rizwan Kadri, Leading member of Ahmedabad Sunni Muslim Waqf Committee, Ahmedabad
- Shri Kirtiratnaji Maharaj, Ascetic, Jain Temple, Jinagnya Trust, Ahmedabad
- Ahmedbhai (name changed), former resident of Tankshal ni Pol
- Lataben (name changed), current resident of Tankshal ni Pol
- Babubhai (name changed), shop owner at Tankshal ni Pol