

IN SEOUL, A
RESURGENCE OF
INTEREST IN KOREA'S
TRADITIONAL TILE-
ROOFED RESIDENCES
IS BREATHING NEW
LIFE INTO THIS RICH
ARCHITECTURAL
LEGACY—OFTEN
IN WAYS THAT ARE
UNEXPECTEDLY
MODERN.

BY JONATHAN HOPFNER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JUN MICHAEL PARK

PROUD



The outdoor hearth
at Rakkojae, one
of the city's most
revered hanok
hotels. Opposite:
Overlooking the
newly built hanok
of Eunpyeong from
a window-side seat
at 1In1Jan cafe.



Tourists dressing the part in Seoul's historic Bukchon Hanok Village. Opposite, from top: Inside Teo Yang's home and studio; a patio at Rakkojae.



ANY NOTION THAT vernacular Korean architecture is underappreciated seems faintly ridiculous in Bukchon. On a sunny afternoon, the winding lanes of Seoul's most famous district of *hanok*, or traditional wooden houses, are in danger of being overrun. Couples crowd timber doorways festooned with fading calligraphy or gleaming brass, and tour groups line up to pose against the backdrop that has inspired a million Instagram posts—a sea of delicately flared tile roofs cascading gently downhill toward the office towers of the city center.

Indeed, Bukchon Hanok Village has grown so popular that the local government deploys marshals to remind noisy tourists that despite its toy-town appearance, this is a living, breathing residential area. For the inhabitants, the patterned stone walls that hide most of these lovely homes from view may not feel nearly high enough.

Yet interest in hanok is a very recent phenomenon, among locals and tourists alike. The art and proliferation of the Korean-style house reached an apex during the Joseon Dynasty from the 14th to 19th centuries, but the tumultuous years of Japanese occupation, fratricidal war, and rapid industrial development that followed were tough ones for old buildings, hanok included. “The entire history of architecture in Korea was really cut,” says Daniel Tandler of Seoul-based architecture firm Urban Detail, which has overseen numerous hanok projects. As South Korea grew more prosperous, humble, typically single-story dwellings of wood and clay seemed less something to aspire to than humiliating reminders of a poverty-stricken past, and gleaming apartment blocks mushroomed in their place.

So what changed? Some credit must be given to the government.

In 2001, Seoul launched a regeneration program that directs funding to the protection and restoration of hanok, which are now seen as “indispensable to upholding traditional architecture and culture, and protecting the city’s identity,” says Kim Seong-chan, a public relations manager with the city’s Hanok Heritage Preservation Division. The program has saved hanok clusters in areas such as Donuimun—which once marked Seoul’s western boundary—from the wrecking ball, though, as Kim admits, the surviving houses “make a stark contrast” with the high-rise apartment complexes behind them.

Since the program began, the city has managed to maintain around 11,000 hanok and has led a broader nationwide resurgence in hanok architecture. But in addition to the besieged residents of Bukchon, there is a number of young architects, designers, and creatives who would be hesitant to call the current approach to hanok an unqualified success. Whether it be Bukchon or Jeonju Hanok Village in Korea’s southwest, there are concerns that hanok neighborhoods fetishize—and fossilize—a watered-down version of the past, ignoring the fact that hanok themselves have constantly evolved, and boast qualities that are light years ahead of their time. Rather than sticking rigorously to tradition, these people are reworking hanok for an anxious contemporary age, creating distinctive new venues and cultivating new audiences in the process. “Korean architects are just starting to go back to traditional architecture and extract more from that for modern architecture,” Tandler says.



“That makes it an interesting time to be here.”

Teo Yang is a case in point. Something of a rising star on the Korean (and international) design scene, he was educated in the United States and Europe, immersing himself in Western artistic traditions before returning home and realizing “there’s so much beauty to discover and explore in Korea.” Seven years ago, he moved into a handsome old hanok on the fringes of Bukchon. “It was love at first sight,” he recalls. Now his home and studio, the renovated building encapsulates the balance Yang strives to achieve in his work, with cool marble floors supporting its weathered wooden frame and a space-capsule like reading room with immaculate eggshell-white walls that opens onto a courtyard dominated by a gnarled pine. “It’s important for me to show that anybody who lives in the 21st century doesn’t have to look at hanok as an old artifact,” he says. “It’s a tradition, but it’s also a living platform that we can utilize and appreciate in the present day.”

To advocates like Yang, while beautiful, the most prominent aspects of hanok—the gently curving tile roofs, the intimate courtyards, the emphasis on natural materials—aren’t necessarily what make them so special, since variants of these are found in other East Asian architectural traditions. Rather, it’s the way hanok design seems to anticipate entirely current needs.

The basic hanok layout includes a *daechong*, or wide central hall. Facing the courtyard, it functions as a reception and living area, separated from the outside and private rooms at the rear by sliding doors of wood and *hanji*, a translucent paper typically made from mulberry bark that filters light into a warm, comforting glow. This allows the daechong to be easily opened to the elements, serving as a patio and allowing cool breezes to flow through the property in the summer, while the traditional *ondol* underfloor heating system, which warms the house via a wood furnace (or these days, hot water pipes), keeps everyone snug during winter.

Other rooms, meanwhile, can be sealed off for privacy or contemplation, or opened to create larger space configurations. Standard furnishings, such as bedrolls, small lacquer tables, and folding screens, are relatively austere and designed to be easily dismantled or carted from place to place. The hanok is therefore modular and lends itself to modification, equally conducive to quiet study or a big dinner gathering, encouraging communion with nature and achieving much with a relatively small footprint. The perfect building, in other words, for our era of spatial and environmental constraints.

Yang has incorporated hanok features into many of his most feted projects, from cultural centers to refurbished restrooms at a highway rest stop. Even to the plush Seoul Sky Premium Lounge on the 123rd story of the Lotte World Tower, Korea’s tallest building, where patrons might be too busy taking in the cityscape below to notice how the textured walls evoke folding screens; and his revamp of Seoul’s oldest bakery, Taeguokdang, where the lofty illuminated ceilings are patterned after latticework hanok windows.

But hanok principles may find the purest expression in the flagship boutique of Yang’s Eath Library skincare venture, located a short distance from his studio in the shadow of Gyeongbok Palace. Instead of the glass and glitter of typical cosmetic shops, visitors step into a realm where the walls are clad in rich wood, moon-shaped windows admit a cozy helping of light, and goods are laid out on handcrafted shelves set against minimalist versions of the delicate screens that grace hanok rooms. Even the products themselves, which range from soaps and lotions to lifestyle goods like bags, trays, and scented candles, come in hanok-inspired packaging; bottles, for example,



mimic stacks of old books. Suffused with soothing colors and herbal scents, it’s a rare venue that is as therapeutic as its treatments, as befits a brand based on traditional medicine.

Barely a block away, a similar approach is evident on the grounds of the Art Sonje Center, where a formerly derelict hanok has recently been refashioned into the Almost Home Café. The building’s basic openness to the elements has been enhanced with floor-to-ceiling glass panels that open onto a garden full of flowering plants and thickets of bamboo, a sanctuary from which barely a sliver of the city beyond is visible. The furnishings and gleaming counters where lightning-quick baristas dispense espressos and green-tea lattes are entirely contemporary, yet from every angle the structure presents views that are timeless—an opportunity not lost on the café’s well-heeled clientele, none of whom seem to be in any hurry to leave.

Almost Home is one of several postmodern hanok that have mushroomed in the area and attracted no shortage of social media traffic. The new Anguk branch of Café Onion, a brand rooted in Seoul’s Brooklyn-like Seongsu-dong area, brings the original outlet’s patented industrial minimalism to a sprawling old house in a quiet side street. Its vast courtyard and surprisingly spacious interiors marry soft wood and exposed concrete, with layered doorways framing shelves bursting with baked goods or leading onto successively quieter nooks and crannies. As with other hanok, the venue as a whole manages to be both complex and simple, offering openness or intimacy, immersion in nature or shelter from it, depending on which corner one chooses to claim on any given day.

That versatility is one reason young Koreans “are now choosing to spend their weekends in hanok instead of glitzy hotels,” says Grace Jun, who, as the owner of one of Seoul’s hottest new hanok properties, would know. Late last year in the gritty Dongdaemun

ADDRESS BOOK

1In1Jan

9992-418 Jingwan-dong, Eunpyeong; 82-2/355-1111.

Almost Home Café

Art Sonje Center, 87 Yulgok-ro 3-gil, Samcheong-dong; 82-2/734-2626.

Beyond Stay

17 Donhwamun-ro 11-gil; 82-2/742-7829; beyondstayseoul.com; doubles from US\$85.

Bonum 1957

53 Bukchon-ro, Gahoe-dong; 82 2-763-1957; bonum1957.com; doubles from US\$154.

Café Onion Anguk

5 Gyedong-gil; 82/70-7543-2123.

Eath Library Showroom

31 Samcheong-ro 2-gil; 82-2/723-7001; en.eathlibrary.com.

J.Hidden House

94 Jongno 6-ga; 82-2/744-1915; jhiddenhouse.com.

Rakkojae Seoul

Bukchon Hanok Village, 49-23 Gyedong-gil; 82-2/742-3410; rkj.co.kr; doubles from US\$214.



From top: Designer Teo Yang at the entrance to his Eath Library Showroom; the courtyard at the Anguk branch of Café Onion. Opposite: Almost Home Café occupies a hanok of its own on the grounds of the Art Sonje Center.



Grace Jun outside J. Hidden House, a century-old hanok that she has transformed into a café and cultural space.

area, Jun reopened an expansive century-old courtyard residence as J. Hidden House, a tranquil café and cultural space. Jun maintained many original aspects of the building, including its stout timber beams—assembled without using a single nail—and rare lattice-and-cloth windows. Heirlooms, from old furniture to an ancient pair of wooden skis, are scattered around the property, which has been in Jun’s family for generations. But it’s far too sleek and stylish to mistake for a museum, with artfully placed mirrors, globe pendant lighting fixtures, and an eight-meter tiled bar counter where fresh pastries, hand-roasted coffee, and draft beers from celebrated local brewery Hand & Malt beckon.

“I really wanted to make this a showcase of the best Korea has to offer, not only with the hanok, but also the food and beverage, and the service,” Jun explains. This is one reason the venue has become a regular staging ground for events run by organizations focused on promoting local artistic traditions, such as the Arumjigi Culture Keepers Foundation. On warm weekends, the courtyard tables are packed and the chatter is punctuated with the telltale click of cell phone cameras. “We’ve become as popular as we are through the power of social media—it’s basically hashtags,” Jun laughs. Yet she also believes hanok meet a serious need. “People are stressed, and that’s why they are looking for contemporary hanok—they want to be comforted. We were aiming for nostalgic 40- to 50-year-olds when we opened, but it’s the 20- and 30-year-olds who are coming here on dates.”

When those dates last a little longer, residents (and visitors) can take advantage of an expanding roster of hanok hotels. Previously limited to aristocratic properties like the celebrated Rakkojae in Bukchon Hanok Village, the newer variants tend to be smaller and boast more of a boutique flair. Bonum 1957 and the more modest Beyond Stay are two prominent examples: located in the history-rich Jongno district, both guesthouses blend hanok structure with Scandinavian functionality and welcome touches like mini-terraces and marble-rich bathrooms.

And some people may graduate from overnight stays to something more permanent. After a slow start, a brand-new hanok village first planned by the Seoul government a decade ago is taking shape in the northwestern district of Eunpyeong, in the foothills of the Bukhan mountain range. Encouraged by city grants, around 50 hanok have sprung up in the area, with more under construction—the first such spate of hanok-building at scale in well over a century.

In contrast to many of the restored properties in the city center, Eunpyeong’s new hanok tend to be larger structures with more visibly modern elements, such as second stories, balconies, even garages. Yet, with their well-tended grounds and the backdrop of rocky peaks, they retain an air of harmony with nature, and the area’s relative distance from central Seoul ensures a certain level of tranquility. The district government has ambitious plans to attract more tourists. A hanok museum (in a hanok, of course) has opened alongside a number of atmospheric restaurants and teahouses, including 1인1잔 (literally, “one person, one cup”), with an eclectic neo-Mediterranean menu and a stunning raised interior perimeter where patrons dine next to windows overlooking the entire neighborhood. But despite these lures, and the abundance of soothing scenery and hiking trails nearby, the danger of Eunpyeong becoming another Bukchon seems a distant one.

The neighborhood’s placid surface disguises the fact that it is in some respects at the heart of the battle over what hanok can, or should, be in the contemporary context. On the one hand, the

WITH THEIR WELL-TENDED GROUNDS AND THE BACKDROP OF ROCKY PEAKS, EUNPYEONG’S NEW HANOK RETAIN AN AIR OF HARMONY WITH NATURE.

influx of residents and steady march of construction seems welcome proof that hanok can serve modern lifestyles. On the other, few believe the district would survive without government subsidies that offset much of the cost of hanok-building. These subsidies are also controversial because they require qualifying hanok to adhere to rigid standards that critics believe essentially constrain the form. Tandler, for example, says there’s a “certain attachment” to a late-Joseon Dynasty building style that, “while probably necessary in some areas, has also held back creativity in the hanok field.”

That may be a risk in Eunpyeong, and indeed there are rumblings of discontent elsewhere about a sudden surge in cookie-cutter buildings that adopt some of the basic trappings of hanok architecture, particularly the sloping tile roofs, without the substance—what some critics have derided as imposters wearing hanok “hats.” Yet there are also encouraging examples of designers moving beyond “stereotypical thinking about hanok and thinking in a bigger context,” as Yang puts it, pushing the boundaries of the art to the extent that it may not even be immediately recognizable.

Take the Won & Won 63.5 building in Seoul’s ultra-modern Gangnam district, designed by pioneering architect and noted hanok advocate Hwang Doojin. On a cursory inspection, the slender red-brick tower looks entirely modern, even futuristic. But its porous surface, intended to reduce barriers between the building and outside, and rooftop garden, laid out like a C-shaped courtyard, are taken directly from the hanok playbook. Meanwhile, in decidedly less fashionable Sinseol-dong, a district almost completely devoted to light industry, CoRe Architects have integrated a dilapidated old hanok into a contemporary building, using a steel-and-glass framework to both support the roof and extend it vertically, so that it almost appears to be suspended in a giant aquarium. Switzerland’s new embassy in Seoul offers another striking reinterpretation of hanok design, with a low-slung central building propped up by exposed wooden beams as it curves around a spacious garden.

Projects like these are a good sign Korea’s architectural legacy is not only being reclaimed, but imbued with new vitality as architects, entrepreneurs, and consumers all find aspects of the hanok to employ, enjoy, even reinvent. Ultimately, says Yang, “if you don’t give people freedom when working with hanok, the tradition will end up like water in a pond. It’ll get stagnant.” ●

Home to an excellent museum and public gardens, the grandiose Victoria Memorial is one of Kolkata's better preserved monuments to empire.

CONSERVING CHANGING

KOLKATA

NEVER A CITY FOR COLONIAL NOSTALGIA, THE FORMER CALCUTTA HAS A POOR RECORD WHEN IT COMES TO PROTECTING ITS ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE. YET EVEN AS THE WEST BENGAL CAPITAL MOVES DETERMINEDLY INTO THE FUTURE, CONSERVATION-MINDED THINKING IS QUIETLY GAINING GROUND.

BY JASON OVERDORF
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PANKAJ ANAND



A V

FEW MINUTES BEFORE WE WERE to meet in the affluent Kolkata neighborhood of New Alipore, conservation architect Nilina Deb Lal called me from her car to say she was just around the corner, but stuck in traffic. Suggesting that I start our tour without her, she said, “Are you in front of that huge monstrosity? Then walk to the corner and down the lane, and you’ll see an old, old bungalow.”

The “huge monstrosity” was a new government building called the Soujanya State Banquet Hall. At first glance, it didn’t seem all that monstrous to me. But after I wound my way around to what Indians call “the backside,” I saw what Deb Lal was getting at. Crouched in the building’s shadow at the edge of a bus parking lot was a dilapidated 18th-century mansion whose stately proportions suggested it had once been an important colonial landmark. Now, its paint was peeling and its facade was crumbling. A signboard above the pillared porte-cochere identified the faded beauty as the Institute of Education for Women, though a smaller plaque informed me it was originally known as Hastings House—the onetime summer residence of

the first British governor-general of India, Warren Hastings.

I understood why Deb Lal, who holds a PhD in architectural history from the University of Edinburgh, wanted to meet me here. I’d come to West Bengal’s state capital to take stock of its rich trove of colonial architecture, and this forlorn former mansion—hidden and ignored rather than restored and celebrated—was emblematic of the city’s ongoing struggle to digest and capitalize on that very heritage.

Developed from three riverside villages granted to the East India Company by the nawab of Bengal in 1690, Kolkata—known until recently as Calcutta—became the first capital of the British-held territories in India a century later and remained the capital of British India until the seat of government was moved to New Delhi in 1911. And yet, as Deb Lal explained when she arrived a few minutes later and spread out a map of the city’s heritage sites, the original headquarters of the Raj today sees only a fraction of the foreign tourists who explore Lutyens’ Delhi or the Gateway of India area of Mumbai.

In part, that’s down to an undeservedly grim reputation. Often conflated with the Black Hole of Calcutta (a dungeon where 143 British prisoners of war suffocated to death in 1756), Kolkata is also widely associated with Mother Teresa’s work with lepers as well as unflattering descriptions by foreign authors such as Günter Grass, who, in his 1975 novel *The Flounder*, described the city as “a pile of shit that God dropped.” Nor has its colonial history been a point of

local pride. Steeped in the intellectual patriotism that made Calcutta the center of the Indian independence movement in the early 20th century and later gave rise to Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army, Bengalis have been reluctant to embrace the city’s legacy of imperial rule, even though the Victoria Memorial—a white-marbled pile built a century ago in the so-called Indo-Saracenic style—is perhaps the most remarkable homage to empire in all of India. (For my money, it also houses the country’s best museum.) In one exercise in revisionism, Job Charnock, the enterprising British East India Company agent hitherto credited with founding Kolkata, was erased from all official histories of the city in 2003.

As I discovered over the next few days, however, India’s economic rise has helped to dispel the Bengalis’ postcolonial hangover. Far from a cesspool of filth and poverty, Kolkata is one of most vibrant and engaging metropolises in the country. And there’s a newfound enthusiasm for restoring and celebrating its architectural heritage even in the face of formidable obstacles.

A slim, practical woman dressed in a green tweed vest and khaki pants, her hair parted in the middle and tied back with a rubber band, Deb Lal briefed me on those hurdles with the aid of a map of landmarks she’d helped develop on behalf of the nonprofit Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) some years ago. Sprawled along the banks of the Hooghly River, Kolkata

was never a planned city like New Delhi, she explained. In modern times, sporadic attempts to decentralize and decongest the urban core have never come together into a coherent strategy for simultaneously developing the city and preserving its unique character. “There has always been a hesitance to take hard measures,” Deb Lal said. “As a consequence, it’s sort of a free-for-all. Anything goes anywhere.”

It was not until the late 1980s, in the lead-up to the 300th anniversary of Kolkata’s since-repudiated founding, that the municipal government attempted to create a list of historical landmarks. But according to Deb Lal, it was a back-of-an-envelope undertaking without a basic theoretical framework; subsequent efforts have expanded and then pared down the list without remedying its flaws. The result is a barebones catalog that only outlines the city’s significant architectural heritage, ranging from undeniable icons like the Writers’ Building (a Greco-Roman landmark originally built for the British East India Company in the 1770s) to effectively anonymous structures such as an “old residential house” on Abhoy Guha Road. The entries are so vague that travesties like the

Above, from far left: Iftekhar Ahsan at the entrance to Calcutta Bungalow, the old townhouse he has converted into a six-room inn; the nave of St. John’s Church; built in 1910, Esplanade Mansions is a rare example of art nouveau design in Kolkata; Calcutta Bungalow’s modest dining room.

Situated near the east bank of the Hooghly River, the Calcutta High Court Building is a neo-gothic landmark dating to 1872.



THE DETAILS

Getting There

Between them, **Singapore Airlines** (singaporeair.com) and subsidiary **SilkAir** (silkair.com) offer daily flights from Singapore to Kolkata. For travelers from Hong Kong, **Cathay Dragon** (cathaypacific.com) has the only direct service to the West Bengal capital, flying every day except Monday.

Where to Stay

The Oberoi Grand

The grande dame of Kolkata hotels occupies a landmark neoclassical building that dates to the mid-1800s. 15 Jawaharlal Nehru Rd.; 91-33/2249-2323; oberoihotels.com; doubles from US\$130.

The Astor

15 Shakespear Sarani; 91-33/2282-9950; astorkolkata.com; doubles from US\$70.

The Calcutta Bungalow

5 Radha Kanta Jeu St.; 91/98-3018-4030; calcuttabungalow.com; doubles from US\$72.

The Glenburn Penthouse

This nine-suite bolt-hole overlooking the Victoria Memorial is not a heritage property per se, but it's done up to look like one, with an exquisite collection of antique Bengal-colonial furniture and art. Kanak Bldg., 41 Chowringhee Rd.; 91/98-3007-0213; glenburnpenthouse.com; doubles from US\$345.

Where to Eat

Bohemian

Chef Joy Banerjee's contemporary take on Bengali food. 32/4 Old Ballygunge, 1st Lane; 91-33/6460-1002; fb.com/bohemiankolkata.

Peter Cat

A Park Street institution celebrated for its Iranian-style *chelo* kebabs. 18 Park St.; 91-33/2229-8841; fb.com/petercatkolkata.

6 Ballygunge Place

An elegant heritage bungalow sets the stage for refined Bengali cuisine. 91-33/2460-3922; 6ballygungeplace.in.

Sei Vui Restaurant

For a taste of Kolkata-style Chinese food in a converted Tiretta Bazaar dormitory. 17 Black Burn Ln.; 91/98-7471-8756; fb.com/seivuirestaurant.

What to Do and See

The Zs' Precinct

18/76A Dover Lane; 91-33/2461-9353; fb.com/zsprecinct.

Heritage Walk Calcutta

91/87-7747-8529; heritagewalkcalcutta.com.

Calcutta Walks

91-33/4005-2573; calcuttawalks.com.

Indian Museum

27 Jawaharlal Nehru Rd.; 91-33/2286-1699; indianmuseumkolkata.org.

Victoria Memorial Hall

1 Queen's Way; 91-33/2223-1890; victoriameorial-cal.org.

often no way to turn the most notable (and therefore most heavily restricted) buildings into commercial ventures and every incentive simply to let them fall into ruin, after which they can be declared derelict and be demolished. Case in point: the Old Kenilworth Hotel, an iconic if tumbledown establishment that fell victim to the wrecking ball last year after the Kolkata Municipal Corporation downgraded its heritage status. A 35-story residential tower is now going up in its place.

The looming threat to its landmarks notwithstanding, for the tourist, Kolkata remains breathtaking. The city's main colonial-era edifices—from the grand General Post Office and Writers' Building to the hushed confines of St. John's Church, whose grounds house Job Charnock's mausoleum and the Black Hole Monument—are undeniably evocative. But beyond these, there's a romance to the decaying mansions, temples, and civic buildings that is lacking in the perfectly conserved monuments and palaces of France or Germany; the sense of history that comes with scars. The past lives on everywhere, clashing and combining with the future in a colorful tapestry: flower vendors hand-stripping stems of their thorns by the bushel with their smart phones laid on the pavement beside them; hawkers rolling and folding samosas for suited office workers and young rockers festooned with piercings; *dhoti*-clad laborers taking their morning bath in the frigid Hooghly, just as they have done for hundreds of years.

Later that afternoon I settled in for a beer on the sunny restaurant terrace at The Astor, the modest boutique hotel where I was staying. Looking up at the bougainvillea-festooned window boxes on the building's pretty red-brick exterior, I recalled Deb Lal's complaint about the "facade-ism" that has become a stand-in for more substantial conservation efforts in the absence of a comprehensive heritage plan. To make the Victorian building a profitable venture, owner Vikram Puri, a former Wall Street investment banker whose father purchased The Astor in a distressed sale in 1999, opted to retain its colonial flavor in the reception and common areas, which boast patterned marble flooring, wrought-iron railings, and a beautiful staircase made of Burmese teak. But my room was outfitted for the modern business traveler, with practical rather than evocative furnishings and only the slightest nod to the building's age. And while the plush Phoenix nightclub downstairs harkens back to the 1960s, when The Astor was one of the few jazz clubs in town, it has the aspect of a disco that swallowed a sports bar rather than someplace Duke Ellington might have played.

Despite those compromises, given the fate of the Old Kenilworth, The Astor represents an important victory for conservation, and along with a few other pioneers, it could mark a turning point for the city. According to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation's Graded List of Heritage Buildings, The Astor, originally built in 1905 as a boarding house for British soldiers, is a Grade I structure. That puts it in the same category as the General Post Office and St. John's Church. The designation meant all renovations had to be cleared through the city's Heritage Conservation Committee and changes to the exterior were not permitted, despite the fact that the building was virtually falling apart when restoration work began in 2012.

With business thriving, The Astor is now a testament to how heritage can be revived with a little ingenuity and a lot of perseverance. And several other ventures scattered around town are starting to show that heritage has marketable value, not only for individual property owners but also for entire neighborhoods. The storied

encroachment on the grounds of Hastings House have been inevitable. Meanwhile, the guidelines for owners of heritage buildings include a clause stating that any portion of the structure that is not considered significant can be demolished, with no mention of how that significance will be evaluated.

"Because it doesn't have any theoretical foundation, the list is dangerously prone to manipulation," said Deb Lal, bemoaning the destruction of several post-independence structures associated with Writers' Building.

At the same time, as in Delhi and other cities throughout India, owners bear the brunt of restrictions on what they can do with their property without any state funding for maintenance or upkeep, apart from exemption from property taxes. That means there is

Fishermen on the Hooghly. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Inside Sei Vui restaurant; tea service at the same establishment; Calcutta Walks guide Ramanuj Ghosh at the Mullick Ghat flower market; the restored interiors of The Astor hotel.





Right: Rajesh Sen at The Zs' Precinct in South Kolkata. Opposite: Heritage Walk Calcutta's Tathagata Neogi and Chelsea McGill on the grounds of St. John's Church.

Fairlawn Hotel, an eclectic colonial throwback that has hosted hip and famous guests ranging from Günter Grass to Sting, was recently acquired by Brij Raj “Diamond” Oberoi, a nephew of the founder of Oberoi Hotels & Resorts. Ambuja Neotia Hospitality, which operates various clubs

and resorts as well as the Swissôtel Kolkata, last year completed a modern replica of an old Bengali *rajbari* (mansion) to launch an opulent boutique hotel—the Raajkutir—that offers carriage rides, Victorian high tea, and an extensive menu of single malts. Iftekhar Ahsan, the young entrepreneur behind tour company Calcutta Walks, not long ago converted a 1926 townhouse into Calcutta Bungalow, a pioneering heritage hotel in an area of North Kolkata dotted with the decaying mansions of Bengali traders who grew rich off the Raj. And that’s not all.

One evening, I made my way to the home of Jael Silliman, an American-trained academic who is among the last remaining members of Kolkata’s once-thriving Baghdadi Jewish community. The driving force behind a collaborative online media archive called Recalling Jewish Calcutta, she has most recently authored *Where Gods Reside*, a book that explores the city’s diverse places of worship—lesser-known gems include a Greek Orthodox church and a Japanese Buddhist temple.

Silliman had told me on the phone earlier that she wasn’t an expert on conservation, and the crumbling facade of the building in which she lived seemed to bear that out. But inside her elegant, high-ceilinged apartment, Silliman talked for an hour about heritage projects it would have taken me a month to discover. Among them were ongoing efforts to revitalize the erstwhile European trading settlements in Kolkata’s northern suburbs. Sometimes collectively referred to as “Europe on the Hooghly,” these enclaves—similar to the foreign concessions of treaty port-era Shanghai—once housed Danish, Dutch, French, and Portuguese traders, and are now attracting restorers’ attention. In the riverside town of Serampore, which served as a Danish outpost for 90 years until its sale to the British East India Company in 1845, the restoration of the 200-year-old St. Olav’s Church bagged a UNESCO heritage award in 2016 for its “meticulously executed conservation work.” The project was part of an ongoing preservation program led by the National Museum of Denmark, which has also overseen the resurrection of Serampore’s Denmark Tavern, an 18th-century inn that lay in ruins just four years ago. Now, the handsome yellow building operates as a café and a soon-to-open six-room hotel.

Silliman, who grew up in the Calcutta of the 1960s, also told me about the recent refurbishment and rededication of the city’s two surviving synagogues, the oldest of which, Beth El, dates to 1856. Apart from having the largest number of colonial buildings of any city in India, she added, Kolkata was also once a “world city” along the lines of New York. “We’re trying to recast Calcutta as a cosmopolitan city, rather than the city of poverty and Mother Teresa. Now, it’s starting to happen.”

The next morning I stepped out to explore what UNESCO would call Kolkata’s intangible heritage on a guided walking tour



with Calcutta Walks. Thinking I could manage colonial landmarks like Dalhousie Square, Eden Gardens, and St. John’s on my own, I opted for a tour of neighborhoods along the Hooghly.

Led by a young “explorer” named Ramanuj Ghosh, we began at Mullick Ghat’s famous flower market, where some 2,000 vendors produce wreaths of marigolds and red hibiscus for celebrations and religious rites. During October’s Durga Puja, the most important Hindu festival for Bengalis, this bazaar is an impassable mass of people and blooms, Ghosh explained. But even on this off-season day for the flower sellers, we had to be on the lookout for the deliverymen who keep the stalls stocked as they plunged down the narrow lanes with Volkswagen-size loads of marigolds balanced on their heads. We threaded through the stalls and down to the riverbank, where some of these workers were bathing in the shadow of the Howrah Bridge. Then we hopped on a ferryboat to Kumartuli, a traditional potters’ quarter where sculptors manufacture icons of the goddess Kali and other Hindu gods out of straw and clay from the Hooghly.

Bordering the North Kolkata area that is home to such lavish Bengali mansions as the 19th-century Marble Palace and the 18th-century Shobhabazar Rajbari, Kumartuli is surrounded by incredible ruins collapsing under their own weight. It was the story of India all over again: “intangible” ingenuity was thriving by dint of *jugaad*—or “making do”—while the infrastructure crumbled around it.

Later that afternoon, I met up with husband-and-wife scholars Tathagata Neogi and Chelsea McGill to learn

CONTINUED ON PG.107

CONSERVING KOLKATA

Continued from page 87

more about the fight to stop those buildings from disappearing altogether. We rendezvoused at 6 Ballygunge Place, an upscale restaurant that occupies a large white bungalow in the South Kolkata neighborhood where 18th-century European residents once built their so-called garden houses. It's apparently been the city's premier spot for traditional Bengali favorites like prawn *malaikari* (whole prawns in coconut-milk gravy) and *mangshor jhol* (a spicy mutton curry) since it opened in 2003. We arrived just in time to avoid the long queue, and my tablemates, who run a tour company called Heritage Walk Calcutta, ordered up a

feast worthy of twice our number, including deep-fried flatbreads filled with green peas (*koraishutir kochuri*) that are a winter staple.

Sitting in the bustling, colonial-style dining room, it was hard to believe that elsewhere the city was struggling to conserve its architectural heritage. But as Neogi (who earned a doctorate in archeology from England's University of Exeter) and McGill (who has a master's degree in South Asian studies) explained, there is so much to preserve that a constant battle is inevitable, especially without a coherent vision for delineating historical districts and landmarks. Where citizen groups are active, such as in the old Chinatown area of Tiretta Bazaar, revival efforts are starting to gather steam; McGill was particularly effusive about the 2017 transformation of a 110-year-old Chinese dormitory into Sei Vui, a restaurant run by one of the neighborhood's surviving

social clubs. Considerably more ambitious is Singapore-based journalist turned entrepreneur Rinkoo Bhowmik's CHA Project; the social enterprise has partnered with INTACH to convert a 100-hectare swath of Tiretta Bazaar into a historical center featuring food streets, heritage trails, and a night market.

But without a master plan, such efforts remain isolated examples of what might be possible even as the public outcry over Kolkata's disappearing architectural heritage grows louder—last April, a group of prominent citizens including novelist Amit Chaudhuri and filmmaker Aparna Sen marched on the mayor's office to protest the demolition of historic buildings. “A lot of new nonprofits have come up,” Neogi said. “But in terms of actual restoration work, there hasn't been much.”

After lunch, I took a taxi to a nearby gallery-cum-store to see another example of adaptive reuse. Built during the expansion of South Kolkata after the first partition of Bengal in the early 20th century, the 89-year-old art deco building that now houses The Zs' Precinct had been lying vacant for a couple years before retired Indian Tobacco Company executive Rajesh Sen acquired it in 2015. A genial man with a neatly trimmed gray beard, Sen took justifiable pride in showing me the work he had done to preserve the property's original features (red oxide floors, decorative window grilles) while modifying it for use as an art gallery and museum shop-style boutique that sells eclectic apparel and home decor.

After detailing the restoration process and the creative ways he's making the building pay for itself (an artist-in-residence room upstairs and pop-up restaurant events, for instance), Sen took me on a lightning tour of the surrounding neighborhood to illustrate its potential value as a historic district. Once I started looking, I realized that dozens of the neighboring homes boasted similar rounded balconies, glassed stairwells, and circular windows that are hallmarks of the art deco style. Then I recalled something Deb Lal had told me when I first arrived in town: city officials and residents alike are quick to discount the heritage value of “modern” architecture.

“The main thing is to raise awareness,” Sen told me. “This isn't a spectacularly different house from what people know of from their lifetime. But,” he added with a frown, “most of those houses have already been demolished.” ●



Keeping things tidy at Kolkata's 1864-built General Post Office Building.