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# is this growth?

"WE GLORIFY OLD MADRAS. HOW ABOUT DEMONSTRATING AESTHETIC SENSITIVITY TO THE EMERGING NEW MADRAS?"

**B**orn and educated here, my 'Chennai experiences' span over three decades. As an architect, I consider this city both my muse and my home. I feel very strongly about it and, as I compare it with other parts of the world that I have visited, I realise it has lost its aesthetic sensitivity.

The changing face of Chennai is typified by Mylapore, which was once a verdant village of paddy and coconut groves. Today it is cut through by the Buckingham canal, with the Kapaleswar temple as its cultural nerve centre. The row houses in the Madaveedhis have been replaced by unmonitored commercial development while the T. Nagar retailers are a glitzy intrusion into the charm of period buildings and the majestic temple Gopuram.

Urbanisation cannot be avoided, but it can be planned. Bad urban planning in Chennai has allowed hutments to flank the waterway. A potentially valuable visual element is reduced to an expansive open sewer. The thrill of viewing the Adyar estuary from the bridge while crossing the river has been killed by a large walled pipe work. To make matters worse, it is crudely painted in a tasteless pista green.

We proudly display the few heritage public buildings left by the British, and glorify Old Madras. What about aesthetic sensitivity to the emerging New Madras?

We are a vibrant metropolis with a thriving industry and economy. As intellectuals, professionals and well-traveled world citizens, we are alive to every parameter of progress but

blind to the city's growth. So many things are Uniquely Chennai. The Adyar banyan, Kalakshetra, the beaches, the marriage mandapams and the kolams on the streets. Things that add spice to that intrinsic flavour are the 'Season' in December, the sabhas and the many tiffin joints that provide stiff competition to the pizza revolution.

swell with pride. Chennai is a city where people feel safe walking at night, where women are respected, and intellect and talent are the foremost measure of a man.

But there is another face to the city. Reality is also slums with poor living conditions and pollution. Not to forget the encroachments by the small stores that clog the roads and platforms or the sheer injustice of children begging. There is also a Chennai which we abuse, by turning a blind eye to building violations, tolerating litter on the road and not reacting to unstable hoardings.

Ignoring this reality, we try to add gloss to Chennai with posh boutiques and swanky multi-plexes. But the sleek buildings on the IT highway cannot hide the encroachments and the facelift at the airport does not hide the crude aesthetic seen upon arrival. Chennai is doing great but it needs a reality check. If collective thought can be given to urban planning, social issues, public health and infrastructure, the intervention will be timely. Then the Chennai of the future will be one we are proud of. Once labeled a sleepy town and now touted as the metro with potential, it can definitely be the forerunner.

The average Chennaiite still believes 'less is more', people underplay their achievements and business promotion is understated. The energies saved on wasteful exhibitionism on a personal front need to be channeled into a result-oriented approach to public issues. The need of the hour is greater aesthetic sensitivity to the city's growth. ■



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

There is a Chennai we are all proud of. A Chennai which houses industries, has IT parks and displays progress in infrastructural works. It has charities and NGOs like the Banyan, Sukriti and **Bhumika** doing path-breaking social work. We have the Cancer Institute, hi-tech hospitals, NRIs and icons who make us