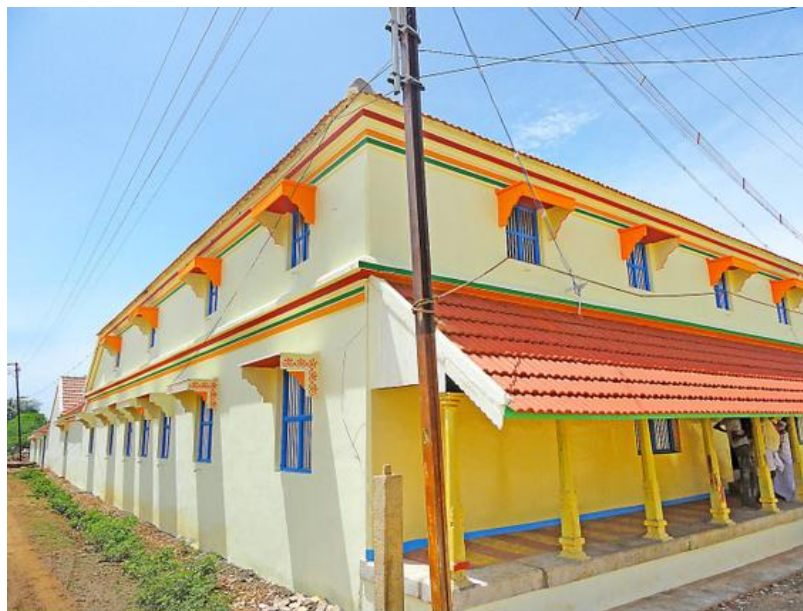


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Homes that house history



INTACH Madurai Chapter's Heritage Home Hunt initiative brought to fore the need to preserve old houses and to see them as storehouses of stories and not just shelters

“Our house is nothing less than a palace. I maintain it like a temple,” says Valliammai Aachi, about the 130-year-old Renganthan Chettiar Mansion in Athangudi. She takes pride in the ornate teak-wood pillars, fresco-painted ceilings and the grand *mutram* of the house. “It’s an exemplary work of art conceived by our forefathers,” she says. For Ashok, owner of the famous ‘*Rettai Gopuram Veedu*’ or the twin-tower house at Virudhunagar, his house is a proud legacy. “It was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi. People there continue to see it with sanctity and revere us as a patriotic family,” says Ashok. Likewise, Karupanan’s 110-year-old house in Sholavandan was visited by Jawaharlal Nehru. “We have a plaque at the entrance mentioning the event,” beams Karupanan.

As many as 40 participants from five districts around Madurai took part in the Heritage Home hunt, an initiative by INTACH Madurai Chapter to identify houses that are at least 75 years old. The heritage home owners were awarded at a felicitation function last Sunday at LAICO Hall. Many of the owners shared stories and history behind their houses. As part of the initiative, a team of historians, conservation architects and students embarked on the mission to track down heritage homes in the districts of Madurai, Virudhunagar, Sivagangai, Dindigul and Theni. “We were able to identify hundreds of homes,” says Rajesh Kanna, Co-Convener of INTACH Madurai. “Our aim was to look at how people value and maintain their houses. We gave more preference to century-old houses where family members continue to live for generations. We also took into account the modifications done to the original structure. The next step to the home hunt would be to document the aesthetics of the architecture and the antiquity of the construction techniques.”

“There are a number of heritage houses lying vacant and locked around the temple area in the heart of Madurai. But people are unaware of the worth and value of these houses,” says Rajesh Kanna, who branched out into the outskirts

like Navinipatti, Sholavandan, Usilampatti and Mangalum near Melur, where many antique houses were identified. “Most old houses have unique features. Some of the materials used were even imported,” says Srividya, whose 120-year-old Mathalai Nadar house in Virudhunagar is known for the vibrant stained-glass ventilators. “During the day, the glasses cast a wonderful glow into the living room. As my grandfather was a seafarer, he brought in tiles from Italy and Myanmar for the house,” says Srividya.

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