Abstract

The preparation of a conservation management plan (CMP), guided by the Australian ICOMOS Burra Charter, for a culturally significant mid-1880s house in southern India – the Kamarajar Memorial House – has confirmed its cultural significance, and clarified the conservation needs for the building and its collection enabling a rationalisation of the presentation of the artifact/place and so, an improved and more authentic interpretation of the artifact/place. The house, located in Virudhunagar, southern India, is the birthplace of K. Kamaraj (1903-1975), a highly revered politician of his generation. Kamaraj spent much of his early life in the house and his family continued to live there until it was purchased by the Tamil Nadu State government soon after his death. However, since this State acquisition, the place has been substantially modified and now poorly reflects Kamaraj’s critical formative years which is the phase of his life most directly connected with the cultural significance of the place.

Keywords

Conservation management plan, Burra Charter, reconstruction, curatorial program

Introduction

This paper seeks to convey how the process of preparing a conservation management plan (CMP), specifically guided by the Australian ICOMOS Burra Charter, for a house museum in southern India – the Kamarajar Memorial House, the birthplace of K. Kamaraj, a highly revered and illustrious politician from the mid-twentieth century - has clarified its cultural significance and better defined the conservation needs for the house and its collection. Consistent with the Burra Charter approach, the artifact is understood to be the place comprising both the building and its collection, ideally presented as one, seamlessly. Place, defined in the Burra Charter ‘means site, area, land, landscape, building or other work, group of buildings or other works, and may include components, contents, spaces and views’ [Australia ICOMOS, 1999, 2].

A CMP prepared in accordance with the Burra Charter is intended to become the ‘principal guiding document for the conservation and management of a heritage place. It is a tool that allows owners, managers and approval authorities to make sound decisions about heritage places’ [Johnston & Heritage Council of Victoria, 2010, 4]. Similar documents are prepared in other countries according to standards and charters; in Australia it is industry standard that CMPs are prepared according to the Burra Charter which states that ‘Work on a place should be preceded by studies to understand the place which
should include analysis of physical, documentary, oral and other evidence …’ [Australia ICOMOS, 1999, 8].

The Kamaraj house may be classified as a ‘documentary historic house museum’ type as defined by S. Butcher-Younghans in 1993, though it does not currently conform with this definition sufficiently to ‘recount the life of personage or place of historical or cultural interest in which the environments must contain the original objects, and if possible in their original layout.’ The house can rather be classified as a sub-type, established by Rosanna Pavoni and Ornella Selvafolta in 1997 - ‘houses dedicated to illustrious men’ [Pinna 2001, 8].

Life of Kamaraj – ‘The Kingmaker’

Kamaraj was born on 15 July 1903 in Virudhunagar in modest circumstances. The town had long been a trading centre, however its ascendancy over nearby towns was due to the extension of the railway from Madurai (a major centre 50 km to the north) in the 1880s [Jagenathan, 2007], about the time the subject house was built. The population featured a high percentage of Nadars, the caste to which Kamaraj’s family belonged. The Nadars were traditionally associated with various agricultural industries related to the cultivation and harvesting of palm trees, including toddy tapping (alcohol production), which had caused them to have a lowly status in the Hindu caste system [Hardgrave, 1967, 19-21].

Kamaraj was schooled locally for seven years before his education was cut short after the premature death of his father, Kumarasamy, in 1909. From the age of 12, he worked in shops owned by his extended family to support his mother (Anna Sivakami) and younger sister (Nagaamal). During his teenage years, Kamaraj’s political awakening commenced when he joined the Congress Party (established in 1885 and one of the oldest democratic parties worldwide) in 1919 and he began attending meetings of Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement [Narasimhan, 1966 & Narayanan, 2007, 9].

Kamaraj’s political activities brought him into conflict with the British authorities, as he was interned three times (for a total of about eight years) from 1930 to 1945, and also with the leaders of the Nadar community. Kamaraj was forced to leave Virudhunagar in 1923 because he was ‘branded as a traitor to his caste’ for his support of the Congress Party. A few years later however, he was welcomed as a local hero when he returned briefly in 1931 after his first jail term, though he was not embraced by the Nadar community leaders for another decade, by which time his political prominence could no longer be denied [Hardgrave, 1967, 186-190].

In 1937, Kamaraj was elected to the new Legislative Council at the State level (these were the first bicameral elections held after the British began to allow provincial autonomy), and from 1946, when he was appointed to the Legislative Assembly he relocated permanently to Chennai. In 1954, he was appointed Chief Minister (leading political figure equivalent to a State Governor in the USA or State Premier in Australia) in Tamil Nadu, a position he held for 9 years.

During his years as Chief Minister, Kamaraj implemented major improvements in the spheres of agriculture and industry, however his education reforms are undoubtedly his greatest legacy. He was responsible for introducing free and compulsory education, reopening thousands of recently closed schools and establishing many new schools, so that no child had to walk more than 3 miles (4.8 km) to attend. Furthermore, a Midday Meal Scheme was instigated so that children were provided with at least one meal per day. As a result of these programs, the literacy rate in Tamil Nadu was increased greatly and it remains amongst the highest in India [Balasundaram, 1983, 39-41].
Subsequently, Kamaraj became a major political figure at the national level, though he declined the offer to become Prime Minister in 1964 after the death of Nehru. He was, however, instrumental in bringing the next two Prime Ministers to power – Lal Bahadur Sastri (1964-66) and Indira Gandhi (1966-77, 1980-84), and hence is often referred to as ‘the kingmaker’. Kamaraj’s funeral procession in Chennai during 1975 was attended by enormous crowds [Parthasarathi, 1982, 43].

Development of House – 1890s to present

Kamaraj spent much of his early life in the Virudhunagar house, which was the family home for at least 80 years (from c.1900 to the late 1970s) before it was procured by the Tamil Nadu government to be presented as memorial museum. The detailed history of the building has not been firmly established, though much of the constituent building fabric of the house (mostly stuccoed brick) is understood to date from late nineteenth century.

The urban context of the Kamaraj House has a dense character. It is located in an older part of the town with consistent, attached, small single and two storey, masonry houses though interspersed with some larger, mansion houses. Quarters are created by a network of winding and irregular streets and laneways, which are ringed by wider thoroughfares. Within the quarters, the streets are narrow, limiting access to pedestrians, scooters, bicycles and the like - larger vehicles (cars or trucks) cannot penetrate this urban fabric (Figure 1). Directly in front of the Kamaraj house which is located on a corner, the open space to the east is slightly wider than adjoining streets, forming a minor public square which features a small Hindu shrine and a free-standing portico, which has been recently constructed in front, limiting views of the building.

The Kamaraj House is mostly two storey, consisting of three distinct sections, not necessarily constructed at the same time, nor internally (Figure 2) conjoined as now. It is known one small section was acquired during the mid-twentieth century, probably to accommodate...
security personnel when Kamaraj visited his family after he became Chief Minister. The three distinct components are the:

- Northern section, which is the largest and contains the public areas of the museum, previously the main living areas.
- Middle section, with similar internal detailing as the northern section, containing kitchen and a third storey storage area.
- Southern section: acquired later and containing ablutions areas to the ground floor.

Fig. 2. Exterior with shrine and portico

The building which occupies the whole L-shaped site (approximately 80 m² or 860 feet² in area) is modest in size (Figure 3). The kitchen (which is not on display) is only c. 8m² (80 feet²) and the largest room about 5 x 6 metres (322 feet²). The ground floor consists of the main hall (lounge room/primary living space) and two small rooms to the rear. The mostly original main hall is typical of the period and is distinguished by timber (probably teak from Burma/Myanmar) detailing and includes four tapering columns with simple carved stone bases, elaborate brackets and beams with sunflowers carved to the underside. The first floor, where there is an open terrace, a much-altered anteroom and Kamaraj’s bedroom, is reached by a later concrete stair steep, but not as steep as the earlier/traditional timber stair. Kamaraj’s bedroom retains a marvellous painted concrete floor imitating tiles (Figure 4), another characteristic of southern Indian houses of the late nineteenth century.
(the decoration is often extended as a dado, but not in this instance).
Externally, the façades have been modified so that the formerly separate sections are now integrated to read as one larger building, finished in a contemporary Modernist-influenced idiom, diminishing its appearance as a typical residence of the suburb (albeit now on a corner allotment) and giving it a grander and more institutional character (Figure 5). The result is that it appears relatively large in scale compared to many houses in the vicinity and closer to that of nearby mansions. External alterations have included: the introduction of small canopies over the windows, and the replacement of the presumed earlier canopy over the front entrance, as well as the original doors and some window shutters with non-traditional types.

Internally, in the parts of the house which are publicly accessible, the house has been stripped of its domesticity - several original features and finishes, typical of such houses in southern India (inset cupboards, niches, the front door, windows with timber shutters) have been removed or are obscured by later elaborate veneer panels used as the backdrop for the collection (Figure 6). In addition, the earlier concrete floors with decorative etched (mat-like) detailing, known to have existed in some of the ground floor areas, appear to have been tiled over while ‘back of house’ zones, such as the kitchen are not accessible.

It is observed that the process of museumisation of the Kamarajar Memorial House to date (by State acquisition and sponsorship) has enabled the retention of much of the significant place and offered interpretative opportunities, though they do not necessarily assist with the telling of story of the place but rather Kamaraj’s political career. As such, the museumisation thus far has to some extent resulted in a disconnect of the artifact from the place.

The changes that have ensued have in part reduced the authenticity of the place, so that it no longer reflects its original purpose or easily facilitates its interpretation. It has been altered to become a site that memorialises Kamaraj’s noteworthy political career rather than an historic house museum that reflects and documents his...
earlier, formative life there.

These interventions, presumably undertaken out of respect for this much-admired man to create a legacy befitting an important leader, translate, in our view, to an aggrandisement of the place which confuses its story; while also appreciating the process of near deification associated with the contemporary reverence that is afforded to Kamaraj in southern India (he has a near saint-like status similar to Gandhi’s). The house in Virudhunagar is one of several Kamaraj commemorative sites across Tamil Nadu including a memorial at Guindy in Chennai (next to Gandhi’s), a memorial museum at Kanyakumari where his ashes were immersed (also next to Gandhi’s), several statues, and the domestic airport in Chennai named the Kamaraj Terminal.

**Built Fabric Conservation Recommendations**

Based on what has been established as the cultural significance of the Virudhunagar museum – Kamaraj’s birthplace and his childhood home – the CMP recommends that the domestic appearance of the building/s be reinstated both externally and internally, where confirmed by appropriate documentary or physical evidence. The reconstruction of the façades to their original/early state would entail the removal of later modifications, as they compromise the ability to interpret the buildings as consisting of two or three separate sections and their former residential use.

Similarly, it has been recommended that the interior be returned as close as possible to the time when it was
occupied by Kamaraj, that is, the first half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, there are features it would not be practical to reinstate, such as a dirt floor (which is likely to have been the original treatment until about the 1930s), and the original, very steep timber staircase in the main hall.

The proposed approach has been offered with full acknowledgement that we, as Australian cultural heritage management practitioners, have our own predilections, biases, and understandings which may differ from those of Indian colleagues and friends. However, the request from the Indian authorities was to provide this Australian perspective and the response to the recommendations of the CMP has been positive both from the stakeholders and authorities in India. We are also mindful that it may not be necessary to eradicate all indications of the later phases and that the existing condition should be archivally documented, before major changes are undertaken.

**Current State of the Collection**

The collection of the Kamarajar Memorial House in Virudhunagar consists mainly of large scale reproductions of black and white photographs, predominantly relating to Kamaraj’s time as Chief Minister (1954-63) and subsequent political career, with only a few images dating to the earlier life when he was based in Virudhunagar. Cabinets are located in four rooms containing items dating to the latter years. These display ceremonial objects such as gifts from foreign dignitaries, scissors (for cutting ribbons), trowels, and the like. There are a few personal items, including simple kitchen implements, reflecting Kamaraj’s austere lifestyle, travelling items, including a suitcase and some toiletries, and some clothing (Figure 7).
Like typical houses in this tropical climate, there are timber shutters but there is no glass to the windows and internal climate control is limited to basic ceiling fans, only operated when visitors are present and when electric power is available (which is intermittent). The ground floor remains relatively protected from the impact of the hot sun because of the narrow streets. Objects are displayed in contemporary timber and glass cabinets protected from dust but it is unclear what other pest control procedures are in place. The collection is not extensive and there are only a few fragile objects, such as pages from manuscripts and cloth, including traditional clothing worn by Kamaraj, and his mattress – all of which are showing signs of decay.

The Virudhunagar house is one of three museums which celebrate Kamaraj’s life and a similar curatorial program has been adopted at all three. The Chennai house, located in a central tree-lined suburb, is a much larger, free-standing Modern style building probably constructed during the 1930s. Kamaraj rented this house from 1946 and it was opened as a museum in 1978 (Figure 8). The third museum is a new building, opened in 2000 at Kanyakumari at the southern tip of mainland India. These three museums, although laudatory in their intention, almost deify Kamaraj by focusing on the years when he was at the political forefront highlighting his meetings with important persons, from India and abroad. Although this curatorial approach is relevant to the Chennai house, and possibly to the Kanyakumari museum, it makes less sense at the Virudhunagar house, which offers the opportunity to appreciate a complementary aspect of Kamaraj’s life - his early, formative period and his family background.

Fig. 8. Chennai house – exterior with statue
**Recommendations for Collection**

The visitor experience would be enhanced by a curatorial program for the museum that focuses on Kamaraj’s life during the years when he was based at the house, from 1903 to 1945, which as previously outlined, is the primary period of cultural significance of the Kamarajar Memorial House. Displays relating to his school years, early working life, nascent political development, periods of internment, and his relationship with the broader Nadar caste/community, are recommended.

A collections and acquisitions policy needs to be developed to support the curatorial and interpretation program for the museum. Except for Kamaraj’s bed, there are few items relating to the domestic use of the building, though it is reported some important items still exist, such as the family cradle that would have been used by Kamaraj, and his mother’s chair. Acquisitions with demonstrable provenance to the building and the family should be the focus of the collections and acquisitions policy.

Surviving relatives of Kamaraj, including some who lived in the house, are a valuable source of information about the building and the lives that were lived in it, and oral histories need to be gathered from these people as a priority. Information about how different parts of the building were used would complement stories about Kamaraj and his family, especially his mother and sister.

How best to care for the collection is an important concern and it would be optimal to create an environment that regulates light and temperature in at least part of the building, where fragile items could be preserved, stored and displayed, though this may be difficult because of the irregularity of the electrical supply.

Programs to promote the site and collection and to disseminate information about Kamaraj’s early life may include an education program, the creation of a library/archive, and an internet site. Over time, a research collection could be developed that includes archival material and primary sources such as recordings and transcripts of oral histories which could be located on the World Wide Web, including YouTube and the like. This collection could also be broadened to incorporate material on political history, especially of southern India. A research collection would also support the development of changing exhibitions on Kamaraj and other related subjects. At present, the Kamarajar Memorial Museum does not have any dedicated digital media to support it such as a webpage, Facebook or the like. Once this is established it can be developed over time as a research portal providing access to library and archive material.

Additional facilities might be required to realise some of these recommendations. There is limited scope for physical expansion because of the relatively small scale of the site and future development (for an administrative/storage/support facility) may necessitate the acquisition of an adjacent property.

**Consultation & Involvement with Indian Authorities and the Community**

The project was initiated by the local Member for Parliament (Virudhunagar Constituency), Mr Manickam Tagore, who knew one of the co-authors Vinod Daniel. Daniel was born in Virudhunagar and is also a Tamil speaker. Mr Tagore’s support has been invaluable and has helped to raise the profile of the project with the State government.

The CMP was prepared under the auspices of AusHeritage with financial assistance from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Australian Government. The efforts of the Australian Consul-General in Chennai, Mr David Holly, and the Australian High Commissioner, Mr Peter Varghese, have also been instrumental in connecting with the highest levels of the Tamil Nadu government.
In order to ensure an inclusive approach, a draft of the CMP was provided to various stakeholders and a small forum was conducted under the direction of the District Collector (chief administrator) of Virudhunagar. The recommendations were translated into Tamil so that they could be discussed by family members and other stakeholders. A final report was presented to the current Chief Minister’s Department, managers of the site, for comment. Initial response from the government has been positive.

There has been a considerable degree of publicity in the local newspapers including a recent article in the Hindu (2.09.2012), the most highly respected paper in Tamil Nadu, which will hopefully serve to keep the project on the Government’s agenda. Currently the CMP is with the Chief Minister and Chief Secretary and many discussions are underway for the State government to implement it.

**Conclusion**

The recommendations of the CMP encourage a different conservation approach to the constituent fabric of the building and the collection in combination with a clarification of the curatorial agenda, based on what has been determined to be the cultural significance of the place. This approach, consistent with Burra Charter guidelines, would result in a subtle shift in the presentation of the building from a Memorial House to an Historic House Museum (as defined by ICOM DEMHIST) and in so doing, the reconnection of the artifact to its context.

**Endnotes**


**References:**


Disclaimer:

*These papers are published and distributed by the International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) and Committee for Historic House Museums (DEMHIST), with authorization from the copyright holders. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the policies, practices, or opinions of ICOM-CC or DEMHIST. Reference to methods, materials, products or companies, does not imply endorsement by ICOM-CC or DEMHIST.*