Nakshay - A community led culture mapping initiative an attempt towards best practices and successful conservation
Krupa Rajangam and Pankaj Modi, Conservation Architects
Vishweshwariah Technological University and Saythu...linking people and heritage

1. Introduction
Nakshay, a community led culture mapping initiative where communities identify and map their cultural heritage, is a personal initiative of the authors. It arose out of their interest in the role of communities in conservation and observations of over a decade of working with State and National conservation organisations in India. As practising conservation architects the authors felt a lacuna in the prevalent expert led monument centric approach to identification of heritage.

The starting point for this initiative was the premise that a successful i.e. sustainable heritage conservation management system is one which has developed from within the community. The first step towards having such a system in place would be to have community identify existing cultural heritage.

2. Aim and Objectives

Nakshay creates awareness of cultural heritage with the aim to instill a sense of pride in communities and foster local identity. This is in the hope that a shared identity will ensure that local groups take a lead in conservation of their heritage. The objectives are twofold, get different community groups to identify and map places of significance to them and based on the sessions develop guidelines towards involving different community groups, (be it based on gender, age, social background, region, language...) in heritage identification and conservation.

3. Approach

3.1. Summary

In keeping with the aim the authors considered the following criteria while developing methodologies. First, understand what a community group considers heritage or culturally significant through a bottom up approach rather than top down. Second, attempt to understand community perspective without influencing them in anyway. Third, undertake a number of interactions with a particular group to ensure deeper engagement. Fourth, work with cross-populations (children, adults, associations) to understand different perspectives and finally make the whole process available in the public realm by documenting the sessions (video and text). The authors undertook two pilot studies with two different age groups - school children and college students. They planned four sessions - first, an orientation, followed by a group discussion / interaction, then a deeper engagement and finally either one to one in the field or a presentation to their peers (based on age group).

3.2. Pilot Study at Fort High School, Bangalore

The authors were able to undertake three sessions with 41 students (ratio
of boys and girls 3:1) of the 10th standard (14-15 year olds) in the presence of their history teacher. Choice of school was deliberate. Fort High school, a government run school, founded in 1905 by the British, was the first English medium school in the state. Today, the medium of instruction is the local language, Kannada, with English from high school level. The building is a historic colonial period structure that sits in the heart of the old fort area of Bangalore founded in the 16th century AD and is surrounded by nationally and regionally protected built heritage.

The first session was exploratory engaging all the students of the class. The team tried to establish a rapport with the group and get them to think about something unique to their locale, not found elsewhere. The second session was a discussion with the group on the object / place / thing / person they had noted as "unique" to probe their choice. For eg, two of the students had both stated Tipu’s fort was unique. However for one it was because of its association with Tipu Sultan. Whereas for the other it was because it was a fort - i.e. a defensive structure built for a particular use. At the end each of them were asked to prepare a chart with sketches / poem / picture of their selected significant object / place / thing / person and note down what they would do if this unique place / object was under threat. The third session engaged the students who had prepared the charts.

3.3. Pilot Study at MES (Malleswaram Education Society), Bangalore
The authors undertook three sessions with 20 students (ratio of boys and girls 1:4), a mixed group of commerce and science undergraduates in their second and third year (19-20 year olds), who were members of the youth wing of a community service organisation. The choice of college was again deliberate. It is one of the older well established institutions of the city located in the heart of Malleswaram, a historic cultural quarter and one of the earliest formally established extensions to the old city.

First was the exploratory interactive session followed a week later by a group discussion. Finally the team met interested individuals in the field at their chosen site in an attempt to encourage them to engage with outsiders, in this
case the Nakshay team. This was in the hope that in the future they might be able to take visitors on a heritage walk around their area and describe its uniqueness.

3.4. Pilot Study at Somanathpura village
The authors are currently commencing a series of sessions in the village of Somanathpur with a cross-population of residents, schoolchildren and visitors. This historical village on the banks of a culturally significant river, the Cauvery has one of the most visited nationally protected monuments, a 14th century AD temple complex. A reconnaissance has been done to understand the village profile and informal discussions have been held with the principal, teachers and students of the local school and members of the Panchayat (village council).

4. Results
4.1. Fort school
In the 1st session, the responses to unique places / objects ranged from a temple procession to their own house. During the next session, students were asked to rank each other’s choices and perhaps not surprisingly religious structures got the maximum votes. In the final round possible “threats” to their choices were discussed. Responses ranged from approaching local councilors to the media.

4.2. MES college
Responses to culturally significant places in the 1st session ranged from a large living temple complex to the sprawling tree covered campus of a research institute en-route to college. In the next session, the group discussed each other’s choices by trying to assign values to them. Figures below note two of the mapped responses.

4.3. Somanathapura village
Sessions are to yet commence in the village.
5. Discussion

5.1. Considering the approach summarized in section 3.1,

- bottom up rather than top down and working with cross-populations,

Local heritage is regularly identified and mapped by experts for different institutions and organizations, who generally approach it as a technical exercise, using standard formats. To the best of the authors’ knowledge neither has heritage identification (in India) been attempted in an exploratory manner nor have efforts been made to interact with different profiles of people within a particular community. Varying the methodology depending on the group is also unique.

- Not influence the group in anyway,

In India, people generally consider heritage and culture to just include monuments. The authors particularly wished to avoid this preconception as they consider not just built historic to be heritage but also intangible, rituals, objects, maybe even people, Hence the efforts to not influence groups through use of phrases such as “do you know any culturally significant site or heritage site in your area” and so on.

This was tested in the case of the Fort School pilot study, where the first answer to what you would consider unique was a flyover. However, by discussing the presence of such infrastructure in most localities, the team was able to get the school boy to open his mind. With youth the initial responses were places they would “hang out”; which the team found useful to explore the notion of intangible heritage. Here it is worth noting that for this age group heritage was more than buildings; it also included the environment.

- Multiple interactions and in the field,

Repeatedly engaging the group rather than giving a lecture or presentation was productive. One of the students had mentioned noticing a mall enroute from school to home in the 1st session. In the 3rd session the same student
prepared a chart of a local historic botanical garden considering it not just a park but a garden with old buildings, flora and fauna. One member of the youth group mentioned the possibility of starting a nature club in his college after the team visited a local water tank with him; a second spoke about renewing her early interest in art after visiting the leafy environs of an art school.

5.2. Considering the results,
- The orientation session with both groups followed the same pattern; but the youth responded immediately, an indicator of age and exposure. Though school children took time to get involved in the discussion, they surprised the team with their insight once they did. Moreover, as the group was younger, it was not possible to engage them in the field.
- There was a certain level of awareness of the historic area their institution is located in among both groups. However, this was higher among the youth. Just two students identified Tipu’s fort located close to their school, whereas with the youth more than half pointed out local landmarks, like the house of a famous scientist, a boulevard leading to their college, a bungalow behind it... One student included the college (MES). Not surprisingly school children mentioned more places closer to their homes.

5.3. Comparisons
- There are similarities with the UK national charity CommonGrond, which champions democratic involvement in localities. Both promote awareness creation of an area’s uniqueness but from different perspectives. The former focuses on the environment and actively seeks to present the local viewpoint to authority while the latter focuses on heritage and leaves further action to the discretion of the community. One of the authors had a series of interviews with the founders this charity which was useful while developing the methodology.

6. Conclusion
The pilot studies showed the difference in the level of awareness considering age, exposure and education. However as the results were fruitful, the authors intend to continue with the sessions as outlined in the methodology. In keeping with the objective of developing guidelines, a dedicated website has been set up which describes the aim and process. The results as a map and short films on the 2 pilot studies are available online.

7. Significance of the study
The prevalent approach to conservation hinders national and regional conservation organizations from engaging with local people. Over the years, mistrust between such organizations and community groups appear to have become endemic. This inevitably leads to conflict and dissociation of heritage from those very communities which ought to actively participate in its conservation. Moreover, in a country like India, with vast unprotected heritage – both tangible and intangible, community participation becomes a key to successful conservation.
The authors’ initiative is a novel and useful attempt to bridge these gaps. It empowers communities to identify (and hopefully manage their) heritage and adds value to certain culturally significant places / things which may not have been perceived as heritage. Thus, Nakshay could be deemed an effort towards developing best practices. Here, it is noted that the authors consider conservation to be, ‘all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance”.

8 Future directions
Besides the village study, the authors are planning a session with students of a private school to compare the results with the government school group. Gradually, it is hoped to extend Nakshay from Bangalore to other rural and urban settings, nationwide.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank the Nakshay team - Architects Sonalika Dugar and Aparna Shastri, filmmaker Clemence Barret and teachers and students at both locations for their support.