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## **INHABITED WALL: A STUDY OF A STREET OF INHABITED WALLS**

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**Abstract:** Indian cities are kinetic, everchanging and adapting to new needs. Streets and thresholds significantly participate in this constant dialogue of change. Urban fabric of a neighborhood can be identified in its manner of manifesting change, where street morphology, relationship of open to built define and describe territory. This paper is an exploratory study of one area showing the manner in which spaces collectively through changing functions and threshold relationships give life to the city and help define it. The paper further attempts to draw parallels between Simon Unwin's "inhabited walls" and street buildings where the street conceptually acts as a wall. Further the interconnected and placement of these inhabited walls are describe within the framework of Kevin Lynch points on imagability. Documentation in sketches and mapping of a specific street and a range of inhabited walls will be used to construct this explanation. Analysis will show that inhabited walls and these liminal spaces between buildings and streets permit negotiations of boundaries by the people who, through active participation and choice make the city safer and more alive and are fundamental to enriching street life and city life.

**Keywords:** Walls, City, Territory, Space.

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### **Introduction**



**Fig.1:** Inhabited wall ....Cenotaph First Street Corner.

In Simon Unwin prolific book "the Wall": Unwin describes the different roles walls play in architecture and in towns of the many functions walls perform, the following statement pertains to this paper. "In towns and cities the walls of streets and squares are inhabited. The houses, shops and other buildings form the walls of the public spaces." (Unwin 1997) In another reference he refers to buildings as walls of an "urban room". Yatin Pandya refers to building facades as walls in the context of a city.

What is the definition of an inhabited wall? It is a carved out space using the principle of subtraction which houses an activity. By virtue of its definition it has depth, length and breadth. As it conjuncts a

road it has a threshold .Sometimes luminal spaces occur on either side or on one side. The line of facades of the street form a metaphorical wall which encloses the street and is perceived as a dense , thick block. The inhabited wall is a result of space being subtracted from a dense hard block .Unwin refers to this subtraction as “the mining of space”.Through its varying functionality ,permeability and design ,the inhabited wall gives life to the street by creating encounters and generating life such that the street is always alive. It provides temporal spatial identities which regenerate the life of the street. In essence the inhabited wall represents the kinetic force which drives the city by its continuous transformations. The wall or façade constitutes a threshold between street and public and inhabited space and private space. The walls that contain this territory contain within themselves a range of typologies from house ,to shop ,to stairs to courtyard. Each function relates differently to the street .Each has its own requirements from the” wall”.But all collectively enact the life of the street.

The wall therefore in each case is not of the same description and varies in materiality and permeability. It provides a hard territorial boundary which buffers the street noise,pollution and bustle from the house.In the corner house and others the street is lined by the territorial façade wall which has small openings and controlled access. It is relatively impermeable.Privacy is maintained by the high walls.In one such case a double gate allows some visual permeability for the forecourt which has a swing.The wall here is structural and creates a fixed enclosure.

At a macro level, the street itself is contained between two walls where the buildings enclose it to form as in Simon Unwin’s terms an ‘urban Room”. Refer Fig.In their manifestations of size, permeability ,type and materiality inhabited walls give identity to the urban fabric. They are not static but everchanging as in a liminal space converted into a storage area for two-wheelers with a 3’wide roller shutter that encloses it and gives access to it from the street. Temporal space converted and reconverted tomorrow to another use.

“Inhabited walls” can contribute to give identity to a neighbourhood ,inhabited walls can ,as the paper will show, constitute their role as elements in the language of Kevin Lynch’s “image of a city”. In an Urban context Kevin Lynch looks at five basic elements in the Image of the City. These are District, nodes, path ,edge and landmarks. He writes “Districts are structured with nodes, defined by edges , penetrated by paths and sprinkled with landmarks.”<sup>2</sup>(Lynch,1960,pg30)Path refers to streets , while nodes refer to intersections of streets. A precinct is a neighborhood or part of the city and a landmark is a fixed point of reference. Edge is defined as the streets linearity. Path ,edge, node and district describe the fabric of the city in terms of weaving its intangible stories based on culture and social customs into its urban fabric in the manifestation of interfaces between inhabited wall and street, location and

permeability. Through a study of one part of the city the objective of this paper is to demonstrate the existence and illustrate the characteristics of the inhabited wall in its role of making the city kinetic and giving identity to it.

The area to be covered is in Alwarpet, Streets covered are Alwarpetsecondstreet,Cenotaph 1<sup>st</sup> Lane and Cenotaph road First street and TTK road.

The paper will study the inhabited wall based on

1. Function ie: activity categorize the inhabited wall into different typologies.
2. Description of space ie closed versus open
3. Depth of space
4. Nature of open space
5. Size of opening to the street.
6. Materials and façade.
7. Threshold and interface with the street.

The paper will also look at the street as a whole and in its context to the neighborhood within the framework of Kevin Lynch’s “image of the city”.The area of study has been chosen as primarily Alwarpet second street as it offers a rich diversity in description and use of the inhabited wall.

**Background:** Alwarpet was a village according to British records, that and called “Alwarpett” and dates to 1777. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century it housed well known personalities of Chennai and was considered a “posh” neighbourhood. Today some of these houses still exist amongst a fabric which is of mixed use residential.



Fig 2. Alwarpet



Fig 3. Corner of Street..Baji Shop



Fig 4. Mother Mary niche on TTK road

Sketches below show plans of the street. The neighbourhood is of mixed use with little shops and residential. The maximum height is ground plus two storeys. There exists a mix of older buildings of the last century and new recent constructions and existing buildings with renovated structures. There is no specific architectural style or material and the street façade is a jumble of expensive rich marble and stone cladding with painted stucco and crumbling plasterwork. It has newly developed plots of approx 40 feet frontage converted to apartments with parking and older houses with boundary walls and residence walls abutting the street. Continuous building and set backs are visible. No pavements are seen but approximately three feet on either side is not part of the road and is tiled. These spaces offer opportunity for the everchanging city dweller and re used differently.

**Table 1:** Table Showing Typology Of “Inhabited Wall” And Location

Sl. No.	name	Street name	Location	Typology	Size
1.	Corner shop	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> St Cenotaph 1 <sup>st</sup> street	Corner	Shop/household	Under 100sqft
2.	Tea stall	Cenotaph 1 <sup>st</sup> street	Facing a street and on the corner	Eatery	100-200sqft
3.	Machine repair shop	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	Towards one end	Shop	Under 100sqft
4.	tailor	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	Towards middle	Shop/service	Under 100sqft
5.	Ironing	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	Towards one end	Shop/service	Under 100sqft
6.	staircase	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	middle	Access to top floor	Under 100sqft
7.	Front Space to dwelling	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	middle	Residential Car parking	Front set back Apprx 15 feet
8.	Front Space to dwelling	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	middle	Residential Open space with swing	Front set back Apprx 15 feet
9.	Front entry	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	middle	Residential Ante space leading to front door	Front set back Apprx 15 feet
10.	Front space to dwelling	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	Towards one end	Residential ante space for two wheeler parking	Apprx 10 feet
11.	Front space to dwelling	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	middle	Residential flats Set back for parking cars	Front set back Apprx 15 feet
12.	Front and side space	Alwarpet 2 <sup>nd</sup> st	middle	Residential Setback space	Front set back Apprx 15 feet

**Discussion:** Cultural diversity and richness contribute to give character and identity and are seen in the range of activities Inhabited walls can be mere niches which hold a statue of a God .Refer fig 2.Mother Mary in a decorated niche ,lit at night and facing TTK road .the two steps are multipurpose and are used for jars of flowers and by people to sit on in the evening. Worship happens on the pavement ,as the pavement is the threshold. fluctuate from public to sacred . The pavement oscillates between a place of worship and a public thoroughfare from sacred to profane. The niche becomes a landmark with the inhabited wall functions as a marker.The pavement in turn receives attention. Such subtractions of space in walls are available spread across TTK road as , altars, ATM's and even small boutique shops. Part of the e neighbourhood is to inject life. The wall is a boundary which shuts out the street but also is pierced discretely to bring in light .Inhabited walls have threshold spaces which directly interface with the street or through pavements. Pavements become threshold spaces that transform into living/functional spaces not mere public pavements by careful adaptations and transformations. The inhabited wall offers security .

The iron man in his makeshift movable ironing trolley uses the wall as a ballast from which he gains shelter. His functional space is created by carving out from the space in front of the boundary wall.He uses the wall as arepository for all his work accouterments. He has built a sunshade which protects him while ironing..He is a landmark in the network of roads as a fixed element which supports the life of the city. He constitutes the image of a landmark in the precinct he works in a similar manner, the flower seller in front of the temple carves out his space in part of an opening in a t. In temple wall inhabiting it and giving it further richness by using every nook cranny and crevice to hang and store.

corner , shop<sub>1</sub>,has scooped out a chunk so he can operate from two streets. What separates him from the street is the two rolling shutters which secure his shop. People stand directly on the street in order to purchase on one street and on another side there is a pavement. Opposite him is a tea and baji stall where the shop directly interfaces on the street and which is an extension of the tea shop and is where tea is drunk. It is a male dominated space. It is congested with people and two wheelers .It is a dynamic space where people are constantly moving to and moving out of. It is a hub. It forms a node catching the passerby and drawing people to it. Inhabited walls such as these give opportunities for cultural and social integration and keep street life alive.

The street is considered safe being under constant vigilance from these vendors. Women use it at all times of the day to walk to work ,market etc. Women come out to talk to people on doorsteps.Men sit on thresholds to read newspapers.

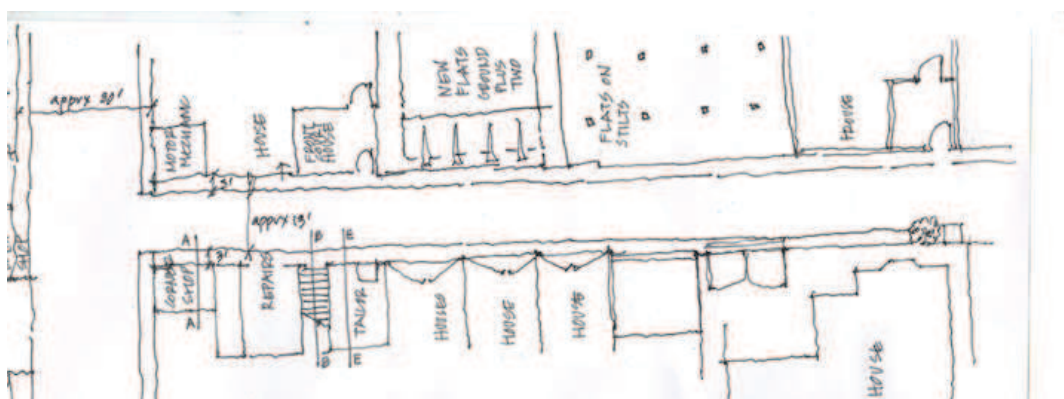


Fig 3: Part Street Plan





Fig 3: Street as Room....Pandal 1



Fig 5: Tailor Shop 1

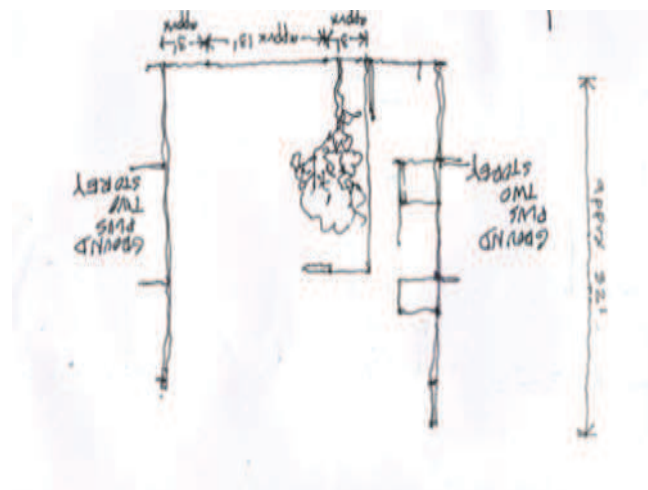


Fig 6: Section of street 1

Inhabited walls such as these give opportunities for cultural and social integration and keep street life alive port and shelter to the threshold space on its exterior and transforms the street. Refer Figures 4-9. There is no clear demarcation of edges. The street edge changes according to the time of the day and can be formed by the wall edges at times when no business is transacted but is ambiguous during opening hours. A tailor has his cutting table placed such that you stand just within, on a step which is the threshold of his shop to discuss with him. A rolling shutter drawn up reveals his entire frontage of approximately nine feet. A sign board occupies a space in the street. The neighboring shop similarly opens up to the street at a higher plinth and offers a seat for the passerby. People adapt and find ways of negotiating the street into their daily life and give meaning to their inhabited walls. Daily activities spill out into the street and in threshold spaces. Private and public mix.

An ironing man has his table on the street outside his threshold space. Once the shutters are open he spills into the street exposing the interior of his workspace. The street is included in his space of **Articulation**

Narrow rolling shutters when opened reveal staircases and narrow deep storage spaces. Texture and grain are not uniform. Shops use rolling shutters and residential buildings use gates. The wall is a composition of metal grille, steel gates and rolling shutters. The wall offers varying permeability and discloses partially, and completely its inhabited spaces.

Varying degrees of security can be seen. In residence 2, the wall covers the entire height of the ground floor and through a grille gate reveals an ante space sufficient to park a bike. The wall appears to shut off the street from the residence. In another instance an intricately designed gate leads to a front court

which houses a swing. The gate screens the street from the dwelling and through its design offers permeability from both sides in comparison to its neighbor. Sitting on the swing one can engage with activities happening on the street from a secure protected private enclosure.



Fig 7: Ironing Man

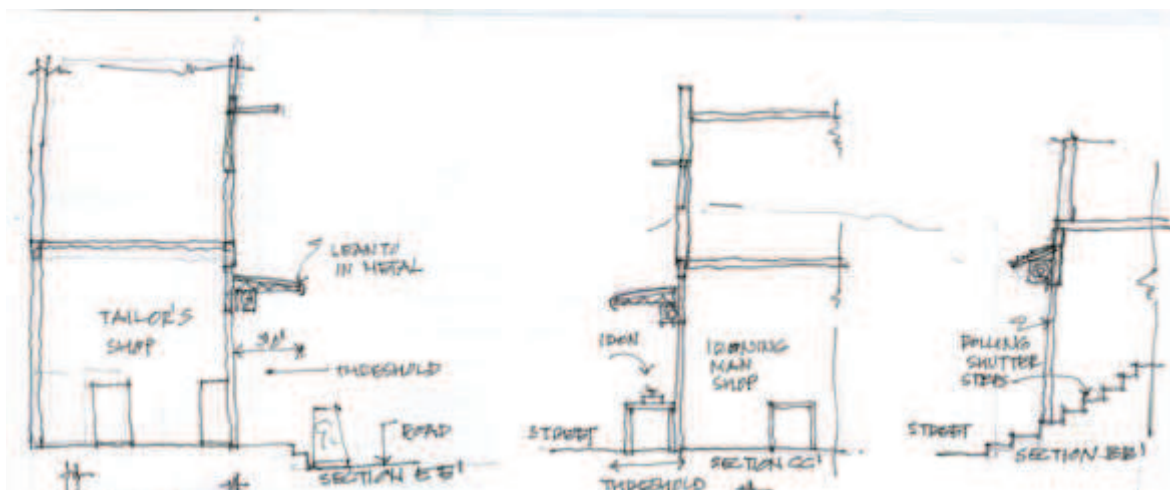


Fig 8: Sections 1

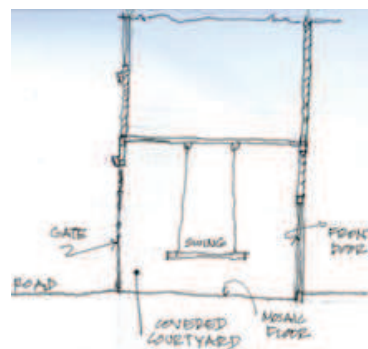


Fig 9: Section cc Through Courtyard



**Figure 15:** Part Elevation (wall) of Street.

Some openings in the wall are narrow and comprise a passage. Some narrow openings lead to dwellings or are service areas.

The tailor and ironing man and adhoc parking of various cars vans two wheelers etc seem to indicate that the street is available for use by the people who live there.

One perceives a claim of each resident on the street which materializes in particular on festival days. During a festival or function in any of the resident's houses, the street is closed and a pandal is stretched on the street between opposite walls and the street becomes a room. The street becomes an inhabited room carved out of the cities "walls" and no longer a public street. It is a community space enjoyed by the people who are residents of the street ,a node which draws the people together.

**Conclusion:** The inhabited wall acts at the macro level when the street itself transforms to a public square drawing people together as a community space .Space becomes place constituted by the socio-cultural identity of the nature of function etc. The macrocosm is the microcosm. Inhabited space is the "urban living room " carved out of the dense fabric of buildings.

At the micro level the paper shoes how neighborhoods create identities manifested by function and articulated in their materials and degrees of permeability in their inhabited walls. Varying levels of privacy,security, penetrability are demanded from these walls based on functional needs. The city thrives on an interface between activities that engage in dialogues with these walls. People adapt and cities are in constant stages of transformation and inhabited walls play the crucial role of offering temporal spaces of dialogue that keep the city alive.

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