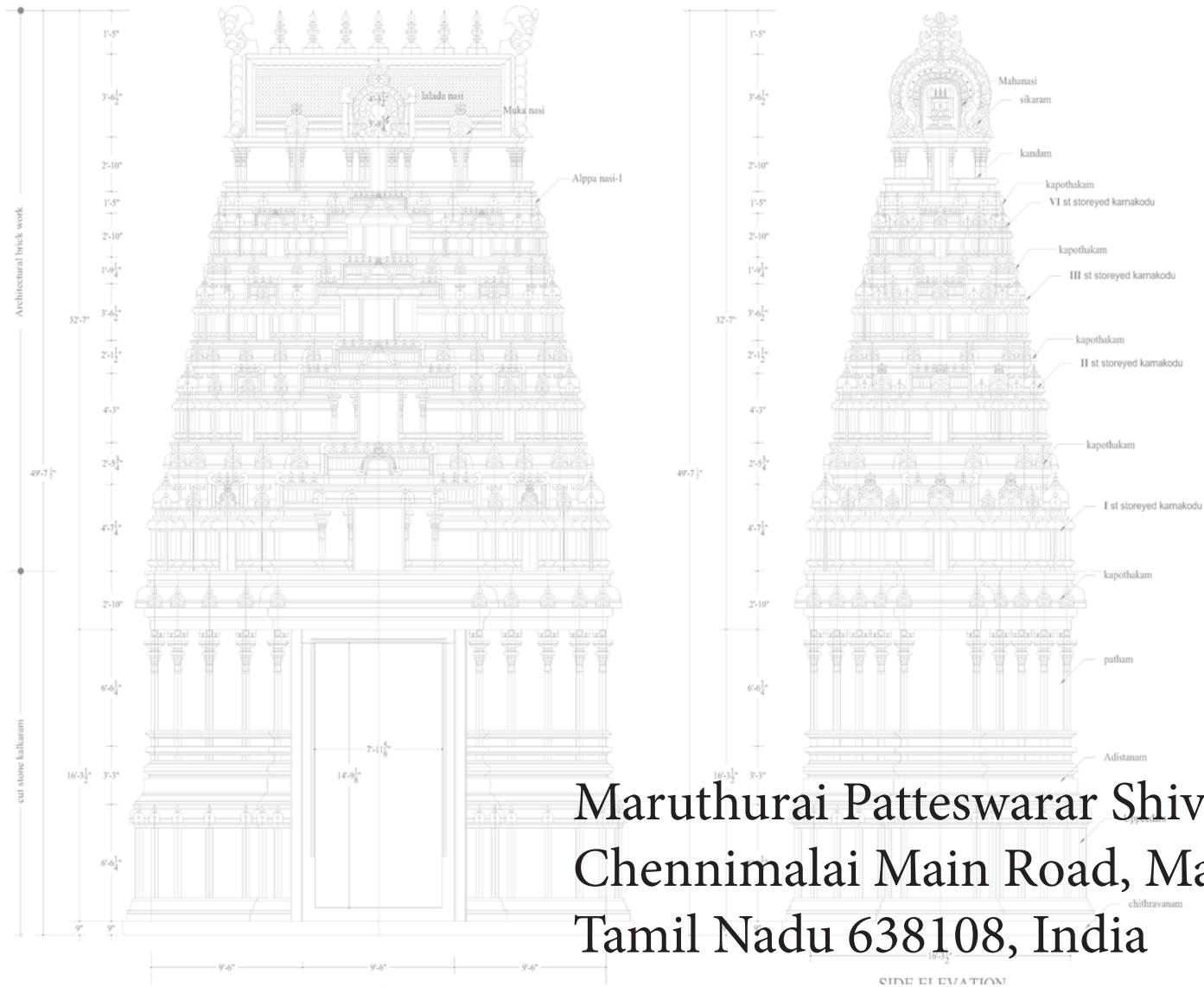




Maruthurai Patteswarar Shiva Temple,
Chennimalai Main Road, Marudurai,
Tamil Nadu 638108, India



Eternal Spaces

Origin of the idea to build Marudurai Temple

Growing up in India and in a religiously inclined family and community, temples played a central role in not just religious life but also in a social context. Some of my earliest and fondest memories are set in a temple context, and I have been drawn to the architectural and visual opulence of Indian temples (many of which are centuries old and yet as sturdy and vibrant as they were when initially constructed)

The germ of this concept, i.e. to restore an ancient temple that has fallen into disrepair even as it has remained in use by the local population, has been in my mind for years. Prominence given in recent times to such rebuilding efforts, almost all of which are government –financed and of relatively small scale, only further kindled my desire to find a way to make a personal contribution in this field

As chance would have it, during my weekly visits to a prominent temple in Singapore (where I lived then), I became acquainted with a priest recruited from India to serve at the temple. This young man had a burning desire to find a way to rebuild an ancient temple which his family had served as a priest for generations; however, with the temple almost in ruins, it was no longer supporting the 200,000-strong rural community for which it had served as a center of religious, cultural and social life

Over extensive discussions in the ensuing two years, and drawn especially by the potential to breathe new life into this rural and somewhat isolated region, my husband and I resolved to do our part to rebuild this centerpiece of the community. But also, we wanted to help recreate, albeit on a modern scale, this ancient temple, that will provide a platform for this community to revive its social fabric



Temple Background and History

This temple dedicated to Lord Shiva (of the Hindu triumvirate of Creator (Brahma), Preserver (Vishnu), and Destroyer (Shiva)) was constructed at a holy spot by the Noyyal river. As legend has it, this location was revealed to the local monarch in a dream, and chosen to be the place where the scared royal cow chose to lactate and feed its calves; this being a symbolic and deeply revered action in Hindu beliefs, the spot was considered scared and a temple erected there

The first major structure is believed to have been constructed in the reign of King Karikala chola, one of the early rulers of the Chola dynasty which ruled large parts of southern India from their capital city of Thanjavur and reached the peak of its prominence in the 8th-12th centuries. The idols of Lord Shiva, his consort Parvathi, and a few other deities in the Hindu pantheon are believed to date from this structure (or perhaps even earlier) and have been in continuous worship since then (a practice which continues to this day)

Per a granite tablet at the temple site, the structure was rebuilt in the 15th century by the legendary emperor Krishna Deva Raya who ruled the kingdom of Vijayanagar (and whose conquests added the erstwhile Chola territories to the Vijayanagar empire). King Krishna Deva Raya also bequeathed to the temple vast tracts of fertile agricultural land in its vicinity, with the intent of the income from these lands be directed towards upkeep and operation of the temple

With the passage of time, and primarily during the British rule of India in the 19th and first half of 20th centuries, the lands were annexed by various individuals. Following this latest effort to rebuild and consecrate the temple, the government has initiated legal action to recover the title of these lands with a view to making the temple self-funded once again



Architectural and Design Objectives

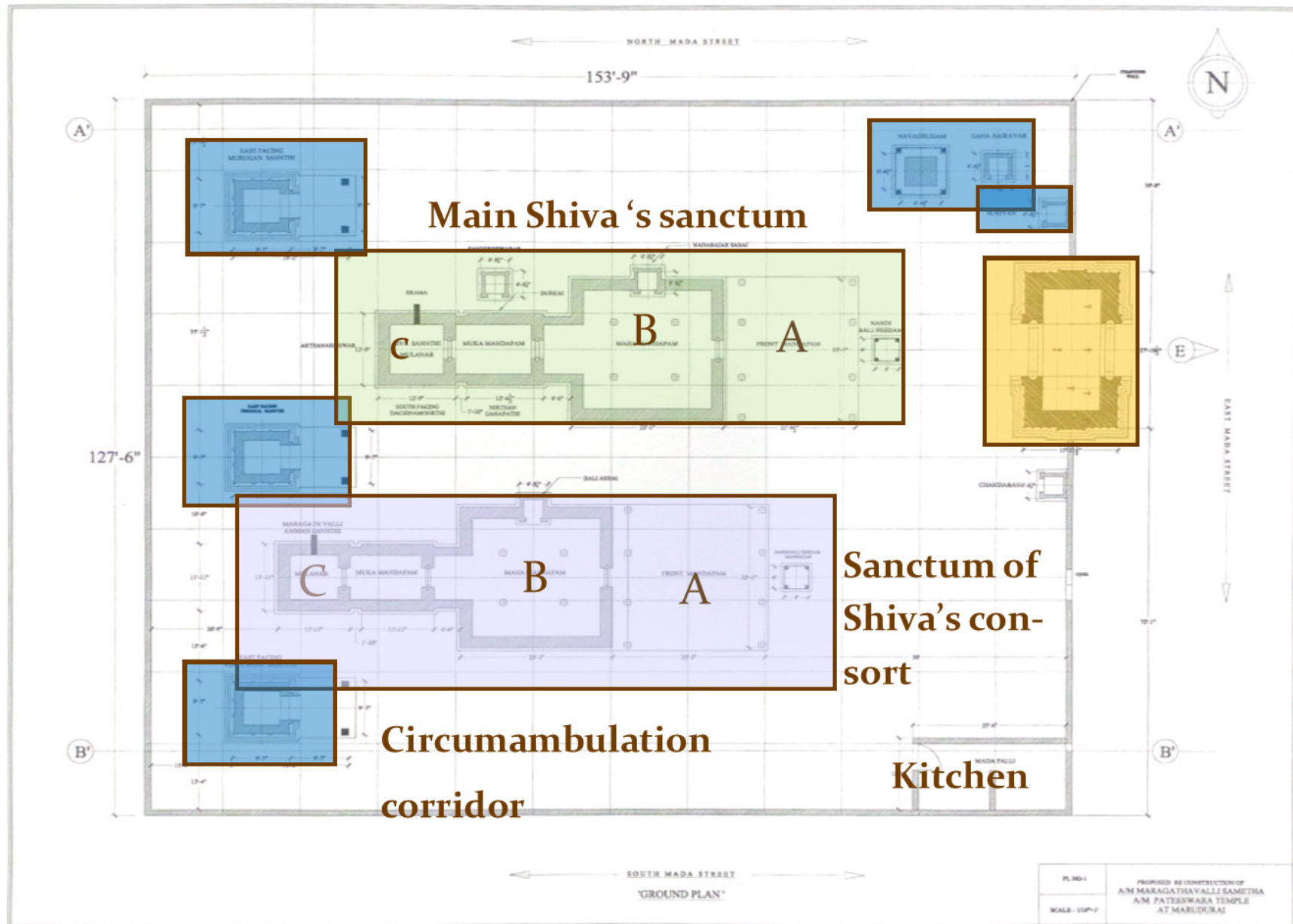
In striving to achieve a healthy balance between tradition, history, function, and practicality, the temple design has been anchored around four over-arching design objectives:

Functional ... in keeping with the rural location and multiple of social and religious purposes for which the temple would be used, design features include fully paved courtyard and pathways (e.g. for wedding processions), large outer pavilions to serve as function spaces, and an integrated kitchen to cook food for key festivals

Open ... to blend into the wide open surroundings in which the temple sits, over half of the temple compound has been retained as open space for people to congregate as well as for the circumambulation (a critical act in the observation of Hindu religion). Also, the two major shrines each sport large outer pavilion permitting outdoor conduct of key religious ceremonies which have traditionally been restricted to the confines of the enclosed inner sanctums

Modern ... reflecting the current times, with innovative features including wider doorways leading to the main sanctum for each of the two major shrines and skylights and electric lighting designed to complement abundant natural lighting and provide the right ambience for mediation and prayer

Achievable ... given much of the sculpting skills (esp. in working with granite, an very hard stone that is difficult to sculpt) have declined since the loss of royal patronage for temple-building, careful selection of design and ornamentation was needed to construct a structure that instantly evokes the grand temples of centuries of past but also reasonably feasible with the artisans and tools available today



Temple Background and History

East-West alignment: The temple is set on a high plinth or platform to symbolize its significance as God's abode, and is laid out in an east –west alignment, with entrance on the eastern side and the sanctuary on the western side that follows the sun's path

Temple compound: Unique to South Indian temple style, this temple is encircled by high walls with entrances through large pyramid style gateways called “gopurams” (shown in brown)

Open Pavilion or Ardha Mandapam (A): This 16 pillar hypostyle hall, is an assembly hall for devotees to view the idol in the sanctum. The space is also used for cultural performance and religious ceremonies requiring a fire pit

Intermediate Space or Mukha Mandapam (B): An enclosed chamber that connects inner sanctum to the open pavilion

Inner Sanctum or Garbha Graham (C): The square shaped sanctuary is cave like abode of the deity

Circumambulation corridor: Central to the Hindu faith, it signifies that humans should walk the circle of life, with God at the center of it all



Scared Tower “Gopuram”

The formal entrance to a temple or “gopuram” is often the most visible and striking aspect of a temple, and occupies a prominent role in traditional temple architecture. Beyond its imposing size, the entrance is decorated with figurines depicting scenes which collectively narrate stories from Hindu mythology. While offering plenty of room for individual expression, the core dimensions and shape of the gopuram need to adhere to strict guidelines based on the presiding deity of the temple

Specific design choices in this temple include:

A five-tiered pyramid shape (vs. conical or other shapes)

Eaves that project ever so slightly form the face of the façade and parapets, which are decorated with figurines surrounding a miniature entryway (a style of decorating the entrances which has evolved in the past 2 decades)

The peak of the gopuram adorned with nine ornamental brass vessels which play a central role in the consecration ceremonies for the temple



Columned Pavilion

This is the centerpiece of the temple, housing the centuries-old idol of Lord Shiva which has been worshipped since the original temple was built over a thousand years ago. Reflecting its importance, the design is elaborate and ornamental, with many distinctive features

Beyond serving a functional purpose as a gathering place for devotees, this 16 pillar pavilion, held up by a graceful set of hand-carved columns is perhaps the most distinctive feature of a temple, decorated as they are with motifs from everyday life and mythology. Design and ornamentation of columns in this temple was inspired by Jambukeshwarar temple in Trichy, and includes:

Rounded columns, which entail heavy manual labor to create (being carved as a set of polygons with increasing numbers of sides until it is fully rounded)

Ornate base relief representing different forms of the resident deity (shown in yellow)

Lotus capital (shown in blue)

Inverted lotus bud bracket (shown in red)

Each of the four sides of the square base of the columns has a distinct sculpture: together, they extol the virtues of the presiding deity of this temple



Sanctum of Lord Shiva (presiding deity)

This is the centerpiece of the temple, housing the centuries-old idol of Lord Shiva which has been worshipped since the original temple was built over a thousand years ago. Reflecting its importance, the design is elaborate and ornamental, with many distinctive features:

Temple wall characterized by shallow pilasters

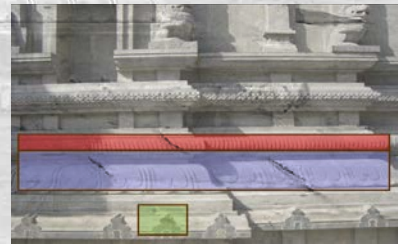
Wall structure designed with double width projections and single width recessions¹

Pilaster carved from a single block of granite and assumes two forms: a wide pilaster paired with niche that represents a form of the resident deity (shown in red) or a narrow pilaster with a lion base (shown in blue) and paired with decorative pillars (shown in yellow) that includes weaponry used in warfare². Each of these motifs is intended to symbolize the power of the resident deity, Lord Shiva.

Source:

1. Hindu Temple of South India, by David Raper and Jennifer Raper

2. Ibid.



Sanctum of Goddess Parvathi(Lord Shiva's concert)

Second only in importance to the shrine of the presiding deity, the Lord's consort has a shrine that is usually more intricately designed than even the main sanctum. In this temple, ornamentation includes three level of friezes on the base platform of the shrine and pavilion: the sacred lotus motif(shown in blue), a horse shoe shaped arch (in green), and a thin bangle-patterned semi circular offset pattern (shown in red



Domed sanctum rooftops - “Vimana”

Serving as the roof over the head of the main deities of the temple, the Vimana naturally commands attention. Interestingly, these structures have traditionally been designed to be elegant yet simple, in marked contrast to the other structures in the temple

There is, however, a discipline and set of guidelines governing the shape and style of the Vimana, which in turn have influenced the style adopted in this temple:

Onion shaped dome (shown in yellow) or bell shaped dome resting on a square base and ornamented with horseshoe shaped arch(in green) capping each inner sanctum
Each of the four sides sporting sculptures and figurines depicting a specific and distinct form (“avatar”) of resident deity



My role in rebuilding the temple

Over the course of this project (discussions for which originated in 2005 with formal construction over the period of 2007-12 leading up to its consecration in June 2012) I played multiple (often concurrent) roles. Temple devotees use the term “karta” in the local dialect to describe my role, which translates literally to “doer” or more broadly to “patron”

Initiation and sponsorship: from expanding and fleshing out the initial needs and requirements for a functional temple to fleshing out the concept (in consultation with the temple architects) and determining the scope of the redesign, this early work helped crystallize the endeavor and provide the basis for necessary approvals and permits to start the project

Design parameters and choices: while the goal of constructing an all-granite temple (rare in contemporary India given complexity and cost) held intuitive appeal, numerous design decisions were required to make it practically and economically feasible

Design detail: in support of the master temple architect, I undertook in-person visits to study in detail the design of over a dozen ancient temples (some dating back over a thousand years). The resulting choices have made this temple unique, drawing styles from multiple architectural periods while also extensively adapting and blending them to make it practical to construct and negotiation (granite quarries, equipment rental, etc.), budget preparation and tracking, and contingency planning and roadblock resolution



Personal Reflections

Viewed along several dimensions - scope and complexity of the endeavor, time an effort involved, and degree of emotional investment - this has been a seminal experience for me. With the benefit of a couple of years to reflect on it, a few elements stand out:

Trading off practicality for ambition: I am by nature drawn to the practical and feasible, and the simple answer here would have been to pick a simple brick-and-mortar (as opposed to granite-based) structure and get it built in about 2 years. Setting aside some of this practicality in favor of creating something distinctive (and increasingly rare in modern day temple construction) has been a difficult decision to make and even harder to sustain, but it has made a striking difference in the outcome

Perseverance: at several points it appeared that this project might never see the light of day, with hurdles ranging from inflexibility of heritage board officials, a ban on granite quarrying operations (thankfully only temporary in nature, and inability to retain skilled labor crews, due to remote site location. Being dogged and tenacious (and simply wearing down opposition) eventually created a path forward each time, a valuable lesson

It take a village: in this case, quite literally. The need for mobilizing multiple stakeholders including the sizable local population, approaches to doing so, and the investment required to sustain high levels of intellectual and emotional engagement across the stakeholder group have all been instructive to me

With some luck, this temple will stand the test of time



