TAMIL DIASPORIC IDENTITY MANIFESTED THROUGH THE ARCHITECTURAL HYBRIDIZATION OF TEMPLES

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on fieldwork conducted at the Highgatehill Murugan Temple in London, this case study examines how a Tamil worshipping community preserves a distinct cultural and religious identity despite their displacement. This particular identity is expressed through the use of unconventional architectural forms. Because this temple reflects a marker of Tamil identity in London, there is an inherent desire to reconstruct a truly "authentic" temple. The transnational temples of the Tamil diaspora highlight not only the desire to maintain material links to the homeland, but also symbolic links. The symbolic significance of desiring the regional god Murugan as its presiding deity, rather than a pan-Indian one, allows Tamils to differentiate themselves from other Hindu diasporic religious communities. Moreover, the innovative designs of this temple replicate distinct South Indian architectural heritage. In particular, the temple's symbolic new façade reflects a strategy of architectural hybridization integrated within the London landscape. In sum, this study of a Tamil temple explores questions of architectural identity and traditions as well as authenticity and transformation in the diaspora.

INTRODUCTION: TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE, THE DIASPORA, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

2 00A Archway Road, London, has a compelling history. First constructed as a Baptist church, it later served as a synagogue until its roof was destroyed by fire. A Tamil community subsequently purchased and rebuilt the structure as a temple or *kōvil* as it is called in Tamil. When I first visited the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, tarp mats covered the entrance while workers from India were installing two new door guardians. It was clear that the building was once again undergoing a period of transition. The city council had finally approved the planning permission and major renovation had just begun on the façade of the temple. The once austere place of worship that blended in with the terraced British houses on either side would now stand out with added South Indian architectural elements, giving it a

visually distinctive character and identity. Significantly, the new exterior design plan incorporates an iconic representation of the Tamil god Murugan as well as a *gopuram* elevation, both important architectural features of the entrance to South Indian temples. The form of the building raises issues on the transformation of the architecture of the Tamil temple in the diaspora.

The Highgatehill Murugan Temple demonstrates continuity, but more importantly, innovation. This inevitably leads to issues of the continuity of tradition vis-à-vis modernity. The question arises: can the same definition of an "authentic" South Indian temple be applied to modern temples outside the homeland? Parker aptly asserts that modern Hindu temples, whether in India or abroad:

> …resist classification as either traditional, modern or postmodern. Perhaps improvisational would be a better label. Like specific performance of a musical mode (*raga*), they give indefinitely variable lift to implicit, fluid structures.[1]

This study asserts that South Indian temples were never really timeless or changeless forms of architecture, but rather, as Parker suggests, fluid structures that can and must adapt to shifting circumstances in the diaspora. I draw on the theoretical narratives of Waghorne, Geaves, Taylor, and Mehra, who have contributed to the body of research on Tamil identity and temple building in the diaspora. However, there is a relatively limited range of literature in the current field. Moreover, this research has been essentially conducted from anthropological or religious studies perspectives. There are still interventions to be made from a visual and architectural point of view.

This study draws on qualitative research conducted at the Highgatehill Murugan Temple over a period of two months. During regular visits to the temple, I collected empirical data through observations as

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1   Samuel K. Parker, "Text and Practice in South Asian Art: An Ethnographic Perspective," *Artibus Asiae* 63.1 (2003): 16.

well as interviews with a wide range of people involved in the temple community. Interviews with temple officials, administrative authorities, engineers, craftsmen, workers, priests, and devotees aided in creating a holistic picture of the current renovation project. In my study of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, I argue that this South Indian diasporic structure represents a new "architectural hybrid," a term used by Mehra in his survey of Hindu temples in Chicago.[2] The temple represents a hybrid in the sense that the new building utilizes an architectural strategy that incorporates both elements from the home country of India and the architecture of the host country, Britain.

My intent is not only to examine the unconventional nature of the architecture of this temple, but also to understand how this space allows the Tamil community to assert their religious identity in the multicultural setting of London. Indeed, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple represents a particular form of Hinduism. It is an explicitly Śaivite temple, and I argue that the presiding deity of the temple, Murugan, becomes an important symbol of Tamil identity. This allows the temple to distinguish itself from other Indian religious communities in the host country. With devotees from the international Tamil diaspora including Sri Lanka, India, Mauritius, and Malaysia, the temple reflects a collage of multiple national, linguistic, and even caste identities. Śaivites of Tamil origin have carried with them their distinct form of worship and rituals, as well as their temple architecture to London. These temples can be characterized as "transnational" as they represent the spread of practices, deities, and devotees across national boundaries.[3] The central question I seek to examine is this: what architectural strategies does this transnational temple use to express Tamil identity in London?

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2   Bharat Mehra, "Hindu Temples and Asian-Indian Diasporic Identity in the United States," *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*, ed. Thomas Turino and James Lea (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park, 2004), 93.

3   Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in a Middle Class World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 178.

As a point of departure, I begin my analysis of the temple by setting out a few concerns related to the understanding of religious identities in the diaspora, followed by a discussion of Murugan as a symbol of Tamil identity. Regional identity is significant, as it informs the community's architectural heritage. Next, an understanding of the historical context of how the community acquired the temple is important in order to better appreciate the current renovations. The focus will then shift to examining the visual and material aspects of the temple. I will provide a detailed description of the adaptations made to the form of the temple interior, and then discuss how the new external design of the building will reflect a hybrid form of architecture. Finally, conclusions may be drawn on how the temple embodies the need for Tamils to worship distinct gods in a sacred space that remains faithful to their respective traditions.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TAMIL?

Within the umbrella of "Hinduism" there are distinct identities based on regional practices. Forms of worship vary across India, and these distinctions are reflected in the Hindu temples found across London's landscape. Therefore, the region that a devotee comes from informs the ways in which their religious practices are expressed in the diaspora. Thus, the expression of Tamil ethnicity through architecture at the Highgatehill Murugan Temple must first be understood in light of identity issues that derive from the country of origin. Rayaprol states that many Indian immigrants hold the belief of a shared ancestral homeland and history, or "myth of origin."[4] Notions of a common region, history, and language are encompassed within the notion of *Tamiḻakam*, or the Tamil homeland.[5] More significantly, religion

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4   Aparna Rayaprol, *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

5   Pierre-Yves Trouillet, "Overseas Temples and Tamil Migratory Space," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 6 (2012): 3.

is a means by which the Tamil community maintains ties with their cultural heritage, as do many others. Although the temple reflects an eclectic group of Tamils from across the globe, the community is able to preserve a strong group identity because they share the essential religious values of a South Indian past. Remembered spaces such as temples serve as "symbolic anchors" in the diasporic consciousness.[6] Consequently, the variations in the visual character of Indian temples are an indication of their distinct historic and socio-cultural identities within the overarching concept of Hinduism.

THE "TAMIL-NESS" OF MURUGAN

The Highgatehill Murugan Temple reflects the need of the Tamil diaspora to provide a sacred shrine for an important South Indian deity, the god Murugan. Indeed, Murugan arguably serves to reinforce regionalist notions of an indigenous Dravidian culture. Devotees are highly conscious of his strong ties to Tamil Nadu, and he is known as a *tamiḻ kaṭavuḷ*, or Tamil god.[7] As an ancient Dravidian hill god prior to the Aryan invasion, he was later assimilated into the Brahmanical and Puranic pantheon.[8] Known as Skanda in North India, he was subsequently included in Śaiva mythology as the son of Śiva and his consort Pārvatī, as well as a brother to Gaṇesh. He has since preserved his status as a popular South Indian god. As Ron Geaves accurately summarizes: "Although the worship of Skanda has almost ceased to exist everywhere, the south Indian cult of Murugan has emerged historically as one of the

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6   Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 39.

7   Trouillet, "Overseas Temples and Tamil Migratory Space," 6.

8   Ron Geaves, *Saivism in the Diaspora: Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship* (London: Equinox, 2007), 35.

most powerful regional expressions of Indian religiosity."[9]

Fred Clothey also stresses the significance of Murugan as an expression of Tamil identity and culture, describing the god as "riding the crest of Tamil self-consciousness."[10] He argues that the cult of Murugan can be seen as an exponent of Śaiva Siddhānta theology.[11] In this school of thought, the god Śiva is regarded as the supreme reality. According to Geaves, Śaiva Siddhānta incorporated Murugan as a son of Śiva during the medieval period.[12] Geaves continues:

> Saiva Siddhanta gave to Murugan myths, a complex philosophical tradition, (*and*) a metaphysical route to liberation and the Agamic traditions supplied the equally sophisticated forms of ritual practice to live alongside the vernacular forms of worship.[13]

As a sectarian temple, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple strictly follows the orthodox Śaiva Siddhānta practices and worship. The rituals performed by Brahmin priests who live in the temple are conducted according to the prescriptions of sacred texts called *Āgama*s. In fact, an annual temple festival program explicitly states that the "reciting of songs other than those twelve Thirumurai, Thiruppugal, and such religious compositions are not allowed in the Temple complex premises."[14] The exclusive use of Śaiva Tamil hymns at the Highgatehill Murugan Temple in part allows the temple to derive authenticity from them. Thus, with Murugan as the presiding deity, the temple can be seen as an explicit symbol of traditional Tamil Śaivism. Yet what accounts for

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9   Ibid., 59.

10   Fred Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan: The History and Meaning of a South Indian God* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 2.

11   Ibid., 88.

12   Geaves, *Saivism in the Diaspora*, 44.

13   Ibid., 57.

14   *Auspicious Days, Special Poojahs & Festivals*, Highgatehill Murugan Temple Events Calendar, January-December 2013: 5.

the popularity of Murugan rather than Śiva in this context? Taylor explains that Śiva may not be preferred because he is at the top of the hierarchy and mundane requests may insult him, so it is better to address requests to one of his sons.[15] Mr. Thambhirajah, a volunteer at the Highgatehill Temple, provided an intriguing explanation for Murugan's popularity, saying that although Śiva is the patriarch, he wants to take a step back from his responsibilities and let his children do the work.

Murugan thus embodies and asserts a particular identity, which provides the Tamil community with a sense of shared roots within the diaspora. Clothey aptly summarizes: "Some of his devotees find in stressing Murukan's Tamil heritage something of their own identity as Tamilians … in short, the Murukan cult helps many Tamil adherents answer the question – who are we?"[16] Waghorne further defines the worship of this quintessential Tamil deity within the context of diaspora as "globalized localism," in other words, the globalization of more localized Indian traditions.[17] In other words, as identities and religions become delocalized, they do not become detached from the homeland.

The gods of India are often associated with sacred landscapes and specific localities connected to their mythical history. Geaves explains: "For Tamil regional identity politics it becomes crucial that Murugan is purely an indigenous deity identified with the land itself."[18] In the case of Murugan, Tamil Nadu is believed to be the god's domain. There are six major pilgrimage sites marked by temples scattered over the South Indian state, each of which describes an important event in Murugan's life. In fact, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple has six framed posters on the walls of the main shrine room representing these six locations. By referencing the six pilgrimage sites,

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15   Donald Taylor, *The Symbolic Construction of the Sri Lankan Hindu Tamil Community in Britain,* Ph.D. dissertation: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994: 315.

16   Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan*, 2.

17   Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods*, 172.

18   Geaves, *Saivism in the Diaspora*, 58.

these images invoke symbolic links between the London temple and the Tamil homeland. According to Clothey, these locations hold significance to devotees, as they "sacralize" Tamil Nadu.[19] Waghorne emphasizes that the temples are not famous national pilgrimage sites, but rather, are regionally famous, even locally familiar temples.[20] They are considered local in the sense that they are associated with specific sites of Tamil country, which include Paḻaṇi, Tiruccentūr, Tiruttaṇi, Tirupparaṅkuṉṟam, and Suvāmimalai.[21]

Interestingly, as Clothey explains, there is no specific place ascribed to the sixth pilgrimage site in the region.[22] The sixth site is thought to be every place, and in particular, every hill, where a temple dedicated to the god is erected.[23] In popular mythology, Murugan is thought to reside in the hills. Although the temple on Archway Road is located outside the sacred geography of India, it seems fitting that Murugan resides on Highgate Hill. This landscape reflects sacred Tamil land by establishing sacred space for devotees. As Waghorne argues, Murugan has become a globalized local deity.[24] After the *prāṇa pratiṣṭha*, or breath giving ceremony, Lord Murugan became understood as a living deity residing in the London landscape, making the once localized worship of this Tamil god global.

John Fenton highlights the significance of a diasporic community's ability to continue their religious traditions through the construction of a temple: "Immigrants take an important step toward community formation when they invest in a building and dedicate it for the purpose of group worship."[25] This Tamil religious community evolved

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19   Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan*, 166.

20   Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods*, 173.

21   Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan*, 117.

22   Ibid., 117.

23   Ibid., 128.

24   Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods*, 177.

25   John Y. Fenton, *Transplanting Relgious Traditions: Asian Indians in America* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 170.

from initially using temporary spaces in the homes of devotees, shared premises in a community hall, and finally, gathering the resources to purchase an existing building. This has eventually led to the current hybridization of the building's architecture. In the next section, I will explore how this lord of the hills came to live on Highgatehill.

AN ACCOUNT OF THE HISTORY OF
THE HIGHGATEHILL MURUGAN TEMPLE

In addition to drawing upon the research of Taylor, Waghorne, and Clothey, I obtained material from various temple publications to provide an account of the temple history. These materials include: a souvenir from the "Maha Kumbabishekam Consecration Ceremony," a brochure from the "Centennial Birthday Anniversary of the Hindu Shaiva Pioneer Shri Sabapathipillai," and a pamphlet from the "Twentieth Anniversary Celebrations and Pongal Vizha." I gleaned the following history from these materials.

Before the temple was built, devotees would regularly gather in homes to perform Friday evening *pūjā*s or worship. In 1976, as the *pūjā*s attracted a great number of devotees, the weekly gathering location changed to Kenneth Black Memorial Hall in Wimbledon. From 1976 to 1979 the congregation increased in size from one hundred to three hundred members from all over London. In 1977, the time was ripe for the community to purchase a property on Archway Road, North London. The property was formerly a Baptist Church and later a Jewish Synagogue. However, the dilapidated building's roof had been destroyed by a fire (**Fig. 1**). The reason for the temple's location was most likely economic, as it was relatively inexpensive because of its condition. However there was another factor that influenced the selection of this site. The secretary of the temple, Mr. Nagarajah, recounted an anecdote that Mr. Sabapathipillai had chosen the site because of its location on Highgatehill, a location that Murugan, the traditional lord of the hills, would like.

Reconstruction of the building site began in 1977 (**Fig. 2**). Volunteers were instrumental in contributing to the design, engineering, accounting, and legal services required for negotiating with the council for the approval of the plans. Many volunteers helped during the weekends carrying bricks and mortar. To raise money for the construction, volunteers created a scheme which divided the building plan into block units. They then appealed to donors to fund either full or half units. They cleaned the basement and the living quarters for the Brahmin priest and his family, who were due to come from Sri Lanka and installed central heating, plumbing, and other accessories, Lastly the walls and ceilings needed to be strengthened to support the *vimāna*, or the large structure that would house the deity of Murugan on the top floor. On the Hindu New Year in 1980, the priest performed the *prāṇa pratiṣṭha*, or life giving ceremony, for the newly arrived deities of Murugan and his consorts, Vallī and Tevyayāṉai while the building was still only partially completed. These statues were made in the city of Trincomalee in Sri Lanka.

A Brahmin priest was chosen from the Koneswarar Temple in Trincomalee. He arrived in late 1980, and began to conduct both daily rituals and festivals. The final stage of construction began in 1983 when a team of six *sthapati*s, or traditional temple architects, trained at the renowned Government College of Architecture and Sculpture in Mahabalipuram outside of Chennai constructed the *garbhagṛha*, or womb chamber of the deity Murugan. They ensured the work accorded with South Indian architectural style. After they came to the end of their contract, a further six sthapathis completed construction. Prior to completion, the *mahākumbhābhiṣeka*, or consecration ceremony, took place between the 9th and 13th of July 1986. Over a thousand devotees attended. Brahmin priests consecrated the Highgatehill Murugan temple according to the prescriptions of the *Āgama*s in order sanctify it.

The narrative of the history of the temple describes not only the importation of objects of worship and rituals from India, but more significantly, the actual reproduction of a holy place outside of the

Above: *Fig. 2: Old exterior. Image source: "Centennial Birthday Anniversary of the Hindu Shaiva Pioneer Shri Sabapathipillai" brochure, Highgate Hill Murugan Temple.*

Right: *Fig. 1: The condition of the building when purchased by the Trust. Image source: "Maha Kumbhabhishekam Consecration Ceremony" souvenir, Highgate Hill Murugan Temple.*

homeland. As Trouillet states "... the overseas *kovil* is a sign and a si nature of the Tamil presence" in the diasporic landscape.[26] Indeed, I argue that the temple reflects the need to preserve and reconstruct a distinct Tamil identity in the diaspora, one that is constituted though a transnational politics of community identity.

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26   Trouillet, "Overseas Temples and Tamil Migratory Space," 17.

TRADITION VS. INNOVATION WITHIN
THE TEMPLE INTERIOR

Because the temple was reconstructed from the shell of a former nineteenth century London Baptist church, architects have adapted several features of the traditional Tamil temple in order to comply with local building regulations. These concessions often diverge significantly from the orthodox Tamil Dravida architectural style, highlighting the flexible and often improvisational strategies of temple construction in the diaspora. The Indian temple is traditionally based on the sacred diagram of the *maṇḍala*. As the basis for the layout of the temple, the *maṇḍala* has been interpreted as a miniature replica of the universe.[27] Because this London structure was not originally built as a temple, such a *maṇḍala* design was not possible. Another divergence from tradition is the Highgatehill Murugan Temple entrance that, given the constraints of the location of the pre-exising building, happens to face west. However, the entrance to a traditional Hindu temple almost always faces east, towards the rising sun.

There are other noticeable structural differences between the Highgatehill Murugan Temple and a typical Tamil temple. Whereas Tamil temples typically have only one floor, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple utilizes space between three floors. In her study of temples in the United States, Waghorne draws attention to the unorthodox choice of constructing split-level temples.[28] This architectural feature seems to be a common innovation found in many temples in Europe and North America. The layout of the three-storied Highgatehill Murugan Temple includes the basement floor of the temple,

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27   George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meanings and Forms* (Chicago: Universtiy of Chicago Press, 1997), 71.

28   Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World: The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Suburban Washington, D.C," *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert Orsi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 121.

where there is a wedding hall, or *kalyāṇa maṇḍapa*, as well as a small conference room with a library. The living quarters for the priests are also accessible on the basement level. The temple also includes toilet facilities on the basement and ground floor, which would be unheard of in a traditional Tamil temple, as it is seen as polluting the purity of the sacred space. The community has accepted this non-traditional feature because of the temple's location in London. Offices, a kitchen, and a large congregation hall with a stage to host cultural functions are located on the ground floor of the temple. Incorporation of a non-ritual space for the community to gather on the ground floor is a visible divergence from traditional Tamil temples. Accommodating several hundred people, this venue provides a place for socialization and communal eating. Waghorne also notes that this "upstairs/downstairs" divide of the religious and cultural activities is a common feature in many Indian temples in the United States and in Britain as well.[29] A television screen in this hall allows devotees to sit, chat, and eat food served at the temple while they watch the religious activities occurring on the floor above, a further divergence from the typical Tamil temple as well as an innovative use of technology.

In addition to containing an information desk, a small office, and the *maṭaipaḷḷi*, or priest's kitchen, the second floor of the temple serves as the sacred space where the deities reside. Referred to as the "temple floor," visitors remove their shoes and place them in the shoe racks provided on the ground floor before climbing the stairs to this space. Essentially, the temple's design plan designates the second floor for this purpose as the priests also live within the building and no one should live above the gods. The *garbhagṛha*, or womb chamber, is on this floor, housing the image of the resident deity, Murugan. Branfoot describes this small, dark chamber at the heart of all temples as "the ultimate destination of all devotees."[30] Indeed, the main pur-

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29 Ibid., 119.

30 Crispin Branfoot, *Gods on the Move: Architecture and Ritual in the South Indian Temple* (London: Society for South Asian Studies, 2007), 87.
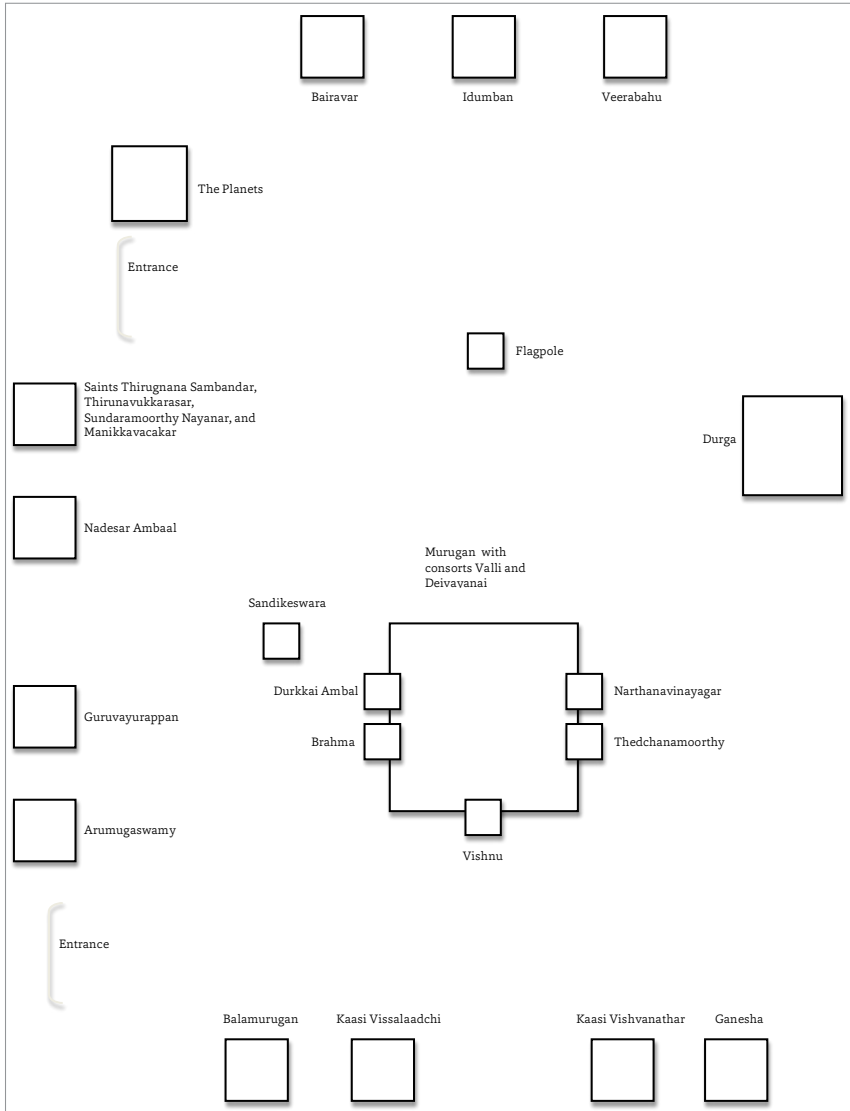
Fig. 3: Floor plan of the deities in the main shrine room, top floor of the temple. Image created by the author.

pose of the Indian temple is to serve as a place to house the *mūrti*, or divine image of the god.

The sanctum's placement on the second floor poses a dilemma, however. Such a temple design would not be found in a Tamil temple in India because the deities should traditionally always have direct contact with the earth. Waghorne and Clothey note that the deities of some temples in the United States are also located on the second floor. In these American temples, columns of dirt were included un-der the sanctums, con-necting the deities to the earth.[31] Similarly, the ar-chitects of the Highgate-hill Murugan Temple used the same creative solution for this requisite, using copper pipes filled with sand under each separate image. These pipes allow the temple to be adaptive in design while maintain-ing tradition.
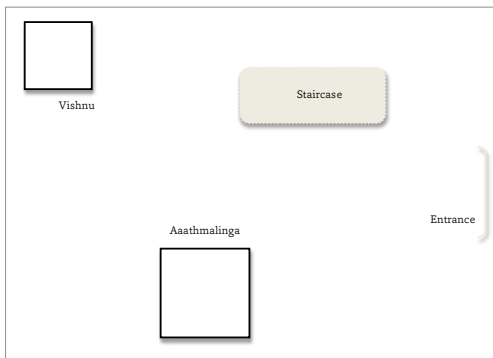

Fig. 4: Floor plan of the deities outside of the main shrine room, top floor of the temple. Image created by the author.

Although Thomas, Waghorne, and Geaves have included the gods of the Highgatehill Muguran Temple in their research, I have included an updated floor plan with deities added more recently (**Fig. 3** and **4**). Smaller shrines for deities commonly associated with god Śiva sur-round Murugan and his consorts located in the center of the temple floor. While there are many different deities in the temple, according to the Śaivite school of thought, these deities are only believed to be qualities, powers, and functions of one supreme reality, Śiva. As Taylor

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31   Fred Clothey, *Ritualizing on the Boundaries: Continuity and Innovation in the Tamil Diaspora* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2006), 52; Waghorne, "The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World," 116.

succinctly summarizes: "There are many gods but Śiva is one."[32] The temple hall is designed in such a way that the visitor can circumambulate the customary *pradakṣiṇapatha* path in a clockwise direction. All the shrines in the temple, with the exception of the *garbhagṛha*, are set against the outer wall. However, the shrine to the nine planets and moons can be circumambulated independently. Gods are traditionally housed each in their own shrine within the open-air complex of traditional Tamil temples.

Interestingly, although the temple continues to strictly adhere to the Śaiva tradition, a deity of Viṣṇu can be found within the temple, albeit relegated to the space outside of the room containing the central shrine, in a far corner. Members of the temple community strongly opposed plans to install the deity, as evidenced by the rather subjective view of one devotee claiming "some are allergic to Viṣṇu here."[33] It is interesting to note that combining elements of the two major Hindu traditions of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism within a temple is atypical in the Indian context. When discussing the choice to include Viṣṇu in the temple, Mr. Ranganathan replied that a Śaiva deity would never be found at a Vaiṣṇava temple. Despite the temple's strict sectarian beliefs, this compromise can in a sense be seen as a desire to reach out to the Vaiṣṇava community. Indeed, in a foreign context, it is not practical or even possible in most instances to have temples dedicated to every god as in India. While the temple is a unified sacred space, this accommodation allows devotees of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple to focus on one deity that they may identify with most closely.

One of the most visible differences of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple with that of its counterparts in India is its exterior aesthetic. As a renovated Baptist church, the temple was reconstructed with exposed brick rather than traditional stone. It appears relatively austere when compared to the typically highly ornamented South Indian

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32 Taylor, *The Symbolic Construction*, 235.
33 Waghorne, "The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World," 200.

Fig. 5: A priest standing outside the temple's ornate vimāna. *Photograph by the author.*

temples. Furthermore, the most noticeable missing element is the *gopuram*, an important characteristic of Tamil Dravida architecture. These towering pyramidal gateways traditionally crown the main entrance of the temple. Unfortunately, despite intentions to refashion the destroyed roof of the synagogue into a traditional South Indian style *gopuram*, planning permissions were refused by the local council. The Trust was forced to rebuild the temple in the style of the original church.

However, plans were drawn up to build a *vimāna* within the new roof of the building. The *vimāna* is the principal shrine of the presiding deity in Dravida architecture. It consists of the womb chamber, or *garbhagṛha*, housing the image of the main deities. Today, this towered structure stands in the center of the room on the second floor (**Fig. 5**). In the case of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, the *vimāna* contains Lord Murugan and his two wives, Vallī and Tevyayāṭai, flanking him on either side. Storied tiers, or *tala*s, form the layered pyramid above the shrine.[34] This roof is made up of colorfully decorated sculptures depicting the god's mythology. When gazing at it from below, one can find representations of Murugan and his wives along with saints kneeling before them in devotion. This princi-

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34   Branfoot, *Gods on the Move*, 252.

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pal tower, however, would normally stand out in the open within the South Indian temple and not under the roof of a building. On either side of the shrine are the *dvārapālaka*s, or door guardians of the sanctum. Running up the center of the temple floor in front of the main shrine are the *yākacālai*, where the sacrificial fire burns for ceremonies and special occasions. This includes an extractor chimney for excess smoke. Next is the *koṭi kampam*, or flagpole, used to mark the beginning and end of festivals. While the flagpole of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple is under the roof of the building, flagpoles in Indian temples are always found outside. This is followed by a long table for offerings.

Devotees entering the traditional Tamil temple often have a long journey to its heart, where the main shrine of the presiding deity is located. Branfoot explains that the Tamil temple "is characterized as a processional space, a space to move through by the approaching devotee moving inward to the heart of the temple and the devotional sight of god."[35] Indeed, in the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, there is arguably the traditional intermediary space between the entrance of the temple on the ground floor and the second floor where the main shrine is located.

Again, various adaptations have been made because of the fact that the temple was not purpose-built and is, rather, contained inside the shell of the former church. The choice to include these innovations to the interior form of this temple can be seen as a process of acculturation. I would argue that it demonstrates the creative reconstruction of a South Indian architectural identity. Moreover, this temple is not disconnected with the country of origin. Although some features may not be found in a typical temple in India, it can be argued that on a conceptual and symbolic level, the historical, cultural, and religious ties remain unfrayed, allowing the temple to function as "authentic."

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35   Ibid., 5.

TAMIL IDENTITY VIA ARCHITECTURAL HYBRIDIZATION OF THE TEMPLE'S EXTERIOR

Although the interior of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple reflects an effort to replicate a typical Tamil temple, its exterior features still resemble the original Christian church. In her account of the temple, Waghorne writes that a small "OM" in Tamil script in an upper window "was the only public announcement of a Hindu presence in the large brick church structure."[36] When Waghorne visited the temple in the early 2000s, she noted:

> … many devotees and donors bemoaned what they perceived as willful obstructionism by borough (local) planning commissions and various safety inspectors in allowing Hindu temples a public face in this city. One founder of a temple called the attitude of many native Londoners 'hypocritical' because, for all of the official talk about multiculturalism, when Hindus apply for planning approval for a new temple, they are frequently delayed or denied on the thinly disguised grounds of the architectural integrity of the neighborhood.[37]

Because it was one of the first temples of its kind in London, the need to build the space was more pressing than recreating a truly authentic Indian architecture.

When I first visited the Highgatehill Murugan Temple in the summer of 2013, the building was at a point of transformation. Although the town council refused permission to reconstruct the roof of the building with a *gopuram* in the 1980s, the board of trustees recently reapplied and received approval from the town council for a roof reconstruction and other changes. Commonly referred to as the "Lift

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36   Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods*, 196.

37   Ibid., 201-202.

Fig. 6: The new "Lift Project" plans. Image source: http://highgatehillmurugan.org.

Project" around the temple, the major renovation work that is currently in progress includes the installation of a lift, as well as a front extension incorporating a *gopuram* elevation (**Fig. 6**). The new lift will accommodate elderly and disabled devotees as well as mothers with prams who patronize the temple. The front extension and construction of a lift shaft will be completed in four months, while work on the *gopuram* and other structural work to the façade will take another three months to complete. The same block unit strategy that was used to fundraise the reconstruction of the destroyed building in the late 1970s will help to finance the current project. The front elevation of the construction has been divided into equal units, which can be purchased by devotees of the temple. The television screens on the ground and top floor of the temple describe to visitors the work that is taking place and appeal to the community to donate to the Lift Project. A board in the main hall, updated on a weekly basis, displays for devotees the amount of funds that have been collected for the project.

The website of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple conveys the

community's hopes that the building's new façade will give it "a Saiva Temple appearance and identity."[38] This identity carries with it a particular architectural heritage that will be continued in London. As Lal notes: "People who migrate and settle carry with them 'cultural artifacts' – ideas and values in terms of religion and artistic endeavor."[39] It is through these "cultural artifacts," whether a deity of Murugan or a *gopuram*, that the Tamil community is able to visually demarcate itself in a plural society such as London. Adding new South Indian architectural elements to the building will help to legitimize its identity as a Śaiva temple. The new façade of the temple raises not only the issue of identity, but also authenticity, a desired attribute of Hindu temples outside of the homeland. Parker suggests that authenticity "appears as an internally ironic form of value that is fabricated by historical, economic, and disciplinary practices and mythically naturalized as purely objective."[40] The question then arises: do the new plans for the Highgatehill Murugan Temple successfully create the experience of the traditional Tamil architectural style for its devotees? Tensions arise between the desire for the continuation of tradition and the pressure to adapt to the changes of modernity. In many instances, a balance must be struck between the restrictions of the host country and the particular needs of the diasporic community to assert an identity.

How can this new architectural form of sacred space be defined? The building represents the intersection of two cultures, namely, the host country and the homeland, as the architecture combines aspects of both. I argue that this modern design reflects a strategy of architectural hybridization. These plans combine seemingly contradictory design elements, reflecting an innovative expression of archi-

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38 Highgatehill Murugan Temple Website, accessed 10th September, 2013, http://www.highgatehillmurugan.org.

39 Brij Lal, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006), 18.

40 Parker, "Text and Practice in South Asian Art," 28.

tecture. I draw on Mehra's analysis of the architectural form of Hindu temples in Chicago, which he understands as a process of "cultural hybridization."[41] Mehra explains the term as follows:

> ...the various processes of drawing on the values, beliefs, and practices of two or more cultural formations in ways that are new and different from original formations, yet which incorporate and assimilate elements from both of them.[42]

I contend that this argument is very apt when examining the changes being made to the Highgatehill Murugan Temple. However, while the temples that Mehra analyzes are purpose-built, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple provides a different case study as the community is restricted to adapting an existing building. Consequently, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple represents the concept of hybrid architecture as the building quite literally fuses key features of the Tamil Dravida language of architecture into a typical London building.

The current project is significant, as the new façade ideally will strengthen devotees' spiritual ties with their respective homelands. As Mehra argues, the Hindu temple in the diaspora provides a spatial setting for memories of myths of the homeland.[43] Just as sensorial experiences, like the sound of chanting or the smell of incense can have emotional responses to devotees visiting this temple, architectural symbols can also trigger memories of the homeland and evoke powerful feelings of nostalgia. These symbols may construct imaginings for those second-generation Tamils who do not have memories of the homeland. Mehra correctly highlights that the temple in the Tamil migratory space serves "to provide emotional, mental, physical and

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41   Mehra, "Hindu Temples and Asian-Indian Diasporic Identity," 93.

42   Ibid., 93.

43   Ibid., 100.

conceptual connections with India."[44] Moreover, the new architecture, shaped by its new London context, will make the temple into a physical space that serves as an important identity marker for the Tamil community. Arguably, the temple will derive its authority as an "authentic" temple from these traditional elements of the Southern Indian style of architecture.

The head engineer of the project, Mr. Jayaraman, conveyed his hope that the new façade would help the temple not only to prosper, but also to become a landmark for the community. When asked where inspiration for the new project came from, he pointed to a photograph of the tallest Murugan statue in the world in Malaysia that hung on the wall in the small temple office. This statue dominates the entrance of the Batu Caves where the famous Sri Subramaniyar Hindu Temple is located. Impressively, the statue stands 42.7 meters high and is made up of 1,550 cubic meters of concrete, 250 tons of steel bars, and 300 liters of gold paint from Thailand. The ambitious project was crafted by fifteen sculptors and took over three years to complete.[45] In particular, Mr. Jayaraman had wanted the chief architect of the project, specialized in the construction of Agamaic temples, and his best craftsmen to renovate the London temple.

The temple derives its authenticity from experienced specialist architects, *sthapati*s, educated in the construction of traditional religious architecture. The skilled craftsmen currently working on the project arrived in the summer of 2013 from the city of Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. They will remain for the entire duration of the renovation project. As well as attracting many pilgrims to its famous temples, the city of Chidambaram is known for its families of skilled craftsmen and artists who pass down their traditional skills from father to son. These specialists were chosen by the trustees in particular because

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44   Ibid., 101.

45   "Tallest Murugan Statue in the World Unveiled at Batu Caves," *Bernama: The Malaysian National News Agency*, Kuala Lumpur, 29 January 2006, http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news_lite.php?id=178027.

of their proven track record, having worked on projects abroad in Singapore as well as Malaysia. The qualifications of these men, including a thorough knowledge of the *Āgama*s, will contribute to legitimizing the temple's authenticity. Significantly, temple priests conducted a *pūjā* to receive blessings from the deities before work commenced in order to protect the workmen during the construction and ensure that the renovations ran smoothly.

According to Mr. Ranganathan, the main arched window in front of the building cannot be changed under a preservation order from the local council. How-

Fig. 7: The new statue of Murugan. Image adapted from http://highgate-hillmurugan.org.

ever, new key features will be added to the temple exterior. Along with ornamental moldings and pillars, two door guardians will be placed in front of the newly extended entrance of the temple, along with two statues on either side of the original arch, representing Śiva's two sons Gaṇeśa and Murugan in their typical iconography. Most importantly, a *gopuram* elevation will be added. These new elements represent symbols associated with Tamil tradition to which members of the community assign meaning. These significant symbols from the homeland, perhaps not understood by those outside their community, further aid group identity formation. I argue that the Murugan statue in particular can be seen as a symbol that reinforces a Tamil identity for devotees.

The new statue of Murugan on the right hand side of the arch will essentially be a replica of the tall Murugan in Malaysia (**Fig. 7**). This Murugan sculpture reflects a particular mythology associated with
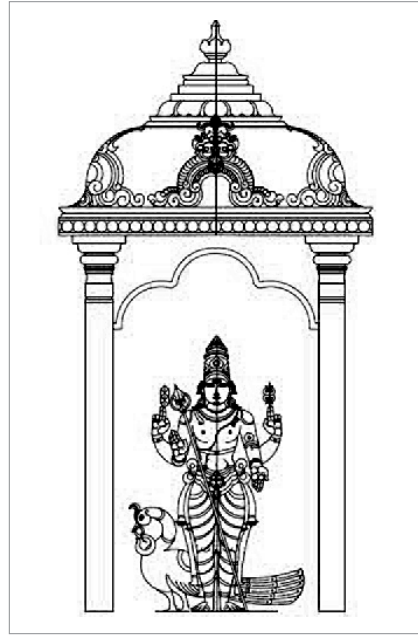
Fig. 8: Plans for the new temple entrance including two door guardians.
Image adapted from http://highgatehillmurugan.org.

Tamil culture. The sculpture depicts the typical iconographic depic-
tions of Murugan in his Tiruccentūr form. In this form, he has four
hands. Two hands bear the *abhaya mudrā*, the "fear-not" gesture, and
the *varadā mudrā*, denoting the granting of wishes. He also holds a
vajra and carries a spear of energy called the *śakti vēl*, a gift from his
mother Parvati. The sculpture also includes the significant symbol of
the *vēl*, or a leaf-shaped lance. According to Clothely, the word is in
fact synonymous with Murugan, as he his known as Vēlaṉ, the bearer
of the lance.[46] While Murugan's weapon can have multiple meanings,
Clothey notes that the lance represents the god's destructive power as
well as creative power.[47] More importantly, it is understood by devo-
tees as an instrument of spiritual victory.[48] As in this statue, the lance
is most commonly depicted slanted diagonally and resting against
Murugan's right solider. The only difference between the sculpture
in Malaysia and the smaller London one is the choice to include his

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46   Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan*, 191.

47   Ibid., 192 – 193.

48   Ibid., 192 – 193.

vāhana, or vehicle, the peacock, behind him. The peacock is arguably the most important animal in Murugan symbolism, as the color and fertility of the bird is often equated with the vibrant beauty of the hills where the god resides.[49]

Another unusual feature in the design of these deities on either side of the arch is that they will be protected by a glass enclosure. This would certainly not be done in India. The engineer of the project conveyed his concern that outsiders of the community may throw stones or eggs at the statutes of Gaṇeśa and Murugan. This not only highlights a sense of exclusion, but carries with it connotations of violence. This suggests that the diasporic Tamil community may not perceive itself as being fully accepted by the host country. All too often, minority communities experience feelings of alienation and marginalization. Door guardian figures, or *dvārapāla*s, are a typical architectural feature marking the entrance of many Hindu temples (**Fig. 8**). Male guardian figures stand on either side of the newly carved wooden doors of the temple. Holding a large club, they protect the sacred space of the temple. One hand bears the *tarjanī mudrā* with vigilantly raised forefinger, warning the devotee to be mindful when approaching the sacred space (**Fig. 9**).

It is also important to give a voice to the craftsmen involved in the project. Scholarship discussing the Hindu temple in the diaspora tends to highlight the many differences rather than similarities with temples of the homeland. During an interview with one of the craftsmen, I asked him how his work in London differed from his work in India. Intriguingly, he simply replied that there was no difference. Indeed, Parker begins his study of contemporary South Indian architects and sculptors by explicitly stating: "There is a striking difference between the aesthetic judgments of the living South Indian architects and sculptors who build Hindu temples and academic specialists who

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49   Ibid., 181.

write about South Asian art."[50] I realized that perhaps a preconceived expectation to look for divergences from tradition influenced my own aesthetic judgment of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, while the craftsmen I spoke to made no such distinction. Parker reminds us that the perception of the academic art historian is not more authoritative or legitimate than those of the Tamil *sthapathi*.[51]

Fig. 10: Craftsman working from a drawing board. Photograph by the author.

The choice of building materials used for the current renovation as well as the techniques used are also of significance. Because the traditionally used stone is very costly, the material used to construct the new ornamental features of the temple is concrete. The craftsmen sieve sand into a fine powder, which acts as a bonding agent in a mixture of gravel and water to create cement. Steel bars frame and reinforce the sculptures. For creating the new ornamentation, the workers start by using a drawing board carved out of wood as a guide to then create moldings and pillars (**Fig. 10**). Then craftsmen from India come to the temple to paint the statues once they are made.

One of the most obvious differences between the Highgatehill Murugan Temple and a typical Tamil temple is that the *gopuram* was conspicuously absent. This architectural element is arguably the most iconic feature of South Indian architecture, in its conspicuous adornment of the entrance gateway of a temple. Branfoot highlights the importance of the

50   Samuel K. Parker, "The Matter of Value Inside and Out: Aesthetic Categories in Contemporary Hindu Temple Arts," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992): 97.
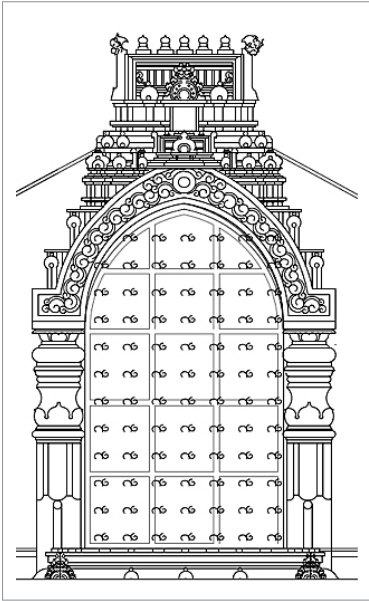
51   Ibid., 107.

Fig. 11: New gopuram elevation incorporated into the building's original arch. Image adapted from http://highgatehillmurugan.org.

presence of *gopuram*s in the landscape of Tamil Nadu: "The first sight of the temple seen by an approaching devotee is of the *gopuram*s that mark the outermost walls, often towering above all surrounding structures to this day."[52] Rectangular in shape, they vary in size from modest, such as the Highgatehill Murugan Temple, to monumental in some grand Tamil temples. On the top of all *gopuram*s is the barrel-vaulted *śālā* roof.[53] The new *gopuram* elevation at Highgatehill will be incorporated around the original arched window of the building (**Fig. 11**). The new structure is yet another demonstration of how Indian architects have been able to incorporate key elements of Dravida architecture creatively into a local London building. Despite having described the planned changes currently being carried out on the temple exterior, I have unfortunately been unable to trace the progress of the entire project to completion. The façade is still under construction, however, and the final outcome of the design is indeed a topic that would merit further investigation.

This resourceful adaptation of the façade into a building that will visually have a Tamil character and identity can be defined as an architectural hybrid. I argue that there are two points of departure in design, namely architectural homogeneity and architectural hybridization. While architectural homogeneity reflects uniform composition or character,

52   Branfoot, *Gods on the Move*, 53.
53   Ibid., 54.

architectural hybridization is a blend of two different elements. The integration of various cultural icons and symbols, traditional architectural methods and strategies from the home country, and the already existing building in the host country create an intriguing juxtaposition. Mehra describes these temples as creating "a new architectural idiom, appropriate for and unique to the new cultural and spatial context."[54] This is why Hindu temples of the diaspora "acquire a new form in the truest sense."[55]

Indeed, the distinctive Tamil Dravida architectural features will contrast greatly with the surrounding urban landscape of London. The renovations made to this existing building will visually distinguish it from the row of uniform buildings on either side. Trouillet rightly argues that temples can be seen as "territorial markers" in the public space, which affirm their distinctiveness and difference.[56] The new design suggests some degree of resistance. Instead of simply assimilating with the host country, the community hopes to rebuild authentic traditions in the South Indian style. However, the new façade of the temple presents some duality. On the one hand, there are architectural elements that reflect the "traditional" Tamil temple, while on the other, the building demonstrates several original design solutions in the new context of London. I argue that given the limitations within a foreign context, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple succeeds in reproducing an authentic experience of worship in the eyes of devotees. The temple can be defined as a "typical" Tamil temple because of the very fact that devotees have assigned that particular meaning to the space. Moreover, the façade creates architectural ties with the homeland, making it an emblem of the Tamil community in the London urban landscape. Clothey sees the temple as affirming "a world – a psychic space – in which the community lives and acts out its identity."[57]

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54   Mehra, "Hindu Temples and Asian-Indian Diasporic Identity," 100.

55   Ibid., 102.

56   Trouillet, "Overseas Temples and Tamil Migratory Space," 8.

57   Clothey, *Ritualizing on the Boundaries*, 51.

Indeed, the new architecture gives expression to this group identity.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE TRAJECTORIES IN THE STUDY OF MODERN TAMIL TEMPLES

My investigation centers on how a community seeks to replicate the traditional temple outside of the Tamil milieu. The architectural strategy of adaptation reflects a transformation in traditions, specifically, the change in the form of the temple outside of Tamil Nadu. I argue that Hindu temples are not stagnant, but rather fluid structures that are reinvented to suit particular circumstances. The architecture of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple gives expression to a particular community identity. There is an overarching sense of shared history and heritage that forges bonds of belonging within the temple's community. The forms of worship, names of resident gods, and most importantly, the architecture reflect a South Indian temple. More specifically, these elements reflect a Tamil ethnicity with a Śaiva Siddhānta religious affiliation. Murugan is a deity that particularly embodies this Tamil consciousness. Therefore, it is the Tamil region that informs the architectural expression of identity more so than the religious tradition.

As one of the craftsmen of the Highgatehill Murugan Temple aptly summarized, while the temple may not be "typical," it tries to be as close to a traditional temple as possible. Arguably, the temple is able to derive its authenticity through efforts to remain faithful to architectural elements in Murugan temples of the homeland. The Highgatehill Murugan Temple's novel appearance attests to the successful incorporation of the Tamil Dravida language of architecture within the limitations of an urban London context. Despite efforts to remain faithful to the normative temple form, several adaptations had to be made. The Highgatehill Murugan Temple's interior reflects these creative innovations. Moreover, the exterior reflects a strategy of incorporating South Indian architectural idioms to an already existing building, together forming something new. This can be defined as a hybrid style in which diverse conceptions are combined to create

a coherent whole. A coping strategy of adaptation is used, the result being that the temple invokes the home country of India while at the same time reminding the observer of its setting in London.

The recreation of traditions in a foreign context inevitably requires reinvention. Intriguingly, in the process of trying to retain the past, a new future appears. In sum, the Highgatehill Murugan Temple demonstrates how architecture not only reflects the aspirations and needs of a community abroad, but also serves as an important icon of Tamil identity. This temple illustrates a desire for the community to establish permanent cultural roots in a foreign location. I hope that this study highlights the merit of further research utilizing visually and materially oriented perspectives on new trajectories and trends of modern Tamil temples.[58]

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[58]   I wish to convey my heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Arun Gopalakrishnan for his unwavering support throughout this project.