Wandering/Sanctuary:
Perceiving Learning Spaces Through A Tamil Sangam Lens

by
Yeshwanth Mani

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thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Architecture

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis including any required final revisions as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Keywords:

Pedagogy – History – School Architecture – Context – Culture – Sangam Tamil – Iconography – Symbolism – Mythology

The role that architecture could play in shaping our world and hence our lives is undermined – and the role that it already plays in ingraining values promoted in a society is skimmed-over. For the complexity of any given society is a culmination of various societal, political and cultural values fueling it. Architecture then, becomes a by-product of these said values – thereby playing considerably the most consistent role in influencing the masses. A niche of this framework that this work focuses on is education and school architecture. To understand how school architecture could influence students' education, it becomes essential that a good understanding of the educational values of a society is required. This is done by taking a critical look at the current educational values of our society.

The Sangam literature is a body of Tamil literature belonging to the Sangam Age (circa. 300 BCE – 300 CE) – a period of history in the sourthern part of India and parts of Sri Lanka. This body of work is a compilation of poems that deal with various aspects of life – philosophy, governance, ethics and many love poems that give vivid descriptions of the lives of these poets and their surroundings. Through analytical research of existing publications and some original works, the people of the Sangam Age are traced through these poetry to have had an epistemological approach to life, and their knowledge being deeply rooted to their context – where nature herself was considered The Greatest Teacher. These poems and the philosophy they embody are adopted as spiritual and cultural mentors and guides to get an understanding of how education and its context coalesce to form a school.

To embody the values of the Sangam texts, the city of Vellore in Tamil Nadu, India is chosen as the context to synthesise this hypothesis. The Vellore fort has in its unmaintained peripheries beyond its moat, pockets of memories from my childhood, and plots of land that are now dilapidated parks. Looking through an architectural lens, such a culturally significant “plot” deserves regulation and a typology of architecture that would propel the place’s heritage – while potentially enriching the culture of the city and its people.

This Master of Architecture thesis proposes an institutional complex in Periyar Poonga (one of the dilapitated parks inside the Vellore Fort complex), while trying to answer this question:

How can the spatiality of a pedagogy contribute to culturally enriching it?

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To the friends who *almost* understood, the professors and peers who tolerated my unsolicited theories, and the strangers who accidentally said the right thing – thank you for shaping my inner monologue and outer confusion. Somewhere among you was a silence louder than words, and this thesis was concocted in that blithering void.

Dedication

Dedicated to,

Kids who aren't privy to a good form of education – for they are categorised as underprivileged;

Kids who are given education – but not the wisdom to value it;

Cultures that are but ruins of what – in their own twisted ways, had flourished;

Anna, Dad, Mom

...and obviously – *True, Bro, Joy, Tripper, Dale, Staap And Without Whom I Am Not What I Am, My Kutty Machi.*

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யாதும் ஊரே யாவரும் கேளிர்
தீதும் நன்றும் பிறர்தர வாரா
நோதலும் தணிதலும் அவற்றோ ரன்ன
சாதலும் புதுவது அன்றே, வாழ்தல்

– கணியன் பூங்குன்றனார் – புறநானூறு, பாடல் 192

Every land is my homeland, all people are my kin.
Neither virtue nor vice comes from without.
Sorrow and joy arise from within;
Neither death is novel, nor life a marvel.

– Kaniyan Poonkundranar – Purananuru, Poem 192

INTRODUCTION

Thamizh, usually spelled and pronounced as Tamil, is a language spoken predominantly in the state of Tamil Nadu in India, and many parts of Sri Lanka in the form of *Ilangai Thamizh.* But the language is spoken in many different parts of the world due to the migratory tendencies of the *Thamizhs* since antiquity. In one of his accounts, the Roman geographer Strabo has noted that commerce flourished with the Thamizhs and that they were a wealthy country who were knowledgeable in various aspects of their society. [1] There are traces that show they were migrants who travelled to different lands and carried their language with them. Their reverence towards epistemology is depicted in surviving texts that hail learned men who were respected irrespective of their gender, caste or creed even by kings. With poetically rich nuance in their lyrical structure and beauty, palm leaved treatises such as, *Tholkappiyam, Puranaanuru* and *Thirukkural* deal with a vast array of wisdom and philosophical poetry and prose. Two renowned epics *Silappadhigaram* and *Manimegalai* give vivid descriptions of the structure of the society that is said to have existed at least in 3rd c. BCE. – as though a portal through which one could steal a peek at the ancient past.

Through these lyrical portals one, could almost become a part of the society that considered villages without schools as not worth living in, and a good place to live in is where the community itself promotes learning. [2] These texts describe *Mandapams*, that were community halls where teachers taught anyone who was willing to learn, and they could just walk in. Stories even mention *Madurai* where students, Buddhist and Jain monks from various provinces and countries flocked to study in its mandapams and that they worked to pay the teacher his fee. These seekers of knowledge and mastery depended on the community to shelter and feed them and notably, the community even encouraged their own children to do so. Linguists, historians, archeologists and other such researchers keep digging (literally and figuratively) to find new evidence that prove such a culturally rich ancient civilization thrived due to its epistemological significance. Because of these texts, this period between the 3rd c. BC and 3rd c. CE is generally regarded as the *Sangam Age*. Where the word *Sangam* refers to assemblies or gatherings of poets and scholars.

1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/2603
2 Ibid.

As various kingdoms fell and cultures mixed, the described wisdom and spiritual depth in societies fell like pieces in a domino puzzle. Identities and belief systems of the then existing "religion" morphed, which in turn gave new forms to the cultural values that drove the society. The intervention of caste system created hierarchies, which ensured that the right to education and spiritual wisdom stayed in the hands of a select few, based on one's caste and creed. Though unfair and petty, the select few did pass on their spiritual wisdom and cultural significance – though along with the still ongoing discrimination based on caste and ancestry as years have passed. But with the arrival of western companies in India during the British rule, the educational landscape of Tamil Nadu was dramatically subjected to change. [1] English was made the primary mode of instruction and administration, while European knowledge was prioritised and largely fetishized due to promise of employment and material wealth – consequently eradicating the significance of cultural values in education as native to the region. This continues even till today where English is highly celebrated and sought after, leaving behind ruins of the Thamizh values and knowledge systems that were place based, and were rich with diverse understanding of contextually relevant knowledge. With the adoption of English as primary mode of conduct in schools, education itself became the factory through which a plethora of young minds that are trained to be – active participants in the neoliberal world, and its way of life.

I am a product of such a system too.

1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/2603

I am twenty-seven years old, and the more I dig into the history of my culture, the farther I feel from it. "Tamil" was just a language course that students and even teachers were not concerned about. But I was interested in it – how much ever I was allowed to, at least. Going further, my interest in languages spread to even English for that matter. But there were other "more relevant and necessary" courses that demanded me their attention and focus. These were the courses that would get a student like me into a university which in turn would fetch me a high paying, "reputable job". This shift in how learning and knowledge acquisition has become a means to the market driven lifestyle is a critical blow to cultures and values that have existed throughout the world. Essentially, these capital centric values lack spiritual depth, while turning human children filled with unique personalities and talents into a 'student'. Doing so, assigning a role to children right from the beginning stages of their experiential interaction with the world. Through this framework, education itself becomes a vehicle that implements market driven values by overruling cultural significance.

It is highly questionable that a monocultural education which is based on similar worldviews, would provide a sustainable civilization. For throughout history, various indigenous cultures that were native to their surroundings have had their own organic advancements and innovative streams of thought. [1]

I find it rather ironic that even descendants of the people who were once known for, and were proud of their thirst for knowledge, have been turned blind to their own cultural heritage.

William W. Cutler, III, in his article, "Cathedral of Culture: The Schoolhouse in American Educational Thought and Practice since 1820" vehemently states that architecture for schools has been subjected to demands for economy and efficiency. This lack of significance to prioritising school architecture, has led architecture to become a mere tool that treats schools as shelters for learning. He also expresses that architecture with its ways of defining and shaping our everyday lives has a vast, yet unexplored potential to cultivate education.[2] In recent times innovative explorations have been helmed by educationalists, psychologists and architects – who align architecture with a holistic form of learning rather than producing a new generation of workforce. Though noble and much necessary, these steps and theoretical explorations are unable to tap into the 'curious to learn' aspect of being human. A vast number of radical pedagogies like Waldorf Education, Montessori Schools, Regio Emilia Schools and forest schools have been developed and implemented to enable a more holistic and inclusive way of learning.

1 *When a single philosophy drives a whole civilisation with no peers and references, wouldn't the civilisation implode on itself? For it would be unable to accommodate radically different philosophies competing or rather, learning from each other. Humanity has survived thus long due to every unit of the species possessing, unique traits that enable them to reason with things in their own individualistic ways.*

2 Louv, Richard. "Leave No Child Inside." Essay. In Orion Magazine. Great Barrington: Orion, 2013.

The interaction between the child and the environment, specifically – contact with nature is highly emphasised both in the design of the pedagogy and spatially. John Dewey, a prominent educationalist, noted that children should pursue understanding their world, not just through verbal study, but also through physical activity, sensory exploration, and expressive activities. [1] Similar to this research, notable works have been published in various streams of academia, that delve deep into the significance of empirical learning.

One such academic stream of thought is to immerse learning environments in nature. As if to give this idea a form, Richard Louv in 2005 published a book titled *Last Child in the Woods*, where the author directly links the lack of nature in the lives of todays wired generation – calling it the nature deficit disorder (NDD) – disorders like obesity, attention disorders and depression are some of the diagnoses that children are plagued by in the 21st c. CE . [2] A campaign titled 'Leave no child inside' was the successor of this publishing. This movement believed that the diversity offered by natural settings with its varied plants and landscapes inherently invite children to act on their natural curiosity. [3] Going further, the movement promoted the notion that the endless range of things to explore and question in nature, provides a uniquely engaging environment for unstructured play, leading to scientific learning and critical thinking. These observations evoked a sense of alarm in parents that made them reconsider how schools, and the educational environment impacted their children's growth. Furthermore, regular interaction with nature is said to have enhanced the curious mind in children, and their want to learn more about things they directly encounter. [4] The issue of children and unstructured play in nature, has a peculiarly unifying effect on people, regardless of political or religious inclinations – as noted by Cheryl Charles in her work, "Children & Nature".[5] Sharing experiences in nature – traditions that were intrinsic to our cultures such as storytelling in campfires or exploring local vegetation, can be adapted to modern lifestyles that become communal activities that foster social interaction and a sense of shared experience.[6]

1 Wirth, Arthur G., and Carl Bewig. "John Dewey on School Architecture." Journal of Aesthetic Education, vol. 2, no. 4, Oct. 1968, p. 79.
2 Samples, C. C. (2004). *Coming Home: Community, Creativity and Consciousness*. Fawnskin, CA: Personhood Press.
3 Charles, Cheryl. "Children and Nature." Museums & Social Issues, vol. 4, no. 2, Sept. 2009, pp. 159–171.
4 Barratt Hacking, Elisabeth, et al. "Engaging Children: Research Issues around Participation and Environmental Learning." Environmental Education Research, vol. 13, no. 4, Sept. 2007, pp. 529–544.
5 Charles, Cheryl. "Children and Nature." Museums & Social Issues, vol. 4, no. 2, Sept. 2009, pp. 159–171.
6 Ibid.

Bringing these observations together, one can conclude that the spatiality of a school has a significant impact on the pedagogy itself. Consequently, Thamizh being my mother-tongue, and hence my cultural system of thought, has in its history a culture of education immersed in nature spatially and philosophically. This thesis has this framework in place to pose this hypothesis:

How can the spatiality of a pedagogy contribute to culturally enriching it?

For such required reform in education through architecture, the architecture must be not just about the built structure – its forms, its symbolisms or its appeal, but more so about the situationship required by the context pertaining to that specific site. A culturally nutritious place that holds rich values and heritage. The Vellore fort, named after its city, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India, has in its unmaintained peripheries beyond its moat, pockets of memories from my childhood, and plots of land that are now dilapidated parks. Looking through an architectural lens, such a culturally significant "plot" deserves regulation and a function, that would propel the place's heritage, while potentially enriching the culture of the city.

The methodology of this thesis embodies its title. Education being at the epicenter – a juxtaposition of various streams of thought around it is synthesised through the act of wandering. A thorough literature review that delves into the relationships between the frameworks, while having the Sangam texts as spiritual and cultural guide is done. Through this lens, contemporary research surrounding existing education systems and values pertaining to the pedagogy is analysed. Existing alternative pedagogies and their innovative school designs, become evidence for the implication that, *'spatial design directly has an influence on the pedagogy'.* Furthermore, architectural descriptions from the Sangam texts help in dissecting the societal tectonics to understand the values such architecture held. Archaeological excavations in the form of Buddhist and Jain monasteries become sources of inspiration and precedents, that explore the cultural significance of spatial design and its empirical intentions. While existing old temples and the vernacular Chettinadu houses become experiential precedents for architectural expression of culture.

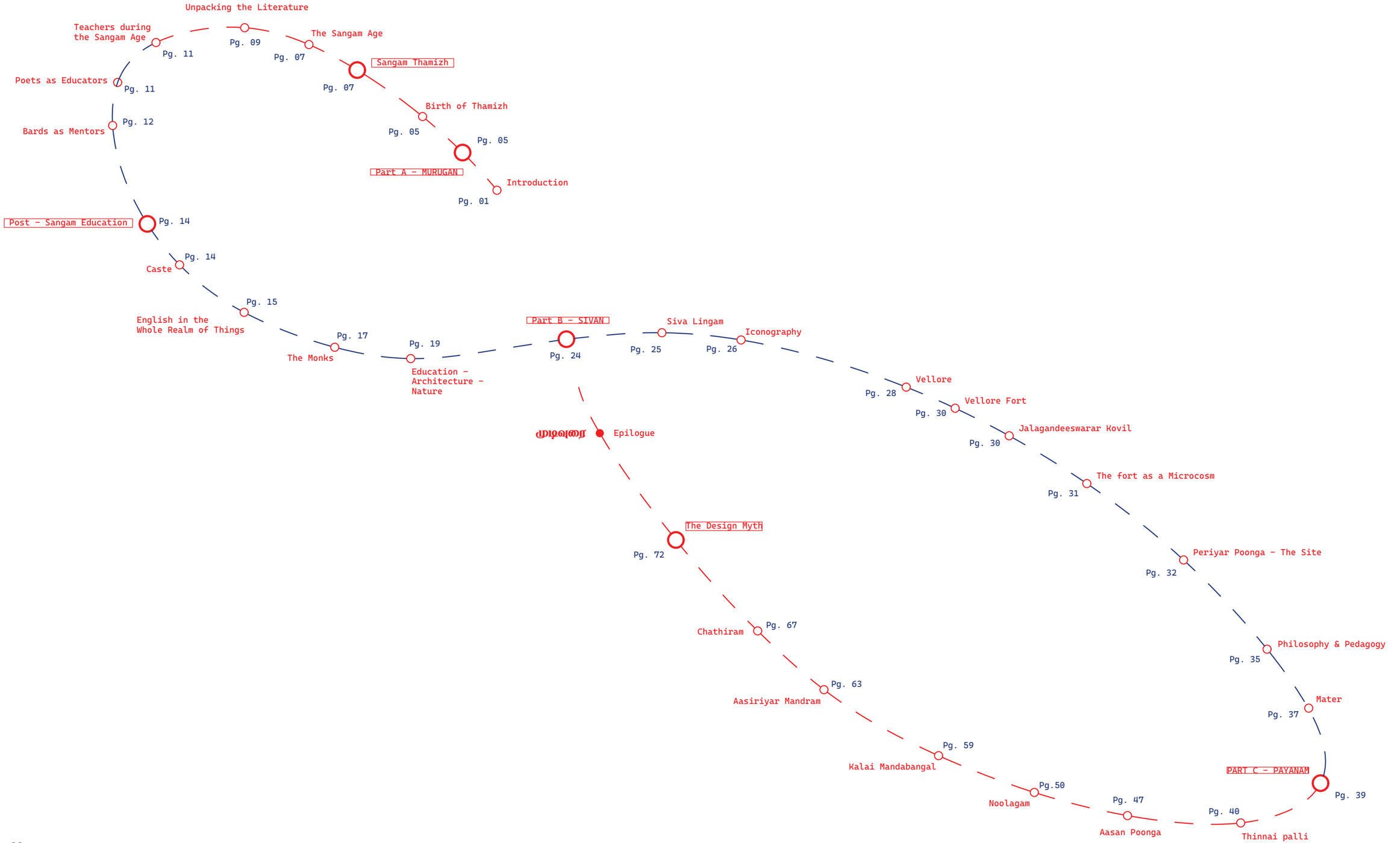


Fig. 00. en payanam

PART A - Echoes

முருகன் (MURUGAN)

'Murugan' is often called Karthikeya/ Skanda in the Sanskrit version of Hinduism. He has a long history of being associated as the 'Thamizh Kadavul' meaning the God of the Tamils.[1] To understand the different layers of this myth and his influence and worship pertaining to Tamil culture, one must go through the Sangam texts. In works like *Thirumurugattrupadai* and *Paripadal* poets revere him as the guardian and divine chief of the Thamizhs across its five landscapes (*tinais*). Namely - Kurinji, Mullai, Marudham, Neithal and Palai. Furthermore, the ancient Tamil scholar *Tolkappiyanar*, poet of the infamous *Tolkappiyam* describes Murugan's unparalleled youth, beauty and valour. *Auvaiyar, Nakeerar* and *Arunagirinathar* who succeeded Tolkappiyar, reiterate his words and push it further by laying emphasis on his unfathomable knowledge - often calling him, *'Gnyana Kuzhanthai'* meaning, child of wisdom. [2]

This annotation of Murugan to knowledge and wisdom is due to the mythology of his birth. The demon *Surapadman* had to be vanquished for his evil doings and since the numerous gods were unable to defeat him, they prayed to *Sivan* (Lord Shiva) the destroyer, and the supreme deity, to vanquish him. Heeding to their prayers, Sivan released a divine, cosmic spark from his third eye - a divine energy to create a formidable being to defeat Surapadman. This divine spark is said to have been carried by the sacred Ganga, where the spark, unable to contain itself splits into six fragments and reached the mythological lake of *Saravana Poigai*. There, with Sivan's blessings, the *Karthigai Sisters* (Karthigai denoting the Pleiades - the six sisters) are suggested to raise the six children as their own - under the watchful eye of *Goddess Parvati*. As the children are given form through love and care by the sisters, Goddess Parvati embraced the six children. The children combined to form the 6 faced Murugan - giving him the name, Aarumugam (six faced). In Hindu mythology, '*gnyanam*' is the act of realising the truth of the universe. This is believed to be realised only by one who opens their third eye to the universe. Since Sivan gave birth to Murugan by opening his third eye, it is believed that Murugan encapsulates the knowledge of the universe. [3]

1 Chanda, Urmi. "Murugan Vs. Skanda: The Aryan Appropriation of a Tribal Dravidian God," n.d.
2 Kamil V Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan* (1973; repr., Netherlands: BRILL, 2023), https://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/book_archive/196174216674_10154746791936675.pdf.
3 Ibid.



Fig. 01 A shrine of Lord Murugan adorned with garlands, Sandal and Vermillion - still an everyday practise for Tamil people throughout the world

Birth of Thamizh

According to '*Thiruppugazh*', composed by *Saint Arunagirinathar* - even as a child, Lord Murugan is said to have known the meaning of 'Om' – a word that signifies the sound believed to exist everywhere in the universe. Once, *Brahma* (Lord Brahma), the creator of the universe - failes to show respect to the young Murugan as he was the just a child. Being playful as he was known to be, and ironically easily offended - Murugan sings praises of Brahma for creating the universe, while finally questioning him about the meaning of the sound 'Om' that which seems to encapsulate the whole universe. Brahma who is unable to give an answer is accused by Murugan for his incompetence and is imprsioned by him - this halts the perpetual creation of the universe. Sensing the imbalance - him "being" the destroyer - Sivan realizes the reason and demands Murugan to give an explanation. Murugan explains the reason and asks if Sivan knew the meaning behind 'Om". Sivan, fascinated by Murugan's awareness of the universe, pretends to not know the meaning behind the sound and requests Murugan to tell him the answer. Teasing his father - the supreme being for not knowing the meaning of something so significant, he suggests that Sivan takes Murugan as his Guru (teacher) so that he could teach Sivan the meaning. Sivan accepts. Being the culture that a Guru is always to be positioned higher than the ones he imports his knowledge to, Sivan picks up the young Murugan and seats him on his broad shoulders. Here, Murugan whispers the meaning of 'om' in Sivan's ear. According to ancient scripture, Murugan explains the meaning of the sound 'Om' in *Senthamizh* (beautiful Thamizh) and by doing so, giving birth to Thamizh. This is believed to be the narrative behind the birth of the language and hence, Murugan is hailed as Thamizh Kadavul.





Fig. 02 (top) An illustration depicting a young Murugan standing on his 'Vahana' peacock - writing the word 'om' in Tamil

Fig. 03 (bottom) Sculpture on a Gopuram depicting Godess parvati holding the baby Murugan - surrounded by the Karthigai Sisters and other gods

The name Murugan has a profound meaning in the Thamizh language – derived from the Thamizh word Murugu – meaning beauty. This word not only signifies the physical beauty but also represents grace, valour and wisdom. Furthermore, *Muruga* resonates with the Holy Trinity of Hindu mythology:

Mu – Mukundan (Lord Vishnu);

Ru – Rudran (Lord Shiva);

Ga – Kamalodbhavan (Lord Brahma).

His association as Thamizh Kadavul is carried out through his symbolic myth too, where (Arumugam, the six faced god) is depicted with twelve eyes, symbolising the twelve vowels of the Thamizh language. His primary face that has the third eye, represents the three types of letters as described in the 'Tolkappiyam' – being strong sounding, soft sounding and intermediate sounding letters, representing the diverse, yet unified characteristics of the language. His divine spear 'Vel' usually ornamented with exaggerated curves, typical to Thamizh weaponry is seen as a unique emblem that mirrors the Thamizh language's exclusive characters. [1]

Vowels (உயிரெழுத்து) and diacritics

அ	ஆ	இ	ஈ	உ	ஊ	எ	ஏ
	ா	ி	ீ	ு	ூ	ெ	ே
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ē
[a/ʌ]	[aː]	[i]	[iː]	[u/ɯ]	[uː]	[e]	[eː]

ஐ	ஒ	ஓ	ஔ	ஃ	அஂ
ை	ொ	ோ	ௌ		ஂ	ஃ
ai	o	ō	au	aḵ	aṁ	mutes
[aɪ]	[o]	[oː]	[aʊ]	[x]	[ˆa]	vowel

Consonants (மெய்யெழுத்து)

க்	ங்	ச்	ஞ்	ட்	ண்	த்	ந்
k	ṅ	c	ñ	ṭ	ṇ	t	n
[k/x/g]	[ŋ]	[ʧ/s/ʤ/ɕ]	[ɲ]	[ʈ/ʈ/ɖ]	[ɳ]	[ʈ/ɖ/ð]	[n]

ப்	ம்	ய்	ர்	ல்	வ்	ழ்	ள்
p	m	y	r	l	v	ḻ	ḷ
[p]	[m]	[j]	[ɾ]	[l]	[ʋ]	[ɻ]	[ɭ]

Grantha letters

ற்	ன்	ஜ்	ஶ்	ஷ்	ஸ்	ஹ்	க்ஷ்
r̲	n̲	j	ś	ṣ	s	h	kṣ
[r]	[n]	[ʤ]	[ɕ]	[ʂ]	[s]	[h]	[kʂ]

1 Kamil V Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan* (1973; repr., Netherlands: BRILL, 2023)

SANGAM THAMIZH

The Sangam Age (Circa. 300 BCE – 300 CE)

These stories and associations became mythologies and belief systems that were imparted to the young through oral traditions during the Sangam age. Some of the poetry and prose are still being read by students through Tamil courses in schools or as devotional songs and stories by adults. As mentioned earlier, the Sangam Age is typically considered to be from the 300 BCE to the 300 CE. [1] Though much debate has been ongoing for ages, where different scholars push it farther back and some pull it closer to the advent of Ariyanisation (late 7th c. CE) of the Thamizh culture, this work aims to focus on the values and the egalitarian societal system that has been described in the Sangam texts. This is to avoid the specifics of the time periods and the tectonics of which form of the same religion these texts describe, and what superstitious beliefs existed.



Fig. 04 (left) The primary letters of the Thamizh language and their phonetic alphabets

Fig 05. (right) map showing the ancient cities of the Sangam Era

1 SHULMAN, DAVID. *Tamil: A Biography*. Harvard University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1g69zdt.

Looking past these adversaries of knowledge, the Sangam Literature then becomes an archaic artifact that provides a vision into an utopian-esque, egalitarian society. Comprising of around 2,381 poems of varying lengths and formats, it is believed that there should have been more such works that have been eaten away by history. The oldest surviving text is the Tolkappiyam by the poet, Tolkappiyanar – written somewhere around 300 BC. Tolkappiyam is a work on the grammar and poetics of the Thamizh language belonging to the (evidentially unproven) Second Sangam that guided the *Third Sangam* (the Sangam literature that has survived are from the Third Sangam). *The First* and Second Sangams are mentioned to have existed sometime before Tolkappiyam, where the First Sangam existed 6,000 years ago in the cities of Madura and later in Kumarikandam and Kavatapuram – which were acclaimed to have drowned. While all the three crowned kingdoms of the Sangam Era, *Pandya, Chera* and *Chozha* contributed towards the works of the surviving Sangam literature, a Pandya King is said to have created the First Sangam, and they are considered as the biggest patrons of the Sangams in the years that followed the Sangam Era.[1]

The word Sangam in Tamil Literature refers to an academy that was an expert body of literary censors whose role was to compile the rich literary works in the Thamizh language. These works, as the palm-leaved treatises prove, were written by Sangam poets who ranged from royalty to farmers, travelling merchants to monks in monasteries patroned by kings and many others – the versatility of the origins of these works signifies that the wisdom and beauty of the poem was valued over where the expression originated from. It has to be noted that of the 473 poets who comprise the Sangam literature corpus, at least 27 of them are women. While 102 of them remain anonymous, it can be assumed that they too would be by the common village and city folk.[2]



Fig. 06 (left) Tholkappiyar as per Thiruvalluvar Kazhagam

1 SHULMAN, DAVID. *Tamil: A Biography*. Harvard University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1g69zdt.
2 Dikshitar, V. R. Ramachandra, and V. R. Ramchandra Dikshitar. "THE SANGAM AGE." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 5 (1941): 152–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44304708.

Fig 07. (right) The first 4 poems from Tholkappiyam

எழுத்ததிகாரம்

கஃ. நூல் மரபு

எழுத்து எனப்படுப
அகரம் முதல்
னகர இறுவாய் முப்பஃது என்ப
சார்ந்து வரல் மரபின் மூன்று அலங்கடையே. கஃ

அவைதாம்,
குற்றியலிகரம் குற்றியலுகரம்
ஆய்தம் என்ற
முப்பாற்புள்ளியும் எழுத்து ஒன்ன. உ

அவற்றுள்,
அ இ உ
எ ஒ என்னும் அப் பால் ஐந்தும்
ஓர் அளபு இசைக்கும் குற்றெழுத்து என்ப. ஊ

ஆ ஈ ஊ ஏ ஐ
ஓ ஔ என்னும் அப் பால் ஏழும்
ஈர் அளபு இசைக்கும் நெட்டெழுத்து என்ப. ஏ

Fig 08. (bottom) Picture of Murugan Temple excavation Subrahmanya Temple, Saluvanakuppam, Tamil Nadu - The temple's oldest layer dates back roughly 2,200 years (Sangam period), with a later 8th-century Pallava layer built atop it



Unpacking The Literary Corpus

The Sangam Literature was propagated as a classical language and literature by UV Swaminatha Iyer (passionately known as Thamizh Thatha – 'Tamil Grandfather' by Thamizh historians) during the early 19th c. CE. He played a pivotal role in discovering the Sangam literature in and around Tamil Nadu. The proposed Sangam Literature can be categorised into *Ettuthogai* and *Pathupattu*. These collections of poems are of two genres, *Agam* meaning 'Interior' and *Puram* meaning 'exterior'. The Eight Anthologies (Ettuthogai – ettu in Thamizh meaning eight) comprise of six Agam poems and two Puram poems. Agam poems talk about love through the concept of tinai. Tinai were the different terrains of the then Thamizhagam that were categorised by Tolkappiyanar, In Agam poems the phases of love were associated with each of the five landscapes and this enabled the poets to make love universalised. No specifics such as names of persons or places were used to express emotions, for example in Kurunthogai 3,

"Can the mirage in the desert
hold the truth of real water?"

Here, the tinai is *paalai* (desert – signifying separation and longing). In a similar fashion, all the 5 different landscapes were used signifying the stages of love (See Fig 00).[1] Through these poems we are made aware of the cultural innuendoes behind the described emotions and the depth and structure of the poetry. The other two of the eight works are of the Puram genre – poems about kings and heroes. Hero worship of warriors who achieved great feats in war is a much-anticipated celebration of the society. Here, it has to mentioned that the Thamizh people of the Sangam era were patrons of fighting for honour - while courage and valour were the most aspired quality in every human being. The Puram texts deal with a vast array of philosophical themes - ethics, generosity, loyalty, war, aftermath of war, friendship etc. These were written by poets who both praise and critique rulers. The *Porulathigaram* categorises the puram verses. They are *valkai* (life), *iyalbu* (conduct), *thunivu* (valour), *avai* (assembly), *padai* (war), *Thudai* (aftermath of war). Along with Pathupattu (Ten Idylls – pathu in Thamizh meaning ten), which consists of dramas and narratives, the Ettuthogai and Pathupattu make up the Sangam Literature. Together, these texts are called *Pathinenmelkanakku* (The Eighteen Greater Texts).[2]

1 K. Kumaran, "Cultural History of Sangam Age," Think India Journal 22, no. 14 (December 2019).
2 Ibid.





Fig. 09. (top) Cave paintings found in Palani, Tamil Nadu belonging to 3 BCE

Fig 10. (middle) Manuscript of Sangam literature from a Hindu Shaivism Monastery

Fig 11. (bottom) Inscriptions in Tamil Brahmi - Arittapatti, village in Tamil Nadu - 2 BCE

These texts address a lot about the values a virtuous person should have – values for sons and fathers, mothers and daughters - respect to be shown by children to elders, freedom that elders are expected to give children, and other such everyday values. These values have been ingrained in the contemporary Tamil society. For the values I now hold sacred were passed down by my parents to me, sourced these surviving texts. It is just that the eyes of the current generation of children are busy with the luxury of the West, as I was. Furthermore, these texts act as philosophical treatises that deal with - accumulation of wealth, kingdoms and kinship, devotion and spirituality - while having nature as the backdrop for these poetic expressions.[1]

Evidently, nature plays a prominent role in being the muse to express emotions in these texts. The depth of their poetry conveys the fascination and admiration of nature that existed in the Thamizh society. Specifically, the descriptions of the villages, cities and the active townsfolk in *Silapathigaram* and *Manimegalai* (two prominent epics of the Sangam Literature) portray beautifully the relationship the people had with nature, and how nature was considered divine and a part of everyday life. The deities too were in accordance with the five landscapes as described in the Tolkappiyam and *Natrinai*. According to Natrinai, the landscapes and the associated gods were - *Kurinji* signifying mountainous region of Thamizhagam worshipped Murugan the tribal and war god, *Mullai* signifying forest regions worshipped *Mayon* (Krishna), *Neidhal* signifying coastal regions worshipped *Varunan* the sea god, *Marudham* signifying agricultural land worshipped *Indran* the rain god and *Paalai* signifying the arid regions worshipped *Korravai* (Durga/ Kali) the war goddess. Just as the gods worshipped depended on the geographical regions of the then existing Thamizhagam, the occupation too was dependant on the context - giving way to religious rites and customs being associated with their location and occupation. The existence of people of multiple beliefs ensured coexistence with tolerance, and such values accommodated festivities of different gods in cities where everyone took part in the celebration. Festivals such as *Karthigai, Thiruvonam, Thiruvadirai, Thai Pongal* (most prominent of the festivals of the Tamils) and *Kaman Vilavu* were celebrated – Karthigai and Thai Pongal are still auspiciously celebrated in Tamil Nadu.[2]

Though religious festivals were celebrations where people of different belief systems came together, it has to be brought to notice that temple architecture was encouraged by the culture only after the Sangam Era (7th CE). This signifies that religion was but at the backdrop of the societal priorities of the Thamizh people, rather than at the forefront as usually assumed of the classical history of India.

1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/2603. See Chapter 2.

2 Dikshitar, V. R. Ramachandra, and V. R. Ramchandra Dikshitar. "THE SANGAM AGE." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 5 (1941): 152–61. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44304708.

Fig. 12 (top) Image depicting Tamil villagers celebrating 'Thai Pongal'

Fig 13. (bottom) Image showing the 'padayal' - offering made to the Sun during 'Thai Pongal' - the Tamil harvest festival





Teachers during the Sangam Age

The Sangam Age was fueled by the poets and bards of the Sangam period. Knowledge and wisdom acquisition was seen as a lifelong act that gives a person their life's purpose. Following this, any village that was without a teacher was believed to not be worth living in, and every village had a teacher. It was also a common practice that the teacher's house was used as the *Palli* (school) of the village. The teacher of the village was highly respected, and they also acted as advisors in village assemblies. Though the knowledge within a village would have been limited, it is stated that almost all the villages had at least a *Kanakkayar* (Mathematics Teacher). The other subjects that were commonly taught were literature and grammar taught by *Aasiriyar*, and philosophy and humanities taught by *Kuruvan/Kuru* (Guru). Villages and towns were autonomous during the Sangam Age – so much so, that many kings have been praised for not collecting tax from their citizens. Due to this reason, public buildings were built by the community and were used for various purposes. Public halls called *Chathiram(s)* - where teachers and wandering poets (Pulavar) gathered, and resthouses called *Mandram(s)* where students could stay, were pretty common. Cities even had *Mandapams* (assembly halls) where renowned poets and teachers taught to their students and the public was also encouraged to join.[1]

Poets as Educators

Poets were the people of power during the Sangam Age. These poets were called *Pulavar* who were wandering individuals, similar to saints – but not always religious. They were highly respected and were well known by the people for their knowledge and wisdom in philosophy, ethics, astronomy and theology. They were learned folk who were philosophical and those that had received formal education. Many of the Puram poems were written by them. They were the elite class of the society and were respected and feared even by the royal families and officials. Kings maintained a great relationship with the Pulavars and were careful in the way they treated them so as to not offend them. As they were highly respected both by the public and the nobles, political decisions were made with the poets being the King's advisors. Renowned poets were considered so powerful that they denied the right for even kings to slander or slight them. It was also a common belief that if you offend such a poet, even your future generations would face their wrath.[2]

1 Xavier S. Thani Nayagam, "Ancient Tamil Poet Educators," Tamil Culture 6, no. 4 (1957).
2 Ibid.

Fig 14. (top) 9 CE mandapam in Parthivapuram, Tamil nadu - these mandapams were used as spaces of teaching for the Thamizh public after Brahminism penetrated the later stages of the Thamizh society

Fig 15. (bottom) 15 CE mandapam with rich ornamentation where performances and marriages were held - Jalakandeeswarar Kovil in Vellore, Tamil Nadu





Bards as Mentors

While poets were of the elite and formally educated class of the warrior society, bards were a cultural addition to the common folk's lives. Bards were a group of devoted performers of art that brought in music, songs and dance to the people. *Kalithogai* for example, consisted of small narratives of love stories and erotic longings of wives for their lovers or husbands. These dramas had songs and dances embedded in the narrative that were expressed through rich poetry. What was unique about these plays was that in many cases, they were performed by a single female performer. These professional actors alternated between genders, characters and in some cases, even duet songs were performed by an individual. These performers, travelled in groups to villages and cities to earn their living – singing praises of kings and noble families, performing for the warriors before wars to raise their morale and also various religious and fertility rites in villages across the five Sangam regions highly anticipated their arrival. The people of these villages paid them through gifts and their harvests – while kings and nobles showed their generosity through giving them supplies for their journeys and in some cases, they even received horses and chariots to encourage and support their work. They stayed in Chathirams or were housed and fed by the wealthy of the village in many cases. Since they were nomadic and their art fed them, they were reverent and devoted to their art. The group travelled and learned their skill through discipleship – the mentor usually being the leader of the group. The disciples revered their mentors and there existed a parent – child relationship between them.[1]



Fig 16 – 27. Sculptures depicting events from Silapadhigaram – one of the most prominent epics of the Sangam Era – Maritime Archaeological Museum, Poompuhar in Tamil Nadu

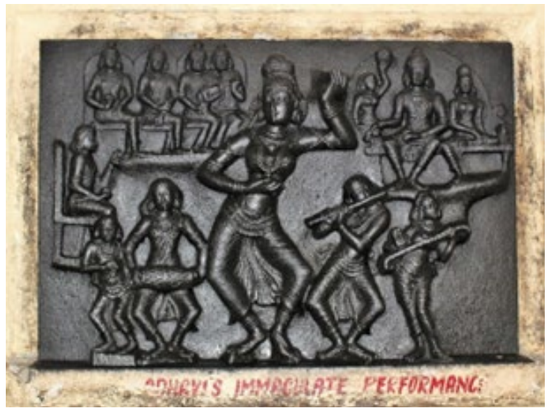
These artefacts offer a glimpse into the spatial imagination of the period–revealing how people lived, moved, and occupied space, along with the implied tectonic sensibilities embedded in the epic's narration.

1 S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, "Nomadism During Sangam Period: Ethnographic Perspectives," International Journal of Tamil Culture & Civilization 1, no. 1 (2010): 25–34.













Though the importance of educating oneself is populated through out the works, the values pertaining to learning has been emphasised specifically by *Thiruvalluvar* in his work *Thirukkural*. Thirukkural offers advice on education, politics, business, and inter-personal relations based on principles such as trust, honesty, and integrity. Though often overlooked by modern Western scholars interested in Indian classical literature – for not being written in Sanskrit, its value has been praised by scholars and historians of the latter part of the 20th c. CE and has been translated into more than 10 Western languages. The work totals 1330 verses spread across 130 chapters of 10 couplets each. Of these 130 chapters, 5 chapters (Chapter 40 - 44) are specifically dedicated to (40) Learning; (41) The Neglect of Learning; (42) Listening to the Learned; (43) Possession of Wisdom and (44) Guarding Against Faults. The ethics and definition of virtues it preaches are considered to be broadly based on humanism but not logically related to any particular religious doctrine.[1]

Considering the various descriptions and tectonics of the poetry, it seems that the community itself was based on an epistemological intent. Knowledge was highly valued and revered, education was culturally accepted as for all, teachers and the learned were considered the elite of the society, their warrior lifestyle fueled their artforms and vice-versa. Though being literary works there should be an exaggeration of facts and the purity of things, the depth and beauty of it is undeniable.



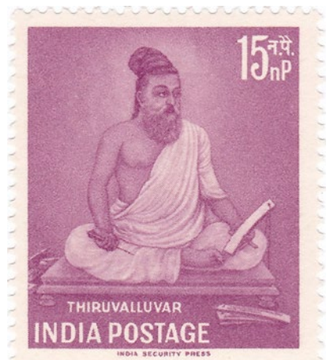


Fig 28. (left) Chathiram from Varadharajar Perumal Kovil, Tamil Nadu - spaces where performers and travellers stayed - in some cases Pulavars used to teach and hold public events preaching knowledge and wisdom through debates and lectures

Fig 29. Thiruvalluvar stamp by India Postage in the year 1960 - during the high points of the Tamil Renaissance

1 Jayashree Aanand Gajjam, "A Thirukkural Way of Intellectual Humility," Language in India 22, no. 7 (July 2022.

Post-Sangam Education

By the 7th c. CE – when the Pallavas took over Thamizhagam (the precise dates of their rule are still unclear), Brahminism which was struggling to lay its roots and infiltrate the existing paradigm of the Thamizh society, finally set foot steadfast. The Pallavas were kings who devoted themselves to expressing their wealth and devotion through building magnificent temples. This sudden shift in perceiving devotion realised through physical manifestations could be credited to the Vedic teachings of Brahminism. The Pallava kings were big patrons for the Vedas and later Upanishads under the influence of Brahmins – the chosen priests. This was expressed through bringing the caste system to the existing seemingly egalitarian Sangam Thamizh society.

Caste

According to Manu, 'the first human' in Hinduism, the Brahmins were the superior of the 4 castes – *Brahmins* (priests, god's messengers), *Kshatriyas* (Royal blood), *Vyshiyas* (merchants, traders, farmers) and *Shudras* (labourers - untouchables) of the society. [1] The sole duty of the Brahmin is to attain '*Moksha*' – escape from the cycle of reincarnation. The other three castes' purpose was to aid them to do so. According to Manu, it has been mentioned that the lower two castes of the three can learn the sacred works (Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas) through learning Sanskrit – which was considered the language of the gods. But what became practise was that the Brahmin priests' sole purpose was act as a messenger to gods and learn the Vedas to teach them to the other castes. Though sounds noble, this stratified the community based on hierarchies that governed the access to knowledge that people were privy to. Moreover, the Vedic teachings negated the right to education for women - thereby exacerbating the prevailing patriarchal society of the Thamizhs. With the introduction of an elitist language into the realm of epistemology - through which the Thamizhs had balanced their prideful warrior lifestyle with lyrical philosophy, the existing paradigms were disturbed in a major way that caste-based discrimination and abuse is almost accepted by the public even today - with rising awareness and protests. The Brahmin priests spent their lives dedicated to acting as prime ministers and advisors to kings and exploring themes like philosophy, logic and ethics. [2] The kshtriyas (royal folk) learnt – through being taught Sanskrit, about the *dharma* (purpose) of governance and war. Many kings have been philosophers themselves too, through their mentors and advisors who were Brahmin priests.

1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. See Chapter 3
2 Herman Tieken, "The Reconstruction of the Early History of Tamil-Speaking Southern India," Handbook of Indian History, January 1, 2024, 241–75.

The *Varnashrama Dharma* (denoting caste system) became the structure of the society in the 600 years that the Pallavas ruled Thamizhagam. The governance of the society became much centered on hierarchical organisation similar to the varna caste system. The village life too was affected by this reorganisation – villages that had functioned autonomously, had a caste reinforced committee governing it now. Caste hierarchy became the driver of a village's community decisions [1] and hence, overruled by the voice of the people of the higher status, the teacher was pushed aside. This led to village funds and public spaces being assigned to religious celebrations and rites rather than to schools and resources for education. Since education itself was renavigated towards a religious belief of 'moksha', religious teachers became being considered the enlightened ones - in place of poets and bards. During the later years of the history of Thamizhagam, before the invasion of the British East India Company in the 16th CE, these teachers became so marginalised and impoverished that *Patasalas* (where schools were at the home of the Brahmin teacher of the village) almost ceased to exist. [2]



Fig 30. (left) Statue of Kannagi – the protagonist of Silapadhigaram, a symbol of women empowerment – statue in Chennai, capital of Tamil Nadu

1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. See Chapter 3
2 Ibid

Though the imposition was drastic and detrimental to the 'education for all' and 'learning is a lifelong journey' philosophy of the Thamizhs of the Sangam age, the intervention of Brahminism to the society did bear fruits. The temple architecture of the Pallavas stands as evidence to the importance Indian history has to arts and crafts in its veins.[1] The ornamentation found in temples and existence of various public buildings called Chathiram(s) and Madam(s) stand as evidence to the importance that was given to educational and religious public spaces. Mandapams where religious rites and cultural artforms were performed and Chathirams where Brahminic teachers taught to other local *Purohits* (Brahmin priests) were patronized by kings and wealthy merchants. Madams that were built alongside temples became spaces of gathering where travelling teachers and Jain monks taught the common folk in Thamizh (these Madams later act as the only primary source of education for the lower castes during the time British stopped funding indigenous education systems – only way through which Thamizh pedagogy existed). By the time the Cholas took over Thamizhagam (early 10th c. CE), the Vedas were the sacred texts of the Tamils, and the two sacred Puranas- Ramayana and Mahabaratha, became their belief epics. Magnificent religious rites and sacrifices became the celebrations that people looked forward to – the gods of the landscapes became Aryanised, reality became a shadow in the presence of the belief in the afterlife, and educating oneself became the deed of the elite and ignorable to and by the masses.

The period that followed was really tumultuous where the Thamizh land passed many hands and education remained as that of the elite. Consequently, Thamizh pedagogy barely survived through few Shivite, Vaishnavite followers and the Bhakts (Thamizh Jains) and travelling monks.[2] By the time The East India Company first laid its foot in Madras, the Thamizh pedagogy was already barely hanging onto the boiling pot of different religious doctrines – added more to it were the Christian missionaries. When the British Raj (British Empire) stopped their funding to Buddhist and Jain monasteries and Patasalas in villages, the Thamizh idea of education that which considered educating oneself as ones purpose and nature as the mediator that connects us with our emotions became unspoken whispers of history. The quality of educational spaces and the significance of school architecture in the society deteriorated and the belief that – what one learnt could and should be expressed in beautiful poetic ways became just another myth of just another language that claims that it had advancements in its own indigenous history.[3]

With the discovery of India by the British and the other colonial lot, Thamizh came in contact with English – where cultures submerged and new horizons emerged, though with much sacrifice.

1 Ravi Kumar Kodali and M. Adinarayana, "Evolution of Dravidian Temple Architecture in South India," International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research 9, no. 7 (July 2020): 54–62.
2 M. Arunachalam, *Education in Ancient Tamilnad* (Tiruchitrambalam: Gandhi Vidyalayam, first edition October 26, 1969).
3 Ibid.

English In The Whole Realm Of Things

The narrative of English education in Tamil Nadu began much earlier than recognised – in 1717, when Danish missionaries from *Tharangambadi* (Tranquebar) establishing charity schools in Madras (Chennai). These early schools, often overlooked, became the groundwork upon which colonial pedagogy later asserted itself into not just Tamil Nadu, but the whole of India as a colonised country. By the time Sir Thomas Munro published his seminal educational survey in 1822, the Tamil society exhibited an intricate web of Sanskrit and Thamizh indigenous learning institutions. The survey, which spanned across the Madras Presidency, documented 12,498 functioning schools for a population of over 12 million. Munro himself conceded that, in spite of its organic and informal nature, the indigenous system of education in South India was more widespread than contemporary schooling systems in Europe.[1]

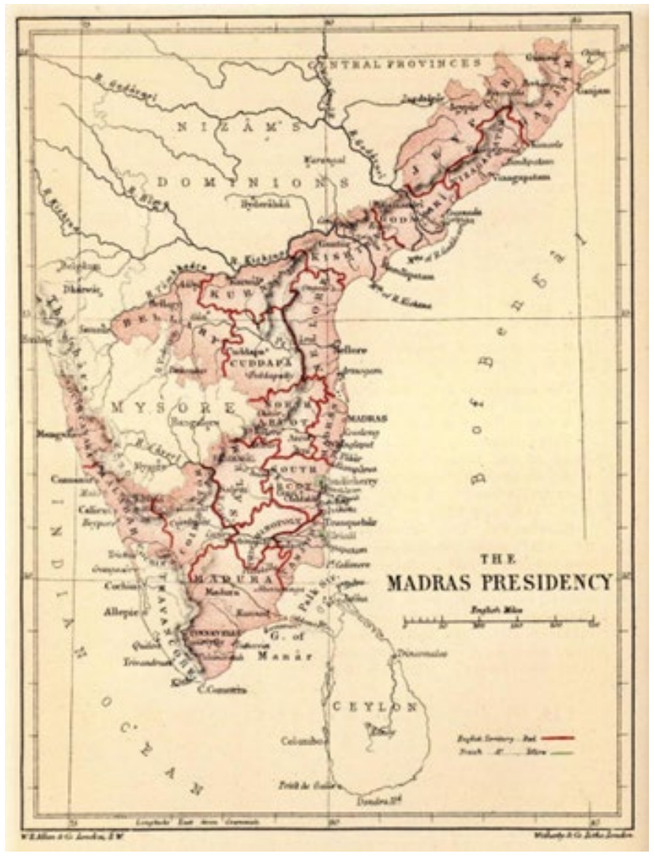


Fig 31. (left) Map of the Madras Precidency – name of Thamizhagam under British Raj

1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. See Chapter 4

However, the colonial directors and the overlords thought otherwise, Sir Munro's plan of integrating English to the indigenous learning systems from the bottom-up, was not enforced. The most decisive moment came in 1835, when Thomas Babington Macaulay, delivered his infamous 'Minute on Education'. His aim was pretty transparent – it was to manufacture "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." [1] This was not just an educational reform, it was a linguistic and cultural reprogramming designed to sever the Indian subject from their own epistemologies. The English Education Act of 1835 gave form to this philosophy. English was declared the official medium of instruction for higher education. Funding and legitimacy were withdrawn from both indigenous schools and mass education. Doing so, transmitting the benefits of learning to an elite few who prioritised the Anglo way of living to that of the indigenous ways. The focus shifted from community-based literacy to a much-simplified premeditated hierarchy. [2]

During all these authoritative changes, Christian missionaries played rather a paradoxical role in integrating English into the society. While aiding the poor and the overlooked by feeding and preaching to them a better life, they were much inclusive and embracing. [3] Missionary institutions across Tamil Nadu - particularly in regions like Thirunelveli, Madurai, and Salem - became laboratories of bilingual pedagogy. Tamil was used as a bridge language to teach faith and in doing so, promoting the Anglo systems of thought. These schools became popular among aspirational non-Brahmin and lower-caste groups, offering access not only to knowledge but to new modes of mobility. Thus, missionary education played a dual role, it helped spread English as a language and as a higher and more "civilised" way of living, [4] while inadvertently preserving Tamil as an active medium of learning for the masses and giving hope of a better life to the "underprivileged".

1 Chaudhary, Latika, Caste, Colonialism and Schooling: Education in British India (May 2012). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2087140 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2087140
2 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. See Chapter 4
3 Ibid.
4 Sumathi M., Educational Contribution of Christian Missionaries with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu: Erstwhile Madras Presidency, TIJER 11, no. 4 (April 2024): [a407],

The bilingual approach to ease in English into the society was concretised through Wood's Despatch of 1854. This comprehensive policy document frameworked the educational hierarchy of colonial India. For the first time in the subcontinent of India, a formal structure was proposed for the whole of the then Indian society, irrespective to any of its other complexities and societal hurdles - vernacular languages for primary education, bilingual instruction for secondary schools, and exclusive English usage for colleges. This policy led to the establishment of the University of Madras in 1857, which was one of the first three modern universities in India. Doing so, establishing a physicalized English education architecture in the Tamil region. [1]

1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. See Chapter 4

The Monks

The humanitarians had infiltrated the Thamizh land much before the English or the Brahmins. Though the Sangam literature claims and praises the events of the then Thamizhagam, there did exist a loose hierarchy based on the family's occupation even within the regions of the five tinais. There were untouchables who did the dirty work – cleared the ditches, bathed the animals, sang sonnets during funerals and performed the cleaning after sacrifices. As ingrained into the structure of the society as they are for any civilization to begin to function – they were pushed to the exteriors of the settlements. [1] Though shunned, they were respected for their work, and within them too, the Thamizh epistemological principles and teachings could be observed. Though it is unclear if they were part of the Pallis that existed in the villages of the Sangam era, the artforms - dances and *oppari(s)* (songs of lament for the deceased) were accompanied by instruments and ritualistic make-up, and skills required for their "dirty" work, were passed down through mentors much similar to the bards. The formal and more advanced education – such as structured poetry, martial arts, more nuanced dance forms, etc., still was reserved for the elite due to social hierarchies. [2]

Fig 32. Tamil-Brahmi inscription on Kallvettu Hill, Mangulam, Madurai – among the earliest written records of the Tamil language (2nd BCE) – The site served as a Tamil Jain monastic retreat under Pandyan patronage, with inscriptions detailing stone bed donations for monks



1 George L. Hart, "Early Evidence for Caste in South India," University of California, Berkeley, accessed June 29, 2025, https://tamilnation.org/caste/hart.pdf.
2 S. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi, "Nomadism During Sangam Period: Ethnographic Perspectives," International Journal of Tamil Culture & Civilization 1, no. 1 (2010): 25–34.

The Jain monks and monasteries play a major role throughout the known past of the Thamizhs. Jain monks are recorded to be highly respected for their knowledge. Many monasteries and cave inscriptions around major cities have been discovered and excavated. These inscriptions and paintings, mention names too, of merchants, poets, kings and even farmers who were patrons of these monasteries and settlements. The supposedly humanitarian lifestyle of the Thamizh people coerced with the religious teachings of the Buddhist and Jain doctrines. These systems of thought were accepted for their profoundness and inclusiveness. [1] Specifically, the influence of Jainism and its doctrine of Ahimsa (non-violence) is seen in some of the Sangam works that deal with ethics and spirituality. Many Jain poets were major contributors to the Sangam literature.

Fig 33. Sittanavasal Jain cave (9th CE) depicts how Tamil spaces were used not just for worship, but also for sharing knowledge – the carved figures and quiet interiors reflect a time when learning was tied to silence, discipline, and sacred spaces



1 Savarimuthu, Savarimuthu, "A History of Education in Tamil Nadu, India" (1972). Master's Theses. 2603. See Chapter 2

The influence of Jainism increased by leaps during the tumultuous post-Sangam period. The period between 4th c. CE to the 9th c. CE is generally considered as the Dark Ages of Tamil history by Tamil Scholars. This was the period when Vedic Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism – with the evolved Saivism and Vaishnavism of the indigenous religions were competing to become prominent. Manimegalai and Silapathigaram of these periods give various accounts of references to Buddhist and Jain practices.

When education became Sanscritised – just for the select few, the teachers who were usually of the "lower caste" lost their significance and their financial status starkly faced a downfall. They became merchants and servants while hosting philanthropic teachings now and then.[1]



1 Ibid



Fig 32. (below) Chennakesava Temple, Belur, Karnataka (12th CE) – built by the Hoysalas – shows how temple spaces held layered meanings – not just devotion, but knowledge, memory, and artistic mastery – sculpted narratives acted as tools of learning, preserving philosophy and craft





Fig 38 – 40. Thotlakonda Buddhist Monastery, Visakhapatnam (2nd BCE 2nd CE) – hilltop Hinayana complex – viharas, stupas, chaityas, cisterns, dining halls – scattered yet linked by axial stone paths – architecture shaped by terrain, not imposing







Fig. 38 (top left) Vihara foundations, Thotlakonda – linear layout – brick plinths marking monk cells – axial entry path – modular, introspective unit

Fig. 39 (top right) Buddha statue, Thotlakonda precinct – later addition – symbolic anchoring in landscape – not part of original structural remains

Fig. 40 (bottom) Chaitya hall ruins, Thotlakonda – rectangular prayer space – central pathway leading to stupa base – flanked by low brick walls – open-to-sky ritual geometry.

Education - Architecture - Nature

By the time Sangam literature was rediscovered during the late 1800s and early 1900s, people had already moved on from the holistic idea of education, education had become as that of the elite. Though Tamil historians did voice their opinions, the common folk were worried about their next meal during The Great Famine of Tamil Nadu (1876–1878, 1891) that struck villages and cities alike. Added to this, the fascination and the supposed civilised lifestyle of the English had laid its roots – it was a well grown plant by then. With the implementation of The English Education Act of 1835, the pedagogy followed in schools throughout India had the same curriculum. This laid the foundations for the nationalism in education that India adopted after independence.

The standardised form of education - where regional knowledge is swept aside to form a united national identity, follows a system where children are graded and ranked on subjects that *they half don't understand what or why they are learning something.* [1] The philosophies fueling the pedagogy need reforms that are responses to the reality of the people. For, the state of education and the schools themselves in rural Tamil Nadu become invisible collateral units. These marginalised people face issues such as discrimination based on caste and gender, economic struggles and mostly irrelevancy of the syllabus to children – this has resulted in majority of the students in rural villages and many in even urban cities dropping out of school.[2] With the culture that believes that the mind of an unlearned man is clouded by darkness, even amongst these "underprivileged" folk, cases where farmers sell their ancestral agricultural lands to factories and loan sharks to aid their children in pursuing education in cities are really common throughout India.

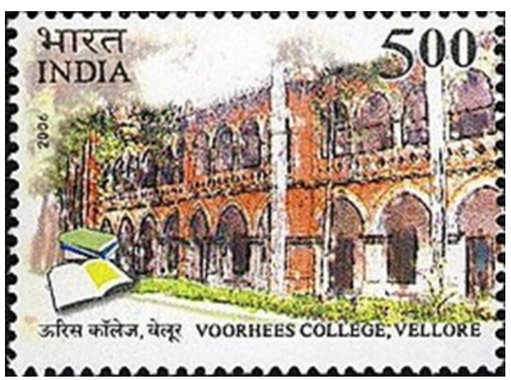


Fig 41. (left) Commemorative stamp of Voorhees College, Vellore (2006) – red-brick colonial architecture with arched corridors – symbol of early missionary-led education in Tamil Nadu – representative of institutional standardisation under colonial pedagogy.

1 Malcolm S. Adiseshiah, "A Learning System in Tamil Nadu," International Review of Education 20, no. 4 (December 1974): 505–508, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00598246.
2 S. Hari Krishnan and A. Vickram, "A Study on Higher Education System in Tamil Nadu," Think India Journal 22, no. 10 (November 2019): [8230], ISSN 0971-1260.

The child's education thus becomes an investment in which, the child is force fed knowledge in the form of commodified education, leading to high suicide rates and intense depression cases at young ages. This issue of schooling's evident impact on the mental health of children is being observed specifically in countries like India, China, Indonesia and many other countries of the east. Many scholars have critiqued the impacts of ignoring and most often than not dismissing the child's individual interests or natural inclinations and talents.[1] The monotonicity of the education enforces an idea of individual progress that paves way to the market driven values of the "outside, real world", much in the early stages of the child's cognitive development. Though the standardisation provided education for all much similar to the Sangam Age, it was only in theory. With the already multilayered ongoing cases of casteism and religious turbulence in Tamil Nadu, or the whole of India for that matter - the world that the schools reconfigured and prepared the children for, had undergone another iteration of stratifying itself further. Classism based on monitorial values densified the group categorised as "underprivileged", resulting in ignorant individuals and undermotivated dropout geniuses – never realised.[2]



Fig 42. (bottom) Government school in rural Tamil Nadu – plain concrete building with basic facilities – reflects how standardised education continues after colonial times – a simple space holding deeper problems of caste, class, and unequal access.

1 Wirth, Arthur G., and Carl Bewig. "John Dewey on School Architecture." Journal of Aesthetic Education 2, no. 4 (1968): 79–86. https://doi.org/10.2307/3331646.
2 Ron Ayres and Manuela Torrijos Simon, "Education, Poverty and Sustainable Livelihoods in Tamil Nadu: Inequalities, Opportunities and Constraints," Review of Political Economy 15, no. 2 (April 2003): 211–229, https://doi.org/10.1080/0953825032000064896.

John Dewey, the prominent educator and philosopher argued that the "factory model" of learning in formal schooling – where knowledge is transmitted in an assembly line fashion, perpetuates a linear and predictable image of learning.[1] The output of such an approach creates 'waste and isolation', defining waste as the void that develops when school is divorced from life, both physically and intellectually. Further, he criticizes the internal isolation of the curriculum that cages itself in a contained learning box. A century after Dewey's time, the problem still persists. Despite the expectations for schools to become more democratic, the learning environment has come to be compared to a 'police state', failing to encourage ownership, participation and responsibility.[2] This could be credited to the obsession over focusing on the "core" subjects, thereby leading students to helplessly become feed to the neoliberal machine. In this regiment, the student is reduced to a roll number and a potential labourer. Further, the built environment of schools has been scrutinised and brought into focus by many scholars and thinkers to loosen the snares that education has been subjected to.

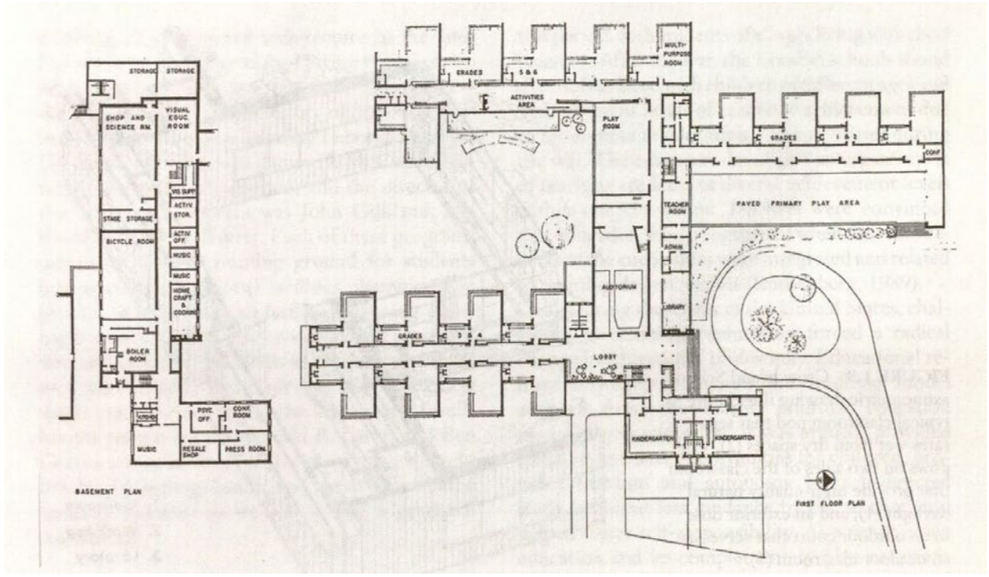
School architecture then is seen merely as a container to produce students rather than realising its potential to evoke creativity and imagination during the early developmental ages of children – here architecture is seen as a potential agent that contributes to learning.[3] Similarly, William W Cutler in his work argues that imagination and flexibility is sacrificed in school architecture for economic feasibility. He observes that this has led to designing of uninspiring, repetitive classroom layouts and floor plans. Schools need pathways that allow for freedom of movement, spaces to stumble upon, nooks and strategic open spaces for introspection and gathering spaces or shelters for group activities.[4] In place of these that could have been, what majority of the children get are spaces that reinforce notions of control, discipline and values that ignite competition amongst friends and foes alike. Bullying and discrimination have become much too common in schools with higher densities of children stuffed into a single classroom. Ironically, children tend to feel the most alienated in such scenarios where the hierarchy of the oppressor and the oppressed is ingrained in the child directly affected by the event and the ones spectating. Opening up spaces and strategic design of group activities in outdoor areas tend to bring children of various backgrounds together – a sense of community and belonging gained through these, could develop a sense of identity in a child. [5]

1 Wirth, Arthur G., and Carl Bewig. "John Dewey on School Architecture." Journal of Aesthetic Education 2, no. 4 (1968): 79–86. https://doi.org/10.2307/3331646.
2 Rena Upitis, "School Architecture and Complexity," Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity in Education 1, no. 1 (2004): [page number], published by Complexity Science and Educational Research (CSER).
3 Tanner, C. K. "The Influence of School Architecture on Academic Achievement." Journal of Educational Administration 38, no. 4 (2000): 309–330. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230010373598.
4 Cutler, William W. "Cathedral of Culture: The Schoolhouse in American Educational Thought and Practice since 1820." History of Education Quarterly 29, no. 1 (1989): 1–40. https://doi.org/10.2307/368604.
5 Cheryl Charles and Richard Louv, Children's Nature Deficit: What We Know – and Don't Know (Minneapolis, MN: Children & Nature Network, September 2009).



Fig 43. (top) Crow Island School façade – low horizontal volumes, child-scaled massing – brick and glass for warmth and light – tower as circulation anchor – outdoor integration supports free movement and play

Fig 44. (bottom) Plan layout – radial classroom wings with direct outdoor access – L-shaped rooms with breakout zones – central shared core – modularity and openness reflect progressive learning methods



In response to these critiques and observations, the role of school architecture in the quality of pedagogy has been dissected and experimented by various alternative pedagogies. Schools like, Frobel, Reggio Emilia and Waldorf were developed to emphasise how the design of spaces and the pedagogy itself would shape the development of the child. When spaces are well lit with access to outdoors with unstructured play and interaction with natural materials are encouraged by the pedagogy itself, the sensory literacy and critical thinking have been observed to have increased in children.[1] These experimental and open-ended techniques were taken through close interactions between educationalists and architects. The avoidance of these important discussions becomes detrimental to education – for the schools built then, would become hollow shells that lacks vision. Without a vision to reform, reproduction of faulty, educationally unsound and dated architecture designs becomes inevitable.[2]

Fig 45. (bottom) METI Handmade School, Bangladesh – mud walls with exposed bamboo roof structure – deep overhangs for shade and rain – open corridor blurring indoor-outdoor boundary – architecture rooted in craft, climate, and Montessori-inspired freedom of movement in nature



1 Rena Upitis, "School Architecture and Complexity," Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity in Education 1, no. 1 (2004): [page number], published by Complexity Science and Educational Research (CSER).
2 Cutler, William W. "Cathedral of Culture: The Schoolhouse in American Educational Thought and Practice since 1820." History of Education Quarterly 29, no. 1 (1989): 1–40. https://doi.org/10.2307/368604.

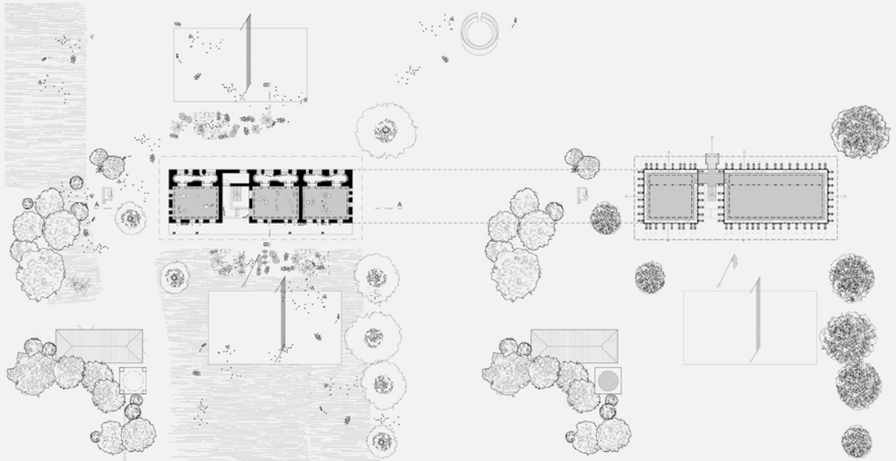


Fig 46. (top) METI School site plan – scattered pavilion layout with gardens and shaded zones – central path links classrooms to community – spatial openness reflects village-scale porosity

Fig 47. (bottom) METI classroom interior – bamboo structure with mud walls and woven screens – floor seating and open lattice for light and air – space supports group learning, movement, and material interaction

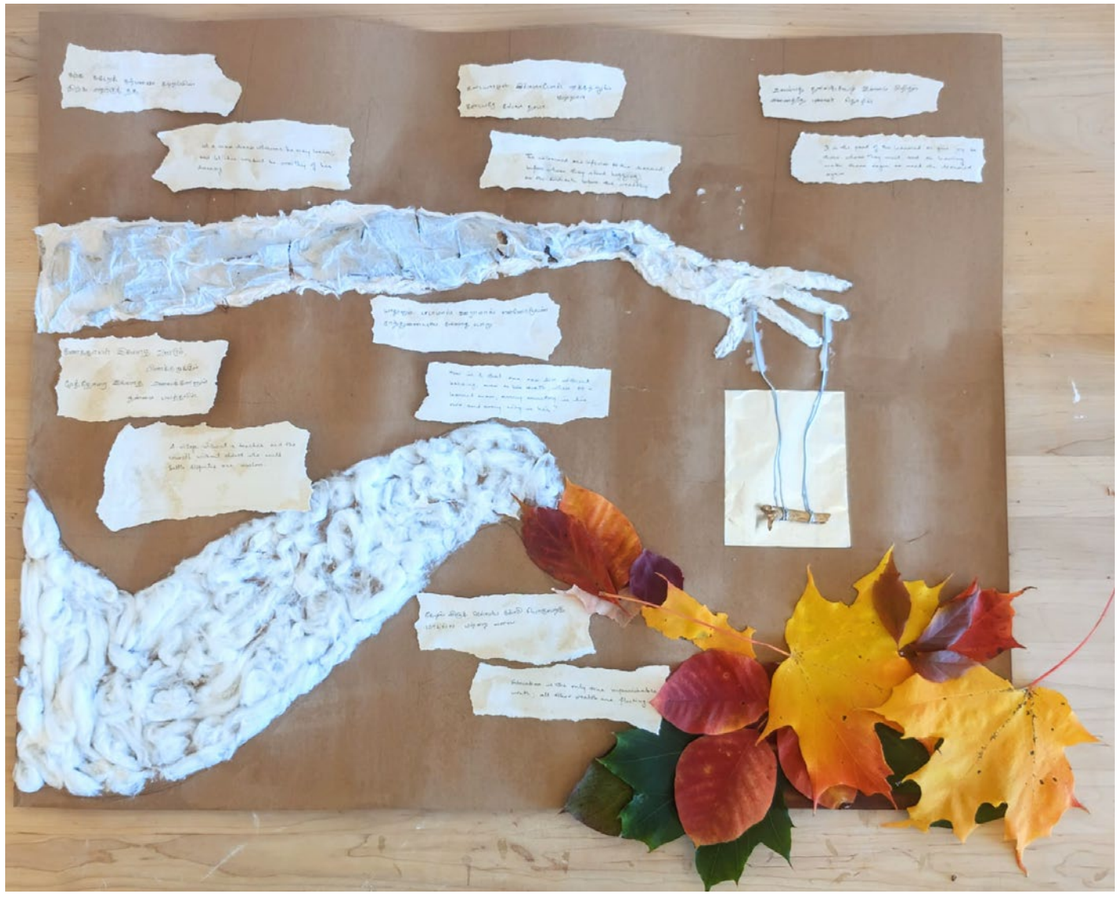


Pushing this idea further, in 2006, Richard Louv famously termed “nature-deficit disorder” in his book *Last Child in the Woods*. Here, he directly addresses the disconnection of children from the natural world, while critiquing that the modern education privileges indoor, screen based and text-based learning over experiential, sensory rich exploration.[1] In place of this education, he promotes place-based learning where the school becomes a microcosm of the community by embedding the pedagogy in local ecosystems and organised community experiences that could aid in restoring enthusiastic attention, curiosity and wonder.[2] Forest Schools were developed where children attended summer camps or full time schooling in the outdoors. In these schools, the pedagogy itself was integrated with activities in nature. Basic skills like foraging in the wild, building a fire, setting up camp and more sensory skills like making art and craft out of natural materials that they are taught about are encouraged in children.[3]



1 Louv, Richard. (2008, 2005). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature- Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books
2 Bradley, W.S. (1998), “Expecting the most from school design”, unpublished manuscript, Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.
3 John Dewey on School Architecture. Arthur G. Wirth and Carl Bewig. The Journal of Aesthetic Education, Oct., 1968, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Oct., 1968), pp. 79-86

This coupling of education with nature then makes the environment of the child into a syllabus in itself – much similar to the Sangam Age. Like how there, the organisation of the landscapes – the tinais were not merely treated as typologies of topography, but each tinai was considered its own world – a constellation of terrain, occupations, deity, emotion and an associated poetic mood, the philosophy of the pedagogy of now too needs to coalesce with the context of its surroundings. For the children of the Sangam Age were expected to absorb knowledge through exposing themselves to the elements – not just through rigid institutions and structured syllabus. Watching harvests, birds, participating in rituals, touching soil and emulating elders were not seen as extracurriculars and unserious, but were seen as core epistemology. Here nature is respected and revered as The Greatest Teacher.



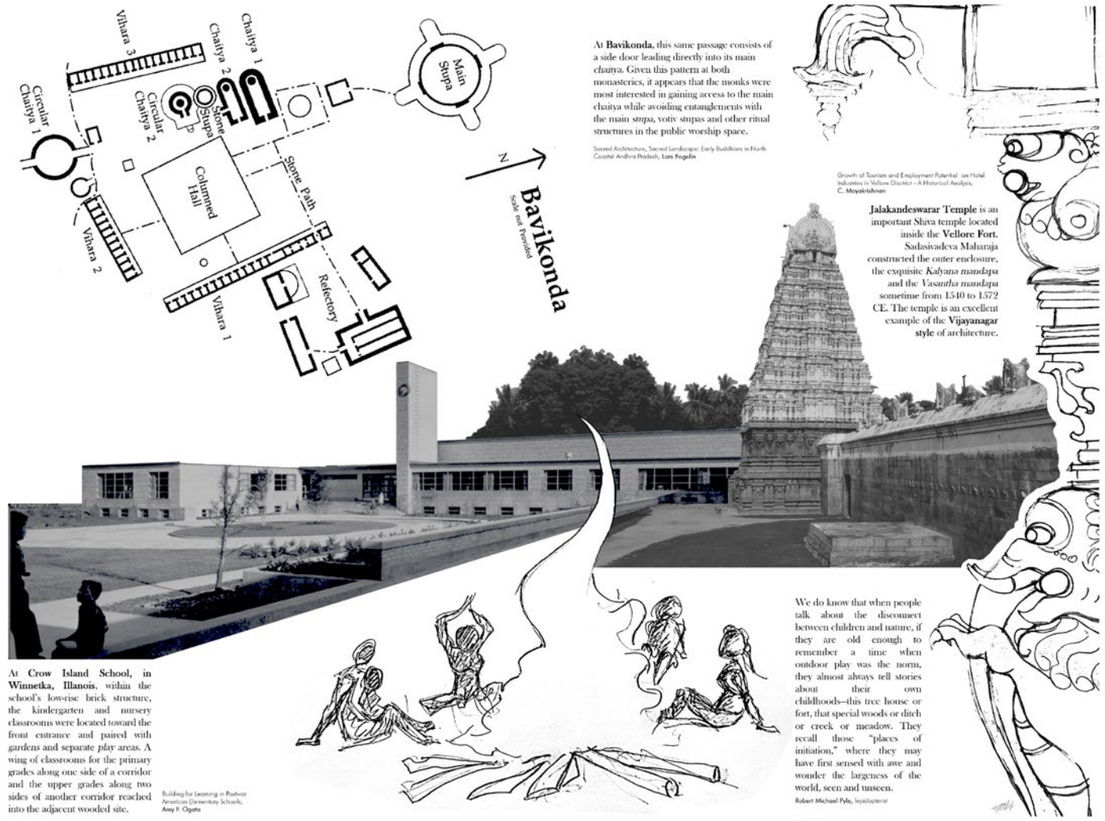


Fig 48 a. (left) Flatbed by author

"All we have learnt since then – that fire burns and rains make you sick; that the earth was round, and stars were not your ancestors in heaven; that birds can fly in the sky and can float in water because their bone densities were low and that man could too, if he had a vessel of such proportions – is from nature."

The flatbed resonates the same idea of learning from nature by using simple elements from nature and through its composition conveys layers of metaphorical intentions.

Fig 48 b. (top) Collage by author

juxtaposing sacred and secular – Thotlakonda's axial monastic plan – Jalakandeswarar Temple's layered ritual geometry – Crow Island School's child-centric modernist layout – three spatial responses shaped by belief, hierarchy, and pedagogy

Part B - Fragments

சிவன் (SIVAN)

'Sivan' (Lord Shiva) is believed to be the embodiment of the supreme being in the Shaivism mythology. Shaivism is a major tradition within Hinduism where Sivan is unanimously credited to being the supreme being. He is believed to be both the creator and the destroyer – much dissimilar to the duality of light and darkness (good and evil), being emphasised in many mythological belief systems of the predating West. He is one of the more mysterious beings. For, the origins of his existence through one form or the other dates all the way back to the Indus Valley Civilization.[1] *The Pasupathy seal (Seal #420)* excavated in Mohenjo-daro is believed to be of Sivan as a yogic man with horns adorning his head. Though there exists a lot of controversy around much of the mysteries of the Indus Valley Civilisation's origins, the significance of symbols associated with various cultural belief systems is to be noted. There exists a multitude of various forms of Sivan in both the Sangam literature and other ancient texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads, but the most common of his symbolic representation throughout Hinduism is the *Siva Lingam*.[2]



Fig 49. (bottom left) Pasupathy seal – Indus Valley artifact – possibly early depiction of Sivan as seated yogic figure with horned headdress



Fig 50. (bottom mid) Sivan as Nataraja – cosmic dancer – surrounded by devas and rishis – Himalayas in backdrop – dance symbolising creation, destruction, rhythm of the universe

Fig 51. (bottom right) Sivan with Parvati – wild ascetic form – animal skin, trident, snake – Parvati in red – union of austerity and fertility – in mountain forest setting



Fig 52. (right) Sivan in Kailasa – seated under stylised tree – surrounded by Parvati, Ganesha, Murugan, Nandi – multiple arms with trident, drum, serpent – divine family iconography – Pahari painting style

1 O. Somasundaram and T. S. Murthy, "Siva – The Mad Lord: A Puranic Perspective," Indian Journal of Psychiatry 59, no. 1 (January–March 2017): 119–22, https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.204441.
2 Doyel De, "The Aniconic Cult of Lord Shiva: The Mostly Different and Mysterious God of the Hindu Pantheon," in *Approaches into Indian History and Cultural Heritage*, ed. Guptajit Pathak and Doyel De (Delhi: Prakhar Goonj Publication, June 2021), 100–112.

Siva Lingam

The Siva Lingam (Shiva Linga) is an abstract or aniconic representation of Sivan in Shaivism. It is typically the primary cult image in Hindu temples dedicated to Sivan – also found in smaller shrines, or as self-manifested natural objects. The lingam is often represented within a disc-shaped platform – sometimes even as a simple column or more prominently, a column jutting out of a round base. According to *LingaPurusha*, the Siva Lingam represents the union of the male and female principles of the universe, where – the column (yoni) as *purusha* represents the universe and the lipped base *prakriti* represents the supreme power that holds the universe within it.[1]



Fig 53. (bottom) Siva Lingam from Hampi, Karnataka – symbol of cosmic force and union – placed in tight, sunken chamber – irony of enclosed infinity



Fig 54. (right) rural Siva Lingam – simple aniconic form – no temple enclosure – worship in open landscape – represents direct, localised sacred practice



Fig 55. (bottom right) Ancient Lingam on brick base – damaged and weathered – part of an archaeological site – shows early use of abstract symbol in temples



Fig 56. (bottom far right) Ardhanarishvara in folk painting – Shiva and Parvati shown as one body – tree as cosmic axis – visual expression of gender unity and divine balance

1 Doyel De, "The Aniconic Cult of Lord Shiva: The Mostly Different and Mysterious God of the Hindu Pantheon," in *Approaches into Indian History and Cultural Heritage*, ed. Guptajit Pathak and Doyel De (Delhi: Prakhar Goonj Publication, June 2021), 100–112.

Iconography

The iconography associated with Sivan can be found in all of his representations in one form or the other. They are usually metaphors depicting various innate attributes of the entity because of its nature and beliefs around it. When one looks at representations of Sivan, there are various “entities” that can be identified. The most prominent ones are his third eye, a snake coiling around his neck and his weapon – the trident, being few of the many other. Moreover, he is worshipped in different forms or avatars under different names throughout India. Chidambaram’s Nataraja is a prominent avatar of Sivan that has its history in the pre-Aryan times of Thamizhagam.[1] Such so, he has played a major role in the Thamizh culture.

The meanings and ways of worshiping him can be found in the Shaivite parts of the Sangam literature. Primarily, Thirumandhiram by Thirumular and Thiruvasagam by Manikkavasagar describe the poet’s devotion through elaborating the profound meanings behind different stories and aspects of his iconography. Reading past the evident devotion conveyed through these poems, the depth of their understanding of qualities of nature and how humans comprehend it to assign attributes to nature and things can be understood. Here it has to be noted that the philosophical and cosmological knowledge of the poets is overpowered by the devotional tone. Be it the idea that Sivan dones a crescent on his matted hair, representing his domain over the passage of time, or the belief that the Ganga flows from his hair represents spiritual purification,[2] thus making the Ganga River sacred even till today – though now people tend to show their belief by dumping dead bodies and offerings in it in hopes of a better afterlife.



Fig 57. (left) Ganga river during festival – believed to be holy, flowing from Sivan’s hair – people still come with faith – but the river is now overcrowded and polluted – spiritual meaning held, physical space ignored



Fig 58. (right) Statue of Sivan in modern depiction – trident, serpent, crescent, Ganga, and matted locks – symbolic elements representing iconographic tradition in Shaivism

1 Richard Stromer, Shiva Nataraja: A Study in Myth, Iconography, and the Meaning of a Sacred Symbol (2014), accessed July 15, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274077466_Shiva_Nataraja_A_Study_in_Myth_Iconography_and_the_Meaning_of_a_Sacred_Symbol.
2 Stuart Blackburn, Tamil Devotional Poetry – Siva, Humanities Institute, accessed July 15, 2025, https://www.humanitiesinstitute.org/assets/tamil.poetry.siva.pdf.

The temples too similarly depict various stories and events that convey the values and customs the devotees are expected to learn from in their sculptures and mythologies. The architecture is informed by these stories too - the orientation of the deity, where they are placed, how and why, what other gods accompany them and where their shrines are, etc. Every temple has its own story and thus varying ways of worship and customs pertaining to that deity or event. Thus old temples found in cities and villages throughout India - through these stories, carry fragments of history of that hint at the ancestral belief systems and way of life pertaining to that particular settlement.[1]

Tamil Nadu has a culture of having 'Kaaval Dheivam Kovil" - The Guardian Deity's Temple in most of its cities and villages (though cities have many guardian deities, usually covering the older parts of the city). My hometown Vellore in Tamil Nadu - the southern most state in India has such a deity too. Her name is *Aanaikulathamman* and her temple was built in the 7th CE. Usually, the name of the deity hints at the story of the deity and hence the history of the settlement. Here, the story goes like, Vellore was a foresty region where 'Velamaram' - an indigenous tree of Vellore (this is where the city gets its name from - City of Velamaram) dominated the wild. During those times, herds of elephants used to cause havock in the city. Aanaikulathamman (Aanai - elephant; Kulam - clan: Amman - female deity) was the deity who was worshipped to protect the people from these wild elephants.

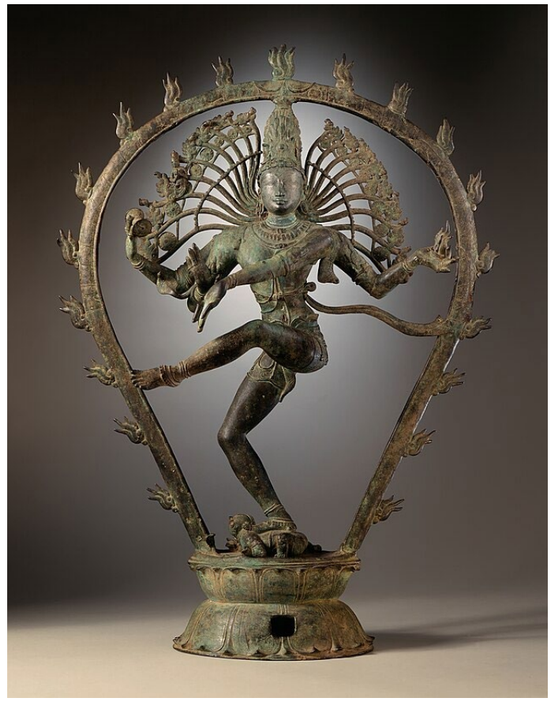


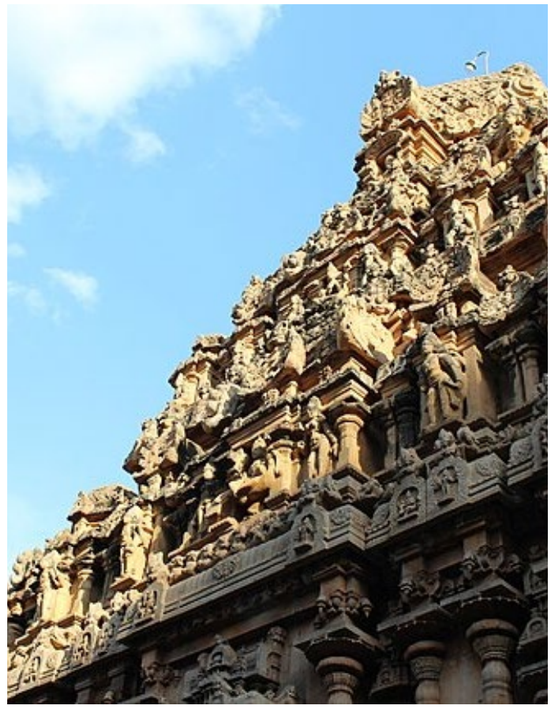
Fig 59. (left) Sculpture from Jalakandeeswarar Temple, Vellore - detailed stone carving - part of narrative tradition in temple art - stories and values conveyed through form - myth and moral embedded in architecture

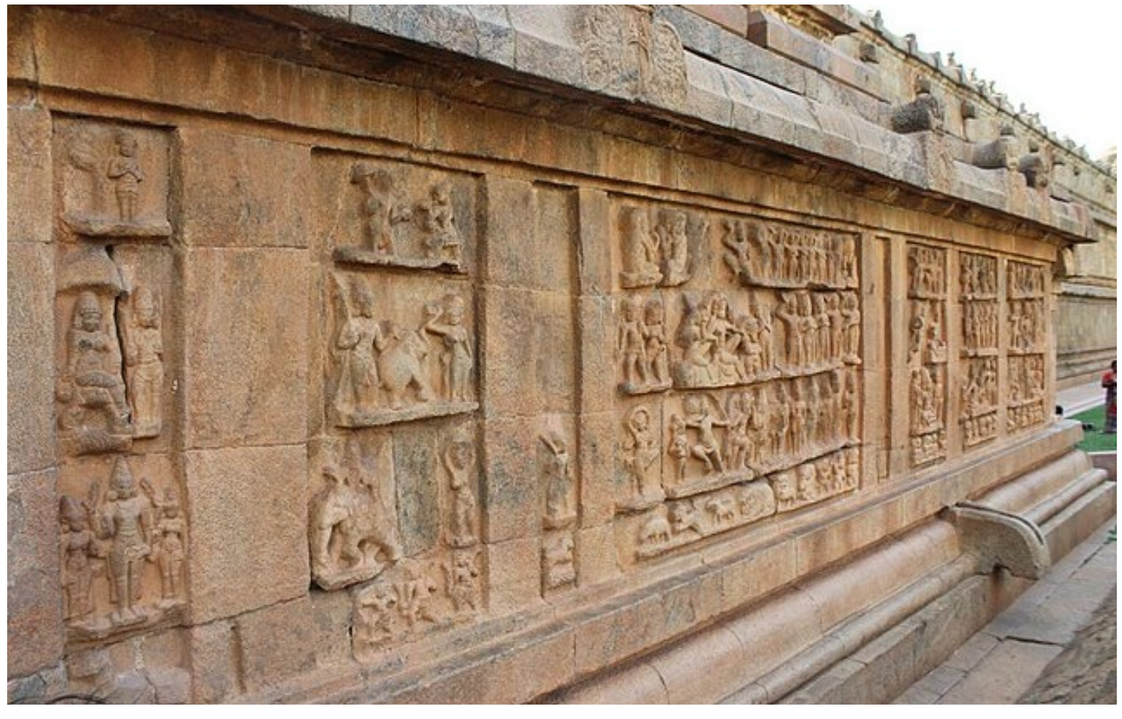
Fig 60. (right) Bronze Nataraja, Chola period (10th-12th c CE) - Sivan dancing within a ring of flames, balancing on the demon of ignorance

Fig 61. (far right) Gopuram facade at Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram (12th CE, UNESCO site) - tiered tower densely carved with gods, mythic scenes - promotes visual storytelling, guiding worshippers through sacred narratives

Fig 62. (bottom right) Narrative frieze at Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram - continuous stone panels with carved episodes - scenes from epics and daily life - can be used to teach, recall, and ritualise stories through visual sequence







1 ARUMUGAM, INDIRA. "'The Old Gods Are Losing Power!': Theologies of Power and Rituals of Productivity in a Tamil Nadu Village." Modern Asian Studies 49, no. 3 (2015): 753–86. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X1400016X.

Vellore, Tamil Nadu

After more than 2000 years since Sangam Era

In a town called Vellore in the State of Tamil Nadu

A province in India.

I remember reading some of the Sangam poems in my childhood or trying to if I am being honest – we were too young and were clueless about the significance of what we were learning.. But we were asked to learn the lines by heart and you had to read them loud. I did really well in Tamil exams, many of my classmates did too – I never did read aloud though, I found it rather ironic. Tamil was one of the easy 'side' subjects – you write what you understand in your own words, just in a more academic way. Usually stories, poems and a bit of grammar. – we forgot what we learnt right after the exams, no one would test us on it anymore.
The important subjects were a trouble altogether, though. I was really bad at almost all of them – except English tho – credits to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Marshall Mathers and – yes I said it, Taylor Swift.

Dust and noise welcome you.

Surrounded by loud people with tawny skin probably because of the scorching canopy that covers the sky – the streets are abuzz with chaotic traffic and the vendors chanting away cheap goods. Yet within this chaos lies an essence of harmony and perpetuality – like corner tea shops where the old and the youth sip their tea, most with a cigarette or *beedie* between their fingers, or college kids bargaining with fruit vendors – fighting and teasing, or bus drivers honking their horns in different tunes – jarring, but the right note still. Hidden among this heap of regularity of everyday life, right opposite to the Vellore Old Bus Stand – you would not have missed it – The Vellore Fort.

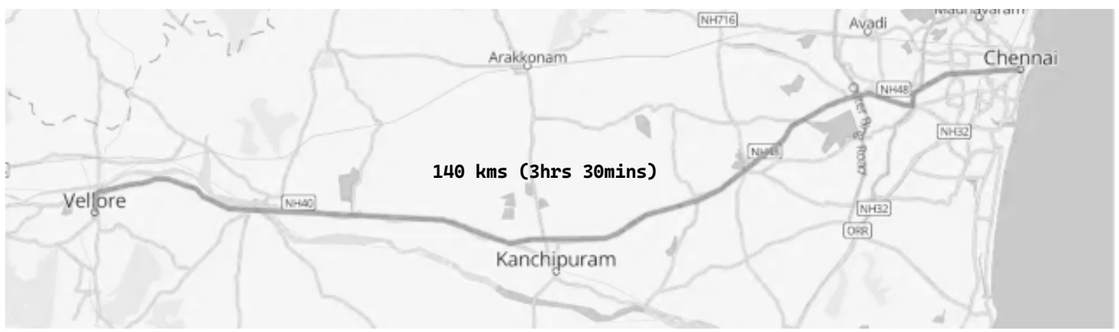




Fig 63 (a). (left) Map showing distance from Chennai, capital of Tamil Nadu to Vellore

Fig 63 (b). (top) India Map highlighting Tamil Nadu

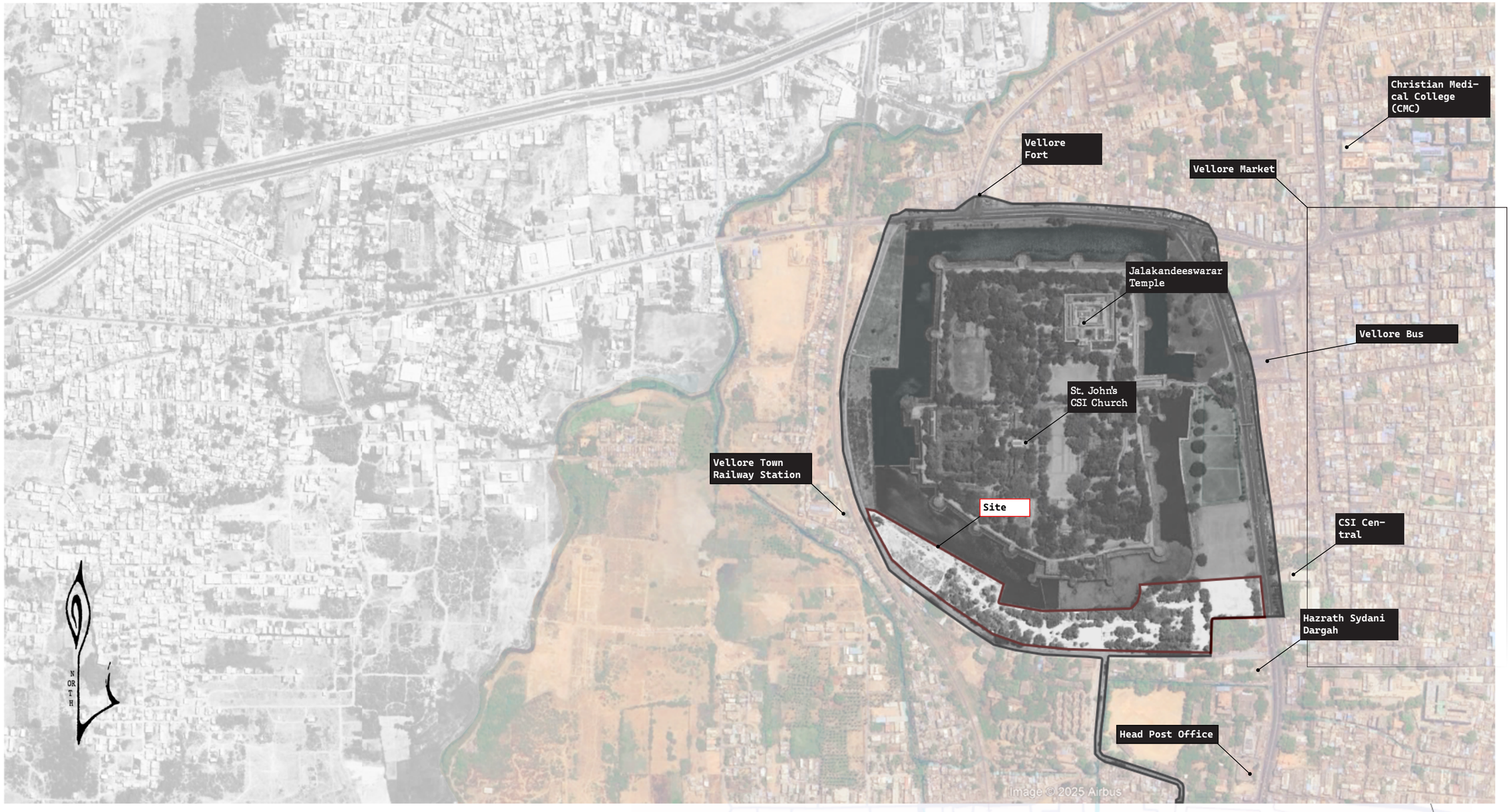


Fig 64. Map showing site in Vellore Fort complex and the landmarks around it

Vellore Fort

The Vellore Fort was built during the reign of Chinna Bommi Nayak (1526 – 1595 AD), The complex spreads over an area of 133 acres and the fort that lies at the core of the complex has a 3 meters wide fort wall that runs 3 kms around the fort. Beyond the fort wall is the 57 meters wide moat which is 8 meters deep. According to the inscriptions, the moat used to have more than 800 crocodiles that were used to act as a defense line. The walls of the fort are made of huge granite stones called cyclopean stones on both exterior faces – packed with the mud dug from beyond the periphery of the fort, which later became the moat. There used to be a drawbridge that connected the fort to the main road at the east entrance – now it is a bridge that connects the city to the fort complex. Throngs of people enter the fort complex everyday – kids who play football and cricket in the fort grounds, police training cadets using the other ground for their marches and workouts, government officials who sneak away into the many old mud wall buildings that the public is barely let to cross and old people. Right before the bridge, along the southern glacis of the fort complex is the undermaintained public park, beyond which was the better maintained Periyar Park. Along with this, regular devotees of the Jalgandeeswarar Temple keep the complex always busy and happening. Vendors and shops adorn the main road that leads you to the north facing temple.[1]

Jalagandeeswarar Kovil (Sivan's Temple)

The Jalagandeeswarar temple is a prominent example of Vijayanagar Temple Architecture. The Kalyana mandapam (Marriage Hall) on the left before one enters the Gopuram of the temple, beautifully showcases the skill of the sculptors who believed that the black granite was divine. The sculptural mastery of the stonemasons of the 16th CE Vijayanagar Velour (Vellore) are expressed through the decorative fluted columns of the stone Mandapam. Horses, elephants, lions and various other hybrid beings are incorporated into these columns and walls. Stories from the then Hindu mythology give each of these columns a symbolic meaning and significance. The temple inside is dedicated to Sivan and it is believed that the King dreamt of the temple first and then decided to build the fort around it.

1 Kiran Satyabodh Kalamdani, Kalyan Mantapa at Jalakandeswarar, Vellore (October 2019), accessed July 2025, https://www.academia.edu/42041819/Kalyan_Mantapa_at_Jalakandheshwarar_Vellore.

Fig. 65 (right top) View of the Jalagandeeswarar Kovil beyond the Vellore Fort wall

Fig 66. (right bottom) View of the moat





The Fort As A Cultural Microcosm

The architectural journey within the fort mimes the societal and cultural morphology of Vellore and its people.

Firstly, built by the Vijayanagar King in the year 1556, the fort complex earned its place as a fort and a temple complex. What followed this was a tumultuous period of shifting empires and kingdoms, where just repairs were made to the structure. Then in the year 1750, the last Arcot Nawab built the Vellore Fort Mosque. The indo-saracenic mosque still exists today but due to the reopening of the Jalagandeeswarar Temple in the years following the Independence of India, the mosque has been closed for prayers. Though it has to be taken with a grain of salt, the event suggests at the cultural harmony and brotherhood that exists in the city.

At the dawn of June 10th, 1806, the Indian sepoys (Indian soldiers who worked for the British) stationed in the Vellore Fort attacked the European barracks that was within the complex. Many lives were lost on both sides and the British sent reinforcements to control the revolt. Though it was put down the following noon by the British Raj, the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 is considered to be the first large-scale Indian mutiny against the British, and a prelude to the much larger Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 that took place in Bangladesh.[1] Following the ongoing control of the fort in the hands of the British, the St. John's Church was built in 1846 by the Governor of Madras for the officers and the people of the East India Company. The Indo-gothic church still stands inside the fort complex where believers of faith are still fascinated by the charm of the colonial history of the city.

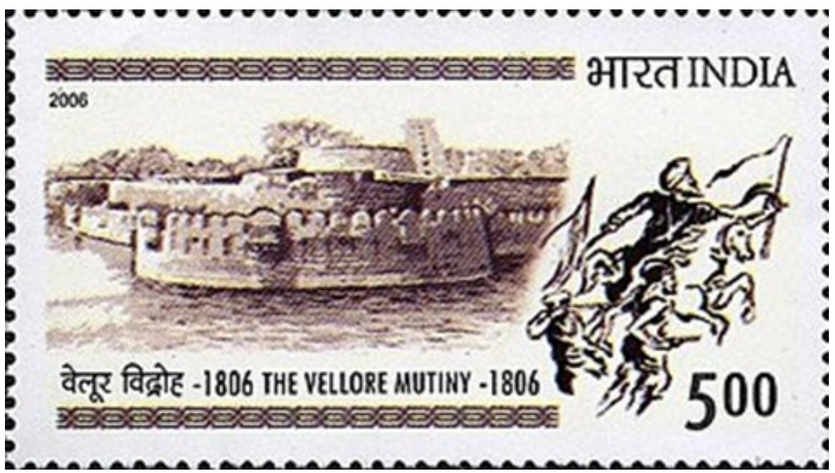


Fig. 67 (left) Commemorative stamp (2006) marking the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 – depicts Vellore Fort and sepoy uprising – first large-scale Indian rebellion against British rule – symbol of early resistance and colonial tension



Fig. 68 (right top) Arcot Nawab's mosque (1750) within Vellore Fort – twin minarets, domed roof, arched openings – fine example of Indo-Islamic architecture nestled inside a military fortification



Fig. 69 (right bottom) St. John's Church (1846) inside Vellore Fort – single-story Gothic Revival design – verandah with columns, pitched roof, and pointed window details

1 Plliay, K. K. "THE CAUSES OF THE VELLORE MUTINY." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 20 (1957): 306–11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44304481.

The rest of the fort complex is an amalgamation of new civil building additions and a transformed prison, along with the Tipu Sultan museum - Tipu Sultan was one of the prominent kings of the Southern India during the British Rule. His family was imprisoned in the prison according to reports and the tomb of Tipu Sultan is also part of the fort complex.

Periyar Poonga (The site)

Exiting the fort and heading south along the periphery of the complex, the pathway that has become makeshift shelters for the underprivileged and storefronts for various vendors leads to a right turn. The wide road ahead is much cozier than the artery road that proceeds in the south direction. The east facing street is shaded with trees, underneath them flocks of customers adorn both the sides of the road - disordered, yet cozy still. Going further in, the entrance to the once maintained Periyar Park becomes visible. The exisiting compound wall surrounding the fort complex does a decent job of seperating the city and the complex itself, due to the presence of tall iron grills that make it hard for people and stray animals to enter the complex.

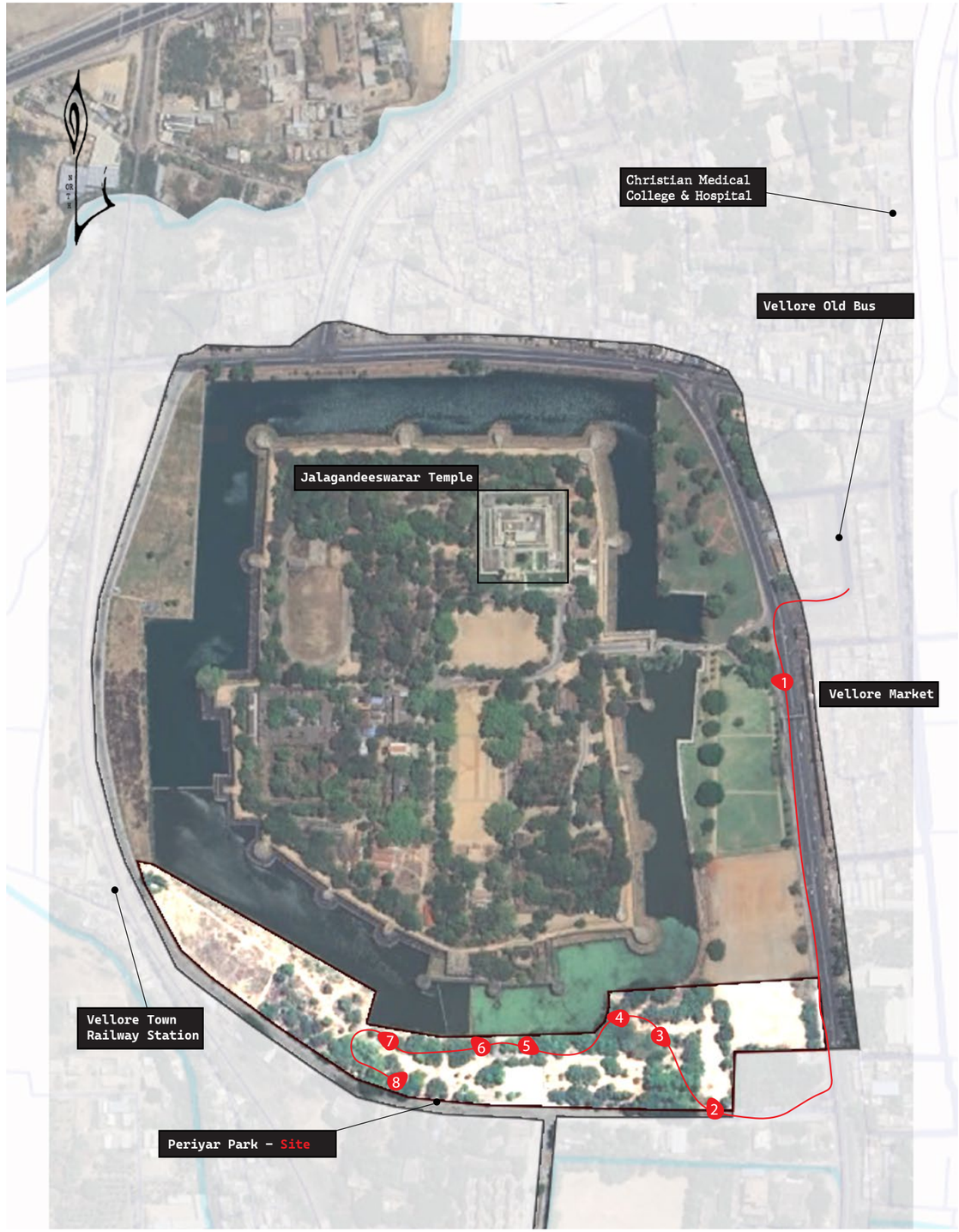


1 - Entrance leading to the Fort Complex

Fig. 70 (left) View of the road leading to the fort complex

Fig. 71 (right) key map showing spots leading from the Vellore Old Bus Stand to the site

Fig. 72 - 78 Various points inside the site taken by author's brother (June 2025)





2 – Entrance to Periyar Park



3 – View overlooking the landscape

The physical state of it is still calming – a sense of encroached wilderness in the once civilised park which thrived till around the year 2010 and was closed due to shortage of funds. A fair every weekend, food stalls of Thamizh street food that both the young and the old stood in lines to get, miniature theme park rides that people need to plan months ahead for their kids were then part of the neighbourhood park. The ruins of it grace the heterotopic few of Vellore – drunkards, their eyelids too heavy to sense the afternoon sun, couples who sneaked away to share what through phones they could not and little kids playing around unaware of their ragpicking parents and some who go on walks along the pathway that once barely was sufficient. An aspect that unites them all is the direction in which they are attuned to face or hang around in – north, The northern boundary of the park faces the moat beyond which lies the fort wall.



4 – View of the fort and moat from the edge of the park



5 – Interior of park – barely used by the locals anymore



6 – The stone bridge that connects the park to the Fort Complex



7 – view of Primary Axis in the mind-palace



8 – Wilderness as beauty and the beaming sun as divinity

Philosophy & Pedagogy

If the residues of political and social changes had not stained the epistemological perspectives of the Thamizhs, and yet history had taken its course in Vellore as it has in this reality - how could the architecture have responded to the city's pedagogical needs ?

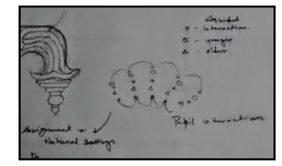
Considering the need for alternative pedagogies that encourages interaction with nature and to kindle the wonder and curiosity for knowledge that is innate to children, a space of learning could take advantage of the proximity of the site to the fort. Doing so would enable children who are regularly exposed to the city's history and culture, develop a sense of identity and belonging to the city.

To enable this, and for the the pedagogy to make full use of the expanse and cultural significance of the site, an ongoing systematic pedagogical research programme needs to function alongside the "school". This body of teachers and intellectuals need to come up with culturally significant and relevant courses that align with the epistemological values of the Thamizhs. The reverence for all kinds of knowledge and to value its beauty, an inclusive attitude towards artful forms of expression of knowledge, and most importantly, contextually relevant knowledge as required by the changing of the times has to be taught to the children.

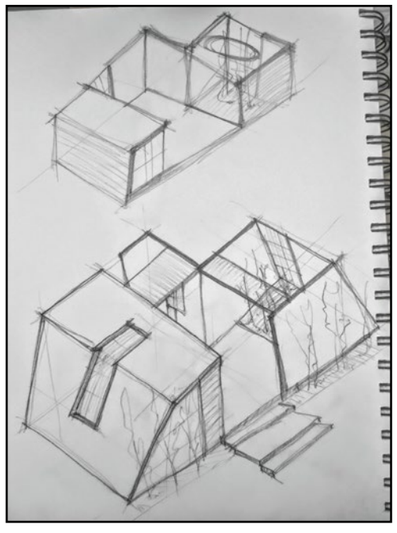
For such an alchemy to achieve the most beneficial product of intent, the pedagogy must be a synthesis of these values and ideas. A pedagogy that does not shy away from roaming the existing wilderness to stumble upon ideas and courses as generated by the erudite intellectuals through a cybernetic approach to designing and updating the syllabus of the school.

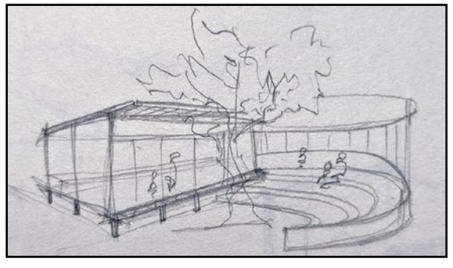
A move that could elevate this approach is to not organise classes based on age or through ranks or grades achieved. The student community should be reared as a single entity that learns together and shares knowledge through peer interactions and activities - the more diverse the age group, the better. By not confining children in enclosed classrooms and age-restrictive grade systems, organic relationships between individuals of shared interests and passions that could enable the creation of new ideas and unexplored conversations could be stumbled upon. Teachers then become moderators who manage crowds of various ages and artful inclinations - this could be achieved through manuevering elder-younger pupil relationships to strategically guide the younger ones and to refine and reiterate the understandings of the elder ones.

The architecture too then needs to reflect the pedagogical intent - unrestrictive classrooms, flexible spaces that do not hold a single orderly function (except washrooms and kitchens) and the relationship between the built and the thriving wilderness.









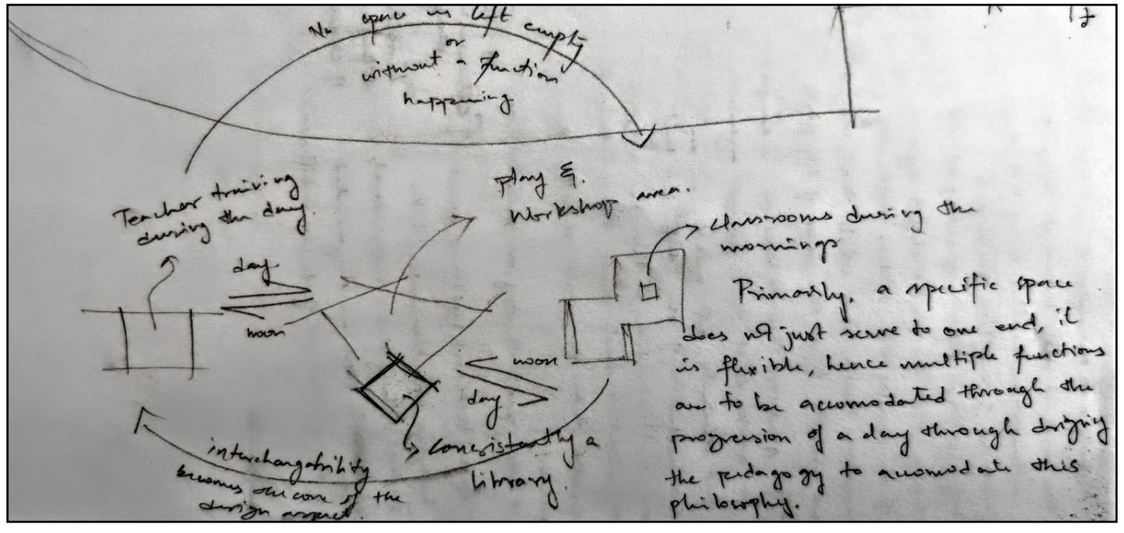


Fig. 79 - 81 (below) Experimental sketches to understand the relationship between the interior and the exterior. Role of walls, roofslabs and floorplates are rethought to coalesce nature and the built form.

Fig 82 - 83 (right) Sketches describing the pedagogical philosophy of the parti and concept sketch showing the pupil interactions

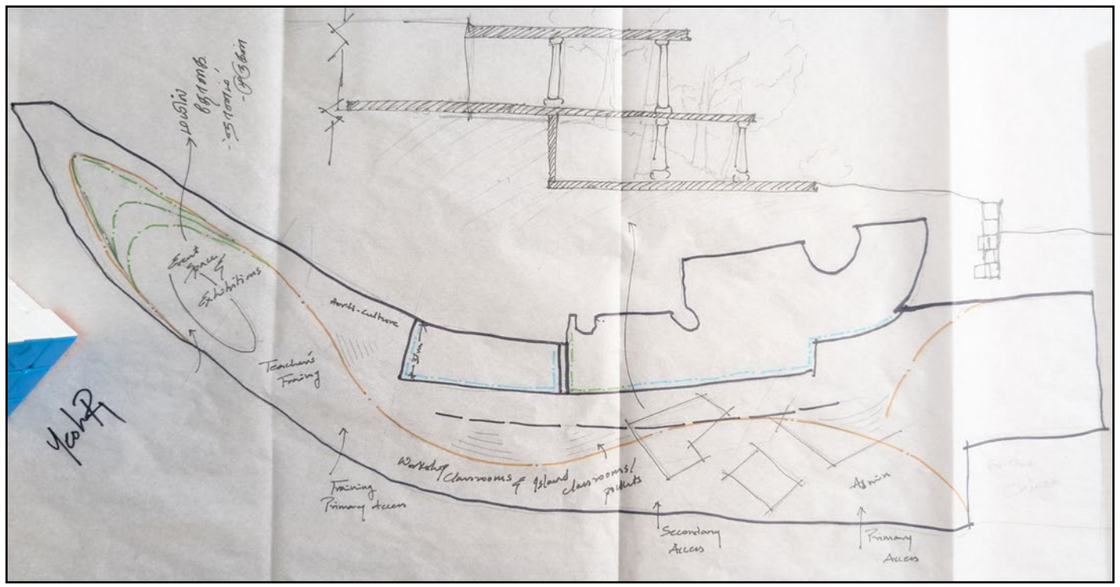
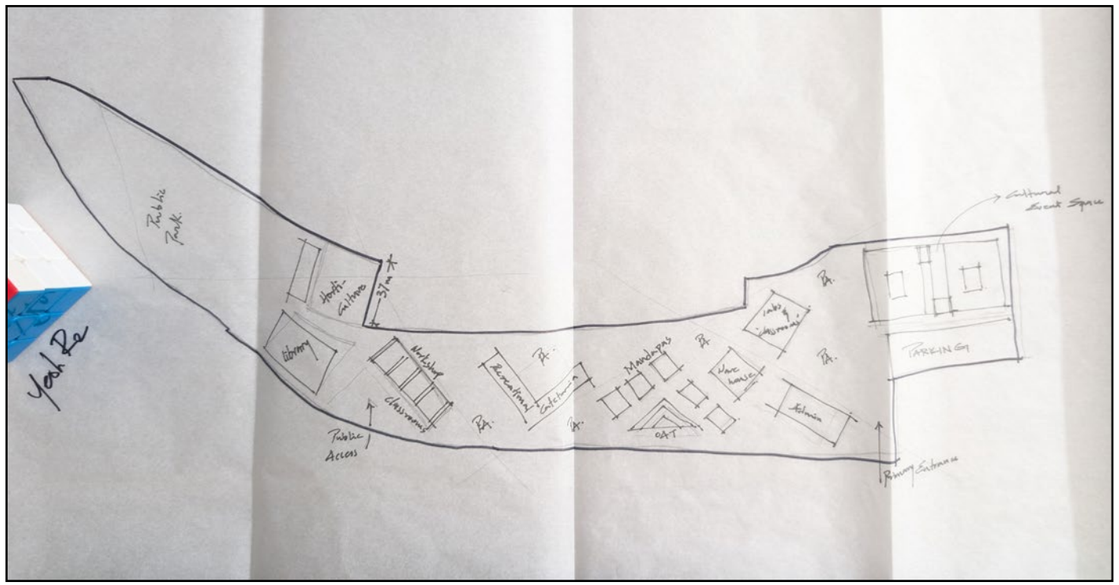


Fig 84(a). The peacocks's feather which signifies Murugan and his wisdom acc. to Thamizh literature, is abstracted to follow the natural topography of the site - doing so, weaving the different programs like a thread does flowers

Drawing inspiration from the monastries that shared much of its humanitarian and epistemological views with the Thamizhs, the scattered distribution of spaces connected by pathways according to required functions is envisioned on the site. The monastries were immersed as one with nature - sans barriers and strict boundaries and hence no 'contained' functions. Similarly, the sequencing of programs are juxtaposed to encourage movement amidst the wilderness of the site. Fig 84(b)



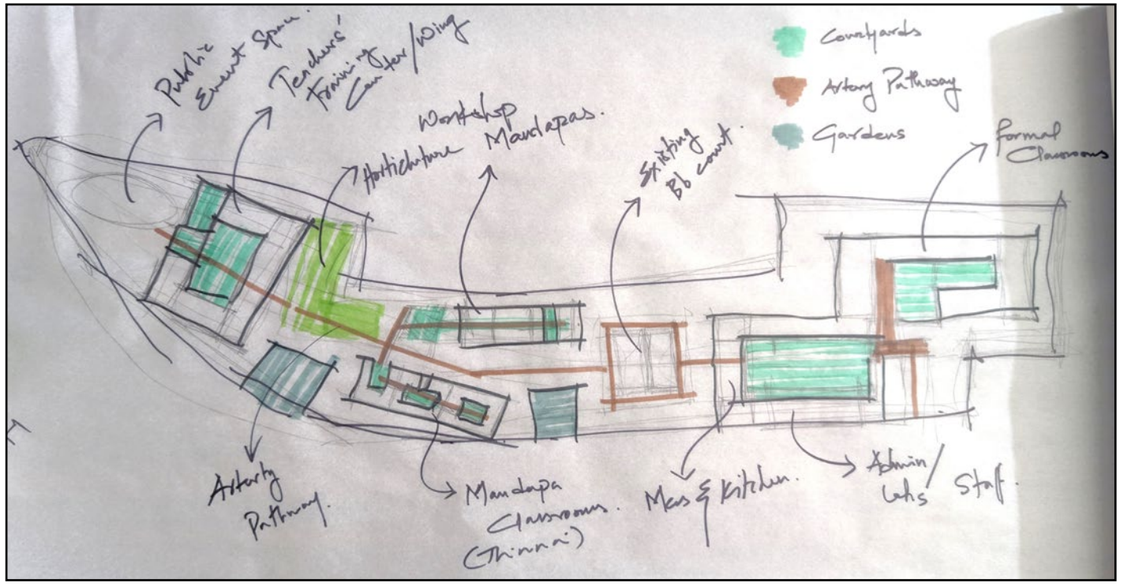
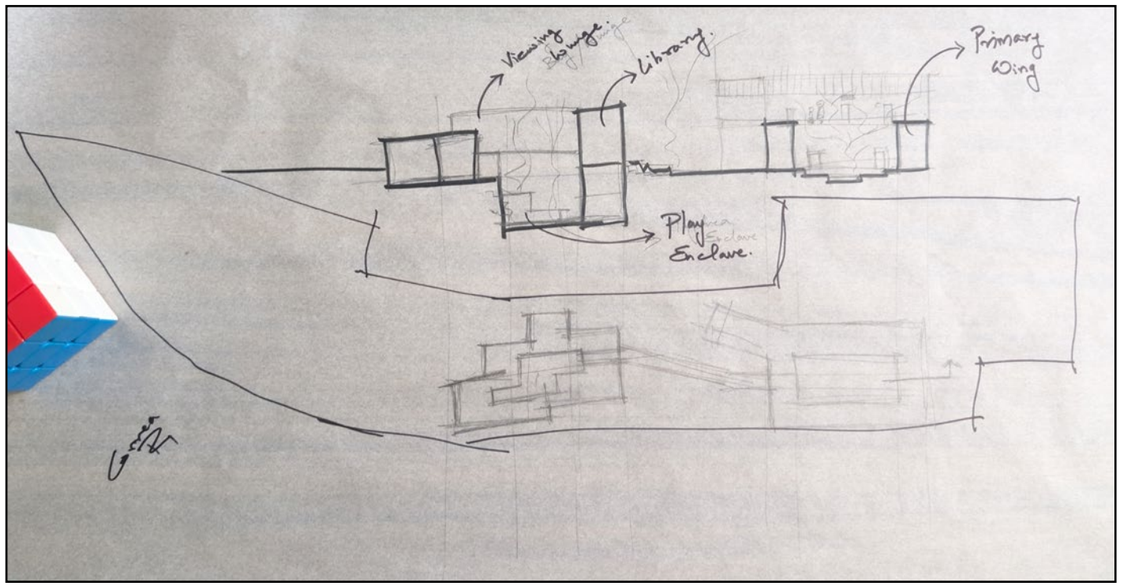


Fig 84(c). Reinventing the idea of the palli as the home of the teacher and Geoffrey Bawa's approach of bringing together a home and a garden, spaces are axially organised much similar to religious spaces where the architecture itself is considered sacred and hence the usage of space, ritualistic.

The topography of the site inspires the function pertaining to that specific part of the site. Charles Correa's manipulation of levels as per the required function adds an efficient sustainable layer to the design of spaces Fig 84(d)



ARIDITY

'Mater'



Nature in the form of the waterbody, embodied here as *Mater*, becomes not just a passive backdrop but the very landscape upon which pedagogical life takes root. Just as Mary in *Michelangelo's Pietà* is read as terrain – a vast and unfolding living landscape that gives form and support – the site itself assumes this maternal quality. The waterbody becomes the binding element, a nurturing vein that carries knowledge to where it belongs, situating learning within the cycles of flow, replenishment, and continuity. It is not just a geographic presence but a cultural and epistemological anchor, one that shapes the streams of thought as much as the architecture that situates itself in it.

Into this living landscape arrives Christ – not as figure but as an embodiment of pedagogical values - curiosity, exchange, critique, and cultural continuity of knowledge. Just as Christ's much smaller and yet enduring body in the Pietà is symbolic of values abandoned and not yet destroyed, the culturally inclined pedagogical values inhabit the site - fragile and waiting to be revived - carried again by the community that consumes the architecture. Together, Mater and Christ establish the dual ground of the design – one as the physical terrain that nurtures, while the other as the ethical and cultural inheritance that demands renewal.

This nurturing quality of Mater is carried forth in dealing with the existing elements located in the site - the playscapes such as the basketball court and the skating rink are transferred to near the Fort Grounds within the fort walls. This would enable children to wander much freer in the institutional complex without being confined to specific type of sports or activities.

Going further, the trees that need to be removed for the design to work while cozying alongside nature, become part of the pedagogy itself. These trees are treated as sacrifices towards the beginning of the learning journey, and are removed through ritualised ceremonies that students are required to take part in. The timber produced could be used for construction or for carpentry workshops.

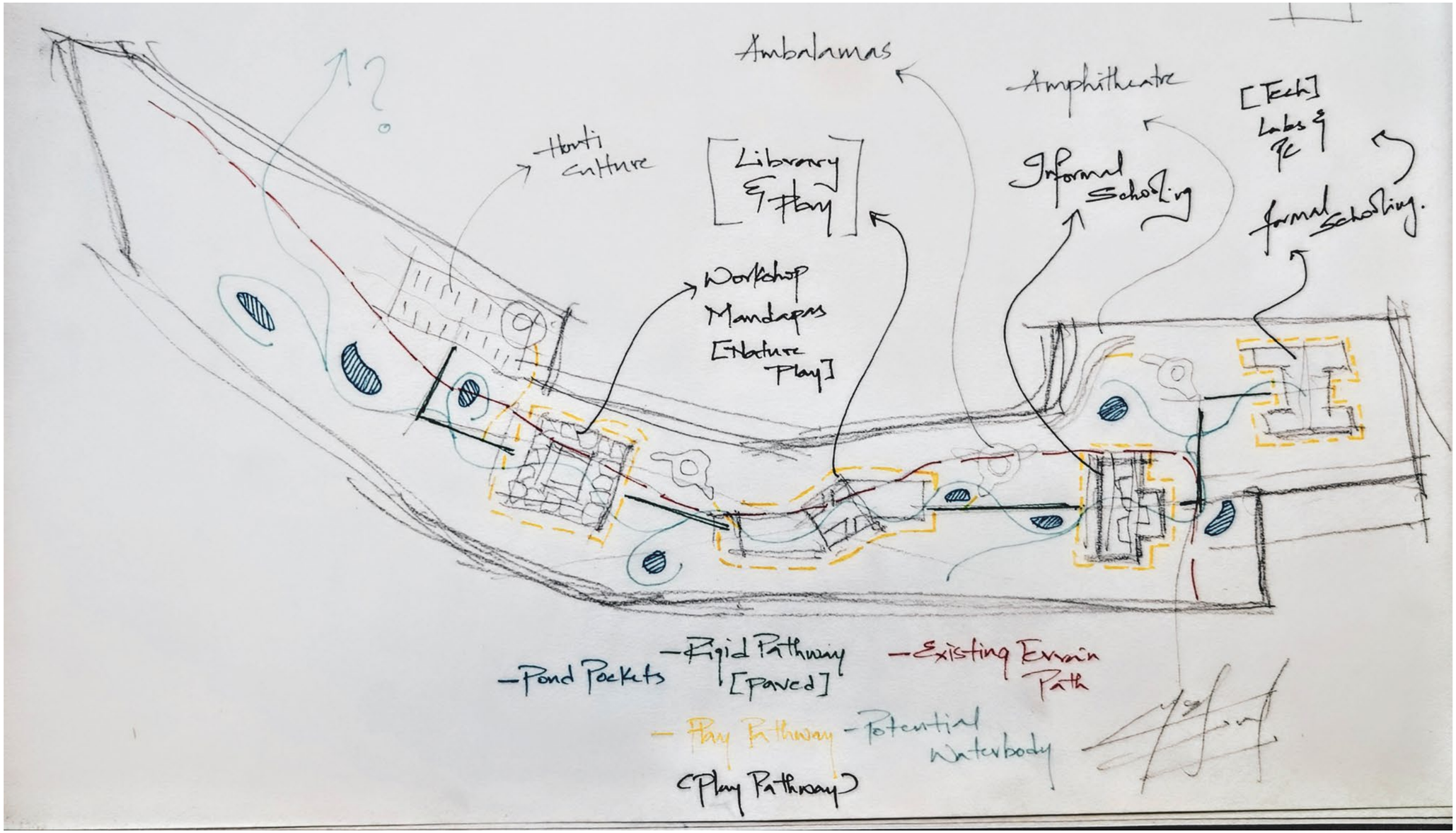
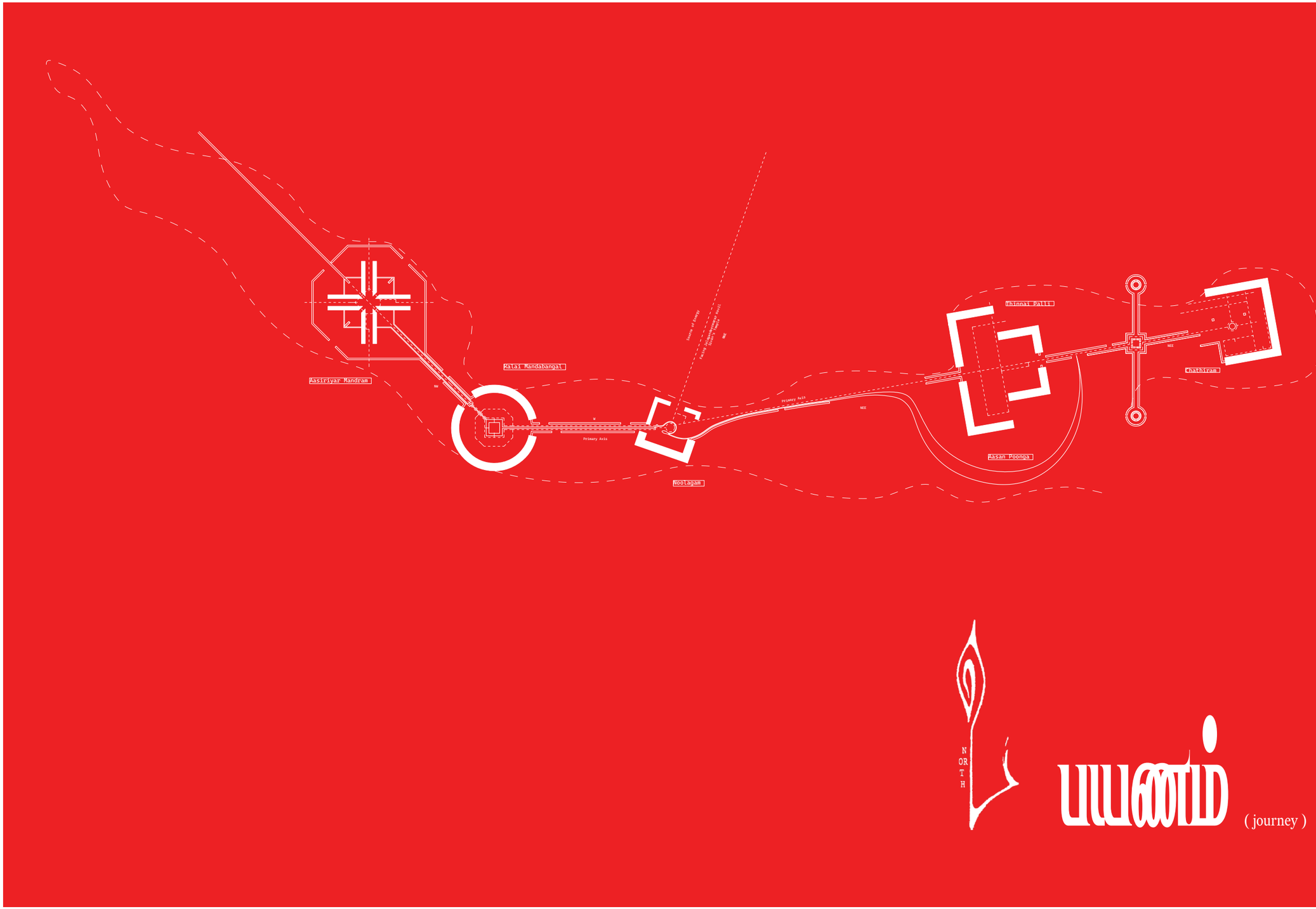
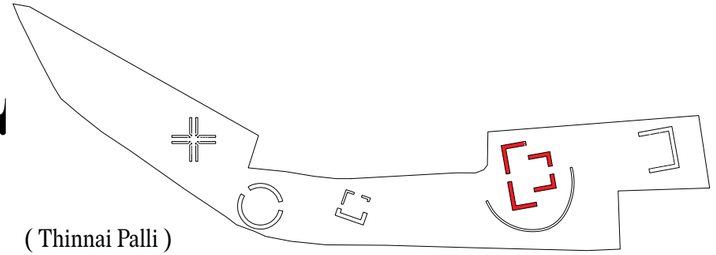


Fig 85. Illustration showing the waterbody as the connector of the different nodes of the design - metaphorically acting as the vein that links up a knowledge with where it belongs and is required. In recognition of its nurturing role, this thesis venerates water as ***'Mater'*** – the mother that sustains and unites the design parti


Aasiriyar Mandram
Kalai Mandabangal
Source of Energy
Parvai Kalaimamanigal Vaazhvil Ilaiyarajaa
NW
W
Primary Axis
Nootagam
Primary Axis
NEE
Thinnai Palli
NEE
Chathiram
Aasan Poonga
NORTH
பயணம்
(journey)

தின்னை பள்ளி (Thinnai Palli)



As one stumbles onto the park, as one often does not in these times, a grand archway facing east welcomes them. No defined pathway but for studded stone slabs that goes about the semicircular waterbody. These studded stone path leads one to an opening where a north-east stone way much more defined and leading to two buildings is seen. The closest one being on the East, adorned by Jalis and adobe walls as typical to Rural Tamil Nadu Architecture invites them.

A completely open space, somewhat similar to a Chettinadu house awaits you, as you enter the adobe building. On either side of the stone way, are a row of small rooms. On your right would be an opening in the wall leading to the kitchen, signifying the undefined sheltered space to be the dining area. Next to the kitchen are two washrooms. On your left are three rooms - an infirmary, a storage space and an admin office. The flooring is a simple yet cool compacted mud flooring. That is - wherever flooring is done. A matrix of mud walkways connects the two rows of the spaces and along the axis of the entrance, past the two lily ponds where fishes court, runs a long corridor perpendicular to the primary stone way axis.

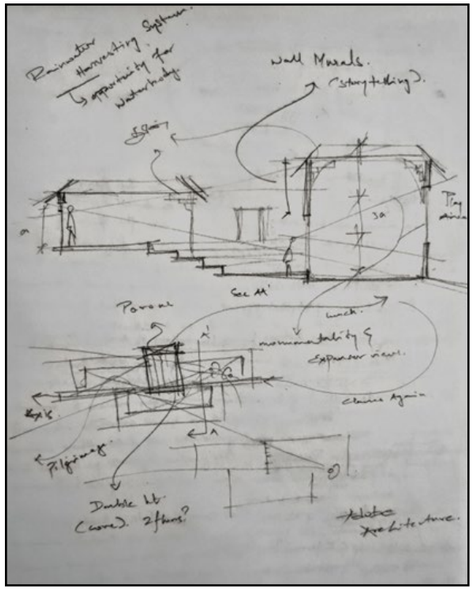
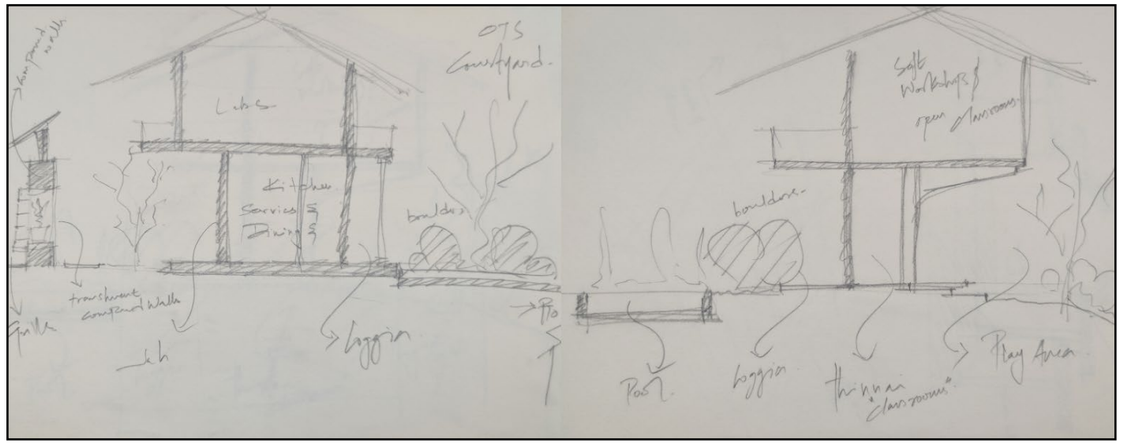
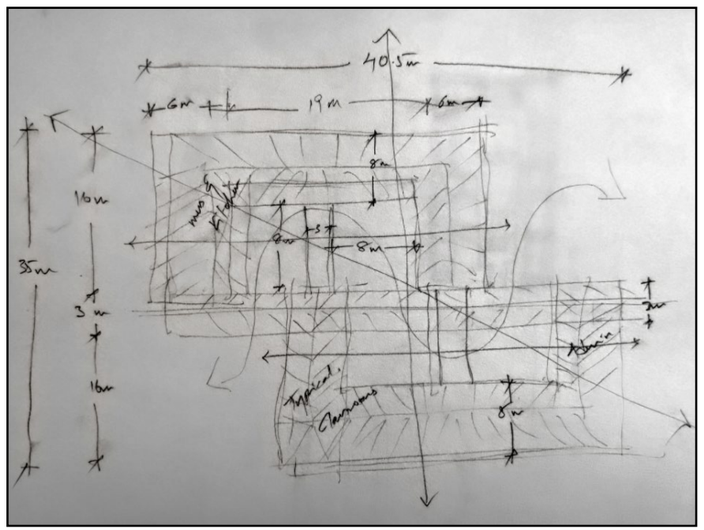


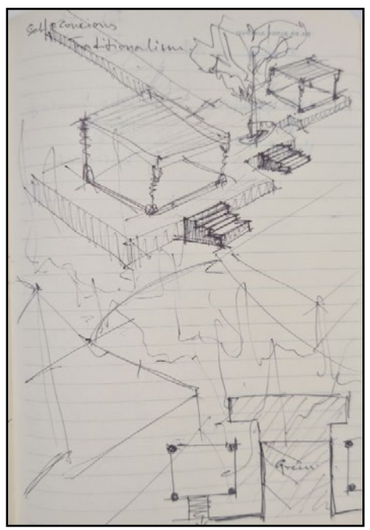


Fig 87. A typical Chettinadu House interior, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu

Fig 88 - 91. Wooden columns that hold up the terracotta tiles and eaves to shelter the mud walls are typical of rural Tamil Nadu homes: use of timber windows and doors with simple ornamentaion and 'vasakal' - thresholds between transition spaces folowing the traditional culture - various iterations of expressions of Chettinadu houses are retained to encapsulate the passive stratergies to deal with the tropical savannah climate of Vellore - achieved through plan and layout articulation in this typology







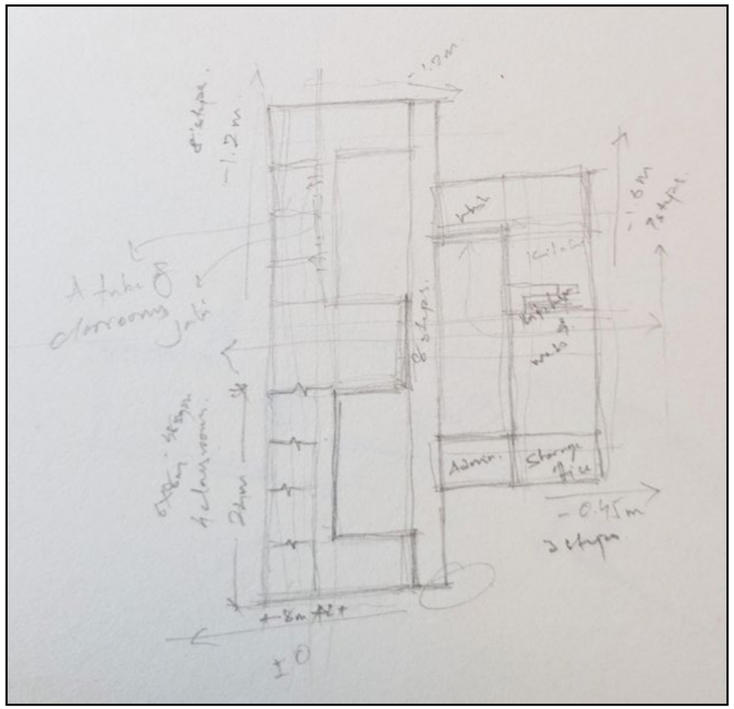
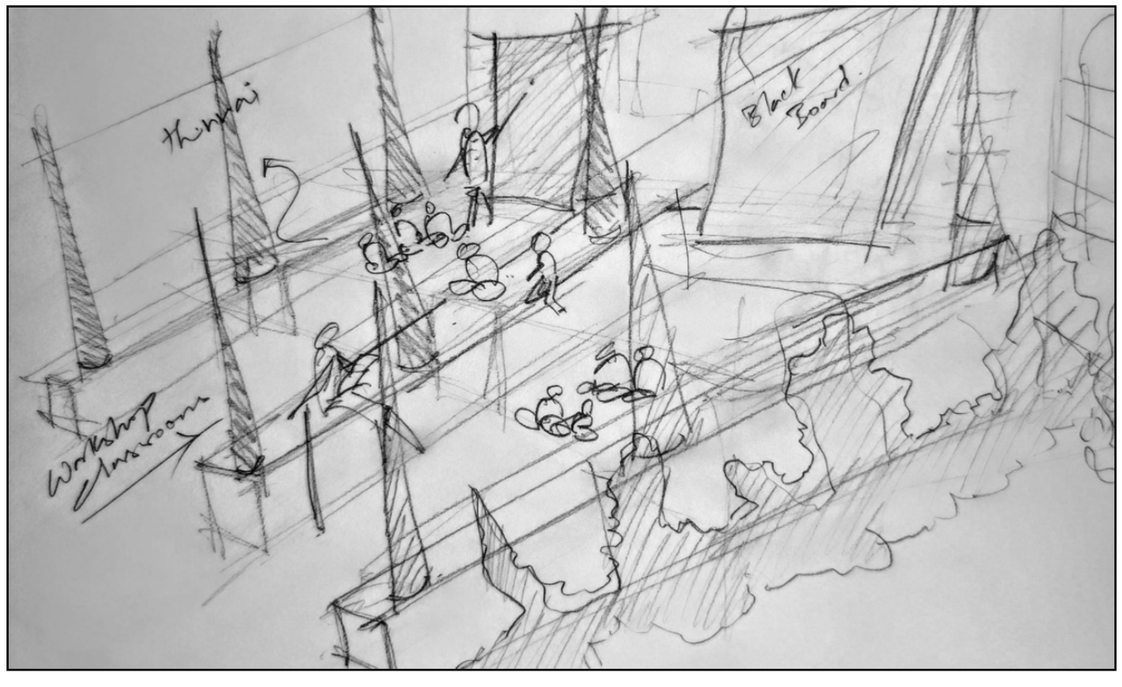
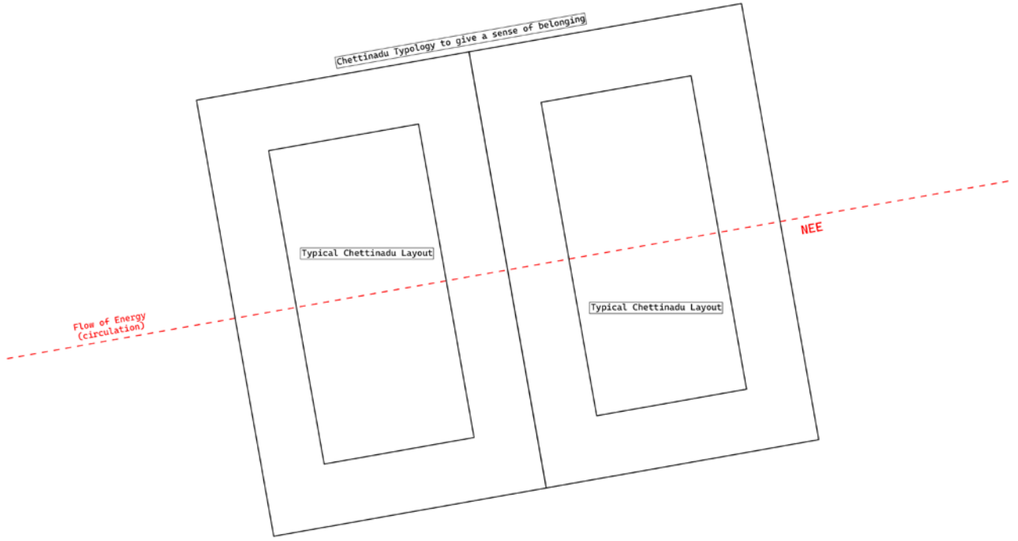


Fig 92 - 93. The courtyard being the most prominent elemtent of this typology, is expanded to create more openings as response to shift in the function being for a learning space - doing so, merging the traditional knowledge of this typology with a much more ancient indigenous philosophy

'Thinnais' as social condensors have been a long tradition in houses - thinnais are extended half-walls that could still be found outside old houses across Tamil Nadu. These foyer like spaces functioned as the in-between spaces separating the public and private

The simple cement flooring gradually follows the topography of the site - the thinnais here become the in-between spaces, blending classrooms and children of various stages of education alike





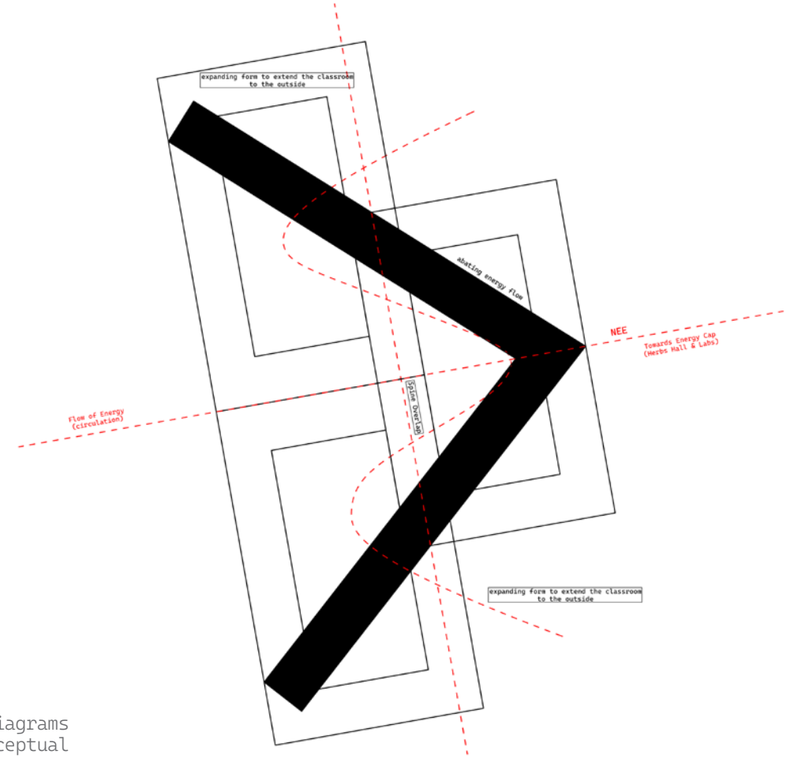


Fig 94 - 95. Conceptual diagrams explaining the conceptual framework for the Palli

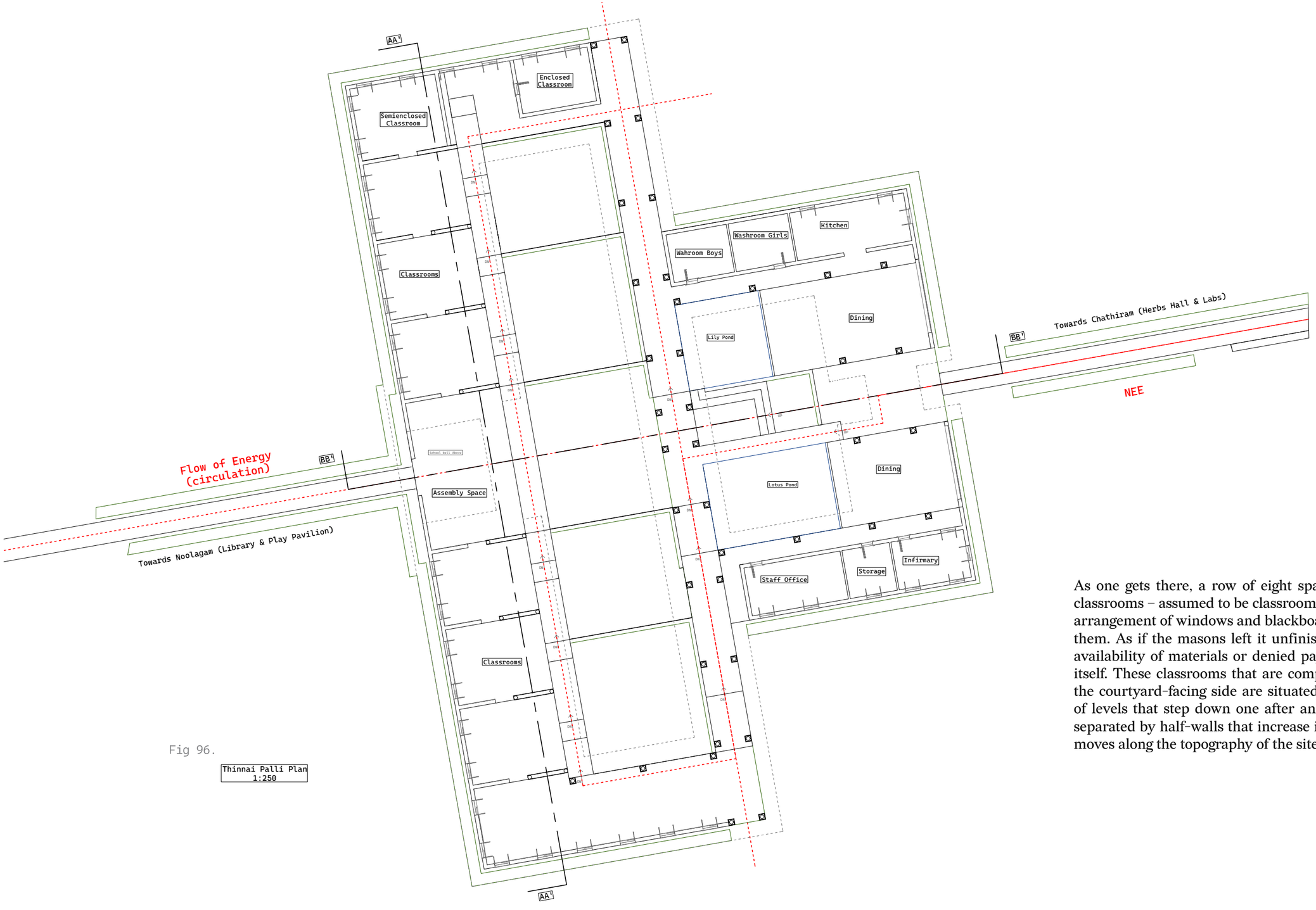


Fig 96.

Thinnai Palli Plan
1:250

As one gets there, a row of eight spaces resembling classrooms – assumed to be classrooms because of the arrangement of windows and blackboards in between them. As if the masons left it unfinished due to un-availability of materials or denied payment presents itself. These classrooms that are completely open on the courtyard-facing side are situated in a cascading of levels that step down one after another. They are separated by half-walls that increase in height as one moves along the topography of the site.

These half walls have black boards on them with scribbles and misspelt words on the left extreme and diagrams and equations on the taller boards on the right extreme. These classes are connected with one another through a central spine that runs parallel to the corridor of the block. As you proceed along the primary axis, a triple storey tower pulls you in. Look up and wish that the huge bell that hangs above your head has no rusted bearings to avoid any accidents. The space that you are in is meant to be a space of gathering – a space of assembly.

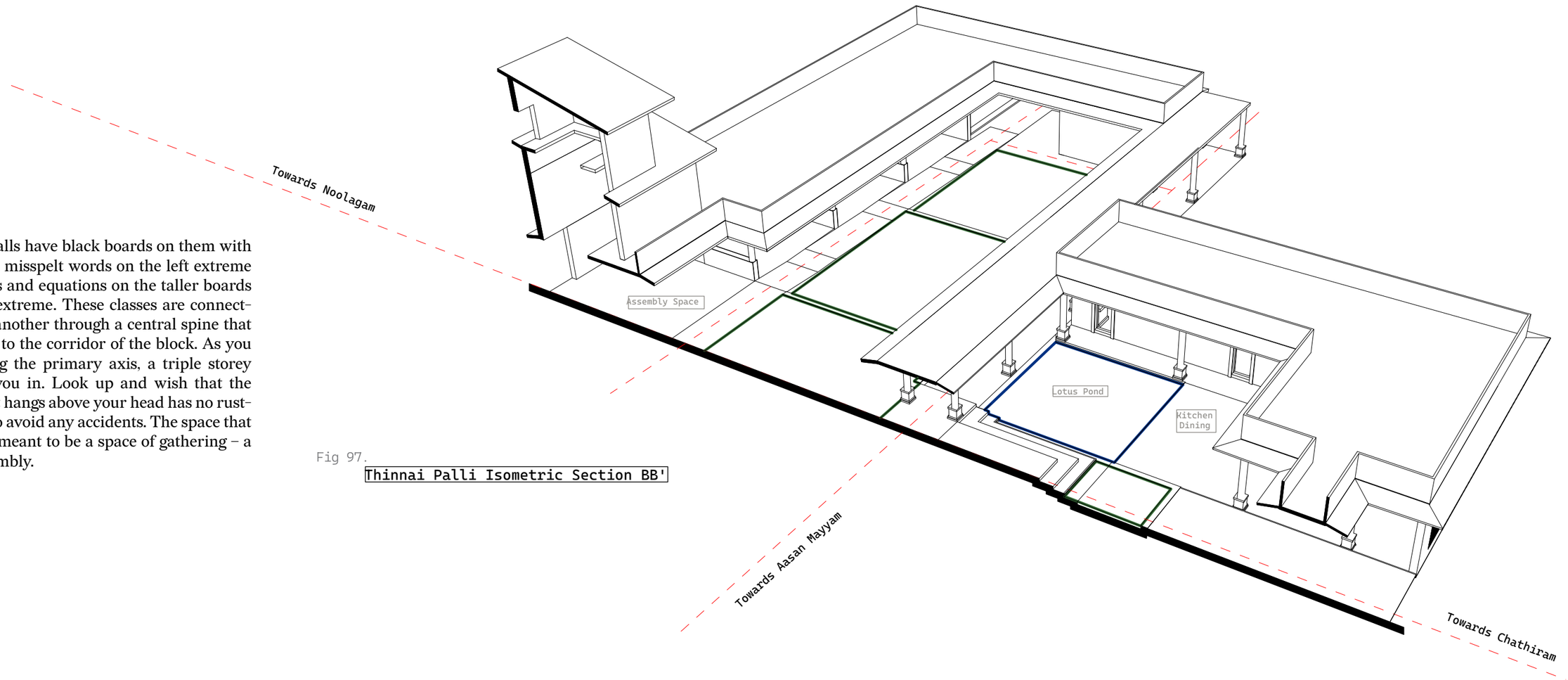


Fig 97.
Thinnai Palli Isometric Section BB'

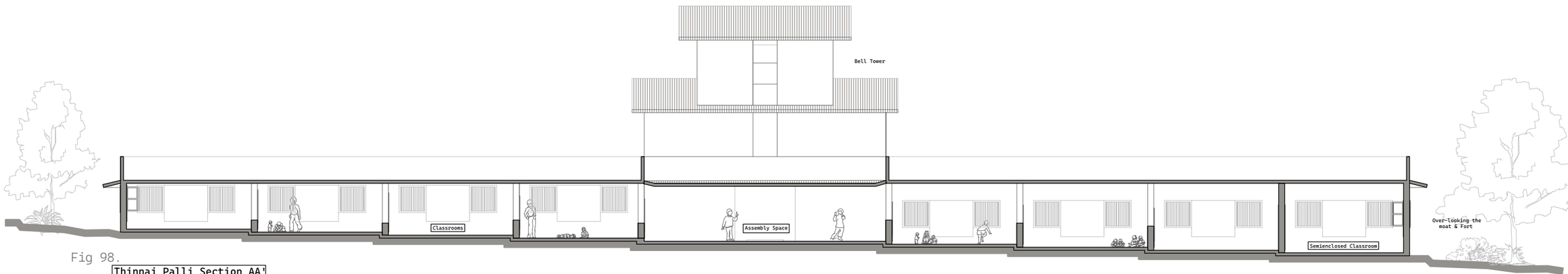


Fig 98.
Thinnai Palli Section AA'
1 : 200

Fig 99. The lily pond here is intended to hint at the deeper role of the ‘Mater’ in connecting the various nodes of the institutional complex





Fig 100. The role of the wide courtyard extending from the classrooms becomes significant because, though could be considered “distraction” – at early stages of development, guided, unstructured exposure to the elements could go uncomprehencably beyond ordered and controlled exposure to known knowledge

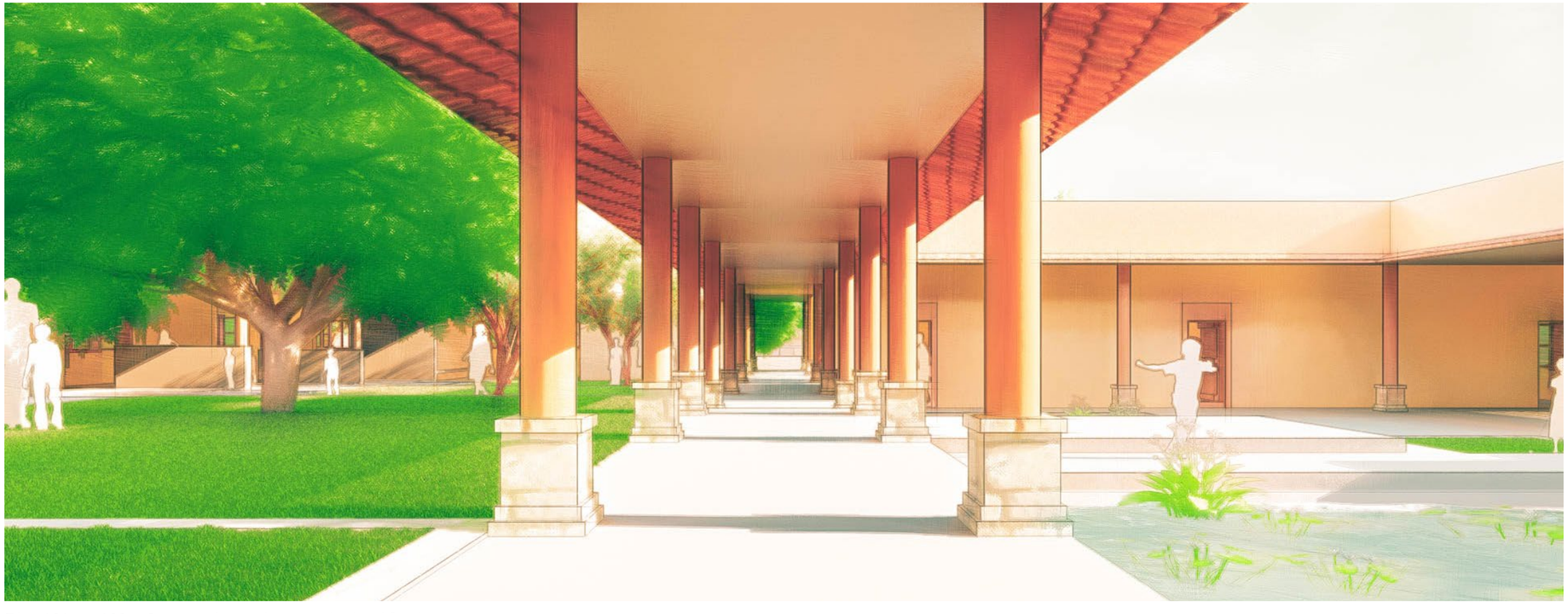
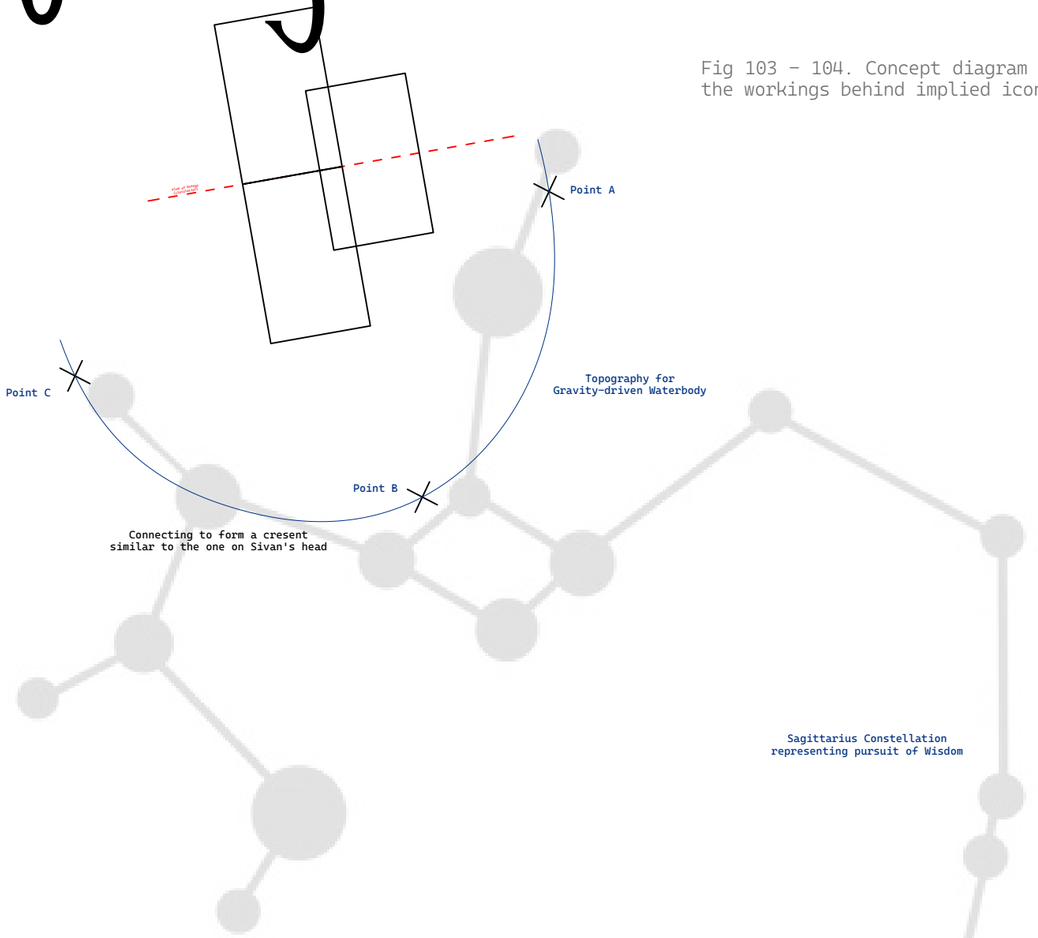




Fig 101 - 102. Spaces in and around the block are designed to make best use of the wilderness that provides shade, underneath which classes could be held, making the different nodes as parts of one big classroom

ஆசான் பூங்கா (Aasan Poonga)



Heading south, along the classrooms to your right, through the traditional wooden windows, the stone erections that you could not have missed while you stumbled upon this land, pokes at your curiosity. if you so give in, you answer its call. but no path leads you from the classroom pavilion to the erections, just the cement floor ending and a large patch of grass studded by shrubs and trees sprinkled here and there.

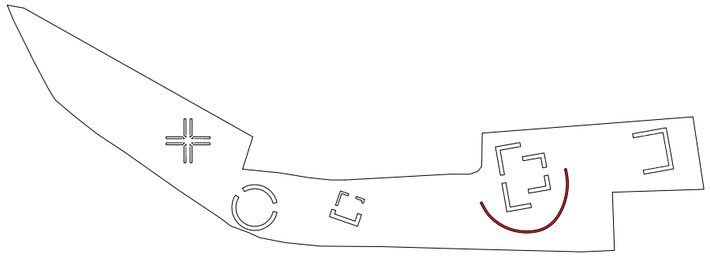
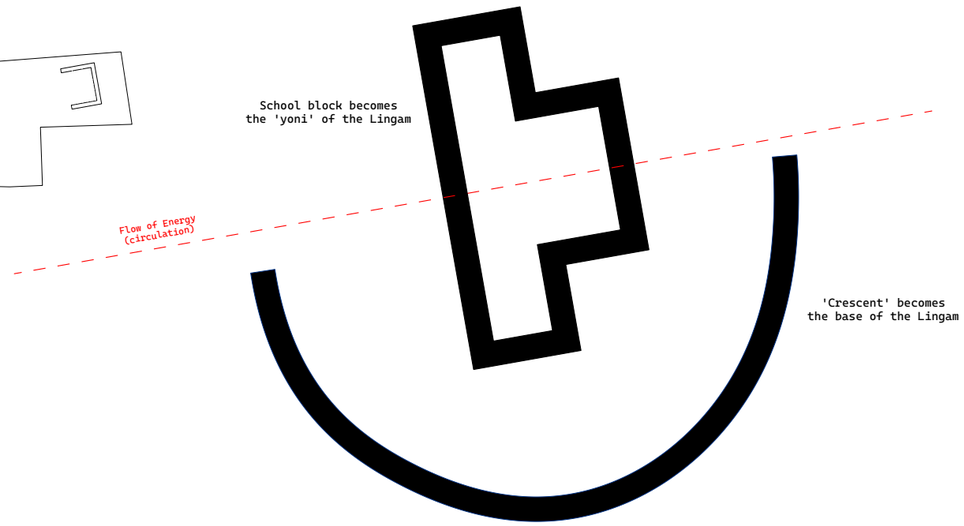


Fig 103 - 104. Concept diagram explaining the workings behind implied iconography



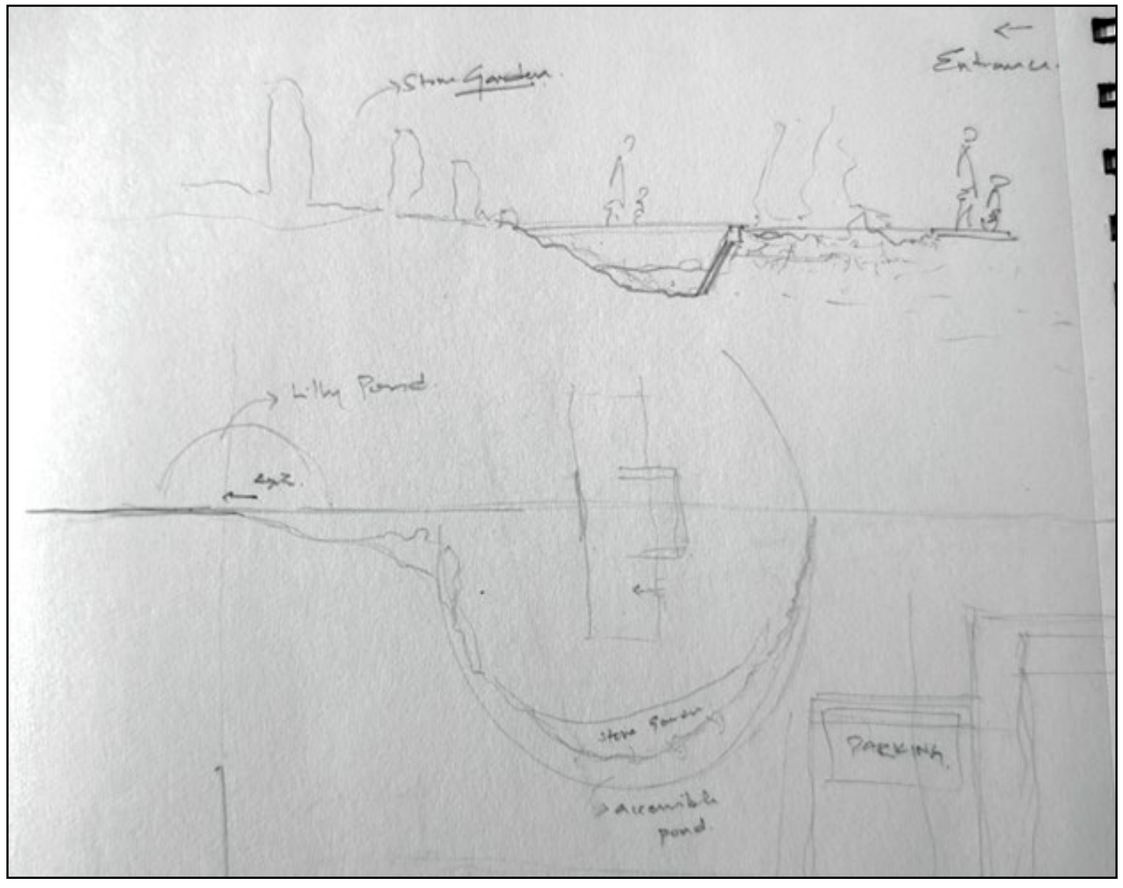


Fig 105. Conceptual sketch and accompanying section

As if doing something illegal, if you dare to near the erections by trampling on the green grass, you will notice inscriptions in various languages credited to various names from throughout the history of our current timeline. Known mythologies of familiar names like Leonardo Da Vinci, Vitruvius, Michelangelo among other great men are inscribed in these orderly erections. But more densly inscribed are lines of poetry and literature from Dravidian poets and scholars similar to that which ornaments temple walls and caves.

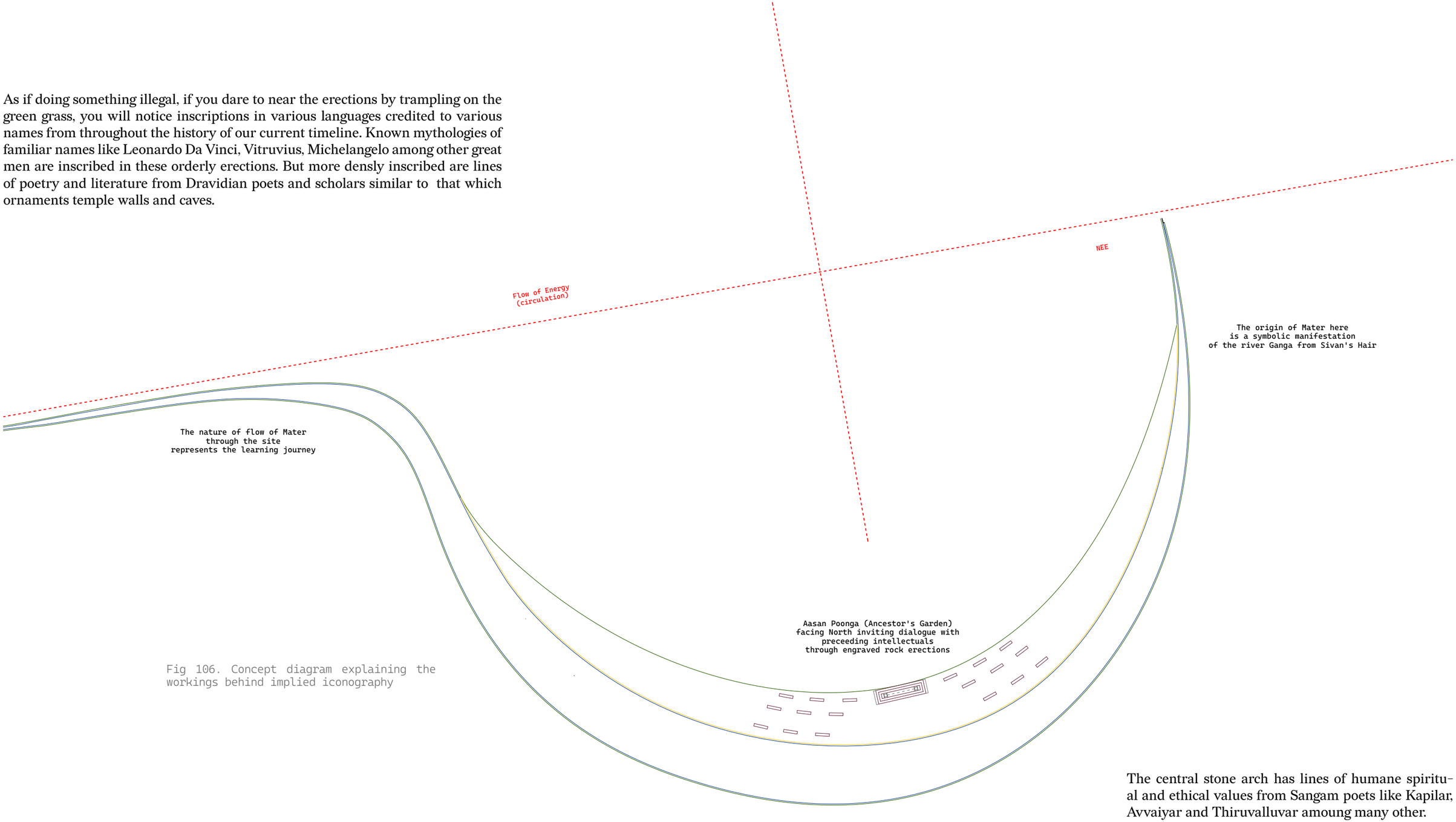


Fig 106. Concept diagram explaining the workings behind implied iconography

The central stone arch has lines of humane spiritual and ethical values from Sangam poets like Kapilar, Avvaiyar and Thiruvalluvar amoung many other.

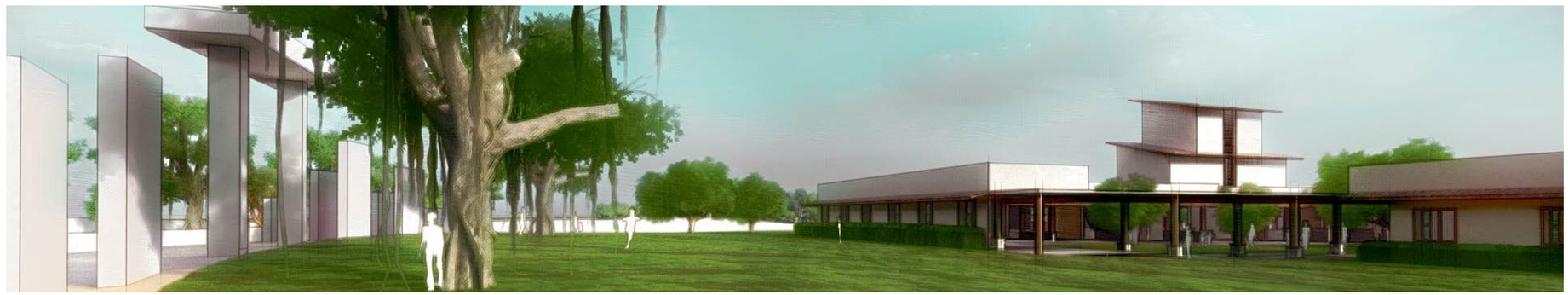


On a deeper level, the arch is north – south facing, where according to the Navagrahas (nine planets) and Vastu Shastra, they signify communication and intellegence.

This space is intended to act as a place of remembrance and reverence where the young thank the old for passing down their knowledge – almost like a place of worship where the learned are treated like immortal gods; for in a way, they are.

Fig 108. (below) View from the entrance of the institutional complex

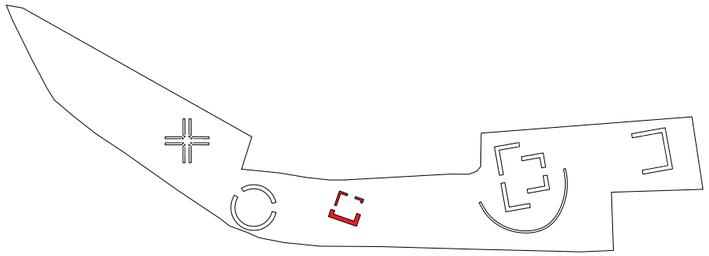
Fig 107. (top) Aerial view of the Palli – Chathiram on the farther end



Tying this with the crescent on Sivan's helm – which signifies the perpetual act of creation and destruction – the conception of the learning journey is based on a philosophy wherein learning and unlearning are core values of epistemological thought.

நூலகம்

(Noolagam - library)



As you follow the Mater, as she flows – too coherent to the flow of time, you get back to the primary stone-way axis, cushioned by the hedges that might lead you to the midst of flourishing wilderness if only you would dare. As you move, a three-storeyed mud monolith slowly emerges. Blocks of earth, punctuated with voids and arched balconies studded with jalis and vaults, echo Islamic architectural influences that merged with the vernacular character of Vellore. Going over the Venusian mound that hides the base of the structure – the Mater flows away from alongside of your journey, so as to signify the advent of progress - thick mud walls are reimagined as scattered columns and boundary walls that does little to enclose the space, in contrast to a typical religious space. For this monolith is the Noolagam (library) of the complex.

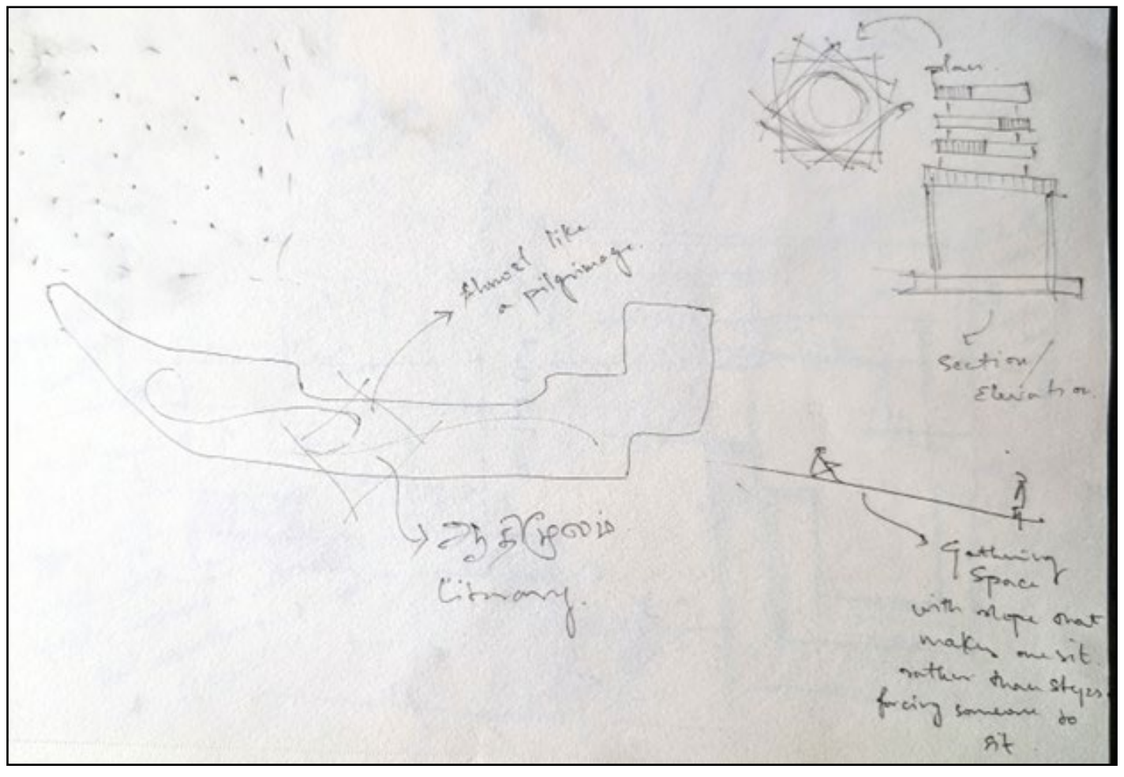
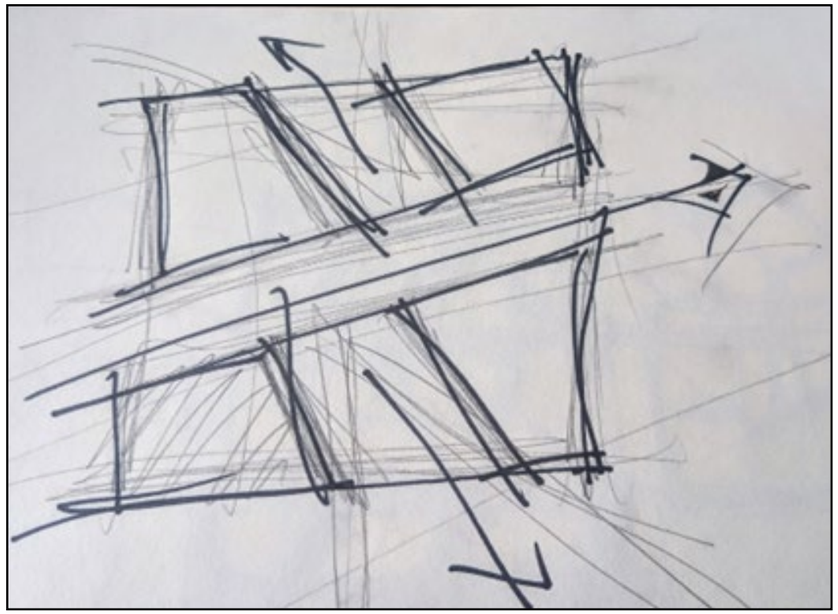


Fig 109 - 111 The library is treated as the core enabler of the overarching parti - its irregularity is strategically orchestrated to reorient the flow of the journey. This emphasis on its treatment is credited to what a library means to a learning ecosystem. This is reflected in this being the only multi-storeyed structure



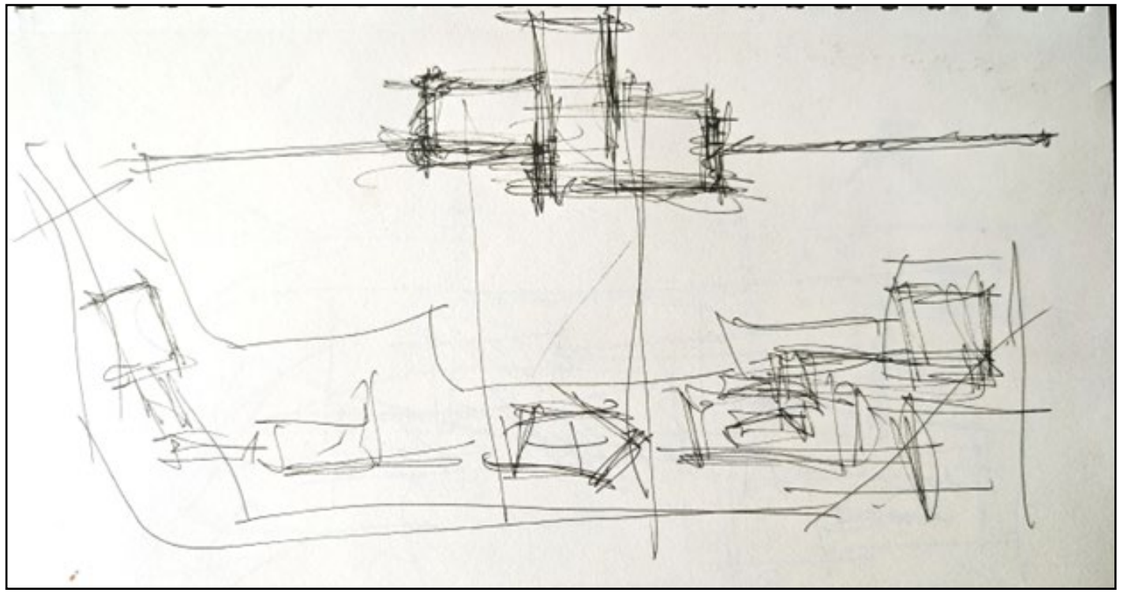
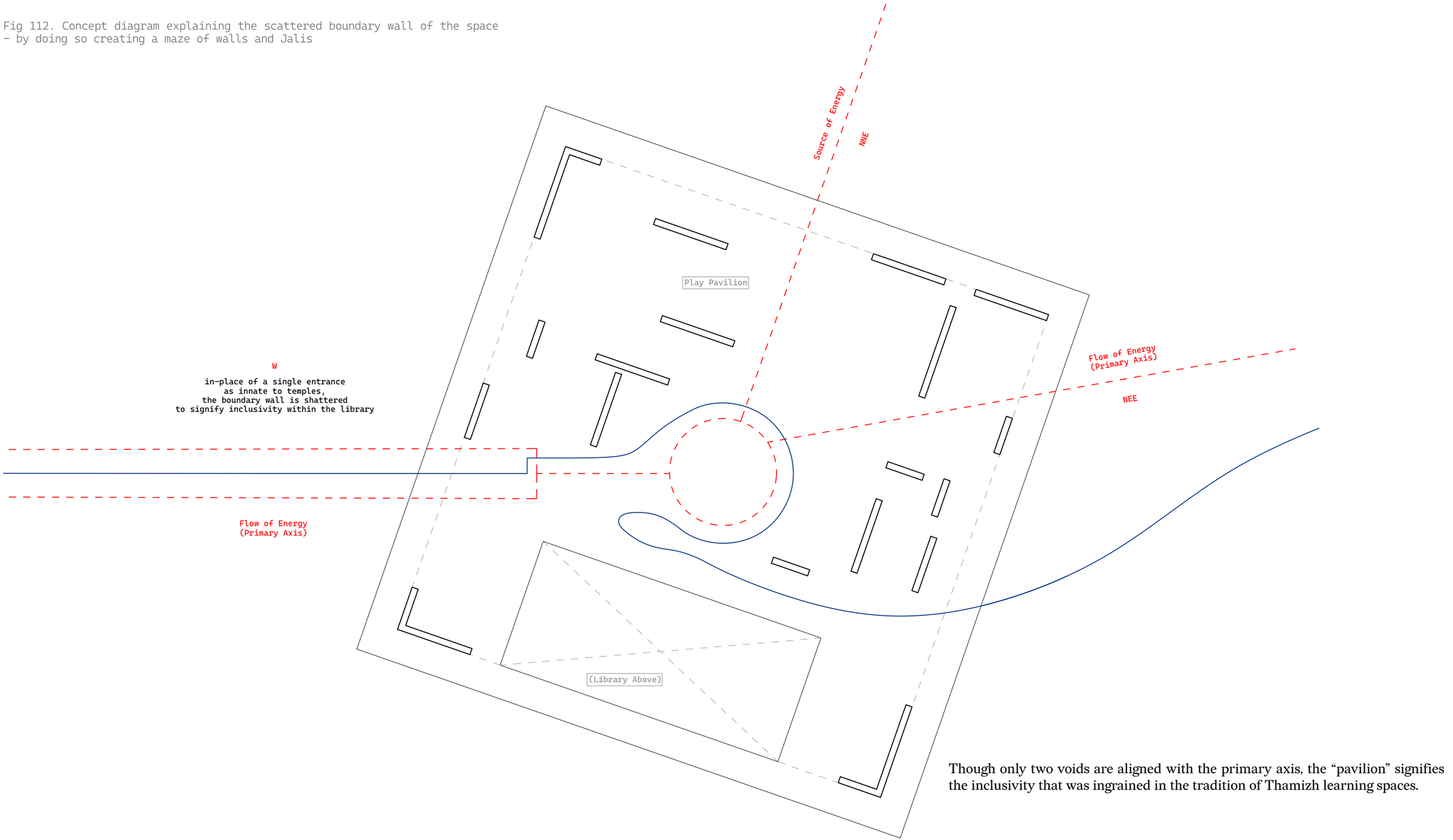


Fig 112. Concept diagram explaining the scattered boundary wall of the space – by doing so creating a maze of walls and Jalis



Though only two voids are aligned with the primary axis, the “pavilion” signifies the inclusivity that was ingrained in the tradition of Thamizh learning spaces.

Entering the pavilion, what you do not witness is the different energy lines that both converge and emerge from the circle formed by the Mater. The center circle houses a Sacred Fig that canopies the pocket of sky that shines down on a locally sourced, unshaped rock that juts from the unpaved ground. This represents Pillaiyar in his anionic form. Pillaiyar (the elephant faced Ganesha) is the first son of Sivan and Parvati – the elder brother of Murugan. In Tamil traditions still, he is worshipped first before any other gods, even in temples dedicated to other deities. This is because he is believed to be the remover of ego and hence the God of Beginings who humbles devotees before meeting the deity(s) inside the temple.

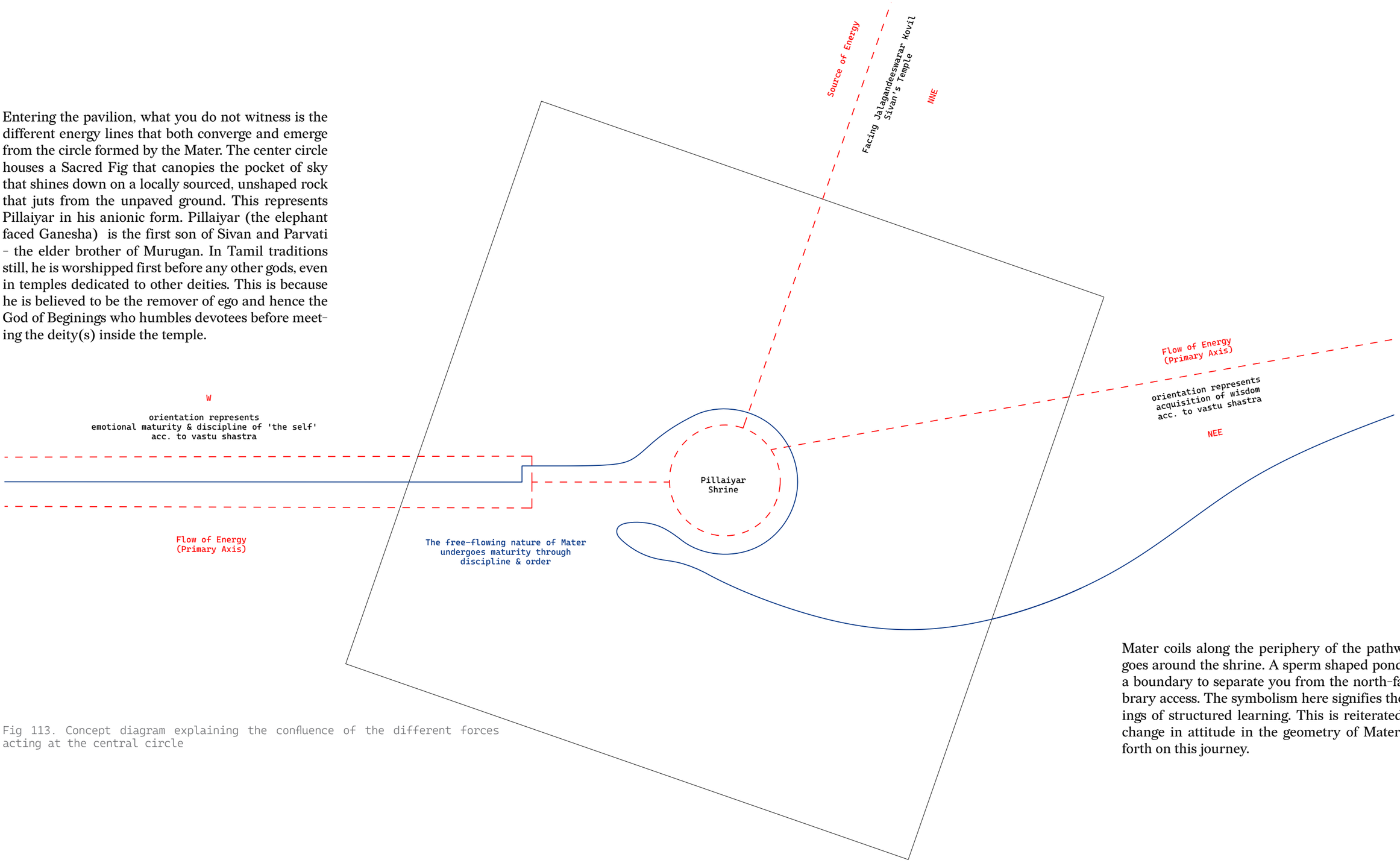


Fig 113. Concept diagram explaining the confluence of the different forces acting at the central circle

Mater coils along the periphery of the pathway that goes around the shrine. A sperm shaped pond acts as a boundary to separate you from the north-facing library access. The symbolism here signifies the beginings of structured learning. This is reiterated by the change in attitude in the geometry of Mater henceforth on this journey.

On either side of the library access, pockets of spaces envelop the public washroom to the right and the library office to the left. If you have the time and the required curiosity to be a wanderer, you'd take the two flights of stairs that lead you to the library.

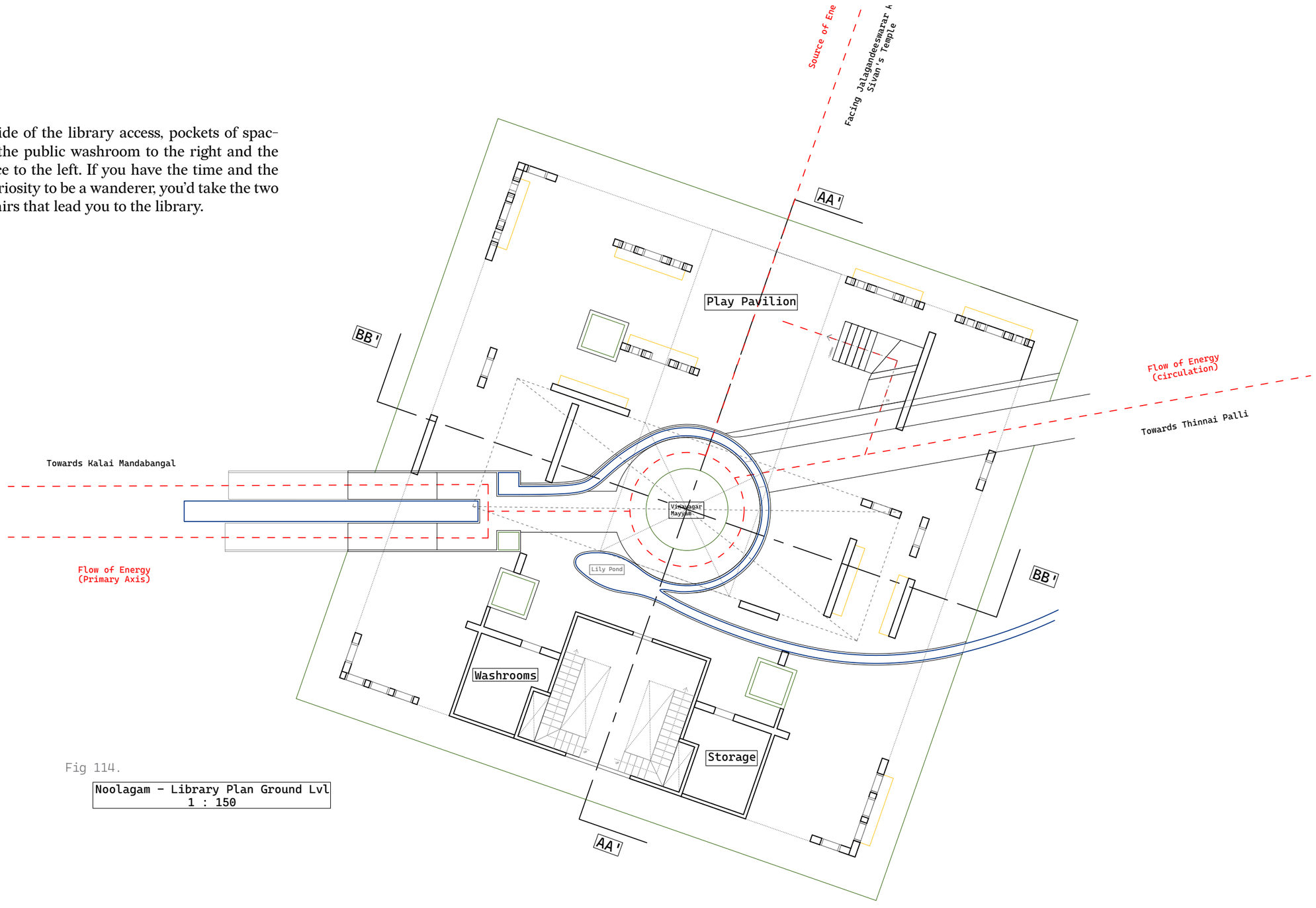


Fig 114.

Noolagam - Library Plan Ground Lvl
1 : 150

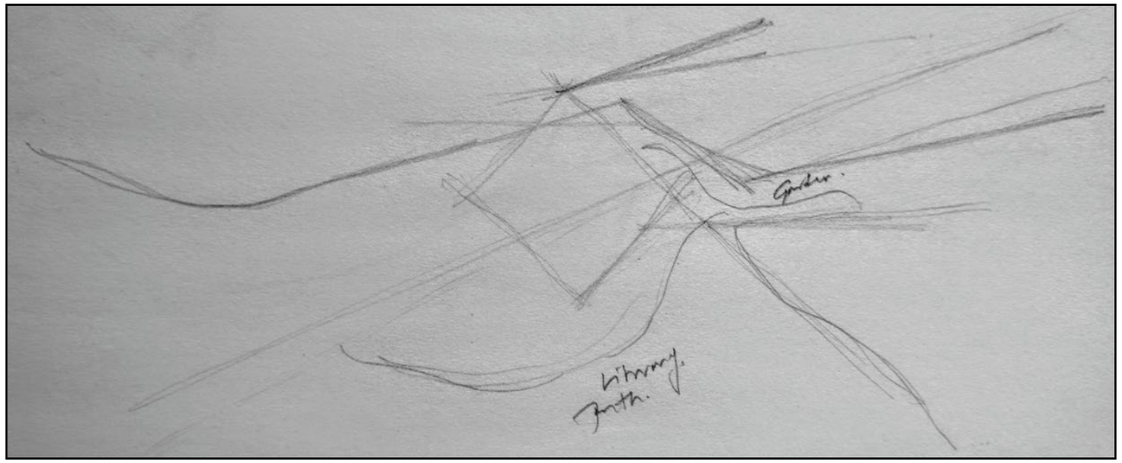


Fig 115 – 117. The first floor above the pavilion 'Palli Pagudhi', is intended just as storage spaces for books for the children of the Thinnai Palli – not providing reading spaces within the enclosement is to encourage reading outside in natural sun light

The second floor follows this principle too, but houses more advanced and niche books for
the Aasiriyar Mandram

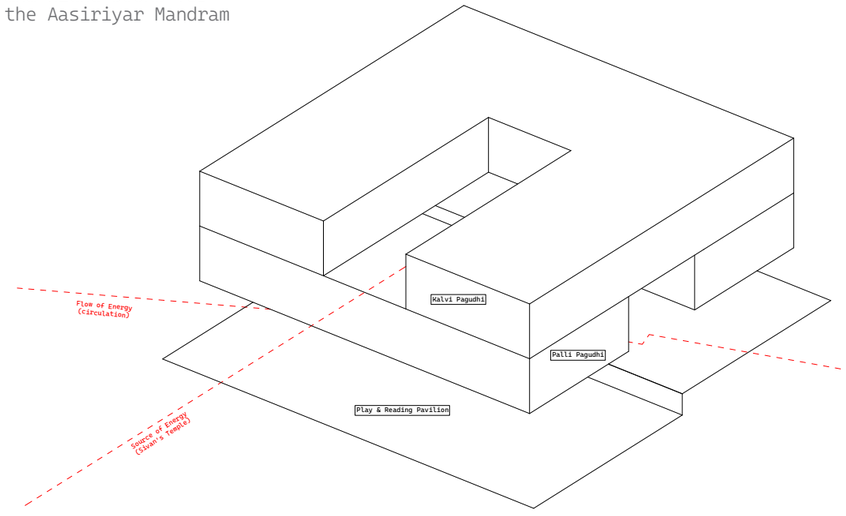
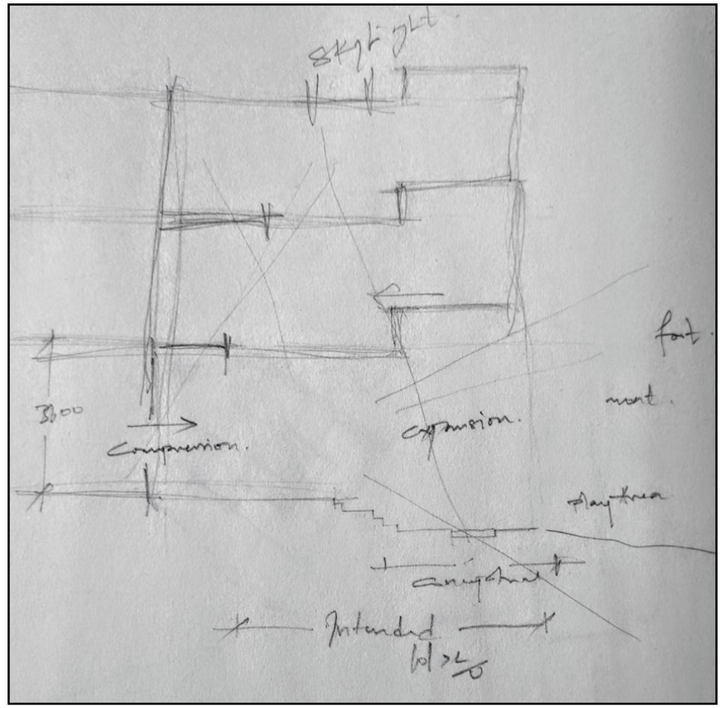
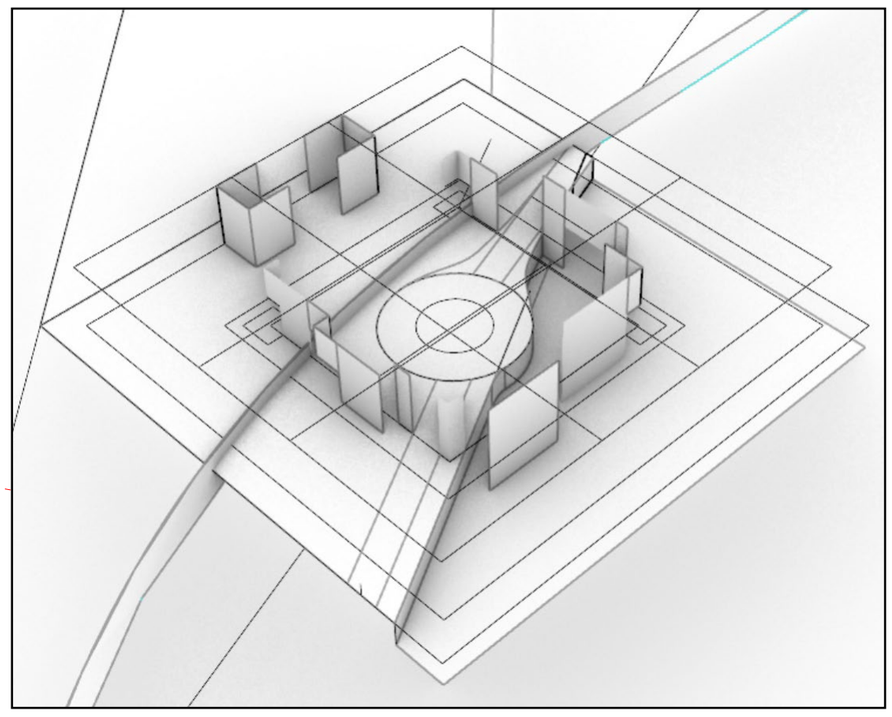
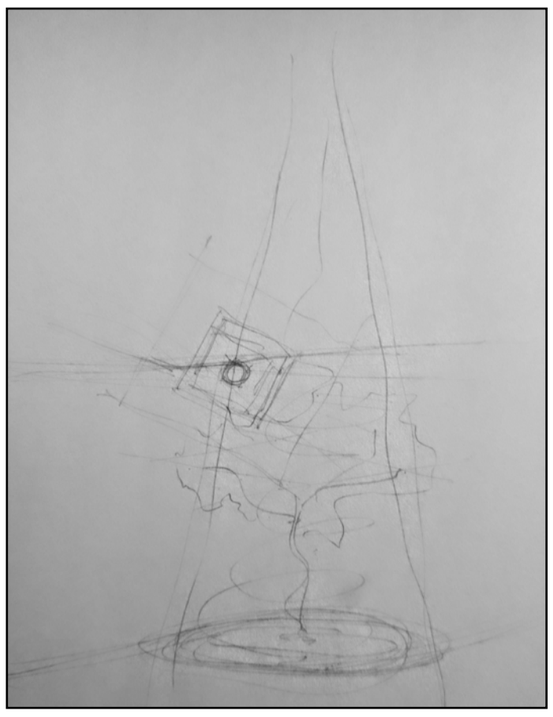


Fig 118 – 119 (below) Ground plane is manipulated to bridge the two unlikely functions of study and play – the lower plane which is a loose labrinth of walls opens up to the long, wide play area that runs along the periphery of the moat – a row of trees run through its length, providing spaces for gatherings groups and reading nooks for individuals







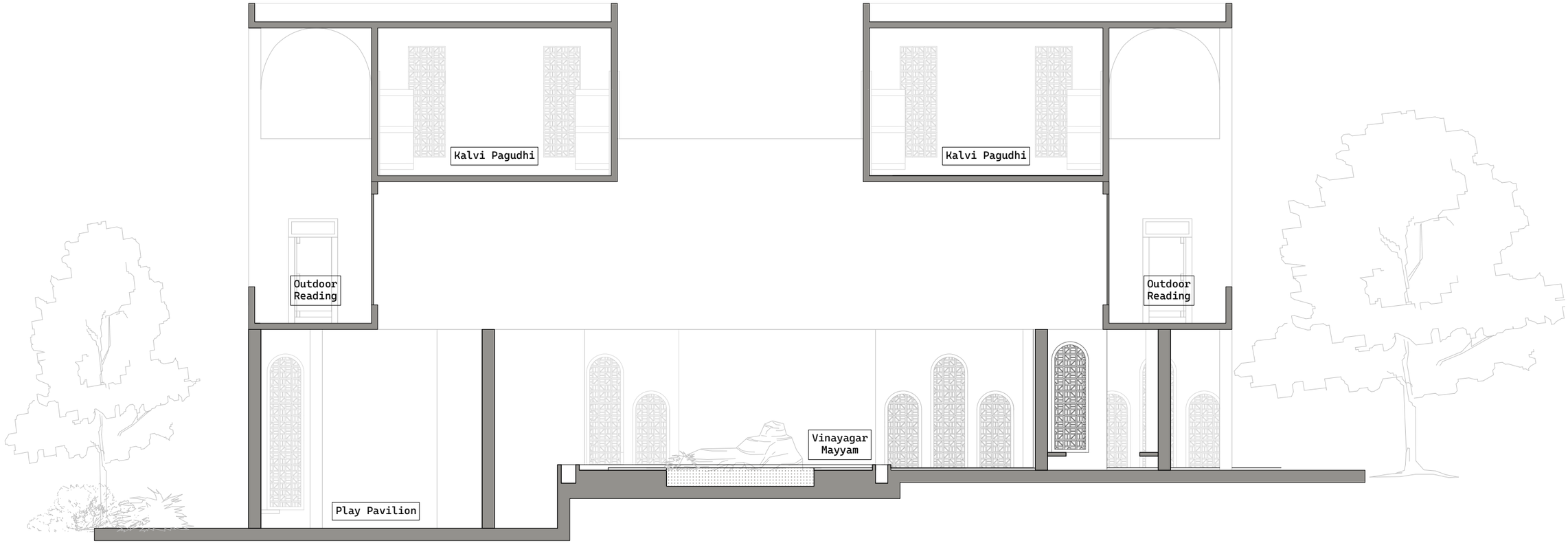


Fig 120.
Noolagam Section BB'
1 : 100

Once you do, you get to the first floor as what resembles a sky bridge leads you to the library. Right in front of the bridge is a jali wall that is intended to demand you to peer through it – if you are chosen. Yielding to your instinct, if you do so, you are to be graced by the sky above and the water of the moat below. Signifying the extents of the world. Sandwiched between is the fort complex. Peer in to take in the view and as you do, if you are lucky and believe that you are chosen, the gopuram of the Jalagandeeswarar temple blesses your view.

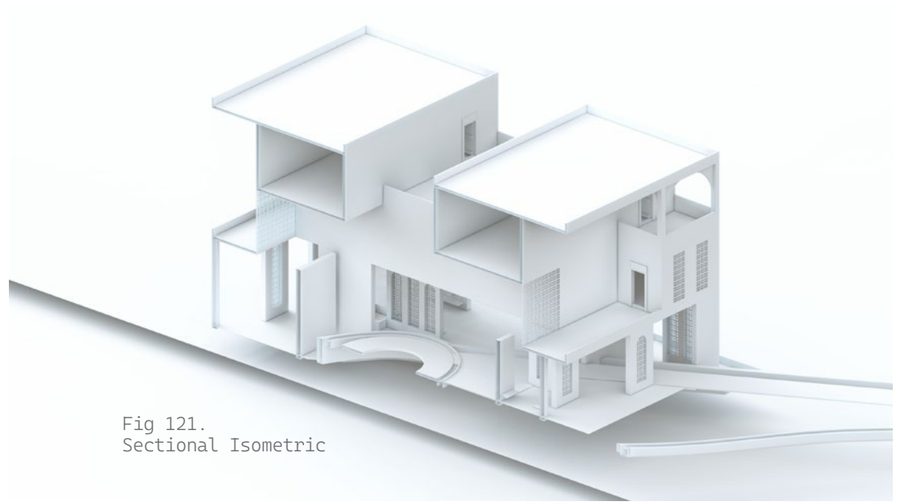


Fig 121.
Sectional Isometric



Fig 122. View showing the primary axis leading to the Noolagam from Thinnai Palli

The arches and the jalis though highly functional passive elements that would help survive the hot Vellore climate, are used more as symbolic homage to the influence of islamic communities that form a vast portion of the Vellore townsfolk and thus, contributes to a major part of the city's culture.

Sigh in disgust or tear up in its cosmological significance. Once you've spat or have dried your eyes – depending on what emanates from within you, get to the right balcony and view the school complex from where your journey began. Once done with that, get to the next floor and from there, get to the left side of the building where you get to choose between two balconies that are present before you.

Fig 123. View of Noolagam from the play area beyond the play pavilion

This alchemy of Islamic architectural expressions in a Temple of Wisdom kind of a library that harnesses on traditional, Sanscrit Vaastu Shastra that follows Hindu doctrines, is an idea incarnate of the ‘valueing the significance of knowledge and wisdom irrespective of its origins’ philosophy of the Thamizhs

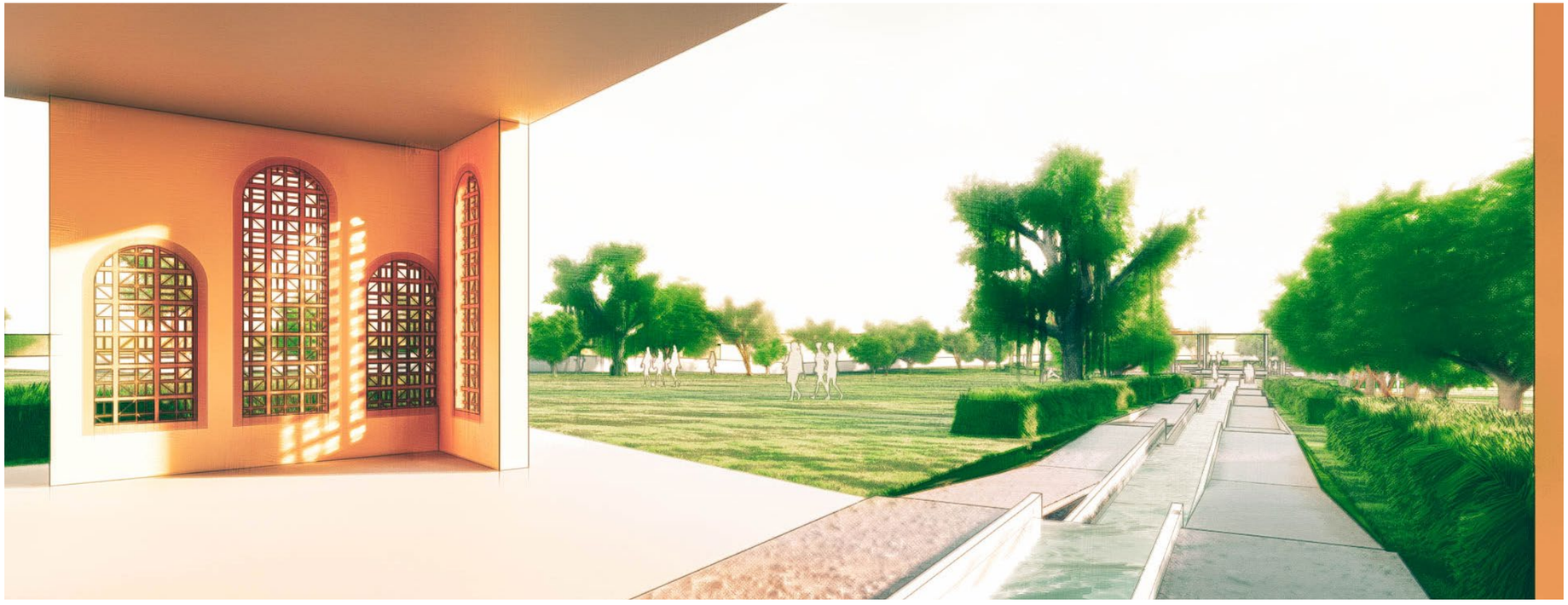




Choosing one and entering the balcony, or exiting the library, as you seem fit – head to its parapet and look down. You should be able to notice the change in orientation of the primary axis to the cardinal west - which previously, till the Pillaiyar shrine had been in the north-east-east orientation

Fig 124. (left) View of play corridor from the pavilion

Fig 125. (below) View leading to Kalai Mandabangal from Pillayar's shrine



கலை மண்டபங்கள் (Kalai Mandabangal)

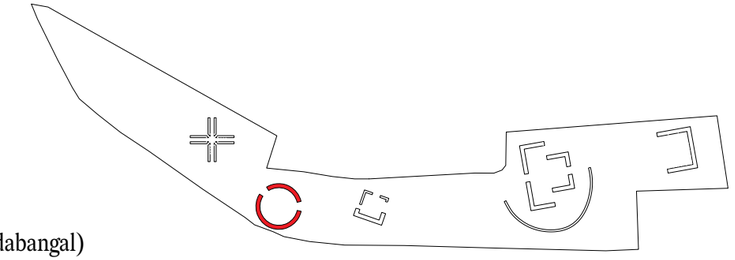
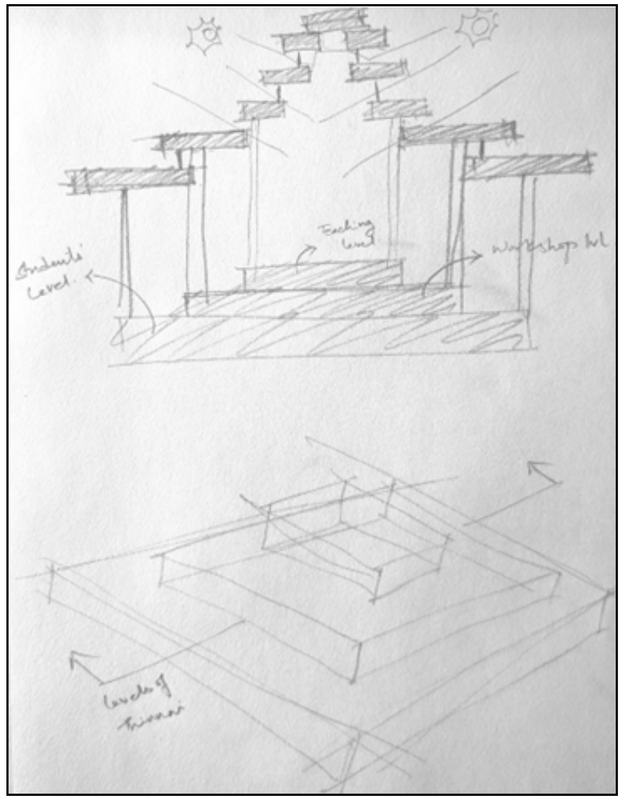
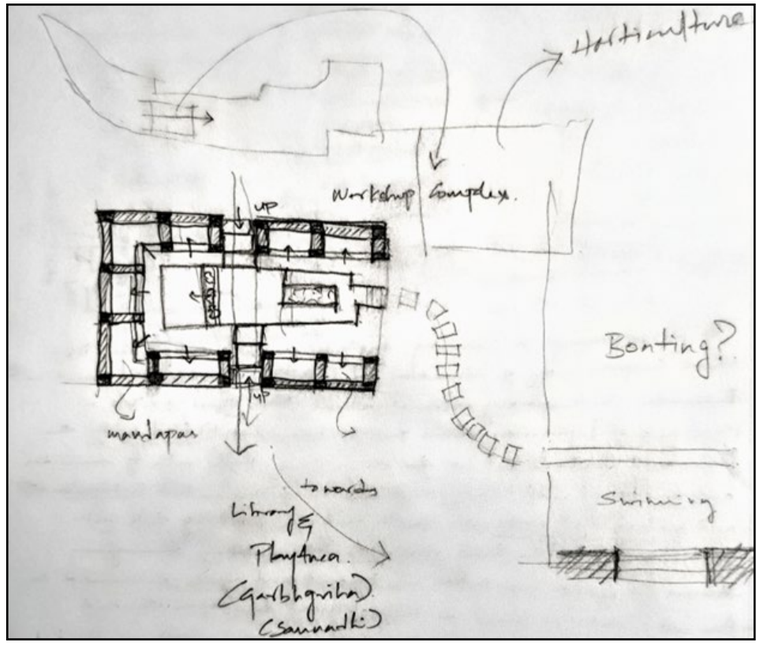




Fig 126. (right) The Navagraha shrine can be found in many Hindu temples throughout the world - the nine (Nava) planets (Graha) represented as deities - with each carrying a world of their own beliefs and customs

The Mater now runs in the center of the stone way, splitting it into two. Following the topography of the site, the mater and the stone way cascade to lead your eyes to a group of Mandapams - where each faces the eight points of a compass. But the one in the center - that which is in line with the direction of the axis has no roof to shelter the rain or to contain the filth that we humans breathe out. Give in to your curiosity and get down to the pavilion and access the primary pathway again. For one's journey does not make sense to be stuck in where one gets a decent view.





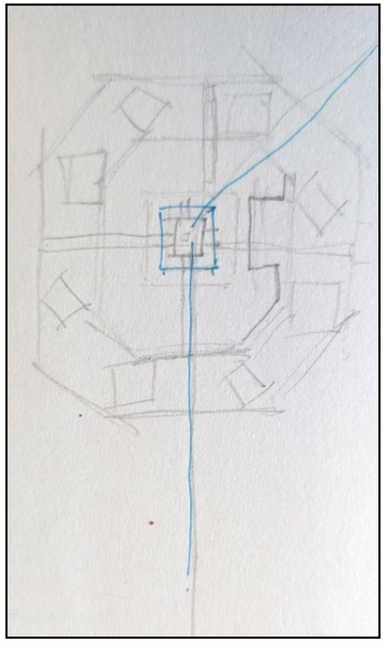
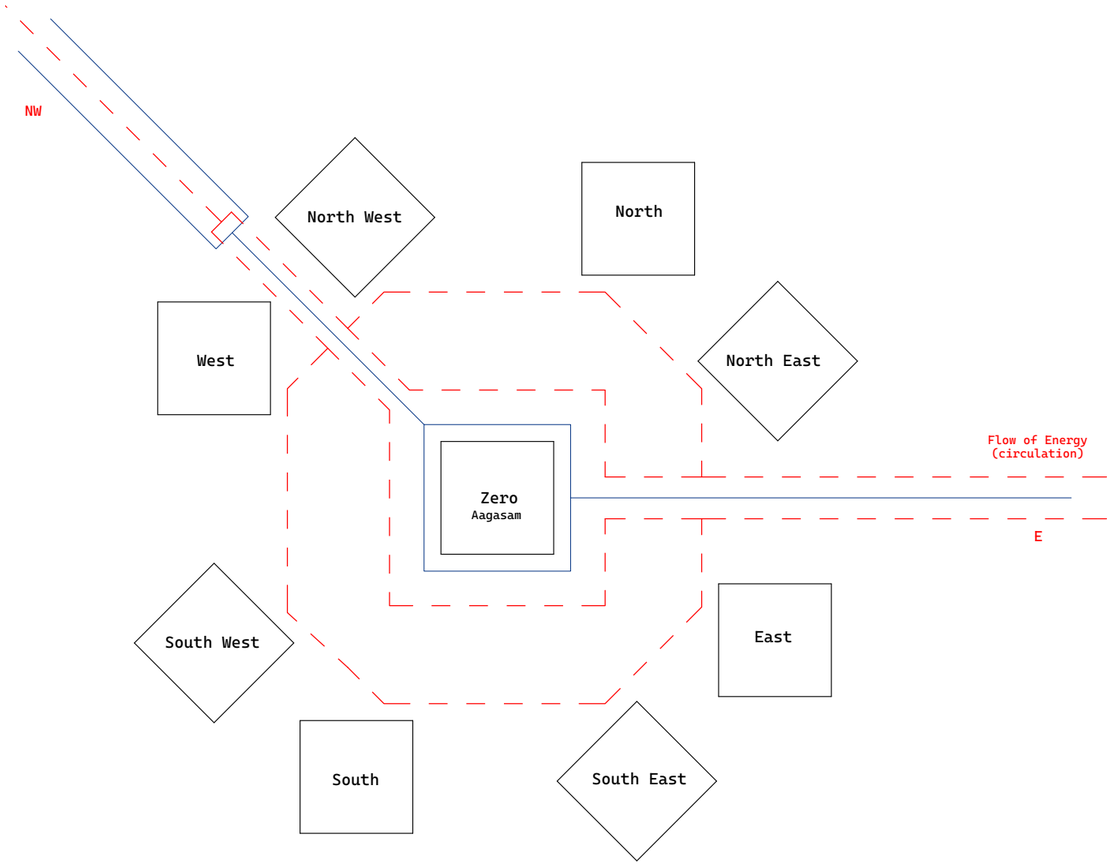


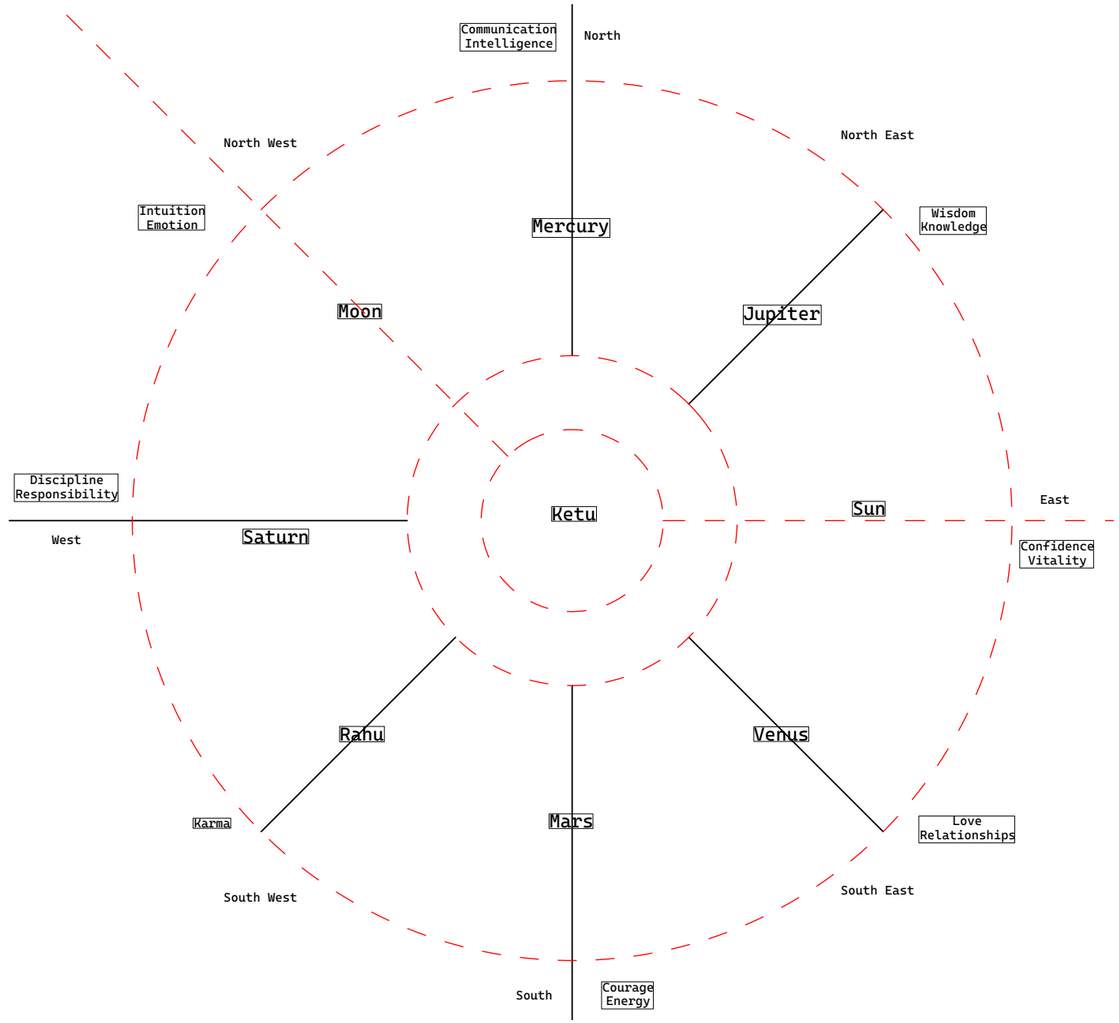
Fig 127 - 129. (sketches above) Conceptual sketches of formation of parti for this node

A space dedicated to house flexible cultural courses that are designed with locally available skills in and around Vellore. Some available cultural skills that are part of the everyday life ranges from basket weaving, garland and carpet making to hosting dance, music and theatre performances are envisioned through the use of the nine mandapams



Access the primary axis again and you too cascade with your legs according to the topography of the stone way which leads to the mandapa complex. As you get to the mandapa complex, check your compass - if you have it on your phone, and you will notice that the stone way is oriented in the east-west direction and the different orientations of the eight mandapas indicate the eight cardinal directions of the universe.

Fig 130 - 131. Conceptual diagrams of orientations of the mandapams and elaboration of Vaastu Shastra - the science of designing habitable spaces



The roofless mandapa at the center signifies Aakash (Sky) - signifying that all forms of expression of knowledge are one under the sky.

On the periphery of the central mandapa, within the extents of the other eight mandapas, are three platforms intended to be performance stages where different performances could take place. These 3 platforms reinforce the idea of culture and arts as the personified form of emotions and consciousness that is believed to be the epitome of human expression. The eight directions in the Indian directional sciences, have attributes assigned to them and these attributes attest to the various forms of art and cultural expressions.

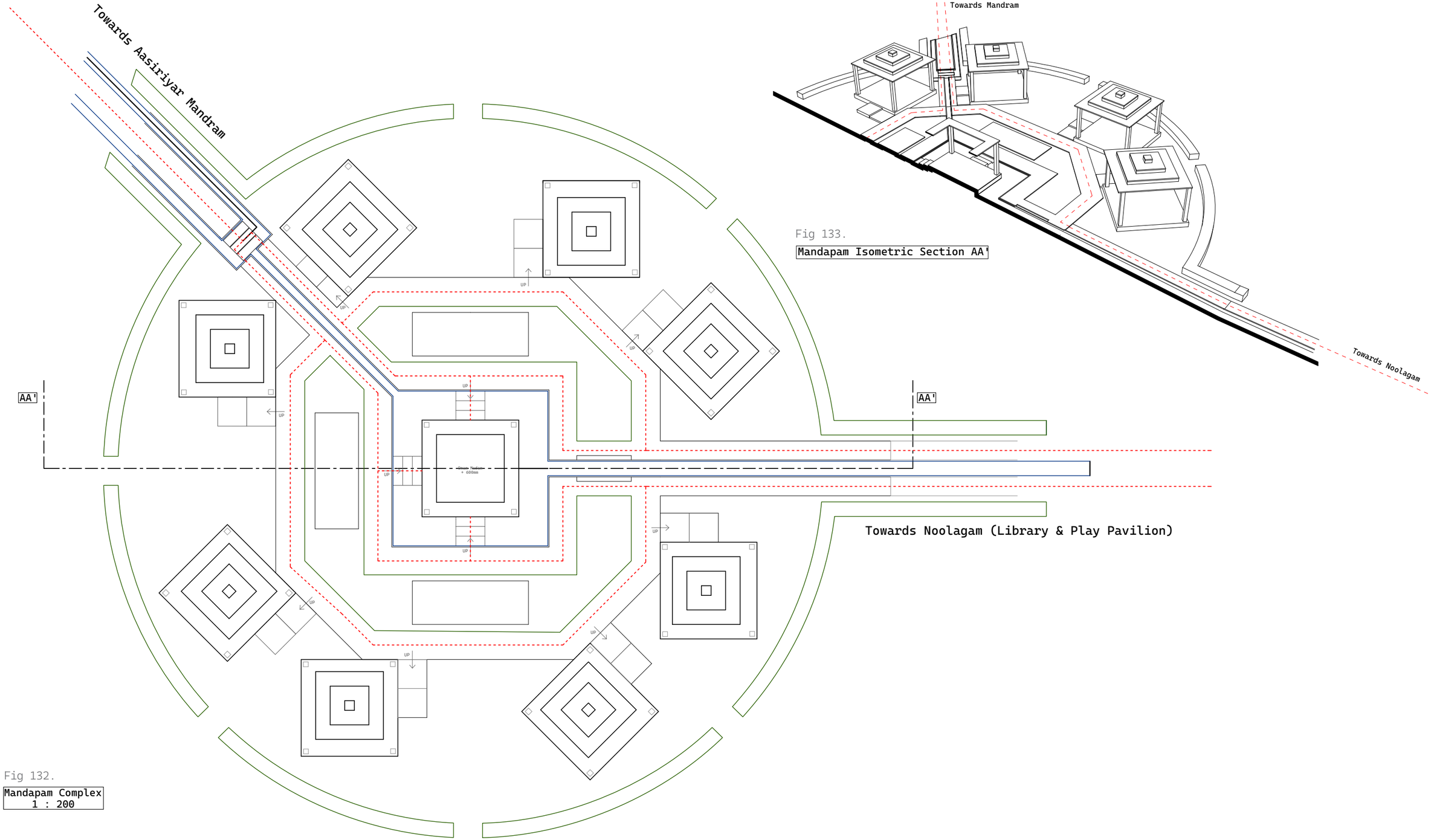


Fig 132.
Mandapam Complex
1 : 200

Fig 133.
Mandapam Isometric Section AA'

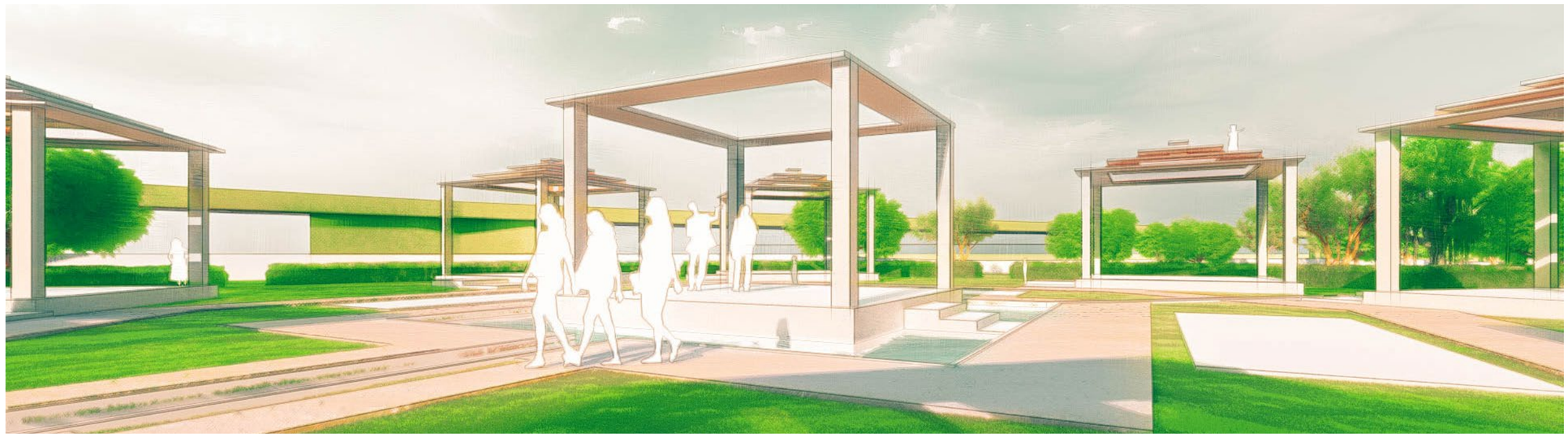


Fig 134. (above) View showing the Mandabangal from the Primary Axis

The openness of the mandapam complex is intended to attract use of space for a various range of functions as demanded by the circumstances and opportunities made available



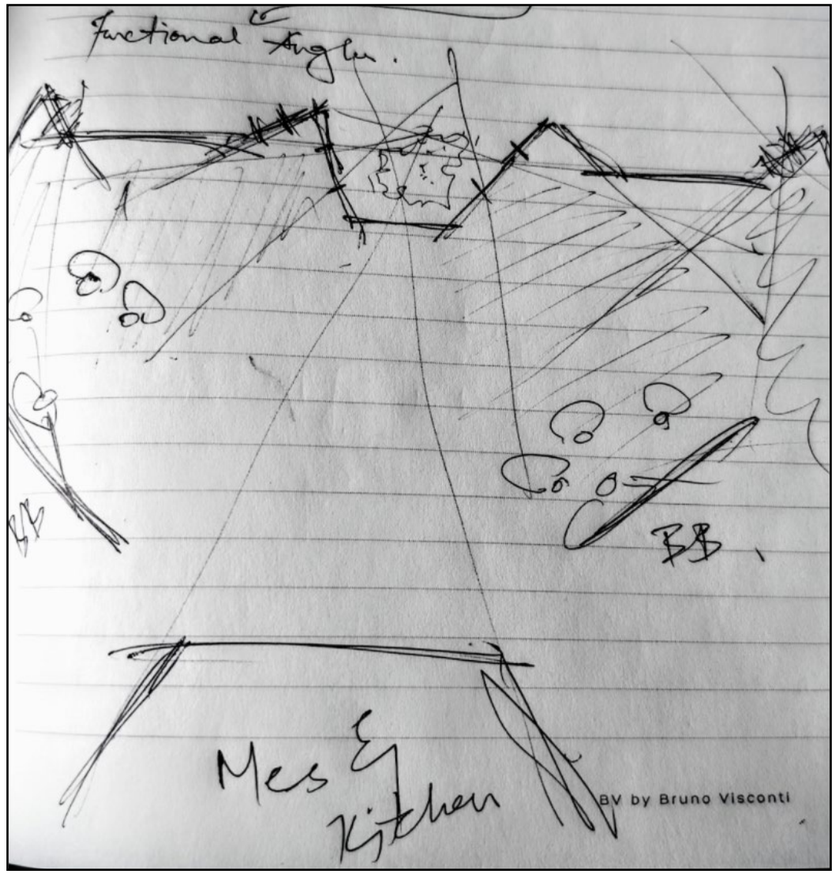
Fig 135. (left) View of the central sky mandapam

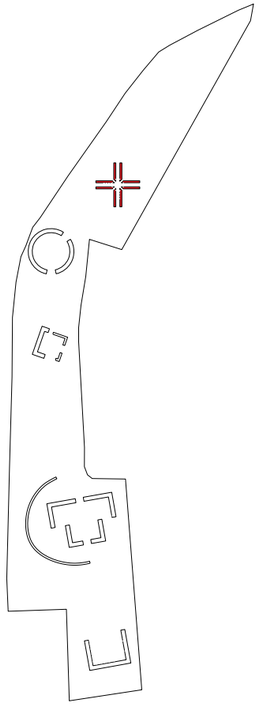
The sequencing of spaces here bridges the knowledge core – that is the library, to the Aasiriyar mandram that follows this, where the mentors can reexamine their knowledge by teaching the kids in the Kalai Mandabangal what they learnt and by doing so, refine their knowledge

ஆசிரியர் மன்றம்

(Aasiriyar Mandram)

Following the axis that demands you take it, you are led towards a building – a building finally, rather than another makeshift one. On either side of the stone way, the so far ever accompanying hedges part away from the path, opening your view to the expanse of the building before you. On the periphery of your vision, are mandapas aligned and hence acting as extensions to the building itself. Push further in the path towards the building's entrance – on the sides of which are platforms that act as buffer zones before entering the building. Climb the stairs and enter.





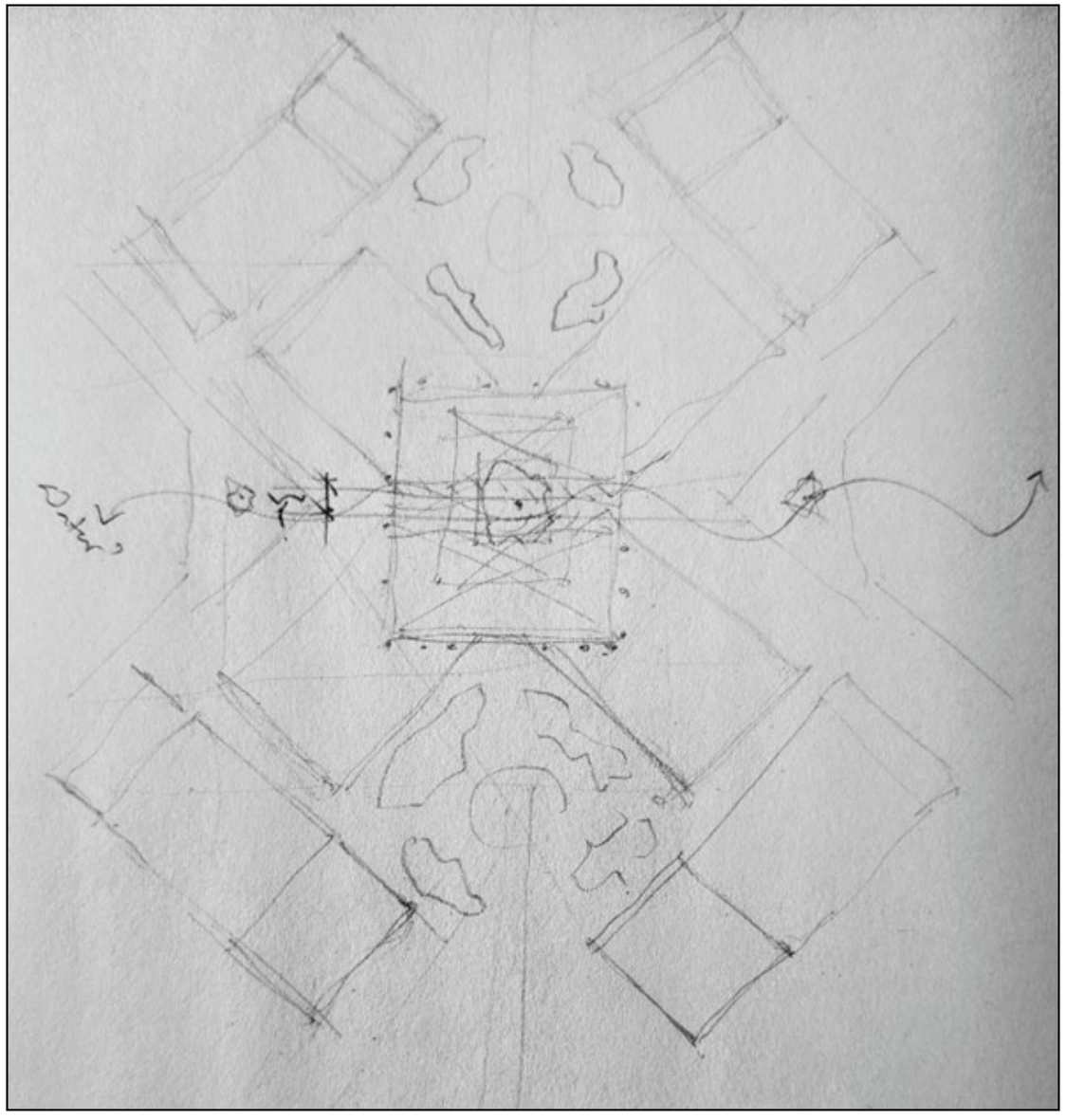
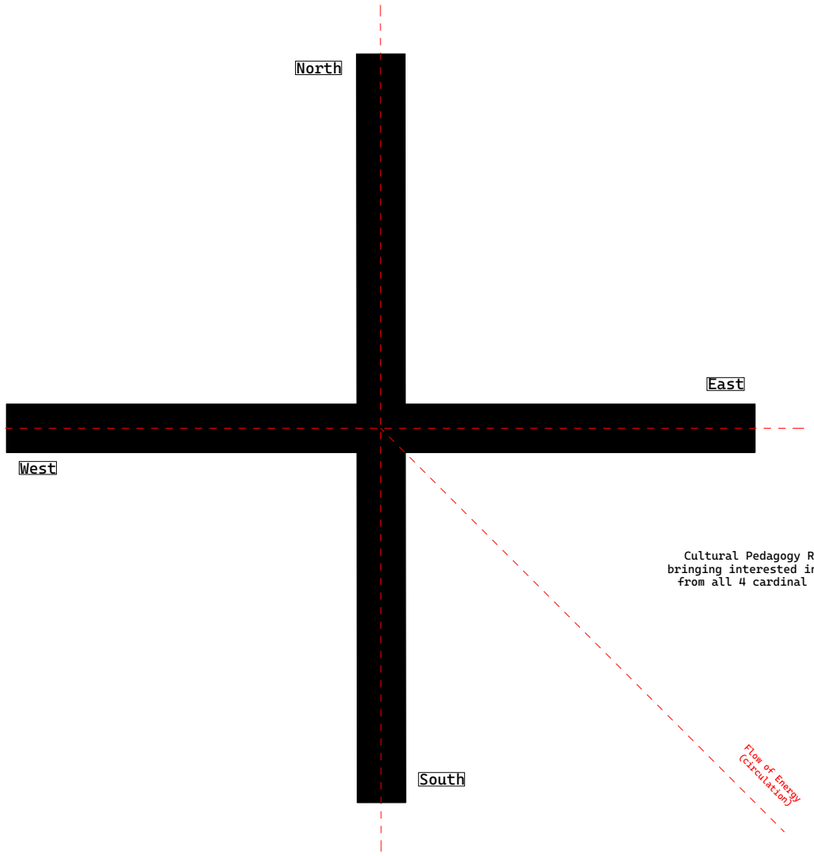


Fig 136 – 137. Sketches showing the working iterations of different elements of the node

The notion of a learning space resembling a home is implemented here too – with the architectural expression surrounding vernacular materials similar to the Thinnai Palli – except here, the cortyard is treated for what it is than for what it could be – a space that brings in the different functions of a habitable space to an ambiguous center

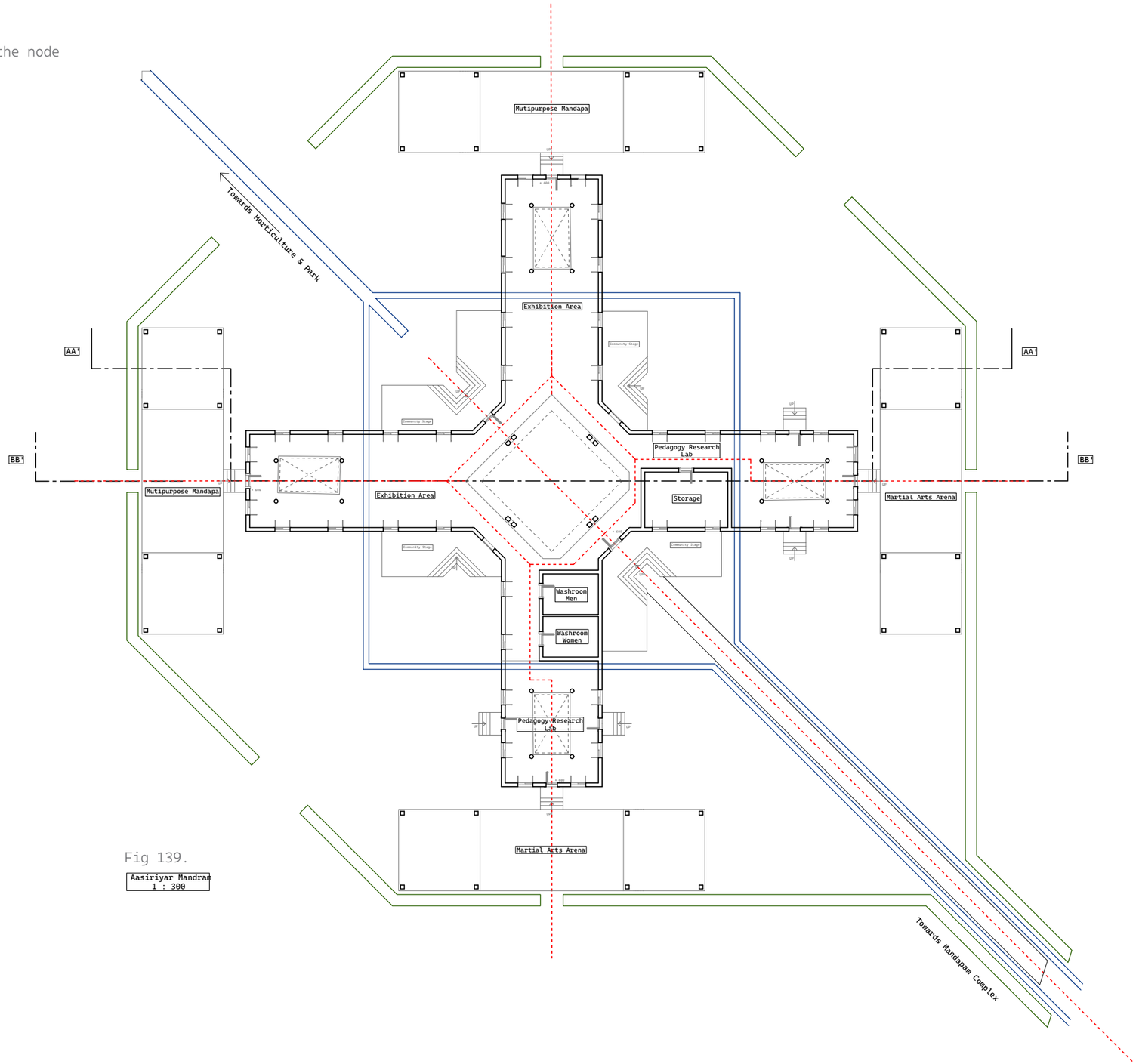
Fig 138. Conceptual diagram of core parti of the node



Upon entering, you stumble onto a wooden support which is divided to form two sturdy columns. Inevitably peering through the parted structure, the 2 other extensions of the building are presented to you. These two structures are open and have no obstacles dissimilar to the two supposed rooms that hide the two extensions that were visible from the stone way leading to the building. Beyond the rooms – the one on the left, washrooms and the one on the right, a storage space, are workshop spaces where teachers can gather and research on cultural knowledge to impart the young while furthering known indegenous knowledge.

Fig 139.

Aasiriyar Mandram
1 : 300



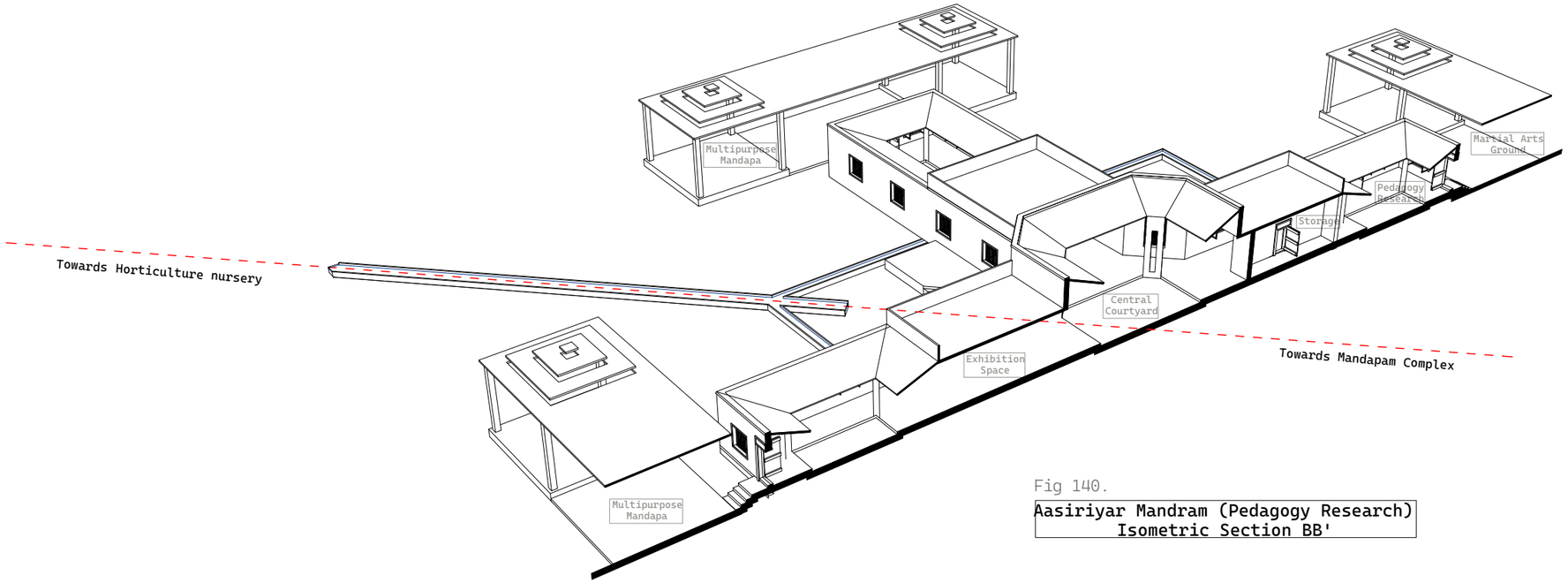
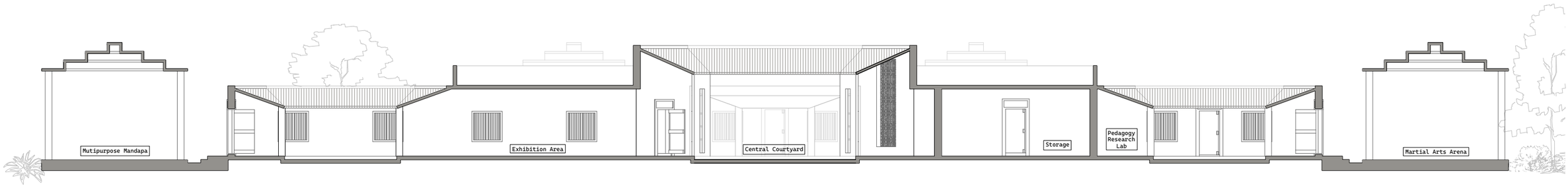


Fig 140.
Aasiriyar Mandram (Pedagogy Research)
Isometric Section BB'



Aasiriyar Mandram Section AA'
1 : 175

Fig 141.

This block becomes the space where the pedagogy is determined through observations and where experimental education systems are formulated. The two wings that open up as simple shelters are intended to be both exhibition spaces where the works of the children of the “school” are displayed and spaces to use as per requirement – either to teach kids or to educate teachers of the intended pedagogy. Beyond the entrance from where you make these observations is the courtyard where the 4 wings of the buildings converge. At its center the compass would indicate that the four wings are aligned to the four cardinal directions – signifying the attraction of knowledge from all the directions and streams of knowledge of the physical world.



Aligned with the entrance is the exit on the other side. Accessing the exit, you are led to the mirror of the path you saw when you came out of the mandapa complex. Extending your vision further, the horticulture garden that extends to the extents of the site is presented. This view is bordered by the existing urban fabric of Vellore on the left, and the seemingly infinitely flowing moat, beyond which lies the magnificent fort.

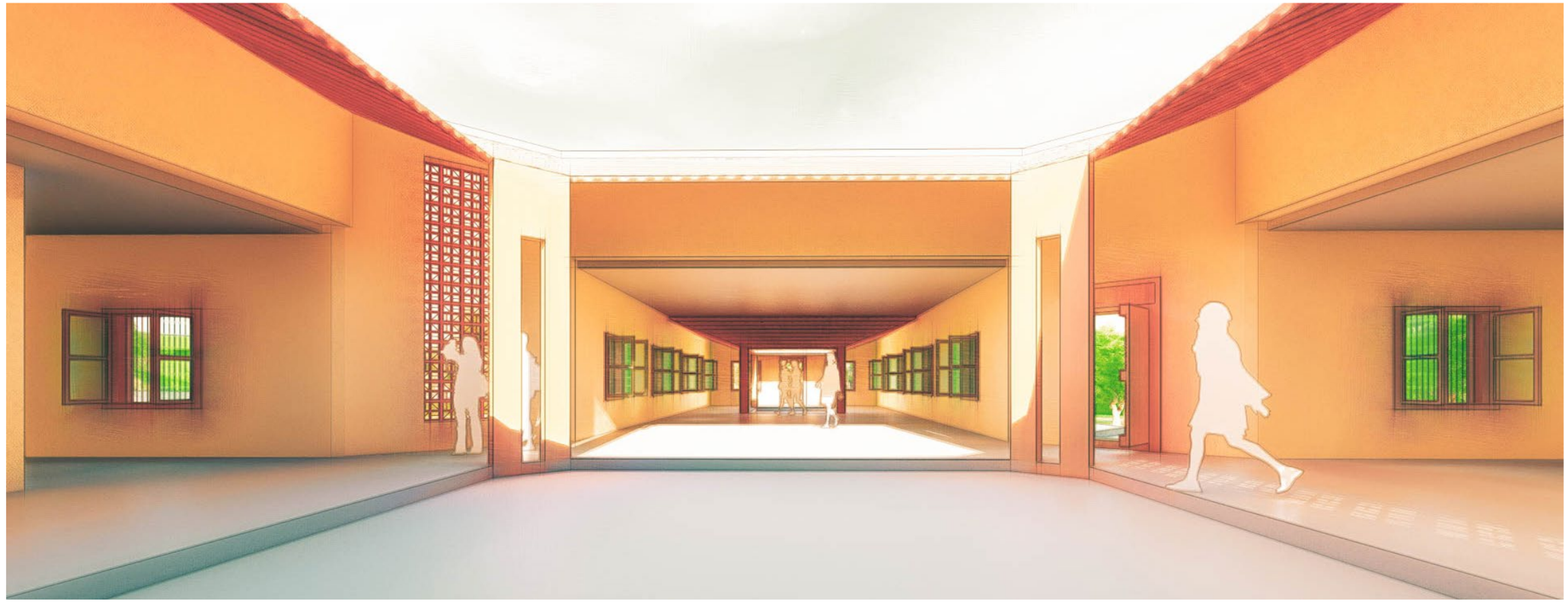


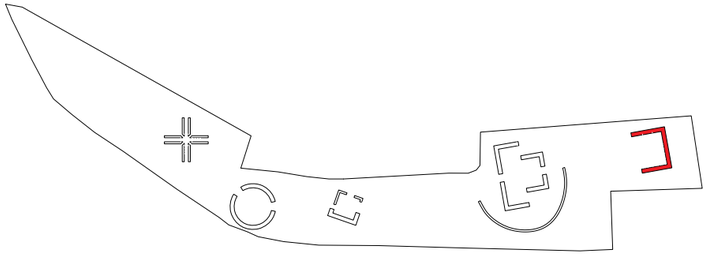
Fig 143. (above) Interior view of the exhibition spaces from the central courtyard

The effects of this seemingly final node node where the form of the built up space attracts structured knowledge systems pertaining to cultural pedagogy, is most realised and implemented on the other extreme of the site - the Chathiram, where different labs enable processed knowledge meet exectution and applied experimentation

Fig 142. (left) Frontage of the space

சத்திரம்

(Chathiram)



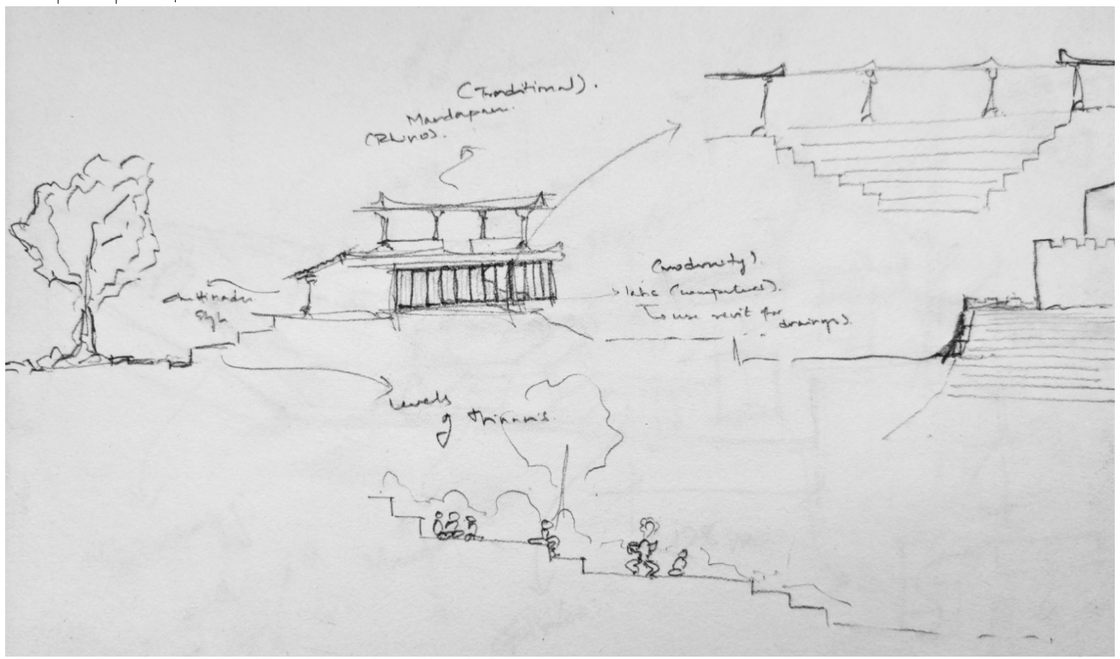
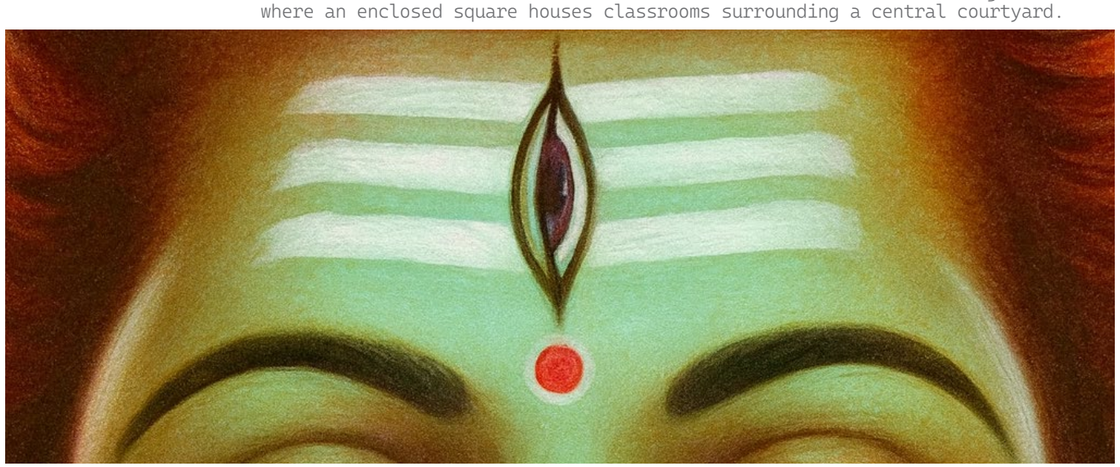


Fig 146 a & b. (top) Process diagram and conceptual section of the parti of the node

Form of the structure is dervied from Madarasas of the Islamic learning traditions where an enclosed square houses classrooms surrounding a central courtyard.



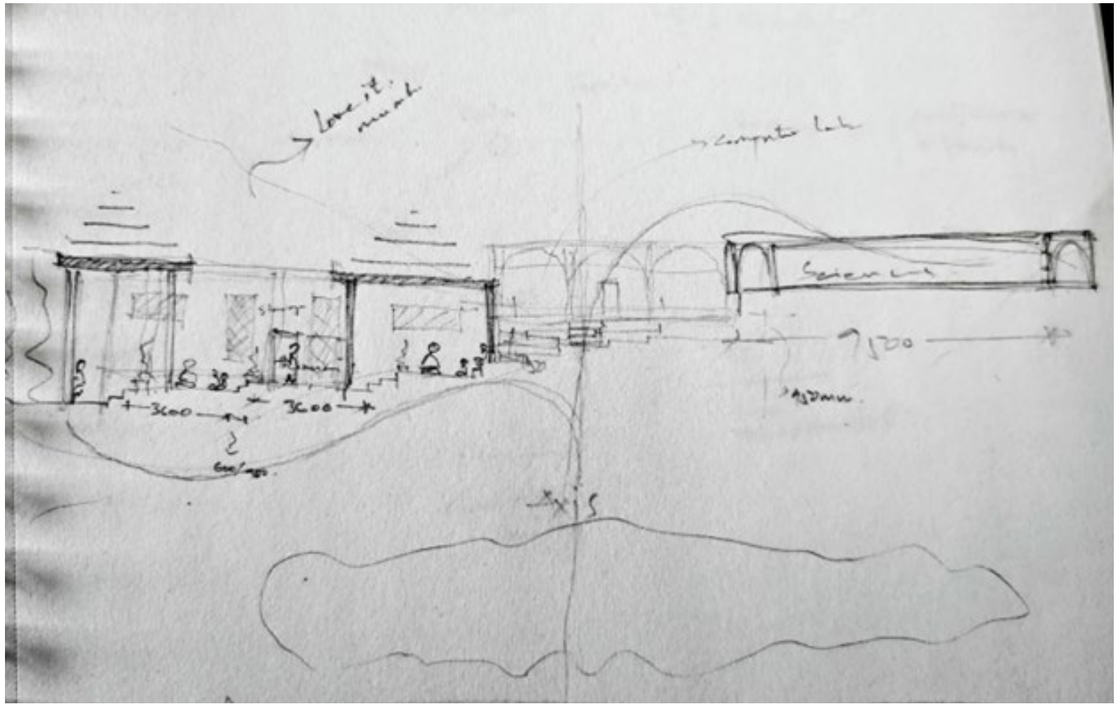
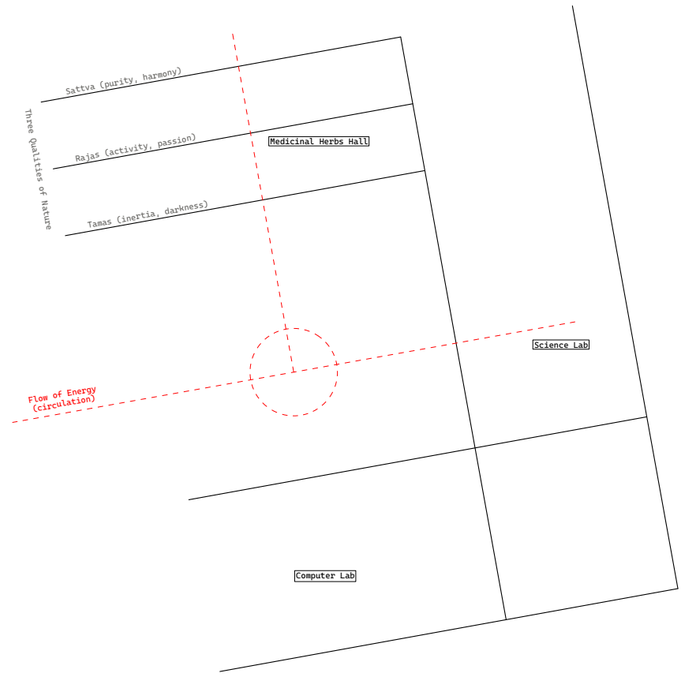
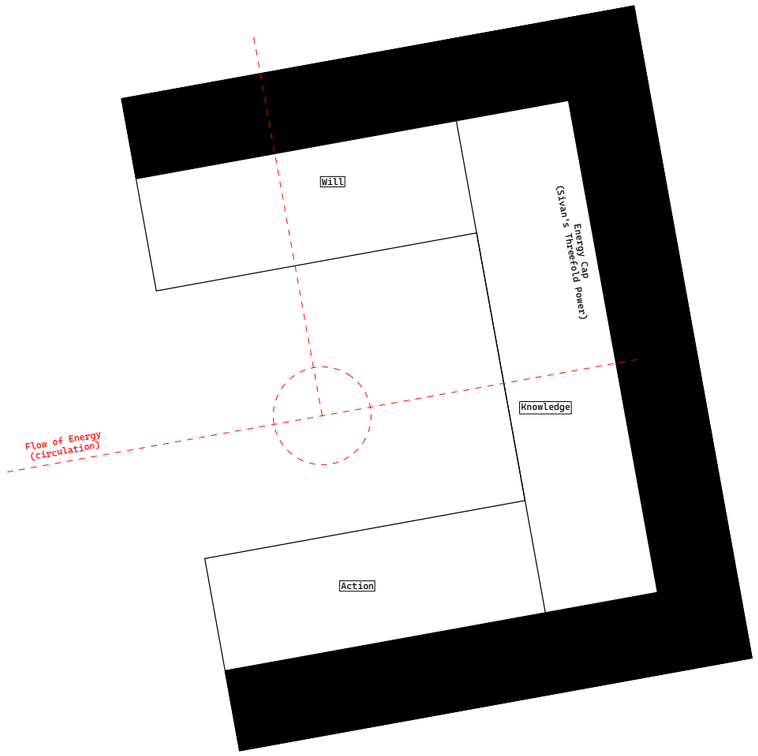


Fig. 147. (left) The three lines of ash on Sivan's forhead represents the three qualities of nature

148. (right) Conceptual diagram elaborating the metaphorical undertones of the parti





Descending the stairs, the plants are medicinal and hence, their existence here becomes beauty more than some coloured leaves and some colourful flowers and berries that give colour and texture to the organised nature amidst the wilderness.

To sustain the immensity of the energy produced off of the ongoing learning journey, the form is reinforced spiritually by adopting metaphorical essence from Sivan's threefold powers

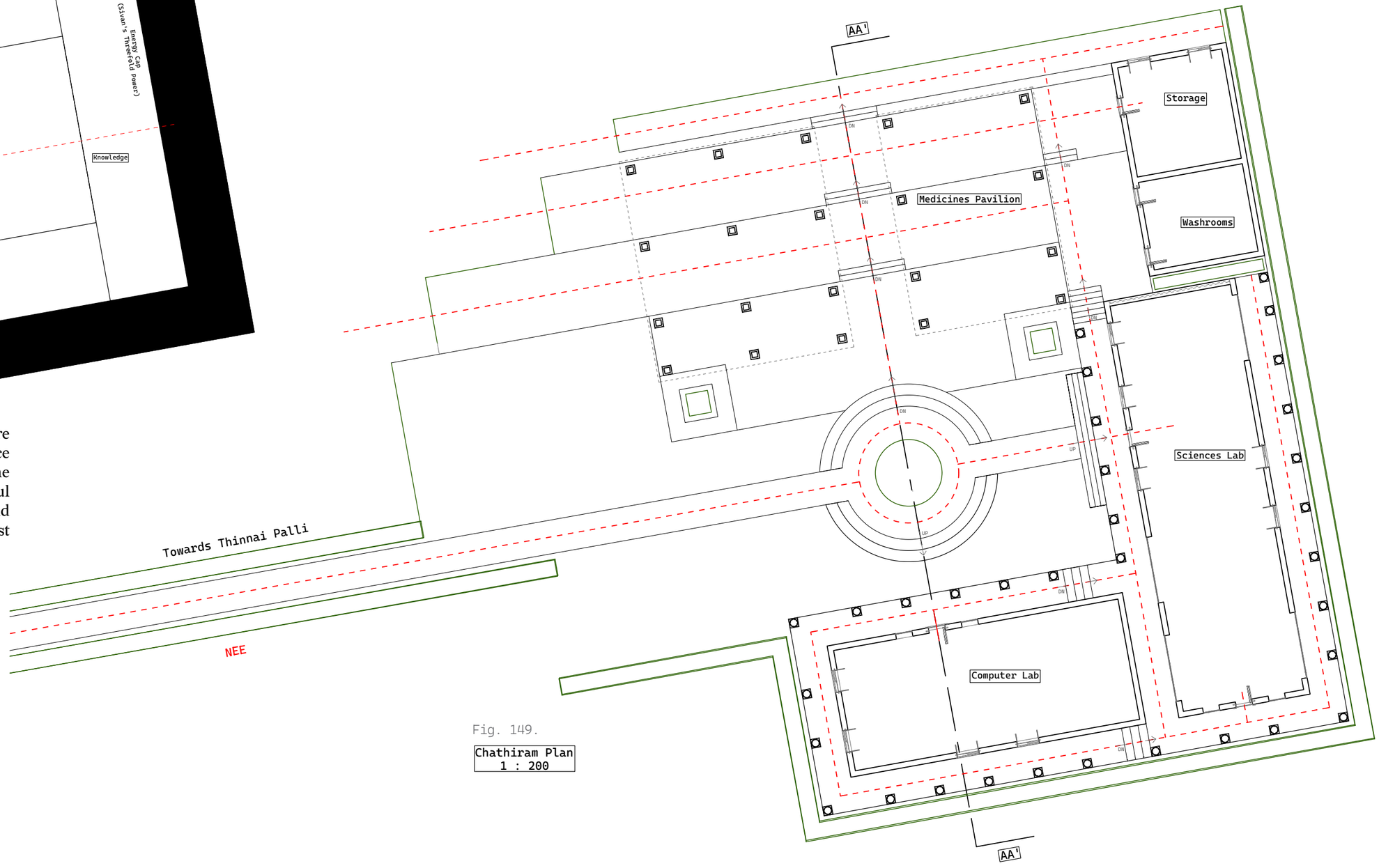
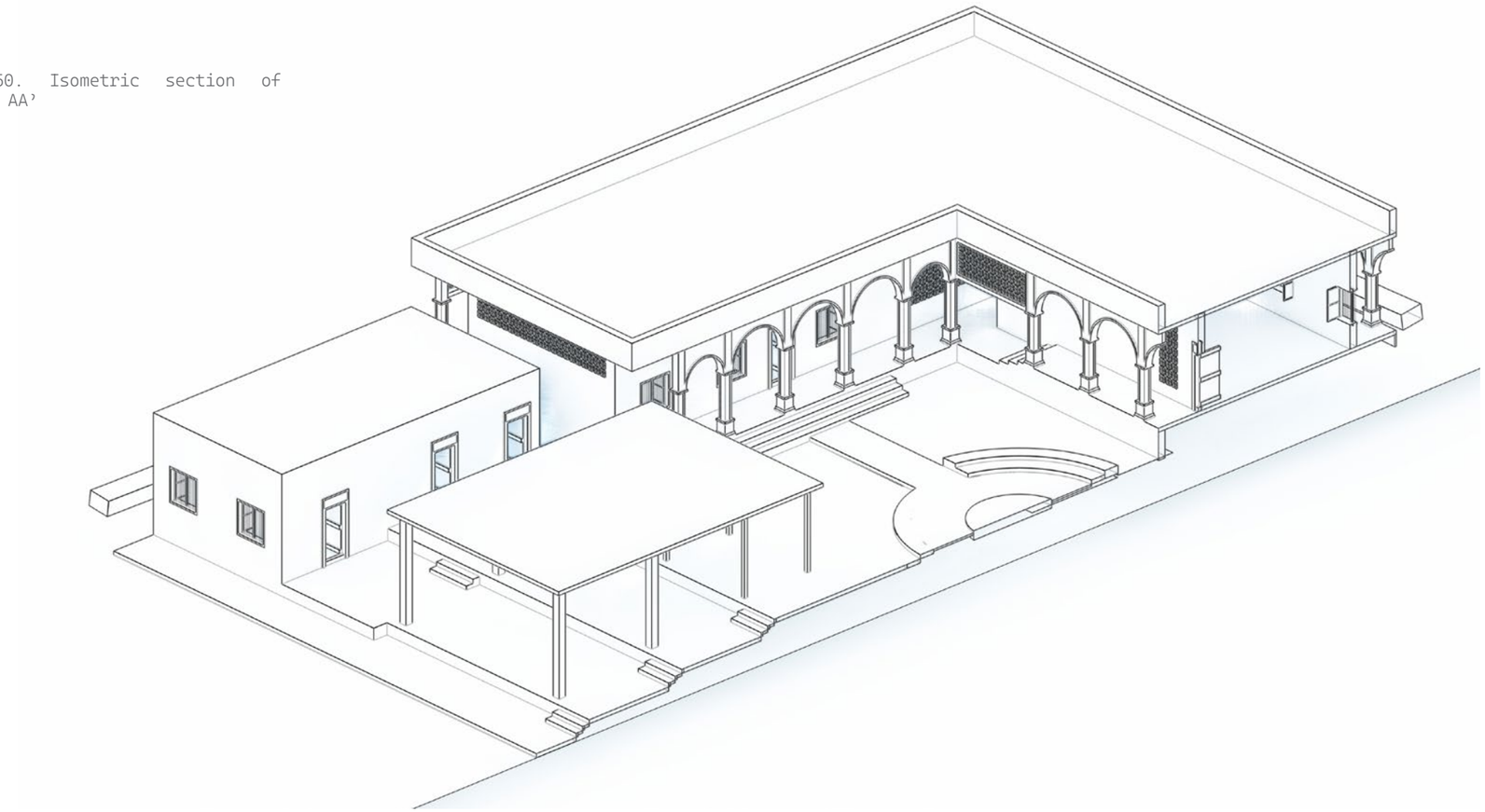


Fig. 149.

Chathiram Plan
1 : 200

Fig 150. Isometric section of Section AA'



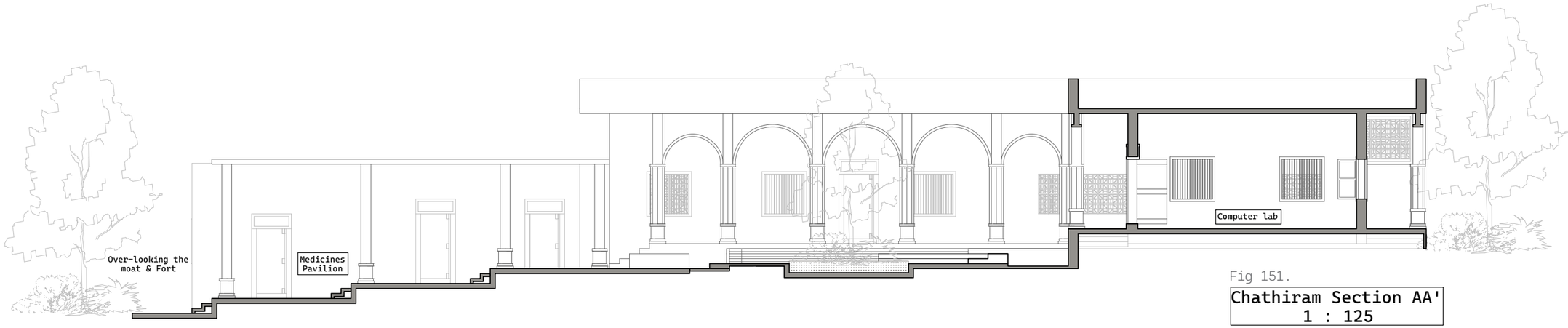


Fig 151.
Chathiram Section AA'
1 : 125

Cushioning the Eastern border of this mandapam are the washrooms and a storage space. Heading south from there, you are shaded by the columnade that veered you in. On your left is the sciences lab where more focussed indigenous scientific knowledge is taught to the children. The walls are punctured with windows and jalis to bring fresh air and natural light to aid with the normal conditions as required for science experiments and excercises. Following the corridor and turning right, the computer room - its shut windows and doors glances at you.



The primary axis ends here, signifying both the unboundedness of well nourished, implemented knowledge and the limits of structured and guided knowledge systems

Fig 152. View of Chathiram from the Primary Axis

Islamic ornamentation through the use of defined arches and Jali walls as passive stratergies to encourage outside activities

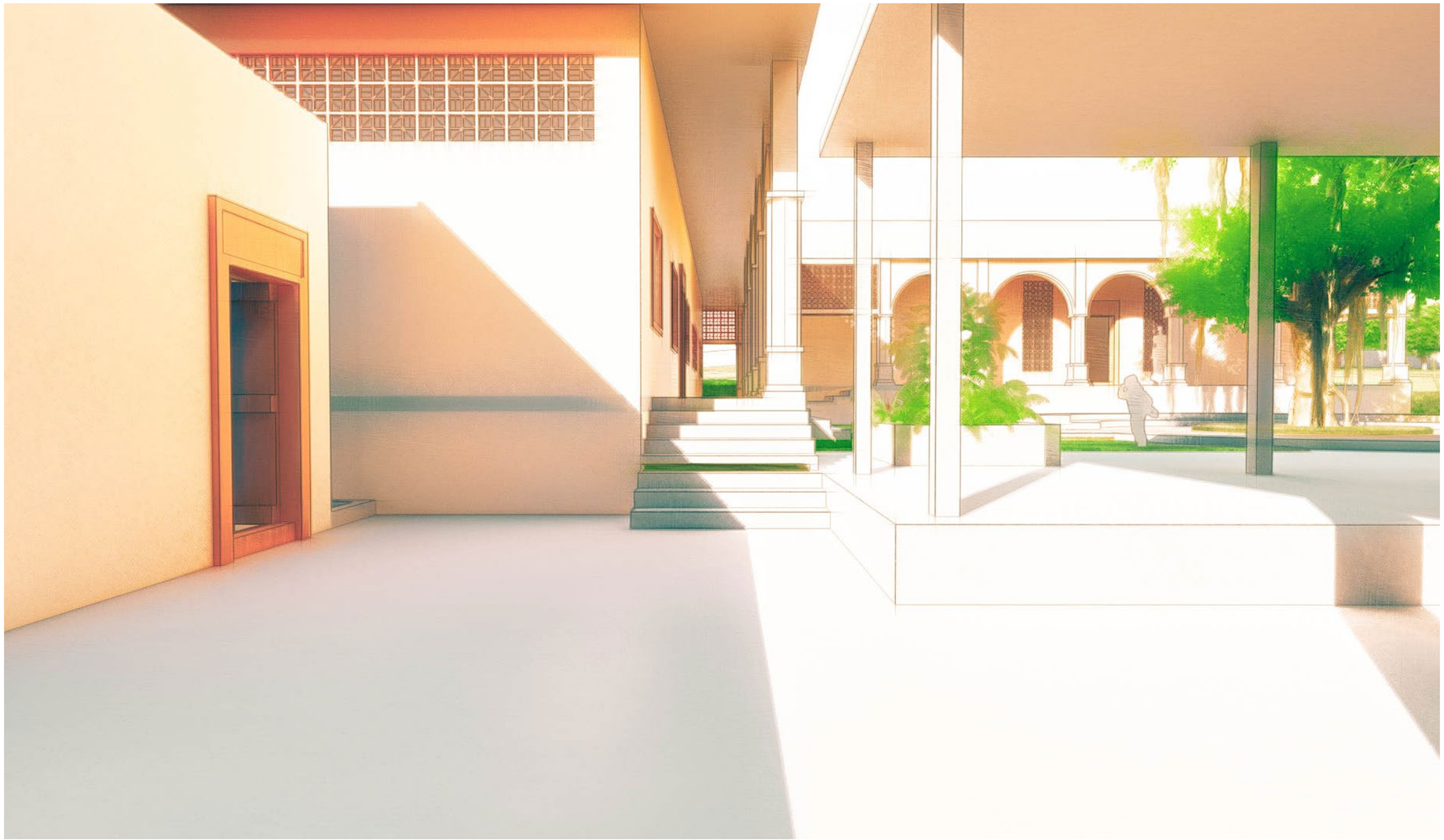


Fig 153. View of the arcade from the medicine hall

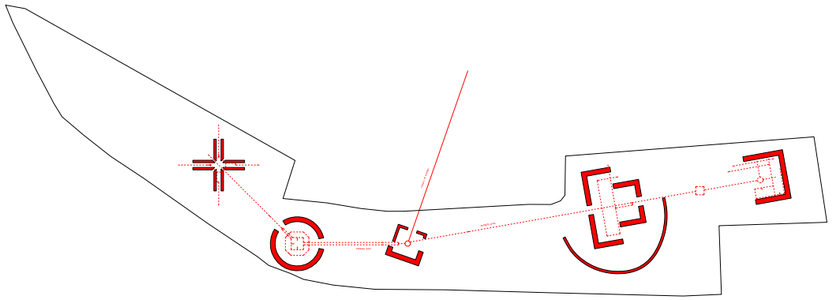
The terrain here is drier than the rest of the institutional complex - nature had taken its course and the dry land reflects the screaming Velloring Sun. To nourish the Palai terrain, strategic planting of medicinal herbs and plants both for the well being of humans and the land on which it grows.

Mater does not reach this part - for the topography here flushes the fertile soil to the moat during the monsoon seasons of June to December. A well engineered landscape could extend the headwaters of the Mater which embraces the Thinnai Palli.

By implementing a cybernetic plan of progression and organic expansion of the complex, the philosophy of perpetually learning and adapting aspect of Thamizh thought is emanated in the vision of the Architecture too.

வடிவமைப்பின் புராணம் (the design myth)

Embodying this framework, the primary axis of the complex is treated as the modulator for the flow of energy within the complex. The overarching design myth gets pieced together when all the nodes (the 6 different points of the complex) are aligned along the primary circulation axis.



In this design mythology, the perpetual act of learning originates in the Thinnai Palli within the embrace of nature's cradle (crescent) and the blessings of preceeding minds (Aasan Poonga). Mater's movement is embodied as the learning journey of the innocent children - woken into existence from her tranquil slumber by noise and disturbance from around the lily pond which is nestled amongst the other hatchlings that hapazardly run amock with energy within the Palli. Mirroring the wandering spur of children, the Mater's journey of learning begins its course alongside them.

Through her journey, she carries forth the natural naive tendencey of a child's curiosity and wonder - depicted by her freeflowing trajectory. At the Noolagam that orients itself towards Sivan's divine glance, where his will nurtures wisdom to the infantly waters and through his mentorship, she learns the cosmological understanding of energy flows which is accentuated by realising the essence of Vastu Shastra. At this point in her journey, Mater becomes aware of the north-east-east orientation of her journey where she is bestowed with divine alignment through aquisition of knowledge and insight.

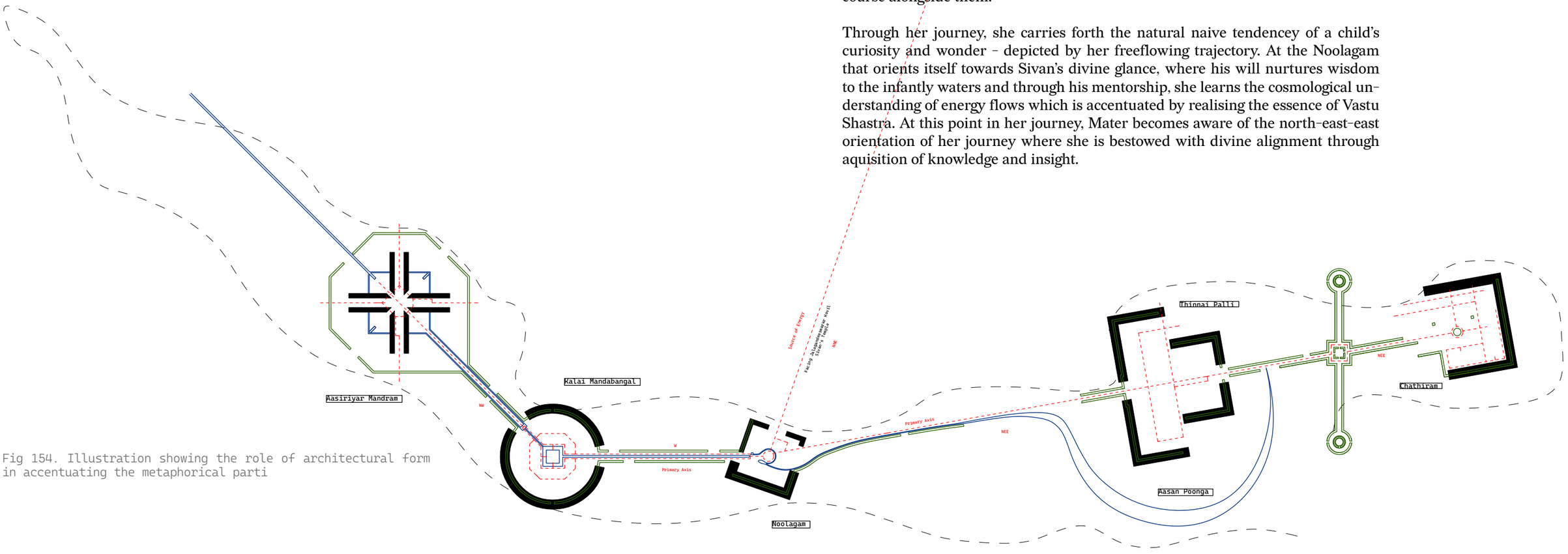


Fig 154. Illustration showing the role of architectural form in accentuating the metaphorical parti

Parallely, in the realm of Murugan, who stands for the unbounded knowledge of the universe, makes himself present through the symbolism of the Aasiriyar Mandram's '+' form. This node becomes the node of Murugan's abode due to its extreme positioning in the sequencing of the whole parti - this is a symbolic representation of how Sivan placed Murugan on a higher position, acknowledging his unbounded knowledge - complemented by the peacock feather-like enclosure of the hedges around the Mandram. The journey of this unbounded energy-force is directed by the primary axis which is aligned to the north-east orientation which signifies the gifts of human conciousness - emotions and intiution.

This strategic confluence of the energy-force along the north-east orientation gets further tempered at the Kalai Mandabangal. Here, the primary axis is redirected to the cardinal West - which signifies discipline and moral duty. From here the by then matured energy heads towards the Noolagam. Climbing the cascade of ramps which are symbolic representation of consistent action, the energy-force comes in conflicting contact with naively adolescent Mater's learning journey.

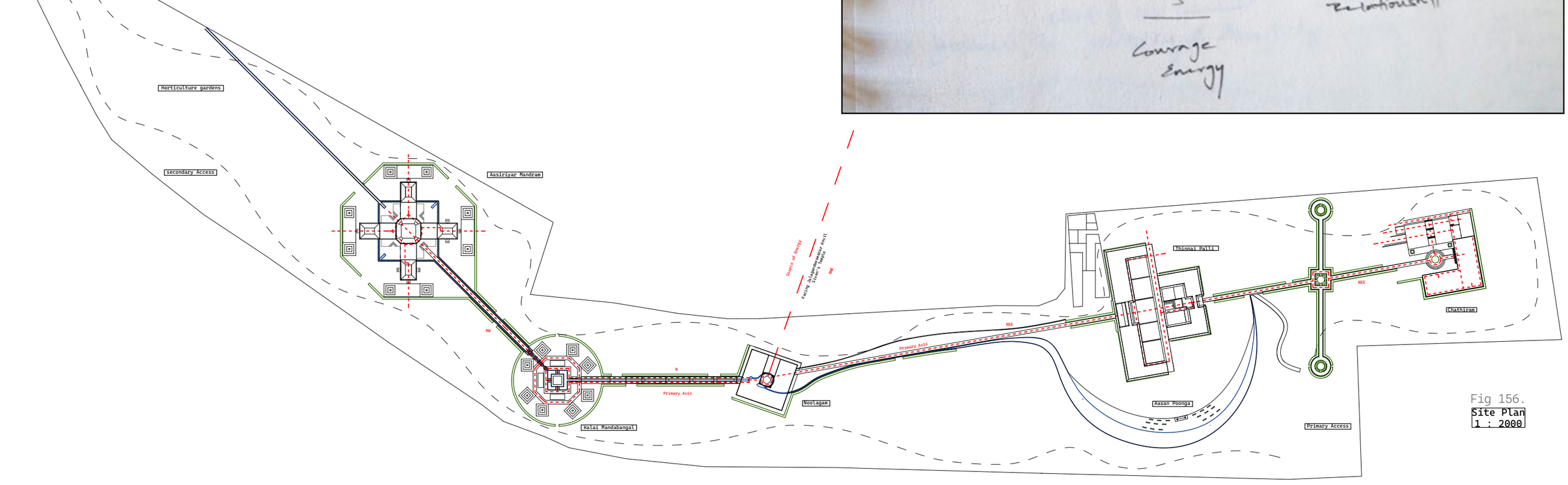
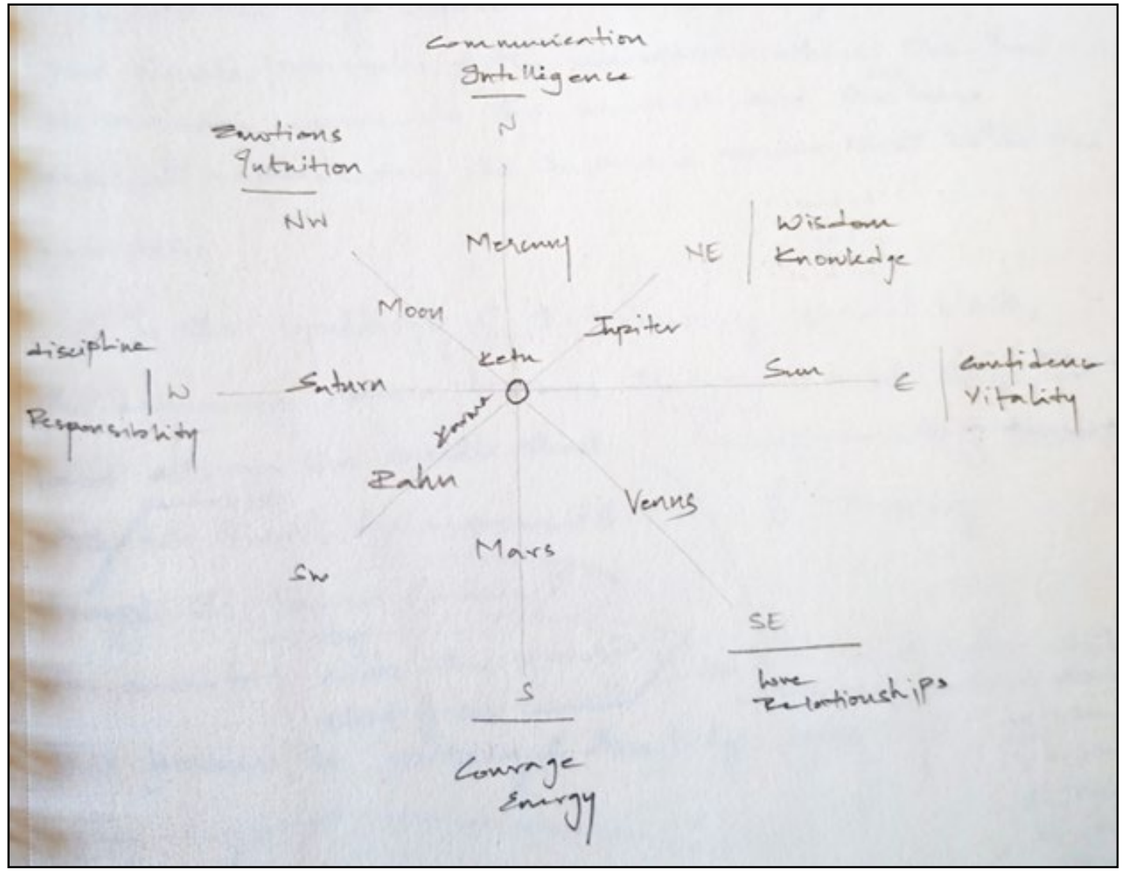


Fig 156.
Site Plan
1 : 2000

Fig 155. Diagram showing the eight directions and their associated energies according to Vastu Shastra



This collision of contradicting energies creates a torque which in the first place had physically given the Noolagam its orientation towards Sivan's graceful sight. The Noolagam aligns in the north-north-east direction when orienting itself to the Jalagandeeswarar Temple inside the Fort complex - this symbolises mental clarity and cognitive alignment in Vastu Shastra.

Through this alchemy of different energies under Sivan's watchful eyes, the prideful knowledge of the universe gets humbled by Pillayar's shrine under the Sacred Fig. The now refined knowledge of the universe - through the primary axis reaches the Thinnai Palli. As the immense energy flows through the courtyards, it makes contact with the lily pond - the origin of Mater's innocence. Mesmerised by the tranquility of Mater's humble beginnings, the energy is further abated and hence refined by the form of the Palli itself.

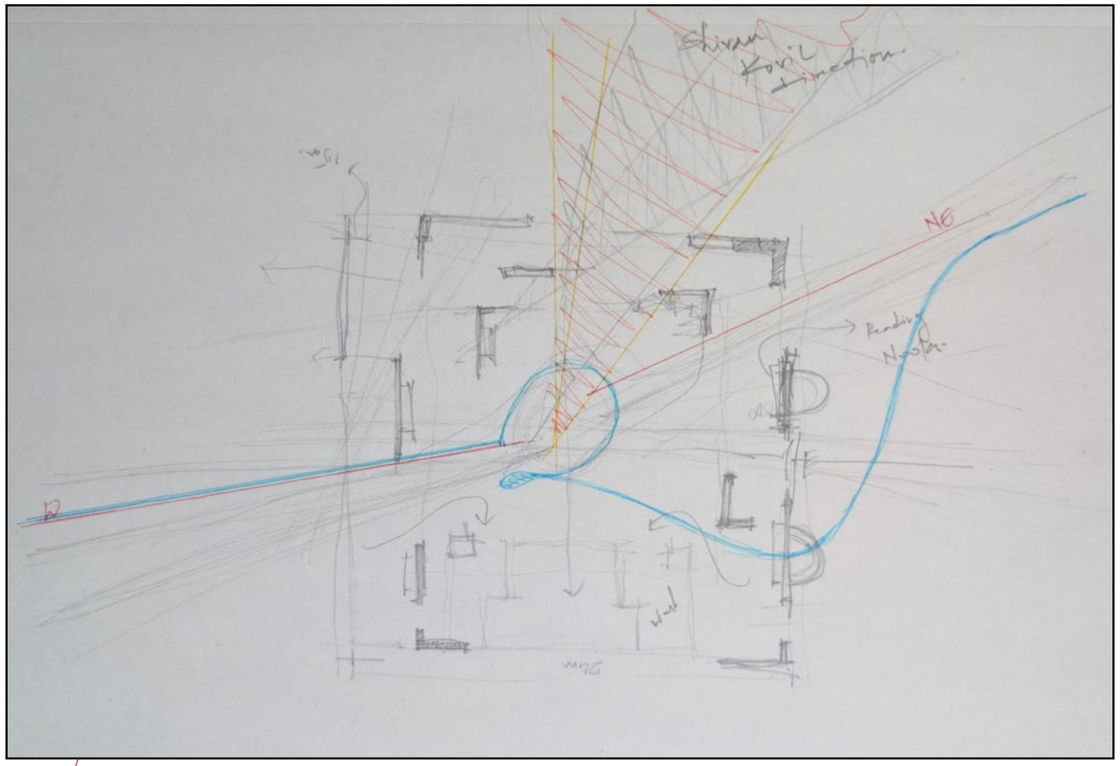


Fig 158. Conceptual sketch to analyse the relationship between the different forces acting at the Noolagam node - here the scattered boundary wall is intended to accommodate the chaotic reactions when different forces collide

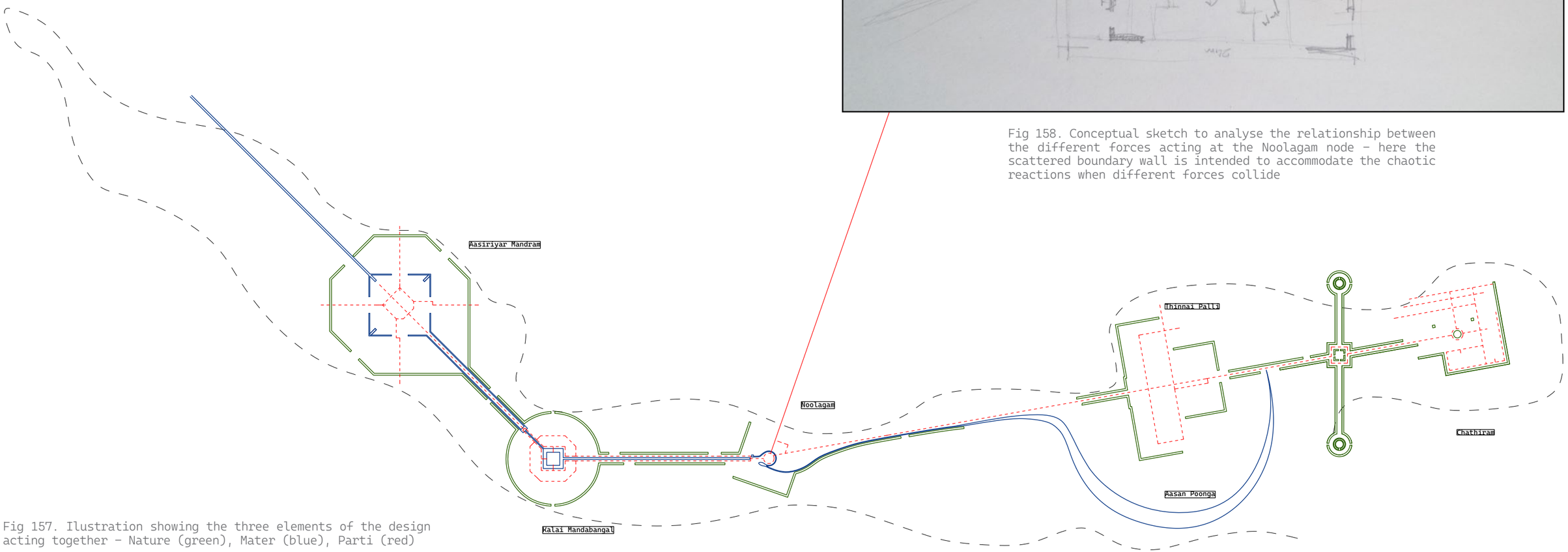


Fig 157. Ilustration showing the three elements of the design acting together - Nature (green), Mater (blue), Parti (red)

This awakened energy flows through the primary axis and culminates at the Chathiram – where knowledge finally colaces with action and implimentation – signified by the symbolic metaphor of Sivan's Trident and hence attains 'moksha' through realising its purpose of 'applied knowledge' along the north-east-east orientation.

Meanwhile, the adolescent journey of Mater, guided by the primary axis' trajectory and under Murugan's blessing flourishes like a Kurunji Mountain in the form of source of life for the Horticulture Gardens – thus this journey too culminating at relising the purpose of 'applied knowledge' for the betterment of the sudden context.

Fig 159. (below) Diagramatic representation of how through its form and sequencing, the design parti physicalises the perpetual journey of learning philosophy of the Thamizh Sangam

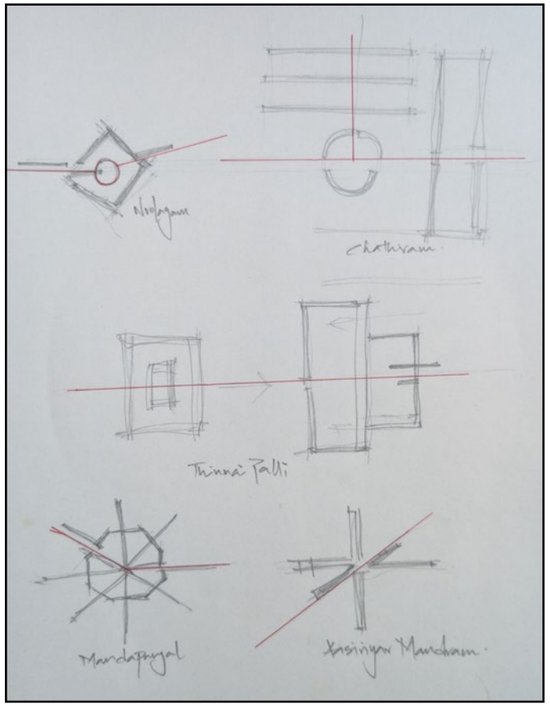


Fig 160. (right) Working sketches of the illustration

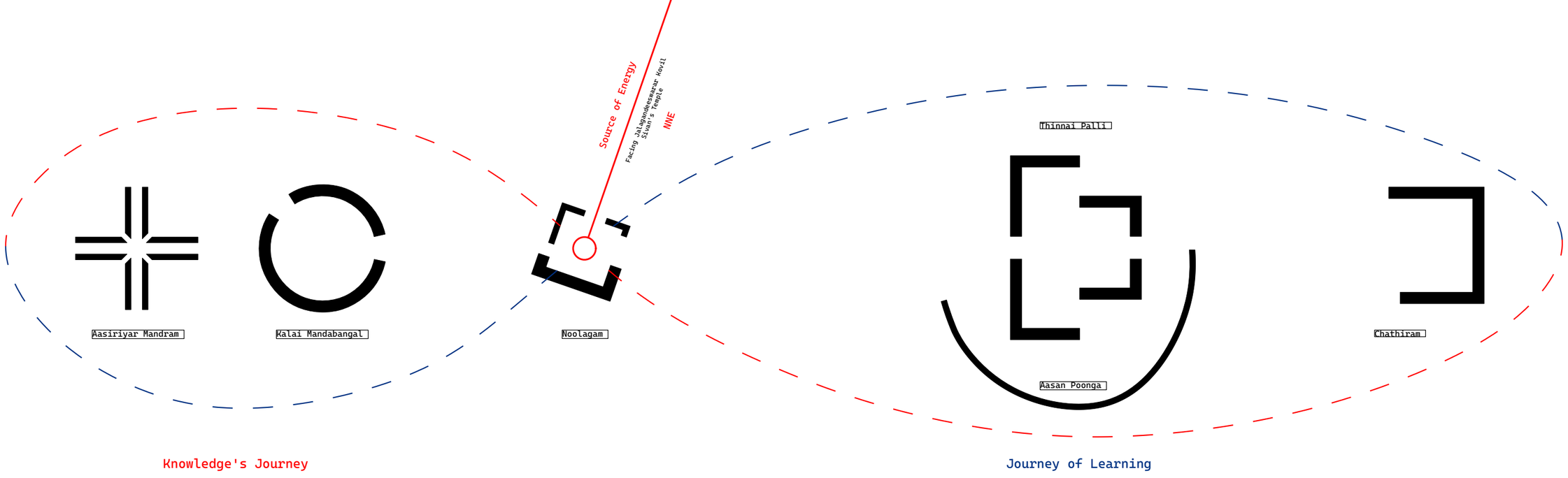




Fig 161. Illustration depicting relationship between the Noolagam and Sivan's temple



Fig 162. illustration showing the site plan projected onto the existing context of Vellore

முடிவுரை

EPILOGUE

When a society's development is steered by commerce alone, technological and infrastructural progress becomes a servant to market driven values rather than to the spiritual needs of its people. If education itself becomes a commodity under such values - as it has in the twenty-first century, such a trajectory risks marginalising the weaker and quieter voices - rewarding only those who are privileged and lucky enough to consume knowledge, not necessarily those who can contribute to the richness of communal living.

This thesis reframes this framework and imagines an architecture that serves a society oriented toward the pursuit of knowledge, not as an individual commodity but as a shared inheritance. For, considering the greed of man, and as money evidently does not seem to provide one with content and happiness - knowledge being the ever expanding, could provide a by-pass in the trajectory of humanity's progression through which we can redirect our greed. As depicted in the design myth of this thesis, the perpetuality of learning and applying said knowledge to enrich the ecosystem where it has been birthed, could act as a cheat-code for humanity's betterment. In this vision, epistemology is not an abstract theory but a lived experience woven into the rhythms of daily life, into the design of spaces that teach through symbolic forms and narration-driven sequencing of spaces that culturally enrich the ecosystem it belongs to.

Governance in such a world is envisioned as driven by the cultivation of knowledge and beauty - not merely by the metrics of owning commodities as capital. If we are to integrate emerging technologies - from artificial intelligence to advanced urban automation as fantasised by the contemporary futurists, the values that drive the architecture must serve the foundational qualities that make us human. This equates to retaining and reinterpreting the rituals, customs, and spatial practices that have allowed humanity to endure thus long - particularly those embedded in nature-dependent cultures, such as the landscapes and epistemological traditions of the Tamil Sangam Age. These are not mere relics that have survived since antiquity, they are frameworks that could enable future generations to come up with new forms of culture while staying grounded in ecological and communal inter-dependence as found in many other indigenous cultures.

At this tipping point in humanity's history where technology threatens to replace humans and their "role(s)" in society, our deepest strengths may not be found in surpassing our antiquity, but in owning it with dignity backed by concise cultural intent. Applying this philosophy to school architecture, architecture then becomes more than a shelter - it becomes the vessel that reminds us who we are, while we continue figuring out who or what we might become.

This work is but a single shed teardrop in the ocean of unshed tears of children who have been denied the right to breathe due to various social, political and religious values.

In a world of such filth, educating the young is but a luxury and seen as an investment - rather than what the Sangam texts portray. This journey (of mine) is a fleeting cry of the extents to which architecture could have enriched our lives if it had not been a by-product of human tendencies.

I would like to wrap this work with a simple question:

How can an architecture without a story to tell, help humans create stories - or worse, contain them in the first place - are human beings so simple that they need nothing more than boxes to shelter themselves?

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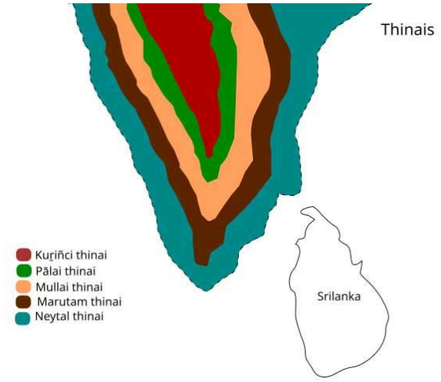
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uchronia

Uchronia is currently an English word-in-formation, a neologism, that is sometimes used in its original meaning as a straightforward synonym for *alternate history* - a genre of speculative fiction that reimagines historical events going in new, imaginary directions.

Final project for elective course *Architectural Imaginations, Provocations And Utopias*

தினைகள் Landscapes



map showing the five landscapes as per Tolkappiyam

In Sangam literature, Tinai is the system that blends landscape, human emotion, and poetic situation together. There are five primary Akam Tinais for love poetry:

Kurinji is the mountain landscape. Whenever a poem mentions hills, waterfalls, or mountain flowers, it signals the moment of first union or secret love. The mood is passionate and new, and the presiding deity is Murugan.

Mullai is the forest and pastoral landscape. It represents waiting and patience — the heroine enduring the lover's absence, trusting his return. Cattle-grazing fields, cool evenings, and quiet forests embody this emotion, and the deity is Mayon (Vishnu).

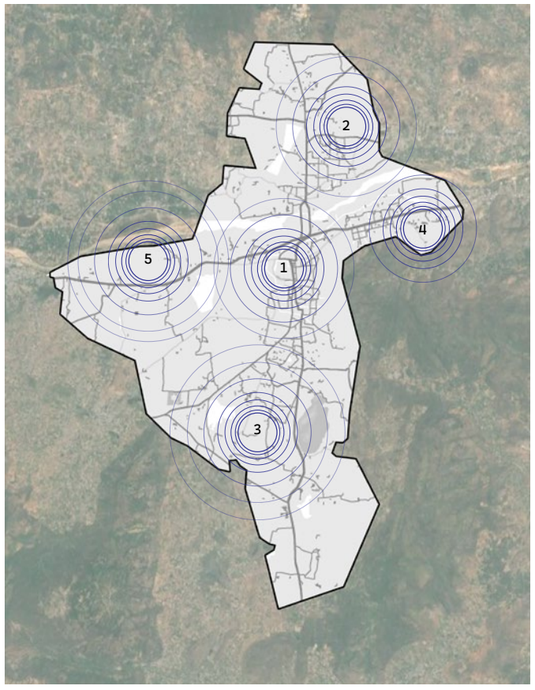
Marutham is the fertile farmland. It encodes domestic love and conflict: quarrels, infidelity, and reconciliation within the rhythms of village and river life. The associated deity is Indra.

Neythal is the seashore. When the waves and fishing boats appear, the poem is about longing and separation — the lover who hasn't come home, the ache of distance. Varuna, the sea god, presides over this Tinai.

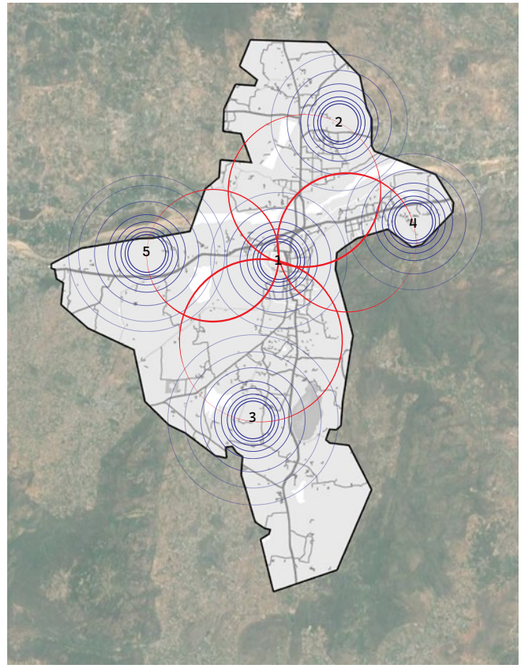
Paalai is the arid wasteland. It is not a separate ecology but a transformation of the other four under heat and hardship. It signals elopement, dangerous journeys, and survival against odds. The fierce goddess Korravai (Durga) rules this Tinai.

In this way, a single reference to a flower, a bird, or a type of land instantly reveals the emotional situation. Mountains mean secret lovers; the sea means longing; the forest means waiting. Tinai turns nature into a language, making every poem a map of both ecology and the human heart.

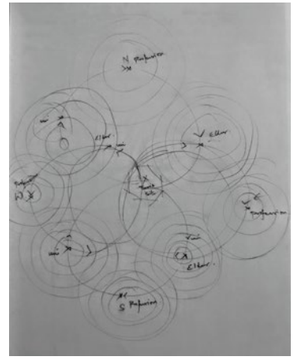
Mullai (Pasture)	1 – Vlr. Fort (Pasture)	Thesis Proposal (Primary Edu – Pedagogy Research)
Paalai (Desert)	2 – VIT (Desert)	Information Tech District
Neythal (Coastal)	3 – Farmer's Market (Coastal)	Agriculture & Crafts District
Kurinji (Mountainous)	4 – Civil (Mountainous)	Law & Ethics District
Martham (Fertile Lands)	5 – Animal Husbandary (Fertile Lands)	Dairy & Tannery District



Existing Vellore Map w potential influence institues



Concept map of areas of influence w users typologies represented





Working sketches for the concepts

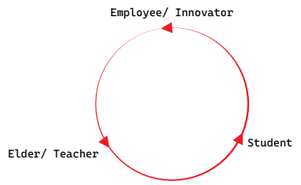
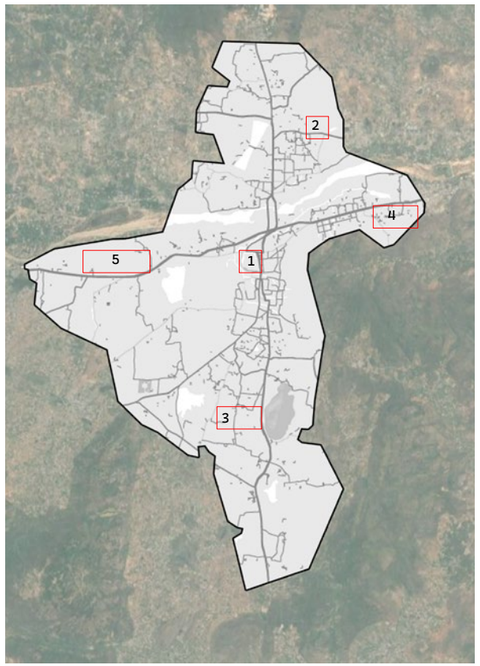
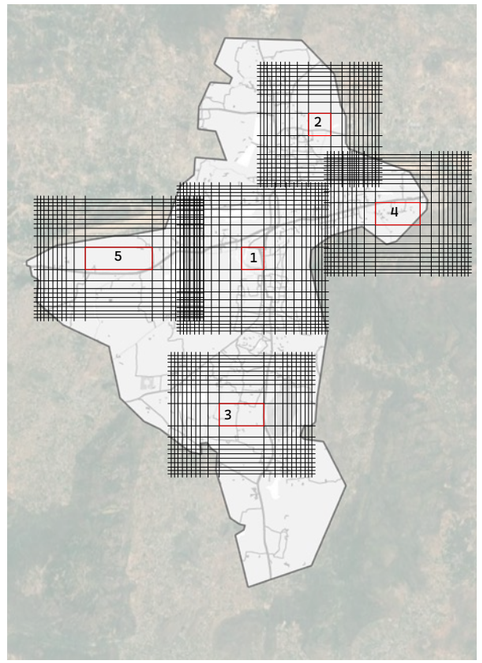


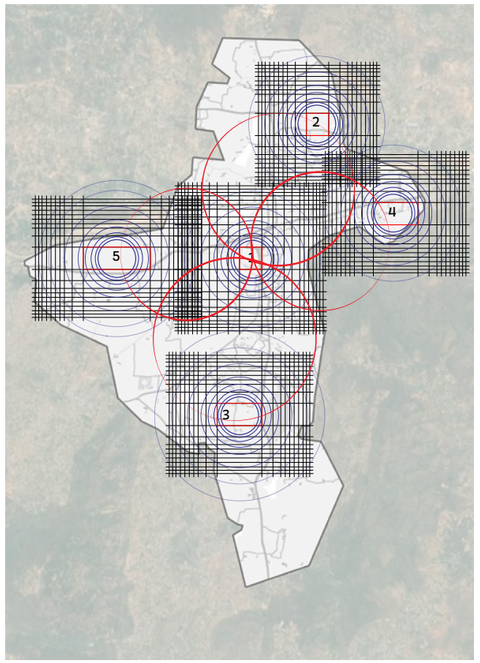
Diagram showing the flow of users typologies



Keymap of Vellore Showing areas of interest



Grid for plots - area decreasing w proximity to institution

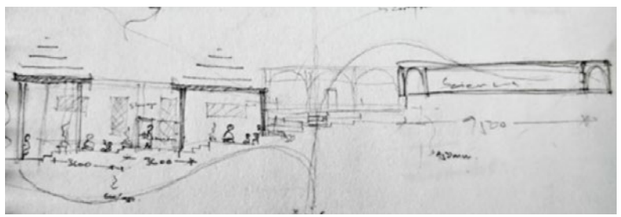


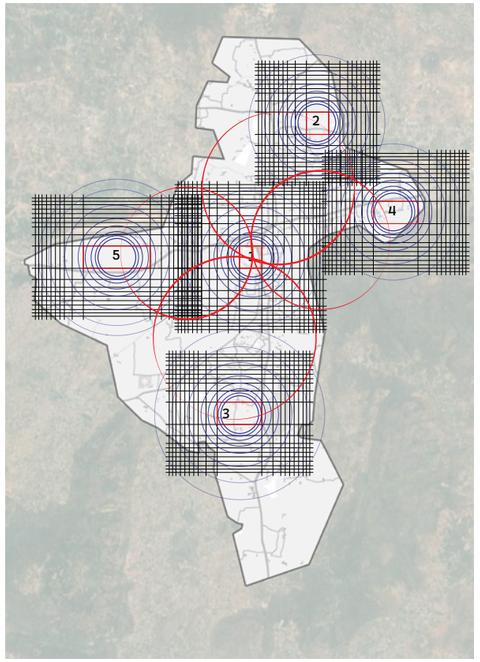
Concept map showing influence rings & the grid layout

	FORM	MATERIAL	TYPOLOGY	SPACES
2 - Information Tech District	Brutalist geometries	Corten steel, GRC, black concrete	Wind-cooled labs, modular pods	Vertical Towers and settlements



	FORM	MATERIAL	TYPOLOGY	SPACES
3 - Agro & Crafts District	Fluid, open sheds	Bamboo, adobe, reflective water	Salt-pan stalls, canal ghats	Breezy - Vibrant amphitheatres





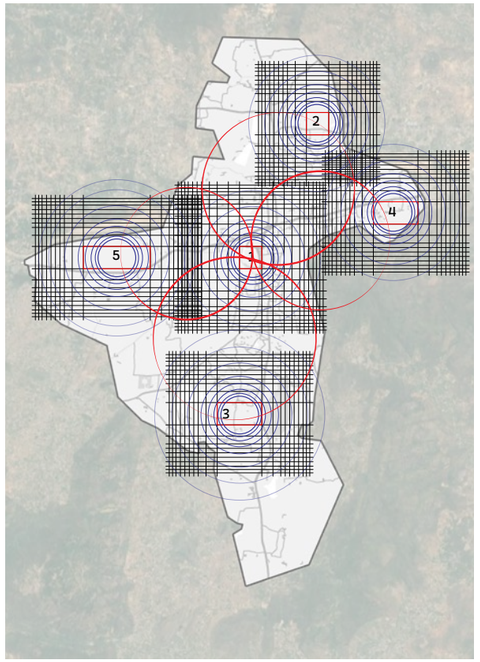
Concept map showing influence rings & the grid layout

	FORM	MATERIAL	TYPOLOGY	SPACES
1 - Education District	Courtyard clusters	Laterite, terracotta, lime plaster	Thinnai class-rooms	storytelling courts







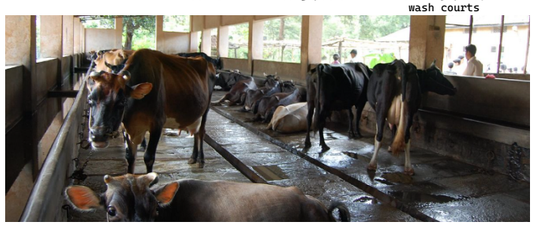


Concept map showing influence rings & the grid layout

	FORM	MATERIAL	TYPOLOGY	SPACES
4 - Law & Ethics District	Tiered terraces	Granite, timber, vine pergolas	Debate courts, silent walkways	Senate halls, debate platforms

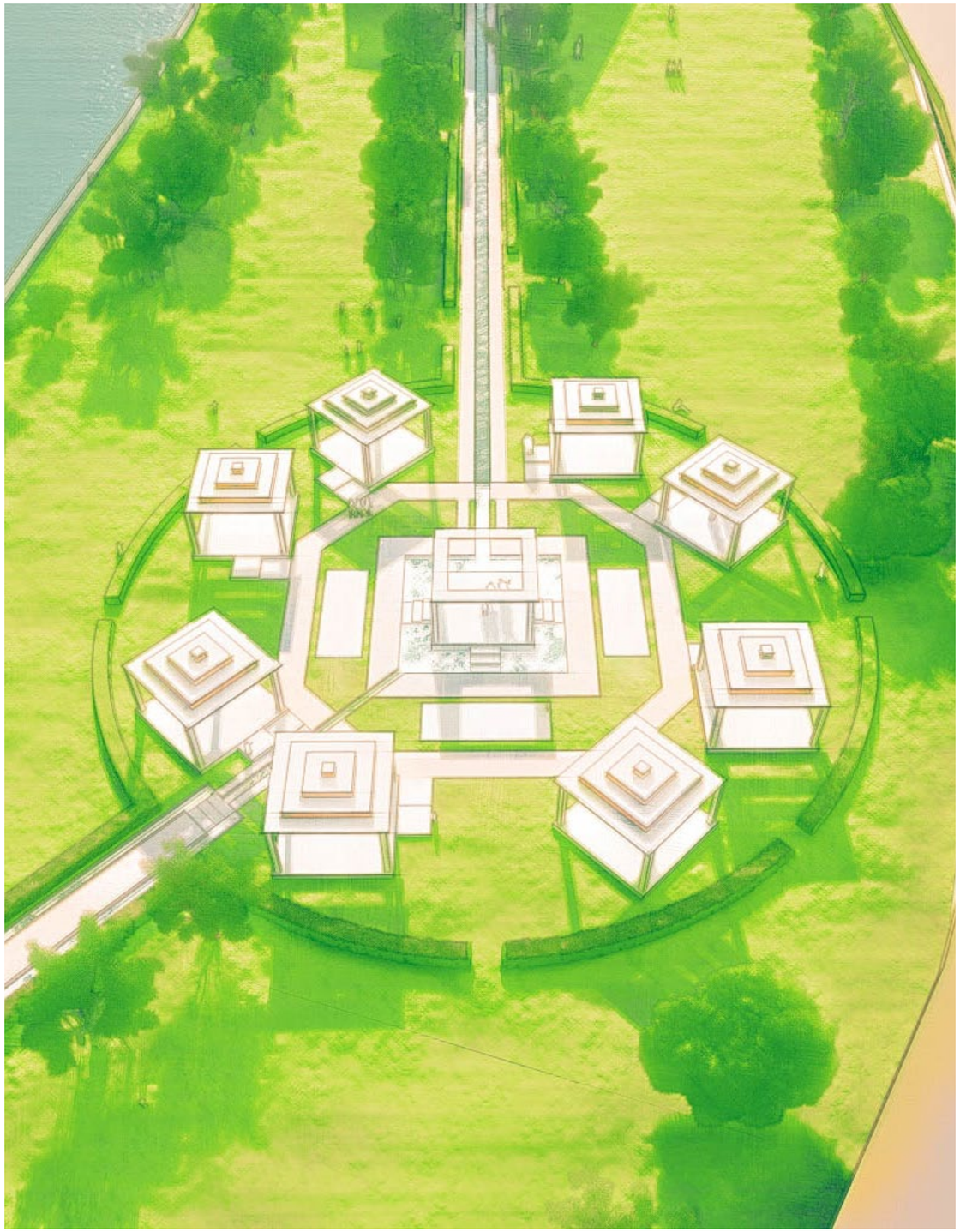


	FORM	MATERIAL	TYPOLOGY	SPACES
5 - Dairy & Tannery District	Long-span barns	Brick, red oxide, dung-polish	Cow barns, tannery pens, wash courts	Cattle ramp, discussion gallery











Glossary

Language

Thamizh – Tamil
Thamizhagam – Tamil Nadu of the Sangam era
Sangam – Assembly of learned poets who critiqued and curated the Sangam Literature
Sangam literature – Literary corpus of Thamizh culture of the Sangam era
Sangam Age – 3rd centuary BCE to 3rd centuary CE
Tinai – landscapes of Thamizhagam as per Tolkappiyam
Tolkappiyam – origin works of Thamizh (circa. 300 BCE, probably older) grammatics of the Thamizh language
Mater – water: elixir of life, amurdham (nectar)

Architecture

Palli – schools in Thamizhagam: usually the house of the teacher of the village: community aided
Padasala – Thamizh schools after Sanskritization
Poonga – garden
Mandapam – assembly spaces: usually columns and a solid slab covering its span
Chathiram – resthouses



thanksforreading.