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## Clearing backlog on top of to-do list

[Bella Jaisinghani](#) , TNN | Jul 25, 2012, 06.28AM IST MUMBAI: Twelve months have elapsed since the term of the previous [Mumbai](#)

[Heritage Conservation Committee](#)

expired last July. The unprecedented delay has caused a small mountain of proposals to pile up before the new panel that was set up on Saturday. Apart from micro-level decisions, the committee will have to address macro-level policy issues like drafting a new list of heritage regulations and devising ways to incentivise conservation by private owners.

Everybody from representatives of the [urban development](#) department to former panel members and heritage activists put clearing the backlog at the head of the new committee's to-do list. "That and the task of getting the revised heritage guidelines cleared by the state government," says outgoing chairman Dinesh Afzulpurkar.

In the absence of a functioning heritage committee it is the municipal commissioner who reserves the right to clear proposals, but given the busy profile of the job as well as the recent change of guard, this did not come into practice.

Meanwhile, the state has a wish list for the new panel as well. "The government expects the committee to devise ways of granting incentives to private owners who choose to conserve their old properties rather than destroy them. The previous committee had initiated the process of planning a heritage fund and that must be taken forward," says a senior UD official. However, a parallel proposal to fine those who damage or destroy heritage structures is not on the anvil.

The state has already said it would like the heritage committee to tread a balance between the city's need for conservation and development. "Most heritage buildings are located in south Mumbai and new infrastructure projects are coming up in that zone. The committee must curb its tendency to be overly enthusiastic, for this could jeopardise essential development in the name of heritage. Urban renewal calls upon us to take stock of crumbling, old buildings," the government official says. He recalls receiving complaints over neon signs installed by shops located in heritage buildings and says the conflict must be handled in a "sensitive manner".

Ironically, lovers of heritage have similar expectations from the government. "Mumbai has just 648 listed heritage buildings, which is barely 0.01% of the entire building stock, far lesser than other international cities. After the rules were diluted for Grade III buildings, we are left with barely 200-300. Remove government buildings from the list and you are left with a few anyway. Is conservation getting in the way of development or is it the reverse?" asks the member of an earlier panel.

**Times View:** Heritage panel has task cut out

That Mumbai has gone without a heritage committee for a year indicates the importance preservation of heritage has in our government's scheme of things. It also means the panel that takes charge now will begin with a backlog of files and issues. But that should not bog it down. To serve Mumbai's interests best, the new panel has to be authoritative enough to stop wanton destruction of heritage and sagacious enough to balance development demands with the conservation of the city's unique architectural history.