

# Learning From the Vanishing Built Heritage of Colonial Architecture (A case of Abbottabad-Pakistan)

Mir Wali, Shah/Azmat Ali, Khan/Waqar, Khattak/M. Fahmeed-Ullah, Shah\*

## Abstract

*Built Heritage is irreplaceable when it is at high risk; because culture cannot wait! The rapid urbanization is threatening the historic urban landscape and is making it increasingly vulnerable to natural hazards such as earthquake, Flooding, droughts and man-induced conflicts. These threats have obviously endangered the built heritage of colonial Architectural heritage in Abbottabad, once the garrison in British rule of India. In the early 20th century, Abbottabad became an important military cantonment. In October 2005 Abbottabad was devastated by the great earthquake, As a result most of built heritage became vanished, In order to preserve this valuable assets from vanishing which is the reflection of our past inherited from the British era in indo-Pakistan and then Pakistan.*

*Most of the built heritage of Abbottabad, once vanished, is inimitable and now what we have is to conserve for the future. This could be only possible through practical approaches for the sustainable development. These approaches ranging from mass awareness campaign regarding the protection of built heritage, National legislation for the its protection needs to be revisited as per Antiquities Act of Pakistan gives protection only to 75 years or older buildings and cultural landscapes. Well equipped and trained people acquired for the conservation of built heritage through conservation Manuals and guidelines, These Manuals will educate un-skilled people, explaining the importance of the built heritage and cultural landscapes. It also explains the techniques for the repair and upkeep of historic sites, which will make sure that during repairing or reconstruction, antiquity or originality of the building or site may not be destroyed.*

*In Pakistan, built heritage surrounded by the historic landscapes, Fragile and skillfully built towns like Abbottabad and Galliat are now in shambles, what remains of their original designs and buildings are gravely endangered after this recent earthquake. Architecturally and historically significant built heritage is now at high stake and needs proper consideration of Archeologists, Architects and structure Engineers to make sure of keeping its true identity by*

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\*Corresponding Author: e-mail -

*maintaining its glorious history of British Empire, its antiquity and for the blooming of cultural tourism industry in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Colonial Architecture, Built Heritage, Conservation, Urbanization, Legislation

## **Introduction**

This is the general phenomena that natural as well as man-made disasters affect the communities habitat, the human settlements is great relation to the past history which is culture and heritage, to understand the life style and culture of the community can only recognized through heritage i.e. buildings, whenever the disasters struck the community urban fabric as a result of the destruction major or partial damages occurred in buildings. The great earthquake 2005, not only vanished a lot of built heritage but also damaged the significant the urban landscapes and historical buildings generally in different part of Pakistan and specially in northern regions of Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa, Pakistan. This was a huge disaster ever occurred in the history of Pakistan. The city under intervention is Abbottabad of KPK, having fame for cultural landscape and eco-tourism named after Major; James Abbott, The city which is reflecting holistic urban landscapes. The past experiences show that after the catastrophe like earthquake and then after the human intervention in shape of NGO'S and foreign aid agencies had been done blunders while dealing the urban landscape. It's obvious that it'll cast negative impact on the urban historic culture of the communities habitat. In case of Abbottabad city surrounded of beautiful mountains and built Heritage, was one of the British-era Architecture needs to be protected and conserved for the future generations and it's the need to understand the cultural value for learning from the colonial. Architecture once flourished in the vicinity Abbottabad.

## **Abbottabad**

Geographical location of Abbottabad is nearby the Orash Valley lying between 34°09'N latitude and 73°13'E longitude at an altitude of 4,120 feet. To the north is the picturesque Kaghan Valley. The town of Abbottabad, under the British Raj, was the headquarters of the Hazara District during British rule of India. It was named after Major James Abbott who founded the town and district in January 1853 after the annexation of Punjab. He remained the first Deputy Commissioner of the Hazara district from 1849 until April 1853. Abbottabad is a city located in the Hazara region of the Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa province, in Pakistan. The city is at a distance of, 110 kilometers north of the capital, Islamabad. (Shah, MW. Pp.1-7)

## **Colonial Architecture in Abbottabad**

"A building is considered to be historic based on its aesthetic, historical, scientific or social value as a basis of cultural identity for past, present and future generation. For Pakistan most structures built prior to 1947 are considered historic." (Lari, Y. pp. 01)

Abbottabad is one of the colonies of the British era buildings since 1857. Most of the buildings were built by the British during their governance in Indo-Pak. After the earthquake 2005, most of the built heritage was either damaged or destroyed due to earthquake or due calamities like fire, flooding, droughts/climate affect. The breaking news after the earthquake, when Earth

quake Reconstruction and Re-habilitation Authority (ERRA) had taken the initiative of re-constructing the public buildings like Frontier house, Commissioners House and other public buildings partially destroyed during the earthquake, but it's really very shocking when the Authority's had make an attempt to vanish its true cultural identity of urban landscapes by replacing with erecting some sort of alien structures. Now the need is how to protect these historical buildings of colonial era on war footing bases, Heritage Foundation Pakistan, under the chair of Architect Yasmeen Lari, has taken the initiative to rehabilitate the colonial-era buildings of Abbottabad in its true identity ,for this she's tried to convince the high authority to understand the value of the heritage. In this connection, the first step was taken from prominent public buildings of colonial architecture Frontier House and Commissioner House Abbottabad.

### **Architects Intervention**

The most important thing is to understand that how to conserve legacy of a historical buildings. Experts are required to conserve. The architects always play vital role in the community development to make a sustainable society. Architects as a social worker often conscience about the culture /urban landscape and especially about the built environment. Before the initiation of Architect intervention in cultural buildings, it needs to devise some conservation strategies on the site and off the site.

### **Action to be taken**

It is important to undertake the blueprint for the line of action in order to streamline the overall conservation activity on priority basis that is triage, in this whole cycle of conservation expertise like conservators, Archeologists and Architects each and every one's has a room to play their role as per their experience and expertise.

### **Undertaking Historic Conservation for the protection of vanishing built heritage**

#### **1. Methodology**

#### **Frontier House and Commissioner House Abbottabad**

##### **1.1. Introduction**

Frontier House and commissioner House was among top priority in the list of built heritage to be conserved after the great earthquake 2005, As a result of prilimery visual survey, lot of cracks and material decay were identified, and Frontier house and commissioner house are the unique examples of British Era Architecture. (Figure. 1 & 2)



Fig. 1: Frontier House Abbottabad  
Source: Author

## 1.2. Research

It is important to trace back the history of these two prominent buildings and it could be only possible by producing the historical documents and maps. It would be convenient for the expertise like Architects and Archeologists to carry out the initial damage and then to sort out the practical approach for the conservation of two significant built heritage. Before undergone through this exercise, its utmost important to understand its original identity through its materials, construction techniques, form and spaces. The historical research enable us how to bring back the earthquake affected heritage into its original identity. For this we undergone through the study of old documents and historical background of buildings to make possible solutions.



Fig. 2: Commissioner House Abbottabad  
Source: Author

## 1.3. Condition Survey

It is important to know exactly about the existing condition of affected building before undergone through the conservation. During this exercise of conservation, we use three types of condition survey i.e. good, worse and completely damaged.

The visual survey of twin buildings is all done through the help of Heritage Architects. Each and every technical aspect of the buildings was checked during the condition survey to ensure the safety and authenticity of built heritage. The buildings were examined in details. The Architectural and Archeological features were identified by Archeologists during the condition survey. Plans and sectional details, elevation, and roof details were documented during the survey as well as primary and secondary elements and technical aspects were studied to sort out treatment. (Figure. 3)



#### **1.4. Monitoring**

It is worthy to monitor the overall exercise from conception to completion, so that no misshape would happened before undertaking the conservation work.

#### **1.5. Non-Destructive Techniques**

To make sure that none of the destructive technique incorporated in this exercise to avoid any harm to the built heritage that later became a cause of vanishing. In this connection, Different methodology and conservation techniques were utilized on the bases of our pervious experiences while handling any conservation work.

#### **1.6. Access to Voids and Strom water drainage**

The next crucial step in conservation was to open the roof in order to identify the voids which later on might be become a serious problem in storm water management. In frontier house the access were difficult to roof due to very worse condition of the roof because of dampness in wooden materials as the structure is surrounded by heavy tall trees around the buildings. The roof was repaired in its original condition through the help of expertise. (Figure. 4)



Fig. 4: Frontier House Back Side View  
Source: Author

#### **1.7. Investigation**

Conservation is itself a helical process, The information which we collected during the research and condition survey were efficiently incorporated , but some information are still acquired which could be done through the investigation i.e. to visit archives and such other places where we can trace the footprints of colonial Architecture.

#### **1.8. Opening Up**

While executing the opening up, it is precautionary that Extensive removal of materials needs to be avoided. The objective was only to investigate and determine the nature of damage and to evaluate the percentage of risk, which might cause a threat to these historical buildings.

#### **1.9. Opening the roof from above**

The assessment for the roof of these buildings was being made in order to identify the nature of damaged occurred due to the earthquake and weather condition. It was consider to accessing the roof details of the historical building and to sort out the possible solution for retaining its originality without taking any risk. (Figure. 5 & 6)

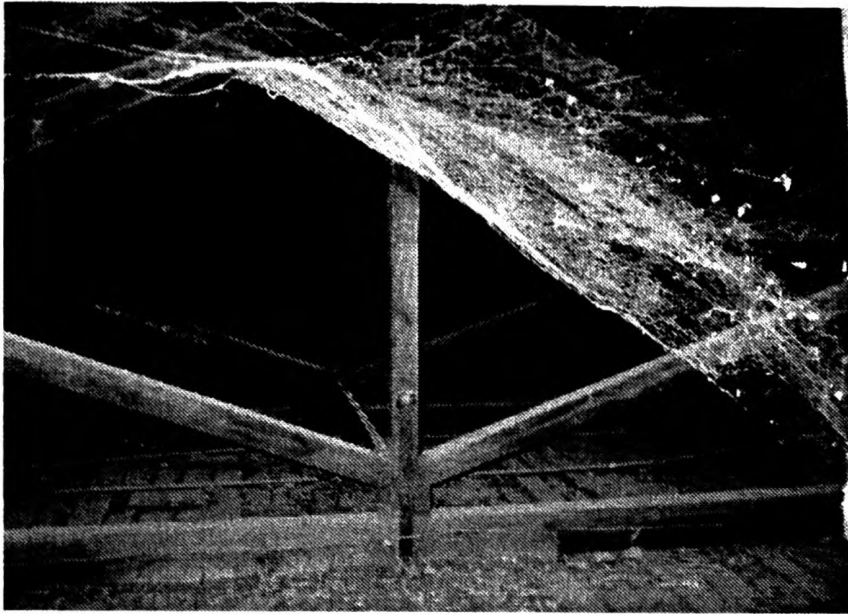


Fig. 5: Commissioner House Roof Inside  
Source: Author



Fig. 6: Commissioner House Roof Top  
Source: Author

### 1.10. Removal of Finishes

For proper investigation of built heritage which is at stake, we were supposed to remove the herbs/sherbs on the walls and on its roof very carefully according to the experts' opinions and advice. While removing the finishing from the walls, proper consideration needs to be taken. In given figure (7) the window shown was completely damaged and due to the vegetation on the wall surface, unnecessary plants were removed from the whole building to clean and secured from the further seepage and keep the originality of the buildings maintained. (Figure. 7)

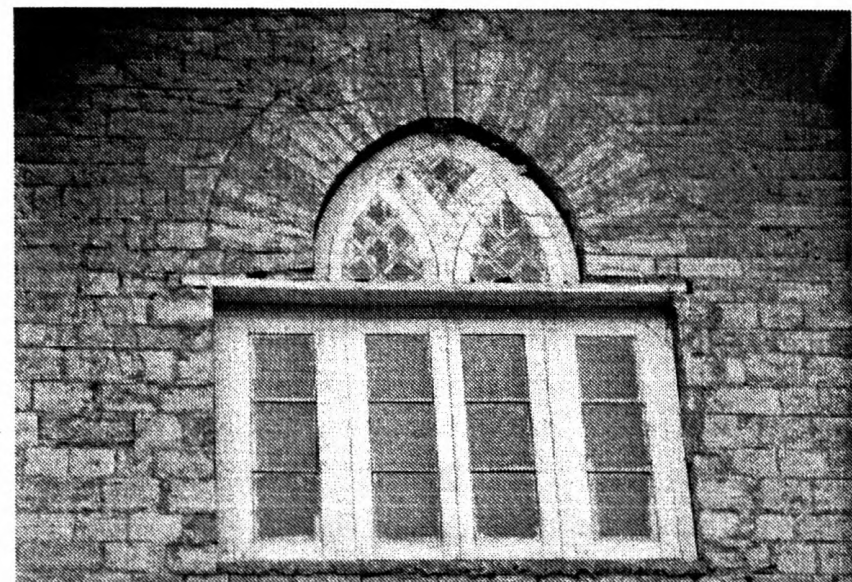


Fig. 7: Frontier House Window  
Source: Author

### 1.11. Recoding information

Recording is one of the important aspects of conservation, without proper documentation, this exercise seems to be incomplete. From our previous experiences in dealing heritage sites and buildings, recording and documentation plays a vital role in the transfer of message from present to future generations. The details drawing of the built heritage regarding the conservation undertaken should be recorded. The extent of opening up should be recorded on the drawings along with photography of conditions before and after the intervention. Especially the materials that were taken out should be stacked and re-used whenever possible. All objects should be labeled and referenced according to drawings, so that they can be accurately re-produced. (Figure. 8 & 9)

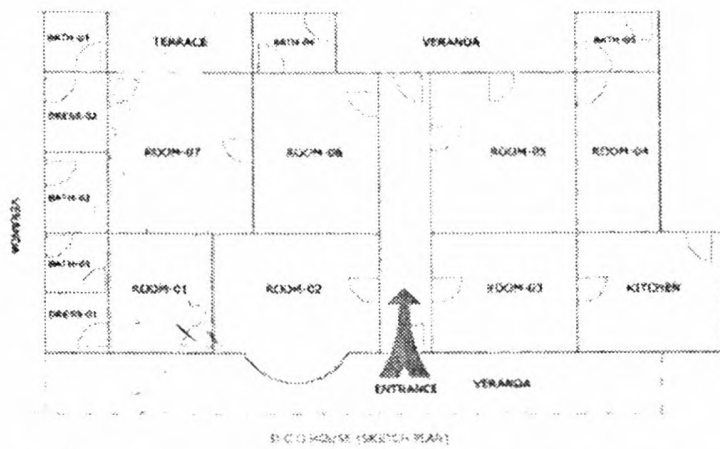


Fig. 8: Commissioner House Initial Plan Sketch  
 Source: Author

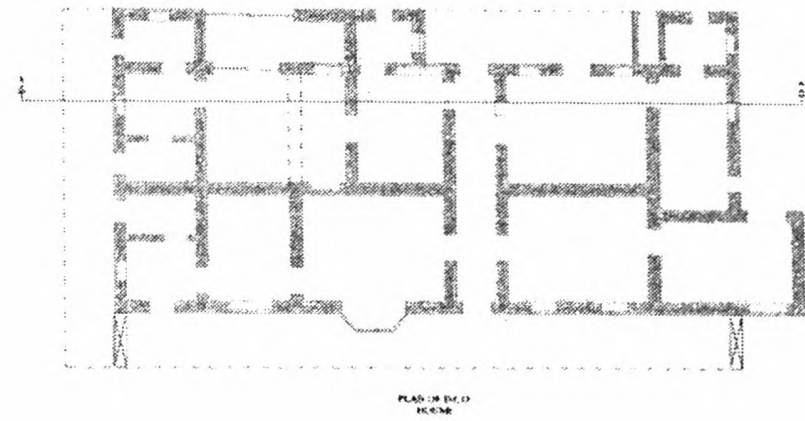


Fig. 9: Commissioner House AutoCAD Plan  
 Source: Author

### 1.12. Precaution measures

Precautionary measures in the conservation work are of prime importance and before undergone through the conservation of Historic buildings that have been not in use for some time and are in condition of highly deteriorated state. It is important to use all safety tools, equipments and methodology before enter into the building. (Figure. 10 & 11)

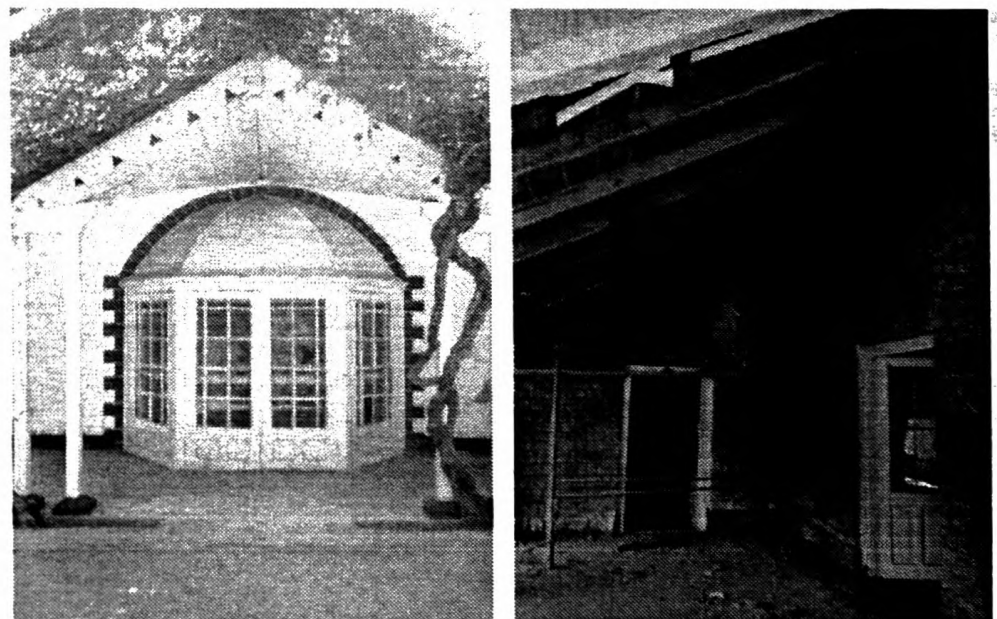


Fig. 10 & 11: Commissioner House Front and Back Entrance. Source: Author

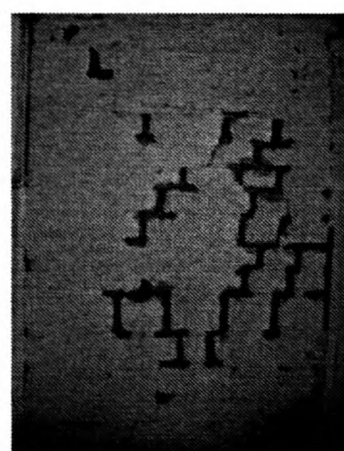
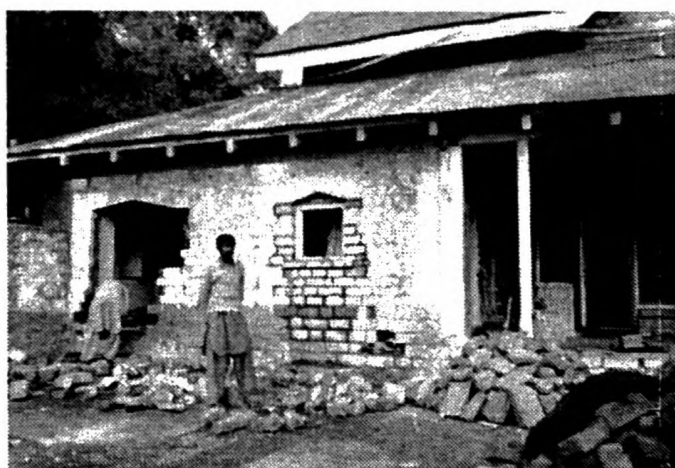


Fig. 12, 13 & 14: Frontier House Inside and Outside View during and after work. Source: Author



Fig. 15 & 16: Frontier House Back Side View and damaged wooden handrail  
Source: Author

## Conclusion

The focus of this paper is to highlight the importance of built heritage which is at high risk to all stake holders. The aim is how to safeguard these vanishing built flourished in British era now termed as colonial Architecture. The conservation of frontier house and commissioner house at Abbottabad was not less than a challenge in that time of crises arose after the great earth quake 2005, Conservation expertise and awareness about the importance of heritage was lacking but with passage of time all gone well, As authors initiate the project from these two prominent historically significant public buildings. At last but not the least the conservation of the said built heritage started in the supervision of Architect Yasmeen Lari, Chairperson of Heritage Foundation Pakistan (HFP), in collaboration of Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA). After the successful completion of this project, we then accomplish the conservation of more than seventy built heritage buildings. The conservation was undertaken by using the guidelines manual of heritage with the consultation of expertise followed by Hague protocols and legislation.

Disasters are the attached asserts with the human life but the precautionary measurements are important to be taken in view of existing built heritage which is at high risk. It links the present with the past and then with future generations about their life style and settlement. Heritage once vanished cannot be replaced as culture cannot wait!

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