

“Conservation Challenges and Architectural Significance of Chinar House, Abbottabad: A Case Study of Colonial-Era Heritage”

Sundas Mahmood¹, Ar. (Dr.) Adnan Anwar²

¹ MPhil Scholar, Hazara University Mansehra Email: Sundasmehmood99@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Department of Architecture Hazara University Manshera

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Abstract

In the face of rapid urbanization and modernization, historic structures such as Chinar House in Abbottabad represent the fading architectural legacy of colonial-era Pakistan. This research investigates the architectural characteristics, historical background, and current conservation challenges of Chinar House a prominent example of British colonial residential architecture. Utilizing primary documentation through site surveys, photographic analysis, and architectural drawings, alongside secondary research, the study highlights the physical degradation due to natural and human-induced factors. Key conservation issues identified include structural cracks, material decay, roof damage, and aesthetic deterioration. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for restoration strategies and emphasizes the need for integrated heritage conservation policies at the local and national levels.

Introduction

As time changes, the need for various spaces decreases, leading some buildings to become abandoned or damaged. Historical buildings play a crucial role in shaping social identity, so it is important to adapt them for new uses to preserve their significance (Ma, 2025). Adapting existing buildings for new functions isn't a recent idea; historically, structures have been modified to serve different purposes without major issues, such as during the Renaissance or the French Revolution (Stas, 2007). In Pakistan, the architectural heritage is eminent.

The British established the framework for many cities, constructing significant buildings and infrastructure while employing their architectural styles but using local materials. Preservation efforts aim to define a building's original values and ensure they remain relevant for future generations (Avrami, 2016). Sustainable urban development, involving low carbon emissions and building rejuvenation, can help extend the life of structures, reduce waste, and provide social and economic advantages (Ajirotutu et al., 2024).

Conservation involves activities to prevent damage and manage change, focusing on preserving cultural and natural heritage through legislation, planning, and documentation (Keitsch, 2020). Various challenges arise in the knowledge and management of historic sites, requiring careful attention to authenticity, construction materials, history, and architectural qualities. Preservation practices, rooted in a European tradition, continue to evolve, emphasizing sustainability through the reuse of structures and materials while performing minimal intervention. Effective conservation requires specialized skills and techniques to protect these valuable historical buildings (Watt & Colston, 2016).

A Comparison of Abbottabad's Various Architectural Styles

British Colonial Architecture

British colonial architecture style was both simple and beneficial. The combination of local and foreign elements was typically the case. It is more frequently seen in museums, tribunals, railway stations, cantonments, schools, churches, universities, and scaffolds. The British colonial style is recognized and relies on well-balanced designs with gable roofs, pitch roofs, shades, and regular columns (Zulfiqar, Anwar, & Khan, 2020).

In several colonial towns now located in Pakistan. The British built military cantonments with housing for officers and their families. Cantonments frequently have straight roads and are located in residential areas. The roads lined with trees faced the bungalow. The British often built churches in the cantonments that would not look out of place in England. (Cavendish, 2006)

Mid-1800s English Raj employed the colonial style of architecture. Pakistan, which was a developed nation, was a key component of British India, which lasted for more than a century as a crucial element of the British Empire. That was thought about in the middle of the 1930s, after the United Kingdom wholeheartedly granted the state its independence in 1947.

British architecture is characterized by its straight lines and curves, its use of black and white, its combination of delicacy and hardness, its structure and capacity, its erection and heading, its depth and popularity, its modernity and vernacular, its locality and universality, its intensity, its elegance, and its sustainability.

Islamic Architecture

Islamic architecture is characterized by a variety of arches, paired windows with a focal point, the use of brick and stone in construction, polychrome tiles, intricate cut plasterwork, calligraphy, Islamic geometric design, and other features (Simalullah, Tajudeen, & Jothilakshmy).

The era of great artistic innovation is characterized by Islamic workmanship. Pakistani Islamic architecture, commonly referred to as Islamic design, has Persian, Christian, and Indian origins. In particular, the architecture and designs were primarily influenced by the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires (Naz, 2024).

The mosque, the center of Islamic culture and society, is the most important building type in Islamic architecture. It is not just a place for worship, but also a place to discuss topics relevant to everyday life.

Muslims gather at the mosque, or masjid in Arabic, to pray. A mosque is essentially a "spot of submission," and among the most well-known aspects of this Islamic architecture are towering minarets, enormous open courtyards, and high vaults supported by columns. The four main features that nearly all mosques share are the minaret (tower), the mihrab (specialty), the qubba (arch), and the sahn (patio).

Architecture of the Sikhs

The majority of Sikh architecture combines Hindu and Muslim elements (Elgemaiey, 2021). The most alluring feature of Gurdwaras is their scalloped or, on occasion, simple hemispherical vault (75% of a circle). The parapet is mostly decorated with turrets, crenellations, and tiny domes, while the vaults are other stunning elements in the sanctuary's four corners. The outside walls were made intriguing and appealing by using metal or copper sheathing. In their design, they borrowed inspiration from the Mughals and integrated the Pietra Dura, reflect work, themes of winged creatures, anima, cornices, and frescoes. Sikh (Kathari) impacted this area for many years. Similar to the Mughals, Sikhs used bricks, lime-mortar with lime or gypsum mortar, lime-concrete, and stone (Kabir, Abbas, & Hayat, 2017).

The Sikh community was the city's upper and trade lesson; they ran the exchange. There were a lot of Ghurdawars built by Sikhs during their time, and they were a very religious people. Their houses, Havelis, and religious sites were built to be distinct from those of Muslims. They erected their structures in metropolitan locations as well as throughout the rural area. They constructed Havelies in the urban area, which are two or three stories high. Their architecture is an example of the flawless Sikh architecture found in this area.

British Colonial Architecture in Abbottabad

The British influence in Abbottabad began in 1853 with James Abbott's arrival, replacing Sardar Chate Sing, the previous ruler. The British developed the city's infrastructure, building government buildings like the Town Hall, courts, churches, and roads using local materials. Their architectural style differed from Muslim and Sikh designs, focusing on functionality without decorative elements. Many colonial structures still exist in Abbottabad, such as the DCO Bungalow and St. Luke Church. Efforts are underway to recognize these heritage sites as tourist destinations (Shamraez, Iqbal, & Khan, 2023).

Importance of conservation in Pakistan

The preservation of Pakistan's historical buildings has both theoretical and real importance. Architecturally, these structures are physical connections to the past, showcasing the cultural identity, skill, and technical advancement of past generations. Preserving them is imperative not only for historical memory but also for sustainable use adaptation to satisfy current requirements. While keeping their original architectural character, restoration projects seek to protect these aging buildings from additional deterioration brought about by human neglect and environmental elements. Given Pakistan's architectural heritage ranging from ancient civilizations to Mughal and colonial eras, conservation is crucial in teaching next generations about regional aesthetics, traditional construction methods, and design. These buildings are documents still alive of our communal history and identity, not simply relics. Therefore, preserving cultural continuity and fostering a greater awareness of Pakistan's rich architectural heritage depend on architectural preservation (Mehmood & Jan, 2022).

Selected Building (Chinar House):

Chinar House (History and Folklore)

Commander of the Fifth Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force), Colonel Alfred Fitzhugh constructed Chinar House, also known as 3 Club Road, in Abbottabad. Suggesting he did not particularly like this beautiful spot, he seems to have left the battalion and perhaps Abbottabad in September 1885.

It is as though a plague descended upon Colonel Alfred Fitzhugh's residence: the perfect Chinar House in Abbottabad gained notoriety for a fictitious tale of murder and romance.

After becoming a major general, Alfred Fitzhugh retired from service and went back to England with his better half, Cecilia Jane. Cecilia Jane went into depression following a surgical operation in March 1911. During her convalescence in Folkestone by the sea, she learned how to strangle herself with the shade string in her locked chamber. According to the South Eastern Gazette of March 21 of that year, she was found 'dead' after passing by a window.

Fitzhugh lived to be 92 years old. In February 1929, he was buried in Streat, a Sussex village. He was born in a same city.

Regardless, at 3 Club Road, Alfred Fitzhugh left behind a long-lasting tale. There was an artist in Pakistan named Hall Bevan Pitman in the 1950s. He is well-known for having portrayed a diverse selection of representative officials of independent Pakistan. At Abbottabad, his wife continued to reside until the 1980s.

The Fitzhughs' daughter, who is nameless, was said to have practiced the piano in the renovated salon, according to Mrs. Pitman. At this moment, two army officers enchanted the lovely young lady. O'Brien was in a Sikh regiment, while one was given a British regiment. Despite being progressively inclined to O'Brien, the young woman was conflicted. With regard to the colonel, he would prefer the British regiment's man as his son-in-law.

Every time they were allowed, the two fans would see Miss Fitzhugh in the living room on a regular basis. A terrible event occurred at some time. It is said that O'Brien and the young woman were shot and killed after a heated and tumultuous argument.

There are currently two versions of events. It is believed that the colonel shot the couple. While there is no doubt that O'Brien was killed by the colonel, the young lady did it herself. She was clearly becoming more drawn to the dead young officer, much to the chagrin of her father.

The home was said to have remained deserted for ten years after the terrible fatalities and Fitzhugh's departure. After that, it changed hands several times until the Tarin family acquired it shortly after independence in exchange for real estate that was left behind in Simla. Furthermore, the tale of the extraordinary begins here.

Therefore, the proprietor of this building stated on that particular night that the house was surrounded by piano music coming from the parlor, but we cannot be certain if previous residents ever shared this information. In fact, they said they heard the music throughout the 1950s. Earlier tenants grew tired of the music and other sounds around 1957.

But we don't know if that will happen. If the house were to go, another portion of our accumulated history would be permanently lost.

Architectural Description of Chinar House, Abbottabad

Chinar House, situated in the scenic colonial quarter of Abbottabad, is a fine yet deteriorating example of British colonial residential architecture in northern Pakistan. Designed in a vernacular adaptation of the English country house style, the structure exhibits defining elements such as gables, bay windows, and a sloping, oak-pitched roof with low dormer windows. While the core architectural vocabulary aligns with typical English domestic design, Chinar House incorporates regionally appropriate adaptations most notably, the veranda that runs along the entire front elevation and continues along the eastern side. In the British climate, such a feature would be considered superfluous; however, in Abbottabad's context, it provides necessary shading and ventilation in response to the summer sun and monsoon rain.

Behind the main building lies a series of ancillary structures: a linear row of small rooms that may have once accommodated servants or traveling guests, and a high-roofed, dilapidated byre (a cowshed or barn-like structure), largely concealed by a mature cedar tree that still dominates the rear courtyard. These outbuildings are spatially separated from the main house, reflecting the colonial practice of maintaining distance between service areas and the primary living quarters.

The building rests on a raised stone plinth and is accessed via wooden steps, which originally led to the attic or a loft space but have since been modified to serve as an internal parlor. The façade is defined by its symmetrical composition, punctuated by timber-framed bay windows, decorative eaves boards, and slender yet slightly ornamented columns supporting the veranda roof. The

colonial history of the building is reflected in many brick chimneys, which also echo the formerly utilized fireplaces inside. For the main walls, merging local stone masonry with wood structural members and joinery reveals a hybrid construction approach very popular in the area and time. Chinar House exhibits significant material and structural degradation even if elegant in form. Cracks abound in load-bearing walls; roof tiles have slipped or fallen off; and the wood veranda railings and stairs indicate rot and termite damage. Originally a gorgeous feature, the dormer windows have suffered as a result of prolonged exposure and apathy. Still, many unique architectural elements survive, presenting priceless data on Hazara region colonial-era building techniques.

Chinar House serves as a legacy as well as a resource: a disintegrating yet instructive example of local colonial design appropriate for a sub continental setting. Its design and spatial arrangements provide a lens through which to grasp the socio-cultural and ecological adjustments implemented under the British presence in Abbottabad. Preserving such buildings advances architectural history as well as broadens our knowledge of hybrid colonial urbanism in northern Pakistan.

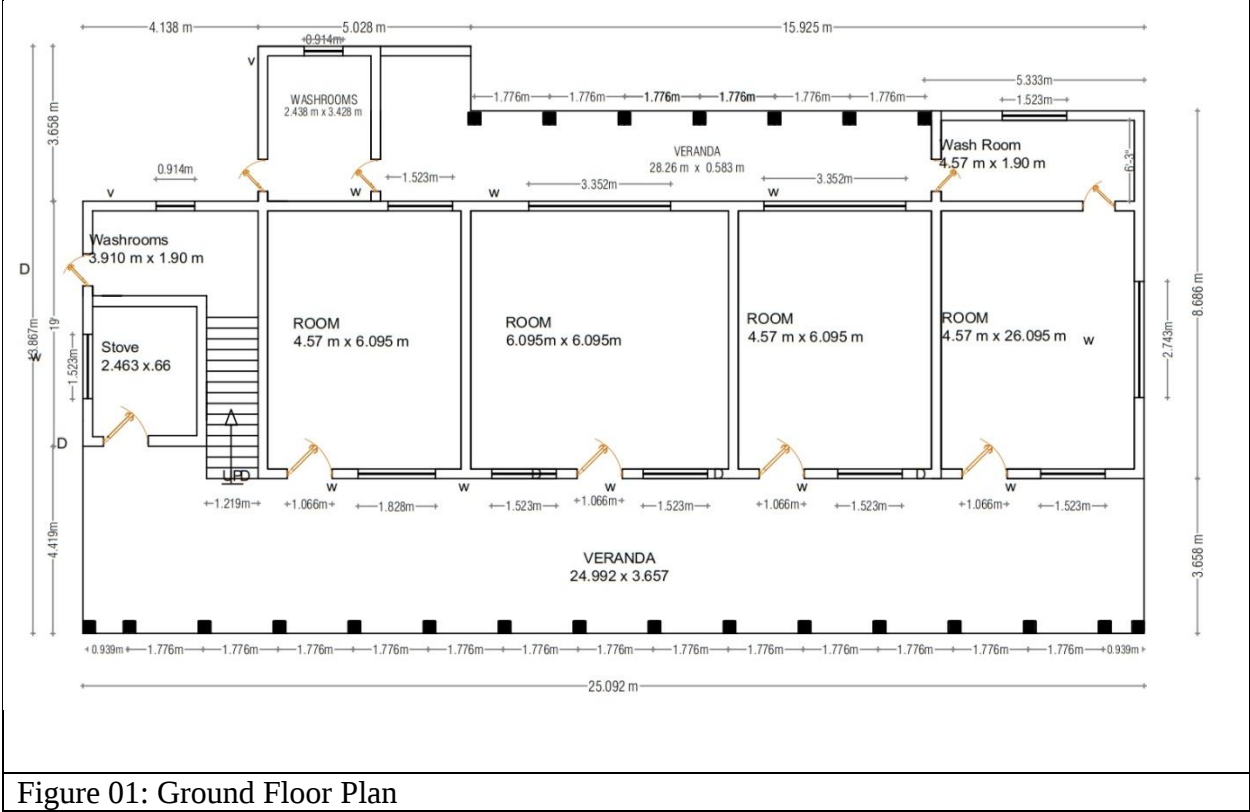


Figure 01: Ground Floor Plan

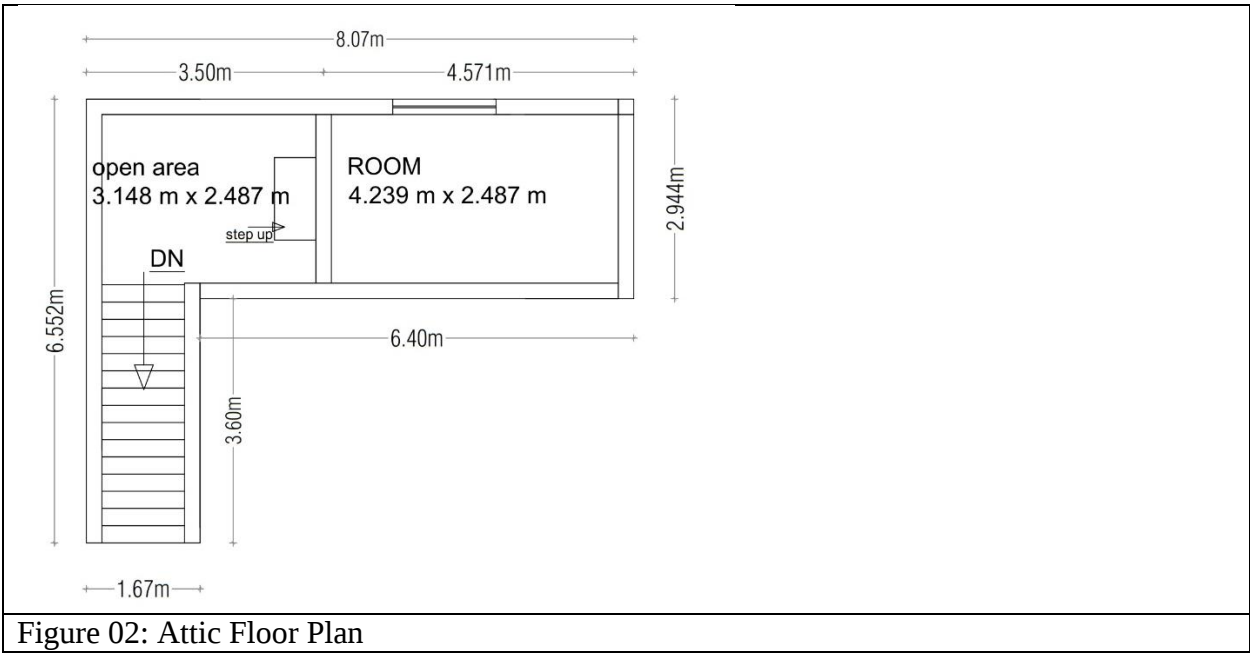


Figure 02: Attic Floor Plan

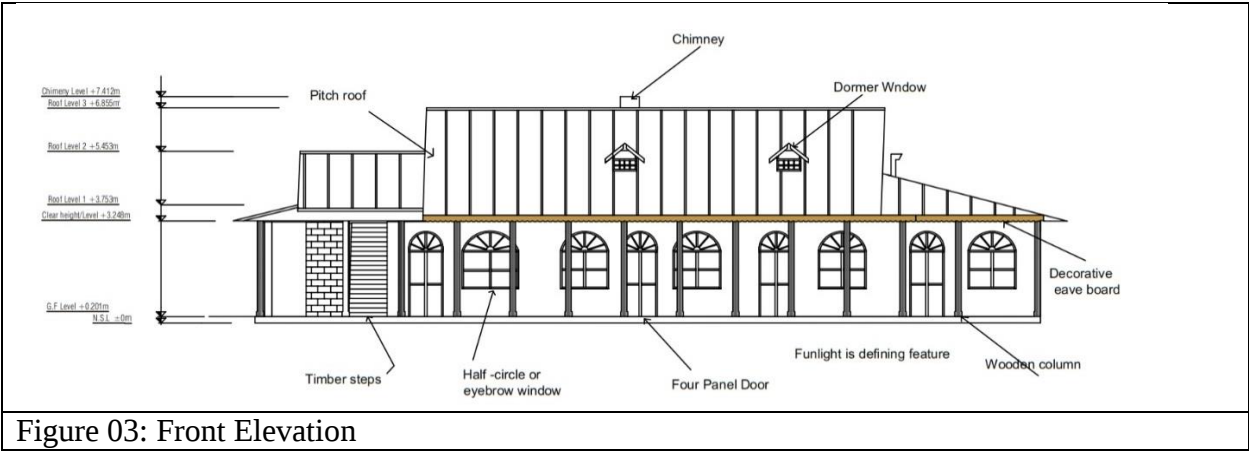


Figure 03: Front Elevation

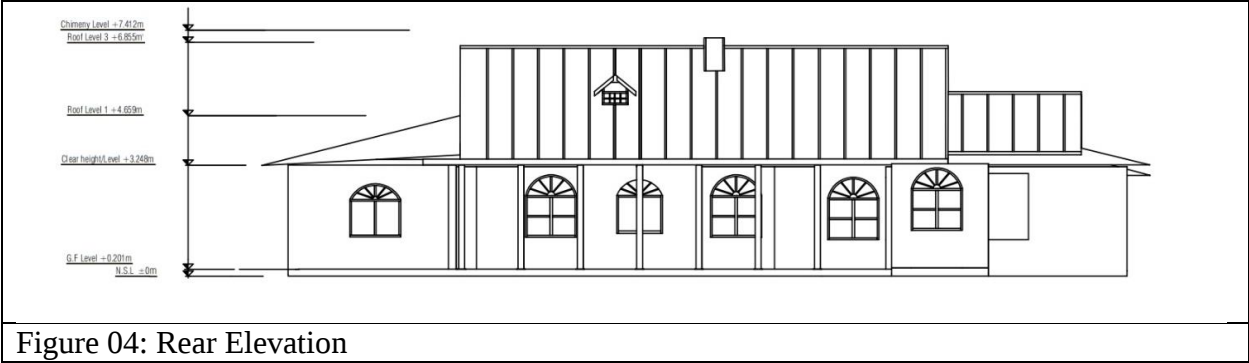


Figure 04: Rear Elevation

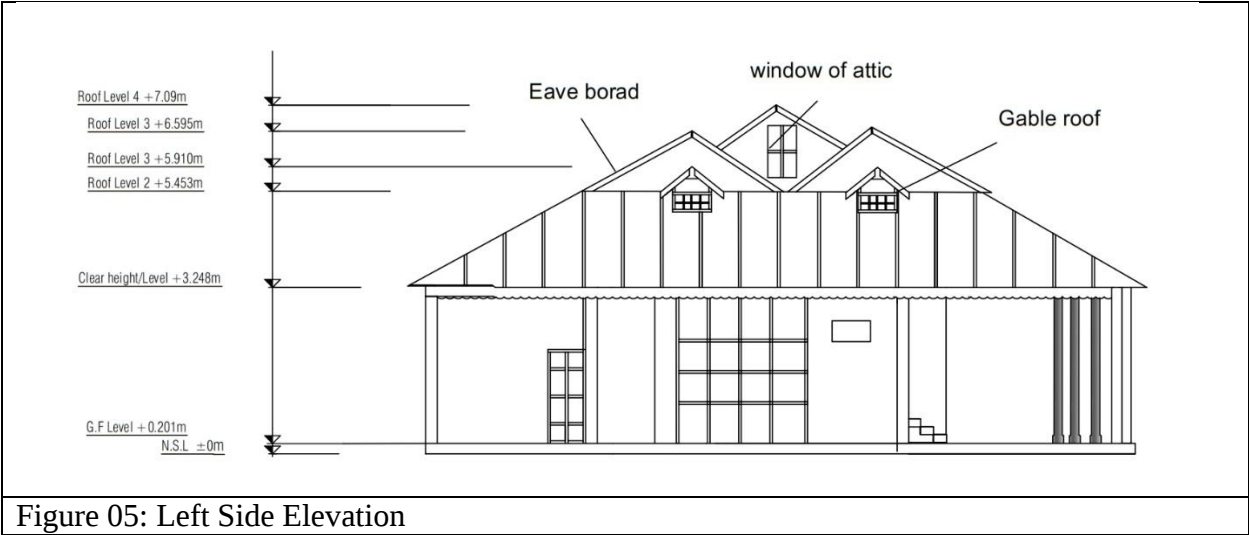


Figure 05: Left Side Elevation

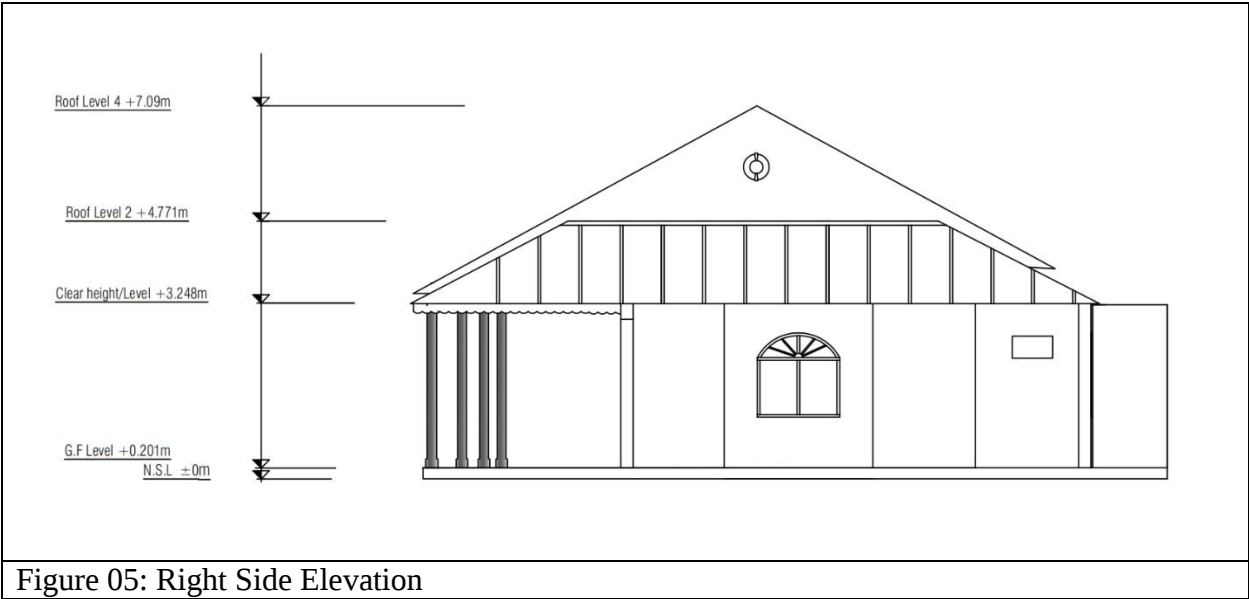
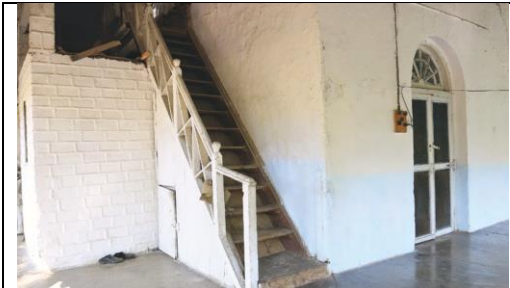


Figure 05: Right Side Elevation

	
Figure 06: Wooden Staircase and Arched Doorway	Figure 07: Front View and Pitched Roof
	
Figure 08: Right Side View of the Building	Figure 09: Rear Side View of the Building
	
Figure 10: Building Detail	Figure 11: Distortion in the Building
	
Figure 12: View from Outside	

Research Aim:

To document, analyze, and propose conservation solutions for Chinar House

Principles of Conservation

Conservation of architectural heritage is guided by a set of internationally recognized principles that aim to preserve the historical, cultural, and material integrity of historic buildings. The Venice Charter (1964), formally known as the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, is one of the most important papers in the field. Adopted by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), the Venice Charter provides fundamental principles still at the core of conservation programs everywhere.

One of the core views of the Charter is preserving authenticity, the idea that old buildings should be maintained devoid of falsification or change of their original character. The charter emphasizes that all actions should respect the historical value, architectural fabric, and environment of the structure. Except in rare circumstances, it discourages repair and instead promotes documentation before intervention, therefore ensuring all changes are recorded for later reference.

Minimum intervention, which calls for the least feasible physical change required to ensure the stability and use of the construction, is one central concept derived from these ideas. This approach first favors reversibility, therefore any future new add-ons or repairs should be removable without damaging the present structure. The goal is to extend the life of a historic structure without compromising its historic integrity or visual harmony.

Considering neglect, urbanization, and poor restorations impacting many historic sites including Chinar House, the ideas made in the Venice Charter and the theory of Minimal intervention offer a harmonic and environmentally friendly framework. Accepting the realistic realities of material

degradation, environmental exposure, and evolving urban needs, they support conservation techniques sensitive to historical significance.

First stabilizing the construction and weather protection with traditional materials and techniques wherever possible, then applying these ideas to Chinar House. Ensuring that any alterations or additions honor the architectural value. Following such universally accepted standards will allow preservation efforts to save the authenticity and instructional worth of historical buildings for future generations.

Previous Works on Colonial Heritage and Conservation in Abbottabad

Recent research on Pakistani colonial history especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has highlighted growing concern about the deterioration and destruction of historic monuments brought on by hurried construction. Lack of maintenance, poor policy implementation, and urbanization. Emphasizing the architectural and historical importance of Abbottabad's colonial buildings, Zulfiqar, Anwar, and Khan (2020) note their own aesthetic features and advocate their be maintained as part of a larger heritage tourism program. Their studies show how these ignored structures could become priceless cultural artifacts if integrated into environmentally friendly urban planning. Shah et al. (2019) also stress the urgent need of awareness, competent conservation experts, and more strict legislative action to protect these buildings from encroachment and natural decay. Aurangzeb Khan and Shakirullah Khan (2017) present a complete typological examination of colonial-era structures in Abbottabad, demonstrating the fusing of European and local designs and how vulnerable these structures are in light of human-caused and natural threats. Taken together, these studies reveal that although Abbottabad's colonial structures are quite valuable architecturally, methodical conservation efforts especially for abandoned residential structures like Chinar House are badly needed. Needed through documentation, policy changes, and community involvement.

Condition Assessment and Conservation Issues of Chinar House

Chinar House, once a stunning colonial mansion in Abbottabad, is plainly decaying after decades of disregard, environmental exposure, and uncontrolled changes. A comprehensive condition report through on-site inspections and photographic documentation, examination uncovers several structural, material, aesthetic, and environmental problems threatening the architectural integrity of the structure. The results are presented as follows:

Structural Issues

The structure reveals evident structural damage especially in its foundation and wall systems. Exterior masonry walls exhibit evident cracks, especially near to load-bearing corners, implying maybe foundation settlement or side movement resulting from earth movement. Another major concern is roof damage; some areas of the angled oak roof have sagged or partially collapsed, permitting water ingress and compromising the wood trusses. Internal indications of floor settlement include uneven heights and creaking wooden floorboards, probably brought on by long-term moisture exposure and deterioration of the supporting joists.

Material Deterioration

Material disintegration abounds. Visible signs of rot and termite infestation are present in the timber elements, veranda columns, staircases, window frames exhibiting considerable deterioration. Particularly close to windows and roof intersections, where dampness has remained uncontrolled, the plaster on outside and inside walls is peeling. Stone surfaces used in the foundation and sections of the wall base have eroded, revealing crumbling along joints and a powdery surface texture a result of persistent weathering and the lack of protective coating or maintenance.

Aesthetic and Functional Degradation

The building also lost significant artistic appeal. Concealing architectural features and contributing to abandonment feeling, the original paint has flaked off or vanished. Important decorative elements like eaves boards, balustrades, and molded decoration have either fallen apart or totally vanished. From a functional point of view, components such windows and doors are warped or broken, making some areas of the house hazardous or unsuitable for usage. The once-unique veranda seems unstable as columns turn and foundation supports are damaged.

Human and Environmental Factors

Chinar House has suffered from both human neglect and environmental pressures. Encroachments and vandalism have harmed the grounds; some portions of the backyard are informally repurposed;

and garbage is piling up everywhere the residence is situated. Moisture attack has accelerated material deterioration and thus created conditions for biotic growth on wall and wooden elements, especially via damaged roof sections and poor drainage. The lack of routine upkeep or conservation monitoring has allowed these issues to increase with time, pushing the structure to the verge of irreparable damage.

Chinar House is now at a crossroad where quick preservation initiatives could assist to preserve much of its historical and architectural value. Though severe, structural and material flaws come still under the ambit of remedial conservation provided they are treated with great care and skill. In order to ensure both structural integrity and historical accuracy, repair projects have to start by stabilizing the structure, preventing any water infiltration, and employing appropriate materials for fixes.

Discussion

Chinar House's deteriorating condition is a clear sign of the bigger trend of neglect of conservation in Abbottabad and other comparable second-tier Pakistan towns. Though it has architectural significance and historical value, Chinar House like many other colonial-era structures suffers from lack of institutional focus, preventative maintenance, and public awareness. The degree of structural and material damage discovered in this study reveals a systemic failure in addition to the physical aging of the structure. Chinar House perfectly captures regional residential colonial design. Reflecting the architectural value of like bungalows, its pitched roof, dormer windows, large veranda, and hybrid building techniques, mixing local stone and wood with British spatial design, circuit homes and government official residences constructed under British rule. Observed here deterioration patterns including timber rot, plaster failure, and structural instability correspond with results from research on other buildings of the same period in Mountain settlements like Murree and Abbottabad. This underlines the necessity of organized instead of individual conservation strategies that address the typical deficiencies of this style of architecture.

Losing such structures has wider consequences beyond the disappearance of particular buildings. Physical reminders of the architectural, cultural, and political events that have formed the identity of northern Pakistan, these colonial-era homes are actual connections. Their absence helps to erase urban character and historical continuity, therefore decreasing opportunities for cultural education, tourism, and heritage-based financial growth. Every demolished building also denotes a missed opportunity to involve the people with architectural skill and ecologically friendly building methods getting ever rarer.

Currently, there is no proof of active participation by local governments or heritage groups in the preservation or upkeep of Chinar House. Although the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has done good in repairing a few well-known places (e. g. , Gor Khatri, Sethi House in Peshawar), residential colonial structures in Abbottabad mostly unreported and beyond the scope of present heritage records. Chinar House does not seem to be included in official conservation plans of either the municipal authorities or any provincial heritage agency. This institutional gap, together with a dearth of inheritance legislation suited for urban residential buildings, keeps such buildings at risk.

Local stakeholders academic institutions, government agencies, and heritage groups must work together to create inclusive preservation policies, documentation initiatives, and adaptive reuse solutions in order to save Chinar House and comparable buildings. These processes guarantee the survival of neglected artifacts for next generations by turning them into educational, cultural, or community treasures.

Recommendations

Saving Chinar House calls for a multifaceted strategy that balances physical reconstruction with policy integration and adaptive reuse. Based on the condition evaluation and study, the following suggestions are made:

Specific Interventions

- To stop more damage and stabilize the building calls for fast technical action:
- Local, seasoned wood that matches the original in species, size, and finish should be used for timber replacement. Should incorporate structural strengthening and termite control.
- Using historically accurate materials like wooden shingles or clay tiles will help the pitched roof be re-roofed. Damaged dormer windows ought to be repaired with suitable joinery.
- Stone restoration at the wall base and foundation should entail painstaking cleaning, repointing of joints with lime mortar, and consolidation of worn sections using heritage-approved stone treatment techniques.

- All structural damages should be examined and grouted using non-invasive methods to guarantee structural integrity is maintained without erasing historic craftsmanship.

Material and Methodology Guidelines

Consistent with the idea of material authenticity, conservation efforts should give priority to traditional materials and methods. Modern conservation-compatible materials such lime-based mortars, breathable sealants, or treated hardwood may be employed where traditional methods are ineffective or unavailable, provided they do not harm the initial fabric or change the structure's character. To preserve architectural authenticity, every intervention must follow minimum intervention and reversibility criteria.

Adaptive Reuse Strategy

- Chinar House should be converted for a purpose that honors its historical significance while yet giving it fresh life to guarantee long-term sustainability and community involvement. Possible adaptive reuse strategies include:
- A local history museum or heritage interpretation center highlighting colonial-era architecture and Abbottabad's urban growth.
- Center for research and documents for architects, conservationists.
- Hosting little exhibitions, lectures, and workshops on historical preservation, a cultural hub or artists' residency.
- Such activities would promote public appreciation and community stewardship as well as provide financing for daily maintenance.

Policy and Institutional Recommendations

- In official heritage conservation plans, inclusion is necessary for the sustainable preservation of Chinar House. These institutional actions are advised:
- To designate Chinar House as a protected heritage site, contact the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- Promote a body in Abbottabad or the Hazara area to supervise heritage preservation in tertiary towns.
- Encourage local governments, Hazara University, and conservation groups to start documentation and awareness campaigns.
- Introduce planning restrictions or heritage regulations Abbottabad to stop illicit modifications or demolition of colonial-era structures.
- Adoption of these recommendations will not only safeguard the architectural and historical value of Chinar House but also help to create a bigger conservation culture in Pakistan's smaller towns where most heritage assets are threatened by invisibility and inactivity.

Conclusion

Chinar House is a monument with historical and architectural importance that represents British colonial presence in northern Pakistan. Offering insights into the spatial, material, and climatic reactions of a vanished era, its design reflects a combination of English domestic architecture and regional adaptation. Although it is falling apart, the building still preserves much of its original character gables, wooden verandas, bay windows, and pitched roofs that makes it an irreplaceable component of Abbottabad's historical urban environment.

Seen at Chinar House, the advanced degree of decay is not an aberration but rather indicative of the widespread neglect of colonial-era residential buildings in Pakistan's smaller cities. Without prompt and competent preservation efforts, the nation runs the risk of losing a great degree of its architectural heritage. Timely actions including structural stabilization, material restoration, adaptive reapplication, and legacy designation can transform Chinar House into a beacon of awareness and preservation in addition to preserving it.

Chinar House provides Pakistan's future conservation projects a priceless testing ground rather than just a repair initiative. Especially those outside major cities, its recovery might serve as a model for the preservation of similar colonial buildings across the country. Save Chinar House will help us save not only a building but also a historical narrative that continues to influence the cultural identity, urban memory, and architectural history of the region.

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