

Chittagong Court Building Complex: A Case for Conservation

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Abstract: The paper makes a case for historical conservation of Chittagong Court Building Complex (CCBC). The setting and the events that were witnessed by the CCBC, besides its architectural style, have drawn the attention of the activists leading to campaigning for its conservation. The study also extends its support to build it as a case for conservation. The study took a cue from a studio project conducted under the supervision of the authors; however, the end product is entirely based on the authors' observations. The various legal tools for conservation, phases of CCBC development and the impact it created on the city fabric are investigated. The objective of the study is to identify appropriate approaches for CCBC's conservation, thereby restoring it to its past glory that is fading out rapidly in recent years. The study came up with four approaches for restoring the complex thus making it a land mark of the city as before.

Key Words: Historic Conservation, City Fabric, Colonial Architecture, Landmark.

Introduction

Fairy Hills, also known as Parir Pahar or Kachari Pahar (Court Hill) located at a strategic point in the Chittagong city centre under mouza Batali of Kotwali Thana, houses the Chittagong Court Building Complex (CCBC). Being the focal point of administrative and judicial system of Chittagong Division CCBC is the nerve centre of the city. The CCBC complex presently accommodates District Judge Court, Divisional Commissioner's Office, District Commissioner's Office or Court, Metropolitan Magistrate's court besides other special courts, bar council and other relevant activities. The built area including the historic building is approximately 150,000 sft, but about 350,000 sft of built area is needed to accommodate properly all the existing functions. Therefore, there is a need for new

construction. According to Public Works Department (PWD) sources the extensions and additions to the building particularly the second storey in 1953, led to the structural deterioration of the building. Although by PWD the building was declared, in 1985, unstable and thus unsuitable for public use, the civil society or community overwhelmingly favoured its conservation. Restoring or Conserving buildings to their old uses or adapting them to new uses, and keeping a whole area of a city alive, are practised as long as buildings and cities have existed. Adaptive reuse or historic preservation or conservation process does not exclude change, demolition, reconstruction or even new construction. Without the ability to change, building or a city quarter would die. In this backdrop it is argued that desire and decision of the

stakeholders are sufficient to propose conservation of CCBC, keeping nature of use similar to the original one.

"It is ... no question of expedience or feeling whether we shall preserve the building of past time or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us". (Cantacuzino, 1989) We may not have to go that far in identifying the artefacts for conservation but there is no denying of the fact that we need to have some sort of continuity or connectivity with our past. The decision itself to conserve (a building or site) is of paramount importance; CCBC is clearly something worthy of conservation, because it is a valuable part of our past that should be maintained for the present and the future. Fathy (1980) noted that in Europe and the West, the change has continued along the same lines, while in our countries (African and Asian) change has been diametrically in contrast to our traditional culture because of British colonization at some stage. So, the pressing question is, shall we eradicate which has been forced on us or shall we try to accommodate that with the traditional stream and march forward? Perhaps, rationality lies with cultural continuity. Conservation is not a rigid thing. Makiya observed that it is not simply a matter of saying, "We'll keep it because of its emotional quality, because it is like an open book which should be preserved for the next generation." (Makiya, 1980) 'A historic site is something money cannot buy, a thing beyond value and an irreplaceable asset. Conservation implies a desire to live in harmony and not a rigid word, as its interpretation can differ. There is no 'one right way' of conserving. Civil society's desire and the sequence of events discussed below that the CCBC had catered obviously makes it worthy of conservation.

A Case for Conservation

Socio-Cultural Issues

The building, a symbol of the British colonial period, has lost its originality to some extent due to insensitive additions, extensions and adaptation to the cope with the expanding judicial work. Until 1950s extension and additions had reasonable consistency and unity in form that gave a sense of dignity to the building. Indiscriminate addition of 2nd floor, lacking an understanding of style in particular, has affected the building both aesthetically and structurally. Yet the building is deeply associated with the city, its history, its people and their memories. People flock around the building's exterior spaces throughout the day and enjoy the breath taking views. Ascending the hill by the approach road is a rewarding experience in itself.

CCBC has stood for more than one hundred years on approximately 25 acres of land on top of the Fairy hills (Figure 1) and have witnessed many episodes of our national history, besides influencing the evolution of Chittagong from a mere provincial town to a sprawling metropolis. At present, more than 35,000 people use or visit the site every day. Though CCBC may not be a great piece of any architectural style (Figure 2), the observations made above alone may qualify it for conservation.

Legal Context of Conservation

The Constitution of Bangladesh (Art. 24) stipulates that the State shall adopt measures for the protection

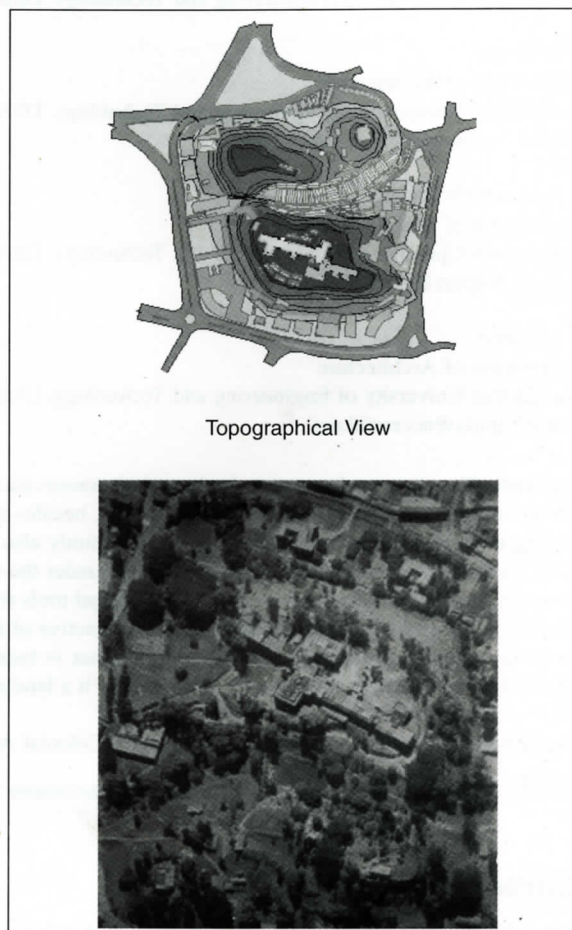


Figure 1 : Present Condition of Fairy Hills - Topographical and Aerial View



Figure 2 : The Chittagong Court Building

against disfigurement, damage or removal of all monuments, objects or places of special artistic or historic importance or interest. However, no law has yet been framed under this article for the conservation of buildings. Land use planning is expected to play a major role in ensuring that urban change occurs efficiently and in an acceptable way. There are two aspects to this process i.e. planning and implementation. At present the two major legislative enactments, namely the Town Improvement Act (TIA) 1953 and the Building Construction Act (BCA) 1952 contain necessary provisions for controlling development of the city. The TIA 1953 controls the use of land and buildings while the BCA 1952 regulates the construction of buildings. Actually these are not planning or design laws and at the same time they are inadequate and limited in scope, for the planning of cities in Bangladesh, as the violations are seen to be occurring frequently. Nearest approximation to the developmental control is found in the Building Construction Rules 1984 (amended in 1989 and 1996) under BCA 1952. A few general criteria are prescribed in regard to space around buildings, setbacks, site coverage, building heights etc.; but in general the rules are inadequate to form basis of even basic planning controls, let alone the idea of architectural conservation. There is also Pourashava Act of 1977 regulating some aspects of physical development but surprisingly none of these regulations have addressed to the need of architectural or historical conservation of sites and buildings.

Antiquities Ordinance of 1976 (amended) is the only act which has some reference to the protection of monuments and antiquities but that too is not elaborate enough to present a conservation guideline for our heritage artefacts. This act qualifies historic buildings of over 100 years old for protection. The settlement plan of the Chittagong Metropolitan Master Plan (CMMP) 1995 approved by the government in 1999, also recommends conserving buildings and monuments of cultural, architectural or historic interest. Chittagong Court Building is included in the preliminary list recommended for conservation.

Architectural Style

The Chittagong Court Building is said to be a miniature imitation of the Writers Building of Kolkata, India. In fact, the buildings of a certain era often belong to artistic activities conditioned by prevailing value structure and hence fall within the realm of aesthetics which may be defined as knowledge dealing with historically determined essence of human values, its creation, perception, appreciation and

assimilation. A number of related developments were experienced at the end of 19th Century and the beginning of 20th Century. The important one being the rise of bourgeoisie in Bengali Society based in Calcutta and secondly the government policy of westernization of upper classes with the development of India. CCBC is a product of that context. Partition of sub-continent also influenced the evolutionary process of the architectural style to a great extent.

Though it will be difficult to distinctly differentiate one phase of style with immediate past or future trend, still to understand evolution of CCBC in various phases a chronological development of aesthetic ideas in the Architecture of Bangladesh is briefly given in Table-1. The table will put CCBC in an appropriate context for evaluation and understanding. The Chittagong Court Building was constructed in 1892-94 in line with the prevailing architectural style of the period as discussed here. At first it was a symmetrical structure but later it was extended in quick succession to accommodate the rapidly increasing functions during the partition of Bengal during 1906 and 1912 (Figure 3). The First phase of the building may be classified as Indian Neo classic style. The massing in the central portion and entrances to the building is typical colonial whereas part of the arches, eaves etc. were definitely of local origin. Subsequent extensions were naturally not symmetrical as it had to follow topography and the site limitations. Though not consistent, it maintained a certain style which may be broadly termed as Tropical Euro-Indian, until 1950s when it was further extended vertically with a total disregard to the architectural vocabulary of the building.

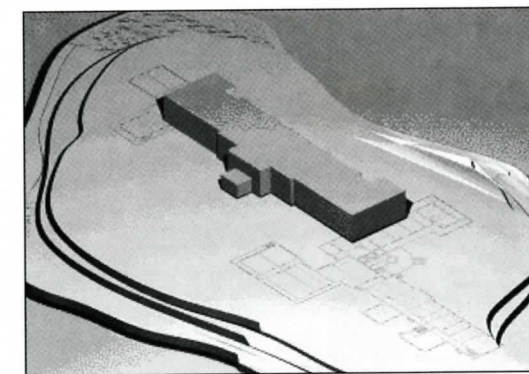
The new architectural elements introduced, during the 19th Century, were the semi-circular arch, the triangular pediment carried over semi-Corinthian, Doric or Ionic columns and other foliated motifs. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a new hybrid Mughal and European style emerged in the wake of first partition of Bengal, largely under the influence of Lord Curzon. Local elements such as hanging eaves, brackets, loggias, verandahs, lattices, kiosks or cupolas began to appear on the buildings modelled after basic European forms. Besides the colonial British the local elite in order to imitate the ruling class, tried to follow European hybrid anglo-Indian or transformed traditional typology. The features noted in the CCBC puts it in the relevant context (Figure 4 to 6).

¹ Development for this purpose is normally regarded as any change of use or any physical/ engineering operation in, on or over the ground.

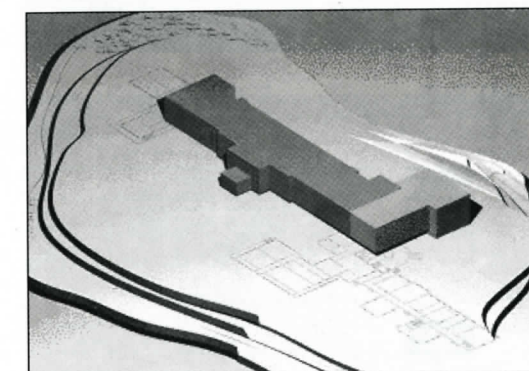
Table 1: Contextual Development of Aesthetic Ideas in the Architecture of Bangladesh

Style	Description
Vitruvian Classicism (till end of 18th Century.)	Fixed the use of the classical order according to the function of the building. Doric-masculine, Corinthian-feminine and Ionic mediate between these two for example. Doric and Tuscan order were assigned for military construction while Ionic and Corinthian for domestic architecture. For example. Bank of Bengal, Catholic Church (Johnson road), etc.
Indian Neo Classicism (beginning of 19th Century)	Less emphasis on prototypes or codes than a mode of expression. The magnificent large dimensions and the sharp profile associated with the background, the Graco-Roman antiquity. The growing domination on political and cultural levels of sub continent was pronounced by deliberate use of the style in Architecture where classical column become the symbol of progress for example. Ahsan Manzil Andar Mahal, Dhaka Medical College Building.
Tropical Euro-Indian (till end of 19th Century.)	Classical vocabulary influenced by local geo-climate and technology (similar to Racial classicism) for example. Chittagong Court Bldg, Dhaka's Old municipal bldg. Chummary House etc.
Racial Classicism (late 19th Century)	Neo-bourgeoisie of the sub continental society laid to structural adaptation within classical frame. Mixed style /Indian skeleton dipped into European skin/Euro-Indian style for example. Ahsan Manzil, Shankhanidhi Lodge etc.
Gothic Style (Mid-nineteenth cent). Or Early Indo-Gothic style.	Trend to combine sub-continental antiquity with gothic approach. The Gothic features like tri-foil or Tudor arch. Clustered columns dome or kiosks with pointed pinnacles were prominent in use. For example. North Brook Hall.
Indo-Saracenic Style (end of 19th Century and early 20th century) Or Late Indo - Gothic Style	Gothic approach with Indian form. Multi foil arches clustered columns grouped domes like the encrusted carving minarets shikharas and chhatris all represents gothic counterpart of classical formulae e.g. Curzon Hall
Quasi Islamic Style (mid 20th Century)	Corrupt Islamic elements on colonial space planning. Superficial use of so-called Islamic elements. For example. New High court building and Banga Bhaban.
Quasi Modern Style (mid 20th Century.)	Simultaneous to Quasi-Islamic trend there was a movement to borrow heavily but superficially from the west but not from so-called Islamic style. Emphasis was on imposed facade treatment. E.g. Dhaka University Teachers Club, most of the Dhanmondi Residences, Sonali Bank HQ Building (Motijheel), Lukshmibazar Municipal Building after renovation.
Modern and International Style (late 20th Century)	Waves of international trends influencing the local development. Foreign Architects and Foreign trained Architects were the pioneer. eg. TSC Dhaka, BUET Halls -Dhaka, Bangladesh Bank etc.
Rustic Regionalism (late 20th Century)	Transition: Desperate searches for identify with in Modern and international styles influenced by colonial features. For example. New Judges court, Dhaka and Dhaka Nagar Bhaban.

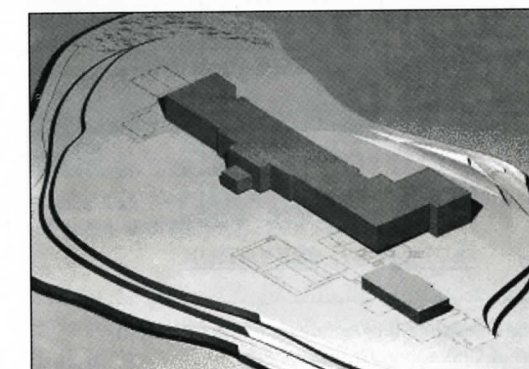
Source: Based on Mowla et al (1995) and Mowla and Reza (2000): ibid,p.43.



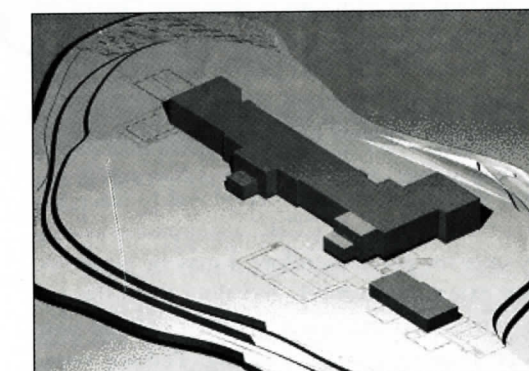
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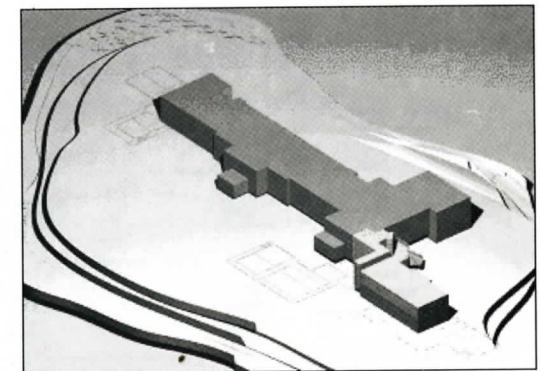
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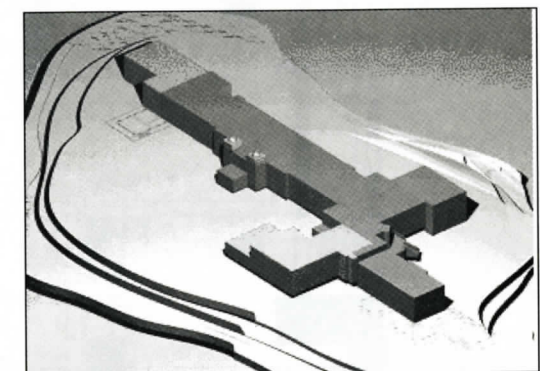
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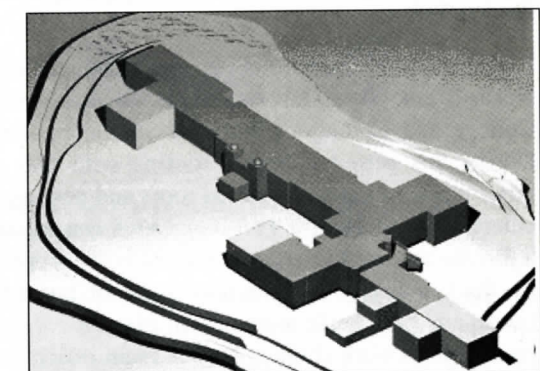
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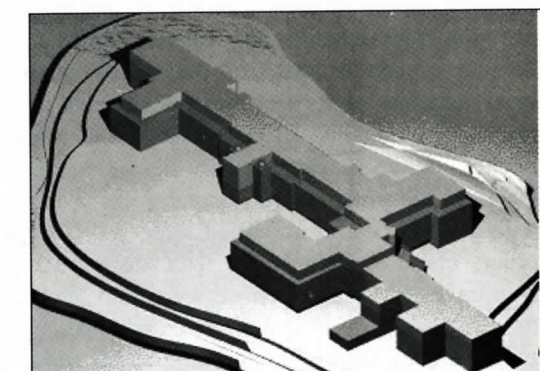
Phase 05



Phase 06



Phase 07



Phase 08

Figure 3 : Various development phases of Chittagong Court Building Complex. Development of up to phase 06 took place in quick succession and subsequent expansion was necessitated after 50s

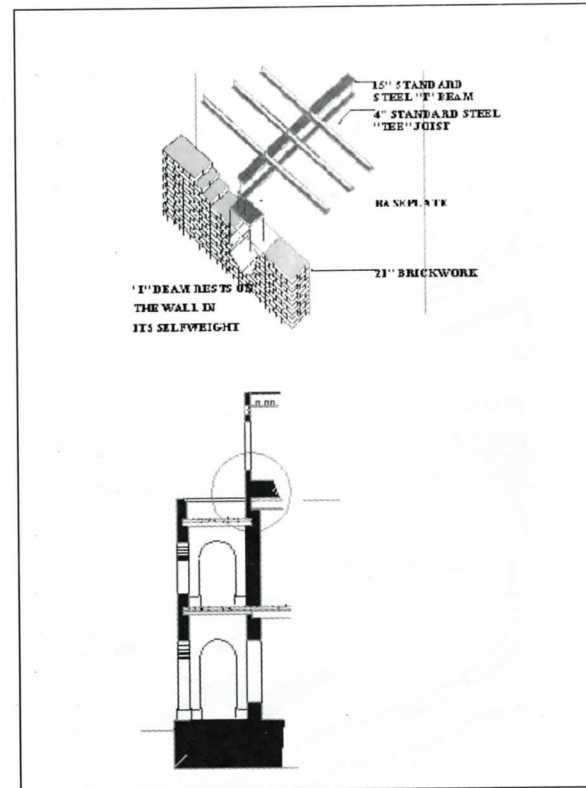


Figure 4 : Joining Details of 'I' Beam in roofing and Load Bearing Walls

Examples of this new trend can also be noticed in the North-Brook Hall, Curzon Hall, Dhaka Medical College and Chittagong Railway Station buildings. During this period trabeated roofing with tiles and rafter replaced massive vaulted roofs and pure arches emerged. In CCBC the kari-barga roof system (steel 'I' beams are used to support flat roofs) is supported by thick masonry construction made of burnt-clay bricks and lime-surki mortar, with exterior red oxide painted brickwork (Figure 4). The main office space is 17 foot high with veranda enveloping it all around allowing easy circulation of people, air and protection of rooms from rain and sun. Colonial rulers were trying to transplant the style from their home country but local materials, craftsmen, geo-climate were some of the obstacles against direct transplantation attempts. Arches, columns, capitals etc. of various natures occur in the building. In general column appeared with capitals bearing modified Ionic and Corinthian order; classical entablature with distinctive parts architrave, frieze and cornice were also applied. In the Chittagong Court Building veranda openings are typical arches, ranging from semi-circular, semicircular stilted, segmental three centred and Venetian, mostly with distinct and prominent keystone at the centre. In keeping with the local climate and tradition the corridors/ verandas were introduced on two longer facades exposing the circulation and thus

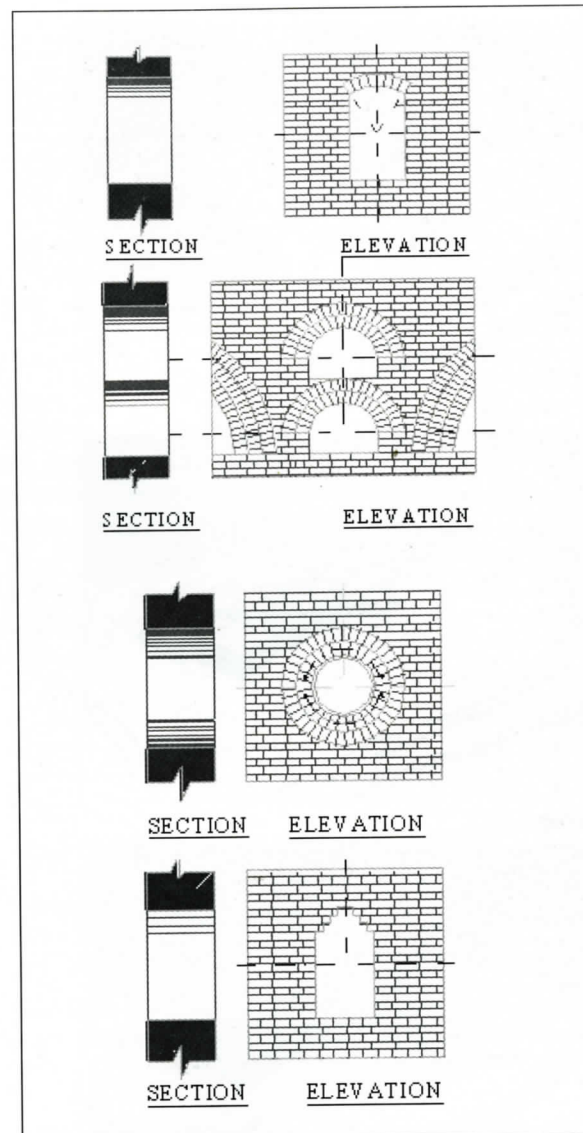


Figure 5a : Treatment of openings in the walls and elevation of Chittagong Court Building

making the building extrovert in character. One of the features of the frontage is openings or windows occupying the centre of the wall panel. In shape, it is a stilted semi-circular aperture divided into lunettes, within which the window panels are fixed (Figure 5).

A general practice in colonial period was to place terrace over the porch but in CCBC a staircase was constructed over the porch therefore it may be attributed as a later extension to reach 2nd floor from the 1st. All the entries and the porch are well defined with significant projections and detailing. Perhaps dome was introduced in this building during the last phase of extension to give it an Islamic look (Quasi Islamic Style: refer Table-1) (Figure 6). Details of the parapet, decorative work, the kiosks on pillars and corners of parapets are indicative of Indian influence. The stair

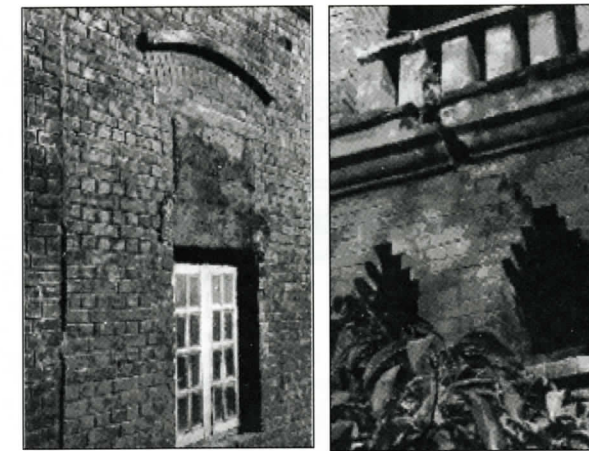


Figure 5b : Treatment of openings in the walls and elevation of Chittagong Court Building.

linking the ground floor with the first floor is of typical colonial style and cast iron work is used in railings (Figure 7).

Conservation Guidelines for Chittagong Court Building Complex

Chittagong Court Building in its original form can be judged as a unique example of early hybrid architecture in this region with reasonable fusion and embodiment of western rationality and eastern sensibility (Figure 8). The building has all kinds of extension and additions both inside and out side, some in concrete and others in corrugated iron sheet and timber partitions. Besides coastal humid weather, unplanned additions and alterations have led to structural problems. Repair and maintenance of historic buildings require special attention, skill and technology. In CCBC inappropriate techniques for maintenance has done more harm than otherwise. Most deplorable were toilets, added in various locations. Driving rain

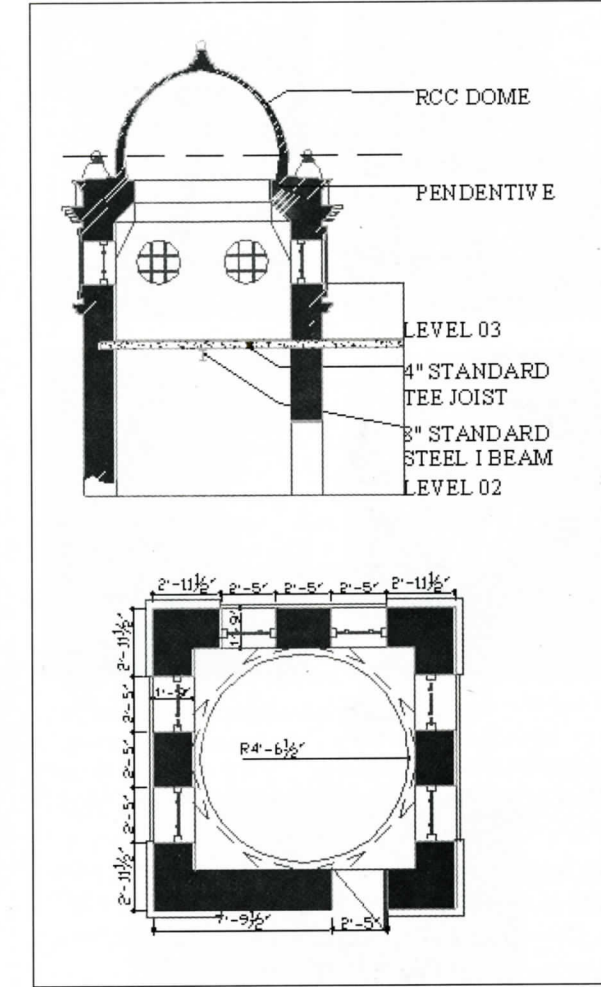


Figure 06 : Showing a typical detail of dome in the Chittagong Court Building

in the verandas and leaking pipes from the toilet are damaging the walls. Dampness together with soil erosion/ land slide is the added problem in the site. Electrical fittings and fixtures were also indiscriminately installed without any sympathy towards the type and style of the building.

A design project titled "Conservation of Chittagong Court Complex" was given in February 2003 to level-5 Term-1 class of Bachelor of Architecture Programme, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka (Survey Report, 2003). The authors being the design studio tutors jointly supervised the project. The project brief asked the students to a) study and document the past and the present situations; b) assess the current and future needs and formulate a design programme; and c) come up with a plan for cultural as well as architectural conservation of CCBC accommodating the current and future needs. The students did extensive documentation of the existing situation, identifying



Detail : Interior Stair

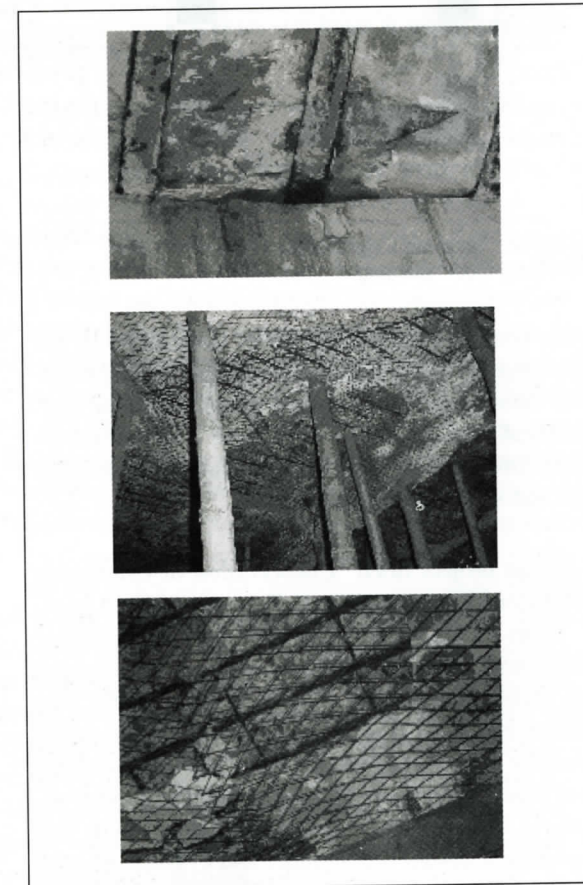


Figure 7 : Some details of Chittagong Court Building

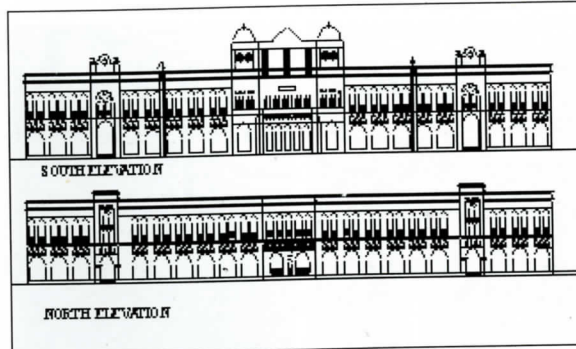


Figure 8 : Previous Elevation of Court Building without second floor (reconstructed view)

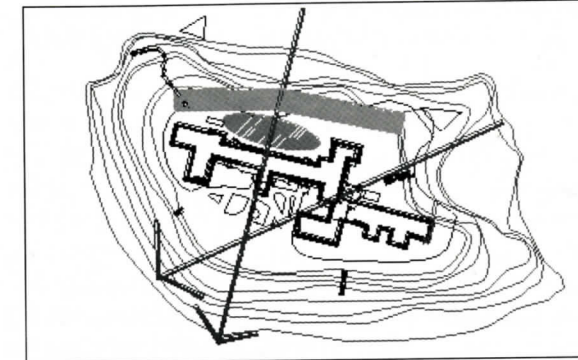
all additions and changes in various phases (Figure 3). The students of the design studio agreed unanimously that the complex deserves conservation. The proposals by the students suggested that the complex be focused as the main landmark of Chittagong city development. The proposals of students emphasised to relate the complex visually to the existing city fabric by creating or opening up view corridors, creating vistas and axis to highlight the complex with relation to its surrounding development and the city fabric. The studio studied various options to make the area acceptable to the users and the city. The major options were as follows:

- 1) Restoring the Court Building to its pre-partition condition and providing new buildings to accommodate additional functions.
- 2) Massive repair and reconstruction of existing building to make it safe for occupation and
- 3) Relocation of uses not directly related to the District Court and thus clear the Court Building of unnecessary chaos.

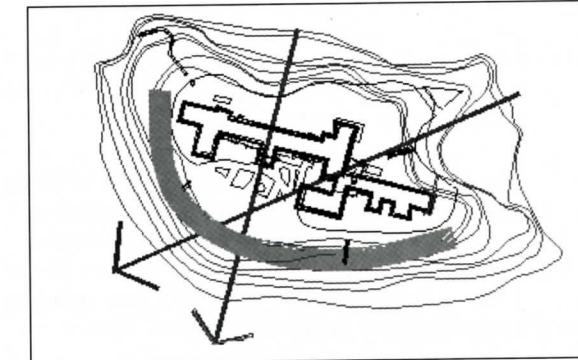
Most of the design proposals subsequently melted down to the first option. The students' design explored the idea of a surprise and a captive experience for the sudden appearance of the main building or the main gateway within the complex or making the complex a dominant spatial composition in the city context. All the proposals advocated opening up the campus to the public as a recreational as well as a tourist spot. Outdoor spaces were very carefully treated in each option and emphasized on the segregation of official and public circulation and spaces. Public areas were also organized hierarchically into Court Building related and recreation related domains. The design proposals put forwarded by the studio were categorised by the authors into four basic design concepts. They are presented schematically (Figure 9).

Discussion on Various Schemes

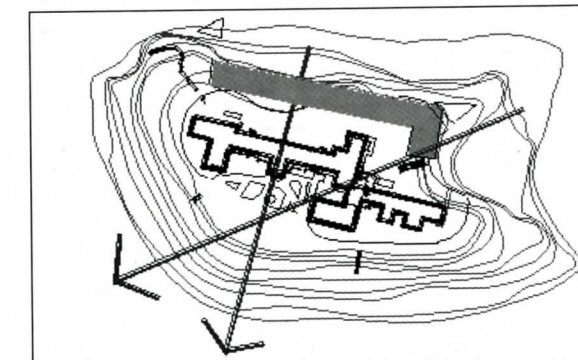
Experientially all the schemes kept the existing approach and entry axis to meet approximately at 45 degree thereby focusing first on public entrance to the building and the site, then creating a transitional and sequential experience of movement from the outer to the inner realm of the complex. Approach road ascends from public road to about 80 foot higher level where the CCBC is located and considered as a



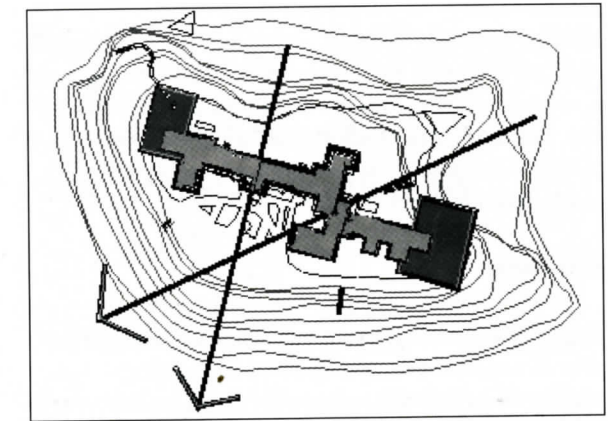
Schematic Layout-1: Restoring the old court building and putting new buildings in the valley (inner) side thus make it appear to be in its original natural setting.



Schematic Layout-2: Restoring the court building and putting the new buildings surrounding it on the outer hill slope thus make it appear to be sitting on a podium.



Schematic Layout-3: Restoring the court building in the backdrop of contrasting but simple new construction.



Schematic Layout-4 : Extending the original building to existing height with similar architectural character as the original colonial one - minimum of new construction that is needed is to be placed in either side or in the valley (inner) side thus accentuating the current impact.

Figure 9 : Various Schematic proposals summarized from students projects

design opportunity to be manipulated in most of the schemes. Visual impact is further enhanced by removing some of the temporary structures in the line of vision. Some modifications are suggested in the recently built bar Council building which being in direct line of vision, thereby, adjusting the sequential experience of movement. A carefully planned sequence of ascend along the approach axis is expected to dramatise the overall visual experience of the complex.

The dynamic relation between the past and the present could only be attained through sensitive control and juxtaposition of internal circulation system and corresponding functional order. The design proposals quite pragmatically segregated different types of circulations but again allowed appropriate cohesiveness by converging them to different uses catered by the buildings. The complex is zoned into public and official domains by using courtyards, out door spaces and new buildings. Indoor circulations and activities were also synchronized with the overall scheme.

First, second and fourth schemes attempt to relate the CCBC visually to the existing experience from the city roads but the degree and methods applied to achieve this goal is different. In the first and fourth scheme the original building is highlighted by restoring the building and clearing the vision corridors from the surrounding public roads. Additional buildings are proposed at the inner side away from the line of vision from the surrounding cityscape. In the fourth scheme impact is enhanced by increasing the height of the main building with colonial details.

Similar strategy is adopted in the second scheme by creating a visual podium on top of which restored building is placed. In the third proposal a visual shock is conceived by creating a dominant and contrasting new building in the backdrop of the older one and is rightly considered another way of highlighting the older structure identified for conservation.

Epilogue

The building, initially symmetrical and rectangular in plan, is a typical example of colonial buildings of that period. In a nutshell, consensus is on restoring the CCBC building to its pre-1947 grandeur. Developing it as the landmark icon of Chittagong city by clearing the obstacles of vision from different roads was yet another goal of the study which has been efficiently presented in different schemes. Unauthorized Zohur market in the valley is proposed to be relocated elsewhere and public recreational facilities be provided there to improve the environment of the Fairy Hills. A special planning regulation that justifies the conservation is needed to be promulgated to control the physical development in and around the hill. Last but not the least, to make the conservation sustainable, it is imperative to create a skilled work force with adequate funding for regular repair and maintenance of the historic buildings and spaces in the site.

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