To what extent has post-1947 urban development changed the use and physical condition of colonial-era buildings in Amritsar?

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Introduction and Historical Background

Urban environments frequently retain built structures originating from earlier political and administrative systems. In many Indian cities, a significant proportion of the built environment was constructed during the colonial period and designed to support the government's administrative and infrastructural functions under (Ashworth, 1991). Following independence in 1947, these structures remained physically present within cities undergoing rapid demographic and economic transformation.

India's post independent urban development has been characterised by population growth, increased commercial activity, and expansion of infrastructure (Shaw, 2009; Census of India, 2011). These processes have altered patterns of land use, particularly within historic urban cores and colonial-era buildings, often located in central areas, have been subjected to changing functional demands, modifications, and uneven maintenance. While some structures have continued to serve similar institutional roles, others have been repurposed, or allowed to deteriorate (Rodwell, 2007; Bullen and Love, 2011).

This investigation examines the extent to which post-1947 urban development has altered both the use and physical condition of colonial-era buildings in Amritsar. The reason why Amritsar provides a suitable case study is due to its concentration of colonial infrastructure and visible contrasts between administrative, commercial, and heritage zones (Shaw, 2009; Government of India, 2015). The study focuses on six sites representing administrative, educational, commercial, transport, and military functions and by comparing their original roles with their present use and physical condition, the investigation evaluates how urban development has influenced their transformation. The investigation reveals and argues that the impact of urban development has been uneven, with buildings experiencing preservation, modification, adaptive reuse, deterioration, or transitional decline depending on their functional relevance, exposure to economic pressure, and level of policy support (Ashworth, 1991; Pendlebury, 2013).

Following Amritsar's incorporation into British India in the nineteenth century, it saw the construction of infrastructure intended to support governance and economic integration; therefore, its urban structure reflects both pre-colonial development and colonial planning. (Kalia, 1999; Ashworth, 1991). After independence in 1947, Amritsar experienced rapid demographic expansion and increased demand for housing, infrastructure, and commercial space (Shaw, 2009; Census of India, 2011). This led to significant changes in land use, particularly within central areas. Zones originally designed for administrative or lower-density functions became sites of commercial intensification, while older buildings were either adapted, modified, or left neglected depending on institutional relevance and policy support (Rodwell, 2007; Government of India, 2015). The results showed a non- uniform pattern of changes and these outcomes reflect broader tensions in post-colonial cities between inherited infrastructure, economic pressure, and selective conservation.

Literature Review

Scholars of colonial urbanism argue that colonial-era buildings were constructed primarily to serve administrative and economic functions rather than purely aesthetic purposes, also arguing that their location and design reflected different priorities within imperial systems (Ashworth, 1991; Kalia, 1999). This interpretation establishes that colonial buildings were functionally embedded within systems of power, making original use central to understanding later transformation. Although this perspective clarifies why buildings were constructed, it is limited as it fails to account for how they adapt within rapidly changing urban environments. Thereby to address this, research on post-independence urban development emphasises the role of population growth, economic expansion, and increasing demand for land in reshaping Indian cities (Shaw, 2009; Dupont, 2007). These pressures have been particularly intense in historic cores, where commercialisation and congestion have altered patterns of land use and specifically in Amritsar, studies identify the walled city as a zone of high-density activity where encroachment and infrastructure strain directly affect historic structures (Singh and Joshi, 2022).

While urban development literature explains external pressure, why some buildings deteriorate while others are preserved is not entirely explained. This is addressed by heritage conservation theory, which distinguishes between preservation, restoration, and adaptive reuse. Adaptive reuse, in particular, is identified as a key strategy in maintaining historic structures by assigning them new functions (Bullen and Love, 2011). Rodwell (2007) argues that continued use increases the likelihood of maintenance as compared to disuse, which leads to decline.
Nonetheless, Pendlebury (2013) challenges the neutrality of this process, suggesting that conservation is shaped by institutional priorities over purely historical value and this introduces the idea that preservation is selective. Particularly in the context of Amritsar, this selectivity is clearly evident as research has highlighted weak enforcement of conservation policies, alongside strong commercial pressures and limited long-term planning (Singh and Joshi, 2022). Government initiatives such as the HRIDAY scheme demonstrate attempts to integrate heritage into urban development, but these interventions are often uneven in implementation

(Government of India, 2015). As a result, some buildings are restored and repurposed, while others remain neglected or deteriorate.

A key limitation across the literature is that these perspectives are often treated separately. Colonial planning studies' narrow focus on original function, urban development research emphasises only external pressure, and conservation theory only examines preservation strategies. There is limited integration of these frameworks at the level of individual buildings within a single city, which clarifies that existing research has yet to explain why different buildings within the same urban environment experience different outcomes.

This investigation addresses that gap by combining these perspectives through a comparative case study approach. I conducted analysis on three main factors, including how functional relevance, economic pressure, and policy intervention interact across multiple buildings in Amritsar to elaborate on variation on a local level.

Methodology

A comparative case study approach was chosen because the investigation focuses on variation rather than a single outcome. The aim is not to describe one building in depth, but to compare how different types of colonial-era structures have responded to post-1947 urban development.
Six sites were therefore selected to represent different original functions and different present-day trajectories, including administrative, educational, commercial, transport, and military structures. Yet, relying only on written sources would not have been sufficient for this investigation. Government reports and planning frameworks, including HRIDAY and local development plans, outline how buildings are intended to be preserved or redeveloped.
However, these sources reflect institutional priorities and have not necessarily captured what has actually happened on the ground. This creates a gap between policy and reality that needs to be addressed.

To deal with this limitation, structured site observation was used as a central method. Each site was visited and assessed using the same criteria: present function, physical condition, visible alteration, and surrounding urban pressure. Applying the same framework across all six sites allowed direct comparison. This was important for identifying patterns to interpret these observations, secondary literature that consisted of studies on urban growth, conservation, and adaptive reuse providing explanations for why buildings change in different ways. However, most of this literature operates at a national or theoretical level, therefore fails to fully explain the variation observed within a single city, which is why primary observation remained necessary.

Alternative methods were also considered but rejected. Surveys were not used because they rely on perception rather than physical evidence, and archival research alone would not capture present-day conditions. The solution was a combined approach used here that allows comparison between intended policy outcomes and actual physical and functional change.

Despite this, the method has limitations. Observations are restricted to specific points in time and reflect short-term processes. In addition, access to some buildings was limited, which reduced the ability to assess internal conditions. However, using multiple sources improved the reliability by allowing cross-checking between documentary evidence, academic interpretation, and direct observation.

Table 1: Measurement Criteria

To ensure consistency across the case studies, a set of common criteria was used to assess each site.

These are outlined in Table 1.

Factor	What it measures	Purpose
Physical Condition	Structural Integrity, Damage	Indicates Preservational Level
Functional Change	Original vs Current Use	Shows Extent of Transformation
Urban Pressure	Density, Congestion & Encroachment	Indicates External Use
Policy Influence	Evidence of Intervention	Explains Preservation Outcomes

Table 1: Measurement Criteria

Framework and Approach Used

This investigation necessarily operates across multiple analytical lenses because no single discipline can fully explain the transformation of colonial-era buildings in Amritsar. A historical perspective is required to situate these structures within their original administrative and urban functions under colonial rule and to trace shifts following 1947, when institutional priorities and governance structures were reconfigured. Historical continuity, economic factors, particularly the expansion of tourism and informal commercial activity, directly shape patterns of use, adaptation, and physical strain, especially in high-density zones such as Hall Bazaar. At the same time, political and planning frameworks determine the extent and direction of intervention, as seen in state-led redevelopment projects under schemes such as HRIDAY. Spatial and geographical factors further influence outcomes by affecting congestion, land use intensity, and accessibility, which in turn condition how buildings are maintained or modified. Finally, elements of user behaviour and perception, including how spaces are occupied, valued, or neglected, introduce a social dimension that affects both preservation and degradation over time.

Case Studies

The following case studies apply a consistent framework to enable direct comparison across sites.

Site Name	Date(s) Visited	Time(s)	Interior Access
Amritsar Town Hall	19 & 21 March 2026	14:00 PM, 15:00 PM IST	Partial ((Partition Museum accessible; upper architectural elements restricted)
Amritsar Railway Station	28 February 2026	12:00 PM, 17:30 PM IST	Full access to public areas (platforms, waiting halls, concourse areas)
Khalsa College	7 April 2026	11;00 AM IST	Restricted (general access limited to external areas; partial access to selected public spaces)
Hall Bazaar	November-December 2025	12:00 PM, 17:00 PM, 19:00 PM IST	Partial (High access to shopfronts and market lanes; upper-storey access limited and dependent on individual shop permission
Old Deputy Commissioner's Office	14 April 2026	14:00 PM IST	Restricted ((limited entry due to structural condition and ongoing restoration context)

Gobindgarh Fort	27 December 2025	20:00 PM IST	Full (ticketed public access across major internal areas)

Table 2: Site Visitation Details

CASE 1: Amritsar Town Hall

Site Identification, Current Use, Occupancy, Observed Physical Condition, Visible Alterations and Urban Pressure

The Amritsar Town Hall, constructed in the late nineteenth century, originally functioned as a municipal administrative centre under British rule, reflecting the colonial priority of centralised governance and urban control. In its current form, however, the building operates as a heritage and cultural complex, housing the Partition Museum alongside commercial and public-facing functions. Early on, this appeared to be a straightforward case of functional replacement but it is a part of the post-independence orientation of colonial institutions towards identity formation.
Upon observation of occupancy levels, which remain consistently high, particularly during weekends, it was concluded that it was due to its location at a major tourist entry point, with visitor flow increasing noticeably in the afternoon.

The same functional transformation is also reflected in the building's physical condition as direct observation suggests that the structure is in a well-maintained condition. The structure is well maintained with no significant structural deterioration visible. There is no external evidence of rising damp or water damage at the base of the structure as well, which indicates that this building is *actively preserved*. However, this stability coexists with visible modifications, including modern signage, glass entry systems, and the replacement of the original street surface with a marble pedestrian plaza under heritage redevelopment schemes. These interventions prioritise visitor-oriented use over the building's original administrative function. Located within a high density tourism zone, sustained pedestrian and commercial pressure force it to adapt. This reflects the selective reinterpretation of colonial administrative spaces within post-independence urban frameworks.

The inclusion of the Partition Museum fundamentally alters the building's function, as it no longer operates as an administrative centre but as a curated exhibition space designed for public engagement.

CASE 2: Amritsar Railway Station

Site Identification, Current Use, Occupancy, Observed Physical Condition, Visible Alterations and Urban Pressure

Amritsar Railway Station is a colonial-era transport node established in the nineteenth century, and unlike administrative or institutional buildings, it still performs its original function. It continues to operate as the primary railway junction for the city and the wider Punjab region. But the scale at which it operates has deepened. Increasing passenger volumes and peak congestion have led to the introduction of expanded circulation systems, waiting halls, and commercial facilities, all of which respond directly to intensified demand. Yet there is uneven maintenance, since ore circulation areas remain structurally stable and actively managed, but peripheral sections show visible wear from constant use. This difference shows how today governments prioritise spaces that sustain movement and efficiency and let less critical areas absorb the physical strain of high usage. The building is likewise selectively maintained in line with operational priorities.

This has been happening all across history. The railway infrastructure under British rule was designed primarily to facilitate extraction and movement, which is the same functional logic that has intensified. Contemporary additions such as escalators and overhead concourses have allowed it to handle greater volumes within the same structural framework and today it's value rests in its continued utility.

More importantly, this continuous use prevents the station from entering the kind of transitional phase seen in other colonial structures. Where buildings like Town Hall or Gobindgarh Fort undergo functional breaks that allow them to be preserved or repurposed, the railway station's role as active infrastructure keeps it locked into the present, leaving no clear point at which it can be conserved as a heritage site. As a result, it is not transformed into a heritage site.

Judging from this, functionalism has produced constant modification and here particularly, urban development has absorbed this building into ongoing use.

CASE 3: Khalsa College

Site Identification, Current Use, Occupancy, Observed Physical Condition, Visible Alterations and Urban Pressure

Khalsa College, established in 1892, presents a very different trajectory from most colonial-era buildings in Amritsar. It has not been forced to redefine its purpose after independence, nor has it been significantly altered to meet external pressures. Teaching, administration, and student activity continue to dominate the space, and this uninterrupted use immediately sets it apart from buildings that have undergone functional shifts. Physically too, the structure shows a high degree of stability. There is little visible deterioration, and most changes are contained within the

internal functioning of the institution, for example surveillance systems, technological upgrades, and service-related additions. These have kept the external form meaningfully the same. More importantly, though, the building is well maintained, but the change that has occurred has remained controlled and limited in scope.

When placed alongside other cases, including administrative buildings, once tied to colonial governance, which are often repurposed to align with new political or cultural narratives or transport infrastructure is continuously modified to accommodate rising demand–--Khalsa College does neither and instead operates outside both processes.

An explanation can partly be offered by looking at its spatial presence. The campus is large and self-contained, which reduces exposure to the congestion, commercial encroachment, and tourism flows that virtually shape other sites. Despite this, other buildings with clear functional roles similar to Khalsa College have still been altered significantly so there must be a more convincing explanation. One possible answer lies in how the building is positioned historically because educational institutions established during the colonial period varied in symbolic weight as administrative centres of power. Over time, they became associated with intellectual development and local advancement which is why the building does not need to be distanced from its origins in the same way.

Therefore, it undergoes a different kind of continuity. The structure is neither adapted to survive nor repurposed to remain relevant. Instead, it persists in a relatively stable form because its role aligns with the priorities of the present. In this case preservation is visibly seen as a form of acceptance, where the building's original function remains both usable and legitimate within the modern urban context.

CASE 4: Hall Bazaar

Site Identification, Current Use, Occupancy, Observed Physical Condition, Visible Alterations and Urban Pressure

It's difficult to fit Hall Bazaar into a category of buildings that have been transformed at a particular moment due to it operating as a continuous commercial surface, where change is ongoing. One factor that defines how the space functions is the high intensity of activity here. The movement and commercial turnover are constant and the ground-floor units are under pressure to maximise visibility and access at all times. This pressure results in small, repeated adjustments wherein shopfronts are repainted, extensions push incrementally into circulation space, and services such as wiring and cooling systems are added wherever required. It is the accumulation of these changes that steadily alter Hall Bazaar and the way the change is distributed matters greatly here. Modification is concentrated at the ground level, where

economic return is highest, while upper floors receive less investment and show visible deterioration. This uneven condition is proof of a hierarchy of value within the structure, where only commercially productive zones are actively maintained.

This is why such change is fundamentally different from the other cases, since there is no single authority directing intervention. Instead, the structure is continuously altered one shop at a time via individual decisions, which is to say that control is decentralised, and as a result, change is difficult to regulate. This complicates how preservation can be understood in this context as well. In contrast with other case studies, Hall Bazaar does not allow for a fixed state of preservation at all. Its economic function actively resists stabilisation and any attempt to impose uniformity is immediately absorbed into the same cycle of modification, as commercial pressures reassert themselves at the micro level.

Hall Bazaar, thereby, exists in a state of continuous recalibration and survives because it remains economically active, and ironically that same activity ensures that it is constantly being altered in ways that undermine any attempt at cohesive conservation.

CASE 5: Old DC Office

Site Identification, Current Use, Occupancy, Observed Physical Condition, Visible Alterations and Urban Pressure

The Old Deputy Commissioner is suspended and no longer performs its original administrative role, yet it is not fully abandoned or meaningfully repurposed as well. It originally functioned as the central administrative headquarters for the district under British rule. It held great importance in local administration. But today there is an absence of a defined function and that has decided everything about how the structure is treated. This idea is visible in the way the reinforced sections at ground level are placed alongside upper areas that still show signs of past structural failure, including fire damage and inconsistent material replacement. These were all made at different moments and built to address immediate problems as they arose. Finally, this left an incomplete building with visible marks of the ongoing instability.

This is mostly because once the building stopped functioning as a central administrative hub, there was no longer a continuous need to keep it fully operational, so it was more selectively approached and action was taken only when there was structural risk. In that sense, the building is simply being held together. What complicates this further is that the surrounding area has not declined in the same way as activity there continues, particularly because of its location within a dense legal and administrative district. Despite being physically present within an active zone, it is gradually neglected and not used anymore.

Over time, this produces a slow and uneven trajectory of change which causes the building to remain in a prolonged state of adjustment.

CASE 6: Gobindgarh Fort

Site Identification, Current Use, Occupancy, Observed Physical Condition, Visible Alterations and Urban Pressure

Gobindgarh Fort is a historic military structure originally constructed as a defensive installation. It later came under colonial control and remained restricted for long periods. In the post-independence period, it has undergone significant redevelopment and is now open to the public as a heritage and cultural site. The fort has been repurposed into a public heritage and cultural complex. It now functions as a visitor-oriented site incorporating museums, performance spaces, and commercial activity such as food stalls and retail outlets. Occupancy is high during evening hours, particularly during scheduled cultural programmes and light-and-sound shows. Unlike the railway station, footfall is concentrated in specific time periods linked to tourism. Beyond this, the surfaces across the site appear consistently maintained, with limited variation in material condition. Circulation routes are clearly defined, and spaces are arranged to support large-scale movement without disruption. The current state is the result of sustained intervention

It is also significant to note that Gobindgarh Fort's physical condition aligns well with its current use. Additions such as performance spaces and exhibition areas have been made are involved in directly influencing how the structure is used. Currently, changes in internal sections have also been made to adapt to accommodate visitors. But this represents a fundamental reversal of its original spatial logic. It is because earlier it limited entry and prioritised security, but now depends on accessibility itself with the structure moving away from its past organisation around defence.

To cause such transformation, the structure has been greatly simplified for the public. This consists of standardizing the surfaces and reducing variation across different sections. While this improves usability and clarity for visitors, it also limits the visibility of historical layering within the building, and the surrounding context also supports this controlled transformation. Overall, this case demonstrates a form of change driven by deliberate redevelopment as the building has been retained, but its function, organisation, and internal logic have been systematically altered to meet present demands.

Table 3: Scoring of Case Study Sites
(Function, Condition, Urban Pressure, and Policy Influence)

Scores from *1 to 3* indicate how strongly each factor is present.
For functional change, 1 means continuity, 2 partial adaptation, and 3 complete transformation. For physical condition, 1 reflects deterioration, 2 mixed or uneven maintenance, and 3 active preservation.

Urban pressure ranges from low (1) to high (3), based on congestion, tourism, and commercial activity.
Policy influence ranges from minimal (1) to strong, visible intervention (3).
These scores are used comparatively to show which factor is driving change in each case.

Site	Function Change (1-3)	Physical Condition (1-3)	Urban Pressure (1-3)	Policy Influence (1-3)	Primary Cause of Change
Town Hall	3	3	3	3	Policy & Tourism
Railway Station	2	2	3	3	Infrastructure Modernisation
Khalsa College	1	3	2	3	Institutional Continuity
Hall Bazaar	1	1	3	2	Commercial Pressure
Old Deputy Commissioner Office	2	2	2	3	Functional Loss
Gobindgarh Fort	3	3	2	3	Policy- led Redevelopment

Table 3: Comparative Summary of Case Study Findings

Comparative Analysis

At the beginning of the comparison, the most straightforward explanation appeared to be functional continuity as buildings that continued to be used seemed more likely to remain stable, while those that lost their role appeared more vulnerable to decline. This initial assumption aligned with a historical perspective, where continuity after 1947 would logically support preservation. However, this explanation became difficult to sustain when comparing Khalsa College and the Railway Station. This was because the structures maintain their original function, but still their physical conditions differed sharply. On one hand, Khalsa College remains well preserved, while the Railway Station shows continuous modification and uneven maintenance. When this contradiction arose, it was clear that factors beyond historical continuity were causing the present outcomes. At this point, the type of function was more important to consider.

This led to a greater focus on economic factors as in places like Hall Bazaar, high-density commercial activity allowed continuous adaptation to occur and for the structural strain to be visible. Although this explanation worked for one case study, it remained incomplete for others like in the case of the Railway Station. It experiences similarly high levels of use, but then why do its changes remain structured? So, a conclusion was drawn that economic pressure only influences the intensity of change, but there is something else that determines its form.
The role of policy intervention then became necessary to explain this variation. In the Town Hall and Gobindgarh Fort, redevelopment has been conducted by mainly state-led initiatives which have actively proved that change came due to their policies. It might be true in these cases but Hall Bazaar shows the limits of their policy, where the existing improvements can not cause deeper structural change. This means that even policy presence alone is an insufficient explanation.

Sites located within dense commercial or transit zones, such as Hall Bazaar and the Railway Station, are exposed to continuous external pressure, which shapes patterns of use, maintenance, and adaptation. In contrast, Khalsa College's more enclosed campus environment reduces direct exposure to these pressures, allowing for controlled preservation. This shows that geographical setting conditions how economic and functional forces are experienced at each site.

Finally, patterns of user behaviour provide an additional layer of explanation. Spaces that are characterised by informal, high-intensity use show uneven adaptation, specifically evident in Hall Bazaar, where continuous occupation produces uncoordinated change. Starkly contrasting with Hall Bazaar is the Old DC Office, which has lost active use and shows, at best, partial intervention. This demonstrates that through different processes both overuse and underuse have produced instability. Taken together, these comparisons show that no single factor is sufficient to explain transformation and that each factor becomes more or less significant depending on the conditions of the site.

The most important conclusion is that post-1947 urban development has acted indirectly on colonial era buildings by altering their position within the modern city. Buildings that remain functionally relevant are either stabilised or continuously adapted depending on the nature of their use and those that can be redefined through policy are preserved through controlled transformation. In contrast, buildings that lose relevance without effective intervention are more likely to enter prolonged states of decline.

Conclusion

This investigation set out to examine how post 1947 urban development has altered colonial-era buildings in Amritsar. The six cases that have been analysed have all shown a different path to change. The future and the present of these buildings is the consequence of the past and the way they have been taken up in the contemporary system today.

Some cases have excelled and shown stability and others have shown gradual decline or continuous adjustment overall. Moreover, changing the initial approach and to a more interdisciplinary one has revealed the presence of multiple factors that have produced change, via a combined effect, over a period of time. The extent of transformation, therefore, is best understood as a measure of how successfully each building has been added to the evolving urban structure and it is also important to understand that post-1947 development has redistributed them into different roles within the city.

In conclusion, despite all changes and deterioration, these structures have survived to the extent that they continue to matter in the present society and culture of Amritsar.

The following is a table highlighting the patterns across the six case studies:

Condition	**Outcome**	**Example**
Controlled Functional Continuity	Preservation	Khalsa College
High-pressure Functional Continuity	Continuous Modification	Railway Station
Policy-led Reuse	Structured Preservation	Town Hall, Gobindgarh Fort
Unregulated economic Pressure	Fragmentation	Hall Bazaar
Loss of Function and Weak Policy	Transitional Decline	Old DC Office

Table 4: Conclusion

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