

## Field Report

# Shimla: A Case Study of Transition from a Colonial Capital to an Indian Town

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This report explores changes in the urban fabric and architectural vocabulary of Shimla, India, as observed through the lens of two important shifts in its demographic profile. The first shift occurred when British colonial authorities took ownership of the area from local hill people in the mid-nineteenth century, the second when the settlement reverted to Indian control after independence in 1947. The report analyzes the sociocultural factors that guided the evolution of Shimla through these two historical transitions to understand the present pattern of unregulated, unchecked development that has allowed its once-pristine ecological setting to be choked out by unmindful construction.

The hill town of Shimla is located at an altitude of 2,276 meters (7,467 feet) in the foothills of the Himalayas. The present capital of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, it is located some 345 kilometers north of the national capital, New Delhi (FIG. 1). It is perhaps better known historically as a “hill station,” occupied during the summer months by members of the British colonial government. Indeed, for the better part of a century it served as the summer capital of the British Raj.

Shimla began existence as a small hamlet, inhabited by an indigenous community, but it lay in an area explored by the British in the early 1800s. Across Europe, this was also a time of change, as the industrial revolution was allowing the emergence of a new “middle class.”<sup>1</sup> The spread of this new social category was enabled by growing ambitions in terms of amenities and luxuries made possible by technological advances. In terms of urban development, these included a process of categorizing space into places for work and leisure. And with regard to India, as Anthony King has explained,

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*For a particular social class in the metropolitan society, a model of “dual residence” emerged comprising a permanent, usually winter, residence in the town and a temporary location, ostensibly for health but in reality equally for social-recreational reasons,*



**FIGURE 1.** Location of Shimla in India with respect to some important cities and hill stations. Image from *mapfordesign.com*, used with permission.

in a “resort.” The originators and early patrons of the hill station shared these social, temporal and spatial models.<sup>2</sup>

The establishment of Shimla, along with other hill stations, reflected this new sociocultural norm within British colonial society. Yet, beyond its establishment as a mirror image of suburban patterns “back home,” Shimla soon gained special importance among the almost eighty other British hill stations in India.<sup>3</sup> This came with its designation as the summer capital of the British Raj during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, it transitioned from being just another sanatorium to the core space of administrative power for nearly a century.

Shimla’s radical transformation enables it to provide a prominent case study of how processes of acculturation and enculturation may influence a built environment. The town was under purely Indian ownership both before and after its brief interlude as a center of British culture. Its complete shift into and out of this condition twice brought drastic changes to its spatial dynamics based on the changing sensibilities of its residents.

Every settlement’s evolution is undeniably guided by a complex interconnection of various tangible and intangible phenomena taking place in temporal and spatial contexts. The objective here is to observe and analyze the give-and-take relationship between the built environment and the social structure of Shimla over a period of nearly two centuries.

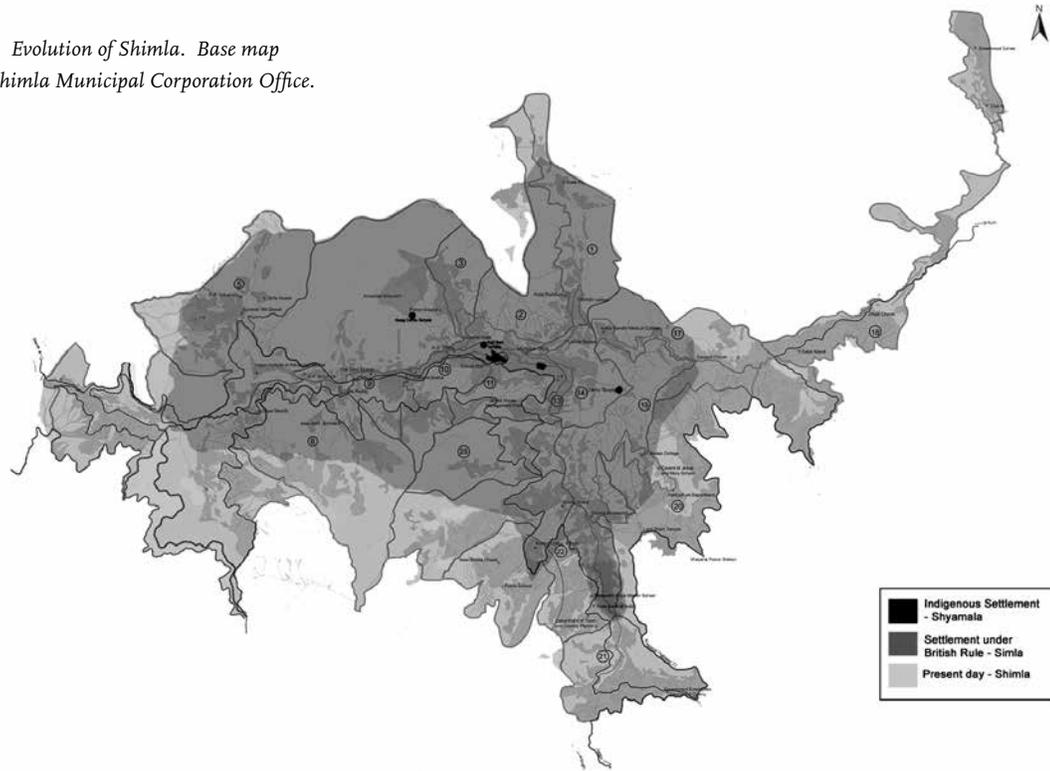
## THE PRECOLONIAL SETTLEMENT

Historical records suggest that the original village of Shimla, called Shyamala or Shumlah, was a small hamlet surrounded by a dense forest full of wildlife.<sup>4</sup> This original nucleus was located where the present-day core market area of the town developed (FIG. 2).

Until the early nineteenth century the indigenous societies occupying the challenging terrain of the Himalayas were constituted as hill tribes. The original hamlet of Shimla thus likely took the form of a cluster of twenty to thirty houses of families dependent for survival on the natural resources that surrounded them. Apart from this settlement cluster, however, records indicate the prior existence of three Indian temples in strategic settings in the area. One, the Jakhu temple, was located on the highest hilltop within the town, and is still one of the area’s most prominent and venerated landmarks. In his *Simla Guide* of 1870, W.H. Carey mentioned the theory that “Simla derives its name from ‘Shyeamalaya,’ the house built of blue slate erected by a fakir on Jakko, the first nucleus of the settlement” — though most records argue that this derivation is fanciful and farfetched.<sup>5</sup> A second temple that predated the hamlet was also dedicated to a local *deota* [deity]. It was situated near the only naturally occurring area of flat ground in the town, an area later named Annadale by the British, and also today an important landmark. The existence and location of the third temple is disputed, but it holds great importance. This was believed to have been a temple of the goddess Shyamala Devi, which was later shifted to the present-day Kali Bari complex. As might seem evident, the popular and most accepted theory regarding the name of the town is thus that it is linked to the name of the goddess.

Except for the temples, no physical evidence of the original village remains today. Yet, considering Carey’s description of the “house built of blue slate,” and observing the construction of the *deota* temple near Annadale (even if it has undergone multiple repairs), it is likely the original hamlet was composed of structures employing a traditional practice called *kath-kuni*. *Kath-kuni* construction was once widespread in various Himalayan regions, including the district of Shimla. It consists of alternating layers of dry-stone masonry and monolithic timbers, arranged so that builders could achieve a continuous wooden connection at corners (FIG. 3). When translated into the local dialect, such a corner is known as *kath kona*, giving rise to the name of the construction technique. *Kath-kuni* is a labor-intensive process, but provides

**FIGURE 2.** Evolution of Shimla. Base map provided by Shimla Municipal Corporation Office.



an effective method for creating small buildings with small openings. Its stability in a seismically active region also derives from the fact that, ideally, a single piece of wood spans the entire width of each wall.

The fact that the British did not continue building in this technique, however, even if materials and construction knowledge remained locally available, illustrates how every sociocultural group, especially a dominating one, will find it necessary to create a context through tangible and intangible cultural cues that communicate their identity and status.<sup>6</sup>



**FIGURE 3.** A typical example of kath-kuni construction, showing the alternate layering of stone and wood that forms a flexible joint at corners. Even though there is no longer any existing example of this type of construction in the town of Shimla, villages in the Shimla district are replete with this traditional architecture typology. Photo by author.

Therefore, when the British started building, they introduced their own patterns of spatial engagement at both the building and urban level, eventually bringing an entirely new architectural vocabulary to the region.

#### SIMLA: THE SUMMER CAPITAL OF THE BRITISH RAJ

The establishment of the British hill station called Simla began in 1830. Initially conceived as a sanatorium offering refuge from the nearby hot, humid lowlands, the process began with the purchase of land in the area from its original owners, the Maharaja of Patiala and the Rana of Keonthal. However, records indicate that even before its formal establishment, Europeans had been visiting the area, with permission from local hill chiefs, mainly to recover their health in a comparatively friendly climate. Thus, the claim of the oldest dwelling belonging to a European dates to as early as 1819.

As the town grew, it increasingly came to be visited by members of the British imperial bureaucracy. And, by the 1840s, it began to take the shape of a proper settlement, with public buildings, residences, amenities, commercial streets, and gathering spaces. In 1851 one of the oldest municipal committees of British India was set up there. But the real transformation began in 1864 when, under the viceregal tenure of Sir John Lawrence, Simla was designated the summer capital of the British imperial government in India. This meant the viceroy and his council would typically shift their office from Calcutta to Simla every year for seven months (April to October).

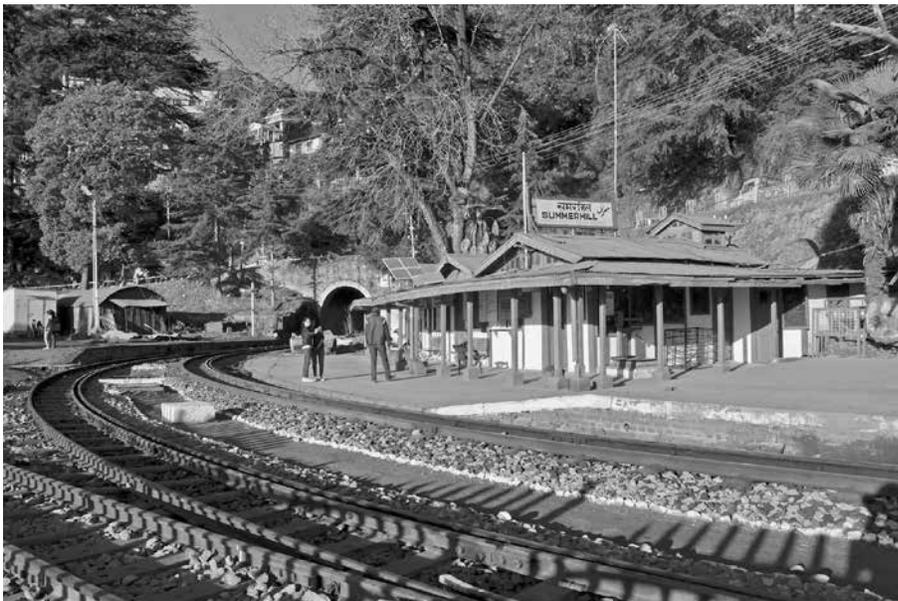




**FIGURE 5.** An early-morning photograph of Mall Road showing its present form. Notice the remnant features of the colonial architecture typology and the local market being overtaken by the global brands. Photo by author, 2014.

During the period of initial British settlement, roughly 1830 to 1903, Simla's circulation network was formalized to such a fine degree — both in terms of vehicular approach from Kalka and internal street layout — that, except for gradual expansion at its periphery, the network of streets in the old city is absolutely the same today as it was then. This is true to the extent that even the pedestrian pathways marked on the Survey of India Map of 1925 can be followed exactly today. In 1903 this initial period of settlement was capped by the opening of the Kalka Shimla Railway line, now listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (FIG. 6).

Such a rapid pattern of growth would have been impossible without the involvement of the local community. Initially, local hill chiefs arranged for the employment of the lower social classes as laborers in construction, load-bearing, and transportation. But as the town grew, many Indians from out of the area, mostly merchants and contractors, recognized the growing opportunity, and established themselves in strategic sectors. Eventually, Indians from many other parts of the country settled in the thriving new hill town. This included a complete social spectrum, from maharajas and ranas, who purchased properties and were frequently invited to European households, to the domestic help needed to run every household.



**FIGURE 6.** Kalka Simla Railway, Summerhill Railway Station. Technological feats like the railway were factors that encouraged European society to venture into challenging terrain. Photo by author, 2016.

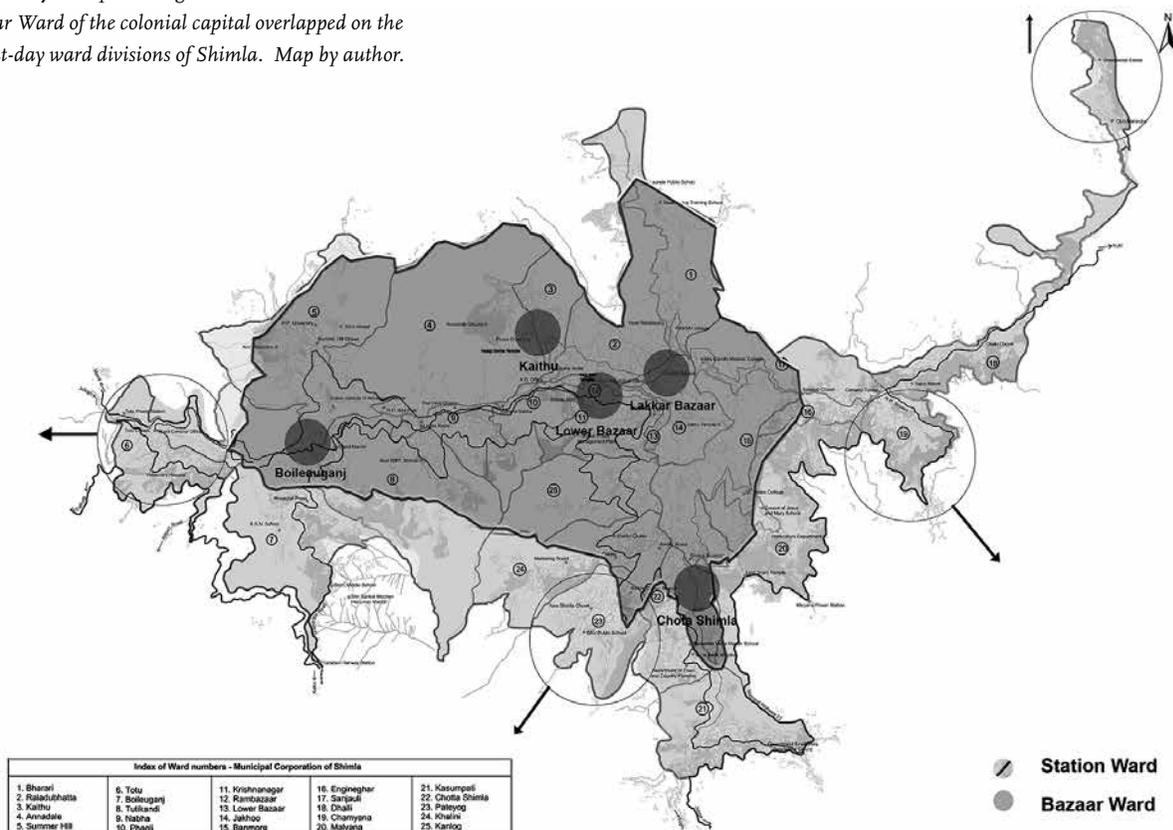
To facilitate its governance, in 1884 the town was divided into two areas, the Station Ward and the Bazaar Ward (FIG. 7). Initially the division was based, more or less, on land use. The Bazaar Ward, as the name suggests, encompassed Simla's markets, and included the occasional residential, institutional or administrative building within its central area. The Station Ward, meanwhile, under the jurisdiction of the municipal committee, encompassed the rest of the settlement, extending over the surrounding seven hills and including private residences and some outlying administrative and institutional buildings (FIG. 8). In 1900, Mall Road was included in the Station Ward, however, making it clear that, as more Indians became permanent residents, governance of the town would be divided according to sociocultural status. Its administrative division, originally foreseen as a way of dividing it according to function, thus evolved to reflect ideas of racial superiority, as Europeans, who held the reins of power, preferred to establish a clear boundary between themselves and the supposedly inferior local population.

It must be noted that a person's wealth, regardless of whether they were European or Indian, was also a factor determining access to property and status in Simla. Thus, in

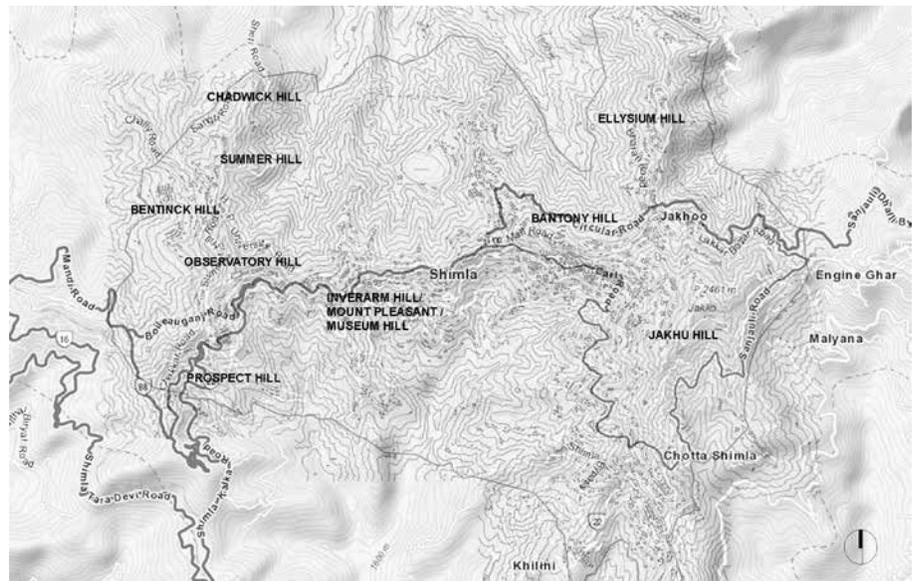
the early 1900s the Station Ward included villas owned by members of the Indian royalty, whose grandeur was not only similar to, but sometimes exceeded, those of high-ranking British colonial officers. It also contained a number of lavish properties owned by enterprising Indian businessmen. Yet even if an Indian owned multiple buildings in the Station Ward, except for a royal Indian family, the Indians did not reside in its central part. Many cottages in the ward owned by Indians were rented to Europeans as a source of income — especially when the British imperial government shifted its headquarters to Simla each summer. Moreover, properties occupied by Indians inside the Station Ward were typically located on its periphery and were approached by separate roads.

There were also rare instances where British citizens ended up residing in the Bazaar Ward. In a majority of these cases, however, the British accommodations predated the dense development that surrounded them because they had been built before the division of the wards. Therefore, when the ownership records and the maps of that era are studied in finer detail, it is clear how racial prejudices governed the layout and functioning of the entire town.

FIGURE 7. Map showing the Station Ward and Bazaar Ward of the colonial capital overlapped on the present-day ward divisions of Shimla. Map by author.



**FIGURE 8.** *The hills of Shimla. Even though Shimla is said to be spread over seven prominent hills, the above-mentioned nine hills still remain identity markers for the city. Base map: Google Earth.*

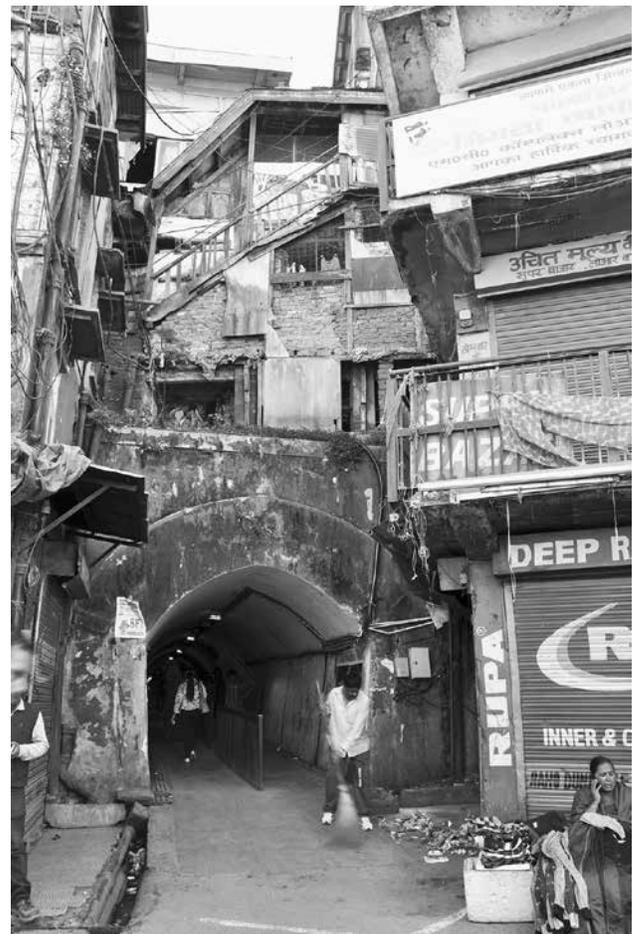


#### URBAN FABRIC OF SIMLA

The establishment of a boundary between areas occupied by two very different cultures is critical to understanding the overall fabric of the town in the early and mid-twentieth century. When viewed from a purely physical perspective, the densities of these areas presented a stark difference. The Station Ward was a quiet area of very low settlement density, consisting of properties spanning acres, located at great distances from each other amidst the beauty of the native deodar forests. The Bazaar Ward was a high-density area, composed of three- or four-story buildings that frequently shared common walls and staircases. Narrow streets and dingy service lanes running between blocks of row houses connected various levels of the urban fabric here, affording little scope for expansion (FIG. 9).

Considering a variety of tangible and intangible factors, it is also possible to identify multiple levels of spatial engagement within the various communities encompassed by the two wards. Thus, apart from the earliest selection of residence sites based on favorable features of the natural environment, four factors determined the density of parts of the town: financial status, cultural background, occupation, and position within the social hierarchy.

Lowest in the social structure were the Balmikis — sweepers, rag-pickers, and scavengers. Not only was their residential cluster the densest (almost like present-day slums), but it was physically located on the lowest part of the town's southern slope. Next in terms of relative density were the neighborhoods of migrant Indian laborers. Several of these neighborhoods (called *mohallas* in the local language) were named after the place from which people of a common ethnic background had migrated. Many who worked as coolies, or load-carriers, had migrated from Kashmir, and their cluster of houses, located in the Lower Bazaar below Mall Road, was



**FIGURE 9.** *The multiple layers of the Lower Bazaar. Photo by author, 2019.*

called Kashmiri Mohalla. Similarly, many who labored in construction had migrated from Ladakh, and their cluster, located below Cart Road (the road that still serves as the main vehicular entry to the town), was called Ladakhi Mohalla. In many cases, the division of these areas was additionally based on religion. Thus, as recorded by Pamela Kanwar, the Kashmiri Mohalla was largely comprised of houses owned by Sunni Muslims, while residents of Ladakhi Mohalla were largely Shia Muslims.

As neighborhood density decreased, residential clusters came to be defined more by the type of work residents were engaged in, regardless of place of origin or religious belief. At this level of the social hierarchy there was also less variance in terms of density, and the individual clusters were generally better organized and offered better natural light and ventilation. Some of these areas were home to the Indian business class, members of which had set up shops in certain areas of the town depending on their trade. For example, the vegetable, meat and grain markets, along with shops for daily-need items, were situated below Mall Road in areas known as the Lower and Middle Bazaars. The Kashmiri Mohalla was located in the Lower Bazaar, suggesting that since its residents typically found work as load-bearers, they had chosen to live near businesses for which they carried loads.

Another example one might point to is Lakkar Bazaar (*lakkar* in local dialect means “wood”); this area is still where most timber-related services are located. Market areas of Simla were typically composed of three- or four-story buildings, with a shop and storage on one or two floors and a residence on the others. Lakkar Bazaar contains two such typical market streets, offering a concentrated area occupied by the residences of shop-owners, sawmills, and timber-product

workshops. Typically, the density of each cluster would vary depending on the area required for its particular trade.

Next higher in the social hierarchy were areas home to Indian and Eurasian civil servants. As part of the machinery of government, these groups were more prone to the influence of European culture, and the main factor keeping them from occupying lavish properties, like those of the British, was their financial condition. The most prominent settlement for people of this background was Kaithu, an area originally occupied by small cottages with front or back yards, or both (FIG. 10). Kaithu began as a cluster of houses owned by Indians, with a central market of similar density as the town’s other bazaars. But when Simla was designated the summer capital of the British Raj, it became important to find accommodation for lower-level government employees. Because most government offices were built along Mall Road, Kaithu was the ideal location for them to reside because it was close by, and possibly also because until then this spur had been largely undeveloped for European cottages. As the area developed, however, it also came to serve as home to businessmen who were a level up the financial chain from those residing in high-density areas, yet lower down than those who were able to afford to live in the central Station Ward.

Other such areas were typically home to chiefs of the surrounding hill states. Except for their market clusters, they too were included within the boundaries of the Station Ward. However, when areas of Indian residence were contained within the boundaries of the Station Ward, they were almost always located strategically at its periphery so that they could be approached along roads that did not intersect with those used by Europeans. Even if located inside the same ward, Indian and British communities remained physically segregated.

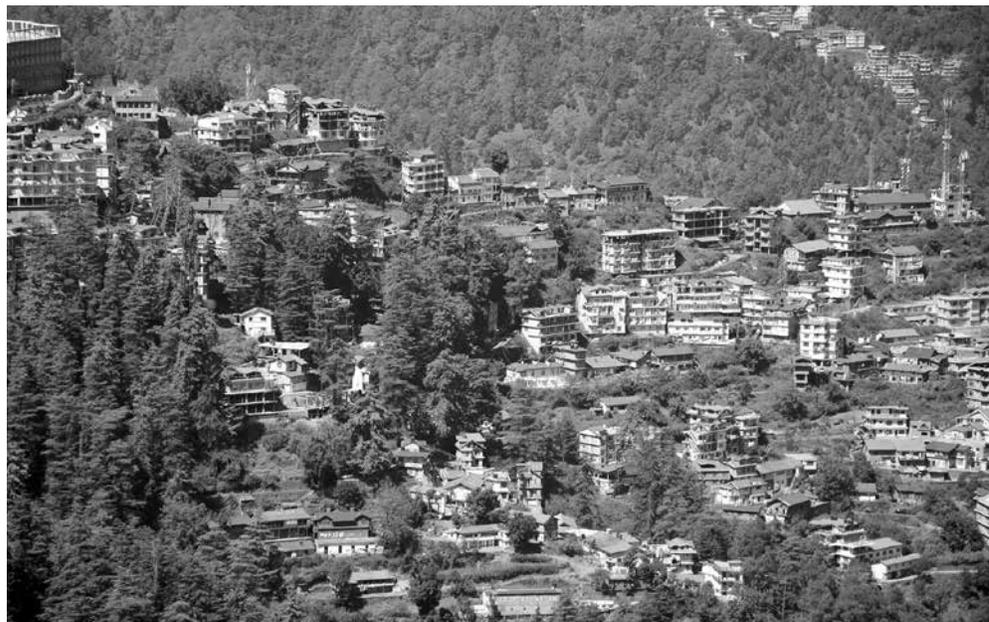


FIGURE 10. View of Kaithu.  
Photo by author, 2019.



**FIGURE 11.** *The Cedars.* Originally a residential property, it now functions as the Punjab Government Circuit House. Photo by author, 2016.

Within this overall hierarchy of settlement, the lowest-density area was the core of the Station Ward. This included properties belonging to Europeans and the richest members of the Indian community. Properties within the Station Ward were measured in acres, and typically provided space for either one palatial villa or a set of two to three cottages surrounded by lush, terraced gardens and tennis courts (FIG. 11). These properties might also include separate buildings, or outhouses, for permanent domestic help. They were surrounded by beautiful walks through the deodar forest. Overall, the central part of the Station Ward defined a grand pattern of ownership for those at the highest level of colonial society through its low-density layout and planning.



**FIGURE 12.** *State Library building on The Ridge,* one of the finest examples of Tudor architecture in Shimla. Photo by author, 2019.

## ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ARCHITECTURAL VOCABULARY

As previously mentioned, the British brought a new style of architecture to the region, which owed its inception to various factors. Apart from their natural instinct to want to create spaces they were accustomed to, the British also wanted to stamp their presence on a new territory by introducing, in every possible way, the aesthetics of their homeland. A complete replication was not possible because of material constraints and the unfamiliarity of local laborers with European construction systems. However, British architects sought to reenvision familiar spaces and forms using available materials and construction practices. Luckily for them, an Indian construction system called *dhajji dewari* offered a similar typology of materials and skills, and it was this that was used in most of British structures, especially cottages. The basic principle of *dhajji* construction was a braced timber frame with stone or brick infill, which was then either plastered or not depending on the quality of the frame. The contractors and skilled laborers who produced such buildings were typically hill people from Kashmir and neighboring regions where *dhajji* was a traditional practice.

A parallel may be drawn between this local construction system and the Tudor style, one of the most important styles in Britain. And, in absence of a written historical record, it is safe to deduce that it was not difficult to reproduce a European aesthetic inspired by the Tudor style in Simla because of the presence of craftsmen from Kashmir and Ladakh. Because they were well versed with the *dhajji* technique, they thus succeeded in implanting these practices in a new area of the Himalayan foothills.

Where the Tudor style inspired the design of residences and small public buildings, many resulting structures featured intricate wooden facades (FIGS. 12, 13). Bigger public



**FIGURE 13.** *U.S. Club, Block no.4,* a residential building showcasing a beautiful wooden facade. Photo by author.



FIGURE 14. Viceregal Lodge, Shimla. Photo by author, 2018.

and administrative buildings, meanwhile, were inspired by other European styles such as Gothic Revival and Scottish Baronial. Certain of these iconic buildings are still among the most important landmarks of the town, such as the Viceregal Lodge, Ellerslie, and Gorton Castle (FIG. 14). Later on, cast iron was also experimented with, and the Railway Board Building along Mall Road is an outstanding example of this (FIG. 15). However, with the introduction of reinforced concrete as the main building material in the early twentieth century, the prevalent architectural style in Simla changed to reflect a new type of structure that was lighter, taller, and largely stripped of ornament or complex articulation.

After Indian independence, the country had to overcome many hurdles, and concern for architectural style in building production and maintenance took a back seat. Indeed, in many cases, aesthetic concerns were frequently obscured by more practical considerations. For instance, many of the residential spaces designed by the British were inspired by life in England and included features like big rooms with bay windows, covered verandas looking over landscaped gardens, usable attics, pitched roofs with dormer windows, carefully detailed fireplaces and chimneys, wood-paneled interiors, lavish floral wallpapers or cloth coverings, and separate kitchens connected via service areas so that servants could come and go without being seen by a family and its guests. These features did not have the same meaning for the middle-class Indian families who, after independence, became owners of these properties. Therefore, these new Indian owners frequently changed their interiors so that only a building's exterior might speak of a former British existence. Large internal spaces were divided to create smaller rooms; kitchens were brought inside the house as separation was no longer needed between served and serving class; open verandas were glazed in to maximize internal space; and extremely low concern was provided to maintaining aesthetic details.



FIGURE 15. Railway Board building, Shimla. Photo by author, 2018.

Moreover, as concrete became the material of choice for reasons of cost and construction efficiency, no one paid attention to the maintenance of old structural systems. Conditions in Shimla have now reached a point where it is rare to find a craftsman who even knows how to work with mud or lime plaster. And the skill set of *dhajji* construction has been almost entirely lost, and may soon lead to the extinction of an architectural style that once defined the charm of this hill station.

#### SHIMLA: THE POST-INDEPENDENCE SHIFT

When Shimla was named the capital of the newly formed Indian state of Himachal Pradesh in 1971, it was widely expected that the town would rise to the challenge and regain its former glory. The change in status from its colonial identity was confirmed by the decision in 1983 to change its name from Simla to Shimla. The local Indian population had reportedly always called the town Shimla. It had only been because Europeans found it difficult to pronounce this word that the town had officially been called Simla during British rule.

After its change in status, the town initially witnessed an increase in density within its colonial-era boundaries (which took in only the original seven adjoining hills). But it soon burst out to expand in all directions (REFER TO FIG. 2). Presently, according to official records, the Shimla Municipal Corporation occupies an area of 19.99 square kilometers, with a permanent resident population of 142,000 and a floating additional population of 75,000. Meanwhile, serving approximately 27,000 households, its 117-year-old infrastructure for services like water and sewerage has become completely outmoded, and the town is experiencing immense new developmental pressure. Among the factors behind this may be listed a sudden sociocultural shift in its core resident population, the necessity to develop an administrative center, changes

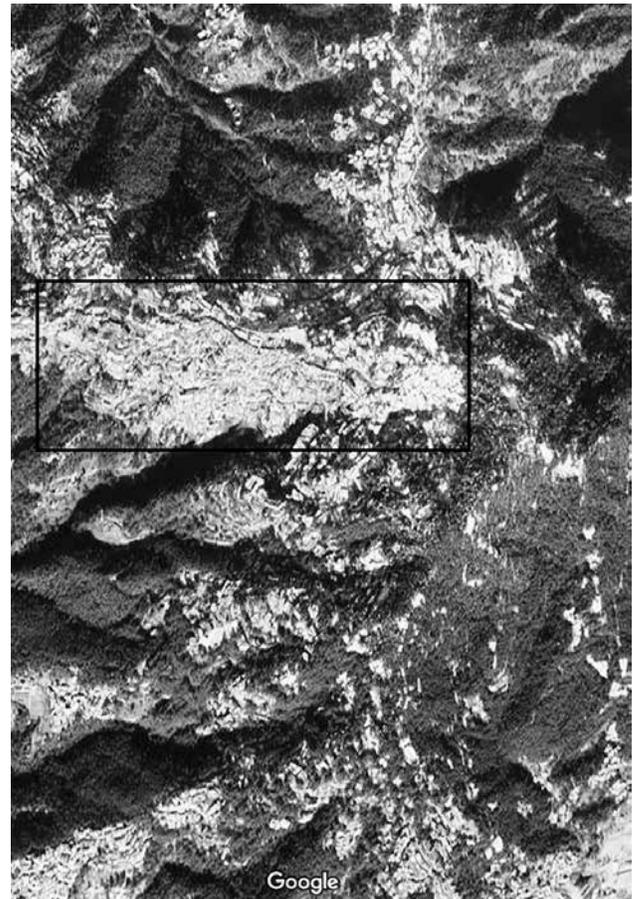
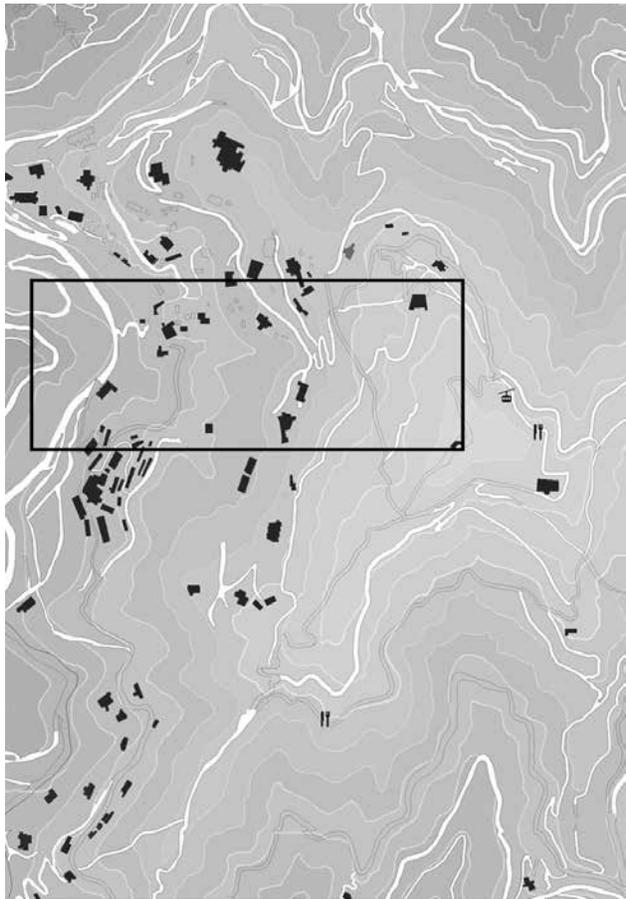
in architectural style and construction techniques, a gradual layering of new infrastructure, absolute growth in the resident population, the explosive growth of tourism as an industry, and the overpowering of local markets by global forces.

Restoration to native Indians of control over the town has also caused a shift in demographic profile that has changed its physical fabric, and is continuing to do so. In one important sense, this allowed a new standard of representative governance, as the division of wards is no longer based on racial prejudice. Both the Station Ward and Bazaar Ward were dissolved, and there are now 25 administrative wards within the Municipal Corporation.<sup>9</sup> It has also meant that most properties within the central Station Ward, which contained few Indians for more than fifty years, are now owned by Indians.

During the challenging times following independence, most administrative and institutional buildings were acquired by the newly formed Indian government, but many privately owned properties faced another fate that has allowed them to deteriorate. Specifically, many of the Indians who found themselves owners of lavish properties did not have

the same financial resources to maintain them, as had their previous owners. This led them to sell off parts of them, or divide them among family members. A majority of privately owned properties that previously incorporated acres of forest under a single ownership were thus divided among multiple owners who haphazardly started construction on smaller sites. This not only increased the overall settlement density but led to a disastrous decrease in green cover (FIGS. 16, 17). With time, multistory concrete structures were also constructed with little consideration to neighbors' rights to views. As a result, remaining beautiful cottages all over Shimla are now hidden behind hideous concrete blocks.

With many old cottages now replaced by multistory concrete structures, Shimla is on the verge of losing its connection with nature and previous distinctive ecological setting. Nevertheless, credit must be given where it is due. Local authorities, along with national authorities like the National Green Tribunal, have begun to demarcate green zones in the city. The rapid decrease in green cover may now have come to a halt, at least in the old city area. Bylaws are also being made



**FIGURE 16. (LEFT) and FIGURE 17. (RIGHT).** These images reveal the loss of green cover and the great increase in urban density on the Jakhu hill, a central part of the Station Ward during the British period. The left image is based on the 1925 Survey of India map. The right is a present-day Google Earth view of the site.

stricter to keep a check on the density of the urban fabric. But these and other efforts by the government are still not enough when compared to the damage already done.

Today the town has active slide zones whose stabilization only becomes an issue when a problem occurs. And historically dense areas like the Lower Bazaar are replete with old structures that are no longer safe to inhabit. These areas sometimes have such narrow streets that during an emergency, an ambulance or a fire engine cannot enter them. In addition, old structures are vulnerable to disastrous fires, and some have been so neglected that their owners ultimately have no choice but to pull them down and replace them.

If someone does want to restore an old cottage, it is likewise extremely difficult to find skilled conservation labor to perform the work. Indeed, instead of adding new knowledge to existing skills and experience, local building culture appears to be losing the skills of the past. To grasp at what the future has to offer, Shimla is becoming a city of concrete, hiding ruins of the past. Meanwhile, present construction activity has largely been left in the hands of unskilled laborers from states like Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, or Bihar. Many of these migrants have upgraded themselves to contractors, but their construction knowledge is more suited to flat sites, typical of the areas where they originated. Applied to a hill station, their previous skillsets have only created a new building typology that is completely out of context.

Shimla today is witnessing continuing change in its once-distinctive urban morphology and deterioration of its historic built fabric, caused by growing development pressure and the apathy of local regulating agencies. However, the present state of dangerous, unchecked construction may ultimately be traced to the sudden shift in socio-cultural paradigm that took place at the time of Indian independence. This dislocation set in motion the process of gradual deterioration that has continued ever since. This raises an important question. Is the ongoing deterioration of the urban fabric the result of an indifferent social attitude and local ignorance concerning the importance of ecological and architectural conservation? Or does it derive from the original stark cultural difference between the colonial town's two resident groups, which never allowed Indians to completely engage with British spaces, creating the basis for the present seemingly intractable condition?

#### THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL DISLOCATION

The core concern identified in this report is the disconnect of the native with nature caused by the transformation of an orthogenetic settlement to a heterogenetic city. And, in this case, the disintegration of a local building culture and the introduction of new cultural patterns was driven not by a subtle change but by a drastic shift in sociocultural, economic, political and administrative dynamics.

This disconnect with nature has moreover taken place at both tangible and intangible levels of engagement. For instance, during the 1960s and 70s, when the town was coming to terms with the turmoil it had witnessed in the past, creative fields like architecture were relegated to a back seat, and little importance was given to developing an awareness of spatial design. Sadly, the town of Shimla has never been able to entirely overcome this interlude of enforced ignorance.

Adding to this, tourism has now grown into such a prominent economic activity that the growing number of visitors and expansion of tourist facilities is challenging the town's holding capacity. Shimla's present population is already approximately three times that for which its services were designed, and this excludes the seasonal tourist influx. Pressure on infrastructure has almost reached a breaking point. Multiple hotels and mundane concrete-frame parking structures have now become prominent visual markers in the dense urban fabric. Global branding has overturned local businesses. Where a view of Shimla at night may still be described as a twinkling of stars on earth, the reality by day is of a concrete monster sleeping on a once-pristine landscape (FIG. 18).

It is further ironic that, as *kath-kuni* and *dhajji* construction are now nationally recognized as earthquake-resistant traditional building techniques, the knowledge needed to produce and conserve them has been lost in areas like Shimla, where they were once widely employed. And the future of a society is bleak, indeed, if, with all the resources of modern times, it is unable to understand that not every parcel may be built on in the same manner, or that it is undesirable to build in every part of a natural setting. This is especially true in mountainous regions, where humility and veneration toward nature should be a core value of every human being, whether a resident or a visitor.

Shimla is presently undergoing a period of social and cultural disintegration. Across India, the underlying causes are well known: growing economic ambition, globalization, and migration to cities in search of opportunities. All this might be seen as the outcome of poor developmental policies. But it might also be seen as an aftereffect of a change in resident sociocultural structure. Thus, in locations like Shimla, Indians have acted like simple landlords, instead of caretakers of a rich urban landscape constituted of architectural heritage of immense value.

Architecture, in many ways, is the reflection of a society. A lack of awareness regarding good design practices, combined with poor government enforcement mechanisms, is today allowing architecture in Shimla (and in a majority of other cities in India) to become increasingly devoid of character, especially in regional attributes. An irreparable loss of natural and cultural heritage is underway in Shimla at present. And if immediate, informed conservation actions are not taken soon, the city's distinguishing qualities will be lost entirely. In the words of Lewis Mumford:



**FIGURE 18.** Present-day view of the southern slope of old Shimla town. The image corresponds to the area shown in Figure 4. Photo by author, 2018.

*Man cannot achieve a high level of economic life or culture in an environment whose resources he has plundered and defaced. And if even an economic system demands a balance between energy income and outgo, human culture demands a still greater degree of discrimination and care in the use of the environment: a more active sense of place-possibility, more delicately poised equilibrium between the landscape and the modes of human occupation.<sup>10</sup>*

#### REFERENCE NOTES

1. For a further reading of the temporal context, refer to A.D. King, ed., *Buildings and Society: Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980). Especially notable is King's essay "A Time for Space and a Space for Time: The Social Production of the Vacation House," pp.195–96. Also see C. Allen "A Home Away from Home," in R. Fermer-Hesketh, ed., *Architecture of the British Empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), pp.32–73; and C. Allen, *Plain Tales from the British Empire* (London: Abacus, 2008).
2. A.D. King, *Colonial Urban Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), Chapter 7.
3. S. Gupta, *Architecture and the Raj (Western Deccan, 1700–1900)* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1985), pp.17–19.
4. The discussion of Shimla's history here is based on a thorough study of the following resources: E.J. Buck, *Simla Past and Present* (Bombay: The Times Press, 1925, 2nd ed.); J.B. Fraser, *Journal of a Tour through Part of the Snowy Range of Himala Mountains and to the Sources of the Rivers Jumna and Ganges* (London: Thomas Davidson, Whitefriars, 1820); F. Beresford Harrop, *Thacker's New Guide to Simla* (Simla: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1925); P. Kanwar, *Imperial Simla: The Political Cultural of the Raj* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, 2nd ed.); Punjab District Gazetteers, *Gazetteer of the Simla District 1904*, Volume VIII-A (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp, 2012); and Punjab District Gazetteers, *Gazetteer of the Simla District 1888–89*, (Punjab Government, Department of Language Art and Culture, 2000).
5. For a complete description of this house, predating the British settlement, consult Buck, *Simla Past and Present*.
6. A. Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication* (London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1982); and A. Rapoport, *House Form and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1969).
7. IIAS Archives, *Survey of India Map, Simla*, 1925.
8. For a reading into the establishment of hill stations in India, refer to King, *Colonial Urban Development*, Chapter 7; A.D. King, *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), pp.14–65; P. Davies, *Splendours of the Raj: British Architecture in India, 1660–1947* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1987), Ch.5; and J. Morris, *Stones of Empire: The Buildings of the Raj* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp.198–202).
9. Consult Figure 7 for a list and demarcation of the present 25 wards of the Municipal Corporation of Shimla. The base map for this map is *Present Ward Division Map*, 2008, prepared by GTZ-EM, provided solely for academic purposes by Municipal Corporation Shimla.
10. L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1945), p.355.