

Need for Conservation and Relocate the Historical Building – Sylhet, Bangladesh

M. M. Rahman

Department of Architecture
Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet-3114, Bangladesh

Abstract: During British period many colonial style building were built in Sylhet and after that in later colonial period some building were furthermore build which followed that colonial style and later colonial style. Present Customs and Food Division Head Quarter (CFDHQ) building situated near Zindabazar, Sylhet; is one of them. Other than without proper conservation and mismanagements of proper authority this historical building lost its all archetype and the past heritage. Therefore this paper attempt to focus the importance and crisis of such kind of builds form and makes a case for historical conservation of this Customs and Food Division Head Quarter (CFDHQ), Sylhet. Again it tries to identify the original history of this building, disclose the findings and discuss the appropriate ways or recommendations by proposing recovered layout plan to conserve and maintain and why existing function of this building should relocated and protect this building based on several proposal.

Key words: Conservation, Preservation, Relocate, Historical Conservation, Archetype.

Introduction

Though conservation and preservation of old building is one of the recent program concerning the built environment of Bangladesh, it is realized that these buildings have important significance with the nation's historical development. Nevertheless, most of the problems emerge after the post colonial period where building protection and maintenance managements is not really emphasized in any conservation law and guidelines and by organization or parties that are responsible for the upkeep of the buildings. These problems give a great impact to the buildings performance, condition, structure stabilization and building character. Thus the aim of conservation is to retain and safeguard the cultural significance of a place with unswerving respect of the existing fabric; the aesthetic, historical and physical integrity of the cultural property. The essential principles and aims of conservation are that historic building has a special message from its creator and thus, its original structure and appearance must not be altered or falsified.

In addition the concept of an historic monument is defined to embrace not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or an historic event. (2nd International Congress of the Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice, 1964, Article 1).

On the other hand great buildings of the past 'do not belong to us only they have belonged to our forefathers and will belong to our descendants unless we play them false. They are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those who come after us (Morris, William, Manifesto, Society for Protection of Ancient Building, 1875). The importance of preserving our architectural heritage and passing it through future generations through conservation is

a universally accepted matter, but in reality it is a neglected issue. Budgetary funds required for repair and protection of our architectural heritage receive the lowest priority, while in the name of development, entire sections of our older built heritage are being pulled down or re-developed in a most unsympathetic manner. (Shah Alam Zahiruddin, 1990).

Again Conservation is not about turning back the clock. It is about reclaiming heritage. It also is a way to align the past and present to make way for responsible urban living with an improved future in view (Mustafa Zaman). Still it is no question of expedience or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past time or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belongs partly to those who built them and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us the greatest glory of a building is its age (the seven lamps of architecture-1849; Jhon Ruskin, 1819-1900). Once more the importance of old buildings not only on its function as it was on the past, but also gives us the picture of the lifestyle of the past generation. It also contributes to us the character of our past architectural heritage (Konrad, 1990; Choon, 1989). While to conserve a project historical remuneration has to be inquired. A deliberation is rendered over the particular historical carefulness of the project. In these points present CFDHQ is a valuable part of our past and that's why it should be sustained for the present and also for the future. Though our traditional culture changed for sometimes during British colonial period, but we should not cut off from our main stream and we should move forward because conservation of past heritage is not a stiff thing. Therefore the assessment itself to conserve is a dominant consequence and for the importance of the picture of the lifestyle and heritage of the past generation CFDHQ is obviously something admirable of conservation.

Conservation plan and process

Conservation is about the care and continuing development of a place in such a way that its significance is retained or revealed and its future is made secure. To enable that the significance of a historic place is to be retained, the process and approach to conservation projects according to Mr. J.S. Kerr is summarized in the following figure

is very important in building conservation projects. All kind of expertise demands a high degree of cooperation, teamwork, experience, communication and knowledge of building materials and construction especially when dealing with this kind of historic buildings. Thus before the commencement of proposed conservation work, the methodology of overall process was designed first.

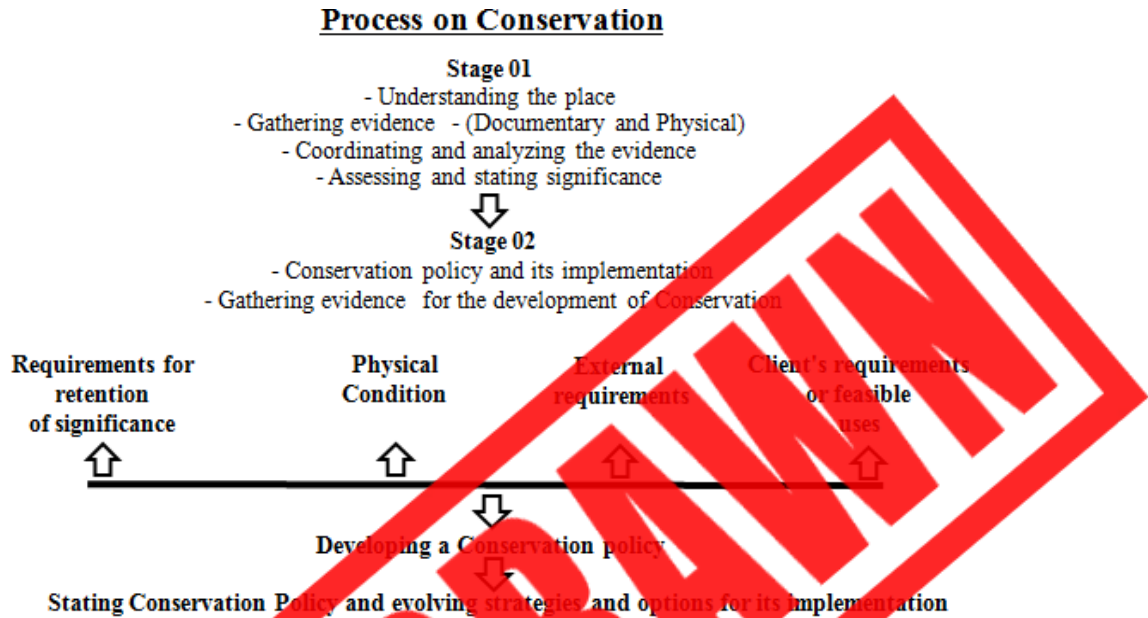


Fig. 1. Process of Conservation (Source: Kerr, James Semple)

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Objectives

Though conservation technique of old building is very important for the city neighborhood to know the history and ancient times, the city authority and the responsible authorities have always neglected this sector. So for the sake of a better environment of the city like Sylhet, this study will help the architect, decisionmaker, planners and engineers to pay attention in this field. Besides this there are four specific objectives of this study which are as follows:

- To know the historical background of this old building.
- To focus the importance and crisis of such kind of build form.
- Explain the reasons, why present function of this building should relocate.
- Finally to propose a better layout plans with conservation techniques.

Methodology

The framework of building research methodology

Earlier than embarking on any physical interventions in, or design strategy for a potential conservation project it is essential to assemble all the available evidence on the building and/or site that is to be conserved. Therefore for conserving this historical building, the present study attempts to collect the following information with comprehensive field survey –

- Bring together all comparative information from historical evidence and local persons about the build form.
- Prepare existing layout plan of the conservation area with built form.
- Obtain existing building's photographs to make out the present condition and identify archetypes of the building.
- Then all the visual evidence have been written or located in measured drawing.

These all assist to acquire a good picture of real condition of this building along with by assembling information of the present and past stipulation, the proposed design strategy can be decided more wisely.

Historical background of this building

Sylhet is a major city in north-eastern Bangladesh. It is the main city of Sylhet Division and Sylhet District, and was granted metropolitan city status in March 2009. In addition it is one of the largest cities in Bangladesh. It is located on the banks of the Surma River and is surrounded by the Jaintia, Khasi and Tripura hills. The city is approaching a population of 500,000 people while also having a high population density. Sylhet is well known for its culture and heritage. It has a long history of British Colonial period. History stated the 17th century started the British rule in the Indian subcontinent. During the period the British East India Company employed Indian lascars which included Sylhetis. In the late 18th century, the British East India Company became interested in Sylhet and saw it as an area of strategic importance in the war against Burma. Then Sylhet was gradually absorbed into British control and administration and was governed as a part of Bengal. During this episode many colonial style building were built in Sylhet and after that in later colonial period several building were furthermore build which followed that colonial style and later colonial style. Present Customs and Food Division Head Quarter (CFDHQ) building situated near Zindabazar, Sylhet; is one of them.

However history says CFDHQ building was built for residential purpose and the owner of this building was Roy Bahadur Girish Chandra Das who was the first Engineer of Sylhet. He was also appointed as first chief engineer when Sylhet municipality was found in the year of 1878. He made his graduation on civil engineering from Shibpur Engineering Collage Kolkata in 1891 (internet search will need). He worked for the British Martin company in Kolkata; appointed as an engineer for "Jaypur city extension project, India" and also worked in the various famous architectural projects. Thus the existing different architectural motifs of this building express the knowledge of his experience and design techniques. Then during separation of India and Pakistan in 1947 the ownership was sold to Dewan Eklimur Raja (Son of Hasan Raja), because in that period Girish Chandra Dash was migrated to Kolkata from Sylhet. After three years in 1950 Government took requisition of the building and established it with new function as Customs and Food Division Head Quarter (CFDHQ) in the same period. Subsequently the complex is contentiously being used as a Customs and Food Division Head quarter, Sylhet. Starting as a government office building to till now, few renovations were rendered over the complex for functional purpose that snatched away the original appearance of the complex. In addition history ejected from the existing build form is enough then a text reference as there is not much written evidence in any books about this building. Any source of any information

about this build form is still rare. Physical survey and discussion with some local person managed to accumulate some historic essence about this build form.

In addition these evidences explain the engraved year on the pediment which surmises that it took eight years to construct the main building of the complex. These evidences also illustrate that the north wing of the building established in 1926 and pediment of the east wing says it was constructed within year, 1928; later the south wing of the building was composed with north and east wing in the year, 1934. The portion built around the courtyard now being used as the residence of the guard, is assumed to be built at the same period of the east wing; cause the exploration of the east wing and the guard room has proven to be same. The colonnade space does have some dispute about its building period, the purpose of its establishment also has wavering opinion. Survey map of 1956 doesn't also exposes its existence. Semi pakka structure of Jela food control office and office canteen is not precisely old as the other established structures. But very few motifs have been seen to be attached with those masses; doesn't prove any historical importance of those building. The mosque built in 1975 and renovated in 2004, do not have any eventful background. Exploration of the Ghat (seating area) similarize with the trite ornamentation of the main building, while sudden use of detailed ornamentation in the sitting raises its importance. Proof of the waterbody erected during the built period of the main building can be assumed through proper observation. Subsequent figure 2 shows the existing condition of build form of the site.



Fig. 2. Existing build form and Views of the site

Built form & functional arrangement of present CFDHQ building

“Customs and Food Division Head quarter” is situated in between Zindabazar and Chowhatta, the centre of commercial activity within Sylhet city. Total area of the site is approximately – 1, 92,550sqft. Among it shaded area is 96,275sqft, open area is 83,008sqft and water body is 13,267 sqft. Next figure 3 shows the exact location of this site and the surroundings.



Fig. 3. Location of CFDHQ building



Fig. 4. Existing plan of CFDHQ building



Fig. 5. Existing elevation (west) of CFDHQ building



The present functional arrangements of CFDHQ show that total number of build form is nine. Figure 4 exhibits the existing plan and functional arrangements of the site. It shows that the main building in this site is Customs and Food Department office. Afterward the two storied colonnade space in this site now using as a club building, few clerks temporally live in upper slab of this building. In front of the club building there is a tennis court. Other two buildings around the courtyard are being used to accommodate the guards. Walls are constructed nearby the guard room defining the garden and to define the boundary wall of water body. The Ghat(seating area) besides the water body was decorated with Kiosk and exclusive treatment. In front of the main building a deferent portion of Food Control office is located with a semi Pakka Ghar and just at the opposite of the main entry; beside the pond a new mosque is located. A canteen with minimum service only for official persons is in front of the mosque. The other two temporary structures which are located to the east side besides of the pond are less important to point out and there is another entry from Taubazar road which has totally demolished. Then figures 5 and 6 shows present west and south elevation of this CFDHQ building complex.

Archetypes of this building

The existing different architectural motifs and archetype of this building express the comprehension of experience and design techniques of that period. The archetype, construction period (in between 1926 to 1934) and compared to other contemporary buildings of that period which are still exist in Sylhet city, this CFDHQ building complex seems to be an example of later colonial architectural style. Now following are the discussion of very short detail of the building’s has remaining features which prove that it is a late colonial architecture style.

Boundary wall :



Fig. 7. Boundary Wall

- Boundary wall appearance is festooned style.
 - Suspended in a curve between two posts.
- Posts are adorned with caps and brickwork having Flemish bond.

Pediment:

- Pediment explains the construction period of this building.
- Pediment has sloping edges and has low pitched

triangular shape with sunken panels of decoration.



Fig. 8. Pediment

- It has also masonry skewback against sloping face.

Enclosure entry:

- Total number of enclosure entry in this complex is four.
- Every enclosure entry has archivolt which is stilted and has three concentric masonry rings



Fig. 9. Enclosure Entry

forming order; each projects beyond the one below.

- The entry features shows taenias style.
- Then two slantwise entries shouldering stairways and encompassed with inserted panel.

Doorways and windows:

- Doors and windows explain that these architectural features are of later colonial architectural style.
- All are rests on segmental arch and its highest point ornamented with crown.



- In entry level it display Elizabethan Pattern of doorway.
- Then in main entry level there is few slender pointed arched lancet windows.

Dome:

- Onion style of dome were used which has light belfry structure.
- The top of every dome consist flag rail with

vaulted base.

- The base of dome has projecting slab like corona of cornice and strap bandage placed around springing of dome and base of the dome is square form.

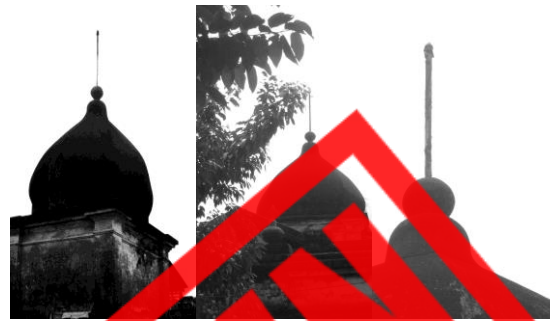


Fig. 11. Dome

Urn:



Fig. 12. Urn

- Use of urn which has episodic ornamental feature.
- These are composed through bird like arrow motif with pot motif.

Kiosk:



- Location of kiosk is in Ghat (seating area of pond) area.
- Provably to place minor divinities.
- Also has floral decoration which has similarity with Sikhara.

Pallava:

- This very infrequent ornamented architectural feature shows the craftsmanship and detailed work which was well known of colonial and late colonial architectural style.
- Very detailed wooden ornamentation work, located at corner of slope roof where it joint each other.
- But this ornamental works found only in the colonnade space building.



Balustrade:

- Use of balustrade in every stair and veranda as railing.



Fig. 15.Balustrade

- Every balustrade has short stems with abacus.
- Also has one bulb with rings shape.
- Oval and cavetto moldings with post and column like balustrade are found.

Column



Fig. 20. Column

- Two types of column exist in this building: concrete column and iron columns.
- The architrave of columns resembles Corinthian order and the entasis shaft resembles the Tuscan.
- Bell features acanthus, helix and caulicles and it precisely resembles with Corinthian order.
- Presence of hypotrachelium and prominent three echinus moldings with pointed trefoil arch in drop and has only plinth in base.
- Iron columns having slender shaft and the capital stylized of crocket.

Proposals and Recommendation

The overall condition of this site is very congested and the present situation of this building is not so sound, whereas this area is very much busy and important location for urban neighborhood as a variety of reasons. On the other hand this complex has very significant value to know our history. Therefore planning and design proposals are proposed with a view of conserving the urban character of this area and the building itself with an open space for break of urban dwellers. In addition enhancing its quality by providing walkway and landscaping to feel the history and as a final point introducing some breathing space is proposed for the best use of this site. Besides these for conserving this historical building, this study also proposed following proposals and recommendations –

- Initially confirmed this site as a conservation area. So when the question of conservation is raised, first priority is to conserve the buildings with historical and architectural importance.
- Relocate present Customs and Food Division Head Quarter to other city side.
- Then apply the existing building as a museum for demonstrate Roy Bahadur Girish Chandra Das, who was very famous engineering in this reason and exhibit his past existence.
- Then this study proposed four steps of planning and designing process for implementing the final layout plan.
- In step 01, rearrange some existing structure, such as – Moshjid, Canteen and Guard Room and remove all temporary structure as proposed plan.
- Step 02; develop the bank of pond as an open area and developed for landscaping and walking area. This could be done by restricting vehicular entry and arrangement seating and necessary landscaping.
- This step also required to develop the east side colloned platform area by removing present tennis court and other temporary structure as performing playful activities.
- Step 03; when every temporary structure removed from the site, this study then proposed a walkway around the entire site.
- Step 04; later than completing the previous plan, repair the whole structure as it was with the help of proper authority and experience persons.

- Finally improve of the service of all the buildings to a satisfactory standard as it was. This will involved the development of drainage, sewerage, water supply, gas, electricity and walkway lighting.
- This building does not reflect as a government building and not supporting enough storage for the function
- Ergonomically this building is not suited for an office activity,for this reason furniture cannot

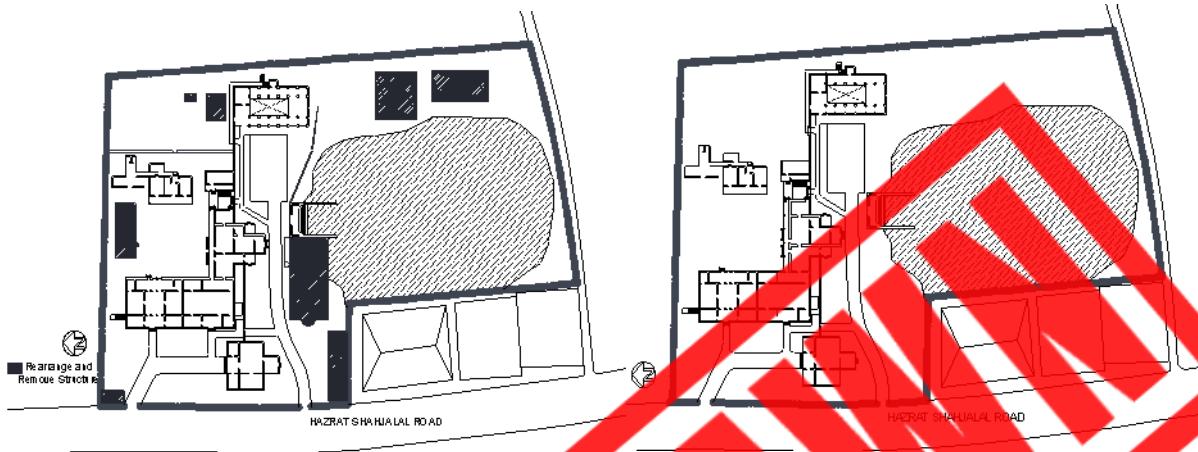


Fig. 21. Proposed plan _step 1 (rearrange and remove temporary structure) and step 2 (without some existing temporary structure)

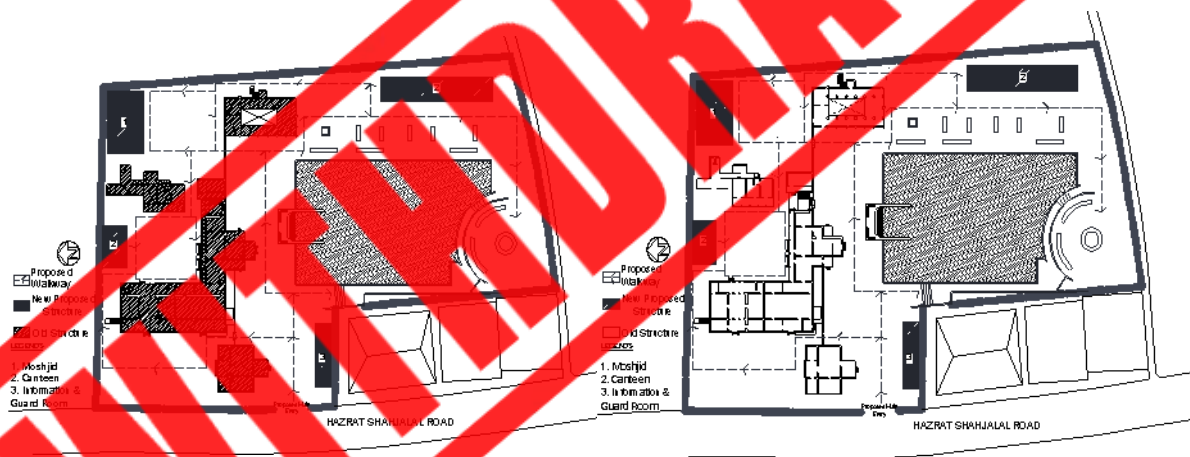


Fig. 22 Proposed plan _step 3 (walkway, landscape and new proposed structure) and step 4 (with new proposal)

Reasons for relocating Customs and Food Division Head Quarter

As history define this building was built for residential purpose and its functional arrangements reflects that it was a residential building, therefore present function “Customs and Food Division Head quarter” office should relocate in suitable space. Once more subsequent are some reasons for relocating this office –

- No facilities to accomplish administrative purpose and no executive establishment, meeting room, supervision office, waiting and reception area in this building.

locate properly.

- Presently life safeties of all employers are threatening for the building’s poor structural condition and the heavy vehicular access around the building causing wane of durability.
- Afterwards most of the Custom’s Office administrative activities take place in Upashahar, (Sylhel) new office, only few administrative activities taking place in this site.
- The surrounding circumstance of this commercial zone is also not suitable for acustoms house. Because Sylhet city’s major administrative center is in Bandar Bazar area

where government offices like - D.C. office, G.P.O. Circuit house, Judge Court, City Corporation are located. So that area is more suitable for present Customs and Food Division Head Quarter and should be allocated on that area.

Conclusion

Building conservation requires particular planning, expertise, care and execution because historic monuments are significant and invaluable heritage of our culture that once lost or damaged cannot be replaced. Therefore conservation of historic buildings and cultural properties is about authenticity and the principles governing conservation have taken centuries of philosophical, aesthetic and technical progress to articulate. In addition if viewed from the wider context, the rising land value and crisis in the urban areas many historical buildings are now re-used. Of course it is very difficult to start protecting historic building in a city where market forces and land crisis have always determined the pattern of increase. Because a building is threatened when the value of the site is greater than the value of the building on it and since building is adopted for re-use. On the other hand the Customs and Food Division Head Quarter Building (CFDHQ), a symbol of the British colonial period, has lost its originality to some extent due to change its original function. Due to unsystematic change of its function from residence to administration building, has affected the building both aesthetically and structurally. Yet the building is acutely related with the city and its glorious history. In this circumstance it becomes necessary for the planning authority to make a better policy to

conserve the building with respect of its existing functions and condition.

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