

Architectural Conservation and Social Heritage: Protecting Aligarh's Scientific Society

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Abstract: The research delves into the Scientific Society Building in Aligarh, underscoring its architectural and historical significance. It conducts a thorough analysis of the building's architectural characteristics, evaluates its current deteriorating condition, and underscores the necessity of its preservation. The building, which once played a pivotal role in advancing education, now faces threats from environmental and other factors that necessitate immediate conservation efforts. Upon examination, the building shows signs of severe neglect, with issues like unchecked vegetation growth, dampness, and defacement.

This paper also provides building original architectural plans and sections along with its present building conditions. The paper suggested recommendations for restoration of the building, which includes adaptive reuse of the structure into a museum to celebrate its legacy, removing any unsuitable structural changes, and addressing the damages inflicted by termites and moisture. The paper advocates decisive action to safeguard this invaluable cultural asset, ensuring its survival for the appreciation of future generations.

Keywords: Scientific Society, Heritage, Conservation, Restoration, Preservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Scientific Society Building stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, whose vision and dedication were instrumental in the establishment of Aligarh Muslim University. He was born on October 17, 1817, in Delhi and played a crucial role in the social and educational reform of the Indian Muslim community. He recognized the importance of English language proficiency and modern sciences for the Muslims, especially after the 1857 revolt (Sir Syed Ahmad Khan | Founder AMU, n.d.).

This edifice not only embodies his commitment to education and societal advancement but also serves as a tangible manifestation of his profound ideas. The imperative to preserve this structure for posterity is underscored by its exquisite architectural design, which is a harmonious amalgamation of French, Roman, and colonial styles. The building's significance is further augmented by the wealth of tangible and intangible heritage it houses, encompassing its historical narrative, the lore it preserves, and the communal identity it fosters—elements that are as vital to conserve as the edifice itself.

Current research reveals the building's lamentable state of decay, marred by neglect, unchecked vegetation, moisture damage, and defacement. This paper advocates for a transformation of the building into a museum, the reversal of unsuitable alterations, and the remediation of structural damages caused by termites and dampness. The urgency of these interventions is paramount to ensure the edifice's survival as a historical beacon. Thus, the goal of this conservation and restoration endeavor transcends simple preservation; it is an effort to protect a slice of history and uphold our cultural heritage.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 History

The Scientific Society was established on January 9, 1864, at the residence of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in Ghazipur. Its foundation stone was laid by the Honorable Edmund Drummond, the Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Provinces, on November 30, 1864 (Ali, 2016). The byelaws of the Society mandated that it should be situated in the same city as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Consequently, when Sir Syed was transferred to Aligarh, the Society also moved there. In 1864, J.H. Prinsep, the district collector of Aligarh, granted three acres of land along with a public garden, the new building of the Society in Aligarh was inaugurated by Mr. F. Williams on February 14, 1866. (Gupta & Kidwai, 2021)

The Scientific Society is dedicated to translating educational and technical literature from English and European languages into Indian languages, publishing scientific and agricultural books by Indian authors, introducing modern agricultural tools and techniques, and uplifting the backward classes, especially impoverished Muslims. This aligns with their broader mission of fostering knowledge and social progress. (Alam, 2000)

2.2 Values and significance

The oldest building of Aligarh Muslim University, established by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan on January 9, 1865, currently houses the Tabbiya college in Aligarh (Naqvi, 2001). This building is not only a testament to the university's history but also reflects the vision and thoughts of its founder, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. The Scientific Society, which operated within this building, had a profound educational mission: to translate Western works on arts and science into vernacular languages, thereby promoting Western education and fostering a scientific temperament among the Indian masses. This initiative aimed to make Western knowledge accessible to Indians in their own languages, contributing significantly to the educational values of the society. (Azmi, 1969)

2.3 Architecture description

The architectural design of the Scientific Society's building is a harmonious blend of symmetry in both its plan and elevation. The facade features exposed brickwork, semicircular arches, jack arches above doors, cornices along the parapet edges, quoins, a pitched roof, and a vaulted ceiling. This structure is a testament to hybrid architecture, drawing influences from French, Roman, and Colonial styles. Constructed with bricks and lime mortar, the building incorporates wood in girders and doors, and iron in angles, pipes, and truss sheets. However, the building's condition has deteriorated due to neglect, with issues such as heavy vegetation growth, dampness, and vandalism requiring urgent attention.

The Scientific Society's building is a two-storied structure that exhibits a symmetrical design with exposed brickwork. It features a high plinth and a pitched roof, adorned with semicircular arches and jack or flat arches. Decorative elements include animal-shaped gargoyles, quoins, and cornices, all contributing to its distinctive architectural character. The vaulted roof adds to the aesthetic and structural integrity of this historically significant edifice.

The fountain, once gracing the lawn of the Scientific Society Building, was a gift from Mr. Lang's daughter, celebrating the college cricket team's 1879 victory. It now stands near the Union hall, possibly still bearing Miss Lang's Urdu inscription. (Bhatnagar, S.K., 1969)

2.4 Conditional Assessment and Maintenance

Based on site surveys and observations the architecture condition of the Scientific Society reveals critical issues threatening the building's structural integrity and aesthetic appeal. External walls suffer from flaking paint and plaster cracks, signs of water seepage, compounded by blackening, bacterial, and plant growth. Internally, plaster degradation exposes bricks, while doors and windows show faded paint, broken hinges, and glass. The roof battles water clogging, algal growth, and structural damage, with plants infiltrating walls and corners. Rooms display flaking paint and damaged floors, underscoring the urgency of restoration to maintain the building's historical and structural importance.

The maintenance plan is dedicated to preserve the Scientific Society's cultural, historical, aesthetic, and educational values, ensuring its architectural integrity remains intact. It highlights the issues like termite infestation, weather-induced wall stains, unwanted vegetation, structural alterations, and policy negligence. The plan proposes strategies for preserving architectural and environmental significances, such as regular maintenance checks, strategic landscaping, and air-quality enhancing flora. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for safety measures and the diligent implementation of plans during and beyond restoration, to safeguard the building's legacy and safety.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research, the qualitative content analysis was used to evaluate the relationship between the architectural heritage and conservation and the quantitative content analysis was used to assess the relationship between the semantic values and conservation.

- **Data Collection:** Primary and secondary sources including historical records, architectural documentation, and from interviews.
- **Content Evaluation:** Data is assessed for relevance, accuracy, and credibility to maintain research integrity.
- **Architectural Analysis:** Detailed examination of design elements and current condition to understand historical and aesthetic value.
- **Content Analysis:** Key themes and findings are analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding.
- **Interpretation:** Findings are interpreted to draw conclusions and propose actionable recommendations.

IV. KEY FINDINGS OR RESULTS

- The scientific society is the first building erected in Aligarh by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.
- The building is closely associated with the vision and thoughts of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.
- The building played a crucial role in promoting Western education and scientific knowledge among the Indian masses.
- Initially, the scientific society complex has a char Bagh based layout having orchids of trees like guava, mulberry, sweet lime, pomegranate etc.
- The overall building was designed symmetrical in plan as well as in elevation. And has a central hall with four rooms at corners connecting with corridors.
- The building showcases a unique blend of architectural styles, including French, Roman, and Colonial influences.
- The building has two interesting features are: Animal shape gargoyles and Fountain, which was initially installed at lawns of scientific society. At present this is installed at the rear lawn of student union building.
- The building is deteriorating due to a lack of maintenance. And major concerns include heavy vegetation growth, dampness, and vandalism.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the Scientific Society Building in Aligarh is a historical treasure that must be conserved and restored for future generations.

To achieve this, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1) To convert the building into a museum of the Scientific Society to promote Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's vision and educate visitors about the society's objectives.
- 2) Prioritize the removal of later additions and alterations to restore the building's original features. This includes removing plaster and paint from the exposed brick facade.
- 3) Reinstall the fountain, originally located in the scientific society lawn, to its original position.
- 4) Address issues caused by termite infestation, dampness, and other factors through appropriate treatment and preventive measures.
- 5) Develop a maintenance plan to ensure regular upkeep and preservation of the building.

By implementing these recommendations, the Scientific Society Building can be preserved as a symbol of educational and cultural heritage, honoring the legacy of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and promoting the values of the Scientific Society.

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