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Cultural & Architectural Continuum Analysis, in Capturing the ‘Essence of a Place’

Abstract

Culture is the lifestyle of a group of people living in a particular geographic location. The climate and natural resources of a place influences lifestyle, which includes all aspects of human existence, including architecture. Expressions of culture evolve slowly over time, with additions, rejections and changes. The paper attempts to understand and capture the ‘essence of a place’ with respect to the architectural and cultural continuum. The authors explore the visual panorama created by the cultural expressions of the various settlements in the Indian context, through history and attempt a classification of the visual characteristics, grammar and values cherished by the people. The aim of the analysis was to arrive at a palette/template in assisting the architect/designer to incorporate the elements captured and create a sense of belonging in the synthesis of architectural form.

Keywords

Semiotics; Culture; Architecture; Continuum; Identity; Placelessness

1. Introduction

Architecture is an ancient art form. From ancient times, the various styles which have evolved were closely related to the physical and cultural contexts, acting as the major determinants of architectural form. It was only after the advent of the Modern and International Modern Style, during the 20th century, the issue of ‘lack of identity’ and ‘placelessness’ was observed in the works of architects globally. Human settlements across the world, and specifically in the Indian context witnessed an overlapping of cultural expressions and styles along with the application of indigenous, as well as new materials and technology. The challenge before designers today was to evolve creative ways of absorbing the new and maintaining identity of the place and values of the people. The study of trends set by critical-regionalism and meta-modernism in recent times, without rejecting pre-modern, modern and post-modern styles, is the intention of cultural & architectural continuum analysis, in capturing the ‘essence of a place’ during form-synthesis.



2. Objectivity in Form Synthesis by Declaring a Qualitative Program

Ayn Rand, the author of ‘The Romantic Manifesto’, dealing with the subject of aesthetics, defines “*Art as the concretisation of metaphysics*” [01]; being applicable to a complex art form like architecture, as well. Art and Design resolutions may be achieved by

- Trial & Error (aimlessness),
- Whim & Fancy (subjective), and also
- Through an Objective process.

Hence, declaring a qualitative program or describing the people-centric ideas/values or an appropriate ambience, visual character, meant for capturing the ‘*essence of a place*’; and then going ahead with ordering the tangible; or abstracting/articulating the intangible, becomes an objective design process. Various resolutions are possible, involving the individual designer’s skill of form synthesis. The visual domain dominates human spatial perception, which is the expertise of the architect. Every object/built-form or group of objects/built-forms, whether natural or man-made has a certain visual character which generates a spatial experience in and around it, involving all human senses. Humans can only describe the visual or spatial experience verbally or in writing, with adjectives. Even when a built-form, mere shelter or building (designed by a non-architect), is described as having ‘lack of character’ or ‘characterlessness’, it falls into a non-descript category or class. There are many structures dealt by engineers, contractors which lack visual appeal. To create a built-form and specifically an architectural form, one needs to ascertain the appropriate alternative visual characteristics, ambience and spatial experiences possible,

depending on the users, functions, physical and cultural context, to capture the ‘essence of a place’. Certain abstract compositions in architecture are merely iconic and sometimes ‘jaw-dropping’, visually eye-catching and act as a psychological stimulant; but they also become a part of the urban landscape, with which the local people associate and admire (Examples: Eiffel Tower, Paris, France, 1889 by Gustave Eiffel; SagradaFamilia Church, Barcelona, Spain, 1882 by Antonio Gaudi; Oculus, World Trade Centre Transportation Hub – NYC, 2016 by Santiago Calatrava, etc.).

2.1 Design Approach

There are numerous normative approaches to achieve this ‘sense of belonging’, by looking at architecture as a constituent of culture; a means of communication and meaning; as a symbol of values; as a connotation of functional ideology. The study of the continuum of culture and architectural styles adopts a semiotic approach in generating a palette of syntactic, semantic, abstract architectural codes, from which the designer may select to generate exciting forms identifiable with the place and its people.

The ‘*Form follows Function*’ approach of modern architecture needs to be preceded by ‘*Function follows Form*’, by declaring the ambience to be created for achieving identity and ‘sense of place’.

For this purpose, the authors created an academic exercise, discussed in Section 8. Ofcourse, the design process continues as an iterative process, to accommodate other functional layers as well. Before taking up the academic exercise, it was necessary to study the various overlapping layers for clarity as described in Section 3 to Section 7.



3 The Understanding of Semiotics in Culture and Architecture

3.1 Semiotics

Umberto Eco, 1973 stressed on the functional use of architecture and also as a means of communication. The study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation lead to the subject of semiotics [02],[03].

3.1.1 Semiotics of Culture

Looking at culture from the semiotic perspective as a symbolic activity generating meaning in everything around us, including language is referred to as semiotics of culture and language [04].

3.1.2 Semiotics of Architecture

The symbols and language that built form manifests or tries to transmit, is the semiotics of Architecture. If all cultural phenomenon are a system of signs and communication, then it is applicable to architecture as well being a part of culture [05].

3.2 Cultural Expressions and Influences

3.2.1 Culture and Built-Form

Amos Rapoport's (1969), work has focused mainly on the role of cultural variables, cross-cultural studies, and theory development and synthesis. His influential book '*House Form and Culture*', explores how culture, human behaviour, and the environment affects house form [06]. Architecture and all other art forms, are an expression of culture or the lifestyle of people living in different geographic locations during different time periods in history. Cultural expressions are influenced by various factors, which include geographical context and climate, soil

conditions, water resources, agricultural produce, vegetation and cuisine, language and script, clothing and attire, religion, customs and rituals, historical precedents, socio-political and economic conditions, available material and technology.

3.2.2 Shelter and Indigenous Architecture

Man-made built forms which started as mere shelters for protection from the vagaries of nature, later on extended to indigenous, ethnic, folk and vernacular architecture by the people, belonging to a place or region. They represent built-form outside any academic tradition, and without professional guidance, usually serving immediate local needs; constrained by the materials available, reflecting local traditions and cultural practices.

3.3 Human Settlements and the Evolution of Architectural Styles

With the advent of agriculture, man started settling down near perennial sources of water, utilizing local resources. Art and architecture developed under the patronage of monarchs and affluent. Architectural styles developed, flourished reached a climax and slowly decayed over time due to repetition and absence of any new ideas.

4. Continuum

Over the centuries, human settlements have evolved slowly with overlapping expressions of culture. The old gives way to the new; and there is a rejection of the obsolete, along with the addition of newer values, materials and technology. A continuum is something that keeps on going, changing slowly over time, characterized as a collection, sequence, or progression of values or elements.





Figure 01: Collage of Cultural Continuum, Gulbarga, Karnataka. Refer Section 8
Source of the images: Web references.

4.1 Cultural Continuum

The idea of culture as a static phenomenon and an ‘absolute’, seems to be a misconception. It has been observed that the ‘lifestyle’ of people in ancient settlements in India and elsewhere has slowly evolved historically, through changes, mutations and retention. This is also accompanied by overlapping layers of historical development (Figure 01).

4.2 Architectural Continuum

Along with the idea of a cultural continuum, parallelly there is the phenomena of an architectural continuum, as well. The study of old settlements reveal, that there is an existence of various types of older shelters, shanties, slums, indigenous examples, vernacular, mere-building and older historical styles, along with modern, contemporary and futuristic examples (Figure 02). Further investigation reveals, that the built-form existing in these old settlements,

either relate to the place, or appear alien and out of place. There are certain traditional neighbourhoods in a settlement which historically identify with its ancient culture and certain areas, which resemble popular foreign locations. This is due to the strong influence of international contemporary trends in architectural design, along with adaptation of foreign technology.

5 Continuum of Architectural Styles

5.1 Modern Architecture Style

Indian settlements have been, like the rest of the world, influenced by Modern architecture style, appeared as a movement introducing construction techniques, especially with the use of Steel, RCC and Glass. The stress on functionalism, minimalism and the rejection of ornament started in the beginning of the 20th century and prevailed until 1980s. This led to lack of identity and placelessness of the built-forms in contexts.





Figure 02: Collage of Architectural Continuum, Gulbarga, Karnataka. Refer Section 8
Source of the images: Web references.

5.2. Postmodern Architecture Style

Slowly, institutional and corporate buildings were treated in the postmodern style which replaced modernism in developed countries, who could afford to experiment.

Austerity, formality, and lack of variety of modern movement were addressed by postmodern architecture. Though the postmodern movement had various new trends like new classical architecture, deconstructivism, neo-futurism and high-tech architecture; but all this did not address the identity and place issues.

5.3 Late Modern Departures and Critical Regionalism

Late modern departures demonstrated by Le Corbusier, had more influence in the Indian context, compared to postmodern trends in

built-form; but the movement which also influenced architects like B.V. Doshi, Charles Correa, Laurie Baker, Raj Rewal, Revathi Kamath and others, was Critical Regionalism (Bahga&Raheja, 2018) [07]. ‘Critical Regionalism’ was coined in 1981, and later developed by Kenneth Frampton. It was also called ‘Regional Modernism’[08], [09].

The International style failed to address placelessness and lack of identity which was fulfilled by Critical regionalism. The whimsical approach of postmodernism with excessive ornamentation was also not accepted. Importance to geographical and cultural context along with Global trends was the critical regionalism approach. “Think Globally and Act Locally” was the hallmark of Critical regionalism[10], [11].



5.4 Metamodernism in Architecture

The term Metamodernism was due to the theorization of post-post modernism by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. In their essay “*Notes on Metamodernism*” [12], [13] they stressed that after 2000 there was a return to the modern position, without neglecting the postmodern trends of the 1980s and 1990s. According to them, the prefix Meta denoted a movement between opposite poles as well as beyond them, implying an oscillation between modernism and post-modernism like a swinging pendulum. An amalgamation of these premodern and traditional cultural codes. The return of romanticism [14] was observed in the metamodern trends synthesising the best qualities of modernism and postmodernism [15].

**Romanticism was a movement between 1800-1850 that stressed on and individualism, emotions, idealization of nature, glorification of the past, industrialisation and suspicion of science [16].*

6 Metamodern Classification

Recent architectural trends globally, with metamodern outlook, may be classified as follows:

- The usage of old and new technology and materials in economically backward countries.
- The combination of old and new styles in the architectural continuum of a place.

- The merging of old and new values in the cultural continuum, with contemporary methods and technology
- Sustainable architecture, responsive to the context, culture and climate.

6.1 Metamodern Examples

Examples of the above trends are described in ‘*Building from tradition – local materials and methods in contemporary architecture*’ by Elizabeth M. Golden, 2018; covering developing countries (Image 01 and 02 - of Thread Artist Residency and Cultural Center – Senegal, 2014) [17].

Also examples and images [18] of various other architects like Herzog & de Meuron (Image 03 and 04 - Elbe Philharmonie, Hamburg, Germany, 2016); David Adjaye (Image 05 - The National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C., United States, 2016); Proposed Atkins Design Group (Image 06 and 07 - Namaste Towers, Mumbai, 2011); SOM (Image 08 and 09 - Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport Terminal 2, Mumbai, 2014); and others in developed nations.

The first step of metamodern architects in any change was to break old thinking. From the end of post-modernism to parametric modelling interventions, architects around the world are exploring future and progressive built environment influenced by today’s emerging technologies, material innovations, digital culture and other disruption.





Image 01 and Image 02 : Elizabeth M. Golden - Thread Artist Residency and Cultural Center – Senegal, 2014
Source of Images:<https://www.archdaily.com/608096/new-artist-residency-in-senegal-toshiko-mori>



Image 03 and 04 : Herzog & deMeuron (Elbe Philharmonic, Hamburg, Germany, 2016)
Source of Image 03:<https://www.archdaily.com/802093/elbphilharmonie-hamburg-herzog-and-de-meuron>
Source of Image 04 :<http://architecturestorage.blogspot.com/2017/04/elbphilharmonie-hamburgs-dazzling.html>



Image 05 :David Adjaye (The National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C., United States, 2016)
Source of Image 05 : <https://www.cladglobal.com/CLADnews/architecture-design/National-Museum-of-African-American-History-and-Culture-Smithsonian-Washington-DC-architecture-design-David-Adjaye/321372>





Image 06 and 07: Proposed Atkins Design Group (Namaste Towers, Mumbai, 2011).

Source of Image

06: <https://www.thecoreengineers.com/2020/04/namaste-tower.html>

Source of Image 07: <https://www.tfod.in/art-design-articles/3542/namaste-tower-mumbai-by-ws-atkins-dubai>



Image 08 and 09: SOM (Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport Terminal 2, Mumbai, 2014).

Source of Image 08:

<https://www.archdaily.com/477107/chhatrapati-shivaji-international-airport-terminal-2-som>

Source of Image 09:

<https://worldarchitecture.org/article-links/epmfe/som-designed-chhatrapati-shivaji-international-airport-mumbai-is-a-fusion-of-tradition-modernity.html>



6.2 Cultural & Architectural Continuum Analysis

ELEMENTS	IMAGES	VISUAL CHARACTERISTICS
COLOUR		UNEVEN IRREGULAR SECURE STABILITY RUSTIC
LINE		UNEVEN RADIATING LINES GEOMETRIC ARCHES CIRCULAR
PLANE		SYMMETRY HIERARCHY HARMONY STABLE SERIES STATIC
SHAPE		ARCHES SPHERICAL DOMES PYRAMIDAL RECTANGULAR MASS
VOLUME		MONUMENTAL HIERARCHICAL DOMINANT REPETITIVE VOLUMES
MASSING		GEOMETRIC HEAVY SYMMETRIC DIVISION BOLD
TEXTURE		SMOOTH AUTHENTIC RUSTIC FLORAL GEOMETRIES
MATERIAL		SHABBA STONE BRICK STONE LIMESTONE

ELEMENTS	IMAGES	VISUAL CHARACTERISTICS
SYMMETRY		PROPORTIONATE AXIS UNIFORM REGULARITY BALANCE
ORDER		UNDEVIATING STATIC ASCETIC INTEGRITY
BALANCE		FIRM TENACIOUS UNITY STEADY UNIFORM
RHYTHM		HARMONY PROGRESSIVE ORNAMENT FLOW PERIODICITY
REPETITION		MOVEMENT DYNAMIC FIRMNESS COALITION
HIERARCHY		INTEGRITY SCALE CHAIN OF COMMAND GRADATION STRUCTURE
ROADS		NODAL JUNCTIONS RADIATING ROADS ASYMMETRIC PATH

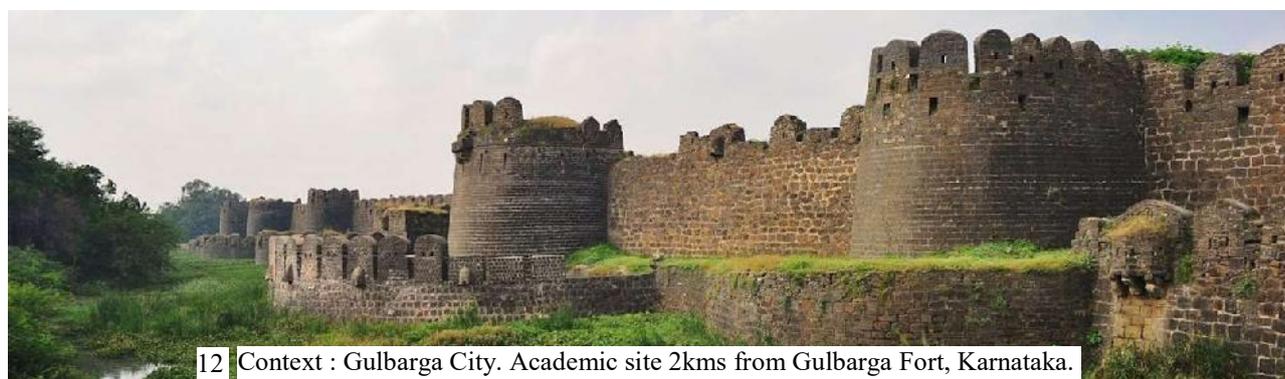
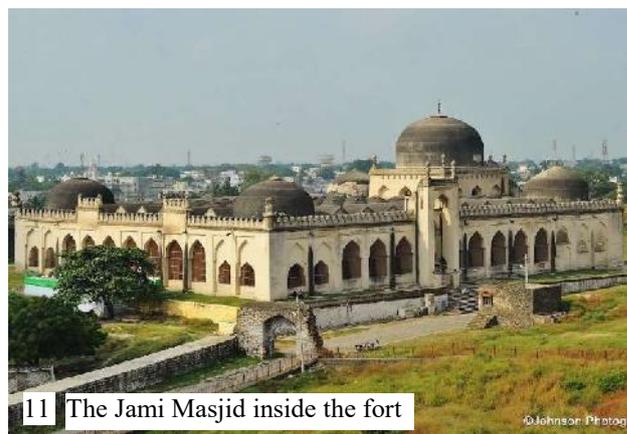
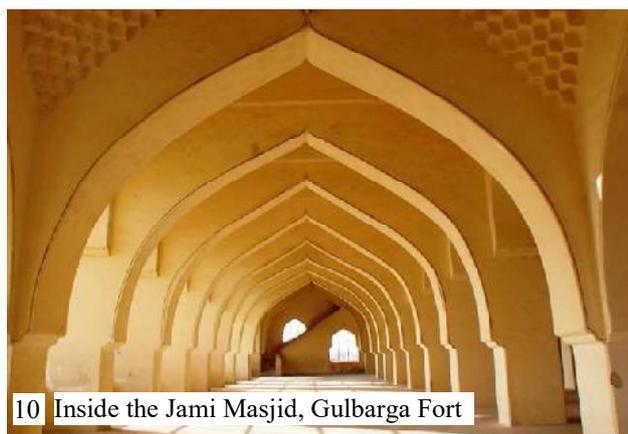


Figure 03: Determinants of “Objective” Ordering/Articulation of proposed form. Academic exercise – (10a).
 Source of Image 10: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inside_the_Jami_Masjid,_Gulbarga_Fort.jpg



Source of Image 11 and 12: <https://maverickonthemove.wordpress.com/2016/12/24/gulbarga-fort-where-the-bahmani-kingdom-thrived/>

Based on an in-depth study of modern, postmodern, critical-regionalism and metamodern architectural movements; the authors conducted an exercise on the “Cultural & architectural continuum analysis”, in capturing the ‘essence of a place’. The paper attempts to understand the ‘essence of a place’ with respect to its architectural and cultural continuum. The visual panorama created by the cultural expressions (including architecture) of a few selected settlements in the Indian context, through history. An attempt at classification of the visual characteristics, grammar and values cherished by the people. The aim of the analysis was to arrive at a palette/template to assist the architect/designer to incorporate the elements captured, to create belonging and identity in architectural design, for the users and people to appreciate and immediately connect (Refer Figure 04).

7 Identity, Values and ‘Sense of Place’

The form, configuration, visual grammar, massing, shapes, features, colours, voids, textures, patterns, materials and technology used in architecture enables people to recognize or identify it, as belonging to a place, region, nationality, culture or amalgamation of cultures. The built-form may also represent the functional usage, convey meaning and values of people living in a settlement, creating a ‘sense of place’ or belonging. “Architecture serves as a certificate and from the identity perspective, represents the thoughts of its own people, thereby creating distinctive architecture in various periods and locations” (Torabi and Brahman, 2013) [19].

8 The Academic Exercise in Capturing the ‘Essence of a Place’

The academic attempt in ‘capturing the essence of a place’ consisted of the following steps:

- Study of the settlement (old to new) and its brief history.
- Study of the 'essence of a place' & related 'values of its people'.
- Study of elements of the visual domain in a place.

Based on the above studies the exercise emphasized the following:

- Create a collage for the ‘cultural continuum’ of the settlement (old to new). This includes visual shapes, patterns, colours, textures, materials, techniques, etc, of the people and their garments, attire, cuisine, dance, drama, art, sculpture, signs, symbols, script, customs, rituals and all aspects of the overlapping cultures and their respective values over time (Figure 01).
- Create a collage for the ‘architectural continuum’ of the settlement (old to new). This includes the panorama of historical remains, shelters, structures, edifices, architectural styles, materials and technology; along with their visual features, proportions, colours, textures, mass, void, grammar, character, ambience and spatial experience (Figure 02).
- To ascertain and select the determinants of objective ordering/articulation of the proposed form based on the above studies (Figure 03).



- To arrive at the verbal description of appropriate visual character, ambience, spatial experience and values in terms of adjectives.
- To arrive at the ‘qualitative aspects of a spatial program’.
- Objective ‘form synthesis’ based on the above program, capturing the ‘essence of place’

9 Conclusion

The results obtained from the various designs using the above approach, is an eye-opener.

Indian settlements have a variety of images and values, to pick and choose from the

continuum of its cultural and architectural continuum, including overlapping layers of history, as well as the global influences to assist the designer in creating appropriate ambience, visual character and spatial experience. Indian architects have to only introspect and look at their own rich heritage and discover what the people cherish, to capture the ‘essence of a place’.

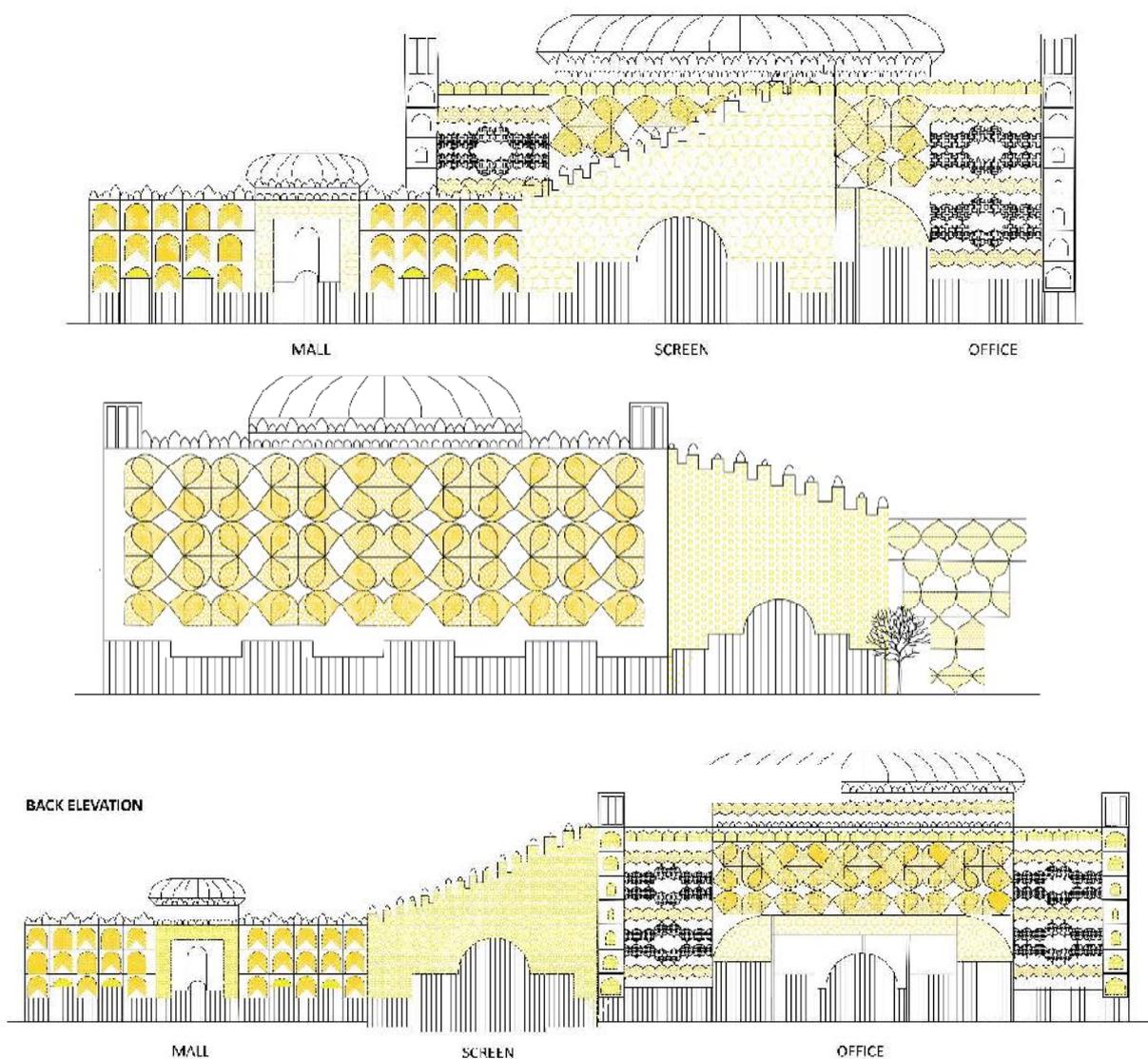


Figure 04:Synthesis of Form – Elevations capturing the ‘Essence of Gulbarga City’, Karnataka.
Source: Academic exercise - (10b).

STHALA/ IS S N 2582 - 9491



10 Acknowledgements

Aishwarya P M (10a) and Divyashree S (10b), Students of Semester 07 (Batch 2017), SJBSAP, Bengaluru. (Design mentors : Authors, Refer Section 8).

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