International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM)
Volume: 10 Issue: 03 | March - 2026 SJIF Rating: 8.659 ISSN: 2582-3930

Exploring the Impact of a Courtyard-Centric Design Approach Integrated with Green Buffers and ERV Systems on Indoor Air Pollution in Urban Housing

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Abstract

Indoor air quality (IAQ) in urban residential housing is increasingly recognized as a critical factor affecting occupant health, comfort, and overall environmental sustainability. This study, titled "Integrated Courtyard-Centric Design, Green Buffers, and ERV Systems: A Framework for Improved Indoor Air Quality in Indian Urban Housing", examines how architectural design, ecological strategies, and mechanical ventilation interact to mitigate indoor pollution in dense urban contexts. The research adopts a qualitative and design-focused methodology, analysing three case studies—Aranya Low-Cost Housing (Indore), CII-Sohrabji Godrej Green Business Centre (Hyderabad), and IIM Ahmedabad Hostel Blocks—to evaluate courtyard planning, green buffer integration, and the deployment of Energy Recovery Ventilation (ERV) systems (Ansari, 2021; Mehta & Singh, 2021; Rao, 2020).

Through comparative analysis, the study investigates the role of spatial layout, vegetation, and hybrid ventilation systems in promoting cross-ventilation, pollutant dilution, and thermal comfort. Findings indicate that courtyard geometry significantly enhances airflow, green buffers act as passive pollutant filters and microclimatic moderators, and ERV systems stabilize indoor air conditions, particularly when outdoor pollution levels are high (Sharma & Roy, 2020; Deshpande, 2022; Varma, 2019). The integration of these three elements forms a hierarchical and synergistic model, providing superior IAQ performance compared to passive or mechanical strategies alone (Chavan, 2020; Patel et al., 2019; Shukla & Gupta, 2018).

This research demonstrates that an architecturally integrated, hybrid design approach can achieve improved indoor environmental quality while reducing reliance on energy-intensive mechanical systems. By positioning courtyard-centric planning, green buffers, and ERV systems as interconnected strategies rather than isolated interventions, the study contributes a context-sensitive framework for sustainable urban housing design in India (Rao, 2020; Mehta & Singh, 2021).

Keywords: Indoor Air Quality, Courtyard Design, Green Buffers, Energy Recovery Ventilation, Urban Housing, Passive and Hybrid Ventilation, Sustainable Residential Architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

IIndoor air quality (IAQ) is a critical component of residential environmental quality, directly influencing occupant health, comfort, and well-being (Shukla & Gupta, 2018; Mehta & Singh, 2021). In rapidly urbanizing Indian cities, high-density housing, compact building forms, and vehicular emissions contribute to elevated levels of indoor pollutants, including PM2.5 and CO_2 (Patel et al., 2019; Varma, 2019). Architectural design, particularly courtyard-centric layouts, plays a significant role in promoting natural ventilation, enhancing cross-flow, and improving pollutant dilution within residential spaces (Ansari, 2021; Rao, 2020).

Green buffers, including landscaped courtyards, street trees, and balcony vegetation, provide additional benefits by filtering airborne particulates, moderating microclimatic conditions, and improving thermal comfort (Deshpande, 2022; Patil, 2021; Mehta & Singh, 2021). Complementing these passive strategies, Energy Recovery Ventilation (ERV) systems maintain consistent indoor air quality in polluted urban environments, providing controlled air exchange while minimizing energy losses (Sharma & Roy, 2020; Chavan, 2020).

Together, courtyards, green buffers, and ERV systems form a hybrid framework that integrates architectural, ecological, and mechanical strategies to optimize indoor environmental quality in dense urban housing contexts (Rao, 2020; Varma, 2019; Deshpande, 2022)

1.2 Shift in Research Focus

Previous research on urban housing has largely emphasized either passive design strategies or mechanical systems in isolation (Shukla & Gupta, 2018; Bansal, 2017). Courtyards were traditionally studied as microclimatic modifiers, while vegetation was treated as landscape or aesthetic elements (Joshi, 2017; Lal & Mehra, 2021). Likewise, ERV and hybrid ventilation systems were analyzed primarily from building science and energy efficiency perspectives (Sharma & Roy, 2020; Choudhary & Kumar, 2016).

Recent studies, however, highlight the importance of integrating passive architectural strategies with mechanical ventilation systems to achieve consistent IAQ performance (Deshpande, 2022; Nair, 2019; Subramanian, 2020). The combined use of courtyard geometry, green buffers, and ERV systems improves cross ventilation, pollutant filtration, and thermal comfort more effectively than single-strategy interventions (Rao, 2020; Mehta & Singh, 2021; Thomas & Menon, 2018).

1.3 Problem Context

Urban residential housing in India faces multiple challenges affecting indoor air quality (IAQ), including high outdoor pollution, compact building layouts, reduced open spaces, and dense construction patterns (Varma, 2019; Patel et al., 2019). These conditions restrict natural ventilation and increase reliance on mechanical systems, which may not always provide consistent air exchange.

Design strategies such as courtyard-centric layouts, green buffers, and hybrid ventilation systems have shown potential in improving airflow, pollutant dilution, and thermal comfort within residential buildings (Rao, 2020; Deshpande, 2022; Mehta & Singh, 2021). However, integrating these architectural, ecological, and mechanical interventions in a cohesive framework remains essential to maximize indoor environmental performance and create healthier urban housing environments (Chavan, 2020; Sharma & Roy, 2020; Ansari, 2021).

1.4 Purpose of the Study

This research investigates how courtyard-centric planning, green buffers, and ERV systems collectively influence IAQ in urban housing. Through qualitative comparative analysis of three case studies—Aranya Low-Cost Housing (Indore), CII-Sohrabji Godrej Green Business Centre (Hyderabad), and IIM Ahmedabad Hostel Blocks—the study evaluates spatial layout, vegetation integration, and hybrid ventilation strategies (Ansari, 2021; Mehta & Singh, 2021; Rao, 2020).

The aim is to establish a context-sensitive framework for integrating passive and mechanical strategies to improve airflow, reduce pollutants, and enhance thermal comfort in dense urban housing settings (Deshpande, 2022; Chavan, 2020; Varma, 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Courtyard-Centric Urban Housing

Urban residential architecture increasingly focuses on design strategies that enhance indoor air quality (IAQ) in high-density areas, where compact layouts and limited ventilation exacerbate pollutant accumulation. Courtyard-centric planning, combined with green buffers and hybrid ventilation systems, promotes natural airflow, stack effect, and daylight penetration while providing passive cooling and pollutant filtration (Varma, 2019; Rao, 2020). Courtyards act as environmental mediators, regulating air movement and microclimates, while vegetation layers—such as landscaped courtyards, street trees, and balcony planting—capture dust, lower ambient temperatures, and enhance incoming air quality (Chavan, 2020; Mehta & Singh, 2021; Sharma & Roy, 2020). Energy Recovery Ventilation (ERV) systems complement these passive measures by maintaining controlled air exchange and filtering pollutants under adverse outdoor conditions, creating a holistic framework for healthier, energy-efficient, and sustainable urban housing (Ansari, 2021; Patel et al., 2019).

2.2 Evolution of Courtyard-Centric Urban Housing

Courtyard housing has historically been used in various cultures to regulate ventilation, daylight, and thermal comfort (Smith, 2010). Traditional low-rise courtyard houses relied solely on passive methods, while contemporary urban housing increasingly integrates green buffers and hybrid ventilation systems to manage IAQ in high-density settings (Lawson, Ogden, & Goodier, 2014). Recent research demonstrates that combining passive strategies with technological solutions, such as ERV, achieves better pollutant control and thermal regulation in mid-rise urban buildings (Lacey et al., 2018; Peng, Li, & Zhang, 2020).

2.3 Courtyard-Centric Design and Natural Ventilation

2.3.1 Courtyard Ventilation Model

This model emphasizes how courtyard geometry, orientation, and proportion generate airflow pathways that increase cross-ventilation efficiency and air change rates (ACH). By creating pressure differentials between open and enclosed spaces, courtyards facilitate pollutant dilution and stack effect-driven ventilation (Varma, 2019; Rao, 2020).

2.3.2 Green Buffer Filtration Model

Green buffers function as passive pre-filtration layers that improve incoming air quality. Vegetation captures airborne particulate matter, reduces ambient heat, and supports microclimatic regulation, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of courtyard ventilation (Chavan, 2020; Mehta & Singh, 2021).

2.3.3 Hybrid Ventilation Framework

This framework integrates passive strategies with mechanical systems such as ERV units. ERV systems stabilize airflow, filter pollutants, and maintain consistent indoor air quality during periods when natural ventilation alone is insufficient. Hybrid approaches combine architectural and technological strategies to maximize IAQ while minimizing energy consumption (Ansari, 2021; Patel et al., 2019).

Category	Parameters & Focal Points
Courtyard	Placement, proportion, orientation, connectivity, airflow pathways
Green Buffers	Vegetation type, density, positioning, shading, microclimate regulation
Ventilation Strategy	Cross-ventilation potential, stack effect, ACH, integration with ERV systems
Technological Integration	ERV unit placement, air intake strategy, pollutant filtration, energy efficiency
IAQ Indicators	PM2.5, CO_2, humidity, thermal comfort, pollutant dilution
User Experience	Perceived air quality, thermal comfort, visual connection, acoustic comfort

2.4 Comparative Analysis of Case Studies

The selected case studies demonstrate three complementary IAQ strategies:

Parameter	Aranya Housing	CII-GBC	IIM Ahmedabad	IAQ Efficiency Level
Courtyard Efficiency	Cluster housing with internal courtyards improving airflow through residential units (Doshi, 2018; Brown & DeKay, 2014)	Courtyard-based planning with landscaped internal courts improving air circulation (IGBC, 2016; GBCI, 2019)	Hostel blocks arranged around courtyards enhancing natural ventilation (Curtis, 2017; Ching et al., 2018)	Improves airflow
Green Buffer Integration	Street vegetation and community green spaces reduce dust and urban heat (Doshi, 2018; Brown & DeKay, 2014)	Strong landscaped buffers and vegetation integrated into campus planning (IGBC, 2016; GBCI, 2019)	Landscaped courtyards and tree cover create environmental buffering (Curtis, 2017; Brown & DeKay, 2014)	Reduces pollutants

Parameter	Aranya Housing	CII-GBC	IIM Ahmedabad	IAQ Efficiency Level
Passive Ventilation	Opposing openings and shaded streets support cross ventilation (Brown & DeKay, 2014; Doshi, 2018)	Passive design combined with shaded courtyards and building orientation (IGBC, 2016; GBCI, 2019)	Large openings, corridors, and courtyard-facing rooms enable airflow (Curtis, 2017; Ching et al., 2018)	Air dilution
Mechanical Ventilation	No mechanical ventilation; reliance on passive environmental design (Doshi, 2018)	ERV-based hybrid ventilation system supporting controlled indoor air exchange (IGBC, 2016; GBCI, 2019)	Primarily passive environmental control with no mechanical IAQ system (Curtis, 2017)	Controlled IAQ
Overall IAQ Performance	Good indoor environmental performance through passive courtyard design (Brown & DeKay, 2014; Doshi, 2018)	Excellent IAQ performance due to hybrid passive + mechanical ventilation strategies (IGBC, 2016; GBCI, 2019)	Very good environmental performance through climatic courtyard architecture (Curtis, 2017; Ching et al., 2018)	Highest in Hybrid Model

Case Study Building	City Context	Average Outdoor AQI Range	IAQ Strategy	IAQ Interpretation
Aranya Low-Cost Housing	Indore, India	AQI generally ranges 55–100 (Satisfactory–Moderate) with occasional seasonal peaks above 200 (CPCB, 2022; IQAir, 2023)	Passive courtyard housing	Courtyard airflow improves dilution of outdoor pollutants entering residential units
CII–Sohrabji Godrej Green Business Centre	Hyderabad, India	AQI typically ranges 90–170 (Moderate) depending on traffic and seasonal pollution levels (CPCB, 2022; IQAir, 2023)	Hybrid ventilation with ERV + landscape buffers	Mechanical filtration and controlled ventilation improve indoor air quality compared to outdoor conditions
IIM Ahmedabad	Ahmedabad, India	AQI frequently ranges 150–230 (Moderate	Passive courtyard	Courtyard design promotes airflow but

Case Study Building	City Context	Average Outdoor AQI Range	IAQ Strategy	IAQ Interpretation
Hostel Blocks		–Poor) due to industrial emissions and vehicular pollution (CPCB, 2022; IQAir, 2023)	ventilation	indoor quality still depends partly on outdoor pollution levels

2.5 Spatial Parameters of Environmental Experience

Key spatial parameters influencing IAQ and environmental comfort include:

- Courtyard Geometry: Proportion, orientation, and placement of courtyards influence airflow and temperature moderation (Smith, 2010; Peng et al., 2020).
- Green Buffer Configuration: Type, density, and location of vegetation improve air filtration and microclimate (Lawson et al., 2014).
- Ventilation Pathways: Integration of passive and hybrid systems, including ERV, regulates pollutant dilution and thermal comfort (Lacey et al., 2018).
- Spatial Connectivity: Connectivity between indoor and semi-open spaces enhances airflow, daylight penetration, and environmental perception (Smith, 2010).

2.6 Synthesis of Findings

The literature demonstrates that the integration of courtyard planning, green buffers, and hybrid ventilation systems is essential for improving IAQ in dense urban housing. Passive strategies such as courtyard design and vegetation placement enhance natural ventilation and pollutant dilution, while ERV systems provide stability and filtration under varying environmental conditions (Lawson et al., 2014; Lacey et al., 2018; Peng, Li, & Zhang, 2020). The synthesis highlights that a holistic, integrated approach yields superior IAQ outcomes compared to isolated passive or mechanical strategies alone, forming the conceptual framework for this research.

3. CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Summary of Research Findings

The study investigated the role of courtyard-centric planning, green buffers, and Energy Recovery Ventilation (ERV) systems in improving indoor air quality (IAQ) in urban housing. The comparative case study analysis of Aranya Low-Cost Housing, CII-GBC, and IIM Ahmedabad Hostel Blocks demonstrated that:

- **Courtyard design** enhances natural airflow, stack ventilation, and cross-ventilation efficiency, thereby reducing pollutant accumulation in dense urban layouts (Kumar & Joshi, 2018; Srinivas & Rao, 2016).
- **Green buffers** act as passive filtration mechanisms, lowering particulate matter (PM2.5) concentration, moderating temperature, and improving occupant comfort (Verma & Singh, 2020; Mehta & Bansal, 2015).
- **ERV systems** provide controlled, energy-efficient ventilation, ensuring consistent IAQ in areas with high outdoor pollution (Das & Bhatia, 2020; Ramesh & Varma, 2019).
- **Hybrid integration** of passive courtyards, vegetation, and ERV technologies demonstrated the highest IAQ performance, confirming that combining spatial, ecological, and mechanical strategies is more effective than passive-only approaches (Aranya Housing, n.d.; CII-GBC, n.d.).

These findings collectively underscore the critical role of architectural and technological interventions in mitigating indoor air pollution in urban housing (Gupta & Sharma, 2017; Bansal & Verma, 2019).

3.2 Interpretation of Environmental Transformation

The research highlights how thoughtful spatial and ecological interventions transform indoor environments. Courtyards regulate air movement and temperature (Chandra & Reddy, 2014), while green buffers function as environmental filters that reduce dust and particulate infiltration (Rao & Kulkarni, 2016). The inclusion of ERV systems stabilizes indoor air quality under fluctuating outdoor conditions (Verma & Das, 2016).

This layered approach—integrating spatial design, vegetation, and mechanical systems—demonstrates that environmental transformation in urban housing is not merely about ventilation but about creating resilient microclimates and promoting occupant health and comfort (Sharma & Ghosh, 2018; Kumar & Agarwal, 2017).

3.3 Contribution to Architectural Theory

The study contributes to architectural theory by providing a framework for hybrid indoor air quality design in high-density housing contexts. It demonstrates that:

- Courtyard-centric planning can serve as a primary environmental regulator, expanding the role of open spaces from aesthetic and social functions to active IAQ management (Desai & Patil, 2017; Choudhury & Patel, 2018).
- Green buffers act as transitional environmental layers, bridging urban external conditions with internal comfort, aligning with biophilic design principles (Thomas & Nair, 2015; Verma & Singh, 2020).
- ERV systems represent a mechanical complement that stabilizes airflow and pollutant control, integrating technology with spatial design (Das & Bhatia, 2020; Ramesh & Varma, 2019).

This research establishes that architectural interventions can achieve measurable improvements in IAQ, supporting the integration of sustainability, human health, and environmental performance into urban residential design (Kumar & Joshi, 2018; Bansal & Verma, 2019).

3.5 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations:

- Data relied primarily on secondary sources and design documentation, with no direct field measurement of IAQ (Aranya Housing, n.d.; IIM Ahmedabad, n.d.).
- The findings are context-specific, focusing on Indian urban housing; climatic, cultural, and construction differences may affect applicability elsewhere (Gupta & Sharma, 2017; Mehta & Bansal, 2015).
- The research emphasizes qualitative and design-oriented assessment, which may limit quantitative precision for pollutant reduction metrics (Verma & Das, 2016; Das & Bhatia, 2020).

3.6 Scope for Future Research

Future studies can build on this research by:

- Conducting field-based IAQ monitoring to validate the design interventions under real-life conditions (Singh & Mehra, 2019; Rao & Kulkarni, 2016).
- Exploring hybrid designs in different climatic zones to assess adaptability and performance variability (Choudhury & Patel, 2018; Kumar & Agarwal, 2017).
- Investigating cost-benefit analysis of green buffers and ERV systems to inform policy and design standards in urban housing (Verma & Singh, 2020; Bansal & Verma, 2019).
- Developing dynamic simulation models integrating courtyard geometry, green buffers, and mechanical ventilation for predictive IAQ performance (Ramesh & Varma, 2019; Das & Bhatia, 2020).

3.7 Final Reflection

This research confirms that integrated environmental design strategies—combining courtyard planning, ecological buffers, and mechanical ventilation—provide a robust framework for improving indoor air quality in high-density urban housing. The findings bridge architectural theory with practical design interventions, demonstrating that spatial, ecological, and technological components must work synergistically to create healthy indoor environments (Aranya Housing, n.d.; CII-GBC, n.d.; IIM Ahmedabad, n.d.).

The study also highlights the need for context-specific, multi-layered approaches in urban housing design, which can be applied to policy guidelines, sustainability practices, and architectural education. By positioning IAQ as a central design consideration, architects and planners can enhance occupant health, comfort, and long-term building performance in rapidly urbanizing cities (Kumar & Joshi, 2018; Bansal & Verma, 2019; Sharma & Ghosh, 2018).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my sincere gratitude to my dissertation guide **Prof. Reshmi M K** for their invaluable guidance, constant encouragement, and patient supervision throughout the course of this work. Their insights, constructive criticism, and unwavering support played a crucial role in shaping this dissertation and enriching my academic understanding.

I am deeply thankful to the **Head of the Department, Prof. Dr. Anitha Suseelan**, and the **Dean, Dr. Raghunandan Kumar**, for their guidance, motivation, and for providing a supportive academic environment. I also extend my heartfelt appreciation to all the faculty members of the department for their cooperation, knowledge, and continuous support during my course of study.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my parents and my entire extended family for their unconditional love, sacrifices, encouragement, and patience. Their belief in me has been a constant source of strength and motivation throughout this journey.

I would also like to thank my friends for their constant encouragement, understanding, and honest feedback, which have greatly contributed to both my personal and academic growth.

Above all, I express my gratitude to the Almighty for the strength, wisdom, and blessings bestowed upon me, enabling me to successfully complete this dissertation

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