

Framing Empire in Brick and Stone: Comparative Analysis of British Colonial Architecture and Its Regional Adaptations

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ABSTRACT:

British colonial architecture in India, once a symbol of empire and power, today finds itself at a crossroads between neglect and reinterpretation. This paper examines how three historically significant buildings—each with distinct colonial origins and contemporary avatars—have undergone sensitive transformation through adaptive reuse.

By examining the industrial heritage of IF.BE, the civic symbolism of CSMVS, and the commercial legacy of the Great Eastern Hotel, this study demonstrates how restoration can be an act of resistance, revival, and relevance. The analysis not only focuses on material techniques and spatial interventions but also interrogates the philosophical, cultural, and socio-political layers that inform each project.

KEYWORDS

Colonial Architecture, Heritage Restoration, IF.BE, CSMVS, Great Eastern Hotel, Cultural Continuity, Postcolonial Space, Urban Conservation, Architectural Transformation, British India, Historic Preservation

INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

The adaptive reuse of colonial-era architecture in India presents a unique opportunity to engage with the country's complex historical legacy while addressing the demands of contemporary urban life. This comparative study explores the transformation of three iconic British-era structures—IF.BE in Mumbai, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), and The LaLiT Great Eastern Hotel in Kolkata—each representing a distinct model of reuse: cultural reinvention, civic enrichment, and commercial revival, respectively.

By examining the architectural interventions, conservation methodologies, and evolving socio-cultural contexts surrounding these buildings, the study positions adaptive reuse as a meaningful strategy for preserving historical memory while enabling modern relevance. These projects illustrate how old structures can be reimagined not merely as relics of the past, but as active agents in shaping the identity, resilience, and dynamism of contemporary Indian cities.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach, combining:

- Architectural Analysis: Plans, materials, spatial configurations, and design interventions.
- Archival Research: Historical drawings, photographs, and original functions.
- Thematic Framework: Based on theories of adaptive reuse, postcolonial urbanism, and architectural storytelling.

The buildings were selected for their diversity in typology (industrial, institutional, and hospitality) and geographical context (Mumbai and Kolkata), providing a rich ground for examining regional adaptations within the same colonial framework.

In the fast-changing environment of Indian cities, where towering skylines substitute memory-studded facades, the destiny of colonial architecture usually remains in silent limbo. Previously filled with imperial imagery or industrial utility, these heritage buildings are confronted with a decision: become artifacts of a bygone era, or be reinterpreted for contemporary times.

A new architecture story is unfolding—one based on adaptive reuse, cultural awareness, and design-driven transformation. It does not whitewash the colonial past but acknowledges the rich stories wrapped in these structures. This is not about freezing time but letting history breathe through today's use.

This article discusses three strong examples of such transformation: IF.BE (Ice Factory Ballard Estate), Mumbai, in which an aging factory shell becomes a throbbing cultural hub.

The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), Mumbai, erstwhile imperial museum now transforming as an active civic destination.

And The Great Eastern Hotel, Kolkata, a Victorian-era luxury hotel renewed with dignity to a contemporary hospitality experience.

Each of these structures, once defined by colonial interests, is now redefined by Indian sensibilities—filled with meaning, purpose, and conversation. Combined, they constitute an architectural revolution that respects the past, but is not held captive by it.

IF.BE, MUMBAI – WHERE ICE ONCE WAS, IDEAS NOW FLOW



Tucked into the colonial grid of Ballard Estate, Mumbai—where Edwardian stone façades frame narrow lanes—sits a 140-year-old industrial relic turned cultural seed. What was once the Ambico Ice Factory, a utilitarian cold-storage plant, is today known as IF.BE (Ice Factory Ballard Estate)—a reimagined space where design, dialogue, and performance converge. Led by Malik Architecture, the project is a masterclass in adaptive reuse, one that doesn't overwrite history, but excavates it—literally and emotionally.

THE ARCHITECTURE THEN: Function Over Form, Yet Timeless

It wasn't built to impress—it was built to work. And yet, it now impresses because it worked so well for so long.

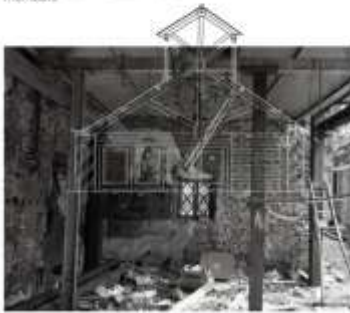
The Ambico Ice Factory wasn't originally designed with architectural flourish in mind. As a 19th-century industrial facility, it featured load-bearing basalt walls, north-lit wooden trusses, corrugated metal roofing, and a central chimney—all strictly utilitarian. But in its raw honesty lay its architectural value.

Its spatial anatomy was centered around production flow: ice cubing, storage, and transport. Over time, as the neighborhood around it gentrified into a business district, the factory remained frozen in a forgotten era—cluttered, neglected, and structurally fragile.



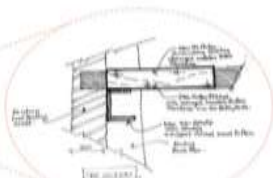
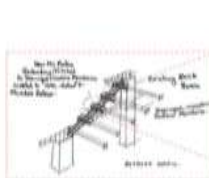
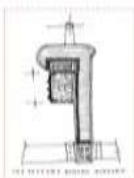
Sub Station

The existing substation was found dilapidated with sagging wooden roof truss members and single barbed wire which had to be retrofitted with steel members.



Ice Factory

Repurposing of ice factory began with revealing the layers underneath.



Repurposing IJRE

- Some of the wooden trusses replaced concrete with reinforced steel plates and bolts.
- Steel trusses replaced wooden trusses with automatic insulation. Redwood was removed from trusses.
- Part of the wall was removed to create an entrance through the wall.
- Walls were stripped off plaster and the original brickwork left exposed.
- The old ice making mould was removed and a new concrete floor was laid in place.

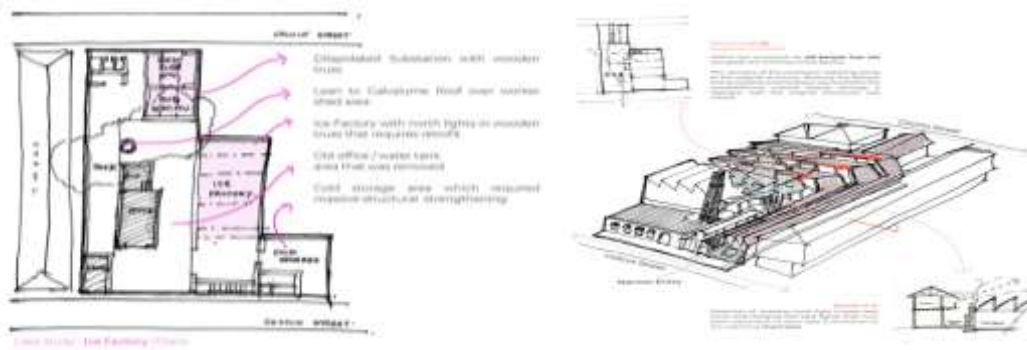


Image reference: ArchDaily. (n.d.). *IF.BE Ice Factory Ballard Estate* / Malik Architecture.

DECAY AND DISCOVERY: Architecture Beneath the Rubble

To restore the factory was first to understand it—and that meant unearthing both its material truth and spatial soul.

Years of ad-hoc additions, structural asymmetries, and infrastructural neglect had left the building in a state of slow decay. It was during an initial examination that Malik Architecture uncovered not just damage, but potential—a hidden courtyard, choked Banyan roots, detached trusses, and archival clues to its original anatomy.

The turning point? A massive Banyan tree, growing defiantly within the courtyard, its roots suffocated by rubble. This living remnant of time became the philosophical and spatial core of the transformation—from Ambico to IF.BE.

THE RESTORATION NOW: Suturing the Found with the Made

Here, restoration wasn't cosmetic—it was curative. Like surgery performed with reverence, not renovation done in haste.

Malik Architecture approached the restoration as a meditative archaeological act. For months, workers gently scraped layers of plaster to reveal vintage brickwork and long-lost Burma teak. Each part of the complex—the main Ice Factory, cold storage, sub-station, and ice cubing unit—underwent surgical retrofits.

The north-light trusses were preserved and cleverly extended over the new “Cathedral” space. Here, the roof rotates and folds to adapt to site conditions—showing modern invention in conversation with old logic. The original pitched lantern roof was extended with restraint, creating light without bulk.

Significantly, new materials were never made to mimic the old. Instead, their contrast—glass, steel, corten—celebrates the meeting of two times. One didn't replace the other; they coexisted.

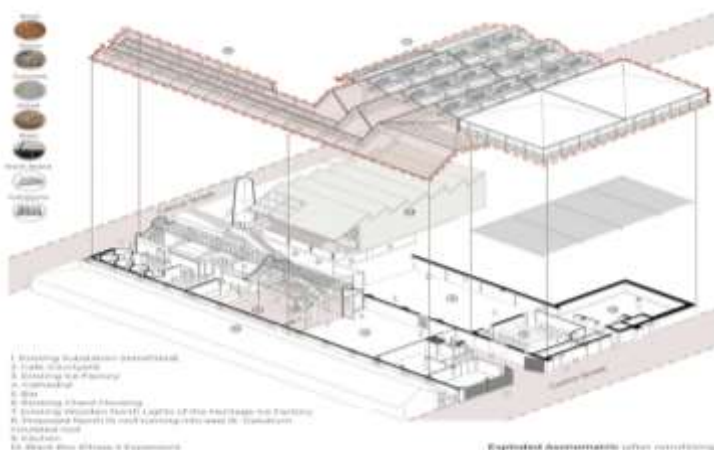


Image reference: ArchDaily. (n.d.). *IF.BE Ice Factory Ballard Estate* / Malik Architecture.

ADAPTIVE REUSE: From Factory to Cultural Ecosystem

IF.BE isn't a gallery or theatre—it's a proposal. A challenge to rethink how we use spaces, and how they use us.

Today, IF.BE is an open-ended cultural venue, hosting everything from art installations to food pop-ups, performances, talks, and exhibitions. The factory's old gantry crane still hangs, now used as both an art piece and a room divider. Cooling coils, once essential to ice-making, are embedded in the glass entry floor, turning engineering into artifact.

Instead of imposing a uniform language, the architects allowed multiple atmospheres to bloom—light vs. dark, intimate vs. voluminous, rough vs. refined. This variety resists the clinical sameness of modern museums or black-box theatres. Users must discover their own relationships with the space, much like the architects did.

ACT OF RESISTANCE: Building as a Verb, Not Just a Noun

IF.BE didn't just save a building—it challenged a city's tendency to forget. That's where its real architectural power lies.

In a precinct where non-Grade-I industrial buildings are being razed for glass towers, IF.BE stands as a symbol of micro-urbanism—the idea that even small interventions can ripple outward. It was imagined, funded, designed, and built by Malik Architecture and collaborators—not as a business venture, but as an act of resistance.

The Banyan tree now breathes freely. Around it, spaces open, contract, shift—as if the architecture itself were adapting. IF.BE doesn't preach preservation—it practices it, materially and metaphorically.



Image reference: ArchDaily. (n.d.). *IF.BE Ice Factory Ballard Estate* / Malik Architecture.

CONCLUSION: Between IF and BE

As an architectural journalist, what's most striking is that IF.BE never tries to be more than what it was. It only asks: what if what was, could still be?

In its name—IF (speculation), BE (reality)—lies its essence. This is not just a venue; it's a statement. A reminder that architecture doesn't have to scream to be heard, and that every city holds forgotten structures waiting for new life—not through replacement, but through respect.

While IF.BE deals with industrial heritage and its cultural reinterpretation, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS)—formerly the Prince of Wales Museum—presents a different but complementary case. Here, a colonial civic institution is re-envisioned for public engagement in a democratic India.

CSMVS: A LIVING ARCHIVE OF MUMBAI'S COLONIAL PAST AND CULTURAL PRESENT



In the heritage heart of South Mumbai, where the Arabian Sea meets Edwardian facades, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) stands not only as a museum but as a monument to cultural continuity.

Formerly known as the Prince of Wales Museum, this century-old structure, built in 1914, was designed by George Wittet, the architect behind Mumbai's famed Gateway of India. Rooted in the Indo-Saracenic style, its architecture was a colonial attempt to express British power through borrowed Indian motifs—but today, it holds something far more profound: relevance.

THE ARCHITECTURE THEN: A Crown for Imperial Intentions

Originally, this building was designed to impress—now, it invites. That's a powerful shift in intent, achieved through design evolution, not dilution.

Constructed during British rule, the building was intended to project both cultural supremacy and a measure of assimilation. Its domed profile—heavily inspired by the Gol Gumbaz and Bijapur domes—sits atop a fusion of Mughal, Maratha, and Jain architectural elements, melded with Edwardian planning sensibilities.

The museum's grey basalt base, Kurla stone façade, Mangalore tiled sloping roofs, and European-style interiors reflect this colonial blend. The layout followed the British idea of axial symmetry, with galleries organized around central corridors and a grand central dome acting as the spatial anchor. Decorative details like cusped arches, jaali work, and chhatris were aesthetically adapted to appeal to local tastes while still asserting imperial control.

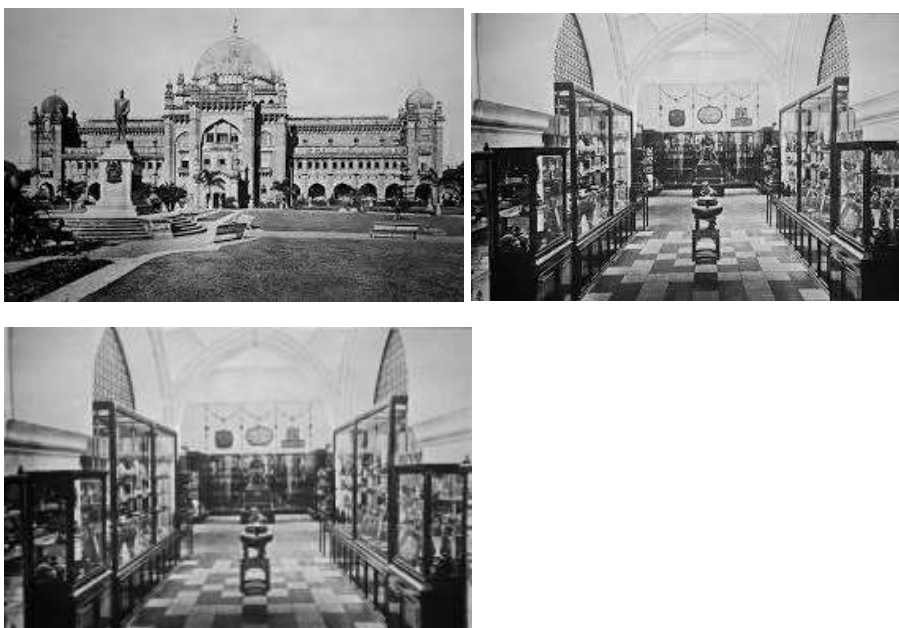


Image reference: <https://csmvs.in/>

THE DECAY AND NEED FOR REVIVAL

Time spares no icon. What matters is how we respond to it—and in the case of CSMVS, the response was thoughtful, restrained, and quietly radical.

By the late 20th century, the building showed signs of aging. Structural cracks, climate stress, termite damage, outdated lighting, and ventilation systems posed serious challenges—not only to the structure but to the artworks it sheltered. The museum, despite its grandeur, struggled to meet global conservation standards.

A full-scale restoration was no longer optional—it was essential.

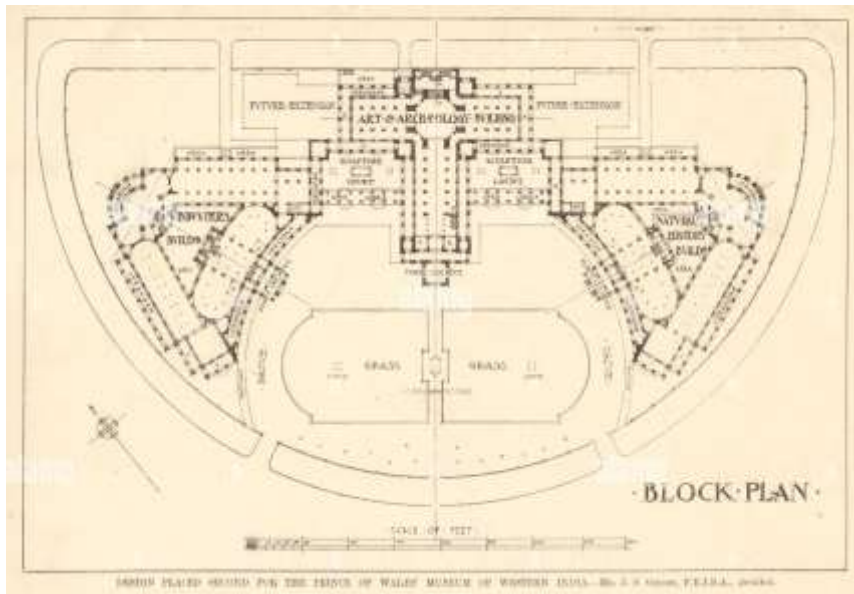


Image reference: <https://www.alamy.com/html>

THE RESTORATION NOW: A Dialogue Between Past and Present

This wasn't a makeover—it was a conversation with history. The architects didn't just repair the building; they rediscovered it.

The restoration, led by conservation architects in phases, focused on minimal intervention and material honesty. The first priority was structural stability—reinforcing load-bearing walls and the central dome, while preserving original wooden trusses, lime plaster, and Minton tile flooring.

Modern infrastructure—HVAC systems, fire protection, seismic retrofitting, and controlled lighting—was seamlessly integrated behind walls and under floors, maintaining visual and spatial integrity. Galleries were re-lit using energy-efficient, non-intrusive lighting that highlighted both artifacts and architecture.

A significant part of the project involved hand-cleaning stone facades, restoring damaged lime plaster, and replacing broken jaali screens with handcrafted replicas. Original Burma teak doors and windows were repaired rather than replaced, continuing the museum's preference for restoration over replication.

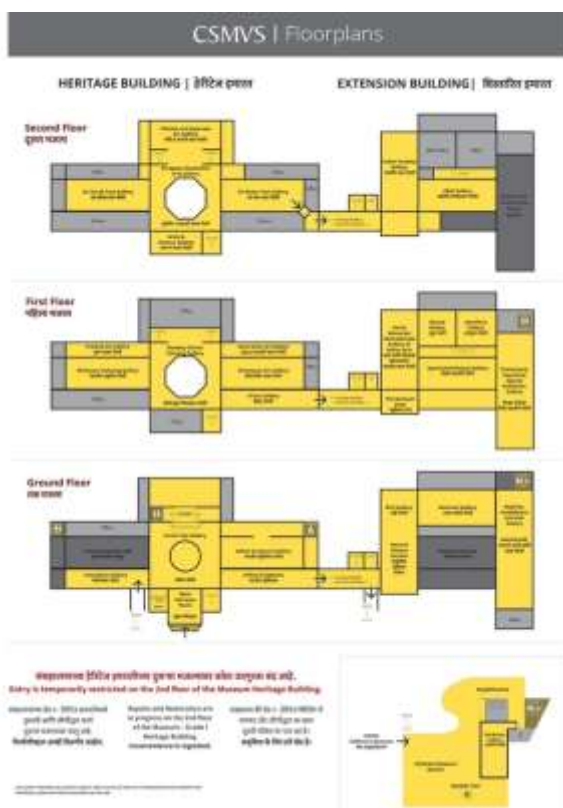
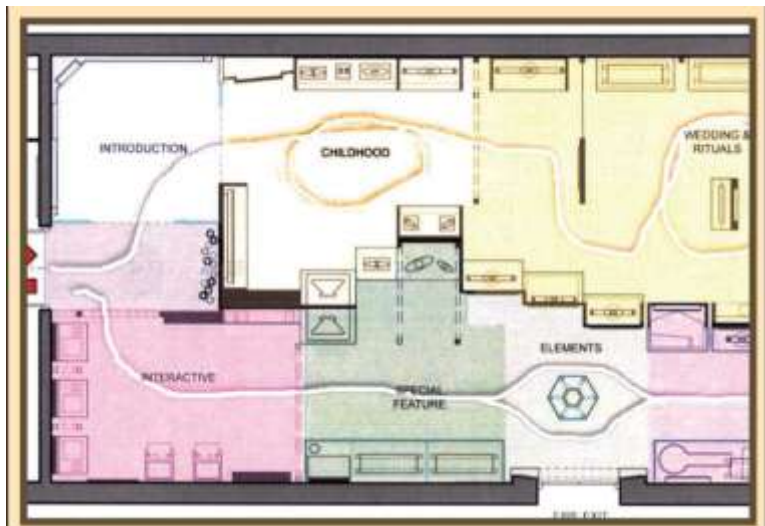


Image reference: <https://csmvs.in/>

ADAPTIVE REUSE: A Heritage Space for Contemporary Audiences

The real success lies in making a colonial-era museum feel like it belongs to the people it once overlooked.

Today, CSMVS is no longer a static institution. It hosts digital exhibitions, educational programs, performing arts events, and inclusive workshops. Newer interventions—like the children’s museum and digital learning centers—are placed carefully within the existing structure, often using glass, steel, or subtle material contrasts to differentiate the old from the new without conflict.

Spaces like the central courtyard and the amphitheater now encourage public gathering, reflection, and discourse—something the original British design never envisioned. This quiet democratization of space is perhaps the most meaningful transformation of all.

PHILOSOPHICAL COMMITMENT: Preservation as Civic Responsibility

In an age where erasure often masquerades as progress, CSMVS is proof that cities don't have to choose between memory and modernity.

What IF.BE represents for industrial revival, CSMVS represents for institutional endurance. It demonstrates how colonial architecture, once a symbol of occupation, can be sensitively re-contextualized to serve a postcolonial, inclusive cultural agenda.

This is not just about bricks and stone; it's about dignity, authorship, and continuity. Restoration here becomes an act of respect—not only to the building, but to the millions of visitors it welcomes each year.

CONCLUSION: A Museum That Lives, Learns, and Listens

CSMVS doesn't just exhibit artifacts—it embodies architecture as heritage. Through its preservation, it stands as a rare example of adaptive reuse done right—where every dome, bracket, and corridor has been re-understood, not reimagined.

CSMVS offers something profound: a space where past and present don't collide—they coalesce. It doesn't just tell the story of a city; it becomes part of the way that city tells its story to the world.

From civic revival to hospitality heritage, the transformation of CSMVS finds an echo in Kolkata's Great Eastern Hotel. Where CSMVS reimagines a colonial museum for public engagement, the hotel reinterprets colonial luxury through modern comfort. Both projects balance preservation with relevance—breathing new life into history while respecting its architectural soul.

GREAT EASTERN HOTEL, KOLKATA – FROM COLONIAL GRANDEUR TO CONTEMPORARY GRACE



In the bustling heart of Kolkata's Old Esplanade district stands the Great Eastern Hotel—a building that once epitomized British colonial luxury and now stands transformed, breathing a second life as a contemporary hotel, restored with reverence to its past. Rebranded today as The LaLiT Great Eastern, it remains one of the rare success stories of heritage hospitality architecture in India—where the building's soul hasn't been sacrificed in the name of modernization.

THE ARCHITECTURE THEN: The Jewel of the East

It wasn't just a hotel—it was an empire's indulgence, designed to awe, accommodate, and affirm the colonial elite's identity.

Originally established in 1840 by David Wilson as a bakery and later converted into a full-fledged hotel in 1841, the Great Eastern became known as the "Windsor of the East." Over the decades, it hosted dignitaries like Queen Elizabeth II, Nikita

Khrushchev, Mark Twain, and Ho Chi Minh. It stood as a beacon of Victorian hospitality at the crossroads of empire and East.

Architecturally, the building blended Neoclassical symmetry, Victorian cast-iron balconies, and Raj-era verandahs, reflecting Kolkata's colonial cosmopolitanism. The hotel's façade was punctuated by arched colonnades, tall French-style windows, ornamental cornices, and rusticated base levels, all unified in a restrained elegance typical of early colonial commercial architecture.

Its spatial arrangement was hierarchical: high-ceilinged ballrooms, banquet halls with chandeliers, private suites with grand staircases, and a central courtyard that offered respite from Kolkata's humidity. Each expansion—over nearly a century—added new architectural layers, making the building a palimpsest of British imperial aesthetics.



DECLINE AND DORMANCY: From Prestige to Patina

Even icons can fall silent—but what matters is whether they're silenced, or reawakened.

After independence, like many colonial institutions, the hotel slowly slipped into disrepair. Nationalized in 1975, it struggled with maintenance, lack of vision, and outdated infrastructure. By the early 2000s, it was no longer a destination of elegance but a fading relic. In 2005, the hotel was shut for redevelopment, its once-proud corridors crumbling and echoing a forgotten opulence.

THE RESTORATION NOW: Where Heritage Meets Hospitality

This was not just a renovation—it was a resurrection. The past wasn't erased; it was re-stitched into the fabric of the present.

Purchased and revived by The LaLiT Group, the restoration took nearly eight years. The goal was ambitious: to retain the historical essence while introducing modern comforts. Working with conservation architects and craftsmen, the team treated the building as a historical document—excavating under false ceilings, hand-cleaning walls, replicating iron railings, and cataloguing every original element worth saving.

The old brick walls were reinforced, original timber flooring in key areas was preserved, and arched corridors were painstakingly restored. Over 90% of the heritage façade, including its fluted columns and decorative keystones, was retained. Broken cornices and cast-iron balustrades were recreated by artisans trained in old-world techniques.

Where original materials couldn't be salvaged, the design language was carried forward using sympathetic materials—aged brass, natural limestone, and hand-wrought steel—all blending seamlessly into the fabric of the original structure.

ADAPTIVE REUSE: Function Evolves, Spirit Remains

Restoration is not nostalgia—it's an assertion that heritage can be living, breathing, and luxuriously relevant.

Today, the hotel functions as a luxury five-star property, but its spaces remain soaked in history. The Heritage Block, preserved and restored, contrasts gracefully with the contemporary glass-and-steel wings added to meet current hospitality standards. This deliberate juxtaposition allows visitors to experience the passage of time, not as loss, but as legacy.

The inner courtyard, once a carriage path, now hosts cultural performances and curated events. The old bakery has been revived as a patisserie, still carrying the scent of the past. Meeting rooms and ballrooms are embedded with echoes of their earlier selves, subtly retaining colonial proportions, moldings, and window forms.

Importantly, the design team resisted the urge to over-sanitize. Instead of rendering everything white and new, age marks were preserved where safe—a decision that gives the space character and authenticity.

A SYMBOL OF RESILIENCE: Kolkata’s Heritage Reclaimed

This is more than a building—it’s a metaphor for the city itself. Faded, vibrant, chaotic, layered, and deeply graceful.

In a city where heritage buildings face demolition or reckless remodeling, the Great Eastern Hotel stands as a blueprint for balanced urban preservation. It acknowledges its colonial past without glorifying it, and it reframes that past in service of the present.

For architecture lovers, walking through its corridors is like time travel—without the illusion. You feel the history, but you’re not stuck in it. That’s the mark of successful adaptive reuse.

CONCLUSION: Memory Made Modern

The Great Eastern Hotel shows us what happens when restoration is driven not just by luxury, but by love. Its return isn’t just commercial—it’s cultural.

In the dance between memory and modernity, the LaLiT Great Eastern has choreographed a rare harmony. It reminds us that architecture isn’t just about preservation—it’s about participation. And here, the past still checks in, every night.

ANALYSIS

Aspect	IF.BE (Ice Factory, Mumbai)	CSMVS (Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai)	The LaLiT Great Eastern Hotel, Kolkata
Original Use	Industrial Ice Factory (1880s)	Museum (Built 1905–1922)	British-era Hotel (Built 1840s)
Current Function	Cultural and Event Space	Museum with updated infrastructure	Luxury Heritage Hotel
Architectural Style	Industrial Colonial with basalt stone, wooden trusses	Indo-Saracenic Revival	Victorian + Edwardian + Contemporary blend
Adaptive Reuse Strategy	Minimal intervention with spatial layering, retained raw textures	Restoration of original features; modern services subtly inserted	Structural retrofit and stylistic hybridization for hospitality
Design Intervention	Integration of glass, corten steel, and climate-responsive elements; tree preservation	Careful structural repair; addition of climate control and new galleries	Mix of conservation and contemporary finishes; interior modernization
Cultural Integration	Space for art, performance, dialogue—linked to creative communities	Continued public engagement through exhibitions, education, and global heritage programs	Commercialized but evokes nostalgia and local pride

Sustainability & Heritage	Reused material, passive cooling, adaptive layout around natural elements	Focus on long-term conservation, sustainable retrofitting, digital archives	Preservation of identity while introducing modern energy and comfort systems
User Experience	Intimate, flexible, experiential; fosters dialogue between old and new	Monumental yet accessible; blends history with interactive exhibits	Premium, curated experience; blend of heritage hospitality and modern luxury
Conclusion	A bold architectural narrative of memory, texture, and urban reuse	A rare case where museum design respects both conservation and evolving display technologies	While more commercial, it sets a benchmark for adaptive reuse in the hospitality industry, though it balances nostalgia with profit motive
Views	IF.BE redefines reuse by celebrating imperfection and urban memory — a model for community-led cultural regeneration.	CSMVS offers a textbook example of how museums can preserve colonial legacies while embracing inclusive and contemporary museology.	The LaLiT demonstrates the economic potential of adaptive reuse, but its impact lies more in luxury positioning than public cultural enrichment.

CONCLUSION

Across three cities, three typologies, and three architectural intents, a singular philosophy emerges: adaptive reuse as an act of cultural continuity. Whether transforming a crumbling factory into a cultural incubator, modernizing a colonial museum for inclusive public discourse, or reviving a heritage hotel into a luxurious stay—each project resists the flattening effects of time and development.

These buildings were never meant to last this long—certainly not for these uses. And yet, through design intelligence and cultural empathy, they not only survive but thrive in new avatars.

It's clear that these interventions are not mere restorations—they are re-narrations. They remind us that the built environment is never truly finished. Like the cities they belong to, these structures are always in the making—formed by the past, informed by the present, and framing the future.

FINDINGS

1. Adaptive Reuse as Cultural Rewriting: Each case resists colonial erasure not through demolition or mimicry but through transformation. Adaptive reuse becomes a way of reclaiming agency over spaces originally built to serve colonial intentions.
2. Material Integrity + Design Innovation: All three interventions respected the original material palettes—be it basalt and Burma teak (IF.BE), lime plaster and Minton tiles (CSMVS), or iron and timber (Great Eastern Hotel)—while carefully integrating modern systems such as HVAC, seismic retrofitting, and digital infrastructure.
3. Space Reprogramming with Emotional Intelligence:
 - *IF.BE* transforms functionally obsolete infrastructure into a cultural hub without sanitizing its industrial past.

- CSMVS evolves from a colonial museum into a participatory civic space for all age groups and communities.
- *The LaLiT Great Eastern* re-establishes itself as a premier hotel while preserving its layered historical narrative.

4. Architectural Continuity as Urban Resistance: These buildings resist the homogenization of urban development. Especially in Mumbai's Ballard Estate or Kolkata's Esplanade, such projects become micro-acts of defiance against rampant modernization and architectural forgetfulness.

5. Regional Sensibilities Shape Adaptive Strategies: The transformations reflect regional materiality, climate adaptations (like ventilated verandahs), and urban culture—showing how colonial frames can evolve into regionally grounded architectures.

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