



Determinants of Character of Physio-Spatial Built Environment: Context of Hill Stations in India

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ABSTRACT: Most of the physio-spatial-built-environments with a distinct socio-cultural-economic and political setting at a given time acquire a unique character. In this paper Hill Stations have been studied as a context to understand built environments as manifestations of socio-cultural preferences, their emotional affinities, and cognitive interpretations of the physio-spatial environment by people, their cultural practices. This paper explores the emotional intersections between people, places and the changing socio-cultural dynamics in context of hill stations of India and how these determine the character of their physio-spatial built environment.

Keywords-Hill Stations, Built Environments, Socio-Cultural Practices, Emotional & Visual Preferences, Character of built environments

I. INTRODUCTION

Physio-spatial built environments are manifestations of the socio-cultural-economic and political setting of any culture at a given time. Different places and spaces in a built environment form the settings of day to day activities related to social interactions, congregation, festivals, recreation, religious activities and other day to day activities of shopping, education. These places and setting which are an integral part of their socio-cultural lives and their myriad activities, are all intricately intertwined with their built environment. As the lives of people unfold amidst a designed built environment, their experiences and affinities get connected with it, as well as influenced by it. These public places and spaces play an important role in building a sense of association, belongingness and identities of towns.

This paper explores the emotional intersections between people and places in context of hill stations of India which were built during the colonial rule. Hill stations in colonial India by design were established to bring together people of the colonial society in India into a familiar native environment to further evoke a sense of fraternity and thus strengthen the social connect amongst each other, through emulating physio-spatial built form environment of their native land. Hill stations in India, as described by A.D. King, are unique type of social, physical and spatial organizations that

resulted from juxtaposing urban forms of west on alternate geographic settings(2). Hill stations have been studied as a context to understand built environments as manifestations of socio-cultural preferences, their emotional affinities, and cognitive interpretations of the physio-spatial environment by people, their cultural practices and how these design the character of the built environments.

II. EMOTIONAL AFFINITIES AND COGNITIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF A PHYSICAL SETTING

To understand the emotional connect between people and their physical environment it is important to understand how perception of physical reality is influenced by cognitive interpretations. Image and imagination shape perception, and the patterns of perception. These patterns are shaped by factors like cognitive learning of systems of ideas, recognition of specific details, discerning patterns and relationships. These patterns of perception of individual influence his thinking thus further influencing the emotional connect with a given physical context. While the individual interpretations are subjective in nature, the interpretation of a given physical context is marked by some common factors, arising from a similar socio-cultural and physio-spatial context. Most of these common interpretations are a consequence of emotional reflex to the given context.

Affinities and emotional responses translate into deeper associations over a period of time as a summation of collective interpretations of a select socio-cultural set with common physio-spatial context that is considered as the character of a place.

III. CHARACTER OF PHYSIO- SPATIAL BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Most of the physio-spatial-built-environments that are manifestations of distinct socio-cultural-economic and political settings of a culture at a given time develop a unique character. It is not to say that an urban setting has only one defining character; it is rather to say that while an urban environment may have many characters, the most predominant of those becomes the defining one. Notable examples of urban settlements with distinct character exist throughout the world ranging from cities with dominant historic character such as, Rome, Paris, Delhi, Jaipur, to cities with a pronounced functional character like the capitals cities like Chandigarh, to urban centres of deep religious character like the ancient city of Benaras, to colonial settlements like Pondicherry, New Delhi, to the modern settlements with agnostic character like Auroville, to hill stations that were set out with highly picturesque character.

The predominant character of built environment is perceived through its strong visual identity that defines the distinctiveness of the place. The 'identity' is shaped by the physical design of the built environment and is a manifestation of the socio-cultural factors at given time. While visual characteristics of a built environment are integral to identity; the context of this identity is defined by the socio-cultural context. Since the context is constantly shaped and reshaped by socio-cultural factors, it is important to understand the socio-cultural context at the time of its inception and during different phases of its growth as well as the perception of the local population towards the built environment of a place. The experiences of people in a physio-spatial environment are a function of the historical environment of the given physio-spatial context; the socio-cultural dynamics-the general activities that occur in the given physio-spatial context; the emotional affinities and preferred visual impressions specific to a society and interplay of the physio-spatial setting i.e. its natural features, climate, natural landscapes, the built forms-their scale, their placement in a given geographic context; and the aesthetics associated with the physio-spatial setting. The term 'character' has been consistently used as a common denominator of factors building this experience about a given physio-spatial environment in spite of its varying scope and is discussed further.

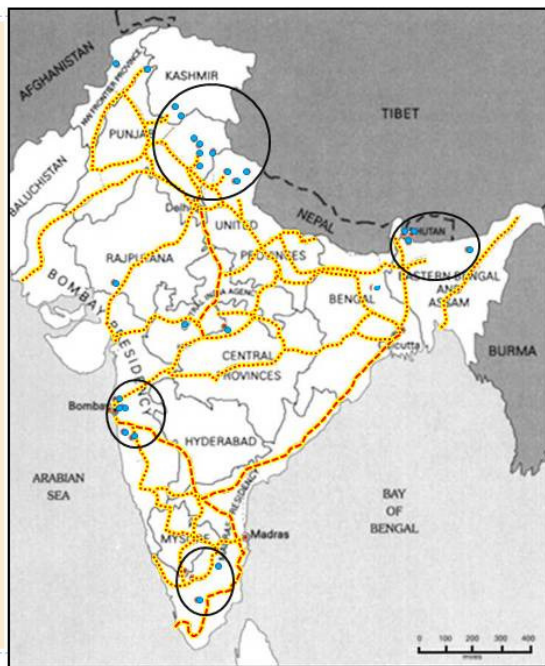
Character is a perceivable result of certain core intangible attributes, which are unique to a place or thing, and thus fundamental in defining identity and distinctness of subject. It is pertinent to note that character itself is a composite result of a wide spectrum of distinct qualities associated with a given physio-socio-spatial environment. Character has a dynamic quality in context of physio-spatial built environments, the dynamics of a city bring in change from multiple perspectives- population growth, demographic change, changing socio-cultural context and changing economic dynamics. The 'ability of the urban and rural fabric to assimilate the functions that are compatible with its specific character' determines the continuity of its predominant character (7).

For places that have a recognized distinct character, it is important that the character must not be undermined by the changes over time. While change consistently morphs the physical character of associate built forms, the aesthetic preferences of society from different periods continue to influence the design and styles of built forms in the physio-spatial environment. Hill stations of India built during the colonial rule are examples of historic built environments with unique character that display the socio-cultural contexts of a community living away from their native land; and also the picturesque character with which they thus created an enclave for themselves based on their visual aesthetic preferences as a distinct society. The relationship between emotional affinities, cultural practices and character of hill stations is discussed further in detail.

IV. HILL STATIONS CHARACTER- A MANIFESTATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL PREFERENCES

Hill Stations are a unique set of urban development that was set up by the British during their colonial rule in India for specific objective of building an exclusive retreat for their society amidst a colonial set up across India. As observed by AD King, the hill stations were an outcome of European cultural perceptions which held that good health could be attained at higher elevations in Indian context. Given their command on political power, the British community could thus go about establishing settlements in hill settings as per their preferences. The Indian hill stations have been recognized as a culture specific built environment. From 1815-1947 almost eighty settlements were located and established in four clusters (Image 1) in lower mountain ranges of India namely;

The Shimla- Mussoorie group accessible from Delhi and Calcutta; the Pune Mahabaleshwar cluster for the Mumbai patrons; the Darjeeling-Shillong group situated near Calcutta; the Ooty –Kodaikanal group in Nilgiri hills near Madras (2). Three transition phases mark the evolution of the hill stations - firstly established as cantonment and sanitarium, 1815 onwards up to a period of next fifty years, these developed into Sanitarium and into dense sanctuary especially after the revolt of 1857. The second stage was marked by hill stations developing into dense sanctuaries which resulted from a need for safe havens, of boarding and institutions, particularly for the colonial community's children and female population in hill settlements.



British India (1909),
Major Hill Stations, and major railway routes

Image 1- Hill stations located in four clusters in India.

From dense sanctuaries these settlements grew into dense urban settlements i.e. hill stations. Distinguished hill stations like the summer capital at Shimla and sophisticated resorts like Nainital, Mussoorie mark the last phase of the evolution of these settlements (2). It is noteworthy that since independence in India, no new hill town has been established exclusively for leisure and tourism purposes. With the changing socio-political context, these urban units present a distinct case study- firstly from point of view of changing emotional affinities; secondly from the point of view of changing socio-cultural context; and most importantly as a unique set of attractive physio-spatial setting that are

still considered attractive; making these popular centers of tourist attractions.

A. Emotional and Visual Preferences for Setting Out Hill Stations in India

The Indian hill stations were set out in the hills, mainly in Lower Himalayan range in North India, provided cooler and dust free environment; quite unlike of what was an Indian plain offered in summers by the colonial society. The hill setting for locating towns gained favors with British community residing in India primarily because these locations provided a climatic environment and geographic setting that was characteristically similar to English town settings in highlands. The hill setting was also preferred because these locations were easily cut off from plains by controlling access routes to the highlands, thus enabling establishment of exclusive settlements for select patrons. *"The British were very much at home in Mussoorie, because it reminded them so much of 'home'. It was cool, it was green, it was quiet, it was comfortable, it was chock-a-block with fellow countrymen and it was relaxing"* (3) The physio spatial design of hill stations was characterized by the need to create a healthy, pollution free, closed community in aesthetically pleasing and scenic locations for recreational, leisure activities strategically commanding military bases and sanatoriums.

For most hill stations like Mussoorie, Nainital, Kodaikanal, the most important source of revenue was the temporary tourist colonial population during summers. *"Of course, it must be remembered that 'visitors' in those days did not just come for a day or two. In fact, many came up for the entire season from April to October. These seasonal visitors included 'grass widows', often with small children, whose husbands would join them from the plains for only a short part of the season; retired military and civilian officers who would be in Mussoorie or the hot weather and then trundle down to Dehradun or elsewhere on the plain for the winter months; and, of course, the invalided soldiers and officers of the cantonment, as well as those on leave. Other part- time residents included shopkeepers, hoteliers, teachers and students, for in the early years shops, hotels and schools were closed during the coldest months, generally from November to March (today, only the schools follow this winter break)."* (3) Most hill stations were popular tourist and leisure destinations as these were set amidst variegated landscape with views of the valley or natural picturesque features like lakes, water falls (Image 2).



Image 2- Distant View of the Hill Station- Mussoorie, located on a ridge, as seen while approaching

These views were an integral part of the promenade street-The Mall (Image 3), and most buildings which were set out loosely on the rugged terrain of the hills. Most popular activities of the town, public, religious and market were laid out so as to encourage leisure strolls along the few roads of the settlement.



Image 3- View of the valley from the Mall Road, Mussoorie

The hill stations design reveal the strong association between the settlement's location, its setting and the socio-psychological preferences of its initial residents in terms of its aesthetics, landscape, architectural style, social services, missionaries, schools and so on. The dominant and essential elements of the physio-spatial design of hill stations that fostered distinctiveness and attractiveness to a hill settlement's appearance, as stated by Owen include Settlement structures that were recognizable and legible; Scale that was both human within the settlement and appropriate to the settlement's appearance in the local and wider landscape; Buildings that were integrated with their natural surroundings, including sensitivity to the shape and structure of land, avoidance of exposure to cold winds and securing the benefits of light and warmth from sunshine; Distinctive landmarks; Unity, although rarely, uniformity of building materials of recognizable local origin (6).

B. Emotional and Visual Preferences shaping the Urban Morphology of Hill Stations in India

British Colonial society in India was mostly a closed community for the given socio-political reasons of its times. The hill stations developed during the colonial age in India make a distinct urban morphology especially in regard to the emotional connect of the people with the place. Their emotional affinity towards their native physio-spatial built environments transcended into the design and culturally preferred visual experiences, social spaces as the original design of the settlement had primarily drawn upon the ideas from English Urban design and architectural practices, wherein the colonial community could mimic ways of a their native land and culture. The most prominent elements of Urban Morphology inspired by English towns were the punctuating built forms distinctly visible from within the settlement and afar. A 'central avenue' that led to the 'Anglican church' was typically the spine of the hill stations; it was the promenade, centrally located, and thus the meeting point of society's member on daily basis (1). The walkway was lined with government offices like post offices, telegraph office, collector's office, banks and other business serving buildings. It was popularly referred as 'the Mall'. These settlements had a variety of social institutions typical to colonial society like Assembly Halls, Residential Clubs, Gymkhanas, subscription Libraries, Masonic lodges, Sports and Recreational Clubs, and, in several of the larger stations, theatres were also built. The initial settlers of hill stations associated strongly with the metropolitan culture of mainland Europe. Their preferences manifested as a culture of land-owning and property, explicitly symbolic of status, and fondness for nature. Most property units can be characterized as inspired from European architectural form and style. The large properties helped maintain a small density in settlement. The physio-spatial expression of this loose built form composition set on contoured terrain of hills was a distinct character typical of hill stations.

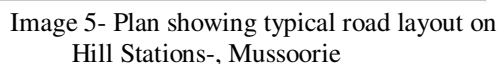
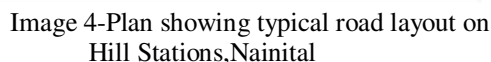
V. TYPICAL BUILT ENVIRONMENT CHARACTER OF HILL STATIONS IN INDIA

Character of typical hill stations in India was shaped primarily by their functions, setting, common elements of their physio-spatial design and their appearance, as reflected in their settlement pattern, location and types of activities, buildings and public spaces.

A. Characteristics of Plan, Layout and Setting of Hill Stations

The hill stations aesthetics emerged in lines of the new role similar to the 'picturesque' environments followed in the mountainous area of north Britain ('the lakes' &

The layout of the hill settlement typically was centered on the Mall road, which was the main street and characterized by its pedestrian nature resembling elegant precincts of England (Image 4,5). Its length was marked by important crossroads of the settlement and its ends defined by government buildings or the church. Important services and institutional buildings were also located along this central thoroughfare of the settlement. From the Mall various junctions lead to lanes which meandered upon the contoured topography of the hill leading to residential neighborhoods and other institutions clustered on the hillscape.



The primary function and consequential character of hill stations was that of a leisure resort for an exclusive clientele. The hill settlements were characterized by a sparse density, although to cater to the seasonal rush during summers a large number of hotels and lodges were set up. As observed by Miedema et al "*Mussoorie, perhaps more than any other hill station, is said to have had a reputation for frivolity, fun and flirting, made possible to large extent because the station was not a summer capital with all the attendant formality and restriction. It was a resort where one went for holiday strictly to enjoy oneself.*" (3); hill stations were renowned as holiday destinations, some more famous than the others. The socio-cultural circumstances of initial settlers of hill stations were distinguished by their homogenous ethnic character, deepened by their estranged circumstances. In their peculiar situation, the design of their exclusive abode in hills was to shape the social cohesion among the members of this cultural set. As observed by Miedema et al "*And in Mussoorie, like in other hill stations, numerous institutions were established that became central to the lifestyle of the Europeans (mostly British) and some Indians (many of them royalty), who had the means to spend... Foremost amongst the institutions that emerged to entertain this elite clientele were the clubs*"(3). The physio-spatial environment was dotted with tourist infrastructure like hotels, lodges, summer cottages, an elaborate market, formal socializing institutions like the club, boat clubs, resorts, informal public spaces like the promenade- the mall, and typical public buildings like the town hall, post office, libraries, police stations, theatre and the church. Hill stations eventually also grew to become the hub of education and health facilities for the colonial community in India.

The hotels in hill stations were renowned for their grandeur and built particularly for the European patrons (Image 6).

For instance it was said about Hotel Charville in Mussoorie, *"The public rooms are a large dining room, a children's dining room, ballroom, public drawing room, smoking room and card room, a fine billiard room with two tables, and a ladies cloak room for ball nights. The linen room is in charge of a European housekeeper, and in addition to the finely appointed kitchen, there is a bakery and a confectionary. There are two tennis courts and a badminton court. There is out-office accommodation for 400 servants, stabling for 50 horses, a piggery, a poultry yard and extensive fruit and vegetable gardens. The area of the estate is twenty five acres."* (3). The elaborate amenities and services provided typically in hotel buildings reflect much about the day to day life of the people and the activities they engaged in.



Image 6- Hackman Hotel built in 1902, Mussoorie

Formal interaction among members of the European society adhered mainly to the British manners and practices. Most cultural activities revolved around formal events set in institutions like club, sports clubs, and theaters. As observed by Miedema [*Clubs in India were*] a home from home and daily reaffirmation of the virtues of fair play and honorable behavior, and the ultimate expression of the Empire builder's apartheid mentality. The reassuring rustle of newspapers and chiming of a well wound clock spoke of permanence, standards and an unswerving Britishness... [*the hill station club in particular*] were specifically designed to re-create an ideal of Englishness. (3) While most activities fostered connect at cultural level the formal setting allowed continuity of cultural traditions and a familiar way of life. An equally important part was played through informal interactions that were deliberately promoted through multiple recreation venues, like libraries (Image 7), race course, polo ground fishing associations' amusement clubs and 'electric pictures' with the coming of electricity to stations and promenades. Multiplicity of spaces were an outcome of physical constraints; for instance as given by Miedema for the Rink in Mussoorie *"Yet another major sporting and entertainment facility in the station was the Rink, which was used not only for roller skating*

but also as a concert hall and theatre... the Rink featured private boxes for use during entertainments, bars and tea galleries, a billiards saloon and tennis courts. Events like boxing tournaments, fashion parades, flower show, dog shows, seasonal festival, ballroom dances, theatrical performances and with the arrival of electricity, cinema pictures.(3) Among the public events the most popular was the military band that played on 'band stand'(Image 8) which was a notable structure typically along the Mall. In recent days similar events have been revived on few occasions reconnecting the activities with the original built form and setting. Few public institutions still continue to survive like the libraries, band stands, and vantage points, popularly known as *hawaghar* (Image 9) but on a much reduced scale.



Image 7- The Library at the crossing point on Mall Road, Mussoorie continues to be an important public building.



Image 8- The Band Stand at the crossing continues to be an important landmarks



Image 9- Niche open spaces along the Mall Road looking onto the valley are distinct public spaces



Image 10- The Mall Road, Mussoorie

The market catered to the day to day requirements of its clientele and its character reveals the lives of the people around it. The European goods market of hill stations was primarily spread along the mall road on one side, while the sundry goods markets were lined along other parts of town.

The earlier practice was marked by the routine delivery of day to day needs at homes, while the 'shopping' was centered on the Mall (Image 10). The slow leisure promenade character of the mall and its central location in the settlement essentially brought out its people out onto it. Thus, the mall remained the most vibrant and active zone of the entire settlement. The mall continues to act as the most important public space with its promenade character and as the core of the historic settlement.

A major cultural factor which encouraged setting up of educational institutes exclusively for the colonial society was to raise and educate the European community's children as British were raised. As noted by Royal Comm. In 1863, "*The climate of Sonawar (near Shimla) is thoroughly English... here it is possible to raise a population thoroughly English in habits, in physical constitution and in mental vigor*" (2) Thus exclusive hill enclaves were strategically founded, as early as 1835, with boarding schools and orphanage for children of poor whites to raise them in a setting similar to England. The hill schools emulated the institutions of English public schools in all aspects. Eventually most hill stations grew as renowned education hubs with elaborate boarding schools run by private and missionary bodies, however exclusively for the colonial and Anglo-Indian clientele.

C. Character of Visual Experiences and Aesthetic Preference resulting from Emotional Affinities

The culturally preferred visual experiences of a given society are observed in the Aesthetics, Landscape, and Architectural Styles they build.



Image 12- Company Garden, a typical public space in a landscaped setting, Mussoorie

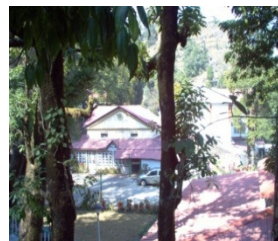


Image13- A typical cottage (residential unit) set on the contours of hill side, Mussoorie

The initial settlers of hill stations were characterized by their keen interest in nature and natural world that encourage them to investigate, read, write, and talk about their explorations. Such interests gave rise to a series of activities like, gardening, walking, admiring specified

views in the landscape, and recording these by sketching, painting, and photography, which thus established a physical spatial environment characterized by large compounds, cultivated gardens, reserved forests, botanical and company gardens (Image 12), each of which was a consciously modified natural environment (2). The appearance of residences was determined by factors like the climate, economics and the symbolic styles of architecture. The typical setting was designed so as to conceal the building amidst its immediate compound (Image 13). The roofscape was characterized by hipped roof form, colored in red for common buildings, and green for important and selected buildings. Vegetation was deliberately integrated with the built forms inspired from the popular impressions of picturesque movement. "*Most cottages were snug and, in consonance with the British Isle-like climate, house names too incline wistfully towards 'home'. The Victorian settlers gave nostalgic English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish names to their Bungalows...*"(3)

Particularly significant signatures of the urban image were the clock towers and sculptures on important road junctions; which were a direct inspiration from the European urbanscape. The Anglican Church was the most important landmark, which was located so as to be visible from great distance. (1)The church spire was a prominent landmark that was visible from distant landscape. The colors on the spire, typically red, stood out amidst the green landscape on hills as a distinct landmark.

VI. DOMINANT ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTERIN HILL STATIONS AS A MANIFESTATION OF CULTURAL PREFERENCE

The style that came to dominate in the hill stations by the mid-nineteenth century was termed as '*Himalayan Swiss-Gothic*' by Jan Morris (1). It was characterized by gabled Gothic villas, half-timbered Tudor style cottages or multi-storied structures, chimneys, steep roof lines, numerous gables, and ornately carved fretwork framing the eaves, windows, and doors. The cottage in form and setting replicated the general features of the English country home. "*Rather than transposing the grid patterns of civil and military stations of the plains to these mountain settings, the British preferred the sinuous contours of the rugged landscape and constructed their cottages along the crests of ridges and around the shores of lakes without apparent premeditation or planning. Typically each bungalow was dug closely to the hill-side, occupying a separate compound and isolated from neighboring sites.*"

The criteria of location were those of seclusion, access to 'views' and conformity to a 'picturesque' landscaping ideal." as observed by Dane Kennedy (1). The cottage design was in contrast to the design of standard bungalows of the plains because the winter time the occupancy was negligible and spaces like veranda or balcony were not included, which were regular features of the bungalow on plains.

The cohesive homogenous and estranged character of earlier society of these hill stations has been completely replaced with a democratic heterogeneous mix of people and a massive influx of tourist population that is driven to these stations for its geo-climatic recreational character primarily.

VII. CHANGING SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT REFLECTING IN TRANSFORMING CHARACTER OF HILL STATIONS

The exclusive nature of social patronage, has changed over a period of time, particularly post-independence and the hill stations urban environment has transformed thus by a reverse social dynamics. These hill stations have emerged as a popular tourist destination for a wider spectrum of society in last few decades. The character of towns altered dramatically mainly due to the rise of middle and lower income population engaged mainly in government or other services (tertiary occupation). With the rise in affordability of urban middle class and investment in tourism related infrastructure by private enterprises, these settlements have witnessed a massive tourist influx, especially on weekend, or short span duration which is fundamentally different from the earlier trends that extended throughout summers and were months long in duration. The bulk of tourism is consistently on rise and so is the demand on the tourism infrastructure which is being developed to accommodate both, the increased number of tourists, and their wide range of affordability.

Most of these estates that were earlier on the outer realm of the town have changed in scale and style, most importantly due to the change in proprietorship and the preferences of a changed social and demographic profile. The transformation of various properties into hospitality buildings, and division of properties as a consequence of growing resident population is drastically affecting the building morphology and harmony which are crucial to the character of the physio-spatial composition of these settlements (Image 14, 15). Apart from these the most important change is the terracing of hills to build new buildings, irrespective of their impact on the view from and of other neighboring buildings.



Image 14 - Hotel and Amenities buildings on hills emulate architecture trends of urban metropolitans, regardless of their visual character and impact on surrounding



Image 15 - Hotel and Amenities buildings on hills emulate architecture trends of urban metropolitans, regardless of their visual character and impact on surrounding



Image 16- The rise in number of motorized vehicle and consequent need for parking has altered the visual character along roads.

The character of newer clientele has overtaken older shops and more metropolitan like shopping units have been placed to engage the tourist population. A very important change in character of market area since its earlier times is that it continues to remain active even after evening hours, when the pedestrian promenade view seeking tourist find alternate engagements on the mall in shopping units and food places during their short weekend trips to these upland stations. Another aspect of development is the growing traffic of motorized vehicles, whose presence questions the compactness of these towns, which were established as the promenade dominated settlements. The high traffic has added to the problem of parking space. Both of these factors have drastically changed the character of experiences along the promenade avenues, the pedestrians' interests on the roads and the views out to the valleys (Image 16).

The constant noise from crowded streets and traffic, and fumes from vehicles also affect the serene character of the hill stations which were established as distinct from urban areas on plains. All these factors of character many of which are important to sustain the interests of tourists are significant to be conserved because the tourism provides for the town's economic sustenance. Any alteration reflecting considerate change in appearance and ambiance of the hill station would be bluntly reflected in the changing functional characters of the town, with irredeemable consequences.

VIII. . CONCLUSION

The built form character of hill stations is defined by its- functions, activities, public spaces, buildings, spatial configuration and architectural character, are all direct reflective of the society at its time, and most importantly its cultural practices and emotional connotations. As cultural paradigm changes with time it assists transformation in built form environment and its design. This is best illustrated in study of hill stations of India that are a unique physio-spatial built environment. The characteristics, values system, emotional preferences of its residents and visitors both display strong connect with the built form environment. Their emotional and visual preferences shaped the urban morphology, character of visual experiences and aesthetic preference while the cultural practices shaped the character of public spaces and social institutions.

The character of built environment of a place is a manifestation of its physio-spatial design which is inadvertently shaped and reshaped by its changing socio cultural context and thus a dynamic aspect of the place's identity. Places that have acquired a definite character owing to its historic and unique cultural past need to conserve this aspect of their identity.

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