

A look at British Colonial Architecture in India – Part I

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Fort William Church Kolkata, 1866 – [Wikimedia](#)

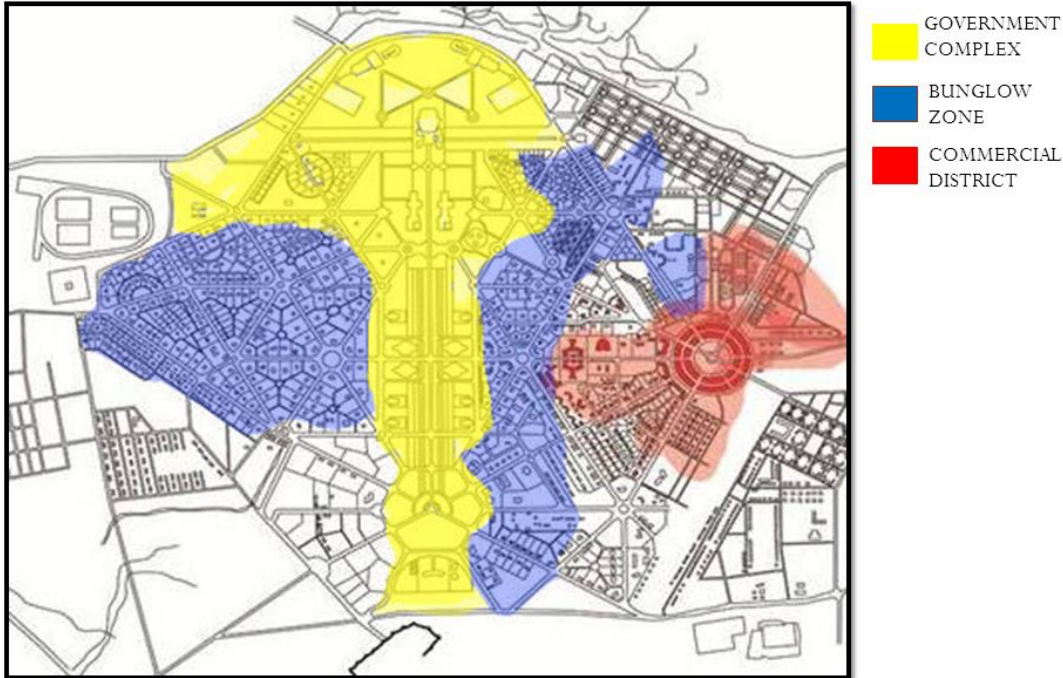
India has a long history of being ruled by different empires, however, the British rule stands out for more than one reason. The British governed over the subcontinent for more than three hundred years. Their rule eventually ended with the Indian Independence in 1947, but the impact that the British Raj left over the country is in many ways still hard to shake off. Freedom came to India with a price. The price of years of struggle, countless men, women and children bearing the brunt of oppression and the political control of the masses by outsiders who didn't quite understand or respect the internal dynamics of the nation for a long time. The British initially were more interested in using the rich resources of the colonized areas. However, it is understood that especially after the 1857 Mutiny they started taking a much keener interest in governance and social norms.



Parliament Delhi – [Roberta Romero](#) via Flickr

British colonial architecture hence came into the picture the very instant that the British set shop in India. But over the years, the architectural styles evolved. From what started out as an all-out endeavor to mark superiority slowly changed into accepting and acknowledging the ‘Indian way’.

Lutyens' Delhi - Zoning



Lutyens Delhi Zoning – [Source](#)

And hence in spite of more than 70 years of Independence, there are many architectural structures in India that were actually built during the British colonial period. In fact, many remain as the major landmarks of the cities that they are built in and some such as the Parliament House in Delhi are administrative centers of the country. Most of New Delhi was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and Sir Herbert Baker and is the main seat of administrative and political governance of the country.



Victoria Memorial Kolkata, Photo by [Martin Jernberg](#) on [Unsplash](#)

So what does this really make us? What does it mean to know that though we are an independent nation, our strongest infrastructure and architectural planning have been given to us from the same regime that we tried to wade off for generations?

It is a tricky spot to be honest, however, a realistic and practical one. The British era is a part of the subcontinent's long history and their influence is and will be seen on many societal, cultural and structural aspects. India as a nation has always been warmly and enthusiastically acceptable of other cultures and ideas and this is also another reason why many changes and features during the colonial rule have not been discarded or shunned away on the pretense of false pride or nationalism.

An overview of the British Colonial Architecture

One of the earliest architectural influences of the British colonial rule is seen on the churches. Gothic and neo-classical style was in rage and many of the structures in the Presidency of Bengal, Madras and Bombay became flag bearers of the opulent style of building. St. John's Church, Fort William, Calcutta Cathedral in Kolkata or the Mutiny Memorial Church in Kanpur are some examples of the Gothic style of colonial architecture.



Image Source – [Wikimedia](#)

However, the constructors realized that the climate of the subcontinent did not always suit the architectural and raw material usage of the built structures. They slowly started to adapt to the climatic needs of the land, just like the Mughals had done earlier and began using the verandahs, blinds, screens, lattice work and so on.

After the Mutiny of 1857, Queen Victoria and Her Majesty's Crown took over the administration of the India. The shift from being traders to rulers was also seen in the architecture of the regime which now started incorporating few Indian designs and motifs into its own style. There was a sort of architectural and construction boon since the mid nineteenth century that saw the building of various monuments, railway

stations, rest houses, government buildings and so on. The Rajabai Clock Tower, Victoria Terminus, Bombay High Court in Mumbai and the grand Victoria Memorial in Kolkata are some of the many notable structures built during the late 19th century.



Madras High Court an example of Indo Saracenic architecture – [Wikimedia](#)

However, it was also during the late 19th century that the Indo Saracenic architecture took its place in the colonial architectural history. Indo Saracenic architecture was in many ways a revival style which incorporated the British style along with many elements from the Mughal architecture as well as the Hindu temple architecture. The Chempauk Palace, Madras High Court and Chennai Central Station are some examples of the Indo Saracenic architecture. Others include the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai, the Khalsa College in Amritsar, Mumbai GPO and many more.



Chennai Central Station – [Arian Zwegers](#) via Flickr

New Delhi is a classic example of early 20th century colonial architecture. Sir Lutyens along with a group of architects designed the main central administrative district of the city that till date stands and houses important buildings and residences of the political and administrative importance.

Cities of British Colonial Architecture

Many cities have some or the other influence of the colonial architecture. However, the cities that are landmarks of the British architectural history are Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Agra, Delhi, Hyderabad, Nagpur, Bhopal and Karachi.



Lutyens Bungalow – [rachaelvoorhees](#) via Flickr

Over the years the names of many of the colonial structures have been changed to give them an Indian tone, however, the structure itself bears testimony to its period and age of construction. The British colonial era is a reality of the Indian subcontinent history and its architecture is an important and integral part of the nation's past and present.

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