RESEARCH ARTICLE

RSP Science Hub

Heritage Ornamentation of Garli–Pragpur Translating Tradition into Modern Design

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Abstract

Garli and Pragpur, India's first recognized heritage villages, embody a unique decorative language where arches, jaalis, murals and woodwork tell stories of cultural exchange and craftsmanship. Their façades, alive with Gothic, Colonial and Himachali influences, form an architectural identity that is both practical and poetic. However, modernization threatens the integrity and visibility of these traditional motifs; this research seeks to bridge the gap between heritage conservation and contemporary design by exploring how these patterns can be meaningfully adapted in modern architecture. This study employs a mixed-method approach combining visual surveys, documentation, and spatial analysis of heritage buildings with interviews of local residents, artisans, and architects. The findings reveal that the ornamentation of Garli and Pragpur is not a static relic but a hybrid vocabulary where Western stylistic cues are seamlessly blended with vernacular traditions. However, this research also highlights urgent conservation challenges like many buildings lie vacant or dilapidated due to changing demographics, economic migration and complex ownership issues, raising the stakes for documenting and adapting traditional patterns before they disappear. By analyzing and translating these motifs, the research demonstrates their potential for meaningful adaptation in modern architecture. The study argues that these decorative traditions can inspire design solutions that are culturally rooted, aesthetically rich and environmentally responsive. In doing so, Garli and Pragpur are positioned not only as living museums of heritage but also as active sources of design innovation for contemporary practice.

1. Introduction

Garli and Pragpur, India's first heritage villages, are known for their rich architectural legacy blending local Himachali traditions with colonial influences [1]. This research aims to explore and analyze the distinct design language of Garli and Pragpur, studying how their architectural vocabulary communicates identity and tradition. By reinterpreting these elements within a contemporary

framework, the study seeks to suggest design approaches that preserve cultural essence while addressing modern spatial and functional needs [2]. Most studies on heritage in Himachal Pradesh focus on documenting settlements like Garli and Pragpur or on Kath-Kuni construction, often for tourism or historical records. While valuable, they seldom translate cultural and architectural knowledge into (Figure 1) practical, contemporary design guidelines. This research fills the gap by offering an integrated framework that bridges heritage principles with modern design strategies, creating actionable, context-sensitive and heritage-responsive approaches for future projects [3].

Figure 1 Heritage Homes of Garli and Pragpur

1.1. Aim
The aim of this research is to explore and analyze how architectural and interior design interventions preserve, reinterpret and enhance cultural and spatial experiences by bridging traditional knowledge with modern practices to guide future heritage-sensitive and contextually responsive design approaches [4].

1.2. Objectives
- To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following objectives:
- To study and document existing architectural and interior design practices and elements with emphasis on cultural influences [5].
- To analyse case studies, both primary and secondary, to identify patterns, challenges and design strategies relevant to the subject.
- To suggest design considerations and frameworks that balance aesthetic, functional and cultural values for future projects.

1.3. Need of the Study
This research carries significance on several levels, as it seeks to link the past and present in the discipline of design [6]. Academically, it contributes to design theory by connecting historical knowledge with contemporary practice, providing a framework to study cultural continuity. Socially, it responds to the urgent reality of fading heritage, underlining the necessity of conservation while fostering awareness and pride within local communities. Professionally, it equips architects, interior designers and planners with strategies to reinterpret heritage elements and embed cultural identity into modern design solutions, ensuring both relevance and authenticity. Beyond this, the study emphasizes the importance of bridging the widening gap between traditional wisdom and current design practices, offering insights that promote context-sensitive, heritage-responsive and sustainable approaches to architecture and interiors (Figure 2).
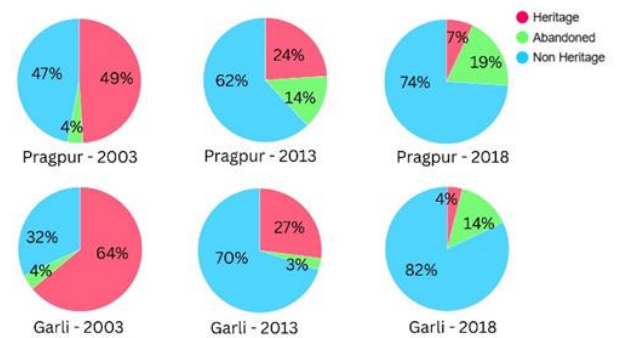

Figure 2 Vanishing of Heritage Buildings

1.4. Scope and limitations
The scope of this study is centered on understanding the architectural and interior design language of Garli and Pragpur, with particular attention to their cultural, spatial and material characteristics [7]. It seeks to reinterpret these heritage-driven elements within a contemporary design context, highlighting how tradition can inform modern practice. However, the study is limited by restricted accessibility to certain sites, reliance on available documentation for some aspects of analysis and the subjective nature of interpreting design, which may lead to varied perspectives [8].

2. Methodology
The methodology of this study combines qualitative research with detailed visual documentation, allowing both cultural narratives and architectural features of Garli-Pragpur to be recorded and

analyzed in depth. A qualitative framework was chosen to address the dual focus of the research interpreting heritage ornamentation as a cultural expression while also examining it as a design vocabulary that can inform and inspire contemporary practice. Figures 3 to 9 are presented center, as shown below and cited in the manuscript.
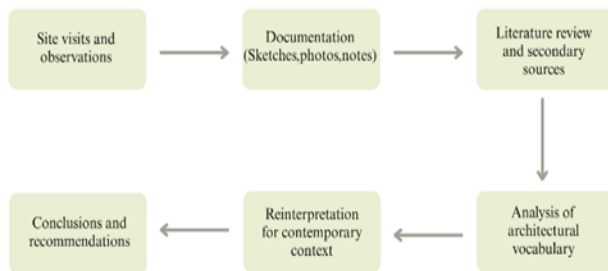
2.1. Flow of Methodology

Figure 3 Shows The Chronological Order of Steps Taken to Derive This Study

3. Literature Review

Preeti Nair (2021) [9] examines the challenges of conserving heritage villages like Garli and Pragpur through a sustainable lens. Using surveys, interviews and GIS mapping, they highlight residents' strong attachment to heritage but also reveal critical gaps in infrastructure, awareness and policy. The study stresses that "conservation alone cannot lead to its own goal," arguing instead for integrated approaches that blend heritage preservation with economic viability and community participation. It frames heritage as both a cultural anchor and a catalyst for rural development [10]. Santosh Kumar (2024) explores how rural tourism shapes both the economy and cultural identity of Himachal Pradesh. They explain that the Rural Tourism Scheme (2002–03) sought to highlight villages like Pragpur and Garli by celebrating their art, architecture and traditions. Tourism today contributes nearly 7% to the state's GDP, offering jobs and helping reduce rural-to-urban migration. Yet, the study points out real challenges like poor connectivity, lack of skilled training and weak promotion. As the authors observe, "Rural tourism provides a great scope for the economic development of the state… yet certain things need to be done to overcome the various hindrances". Vikesh Kashyap (2017) explores the role of cultural heritage in tourism and community life. It notes that "the ambience of the Heritage Zone

(Culture Zone) of Garli-Pragpur is zealously preserved by the residents". Using surveys and field data, it shows that 85.5% respondents believe the environment and traditions sustain heritage, while "activities (fairs and festivals) conducted by the villagers preserve the culture", strengthening tourism and identity. Shashi Kant Singh (Scribd) delves into the traditional architecture of Kangra, unearthing how sustainability is rooted in material choices and vernacular design. The paper highlights that 94% of rural households use local, low-energy materials such as mud, stone, wood, bamboo and slate and particularly noting that mud walls with slate roofs form the most sustainable housing typology in Kangra. Singh observes that "mud has zero embodied energy" and is vastly more efficient than modern fired brick alternatives. Yet, challenges remain: people increasingly prefer hardened, high-energy materials due to perceptions of durability, leaving traditional finishes and their aesthetic and cultural value underexplored. This study calls for renewed documentation, research and training to reclaim Kangra's vernacular heritage before it fades from both rooflines and memories.

3.1. Case Study

Primary Case Study 1: The Chateau Garli, Pragpur, Himachal Pradesh.

Figure 4 The Chateau, Heritage Hotel, Garli

The Chateau Garli in Pragpur exemplifies successful model of adaptive reuse wherein vernacular traditions and colonial stylistic influences are preserved while accommodating contemporary hospitality functions. Originally conceived as a familial mansion, the structure has

been sensitively transformed into a café-hotel without compromising its heritage identity. From a spatial perspective, the building demonstrates a clear zoning hierarchy, with verandahs, bay-window seating, and external stair access facilitating circulation and visual connectivity with the landscape. Public and service domains are deliberately demarcated, ensuring functional efficiency while sustaining cultural notions of privacy and hierarchy. Such spatial organization not only enhances user experience but also accommodates modern programmatic needs within a heritage envelope. The architectural vocabulary of the Chateau reflects a syncretic design language, merging Indo-European and Himachali elements. Climatic responsiveness is articulated through sloping carved roofs, while arched fenestrations, stained glass inserts and projecting bays introduce colonial and decorative characteristics. Folk-inspired murals further embed regional cultural symbolism, making the structure a palimpsest of layered influences. In terms of materiality, the use of exposed brick masonry, timber frameworks and lime plaster signifies vernacular construction systems, whereas colored glass and metal fittings enhance both durability and aesthetic depth. These material choices affirm the building's contextual sustainability and underscore local craftsmanship. Overall, the Chateau Garli illustrates how heritage architecture can be conserved through adaptive strategies, ensuring cultural continuity while supporting new socio-economic functions in a rapidly transforming rural-urban context.

Primary Case Study 2: Abandoned Haveli, Pragpur, Himachal Pradesh

The abandoned house in Pragpur stands as a poignant reminder of vernacular domestic architecture that once shaped the cultural landscape of the region. Although deteriorated, the structure preserves significant insights into spatial hierarchy, hybrid design vocabularies and sustainable material practices that define the architectural ethos of Himachal's heritage settlements. From a spatial perspective, the house follows a clear hierarchical organization with semi-public zones located on the ground floor and private living quarters above. Vertical circulation is managed through an external staircase, enabling privacy while maintaining accessibility. Its inward-facing orientation allows natural light and cross-ventilation, demonstrating an

inherent sensitivity to both social customs and climatic conditions.

Figure 5 Abandoned Haveli, Pragpur

Despite its abandonment, the underlying spatial order remains legible, reflecting resilience in traditional planning. The architectural language of the house reflects a syncretic blend of influences. Arched fenestrations, pitched sloping roofs and recessed wall niches reveal functional adaptations and cultural ornamentation. A carved wooden entrance highlights the role of craftsmanship, while the hybrid integration of masonry walls with timber reinforcements reflects seismic awareness and structural pragmatism. This convergence of Himachali, colonial and Mughal elements situate the house as a layered cultural artifact. Materially, the structure employs brick masonry finished with lime plaster, heavy timber beams supporting floors and roof and finely crafted wooden doors and windows. These locally sourced materials underscore vernacular sustainability and artisanal expertise. Over all, the abandoned house embodies both architectural ingenuity and cultural continuity, even in its neglected state, offering critical lessons in resilience, sustainability and identity preservation within vernacular traditions.

4. Results and Discussions
4.1. Results

The study of Garli and Pragpur has brought forth a set of observations that highlight the villages'

unique design vocabulary, their cultural depth and the challenges they face in the present day.

Ornamentation and Detailing

The survey of Garli and Pragpur revealed a highly diverse ornamental vocabulary. Carved wooden brackets, jaalis and jharokhas were widely used, serving both aesthetic and climatic functions by providing shade and ventilation. Stucco motifs, floral carvings, rose windows and brick jaali screens added layers of decorative richness to facades. Unique elements, such as roof-top sentries, arched balconies and patterned railings, symbolized not only artistic ambition but also the social standing of families. Ornamentation thus acted as a visual language of identity, status and cultural pride.
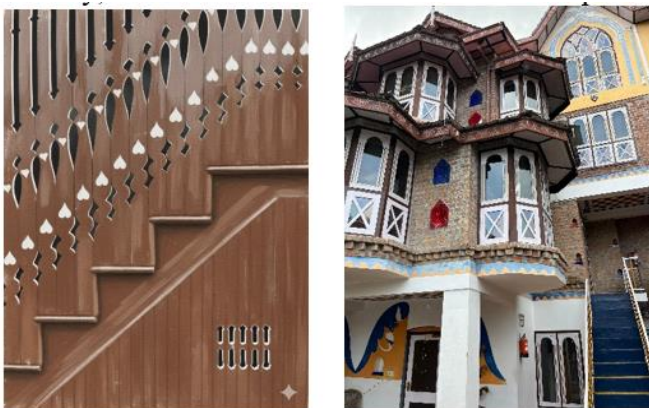

Figure 6 Highly Ornamented Details On Buildings and Structural Elements

Materials and Construction Techniques

Figure 7 Traditional Construction Materials

The dominant materials recorded were local slate, stone and timber, used for roofs, plinths and structural elements, reflecting climate-responsive building traditions. Slate-shingled gabled roofs were universally observed, suited to heavy rainfall and snow in the region. Locally available stone was used for foundations and plinths, while timber was employed in beams, columns, and intricate joinery. Brickwork, often combined with plaster, introduced colonial influences, especially in larger havelis. The juxtaposition of vernacular materials with imported ones highlighted a synthesis between local tradition and global exposure.

Cultural Elements in Architecture

Architectural features also reflected cultural beliefs and practices. Courtyards emerged as central spaces, facilitating family gatherings where light and ventilation symbolize the social heart of houses. Decorative jharokhas and balconies, inspired by Rajasthani styles, indicated the exchange of ideas during the colonial era. The water tank at Garli showed a conscious cultural and ecological awareness, ensuring shared resources. Religious symbolism, from carved motifs to the orientation of certain houses, underscored the spiritual dimensions of design. Public buildings, such as schools and inns, reinforced the cultural value of community-building through architecture.

Figure 8 Intricately Ornamented Jharokha-Style Bay Window

4.2. Discussions

The findings demonstrate that ornamentation, materials and cultural elements are inseparable in defining the heritage architecture of Garli and Pragpur. The image captures both the richness of what remains and the urgency of what is being lost,

making it a living argument for why Garli and Pragpur's architectural vocabulary deserves to be reinterpreted, not erased.

Figure 9 **Contrast Between Traditional Built and Modern Built Houses**

This image itself demonstrates why the study of Garli and Pragpur is critical today. The built fabric visible here narrates a layered story of heritage and neglect. On one hand, we see colonial-era influences in arched openings, thick masonry walls and brightly painted façades that once carried symbolic value. At the same time, the picture also reveals the slow erosion of this identity. The tiled slate roof, timber details and traditional massing coexist uneasily with later insertions of tiled cladding, cement plaster and incongruous color schemes. What was once a cohesive vocabulary of stone, timber and slate, rooted in climate responsiveness and craftsmanship, is increasingly overshadowed by modern, inexpensive interventions that disrupt harmony and erase cultural memory. Cultural elements such as courtyards, communal water tanks and symbolic motifs highlight the fusion of social, functional and spiritual dimensions in architectural design, reinforcing community identity. However, the rise of concrete and steel structures is displacing these features, eroding architectural memory. The discussion underscores reinterpretation rather than replication, encouraging architects to adapt traditional vocabulary such as courtyards, timber details and jaali patterns into modern, context-sensitive design strategies that ensure cultural continuity.

4.3. Considerations/Suggestions

- Reinterpret traditional elements like jharokhas, jaalis and carved brackets through modern techniques such as CNC-cut wood, WPC or metal detailing.
- Translate decorative cornices into subtle grooves or LED profiles to preserve cultural expression in a contemporary way.
- Use sustainable materials such as engineered wood, bamboo, lime plaster, terracotta and 3D-printed tiles as eco-friendly alternatives.
- Combine exposed brick or stone cladding with glass and steel to balance rustic character with modern sleekness.
- Reintroduce courtyard concepts as atriums, skylit double-height spaces or light wells for dense housing.
- Adapt verandah-like transitional spaces into shaded balconies, semi-open terraces or pergolas to enhance indoor–outdoor interaction.
- Preserve spatial hierarchy by differentiating public and private zones in residential layouts.
- Incorporate climate-responsive elements like sloping roofs with extended eaves, solar tiles, green roofs and ventilated systems.
- Revive passive cooling strategies inspired by courtyards and jaalis to reduce dependence on mechanical systems.
- Integrate earthy colour palettes and floral patterns through tiles, paints and surface textures.
- **Reimagine heritage details as flexible design:** modular carved panels, seasonal colour palettes or evolving community art walls.
- **Make heritage-inspired elements functional**: jaalis as wardrobe shutters or partitions, carved railings or symbolic motifs on gates and doors.
- Encourage adaptable detailing across residential, hospitality and community projects.

- Collaborate with local artisans to embed cultural narratives and sustain traditional skills.
- Promote adaptive reuse by reprogramming old structures into hospitality, co-working or cultural hubs.

Conclusion

The study highlights that heritage architecture need not remain frozen in time but can evolve through reinterpretation, sustainability and adaptive reuse. By drawing inspiration from traditional motifs, materials and spatial planning, contemporary design can balance cultural continuity with modern functionality. Climate-responsive strategies and eco-friendly materials ensure resilience in the face of environmental challenges, while collaboration with artisans sustains living traditions. Reimagining ornamentation and spatial typologies in flexible, functional ways allows heritage to remain relevant for future generations. Ultimately, this approach bridges the gap between past and present, creating designs that are rooted, adaptive and culturally meaningful.

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