

Negotiated Neighbourhoods: Juxtaposing Nehruvian Modernism with the Lived Community of Post-Partition India

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Abstract

The 1947 Partition of India precipitated not only a humanitarian crisis but an architectural identity crisis. As the newly independent state sought to project a cohesive and modern identity through top-down master planning, millions of displaced refugees across the nation were simultaneously reconstructing their lives from the bottom up. This paper investigates the friction and synthesis between these two forces. Using a comparative methodological framework, the research juxtaposes a secondary case study of the Nehruvian model, epitomized by Le Corbusier's Chandigarh, against primary qualitative data derived from oral history interviews within the refugee settlements of Alwar, Rajasthan. While the state viewed housing as a standardized unit of "modern living," the displaced communities viewed it as a site of cultural preservation and survival. The study argues that the post-Partition "home" in India was not merely a product of government allocation but a result of "spatial negotiation" where communities actively adapted rigid modernist layouts to fit vernacular social patterns. By analysing these specific oral histories alongside the official national schemes, this research highlights the agency of the user and demonstrates that the true architecture of resettlement was shaped as much by the inhabitants' memories as by the planner's blueprint.

Keywords: Partition, Nehruvian Modernism, Community Resilience, Oral History, Alwar, Lived Architecture, Spatial Agency.

1. Introduction

The Partition of 1947 was more than a drawing of lines on a map. For the Indian subcontinent, it was a massive architectural rupture. With the displacement of nearly fifteen million people, the newly formed Indian government faced a dual challenge. First was the pragmatic nightmare of housing a population in flux, and second was the ideological desire to build a "modern" nation that looked nothing like its colonial past. This paper explores the disconnect and the eventual compromise between the government's vision of a new India and the actual lived experiences of the communities who had to inhabit it.

In the wake of independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru championed a specific brand of modernism. He envisioned architecture as a tool for social engineering and a way to pull India into a rational and secular future. This vision is best understood through the lens of Chandigarh, the master-planned city designed by Le Corbusier. It was meant to be a symbol of "India's freedom, unfettered by the traditions of the past". However, this top-down approach often treated housing as a mathematical problem to be solved with clean lines and zoning laws which frequently ignored the organic social structures of Indian life.

In contrast, the situation on the ground was far less curated. Across North India, refugee colonies were established out of sheer necessity. Here, the architecture was not dictated by a Swiss architect's manifesto but by the immediate needs of survival and the cultural memories of migrants. As noted by Kaur (2007), these refugees were not passive victims waiting for government aid but were active agents who reshaped their environments. They modified government allotments, encroached on public spaces, and effectively "vernacularized" the modernist grid to recreate the community bonds they had lost.

This research aims to bridge the gap between these two narratives. While existing architectural history often focuses heavily on the genius of Le Corbusier or the statistics of displacement in major metros like Delhi, there is a lack of research that directly compares the *intent* of the master plan with the *outcome* of community living in smaller urban contexts.

To address this, the paper utilizes a two-part methodology. First, it conducts a secondary case study analysis of the Chandigarh model to establish the baseline of Nehruvian planning principles. Second, to ground this analysis in reality, it introduces primary data collected through oral history interviews with residents of Alwar, a Tier-2 city in Rajasthan. Alwar serves as a critical case study because, unlike the capital, the friction between the standardized "Government Scheme" and the local climate and culture was even more pronounced.

Ultimately, this paper asks how displaced communities negotiated the tension between the state's modernist ambitions and their own cultural needs. It is argued that the resulting urban fabric of post-Partition India is neither purely modernist nor purely vernacular, but a hybrid "negotiated neighbourhood" shaped by the resilience of its community.

2. Literature Review

The architectural landscape of post-Partition India is defined by a deep conflict between two opposing forces. On one side, there was the state's urgent need to build a new nation, and on the other, the people's desperate need to build a home. The existing research on this topic generally falls into three main categories: the top-down vision of Nehruvian modernism, the bottom-up reality of refugee resettlement, and the methodological frameworks used to uncover these stories.

2.1. The State's Vision: Nehruvian Modernism- After independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wanted a clean break from India's colonial history. Architecture became a primary tool for this. The literature identifies this era with "Nehruvian Modernism," an ideology that adopted the rational and universal principles of the International Style. The most famous example is Chandigarh. Nehru described it as a city "unfettered by the traditions of the past" and a symbol of faith in the future.

Scholars like Kalia (2006) and Evenson (1966) have extensively documented Chandigarh as a monumental achievement in urban design. However, later critiques offer a different perspective. Vikramaditya Prakash (2002) argues that Chandigarh was not just a copy of Western ideas but a complex negotiation between Le Corbusier's vision and the Indian context. Other critics have noted that this top-down modernism was often alienating because it ignored the local climate and the daily social needs of the people living there.

2.2. The Ground Reality: Displacement and Vernacular Adaptation- While the state was building Chandigarh, a chaotic reality was unfolding across North India. The Partition displaced nearly fifteen million people and created a massive housing crisis.

Historians like Gyanendra Pandey (2001) and Urvashi Butalia (1998) focus on the human trauma of this event. But for architecture, Ravinder Kaur's *Since 1947* (2007) is a key text. She documents how refugees were not passive. They actively shaped their resettlement by building homes that mixed their village

memories with their new urban reality. Jyoti Hosagrahar (2005) calls this "indigenous modernities," arguing that non-Western societies create their own versions of modernism that are distinct from what the state imposes. Additionally, Upadhyay (2023) describes how refugees initially occupied monuments and shrines, modifying sacred spaces to create immediate shelter.

2.3. Methodological Frameworks- To connect the official government plans with the actual stories of the people, we need a specific method. Official archives usually only tell the state's side of the story. Lynn Abrams (2016) argues that oral history is a crucial tool for accessing the experiences of marginalized groups. It allows us to build a "history from below". Furthermore, Robert Stake (1978) validates the use of case studies to understand larger phenomena. By using a collective case study approach, we can move beyond single anecdotes to find shared patterns in how communities adapted to their new lives.

3. Research Gap

Thematic Area	What We Know (Existing Literature)	Identified Gaps & Research Opportunity
State-Sponsored Modernism	We have extensive architectural analyses of Chandigarh and Le Corbusier. Research covers the political ideology behind Nehruvian modernism in depth.	Most analysis treats the state's vision and the refugee reality as separate histories. There is a need for comparative work that directly juxtaposes the master plan against the lived community experience within a single analytical frame.
Refugee Resettlement	We have strong historical accounts of the trauma of Partition. Much of the existing oral history work focuses on the social and economic aspects of resettlement in major metros like Delhi.	Geographical Gap: Most studies focus on Delhi or Punjab. There is a lack of research on how "provincial" or Tier-2 cities (like Alwar) negotiated modernism, where the contrast between local climate/culture and the state's plan was often sharper.
Architectural Narratives	The discourse is dominated by high-profile projects designed by famous architects. Studies of "lived architecture" or vernacular adaptation exist but are often treated as a separate field.	Existing case studies often focus on a single family or a general social trend. A collective case study that analyses the <i>spatial</i> negotiations of an entire neighbourhood is needed to build a more robust counter-narrative to the state's monolithic history.

4. Secondary Data: The Nehruvian Ideal – A Case Study of Chandigarh

To understand the "State's Vision" for post-Partition India, this section analyses the master plan and housing strategies of Chandigarh. As the only completely new city built during this period, Chandigarh serves as the perfect case study for the Nehruvian ideal. It represents the government's attempt to create a

social utopia through architecture.

4.1. The Master Plan: The Sector as a Container Le Corbusier's primary planning unit was the "Sector," a self-sufficient neighbourhood of 800m by 1200m. The intent was to replicate the social cohesion of a traditional Indian village but in a modern, hygienic format. Each sector was designed to be introverted and protected from fast traffic, with its own schools, markets, and green spaces (Evenson 1966).

However, critical analysis reveals a disconnect. Unlike the organic Indian *mohalla* which relies on mixed-use streets for social interaction, the Chandigarh sector rigidly separated functions. Living, working, and leisure were zoned into different areas. Prakash (2002) argues that this imposed a Western definition of "privacy" and "community" that was alien to the refugees and citizens moving in. The wide roads and segregation of classes prevented the spontaneous social interactions that defined traditional Indian urbanism.

4.2. Housing Typologies: Hierarchy Over Family The most distinct feature of the Chandigarh experiment was its housing. The government divided all housing into 13 distinct categories based strictly on the rank and salary of the government official (Kalia 2006). This created a built environment that solidified social hierarchy rather than dissolving it.

- **The Design Logic:** The lower-category houses were designed for the "common man." They featured brick construction, flat roofs, and *jalis* (perforated screens) for climate control.
- **The Flaw:** The design prioritized standardization over cultural habit. For example, traditional Punjabi life is deeply centred around the courtyard, which is used for sleeping in summer, drying spices, and social gathering. In many lower-category government houses, private courtyards were either too small or absent, forcing families to adapt their lifestyle to the building rather than the other way around (Sarin 1982).
- **The Kitchen:** Le Corbusier and his team designed kitchens for standing cooking (a Western norm). However, most Indian families at the time, especially those from rural backgrounds, cooked while squatting on the floor. This architectural mismatch forced residents to modify their kitchens immediately upon moving in, creating the first act of "negotiation" with the architecture.

4.3. Inference from Secondary Data- The analysis of Chandigarh demonstrates that the Nehruvian "Ideal" was rigid. It viewed the citizen as a standardized unit that could be molded by modern architecture. The state provided a house that was hygienic and structurally sound, but it often failed to provide a "home" that supported the cultural patterns or the climatic realities of the region. This sets the stage for our Primary Data in Alwar, where we will see how refugees, facing an even harsher desert climate, solved these exact problems through their own adaptation.

5. Primary Data: Oral Histories from Alwar

Methodology of Data Collection- This section presents qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with ten residents of "Scheme No. 1" and the "Company Bagh" refugee settlements in Alwar, Rajasthan. Unlike the metropolitan sprawl of Delhi, Alwar presented a unique context where the incoming refugee population from Sindh and West Punjab had to negotiate with a harsh arid climate and a smaller and more conservative urban fabric. The interviews focused on the friction between the PWD (Public Works Department) built government housing and the social requirements of the residents.

Respondent	Profile/Role	Architectural Intervention	Key Testimony (Translated/Transcribed)
1. Mrs. Sundari Devi	Original Migrant (82 years old)	Kitchen Modification	"The government quarters in Alwar were built like barracks. The kitchen was a dark cell with a standing slab. In our culture, and in this heat, we cook in the semi-open. We smashed the rear wall to open the kitchen into the backyard <i>angan</i> . The architect forgot we live in Rajasthan, not London."
2. Dr. Padamlal Khera	Community Elder	Street Encroachment	"Alwar is a quiet city. We didn't need wide roads for cars back then. We needed space to sit. We built stone <i>chabutras</i> (platforms) outside our gates. The municipality sent notices, but the whole colony did it. It became our evening assembly point."
3. Mr. DN Arora	The DIY Builder	Climate Adaptation	"The flat concrete roof was a mistake. In Alwar's summer, the slab radiates heat all night. I built a <i>chhappar</i> (thatch shed) on the roof immediately. The 'modern' house was unliveable without our traditional cooling methods."
4. Mr. Kailash Khera	Shrine Keeper	Sacred Space	"The Scheme map had plots for houses but no designated land for our Jhulelal temple. We reclaimed a barren patch near the drain. The authorities called it illegal, but for the Sindhi community here, the temple was the first true home we built."
5. Mr. Rajesh Malhotra	Shopkeeper	Zoning Violation	"The colony was designed as 'Purely Residential.' But refugees need to eat. I converted my front verandah into a cloth shop. The colony became a market because the planners didn't provide one nearby."

Respondent	Profile/Role	Architectural Intervention	Key Testimony (Translated/Transcribed)
6. Mr. Anil Vijj	Vertical Expander	Densification	"The plots in Alwar were small. As my sons got married, we had to go up. We added two floors. The narrow lanes now feel like a canyon because everyone has built vertically, blocking the sunlight the planners promised."
7. Mr. Sandeep Grover	Tenant	Subdivision	"I lived in a 'Quarter' meant for one officer. But three refugee families were sharing it. We used curtains and wooden partitions to divide the rooms. The architecture was rigid, but our need for shelter was fluid."
8. Ar. Rishi Taneja	Architect (Renovator)	Gentrification	"In college, we learned about modernism. But living here taught me that my grandfather's 'illegal' courtyard was climatically superior to the official plan. While neighbours are demolishing these quarters to build glass boxes, I am structurally reinforcing the old brick walls. I am proving that these refugee structures are actually sustainable if you adapt them correctly."
9. Ms. Gurusha Khera	Student	Privacy & Gender	"In a joint family house in a small city like Alwar, privacy is rare. The terrace is my escape. It was designed for drying clothes, but for the women of the house, it became the only place to breathe freely away from the men downstairs."
10. Mr. Nithin Arora	Govt. Clerk	Policy vs. Reality	"I worked in the Alwar Improvement Trust. We saw the violations such as balconies overhanging the street and shops in houses. But these were refugees. We couldn't bulldoze their livelihoods. The 'Master Plan' remained on paper while the city built itself."

6. Analysis

The Failure of the "Standard Unit" in a Tier-2 Context- The data from the interviews starkly contrasts with the principles of Nehruvian modernism analysed in the secondary case study. While the Chandigarh model treated the family as a standardized unit, the testimonies of Mr. Anil Vijj and Mr. Sandeep Grover reveal that the refugee family was a fluid and expanding entity. The architecture was static, but the family was dynamic. This disconnect forced residents to vertically expand and internally subdivide their homes which pushed the infrastructure of the small city to its breaking point.

Climate as a Catalyst for Modification- Unlike Delhi, Alwar experiences extreme desert heat. The testimony of Mr. DN Arora highlights a critical failure of the "Modernist Box." The flat concrete roof, a symbol of modernism, was climatically inappropriate for Rajasthan. Furthermore, Ar. Rishi Taneja confirms from a technical perspective that the "informal" modifications made by the refugees were often more sustainable than the formal designs. The opening of kitchens into backyards (**Mrs. Sundari Devi**) was not just a cultural preference but a necessary survival strategy against the heat.

Cultural Resistance through Encroachment- The most significant inference from this study is that "encroachment" was often a form of cultural preservation. Dr. Padamlal Khara's construction of the *chabutra* was an attempt to restore the social pattern of the *mohalla* (neighbourhood). The wide and car-centric roads of the government scheme ignored the specific social habits of the refugees. By physically altering the street edge, residents were actively rejecting the isolated lifestyle imposed by the state.

Conclusion of Analysis- The primary data confirms that the resettlement colonies of Alwar are not products of a single master plan but of a continuous negotiation. The residents did not passively inhabit the "New India" envisioned by Nehru. They actively hacked, extended, and remodelled it. The resulting urban form is a hybrid. It is a concrete modernist shell filled with a vernacular and organic interior.

7. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the Nehruvian ideal and the lived reality of refugee settlements in Alwar reveals a profound disconnect in post-Partition architecture. The state, driven by a desire for rapid modernization and secular identity, approached housing as a logistical exercise. The "Standard Unit" as seen in the master plan of Chandigarh was designed for a hypothetical and nuclear family living a westernized life.

However, the oral histories collected in this study demonstrate that the "home" was not received passively but was actively constructed through negotiation. The residents of Alwar did not reject modernism entirely, but they "vernacularized" it. They broke kitchen counters to suit traditional cooking, built *chabutras* to restore community interaction, and added shading devices to combat the climate that the concrete architecture ignored.

This research challenges the dominant architectural narrative that views the "Planned City" like Chandigarh as the success story of independent India. Instead, it argues that the true architectural achievement of the era was the "Negotiated Neighbourhood." These were the unplanned, messy, and adaptive spaces created by the refugees themselves. These communities proved that architecture is not just about the lines drawn by a planner but about the life breathed into them by the inhabitants. Future research should continue to document these disappearing oral histories before gentrification erases the physical evidence of this resilience.

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