

# Preserving the Colonial Heritage of Tezpur (Assam), through Digital and Participatory Approaches

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## Abstract

*Tezpur (Sonitpur district of Assam), bears the imprints of British colonial administration and military presence through a number of built heritage structures, including churches, colonial bungalows, administrative buildings, and war memorials. These heritage assets, however, remain under documented and face deterioration due to neglect, encroachment, and environmental pressures. This chapter explores the potential for digital heritage mapping and community-based documentation as tools to preserve and reinterpret colonial memory scapes in Tezpur. Drawing on international models like the African Built Heritage Project in Benin, the chapter proposes a framework that integrates LiDAR, GIS, and oral history methods with local stakeholder participation. It argues that such initiatives can both conserve heritage structures and open up critical conversations around colonial memory, identity, and the future of Assam's architectural landscape.*

## Introduction

Tezpur, a city on the banks of the Brahmaputra in Assam, is widely known for its mythological significance and role in shaping Assamese cultural identity. Yet beneath this celebrated image lies an overlooked colonial past, materially embedded in its landscape but largely absent from academic, policy, and public discourse. As a former British administrative and military hub with a cantonment, civil station, and tea estates, Tezpur retains a diverse colonial architectural legacy: churches, bungalows, cemeteries, jails, and public buildings, many now neglected, repurposed, or deteriorating. This chapter argues that these structures represent a neglected '*lieux de mémoire*' or sites of memory that demand preservation not as imperial relics but as spaces for critical engagement. Grounded in critical heritage studies, postcolonial memory theory, decolonizing praxis, and digital humanities, the proposed approach treats colonial heritage as a contested, dynamic domain shaped by history, material culture, and community identity.

Drawing on theorists like Laurajane Smith, Edward Said, and Paul Ricoeur, the chapter challenges the idea of heritage as neutral or universally agreed upon. In Tezpur, the colonial built environment's marginalization reflects broader tensions between honoring indigenous identity and confronting colonial legacies. These structures, occupying a liminal space between rejection and reverence, are palimpsests layered with histories of power, adaptation, and silence.

To ethically engage with these memory scapes, the chapter emphasizes decolonizing methodologies that centre local agency, vernacular knowledge, and relational ethics, as advocated by thinkers like Walter Dignolo and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. In Tezpur's context, this means involving residents, students, caretakers, and civil society in the documentation

and interpretation of colonial sites, ensuring local perspectives shape how the past is remembered. Digital tools like GIS, LiDAR, photogrammetry, and 3D modelling offer new ways to document and share heritage. However, critical digital heritage scholars warn that such technologies are not neutral and must be applied reflexively to avoid reinforcing existing power structures. This chapter therefore proposes a community-driven, critically-informed digital heritage model that uses technology to democratize access, amplify silenced histories, and foster inclusive memory practices. Within this framework, a pilot initiative is proposed to digitally map and document select colonial sites in Tezpur using participatory methods. Inspired by global projects like the African Built Heritage initiative in Benin, the model brings together scholars, technologists, artists, students, and local communities to co-create a living archive. Beyond preservation, the aim is to generate intergenerational dialogue, support cultural resilience, and contribute to rethinking heritage in postcolonial cities not as static monuments, but as evolving, plural sites of memory and meaning.

### **Colonial Tezpur in Historical Context**

The British colonial footprint in Tezpur was firmly established in the early 19th century, following the annexation of Assam (1826). As colonial administration expanded its reach into the Brahmaputra Valley, Tezpur rose in strategic importance, becoming the district headquarters of Sonitpur and serving as a critical node for civil, military, and plantation governance in Assam. This period saw the rapid growth of colonial infrastructure to accommodate the needs of British officers, military personnel, and European planters who had begun to dominate the region's tea economy. The town's urban fabric began to reflect the spatial and architectural logic of the colonial regime, with zones demarcated for administration, residence, and recreation, often segregated along racial and class lines (Sharma, 2012).

A number of colonial era structures constructed during this time continue to mark Tezpur's landscape, albeit in varying states of preservation. Among the most prominent is St. John's Church, built in 1864, which stands as one of the oldest surviving churches in Assam and reflects the spiritual and social lives of British residents. The Tezpur District Library building, originally constructed as a British club, exemplifies colonial leisure architecture and now serves a completely transformed civic function, offering a compelling example of adaptive reuse (Mitra, 2007). Colonial bungalows, located primarily along Circuit House Road and the vicinity of Chitralekha Udyan, once housed administrative officials and planters; many of these feature signature colonial architectural elements such as high-pitched roofs, timber framing, expansive verandas, and the use of indigenous materials tailored to Assam's humid, monsoonal climate.

Other significant remnants of the colonial period include war memorials and cemeteries, some of which commemorate British soldiers and European tea planters who died in the region, particularly during periods of conflict or disease outbreaks. The Tezpur Jail, another key structure, is an example of colonial penal architecture, reflecting both the disciplinary logic of empire and the infrastructure of surveillance and incarceration. Together, these sites form a cohesive yet fragmented memory scape that narrates the city's entanglement with colonial governance, architecture, and spatial planning.

Despite their historical value many colonial structures in Tezpur lack official documentation or legal protection, leaving them vulnerable to decay, alteration, and urban encroachment.

Their unrecognized status complicates conservation and raises questions about memory and neglect in contemporary Assam. Understanding their significance is crucial to preserving Tezpur's evolving urban heritage.

### Significance of Colonial Heritage Sites

Colonial buildings in Tezpur, while deeply entangled with the legacies of imperial domination and control, carry layered and often contested meanings for local communities today. For some residents, these structures represent the foundations of modern infrastructure, governance, and urban planning in the city, marking the introduction of systematic administration, transportation networks, and civic amenities that shaped Tezpur's transformation into a district headquarters. For others, however, they serve as tangible reminders of a fraught colonial past characterized by the displacement of indigenous landowners, the marginalization of local voices, and the imposition of foreign rule. These contrasting perspectives highlight the complex emotional and historical valences embedded within the colonial built environment, which cannot be reduced to a single narrative of either celebration or rejection.

Despite such tensions, the colonial heritage sites in Tezpur present significant opportunities across multiple domains. From an educational standpoint, they offer invaluable resources for learning about historical architectural styles, urban development patterns, and the socio-political dynamics of the colonial era. Their preservation and interpretation can deepen public understanding of the city's layered past, fostering critical engagement with history. In terms of cultural tourism, these sites have the potential to attract both domestic and international visitors interested in heritage trails that reveal Assam's diverse historical trajectories. By integrating colonial sites into curated tours and interpretive programs, Tezpur can broaden its tourism appeal while encouraging respectful dialogue around its colonial legacy. Furthermore, these sites play a vital role in shaping urban identity, influencing how the city narrates its past to future generations and positioning itself within broader regional and national histories.

However, many of these heritage sites in Tezpur are currently in a state of deterioration and suffer from a lack of formal legal protection. Without urgent attention, the physical integrity and historical significance of these buildings are at risk of irreversible loss (Jokilehto, 2007). This situation underscores the pressing need to systematically document, analyse, and preserve Tezpur's colonial heritage. Leveraging technological tools such as digital mapping, 3D modelling, and archival digitization, combined with inclusive, community centred narratives, can offer innovative pathways for safeguarding this heritage. Such an approach ensures that preservation efforts are not merely about conserving bricks and mortar but about maintaining the multiplicity of meanings and memories that these colonial sites embody.

### Methodological Framework

To effectively preserve and critically engage with Tezpur's colonial heritage, this chapter proposes an interdisciplinary methodological framework that integrates digital humanities, architectural conservation, and oral history. At the core of this approach is a combination of advanced technological tools and community centred narrative methods, aimed at creating a holistic record of both the physical structures and their social significance. The first set of techniques involves the use of LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) and drone-based photogrammetry, which enable precise, high-resolution three-dimensional mapping of

heritage buildings. These technologies are particularly valuable for capturing the current condition of structures that are vulnerable to decay, urban encroachment, or environmental pressures. LiDAR and photogrammetry allow for the detection of fine architectural details that may be invisible to the naked eye, while also producing detailed digital models that can serve as virtual archives. Additionally, such models enable monitoring to track changes over time caused by factors such as climate variability or urban development.

Complementing these tools, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) platforms such as ArcGIS and QGIS need to be employed to spatially map the distribution of colonial era buildings across Tezpur (Conolly & Lake, 2006). GIS layers integrate a range of relevant data, including environmental information like flood zones and erosion risks, legal protection status of sites, land ownership patterns, and accessibility. Crucially, GIS also facilitates the incorporation of indigenous or pre-colonial landmarks, allowing for comparative spatial analyses that situate colonial heritage within a broader historical and cultural landscape. This geographic visualization supports more informed conservation planning by highlighting areas of vulnerability and contestation.

While technological methods form a crucial component of the framework, they must be paired with narrative based approaches to fully capture the meanings and memories attached to colonial heritage sites. Oral history and community memory work is therefore essential (Portelli, 1991; Perks & Thomson, 2015). This involves conducting interviews with local residents, caretakers, and elders who possess lived experience and knowledge about the colonial sites. Such testimonies often reveal rich layers of folklore, local myths such as stories about bungalows or British cemeteries and personal accounts of how these buildings were repurposed or reinterpreted following India's independence. By integrating these narratives, the project moves beyond static documentation toward creating a memory scape: a dynamic, living archive that records how the colonial built environment is remembered, contested, and continuously reshaped by communities (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007; Crampton, 2009).

Together, these multi-method strategies combining digital precision with oral histories offer a robust and ethically grounded approach to preserving Tezpur's colonial heritage. This methodology not only documents the material fabric of the city's imperial past but also situates it within processes of cultural meaning-making and postcolonial identity formation.

### **Design of Digital Heritage Preservation in Tezpur**

Drawing inspiration from international efforts such as the African Built Heritage Project in Benin, this chapter proposes a pilot initiative on "Mapping Colonial Tezpur." The project may envision a locally grounded yet technologically advanced model for identifying, preserving, and reinterpreting Tezpur's colonial-era built environment. It could aim not only to document heritage sites but also to foster community participation, educational outreach, and policy advocacy.

The overarching fourfold objectives of the initiative may be: to identify, document, and digitally preserve at least 10 (ten) significant colonial era structures across the city; second, to create a publicly accessible, web-based GIS platform that integrates interactive maps, 3D models, photographs, and oral narratives; third, to actively engage local institutions including schools, NGOs, and heritage clubs in participatory mapping, storytelling, and awareness-

building activities; and fourth, to promote heritage education and ethical tourism through curated digital tours and printed interpretive materials.

The proposed project could unfold across five interconnected phases. Phase I might involve preliminary historical research, field surveys, and archival mapping to identify and verify heritage sites. This may include both ground-level surveys and drone-based reconnaissance to assess the current conditions of structures. Phase II would likely focus on the digital documentation of these sites using LiDAR scanning, photogrammetry, and geospatial data integration. High-resolution imagery, architectural detailing, and geo-tagged site data could be collected and organized into a central digital archive. In Phase III, the project might turn toward oral histories and community memory. Through interviews, workshops, and storytelling sessions conducted with residents, schoolchildren, and caretakers, this phase may seek to recover local narratives, myths, and everyday memories tied to the colonial-era buildings. These narratives could be essential for embedding the material structures within their social and emotional landscapes. Phase IV may centre on the creation of a public-facing platform an interactive online dashboard that hosts a navigable GIS map, 3D building models, archival photographs, and audio-visual oral history clips. This platform could serve both as an educational tool and a living archive, accessible to students, researchers, tourists, and policymakers alike. Finally, Phase V might focus on outreach and policy engagement. Project findings may be compiled into a short policy brief highlighting risks to heritage structures, gaps in legal protection, and recommendations for sustainable preservation. The brief could be shared with local municipal authorities, heritage departments, and academic institutions to initiate dialogue and encourage formal action as the situation may be.

Preliminary target sites identified for this pilot might include prominent and symbolically significant structures such as St. John's Church, the District Library (formerly the British Club), the Tezpur Jail, and the Civil Circuit House near Chitrlekha Udyan. Additional sites such as the colonial cemetery near Mission Chariali and several old bungalows in the former planter neighbourhoods could also be included, for their architectural integrity and historical relevance. Together, these sites may represent a diverse cross-section of colonial urban life spanning governance, religion, leisure, incarceration, and death while providing a foundational landscape for engaging with Tezpur's layered and complex heritage. This may attempt to demonstrate how digital tools, when combined with participatory practices, can help not only preserve architectural history but also reanimate it with the voices and memories of the present.

### **Community Engagement and Decolonizing Perspectives**

Engaging with colonial heritage necessarily raises critical ethical and political questions, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Tezpur. Colonial buildings are not passive remnants of the past; they are material symbols of a history marked by extraction, surveillance, displacement, and asymmetrical power. As such, there is always a risk that heritage projects may unintentionally reproduce narratives that glorify or sanitize imperial legacies. However, the alternative erasure through neglect, demolition, or silence can also foreclose the possibility of critical engagement and intergenerational dialogue. This project recognizes that the value of colonial heritage lies not in romanticizing empire, but in confronting its complexities through inclusive and reflective practices.



Central to this initiative is the active participation of local communities in shaping the heritage agenda. Rather than privileging external expert opinions or institutional criteria alone, the project seeks to centre local voices in determining which buildings matter, what they signify, and how they should be remembered. This process includes collecting community narratives, facilitating participatory mapping sessions, and involving residents, educators, and youth groups in site interpretation. In doing so, the project reclaims colonial spaces not by denying their histories, but by inscribing new meanings into them, informed by the lived experiences and memories of those who continue to inhabit or interact with these sites.

Furthermore, the project adopts a decolonizing perspective that calls for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems in heritage discourse. This includes attention to traditional construction practices, vernacular spatial memory, and place-based cultural understandings that have long existed alongside or in resistance to colonial urban forms. By acknowledging and incorporating these ways of knowing, the project challenges the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks in heritage preservation and encourages a more pluralistic, ethically grounded understanding of the built environment.

Ultimately, this approach aligns with decolonization scholarship that positions heritage as a site of negotiation, rather than nostalgia. Scholars such as Walter Mignolo and Linda Tuhiwai Smith argue, decolonization work requires a rethinking of power relations in knowledge production and cultural representation. In the context of Tezpur, this means treating heritage not as a fixed or frozen category, but as a contested terrain where memory, identity, and politics intersect (Till, 2005; Huyssen, 2003). By foregrounding community agency and encouraging critical reflection, the project aims to foster a more inclusive and transformative heritage practice that is attuned to the needs, values, and aspirations of postcolonial urban communities (Menon, 2012; McCoy, 2014).

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The proposed digital heritage initiative in Tezpur offers a promising approach to engaging with colonial era sites but faces significant structural, technical, and social challenges. Most sites lack legal protection, leaving them vulnerable to neglect or demolition. Limited resources, including costly technologies like LiDAR and the need for technical expertise, further hinder implementation. Environmental factors such as monsoonal floods and humidity accelerate decay, while community scepticism rooted in painful colonial associations or perceived irrelevance may affect local engagement.

However, the project also presents key opportunities: it can promote heritage-based livelihoods, foster academic collaboration, and influence policy by advocating for the inclusion of neglected sites in official heritage registers. By addressing these challenges and leveraging support, the initiative aims to create a sustainable, community-driven model for digital heritage preservation in small Indian cities.

### **Conclusion**

Tezpur's colonial heritage, though visibly present, remains overlooked in official discourse, academia, and public awareness. This chapter argues for reframing these structures not as imperial monuments, but as contested memory scapes that invite critical reflection and inclusive historical understanding. Rejecting both nostalgia and erasure, it proposes a

dynamic heritage approach rooted in ethical engagement, technological tools, and community participation.

Using an interdisciplinary method combining LiDAR, GIS, photogrammetry, oral histories, and participatory mapping the pilot project centers local voices and indigenous knowledge within broader decolonizing efforts. It sees heritage as a space of negotiation, where meaning is continually shaped. Despite legal, financial, and environmental challenges, the initiative offers pathways for youth engagement, livelihoods, academic collaboration, and policy change. As a scalable model, it contributes to reimagining postcolonial heritage as a living, participatory domain. By digitally preserving Tezpur's colonial sites, the project fosters critical memory work, cultural resilience, and intergenerational dialogue.

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