

VISUALS: Beyond Nationalism The visual culture of Fresco's expressionism, a case of the Shekhawati region

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Abstract - The historic medieval towns of the Shekhawati region are culturally rich with their unique urban morphology and painting expression. The Shekhawati towns describe their virtual boundaries by three districts – Churu, Jhunjhunu, and Sikar. However, the largely identified towns within these districts as urban clusters are Mandawa, Nawalgarh, Fatehpur, Ramgarh, Mukundgarh, and Lakshmangarh. These are interpreted towns as my area of focus for this paper writing. Here, this piece document will be presented with an idea of exploring and recording the experience of urbanity through different urban visual cultures in this region. Furthermore, the focus of the study concentrated on the urban development shift because of East India Company Governments from 18-19th century. Industrialization and Colonization brought transformation to Indian urban culture and exploration of new ideas across the Indian subcontinent. This time frame and shift of revival in Shekhawati urban visual will be the central idea of recording and establishing the relationship of visuals with the culture and urban morphological landscape as a method of this paper writing. These cluster has a vibrant culture which states the significance of the whole region. The exploration of urbanity will be largely analyzed with the town's record historically, the merchant's role in shaping the visual urbanity of mural paintings, the notion of homeland, visual reflection of urban morphology, an artistic expression, re-contextualization with urban, the outstanding cultural significance of towns with a visual painting of frescos, that will generate and express the painted murals experiences as an idea of urbanity. Hence, the outcome will be focused on collected frescos' world images and pictures as the visual of the towns. Further, the visual inferences potentially can be the source of the Indian cultural knowledge system which can stand out from the world.

Keywords - Historic Medieval towns, Urban Visual, Culture, Urbanity, Frescos, Urban Morphology

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INTRODUCTION

Shekhawati climatically a semi-arid, historical region is located in northeast Rajasthan, India. Towns have a definable significant character with virtual boundaries which makes a region with a layer of cultural evolution, history, tradition, and urban morphology. The region was named after RaoShekha in the 15th century, a noble of the Kachhwaha dynasty of Rajputs (Cooper, Painted Town of Shekhawati, 2018). The region functioned as an administrative office before 1947. It used to cover the northwest range of the maharaja of Jaipur's domain. The Origin and evolution of the region politically was the part of Jaipur, which particularly defines the rich fresco paintings as the vigorous clusters of historic settlements in India. In the 17th Century Jaipur, Bikaner and Shekhawati were under

multiple rulers and patrons (Jain S. , 2005). The region experienced the reflection of art and architecture with social and political influence from medieval to colonization times. In today's Context, the Shekhawati region is largely defined by the virtual boundaries of three districts- – Churu, Jhunjhunu, & Sikar in the northeast of Rajasthan (K.k., 1970). The region consists of thirty-seven various towns, largely identified towns within these districts as urban clusters are Mandawa, Nawalgarh, Fatehpur, Ramgarh, Mukundgarh, and Lakshmangarh are interpreted as rich culturally historic towns as a reflection of the sociopolitical influence reflection of urban paintings. Commonly, at a primary level, such formation of towns emerged from the geography of the place. The basic responsive development took place, considering

climatic conditions and topography. Later, culture evolved with the way function of trade, work, and living styles developed from the 16th to early 20th century in the region. The urban elements emerged over a period of time majorly like, Garh-Fort, Chhatri-Cenotaph, Mandir-Temple, Dharamshala-Caravanserai, Johara-Water tank, Kuan- Well, and Haveli- Mansion with visual images of richly painted murals.



Figure 1: Location of the Shekhawati region

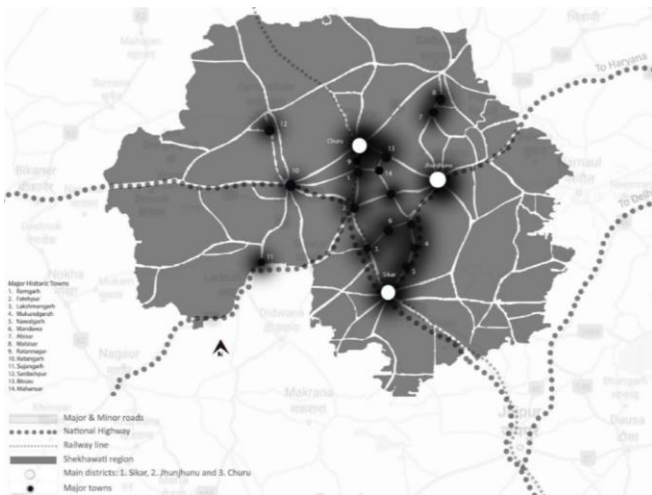


Figure 2: Shekhawati defined boundary limit with major district and towns

From a larger perspective towns and cities are planned with urban concepts like their vistas, composition of open and built spaces, urban scale, proportion, streets, & paths, etc. As a whole, it defines their very nature of urbanity. But here, the urban nature of the towns is not only expressed with urban planning, architecture, & design, it also added an

artistic expression with mural paintings across the built surfaces as an intention to look at urban space beyond the physical divisions. Precisely, this description is about the painted visuals (mural art), which is something specific to the Shekhawati towns. Composition and uncommon play of visuals that has emerged as a symbolic urban landscape.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

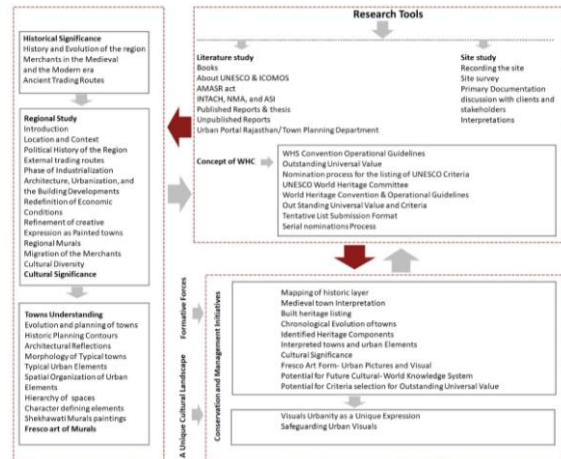


Figure 3: Framework and method of recording

Establishing a significant cultural role of urban visuals

Town's and records

The multiplicity of rulers and Patrons

The emergence of towns: Architecture, Town planning, and Murals on surfaces

Geo-cultural region, Urban morphology

Justification of cultural significance through urban space beyond the built fabric

Merchants and their role

Cultural Diversity: External and internal trade in medieval and in early modern times

Migration and cultural exchange

Notion of Homeland

new ideas for mural paintings: Local and regional boundaries with different subjects

frescos revival: multicultural boundaries, re-contextualization with different subjects

Potential to stand out for the world knowledge

Evaluating the Urban nature of painted murals

Statement for the world knowledge: Hybrid- Indian European style

Town's cities and Records: Before stating the main argument about urban visuals and visibility. Historically, the region was once a division of Jaipur State, and boundary limits linked with Delhi, Jaipur, Bikaner, Haryana, and later Sikar, and Agra in the late 17th century. Relations between Rajput and Mughals started building up the culture and urban morphology of towns chronologically (Jain S. , 2005). The larger development took place in medieval times with mixed architectural styles. These towns grew with a grid-iron pattern, with organic, and Inorganic formation as basic planning ideas. There is no specific urban pattern typology like in other towns in the region. It has a set of relationships, and expressions developed with the time phases. This distributed urban landscape conveniently defines the local and regional symbolism of rich mural paintings. These towns evolved as vibrant town clusters of historic settlements in the Indian context. The Shift in visual paintings is influenced by social and political relations with patrons, rulers, and the colonial empire (Jain S. , 2005). These towns were mostly protected by patrons and rulers that gave rise to painted surfaces. The urban visual morphology of Shekhawati painted walls are vibrant and vigorous, clearly blended with the legacy of Mughal and Rajput style of architecture. Region cultural multiplicity of Mughals, Rajputs, Shekhawat's and later followed by merchants, who defined and set a new identity of Shekhawati.

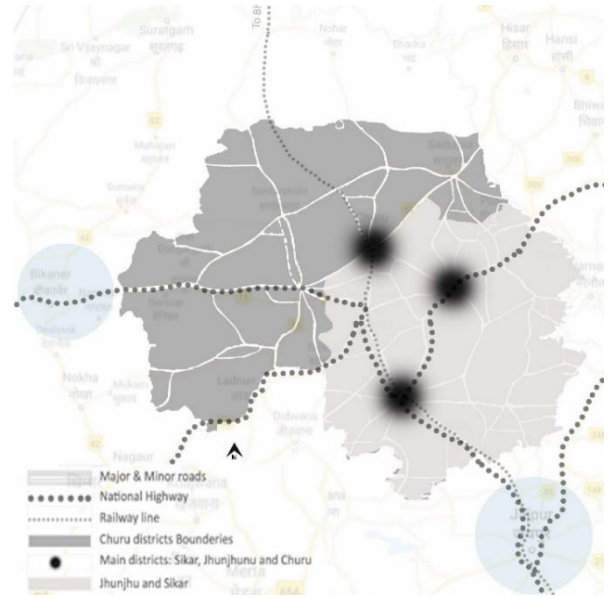
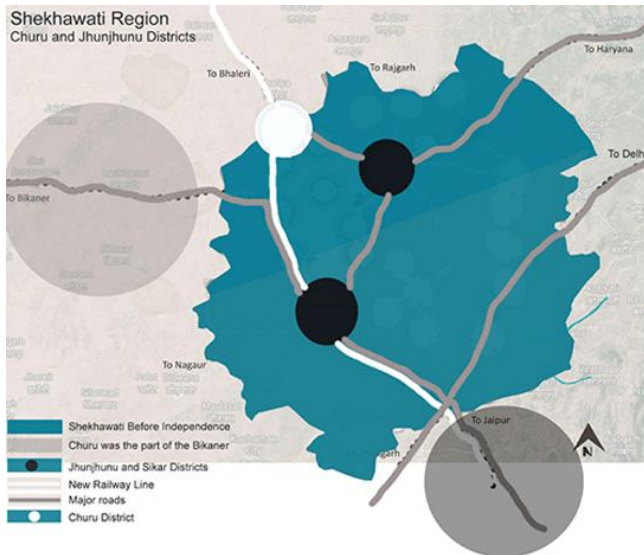


Figure 4: Political boundaries and development before independence and after

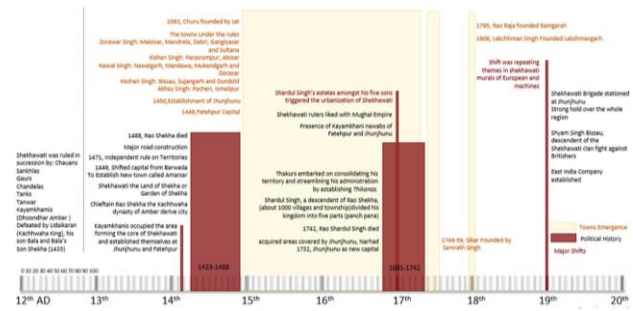


Figure 5: Political Evolution and Town Emergence

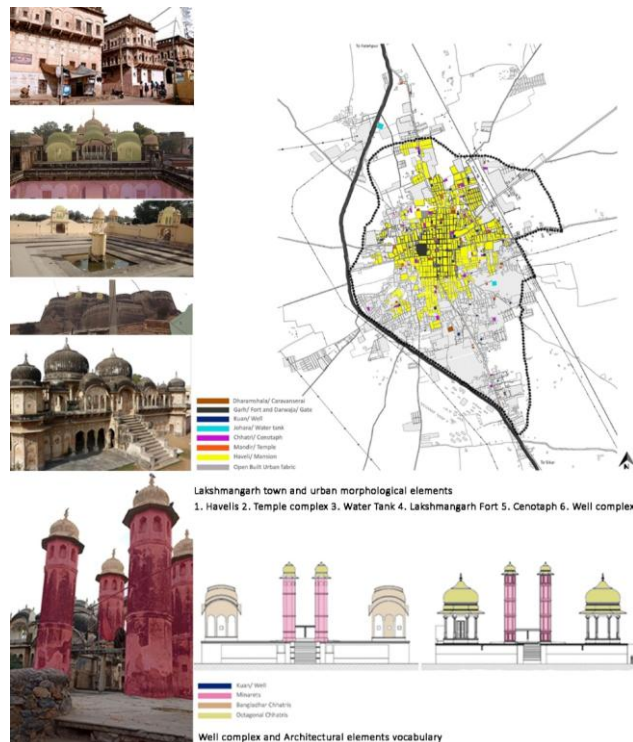


Figure 6: Interpreted Lakshmangarh town with urban elements based on primary survey to build the narrative

Architecture and Town Planning Adaptation: The multiplicity of Mughal and Rajput architecture elements in the Shekhawati style was influenced by the early development of the Rajput's, Shekhawat's, Merchant's, and Mughals' globally known town planning in Shekhawati. Towns were often planned with Grid- Iron patterns and an organic form of development (Kulbhushan Jain, 2000). The rectangular 90-degree angle planning inspired by the Jaipur plan, specifically Lakshmangarh town-planning is adapted with the same street pattern and space division concepts (Jain S. , 2005). The change and transformations through political and social-cultural developments happened over a period of time. The architecture developed climate-responsive, orientation, and reference-based with visuals. The representation of murals art technique was developed by mercantile communities (Patel, 2013). Architectural elements of Rajput's style are admired with Jharokha's, projections, brackets, paintings, trefoil arch, and tribari are prominently seen in Havelis (private residence). Urban elements resemble both Mughal and Rajput styles adapted in the Water tank (public), Well complex (public & private), Cenotaphs (public & private), Caravanserai (public), Temples (public and private), and Fortifications (public and private). The presence of Minarets and Chhatri, Bangladhari pavilion, and octagonal chhatris are crowded on every possible edge, street, and chawk along the town's roads. These urban elements acted as the central path and landmark, sometimes functioning as an edge, node, and district to express distinguished language with each other. Later, paintings were added everywhere on surfaces assuming a mental sense of walking in a Babylonian city full of natural gardens. Such urban contributions of architecture, planning, and art brought a unique character to the region.

Merchants and their Role: The Marwari merchants are businessmen, agents, and money lenders. They had developed a diversified network and mixed culture by traveling across the world in medieval times (Tanket, July 2016). Merchants' community by traveling borrowed visuals as an idea of picturing the home. Architecture, planning, & urban design features developed with distributed urban elements like the Fort, Dharamshala, Haveli, Chhatri, Water tanks, and Wells constructed in almost every possible corner of the towns. Paintings on surfaces of these built structures, especially seen in the havelis surfaces as a unique pattern to this region. Industrialization allowed the spread of mass trading across India. The migration of merchants across the regional boundaries achieved remarkable progress in trade and other commercial activities. The trading of gems, jewelry, silver, gold, jute, hessian, grains, and along with the import-export system has started in bulk (Tanket, July 2016). After independence, trading and traveling has been introduced outside India. Merchants who later, hold their business in the major cities, started building

wealth and power in the towns. Their good relationship was established to empower their business in every possible direction of the world. The colonization and mass migration to metropolitan cities, majorly in Kolkata, Mumbai, and Chennai, to raise their business in the working places and establish their identity as a second home. As the result, their wealth and prosperity are seen by making unique built elements for their patrons and family. The making of mural art with a cultural reflection, this whole process has become an expression of cultural exchange identity. The Mercantile community brought town planning, architecture, and public infrastructure facilities to the region as their prime concern for development. The urban landscape was developed by constructing temples, water tanks, wells, caravanserai, and cenotaphs. The havelis were residential personal spaces as their primary home that leads to their status and wealth. Such development possesses symbolic importance to these historic towns by merchant communities. This multiplicity is embedded in the knowledge of painted visuals, particularly in this region.

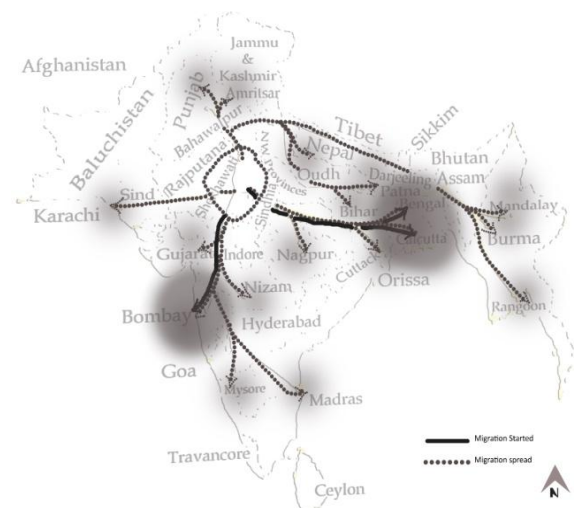
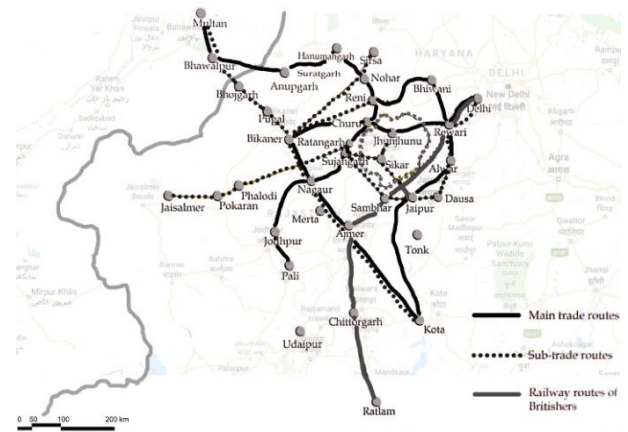


Figure 7: Base map _ Painted town of Shekhawati by Ilay Cooper and The Marwari Heritage by D. K. Tanket, Trade and Migration routes within and outside boundaries

Notion of Homeland: However, the belief of "Hometown", the concept of establishing native

towns, and the notion of going back home come here with migration across the world. These visual images are the transformation of such an urbanscape, specific to Shekhawati towns. The famous communities like Goenkas, Birla's, Dalmia, Jhunjhunwala, Kedia, Khaitan, Poddar, Ruias, and others traced their mixed cultural values of expression famous for painted mansions, this unique community-based culture developed with the notion of homeland, culture, and tradition as living altogether (Mehta, 2013). The richly painted murals in the form of Fresco art are extraordinary in visuals. Distinct subjects for such visuals borrowed by merchant class from all over the world by trading and traveling. These images (mural paintings) represent religious folk art and ragmala (mythology), personages (kings, foreigners, etc.) historical events, day-to-day living, maps, and places, and decorative motifs. These uncommon visual paintings are mostly developed and framed with the havelis surfaces. Selected frames developed by individual artists' expression and imagination to the visual panel formation. These migrated artisans who develop image painting collages represent different schools of thought. Such mixed and crowded images are constructed as trophies/ medals to the back home notion. These surface paintings with an image and picture pasted in every possible corner of the built surface. The exterior wall of the Havelis, other elements like Courtyard, Chhajjas, Bracket, Verandah, and main entrance gate.



Figure 9: Cultural exchange, colour pigments and the painted pictures

An artistic expression: The reflection of the image of crowds is the very typical experience of these local and migrated artisans. The cultural mobility and commercial networks link the notion of the homeland by creating new paintings, particularly by these painters (Mehta, 2013). At the same time, they applied their hands to mural paintings in the Shekhawati and nearby areas. Such decoration as a new application to the urban visual morphology is very dominantly seen in the region. These paintings were inherited in the region as hybrid subjects of mural painting. The regional mural art is practiced and applied in Rajasthan and the Shekhawati school of thought. The set of image groups in one frame with various pictures like Vaishnava Avatar of Krishna, Rama, folk heroes, troops, and everyday environment. These visuals were established and classified based on the selection of pigments, with Maroon (local regional color), Red, and blue (France & European countries), Later, dark blue and multi-colored pigment combinations were constructed by Kolkata, Jammu, and Delhi route to the region (Prince, 2003). The technical process of unique visuals is constructed with fine work inside buildings surfaces and rectangular design frames with local fresco techniques outside surfaces. These frescos had visual stories of painted local gods as their traditional hero's, Vishnu avatars in different forms. Another famous regional identity is the folk hero's imagined by the artists, Laila- Majnu and Dholamaru. Later, mural paintings of a train, cars, bicycles, aero planes, camels, and religious elephants (Cooper, Painted Town of Shekhawati, 2018). Decorative motifs in the frame present distinct cultural traditional styles of paintings.



Figure 8: painted walls, otlas, and courtyards as an urban interaction space

Redefining Indo- European art: The depiction of an art form as a miniature painting is explored with the fusion of different subjects with context. Reinventing the culture into Indian and European diverse cultures by simply changing the context or the images. This imagination brought in colonial times with different schools of thought. The painting of Krishna Lila

(religious folk) imagery was replaced in the base (backdrop) with the colonial-style based place or palatial home, it can also be the merchant haveli and maybe the European landscape. The scenery of Vrindavan, where Krishna steals the clothes of Gopi's. The place which is sacred along the river Yamuna is re-imagined with the replacement of visuals with European women around Krishna with a landscape, palace, and water body (Jain J. , 2011). Here, Lord Krishna stands out as a subject of universal identity to the world. The above argument about Frescos and visuals is expressed with a concept of re-contextualizing images, and subjects are replaced with another object context to give new meanings globally.



Figure 10: Painting beyond the Indian cultural context- Krishna Lila and Krishna in the middle of the Mausoleum

Image Source: Jyotindra Jain (Shekhawati collages, reconfiguring the divine and the political)



Figure 11: Vocal Visuals of frescos as a living object contributing to the mental sense observations

An Urbanity of painted murals: The above topics established the argument of picture image culture in the towns of Shekhawati. Of course, it is not simply collecting various visuals. It is also about the aesthetic presence of historical records and metropolitan culture developed over a period of time. The Homeland concept developed with a sense of visibility and relation with urbanity. Surfaces of havelis are surely like the visual awards constructed in the form of crowded images, pictures, & scenes. These paintings being visual will slowly take us to the idea of Visuality in the urbanscape (Mehta, 2013). From a larger perspective, the composition of open and built spaces, urban forms, scale, streets, and landmarks, largely define their very nature of urbanity. In this context, the urban image is viewed beyond the physical realities of observing paths, nodes, landmarks, and built urban fabrics. Here it is all about the perception of urban space experienced by paintings. Visuality is viewed beyond the physical realities of observing paths, nodes, landmarks, and urban fabric (Lynch, 1960). This sense of ideas will bring a unique way of perceiving urban space experience with visual paintings. Images are demandingly speaking their presence on painted walls, windows, arcades, chhajjas, and almost every small corner of the surfaces. Decoration of surfaces acts as an interface between the architecture and urban design features. Somehow, such crowded paintings produce the screen over an urban edge. The edge could be experienced as a linear break, view angle developed by Jharokha's and Verandah's. The image pictures create hidden boundaries between two continuous phases of long corridors. Further, Shekhawati towns act as urban districts for built elements. The paintings became part of urban space as it allows the observer to perceive through mental awareness.

Statement of outstanding cultural significance: Above all, the records stating the multicultural expression of these images is a result of a hybrid school of thought. Paintings with different schools of thought—local, regional, national and international appreciate the very hybrid Indian-European style of Shekhawati (Patel, 2013). The potential of architecture, planning, and frescos paintings as a whole can stand out to the world under various criteria to safeguard these significant towns. The Cultural exchange exhibits the interchange of human values from medieval to the current days.

Discussion and Interpretations: The conversations started with a caretaker in Mandawa, he began his word by saying we do live here for 100 years now, our forefathers used to serve this haveli, and we assume this is our property only. You can see this court and paintings where we live but the above rooms are locked. Resting in uncle place, Resident-Govt. Officer in Lakshmangarh, he was stating that; this place looks haunted at the night, people steal

goods and other things, and it's difficult to stay here all alone. These towns are not in proper care, original owners don't visit the place and now it is abandoned, simply left to the caretaker, captured, unauthorized addition, and alterations are taking place. Locals don't care about paintings; people simply ignore this part which is the most beautiful thing here. Another conversation took place the next day morning in Char Chawkki Haveli caretaker and family in Lakshmangarh, he stated guiding us that, this haveli is very big, the courts outside were for men and inside for women (as per the Indian parda system), terrace boundaries are made with zali pattern for women to see outside world. These paintings were made by merchants now they live outside India. Again, the resident and temple pujari in Nawalgarh, he was explaining paintings of English men, motifs, an elephant on the front verandah, Lord Krishna, and stories inside the court walls are beautifully done by merchants who originally made the temple near Chhatri, we performed pooja every day twice for Lord Krishna. One day in the afternoon, an American tourist at Fatehpur, near La- Prince Haveli, was sharing his experience with traditional Indian fresco paintings fascination with Krishna, Folk heroes, an elephant with Goddess Lakshmi in the front, etc.



Figure 12: Present state of the urban fabric in the region

In the present context, due to merchants' out-migration over generations now affecting the physical conditions of towns' urban form, resulting, havelis are largely locked-up, some left in the hand of caretakers, abandoned, and dilapidated. Urban development is practicing currently with unplanned constructions. In most cases, havelis functions are replaced with unthoughtful adaptive reuse and towns are facing vulnerable conditions due to a lack of infrastructure, civic services, and no maintenance is neglecting the urban social development. The wall surfaces and paintings are treated with random infill material for plastering. vegetation growth and salt formation due to moisture content are ruining the structural, aesthetic,

and artistic values. The painted mural surfaces were treated with cement or simply vanished with plastering or addition on the external walls. There is a serious need for safeguarding the structural stability of the urban elements as an integral part. The interpreted assessment of present conditions was analyzed with an approach of a primary survey of inventory making on the physical conditions of Lakshmangarh town with the concerns like past and present use, present significance, condition, and interpretations with suggested interventions in the future. The visual assessment recorded the fabric of the town as good, fair, poor, state of decay, and in danger of disappearance raising concerns for urban heritage policy, management, and maintenance.

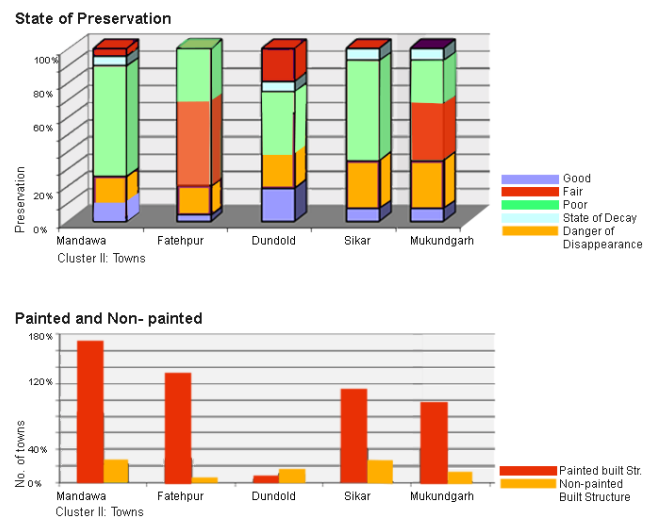


Figure 13: Interpreted Present condition of the towns

CONCLUSION

The above sub-topics with new ideas of experiencing the unique nature of murals in the region collectively speak about artistic and cultural integrity and being authentic. The entire paper document is stating the significance of frescos beyond the Indian cultural boundaries with the idea of urbanity. The contribution of the author tends to believe, that these dynamic urban elements and fresco can potentially be known to the world globally. The new approach can possibly justify the outstanding universal value with detailed documentation in the UNESCO (United Nations Scientific & Cultural Organization) blanket from national initiatives. Evaluation of the argument can again frame the detailed site-specific work and research (primary & secondary) could make the submission complete. Outstanding universal value assessment can fall under criteria 2nd of UNESCO World Heritage Site listing under the criteria of selection. The 2nd criteria is about the cultural exchange, interchange values, architecture, town-planning, art, and urban landscape developed over a period of time. The tentative listening process could be attempted with a serial nomination (tentative list submission format). The World Heritage nomination

can be attempted by the participatory approach with local initiatives, organizations, national body ASI (Archeological Survey of India), INTACH, Professionals, Students, and other NGO'S. The current practices of safeguarding cultural precincts in and around the world can also be significantly applied in this region for the future of world-known Indian Heritage.

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