Colonial rule affected the indigenous society, and hence its architecture, by introducing new forces and the resultant life-styles. While these forces were influencing the existing urban centers, many new centers too were established and developed. Most direct or indirect changes brought by the colonial powers focused on the central institution of the society; changes introduced in the administration were aided by the new education system, economy, customs, values etc. Calcutta emerged as a major colonial city of India though older cities like Dhaka or Delhi existed. Early buildings like the Calcutta Government House, Serampore College and Dhaka Old State Bank were executed in the neo-classical manner, which were exact facsimiles of buildings in Europe.

The style, borrowed from the European Renaissance appearing in the early churches of Dhaka, was subsequently applied to secular buildings. The revived classical Greco-Roman architecture adopted in medieval Europe with salient orders became popular in the late 18C and 19C. The architectural elements introduced were the semi-circular and segmental arches, the triangular pediment over semi-Corinthian, Ionic or composite columns, battlement in parapet, traceried window, molded plinth, rusticated walls and foliated decorative motifs. The columns supported crocket capitals, entablature with architrave; freeze and cornices with brackets were also used in these buildings. Trabeated roofs with tiles and rafter replaced the massive vaults; pure arches were also used. The hybrid Mughal and European architecture overlooked the rich brick architecture. Yet brick was extensively used in delicate patterns covered with stucco to give a look alike the original in stone. Lord Curzon, a great admirer of Mughal art and architecture, patronized this in the wake of 1905 partition.

No evidence of house form in Bengal can be traced back to the Mughals except some in Panamnagar. Buildings that only survived made of permanent materials in this region during and before the Mughals were mainly civic and religious buildings like the fort-palaces, mosques and katras. Some residential buildings during this period must have been made of brick, but possibly were not very significant in number and size. The overall indigenous residential architecture exemplified the rural form created by non-durable materials, climatic consideration, concept of domain, zoning and privacy, etc.; even the use of brick in vernacular architecture was restricted. Only exception could probably be that many urban houses were made of more permanent materials like brick and more motifs and elements were used. Also these could have been more densely built than in rural areas.

Introduction of various policies by the British affected the lives of the local people and hence their houses. Buildings in the new style were built and used by the foreigners and the local elite alike. It was popular to those who could afford it, and longed for power and status, identifying themselves as friends of the rulers. These houses, the bungalows and the mansions, demonstrated the social and economic position of the owners by their scale and grandeur, and soon became a recognized media to display the wealth and status of the nouveaux riches. By the end of the 19C, many Indians cautiously began to adopt European values and aesthetics; this had an early impact on the existing dwellings. The first to undergo transformation were the facades of the large local houses which started to borrow elements and styles from the colonial civic and administrative buildings. However, their plan reflected the long established traditional spatial organization.

With further urbanisation and introduction of rudimentary town planning, new type of houses on regular plots started to emerge, with the conception of boundary walls. In 1888, the first planned residential area in gridiron pattern was laid out in Wari for the emerging elite and middle-class, soon to be followed by in Gandaria. The small villas were mostly owned by the affluent and the emerging middle-class. They adopted the concurrent architectural style in their outlook, indigenous inward-looking spaces draped with alien elements and blended with the colonial extrovert typology. Spatial arrangement in these palatial buildings was cellular around internal courtyards for functional, planning and climatic reasons. Most of the houses had inner courtyard(s) and verandas in the front. These had spaces like entrance portico, living room or parlour furnished in European style intermingled with the local sense of privacy, particularly for the living habits, eating habits etc. The kitchen remains to be the last forte to be affected ...as the eating habits remain the last bastions of a true authentic culture.

Thus the in-built mental map was retained by the locals, which acted as an inherent force in guiding their building motives. The style that evolved in the later days was not only a facsimile, rather an exegesis of the different socio-cultural and political forces. Climate was a major influence forcing the imported style to incorporate some local elements, e.g. overhanging eaves, wooden lattice and veranda. This contributed to the rise of the new style with a strange mixture of elements; for example in the bungalows. However, this popular form was gradually transferred into grand and permanent buildings of various uses. Climate influenced also the internal arrangement of colonial buildings, mansion or any other type alike. When the building belonged to local elite, the traditional spatial layout was intrinsic, though it may ostensibly have borne the colonial style in its facade. I shall write about these next.

Northbrook Hall in Farashganj (on the river), popularly known as the Lalkuthi, surrounded by incompatible extensions done by the government. The civic hall, one of the best examples of Indo-Saracen architecture in Dhaka, is a listed building.

(Professor, North South University)