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Reading the Campus: Leslie-Jones House and Architectural Continuity at Aitchison College in Lahore

Leer el campus: La Leslie-Jones House y la continuidad arquitectónica en el Aitchison College de Lahore

Análise do campus: A Leslie-Jones House e a continuidade arquitetónica no Aitchison College em Lahore

Abstract | **Resumen** | **Resumo**

Through a study of Leslie-Jones House, one of the historic boarding houses at Aitchison College in Lahore, this essay examines the relationship between architecture, campus planning, and institutional identity. Referring to measured drawings, site observation, and historical research, it argues that the college's character emerges not just from individual buildings but from continuity in architectural language, campus landscape, and social spaces. It reflects on the role of traditional architecture in contemporary campus development and considers how future interventions might build upon Aitchison's inherited character while accommodating changing needs.

Mediante el estudio de la Leslie-Jones House, una de las residencias históricas del Aitchison College, en Lahore, este artículo estudia la relación entre la arquitectura, la planificación del campus y la identidad institucional. A partir de levantamientos arquitectónicos, observaciones realizadas in situ e investigación histórica, sostiene que el carácter del colegio no deriva únicamente de sus edificios, sino también de la continuidad de su lenguaje arquitectónico, la configuración del campus y sus espacios de convivencia. Se reflexiona sobre el papel de la arquitectura tradicional en el desarrollo contemporáneo del campus y sobre cómo las futuras intervenciones pueden apoyarse en el carácter heredado del Aitchison College y, al mismo tiempo, responder a nuevas necesidades.

Através de um estudo da Casa Leslie-Jones, uma das residências históricas do Aitchison College, em Lahore, este artigo analisa a relação entre a arquitetura, o planeamento do campus e a identidade institucional. Com base em levantamentos arquitetónicos, observação no local e investigação histórica, defende que o caráter da faculdade emerge não apenas dos edifícios individuais, mas da continuidade da linguagem arquitetónica, da paisagem do campus e dos espaços sociais. Reflete sobre o papel da arquitetura tradicional no desenvolvimento contemporâneo do campus e analisa como futuras intervenções poderão valorizar o caráter herdado do Aitchison, ao mesmo tempo que se adaptam às necessidades em constante mudança.

The character of an institution is rarely contained in a single building. It emerges through decades of construction, occupation, adaptation, and memory. Buildings are added, landscapes mature, traditions take root, and before long an array of structures becomes something more than the sum of its parts. This process is often so gradual that it passes unnoticed, yet over time it produces that most elusive of architectural qualities: a sense of place.

Aitchison College in Lahore is one such institution. Its character resides in the relations between the old house buildings and their settings, in the scale of its avenues, the rhythm of verandahs and facade features, and the generous spaces between buildings. Like musicians in an orchestra, each component plays a part and together they produce a recognizable harmony.

While preparing a measured drawing of Leslie-Jones House (Fig. 1), I found myself returning to a broader question: what is it that makes Aitchison feel like Aitchison? Is it the architecture of the houses themselves, their scale and materiality, or something less tangible that emerges from their arrangement in the campus-scape?

Reading the Campus

Measured drawing is often seen as a method of documentation, a record of structures "as found," yet it also says much about traditions and circumstances. To measure a building is to observe its proportions, its composition, and its relation to its surroundings, allowing one to infer the decisions that shaped it and the architectural culture from which it emerged.

While institutional buildings attract most attention, it is often domestic architecture, such as Leslie-Jones House, that says most about campus life. The old Aitchison house buildings were conceived as residences for study, recreation, and community, and remain the heart of collegiate life.

The boarding house is a prominent type in collegiate architecture. On studying a house's plan, one perceives patterns of habitation, social relationships, and former standards of comfort. And at a time when universities continue to expand and the demand for residential accommodation is pressing, these buildings offer lessons for today.

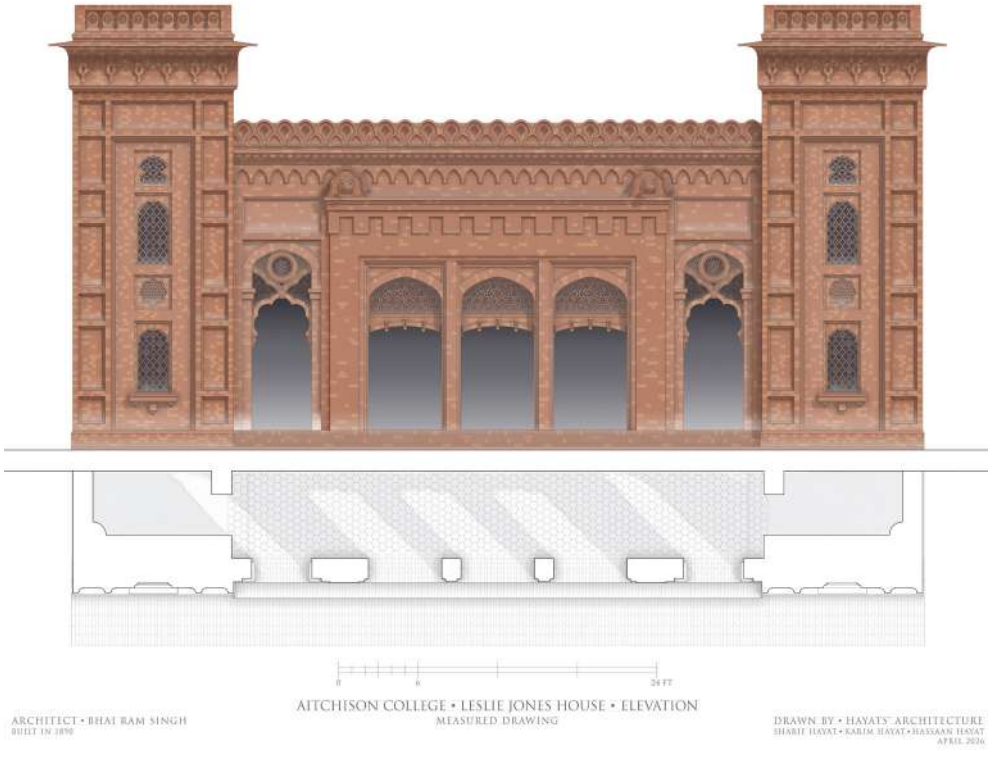


Figure 1. Measured drawing of Leslie-Jones House as part of a study of the architectural history of Aitchison College, 2026 (HARCH)



Figure 2. Forecourt of Leslie-Jones House, showing its U-shaped arrangement, 2026 (Sharif Hayat)

Constructed in the college's formative years, Leslie-Jones House is a piece of Lahori architectural heritage. The building is commonly attributed to Bhai Ram Singh, one of the most accomplished architects working in the Punjab at the turn of the twentieth century, and the bricks used in it are thought to have been supplied by Sir Ganga Ram. Together, these figures shaped much of the architectural landscape of colonial Lahore, and their influence endures.

The house is organized around a neatly composed central block flanked by wings, creating a forecourt that mediates between architecture and landscape. This arrangement has a long lineage. Variations of the forecourt plan appear in Parisian *hôtels particuliers*, country houses, and institutional buildings, where it establishes order and hierarchy. At Aitchison, the principle is adapted to a collegiate setting, producing an environment that is at once formal and convivial (Fig. 2).



Figure 3. Collaborative on-site measurement and sketching (Sharif Hayat)



Figure 4. Arrangement of courtyards on the campus (Sharif Hayat)

Measurement Process

Measurement revealed a design that is simple yet orderly. The rhythm of the facade, the spacing of columns, the depth of verandahs, the proportions of openings, and even the size of the bricks contribute to a coherent architectural composition. Moreover, drawing and measurement highlight features that can go unnoticed (Fig. 3).

There is discipline behind the facade's apparent informality, with strictly ordered bays, verandahs proportioned for ample shade, and openings in an elevation grid that is instantly recognizable. The small bricks, detailed latticework, and restrained ornamentation all speak of a period in which craftsmanship remained inseparable from architecture. These are not decorative additions to an otherwise complete building but elements of architectural language.

Figure 5. The former boxing ring and canteen (left), a social node connecting residential and academic life, 2019, and the site following the construction of Shirazi House (right)





Many of these characteristics belong to the Indo-Saracenic tradition that flourished in British India in the late nineteenth century. In the hands of architects such as Bhai Ram Singh, local building traditions, craft practices, climatic considerations, and principles of architectural composition were ably combined. Without rejecting classical order or replicating indigenous precedent, the style was a synthesis capable of responding to the realities of the subcontinent while retaining architectural discipline.

Character of the Campus

Our measured study of Leslie-Jones House could not overlook that the boarding house precinct was never conceived as a series of isolated structures. Arranged along a campus thoroughfare, the houses form a sequence connected by avenues, courtyards, playing fields, and shared spaces (Fig. 4). The road itself is a social artery, linking boarding houses with classrooms, dining halls, and informal gathering places.

Equally important are the spaces between buildings. These were intended not as plots awaiting development or ornamental landscapes but as part of campus life, providing opportunities for interaction and in many respects as significant as the buildings themselves.



Figure 6. Vanderbilt University Residential College Master Plan, 2003–2024. New collegiate buildings designed as continuations of the Vanderbilt Gothic tradition while accommodating contemporary requirements (Steve Hall and David M. Schwarz Architects)

A memorable example is the former boxing ring situated between Leslie-Jones House and Godley House by the academic blocks (Fig. 5). Originally a venue for athletics and competition, the structure was later adapted as a canteen. Architecturally, it lacked interest. Its significance lay in its position and use. At the intersection of residential and academic life, it became a natural point of convergence as students passed through it, gathered there between lessons or after sports, and hung out in it. Over time it acquired a social value that cannot be designed, emerging through patterns of use.

Thus future development on historic campuses should add buildings that continue a tradition. The finest collegiate environments have grown up through continuity rather than rupture, as each generation inherits an architectural language, adapts it to contemporary needs, and in turn passes it on. The result is a campus that evolves over time with a coherent identity (Fig. 6).

This principle should apply in places such as Aitchison College, where architectural character has accumulated over more than a century. The task of our generation is not to invent a new language for the campus but to understand the existing one and contribute to it with conviction. The best additions to a historic institution are often those that appear as new chapters of an existing story.

Building Upon What Exists

Aitchison College and its campus will continue to evolve as new boarding houses are required and new academic facilities needed, and future generations leave their mark. The question is how.

Good examples can be found in collegiate developments of recent decades, where universities under pressure to expand have demonstrated that architectural continuity and institutional growth need not be at variance. At Yale, Vanderbilt, Notre Dame, and elsewhere, architects have shown that contemporary educational requirements need not be met at the expense of architectural continuity (Fig. 7). In collegiate work by architects such as Robert A. M. Stern, residential colleges, academic buildings, and campus extensions have been unmistakably contemporary in construction, infrastructure, and performance, while remaining rooted in architectural context, continuing an existing conversation.

This is the lesson of traditional architecture. It is not a style but a language, developed through use, inheritance, and adaptation. Each generation receives a vocabulary from those who came before and adds something of its own before passing it on. The resulting environment acquires a continuity that cannot be manufactured as new.

The great collegiate campuses were thus created not by singular acts of inspiration but gradually by successive architects working within a tradition. One often struggles to determine where one architect's work ends and another's begins, even with buildings separated by decades or centuries.



Figure 7. Yale Residential Colleges, Pauli Murray College & Benjamin Franklin College, 2017. These facilities expand Yale's undergraduate capacity by 15% and are the first new residential colleges built on campus since 1962 (Robert A.M. Stern Architects)

Robert A.M. Stern, former dean of the Yale School of Architecture, agrees that urban coherence relies on continuity rather than disruption:

> *I do believe that architecture is a conversation across time. While every young architect and every young generation of architects thinks they have to break the mold, you cannot really create coherent cities, or campuses for that matter like Yale, if every building is the representative of its own unique moment and its own self-invented set of principles and language* (Chaban 2007).

The significance of these projects lies in their stylistic unity and their acceptance of architectural continuity as a cultural responsibility. Their success demonstrates that continuity provides the precedent through which meaningful and enduring additions can be made.

Measured against this standard, recent development at Aitchison raises questions regarding architectural continuity and campus planning. Several additions, though serviceable, are difficult to reconcile with the language and logic that shaped this precinct. Their scale, massing, materiality, and relation to surrounding buildings often suggest an architecture conceived in isolation rather than as part of a larger composition. The result is visual discontinuity and a weakening of the spatial relationships that give the campus its coherence and identity (Fig. 8).

The issue is not simply one of design. More significant are the planning decisions that precede these interventions. The removal of long-established social spaces, leaving residual landscapes with little discernible purpose, can weaken the connections between residential, academic, and social life. In the case of Shirazi House, the precedence given to the new building led to the removal of the former boxing ring and canteen, erstwhile social venues, replacing a center of student life with a largely lifeless forecourt expanse. The former structure, whatever its architectural limitations, possessed something that cannot easily be replaced: its role as a haunt of generations of students. Its significance emerged through use and tradition. Such places are cultural infrastructure no less than campus buildings, with value residing not in architectural distinction but in the life they sustain. Collegiate life depends upon a network of formal and informal spaces, and historic campuses derive much of their character from these patterns of use, where architecture provides a setting and generations of users give it meaning.

The challenge for future development is therefore not merely architectural but institutional. Aitchison boasts a remarkable inheritance: a coherent campus, a recognizable architectural identity, and a tradition of collegiate planning. Our generation's task is to develop that inheritance with ongoing care and conviction (Fig. 9).



Figure 8. Shirazi House, Aitchison College. A recent addition to the house precinct, illustrating the challenges of introducing new development in a historically coherent campus, 2026 (Sharif Hayat)



Figure 9. Architectural details on the historic campus: the college gurdwara and ribbed brickwork with a cornice, 2026 (Sharif Hayat)

Felicitous additions to Aitchison will not be those that seek distinction through novelty or that reinvent the campus but those that allow for the language already present, draw upon precedent, reinforce urban relationships, and extend existing character. Like the finest collegiate developments of recent decades, they will feel less like interventions than accretions, not imported but inevitable, not interruptions but continuations of a story.

We are only trustees for those that come after us (Morris 1889).

Figure 10. Speculative infill proposal exploring how future development in the house precinct might reaffirm the existing architectural language, urban relationships, and social life, 2026 (HARCH)





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Biography | Biografía | Biografia

Karim Hayat

Karim Hayat is an architectural designer and co-founder of HARCH|Hayats' Architecture, a Lahore-based practice with a classical focus. He received his Bachelor of Architecture from the National College of Arts, Lahore, attended by several generations of his family. He comes from a lineage of furniture makers, craftsmen, and interior designers whose work has engaged with the traditions of regional craft and European classical art. His professional and research interests center on classical architecture and the continuity of architectural knowledge in contemporary practice. His recent research has examined the architectural heritage of Lahore, including Lawrence Gardens and Donald Town. Alongside practice, he pursues interests in traditional woodworking and historical manufacturing.