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Speaking Facades of Puducherry: Hybrid French–Tamil Architecture and the Spreadability of Heritage on Social Media

¹ Alessio Patalocco, ² Giacomo Nencioni

¹ Department of Architecture VSPARC, Faculty of Architecture, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

² Department of Italian Language, Literature, and Arts Worldwide, University for Foreigners of Perugia, Perugia, Italy

¹ E-mail: alessio.patalocco@vit.ac.in, ² E-mail: giacomo.nencioni@unistrapg.it

¹ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7414-9083>, ² ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8115-919X>

Abstract

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The architectural language of the facades of Puducherry (Tamil Nadu, India) remains twofold: French and Tamil. This dichotomy appears congenial to the hyper-consumerist condition described by Lipovetsky (2005), in which codes and references continually shift while being nourished by comparison. Such comparison characterises the speaking facades of the French Town as “peculiar”, suggesting a distancing from the geographical reality in which tourists find themselves. These hybridisations are enriched by colour and by the presence of murals appreciated by visitors, which invite photography and video and thus engage social media. This paper aims to reconstruct the “spreadability” of this content—a notion more nuanced than the generic idea of “virality”—by tracing it primarily in the dialogue between physical reality and the shifting meanings of imagery, identity and perception. Methodologically, the study combines an on-site chromatic survey of the White Town with a qualitative analysis of the platform’s aesthetic and algorithmic logic. The originality of the contribution lies in connecting a measurable architectural variable (the chromatic palette and its mode of application) with the media dynamics of heritage circulation, showing how the layered intertextual references of social networks redefine the idea of heritage and of “objects of memory”. The findings indicate that Puducherry is progressively re-coded as an aesthetic destination governed by globalised visual codes rather than by its Franco-Tamil specificity, and they clarify the stakes of this re-coding for heritage studies and for the management of historic urban environments.

Key words: Social Media; Heritage; Tourism; Identity; Murals.

1. Introduction

Puducherry is the capital of the Union Territory of Puducherry, in India, with a population of approximately 250,000 inhabitants and a cultural dichotomy typical of other former colonies. The city came into contact with Danish and Portuguese traders as early as the first half of the sixteenth century, and the French East India Company began transforming this fishing village into a port city in the seventeenth century. For a brief period it became a Dutch colony, from 1693 to 1699: the new colonisers developed a general grid plan in which large rectangular blocks were separated by straight, orthogonal streets. From the mid-eighteenth century the city was contested between the English and the French until 1816, when France definitively regained control of the colony. Puducherry and its territories became Indian territory on 1 November 1954, seven years after India’s independence, marking the end of French colonialism.

This sedimented history has produced an urban palimpsest in which two architectural languages coexist along a single waterfront. The present study takes this coexistence as its point of departure and asks a twofold question: first, how colour operates on the facades of the White Town—both which colours are used and how they are applied to surfaces; and second, how these facades, once photographed and shared, acquire a second life on social media that may diverge from their historical and cultural referents. The notion that guides the second part of the analysis is “spreadability”, understood here not as raw virality but as the capacity of cultural content to circulate while being continuously re-interpreted by the publics that share it. The contribution of the paper, in relation to the scope of this journal and to the existing literature on architecture and social media, lies in joining a concrete architectural analysis of the built fabric to a media-theoretical reading of its circulation, so that the transformation of heritage can be observed at the precise point where the physical surface meets the digital image.

The study is situated within a rapidly growing body of research on the relationship between architecture and visual social media. A first strand documents how platforms reshape the performance and reception of buildings: Alaily-Mattar and colleagues (2025) show, through a longitudinal analysis of hundreds of thousands of posts, that the online attention attracted by iconic architecture is volatile and only loosely correlated with architectural function, while Wagiri and

colleagues (2024) describe how Instagram’s features mediate the embodied, temporal experience of space. A second strand concerns the aesthetics that the medium rewards: Thömmes and Hübner (2018) demonstrate that simple, quantifiable properties of an image predict the “likes” it receives, and Thampanichwat and colleagues (2023) identify a recurrent atmospheric vocabulary favoured by users. A third strand reads the platform as an educational and discursive space, from Valentino’s (2023) reflection on Instagrammable drawing to Redyantanu’s (2025) account of informal architectural learning. What this literature rarely does, however, is anchor the media analysis in a concrete, measurable architectural variable of the built fabric itself. The present paper addresses that gap by taking the chromatic palette of a historic town—its hues and, crucially, its mode of application—as the hinge between the physical surface and its digital circulation.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 reconstructs the physical face of Puducherry through a chromatic survey of the White Town and a comparison with the Tamil vernacular. Section 3 analyses the Instagram face of the city, addressing the role of the algorithm, the chromatic palette as a shared visual language, and the phenomenon of architectural “waves”. Section 4 discusses the political economy of digital attention and its consequences for the phenomenology of urban experience. Section 5 draws the findings together, returns to the initial research question, and states the contribution of the study to the literature.

2. The Physical Face of Puducherry

2.1 Materials and Method: Colour Analysis and Site Investigation

This section presents an analysis of the colour of the facades of Puducherry in the White Town according to two questions: which colour is used on the facades, and how that colour is applied. To address these questions, the routes shown in the figure below were examined during a site inspection conducted on 15, 16 and 17 August 2025. These streets are frequently used by tourists, who exploit the particular aesthetics of the facades to capture images on their mobile phones, whether as souvenirs or to share on their Instagram profiles.

The methodological framework combines three coherent procedures. First, an on-site photographic survey was carried out: photographs were taken at intervals of approximately thirty metres along each surveyed street in order to obtain the most homogeneous mapping possible, and these 2025 images were integrated with imagery available from Google (2023) to fill gaps and verify consistency over time. Second, colour sampling was performed: each representative colour was captured from the photographs using the eyedropper tool in Adobe Photoshop, applied to well-lit but not over-exposed portions of the images, and corrected on site where necessary. Only the colour applied as “wall paint” was recorded; unpainted materials such as brick, wood, stone and railings were excluded, while the recurrent presence of white was always noted. Third, a comparative analysis set the resulting palette against the chromatic and constructive habits of the recent Tamil vernacular, in order to distinguish what belongs to the “French” inheritance from what belongs to the local building culture. Figure 7 summarises this sequence of phases as a single methodological framework.

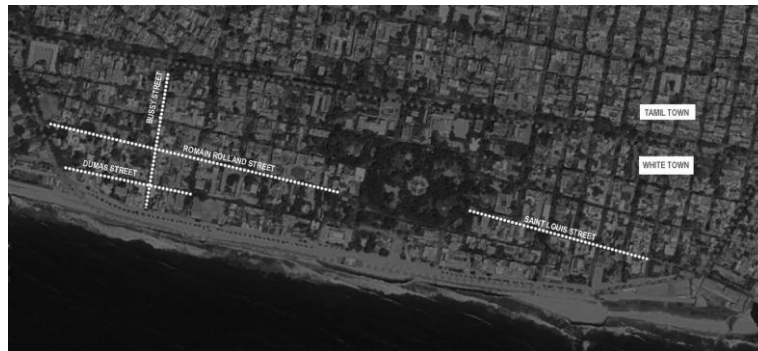


Figure 2. Puducherry: streets mainly examined during the site inspection of 15–17 August 2025.

Only the colour of the facades that directly overlook these streets was analysed, so that the sample reflects the experience of a pedestrian moving through the White Town rather than an abstract inventory of the building stock.

2.2 Which Colour

The colours applied to the main facades of these streets can be summarised in the chromatic diagram below, which records, synthetically, only the colour used as wall paint and always accounts for the presence of white. The diagram organises the sampled hues street by street, allowing the dominant tones and their recurrence to be read at a glance.

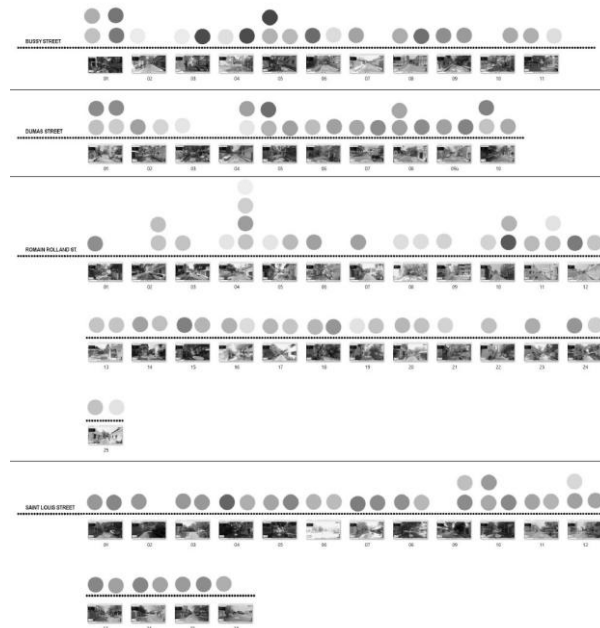


Figure 3. The most frequently used colours of the surveyed streets.

Read together, the samples show a palette that is broadly comparable to the chromatic range found in France—and, more generally, in Europe, with the differences proper to each country—while remaining distinct in its saturation and in the frequency of certain warm tones. The interest of the survey, however, lies less in the inventory of hues than in the way those hues are laid onto the architecture, which is the object of the following subsection.

2.3 How Colour Is Applied To Principal Facades

A second and more revealing point concerns the way these colours are applied to the surfaces of the buildings. A clear mode of application emerges, one that is very distant from the European tradition and much closer to the recent Tamil vernacular. In the vernacular samples documented at Mothakkal, Vellore and Tirumalpur in 2025, colour is applied according to a logic of “painted surfaces” rather than of “volumes”: the hue follows the plane of the wall and its openings rather than expressing the plasticity of the architectural mass. The tones recorded in these settlements also differ markedly from those of the White Town of Puducherry, which remain closer to a “French” and broadly European register.



Figure 4. Vernacular architecture in Mothakkal, Vellore and Tirumalpur (2025).

The comparison clarifies the hybrid character of the White Town. While the palette of Puducherry is similar to the French one, the way colour is applied to the surfaces is entirely different and much closer to the vernacular architecture of Tamil Nadu, where colour reads as an applied skin. This becomes especially evident in the treatment of coloured edges and borders, where the painted line frames the opening rather than modelling a moulding.



Figure 5. Puducherry: details of coloured edges (site inspection, 2025).

2.4 A Double Identity In Three Styles

When the French regained Puducherry in 1699, the Dutch project was revived and extended northward, and the Tamil portion of the city was further divided into three sectors: Hindu, Muslim and Christian. Each street in the Boulevard town was occupied by different communities of workers. The Upper River, which flowed into the stagnant waters of the Bay of Bengal, was canalised along the northern end of the Boulevard: the Grand Canal, crossing the city from south to north, still physically separates the Tamil town from the French town today, functioning as a symbolic boundary between the “Black” and the “White” cities.

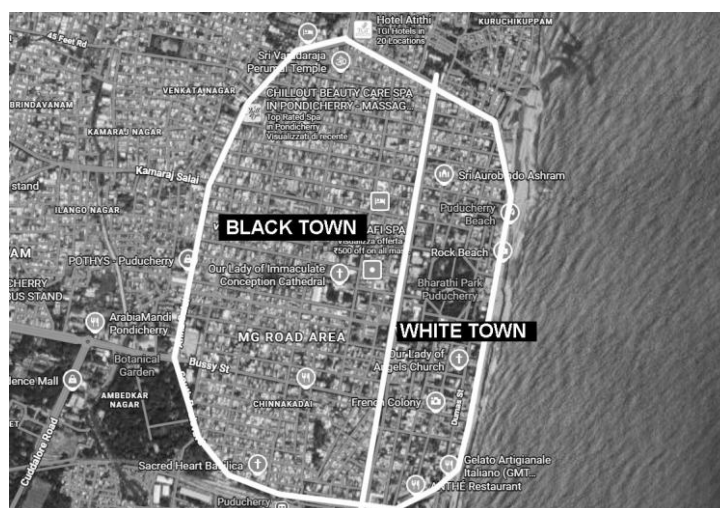


Figure 1. Plan of the city: the “Black” and the “White” towns.

The Boulevard town has inherited a significant cultural heritage from these various communities, and its buildings can today be classified into three styles according to their architectural language: French, Tamil and a mixed French–Tamil style (Velmurugan, 2020). The third, Franco-Tamil style consists of a blend practised by wealthy local entrepreneurs and high-ranking officials working for the French administration. Their houses were built with elements recalling French tradition—so as to display their social rank—while also incorporating vernacular Tamil features, the ground floor frequently presenting the Thalvaram, the Thinnai and the Muttram. Reworked through a “colonial” architectural language, these elements convey the very particular blend that developed in this part of the world. Many of the French colonial elements, although summarised, can be traced back to the treatises of Jacques-François Blondel (Blondel, 1771), widely used in the period by French architects, especially in the colonies. It is precisely these imported elements of architectural language that give Puducherry a unique character, at once estranging and captivating for the contemporary tourist.

2.5 The Scenography of the French Town

These surfaces suggest a temporary distancing from the geographical reality in which tourists find themselves; they allow visitors to “travel” to Europe in a single five-minute leap, offering a “real” moment of that architecture that lets the user experience at least two different places at once (Leoni, 2001). Beyond this aspect, two further factors contribute to the popularity of the White Town: the presence of mural paintings appreciated by tourists, and the favourable ratio between street width and building height that allows for good photography and video. In the specific case of Puducherry, these painted surfaces work like a scenography, offered, in some cases, to the camera of the Instagrammer who visits this colourful, fantastic place.



Figure 6. Mural scenography: painted borders create the illusion of a fantastic environment far from the real location.

2.6 The Physical Face as a Hybrid Surface

Read across its three styles, its applied colour and its scenographic murals, the physical face of Puducherry can be characterised as a hybrid surface rather than as a stable architectural object. The French inheritance supplies a vocabulary of openings, mouldings and proportions; the Tamil vernacular supplies a technique of colour that treats the wall as a plane to be painted; and the murals add a further, deliberately pictorial layer that addresses the passer-by as a viewer. These three registers do not fuse into a single coherent language; they remain legible as distinct contributions, and it is precisely this legibility that makes the White Town so productive as photographic material. The visitor who frames a facade is, in effect, framing a palimpsest in which colonial form, vernacular technique and contemporary pictorial gesture are simultaneously present. This observation matters for the second half of the analysis, because it is this layered surface—not an authentic, singular original—that the platform subsequently selects, filters and circulates. The hybridity documented on site is, in other words, the raw material on which the digital re-coding described below operates.

3. The Instagram Face of Puducherry

3.1 The Algorithm as Urban Curator

The representation of Puducherry on social media, and on Instagram in particular, illustrates clearly how the dynamics of mediatisation transform not only the perception of cities but also their cultural and architectural identity. As Lev Manovich observes in *The Language of New Media*, the logic of new media does not merely represent reality but reconfigures it according to specific aesthetic parameters (Manovich, 2001). In the case of Puducherry, this reconfiguration manifests itself through a progressive disconnection from the original architectural referents—both Indian and French—in favour of a new “Instagrammable” aesthetic that responds primarily to the mechanisms of virality and appeal proper to social platforms.

Instagram is not simply a neutral showcase for architectural representation: it is an algorithmic system that privileges content capable of generating engagement, and in doing so it modifies the public perception of urban space (Wagiri et al., 2024). In the specific case of Puducherry, the platform’s algorithm has progressively selected and amplified those images that best satisfy the social network’s aesthetic parameters, regardless of their authenticity or cultural representativeness. The research by Alaily-Mattar and colleagues (2025) demonstrates empirically that online attention towards iconic buildings follows specific patterns, in which the buildings posted mainly for their architecture tend to gain an instant online popularity that subsequently fades over time (Alaily-Mattar et al., 2025). A comparable phenomenon occurs with Puducherry, where the initial fascination with colonial architecture has rapidly turned into a search for visually appealing backdrops for social content, progressively losing its connection to the original historical and cultural meanings.

The curatorial role of the algorithm is not exercised in a single act but through a feedback loop. Images that perform well are shown to more users, who in turn produce similar images in order to perform well in their turn; over time the set of “postable” views of the city narrows to a small repertoire of angles, crops and colour treatments. The consequence is a quiet editorial power exercised without any editor: the platform does not forbid the photographing of less spectacular fabric, but it makes such images invisible, and invisibility on a platform whose currency is attention is functionally equivalent to exclusion. Puducherry’s heritage is thereby re-ordered according to a hierarchy that owes nothing to historical or architectural value and everything to predicted engagement. This is the sense in which the algorithm acts as an urban curator: it assembles, from the totality of the city, the reduced and repeatable Puducherry that circulates.

3.2 The Chromatic Palette as a Universal Language

The success of Puducherry on Instagram is closely linked to its capacity to interpret the chromatic palettes that perform best on social media. As the survey in Section 2 showed, the colours used on the city’s facades follow the logic of contemporary Tamil aesthetics more than that of historical French practice, producing chromatic combinations that are particularly photogenic in the digital context. Henry Jenkins, in his well-known concept of participatory culture, emphasises how digital media transform consumers into active “prosumers” in the creation of meaning (Jenkins, 2006). In the case of Puducherry, Instagram users do not merely photograph existing architecture; they select, filter and modify images to adapt them to the aesthetic codes of the platform. This process produces what Manovich defines as a metamedium: a medium that contains other media and recombines them according to its own logic (Manovich, 2013). Chromatic choice thus becomes a universal language that transcends local cultural specificities. The yellows, pinks and blues that dominate Puducherry’s facades in Instagram images no longer narrate the Franco-Tamil colonial story; they speak the global language of social aesthetics, characterised by high saturation, elevated contrast and immediate appeal

(Thömmes & Hübner, 2018). The case of Puducherry illustrates how geographical belonging hybridises with aesthetic and cultural factors that often transcend the local context. As danah boyd notes in her analysis of networked publics, social media create spaces in which different contexts overlap and become confused (boyd, 2011). This contextual collapse causes Puducherry to be perceived no longer primarily as a Franco-Tamil city but as an aesthetic destination that answers to international visual codes.

3.3 The Phenomenon of Architectural “Waves”

A particularly interesting aspect concerns the way certain architectures become protagonists of social “waves”—viral trends that determine their meaning independently of the original design intentions. The phenomenon of post-Soviet brutalist architecture, frequently photographed and shared on Instagram not for its intrinsic architectural value but for its capacity to evoke “unsettling” or “sinister” atmospheres, is a paradigmatic example of this dynamic (Nastasi & Ponzini, 2018). In the case of Puducherry, French colonial architecture is re-interpreted through the filter of “cottage-core” and “European summer” waves, aesthetic trends that privilege nostalgic references to a romanticised Europe. As Valentino (2023) observes in his study of Instagrammable architectural drawing, social media—despite the risks bound up with the superficiality and speed of their use—have favoured the emergence of new sharing networks that thicken around such subjects (Valentino, 2023).

This process of re-interpretation transforms Puducherry into what may be defined as an Instagrammable non-place: a space that acquires meaning not from its geographical and cultural specificity but from its capacity to satisfy pre-established global aesthetic expectations. The wave does not describe the city; it consumes it, attaching to its surfaces a set of associations generated elsewhere and returning them to the visitor as the expected content of the visit. The mechanism is sustained by the figure of the influencer, whose imaginaries circulate as a global phenomenon negotiated between followers, the platform environment and commercial expectation (Richter & Ye, 2024), and it is reinforced by the way social media invert the hermeneutic circle of representation, so that photographs taken on site aim above all to reproduce an image already in circulation (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). Comparable dynamics in other historic settlements, where the protection of vulnerable users and of everyday urban life competes with the pressures of touristic visibility, have been documented in studies of traditional Tamil urban fabric (Devi & Jagadisan, 2022).

4 The Political Economy of Digital Attention

The transformation of Puducherry into an Instagram-friendly destination is not a neutral phenomenon; it reflects broader dynamics of the political economy of digital attention. As Iglesias-Sánchez and colleagues (2020) emphasise, Instagram functions as a co-creation space for the building of a tourist destination’s image, directly influencing tourist flows and, in consequence, the local economy (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). This process produces what may be termed an “aesthetic colonialism”: a form of cultural domination exercised through the imposition of globalised visual codes that marginalise local specificities. Paradoxically, while Puducherry gained independence from French political colonialism in 1954, it now finds itself subject to a new, digital colonialism that redefines its identity according to an external logic.

The Instagrammable architecture of Puducherry is further characterised by a strong performative component. As Judith Butler observes in her theory of performativity, identity is not a pre-existing datum but constitutes itself through repeated performances (Butler, 1990). In an analogous way, Puducherry’s architectural identity on Instagram constitutes itself through the repetition of specific visual performances: standardised poses in front of coloured facades, recurring camera angles, filters that emphasise certain hues at the expense of others. This performativity turns architecture from a lived space into a ready-to-use scenography, as the analysis of the mural paintings has already suggested. The city thereby becomes a permanent film set, optimised for the production of social content rather than for the daily life of its inhabitants.

4.1 Global Aesthetic Homogenisation

The case of Puducherry belongs to a broader tendency towards global aesthetic homogenisation facilitated by social media. As Manovich (2017) notes, Instagram aesthetics are characterised by recurring parameters—high saturation, marked contrast, simple geometries—that tend to standardise visual representation regardless of geographical and cultural context. This homogenisation produces what may be called an Instagram International Style: a global architectural language, optimised for social sharing, that tends to erase local specificities. In this sense Puducherry becomes interchangeable with Burano, with the colourful neighbourhoods of Cartagena, or with the houses of Notting Hill, all reduced to the same common denominator of Instagrammable aesthetics.

The research by Thampanichwat and colleagues (2023) on the influence of architectural atmosphere through Instagram confirms this tendency, identifying a set of recurrent atmospheric characteristics—calm space, a clear focal object, concrete materials, defined hues, strong light and shadow, and the presence of vegetation—that are systematically favoured by users (Thampanichwat et al., 2023). These standardised aesthetic parameters are applied indiscriminately to diverse geographical and cultural contexts, contributing to the global homogenisation of architectural aesthetics and reinforcing the very codes that the algorithm rewards.

It would be a mistake, however, to read this homogenisation as a simple loss. The same circulation that flattens local specificity also extends the reach of Puducherry far beyond the constituency that could once travel to see it, and it draws new publics into a relationship—however mediated—with colonial and vernacular architecture. The critical point is therefore not that the city becomes visible, but that the terms of its visibility are set elsewhere: the global palette that makes Puducherry legible to a distant audience is the same palette that makes it interchangeable with other colourful

destinations. As Lindner and Meissner (2019) argue, the urban imaginary is increasingly produced through such circulating images rather than through direct experience, and the photographic iconisation of cities actively sways their subsequent transformation (Nastasi & Ponzini, 2018). Recognising this double movement, of extended reach and narrowed specificity, is essential if heritage policy is to engage the digital regime rather than merely deplore it, all the more so where, as Falcinelli (2020) notes, contemporary visual literacy is itself shaped by the very platforms under discussion.

4.2 Towards a New Phenomenology of Urban Experience

The emergence of Puducherry as an Instagram phenomenon marks a fundamental transformation in the phenomenology of urban experience. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty observes, spatial perception is always embodied and situated (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). The social-media experience of the city, however, introduces a disembodied and de-territorialised dimension that profoundly modifies the ways in which urban space is perceived and given meaning. The Instagram experience of Puducherry is characterised by what may be called a “distributed presence”: a mode of experience that situates itself simultaneously in the physical space of the city and in the digital space of the platform. This double presence creates new forms of urban agency, in which users are no longer simple users of space but active co-producers of new urban meanings.

As Redyantanu (2025) concludes, Instagram extends beyond social networking to serve as a tool for informal learning and the dissemination of knowledge (Redyantanu, 2025). In the case of Puducherry, this educational function produces an informal learning about colonial architecture that is nonetheless mediated by the aesthetic and algorithmic filters of the platform, generating forms of architectural knowledge that may be profoundly distant from the city’s historical and cultural reality. The transformation of Puducherry into an Instagram phenomenon is thus a paradigmatic case of how social media do not merely document urban reality but actively reconfigure it according to their own logic, producing new aesthetic geographies that cut across the traditional boundaries between local and global, authentic and artificial, physical and digital. In this process, cities increasingly cease to answer to traditional architectural, urban and cultural criteria of evaluation and adapt instead to the logic of the digital attention economy, turning themselves into aesthetic products optimised for social consumption.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to answer a twofold question: how colour operates on the facades of the White Town of Puducherry, and how those facades are re-coded once they enter the circuits of social media. With respect to the first question, the chromatic survey of 15–17 August 2025 shows that the White Town shares much of its palette with the French and broader European tradition, but applies that palette according to a logic of painted surfaces that belongs unmistakably to the recent Tamil vernacular. The hybridity of Puducherry is therefore not a matter of motifs alone; it is inscribed in the very technique by which colour meets the wall. With respect to the second question, the analysis of the Instagram face of the city shows that this hybrid surface is progressively detached from its referents and reorganised around the parameters that the platform rewards—saturation, contrast, recognisable poses and recurring angles—so that the city is experienced as an aesthetic destination governed by globalised visual codes.

Taken together, these findings support the hypothesis with which the paper opened: that the “spreadability” of Puducherry is more nuanced than mere virality, because it operates through the continuous re-interpretation of a physical surface whose meaning is renegotiated at every act of sharing. The dialogue between the built fabric and its digital image is not a one-way translation but a loop, in which the algorithmic preference for certain hues feeds back into the expectations that visitors bring to the streets they photograph.

The contribution of the study to the existing literature is to connect two bodies of work that are usually pursued separately. On one side stands the architectural and chromatic analysis of historic urban fabric; on the other, the media-theoretical literature on architecture and social platforms (Alaily-Mattar et al., 2025; Wagiri et al., 2024; Redyantanu, 2025). By grounding a media analysis in a concrete, measurable architectural variable—the palette and its mode of application—the paper offers heritage studies a method for observing the re-coding of “objects of memory” at the exact point where surface and image meet. For the management of historic environments, the implication is that the conservation of Puducherry’s identity cannot be reduced to the protection of its built stock alone; it must also reckon with the digital regime through which that stock is now perceived. Future research could extend the chromatic survey to other quarters and seasons, integrate quantitative engagement data from the platforms, and compare Puducherry with other former colonial cities subject to the same dynamics, in order to test the generality of the “aesthetic colonialism” advanced here.

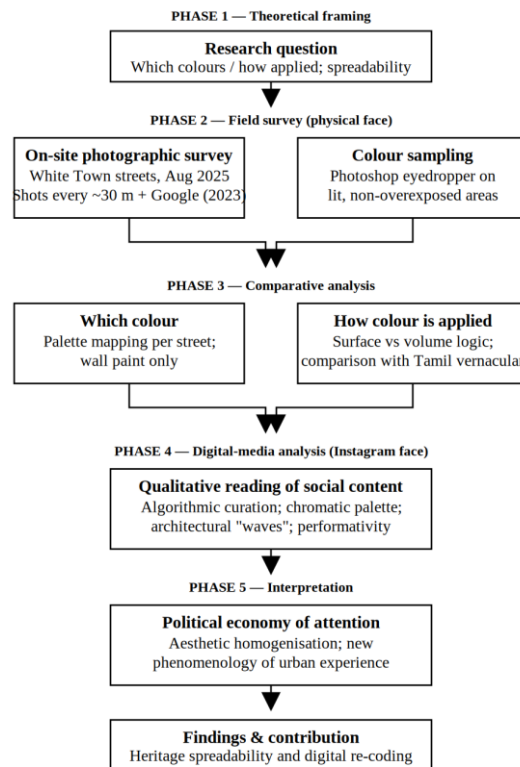


Figure 7. Graphical illustration of the methodological framework adopted in the study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All primary data—photographic surveys and chromatic samples—were collected directly by the authors and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. The study did not involve humans or animals as research subjects.

CRedit Author Statement

Alessio Patalocco has written section 1 and 2, Giacomo Nencioni section 3 and 4. Section 5 was written by both authors. Both authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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