

The Walled City of Lahore: Directions for Rehabilitation

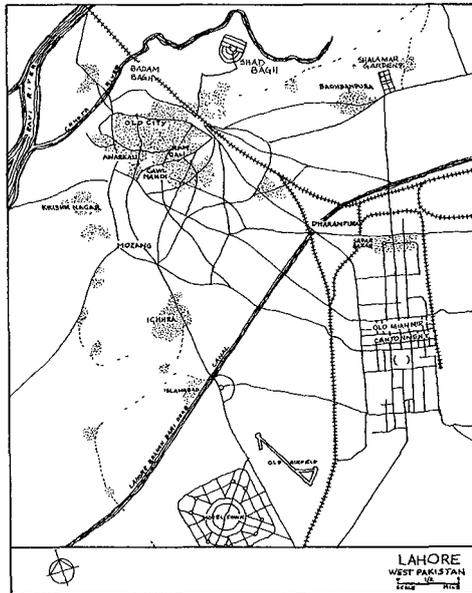
Kamil Khan Mumtaz

The walled city of Lahore is being conserved as part of a project known as the Lahore Urban Development and Traffic Study, which is being financed by a World Bank loan and carried out by the Lahore Development Authority. The walled city is in the northeastern quarter of Lahore, along the ancient route from Kabul to Delhi on the left bank of the Ravi River; the area encompasses roughly one square mile. Settlement dates back some 1,600 years, a thousand of which have a known history. Roughly oval in shape, the walled city was until 1859 enclosed by a moat and double walls, inside which were two mounds, a citadel and the city. Narrow twisting streets were faced on either side by three- and four-story burned brick and timber houses crowded closely together. Today the area is still home for about 500,000 people, a third of them unskilled or semiskilled labourers, a third skilled labourers or small businessmen, a third white-collar workers, entrepreneurs and professionals. Its economy is based largely on small-scale manufacturing and service industries; there is some commerce and trade.

The walled city has been described as a traditional preindustrial Islamic city. The current conservation project clearly recognizes the need to respect these historical and cultural characteristics of both the city in general and of the innumerable buildings within it. Since we are dealing with a living city and not with an uninhabited monument, the project raises a number of problems related to adaptive reuse. At this stage they can only be presented as questions, but as the project progresses we hope to be able to find at least some of the answers.

The first question is, of course, what should and should not be conserved? Presumably any object of historical, architectural or cultural value merits conservation. In the case of Lahore's walled city, the whole area falls into this category. The economic life and social organization that gave rise to its original form not only survive to this day, but continue to dominate its urban life.

The next question can be phrased in a variety of ways: should we conserve the city's past or its present form? If we opt for its past form, which era should we choose?

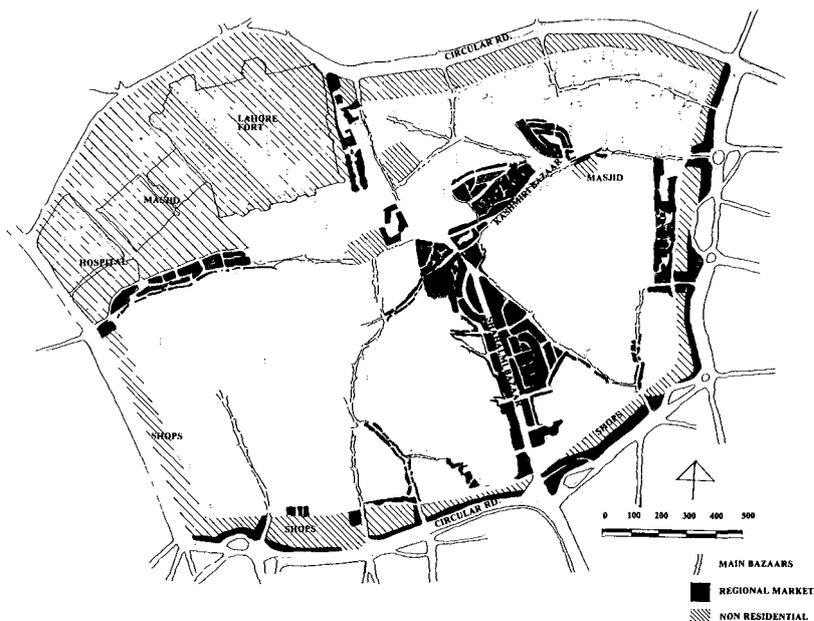


Lahore, Pakistan Map showing the major urban densities and their access routes

After Government of Pakistan Planning Commission (Urban Biographies, 1965)

Regardless of which one is chosen, how can we conserve its past form without turning it into a museum and destroying its present urban life? In other words, how does one preserve a past while still ensuring the continued evolution, development, even transformation of the city in future years?

The walled city is rapidly decaying. It is greatly overpopulated for its size and capacities. Its drains and streets are clogged; its refuse collects far faster than it can be disposed of, its very fabric is crumbling and collapsing. But these are merely some of the symptoms of a more general decay. Is the decay a result of incompatibility with the physical environment, or of the inability of a preindustrial economy to survive in a post-industrial world? The city consumes a host of postindustrial goods and services—from transistor radios to World Bank projects—but it must pay for them with preindustrial commodities. In this exchange it is caught in a predicament comparable to a man who gets the iron lung he needs to survive, but has to pedal to keep it going. Lahore is



Walled City, Lahore. Map showing locations of main bazaars, regional markets and residential areas
Map: K. Mumtaz



Lahore, Pakistan. A view over the Walled City shows its dense texture
 Photo: K. Mumtaz

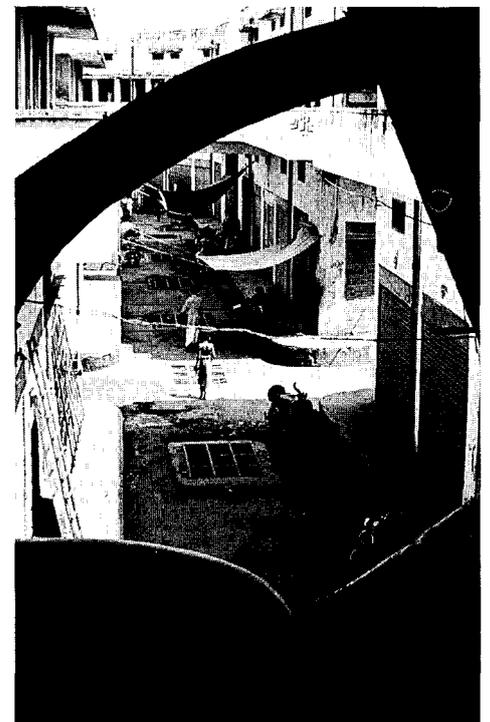
hooked to a space-age technology, but its colour television sets are delivered in bullock carts.

How do we conserve an Islamic city? If we accept the definition of the Islamic city as one developed in an area and period of

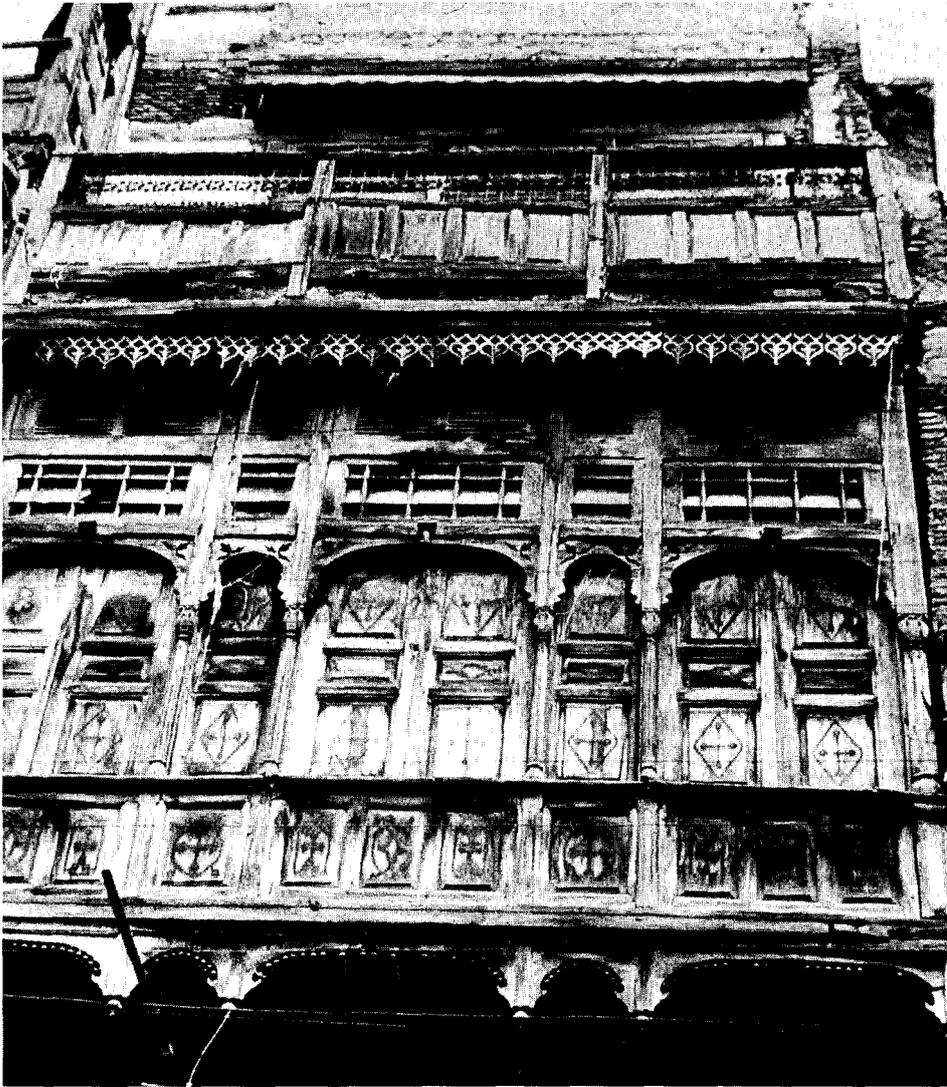
Muslim dominance which still retains the characteristics of that development, then we must conclude that Lahore in the three centuries (eleventh through thirteenth) under the Turkish sultanate was an Islamic city, until its devastation by Mongols. It was again an Islamic city after its subjugation by

Timur and its rehabilitation under the Lodhi Pathans, and yet again after the pillage and burning by Babur, when it was rebuilt by the Mughals and continued under the domination of Nādir Shāh Durrāni. Whether the city that survived a half-century of Sikh domination followed by nearly a hundred years of the British Raj can be called an Islamic city or not is an academic question. It is, in any case, once again in an area and period of Muslim domination. For that reason alone, the city that has developed since 1947 must surely qualify as Islamic.

As for the future conservation of Lahore's walled city, if we talk only about the Islamic city then by conservation we mean only the preservation of evidence for Muslim dominance in the area. If by conservation we mean the conservation of an entire formal tradition, however, then we still have to consider how this can best be achieved.

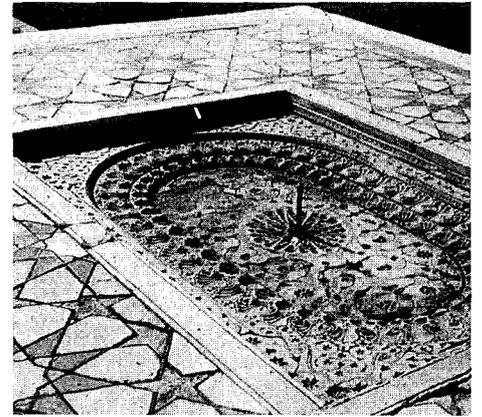


Walled City, Lahore View onto a typical thoroughfare
 Photo: K. Mumtaz



Walled City, Lahore. A typical traditional wooden house with elaborate projecting balconies

Photo: K. Mumtaz



Lahore, Pakistan. Paved fountain base in the preserved Lahore Fort

Photo: K. Mumtaz

While architects and planners deliberate on the problems of conservation and adaptive reuse by design, a process of spontaneous conservation also occurs that merits our attention. In the popular mind a vocabulary of architectural forms exists which it reproduces spontaneously, even when employing new means and catering to new requirements. Thus, while new techniques and materials are moulded in the dyes and patterns of a previous generation, the forms themselves evolve and adapt over time, however imperceptibly, in response to new conditions. Successive generations carry the imprint of the past. A formal tradition is inherited as a continuity established by the very process of regenerative growth and change.