The Alhamra Arts Council in Lahore was formed soon after the partition of the Punjab between Pakistan and India. Since then it has become the foremost centre for the performing arts in the country. Until the 1970s its activities were housed in a large residential villa, which ultimately proved inadequate for the diverse programmes sponsored by the Council and an ambitious master plan was drawn up for a complex of buildings to meet the expanding needs of the organisation.

Originally, the centre was to include a multi-purpose auditorium, theatre, art galleries, music and dance academy, administration block, restaurant and classrooms for art. In fact, the principal building now completed after years of political and financial obstacles that delayed construction is the auditorium, serving such uses as stage drama, puppet shows, musical concerts, film projection and seminars. The small theatre and other facilities were not built.

The project was conceived according to the architect’s twofold desire, to find a contemporary architectural expression that related to a strong pre-existing tradition, and to provide acoustically and visually successful spaces for performances. Handmade bricks locally produced and fired, were employed for bearing walls whose thickness and massiveness are emphasised by their being tapered, slanted inwards, and disengaged at the corners. Exterior decoration is for the most part limited to string courses, and to changes in colour of the bricks. References to monumental architecture of the Mughal period in Pakistan is hence made only by way of the materials, their deployment, and the imposing scale and clean geometricality of the walls. A steel truss roof is carried on these walls.

A certain preference for indigenous materials and local know-how permitted budgetary savings (in comparison, for example, to expensive imported materials and labour) that were consequently devoted to equipping the auditorium inside with modern stage lighting, trap doors, machinery for lifting sets, and amplifiers. As a result, troupes of performers from abroad as well as the local area have found the theatre highly adaptable and hospitable to wide variety of activities. Moreover, the massive walls aid in keeping the ambient interior temperatures at a comfortable level in the generally hot climate.

Thus, the Alhamra auditorium is a frankly contemporary building of Western origin with a classical proscenium stage and amphitheatre seating for 800 persons, yet an effort has been made to evoke at least memories of a local monumental architecture.

Below: Alhamra Arts Centre, entrance on the eastern side with dressing rooms (right) and main auditorium (left). Photograph: I.C. Stewart/AKAA.

Right: Detail of the auditorium exterior with main entrance at left. Photograph: J. Bézent/AKAA.
Site plan.

West and south facades of the auditorium, with main entrance esplanade. Photograph: J. Béjant/AKAA.
Section.

Foyer level of the Arts Centre with shops and exhibition space.

Entrance level to the Alhambra Arts Centre theatre.

First level of main theatre, rehearsal rooms and small theatre.
Left: Interior of the main theatre lobby, Alhamra Arts Centre.
Left, below: Interior of the main theatre with seating for 800 persons.
Photographs: I.C. Stewart/AKAA.
Above: Detail of staircase.